

**The limits of freedom: Migration as a space of freedom and loneliness among Afghan unaccompanied migrant youth**

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**Abstract**

This article examines how unaccompanied minors from Afghanistan experience migration as a space of both freedom and loneliness situated between competing moral frameworks: family projects, neoliberal discourses of independence, and a quest for new ways of being. While migration is devised as a family strategy to financially sustain the household, it also creates new desires for young people: to study, to have fun, and to fulfil individual goals. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the UK, I analyse how youth find themselves caught in moments of moral crisis as both an ethical dilemma and an experience of self-transformation – caused by the tensions between family expectations, social policies, and a search for independence. I argue that young people often struggle to find the moral ground to exercise freedom and to make the *good* choice, without the guidance of their parents and within neoliberal politics of self-governance. This article considers youth's aspirations and imaginaries of 'good life' within different communities of belonging, and it highlights the importance of the role of kinship for understanding how youth conceptualise their future, and ultimately exercise choice.

**Keywords:** migration; unaccompanied minors; refugees; youth; morality; freedom; aspiration

## Introduction

Walking along the river on a cold afternoon, Mohammad tells me, with a sense of pride, how important it has been for him to pursue his studies. Among his Afghan peers who, like him, came to the UK without their family, Mohammad is the only one who attended university. ‘My friends didn’t believe I could do it, but I proved them wrong,’ Mohammad says. Studying – he continues – is an aspiration which has slowly emerged after his experience of migration, giving him a sense of future. Why do you think your friends didn’t go to university, I ask. ‘The thing is that when you come here, you don’t have your parents, and you don’t know what’s good and what’s bad. You’re alone and it is difficult to make the *good* choices,’ Mohammad replies.

Mohammad’s words resonate with those of many other former unaccompanied minors I have met in my fieldwork. Reflecting on their migration, many young people identify two key difficulties in their lives in the UK. First, they have to make plans and choices. Second, they are alone making these choices and, most importantly, they do not have the parental guidance to choose well. The importance of deciding alone increase when turning 18 years old: in institutional terms, young people are then considered responsible adults, and significantly stop receiving care support from social workers.<sup>i</sup>

Drawing on 19-month ethnographic fieldwork with young men from Afghanistan (17–25 years old), this article examines how youth navigate these spaces of freedom as situated between different and often contradictory moral frameworks – shaped by families, institutional policies, and peers. While families expect youth to work hard in order to send remittances and behave as ‘good sons,’ migration opens up new aspirations and ways of being – the ambition to study, the desire to have fun, and to fulfil individual goals. Closely following the life trajectories of two young people, I show how the tensions between these contrasting projects produce key moments of ‘moral breakdown’ (Zigon 2007), as well as reflective spaces for self-transformation.

Examining youth's migratory projects through the lens of freedom and morality, this article focuses on the specific case of Afghan young people. Subsequent to the American-led intervention in 2001 and the deterioration of security in the region, migration from Afghanistan has significantly increased. Since 2007, young people have started to travel alone from Afghanistan to Western countries, constituting 51% of unaccompanied asylum applications in the European Union in 2015, and one of the highest numbers in the UK (Eurostat 2016; Boland 2010).<sup>ii</sup> Their mobility, rather than a mere response to war and poverty or an individual choice, is a strategy to sustain kinship structures and to widen social possibilities for both families and individuals (Mougne 2010; Antonio-Donini and Monsutti 2016; Vervliet et al. 2014).

The complex interplay between collective and individual factors in youth's migration pathways, however, is often overlooked by scholars. The existing literature tends to be polarised with respect to the experiences of young migrants, partially due to our own ambivalence towards children's agency and need of protection. On the one side, many scholars have highlighted how youth's migration is tied to the possibility of securing a future for the family that is left in the country of origin (Vervliet et al. 2014; Hopkins and Hill 2008; De Lange 2007; White et al. 2011). For instance, Heidbrink (2014), in her ethnography of unaccompanied minors from Central America, has analysed how youth catalyse hopes of improving the household living conditions and education prospects. On the other side, criticising approaches to young people as 'things transported by adults' (Dobson 2009, 536), many authors have emphasised their agency, and ability to use mobility as a strategy to make a 'good life' (Ensor and Goździak 2010; Mai 2010; Monsutti 2007; Belloni, this issue). According to this view, children and youth are 'new migratory actors,' with dreams and goals of their own, which differ from those of their families.

