

The Intellectual We Deserve 🍷 Current Affairs

currentaffairs.org (<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2018/03/the-intellectual-we-deserve>) · by Nathan J. Robinson

If you want to appear very profound and convince people to take you seriously, but have nothing of value to say, there is a tried and tested method. First, take some extremely obvious platitude or truism. Make sure it actually does contain some insight, though it can be rather vague. Something like “if you’re too conciliatory, you will sometimes get taken advantage of” or “many moral values are similar across human societies.” Then, try to restate your platitude using as many words as possible, as unintelligibly as possible, while never repeating yourself exactly. Use highly technical language drawn from many different academic disciplines, so that no one person will ever have adequate training to fully evaluate your work. Construct elaborate theories with many parts. Draw diagrams. Use *italics* liberally to indicate that you are using words in a highly specific and idiosyncratic *sense*. Never say anything too specific, and if you do, qualify it heavily so that you can always insist you meant the opposite. Then evangelize: speak as confidently as possible, as if you are sharing God’s own truth. Accept no criticisms: insist that any skeptic has either misinterpreted you or has actually already admitted that you are correct. Talk as much as possible and listen as little as possible. Follow these steps, and your success will be assured. (It does help if you are male and Caucasian.)

Jordan Peterson appears very profound and has convinced many people to take him seriously. Yet he has almost nothing of value to say. This should be obvious to anyone who has spent even a few moments critically examining his writings and speeches, which are comically befuddled, pompous, and ignorant. They are half nonsense, half banality. In a reasonable world, Peterson would be seen as the kind of tedious crackpot that one hopes not to get seated next to on a train.

But we do not live in a reasonable world. In fact, Peterson's reach is astounding. His *12 Rules for Life* ([https://www.amazon.com/12-Rules-Life-Antidote-Chaos/dp/0345816021/ref=zg_bs_books_3?](https://www.amazon.com/12-Rules-Life-Antidote-Chaos/dp/0345816021/ref=zg_bs_books_3?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=6JYRFD7QWG8BCJ7Q6KAP)

[_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=6JYRFD7QWG8BCJ7Q6KAP](https://www.amazon.com/12-Rules-Life-Antidote-Chaos/dp/0345816021/ref=zg_bs_books_3?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=6JYRFD7QWG8BCJ7Q6KAP)) is the #1 most-read book on Amazon, where it has a perfect 5-star rating. One person said (<http://burkejournal.com/the-curious-case-of-the-canadian-psychologist/>) that when he came across a physical copy of Peterson's first book, "I wanted to hold it in my hands and contemplate its significance for a few minutes, as if it was one of Shakespeare's pens or a Gutenberg Bible." The world's leading newspapers have declared him one of the most important living thinkers. The *Times* says his "message is overwhelmingly vital

(<https://www.littlelostbookshop.com.au/p/philosophy-12-rules-of-life-an-antidote-to-chaos--2?barcode=9780241351642>),” and a *Guardian* columnist grudgingly admits that Peterson “deserves to be taken seriously.

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/12/not-all-he-says-is-defensible-but-jordan-peterson-deserves-to-be-taken-seriously>)” David Brooks thinks (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/opinion/jordan-peterson-moment.html>) Peterson might be “the most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now.” He has been called

(<https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2018/03/future-judgmental-father/>) “the deepest, clearest voice of conservative thought in the world today” a man whose work “should make him famous for the ages.” Malcolm Gladwell

(<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/02/the-social-science-of-success>) calls him “a wonderful psychologist.

(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/knowledgewharton/2013/12/05/272013/2/#5c211e30672a>)” And it's not just members of the popular press that have

conceded Peterson's importance: the chair of the Harvard psychology department praised his magnum opus *Maps of Meaning* as “brilliant” and “beautiful.” Zachary Slayback of the Foundation for Economic Education

wonders (<https://fee.org/articles/many-intellectuals-cant-stand-jordan-peterson-why/>) how any serious person could possibly write off Peterson, saying that “even the most anti-Peterson intellectual should be able to admit that his project is a net-good.” We are therefore presented with a puzzle: *if* Jordan

Peterson has nothing to say, how has he attracted this much recognition? If it's so "obvious" that he can be written off as a charlatan, why do so many people respect his intellect?

Before we address the mystery of Peterson's popularity, we need to examine his work. After all, if the work is actually "brilliant" and insightful, there is no mystery: he is recognized as a profound thinker because he is a profound thinker. And many critics of Peterson *have* been deeply unfair to his work, mocking it without reading it, or slinging pejoratives at him (e.g. "the stupid man's smart person (<http://www.macleans.ca/opinion/is-jordan-peterson-the-stupid-mans-smart-person/>)" or "a Messiah-cum-Surrogate-Dad for Gormless Dimwits. (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-messiah-cum-surrogate-dad-for-gormless-dimwits-on-jordan-b-petersons-12-rules-for-life/>)") This has irritated Peterson's fans, and when articles critical of him are printed, the comments sections are full of people (usually correctly) accusing the writer of failing to take Peterson seriously. An infamous Channel 4 interview (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMcjxSThD54>) with Cathy Newman, in which Newman repeatedly put words in Peterson's mouth ("so you're saying X"), confirmed the impression that progressives are trying to smear Peterson by accusing him of holding beliefs that he does not hold. Conor Friedersdorf of *The Atlantic* said Peterson is the victim of "hyperbolic misrepresentation (<https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/01/putting-monsterpaint-on-jordan-peterson/550859/>)" and encouraged people to examine what he is "actually saying."

But, having examined Peterson's work closely, I think the "misinterpretation" of Peterson is only partially a result of leftists reading him through an ideological prism. A more important reason why Peterson is "misinterpreted" is that he is so consistently vague and vacillating that it's impossible to tell what he *is* "actually saying." People can have such angry arguments about Peterson, seeing him as everything from a fascist apologist to an Enlightenment liberal, because his vacuous words are a kind of Rorschach test onto which countless interpretations can be projected.

This is immediately apparent upon opening Peterson's 1999 book *Maps of Meaning* (<https://www.amazon.com/Maps-Meaning-Architecture-Jordan-Peterson/dp/0415922224>), a 600-page summary of his basic theories that took Peterson 15 years to complete. *Maps of Meaning* is, to the extent it can be summarized, about how humans generate "meaning." By "generate meaning" Peterson ostensibly intends something like "figure out how to act," but the word's definition is somewhat capacious:

- "Meaning is manifestation of the divine individual adaptive path"
- "Meaning is the ultimate balance between... the chaos of transformation and the possibility and...the discipline of pristine order"
- "Meaning is an expression of the instinct that guides us out into the unknown so that we can conquer it"
- "Meaning is when everything there is comes together in an ecstatic dance of single purpose"
- "Meaning means implication for behavioral output"
- "Meaning emerges from the interplay between the possibilities of the world and the value structure operating within that world"

Peterson's answer is that people figure out how to act by turning to a common set of stories, which contain "archetypes" that have developed over the course of our species' evolution. He believes that by studying myths, we can see values and frameworks shared across cultures, and can therefore understand the structures that guide us.

But here I am already giving Peterson's work a more coherent summary than it actually deserves. And after all, if "many human stories have common moral lessons" was his point, he would have been saying something so obvious that nobody would think to credit it as a novel insight. Peterson manages to spin it out over hundreds of pages, and expand it into an elaborate, unprovable, unfalsifiable, unintelligible theory that encompasses everything from the direction of history, to the meaning of life, to the nature of knowledge, to the structure of human decision-making, to the foundations of ethics. (A good

principle to remember is that if a book appears to be about everything, it's probably not really about anything.) A randomly selected passage will convey the flavor of the thing:

Procedural knowledge, generated in the course of heroic behavior, is not organized and integrated within the group and the individual as a consequence of simple accumulation. Procedure "a," appropriate in situation one, and procedure "b," appropriate in situation two, may clash in mutual violent opposition in situation three. Under such circumstances intrapsychic or interpersonal conflict necessarily emerges. When such antagonism arises, moral reevaluation becomes necessary. As a consequence of such reevaluation, behavioral options are brutally rank-ordered, or, less frequently, entire moral systems are devastated, reorganized and replaced. This organization and reorganization occurs as a consequence of "war," in its concrete, abstract, intrapsychic, and interpersonal variants. In the most basic case, an individual is rendered subject to an intolerable conflict, as a consequence of the perceived (affective) incompatibility of two or more apprehended outcomes of a given behavioral procedure. In the purely intrapsychic sphere, such conflict often emerges when attainment of what is desired presently necessarily interferes with attainment of what is desired (or avoidance of what is feared) in the future. Permanent satisfactory resolution of such conflict (between temptation and "moral purity," for example) requires the construction of an abstract moral system, powerful enough to allow what an occurrence signifies for the future to govern reaction to what it signifies now. Even that construction, however, is necessarily incomplete when considered only as an "intrapsychic" phenomena. The individual, once capable of coherently integrating competing motivational demands in the private sphere, nonetheless remains destined for conflict with the other, in the course of the inevitable transformations of personal experience. This means that the person who has come to terms with him- or herself—at least in principle—is still subject to the affective dysregulation inevitably produced by interpersonal interaction. It is also the case that such subjugation is actually indicative of insufficient "intrapsychic" organization, as many basic "needs" can only be satisfied through the cooperation of others.

