Liverpool Law Review
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10991-026-09406-7

Adaptation Machines Toward Death: Survival, Time and Moral Decay in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Received: 15 January 2026 / Accepted: 9 February 2026

Abstract
This article examines the consequences of adaptation as the primary response to social, systemic, and moral crisis. Utilising Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* as a point of analytical departure and return throughout, we develop the idea of humans as 'adaptation machines' and situate this within the contextual chaos and brutality of 21st century governance. The article first focuses on individual and interpersonal responses to crisis. Humans exhibit incredible adaptive capacities. Yet when adaptation is asserted or assumed as an ethical end-in-itself, it invites a series of questions. What is the political status of adaptability? How does the status of adaptability change under conditions of authoritarian lawlessness? Can adaptation exacerbate states of social and moral decay? Should we be able to adapt to anything? In grappling with these questions and aided by the novel, we develop a second line of interpretation concerning human adaptation and adaptability as a moral ideal at the collective level in the 21st century. We conclude by questioning forms of governance which place the unbounded pursuit of adaptability at their core. Under forms of contemporary governance characterised by permanent crisis, adaptation becomes a demand placed upon individuals and populations to endure, absorb, and continue to function within systems that normalise insecurity and harm.

Keywords Adaptation · Adaptability · Resilience · Futurity · Crisis · Catastrophe · Cormac McCarthy · *The Road*

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Published online: 13 February 2026

Introduction

> "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." (*The Road* by Cormac McCarthy 2022 [2006]: 306-7)

Reckoning with lost time is perhaps one of the greatest collective challenges civilisation faces in the 21st century. One dominant response to this condition has been an intensification of adaptation, understood as the capacity to endure, adjust, and carry on in the absence of meaningful repair or restoration. Within this contextual frame, this paper offers an existential and socio-political analysis of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, using the novel to develop the notion of humans as 'adaptation machines' toward death and to examine the collective consequences of treating adaptation as the primary response to crisis. Our use of the term *machine* is not intended to deny the possibility of community, morality, or ethical life under extreme conditions, nor to reduce human beings to mechanistic entities. Rather, it functions as a critical metaphor for the way adaptation is increasingly organised, demanded, and normalised in contemporary life. To describe humans as *adaptation machines toward death* is to name a condition in which endurance, optimisation, and coping are prioritised over repair, collective transformation, or moral renewal.

Our core conclusion is blunt: adaptability, while necessary, is not an unqualified good, and when normalised as an ethic of endurance it risks becoming complicity with avoidable harm. Meaningful reckoning, involving material changes that might divert some of the gravest collision courses ahead, is difficult. So too are our psychological tendencies to fear, deny, or otherwise disavow the realities of human impact on the natural world. These emotional maladies are inseparable from this reckoning, regardless of whether we act selfishly or selflessly from here on in. In this article we imagine humans as adaptation machines, a move that requires little imaginative leap given the centrality of adaptation in studies of human biology, social interaction, and philosophical accounts of freedom. Yet the natural world, of which we are a part, is struggling to adapt to the violent pace set by our pursuit of accumulation. Human and nonhuman animal victims proliferate, as do ecological casualties. Yet so do survivors. Our population grows. Vulnerabilities are conquered and multiplied, though many have proven insurmountable, and some precious things are gone forever.

The 21st century presents multiple crises of law, spanning human rights, international peace agreements, climate commitments, and regulatory frameworks, alongside shifting 'natural' laws governing ecosystems, wildlife, and perhaps even human nature. Such semi-speculative claims, containing many moving parts, resist easy social scientific analysis. By the time they are analysed, they are often isolated into discrete academic silos, necessary for specialist research and the production of a

recognisable evidence base. Scientific, economic, and policy processes dictate this necessity, and we do not contest their value here.

Rather, we explore the consequences of imagining humans as adaptation machines, doing so with simultaneous awe at human resilience and revulsion at its normalisation as a political ethic of our age (Joseph 2013; Neocleous 2013; Chandler 2014; Diprose 2015). The metaphor is thus diagnostic rather than descriptive. It highlights the risk that adaptability, when elevated to an ethical or political ideal, becomes routinised, instrumental, and detached from questions of value, responsibility, and shared futurity. Far from displacing concerns with morality or community, the machine metaphor is used precisely to foreground what is placed under pressure, or rendered fragile, when survival and adjustment are treated as sufficient responses to crisis. Unlike nonhuman animals, at least in Western philosophy, humans live with awareness of their own mortality. Living towards a future death, with attendant psychosocial strategies for managing anxiety, human capacities for adaptation appear boundless. This adaptability has contributed both to our present predicament and, perhaps, to its resolution. Diverting crises in this long 21st century never means going back. We cannot go back, only forwards. As we move, the roads civilisation once travelled disappear from view, leaving a world unreachable and lost to accelerated time. Indeed, there is something deeply allegorical about Cormac McCarthy's (2022 [2006]) *The Road*, not only in its resonant 21st century themes but also in the fact it was reportedly written in six weeks, a fitting mode of production for a century seemingly defined by compressed time and space.