Yet, these two views oppose the individual to their surrounding environment, and agency to structural constraints, reinforcing Western assumptions of how society and subjectivity should

be structured. We have yet limited knowledge of the processes – both individual and collective – shaping youth’s perspectives of migration, and how their imaginaries of ‘good life’ are formed and transformed over time after arrival (Vervliet et al. 2014). This article complements this literature, by understanding youth’s aspirations and decisions within different communities of belonging and often conflicting modes of subjectivation – family relationships, social care institutions, and peers.

Following Foucault, I refer to freedom as a ‘reflective space’ where individuals shape themselves into ‘ethical subjects’: that is, they assess themselves in relation to moral codes of rules and conduct (Foucault 1997, 1988). The notion of freedom as an ethical project of self-making has gained recent, even if still scarce, scholarly attention (Robbins 2007; D’Andrade 1995; Laidlaw 2002). Laidlaw, for instance, defines freedom as a space for reflective choice-making where people transform themselves into ‘a certain kind of person, because it is such a person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live’, making their conduct ‘ethical and free’ (Laidlaw 2002, 327). Yet, as I will show later in more detail, the stories of many young people I met during my fieldwork further complicate this idea of freedom as individual choice-making, and highlight the failures of social scientists to examine the role of moral guidance, as well as of wider social relationships of belonging, in the exercise of choice.

In what follows, I will describe the social and political context in which ideas of morality and future are situated in specific relation to unaccompanied minors. After briefly outlining the methodology, I will then present the stories of two Afghan boys, to analyse how young people make sense of migration, and image their futures.

### **Whose futures?**

In examining young people’s migratory pathways, it is important to note that children and youth play a particular role in society: they ‘provide us with a philosophical and emotional conundrum, how did we come to be as we are’ and, most importantly, how would we like to

become (Moore 2004, 736). Catalysing collective hopes for the future, they are considered as social investment: they are ‘citizens in becoming’ who will contribute, with their work, to the prosperity of a society (Lister 2003; Cole and Durham 2008).

Yet, as already discussed in the introduction of this special issue, the figure of the unaccompanied minor unsettles Western assumptions around childhood and adulthood (Derluyn and Broekaert 2008; Heidbrink 2014; Galli 2017). These young people present traits of vulnerability usually related to children, while they also share features which are typically associated with adulthood, such as independence and agency. Experiences of war and migration, as well as separation from family, further complicate traditional models of adulthood and dependence-independence issues (Clark 2007; Rousseau, Montgomery, and Shermarke 2001).

This ambiguous social position – between vulnerable children and adult migrants – is evident in the attitude towards Afghan unaccompanied minors, and young migrants in general. Their protection has been delegitimized by the negative lens of a ‘refugee crisis,’ and an often contradictory portrayal of these young people (Allsopp and Chase 2017; Crawley 2010).<sup>iii</sup> On the one side, they are depicted as ‘innocent children’ and included within wider policies for looked after children – that is, all minors for whom local governments act as parents, when a parental figure is missing. On the other side, they are considered as migrant adults once they reach the age of majority and, if they are refused asylum, as criminals to be deported (Schuster and Majidi 2013; Gladwell and Elwyn 2012).

The impact of these dichotomic discourses on youth’s lives becomes even more relevant as the majority of unaccompanied minors arrive in the UK at the age of 16 and 17, and are situated in an even more transitional phase – very close to the age of majority, 18 years old (HO 2016). This means that many young people often experience a paradoxical treatment: they are children

in care when they are 16 or 17 years old and, only one year later, they have to abruptly learn to become responsible adults.

To be sure, a wide literature has suggested that pathways into adulthood include multiple, subjective, and culturally variable, transitions rather than a linear structure (Thomson et al. 2004; Jensen Arnett 2004; Sirriyeh and Raghallaigh 2018; Chase, this issue). Despite this evidence, welfare policies often envision this transition as a straightforward passage to an autonomous future. Let's take, for instance, the provision of accommodation for unaccompanied minors in the UK. Children who are under 16 are usually assigned to foster care and, on turning 16, they are placed in semi-independent living arrangements (Kohli 2006; Humphris and Sigona 2017).<sup>iv</sup> Once they reach the age of majority, they are moved to independent accommodation. This relocation often happens on the very same day of their birthday, and young people often don't know in advance their new location. Social service provision follows a similar pattern. Until 18 years old, responsibility for unaccompanied minors is assumed by social workers. After the age of majority, however, young people are no longer looked after. If they hold legal status, a personal adviser provides them limited assistance until the age of 21.<sup>v</sup> If they are refused refugee status, they are no longer supported by local government, and they then fall into illegality.<sup>vi</sup> In practice, many young people I met experience the transition into adulthood as a sudden and violent abandonment by institutions, especially if a significant relationship previously existed with their social worker, or their foster family (Sirriyeh 2008; Sirriyeh and Raghallaigh 2018; Wade 2011).

