

The Role of Positive and Negative Moral Comparisons in Aspirational Projects

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Contemporary philosophers have identified several ways in which moral comparisons can be useful to aspirational projects. In *Minding the Gap*, Karen Stohr asserts that a certain type of moral comparison, namely, one with a moral exemplar (in this paper referred to as a “positive moral comparison”), can benefit our aspirational projects by (i) increasing our capacity for moral imagination, (ii) providing us with knowledge about what constitutes moral behavior and how we can improve morally, and (iii) motivating us to improve morally. While I do not disagree with these assertions, the purpose of this paper is to provide a more complete articulation of how moral comparisons can benefit our aspirational projects. To accomplish this, I will (a) recount in detail the benefits of positive moral comparisons on Stohr’s view, (b) supplement this account by suggesting that positive moral comparisons also (iv) rationalize our aspirational projects by giving rise to proleptic reasons, and (c) demonstrate that a negative moral comparison (a comparison with an individual who is morally inferior to the subject, also referred to as a “moral deficient”) is also capable of (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv). In so doing, I

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hope to supplement the current philosophical discourse on this topic and thereby contribute to our understanding of the philosophy of aspiration.

I will begin with an enumeration of the ways in which positive moral comparisons can be beneficial to aspirational projects on Karen Stohr's view. I have chosen to transmit her account from *Minding the Gap* because it is perspicuous and incorporates the contributions and concerns of many philosophers in this area.

In *Minding the Gap*, Stohr aims to "develop an account of moral improvement as a practical project, not simply a theoretical one" (1). Such an account requires that we incorporate "a psychologically plausible account of human beings" into our aspirational projects and "take seriously the psychological limitations we face in trying to [...] instantiate moral ideals in our lives" (Stohr 25, 26). If we decline to do this, our aspirational projects run the risk of being so quixotic that we cannot realistically adhere to them. As Stohr reflects on the psychological limitations with which aspirants must grapple, she considers several claims made by Kant regarding moral comparisons. Kant's view is that "our pleasure in feeling superior to other people, and our aversion to feeling inferior, tempts us to make self-deceived and self-enhancing judgements about ourselves," a phenomenon that leads Kant to "express considerable skepticism about the use of exemplars and comparisons in moral self-reflection" (Stohr 45). Kant's concern is that, because of humanity's proclivity for self-conceit, we will either (a) always compare ourselves with a sample of humanity that makes us appear superior (i.e., a sample that is conspicuously morally inferior to us) or (b) debase those that are genuinely morally superior to us, as opposed to allowing the comparison to contribute to our aspirational project (should we ever compare ourselves to such individuals in the first place). This leads Kant to the conclusion that "comparisons with other people are at best ineffective as a tool for moral improvement and, at worst, inimical to it" (Stohr 46).

After recounting this view, Stohr observes that "Kant may have overstated the case against comparisons" and mounts a defense of positive moral comparisons (87). She begins by averring that moral improvement requires moral imagination, namely, the ability to "imagine what it would be like to inhabit an identity oriented around other kinds of ideals" (Stohr 87). One method of engaging our moral imagination "is through the activity of reflecting on moral exemplars" (Stohr 87). Stohr thinks that so long as we "choose exemplars that are somewhat removed from our own circumstances," we may be able to mitigate the deleterious effects of comparisons about which Kant is concerned (87). For example, an individual comparing his moral courage to that of Martin Luther King Jr. has a much higher probability of allowing the comparison to generate insights that are

useful to his aspirational project than if he were to compare himself to his local friend who is superior to him in this regard. Thus, comparisons with moral exemplars are potentially useful to our aspirational projects on Stohr's view, as such comparisons illustrate "what a morally good (or not so good) life would look like" and help us "learn how to become better by a careful examination of the lives of specific individuals" (88). In summary, they (i) increase our capacity for moral imagination and (ii) provide us with knowledge about what constitutes moral behavior and how we can improve morally.

