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WHAT MAKES LIFE WORTH LIVING? “DURABILITY AND TRANSIENCE” IN THE ROAD BY CORMAC MCCARTHY

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Abstract: *The question “What is the meaning of life?” although one of the oldest questions in Philosophy is also one of the most difficult. One of the main reasons is that such a question can be interpreted in so many different ways; it can refer to a plan for the whole universe, or to people having a purpose, or to the significance or value of life. There are many frameworks for tackling a question like this: the theistic and the atheistic framework, the linguistic approach or the discussion of the meaningfulness of the question itself. In this paper my main concern is with an apparent futility which such a question can have outside a cultural, religious or social framework. I will try to show that Cormac McCarthy’s novel The Road as an outstanding example of a story taking place in a vacuum of cultural, social and temporal references, only appears to preclude any attempt to answer a question about the meaning of life (What can there be of any significance when all the outside world as you know it is gone? What makes life worth living in a post-apocalyptic existence?). I would argue that the reader’s answer to the novel, “the other makes life worth living” is the result of a close investigation of the tension between the protagonist’s life (its durability and determination in spite of a huge psychological trauma) geared towards his son, and the emptiness of the outside world (the transient dying world).*

The subject of the novel ‘The Road’ by Cormac McCarthy is a very straightforward story: a man and a boy (a father and his son) are wanderers in a post-apocalyptic landscape trying to endure the dying world. This is all that it is; a disconcertingly simple storyline. It is not important what happened to the world (or more specifically to the USA); it could have been anything – a nuclear war, a meteorite, a solar explosion or an unforeseen divine punishment. The cataclysmic event is never spelled out because it is only the backdrop for an unfolding struggle for survival. For the purpose of structural clarity I distinguish between three facets of the novel: the story of the intimate relationship between two human beings (the father and his son), the bleak description of a post-apocalyptic landscape and McCarthy’s extraordinary style of writing. I intend to briefly discuss these three facets in order to set the stage for my main argument. I would argue that ‘The Road’ as an outstanding example of a story taking place in a vacuum of cultural, social and temporal references although it appears to preclude any attempt to answer a question about the meaning of life, asks the question more arrestingly than any classic moral story. I will try to show that the answer to the question about the meaning of life in the context of McCarthy’s story depends on understanding that the protagonist’s life is not sustained in any way, by a belief in a transcendental being or the adherence to a particular community or tradition but it is sustained by the protagonist’s immediate intimate relation with *the other* (in this case the last human being in the world close to him – his son).

The story of the relationship between the two main characters of the novel: the father (a man in his late thirties probably) and his son (a boy who is around ten years old) is the focal point of everything that is happening in the novel. There are two ways in which McCarthy captures the father-son relationship: one is the laconic but evocative dialogue and the other a third person description of the boy through the fathers’

eyes. The American writer uses dialogue in an unusual manner: an economic and stripped down language which encompasses short thoughts, feelings or moods of the two main characters.

'[...] This are our roads the black lines on the map. The states roads.
Why are they the states roads?
Because they used to belong to the states. What used to be called the states.
But there's not any more states?
No
What happened to them?
I don't know exactly. That's a good question.
But the roads are still there.
Yes. For a while.
How long a while?
I don't know. Maybe quite a while. [...]' (McCarthy 43-44)

This kind of dialogue makes the relation between the two main characters highly authentic; in a destroyed world the words are scarce and precious, they express only the necessary. The necessary in this post-apocalyptic world is a minimum of basic understanding of survival rules –one such rule is the quick and direct explanations about what the world used to be like. This strategy employed by the adult –the father, is to transmit only essential knowledge about the world and to express very reserved thoughts about the future. The relation between the two is unravelled by these kinds of exchanges between father and son and their reactions to the changing world. Also what we know about the boy we know mainly from the revealing dialogues between the father and the son and from the father's minute close observations about his son: 'Ghostly pale and shivering. The boy so thin it stopped his heart.' (McCarthy 39). There is very little direct description of the father. On a few occasions McCarthy inverts the role of the observer and the observed – the he boy takes on a few times the role of the onlooker: 'After a while he turned and looked at the man. His face in the small light streaked with black from the rain like some old world thespian.' (McCarthy 8). Although the dialogues and the thoughts of the main characters have an almost primitive structure and a simple explicative power (for the reader as well as for the characters themselves) they are the most important indication of the extraordinary relationship between the two ones.