This ambivalent treatment does not only derive from youth's status as migrant 'children of the crisis' (Lems, Oester, and Strasser, this issue), but it is also embedded within neoliberal discourses around adulthood and self-governance which ultimately delegitimize welfare policies of support. In neoliberal societies, the age of majority marks the key biographical border of 'adulthood' and is associated with specific criteria of 'good' citizenship: accepting

responsibilities for one's self, making independent decisions, pursuing education, securing a job (Harvey 2007; Dubois 2014; Clarke 2005). Welfare policies have increasingly emphasized the importance of *enabling* its citizens towards such stage of self-sufficiency, rather than *providing* for them (Giddens 1998, 117). With this move the state places the responsibility for their own future mostly onto individuals, governing 'through the freedom and aspirations of subjects rather than in spite of them' (Rose 1999, 7). In this new welfare architecture, the state shies away from its duty to protect the most vulnerable and develops discourses, practices and techniques 'through which the self-governing capabilities of individuals can be brought into alignment with political objectives' (Rose 1999, 7; see also: Foucault 1988). As I will examine later in ethnographic detail, for unaccompanied minors these discourses of self-governance become the benchmarks of a successful, and impossible, adulthood. Before examining youth's experiences, I will now turn to methodology.

## **Methodology**

I draw here on ethnographic fieldwork which was conducted for a period of 19 months (from May 2015 to December 2016). This was part of a wider research project aiming to analyse the lived experiences of unaccompanied minors as they make the transition to institutional adulthood.<sup>vii</sup> Biographical interviews and ethnographic fieldwork was carried out with 57 individuals (17–25 years old) from Afghanistan, Eritrea and Albania.<sup>viii</sup> Youth had a different range of immigration statuses including: asylum seeker, refused asylum seeker, discretionary leave to remain. During fieldwork, I attended formal and informal meetings and gatherings, in youth's homes, public places and NGOs. Participant observation and biographical interviews focused on everyday lives, migratory experiences, and interactions with social services and institutions. A photography project was also conducted with a group of 20 young people in London, in order to understand their daily lives through visual means and to capture what was left unsaid during interviews (Meloni, Chase, and Haile 2017). Data from fieldwork with youth

(i.e. interviews; fieldnotes; visual materials) were thematically coded to identify cultural and social categories, lived experiences and understandings from young people's own perspective. In the next section, I will follow the life histories of two Afghan boys to examine in depth youth's narratives and psychological dynamics (Atkinson 2007; Crapanzano 1984).<sup>ix</sup> In particular, I will focus on how young migrants navigate between the absence of family guidance, institutional frameworks of independence, and a search for freedom.

### **Too much freedom, too little freedom**

Karim is an Hazara<sup>x</sup> Afghan boy who left his home country when he was 15. At the moment of his departure, his mother gave him two big pomegranates, and a scarf to protect himself when it was cold at night. Only very few things, as if he were leaving for a short trip. Remembering the very moment he left his family, Karim tells me:

I didn't know where I was going to, or what was happening. But I had a couple of pomegranates, big pomegranates. My mum didn't give me anything else because we were in a really bad situation. A tricky situation. I could not think that my family was just sending me away because they wanted to. I had nothing to hold on to.

Seeing his mother silently crying, Karim sensed that something major was happening. Yet, he did not know what that 'something' exactly entailed: the length of his journey, the separation from his family, the point of arrival. His understanding of migration was not as an altogether conscious and linear process. He sensed something, yet he was not fully aware that he was about to embark on a perilous journey to the UK; that he would not see his parents and siblings again. It was too painful and too 'tricky' – as Karim puts it – to allow himself to think that his family were deliberately causing him the pain of leaving home.



This uncertainty is not specific only to Karim and other young people in similar circumstances, but also to wider experiences of mobility. Hazaras use the term *âwârâgi* to describe the act of migration. It means wandering, vagrancy; it implies the idea of being separated from one's homeland unwillingly, of not knowing where one will be going (Abbasi and Monsutti 2017). This concept refers to the fact that migration always entails a route to the unknown, 'somewhere and nowhere at the same time' (Qasmiyeh 2016, 248). It involves uncertainty – the impossibility of anticipating the outcome of events.