What's important about this kind of writing is that it can easily appear to contain useful insight, because it says many things that either *are* true or “feel kind of true,” and does so in a way that makes the reader feel stupid for not really understanding. (Many of the book's reviews on Amazon contain sentiments like: I am not sure I understood it, but it's absolutely brilliant.) It's not that it's *empty* of content; in fact, it's precisely because some of it does ring true that it is able to convince readers of its importance. It's certainly right that some procedures work in one situation but not another. It's right that good moral systems have to be able to think about the future in figuring out what to do in the present. But much of the rest is language so abstract that it cannot be proved or disproved. (The old expression “what's new in it isn't true, and what's true isn't new” applies here.)

Another passage, in which Peterson gives his theory of law:

Law is a necessary precondition to salvation, so to speak; necessary, but insufficient. Law provides the borders that limit chaos, and allows for the protected maturation of the individual. Law disciplines possibility, and allows the disciplined individual to bring his or her potentialities—those intrapsychic spirits—under voluntary control. The law allows for the application of such potentiality to the task of creative and courageous existence—allows spiritual water controlled flow into the valley of the shadow of death. Law held as an absolute, however, puts man in the position of the eternal adolescent, dependent upon the father for every vital decision, removes the responsibility for action from the individual, and therefore prevents him or her from discovering the potential grandeur of the soul. Life without law remains chaotic, affectively intolerable. Life that is pure law becomes sterile, equally unbearable. The domination of chaos or sterility equally breeds murderous resentment or hatred.

Again: it's not that he's wrong when he says that law has a disciplining function, or that too much law is stifling, while not enough is anarchy. But all this stuff about “intrapsychic spirits” and “the flow of spiritual water” is just *said*, never clearly explained, let alone proved. If you asked him to explain it, you would just

get a long string of additional abstract terms. (Ironically, *Maps of Meaning* contains neither maps nor meaning.) Sociologist C. Wright Mills, in critically examining (<https://www.amazon.com/Sociological-Imagination-C-Wright-Mills/dp/0195133730>) “grand theorists” in his field who used verbosity to cover for a lack of profundity, pointed out that people respond positively to this kind of writing because they see it as “a wondrous maze, fascinating precisely because of its often splendid lack of intelligibility.” But, Mills said, such writers are “so rigidly confined to such high levels of abstraction that the ‘typologies’ they make up—and the work they do to make them up—seem more often an arid game of Concepts than an effort to define systematically—which is to say, in a clear and orderly way, the problems at hand, and to guide our efforts to solve them.”

Obscurantism is more than a desperate attempt to feign novelty, though. It’s also a tactic for badgering readers into deference to the writer’s authority. Nobody can be sure they are comprehending the author’s meaning, which has the effect of making the reader feel deeply inferior and in awe of the writer’s towering knowledge, knowledge that must exist on a level so much higher than that of ordinary mortals that we are incapable of even beginning to appreciate it. In fact, Peterson is quite open in insisting that he has achieved revelations beyond the comprehension of ordinary persons. The book’s epigraph is comically grandiose (“I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world” — Matthew 13:35) and Peterson even includes in the book a letter to his father (<https://twitter.com/curaffairs/status/971859512742342656>) in which he tries to convey the gravity of his discovery:

I don't know, Dad, but I think I have discovered something that no one else has any idea about, and I'm not sure I can do it justice. Its scope is so broad that I can see only parts of it clearly at one time, and it is exceedingly difficult to set down comprehensibly in writing.... Anyways, I'm glad you and Mom are doing well. Thank you for doing my income tax returns.

(It's fun to read the letter for yourself and imagine being Peterson's dad trying to figure out what his son is doing with his life.)

Needless to say, when someone is this convinced of their own brilliance, they can be unaware of just how far afield they have drifted from the world of sense and reason. The diagrams and figures in *Maps of Meaning* are astonishing. They are masterpieces of unprovable gibberish:

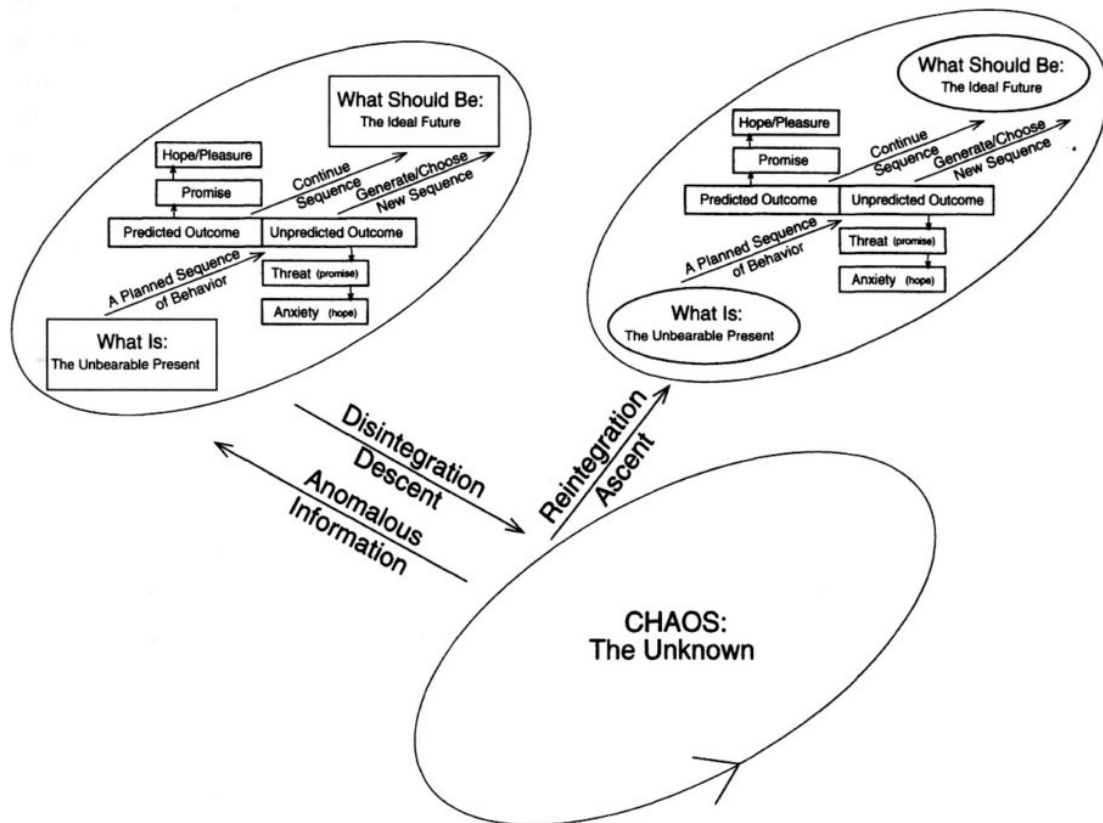


Figure 9: The Regeneration of Stability from the Domain of Chaos

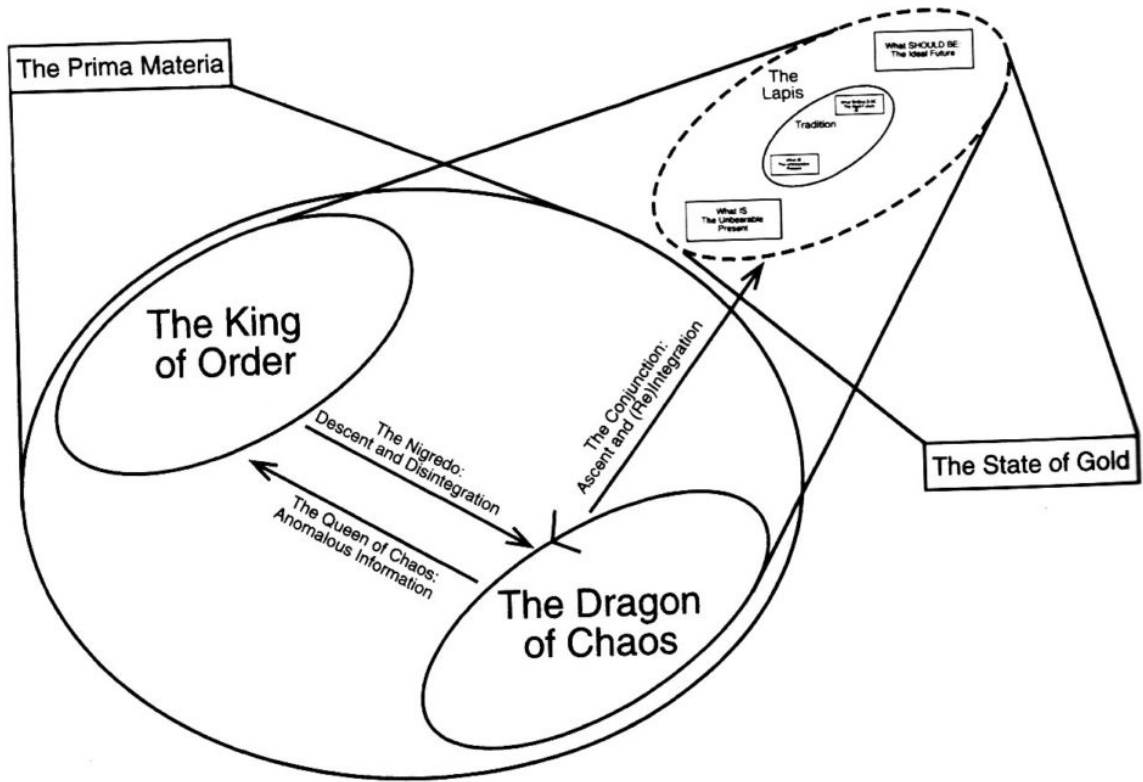


Figure 66: The Alchemical Opus as Myth of Redemption

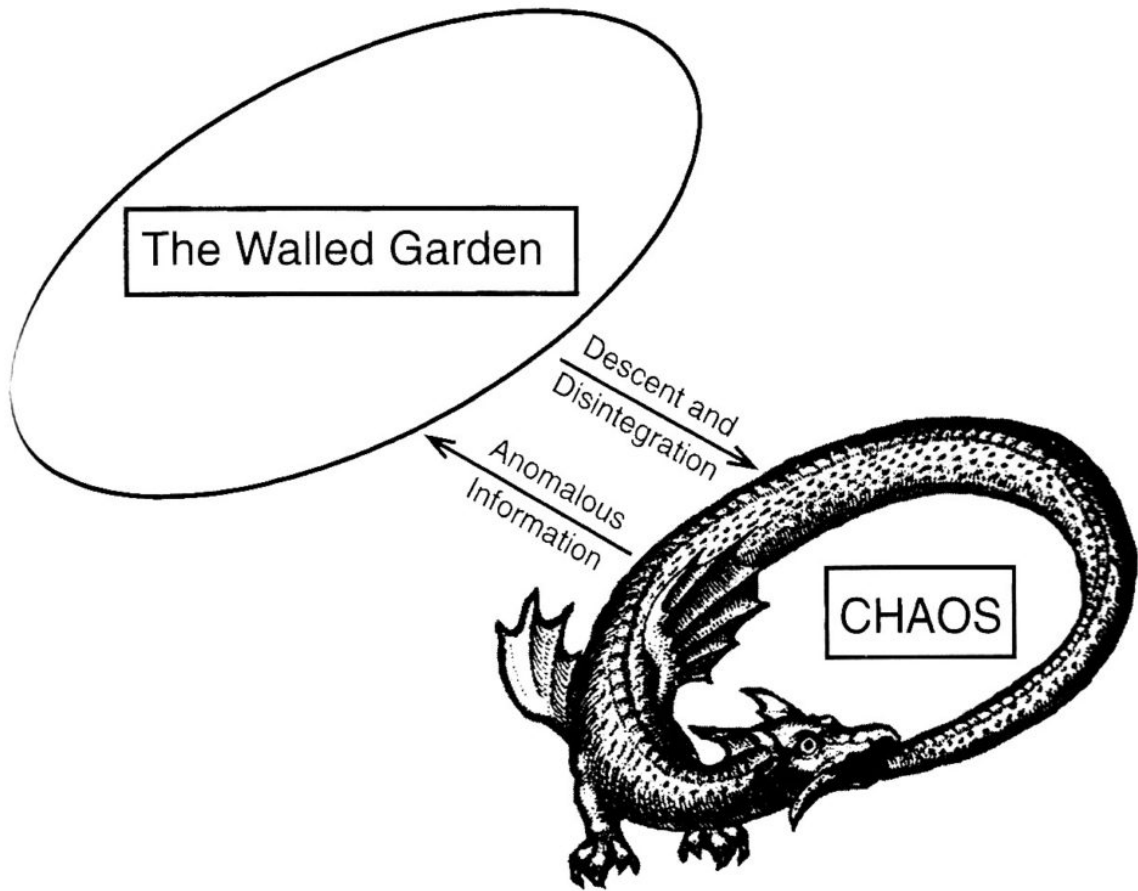


Figure 53: The (Voluntary) Descent of the Buddha

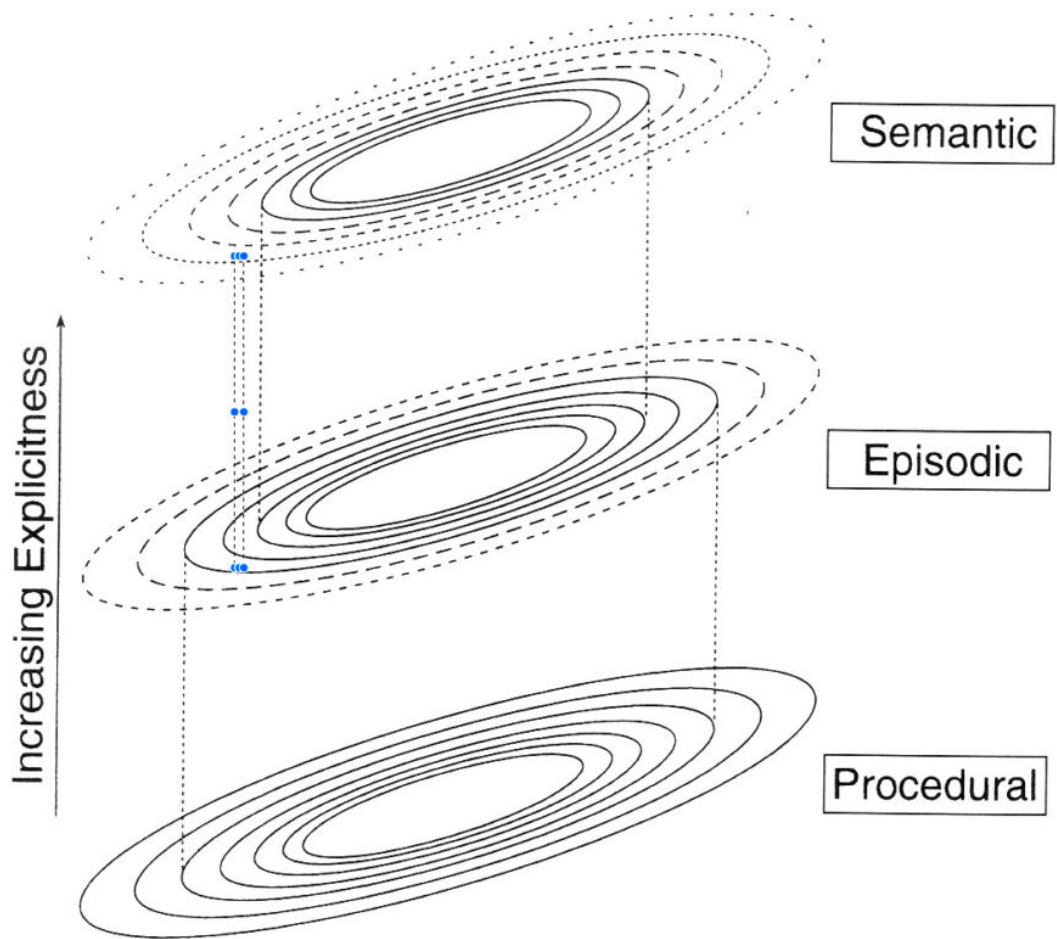


Figure 49: The Fragmentary Representation of "Procedure and Custom" in Image and Word

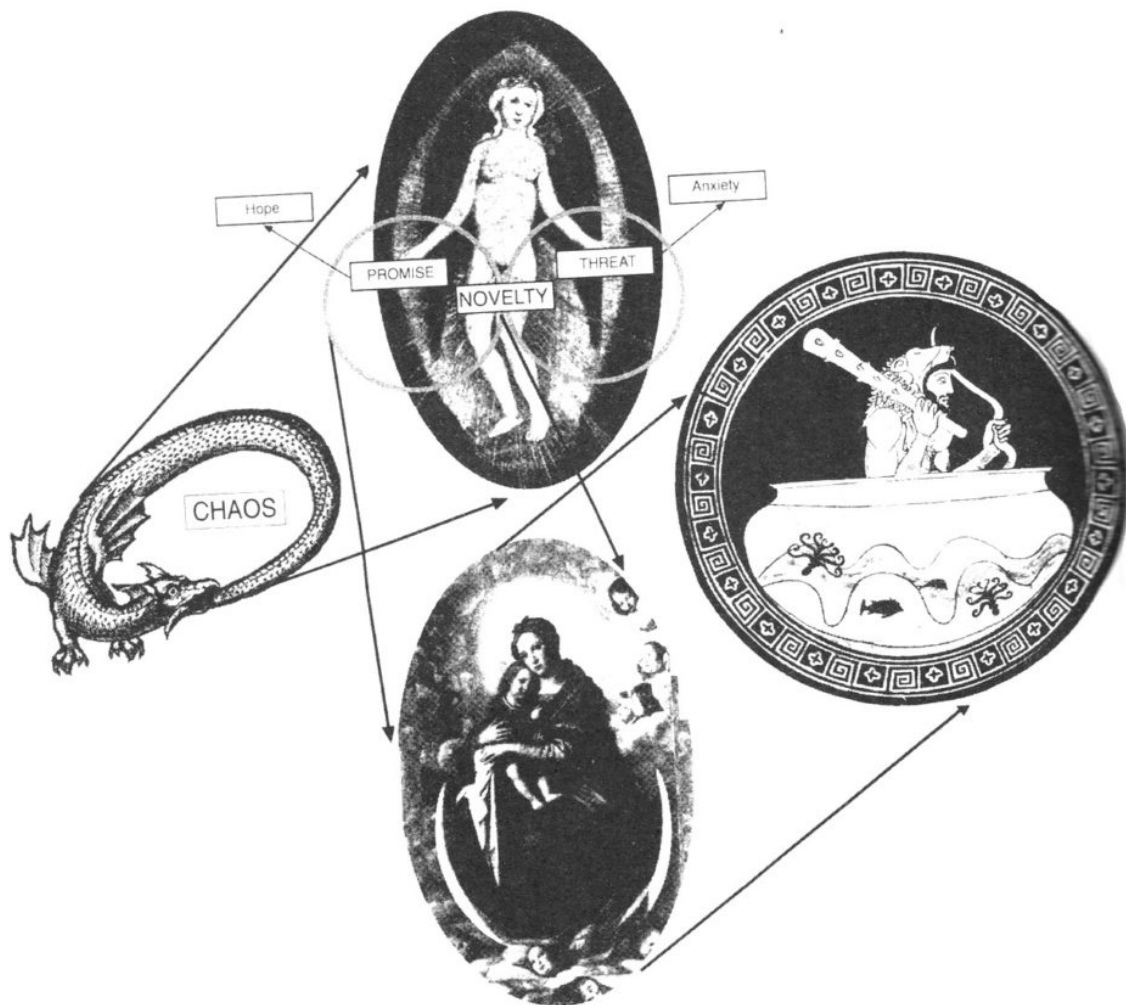


Figure 37: The Exploratory Hero as Son of the Heavenly Mother

How does one even address material like this? It can't be "refuted." Are we ruled by a dragon of chaos? Is the dragon feminine? Does "the 'state' of preconscious paradise" have a "voluntary encounter with the unknown"? Is the episodic really more explicit than the procedural? These are not questions with answers, because they are not questions with meanings.

