

# God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Erik J. Wielenberg

---

Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road* is, among other things, a meditation on morality, what makes human life meaningful, and the relationship between these things and God. While the novel is rife with religious imagery and ideas, it suggests a conception of morality and meaning that is secular in nature. In this paper I show that while the existence of God remains ambiguous throughout the novel, *The Road* contains both a clear moral code and a view about what makes life meaningful. I describe this moral code and examine its connection with meaning in life. Along the way, I discuss the struggle of the man and child to live up to the moral code. I then make the case that the views of morality and meaning found in *The Road* imply that morality does not depend upon God for its existence or justification. Through this discussion, I hope to deepen our understanding both of morality and of *The Road*.

## God's Ambiguity and the Man's Mission

The first words spoken aloud by the man in *The Road* are: "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (McCarthy 5). This statement introduces a fundamental ambiguity that runs throughout the novel. The man does not declare his son to be the word of God; instead, his utterance is hypothetical in nature. He declares that his son is the word of God *or* God never spoke. The book of Genesis depicts God as creating through speech (Genesis 1:1-31); a God that does not speak is a God that does not create. Thus, the man's declaration is that either his son is the word of God, or, for all practical purposes, the universe is a godless one.

Many events in the novel can be interpreted in accordance with both possibilities. Consider, for example, the pattern of near demise followed by unlikely rescue that repeats itself throughout the story. The father and son are on the point of starvation when they discover an underground bunker filled with food (McCarthy 138). Later, facing death by starvation once again, the boy spots a house in the distance, and the house turns out to have food in it (202). Still later, the man finds a flare gun on an abandoned sailboat—a gun that is crucial in a later encounter (240). And, of course, there is the boy's encounter with the shotgun-toting veteran after the death of his father (281). Are these events little miracles—the hand of God reaching into the burned-out hellscape to protect the child—or are they just strokes of good fortune? The answer to this question remains unclear. There are hints of divine activity, but they are never more than hints. For instance, the name of the abandoned sailboat is "Pajaro de Esperanza"—bird of hope. The bird of hope is the dove. In the Old Testament, a dove carrying an olive leaf signals to Noah that the waters of the flood are receding (Genesis 8:11). But the sailboat named after the dove brings a message of despair; it originates from Tenerife, a Spanish island off the coast of Africa. It brings the message that the catastrophe that constitutes the backdrop of *The Road* is worldwide.

A particularly tantalizing illustration of this ambiguity is the father and son's encounter with an old man who may or may not be named "Ely" (McCarthy 161). This character resembles the Old Testament prophet Elijah in certain ways (see Snyder 81).

Elijah predicted a drought (1 Kings 17:1); Ely says he knew that the catastrophe (or something like it) was coming—"I always believed in it" (McCarthy 168). Ely wonders about being the last person left alive: "Suppose you were the last one left? Suppose you did that to yourself?" (169). Elijah tells God that "the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. *I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away*" (1 Kings 19:10, emphasis added). Elijah wanders in the wilderness and is given food by God, who delivers the food by way of ravens (1 Kings 17:5-7); Ely is fed by the boy and possibly mistakes him for an angel (McCarthy 172). In the book of Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament, Malachi foretells a day of judgment, a day "burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day ... will leave them neither root nor branch" (Malachi 4:1). Malachi declares that God will send Elijah in advance of this fiery day of judgment. The book of Malachi—and the Old Testament itself—ends like this:

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6)

The mysterious catastrophe of *The Road* is biblical in scope and it involves fire—a lot of fire. And it has obviously turned the hearts of the man and the child to each other. These hints suggest that perhaps Ely is a prophet who predicted the catastrophe of *The Road* and preceded the child, who is the word of God. On the other hand, Ely has lost his faith: "I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better" (McCarthy 172). He also denies that his name is "Ely" (171). Strikingly, Ely simultaneously denies the existence of God and declares himself to be a prophet in a single paradoxical sentence: "There is no God and we are his prophets" (170). These aspects of Ely point toward the possibility that God never spoke. This old man has survived not through divine assistance but rather through random chance; he and all the other survivors of the catastrophe are prophets of atheism, bearing witness to the absence of God from the universe.

The uncertainty about God's presence exists not just in the universe of *The Road* but also in the mind of the man. At times he tries to convince the child, and possibly himself, that God is still at work in the world: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (77). On an earlier occasion, kneeling Job-like in ashes (Job 2:8), the man expresses doubt about God's existence: "Are you there? ... Will I see you at the last?"<sup>1</sup> Like the man, Job goes about "in sunless gloom" (Job 30:28); unlike the man, Job possesses unwavering faith: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth ... then in my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:25-27). Job asks God: "Do you have eyes of flesh?" (Job 10:4). The man wonders: "Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul?" (McCarthy 11-2). The man's last remark is reminiscent of the advice given to Job by his wife: "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Indeed, the man recalls this advice himself later (McCarthy 114).