This notion, as well as the complex experiences of many young people I befriended, challenge the common assumption in scholarly literature that people choose to migrate as a strategic mean to make a better life (Hage 2009; Carling 2002; Benson and O'reilly 2009). Karim's trajectory sheds light on subtler psychological dynamics in migration patterns, as well as tensions between collective and individual desires. Through the act of migration, his family broadens the horizon of possibilities for the household; but this aspiration is also gradually reappropriated and negotiated by Karim. While initially he did not grasp the scope of his journey, he came to fathom it as his travel unfolded - across Turkey, Greece, Italy, France, and the UK. He describes to me this process as forming a jigsaw puzzle. After his journey, he slowly assembled different pieces of the same picture, making sense of migration as a tussle between his family's expectations and the possibilities that the new present gradually disclosed. On arrival in the UK, Karim was placed with a foster family. He remembers his foster parents as being 'ok' but he couldn't develop a significant relationship with them because, after only a year, he was moved to semi-independent accommodation. Around the same time, he also received refugee status. While for Karim securing legal status was 'quite straightforward', as he puts it, adapting to the new environment took a long time. As Karim says, he was 'alone in a completely new land – everything, *everything* new'. Furthermore, this experience of

loneliness was accompanied by the beginning of a new stage in his life, marked by autonomy and responsibilities towards his family.

Migration was, for him, a rite of passage to adulthood in which he had to prove his capacity to save money to sustain his household financially (see also: Monsutti 2007). Karim says, ‘When I arrived in the UK, I became an adult (*kalan*).<sup>xi</sup> Because when you arrive, your mind changes. You think that you have to make something with your life and of yourself, and you think: how will I get that?’ Migration, then, was not only a process of becoming an adult responsible for himself and his family but also, most importantly, of becoming other: a new self. It opened a space in which he could create different possibilities for his life and for himself – far from the normative moral framework of his family, and his home country.

Yet, the way Karim perceived himself as a young adult was in profound disjuncture with the way he was seen by social institutions in the UK: as an unaccompanied child (Otto this issue).<sup>xiii</sup> Karim felt his social worker acted like a ‘babysitter’ to him, as he recounts to me. At 17 years old, he decided that he no longer needed social work support. He explains his reasoning as follows, ‘My social worker treated me like a baby. And it took up too much time, too many meetings!’ Yet, while he felt that his social worker did not recognise him as the young adult he had become, he also felt that she did not provide the support and guidance he still needed. Reflecting on his choice to cut social care support, he notes that ‘people who stick with social workers, they usually stay in college, and I didn’t. Probably it was a mistake to leave my social worker. But at that time, I thought it was good.’

Karim often mentions not having adults for moral guidance as an explanation of why he didn’t complete his studies. Once, walking to his house, we pass the college where he studied business for six months before dropping out. He stops there for a moment, and then says, ‘You know, I met the wrong people at the wrong times, and then my life became a disaster.’ I ask him what

kind of wrong people he is referring to. Instead of directly replying to my question, Karim continues:

Because you know, when you come here as a child, you don't have your mum and dad to tell you what's good and what's wrong. So, I just met the wrong people. I just didn't know; I had no older ones around me. People to tell me, do this. I have nobody to be afraid of. It is always just me, and I do whatever I want to do.

Karim remembers how he then started to drink, to go to nightclubs, to gamble, and to smoke. As these habits increased, he quit college. He says, 'That's why I stopped going to college: I was spending my nights smoking with friends, and it went in my head, it got to me. It fucked me up. I couldn't go to college in the morning.'

Those years of freedom and fun, which culminated in him leaving education, constituted 'probably, a mistake' according to Karim. Without the guidance of significant adults, he faced a dilemma caused by competing ethical frameworks – his family's expectation that he would send remittances and become a responsible son, and the new ways of being made available in the UK. This key moment constituted what Zigon calls 'moral breakdown', when 'the ethical subject no longer dwells in the comfort of the familiar, but rather stands uncomfortably and uncannily in the situation-at-hand' (Zigon 2007, 138). Parental authority no longer defined what was good and bad for him, or guided him in making choices for his future. Other new moral worlds and spaces of freedom emerged: the demand of his peers to have fun, or the aspiration to an education which, according to his teachers and his social worker, was part of being a 'good migrant.'

