

## Chapter 11

# Bear No Children

Let's say a person who is already unusually responsible in all the obvious ways—who uses very little gasoline, expends very little energy to heat or cool the home, recycles, and much more—decides to take the seemingly drastic step of no longer flying. Would that be enough? Wouldn't dramatically reducing travel by air make a huge difference? Certainly it would. But thinking about our challenge in these terms, however necessary, still relies on a fairly narrow assumption about the task before us. For the most part, we tend to focus on how we as individuals can lower our greenhouse gas footprint through various practical actions. But that approach leaves out of view another key question—*whether to bring more individuals into the world in the first place*, each of whom will, in turn, contribute a lifetime's worth of emissions to the atmosphere.

Insofar as bearing children is a personal choice, the decision to have a child properly belongs within the domain of one's personal impact on climate change. Yet because our culture regards that decision as in some sense absolutely private, as the very essence of personal liberty, we have so far seldom examined the ethics of reproduction as such. Typically, even the toughest commentators on climate change keep silent on this question or approach it with fear and trembling, as if examining the politics of reproduction would somehow violate a taboo. They have a point: it does. But keeping silent on this question makes a mockery of the pretense to have considered the broader impact of our individual decisions on climate change with any thoroughness. The decision about whether to have children is so enormous in its implications it dwarfs virtually all others; if anything, it is *the* question individuals must face when considering how to lead an ethical life today.

As we consider the full range of what we as individuals can do, then, we cannot remain content with the options I outlined in the previous chapter. We must examine the issue of bearing children as well, for it is central to any serious look at the question of how best we can make reparation.

Even the briefest consideration would tell us what a huge impact bearing a child must have on an individual's contribution to climate change. If you have a child, you've added another entire lifetime's worth of greenhouse gas emissions to the biosphere. You can basically assume that your child's impact on the environment will largely replicate your own, or what yours hypothetically would be over the lifetime of that child. At the very least, then, you will have increased your imprint by half (since you will share the responsibility for conceiving the child with your partner). But because that child might well have further children, who may have further children in turn, that imprint is likely to be much larger still. Under what they call the constant scenario—the assumption that individual greenhouse gas emission rates of the parents will continue indefinitely for their children—Paul Murtaugh and Michael Schlx, in a paper published in 2005, estimate that an American woman (on whom they focus, rather than a man, for technically statistical reasons) who drives a more fuel-efficient car, reduces the number of miles she drives each week, installs energy-efficient windows, uses low-energy light bulbs, installs an energy-efficient refrigerator, and recycles will over her lifetime, using the emissions averages of that year, keep about 486 metric tons of carbon dioxide from entering the atmosphere, but a woman who reduces her offspring by one child will over her lifetime save 9,441 tons. If emission rates rise or fall over the course of the child's life, the picture changes dramatically. But this estimate fairly represents the ethical choice facing a potential parent today. It's worth emphasizing what these researchers have found: an American woman who has two children will add “nearly 40 times” as much carbon dioxide to the atmosphere as she might save through her eco-friendly activities.<sup>135</sup>

All this follows from a fairly straightforward look at an individual's environmental footprint. But if we consider as well the fact that humanity as a whole now vastly exceeds this planet's carrying capacity, the case for not reproducing becomes even stronger. As I argued in an earlier chapter, if we manage to shift to renewable energy sources on a scale vast enough

to make a difference, we will greatly expand the presence of our energy infrastructure across the land and sea. As a result, that action will make the sheer overabundance of human beings more visible to us than ever before. Reproducing our current numbers into the foreseeable future—even with zero population growth—simply hands this pattern of devastation down to future generations, who will have many fewer options to solve it well. If we want the life forms of this planet to thrive, we have to reduce our numbers as soon as we can. The only humane way to do so is to reduce our birth rate.

The implications are unmistakable: a person who wishes to forestall severe climate change *should not bear children*. No doubt saying so violates one of the strongest taboos in our culture. But for that very reason, it is all the more necessary to speak the unspeakable, speak it repeatedly, and speak it *now*. If we are to have the slightest chance to reduce the damage our culture causes the environment, we should begin with the activity that causes the most harm, and without question, this is the one.

