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# The Burning Core

## Using Heraclitus's Concept of an *Arche* of Fire to Examine Humanity's Connection with Nature in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

*Jasmin Kirkbride*

**Abstract:** Treating Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* as an ecocritical work, this article uses Heraclitus's *arche* of fire as a new methodological lens through which to examine the text. In particular, it asks how readers can derive hope from such a materialistically bleak novel. Heraclitus was a Presocratic philosopher from fifth century BCE Greece. He was a material monist, who claimed that fire was the principle element of the universe, or *arche*: the preserving and destroying element from which the cosmos came, to which it will return, and by which it will be judged. This principality of fire is reflected in the supra-religious moralistic metaphor that "good guys" in *The Road* "carry the fire." This interpretation challenges Daniel Luttrell's claim that fire in *The Road* aligns to the Promethean myth, demonstrating that Heraclitus's *arche* of fire may offer a more holistic interpretation of the metaphor, particularly when combined with Marcel D. DeCoste, Matthew Mullins, and Erik J. Wielenberg's theories of community as morality within *The Road.* Fire is shown to represent the intrinsic, ambiguous interconnectedness of humankind—and that the defining moral choice of *The Road*'s inhabitants is simply whether they acknowledge it, both in terms of the community of humanity, and humanity's communion with nature.

**Keywords:** Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, dystopian climate fiction, ecocritical literature, Presocratic philosophy

Cormac McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Road* is perhaps an unlikely bestseller. Yet this bleak dystopia, which follows a father and son across an ecologically devastated America, sold hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide its first year in print, and continues to capture the imaginations of new readers. Part of its allure may lie in its central mystery, for though *The Road* is certainly a book about ecological disaster, it remains unknown what caused this destruction.[1]

Many critics have attempted to draw conclusions about this cause. Tim Edwards and John Cant both conclude the apocalypse resulted from nuclear warfare. Conversely, George Monbiot claims it is "the most important environmental book ever written," interpreting it as a comment on anthropogenic climate change. However, the only clue offered by the text itself is that the apocalypse is catalysed or caused by a "long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (54). This event renders the landscape deforested, covered in ash, and devoid of plant or animal life, while extremes of hunger and survival turn many survivors to cannibalism in a world that is "barren, silent, godless" (2). These brief descriptions are, though wrenching, not enough upon which to build a watertight argument for causation.

Further, in his rare interviews, McCarthy himself has repeatedly asserted that he does not know the devastation's cause, and that this ambiguity is the heart of the text: "I don't have an opinion. It could be anything—volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important. The whole thing now is, what do you do?"[2] This essential question—what do you do?—is intrinsically bound up for most critics with the more ephemeral question of what the book *means*. How can its characters derive meaning, and its readers derive hope, if, as Daniel Luttrull argues, "from a materialist perspective, the end of the novel should be dreary out of necessity? There is no biosphere and no hope of reconstructing one; therefore, human virtue will deteriorate and the human race will dissolve into gloom" (24).

This article aims to explore a new angle in answering that question, using the Presocratic philosophical concept of the *arche* (the "principle" or core element) as a lens through which to draw out the novel's underlying ideas of connection and integration. In particular, it will look at Heraclitus's theory of the *arche*. McCarthy's awareness of Heraclitus when writing *Blood Meridian* has been noted, particularly by Steven Frye.[3] However, beyond Frye's work, Michael Lynne Crews laments that "very little has been made of McCarthy's interest in Heraclitus,"[4] despite Manuel Broncano's assertion that it would be a fruitful potential lead for future research.[5] Specifically, the relationship between *The Road* and Heraclitus has yet to be explored. Yet Heraclitus's philosophy may prove to be highly relevant to *The Road*, as his *arche* was fire, which can be related to the novel's motif of the father and son "carrying the fire."

Using Herclitus as a methological lens, while drawing on and expanding theories set forth by Daniel Luttrull, Marcel D. DeCoste, and Erik J.

Wielenberg in particular, this article therefore discusses humanity's relationship to the ecosystem within *The Road*, and whether, as Monbiot says, it should be read primarily as an ecocritical or ecopastoral work, despite the ambiguity of the apocalypse's cause.