Our article begins with a brief discussion of novelistic exploration as a way of writing differently about our subject matter. We then provide a short outline of *The Road*, emphasising the roles of its few protagonists. Rather than offering a detailed plot summary, we develop two interpretive lines inspired by the text. The first concerns human adaptability to violence and lawlessness at individual and interpersonal levels. The second considers adaptability as a moral ideal at the collective level. Here we interrogate the dangers of untrammelled flexibility, returning to the now-memetic aphorism that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. We conclude by asking whether reliance on technological 'fixes' for both the crisis of capitalism and capitalism's crises has produced a form of collective dementia, with governance trapped practically in the present while grasping emotively at the past. Ultimately, we question forms of governance which place the unbounded pursuit of adaptability at their core.

Writing Differently: A Novelistic Exploration of Death, Time, and Governance

This is not a new way of writing differently, but it is a new way of writing for us. What follows offers an eisegesis of Cormac McCarthy's dystopian novel *The Road*, drawing on themes from our prior and ongoing research into resilience, adaptability, and the human condition (McGowan, 2022; McGowan and Perrin, 2026; Perrin, 2024). We are less concerned with authorial intent than with the ideas the novel allows us to think into it. We take inspiration from Kilby and Gilloch's (2022: 637) non-manifesto

for writing the social differently, particularly their reflections that writing is always collaborative, that academic writing is a kind of fiction, and that there is no final version, only latest ones.

Our reading of *The Road* has unfolded alongside everyday labours, mundane responsibilities, frustrated desires, and pervasive fears. It has evoked profound feelings of love for humanity, even as humanity continues to furnish displays of barbarity, reflecting the uneasy proximity of dystopia and hope (see, inter alia, Afnan 1989; Horan 2018; Olivi 2023). We have found resonances with our attempts to think through the existential and phenomenological dimensions of lost time (see McGowan and Perrin, 2026), as well as links to what Lippens (2019) describes as the irreverent sovereign aspirations of our age and the end of law. Reading McCarthy's novel, a quarter of the way through this century, written at its outset, feels increasingly unsettling.

Two Roads

The Road by Cormac McCarthy is a bleak, post-apocalyptic novel that follows an unnamed father and his young son as they journey south through a devastated America. An unspecified catastrophe has destroyed civilization. Cities are burned, forests are dead, animals are extinct, and ash fills the air. Food is scarce and the few remaining humans are often violent, having turned to murder and cannibalism to survive. Against this background, the novel focuses on the bond between the father and son and their struggle to retain moral goodness in a world seemingly emptied of hope. The story unfolds episodically as the pair push a shopping cart containing their few possessions along abandoned roads. Their primary goal is survival, finding food, avoiding hostile strangers, and staying warm, but the father is also driven by a deeper purpose: protecting his son not only physically, but ethically. He repeatedly tells the boy that they are "the good guys," meaning they do not steal from those who need food more, do not eat other people, and try to help when possible. Sometimes their actions on the road necessarily complicate this narrative, particularly for the boy. This moral framework becomes a fragile but vital source of meaning making.

Throughout their journey, the father recalls memories of the world before its collapse and of the boy's mother. She appears in flashbacks as someone who has lost faith in survival and eventually chooses suicide rather than facing ongoing brutality. Her absence underscores the father's isolation and the weight of parental responsibility he carries alone. His health steadily declines, likely from illness caused by the harsh environment, adding urgency and tension to their travels. The father and son encounter numerous dangers – abandoned houses that conceal captives kept as food, armed survivors roaming the roads, and the constant threat of starvation. They also experience rare moments of relief, such as discovering a hidden bunker stocked with food and supplies. These moments provide temporary safety and reveal what has been lost, serving as reminders of the comfort and abundance of the old world. Yet even in these moments, the father remains wary, knowing safety never lasts. As he grows weaker, the son increasingly demonstrates compassion and moral clarity, often urging his father to help others, even at personal risk. This reversal, where the child

becomes the moral guide, highlights one of the novel's central ideas: that goodness can persist even when social structures have collapsed.

