Fleeing from War or Pandemic, and Returning Home

Rory J. Conces

Perspective

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FLEEING HOME

Today, the word 'flee' connotes a moral weakness for many, perhaps even cowardice for some. However, that is not entirely accurate. Fleeing may be a morally decent response to a dangerous situation. As the American philosopher Todd May wrote in his insightful book *A Decent Life: Morality for the Rest of Us* (2019): "Most of us seek to live a morally decent life. We are not moral monsters, but neither do we strive to be moral saints. [There are] avenues of moral improvement that do not require us … to sacrifice our deepest commitments and projects ….[Why? That which] … makes life meaningful gives me permission to limit my aid to others."

Desperate times are just around the corner for most of us, forcing us to decide. The English punk-rock band The Clash had it right all along with their song *Should I Stay or Should I Go* (1982). Unfortunately, the question "should I flee or stay put?" is one that is not seriously available for the asking by everyone in a desperate situation. Why? In some cases, the danger is so immediate because police, military or paramilitary forces are flying overhead dropping ordinance, or the tanks are at the edge of town or masked men are at one's doorstep, in which case it is either leave now with the clothes on your back or die. Much of the civilian populations of Bosnia and Kosovo were displaced by the sudden onset of ethnic cleansing. Then there is Syria, with the constant threat of being blown apart by the infamous barrel bomb.

In other cases, the danger is less immediate, so there is time to consider one's options. Even so, as David Hume, a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, informs us in his "Of the Original Contract" (1748), personal circumstances can limit one's options: "Can we seriously say, that a poor peasant or artizan has a free choice to leave his country, when he knows no foreign language or manners, and lives from day to day by the small wages he acquires?" Hundreds of years later, such factors remain relevant for many who find themselves in desperate situations, including war and pandemic. Fleeing a dangerous situation is not a viable option for everyone. It is not realistic for some to pack up their belongings and flee the scene for a safer environ. Financing such an undertaking may be well beyond their means; then there are the obvious hurtles of: obtaining travel documents, knowing various languages and cultures, taking care of health issues, moving children and the elderly, lacking family and friends elsewhere, dealing with personal security issues, and pandemic lockdowns. Barring some prior morally questionable decisions that lessened one's ability to leave, typically the inability to flee is not looked at as a moral weakness. And there are those who are in a much better position to flee their neighborhood, city, or even country, and do just that. Regardless, it is tragic that people feel the only way to

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have a future is to leave home. No matter how resolute the fleer is, it must be heartbreaking. To say otherwise suggests one has never had a place they called home. Perhaps never having uttered the words, "Home sweet home!" Regardless of their feelings of attachment, the question must be posed, should they have remained behind?

Let's return to May's *A Decent Life*. He asks a simple question, "Are we really obliged to act in accordance with a morality that would ask of us to sacrifice our deepest personal commitments and projects if these conflict with moral requirements, be they consequentialist, deontological, or virtue ethical?" He answers in the negative. Why? May believes that "there are aspects of our lives that make them worth living, that contribute to their being meaningful lives." When we are asked to provide aid to others, we are asked to contribute to their ability to live meaningful lives as well. But "if everyone deserves to live a meaningful life, then it would seem that I deserve to do so as well." To ask me to sacrifice all of it, suggests that my life is not as worthy as theirs. But I think my life is just as worthy. So rather than holding fast to theories that are unrealistic for us, requiring too much of us, even to the brink of moral sainthood [or being a sacrificial lamb], maybe simply being morally decent suffices, which means for May contributing to the others' ability to live meaningful lives (meeting their biological and psychological needs; none of which requires us to risk our deepest commitments and projects and lives for others). By doing so, we support the human dignity of our neighbors.

Having neighbors to aid means that we are residents of a neighborhood. Neighborhood living is an ongoing experiment that exposes the richness of peoples' lives through face-to-face encounters that often lead to deep personal relationships with those with whom we share the world, as well as memberships in various other polities (resident of a city, a state, province or entity, citizen of a country). So, we have arrived at not only moral decency but also political decency, with its civility.

These close encounters also establish intimate relationships, including friendships (built on loyalty and trust). It is no wonder war and pandemic can wreak such havoc by shattering neighborhood living and all that comes with it.

When it comes to the question as to whether someone should flee their neighborhood during times of war or pandemic, the question touches on whether their relationships contribute to the meaningfulness of people's lives. Would their absence have a detrimental impact on the lives of those in the neighborhood? Supporting the defense of a city and country and supporting small business owners and their families are important matters that often make a big difference in peoples' lives.