The man's predicament illustrates the following paradox. Great suffering appears to constitute evidence against the existence of a loving God, but it also has the capacity to

produce or strengthen belief in such a God. It is when we suffer that we most need belief in a loving God to keep ourselves going. The more reason we have to doubt God's reality, the more we need to believe. The world of *The Road* is described as "[b]arren, silent, godless" (McCarthy 4) and the man recognizes that "[s]ome part of him always wished it to be over" (154). It is precisely because of this that he needs to believe that he is on a divine mission.

Contemporary research suggests a correlation between misery and religiosity. There is a growing body of evidence from sociology and psychology that indicates that the happiest nations of the world are also the least religious; the most socially dysfunctional exhibit the highest levels of religiosity.<sup>2</sup> Particularly striking is Phil Zuckerman's book *Society without God*, which is an examination of Sweden and Denmark. According to Zuckerman, these nations are "probably the least religious countries in the world, and possibly in the history of the world" (2). They are also, it turns out, "among the 'best' countries in the world, at least according to standard sociological measures" (Zuckerman 4). Perhaps a contributing factor to this correlation is that misery necessitates faith. In the case of the man, his love for his son motivates him to keep going. His problem is that his desire to keep going appears to lack a rational foundation. This is best illustrated by the flashback in which his wife explains her decision to commit suicide: "Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us ... They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant" (McCarthy 56). After she leaves to kill herself, the man concedes that "she was right. There was no argument" (58). Nevertheless, the man keeps on going despite recognizing, at some level, that the struggle may very well be futile. Because it is in the nature of human beings to desire that the things they do make sense, he grasps for beliefs that will make his struggle make sense. Among these is the belief that he is on a divine mission. It is not that he wants to keep going because he believes that he is on a divine mission. Rather, the desire comes first: because he wants to keep going, he believes—or tries to believe—that he is on a divine mission. At a particularly desperate moment, the man recalls his wife's accusation that he won't face the truth: "He wrapped him in his own parka and wrapped him in the blanket and sat holding him, rocking back and forth. A single round in the revolver. You will not face the truth. You will not" (68).

Perhaps the man recalls his wife's accusation because at that moment, he regrets not following her example. But it is also possible to see the man's thoughts here not as a despairing admission but rather as an exhortation to himself not to face the truth. He realizes that if he faces reality he is likely to despair entirely, so he turns his wife's accusation into a rallying cry. Facing the truth means giving up, so he urges himself not to face the truth.

The man struggles to motivate the child as well as himself. He sometimes invokes the notion of carrying the fire in order to reassure the child. It is because they are carrying the fire, he says, that nothing bad will happen to them (83). What does it mean to carry the fire? Throughout much of the story, the two are literally carrying fire, or at least the means to produce it. Fire sustains them; it keeps them warm and cooks their food. It allows them to play cards and allows the man to read to the child at night. Fire is the foundation of civilization. Of course, fire is also the primary implement of the destruction of civilization in *The Road*. Perhaps to carry the fire is to carry the seeds of civilization. If civilization is to return to the world, it will be through the efforts of "good guys" like the

man and the child. At the very least, the two struggle to maintain civilization between themselves.

Carrying the fire is not easy. In Greek mythology, Prometheus stole fire from Zeus and gave it to humanity. As punishment for the theft, Prometheus is tied to a rock. Each day, a giant eagle eats his liver. But Prometheus does not die. Instead, his liver regrows and is eaten again the following day. Because Prometheus carried the fire to humanity, his days are filled with suffering. This is not unlike the situation of the man and the child.

Just before he dies, the man tells the child that he has been the one carrying the fire the entire time: "It's inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (279). The man says this to try to convince the child not to give up, to keep going down the road. Perhaps the notion of carrying the fire is just a crude myth adopted by the two to keep themselves going, and the man tries to use the myth to inspire the child not to give up after he dies. But perhaps there is more to it than this. Carrying the fire and being a good guy are closely related: only good guys carry the fire. Before he dies, the man also tells the child: "You're the best guy. You always were" (279). Prior to this point, the man has always maintained that *they* are the good guys and that *they* are carrying the fire. As he is dying, the man seems to be saying that the child is the true good guy. What are we to make of this? To answer this question, we must consider what it means to be a "good guy" in the world of *The Road*.

### The Code of the Good Guys

The philosopher Immanuel Kant maintained that all of our moral duties boil down to one fundamental principle, which he called "the Categorical Imperative": always respect the intrinsic worth of rational beings (Kant, *Grounding* 36; *Virtue* 97). The basis of Kantian moral philosophy is that there is an important distinction between *persons* and mere *things*. Things are valuable only as tools; when they no longer serve your purposes, you are free to discard them. Persons, however, have an intrinsic worth that must always be valued and respected.