Through its stark prose and bleak setting, McCarthy explores what it means to remain human when the structures that support humanity have collapsed. The son embodies hope, not through optimism about the future, but through his insistence on kindness and empathy. Near the end of the novel, the father dies, leaving the boy alone on the road. Before dying, he reassures the boy that he can carry on and that the "fire" – a symbol of moral goodness, human decency, and an examined life – lives within him. The boy cries over his dead father's body for three days before encountering another family, including children, who appear to share his and his father's values. He chooses to join them, suggesting a fragile possibility of continuity, community, and love, which pertinently assumes a non-biological form (something we will return to later). *The Road* is perhaps ultimately a meditation on love, morality, choice, freedom, responsibility, and ethics in the face of annihilation. It is certainly a stark vision of human collapse. Yet McCarthy's work emphasises that moral choice and compassion can survive even when the world, as it was, does not.

We wish to trace out two possible readings, two roads of interpretation, concerning human life in the 21st century. One focuses on the authentic and inauthentic depictions of stoicism and resilience displayed by the boy and his father; in short, the unavoidable and necessary adaptations to life in a post-apocalyptic ecosystem where passage (physical, at least) to 'normal times' is apparently blocked forever. Can we analyse the protagonists from *The Road* in order to better understand subjectivity under conditions of lawlessness, authoritarianism, and social and civic decay? What might McCarthy's protagonists in *The Road* be telling us about subjectivity under conditions of lawlessness, authoritarianism, and civic decay? The other situates *The Road* as a cautionary tale which foreshadows adaptability as both a necessary and insidious ethic of our age. Adaptability as an evolutionary mechanism – glacial in pace – has given way to rapid and jarring change, demanding that nature speed up too. 'Adapt or die' could be humanity's motto. The eye is perpetually drawn to the burned-out landscapes in *The Road*, to the ashen and blackened filth of the sea, sky, and land. Parallels with climate catastrophe trip off the tongue, jump off the page, spill out all over. Instead, we wish to seriously and playfully (Kilby and Gilloch 2022: 636) explore the novel and its vivid yet ambiguous foreshadowings as a clarion call against unfettered adaptation. Adaptation to what? From what? For whom? It was not only the natural world whose evolutionary lines became loosened from their rising and falling moorings, but human law too. Which laws? Some laws of the human condition surely remain universal, as our first road intimates, but what of the laws governing society, of the political economies of material needs, of the law as it is written down in statutes, constitutions, declarations, and manifestos of human rights? How fast do we expect these to adapt? How quickly can we demand that they be changed? What might the consequences be of demanding that the law keep in-step with lawlessness? What forms of collective malaise may be produced when we push adaptation of our democratic institutions to their limit?

We know we must embrace adaptation and adaptability to survive. Our engagement is non-negotiable. Yet we are not adapting quickly enough to the demands of our age, demands that would see a serious reckoning with disposability (Evans and

Giroux, 2015) and ecocide (Whyte 2020). At the same time, we frequently take for granted how quickly we are now expected to adapt to the latest gadgets, technologies, and products, all of which promise to free up our time and enrich our lives, but which of course don't. The ease with which we consume images of human suffering, starvation, genocide, and scapegoating, all of which promise to prevent future generations suffering similar fates, but which of course don't, supply more sinister case studies in adaptability. What lessons does *The Road* have for the political status of adaptability? Should we be able to adapt to anything?

In tracing these two lines of interpretation concerning human life in the 21st century, we assume a great deal of overlap with earlier times, but we also wish to sit with the idea that this century may well exhibit vertiginous traits of myriad alienating varieties unique to the technological capacities of today. We could certainly identify and connect some of these to the *vertigo* of past presents and present pasts (*qua* Sebald 1999), or to the *nausea* of existence, of having a personal psychology (Sartre 1938).

Love, Stoicism, and Survival in *The Road*: Living Without a Later

The depiction of love between the father and the son in *The Road* offers one of the most compelling accounts of human endurance in contemporary fiction. McCarthy presents a relationship marked by extraordinary strength, resolve, and devotion. The blood bond between the protagonists sustains them through unrelenting starvation, violence, and despair. Initially, this appears to function as the primary engine of survival. The father's fierce commitment to protecting the boy, acceptingly at the cost of his own health and moral certainty, embodies a form of stoic resolve that borders on the heroic. Yet to read this bond as sufficient in itself would be to reproduce a myth of individual resilience. The father and son remain connected to an external world of people and in both life threatening and yet oddly life affirming ways. Survival, even at the very edge of extinction, is never purely biological. It is social, cooperative, and symbolic, rather than competitive in the narrow sense implied by Darwinian laws or thermodynamic models of energy scarcity (Rowlands 2013: 131).

There are often good reasons for what existential philosophy would describe as bad faith. McCarthy repeatedly stages moments in which moral clarity is deferred, narrowed, or temporarily suspended in order to preserve life. These moments are not presented as simple ethical failures, but as responses to a world in which the conditions for moral deliberation have been radically compressed. Stoicism here is therefore deeply ambivalent. It functions both as an authentic mode of endurance under conditions of catastrophe and as a defensive narrowing of ethical possibility. The father's justifications for concealment, abandonment, or violence are rarely framed clearly as choices between good and evil, despite his frequent invocation of "good guys" and "bad guys". Rather, they are framed, or perhaps semi-consciously justified by the father, as choices between death now or death later.