The inflating of the obvious into the awe-inspiring is part of why Peterson can operate so successfully in the "self-help" genre. He can give people the most elementary fatherly life-advice (clean your room, stand up straight) while making it sound like Wisdom. Consider this summary of principles from the end of *12 Rules for Life*:

What shall I do to strengthen my spirit? Do not tell lies, or do what you despise.

What shall I do to ennoble my body? Use it only in the service of my soul.

What shall I do with the most difficult of questions? Consider them the gateway to the path of life.

What shall I do with the poor man's plight? Strive through right example to lift his broken heart.

What shall I do with when the great crowd beckons? Stand tall and utter my broken truths.

These are pompous, biblical ways of saying: tell the truth, be true to yourself, see challenges as opportunities, set a good example, and, uh, give confident and long-winded lectures to your adoring crowd of fans. (Note the response to the “poor man’s plight,” which is not to actually help him but to show him what a better person you are so that he will have a model to emulate.) Peterson’s writing style constantly adds convolutions to disguise the simplicity of his mind; so he won’t say “the man’s cancer metastasized,” he will say the man “fell prey to the tendency of that dread condition to metastasize.” The harder people have to work to figure out what you’re saying, the more accomplished they’ll feel when they figure it out, and the more sophisticated you will appear. Everybody wins.

A few more Petersonisms:

- *“There is no being without imperfection.”* No shit.
- *“To share does not mean to give away something you value and get nothing back. That is instead what every child who refuses to share fears it means. To share means, properly, to initiate the process of trade.”* Could mean anything, depending on interpretation: if I share my food with a hungry person, and ask for nothing in return, I may still have “gotten something.” But the maxim could also be interpreted as a defense of avarice. You can find a justification in it for whatever your worldview already is.

- “*You can’t make rules for the exceptional.*” By definition.
- “*The future is the place of all potential monsters.*” The future is the place for all potential everything.
- “*People do not care whether or not they succeed; they care about whether or not they fail.*” Which is apparently different.
- “*People aren’t after happiness, they’re after not hurting.*” I’m actually after happiness, thanks.
- “*Life is suffering. That’s clear. There is no more basic, irrefutable truth.*” Anything is “irrefutable” if it’s not clear what we mean by it.
- “*You cannot be protected from the things that frighten you and hurt you, but if you identify with the part of your being that is responsible for transformation, then you are always the equal, or more than the equal of the things that frighten you.*” Unless you are frightened of leopards, and are subsequently eaten by leopards.

The multiplicity of possible interpretations is very important. It makes it almost impossible to beat Peterson in an argument, because every time one attempts to force him to defend a proposition, he can insist he means something else. For example, he sees the world as fundamentally divided between the forces of “chaos” and the forces of “order,” and explains the difference:

[Chaos is] what extends, eternally and without limit, beyond the boundaries of all states, all ideas, and all disciplines... It’s the foreigner, the stranger, the member of another gang, the rustle in the bushes... the hidden anger of your mother... Chaos is symbolically associated with the feminine... Order, by contrast, is explored territory. That’s the hundreds-of-millions-of-years-old hierarchy of place, position, and authority. That’s the structure of society. It’s the structure provided by biology, too...It’s the flag of the nation... It’s the greatness of tradition, the rows of desks in the school classroom, the trains that leave on time... In the domain of order, things behave as God intended.

It's very easy to hear the echoes of authoritarianism, even fascism, in this: strong men create order, which is what God intends, and the social structure is preserved by deference to authority, tradition, hierarchy, flags. (Heck, he even talks about the trains running on time!) But the moment one tries to critique this, to talk about the dangers of adhering to flags and traditions for their own sake, Peterson will angrily insist that you have misunderstood his theory: order is symbiotic with chaos, not superior to it! ("Order is not enough.") The feminine is necessary as well, because chaos is associated with "possibility itself, the source of ideas, the mysterious realm of gestation and birth." If you try to suggest that he has justified patriarchy, he will tell you that when he refers to the "symbolically masculine" he does not mean "men." But it's usually unclear what he *does* mean, and any attempt to figure it out will be met with a barrage of yet more jargon. (What, for example, are we to make of his interpretation of *The Simpsons*, which stresses the importance of having a cruel bully around to keep the soft effeminate kids from taking over: "Without Nelson, King of the Bullies, the school would soon be overrun by resentful, touchy Milhouses, narcissistic, intellectual Martin Princes, soft, chocolate-gorging German children, and infantile Ralph Wiggums. Muntz is a corrective..." An endorsement of bullying the weak, surely? But Peterson would deny it.)

Consider the way Peterson talks about (<https://jordanbpeterson.com/transcripts/camille-paglia/>) the "threat of physicality":

I know how to stand up to a man who's unfairly trespassing against me. And the reason I know that is because the parameters for my resistance are quite well defined, which is: we talk, we argue, we push, and then it becomes physical. If we move beyond the boundaries of civil discourse, we know what the next step is. That's forbidden in discourse with women. And so I don't think that men can control crazy women. I really don't believe it. I think they have to throw their hands up in. . . In what? It's not even disbelief. It's that the cultural. . . There's no step forward that you can take under those circumstances, because if the man is offensive enough and crazy enough, the reaction becomes physical right away. Or at least the threat is there. And when men are talking to each other in any serious manner, that underlying threat of physicality is always there, especially if it's a real conversation. It keeps the thing civilized to some degree. If you're talking to a man who wouldn't fight with you under any circumstances whatsoever, then you're talking to someone [for] whom you have absolutely no respect. But I can't see any way... For example there's a woman in Toronto who's been organizing this movement, let's say, against me and some other people who are going to do a free speech event. And she managed to organize quite effectively, and she's quite offensive, you might say. She compared us to Nazis, for example, publicly, using the Swastika, which wasn't something I was all that fond of. But I'm defenseless against that kind of female insanity, because the techniques that I would use against a man who was employing those tactics are forbidden to me. So I don't know. . . It seems to me that it isn't men who have to stand up and say, 'Enough of this.' Even though that is what they should do, it seems to me that it's sane women who have to stand up against their crazy sisters and say, 'Look, enough of that. Enough man-hating. Enough pathology. Enough bringing disgrace on us as a gender.'

Now one could interpret this disturbing passage to mean that Peterson is upset that there's a social taboo against him beating up the Toronto woman who calls him a Nazi. In fact, I don't really see how to interpret it differently: he says that he's "defenseless" against her "insanity" because the techniques he "would" use on a man are "forbidden." (Why he has no other "defenses," such as "ignoring her," is unclear.) But Peterson would vigorously object to the idea that he's in

any way endorsing violence against women: *no, I'm simply saying that all human interaction has an underlying threat of physicality. How could you so wilfully and unfairly misinterpret me?* And of course, if we challenge Peterson's contention that "when men are talking to each other in any serious manner" there is some underlying threat (I've just been talking to a fellow *Current Affairs* editor about Jordan Peterson, and I did not feel potential violence bubbling beneath the surface, except possibly toward my copy of *Maps of Meaning*), he will retreat to the proposition about how "you can't respect a man who would never fight you under any circumstances." After all, *any* circumstances means he wouldn't even physically intervene to stop you from hurting someone, and *how can you respect that?* (That is a far cry from "there's always an underlying threat," though.) Peterson makes ominous-sounding (and seemingly false) generalizations and yet builds in caveats so that nobody can accuse him of endorsing the thing it sounds like he's endorsing.

This is the same thing that happens with his discussions of nice guys and cruelty. He'll say that people who are too nice will get taken advantage of, and talk about the importance of being capable of cruelty, which certainly sounds like it's encouraging people to be sadistic dicks, but then he'll insist that actually he's not talking about *being* cruel he's talking about *being able to be cruel* (you idiot, how could you not see the difference?) and he's not against nice people, he's just saying that *the weak shall perish*. And because you can "pick your Peterson," those who watch his YouTube videos can take very different messages from the same set of words. A video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N00JEIpzlXo>) about hitting women, in which Peterson never endorses hitting women, has the following among its most highly-upvoted comments:

- *My great grandmother once told me "Never hit a women, but you can sure as hell hit her back".* (upvoted 660 times)
- *shoudnt hit anyone but if someone attacks you you can defend your self, even if it is a woman* (upvoted 745 times)
- *I would never hit a lady. An aggressive bitch is another question.* (upvoted 576 times)

- *The original ethic was that a gentleman should never hit a lady. At the point that a woman threatens you or your own, she is definitely not a lady. Being a lady, like being a gentleman, requires civility, grace, respect, and a personal responsibility for one's own behaviour.*
- *Peterson didn't say that he would never hit a woman. He only implied that every woman he had ever hit is dead.*
- *I believe women deserve rights.... and lefts!!!* (upvoted 550 times)

If people who follow you seem to say things like this a lot, you should probably think hard about why you're attracting this kind of audience. It's *not* that Peterson is endorsing violence, but because he's a Rorschach test who can be interpreted many ways, his lectures about the chaotic female and the necessity of strength and the capacity for cruelty provide ready material to those seeking philosophical rationalizations for aggression.

