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“Whatever exists without my knowledge exists without my consent”: Solipsism versus Free Will in *Blood Meridian*.

Felipe Muñoz¹

Blood Meridian has been called one of the greatest novels of the English language, in no small part due to its unapologetic representation of violence to explore a collage of thematic mainstays of western literature. For all its importance, however, its purposefully muddy, cryptic narrative has prevented analyses of the same from avoiding heavy-handed, nihilistic readings of the work. In these analyses, the subject of free will and the rhetorical trappings of the Judge are usually glossed over—free will usually misunderstood as irrelevant for pessimistic, materialist narratives. In this paper, I submit that such a reading—common as it is—is misguided, given the theoretical cues present in the work. I analyse these cues under the framework of their most representative advocates—Thomas Hobbes and David Hume—and bring their understanding to what the work is conveying about these matters. This analysis concludes that the work is very concerned about free will and, indeed, underscores its importance throughout, even characterizing the main conflict of the work in a way only consistent with those terms. Finally, this paper argues that the world presented in *Blood Meridian* is, then, not as bleak or defeatingly nihilistic as a superficial reading of the work would suggest.

KEYWORDS: Free Will, Nature State, Solipsism, *Blood Meridian*, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume

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Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* is many things. It's a western, it's a horror story, it borders on magical realism, and has enough further room in it for both religious and mystical interpretations. McCarthy's opus seems to at least be effective at everything it sets out to do, and could maybe even be effective at everything we may intend for it to do, hard to pin down as it is. Indeed, McCarthy's text seems to continually taunt us with meaning and yet refuse it every time. It crafts parables, and then dodges lessons; the flow of events seemingly straightforward—even incidental—as every alleged mystery instead shrouds itself the same heavy, overwhelming materialism with which Judge Holden attempts to condemn mankind at every turn.

Perhaps the least controversial—and most haunting—assertion is precisely what visage of humanity is it that McCarthy presents. Man in *Blood Meridian* is trapped in what seems like a continuous maelstrom of chaotic, senseless decay—arguably every bit as moral as it is material. This is not a new idea: it was most famously Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* who argued that man in a “state of nature” is reduced to a perpetrator of violence, trapped in a constant state of war (88). McCarthy presents us with a Wild West in which this understanding of man is exceedingly the case; there are not many constants in the world of *Blood Meridian*, but one which can hardly be contested is the omnipresence of violence: violence in men, violence in landscape, violence in the narration itself. Furthermore, Judge Holden seems to insist on underscoring the weight of this reality, not only reveling in this moral decay but actively supporting it, seemingly without repercussion. And as this lack of repercussion is indeed the case, it becomes tempting to suggest a nihilistic reading, however, Hobbes himself and—his later successor in the Anglo-Saxon tradition of compatibilist freedom—David Hume would most likely submit otherwise.

As previously mentioned, *Blood Meridian* presents a Hobbesian state of nature: Man is left to his own devices, as every suggested third party power is either already absent or quickly dismissed: churches are decayed, priests are lynched, the military is either corrupt or inept and so on. McCarthy

is committed to—and very effective at—presenting us with the most abject of chaos—the prose itself complicit—as an almost wanton collage of splintered, loud descriptions of solids is thrown at us. Nothing takes precedence as man, animal and landscapes all barely exist as more than rudimentary sensory input—not even in the descriptions is there a hierarchy to be found. To be sure, McCarthy makes a masterful job of presenting us with Hobbes’ “time of Warre, where every man is Enemy to every man” (89) and indeed it should be argued that he does, not only in form but also in content. Hobbes’ impression of what humanity’s nature state would be derives from his impression of what human nature and human morality is; an impression which is surprisingly coherent with the struggle between the kid and the Judge, a struggle which Judge Holden himself recognizes: “I recognized you when I first saw you and yet you were a disappointment to me. Then and now. Even so at the last I find you here with me” (341).

According to Hobbes, it’s fundamental for any attempt at human morality that we be able to read and understand other men’s intentions and motivations, which is something we can do, since we are men ourselves (87)—however, for Hobbes this morality is not contingent on a “greater good” or *summum bonum*—since he argues that “good” and “evil” are but opinions in relation to our appetites (39)—but rather on our capacity to choose away from violence and into a path that allows for others to choose away—or to learn to choose away, whether by reward or punishment—from violence in turn (214). As he puts it, “a free man, is he, that in those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to doe what he hath the will to” (146). And the nature state—with man constantly under the threat of violence—prevents us all from achieving this freedom state. Holden, of course, argues to the man that men don’t really know their motivations themselves (342), but this is irrelevant in a world where violence is so ubiquitous that man can hardly ever be said to be a truly free agent. Accordingly—and as if to mock the idea of free will—at the very start of the text we’re introduced to pointless mob violence, as the guiltless “Reverend

Green” is lynched and killed over what turns out to be admittedly false charges of depravity raised by the Judge:

The baldheaded man was already at the bar when they entered. . . . and the kid laid his money down but the barman pushed it back with his thumb and nodded.

This here is on the judge, he said. . . .

Judge, how did you come to have the goods on that no-account?

Goods? Said the judge.

When was you in Fort Smith?

Fort Smith?

Where did you know him to know all that stuff on him?

You mean the reverend Green?

Yessir. I reckon you was in Fort Smith fore ye come out here.

I was never in Fort Smith in my life. Doubt that he was.

They looked from one to the other.

I never laid eyes on the man before today. Never even heard of him.

He raised his glass and drank. (12-13)

Holden’s special contempt for the kid comes precisely from the kid’s capacity to freely choose, even in the face and the threat of violence—mild and unassuming as these choices may arguably be.