In the world of *The Road*, there is a simple rule for distinguishing the good guys from the bad guys. Bad guys eat people; good guys don't. This is what remains of the Categorical Imperative: don't treat people as mere food. While this is the most obvious principle to which good guys are committed, it is not the only one. It is possible to discern in *The Road* a Code of the Good Guys, a set of principles to which good guys are committed. That Code includes the following rules:

1. Don't eat people.
2. Don't steal.
3. Don't lie.
4. Keep your promises.
5. Help others.
6. Never give up.

The man tries to teach these principles to the child and he tries to follow them himself. Throughout the novel we witness the man's struggle to be a good guy, to do

what is right in a world in which most people seem to have abandoned morality altogether.

One confounding factor in this struggle is that at least some of these moral principles admit of exceptions. At least some of these principles are rules-of-thumb that hold only for the most part. Early in the novel, the man and the child encounter a man who has recently been struck by lightning and is clearly at the point of death. The child wants to help him, but the man refuses. He explains his actions to the child this way: “We have no way to help him. I’m sorry for what happened to him but we cant fix it” (McCarthy 50). Later he tells the child: “He’s going to die. We cant share what we have or we’ll die too” (52). Under the circumstances, the man’s actions may be justified. But there is a danger lurking here. The danger is that engaging in justified violations of the code of the good guys can make unjustified violations more likely; a slippery slope lurks. Kant warned against precisely this danger:

Hereby arises ... a propensity to quibble with these strict laws of duty, to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and to make them, where possible, more compatible with our wishes and inclinations. Thereby are such laws corrupted in their very foundations and their whole dignity is destroyed. (Kant, *Grounding* 17)

The man sometimes breaks his promises to the child. For example, at one point he pretends he has split a half-packet of cocoa between the two of them when in reality he has given it all to the boy, something he has previously promised not to do. The boy scolds him: “If you break little promises, you’ll break big ones. That’s what you said” (McCarthy 34). This is Kant’s slippery-slope worry. Breaking a promise in order to give the child all of the cocoa may be permissible, but the worry is that it will lead to impermissible promise-breaking. The man acknowledges the danger but tries to reassure the boy: “I know. But I wont [break big promises]” (34).

The man’s most important promise to the child is that he will never leave him, even in death. When the man is at the point of death, the child begs his father to kill him: “Just take me with you. Please” (279). When it comes right down to it, the father finds himself unable to fulfill the child’s request: “I cant. I cant hold my dead son in my arms. I thought I could but I cant” (279). However, he finds another way to keep this promise. He tells his son that they will be able to talk to each other even after he dies, as long as the son practices: “You’ll have to make it like talk that you imagine” (279). After the father dies, the child promises to talk to him every day and he keeps this promise: “[T]he best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget” (286). The child’s promise to talk to his father every day and the father’s promise never to leave the child are intertwined; by keeping his own promise, the child enables the father to keep his. Thus, while the man doesn’t keep all of his promises, he does keep his biggest promise.

The man also struggles when it comes to helping others. He is suspicious and distrustful of others. He is reluctant to share what little food they have. The child, by contrast, typically tries to reach out to other people and help them. Thus, the encounter with the lightning victim illustrates a dynamic that is repeated throughout the novel. The child often seems to function as the man’s conscience in this regard. When the man helps

others, it is at the urging of the child. The man believes in the ideal of helping others but has a hard time living up to it, given the circumstances. At one point the boy complains: “[I]n the stories [told by the man] we’re always helping people and we don’t help people” (268).

One of the man’s more serious failures to help others involves his failure to help another child. This failing in turn hints at a more serious broken promise. This episode is worth considering in detail.

### A Broken Promise and the Man’s Central Flaw

The two enter a town and explore the area. The man leaves the child alone on the steps of a building. While the man is away, the child sees another boy: “A face was looking at him. A boy, about his age, wrapped in an outsized wool coat with the sleeves turned back” (84). The child runs toward the boy, but the boy has vanished. The child’s shouts for the boy to come back bring the man running: “What are you doing? he hissed” (84).

At this point the familiar dynamic occurs. The child wants to help the other boy, but the man is reluctant. The man insists that they have to leave the town now that they have attracted attention to themselves. Initially the man denies that the child really saw another boy. Then he insists that there were adults around to take care of the other boy; they were just hiding (85). He tries to rationalize his actions. Good guys help others—they certainly don’t abandon helpless children. The man wants to be a good guy; therefore, he cannot admit that he is abandoning another child.

