

On *The Road* to Meaning

- McCarthy on the Meaning of Life -

Abstract. The paper offers a philosophically infused analysis of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The main idea is that McCarthy's novel is primarily a statement on the meaning of life. Once this idea is argued for and endorsed, by using a parallel between *The Road* and a 19th century Hungarian dramatic poem, *The Tragedy of Man*, the paper goes on to argue that the most plausible – although admittedly not the only possible – interpretation of *The Road* is that it advocates a religious account of the meaning of life that is able to accommodate all other possible interpretations of how the question of meaning figures in the novel.

Keywords. Cormac McCarthy; Imre Madách; meaning of life; final value; religion; God

I. Introduction

In his recent novel *The Road* Cormac McCarthy paints for us an apocalyptic situation. We are to imagine a world where humanity's existence, for most of what we can understand, has come to an end. We do not know what exactly happened; we only know the results of some cataclysmic event: a burning world that lies in ashes, without edible food (other than what one can find as reserves left behind from times before the disaster) and drinkable water, without civilization and with some of the survivors hunting other survivors in order to eat them. In short, this is a world that offers no help, only impediments and serious danger for those who want to survive. It is in this world that we follow two of the survivors, the boy and the man, the son and his father (as we parallel find out), on their way to the South where they hope to find some help (or so the boy thinks, the man really is skeptical about it). We know a bit of their pre-history: that the boy's mother has left them having seen no point in going on any more (I will return to this important scene later). We also know that the situation is not new for the man and the boy. The boy, who is now several years old (we do not know exactly, but since he is able to walk long distances and communicate with the man, he cannot be too young), was born into this situation, while the man has lived through the terrible events that led to the present situation.

The pair, as mentioned, is on the road to the South, but it is clear that their wandering has symbolic meaning. The question is what this meaning is. In this paper I will argue that *The Road* is primarily a thesis about the meaning of life. McCarthy's thesis, I will attempt to show, has a central religious line; yet, I do not think that *The Road* is a thesis about salvation, as some commentators have suggested.¹ The secondary layer of the book's symbolic meaning appears instead to be a cluster of claims about what gives meaning to life. The novel, I submit, is about human motivation that is meant to give us insight into the meaning of life. What in general creates difficulties for motivation and despair about meaning are certain aspects of life: death, suffering, the cruelty of other people and so on. These aspects are greatly exaggerated in the novel. In this way the problem of meaning and motivation is illustrated in a striking way. There are thus lessons from the limits of human existence; lessons, in particular, that tell us more about what gives meaning to *our* lives.²

It is itself a question what the meaning of 'meaning' is, and given my particular subject matter and my way of analyzing this subject, I should first say a few words about this question. There is no consensus on what the concept of the meaning of life depicts.³ What is widely accepted is that the meaning of life is a positive final value that an individual's life can exhibit and that meaning, i.e. this value comes in degrees. I regard this as a sufficient meta-account of the meaning of life for our purposes; yet there is one aspect of our meta-views about meaning that I briefly must consider. In my investigation of *The Road*, as I have

¹ See Shelly L. Rambo, "Beyond Redemption? Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* after the End of the World", *Studies in Literary Imagination*, September 2008, 41 (2): 99-120. Many other commentators mention salvation while putting the main interpretative emphasis somewhere else. See e.g. Benjamin Mangrum, "Accounting for *The Road*: Tragedy, Courage, and Cavell's Acknowledgements", *Philosophy and Literature*, October 2013, 37 (2): 267-290, or Adelina Johns-Putra, "'My Job Is to Take Care of You': Climate Change, Humanity, and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Fall 2016, 62 (3): 519-540.

² I am well aware, of course, that there are other interpretations of the novel (although meaning appears in most of them). For references see previous footnote and also Carole Juge, "The Road to the Sun They Cannot See: Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Oblivion and Guidance in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*", *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Fall 2009, 7 (1): 16-30 that puts the emphasis on guidance and the need for education; Euan Gallivan, "Compassionate McCarthy?: *The Road* and Schopenhauerian Ethics", *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Autumn 2008, 6 (1): 98-106 that connects the novel to some of Schopenhauer's views of morality.