I freely concede that simply thinking this thought is enormously painful to most of us. The idea that we should not bear and raise children cuts against a host of assumptions we may have about “normal” life. Although American society no longer so openly disapproves of people who remain single or childless and is becoming increasingly tolerant of nontraditional families of all kinds, including those headed by gay and lesbian couples, people still speak about “getting married and starting a family,” as if the people in question do not constitute a family in their own right but “start” a family only when they bear or adopt a child. Our society also tends to assume that starting a family in this sense is a sign of maturity, an indication that a participating adult is becoming responsible. Moreover, we also take for granted that parents are somehow more nurturing and unselfish than childless adults, more likely to care about the coming generations, and thus more responsive to humanity's fate. All these assumptions are reinforced by the desire many people feel to bear children. That desire can feel so natural, so self-evident, that they might assume other people feel it as well, and that people in general should have the right to satisfy this desire. Needless to say, that desire is often so profound it can define an entire life.

The environmental consequences of childbearing, however, should inspire us to reverse these assumptions, however difficult and nearly unthinkable it may seem to do so. We need to define our notion of family anew so that the very phrase “start a family” takes on a new meaning. We should contemplate the possibility that *not* reproducing is more nurturing and responsible, more loving to others and to humanity, than bringing more people into the world. Clearly, we should not simply assume that childless people are automatically responsible in these ways: leaping to that conclusion is simply not justified. But we should not only respect but *admire* the decision to remain childless if it is part of an individual's broader effort to reduce harm to the environment. The corollary is true as well: we should seriously consider the possibility that having children is *not* responsible. No matter how strong a person's desire to have children might be, we should not assume that it automatically overrides every other concern.

The absence of any serious discussion about these matters permeates our culture. The leading political and economic theories in the Anglo-American tradition, for example, start from the notion of rational self-interest, an assumption that takes for granted the adult status of all parties. But that sort of analysis does not explain what brings individuals into the world in the first place. Apparently the principle of self-interest includes one's decisions about reproduction, but that possibility is not discussed explicitly in the theories of, say, John Locke or Adam Smith, the people whose ideas shape the American traditions we adhere to even today. Perhaps a child is simply an extension of oneself until coming of age, when she presumably turns into a rational adult (but then Locke and Smith also don't seriously consider the possibility that *women* are rational adults as well). Such theories never examine whether a rational adult should have children in the first place, nor do they ponder how childbearing figures into the consequences of self-interest for society as a whole. This question constitutes an immense blind spot throughout the modern tradition of political and economic reflection.

The consequences are immediately clear in the rather muddled state of our constitutional law. Since *Roe v. Wade*, Americans have typically invoked the right of privacy to defend a woman's decision to have an abortion or attacked that right in the name of the unborn child's right to

life. Typically, then, we end up putting one version of individual rights against another. Yet the terms of that debate mask a more honest discussion about whether the principle of equality between men and women should override the woman's traditional role as the bearer of children—whether the principles of modern individualism, now finally applied to women, are more important than the ancient endorsement of reproduction. In this debate as it is currently conducted, the modern notion of individual liberty confronts traditional norms, as it has so often over the past three centuries.

But in our time, that debate is hopelessly outdated. Given the immense pressure of climate change on us all, the abstract liberty of the individual—male or female, born or unborn—cannot take precedence over the basic question as to whether humanity as a whole has any further right to use the Earth for its own purposes. The answer to that question is simple: we do not. But if we as a species have no such right, neither do we as individuals. In that case, the liberty we take for granted—to reproduce or not, more or less as we please—no longer applies. It follows as well that elevating the life of the unborn child over all other considerations is utterly blind to its consequences for the life of the species, as well as the life of the biosphere as a whole. For sexually active people, a “pro-life” position is actually “pro-death,” for it favors human reproduction at the expense of all other forms of life, and, in the end, at the expense of human life as well. Neither the “pro-choice” nor the “pro-life” viewpoint can be very persuasive today.