Yet, this freedom was a paradoxical space, as the choice within it was often an impossible one to make. Karim describes this paradox as follows, ‘We have too much freedom, and too little freedom. We look at the outside world but from the inside, and the neighbour’s grass always looks greener.’ *Too much freedom, too little freedom*. His words capture both the constraints young people are caught in, and the new spaces of possibility and action which are often too vast to be comprehended. Without moral guidance, it was possible, as Karim tells me, ‘to do whatever he wanted to do’ and yet it was difficult to act, and make good choices. Arendt reminds us that freedom does not come in ideal terms but it is always the *exercise* of freedom. It is something undertaken within a plurality; it is the political exercise of acting in a society and in relation with others (Arendt 1958 ). For Karim, freedom remains an abstract horizon with contrasting desires and limited space for action – too much, too little.

The moment Karim stopped college could then be considered as a ‘vital conjuncture’: a key point when subjects try to mediate between structured expectations and uncertain futures (Di Nunzio 2017; Johnson-Hanks 2006). Instead of completing college, Karim opted for temporary, low-paid jobs. Now in his early twenties, he keeps every job for, at best, a couple of months and, at worst, a few weeks. Pondering his future, he says:

I would like to do something. So far I have done nothing. No mortgage, no study, no job, not married. Now I am taking driving lessons and then, maybe, I will think about going back to study my final year. Perhaps plumbing or something like that, something that gives me a profession and a job, you know.

Though Karim often repeats that he would like to study plumbing, he is still hopping between different unskilled jobs, in a continuous state of precarity. But most importantly perhaps, Karim

is keeping a space of freedom for himself in which he could be relieved from choosing whether to be a good son, or a good migrant.

### **Mediating absence**

One morning in October, Ali drives me through his suburban neighbourhood in London. Now in his early twenties, Ali has lived in this area for many years, since he arrived in the UK at 12 years old. We drive around, with no clear direction, in streets that are familiar to Ali. ‘This was my school! Oh, this place has changed a lot!’ As places become animated through memories, Ali recounts his teenage years in London, and his migration from Afghanistan.

Like Karim, Ali was not fully aware of what the journey would entail, but he could ‘sense something.’ Remembering the moment he left his family, he says, ‘There was so much sorrow, and there was so much depression. I could sense that we were leaving.’ Despite this sadness, Ali was excited about his imminent trip. He ‘sort of knew’ that he was going to the UK and he was thrilled because, so his parents told him, there were double-decker buses in that new country. Yet, he couldn’t entirely grasp the significance of the separation and of his new life, ‘I didn’t know why people were crying. I didn’t know that the journey was basically forever. That I would be having a different life and I wouldn’t come back home. I didn’t know how long the journey would be.’

After a perilous travel lasting many months, Ali finally arrived in London. Social services placed him with his uncle – a distant relative he had never met before. Although the presence of his uncle partially mitigated the absence of his parents, Ali profoundly missed the life he had in Afghanistan as a child. He says, recalling his childhood, ‘I missed waking up back home so much. It was sunny, and you could have tea with your family. I missed friends, freedom, and all the games I had in my childhood.’ He pauses, and then adds, ‘I missed the family I was with. In London, it was hard because I was just home doing nothing, sitting around, and watching TV.’ For Ali, the loss of childhood and the absence of his family permeated his

present with an impossible longing: a desire for people and places which were long lost, and no longer obtainable (Bille, Hastrup, and Soerensen 2010). He vividly remembered his childhood years in Afghanistan: how much he enjoyed playing marbles with his friends, swimming, and stealing fruit from the neighbours' trees. 'My childhood, I lost all of it,' he tells me quietly once, as we drink tea in a fast-food restaurant.

For Ali, as for Karim, migration meant the end of childhood and a new life stage of responsibilities. Time was punctuated, and loneliness filled the days. Ali recounts his first years in London thus, 'It was so rough. I got home late in the afternoon, and nobody was home. You are tired, and you have to wake up again, with an alarm clock. And then you don't understand your homework, and my uncle didn't understand either.' Such loneliness as Ali encountered has to be understood not only in terms of the separation from his family context, but also of neoliberal ways of 'governing through freedom', through which individuals become responsible for their own future (Rose 1999; Foucault 1988). The act of assuming responsibility for himself, at only 12 years old, was found in everyday small acts: setting his alarm clock, doing his homework alone. These gestures became even more arduous without the support of his parents, and the limited assistance that his uncle provided. His mother was not present to guide his actions as she did before, he explains to me, 'The first time, my mum would gently tell me not to do something. The second time, she would give me that look of hers. The third time, she would beat me. And then, I knew there were certain things I shouldn't do.' After a brief silence, Ali adds, 'But here, you are alone. You have freedom.'