³ For a detailed treatment with references see Thaddeus Metz, "The Meaning of Life", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2013 edition, ed. E. N. Zalta, and also his "Recent Work on the Meaning of Life", *Ethics*, 2002, 112 (4): 781-814.

already noted above, I will work on the assumption that for McCarthy claims about the meaning of life appear in the form claims about human motivation. Roughly, what propels one into the future, that is, what moves one to stay alive is what gives meaning to one's life. However, this is not to say that I claim to have a necessary connection between meaning and motivation. My assumption is just that in *The Road* whatever gives meaning to life also *happens* to move the agent, the man in our case, whose life it is. Thereby I do not claim that this connection is more than happenstance, i.e., that it has the status of conceptual (or metaphysical) necessity.⁴

Here is how I proceed. I think there is no sustained argument in the book concerning the meaning of life. What I hold is that there is a group of claims about motivation that help us to decipher the book's message concerning the meaning of life. In particular, I distinguish five lines of thought in the novel that are of relevance. Although there is no sustained argument, I maintain that a God-centered view of the meaning of life can be used to pull the different threads together. To show that this is so, I will first put forward my favored interpretation, and then in subsequent sections show how other possible interpretations collapse into and/or can be accommodated by a God-centered view of the meaning of life. In putting forward these ideas, moreover, I draw a parallel with a 19th century Hungarian dramatic poem, Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*. Madách's poem, I argue, is very useful in illuminating several of the points I attribute to McCarthy. At the end of the paper I summarize my investigation and make some concluding remarks.⁵

⁴ My account of 'meaning' is compatible with two approaches that I personally prefer. What I will be singling out as constitutive of meaning of life in subsequent chapters could be considered as *final ends* in Harry Frankfurt's sense (as they appear in his "On the Usefulness of Final Ends", *Necessity, Volition and Love*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 82-94 at pp. 84-6) or *categorical desires* in Bernard Williams's sense (as they appear in his "Persons, Character and Morality", *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 1-20 at p. 13).

⁵ All parenthesized page references, unless otherwise stated, are either to Cormac McCarthy: *The Road* (London: Picador, 2007) or to Imre Madách: *The Tragedy of Man* (Berlin: Forgotten Books, 2007; originally published in 1861 in Hungarian). The context makes it clear which of the two books I am referring to.

II. God

In the book there are several references to God and his relation to the boy. The following passage is from the very beginning of the novel:

“When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything was paling away into the murk...Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.” (3)

At the end of the book, in very similar fashion, we are told that the boy’s breath is God’s breath (306). It is also said at one point that God appointed the man to be the boy’s guardian (80). In fact, in the conversation with the old man towards the end of the book, the man puts forward the idea that the child is God (to which the old man reacts that it would be horrible if this was so, 183). Finally, the man also looks for God in an effort to understand, it seems, the point of going on in this wretched world:

“He descended into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.” (10)

One way to interpret these references is to give a traditional religious account of the meaning of life. What brings meaning to human life is God, typically via some relation we have to him: such as that we are part of the divine plan, that God has a purpose for us, that God has willed us to live this life etc. On this interpretation, the child as such does not bring meaning

to the man's life: he is relevant more as a condition, as an indication of God's existence, or as an indication that God has a plan for the man, namely, to be the boy's guardian.

At this point, it is illuminating to invoke a parallel with a Hungarian dramatic poem - that has the length of a book - from the 19th century, *The Tragedy of Man*, by Imre Madách.⁶ Madách deals with the same sort of 'thought experiment' that McCarthy puts his story in, but does so in an explicitly religious setting. Madách's tale starts from Heaven and the Paradise with first Lucifer revolting against God, then Adam and Eve, prompted by Lucifer, too openly defying God's will. The idea is that by eating from the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve have denounced God, so, they, the humans are God now (33). But then the question looms: if there is no 'real' God, what is the point of life? What brings meaning to life? (40, 202) The idea is to examine, through different historical scenes, the possible candidates for meaning of life other than (our relation to) God.