The same blind spot appears as well in discussions about the falling birth rate in the developed world. Demographers, policymakers, and journalists often ponder what it means that women in the industrialized nations seldom bear children at a rate that would replace the current population. That fact leads to questions about how to support increasingly elderly populations on the labor of a diminishing workforce, for example, or how to provide new incentives for women to reproduce. But few participants in this discussion mention that a lower birth rate is a *good* thing ecologically speaking, that it may be a sign that some people are awake to the challenges facing us and are acting responsibly.<sup>136</sup>

This blind spot in our thinking shows up even in contexts that supposedly encourage environmental responsibility. Websites that help you

calculate your carbon footprint, for example, include all kinds of details about the gas mileage on your car, how much you travel by air, or how much energy you use to heat your home, but they seldom ask whether or not you have decided to bear children. That concern evidently just doesn't figure into our thinking, even in eco-friendly circles. The neglect of this question permeates our culture from start to finish, from top to bottom. Either we're afraid to raise the question or it just doesn't occur to us.

What will happen when we break this silence is a good question. Although it will no doubt be difficult to do so, we desperately need to reexamine all of our attitudes and theories in this new light, to start *thinking* about our reproductive assumptions for a change. Here, as in so many other areas, facing the consequences of climate change really does require us to revise the most basic elements of our common culture. It's impossible to know in advance what new policies, theories, legal interpretations, or actions that endeavor could lead to. The most fundamental working hypothesis to guide us throughout that work, I would suggest, is that *not* reproducing is the most ethical choice we can make today. The burden of proof, the challenge of providing a clear and thorough justification, falls on those who would take the opposite course of action.

Because this is an immense topic, one that requires an extended and focused public debate, I can only touch on a few themes in this brief discussion. Perhaps the most useful thing I can do here is raise a number of the most likely objections to this argument and reply to each in turn.

The first objection might well be the most basic of all. Let's say a loving couple shares a strong desire to bear children; why should they not satisfy that desire? But can our desire on its own justify a decision that may cause environmental harm? Suppose someone with excellent taste and a large income wishes to build a huge, beautiful, and inspiring home—one that will have an enormous carbon footprint. Do we think that's ethically acceptable? No doubt the wish to bear children is more defensible. But in the end, unless the potential parents have something more than desire to go on, they still haven't explained why their plans are ethical.

Evangelical Christians and conservative Jews (among others) might insist that God himself has commanded us to reproduce. According to the book of Genesis, as soon as God created human beings, he told them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion

over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”<sup>137</sup> In effect, God wanted human beings to participate in the process of creation, to extend his founding act over generations of procreation. So far, humanity has fulfilled this command very well indeed: have we not filled the earth and subdued everything that moves? In fact, haven't we already *exceeded* the earth's capacity to sustain us? Aren't we in the process of subduing even the climate itself? Should we go right ahead and help *kill* the Earth? Doing so would hardly keep faith with a command that sees us as part of the creation, not the agency of its destruction. To reproduce unthinkingly would hardly do justice to the divine plan.

Some might object that if everyone chose not to reproduce, before long the human race would come to an end. They have a good point. If this practice became truly universal across all humanity and were sustained long enough, it would indeed result in the end of the species. If the ideas outlined here became widespread enough to influence a good part of the human race, we'd obviously need to collaborate intelligently as a species to reduce our numbers while still guaranteeing our survival. Anyone who feels responsibility for the fate of all life must greet the prospect of such a development with joy, not dismay; if we as the human race proved ourselves capable of cooperating for such a purpose, we would at last demonstrate that we had grasped our place within the network of life and were capable of acting accordingly. Until then, individual actions will have a very positive impact in their own right. The point is not to end reproduction forever for the entire species, but to make a difference in humanity's impact on the biosphere now, at a moment when it really counts.

Some people raise a much more mundane objection, arguing that they would like to have kids who could take care of them in old age. One problem with this idea, of course, is that parents cannot know whether their children will live nearby or have the time or inclination to help out. Moreover, having kids for personal convenience scarcely takes into account the situation of other people, much less the good of the biosphere; it places one's own potential interest above the survival of all others. Finally, and most crucially, it takes for granted that there will be a future to worry about in the first place. If everybody reproduces in this

way and continues to live this kind of life, the last thing to worry about is how we'll do after we retire; at that rate, having kids will help *destroy* our chances for a peaceful old age. These reflections apply as well to the argument often cited in the United States that we need to raise children so they can pay into Social Security and Medicare. But why would we worry about one version of the future—the financial support for us after we retire—if we will not trouble ourselves about another—the consequences of climate change? It would be far more ethical for us to put the interest of all humanity above our own, not have children, and save up enough money over our working years to support ourselves in old age. If we're truly self-interested, let's do the work ourselves. And if we're looking for personal support as we age, we should build an active, loving community of friends and neighbors where we live.