Peterson is at his murkiest when he is talking about nature. Half the time he seems to be committing the naturalistic fallacy (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalistic_fallacy): he'll describe tendencies that exist, and imply that these things are therefore good. So he'll talk about dominance hierarchies among lobsters, and exhort young men to "Look for your inspiration to the victorious lobster." Of course, the animal kingdom is also a place of mutual aid, (<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-mutual-aid-a-factor-of-evolution>) and for a man to emulate a lobster is like a woman treating the existence of the praying mantis as a license to eat her husband. But Peterson will vacillate between seeming to claim that nature implies a clear and virtuous hierarchical order of things and insisting that he is not precluding criticism of the existing order of things. When he seems to be saying something fallacious (e.g. hierarchies are okay because natural) he will qualify it with a caveat that means he is saying nothing at all (e.g. natural things are sometimes okay but not always). Sam Harris (<https://samharris.org/speaking-of-truth-with-jordan-b-peterson/>), who is sympathetic to Peterson's political stances, has pointed out in exasperation that many of Peterson's claims about the foundations of good conduct are either unsupported or do not make sense:

Has human evolution actually selected for males that closely conform to the heroism of St. George? And is this really the oldest story we know? Aren't there other stories just as old, reflecting quite different values that might also have adaptive advantages? And in what sense do archetypes even exist? ... [I]sn't it obvious that most of what we consider ethical—indeed, almost everything we value—now stands outside the logic of evolution? Caring for disabled children would most likely have been maladaptive for our ancestors during any conditions of scarcity—while cannibalism recommended itself from time to time in every corner of the globe. How much inspiration should we draw from the fact that killing and eating children is also an ancient “archetype”?

There's no good reason for turning to evolution and the animal kingdom for moral advice, yet this is what Peterson recommends. Or doesn't. I am dreading the inevitable emails insisting that I *just don't understand* Peterson, containing copious quotes in which he insists he is saying the opposite of things he seems to be saying elsewhere. (By the way, an amusing aside: a few years ago my colleague Oren Nimni and I wrote a parody of nonsensical academic grand theory called *Blueprints for a Sparkling Tomorrow* (<https://www.amazon.com/Blueprints-Sparkling-Tomorrow-Thoughts-Reclaiming/dp/0692479813>), which literally happens to contain a passage recommending that human beings look to lobsters for moral advice: “*We therefore propose a substitute outlet for humankind's affections: the arthropod. Anyone who has attended a lobster wedding knows full well the kind of profundity and romanticism of which these divine creatures are capable. Yet the arthropod languishes in America's battling-cages and seafood joints, stripped of its potential and dismissed in its attempts to make edifying contributions to civic life.*” Peterson's failure to credit us borders on academic malpractice.)

To the extent Peterson has any kind of response to the charges that he is making all of this up, it's just that... imagination is real:

What's common across all human experience across all time... there are moral, or metaphysical, or phenomenological realities that have the same nature. You can't see them in your life by observing them with your senses, but you can imagine them with your imagination, and sometimes the things that you imagine with your imagination are more real than the things that you see...

And when an interviewer asked him why people should believe the myths he cites, Peterson's response is that, well, you might as well take *something* seriously because *life is serious, damn it*, and a catastrophe awaits you:

INTERVIEWER: Because a lot of people just look at these stories like Tiamat and Marduk or the Christ story and the Bible stories and say, "Well, that's just ... Those are nice stories, but I'm not going to take it seriously." What's the case you make, because I know actually—

PETERSON: Well, what are you going to take seriously, then? You're going to take nothing seriously. Well, good luck with that, because serious things are coming your way. If you're not prepared for them by an equal metaphysical seriousness, they will flatten you. You can be dismissive with regards to wisdom, but that doesn't protect you from the coming catastrophe.

(This is not a persuasive argument.)

I don't mean to say that all of what Peterson says is in the category of the "not even wrong (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Not_even_wrong).” Some of it is actually just wrong. He is an unreliable guide to the facts (e.g. “there are far more female physicians than there are male physicians (<https://katana17.wordpress.com/2018/01/22/jordan-peterson-debates-cathy-newman-on-the-gender-pay-gap-transcript/>),” which is false for the U.S. (<https://www.kff.org/other/state-indicator/physicians-by-gender/?currentTimeframe=0&sortModel=%7B%22colId%22:%22Location%22,%22sort%22:%22asc%22%7D>), Canada (

data/2015-06-spec-sex.pdf), and the U.K.

(<https://images.currentaffairs.org/2018/03/Screen-Shot-2018-03-21-at-4.58.43-PM.png>), or his promotion of a bizarre conspiracy theory

(<https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson/status/950736306694336512>) that

Google is manipulating the search results for “bikini” to include plus-sized models for politically-correct reasons, which they aren’t

(https://www.google.com/search?q=bikini&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi87PfquvZAhUBF2MKHceBBtgQ_AUIDCgD&biw=1248&bih=578.) His reading comprehension

skills are... limited. Here is Peterson describing an important political awakening

he experienced from reading George Orwell, who he says finally convinced him not to be a socialist:

he experienced from reading George Orwell, who he says finally convinced him not to be a socialist:

My college roommate, an insightful cynic, expressed skepticism regarding my ideological beliefs. He told me that the world could not be completely encapsulated within the boundaries of socialist philosophy. I had more or less come to this conclusion on my own, but had not admitted so much in words. Soon afterward, however, I read George Orwell’s Road to Wigan Pier. This book finally undermined me—not only my socialist ideology, but my faith in ideological stances themselves. In the famous essay concluding that book (written for—and much to the dismay of—the British Left Book Club) Orwell described the great flaw of socialism, and the reason for its frequent failure to attract and maintain democratic power (at least in Britain). Orwell said, essentially, that socialists did not really like the poor. They merely hated the rich. His idea struck home instantly. Socialist ideology served to mask resentment and hatred, bred by failure. Many of the party activists I had encountered were using the ideals of social justice to rationalize their pursuit of personal revenge.

And here is George Orwell, in *The Road To Wigan Pier*, which Peterson says convinced him that socialism was folly because socialists were resentful:

Please notice that I am arguing for Socialism, not against it. [...] The job of the thinking person, therefore, is not to reject Socialism but to make up his mind to humanize it...For the moment, the only possible course of any decent person, however much of a Tory or an anarchist by temperament, is to work for the establishment of Socialism. Nothing else can save us from the misery of the present or the nightmare of the future [...] Indeed, from one point of view, Socialism is such elementary common sense that I am sometimes amazed it has not established itself already. The world is a raft sailing through space with, potentially, plenty of provisions for everybody; the idea that we must all cooperate and see to it that everyone does his fair share of the work and gets his fair share of the provisions, seems so blatantly obvious that one would say that nobody could possibly fail to accept it unless he had some corrupt motive for clinging to the present system. [...] To recoil from Socialism because so many socialists are inferior people is as absurd as refusing to travel by train because you dislike the ticket-collector's face.

Orwell flat-out says that anybody who evaluates the merits of socialist policies by the personal qualities of socialists themselves is an idiot. Peterson concludes that Orwell thought socialist policies was flawed because socialists themselves were bad people. I don't think there is a way of reading Peterson other than as extremely stupid or extremely dishonest, but one can be charitable and assume he simply didn't read the book that supposedly gave him his grand revelation about socialism.

Even now, however, I am being too generous to Jordan Peterson's intellect. I have been presenting him at his most comprehensible and polished. I have not been giving you the full experience of actually listening to him talk. Sitting through a Jordan Peterson lecture is very different to watching a rapid-fire television interview. Below, please find a fully-transcribed portion of 17 minutes of Peterson's speech. This is a random chunk, from the first lecture (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4tQOIQRp3gQ&t=1h05m10s>) I happened to click on, a lecture that is ostensibly introducing *Maps of Meaning*. In the clip, Peterson is in the middle of (again, ostensibly) analyzing how the

children's book *There's No Such Thing As A Dragon* (<https://www.amazon.com/Theres-No-Such-Thing-Dragon/dp/0375851372>) displays the archetypes found in classical mythology. I would like you to bear in mind that this is a man the *New Yorker* calls (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/03/05/jordan-petersons-gospel-of-masculinity>) the internet's "most revered" intellectual and the *Guardian* says (<https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/jan/21/jordan-peterson-self-help-author-12-steps-interview>) is "fast becoming the closest that academia has to a rock star." Also remember that this is a man who advises people to be clear and precise, and says he is "very, very, very careful with my words." Oh, and that he wants to completely defund (<https://www.dailywire.com/news/16935/dissident-professor-explains-neo-marxism-womens-robert-kraychik>) Women's Studies departments because he thinks they churn out meaningless verbiage. Ready? Here we go.

(NOTE: UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES ATTEMPT TO READ THE ENTIRETY OF THE FOLLOWING PASSAGE. READ AS MUCH AS YOU CAN BEFORE YOU BEGIN TO FEEL WEARY, THEN SCROLL QUICKLY TO THE END.)