In this quest for meaning, Madách guides his hero, Adam – Eve also appears in each scene as in some way related to Adam - through different historical scenes to show that no naturalist - as a philosopher would call it - account of the meaning of life is adequate: no matter what great cause or other end Adam fights for and believes in, he always gets disappointed. In the last scene Adam finds himself at the end of time, or at least at the end of humanity: in a cold, dying world where people no longer have any morality, and their existence is really pitiful. In this setting Adam understands that struggle itself also cannot be the aim of life: one must struggle *for* something in order to make sense of existence (216; I will say more about this point later). This brings him back to God: only our relation to God can make our life meaningful. Thus Adam asks God:

⁶ As Susan J. Tibursky ("The Lingering Scent of Divinity" in *The Sunset Limited and The Road*, *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Autumn 2008, 6 (1): 121-8) argues, another good parallel is with another work by McCarthy (the one that followed *The Road*), *The Sunset Limited*.

“My Lord, such frightful scenes have tortured me; and I know not what is reality. Oh! Tell me, tell me what is my destiny! [...] Enlighten me, and gratefully my fate, whate’er it be, I will endure, if only I may progress, for this uncertainty is hell.” (221)

Unlike in *The Road*, here God replies:

“Ask not again, the secret, veiled beneficently from thy longing eyes, by the wise hand of God. But could’st thou know that momentarily on earth, thy soul did rest while waits eternity above, no virtue ‘twere to suffer longer here. If thou did’st know thy soul would be absorbed in dust, for grand ideas, what incentive to sacrifice the moment’s fleeting bliss? While now, the future gleameth through a mist, so heavy laden with the cares and woes of this transitory life, the sense of an infinitude doth wake; if this engender pride, mortality restricts; both greatness then and virtue, are assured.” (221-2)

Nevertheless, Adam does not feel assured; he has doubts: “but Lord, who will uphold if on the right path I remain?”, he asks (222). God, however, is not moved. He replies:

“Thine arm is strong, thy soul exalted; infinite the scope which e’er to action doth invite; and if thou heedest well, a voice will call to thee unceasingly, to lure thee back and raise thee up; but follow e’er the call.” (222)

The choir of angels in heaven ‘summarize’ the idea:

“What a mighty thought! We’re free, ‘twixt good and ill to choose, while over us, God’s mercy waiteth still. Act boldly, fearing not the herd’s ingratitude; for this is not thine aim but action, great and good...But on the lofty way let thee not blind the sight, the thought, that thou could’st add one atom to God’s might, he only speaks to thee, as means toward thy fate fulfilling. Honor comes from him, for him doth wait.” (223-4)

God then ends the ‘conversation’ (and the poem) with the slogan: “I’ve told thee, man, strive and trust!” (224)

In Madách’s view our life acquires meaning by fulfilling God’s purpose under the guidance and care of God. We should not know about God’s purpose for us, however, because then struggling to fulfill it would no longer be virtuous, nor would we have incentive to struggle.⁷ Madách further suggests that fulfilling God’s purpose makes us part of something infinite (and, perhaps, eternal, though see my remarks concerning immortality at the end of the paper).⁸ I submit that this account can also be applied to the man’s struggle in *The Road*. In his case the child plays a crucial role: he is the man’s link to God, the indication that God has a purpose for him in life, though, of course, just as Adam, the man cannot know it for sure that this is indeed so (recall the second cited passage above). In fact, what God tells Adam, we can also say about the man: were he to know that this was indeed his purpose, were he to have no doubts about his ‘destiny’, his motivation to survive and help the child would not be so strong, nor would it be virtuous. He needs his religion, his faith to to guide and help him on the *road* to meaning.