After the two camp for the night, having left the town (and the other boy) behind, a remarkable passage occurs:

The dog that he remembers followed us for two days. I tried to coax it to come but it would not. I made a noose of wire to catch it. There were three cartridges in the pistol. None to spare. She walked away down the road. The boy looked after her and then he looked at me and then he looked at the dog and he began to cry and to beg for the dog’s life and I promised I would not hurt the dog. A trellis of a dog with the hide stretched over it. The next day it was gone. That is the dog he remembers. He doesn’t remember any little boys. (87)

In this passage, the man offers an extended rationalization of his actions. He tries to convince the reader, or perhaps himself, that the child did not really see another boy in the town they have just left. When they first entered that town, they heard a dog barking in the distance (82). Now the man even denies that; he explains that the child is confused, thinking of an earlier occasion when they had encountered a dog. He denies the presence of a dog or another child in the town they have just left.

In telling this lie, the man reveals a previous broken promise. The man describes an episode when the wife was still alive and they still had three bullets in the gun. When the main narrative of novel begins, there are two bullets in the gun. This raises a question: what happened to the third bullet? This flashback suggests an answer.

In the flashback, the three travelers are followed by a dog. The man clearly wants to catch it and kill it for food. The wife walks away down the road because she does not want to watch the man kill the dog. The child realizes what is happening and begs the man not to kill the dog. The next day the dog is gone. What happened to it? The answer, I suggest, is that the man used the third bullet to kill the dog for food. In so doing, he breaks his promise to the child not to hurt the dog.

Here is an argument for this interpretation. In the world of *The Road*, there are three main uses for a bullet: suicide, self-defense, and killing for food. We know that the third bullet was not used for suicide; the wife accomplishes her suicide by using a “flake of obsidian” (58). There is evidence that the third bullet was not used for self-defense either. After the man uses the second bullet to kill the roadrat who menaces the child with a knife, he tells the child: “You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again” (77). This suggests that the encounter with the roadrat constitutes the first use of a bullet for self-defense. Finally, when the man and child initially enter the town and hear a dog barking in the distance, the child immediately asks: “We’re not going to kill it, are we Papa?” (82). This hints that the child remembers the earlier occasion when they did kill and eat a dog—despite the man’s promise not to hurt the dog.

As I suggested earlier, part of the man’s struggle to be a good guy stems from the slippery-slope problem: sometimes it is morally permissible to violate the code of the good guys, but recognizing this can lead one into impermissible violations. A second confounding factor in the man’s struggle to be a good guy is suggested by something he tells the child after he leaves the thief to die: “I’m scared. ... Do you understand? I’m scared” (259). Even when you know what the right thing to do is, it is often difficult to get yourself to do it. The man knows the code of the good guys. He tries to live up to it; he does not always succeed.

Does this mean that the man is not really a good guy after all? I suggest that reflection on this question suggests that the idea that people are divided into good guys, who always do what morality requires, and bad guys, who never do what morality requires, is an oversimplification. Reality is more complex than this. However, there is an important distinction to be made between those who care about doing the right thing and those who do not. The man is a good guy in that he cares about doing the right thing. Because we are human, having a commitment to moral principles does not mean that we will always live up to those principles. Among those who have such a commitment, some will have greater success than others in living up their principles. The man believes in morality; he tells the child “stories of courage and justice” (41). He tells the child stories in which they help others. The child complains that “[t]hose stories are not true” (268), but the fact that the man tells such stories is nevertheless significant. The stories we tell reflect our ideals. Bad guys do not tell stories like this, and they do not weep at the loss of beauty and goodness (129). Bad guys are not people who strive to be moral and fail; they are people who have ceased to care about morality altogether. They care only about survival and will do anything to attain it. They live without restraint, without principles at all: “My brother at last. The reptilian calculations in those cold and shifting eyes. The gray and rotting teeth. Claggy with human flesh” (75). Socrates suggested that what is important is “not [merely] life, but the good [i.e. just] life” (Plato 48b). Good guys accept this Socratic view and strive to live in accordance with it; bad guys care only about

living, not about how they live. In the world of *The Road*, this means that they will even eat their own children in order to survive.

In one of the more disturbing episodes in *The Road*, the man and the child come across a decapitated baby roasting on a spit (McCarthy 198). They are nearly out of food when they make this find. Horrifying as it is to contemplate, the fact is that the baby constitutes food. Others killed and cooked the baby; not eating it is not going to bring it back to life. But there is never any question that they will not eat the baby; they are good guys, and good guys don't eat people—"no matter what" (128).