The description of the post-apocalyptic landscape and I include here the physical dying world as well as the spiritual death of the majority of survivors who are either cannibals or thieves, captures an ultimate destruction: no organic life is left except some people and one or two dogs. McCarthy emphasises the lack of natural colours, natural smells or any natural patterns (weather, season or sunrise or sunset) because everything is burned, covered in ash and a huge cloud seems to envelop the whole world. This desolate landscape is presented in small but intense visual doses:

'Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away from the world' or
'The blackness he woke to on these nights was sightless and impenetrable. A blackness to hurt your ears with listening.' or
'The roadside hedges were gone to rows of black and twisted brambles. No sigh of life' (McCarthy 1, 14 & 20)

The occasional people that the main characters meet are part of the gray canvas of the monotonous landscape; the burned, ashen and wet landscape is used by McCarthy as a metaphor for the cannibals and thieves' interior landscape – in other words, the scorched and poisonous landscape also covered the people's souls making them indistinguishable from the immediate surrounding and also from each other. McCarthy's

writing style has an extraordinary magic allure: each thought is expressed through short, beautiful almost biblical language. The images he builds, the moods he evokes and thoughts of annihilations he creates are the result of an authentic voice which proves that it looked into the eyes of total destruction. What makes this novel an unforgettable read is McCarthy's evocative language, a language which embodies perfectly the human and the environmental tragedy. There is a minimalist simplicity in McCarthy's turn of phrase which makes you shiver with pleasure:

"He lay listening to the water drip in the woods. Bedrock, this. The cold and the silence. The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief. If only my heart were stone."(McCarthy 10)

McCarthy employs a strong repetitive visual language (grey, black and blackness, ash and ashen, colourless scenery etc.) in order to create a particular mood which carried all the way in the novel by the Sisyphean effort of the two main characters for survival. This struggle for survival seems to suggest not a hell but an absurd and meaningless quest. The story has very few clear breakthroughs (once they find a house with a bunker full of food or their nearly escape from being captured by a group of cannibals) and their endless and tiring wondering towards an unknown place or future takes the reader on a powerful emotional journey. The father and the boy who are walking in the deserted blackened landscape are, some would argue, inevitably looking for a different 'beyond'. Everything is dead, the few people they meet are murderers, savages, cannibals – lost souls. Is there another world beyond this desolation? At the beginning of the novel you travel with the two people hoping, suffering and waiting for a world surpassing their daily struggle (the physical struggle towards south and a psychological struggle against a lonely routine). Later the whole book is carried on only by the implications of the extraordinary relation between the father and son. All humanity is concentrated in a few gestures, words and dreams. Somehow this has a redemptive quality:

'No list of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later. 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'(McCarthy)

The Meaning of Life – a few philosophical considerations in the context of the novel

I will briefly look at different ways of asking the question about meaning of life and suggest a particular form of the question as a working frame for the lives of the two main characters in *The Road*. According to E.D. Klemke, the question "What is the meaning of life?" can be reassessed by distinguishing different meanings of it:

Why does the universe exist? Why is something rather than nothing? Is there a plan for the whole universe? *A PLAN FOR THE WHOLE UNIVERSE*

Why do humans (in general) exist? Do they exist for some purpose? If so, what is it?
PEOPLE HAVING A PURPOSE

Why do I exist? Do I exist for some purpose? If so, how I am to find what it is? If not, how can life have any significance or value?
SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE OF LIFE

The question ‘what makes life worth living?’ is a particular form of the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ reinterpreted in a moral context. How do we need to live in order to make our lives significant (morally)? For contemporary writers and philosophers rewriting the question about the meaning of life in this particular form is more attractive because all attempts to answer it will involve a reference to a source of morality, understanding it and using it as a guideline of living. What is that which can make life worth living: a project with a definite goal, a person, the humanity, a divine being, the promise of afterlife or the struggle to overcome our human nature in Nietzschean terms? I would argue that the lives of the main characters in ‘The Road’ as described by McCarthy seem to bypass such a question (if there seems to be no God, no community or no natural world where is the source of morality or of significance?). The meaninglessness of life in ‘The Road’ is only a deception brought about by the tragedy of the two people and their world and the apparent futility of their struggle. My answer about the meaning of life in this post-apocalyptic existence will focus on the issue of the source of significance/value in such a world which has lost all the cultural, religious and social exterior references.