Further, Stohr notes that we can look "to moral exemplars for inspiration and motivation," alluding to cases where reflecting on the behavior of a moral exemplar inspires us to emulate it (87). This claim has been borne out by recent research conducted by Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist who has written extensively on the emotion of "elevation," what might more colloquially be referred to as "inspiration." Haidt describes elevation as an "emotional response to moral beauty," more specifically, "an emotion triggered by people behaving in a virtuous, pure, or superhuman way" (281, 284). Elevation elicits "especially warm, pleasant, or 'tingling' feelings" in individuals as well as "a desire to engage in virtuous action oneself" (Haidt 282, 283). Individuals experiencing elevation are "more likely to report wanting to help others, to become better people themselves, and to affiliate with others" (Haidt 282). The point here is the following: examining the lives of moral exemplars can engender elevation in ourselves, thereby increasing our desire to imitate moral behavior. Thus, positive moral comparisons (iii) play a role in inspiring us to improve morally.

Let this suffice as a reconstruction of Stohr's view on positive moral comparisons. At this point, I would like to briefly note another way in which positive moral comparisons can be beneficial to our aspirational projects that has not yet been fully articulated, namely, by rendering them rational. Understanding this claim requires a basic knowledge of Agnes Callard's theory of proleptic reasons as contained in *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming*, which I shall laconically explicate below. Callard holds that in order for an aspirational project to be rational, an aspirant requires "access to *reasons* to become the person she will be" (2). One type of reason that is available to an aspirant is a proleptic reason. A proleptic reason is a reason "by which an agent grasps, in an incomplete and anticipatory way, the reason that she will act on once her pursuit is successful" (Callard 87–88). When an aspirant first embarks on an aspirational project, she acts on "her inchoate, anticipatory, and indirect grasp of some good she is trying to know better" (Callard 72). In this case, the aspirant exhibits "not irrationality but a distinctive form of rationality" because "she takes herself

to know why she is doing whatever she takes herself to be doing” (Callard 70, 71). My claim here is simply the following: positive moral comparisons (iv) give rise to proleptic reasons and thereby render aspirational projects rational. This is because by bolstering one’s the ability to “imagine what it would be like to inhabit an identity oriented around other kinds of ideals,” an aspirant begins to grasp “in an incomplete and anticipatory way, the reason that she will act on once her pursuit is successful” (Stohr 87; Callard 87–88). Thus, a positive moral comparison is capable of generating proleptic reasons, rationalizing the aspirational project at hand.

Taking the the preceding paragraph into account, I have now established that a certain type of positive moral comparison can be beneficial to an aspirational project because it (i) increases our capacity for moral imagination, (ii) provides us with knowledge about what constitutes moral behavior and how we can improve morally, (iii) motivates us to improve morally, and (iv) rationalizes our aspirational projects by giving rise to proleptic reasons.

I now introduce my next claim, namely, that another type of moral comparison which benefits aspirational projects, a negative moral comparison, has not received the attention it deserves. An extended discussion of negative moral comparisons is conspicuously absent from Stohr’s account; she only obliquely alludes to such comparisons when she writes that moral exemplars show us “what a morally good (or not so good) life would look like” and “the respects in which those individuals succeed and fail at living well” (88). The case for negative moral comparisons, I argue, demands a fuller articulation since these comparisons can benefit aspirational projects in ways (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv) as well. I will demonstrate the veracity of this claim below.

However, before an enumeration of the benefits of negative moral comparisons takes place, I would like to address the types of negative moral comparisons that will be suitable for our purposes. Just as Stohr qualifies the type of positive moral comparison that is beneficial, I must also qualify the type of negative moral comparison that is beneficial. To begin, the motivation for a negative moral comparison cannot be the desire to obtain (a) pleasure in feeling morally superior to others or (b) comfort in not feeling morally inferior to others. These criteria hearken back to Kant’s concern that these desires tempt us “to make self-deceived and self-enhancing judgements about ourselves” (Stohr 45). I concur with Kant that a negative moral comparison that is motivated by either of these desires is doomed to simply provide the desired pleasure or comfort and nothing more. Ideally, a negative moral comparison will be motivated by an individual’s genuine desire to better understand her current moral position. This also means that such a comparison will not involve

condemnation, but merely an acknowledgement of the fact that some moral deficient does not conform to some unambiguous moral standard. For example, a comparison could be made with an inveterate and unrepentant prevaricator, someone who does not conform to the unambiguous moral standard of honesty. When conducting a negative moral comparison, an individual should not condemn the prevaricator, but merely note the fact that he does not conform to the unambiguous moral standard of honesty and therefore is a moral deficient. Further, during the moral comparison the individual must be actively seeking to identify moral deficiencies in herself using the behavior of the moral deficient as a template. In contrast to positive moral comparisons, if these criteria are met, I do not think it is necessary to choose a moral deficient that is far removed from one's own circumstances. This is because a negative moral comparison with a moral deficient in close proximity will not provoke the disconcerting feelings of inferiority naturally associated with comparing oneself to a moral exemplar in close proximity.