McCarthy pits the biological against the social in a number of ways. The blood bond between the boy and his father is an implicit and crucial tie throughout the novel, yet it ultimately proves insufficient to save either of them. Had the boy soldiered on alone, his father's sacrifice would have surely been for nothing. Rather, it is the boy's adoption by a stranger, previously encountered solely as a figure of danger,

that ultimately breaks the relentless and merciless logic of survival as competition for scarce resource. Here, rather than biological endurance alone, social solidarity, cooperation, and care are revealed as the conditions under which life can persist. Those who 'carry the fire' turn out to be perhaps less like someone recognisably similar to 'us', less someone bound by shared family, and more like "the stranger" (Schütz 1944; Sartre 2003 [1943]) from another plane of social existence, just as we have always needed the love of strangers (Butler 2020). Ethical survival in *The Road* is thus fundamentally grounded in openness to alterity and to non-biological forms of care.

There is an undeniable beauty in the way McCarthy depicts social nothingness. "Where you've nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (McCarthy 2022 [2006]: 78). His prose reinforces sociological insights concerning life on the barest of stages, where meaning is sustained through minimal gestures rather than institutional structures (Scott 2022). Whenever the father and the boy set out in search of firewood to keep themselves warm or undertake yet another starving reconnaissance of the surrounding land and abandoned buildings for provisions, their movements acquire a distinctive economy. Repeated under conditions of scarcity, these actions take on a ceremonial significance, stripped of excess as repetition becomes ritual. Life is lived on the very edge, always on the verge, perpetually about to end, in ways that resonate strongly with Goffman's accounts of the interaction order and social life conducted under radically constrained conditions (Goffman 1959, 1961). Among the ruins, fragments of hope nonetheless persist. The post-apocalyptic form carries an oddly uplifting dynamic in which hope no longer resides in progress, recovery, or institutional reconstruction, but in the fragile and provisional continuity of care itself, a continuity to which readers, like the protagonists, cling wherever it can be found.

There is a hopeful image of cooperation in the novel, not only between the boy and his father but between the two of them and an imagined community (Anderson) of good guys who too carry the fire. The zenith of this cooperation comes from the love of a non-biological stranger, who finally offers safe haven, as far as we know, and disrupts the hitherto dominant image of a post-society populated exclusively by violent marauders. In this sense, the book's ending resembles a form of Genesis, created not by sovereign declaration that "it was good", but through an act of care that emerges from devastation rather than mastery. What underpins these dynamics of love, stoicism, and cooperation is a radical transformation of time itself. *The Road* is a world lived without a later. In Sartrean terms, human consciousness is ordinarily stretched between facticity, what has already occurred, and transcendence, the not-yet, through which action becomes a project oriented toward a meaningful future (Sartre 2003 [1943]). To exist as a for-itself is to live toward possibilities that exceed the present moment. McCarthy stages a world in which this temporal structure has collapsed.

Facticity (Sartre 2003 [1943]) in *The Road* is totalising. Ash, extinction, loss, and irreversible ruin saturate experience. The past is no longer a resource for continuity, and memory becomes a source of pain rather than orientation. Yet what is most striking is not the weight of the past, but the inaccessibility of transcendence. Or is even the illusion of transcendent possibility absent altogether? Surely not. McCarthy's deployment of suicide is no coincidence in this regard. If transcendence was

absent, would they not have followed the same path as the mother (*qua* Camus)? It is the reach for transcendence that keeps them going. It is attained in many small, yet life-saving ways, every time they distract themselves from the cold just enough to fall asleep. Yet it also remains just harrowingly beyond reach in any way that might satisfy normative understandings of capability (Sen, 1993; Nussbaum, 2006). There is no credible horizon of reconstruction, progress, or collective future toward which action might be meaningfully directed. The future no longer functions as a space of projection.

Bayly's account of futurity in cultures of catastrophe provides a precise lexicon for this condition (Bayly 2013). Bayly argues that under conditions of permanent crisis, catastrophe ceases to operate as a rupture demanding repair and instead becomes the ambient condition of social life. When catastrophe is no longer episodic but continuous, the future can no longer be organised as a projective space. What comes to an end is not hope itself, but the project form of futurity. Futurity traditionally presupposes distance, sequence, and the possibility that present action can be justified by reachable outcomes. Projects depend upon a temporal arc in which meaning unfolds over time. Under conditions of chronic emergency, this arc is shortened or severed altogether. The future does not disappear, but it loses its generative function. It presses back upon the present as threat, deadline, or countdown, as in pandemic time structured by case numbers and lockdown horizons during Covid-19; climate crisis framed through tipping points and adaptation timelines rather than transformative futures; war and displacement organised around ceasefire windows, evacuation corridors, and survival thresholds.