A couple of years after arriving, Ali broke out of his loneliness and started to establish relationships with his schoolmates. Many of them were, like him, Afghan Pashtun unaccompanied minors from villages not far from his home town. For the first time after leaving Afghanistan, with this group, he felt like he was part of a community. He says, 'They had the same stories to share. I understood them because I went through similar things, and I

helped them as much as I could.’ The fact of establishing significant relationships with his peers, and feeling recognised by them, was for Ali the beginning of a new phase. ‘It slowly became a new life’, he says.

Yet, even if his friends provided important emotional and social support, they could not offer the kind of moral guidance adults could. His peers were struggling to make a new life too, and could not help Ali to orient his choices. Moreover, many of his friends smoked or drank alcohol – behaviours which Ali considered as *haram*, morally forbidden by the Islamic law.<sup>xiii</sup> The relationships with his peers thus exposed him to different ‘moral registers,’ sets of values and discourses, which coexisted, often contradicting one another (Schielke 2009). The disjuncture between these moral frameworks constituted a dilemma, since Ali had no familiar points of reference – namely his family, and the religious community of elders. Importantly, Ali could not rely on the presence of an established Muslim and Afghan community in his neighbourhood, since he lived in a predominantly white British area.

Without moral guidance, Ali recounts that he ‘got lost so many times’ and, for a few years, he became involved in youth gangs in his neighbourhood. ‘It was rough: I had freedom but no guidance’, he says. When I ask Ali what helped him when he was lost, he replies without hesitation, with a spark in his eyes, ‘Praying’. And he adds:

Praying makes the difference. If you pray. Keeping the values, the religion, who you are. You have to know who you are, being proud of who you are. And I am Afghan, I have these values. And my mum prays for me. When I was riding my motorbike, in 2012, I had an accident. A car crossed the street, and I crashed into it. The front part of the motorbike was completely smashed; there were no handlebars anymore. I was thrown off the motorbike, I lost my helmet and I injured my shoulder. I lost consciousness. It was dark and it was raining. I

remember I heard people screaming and coming over to me. Then, I woke up in the hospital. I could be dead, but I'm still alive. My mum prayed for me. It was my mum's prayers that kept me alive.

The everyday practice of praying was, then, a constitutive part of Ali's Muslim identity and values – what he defines as 'who you are'. But, most importantly, it also reconciled his mother's physical distance: it brought the power of her prayers close to him. According to Meyer (2011), religion<sup>xiv</sup> can serve as a medium of absence, which posits and sets out to bridge a gap between the here and now, and something beyond. Pushing these reflections further, Højer (2009) suggests that religion is not only a way of relating to the presence of absence as such. It is also a means to signify this absence with a sense of potentiality: to relate to 'what is important by virtue of not being there, by virtue of being a powerful centre of gravity, where only nothing is yet' (Højer 2009, 587). For Ali and many young people I met, religion often serves as a moral centre of gravity they can hold on to, when they feel lost. It is a way of explaining their ways of being here, and of making sense of absence. A way of establishing a sense of continuity with who they are, of reconnecting in moments of respite their past, present, and possible selves.

Importantly, religion is also a tool to deal with the uncertainty of his circumstances. Often, when talking about his present situation and plans, Ali says, 'God will know.' These words, perhaps, help to release him from the impossibility of choice – the uncertainty of knowing what the future holds for him, and what is the good choice to make. To some extent, Ali shifts the responsibility of choice from himself to God. Rather than passively accepting the difficulties of his circumstances, or opting for a clear direction, Ali is yet 'doing something and believing in an external locus of control (God)' (Ní Raghallaigh 2010, 549; see also: Goodman 2004). Reflecting on his life, Ali further elaborates:



You can't decide whether you choose that life or this life. I leave it to the will of the Lord. And I don't know whether there is much to do about it. I can still go back and reminisce, or just leave it behind. I would rather have both, and just work with it, live with it.

Looking me in the eyes, Ali smiles and adds, 'I guess, let's just see what happens!'