The man struggles to do what he knows is right. Like many of us, he is a flawed good guy. He does not keep all of his promises, but he keeps his biggest promise. He won't eat people, no matter what. He never gives up. Still, he does possess an important flaw. The man has been damaged by his horrific experiences. He has lost the capacity to trust and make connections with others. Early on we are told that the man and the child are "each the other's world entire" (6). The man no longer has the capacity to expand his world beyond the child; the child, by contrast, does have this ability. This difference between the two explains the recurring conflict between them over helping others. The child is naturally inclined to reach out, to try to make connections with other people, while the man's first instinct is to distrust and avoid others. As the man is dying, he gives the child the following instructions: "You need to find the good guys but you cant take any chances. No chances. Do you hear?" (278). It is impossible to follow these instructions; there is no way to connect with other good guys without taking some sort of chance. When the child encounters the veteran after the death of his father, he asks him how he knows he is one of the good guys. The man responds: "You dont. You'll have to take a shot" (283). The child takes a chance, disobeying his father's instructions, and as a result is able to connect with another family.

The man's flawed instructions arise from his inability to trust others. This flaw has an important implication for the child—the child is unable to connect with other good guys as long as his father is alive. There are hints that the veteran (and perhaps his family) have been following the man and the child for a long time, but were reluctant to approach while the man was still alive. For example, recall the veteran's first question to the child: "Where's the man you were with?" (282). Had the veteran approached while the man was still alive, the man would have done everything he could to avoid interacting with the veteran. The man knows that things are hopeless for the child unless he can connect with other good guys, yet this cannot happen until the man has died. The most important function of parents is to enable their children to flourish in an independent way. Because the man is damaged, he is unable to fulfill this function completely. He can truly succeed as a parent only by dying.

The man recognizes this difference between himself and the child; he is broken and knows it. He worries not just about the survival of the child, but about the survival of the goodness within the child: "But when he bent to see into the boy's face under the hood of the blanket he very much feared that something was gone that could not be put right again" (136). When he tells the boy that he is the one carrying the fire, that he is "the best guy" (279), he is indicating that the child has a crucial ability that he has lost. Only a good guy who has the ability to make connections with other people, to enter or help form a community, truly carries the fire. The child has this ability. This is why the

child is the one who is really carrying the fire—and always has carried it. The man carries the fire only in a secondary sense: he carries the child.

### Meaningful Lives

In her final conversation with the man, the wife tells him: “I’d take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It’s the right thing to do” (56). With these words, the wife declares not only that there is nothing wrong with committing suicide but that she and the man ought to kill the child as well. The foundation of her position is that the three of them will soon face a horrific death in any case:

Sooner or later they will catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They’ll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You’d rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant. (56)

With this horrific fate both inevitable and imminent, the wife declares that her only hope is “for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (57).

Although the man concedes that “she was right” (58), his actions prove that she was wrong. The horrible fate she saw as inevitable and imminent was not. At the end of the novel, the man dies but is not eaten, and the child is drawn into a new family. Nevertheless, the wife’s position and suicide raise an important question. The wife seems to care about nothing and finds life meaningless (56). This raises the following question: what makes life meaningful? What is it that bestows value on human life? We will see that *The Road* answers this question in a way that implies that, God or no God, human life can be meaningful, even in circumstances as desperate as those depicted in the novel.

The specter of a meaningless existence haunts *The Road*. We have already touched on the man’s desperate efforts to convince himself that there is a purpose to his struggle. He tells his wife that they are survivors; she responds that they are “the walking dead in a horror film” (55). He tries to convince her that they must take a stand; she says that “there is no stand to take” (57). One particularly powerful moment in the novel occurs early on in a relatively happy scene, when the man and child are camped near a waterfall. The man tries to teach the child to swim: “He held him and floated him about, the boy gasping and chopping at the water. You’re doing good, the man said. You’re doing good” (39). There is a sense of hopelessness to this image, evoked by the fact that teaching a child to swim is an activity that looks toward the future. At one point the child has a dream about a toy penguin. It was a wind-up penguin; in the dream, the penguin keeps moving even though “[t]he winder wasnt turning” (37). The penguin just keeps going, inexplicably, pointlessly. This image perfectly captures the dreaded possibility that the “survivors” of the catastrophe are trapped in a meaningless existence, that “[e]very day is a lie” (238). What *is* the point of it all?

*The Road* suggests a simple yet powerful answer to this question. To see the answer, we need to consider a flashback that occurs early on in the novel. The flashback depicts a day from the man’s childhood. In it, he and his uncle spend an entire day sailing across a lake to retrieve a single piece of firewood. They do not speak to each other. The man describes this day as “the perfect day of his childhood” (13). But what is so great about it?

The answer is that, despite (or perhaps partly owing to) the absence of verbal communication between them, the man and his uncle spend the day sharing a deep connection with each other. They are working together in a common task; the uncle is sharing his knowledge with the man, and the man is learning from his uncle. This is what makes the day perfect, and this is what provides human lives—both in the world of *The Road* and in our world—with meaning: connections with other people. In a word, the point of it all is love.