III. The boy

On this interpretation it is the boy who brings meaning to the man’s life. There are several such references. It is said that it is only the boy who stands between the man and death (29); the wife also explains the man’s insistence to keep on living with reference to the boy, or at least this is one interpretation (see below for another interpretation that connects it to God). This latter conversation between the man and his wife is crucial. It not only gives insight into

⁷ In the movie *The Brand New Testament* [*Le tout nouveau testament*], (Dir. Jaco van Dormael. Terra Incognita Films, 2015), the exact time of death of each living person are released by God’s daughter. The result is that most people cease to struggle and strive for the things they have been pursuing up to that point.

⁸ Interestingly, as Guy Kahane (“Our Cosmic Insignificance”, *Noûs* 48:4 (2014), pp. 745-772 at 761) points out, while God’s existence may constitute meaning in this – and perhaps, other – ways, this would at the same time be detrimental to our (cosmic) *significance*, which, he argues, depends on our uniqueness as being the only valuable entities in the otherwise value-empty universe.

the man's (and the boy's) past, but also tells us a lot about the motivation of both the man and the wife, thus, given my proposed take on the main theme of *The Road*, about their views on life's meaning. The conversation begins with the wife's announcing her decision to leave the man and the boy. The man protests but the woman is perseverant. She will not stay with them; in fact, she says, she *cannot* stay with them. Why does the man nevertheless stay alive (the woman's choice basically amounts to suicide)? The wife has an explanation:

"Please dont do this.

I'm sorry.

I cant do it alone.

Then dont. I cant help you. They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I dont dream at all. You say you cant? Then dont do it. That's all. Because I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time. You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. 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 this. 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. Breath it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart." (59)

So the idea, according to the wife, is that one needs something or someone to stay alive for. For the man, she suggests, this is the boy. In another conversation, this time with the boy, the man explicitly admits this:

"What would you do if I died?

If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you.

Okay.” (9)

This gives us a naturalistic account of the meaning of life. The appeal to the boy as creating meaning for the man’s life can be understood in different ways, depending on what kind of naturalistic theory one accepts. Thus one can be a subjectivist and insist that only the human mind can constitute meaning; in this case, the man’s love for the boy would be the main constituent of meaning. Alternatively, one can be an objectivist and claim that certain things are meaningful independently of being the object of a mental state; in this case, the boy, or the man’s relation to the boy, or some aspect of this relation would be held to be meaning-giving. Finally, one can also combine these two approaches. Thus one can hold either that the boy (or the man’s relation to the boy) would not constitute meaning without the man’s love for the boy, or that it would, but the man’s love for the boy enhances the meaning thus created.

There is, however, a different interpretation of the boy’s significance: the God-centered account of meaning I have considered in the previous section. This account can make sense of the references cited in this section: the boy is indeed essential for the man to stay alive, but only *indirectly*, i.e., by establishing the man’s relation to God. The appeal to God can also explain the striking difference between the man’s and his wife’s attitude towards life and death. For the question that naturally arises when one reads their conversation is: why does the woman throw away her life and the man does not? The woman, we saw, seems to refer to the boy as the man’s reason, but the question still remains: why is the boy enough cause for the man to stay alive and not for the woman, the mother of the child? Here is the other part of the conversation that takes place just before the part cited above that I think can provide us with an answer:

“We are survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.

Survivors? she said.

Yes.

What in God’s name are you talking about? We’re not survivors. We’re the walking dead in a horror film.

I’m begging you.

I dont care. I dont care if you cry. It doesnt mean anything to me.

Please.

Stop it.

I am begging you. I’ll do anything.

Such as what? I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We’ve been over all this. I didnt bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I’m done. I thought about not even telling you. That would probably have been best. You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I’d take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It’s the right thing to do.

You are talking crazy.

No, I’m speaking the truth. Sooner or later they’ll 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. She sat there smoking a slender length of dried grapevine as if it were some rare cheroot. Holding it with a certain elegance, her other hand across her knees where she’d drawn them up. She watched him across the small flame. I used to talk about death, she said. I dont any more. Why is that?

I don’t know.

It’s because it’s here. There’s nothing left to talk about.

I wouldnt leave you.

I dont care. It’s meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I’ve taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot.