This is what can be described as collapsed futurity. The future no longer expands meaning outward. Instead, it collapses inward, compressing ethical life into the present tense. Agency persists, but it becomes reactive rather than projective. Ethics becomes situational rather than transformative. Action is oriented toward mitigation, maintenance, and survival rather than change. Read through Bayly, *The Road* emerges as a literary world situated after the end of the project. The father's life is no longer organised around any future beyond the next day. There is no rebuilding, no recovery, no long-term moral horizon. His remaining project is brutally minimal: keeping the boy alive today. Survival is organised hour by hour, decision by decision, without the stabilising presence of a meaningful "after". Time becomes emergency time, a perpetual present that intensifies ethical tension while simultaneously constraining moral imagination. This marks an important contrast with Sartre. For Sartre, even in conditions of nausea or absurdity, the possibility of transcendence remains structurally intact. Consciousness is condemned to freedom, and projects persist even when they are anguished or unstable. In *The Road*, by contrast, McCarthy stages a situation closer to Bayly's catastrophe culture, where the very conditions that sustain projects have eroded. Consciousness remains vigilant and intentional but deprived of viable futures to inhabit. The for-itself persists without a world capable of supporting transcendence.

This collapse of futurity helps explain the oscillation between authentic care and defensive withdrawal that characterises the father's actions. It also clarifies why adaptation in the novel so often appears indistinguishable from coping. When the project form collapses, resilience risks becoming endurance without trajectory. Adaptation

becomes the management of exhaustion rather than a movement toward transformation. Yet within this temporal confinement, the boy's insistence on goodness acquires its force. His repeated questioning of his father, his appeals to help others, and his refusal to relinquish the category of "good guys" operate as fragile attempts to reintroduce transcendence into a world that no longer structurally supports it. Ethics here is no longer grounded in expectation of a better future, but in fidelity to a moral orientation that survives the foreclosure of futurity. The final transfer of care, from father to stranger, does not restore the future in any conventional sense. In Bayly's terms, it does not revive the project. Instead, it demonstrates that meaning can migrate when futurity collapses. Care, responsibility, and ethical orientation are transferred rather than accumulated. In a world lived without a later, ethics survives only as practice, enacted in the present tense through acts of care that do not depend on futurity for their justification.

Adapt or Die: against 'Resilience' to Authoritarian Lawlessness

As Emil Cioran observed in *The Trouble with Being Born*, the ultimate human predicament lies not in death itself but in birth, understood as the commencement of a life already oriented toward its end (Cioran 1973). This temporal burden forces consciousness to reconcile existence with a Damoclean trajectory oriented, from its very commencement, toward extinction. Increasingly, however, the dominant response to this existential reality has been an intensification of individualism, as neoliberal discourses, policies, and technologies of the self displace collective meaning-making with demands for personal responsibility, resilience, and self-management (Foucault 1988; Brown 2015). Under these conditions, endurance is reframed not as a shared human struggle but as a personal duty, rendering survival a matter of individual optimisation rather than a collective ethical or political task.

Perhaps with the success of this political economic project, broadly speaking, increasing numbers of people have sought refuge from their insecurities, both emotional and material, in increasingly destructive, inefficient, and carbon intensive ways. As beings toward death dealing with our existential anxieties on an individual basis, we often exhibit staggering levels of selfishness toward future generations. Yet cultural access to better ways, collective ways, more communal and ethical ways, seems foreclosed in many geopolitical spaces. It certainly seems this was something troubling McCarthy. *The Road* is set not in ancient civilisation but very much in built up, late modern, advanced (post) industrialisation. His marauders might be reimagined as commuters or shoppers as part of our idle thought experiment. We find ourselves in a bind: to adapt as individuals (to 'new', less destructive ways) or to die out as a species. Adaptability thus appears not only as a biological necessity but as a moral injunction, increasingly treated as the defining ethical imperative of contemporary life. Yet the danger of human adaptability lies precisely in its speed and scope. We are capable of adapting quickly to brutal social conditions, to such an extent that entire historical conjunctures are written off as merely 'in recession', 'in crisis', or even completely 'lost'. As beings toward death (Heidegger, 1962 [1927]) and as meaning-making creatures who continue pushing forward despite the absurd (Camus, 2013 [1942]), we are perpetually adapting toward our final endpoint. In

this sense, adaptation is not oriented toward flourishing or transformation but toward mere survival through endurance. This condition is vividly portrayed in *The Road*, where adaptation ceases to function as a pathway toward life and instead becomes a narrowing strategy for postponing death.