There are many frameworks for approaching a question about the meaning of life: the theistic and the non-theistic framework, the linguistic approach or the discussion of the meaningfulness of the question itself. In this paper I am not interested in a detailed analysis of these frameworks, although a concise presentation of them will prove useful, as mentioned above my main concern is with an apparent futility which such a question can have outside a cultural or social framework. The theistic approach to the question about the meaning of life, has a clear answer: the meaning of life depends of God (a supreme and benevolent being which transcends the human world and who is the source of morality and significance) and people’s understanding of the relationship with God. The non-theistic approach starts with the premise that if there is no God there is no reason to believe that life has an objective significance given by an exterior power; the meaning of life should be found within the natural world or within a socio-cultural tradition. The third approach focuses on the meaning of the question itself – there is a whole tradition of conceptual analysis: what do we mean by: significance, purpose or value? Prompted by my investigation (is life worth living in the post-apocalyptic world of ‘The Road?’) I am going to look at two philosophical theories put forward by two philosophers John Cottingham and Alasdair MacIntyre.

The British philosopher, John Cottingham argues that:

‘A meaningful life, [...] must involve worthwhile activities or projects that enable us to flourish as human beings. Such flourishing requires the development of our human capacities for feeling and reason: it involves cultivating the faculties that allow sympathetic emotional interaction and open rational dialogue with our human beings.’ (Cottingham 64)

For Cottingham the concept of flourishing is essential for giving meaning to one’s life and this ‘high ideal’ raise questions about the underlying nature of our world. His challenge rests in the idea that an ultimate reality can ‘be supportive of our struggle for meaning and goodness’ (p.64). Also he insists that there is another necessary condition for a life to be meaningful: ‘to have a minimal prospect of success’ (Cottingham 66). The philosopher’s view is that there is a real possibility of meaningfulness the one provided by a religious perspective (a ‘powerful normative framework for a life of virtue’). He argues that the religious dimension does not provide reasons to justify the goodness of the virtuous life because we are capable of recognising features of the world which make an action good but it provides us with a framework where pointing to a transcendental Being means that the hope of virtuous life goes beyond contingencies.

‘We cannot create our own values, and we cannot achieve meaning just by inventing goals of our own; [...]. We need to be sustained by a faith in the ultimate resilience of the good; we need to live in the light of hope. Such faith and hope, like the love that inspires both, is not established within the domain of

scientifically determinate knowledge, but there is good reason to believe it is available to us through cultivating the disciplines of spirituality.’ (Cottingham 104)

There are two immediate comments regarding Cottingham’s view: first, if human are capable of recognising goodness they must accept its superiority over evilness, therefore why do we need a higher moral order? and secondly, if we accept a transcendental framework and there is still the problem of frailty of goodness¹ what guarantees we have that we will ever flourish? Let’s accept Cottingham’s view of meaning of life for the moment and wonder how this would explain the significance of the main characters’ lives in the world of ‘The Road’. Flourishing in a dying world, having hopes of a tomorrow where there is no future, cultivating the emotional interaction and rational dialogue with other people like some of the survivals who are cannibals or having a minimal prospect of success when everything as you know it is gone, can Cottingham’s proposal of what can be considered a meaningful life, be applied to these characters’ lives? To what extent can we speak of a meaningful life as proposed by the British philosopher? We can reject the philosopher view with regard to the protagonist’s story through a deep understanding of the character’s psychology and motivation for action. One way, is to analyse the writer’s descriptions of the thinking process of the father who rejects a transcendental moral realm; I think this is the most powerful argument against a theistic interpretation of morality in ‘The Road’. The father speaks to God sometime but only to curse him or using a rhetorical form – his mention of God is a metaphor for the origin of everything or for the unknown or for whatever is responsible for the dying world (there is a point made in the novel when the people are made responsible but the implication is that God did not stop them). The only concession McCarthy makes to ‘God’ is the portrayal of the duty and love the father has for his son which have an almost sacred quality, therefore borrowing a spiritual dimension. Cottingham could deny that the protagonist does not have any genuine choices and some minimal prospect of success by indicating that the fact he is resilient and determined he shows virtue and recognition of goodness. But the British philosopher quotes L. Kolakovski saying: ‘The sacred is revealed to us in the experience of our failure. Religion is indeed the awareness of human insufficiency; it is lived in the admission of weakness’ (188) and any reader following step by step the two people in their daily struggle could argue that the father did not accept or recognise the possibility of failure and fragility and even though sometimes he admitted weakness he refused to believe that his son will ever be defeated physically or mentally (by the environment or by the bad people or by giving up ‘carrying the fire’):