## Eternal Fire: Defining Heraclitus's *Arche*

Before delving into the text itself, let us first define the Presocratic concept of the *arche* (or ἀρχή in the original Greek). The Presocratics lived in fifth century BCE[6] Greece and were the forerunners of Socrates. They are usually agreed to be the first philosophers of the Western world. The early Presocratics—the Milesians and Ionians—were particularly concerned with finding a cosmogonical explanation that shirked the pre-existing myths of gods performing sexual/reproductive acts in order to create the cosmos.[7] To this end, there arose among them a school of material monists, including Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Parmenides, who aimed to discover the core element from which all other things were made—the elusive *arche*. These philosophers believed that the *arche*, or the "principle," was the one substance in the world from which all others emerged and into which everything would go once more. Each of these material monist philosophers proposed a different substance for their theorized *arche*—Thales's was water, Anaximander's was an ephemeral "endless void"—but the one most relevant here is Heraclitus's *arche* of fire.[8]

Heraclitus was renowned for being abstract and confusing, therefore many references to the man and his work from his own time—mostly in Plato—are comedic and even dismissive. Yet we do know he believed the following:

> The universe is limited in extent, and there is one world. It is generated from fire and it is consumed in fire again, alternating in fixed periods throughout the whole of eternity. (Dio. Laert. 15)

Further, we know that he believed this creation and destruction by fire was in some way connected to morality:

> And [Heraclitus] says that a judgement of the world and of everything in it comes about through fire; for fire, he says, will come and judge and convict all things. (Hippolytus ix I–X 9)

How exactly this judgement would be passed and on what moral basis is ambiguous. Heraclitus only claims it would be conducted by fate or fire, at appointed times.

It is also thought that Heraclitus was the first Western philosopher to identify the morality of the soul, which, it has been conjectured, would be judged along with everything else in the world as being important to the construction of the universe. He believed the soul to be made of *aither*, or the substance of the stars, a view already popular in poetical contexts by his time.[9]

This theory that the world will be destroyed and re-created by fire at times of judgment appointed by fate presents some interesting interpretive opportunities when set against motifs of morality and fire within *The Road*. But before we explore them, first we should look at the prevailing interpretations of fire within the novel, and why a more holistic theory might offer new perspectives.

## Humanity's Flame: Reaching beyond Prometheus

As Ashley Kunsa writes, there is a "religious quality" to *The Road*, which lends itself to ethical and moral questioning (59). In part, this is because the presence of God, like the cause of the ecosystem collapse, is ambiguous. For example, the first words spoken in the book are by the father, "the man," about his son, "the boy," and immediately introduce the idea of God's instability in this world: "If he is not the word of God God never spoke" (3). This is problematic because, as Wielenberg points out, the Bible's book of Genesis (1:1–31) describes God creating through speech (1). A God who may never have spoken is a God who may never have created—and is therefore not a Christian God at all. However, unlike theological critics such as DeCoste, I do not think this ambiguity about God's place in the world of *The Road* is a comment on the crisis of faith in the divine per se. Instead, it invites us to examine a supra-Christian morality— indeed, perhaps even a supra-religious one—in which the tradition and language of Christianity stands in for a "transcendental-humanist" spirituality that is more universal. The narrative is "religious," distinct from "religion."[10]

This theological ambiguity is complemented by a motif of fire throughout the novel, the two themes combining to give the reader—and

indeed the characters themselves—a sense of the dystopia's moral codes. From midway through the book, the man and the boy begin to discuss the idea that they are "carrying fire." The metaphor is used as a way of helping the boy glean a sense of safety in the unstable, and often cruel, world in which he is caught.

> We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa?
> Yes. We are.
> And nothing bad is going to happen to us.
> That's right.
> Because we're carrying the fire.
> Yes. Because we're carrying the fire. (87)

The second time the fire is mentioned, it is a concept by which the boy can define himself against the evils he sees in the world. After the man and the boy have escaped from a house in which they found a locked cellar full of half-eaten human beings, the boy, as Luttrull says, feels "a need to reaffirm his moral identity . . . he combines his sense of self with a sense of right and wrong" (27). In this scene the boy is loath to speak and "looked like he'd been crying," wracked by moral dilemma. Yet eventually, he talks to the man:

> We wouldn't ever eat anybody, would we?
> No. Of course not.
> Even if we were starving?
> . . . No. No matter what.
> Because we're the good guys.
> Yes.
> And we're carrying the fire.
> And we're carrying the fire. Yes. (136)

By the end of the book, the boy uses the ideal of carrying fire as a question to identify whether the veteran who takes him in after his father dies is also a "good guy." When the veteran agrees that he is carrying the fire, the boy feels safe both physically and ethically to join his family (302–4).