Throughout the novel, the father repeatedly justifies violent or cruel actions and, in doing so, implicitly legitimates the actions of every other bandit on the road. When the old blind man is tolerated but ultimately abandoned, when the attacker from the broken-down truck is killed, or when the pair repeatedly conceal their location and property, the reader is drawn into a moral logic in which all is fair in love and war. These moments resonate strongly with Holocaust literature, particularly the recognition that survival may require entry into what Levi (1987 [1947]) terms the grey zone, where moral distinctions lose coherence, and the avoidance of death becomes the overriding imperative. Crucially, the novel does not present this as moral collapse in a simplistic sense. Rather, it presents it as what happens when ethical life is compressed into a survival project, when futurity collapses and choice is reduced to immediate protection. Under such conditions, ethics is structurally deformed and rehierarchised.

Against this restructuring stands the boy's persistent questioning, which functions as the father's living conscience and, by extension, the reader's. He continually demands a better, more logical, more satisfactory account of whether what they are doing is acceptable, whether alternative survival strategies might exist, and whether they can truly claim to be different from those they fear and morally oppose. The question "are we really the ones carrying the fire?" is not rhetorical. It exposes the instability of moral identity when adaptation becomes the dominant ethic. At every stage, the father's decisions to respond with security, violence, defence, or selfish protection are followed by the boy's naïve yet piercing insistence that survival alone cannot justify everything. What the novel makes clear is that the father cannot answer these questions adequately, not because he lacks moral awareness, but because the temporal and material conditions of life on the road no longer support ethical coherence.

This tension reaches its most devastating point when the boy realises (or thinks he does) that there is another small boy on the road, alone and searching for someone to go with him, and his father insists that they leave him behind and push on. This moment exposes the logic of isolationist protectionism in its starkest form. Through the systematic abandonment of the young and the old, it becomes clear that little remains of a universal love of humanity in this dystopian future. What persists instead is an urgent impulse to save one's own, and in doing so to renege on humanity's reliance upon, and implicit pact with, the social. Butler's insistence that nonviolence is not passive but forceful is instructive here (Butler 2020). Resilience to violence cannot be an adaptation to violence. Adapting to authoritarian lawlessness by internalising its logic becomes complicity rather than survival. On the road, resilience becomes compliance with a new normal, one in which killing, hoarding, and exclusion are treated as unfortunate necessities rather than political failures. The pair's eventual success in reaching the sea only reinforces the futility of reclaiming this blood-soaked territory. Survival has been achieved, but at the cost of any mean-

ingful recovery of the social. The question is no longer whether they survived, but what the trade-offs are, what thus survival has become.

Just over eighty years after Alan Turing formalised the abstract logic of the Turing Machine in 1936, it is no longer clear that human adaptation has expanded our ethical capacities rather than narrowed them. We have become extraordinarily efficient at adjusting to technological acceleration, economic precarity, and environmental degradation. What *The Road* exposes is the danger of mistaking this efficiency for moral progress. The novel paints a terrifying and yet bleakly hopeful picture of the limits of human adaptability. The ultimate endpoint, of course, is death. The father's body eventually gives up, no longer able to adapt to starvation, exhaustion, and hopelessness. This does not retroactively validate everything that preceded it as adaptation. Rather, it reveals that much of what is labelled adaptation is in fact endurance under constraint. As Camus makes clear in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (2013 [1942]), persistence alone does not confer value. The question is not whether one continues, but under what conditions continuation becomes indistinguishable from resignation. *The Road* insists that survival without futurity produces a hollowed ethics, one that must be constantly patched together through fragile acts of care rather than sustained through systems or principles.

Adaptation and its political synonyms have become cultural keywords of our age (Williams, 1983 [1976]). In the face of futile culture wars and authoritarian lawlessness, science and scientists increasingly find themselves appealing not to reason but to the economic sensibilities of political and corporate leadership. 'Adaptability' and 'resilience' function as words of learned resignation, accepting in advance that the course of 'it' cannot be altered, whether 'it' refers to spiralling fossil fuel usage, structural inequality, or ecological collapse. "Help us to be more resilient to the impacts of our actions" becomes the dominant refrain, rather than "help us to radically rethink our actions". We seek a cure while remaining reluctant, or unable, to legislate prevention. *The Road* functions here as a moral device, forcing this same logic back onto the reader's present. Nobody would begrudge the boy and his father a single decision made under such extreme conditions. Yet the apocalyptic novel insists that what is excusable at the edge of extinction becomes dangerous when normalised as an ethic of governance.