Despite the many horrors the man and the child face, they also share a deep connection. This deep connection provides their lives with meaning and value amidst all their suffering. It is the existence of this relationship that makes it worth continuing the struggle. Every day is not a lie; every day is a victory, a day in which more meaning and value is won: “The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. . . . So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you” (54). Many of the days the man and child spend together have the same essential structure as the perfect day of the man’s childhood. They spend their days working together toward a common goal, the man sharing his knowledge, the child learning from the man, the two of them sharing a deep connection. It is surely no accident that the “perfect day” is spent in a quest for firewood—the same quest that occupies the man and child in most of their days together on the road.

The motives underlying the wife’s suicide are not as straightforward as they may initially appear. Some of her remarks suggest that she favors suicide because it is the lesser of two possible evils, the other evil being raped, murdered, and eaten. But there are hints of another kind of motivation for her suicide: that she has lost her connection with the man and the child. When the man tells her that he would never leave her, she says that she doesn’t care and describes herself as a “faithless slut” (57). She declares:

My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none. Maybe you’ll be good at it. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. (57)

These lines suggest that the wife no longer feels sorrow. There is also an indication that she does not believe in the man; she says that she doubts that he will be good at caring for the child. Earlier, she tells him: “You cant protect us” (56). She says that she has “come this far” only because she was surviving for other people; the fact that she no longer wishes to live suggests that she no longer cares about those people. If this interpretation is correct, it raises a question. What is the cause of the rift between the wife and the rest of the family? Perhaps it stems in part from the fact that she has seen the man break his promises, for example his promise to the child not to kill the dog. Another clue is found in a flashback that describes the birth of the child. We are told that during the child’s birth, “[h]er [the wife’s] cries meant nothing to him” (57). Perhaps the man’s focus on caring for his son has caused him to neglect his wife. In any case, there are clear indications that she has lost her faith in him, and at least hints that she has lost her

connection with both the man and the child. This explains the man's guilt over her death: "He did not take care of her and she died alone somewhere in the dark" (32).

The absence of connections with others is the real threat to meaning and value; the source of meaning and value is love. The greatest fear of the man and the child is not death, but rather being alone. It is telling that the wife goes off by herself to commit suicide. Her death does not sever her connections with others; rather, it frees her from an existence in which all such connections have already been severed. Again, what is true in the world of the novel is true of our world as well: the best predictor of suicide is social isolation.

Some philosophers maintain that the non-existence of God would render all human lives meaningless, regardless of the circumstances of the world. For instance, the contemporary Christian philosopher William Craig writes:

If there is no God, then man and the universe are doomed. Like prisoners condemned to death, we await our unavoidable execution. ... The contributions of the scientist to the advance of human knowledge, the researches of the doctor to alleviate pain and suffering, the efforts of the diplomat to secure peace in the world, the sacrifices of good men everywhere to better the lot of the human race—all these come to nothing. In the end they don't make one bit of difference, not one bit. Each person's life is therefore without ultimate significance. And because our lives are ultimately meaningless, the activities we fill our lives with are also meaningless. The long hours spent in study at the university, our jobs, or interests, our friendships—all these are, in the final analysis, utterly meaningless. This is the horror of modern man: because he ends in nothing, he is nothing. (Craig 58-9)

We have seen that it is unclear whether God is present in the world of *The Road*. In Craig's mind, everything hangs on the resolution of this issue. If God did not speak, then the struggles of the man and the child are pointless and their lives meaningless—and the same is true of our lives and struggles.

This is powerful stuff. If Craig is right, we had better hope that God exists. But Craig's reasoning is flawed. In Craig's terminology, for an activity to have *ultimate* meaning or significance, that activity must make a difference in how things turn out in the end—the very end. Without God, no human activity can affect the final state of the universe, and so all of our activities lack what Craig labels "ultimate meaning." From this he infers that all of our activities are meaningless. But this simply does not follow. The crucial slide occurs in this sentence: "And because our lives are ultimately meaningless, the activities we fill our lives with are also meaningless." What Craig is saying in that sentence is that any activity that does not influence how things turn out in the very end is entirely meaningless.

Craig's mistake is to overlook the fact that some activities carry value and meaning within themselves; their meaning is not derived merely from the ultimate effect they produce. *The Road* points us toward such an activity: sharing deep connections with other human beings. It is clear early on in the novel that the father's days are numbered. Yet each day that the man and the child spend together contains value and meaning,

regardless of the final outcome. Each day the two spend together is “providential to itself” (McCarthy 54). Being temporary is not the same as being meaningless or worthless. Even if God never spoke, the lives of the man and the boy are filled with meaning. And, God or no God, our lives can be too, for the absence of God does not make a lie of love.