Luttrull proposes that this idea of "carrying fire" is a metaphor for the Promethean myth.[11] Prometheus is a figure from ancient Greek myth, one of the Titans who stole fire from the gods and gave it to humankind. He first appears in Hesiod's *Theogony*, and is punished by Zeus, who ties

Prometheus to a rock and sends an eagle to peck out his undying liver every morning. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod has Zeus punish mankind further for accepting the fire by sending them Pandora, who unleashes evil upon them. The myth is paradoxical: Prometheus both offers man the foundational tool for civilization and simultaneously invites the methods of its destruction. Throughout time, readings of the myth have developed, as examined by Luttrull (20–23). In Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, humanity being denied fire is an arbitrary law laid down by Zeus, depicting the Titan as scorning boundaries. This rebelliousness is then exaggerated by Romantic poets such as Goethe and Shelley, who celebrate human potential through Prometheus's love of humankind and depict Prometheus as an ideal man, who can maintain his moral integrity while struggling against confining boundaries. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche treats Prometheus as a figure who sinned actively for the "progress" of mankind, an idea Jung builds on, concluding that each step forward for mankind is comprised of a Promethean sin, that humanity cannot be creative *and* good. Luttrull concludes: "During this journey from Hesiod to Nietzsche, the Prometheus myth becomes an ever more provocative call for rebellion against limitations and an exhortation for civilized humanity to realize their potential by breaking traditional boundaries. . . . Prometheus [becomes] a tragic hero for whom hubris, traditionally a flaw, is now a strength" (23).

By combining the father's struggle with God in *The Road*—"Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God" (10)—with the motif of carrying fire, Luttrull concludes that the central figures of father and boy are indeed Promethean. Yet by promoting the boy's empathy and kindness toward strangers, even sometimes those he would consider as "bad guys," McCarthy deviates from the narrative of technological or cultural progress, instead defining the Promethean fire as the son's simple charity, a purely moral progress. Traditionally Promethean progress means nothing in a post-apocalyptic world: this new moral Prometheus is the one needed now (30).

While this reading is certainly emotionally gratifying, it does not fully account for the role of fire within *The Road*. While on the one hand "carrying fire" is indicative of being a "good guy" (more on what defines this later), fire is also the primary destructive element aside from other human beings. The text describes "a dull rose glow in the window glass" (54) during the apocalyptic event, likely the flicker of fire, alongside forest

fires and their after-effects in the fictive present. Fire is a force for physical destruction.

What's more, in a literal sense, anyone can make a fire, moral or not: "Within a year there were fires on the ridges and deranged chanting. The screams of the murdered" (33). Morally, it is an ambiguous force, alongside luminosity in general: the father's dreams are "brightened" with memories as he relinquishes his grip on life toward the end of the book. As Andy Dumont points out, these ambiguities are not wholly served by the Promethean metaphor of fire as a progressive force that destroys with hubris (57-63). If that were the case, each time fire destroys, one would expect to see progress being made, yet fire cannot be identified as a symbol of virtue per se because this is not what happens.

These ambiguities are better addressed by viewing the text through Heraclitus's paradoxical theory of fire as *arche*, as the preserver and destroyer from which we came and to which we will all return, and which we will, on some basis, be judged. This is most apparent when we combine this reading with the theories of community as morality within *The Road.*

## A Luminous Network: Fire as Connection

It is time to take a closer look at what it means to be a "good guy" in *The Road*. Wielenberg narrows it down to five principles made clear in the narrative:

1. Don't eat people.
2. Don't steal.
3. Don't lie.
4. Keep your promises.
5. Help others. (5)

Wielenberg goes on to note that despite these principles, the man regularly blurs moral boundaries. For instance, early on in the book, the father and son encounter a victim who has been struck by lightning, but when the boy repeatedly asks the man to help the victim, the man refuses. This kind of morally questionable act does not, however, make the man a "bad guy." "Good guys" do not always do the right thing; even in the real world, that is too simplistic. The man is a "good guy" because he still cares about doing the right thing, and strives to live up to it, whether or not he always can. He is aware that the greatest moral danger is a slippery slope:

"that engaging in justified violations of the code of the good guys can make unjustified violations more likely" (Wielenberg 4–9).

Let us revisit that first principle of the "good guys"—not to eat people. Wielenberg notes a relationship between cannibalism and Kant's imperative not to treat human beings as tools, or food, when they hold an intrinsic worth. This is not because there is a moral imperative from God to do so, but because the result is isolation: "in a godless universe, to turn one's back on morality is to risk alienating oneself from the rest of humanity" (Wielenberg 18). The principles of the "good guys" are the universal tenements that allow a community of people to connect meaningfully, with trust. Ultimately, without these conditions, a person cannot experience love—either from or to another human—and it is that isolation which is the true hell of *The Road*.