PETERSON: Mother made some pancakes for Billy, but the dragon ate them all! Mother made some more, but the dragon ate those too. Mother kept making pancakes until she ran out of batter. Billy only got one of them but he said that's all he really wanted anyway. So I'll tell you another story about that. So, when I lived in Boston, I had little kids and my wife took care of some *neighborhood* little kids because she didn't have a green card and that was she was home with the kids anyways, and anyway, she took care of some other little kids. One of them would only eat hot dogs that was quite funny. He'd only eat hot dogs at his mother's place but at our house he ate all of his lunch and he was perfectly happy about it, so I thought that was quite amusing too. But *anyways* one day a neighbor came by and the neighbor had a four year old child and the neighbor was looking for someone to take care of the child because her *nanny* had been in a car accident and couldn't take care of the child temporarily. So the child had

sort of been circulating around neighborhood *houses* for a couple of days and you know people were taking care of him and then he ended up at our house. Which was fine. And so he's a cute little guy and his — the mother came to the door and she said she's pushed the boy in he was kind of like this [sulking], he wasn't very happy and she said, "*He probably won't eat all day but that's okay.*" And I thought *hmm* that's a remarkably interesting statement to you know, to put forth as a proposition the first time we meet your son. It's like, he won't eat, all day, which by the way is *not* okay, it's *not* okay, *and* you're going to tell us that it's okay and you're going to expect that we're just going to *accept* the fact that you think it's okay. And that's the whole story, you deliver all that information in one little sentence. So I thought, well *that's* pretty damn peculiar. I *believe* she was the psychologist too, which was quite interesting [sniffs]. So *okay*. So that's fine. So I went out to do something and there was four kids playing in the house and when I came *back* the little guy was in the porch like where the *boots* were and everything and he was sort of *standing there* like this [sulking] and I thought *hmm* that's not good because there's all these other kids like he should have been in there playing eh? That *obviously* that's what a child is primed to do! He should have been in there, *messing* about with I think there was a two year-old and a three year-old and another four year-old. He should have been in there you know causing trouble and having fun and *playing* but he wasn't, and he was standing on the porch like this [sulking] and he wasn't happy. He wasn't happy. So I looked at him for a bit and then I poked him a couple of times because I thought, *you know*, if you're interacting with little kids they're very playful eh? They're kind of like puppies and so if you *tease* them a bit, and tickle them a bit, then usually even if they're *crabby*, you know a smile will break out despite their best efforts and then they'll sort of giggle and maybe you know they'll try to whack you away and you know they go into a *play* routine. And although you *may* not know it, *mammals* like us HAVE A PLAY CIRCUIT! You know? So we're intrinsically playful which is partly why we can get along with *dogs* because of course dogs are intrinsically playful and most people know how to play with a dog and you know when a dog wants to *play* right because it sort of *puts its paws down* and looks up at you and sort of grins and puts its tail in the air and goes like this it's like CLUE IN, PRIMATE you know it's time to engage in some playing and you know you basically you know how to do that and even the dog knows

how to do that. So I'm poking this kid and trying to get him to, *smile* but there's *no damn way* you know I'm poking him he's just ignoring me like mad and I thought that's not good, you know, because you don't want your four year-old to have learned that you should, that it's *okay* to ignore the adults, or that you *should* ignore the adults, or that you *can* ignore the adults. That's all BAD because the world's *full of adults* and they *know a lot of things* and they *control all the resources* and so you BETTER GET ALONG WITH THEM PLUS you're going to end up... AS an adult for most of your life, so if the general, so if the first rule is adults *can* and should be ignored then what the hell are you headed for? You know? And it's one of the reasons why it's really useful to make sure the children respect *adults* because they're *going to be adults* so if they don't respect adults then of course they don't have any respect for what they're going to BE why the hell grow up? You end up like Peter Pan because that's what Peter Pan's about right Peter Pan wants to stay in Neverland, with the Lost Boys, where there's no responsibility because you know, he looks at the future and all he sees is Captain Hook. A tyrant who's afraid of death, that's the crocodile right... that's chasing him with the clock in his stomach. And it's the same thing as this dragon. So you know... KIDS HAVE TO RESPECT ADULTS. It's, you're doing them a disservice if they *don't!* So okay so fine, I'm poking this kid, there's just no damn way, I'm not getting anywhere with him and I thought this isn't good. There's something deeply wrong with this little kid. So that's fine. So then we sit all the kids down for lunch, and the rule is: *eat your DAMN lunch* and be THANKFUL FOR IT. Because, think about this, Leonard Cohen wrote this song once about I don't remember the song particularly but he talked about the homicidal bitching that goes down in every kitchen about who's going to serve and who's going to eat. It's like, if you *haven't encountered that* then there's something *terribly* wrong... you know... because a lot of the tension in households is domestic tension. The tensions between husbands and wives they are husbands wives and children it's like just WHO THE HELL'S going to do the domestic duties and *how* and *when* and the answer can't be well we're not going to do them because then you know you eat Cheetos and popcorn and you know for the rest of your life and that's *not good*. It's gotten to the point in *England* because the domestic situations have deteriorated the rituals have deteriorated to such a point that about 1/3 of families no longer have a dining room table and you can buy PRE-COOKED

hard-boiled eggs, yeah, yeah, right, so it's not a good *thing*, and you might ask yourself why the *hell* everyone is fat or has an eating disorder and you know part of the reason is that the entire domestic routine around regulating food intake has disappeared that's a terrible thing for people because we're *social eaters*. So you might say, well, if you sit down with a bunch of other people... at a table... how much *should* you eat? And the answer is: you should eat on average what everyone else eats. And that's exactly what you *do*, even if you don't *notice* it. You know people are so *wired into* we did experiments like this if you bring undergraduates who don't know each other... into a lab... and you give them a snack while they're doing something like watching a movie, they will *eat* the same number of chips. So you know if one of them eats the whole half the thing, the other will eat half. If one only has one, the other will only have one. The correlation between the food intake, between the dyads was about 0.8 it was *staggering*. Seemed to be a little higher for extroverts than for introverts, but it was remarkably concordant. You can understand *why* right? Because human beings share food it's like you are *not* going to be a popular tribesperson... if you *eat* you know 30% of the food when food is in short supply. You better be bloody *awake* and make sure you don't take more than your share. And you know it's a fundamental of human nature to do that. And you know, we also regulate our sense of satiety by cues that are external to us. So regulating our food intake, also because we're omnivores turns out to be a tremendously difficult thing and anyways, back to this kid. So, we bring all the kids to the table and they're sitting around and they're having *lunch* and the rule is, as I said, eat what *is* in front of you *and* be PLEASED AND HAPPY ABOUT IT. So you might say well why would that also be a rule? It's like okay, put yourself in this position now because you'll be in this position. You're going to cook your damn kid some lunch. And you're going to *do* that... well let's calculate it out because I like doing arithmetic. So let's say it takes you a half an hour a day, and you do it seven days a week. But we'll multiply that by three because there's three meals so it's an hour and a half a day *right*? So okay fine seven times an hour and a half is roughly *ten*. So it's *ten* hours a week it's forty hours a month right, forty hours a month is a full work week. So forty hours a month times twelve, twelve full work weeks, right? Yes? That's three full months of 40 hour days of COOKING SOMETHING FOR YOUR DAMN KID. Now, that's a lot of time, and then you're going to do that for

18 years. SO then you might ask yourself... what sort of response do you need... from your child... in order to not feel resentful and miserable about the fact that you have to do that for three bloody months this year. You know you just have to think about this, and this is also why it's necessarily to know that inside yourself you carry a monster just like the world outside you carries a monster. *Do not think* that you're going to be able to *maintain* a healthy attitude towards your child or towards your food or towards yourself if all you can muster up for the effort of cooking and preparing food is the attitude of a slave and continual punishment from the people you're offering *food* to. It's like who the hell wants that?! So you want to teach the miserable little blighter that he's *lucky* that there's any food there at all and that the proper attitude is to say really thank you very much mom or thank you very much dad I'm glad that you produced something and then you know you can be all happy about the fact that you were slaving away in the kitchen and you can like your kid! And so you might think well everybody likes their kids. It's like yeah right, no. That's not true. *That's not true.* And now and then you know you read in the newspaper about someone who's, you know, being pushed a little bit too far on some day that they're unemployed and hungover and you know their relationship is just broken up and they do something absolutely brutal to their child and you think well "*how could anyone do that*" it's like there's a lot of *history* of *terrible* interactions between the mother and the child or the father and the child before something like that happens. So you know if you want to protect your child against the beast that's inside you you might want to teach them to treat you with some respect so that you're much more likely to be a civilized human being around them. So, alright so anyways so this kids sittin' there and there's no damn way he's going to eat anything! So we decide we're going to feed him, which I am an expert at, because my son, the one who said no all the time he is the most stubborn little cuss you could possibly imagine and one time when he was about nine months old he got ahold of this spoon and it was like he was not going to be fed anymore. So that's fine good you feed yourself. But no, kids, eh? They're too damn curious and playful really to *feed* themselves so you sit them in a high chair and you know they fling the food onto the floor because that's pretty cool and they can watch that over and over you know or they mess around with it or maybe they, you know, put some in mom's hair because that's interesting too and they have two or three bites and