Death is not a lover.

Oh yes he is.” (57-8)

Its two parts taken together, the conversation gives us the following picture. The wife, given the circumstances and the probable future she mentions, no longer sees meaning in life: her love of the boy and/or her relation to him is not enough to create meaning, to propel her into the future. Contrary to what she at one point suggests (“They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I dont dream at all.”), it need not be assumed that she no longer loves the boy. She explicitly says that the *right* thing to do, were it not for the man, would be to kill both herself and the boy, and this suggests that she does not think that her obligations towards the boy are void, that her relationship to him is of no significance. In fact, it seems to be that the reason why she will not stay is exactly her love for the boy: she thinks about, what she takes to be, their inevitable future (being raped, killed, eaten), and this she simply cannot bring herself to experience. She will not stay, because she *cannot* stay with them (and see and live through all these horrible things).⁹

Nor need we suppose that she is depressed and therefore not able to make rational decisions, even though she talks about death as her lover. Her decision seems to be a deliberate one based on the assessment of the circumstances and future prospects. She rationally chooses death over life, realizing that what has taken her this far, the boy and the man, are no longer enough for her to move on, given the circumstances. For her they are all already dead (“We’re the walking dead in a horror film”), the question is only *when* (and how) they will die, not whether they will die (“It’s because it’s [death] here. There’s nothing

⁹ Compare this to Bernard Williams’ notion of practical necessity in his ‘Practical Necessity’, in his *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 124-131. Williams would say that what we have here is a moment of discovery: the woman discovers the content as well as the limits of her character, i.e., what she must and must not do. See also Frankfurt’s (*op. cit.*) notion of volitional necessity as well as Robert J. Gay, “Bernard Williams on Practical Necessity”, *Mind* 98 (1989), pp. 551–69.

left to talk about.”). In this sort of world, there is no point in staying alive; neither the man, nor the boy can make *this* fact go away.

There is again a telling parallel here with *The Tragedy of Man*. As mentioned, Adam, with the help of Lucifer, travels through different scenes, different stages of world history, to reach, at last, the end of human existence: a frozen world where humans live like savages, without hope for a better future. This last scene, the (inevitable, according to Lucifer) future of mankind, is too much for Adam to take. It is at this point, literally at the point of suicide - Adam is about to jump off a cliff -, that he learns about Eve’s pregnancy. She is happy to break the news to him, but his reaction is not what she expects:

“Thou’lt smile when I avow my secret; this – come nearer Adam – now, into thine ear I’ll whisper but one word; I feel I am a mother.

(Falling on his knees)

Oh! my Lord, thou’st vanquished me. Here in the dust I lie; without thee, ‘gainst thee, vainly strive must I, raise me, or strike to earth! I bare my breast to thee.” (219-220)

It is clear that in this situation, the child is rather a reason for more desperation, than for hope – or so Adam thinks. Like in the case of the wife in *The Road*: her heart was ripped out when the boy was born. She loves the boy, she loves the man, so she goes on living for a while; but at a certain point, when circumstances, by her estimation at least, become futile, she gives up. In this sort of situation, one would need some extra reason to go on and God could serve as the additional or deepest reason for the man. This is indeed what happens to Adam. He finds God again: we have seen their subsequent conversation in the previous section. In the absence of textual evidence, I cannot claim that McCarthy has anything like this in mind. But

given the analysis in the previous section, and the striking difference between the man's and the wife's reaction to the situation, I think that this interpretation is a plausible one.¹⁰

IV. Struggle

In the novel we find points that seem to highlight the importance of struggle. Thus it is said:

“All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one's heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you.” (56)

And at one point the man remarks to the boy:

“Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up.” (145)

It is not unprecedented to claim that struggle, the overcoming of obstacles, constitutes meaning in life. This would give us a naturalist and at the same time objectivist account of the meaning of life.¹¹ However, the above quotes do not support such an account. For struggle, they clearly show, have no intrinsic, final value for McCarthy; instead, it has an *instrumental* role with respect to the meaning of life: beauty, grace, and in the case of the man, the boy being the constitutive elements instead (or God to whom the boy relates the man, as I shall claim below). One might add though, that struggle can be part of morality: the