The "bad guys" exist within that hell of isolation: the roadrat the man kills when the boy is threatened, for instance, is then eaten by his companions. One of the most harrowing scenes in the book occurs when the man and boy stumble across the charred remains of a newborn baby on a spit, having witnessed its heavily pregnant mother and her companions pass by some time earlier. These cannibals may survive, but the cost is that they have forever severed the possibility of true connection with another person (Wielenberg 17–19).[12]

"McCarthy seems to suggest that we cannot be human without this fire," Matthew Mullins argues, stating that hunger operates as "as a metaphysical reminder of the place of the individual in the larger network of humanity, and as an ethical reminder of the relationality of that larger network" (89, 80). According to DeCoste, that larger network is the core loss of the book, and the basis for the father's hope: though he understands it is not rational, the man hopes that his son can find a community of "good guys" after he has gone.

It is here that Heraclitus's theory of the *arche* emerges as a compelling metaphor. Heraclitus appeared to think that fire as an *arche* was simultaneously literal and symbolic: it was literally the foundation of every object in the world but was also a power for moral judgment. We might also conjecture that souls being made of "the stuff of stars" implies that they, too, are intrinsically bound up with the fiery *arche*. More than that is difficult to discern because of Heraclitus's trademark ambiguity, but this duality seems similar to the way McCarthy treats fire in *The Road*. It is both

a literal flame in the landscape and campfires, and a metaphorical moral flame carried by the "good guys."

The Presocratic philosophers often saw their cosmogonies as being just *Eikôs Mythos*, or "a likely story."[13] The "likely story" linking Heraclitus's and McCarthy's treatments of fire as an *arche* is that, if we can all be seen as being from and heading to the same source of fire, then it follows that we are all connected to it. The *arche* is a part of us, and connects us, whether we are aware of it or not. Whether Heraclitus saw this interconnection, or awareness of it, as a source of moral worth is unclear, but in *The Road* this does seem to be a basis for moral distinction: the "good guys" carry that interconnecting fire, and the "bad guys" do not.

This is crucial: as Kunsa notes, McCarthy highlights the importance of morality by not naming his protagonists, drawing our attention instead to the verbs around them, the character's literal actions on the page. This is in stark contrast to McCarthy's other works, such as *Blood Meridian*, where characters are named partly because their actions are so similarly violent and reprehensible that they cannot be judged. In *The Road*, by contrast, characters are differentiated by their actions because they *can* be: their morality is not all the same. Therefore, the abiding linguistic mantras we are left with concerning the man and the boy are that they are "good guys" who "carry the fire."[14]

To "carry" something is to become aware of a thing, to pick it up and bear its weight. By choosing to "pick up" the fire on the metaphorical level of the *arche*, the man and the boy can also be seen to acknowledge the interconnections it implies: they do not just carry the fire, they carry each other. Indeed, though for the purposes of a different conclusion, DeCoste argues that the father and son only fulfil the hopes of the other, and develop their sense of morality *because* they are connected to each other. Mullins, too, makes the point that morality can only be passed on through true community, that "for McCarthy, the fire is something that is passed on from generation to generation, something essential to being human, something that transcends the individual. . . . While the fire is certainly something within each individual, it must be carried because it is also external to the individual, something that needs to be passed on from person to person" (89–90).

Those who are not able to access connection in *The Road* cannot acknowledge the *arche*, and therefore cannot "carry" it, even if the *arche* is still a part of them. This answers the loose ends left by the Promethean

interpretation: fire is ambiguous precisely because it is in everything and everyone. The moral decision is whether or not you wish to acknowledge it.

## Beneath the Mantle: Examining Humanity's Connection with Nature

Indeed, we can stretch the metaphor of the *arche* further, by speaking not only about the community of humanity, but about human communion with nature. The community of the ecosystem itself. Though, as we have discussed, *The Road* is a book of ecological disaster, humanity's role in the ecosystem's collapse remains unknowable. We can only examine the text's depiction of the natural world, and humanity's relationship with it.

