

# Section on Jordan Peterson's Treatment of Spirituality, Religion, Archetypes, and Metaphysics

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## Introduction to the Peterson Section, by Tom Murray

Jordan Peterson, a recently prominent public intellectual, is known for his writings, recorded lectures, and social media commentaries on a wide variety of topics. He is most cited for his libertarian-leaning views on hot-button social and political issues related to political correctness and identity politics. Less discussed is his body of work on archetypes and the depth psychology of religion, which is mainly focused on Christianity. This is the area that we focus on in this special issue on *Integral Postmetaphysical Spirituality*, inviting contemplation and dialogue away from the steaming swamp-areas of Petersonian controversy, and into a, hopefully, more measured and nuanced and less ideologically cast territory.

It is in this territory that Peterson draws from an interesting mix of traditional narratives, while maintaining a modern scientific perspective, and in addition being acutely aware of the limitations of rational thought, reductive theorizing, and language itself, that post-modern scholars uncovered. His expertise in archetypal modes of cognition allows for a respectful treatment of, not only "spiritual," but centrally "religious" metaphysical themes, while still allowing for a *post-metaphysical* attitude.

A charismatic lecturer loved by his students but also known as an aggressive debater, Peterson's main public face before 2017 consisted of his little-known 1999 book *Maps of Meaning*, which synthesized his background in clinical and theoretical psychology, his study of Jungian archetypes and human meaning-making, and his studies of the conditions leading ordinary individuals to participate in atrocities such as state-sponsored genocide.

For the reader who has not heard of Peterson, there is not space here to summarize his scholarship, opinions, or recent notoriety, but an internet search will yield a bounty of positive and negative perspectives on him (and see the links below). We can summarize the context by saying that Jordan Peterson is both a *person* – a clinical psychologist and Professor of Psychology at Toronto University, and a *phenomena* – a personality that has gone viral on social media, stirring up controversy equally in every corner of the socio-political landscape. He has over a million social media followers, and possibly as many detractors, and has attracted a tsunami of attention from cultural commentators, pundits, and everyday social media trolls that is possibly unprecedented for a public intellectual.



What is fascinating, more than his ascendancy in the public eye, is how he manages to alternately delight and infuriate segments of both the *right and the left*. He has become a lightning rod for the fissures and ambiguities in the contemporary "culture wars," with his popularity shedding light on the contemporary reshuffling of social and political categories. He is also said to be among the most misjudged and misappropriated public figures, with some on the left casting him as alt-right, and some on the right casting him as a left-sympathizing radical.

We chose to invite commentaries on the Peterson in this special issue because, as we said, he is a currently prominent public intellectual who has interesting opinions on religion and spirituality from an arguably post-metaphysical position, but *also* largely because he has also been a controversial figure within the larger "integral diaspora." Though, over recent decades, various figures and topics have been the source of robust diversity of opinion among the integrally-informed, the Peterson phenomena seems to be unique in 2018 as a topic which split us between those who love him and hate him. Thus, the Peterson phenomenon serves as an interesting point of departure for clarifying our own views on key topics. Various alternative opinions on this topic can be found through a Google search of "Jordan Peterson integral developmental," and include podcasts and essays by David Fuller, Jeff Salzman, Jonathan Rowson, Hanzi Freinacht, Ken Wilber, Corey Devos, and David Long, and discussions on the IPS Facebook site. That being said, in this Issue we eschew the usual areas of controversy and public reaction here and focus on his work on religious archetypes.

This Special Issue of Integral Review contains three essays/commentaries on the Jordan Peterson phenomena as it related to postmetaphysical spirituality: by **Brendan LaChance, Andrew Venezia, and Layman Pascal**.

In keeping with the tone of the IPS forum, our goal for the section of this Issue on Jordan Peterson was include a dialogic element, in which each of the authors had an opportunity to comment on the essays of the others. Those comments are included.

Note also that the next (mid-2019) issue of Integral Review will include an essay by Jonathan Rowson titled "Twelve Perspectives on Jordan Peterson: An Antidote to Allergies and Infatuations" (which deals with topics other than archetypes and metaphysics).