¹⁰ Thus I disagree with Erik J. Wielenberg (“God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*”, *The Cormac McCarthy Journal*, Fall 2010, 8 (1): 1-19) who argues that the account of meaning in the novel is exactly this naturalistic one: it is constituted by our connections to (or, love of) others – for the man, this being solely the boy. Weinberg would no doubt answer my above claim about the place of God by pointing out that this is merely a pragmatic concern and does not commit us to the existence of God. I take up this issue briefly in footnote 14 below.

¹¹ A classic statement can be found in Bertrand Russel, ‘A Free Man's Worship’, in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russel, Vol. 12, Contemplation and Action, 1902-1914*, London: Routledge, 1985 (originally published in 1903). For a contemporary version see Ronald Dworkin: *Sovereign Virtue*, Chapter 6, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000. In the Cormac McCarthy literature, I found one example of this approach (Mangrum, “Accounting for *The Road*”), but it is not clear that its emphasis on courage and tragedy are really meant to be giving us an account of meaning (although, he does seem to allude to this at one point (p. 277)).

good guys do not give up, says the man. But again, this gives no meaning-constituting role to struggle. At best it shows that it is virtuous/right to struggle; but then something else, of which struggle is a part, constitutes meaning, namely, morality. At the same time, if morality can bring meaning to life, and struggle is morally right/virtuous, it might be at least part of an account of the meaning of life. I will discuss this suggestion in the next section.

There is, again, a supporting parallel with *The Tragedy of Man*. As mentioned above, Adam, with the guide and help of Lucifer, travels through different historical scenes, each representing a possible, naturalist account of the meaning of life. Thus he considers ambition and glory (Egypt), liberty and democracy (Athens), hedonistic pleasures (Rome), the glory of God (Constantinople), individuality and fraternity (Paris), money and market (London), reason and science (a future scene with a phalanstery). Adam finds all of these ideals ultimately unacceptable, but this does not deter him, at this point, from claiming that there may still be meaning to life:

“What, after all’s the end? The end – when glory’s o’er – I apprehend, the end is death, and life is constant strife; the aim of man, to struggle throughout life.” (206)

However, as we saw earlier, this is followed by the last scene in which Adam experiences the end of humanity in a cold and dying world. What he sees there - the wretched existence of the last remaining humans - convinces Adam that struggle itself cannot be the point of life. He proclaims:

“Let’s flee, Oh! Lucifer! My future sphere let me no longer view, my dreadful fate, the useless strife, now, I would meditate on this, If I can e’er defy God more?” (216)

This is the turning point in the poem. I have mentioned the idea before. Adam realizes that no naturalist criterion, not even struggle can bring meaning to his life (“the useless strife”). One must struggle in order to achieve something, and it is this something that brings meaning to life. Since no naturalist account offers the right kind of end, the return to God is inevitable; or so Adam concludes.¹²

V. Morality

But is this return indeed inevitable? As suggested above, it might be that what brings meaning to the man’s (and the boy’s) life is that they are moral: they are good persons. This is again suggested at several points in the novel: the child receives moral education (the man reads him stories about courage and justice: 42); the man and the boy are the good guys and those who eat humans, torture them or in some other way hurt them are the bad guys (81, 136, 148). There are also the scenes of the child’s expressing compassion (which we can interpret as a sign of a developing, as it is sometimes called, innocent morality; 51-3, 86, 90, 278). The woman in the long conversation quoted above, says that the man “talks about taking a stand, but there is no stand to take” (59). And, as we saw above, struggle, though does not constitute meaning itself, it might be part of morality, part of what a good person does, which does create meaning. Of course, there is then the further question what this morality consists in and the novel is ambiguous about this (what is clear is the contrast between the immoral, animalistic cannibals lacking any proper human tie to anyone and the