When Brown is hurt and the gang seems ready to leave him to die, even as he pleads for his life, this exchange happens:

Will you do her, Holden? No, Davy, I won't . . . Brown glared about him. Will none of ye help a man? None spoke . . . The kid rose. I'll try her, he said . . . The kid withdrew the shaft from the man’s leg smoothly and the man bowed on the ground in a lurid female motion and wheezed raggedly through his teeth . . . When the kid returned to his own

blanket the ex priest leaned to him and hissed at his ear. Fool, he said. God will not love ye forever. (168-169)

This is significant not because the kid is being compassionate but because the kid is being moral. Regardless of having chosen violence before, regardless of being threatened by violence, in turn, the kid chooses compassion. This is not to say that the kid is a brave and virtuous character—he isn't—but he is a moral character, inasmuch as he allows himself the freedom to choose his own path of action regardless of the circumstances around him. He is not defined as a reaction to his violent reality any more than he is defined as an unreflective cog in the paradigm of violence.

Hume picks up from Hobbes' proto-empiricist argument and understanding of freedom and further builds up from it by adding his own understanding of causality, and how it's only the regularity observable in the action and motives on the part of other men that lead us to understand how their motives are cause of their actions and thus how we deem them responsible for their actions. Of course, the non-deterministic nature of this relationship would be what makes Hume's understanding of free will compatible with Hobbes' materialistic worldview, which he most famously shares:

Thus it appears not only that the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature, but also that this regular conjunction has been universally acknowledged among mankind and has never been the subject of dispute either in philosophy or common life . . . this experienced uniformity in human actions is a source where we draw inferences concerning them (An Inquiry, 98, emphasis in original).

It's worth pointing out that this is the same understanding of "causality" that McCarthy alludes to in his epilogue:

He uses an implement with two handles and he chucks it into the hole and he enkindles the stone in the hole with his steel hole by hole . . . and they cross in their progress one by one that track of holes that runs to the rim of the visible ground and which seems less the pursuit of some continuance than the verification of a principle, a validation of sequence and causality as if each round and perfect hole owed its existence to the one before it (351, emphasis mine).

With the addition of Hume's irrealist argument regarding causation, Hume not only argues against possible moral action in a world where regularity is not possible to ascertain—like a violent world would be—but also against the same kind of solipsism of which Judge Holden is so fond, for true solipsism would handicap us in the same way, making it impossible to even understand morality, since an appraisal of reality which fails to concede the existence of mental states other than the subject's own would be incapacitated to conceive of a link between the action of other subjects and the beliefs of other subjects—incapacitated as it would be of allowing beliefs beyond its own. Both of these points are pivotal, for in a world where true morality is not possible due to an impossibility to ascertain regularity, no amount of debauchery would make a man debauched, and so solipsism becomes the only alternative for a truly immoral world. But if moral concepts of “good” and “evil” are but matters of sentiment with relation to human appetites, then the appraisal of these sentiments is pivotal to understanding the mere dichotomy of “moral-amoral”. Solipsism is then impossible in a materialistic world where you can have an impression of “evil”. What this means for Judge Holden is that, if the kid is truly capable of free action, his solipsism is bust, and humanity is not doomed to war; for true morality is then possible, and understanding is possible. To further clarify this last point, it's helpful to bring forth the conversation the kid has with the hermit:

God made this world, but he didn't make it to suit everybody, did he?

I don't believe he much had me in mind.

Aye, said the old man. But where does a man come by his notions. What world's he seen that he liked better?

I can think of better places and better ways. (20, emphasis mine)

The kid not only understands the undesirability of violence, he can imagine and hope for a better world. His understanding of the existence of either suffering or pleasure beyond his own wishes and experience cannot be solipsism. The material world of *Blood Meridian* falls right in line with the material world present in both Hobbes and Hume and, luckily for us, both of them dealt with the role of imagination and hope inside a materialistic—yet moral—paradigm. Hobbes argues that hope is desire mixed with the understanding (or imagination) that such a desire can indeed be had, whereas fear is the same desire with the understanding that it can't (22). Hume expands on this understanding by linking it directly to an agent's impression on good and evil: "We come now to explain the direct passions, or the impressions, which arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure. Of this kind are, desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear" (*Treatise of human*, 399, emphasis mine). This argument comes on the heels of expanding on his proto-empiricist position:

This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called impressions of reflexion (*Treatise of human*, 6).

Here, he clarifies that these are not simply positions of instinctual aversion, but rather a result of reflection upon the consequences and possibilities of desire. This is the kind of understanding that the kid is demonstrating, and from this position he's able to judge the possibility of a "better" world. The nature of this possible world is not particularly relevant. The kid could be imagining a world where he's the omnipotent despot of all he surveys, for what it matters, since the point of contention of the argument is the appraisal of good and evil for the agent in virtue of the

understanding and projection of possible consequences and results. There can be no impression of “good” and “evil” in a materialistic world which is not derived from an opinion relative to appetites. If the kid can imagine a better world and—more critically—“better ways,” then he is able to infer causality from the regularity observed in him and other agents such as himself—which precludes the possibility of solipsism.

Holden’s sophistry is geared to submit others to the material world he ostensibly rules, but the kid nonetheless escapes him. He chooses to help Brown; he chooses to stay in jail; he chooses to leave Shelby in the desert, the kid is the lone rebel in the Judge’s crusade for materialistic totalitarianism. Perhaps most importantly, the kid refuses to take part in his “dance,” most notably choosing not to kill Holden when given the chance, and refusing to fight back once Holden faces him about it. This refusal to abandon his own code, beyond the material, is why the kid, as a free agent, is his biggest threat. He is the illiterate man with a bible, not yet good, but holding the potential for being moral nevertheless. In the immortal words of the Judge himself: “The freedom of birds is an insult to me. I’d have them all in zoos.” (208)



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