then they're not ravenous and then they're much more interested in playing, and that's fine except that if the kid doesn't eat then it gets crabby and you know whiny and miserable and then it disturbs the mother or the father and then it won't *sleep* at night it's like that's no good. So after about three days of that I took the *spoon* back from him and he was *not happy* about that man. Trying to get that little kid to eat once I got the spoon it was like a four hour battle. It was *really remarkable*. So I have a lot of respect for his *ability* just to *withstand stubbornness* you know but I'd learned by that time as a parent that like if you want to discipline your child, there's an attitude that you have to take which is I am going to win this. It's like I don't care how stubborn you are I am GOING TO WIN! And because *I know* I'm going to win I am not going to get angry. I'm just going to out-stubborn you, so I take up some food and put it in front of him he'd go like this [winces] so that was a good trick and so I tried to get the food in there and his teeth were gritted so I'd poke him *poke poke poke poke* and after about ten pokes he'd get annoyed and go agh and I'd put the food in and he tried to spit it out so I'd hold it in. So then that was like three minutes you know and then we did it with another spoonful and you know after about I'd say an hour of this my wife had to leave because just you know she couldn't handle it. And about an hour after this he decided that you know it was ok and that he would let me feed him, but like it was brutal, and it was *amazing* I mean little kids are so *damn* tough you know they're really cute and everything and but they're so *tough* you just can't believe it so anyways. *So...* we had this kid at the table and he was not going to *eat* so my wife, who had learned these tricks by this time, decided to feed him. And he had a lot of sort of nine month old or eight month old behaviors because you know kids have different strategies of resistance if they don't want to do something and those strategies get more sophisticated as they get older but and he had some strategies but they weren't sophisticated you know like he didn't make jokes or knock the spoon away or get angry or run away or any of those things. He did kind of nine month old things which means he just put his head down and when she put the spoon towards him he just averted his head one way or another so so *that* was interesting because I knew his parents had given up feeding him when he was about eight or nine months old, because those tricks worked and so that's why she could come to the house and say [in high pitched voice] "he probably won't eat all day but that's alright" which it ISN'T. IT'S NOT

ALRIGHT. So, fine, so my wife is trying to feed him and he doesn't open his mouth so she pokes him a bit and sooner or later he gets mad and goes AGH and she puts the food in and then she pats him on the head as soon as he swallows it and says look you're being a really good kid you know you're doing a good job and so he's wondering what the hell's going on and then it was so *interesting* because she kept feeding him and he was still doing this [winces] but as she patted him on the head he'd be doing this and he'd open his mouth, so it was like there was this weird conflict between his habitual behavior and this thing that was being *reinforced* so then she'd you know put the food in and pat him and he'd you know he'd be kind of happy about that and then he'd kind of go back to his routine and then she did that for about — I think it was about 20 minutes it wasn't disruptive like all the other kids ate they didn't really notice what was going on. It wasn't a big deal you know but I was watching because I knew something was up because the stupid thing that his mother said and then the fact that he wouldn't play, and he ignored me I thought nah nah there's something really not good here, there's a *dragon* here, and it's a *big* one... So... she feeds him and then he finishes the whole bowl! And she says you're a good boy you ate the whole bowl. Jesus, you should have seen what happened to that *kid* man it just about broke my heart like really, like his eyes got big and he smiled and he was just like he was *super thrilled* because he'd *finally accomplished* this ABSOLUTE BASIC NECESSITY... that he hadn't mastered in FOUR YEARS. He FINALLY GOT IT RIGHT. You think of all the meals he went through, either being ignored or *failing*, three times a day, for like three years. Nothing but *failure* and *bad* responses and you know, he'd internalized all that he thought he was a bad kid and then all of a sudden POOF he figured this out and you know got a little *reward* for it. It was like he just lit up and that whole shell that he had on that he was like using to protect himself when he was in the porch that just melted away. It was like horrifying and amazing at the same time and that he followed my wife around after that, in the house, just like a puppy dog. Like he wouldn't get *he would not* more than one foot away from her. It was unbelievable and then we went downstairs to watch like a movie with the kids and she sat on her rocking chair and he climbed *right* up on her lap and *grabbed* her just like that Harlow monkey grabbed the you know the little soft mother instead of the wiry mother *FROUMP* he was like this [grasping] and he was like that for like two hours he

wouldn't let her go. So then the mother came home and she came downstairs and she looked at what was going on and this kid was like [choking sound] glommed onto my wife and he looked at her and he said oh, super mom. And you know, took her kid, and went home. It's like, Jesus, if you don't think there's a dragon in that story, man, you're not listening to it. It was *not good*. And her response at the end was *terrible*. She should have said "well how did you get him to eat? It's like what the hell is he doing hugging you? He never does that to me!" No way, man, she wasn't going to let *that* piece of information in, and it's no wonder, because the dragon in that story was her, and it was something that she did not want to admit. And she was willing, *perfectly willing* to sacrifice her child to her failure to realize that she could be a dragon. So that meant that the child was the problem. And that's a hell of a thing to do to a four year-old. So... It was *not* pleasant. It was *really* not pleasant. In fact, we probably did damage to the child by actually getting him to do something good, eh? Because we opened him up to the possibility that he could behave properly, and be *rewarded* for that... And that gave him *hope*... And so you can bloody well be sure that hope was dispensed with the next *day*... So... And that's why Billy doesn't get anything to eat.



You made it!

Having safely established that Jordan Peterson is an intellectual fraud who uses a lot of words to say almost nothing, we can now turn back to the original question: how can a man incapable of relaying the content of a children's book become the most influential thinker of his moment? My first instinct is simply to sigh that the world is tragic and absurd, and there is apparently no height to which confident fools cannot ascend. But there are better explanations available. Peterson is popular partly because he criticizes social justice activists in a way many people find satisfying, and some of those criticisms have merit. He is popular partly because he offers adrift young men a sense of heroic purpose, and offers angry young men rationalizations for their hatreds. And he is popular partly because academia and the left have failed spectacularly at helping make the world intelligible to ordinary people, and giving them a clear and compelling political vision.

Peterson first came to international prominence when he publicly opposed Canada's Bill C-16, which added gender expression and identity to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination in the Canadian Human Rights Act. Peterson claimed that under the bill, he could be compelled to use a student's preferred gender pronoun or face criminal prosecution, and suggested that social justice activists were promoting a totalitarian ideology. In fact, there was nothing in the bill

(<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/university-of-toronto-professor-defends-right-to-use-gender-specific-pronouns/article32946675/>) that criminalized the failure to use people's preferred gender pronouns (full text (<http://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/bill/C-16/royal-assent>)), and I share the belief that government legislation *requiring* people to use particular pronouns would be an infringement on civil liberties. But since that's a position shared by Noam Chomsky and the ACLU, it's not a particularly devastating criticism of the left. And when Peterson goes beyond the very narrow issue of compelled speech, his take on social justice isn't much much more sensible than his lecture on Jungian archetypes in the story of the pancake-dragon.

Examine, for example, how in his Channel 4 interview Peterson talks about the “totalitarian” tendencies of the activists who tried to add gender identity to the human rights bill:

PETERSON: *I did compare them to Mao ... I was comparing them to the left-wing totalitarians. And I do believe they are left-wing totalitarians.*

NEWMAN: *Under Mao millions of people died!*

PETERSON: *Right!*

NEWMAN: *I mean there's no comparison between Mao and a trans activist, is there?*

PETERSON: *Why not?*

NEWMAN: *Because trans activists aren't killing millions of people!*

PETERSON: *The philosophy that's guiding their utterances is the same philosophy.*

NEWMAN: *The consequences are ...*

PETERSON: *Not yet!*

NEWMAN: *You're saying that trans activists, ...*

PETERSON: *No!*

NEWMAN: *Could leads to the deaths of millions of people.*

PETERSON: *No, I'm saying that the philosophy that drives their utterances is the same philosophy that already has driven us to the deaths of millions of people.*

NEWMAN: *Okay. Tell us how that philosophy is in any way comparable.*

PETERSON: *Sure. That's no problem. The first thing is that their philosophy presumes that group identity is paramount. That's the fundamental philosophy that drove the Soviet Union and Maoist China. And it's the fundamental philosophy of the left-wing activists. It's identity politics. It doesn't matter who you are as an individual, it matters who you are in terms of your group identity.*

While Cathy Newman was repeatedly unfair to Peterson's views throughout the rest of the interview, here she was perfectly right to be confused: what Peterson is saying makes no sense. He wonders how there could be any difference between transgender activists and Mao's China, then is told that the difference is *millions of deaths*, then *denies* that transgender activists are going to cause millions of deaths, then says they follow a totalitarian philosophy that drives people to mass murder. The reason he's stuck here is that there's no evidence the Canadian Human Rights Act is about to bring us a gulag archipelago, but that's what his grandiose statements about left-wing totalitarianism imply will happen. So he must either allege Alberta is about to get its own Great Leap Forward *or* draw a distinction between Mao's Red Guards and the University of Toronto LGBTQ center, neither of which he wants to commit to. So we get another heaping dish of Peterson waffle.