¹² It might be argued that struggle plays a role in Kant’s account of the meaning of life, if it is also true that this account has to do with our noumenal rational self or agency. See Gareth Williams, ‘Kant and the Question of Meaning’, in *The Philosophical Forum*, 1999, 30 (2): 115-131. If this was the case, the suggestion goes, struggle would have to be a non-natural account of the meaning of life and would perhaps be immune to Adam’s ‘criticism’. However, just as with morality, in this case struggle would only be constitutive of meaning, as part of something else (in this case: agency). Moreover, there is no ground to hold that McCarthy would adhere to such a controversial idea in his novel. This level of philosophical sophistication is surely not present in the book.

man and the boy); however, we do not have to answer this question in order to have a working idea of a possible candidate for the meaning of life.¹³

It is possible, I admit, that morality gives us an independent line as to McCarthy's views on the meaning of life. At the same time, however, the connection to God quite clearly offers itself: we just have to endorse a God-centered account of morality. This is no at all far from the spirit of the book, just think of the discussion of the second section. In addition, there are also explicit references in the book to the connection between God and morality. To begin with, it can be claimed that killing the child - this 'option' is considered at different points in the book - is against God's will. The man continuously struggles with this idea; this is his 'emergency solution', his 'escape route' if everything goes wrong and nothing is left to do. At one point we are witnesses to his internal dialogue:

"They lay listening. Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. *Curse God and die*. What if it doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly." (120; italics are mine)

At other points, the world of the book is referred to as a Godless world (2), as a world without godspoken men (32) – given what we know about the world of the novel, the absence of civilization, the people who hunt, torture, kill and eat each other (the above quoted dialogue takes place while the man and the boy are listening to the 'hideous shrieks' coming

¹³ The ambiguity primarily consists in that while the man teaches a deontic (-looking) moral code to the boy, in his effort to save the boy's life at any price he himself struggles to follow this code. This raises the question whether his behavior only signals motivational problems or is meant to suggest that the moral code in question is more complex than it appears to be. (For example, most who endorse a deontic morality would agree that in extreme circumstances the code can be broken, as no doubt consequentialists would urge us to do. Arguably, the situation described in *The Road* is such a case: the boy's survival might be necessary for the survival of the human race, to mention one thing.) For more on this, see Wielenberg "God, Morality, and Meaning" (pp. 4-8), Mangrum "Accounting for *The Road*" (pp. 282-3) and Johns-Putra "'My Job Is to Take Care of You'" (pp. 530-4).

from a house where humans are kept as living food), it is not, I believe, far-fetched to claim that this is a world without morality, where God no longer reins.¹⁴

VI. “Carrying the fire”

The last thread, concerning the meaning of life, in the novel is also the most enigmatic. It is often said in conversations between the man and the boy that they ‘carry the fire’. But what is the fire? The ‘fire’, or the ‘carrying of the fire’ might be what brings meaning to their life. We do not, however, receive much information as to what this fire might be. The best we get comes in the following dialogue, near the end of the book, between the man and the boy:

“I want to be with you.

You cant.

Please.

You cant. You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it.

Just take me with you. Please.

¹⁴ There is arguably an alternative reading that could keep morality and religion intimately related but in such a way such that morality would/need no longer be God-centered. Thus, John Cottingham (*On the Meaning of Life*, London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 72, 99, 104) argues for a pragmatic role of religion according to which we need religion to be able to do what is morally required given the general human condition, our fragility and poverty as well as the strength of our opposing desires. On this reading then, morality could give meaning to our life without itself being God-centered. Yet, it would still need religion to play this role: we would find life much more meaningful if we conceive of ourselves as operating in a moral order created by God. Observe that Kant, in several of his writings, argued similarly for God as being a necessary postulate (along with immortality) of the Highest Good. For a good overview, see Lawrence Pasternack and Philip Rossi “Kant’s Philosophy of Religion”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-religion/>>.

I cant.

Please, Papa.

I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.” (298)

But even from this conversation we only learn that the ‘fire’ is ‘inside’ the boy. Let us start from this hint. I see four candidates for what the ‘fire’ could be.