McCarthy employs an "exhausted" language to describe nature and, by "drastically underplaying" the cataclysmic event of the book, draws the bulk of our attention to the "blighted" landscape.[15] Oliver Völker notes that, unlike the baroque language employed in his other work, McCarthy uses a spartan style in *The Road* to express scarcity. The *lack* of ecosystem surrounds the reader, enveloping them almost completely, excepting a few flashbacks in the father's mind. These flashbacks are almost exclusively pastoral, as Edwards notes. They juxtapose the beauty of what has been lost—"aching skies" (17) and "the perfect day of his childhood" (12) in "siren worlds" (17) of memory—with the grim reality of the fictive present. This is most clear in the two flashbacks concerning trout fishing, an image that returns at the end of the novel, in a coda that has mystified and moved many literary critics.[16]

> Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (307)

This scene, connected to the novel obliquely by short references in flashbacks but without the explicit point of view of either the man or the boy, jolts the reader out of the fictive present into a past that very much resembles our own time. "As it does not have any overt thematic commentary," DuMont observes, "it thus allows us to acknowledge the material circumstances of the fish, and their ability to create a material impression that leads to material communication between speaker and listener, or reader and writer" (58).

DuMont goes on to claim that this is a source of beauty, not a cause for despair, but on the latter count I disagree. The coda discloses the heartbreak of the novel in two ways. First, as Edwards says, the coda reads nature as sacred text. "This passage is not only pastoral but elegiac, for those brook trout are gone, those mountain streams barren of life in the post-apocalyptic waste land of McCarthy's stark and disturbing novel" (55). We feel for the plight of the fish, as we have felt for the man and boy. The empathy of connection, the fire of the *arche*, is returned to us, the readers, this time for the ecosystem that we know and so often ignore, but which our senses have been attuned to over the course of the novel.

Second, as Hannah Stark says, it places the fish—a living emblem of nature—into the hands of the reader, who is directly addressed through second person: "in your hand." No matter the cause of the cataclysm in *The Road*, seen through the filter of the connective *arche* of fire, this ending emotionally connects us with the reality of our situation: that everything is interlinked, and in the same way we rely on and are responsible for our friends and family, we are entwined with the community of our ecosystem. Once broken, it "could not be put back. Not be made right again."

## Conclusion: The Burning Core

A constant concern of McCarthy scholarship is whether or not *The Road* is hopeful. Kunsa interprets a rebirth toward the end, at least at a linguistic level; DuMont a continued growth of Aristotelian Christian ethics; Edwards a cold warning of the dangers that await us if humanity does not act against its own destructive nature. Of the three conclusions, I am inclined to agree most with Edwards's nihilism. As Stark observes, "Dystopian literature is a repository of our already existing fears, projected into a future world. Climate fiction is exemplary in this case because it

shows us the terrible future of the planet that we already suspect may come to pass" (78). As Michael Chabon observed in his 2007 review of *The Road*, the only true account of such a dystopia would be "a book of blank pages, white as ash." The dilemma of the author is that by writing the world, you bring it into being. As McCarthy destroys the ecosystem, so he brings it to life. Like the *arche* in moments of judgment, the world is being created and undone simultaneously.

By reading the text through the lens of Heraclitus's *arche*, we can reach the burning core of this paradox, interpreting the metaphor of "carrying the fire" as remaining connected to humanity and the ecosystem that surrounds us, even in the face of its greatest creations and most devastating destructions. It is the dichotomy of *The Road*, and for many of life itself, that in these connections lie our best hopes and greatest fears. We either live together in union, or die together in isolation.

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## Notes

1. As discussed in Josephs, 2009.
2. Jurgensen, 2009.
3. McCarthy interpolates a quote from Heraclitus into the mouth of Judge Holden (McCarthy 1985, p. 323).
4. Crews 2017, p. 183. For an argument as to the longevity of this interest, see pp.151–54.
5. Broncano 2013, p. 5
6. In this essay, BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era) are used instead of the more traditional BC and AD. This is both to engage with recent academic trends, and to reinforce the work's emphasis on secularity.'
7. For a basic overview, see Barnes 2002, xix–xxi. For in-depth discussion, see Parker 1967, pp. 9–10.
8. For further clarification, see Algra 1999 and Hussey 1972.

9. For more on these and other beliefs of Heraclitus, see Kirk and Raven 1957: Loc. 340–449.

10. For further discussion of "transcendental-humanism" in *The Road*, see Mullins 2011. For a reading of *The Road* in light of John Dewey's *A Common Faith*, which calls for a separation of "the religious" and "religion," see Metcalf 2017.

11. Also discussed by Kunsa (2009) and Wielenberg (2010) among others.

12. This theory is also supported by Mullins (2004), who relates it to Charles Taylor and Kant, and DeCoste (2012) who relates the suicide of the mother to a sense of emotional isolation are excellent reading.

13. For more on Presocratic self-awareness, see Burnyeat 2005, 143–65.

14. For further discussion, see Kunsa 2009, pp. 60–61.

15. Hoberek 2011, p. 487.

16. Edwards, DuMont, Stark, and Noble, for instance, all wrestle with it in different ways.

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