After studying accountancy for one year at the university, Ali stopped in order to work and be able to apply for family reunification. His desire was to bring his family who live in Afghanistan to the UK, but his application was rejected.<sup>xv</sup> He then moved to Ireland for a year, and tried to reapply, appealing to European laws.<sup>xvi</sup> Yet, the application was rejected again on the basis that he was now considered as an independent adult, which left Ali heartbroken but not without hope. 'This was not my destiny', he tells me with a quiet, sad voice. 'It wasn't meant to happen. But I don't plan to lose hope.' Despite the refusal of his family application, Ali would like to move to another country where migration policies are less restrictive, and would allow him to reunite with his family. Yet, he is still not clear where to go. Perhaps, he would go to Germany, or Italy. Or maybe Turkey, or Canada, he sometimes tells me. He would like to complete his studies, but he doesn't know exactly what to study. 'Perhaps accountancy, law, or politics,' he says. Or perhaps, he'd like to be a teacher. 'What do you think I should do?' he bluntly asks me, as we eat lunch.

Ali now works ten hours a day in a restaurant, in order to pay his debts – mostly, solicitor's fees. His main desires for the future are to study and to reunite with his family. He tells me, 'I'd like to study and to bring my family. Then, I can get married and have children. Just have a life. So many times, you just survive here. To have a good life is hard, isn't it?' After these

words, we keep quiet for a while; then, Ali breaks the silence and says, ‘Life is always hard when you’re from Afghanistan. Nothing comes easy.’

## **Conclusion**

For many young people I met, migration is a process which is permeated by two contradictory, and fundamentally future oriented, moral projects. Firstly, it is imagined as a collective family venture (see also: Cohen 2011; Orellana et al. 2001). The ties with one’s family are maintained by the act of sending remittances – investments in the household’s prospect – but also by the hope of reuniting, one day, in the UK or elsewhere. Secondly, as they arrive in the UK, young people encounter new spaces of freedom that resignify migration with new possibilities for imagining themselves, and their own future. Other aspirations start to emerge: to study, to enjoy life, to travel, to have fun, to become a different self.

This space of freedom that young people encounter is not only emerging from the experience of migration but also, in important ways, from neoliberal policies of self-governance. Such policy models envision a straightforward transition into independence, and place the onus onto individuals. They ask young people to strategically plan for their future, and to become ‘good migrants’ - that is, to become hard-working and self-sufficient adults. Yet, they significantly fail to provide the adequate support and moral guidance that young people need in such delicate life stage, in order to reorient their choices.

In this context, youth often experience a ‘moral breakdown’ between the desire to be a good son, their experience of becoming a new self, and the imperative of being a good migrant. Ali says to describe this paradoxical situation, ‘Here, you are alone. You have freedom.’ Caught between parental expectations and welfare policies of self-responsibility, youth experience a kind of freedom within loneliness, a freedom without moral guidance. Young people, then, do not tend to lack freedom per se, but rather the possibility to exercise it well: to make the *good* choice. They often lack the support of significant adults to help them assess what is good and

what is bad, to reorient their life in relation to competing systems of values. They significantly lack a supportive explanatory framework and caregiving that could replace the one previously offered by their parents.

In this space of freedom and loneliness, many young people often do not opt for a definite pathway. Instead, they keep a space of uncertainty in which they relieve themselves of the impossibility of choice. Karim's and Ali's trajectories – between precarious jobs, shifting and failing hopes – might seem, at a first glance, to be 'stuck' in a continuing liminal phase. We might assume that Karim and Ali are situated in a stage of existential insecurity in which they fail to become adult and 'incorporated,' as has been described for many migrant youth (see, for instance: Grillo 2007; Sommers 2012).

Yet, I argue that such liminality allows young people to maintain a sense of possibility when they cannot otherwise reconcile different moral frameworks, and they cannot secure the certainty of choice. It is a condition that has to be grasped in itself, in relation to the multiple factors and constraints shaping youth's imaginaries of the future, and the actual possibilities of making a viable life. In order to understand youth's trajectories, we need to distance ourselves from traditional views of morality as a conscious and individual domain of choice – that is, a rational process of moral reasoning, during which people make a free and individual decisions between alternative possible actions in order to make a better life.

Youth's complex needs highlight how freedom is not simply a space of actual self-realisation, as imagined by neoliberal policies. Often, doing the *right* thing in relation to their communities of belonging is in contrast with their individual choices, or self-interest. Instead, freedom is often a horizon of 'ethical imagination:' a space where individuals imagine novel relationships to themselves and others (Moore 2013; Liberatore 2016). It is a shifting horizon inherently fraught with tensions, where young people engage with the world within the limits of their circumstances. In the ways Ali drives aimlessly around the streets of London, or in how Karim

changes his job every month, there is perhaps a movement pointing to the painful struggles of their present, while keeping an indefinite space for their future.