With this in mind, I will now enumerate the ways in which negative moral comparisons can benefit aspirational projects. First, negative moral comparisons provide us with moral knowledge about what we ought not to do. In examining the behavior of a moral deficient, we are able to identify and avoid actions and behaviors that are linked to morally deficient vices, outlooks, and ideologies. Second, in comparing ourselves with former moral deficients, we obtain knowledge about how to improve morally. This is accomplished by observing the original state of the moral deficient and noting how he was able alter his behavior such that he shed the status. For example, if a friend was previously a racist but then came to see the error of his ways, in comparing myself to his former racist self I am able to obtain moral knowledge about not only what sort of behavior to avoid, but also how to liberate myself from that behavior. This provides us with a practical guide to overcoming moral deficiencies. Third, negative moral comparisons can also motivate us to change by engendering in us either (a) hope, because we've seen a moral deficient improve or (b) shame and guilt because we have identified similarities between our life and the life of the moral deficient. Finally, negative moral comparisons also ensure the rationality of our aspirational projects by giving rise to proleptic reasons. I will now take a moment to elaborate on the claims that (a) shame and guilt can motivate moral change and (b) negative moral comparisons give rise to proleptic reasons.

It is easy to understand how positive emotions like Haidt's elevation provide motivation for change, but can the same really be said of negative emotions such as shame and guilt? Fortunately, this question has been addressed by recent psychological studies. In the paper "Shame and the

Motivation to Change the Self,” the authors summarize the extant research on this topic and present their own findings. They report that contemporary psychological scholarship suggests that self-conscious emotions like shame and guilt can “aid in self-regulation of behavior toward goals that might be more distant and abstract” (Lickel et al. 1049). This is because these emotions each produce “judgments that one has violated a moral standard, feels responsible for their actions, and experiences anger and disgust at themselves as a result,” thus engendering a desire to improve morally (Lickel et al. 1050). The authors then present the results of their own study, which provides “strong support for a model where shame and guilt . . . predicted a motivation to change the self” (Lickel et al. 1053). Thus, recent psychological findings corroborate the claim that the feelings resulting from both positive and negative moral comparisons can motivate us to improve morally.¹

Now, with regards to proleptic reasons: I aver that, just as the activity of reflecting upon moral exemplars can engage our moral imagination, so too can the action of reflecting upon the morally deficient. As a reminder, the action of reflecting upon moral exemplars engages our moral imagination by enabling us to “imagine what it would be like to inhabit an identity oriented around other kinds of ideals” (Stohr 87). Presumably this is because during the reflection process we picture an identity that is oriented around virtues which we admire. It seems to me that when reflecting upon the morally deficient, we can similarly picture an identity that is oriented around vices we despise. Once we have this identity in focus, we begin to understand the value of the contrary of the vice. This allows an individual to begin to grasp “in an incomplete and anticipatory way, the reason that she will act on once her pursuit is successful,” i.e., once she rids herself of the vice (Callard 87–88). Thus, we see that negative moral comparisons also give rise to proleptic reasons and thereby rationalize our aspirational projects.

With the above in mind, it seems that negative moral comparisons are capable of (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv) as well. A thought experiment will be useful in proving this claim: suppose that an individual thinks that she is nonxenophobic. One day, she decides to scrutinize this claim and begins reading the statements of well-known and vociferous xenophobes who lived during the turn of the century in the United States. These xenophobes

¹ I will note that there are obviously cases in which excessive shame and guilt can be inimical to an aspirational project because it drives an individual into despair or hopelessness. These cases are genuinely troubling, but do not, I think, undermine the claim that an unexcessive quantity of guilt or shame can engender a desire to improve oneself morally in many cases.

engaged in actions that are unequivocally immoral: attacking immigrant groups and driving them out of towns without any legitimate grounds. Only a few of these xenophobes later abjured their xenophobia. As she reads their statements, she begins to recognize that, though she does not endorse the immoral actions committed, she does identify with some of the reasoning employed against certain immigrant groups from that period—she may have even employed such reasoning in modern circumstances. She enters a state of cognitive dissonance: she considers the individuals that uttered the statements to be xenophobic (a status morally inferior to her own) but concurrently recognizes that she identifies with said statements. This causes her to deny the moral permissibility of her statements and, as a result, recognize that she must improve morally by expunging xenophobic tendencies from her life.