Ecologically minded parents might insist that *their* kids will grow up as good citizens of the Earth. *They* will use less energy than others, recycle carefully, and do all they can to support the environmental cause. All that may be true, but even responsible adults in the United States still cause more damage to the climate than nearly anyone elsewhere in the world, far more than the biosphere can sustain. Even when we are doing our best, we do very badly indeed. Adding more people to the equation won't help.

But these parents have one more idea. What if one of their kids turns out to be a genius who comes up with the technological invention that will save the world? But this rationale falls apart almost immediately. The very notion that we should wait for such an invention is part of the problem in the first place; it encourages us to keep going with business as usual while engineers come up with clever schemes to get us out of our dilemma. That plan will get us nowhere fast. Moreover, any child born in 2015 won't be ready to reveal her invention until, say, 2040—far too late to prevent serious harm to the planet.

Some potential parents might ask whether it would be ethical not to reproduce but to adopt children. Wouldn't it be fine to raise children that others brought into the world? Judging by basic principles, it might be. But because American couples are increasingly adopting children from around the world, where the average carbon footprint is relatively small, in effect they are greatly increasing the lifetime impact



of those children on the environment. Whether we have given birth to children is less crucial than whether we replicate our destructive habits in another generation.

Parents who already have little ones might object that this argument ultimately accuses them of doing wrong. But this argument does not lead to such a conclusion at all. Most people in our society have never given this viewpoint a moment's thought; accordingly, we can't assume that parents have *deliberately* chosen to put their wishes above the future good of humanity. People are not to be accused if they have transgressed a principle of which they are unaware. Once they have heard this argument, however, we might wish to hold them accountable, at least to justify their eventual decision. But doing so is not the same as making parents feel guilty for loving children they already have.

Others might comment that choosing not to reproduce reveals a subtle hatred of humankind, a sneaky sort of misanthropy. In fact, the opposite is true: those who choose not to reproduce place the future interests of humanity—as well as the Earth's living systems—above selfish considerations. Doesn't that sound more like the *love* of humanity? But it's worth pausing to take this objection literally. If we love dogs, for example, does it follow that we'd like to see, say, eight billion dogs roaming the planet? If not, does that make us dog haters? Not likely.

The same response goes for the idea that this ethical position somehow reflects a hatred of children. This objection is no more convincing than the previous one, but it has the great merit of bringing a basic question to our attention. If we are quite sure that the biosphere will be in worse shape over the coming decades, that our society will suffer enormously as a result, and that those in the next generation will face increasing difficulties as time goes by, is it more responsible to bring children into the world to face all these challenges—or not to do so? *Is it an act of love to choose a difficult life for those who have no say in the matter?* Is it better to give kids the gift of life, whatever difficulties they might face, or to protect the unborn from the potential disaster to come? Needless to say, we should bless the life of children who are already with us. We should do everything we can to help our young descendants thrive. But choosing a tough life for people *before* bringing them into the world is an entirely

different matter. In fact, it is far more an act of true love for the unborn *not* to force them to accept a difficult life.

What about those who love children but choose not to bear their own? They have many opportunities they might pursue: they can work in professions that allow them to care for infants, the young and growing, the curious and learning, training them to live and thrive responsibly. These adults can heal kids when they are sick, coach them as they play, and include them in a range of adult activities where doing so might be fruitful for all.

No doubt people might object in further ways, but in the end nearly all these replies boil down to the first one I discussed above. I'd like to return to it and ponder a somewhat more aggressive version, one that might reveal the stakes of this discussion even more clearly.

Very well, someone might say. Not reproducing may make sense for most people, but my partner and I are well-educated, well-off, and capable of protecting our children from whatever happens down the road. Why shouldn't we have children if we want to? (Or, conversely, someone might say: My partner and I are quite poor, and the only profound joy in our lives is the opportunity to have children and raise them. Why deny us this joy if we have so little else?) The answer, as I have suggested above, is that our lives do not simply belong to us; whatever we do contributes to our *common* problem or its solution. To think we can do what we like while the rest of the world collapses is to see ourselves as a sublime exception, figures of total privilege. This is at once naive—since no one is truly such an exception—and hopelessly selfish.