Deciding whether an instance of fleeing is morally decent is often no easy undertaking, given that the final judgment may be undecidable until sometime after the fleeing, since the fleeing may send a signal to others in the neighborhood, resulting in a large-scale exodus. Such a contagion effect could have a damaging impact on the ability of others to live meaningful lives in that place. It would only be after waiting to see whether the neighborhood (or worse yet, the city) had emptied out of many of its residents that a final judgment could be made. If the city could no longer defend itself, because of a departure of many able-bodied residents, or businesses took a financial tumble to the point where they were forced to close, because of the departure of so many paying customers, then the initial fleeing would seem to be a clearer case of a morally indecent act.

It is a fact of life that all of us must choose how to act without being certain about the consequences of our actions. Perhaps the best we can hope for is having some clue about the likelihood of those consequences. Regardless, moral decency does not mandate sacrificing it all, including our lives. If you thought that staying in a city under siege (think Vukovar, Sarajevo, Mosul, Aleppo), or in a city dealing with a pandemic (think Wuhan, New York, São Paulo, Mumbai, Delhi) was so risky that you are likely to lose `your life, then that would seem to support fleeing as morally decent. In addition, there is the issue of whether the fleeing would be politically decent. In the case of fleeing a city under siege, if fleeing would likely detract from the city's defense, that would make fleeing in such a situation somewhat normatively murky (or ambiguous).

RETURNING TO HOME "SWEET" HOME

What about the return home for a person who fled their city because of war or pandemic? Many people who

flee a desperate situation do so with the full expectation that they will return. Even the Yazidis, who faced genocide at the hands of ISIS, are now returning to their homeland in northern Iraq—the Sinjar mountains. For some within the frameworks of the two decencies and friendship, however, a return home might not be obviously acceptable.

In the case of war, a professor's return, for instance, may be morally decent, insofar as she is likely to help students, colleagues, and staff at a university; as well as neighbors and family members being able to return to living a more meaningful life, and politically decent insofar as the return is likely to help restore the integrity of the university, thereby contributing to the rebuilding of the country. The same could hold true for the person returning to a pandemic ravaged neighborhood. The returnee could help reinvigorate the customer base of many shops, restaurants, and cafes, establishments that were financially devastated by the pandemic. The return could be politically decent as well through the returnee's show of support for local health safety measures like masking and social distancing in the neighborhood that could contribute to the well-being of many others. In both situations, it seems that a strong case could be made for a morally and politically decent return.

It would be hasty to end the conversation here because friendships have yet to be considered. Once we acknowledge friendships as an important part of a meaningful life, we may think that the case for moral decency is even stronger, since the rekindling of past relationships would contribute to a meaningful life. But even this way of thinking is dubious because it makes short shrift of trust and loyalty that are so crucial to friendships. In the desperate situations of war and pandemic, the fleer left people behind who endured and witnessed great suffering. Take those who remained in Sarajevo during the 1415-day siege. They struggled through sub-standard housing, food shortages, relentless sniper, and mortar, and artillery fire, and the witnessing of the suffering and death of friends, family, and neighbors. And those who stayed behind during a pandemic faced constant death, social isolation, financial ruin, and witnessed the suffering and death of many in the neighborhood. The sound of ambulance sirens a constant reminder of the ongoing tragedy.

Surely, recalling memories of these painful ordeals, as well as   past emotions of fear, anger, shame, and envy (the Israeli philosopher Avishai Margalit calls them "episodic memories") can easily trigger great animosity months or years later in some against many of those who fled and who want to return. This should be no surprise. It is easy to imagine some who stayed put confronting the returnee and yelling "How dare you show your face in the neighborhood. You are no longer one of us!" For some who remained behind, the fleers became personae non gratae. The cost for such betrayal could be quite high. Some professors who wanted to return to academic positions in Sarajevo were punished by disallowing their casual reentry into academic life. They were not wanted. "You should have stayed in Sweden! There is no place for you here." And some now want to charge a settlement tax on those who "abandoned" their New York City neighborhoods for the safer confines of a resort or second home in the country during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Is there a way to navigate this moral conundrum that involves people whose fleeing was both morally and politically decent, yet are also normatively suspect by being disloyal and untrustworthy "friends"? Loyalty and trustworthiness are developed through multiple personal interactions, encounters that will not occur if the fleers are not given an opportunity to rebuild those bonds of loyalty and trust by being relocated so that they can become once again a customer as friend, colleague as friend, neighbor as friend. In the end, it may require those who stayed behind to perform the supererogatory act of forgiving those who fled and giving them a second chance. Many people who live in such desperate situations find it impossible to forgive those who they believe have hurt them terribly. Restoring friendships or a modicum of neighborliness may never happen. My words here are unlikely to advance the conversation very far or nudge anyone to forgive another, but as the American poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox wrote in "Protest"(1914), "To sin by silence when we should protest, makes cowards out of men."