Craig also says: “According to the Christian world view, God does exist, and man’s life does not end at the grave. In the resurrection body man may enjoy eternal life and fellowship with God” (Craig 72). Christianity posits a perfect Father for each of us, one that understands us each perfectly and whose love for us is unconditional and everlasting. The great good of the Christian universe—the one activity that, according to Craig, carries its own meaning and value within itself, is direct union and fellowship with God. It should be obvious that this great good is an idealized version of human fellowship. The problem with human fellowship is that it involves flawed, mortal humans. Christianity promises a connection with another being that is perfect both in its quality and its duration. If God is real, then the faithful will not be lonely in the end; they will make the ultimate connection with another being after death. Thus, a Christian universe provides a kind of guarantee that is lacking in a godless universe. Regardless of the circumstances of this life, a meaningful existence is always attainable.

In a godless universe, there is no such guarantee; human fellowship is an unreliable thing in any world. On the other hand, it has its advantages. While creatures of flesh and blood do not last forever, we know that they are real, and we can reach out and touch them. At the end of *The Road*, we are told that when the child is in the care of his new family, “[h]e tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget” (McCarthy 286). The child, it seems, drew the most comfort from the temporary, flawed but clearly real relationship he had with his earthly father.

I said earlier that the real threat to meaning is the absence of connections with others. This is true whether God is real or not. Hell is often conceived of as a fiery place, a place of great suffering, filled with “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:42). But what truly makes hell hellish is the isolation—the isolation from God. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes: “[T]he answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question: ‘What are you asking God to do?’ ... To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does” (130). Everlasting, inescapable loneliness: *that* is hell.

#### Moral Motivation in a Godless Universe

A brief paragraph late in the novel raises doubts about the man’s struggles: “Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground” (McCarthy 196). The final two sentences dismiss one reason the man might have to struggle to be a good guy, to carry the fire, and to protect and care for his son. The dismissed reason is that the man is being judged by his ancestors regarding how well he lives up to the standards of right and wrong.

The man has a habit of looking at the sky even though he knows there is nothing to see there (103). Before the catastrophe, one might have gleaned information about the time of day, which direction one was heading, the weather, and so on, by looking to the

sky. But after the catastrophe, looking at the sky is pointless; the habit no longer makes sense. The paragraph quoted above raises the worry that the habit of looking to moral principles for guidance is similarly pointless. Before the catastrophe, such a practice would have made sense; after the catastrophe, looking to morality for guidance is as senseless as looking to the sky for guidance.

This worry is in turn connected to one of the oldest questions in moral philosophy: why be moral? What reason do we have to struggle to be good guys? Some believe that there is a reason to be moral only if God exists. William Craig, for example, declares that “[i]f life ends at the grave, then it makes no difference whether one has lived as a Stalin or as a saint. ... [Y]ou may as well just live as you please” (Craig 60-1).

Craig assumes that all reasons are *self-interested* reasons. He assumes that we have a reason to care about morality only if there is something in it for us. But another possibility is that there are *moral* reasons. Consider the first principle of the good guys in *The Road*: don’t eat people. A perfectly good reason to refrain from killing and eating people is that such an act inflicts a horrifying experience on its victim. The same things that make actions right or wrong in the first place also constitute reasons to perform (or refrain from performing) those actions.

Still, if self-interested reasons to care about morality in a godless universe are desired, such reasons exist. In *The Road*, whenever the man strays from the path of the good guys, the child stops speaking to him for a while. This is particularly evident in cases of failures to help others. Each moral transgression by the man weakens, at least temporarily, the connection between the two. Since it is precisely this relationship that sustains the man, giving his life meaning, he has a straightforward, self-interested reason to do his best to be a good guy. Being a good guy draws him closer to his son; failing to be a good guy separates him from his son (and, if the child is the word of God, moral transgressions separate the man from God). One reviewer of *The Road* wrote that the novel gives us “redemption in the form of the love between a parent and a child—their desire to be good although it serves no purpose” (Egan). But the man and child’s desire to be good does serve a purpose: only those who strive to be moral are capable of the sort of love the two share. The desire to be good makes the redemption possible.

More generally, a self-interested reason to care about morality in a godless universe is that being moral enables us to have meaningful connections with other people, whereas moral transgressions tend to isolate us from each other. Extreme immorality may produce substantial material benefits; however, the cost of such immorality—even when undetected—is isolation. It is interesting that Craig specifically mentions Stalin: “If life ends at the grave, then it makes no difference whether one has lived as a Stalin or as a saint” (Craig 60-1). Consider this account of Stalin toward the end of his life:

His bitterness, paranoia and fear make it hard to imagine anyone else wanting to be Stalin. He was described as ‘sickly, suspicious’ by Khrushchev, who wrote, ‘He could look at a man and say, “Why are your eyes so shifty today?” or “Why are you turning so much today and avoiding looking me directly in the eyes?” ... Khrushchev noticed how terribly lonely he was, and how he needed people round him all the time: ‘When he woke up in the morning, he would immediately summon us, either inviting us to the movies or starting some conversation which could

have been finished in two minutes but was stretched out so that we could stay with him longer.” (Glover 250)