Such a response ultimately reveals a willingness to sacrifice the well-being of others for the sake of one's children. That attitude is just beneath the surface in much of American life. Occasionally American-produced movies capitalize on this feeling, inviting audiences to adopt as their own the belief that defending one's children justifies very threatening behavior. In *Flightplan*, starring Jodie Foster, a woman does everything she can think of—including releasing the oxygen masks and turning off the lights in the passenger section of the aircraft on which she is flying—to distract the crew while she looks for her lost child. *John Q*, starring Denzel Washington, tells the story of an African American father who invades a hospital demanding an operation for his son. Neither of these movies

descends into celebrating aggression for its own sake, but each champions the notion that it is acceptable to frighten or threaten other people for the purpose of caring for one's child.<sup>138</sup>

These movies deserve credit for telling a certain truth about American culture. They cast light on the blind spot in our political thinking, showing that we don't give much credence to the notion that we all benefit from arrangements of mutual self-interest. Self-interest turns into something much uglier when children are at stake: it turns out that the child is so sacred that his or her well-being is more important than the interests of others. In comparison to the child, social relations are so much chaff to be tossed into the wind. In daily life, this attitude is expressed in the willingness of many of us to buy the biggest, baddest SUV we can find to protect our kids from harm. If we get in a crash, it's the *other* guy who will suffer, not us. We may even imagine that we show love for our kids precisely through this willingness to make sure that other people will die first. But because in doing so we are potentially harming others to protect those *we* choose to bring into the world, our attitude reveals that we will give up others for the sake of our own priorities. What's worse, the logic of this sort of selfishness collapses very quickly. When the SUV's emissions help destroy the biosphere, it's not just the *other* guy's biosphere that will go. What then? We may *think* we're looking out for our own interests by driving the biggest, safest vehicle on the roads, but in the long run we're destroying our own lives and those of our children, too. Ultimately, this sort of attitude reveals that strange paradox: a *self-destructive* selfishness. When we insist on our abstract liberties, on our right to destroy, we are also choosing to destroy ourselves and those we love.

This general attitude has taken on a kinder, gentler form in Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*.<sup>139</sup> This novel suggests that it is a praiseworthy endeavor for a father to guide his son through a world bereft of any form of life and devoid of any kind of food except for canned goods stored here or there in ruined dwellings—or murdered human beings. Such a world promises no future for any living thing, yet we are asked to admire the effort of raising the son and passing him down to a nonexistent future. Instead of suggesting that it might be acceptable to torch the world for the sake of the son, as violent selfishness would have it, this story suggests that even if the world has already been torched, we should still bear and

raise children. But because the world of that novel could never exist—for without other living things, human beings would have little oxygen to breathe—it is finally a metaphor for *our* world, and thus encourages *us* to think that even if the planet is dying, we should bear children just as before. In the world of the novel, such a belief is delusional: it is truly horrific to usher a child into a dead future. In our world, that belief is far more harmful, for it allows us to comfort ourselves that even if we are contributing to the planet's decline, we are still good people—because we are bearing and caring for children. But in that case, having kids helps us avoid facing the real ethics of our choices. In its gentler way, *The Road* also reinforces a mode of ecocidal parenting.

Since we Americans now live in a society everywhere shaped by these ideas, since our destructive impact on the planet's life continues to grow apace even after we have become aware of that fact, we who wish to preserve a future must consider adopting the *opposite* point of view—one that places the interest of the biosphere above our own wishes. Instead of raising a beloved child in a ruined world, our better option is to raise no children at all—on a thriving, beautiful, and beloved planet. It might sound like the basis for that choice is a joyous selflessness, an utterly altruistic commitment to the life of others. No doubt about it, this choice is altruistic. But only this choice preserves a future for ourselves as well. Only in a thriving biosphere can we live out our lives in the way we might imagine. Choosing otherwise might be selfish, but it would also be suicidal—or at least would kill the future.

I admit that it is more than a little paradoxical *not* to have children at the same time as choosing for the future. After all, children have always served as the very emblems of the future, the embodiment of what is coming next, the carrier of what will be. Nevertheless, a choice not to have children today will make it possible for that understanding of children to return someday. Once we actually transform our culture so that we do not eat the Earth as a matter of course, *then* we can restore the ancient alignment between sustainability and reproduction. A choice not to reproduce would make that eventual alignment possible.