For those interested in Peterson, information can be found at <https://jordanbpeterson.com>. Suggested video lecture and podcast interviews include:

- Debate between Peterson and Ronald de Sousa: "Can we Live Without the Sacred?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zCP9mW0GH4> (51 min)
- Sam Harris & Jordan Peterson in Vancouver 2018 (Bret Weinstein moderating): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1oaSt60b0o> (2 hr 6 min)
- Clip from Rubin Report "Jordan Peterson Discuss Sam Harris' View On Religion:" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjYQ48t4C8U> (14 min)
- Jordan Peterson vs Susan Blackmore "Do we need God to make sense of life?" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=syP-OtdCIho> (47 min)
- Peterson's "The Bible, Symbol and Identity, Part I": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HFt8mc1KG34> (1 hr 02 min)

## Emptiness and the Metaphysics of Jordan Peterson, by Andrew Venezia

*There are no things, nor are there processes.*

Chögyal Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche

Before the excitement of the last years, a friend of mine sent me a video of a wiry, agitated, energetic Canadian psychology professor talking about how the dictates of survival shape our biological interfaces with our environment – how we physiologically and chemically construct perception and experience. Dr. Jordan Peterson would, of course, become an exemplar of our polarized political climate, someone few people had no opinion on. It was not at this point obvious that this was going to happen.

When I sat down to begin writing this paper, I had the notion that this polarization was a reaction – positive and negative – to a kind of inflexibility in Peterson's metaphysics, a valorization of the individual, though as you will see, my argument began to take a different shape. Peterson is in any case an interesting illustration of the tension between the stances we affirm and believe to be real, and that which we do and cannot recognize as being a stance, a position. I will illustrate this by looking at Peterson's metaphysics in the light of emptiness, and the possibilities of a post-metaphysical orientation.

### Peterson's metaphysics

The following paragraphs represent my interpretation of Peterson from watching and listening to the entirety of his Maps of Meaning lectures, his series on the Bible, and other odd bits of media both about and published by him, critical, neutral, and positive. I am simplifying for brevity, but I do not intend to distort or comment on these metaphysics here. As I see them, the key starting points in Peterson's metaphysics of individual and society are: 1) one is born into society, and 2) life entails suffering. Humans are social, and are born inescapably into a culture and society. Life entails suffering – it is our existential condition – and so 1) no society is (or could be) perfect; 2) societies (at any scope) will tend to decay and become corrupt; and 3) each individual will be confronted with this suffering and the brokenness of their society.

Our condition – suffering – is inescapable. *Accepting* our condition, contending with it, is voluntary, and shapes the process of maturation. It lies with each individual to embrace the condition of our being and to make a meaningful life despite it. Meaning must always be snatched from the jaws of suffering – life can and *must* be redeemed. This is *voluntary*, meaning one can simply acquiesce to suffering and the social status quo, and it *comes at great potential risk*. This risk is due both to unavoidable conflict with existing power structures defending themselves, and because one's identity is always carved out of this suffering; to undertake the task is to invite psychological and social crucifixion. It also comes with vast potential reward. Those who are able to overcome the social order and their own selves to return to their 'rightful place' create the new social order – they earn power.

Having won power, one may by definition do with it as one pleases. A just 'king' uses his power – that is, molds the social order – in the service of his society's wellbeing. An unjust king uses

power to defend his own position, and accrue greater wealth and power. Power itself is a-moral. One can assume power from within the more or less corrupt social structure. If one has earned it justly, however, power can also be used justly. No matter how just any one king is, the task of reckoning absolutely with life's suffering is near impossible, and becomes harder and no longer worth the risk when one's (and awareness of one's subjects') suffering is assuaged with the comforts of being in power. And so, even a just society will decay, become decadent and corrupt, and the cycle begins anew.

In short: it is the individual's duty and responsibility to regenerate the just social order, and this regeneration is the process of individuation. That this is possible even though difficult makes this vision hopeful.

## **The Buddha, and emptiness**

You might argue that the story of the Buddha fits or could be fit into this account quite seamlessly. The Buddha is born into an all-but-perfect environment, the son of a king who ensures that he is exposed to none of life's sufferings early on. He accidentally encounters this suffering, inducing a crisis of Being, leading him to renounce his kingdom, take up the path of asceticism, and eventually renounce even this as ultimately useless. Soon after he attains liberation, upon which point he takes his rightful place as the 'awakened one' and regenerates society through his teaching.

This is the *mythical* story of the Buddha – *but it's not what the Buddha actually accomplished*, and neither is Peterson's account of becoming an individual what the Buddha taught. The Buddha accomplished and taught *emptiness*, which has an entirely different relationship to suffering (and metaphysics) than Peterson's existential approach. For this paper, I'll consider the doctrines of *emptiness*, *'no self'*, and *interdependent arising* as interrelated enough to be exchangeable, and will be using *conceptual emptiness*, a kind of emptiness, as a metonymy for all three, though there are of course important nuances distinguishing them.