So, how precisely is a negative moral comparison benefitting this individual? First, she has obtained knowledge that a subset of her behavior is immoral and ought not to be engaged in, namely, the parroting of xenophobic statements and arguments. Continuing, she has access to knowledge about how to improve morally through the examples of the xenophobes that abjured their prejudice. She is also likely experiencing shame or guilt due to her new knowledge that she has engaged in morally impermissible behavior; these feelings are likely to engender in her a desire to improve morally. Further, her capacity for moral imagination has increased such that she begins to have a better grasp of the value of virtues contrary to xenophobia, (e.g., tolerance, fairness, and equality) which gives rise to a proleptic reason, rationalizing a potential aspirational project to become a more tolerant and fair individual. Thus, we see that a negative moral comparison has benefitted this individual in ways (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv).

Now, at this point a complication for negative moral comparisons must be considered: what if the individual making a negative moral comparison is incapable of recognizing that she, in fact, occupies the same status as the moral deficient? Returning to the requirements for a beneficial negative moral comparison, suppose an individual is (a) not motivated by a desire for pleasure in moral superiority or comfort in moral adequacy and (b) seeking to identify parallels between her behavior and the behavior of a moral deficient, but simply cannot recognize the parallels. How is such a problem to be combatted? This very question is addressed by Eric Schwitzgebel in an article entitled “A Theory of Jerks,” though in slightly different terms. Schwitzgebel asks what is to be done in cases where a jerk cannot recognize that she is, indeed, a jerk. The reason for this is that a jerk, being someone who “*culpably* fails to appreciate the perspectives of others,” is “at a general epistemic disadvantage” when it comes to identifying the

fact that she is a jerk since she can only inhabit her own perspective in which she has already rationalized her behavior (Schwitzgebel).

Schwitzgebel suggests two potential solutions to this problem. First, an individual must “shift from first-person reflection (what am *I* like?) to second-person description (tell me, what *am I* like?).” Second, the individual should ask herself how she views others in general. Schwitzgebel puts the question as follows: “Everywhere you turn, are you surrounded by fools, by boring nonentities, by faceless masses and foes and suckers and, indeed, jerks?” If the answer to this question is yes, then perhaps it is indicative of the reality that you are, in fact, a jerk: an individual who culpably fails to appreciate the perspectives of others and therefore dismisses them as irrelevant or foolish. With this framework in mind, I think that a similar solution can be proposed for our question. First, an individual engaging in negative moral comparison should seek out second-person description(s) as opposed to a first-person reflection (i.e., by asking someone “is my behavior reminiscent of that of this moral deficient?”) to mitigate the risk that she is unable to recognize potential moral deficiency in herself. Second, an individual should ask herself whether she is honestly open to the possibility that her behavior is congruent with that of a moral deficient. If she finds that she invariably is closed to this idea and always insists that her behavior is not at all congruent with that of a moral deficient, then she should seriously consider the possibility that she cannot accurately assess the moral value of her own behavior. If an individual who engages in negative moral comparisons consistently does these things, she will significantly lower the probability that she is unable to recognize moral deficiency in herself.

Moral comparisons have an important role to play in the philosophy of aspiration. In this paper, I have sought to delineate the ways in which both positive and negative moral comparisons can contribute to our aspirational projects. I have demonstrated that both types of comparisons are capable of (i) increasing our capacity for moral imagination, (ii) providing us with knowledge about what constitutes moral behavior and how we can improve morally, (iii) motivating us to improve morally, and (iv) rationalizing our aspirational projects by giving rise to proleptic reasons. My contribution has been to completely articulate how moral comparisons rationalize our aspirational projects and more fully explicate the role of negative moral comparisons, given that neither of these items has been thoroughly explored. Having done this, I am hopeful that future scholarship will continue to supplement, correct, and expand upon these claims so that the true nature of aspiration might one day be fully ascertained.

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