The cannibals of *The Road* may survive, but they have paid a heavy price for doing so. By turning their back on morality, they have cut themselves off from genuine human connections forever. After he is killed by the man, the roadrat who menaces the child with a knife is cooked and eaten by his traveling companions (McCarthy 71). The humans that constitute these packs of cannibals may not be alone in a physical sense, but they are alone in a much deeper sense. I mentioned earlier that Kant suggested that the foundation of morality is the recognition that persons are different from mere things in that the former have an intrinsic worth and dignity that should be respected at all times. *The Road* teaches us the cost of ignoring this distinction: by treating other people as mere things, one risks becoming a mere thing oneself, a thing like the toy penguin in the boy’s dream, a thing that keeps going, but for no good reason.

If God spoke, then to turn one’s back on morality is to risk alienating oneself from God. A good reason to be moral is to bring oneself closer to God. In a godless universe, to turn one’s back on morality is to risk alienating oneself from the rest of humanity. The Stalins and Bernie Madoffs of this world are destined for one sort of hell or another; the only question is whether that hell will be temporary or everlasting. In any event, it is manifestly false to claim that if God does not exist, then it makes no difference how we live.

The fundamental ambiguity of God’s existence remains unresolved in *The Road*. One of the lessons of the novel is that the answer to the question of whether God exists is not as important as it is often taken to be. In particular, the question is far less relevant to morality and meaning than many believe. The Code of the Good Guys is straightforward, easily recognized, and universal. It does not belong exclusively to any particular religious tradition. God or no God, the most valuable thing in this world is love, and a good reason to struggle to be moral is that doing so is the only way to attain genuine love. The cost of immorality is, ultimately, loneliness.

According to Christianity, the most important commandment of all is to love God with all of your heart. Neither the man nor the child fulfills this commandment. The novel opens with the man wondering whether he will have an opportunity to throttle God by the neck and cursing Him (11-2). It ends with the child choosing to talk to the man rather than God (286). By the standards of Christian morality, neither the man nor the child does particularly well. The proper conclusion to draw from this is that Christian morality is flawed.

At one point Ely suggests that perhaps the child believes in God. The man replies that he does not know what the child believes in (174). The answer to Ely’s question is that the child believes in humanity. By struggling to be a good guy and keeping his big promise, the man manages to keep the child’s faith in humanity alive. This faith in humanity enables the child to trust the veteran, which in turn allows him to attain salvation—earthly salvation, in the form of meaningful connections with other human beings.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The parallels between *The Road* and the book of Job are explored in depth in Vanderheide.

<sup>2</sup> See Zuckerman, Paul 2005, and Paul 2009.

<sup>3</sup>I would like to thank Greg Schwipps and the editorial board of *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to thank Schwipps for directing me to the writings of Cormac McCarthy in the first place.

## Works Cited

- Craig, William Lane. *Reasonable Faith*, revised edition. Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1994.
- Egan, Jennifer. "Men at Work: The Literary Masculinity of Cormac McCarthy." *Slate Magazine*. October 10, 2006 [<http://www.slate.com/id/2151300/>]. Accessed 2/21/11.
- Glover, Jonathan. *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Trans. James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. J. Ellington. New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964.
- Lewis, Clive Staples. *Mere Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage International, 2006.
- Paul, Gregory S. "Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies." *Journal of Religion and Society* 7 (2005):
- Paul, Gregory S. "The Chronic Dependence of Popular Religiosity upon Dysfunctional Psychosociological Conditions." *Evolutionary Psychology* 7 (2009): 398-441
- Plato. *Five Dialogues*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Trans. G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.
- Snyder, Phillip A. "Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 69-86.
- Vanderheide, John. "Sighting Leviathan: Ritualism, Daemonism and the Book of Job in Cormac McCarthy's Latest Works." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (Autumn 2008): 107-20.
- Zuckerman, Phil. *Society without God*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

The Road, Cormac McCarthy's tenth and Pulitzer Prize winning novel, tells the story of an unnamed man and his son, trying to survive in the aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe that left Earth stuck in atomic winter, where nearly all animals and plants are extinct, ashes are falling from the sky and the ground is burned and barren. Following the road throughout the country their goal is to reach the coast in hope for a better future. On their way they constantly struggle with starvation, sickness and the threat of thieves and cannibals that roam the road. Except for some clothes and the food the Cormac McCarthy's novel The Road is, among other things, a meditation on morality, what makes human life meaningful, and the relationship between these things and God. While the novel is rife with religious imagery and ideas, it suggests a conception of morality and meaning that is secular in nature. In this paper I show that while the existence of God remains ambiguous throughout the novel, The Road contains both a clear moral code and a view about what makes life meaningful. I describe this moral code and examine its connection with meaning in life. Along the way, I discuss the struggle of t