In short, conceptual emptiness means that no object has any essential substance – no thing is 'real-as-such.' No objects have any final, locatable, or essential reality, in and of themselves, but are rather products of the mental process of conceptualization. Objects means here both 'abstract thought:' notions such as 'Justice' or 'Winnebago,' and also objects in the sense of physical, material reality, like, 'this apple,' or 'that Winnebago, parked there.' It further includes more complex interrelated objects such as 'Capitalism' or 'The Russian Navy,' and experiences, such as 'this feeling of bliss/pain.' There is no humanity without dirt and trees and sunlight; there is no thing that will or even can endure through time and space. Time and space themselves are conceptual activities, and so empty. This emptiness extends to and is really most crucially about what most people never consider to be a conceptual activity: their very own self, their identity.

This is not as total a negation as most people fear, nor as relativistic. You exist – as the irreducible entirety of reality, which is awake, and empty. Every 'thing' else (including this 'irreducible entirety') is like a character in a play, a self-aware photon on the screen of the magically displaying movie that is life. A figment of a dream, momentary and elusive. An illusion. Not 'unreal,' just 'real as a dream is.'

Within Buddhism there exist mountains of discourse on this. There is no single definable emptiness or accounting for it. Nonetheless, there is a strong tradition of acting skillfully in the world from the realization of emptiness; in some lineages 'evincing the realization of emptiness' and 'acting skillfully' are identical. This is to say the apparent paradox in the bodhisattva vow – to liberate all sentient beings while recognizing that there are no sentient beings – is a limit of conceptualization, a result of the mind's work. Emptiness is neither nihilism nor moral relativism.

## Implicit and explicit metaphysics

One could view emptiness as a kind of metaphysical truth. And yet, emptiness is not a *positive* metaphysics, not best thought of as a metaphysical truth about some reality. It is *realization* about how our body-mind functions in generating and responding to conceptual reality – and liberation from this activity. It is a 'negative' metaphysic, the possibility of a post-metaphysics.

Metaphysics, as I'm using it, has both an explicit sense, in what we acknowledge to be so, and an implicit sense, that which forms the basis of one's way of being, which must be the case for beliefs and actions to be coherent, but which are necessarily not avowed consciously. A way of acting and doing that one cannot yet name. Without a clearly grounded sense of emptiness, one will always be 'porting' unacknowledged metaphysics into one's account of reality – or simply, what matters, what is important to do and pay attention to.

Becoming aware of some prior implicit metaphysic *liberates* possibilities of being, whether in a structural, historical way, or in a specific situation. We see how whatever it was that we were holding onto was constraining our possibilities for action, our very being and engagement with the world. We also – becoming aware of more and more implicit metaphysics – see that *any* articulation or position of metaphysical truth could never be final – in fact, must be *provisional, situational, creative, relational/communicative, and skillful*, at least in attempt (I will use *skillful* as a metonymy for this list for the rest of this paper to avoid repeating it ad nauseum.) This mode is inquiry, and itself provides a sort of direction. In inquiry, we are continually discovering that which we believe in order to assay its skillfulness, and this direction orients towards greater and greater emptiness and creative skillfulness.

Metaphysics are not *bad*; they constrain. Articulating a metaphysic allows us to engage it, or not. Making one's metaphysics explicit reveals underlying attachments: metaphysical commitments to what is *conceptually* real, as performed in a kind of defense of something that is never real-as-such. The question then becomes, what *kind* of skillfulness is expressed through the metaphysic that one avows? What do one's metaphysics allow for?

## Meaning and the metaphysics of suffering

The contrast between Peterson's and Buddhism's orientations to an explicitly shared metaphysic, i.e. that 'life is suffering,' provides a useful exploration of this. For Peterson, since suffering is humanity's existential condition, *suffering increases the more aware we become*. Moving from ignorance of our condition, say, at birth, to an awareness of it, as a mature ego, we become more and more aware of that which underlies our suffering: our individuality, and so our final separateness from Being, our finitude, our mortality. To remain in ignorance is, however,

insufferable: we will suffer anyway, but without our increasing individuality, autonomy, and taking responsibility for suffering we have no chance of redeeming this suffering as anything meaningful. Meaningful suffering is preferable to meaningless suffering. In a crucial way this is opposite to the realization of emptiness and the teaching of the Buddha, where greater awareness – emptiness brought to more and more conceptual realities – results in the liberation from suffering. Since the liberation from suffering is possible in Buddhism, suffering as a metaphysic is revealed as being a *skillful* metaphysic, of a lesser order than emptiness, the negative metaphysic.