What would be the cultural consequences if many Americans took this ethics as their own? It goes without saying that it would transform our basic assumptions and practices almost across the board. We'd end

up living through a whole array of odd demographic realities that we would need to consider carefully in advance. For many people, it would be hard to explain what all the effort is for—all that hard work—if they can't come home to their kids. The children are the whole point; they, and the home of which they are a part, constitute a relief from professional stresses, a refuge from the rat race, a haven in a heartless world, and a hope for something more. If that is the case, they already help us endure what we see as unendurable or at least as not terribly delightful. But is it really impossible to think otherwise, to stop splitting our lives between the difficulty of labor and the joy of family? Can't we reimagine our working day so that it, too, can become a source of pleasure and joy? Must the experience of family be private, enclosed, aloof? Or can it be found in collaboration with other adults, in less private settings, and in common endeavors that also speak of a hope for something more?

Similar questions arise around our attitudes toward the communities in which we live. If you ask people why they live where they do, in many cases they'll explain that their town isn't all that interesting or thriving, but it's a nice place to raise kids. This answer says a lot: it suggests that people are capable of putting up with the absence of urban pleasures they might desire so they can raise their children in peace. But if they did not have kids and thus had to face the reality of life in the town more squarely, what might they ask it to become? What kinds of events and activities might they create? How might the entire community be transformed?

Some of our basic attitudes suggest that we merely tolerate our workplaces and communities and give our real love to our partners and children. What would happen if we stopped segregating our lives in this way and expanded the range of our affections? What if we treated *all* the arenas in which we live with love and care, seeing those domains as the carriers of our future, the embodiment of our hopes? What if we extended this care to our local ecosystems, and beyond that to the biosphere itself? Why don't we already do so today?

Taking the climate crisis seriously forces us to rethink our most fundamental attitudes. It asks us to contemplate what might seem impossible—to question the core loyalties by which we live. If we hesitate to go that far, to question that deeply, we show that we finally do not care all that much about the future of the biosphere or indeed about how

our own lives may go a couple decades from now. We demonstrate that we think our lives are really about us and are indifferent to the ruins of the future. Most of us would not choose to live that way—but we may not really wish to cast off that attitude entirely, either. Climate change forces us to choose; its potential severity has the power to concentrate our minds. When it does so, it may inspire us to rethink entire areas of our culture, reexamine what family means, imagine a new relationship to place, reinvent our jobs and communities, and sustain a new relation to the biosphere. But how could it be otherwise? If the very context of our lives is at stake, to do it justice demands that we consider reinventing it all, from top to bottom. If we are to begin the task of owning the disaster we are already causing and make reparation to the biosphere as a result, we can do nothing less.

### Notes

135. Paul A. Murtaugh and Michael G. Schlax, “Reproduction and the Carbon Legacies of Individuals,” *Global Environmental Change* volume 19, issue 1 (February 2009): 14–20, available as a pdf document online. The quoted statement appears on page 18. The authors argue that working through lineages including both men and women is “computationally prohibitive,” but that because “the number of genetic units (of both sexes) attributable to an ancestral female is, on average, simply the number of females comprising an unbroken lineage of females descending from the ancestor,” their focus on female lineages will allow them to “obtain an estimate of the total number of person years, male and female, that are traceable to the ancestral female” (16).
136. A key exception is Bill McKibben, who discusses the ecological consequences of reproduction in *Maybe One: A Case for Smaller Families* (New York: Penguin, 1998). As the book’s title suggests, McKibben gently suggests that parents should consider having one child; he does not seriously discuss the possibility of having none.
137. Genesis 1:28. *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Edition* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, Old Testament portions copyright 1952).
138. *Flightplan*, directed by Robert Schwentke, 2005; *John Q*, directed by John Cassavetes, 2002. *John Q* goes out of its way to play fair: the father removes all bullets from his weapon in advance, ends up winning the support of all his “hostages,” shows he is willing to kill himself if need be to supply the heart for his child, becomes a heroic figure for the crowd—and television audience—witnessing the ordeal, and is ultimately sentenced to serve time

for what he did. The harm he has done seems to disappear under all these considerations. Yet the fact remains he does resort to the apparent threat of violence to save his son—and the movie assumes that almost everyone will sympathize with him.

139. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006).