The first is humanity. It is hard to see how this could be meant by ‘fire’ and also bring meaning to the man’s life. If it is understood in a moral way, then it is the same as morality: our capacity, such as a sense of justice, to see and act in accordance with moral requirements, or our ability to establish and maintain ties to others. If it is understood in a non-moral way, as a biological notion, then the ‘bad guys’ also carry *this* fire. So let us consider the second candidate: morality. This could well be the ‘fire’, I submit. But then, in accordance with what has been said above, I would argue that the morality in question is one that emanates from God’s will or is in some other way strongly related to God; in other words, that it is a God-centered morality. The connection to God is, however, an independent candidate for what the ‘fire’ is and I will consider it below. Furthermore, at least at one point in the novel, it becomes questionable if the ‘fire’ is indeed some kind of moral sense. Towards the end of the novel the man says to the boy that “We are the good guys *and* we are carrying the fire” (136, my italics). This suggests that the two, being moral (‘good guy’) and ‘to carry the fire’, denote two different things.

Turn now to the supernatural candidates. There are usually two: the soul and God. But why would the ‘fire’ be an immaterial, immortal soul? Such an idea is never mentioned, not even hinted at, in the novel. At the same time, God, as we saw, is often referred to (and appealed to). Besides, our possession of a soul is often connected to God: the soul is what is divine in ourselves. Thus even if ‘carrying the fire’ refers to the soul, this will be consistent with God’s existence; in fact, in accordance with an important strand in mainstream religious

thought (Thomas Aquinas is a good example), it would be because of God's existence that we would have souls (having a soul, for instance, can be the only way for us to unite with God in Heaven). The alternative is to claim that the 'fire', i.e. the soul, is a short-hand for morality, such as moral sense or sense of justice – in this case, however, I have already considered it above and connected it to God.

This takes us to my preferred interpretation, namely that the 'fire' in us is God, or to be more precise, what is divine within ourselves. This could be the soul, if we are looking for something immortal; but this is not necessary. According to many, immortality is not a necessary condition for a meaningful life; in fact, some maintain, immortality would result in a life devoid of meaning.¹⁵ Nor is it clear that divinity, within ourselves, would require immortality. It could instead refer to morality, such as perfect justice, as mentioned above; or to perfection, both moral and non-moral; or something similarly suitable for the role. I leave this question open in my inquiry.

VII. Summary and concluding remarks

In this paper I have put forward a philosophically driven interpretation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. I have argued that the novel is best understood as a statement on the meaning of life, on what ultimately propels people into the future. McCarthy's imagined world is ideally suitable for this purpose. Depicting an end-of-the-world scenario and thereby abstracting away from the disturbing influences of normal, everyday life, we are allowed to focus on the most important things in life: on God, on our children and loved ones, on

¹⁵ See e.g. Bernard Williams, 'The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality' in his *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 82-101. (As a matter of fact, though, I disagree with Williams' argument. For more on this see my 'Immortal Curiosity' (co-author: Karl Karlander), forthcoming in *The Philosophical Forum*, Fall 2013.) In *The Tragedy of Man* Lucifer tells Adam that what elevates him (and Eve) above the rest of nature is a "spark that lies within thy breast; The feeble flutt'ring of an endless power", which, Lucifer goes on to explain, is not only thought (knowledge) but also immortality (27-8). This prompts Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of immortality as well, but at this point God intervenes and they must flee from Heaven.

morality, and on the struggle for existence. I have argued that in McCarthy's rendering of this subject, God may play a unifying role that pulls the different supposedly meaning-constituting threads together. This, for McCarthy and perhaps for many of us, is the most important lesson from the limits of human existence.¹⁶

Word count: 7 300

¹⁶ Originally this paper was conceived to existence with my Stockholm colleague Karl Karlander. I thank Karl, in particular, for proposing to me the idea that *The Road* could be read as a statement on the meaning of life. I also thank the audience in Konstanz to whom the paper was presented in 2011 and who have asked many challenging questions from which the paper has profited substantially.