Here, Simone Weil's distinction between suffering and affliction offers something to our analysis. For Weil, affliction is not merely pain or hardship but a condition that uproots the human being physically, socially, and spiritually, severing individuals from the roots that sustain moral life (Weil, 2013). Affliction destroys the conditions under which ethical reflection ordinarily occurs by incarcerating subjects within necessity. In *The Road*, hunger, exposure, and violence confine the protagonists within the immediacy of survival. Yet Weil also insists that affliction does not inevitably destroy attention to the good. Under certain conditions, it can clarify it. The boy's refusal to relinquish the category of the good, even when institutions, narratives, and futures have collapsed, exemplifies this clarification. This tension is distilled in one of the novel's most revealing exchanges, in which the boy resists stories that falsely console and insists on the difficulty of real life, even as the father clings to the fact that they are still here:

"They spent the day there, sitting among the boxes and crates. You have to talk to me, he said.

I'm talking.

Are you sure?

I'm talking now.

Do you want me to tell you a story?

No.

Why not?

The boy looked at him and looked away.

Why not?

Those stories are not true.

They don't have to be true. They're stories.

Yes. But in the stories, we're always helping people, and we don't help people". (McCarthy 2022 [2006]: 286–288)

Applied to the present, *The Road* offers a stark warning. In pandemic governance, climate adaptation policy, and humanitarian responses to war and displacement, resilience is increasingly valorised while structural causes remain untouched. Populations are asked to adapt to revolving emergencies, to live with permanent crisis, and to treat endurance as virtue. The lesson of *The Road* is not that adaptation is wrong, but that adaptation without roots, without futurity, and without structural transformation produces a form of ethical atrophy. What the novel ultimately demands is a refusal to accept survival alone as a sufficient measure of what it means to live.

Where are We Going? The Dementia of 21st Century Governance

Drawing together the two interpretive lines developed in this article – the stoicism of the human spirit under conditions of collapse, and the political dangers of adaptability as a governing ethic – we arrive at a vantage point from which to think through our current predicament in the 21st century. *The Road* reflects a world in which the portal between the myths of the past, particularly those pertaining to knowledge, wisdom, and oneness with nature, and the violence of the present appears permanently sealed. This is not merely a world without institutions, but a world without temporality as it has always been known by humans prior to 'now'.

That this temporal closure is not entirely absolute is revealed only at the very end of the novel, when the father's physical power and hard-won survival skills finally give way to frailty and surrender. In this moment, the brutal suspension of time that has governed life on the road yields to a more elemental order. The father concedes to the limits of endurance and adaptation, admitting: "I can't hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could, but I can't." (298). This admission marks a return to human finitude, an acknowledgment that even in a world organised around survival, some thresholds cannot and should not be crossed. Here, the natural order of things, long deferred by necessity, reasserts itself. Shortly before his death, the father once again wakes from a dream. Dreams and their absence recur throughout *The Road*, functioning both as literal psychological phenomena shaped by extreme conditions, and as metaphors for imagination and futurity. The novel's opening and closing dream

sequences resonate strongly with Plato's cave, a connection explored by Juge (2009). Here, dreaming signals a fragile connection to something beyond the ashen present.

McCarthy repeatedly overlays vivid images of a lost natural world onto scenes of total devastation, frequently, if subtly, employing the metaphor of the cave to illustrate humanity's disconnection from its origins. The brook trout serve as a poignant and recurring symbol, representing a perfect creation now irretrievably lost. "No tracks in the road, nothing living anywhere. The fire blackened boulders like the shapes of bears on the starkly wooded slopes. He stood on a stone bridge where the waters slurried into a pool and turned slowly in a gray foam. Where once he'd watched trout swaying in the current, tracking their perfect shadows on the stones beneath" (McCarthy 2022 [2006], pp. 29–30). This imagery not only evokes a haunting sense of nostalgia but also highlights the stark contrast between the vibrant life that once flourished and the desolation of the present. The brook trout imagery is then more explicitly linked to the allegory of the cave: "He'd stood at such a river once and watched the flash of trout deep in a pool, invisible to see in the tea-colored water except as they turned on their sides to feed. Reflecting back the sun deep in the darkness like a flash of knives in a cave" (McCarthy 2022 [2006], p. 42). Here, the cave metaphor resonates with Plato's notion of shadows on the wall, suggesting that what humanity perceives as reality is merely a distorted reflection of a more profound truth. The trout, shimmering in the depths, symbolise the lost knowledge and beauty of a world that humans can no longer fully comprehend or access.

In this context, the cave does not merely signify physical confinement but names the ideological limits that come to govern human action under conditions of collapse. As the characters traverse the devastated landscape, they are drawn into a closed circuit of survival in which the demands of endurance eclipse their relation to the natural world and steadily erode their obligations to others. The father's stoic resolve and the boy's moral insistence thus register not simply as contrasting dispositions, but as competing responses to this narrowing of vision. Where the boy continues to ask what it means to be good, the father increasingly accepts survival as sufficient justification. McCarthy's adoption of the cave metaphor therefore presses readers to confront the ethical cost of reducing life to persistence alone. It exposes how easily responsibility is abandoned when existence is stripped of futurity, reciprocity, and shared meaning. The father, and we argue much of twenty-first century governance, comes to forget this altogether, losing the capacity to sustain the existential tension between ethical responsibility and the absurd labour of surviving within a world of steadily depleted meaning.