‘I said we weren’t dying. I didn’t say we weren’t starving.
But we wouldnt.
No. We wouldn’t.
No matter what.
Because we are the good guys.
Yes.
And we are carrying the fire.’ (McCarthy 136)

The metaphor used by McCarthy of good people as people who ‘carry the fire’ is very evocative (the first step towards civilisation, the understanding of the importance of having a transformative tool as the fire, the continuators of an old tradition, the possibility of sharing thoughts, stories with other human beings around a warm central point –a camp fire and carrying the message of the world/gods). Along their journey the two ones do not seem to meet any other fire carriers and this is a significant detail; they seem the last ‘people’ on Earth. That the meaning of the father’s life is not dependent of the relation to other people – emotional engagement and rational discourse or having a goal or the prospect of success in his quest or is not

¹ Frailty of goodness – is presented by Cottingham as a real problem for establishing reasons for acting in the right way.

dependent of a religious perspective (the normative framework is made up every day accordingly to the situation and accordingly to the boy's measure). We have to reject Cottingham's concept of a meaningful life and argue that the meaning of his life in 'The Road' is defined by the parameters of the relation between the father and his son.

The view that morality is a matter of understanding and promoting virtues not elaborating and following abstract principles was most recently promoted by Alasdair MacIntyre who revived the Virtue theory in his famous book: '*After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*'². I intend to briefly present MacIntyre's view of morality in order to argue that the beliefs and actions of the protagonist's of '*The Road*' (virtuous actions) can be explained outside an existing cultural and social framework. Although this seem to contradict MacIntyre's view about the meaningfulness of life (what is good for the individual is defined by the community of which he belongs), in fact the protagonist's life is meaningful and worth living even when there is no a community as such. The main argument is that the world of *The Road* is an extreme case where a community is defined by the existence and close proximity of at least one another being.

MacIntyre argues that many moral thinkers before him who tried to find rational grounds for morality outside an Aristotelian framework (a teleological view) or medieval Augustinian framework (a theistic one) had failed. He accuses those thinkers (Hume, Kant, the utilitarians, the intuitionists and the analytic philosophers) of failing to find a rational base for morality and proposes a continuation of Anscombe's work that in the late 50s rejected most of historical notions of morality.³ MacIntyre's project was to construct a rational teleological view of morality which has at its centre 'the good' which is explained in terms of virtues. For MacIntyre the view of the human good is justified by a set of virtues (seen as traits of character) which an individual may possess:

'The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good...' (MacIntyre 204).

The protagonist of *The Road* is an exceptional individual who can be seen as the ultimate virtuous person. He is courageous, patient, charitable and selfless. How do we explain his virtuous nature? According to MacIntyre his actions should be part of a unity which is the unity of a narrative quest. MacIntyre's answer to the question 'What is the meaning of life?' can be given only by an individual who is part of a moral tradition which permits 'the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life'.

'We live out our lives, both individually and in relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us, some seem already foreclose and others perhaps inevitable. There is no present which is not informed by some image of some future and the image of the future which always present itself in the form of a telos – or a variety of ends or goals [...]' (MacIntyre 200)

The protagonist and his son are the only persons who could be considered virtuous and in search of 'the good'. There are very few exceptions to this: one is an older man of ninety years old called Ely, encountered by the two main characters in the middle of their journey and with whom they have an interesting, almost prophetic conversation (about death, God, the last men on Earth as prophets) and the

² Which was published 1981, becoming a classic text of contemporary Ethics.

