

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.

– Jordan Peterson (1999, 473)

April 19, Toronto's Sony Centre was sold out. The occasion? Not a big sports match, not a rock concert, but the 'debate of the century.' A crowd of over 3000 people gathered voluntarily to hear two intellectuals talk for 2.5 hours. One of them was Slavoj Žižek; the other, Jordan Peterson, is the topic of this post.



Jordan B. Peterson, Canadian professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, has been called the most important public intellectual of our time (Cowen 2018; Brooks 2018). His book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018) is a bestseller in Canada, the US, and UK. After he expressed worries about the future of his academic career because of his controversial critique of Bill C-16 that would make the use of gender-neutral pronouns mandatory, soon the donations he received through crowd funding platform Patreon exceeded his salary. Peterson voices polarizing standpoints, for instance on cultural practices such as (gay) marriage, religion or political correctness.

He has 1.9 million subscribers and 92.5 million views on his YouTube channel (Socialblade 2019) and over 300.000 Twitter followers. He has his own subreddit about him and another one, *Maps of Memeing*, is exclusively devoted to Peterson memes.

Peterson's popularity often takes on extreme forms. Psychology professor Shelley Carson, a PhD student at Harvard when he was a professor there, recalls: "Taking a course from him was like taking psychedelic drugs without the drugs I remember students crying on the last day of class because they wouldn't get to hear him anymore" (cit. Bartlett 2018). His website displays testimonials from YouTube viewers saying things like "It's heartbreaking to finally see the light and look back at 41 years of suffering" (cit. Robinson 2018).

How did a psychology professor reach such levels of fame? I suggest this could be seen as an interesting case to the 'guru effect' (Sperber, 2010). Consider the following lines from a lecture where Peterson describes what he calls the 'moment of error':

The thing that announces itself as error has a two-fold nature. Because it's chaos and order at the same time. Or its all the archetypal structures at the same time. It's the dragon of chaos, it's the great mother positive and negative, it's the great father positive and negative, it's the individual. Hero and adversary. All of that manifests itself in the moment of error. ... what do you encounter when things fall apart? You encounter the adversary, you encounter the tyrant, you encounter the catastrophe of nature, and you encounter the dragon of the chaos. ("Down the rabbit hole", 2018)

The fragment is characteristic of his rhetorical style, and the way he mixes folklore and fiction with (Jungian) theory. In an ordinary speaker, such obscurity of expression would normally be considered a deficit. In Peterson's case, his fan base will deem the passage profound despite, or rather because of, their failure to grasp its meaning.

How does this work? When it comes to authority figures such as public intellectuals, adapting our trust in their messages can be susceptible to what in psychology and media studies is called confirmation bias (Nickerson 1998). Subconsciously wanting to justify what they already believe, readers or listeners may pay more attention to confirming than disconfirming evidence, and so strengthening their initial belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more evidence is open to a variety of interpretations, the bigger the chance of confirmation bias.

This explains how obscure statements like these can inspire a response of 'interpretive charity'. The greater effort required for interpretation is taken to indicate high relevance, which leads the reader to interpretations consistent with this indication. Such obscure statements and arguments are held as signs of depth and proof of the sender's genius, and can become the object of collective interpretation—in Peterson's case, this happens online, for instance on the subreddits devoted to him.

In *Maps of Meaning* (1999), he asks how humans generate meaning. Studying myths, he says, will help us see how certain meaning-making frames are shared cross-culturally. This is in itself hardly surprising, almost too obvious. The presentation of this point, however, deliberately erects a smoke screen. Marked by a high density of platitudes, presented in a complex and verbose manner, and larded with technical jargon from different academic disciplines, the rhetoric is challenging to any single critic, as most scholars will not have an overview of all these fields. The epigraph reads: "I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 13:35).

Typographically, Peterson makes excessive use of italics, which lends his texts a sense of urgency

and preciseness lacking in the sentences themselves (“I could not see how there could be any alternative to either *having* a belief system or to *not having* a belief system—and could see little but the disadvantage of both positions,” 1999, 473).

More importantly, he rarely states his key terms clearly. When asked for his definition for God, Peterson churns out a list of abstractions:

“how we imaginatively and collectively represent the existence and action of consciousness across time”; “that which eternally dies and is reborn in the pursuit of higher being and truth”; “the highest value in the hierarchy of values”; “voice of conscience”; “source of judgment and mercy and guilt”; “future to which we make sacrifices and something akin to the transcendental repository of reputation”; and “that which selects among men in the eternal hierarchy of men” (cit. in Johnson 2018).

‘Meaning,’ possibly the most important concept in his oeuvre, is defined and redefined in a similarly diffuse manner:

“Meaning is manifestation of the divine individual adaptive path” (1999, 481); “It is during contact with the unknown that human power grows, individually and then historically. Meaning is the subjective experience associated with that contact, in sufficient proportion (482); “Meaning is the most profound manifestation of instinct” (Ibid.); “Meaning emerges from the interplay between the possibilities of the world and the value structure operating within that world” (2018, 1999); “Meaning is the ultimate balance between ... the chaos of transformation and the possibility and ... the discipline of pristine order” (2018, 201); “Meaning is when everything there is comes together in an ecstatic dance of single purpose” (Ibid.) “Meaning is an expression of the instinct that guides us out into the unknown so that we can conquer it ... and prevail” (McKay 2017).

As Matt Johnson notes, such definitions becomes “so elastic and subjective as to be almost meaningless” (2018). This enables Peterson to argue that any skeptic or critic will simply have misinterpreted his words (Robinson 2018). Multi-interpretability makes him a slippery debater, as it allows him to later insist he intended a different meaning.

Closer to a self-help book, *Twelve Rules for Life* (2018) has simple life lessons like—ironically—“Be precise in your speech” (259); “Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world” (147); or “Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street” (355). Putting a spin on the guru effect, often these pieces of wisdom are in fact *so* simple that the reader is again urged to look for deeper, allegorical meanings. These simple life rules are then clad in a certain grandeur and mystification:

I hope that these rules and their accompanying essays will help people understand what they already know: that the soul of the individual eternally hungers for the heroism of genuine Being, and that the willingness to take on that responsibility is identical to the decision to live a meaningful life. (xxviii-xxix)

The failure to correctly interpret the meaning of such utterances without unusual (collective) effort might cause a reader to be awe-struck by the depth of Peterson’s thought and knowledge, heightening his authority and possibly marking his genius. The same words, uttered by a mentally ill

person in the streets, would likely be ignored. Inaccessibility becomes a marker for brilliance.

Works cited

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