This distinction bears directly on questions of meaning, suffering, and suicide that hover throughout the text. Frankl's (1959) insistence that meaning arises not from comfort but from orientation toward value is relevant here, but only obliquely. The father does not lack meaning in the abstract. He lacks a future in which meaning can be enacted without destroying its ethical substance. Similarly, Camus' (2013 [1942]) confrontation with the absurd is not resolved here through revolt or affirmation, but through refusal. The father does not *choose* death because life is meaningless. He surrenders from a life emptied of moral significance. Suicide, in this frame, is neither the central question nor the answer. The more unsettling issue is what kinds of life we ask people to endure in the name of survival.

Throughout the novel, the father has increasingly approximated what might be described as an adaptation machine, a being organised entirely around threat detection, instrumental reason, and anticipatory violence. His vigilance keeps the boy alive, but it does so at the cost of any sustainable moral horizon. To persist indefinitely under such conditions would require not only physical endurance but a profound ethical flattening. The father's death therefore does not represent capitulation to despair, but a rejection of a form of life in which survival is severed from meaning altogether. In this sense, his death constitutes a refusal to live on in a morally deadened state. This refusal stands in stark contrast to the boy, whose innocence is not merely developmental but temporal. The boy retains potential, not only in the sense of future possibility (futurity), but in his capacity to recognise others as ethical beings worthy of nuanced consideration. Where the father increasingly experiences strangers as risks to be managed or eliminated, the boy experiences them as moral problems that demand response. It is this distinction that ultimately determines who can be saved by community and who cannot.

Conclusion

This article has examined the consequences of adaptation when it functions as the primary response to social, systemic, and moral crisis. Humans possess remarkable adaptive and resilient capacities, qualities that are frequently celebrated in periods of instability. Yet when resilience and adaptability are treated as ethical ends in themselves, rather than capacities oriented toward shared moral aims, they risk sustaining the very conditions to which they respond. Under forms of governance characterised by permanent crisis, weakened accountability, and neoliberal authoritarianism, adaptability acquires a political technology. Resilience becomes a demand placed upon individuals and populations to endure, absorb, and continue functioning within systems that normalise insecurity and harm. When adaptation functions in this way, moral possibilities narrow.

Through this eisegesis of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, we have imagined humans as "adaptation machines", developing two interpretive lines. The first examined individual and interpersonal responses to collapse, delineating how resilience at the level of the self narrows ethical concern as survival takes priority. The second addressed adaptability as a collective moral ideal, tracing how resilience is mobilised to responsibilise individuals for structural failure, while insulating governing systems from scrutiny. Modes of governance that place unbounded adaptability and resilience at their core elevate survival as the highest good, thus diminishing futurity and limiting the possibility of moral refusal. Survival displaces ethical appraisal, and endurance renders moral critique inconvenient.

This, in turn, invites us all to consider the implications of such adaptability, whether for its limitations or for its limitlessness. Through collaborative thought experiments during the reading of McCarthy's dystopian novel and throughout the writing of this article, we have found a great many perplexing and often, quite frankly, dizzying social, political, and scientific problems that we encounter in our everyday lives that have provided grist to the mill. Of course, the nameless, formless, imprecise source

of McCarthy's Armageddon, furnishing his novel with such symbolic applicability across no end of 21st century crises, leaves such an eisegesis open to no end of critique. Our only hope is that in writing differently, for us, about death, time, and social decay we avoid the sorts of charges that would surely be levelled by the 'rigorous social science' of our respective disciplines. The idea that we can ponder any number of existential crises without naming them as such, and do so in a serious way despite the heterogeneity of such crises – from the furious rate of expected change and annihilation of human skills due to artificial intelligence, to the growing use of natural resources globally, to the looming threat of nuclear destruction, and on and on – is a liberty we will not deny ourselves in this post-literate age of machine learning.

Thinking through human adaptability to violence and lawlessness at an interpersonal level, and about human adaptability as a moral imperative at the collective level, we are forced to confront our being toward death as both individuals and as collective custodians over our planet. In the end, we had better hope that our normalisation of, and adaptation to, ecocidal destruction knows greater bounds in our honorary capacity as the latter than we have utilised in our fearful avoidance of the former.

Author Contributions W.M. and C.P. wrote the manuscript text with equal contributions and both authors reviewed the manuscript.

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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