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<sup>i</sup> At 18 years, young people move from being supported by a social worker to being assisted by a personal advisor. The latter has the role to advise and assist the care leaver until the age of 21, or until 25 if young people are continuing in higher education. Young people I met during fieldwork considered the support provided by personal advisers as inadequate and very limited, consisting in only sporadic meetings (i.e. once a month or less). Many young people experience this transition as abandonment or a betrayal by social care institutions, especially if a significant and beneficial relationship previously existed with their social worker.

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<sup>ii</sup> In the UK, there were 3,043 asylum applications from Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) in 2015. Overall, UASC applications represented 9% of all main applications for asylum. The countries with the highest number of applications were Eritrea (694), followed by Afghanistan (656) and Albania (456).

<sup>iii</sup> In order to be granted protection in the UK, young people must fall under the juridical category of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC): being under 18; applying for asylum in their own right; and having been separated from both parents and not being cared for by an adult.

<sup>iv</sup> The majority of young people, as they arrive after the age of 16, are not fostered by a family. Moreover, due to the national shortage of foster carers, however, local authorities often use centralised private fostering agencies. Practices of care provision may vary according to different local governments and allocation of resources.

<sup>v</sup> Young people can receive support until 25 if they continue in higher education. Local authorities, however, only support former unaccompanied minors who have established a protection claim for asylum.

<sup>vi</sup> More precisely, youth are no longer looked after by local authorities when they have been refused refugee status and have exhausted their appeal rights ('Appeal Rights Exhausted' or ARE).

<sup>vii</sup> Project Research Title "Becoming Adult: Conceptions of Futures and Wellbeing among Migrant Young People in the UK", funded by ESRC, grant number ES/L009226/1. Full ethical approval was obtained through the University of Oxford CUREC process for social science researchers. Further information about the project and methodology is available at [www.becomingadult.net](http://www.becomingadult.net).

<sup>viii</sup> Interviews were usually conducted in English. Sometimes, in cases the respondents did not feel confident speaking in English, interviews were conducted in the respondents' mother tongue (e.g. Tigrinya, Farsi) and were translated and facilitated by a native research assistant. Interviews were recorded, with the consent of respondents.

<sup>ix</sup> The two stories that I present here are part of biographical interviews and informal conversations I had with these two young people. While pertaining to individual singularities and specific life trajectories, these two accounts are also representative of larger trends in my field research in relation to the ways that young people experience their transition into adulthood and migration.

<sup>x</sup> Hazaras constitute the third largest ethnic group of Afghanistan, after the Pashtuns and the Tajiks. They are originally from central Afghanistan and, unlike the majority of the Afghan population, most of them are Shiite Muslims. The group has been politically and socially marginalized in Afghanistan.

<sup>xi</sup> Karim used the word *kalan* to describe this stage of adulthood. Hazaras have two different ways of describing adulthood: *kalan* and *jowan*. *Kalan* describes a set of responsibilities associated with adulthood, but it is not strictly linked with age. For instance, a young child who takes responsibility for his/her family (such as caring for a sick relative or working) can be considered as *kalan*. *Jowan* describes the stage of young adulthood when people are ready to get married (usually ranging from the age of 17 to early twenties).

<sup>xii</sup> In England, local governments have the sole institutional parenting role vis-à-vis unaccompanied minors and looked after children; responsibilities for care and safeguarding are primarily taken on by social workers.

<sup>xiii</sup> The notion of *haram* refers to acts which are forbidden or proscribed by Islamic law.

<sup>xiv</sup> I refer here to religion as a set of beliefs in a 'higher power' or 'God', and to the ways young people used the term. In this article, I don't engage with institutions and community practices associated with faith, but rather with individual everyday faith practices.

<sup>xv</sup> The current UK policy does not recognise unaccompanied children's right to be reunited with their parents but regards it as a matter of discretion to be exercised only when there are compelling and compassionate circumstances.

<sup>xvi</sup> Under European regulations, unaccompanied minors who have been recognised as refugees have the right to bring their family members into the host country. Under Council Directive 2003/86/EC on the Right to Family Reunification, EU countries are required to allow the entry and residence of family members of the minor's first-degree relatives in the direct ascending line.