³ J. L. Mackie in his book '*Ethics – Inventing Right and Wrong*' reminds us that G.E.M Anscombe rejected classical moral notions because 'modern, non-Aristotelian concepts of moral obligation, moral duty, of what is morally right or wrong, and of moral sense of "ought" are survivals outside the framework of thought that made them intelligible, namely the belief in divine law' (Mackie, 1977: p. 45)

other a couple who appear at the end of the book which seem to be people who might 'carry the fire'. Because the only rational beings we can be sure are 'good people' (people caring for each other, trying not to hurt or even worse eat other people, helping if possible other wanderers, wanting to survive for a something beyond the destruction they encounter or having precious memories of a certain past) are the man and his son. One, the father, probably learned this in the past (there is a moral limit to what he will do for his own and his son survival) and keeps it as a shield against the transitory world and its 'newer' values. The other, the boy, who does not have any experience of a real world but who seem to have a very humane morality, learned probably from the stories the father told him and from watching his father's behaviour. The source of morality in this terrible dying world is the rooted in the interaction between the two characters (between the father's memories and system of beliefs and the boy's innocence and curiosity which function as an 'ear drum' whose resonance affects the father thoughts, motives and course of action). MacIntyre is right that, the stories told to children are essential for character forming and that, the tradition of a community or of a certain historical period create the moral backbone of a person. The man in the novel shows courage, determination and a self-sacrificing attitude because he remembers a past where those things mattered for the health of a family or community. The interesting thing is that although he appears to reject the past (keeping it intact, closed in his deep unconscious), he acts and explains himself as guided by those learned character traits from a forgotten past.

The psychological drama of the father is obvious from his unwillingness to contemplate the past or the future. He is afraid to dream or remember the past; recalling a lost world is something dangerous. He was afraid that the more he dreamt or remember the easier it would be to forget. He did not want to forget therefore he did not dream or if he did he needed to be careful. Each dream could destroy the original memory.

'Memory of her crossing the lawn towards the house in the early morning in a thin rose gown that clung to her breasts. He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not.'
(McCarthy 139)

Analysing McCarthy's description of the father's psychological trauma an interesting observation transpires about an older theory of the relationship between language and thinking. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis⁴ argues that the particular language we speak shapes the way we think about the world; more explicitly this idea is a form of linguistic determinism. The father's fear of thoughts which expressed in almost forgotten words could destroy the memory of the past world –affecting the way he thinks about the past which in turn will change the reality of what he will remember:

'He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He had this feeling before , beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion.'
(McCarthy 39)

At the beginning he thought that recalling the past (colours, serene moments, names of birds, memories of his wife) was dangerous because this was like calling upon Death. He thought about the allure of such dreams and beauties as a sign of rejecting the present – his present had one name, his son. His wife and the mother of the boy (who is barely mentioned) represents the voice of practical reason; the unemotional, factual, naked truth – the end of the life as they knew it. She was drained of energy because she

4 Although the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis was dismissed in the last twenty years – Stephen Pinker is one of the more contemporary thinkers who wrote a damning argument against this linguistic theory in a few of his books (*The Language instinct* and *The Stuff of Thought*), it had a recent come back as "neo-Whorfianism" in psycholinguistic.

knew that there was no future. She understood in a Sapir-Whorfian fashion that by erasing the past (she cannot even dream of previous life) the future will be wiped out. Why did she give up fighting (committing suicide)? One possible answer is that she lost her inner motivation under the unbearable pressure of the atrocities and destruction of the outside world. She could not resist because there was no hope of any redemption. Her narrative broke irreparably, MacIntyre would argue. The man had a psychological mechanism which helped him to fight the dying world and to persist in protecting his son. His sanity is dependent upon controlling his inner thoughts and urges; he needs to be sane to protect his son and by not remembering certain words, feelings he preserved the world as it used to be. The love for his son in this case is a paramount source of affection, aesthetic experiences, moral choices and motivation for existence. The only durable thing is this relationship with his son (an almost archetypal relationship with the other) in contrast with the transient world and its few remaining people shrinking towards oblivion.

‘Creedless shells of men tottering down the causeways like migrants in a feverland. The frailty of everything revealed at last. Old and troubling issues resolved into nothingness at night. The last instance of a thing takes the class with it. (McCarthy 28)

In conclusion the close attention given to the tension between *the durability* of an intense relationship between a man and his son, written as an exemplary story and *the transient* dying natural world, described in McCarthy’s unmistakable evocative and beautiful style, can illuminate a possible interpretation of meaning of life. I have tried to argue that the meaning of life or more explicitly why the life of the main characters of ‘The Road’ is worth living has its answer in the recognition of a unique source of morality: the system of beliefs that the father echoes and adjusts through feedback from his son’s beliefs, feelings and thoughts. This unique source of morality could last as long as there are at least two people interacting and reflecting their attitudes, beliefs, desires, motives, actions in each other:

‘There were times when he sat watching the boy that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn’t about death. He wasn’t sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness.’ (McCarthy 137)

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