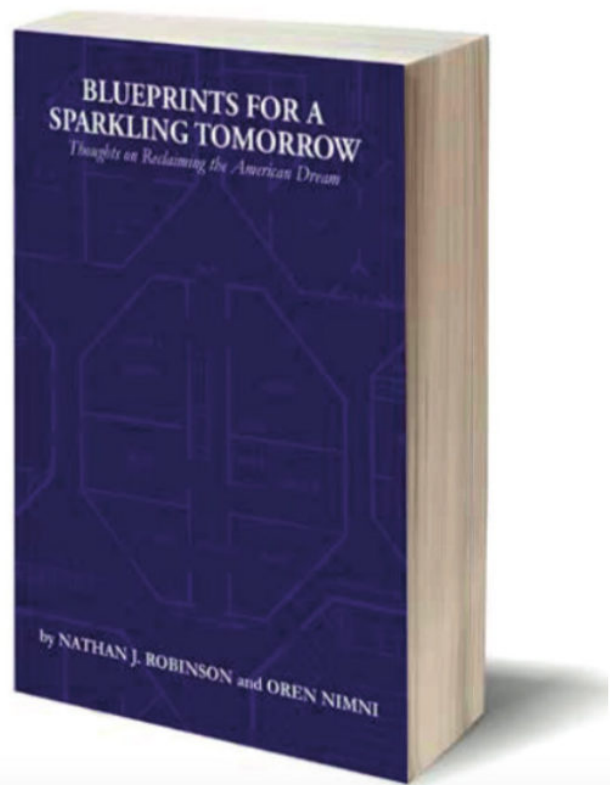
Here again he tries to explain the Soviet-transgender connection, again using the argument that any "collective" or "group-based" political action is following the same philosophy that rounded up and executed the kulaks:

[Liberalism] got flipped so that the world was turned into one group against another. Power struggle from one group against another, and then the social justice warrior types and the lefties, even the Democratic party, started categorizing everybody according to their ethnic, or sexual, or racial identity, and made that the canonical element of their being. And that's an absolutely terrible thing to do! It leads to, in the Soviet Union when that happened, for example, when they introduced that idea along with the notion of class guilt... So for example, when the Soviets collectivized the farms, they pretty much wiped out, or raped and froze to death all of their, all their competent farmers—they called them kulaks—and they attributed class guilt to them, because they were successful peasants, and they defined their success as oppression and theft. They killed all of them pretty much, shipped them off to Siberia and froze them to death, and they were the productive agricultural to the Soviet Union, and then in the 1930s in the Ukraine because of that, about six million Ukrainians starve to death.

I think it's worth remembering here what anti-discrimination activists are actually asking for: they want transgender people not to be fired from their jobs for being transgender, not to suffer gratuitously in prisons, to be able to access appropriate healthcare, not to be victimized in hate crimes, and not to be ostracized, evicted, or disdained. Likewise, the social justice claims on race are about: trying to fix the black-white wealth gap, trying to reduce racial discrimination in job applications, trying to reduce race-based health disparities and educational achievement gaps, and reducing the unfair everyday biases that make life harder for people of color. This is the sort of thing the left is focused on. Read the Democratic Party platform (<https://www.democrats.org/party-platform>) or the Black Lives Matter policy agenda (<https://policy.m4bl.org/>). Disagree with them! But Peterson spares himself from having to actually engage in substantive debates on policy questions, by writing off the left as a bunch of brainwashed totalitarian postmodernist neo-Marxists. (Others have pointed out the ways in which this misses the incredibly important contemporary conflict between leftism and “identity-based liberalism,” a conflict that is hugely important to understanding the left

(<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/09/how-identity-became-a-weapon-against-the-left>.)

If you liked Jordan Peterson's
MAPS OF MEANING
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(<https://www.amazon.com/Blueprints-Sparkling-Tomorrow-Thoughts-Reclaiming/dp/0692479813>)

In fact, Peterson doesn't seem to really understand what politics are to begin with. He says he is against "ideology" despite constantly opining on social questions by applying an elaborate personal Theory of Everything. When a questioner asked him (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqi0jHn_7-I) what he thought people *should* do to effect change, given his opposition to student activism, his answer was telling:

...This happened in the 60s, as far as I can tell, that we got this misbegotten idea that the way to conduct yourself as a responsible human being was to hold placards up to protest to change the viewpoints of other people and thereby usher in the utopia. I think that's all appalling, I think it's appalling. And I think it's absolutely absurd that students are taught that that's the way to conduct themselves in the world. First of all, if you're nineteen or twenty or twenty one, you don't bloody well know anything. You haven't done anything. You don't know anything about history, you haven't read anything, you haven't supported yourself for any length of time. You've been entirely dependent on your state and on your family for the brief few years of your existence. And the idea that you have any wisdom to determine how society should be reconstructed when you're sitting in the absolute lap of luxury protected by processes you don't understand... let's call that a bad idea... The idea that what you should do to change the world is to find people you disagree with and shake paper on sticks at them, it's just...

Activism, then, is arrogant brats holding “paper on sticks,” a peculiar and appalling phenomenon he believes started in the 60s. Nevermind that what he is talking about is more commonly known as *the Civil Rights Movement*, and the “paper on sticks” said “We shall overcome” and “End segregated schools” on them. And nevermind that it *worked*, and was one of the most morally important events of the 20th century. Peterson, who is apparently an alien to whom political action is an unfathomable mystery, thinks it's been nothing but fifty years of childish virtue-signaling. The activists against the Vietnam War spent years trying to stop a horrific atrocity that killed a million people, and had a very significant effect in drawing attention to that atrocity and finally bringing it to a close. But *the students* are the ones who “don't know anything about history.”

Here is where Jordan Peterson's self-help routine connects with his politics. Peterson seemingly discourages all serious political involvement. He says cultivating the self and reading great books is “more important than any possible political action.” Don't focus on changing the world, focus on tidying up your life. After all, “the meaning of life is to be found in the adoption of individual responsibility” and “when you win everything, everyone around you wins too”

because “it means you shine a light on the whole world...” *12 Rules For Life* makes it explicit: stop questioning the social order, stop assigning blame for problems to political actors, stop trying to reorganize things.

Have you taken full advantage of the opportunities offered to you? Are you working hard on your career, or even your job, or are you letting bitterness and resentment hold you back and drag you down? Have you made peace with your brother? ... Are there things that you could do, that you know you could do, that would make things around you better? Have you cleaned up your life? If the answer is no, here's something to try: start to stop doing what you know to be wrong. Start stopping today... Don't blame capitalism, the radical left, or the iniquity of your enemies. Don't reorganize the state until you have ordered your own experience. Have some humility. If you cannot bring peace to your household, how dare you try to rule a city? ... Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.

Note: perfect. And since one's house can never be in perfect order, one can never criticize the world. This is, most obviously, an invitation to total depoliticization and solipsism. But it's also a recipe for making miserable people even more miserable. Blame yourself. Why haven't I fixed this? I suck. Well, it's certainly possible that you suck. (Most of us do!*) But the world also does have injustices in it. A lot, in fact. Peterson speaks to disaffected millennial men, validating their prejudices about feminists and serving as a surrogate father figure. Yet he's offering them terrible advice, because the “individual responsibility” ethic makes one feel like a failure for failing. Oh, sure, his rules about “standing up straight” and “petting a cat when you see one” are innocuous enough. But you shouldn't tell people that their problems are their fault if you don't actually know whether their problems are their fault. Millennials struggle in part because of a viciously competitive economy (<https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/11/why-millennials-are-the-way-they-are>) that is crushing them with debt and a lack of opportunity. Sure, Peterson might train guys to be more brutal and tough-minded, and a few of them will do

better at the competition. But if you can't pay your student loans, or your rent, and you can't get a better job, what use is it to tell you that you should adopt a confident lobster-posture?

But here the left and academia actually bear a decent share of blame. Why is Jordan Peterson's combination of drivel and cliché attracting millions of followers? Some of it is probably because alt-right guys like that he gives a seemingly scientific justification for their dislike of "social justice warriors." Some of it is just that self-help always sells. Another part of it, though, is that academics have been cloistered and unhelpful, and the left has failed to offer people a coherent political alternative. Jordan Peterson is right that people are adrift and in need of meaning. Many of them lap up his lectures because he offers something resembling insight, and promises the secrets to a good life. It's not actually insight, of course; it's stuff everybody already knows, dressed up in gobbledegook. But it *feels* like something. Tabatha Southey was cruel to call Jordan Peterson "the stupid man's smart person." He is the *desperate* man's smart person, he feeds on angst and confusion. Who else has a serious alternative? Where are the other professors with accessible and compelling YouTube channels, with books of helpful advice and long Q&A sessions with the public? No wonder Peterson is so popular: he comes along and offers rules and guidance in a world of, well, chaos. Just leave it to Dad, everything will be alright.

This is a fruitless path, though. That's not just because Peterson is a charlatan. If he was just offering up his brand of "hearty intellectual stew (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/What-s-So-Dangerous-About/242256>)," as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* called it, going around "sprinkling in ideas from philosophy, fiction, religion, neuroscience, and a disturbing dream his 5-year-old nephew had one time," we could just laugh at him. But the Peterson way is not just futile because it's pointless, it's futile because ultimately, you can't escape politics. Our lives are conditioned by economic and political systems, like it or not, and by telling lost people to abandon projects for social change, one permanently guarantees they will be the helpless victims of forces beyond their control or understanding. The genuinely "heroic" path in life is to

band with others to pursue the social good, to find meaning in the collective human striving to better our condition. No, not by abandoning the idea of the “individual” and seeing the world purely in terms of group identity. But by pooling our individual talents and efforts to produce a better, fairer, and more beautiful world.

This much should be obvious from even a cursory reading of him: If Jordan Peterson is the most influential intellectual in the Western world, the Western world has lost its damn mind. And since Jordan Peterson *does indeed* have a good claim to being the most influential intellectual in the Western world, we need to think seriously about what has gone wrong. What have we done to end up with this man? His success is our failure, and while it’s easy to scoff at him, it’s more important to inquire into how we got to this point. He is a symptom. He shows a culture bereft of ideas, a politics without inspiration or principle. Jordan Peterson may not be the intellectual we want. But he is probably the intellectual we deserve.

*Just kidding. You’re great.

Thanks to Addison Kane for transcribing Peterson’s speech.

[currentaffairs.org \(https://www.currentaffairs.org/2018/03/the-intellectual-we-deserve\)](https://www.currentaffairs.org/2018/03/the-intellectual-we-deserve) · by Nathan J. Robinson