Peterson explicitly avows a kind of participatory metaphysics: the relationship between society and individual is not given; it is a kind of activity, a process. I think he would affirm that our individuality is a construction, biologically, psychologically, and culturally. He does not seem open to the radical notion that precisely because of this there are other possibilities for human individuality and society. Individuality is not a ‘thing.’ It is what I am calling a skillful metaphysic. Any articulation of what individuality is and means that doesn’t recognize this is resting its account on an implicit reification. This is relevant because our metaphysics and our suffering mirror each other, each sprouting from implicit conceptual metaphysics. This is why emptiness is both the end of suffering, and the dissolution of reified concepts. How we hold and communicate our suffering and our story of reality will largely determine the possibilities of our individual and social liberation. All beings suffer; all humans suffer. This understanding can form the basis of compassion and compassionate action. In practice, our attachment to our own suffering, our own self-construction, and our own implicit metaphysics, creates barriers of resentment, disgust, and horror between our selves and between our communities.

Peterson’s account of the process that creates individuality and thus re-creates society displays this kind of attachment, even if it’s not quite as simple as a preference for the individual over society. The ‘becoming aware’ of our metaphysical assumptions provides a contrasting trajectory to Peterson’s growth of individual awareness and richness of meaning. Emptiness does not provide meaning: it is meaning-less. Or, if you prefer, it allows for a kind of obvious and immanent meaning-full-ness, a meaning-full-ness that is not conditional, nor the result of the process of individuation.

## **Peterson in light of emptiness**

There’s one final wrinkle here: since any affirmed metaphysics must be provisional, it is always possible that Peterson’s stance is deliberate – a purposeful, skillful articulation as a response to a particular cultural moment. He is, after all, an educator. As a Facebook friend once proposed: Peterson is a 5th order consciousness explaining 4th order to 3rd order college students, in Kegan’s terms. Certainly he’s evincing a kind of participatory approach to reality and development that is typical of 5th order consciousness, and one could assume that he’d understand that whatever he needed to communicate would have to be tailored developmentally to an audience. Is his entire persona a deliberate pedagogical choice?

For this to be the case, Peterson would have to 1) have a mature enough realization of emptiness to recognize the limits of any metaphysics, and 2) be deliberately holding that back to proffer a different view of enlightenment, which he has said is something like recognizing the individual’s infinite capacity for evil. Tellingly, he describes enlightenment as a “state,” which is precisely

what it is not – it is closer to liberation from state-dependent identity. I do not think this is a deliberate choice. I could, of course, be wrong about that, and this is to a certain degree parsing tea leaves. Surely he is acting deliberately; it would be infantilizing simply to say he's not, but as a different commenter on Facebook said: "If Peterson had a taste of emptiness, he wouldn't shut up about it." That is, with all of the words on record from this figure, many of them directly related to the concepts we've been wandering through in this paper, it would be astonishing if he both had experienced emptiness, and was not more forward about it.

There are other reasons for thinking this might not be a choice on his part. Although Peterson speaks of taking responsibility for one's own suffering, his account is still porting a subtle othering of suffering. Suffering for Peterson is caused by the condition one is born into – it *is* that condition. One *may* accept this and create meaning despite this, but this act redeems suffering, it does not eliminate it. I am proposing rather that it is the very performance of this kind of conceptual individuality that generates suffering – not 'the human condition' as such, or one's awareness of it. Recognizing this performative nature of suffering comes along with the possibility of liberation provided by the view, practice, and realization of emptiness, though it need not be formalized in precisely this way. This is *not* to say that suffering isn't also a condition of human being, or that the emphasis for liberation rests solely with an individual's recognition of emptiness. Setting its universal nature as contradictorily opposed to its performative nature is itself the kind of implicit metaphysics that I'm pointing to. That opposition can only be conceptual, though it will certainly be acted out.

By *very subtly* othering suffering in this way, Peterson displays this kind of conceptual commitment. It is not a commitment as simple as 'individual good, society bad,' or 'chaos and death real, order and life fragile,' but *any* arrangement of these as being separate entities – not fully and completely constructed conceptually out of the other – no matter how complex, betrays an implicit metaphysics where the line between the terms is not empty.

Mental objects are not merely abstractions, they are enacted evolutionarily, culturally, socially (meaning, through the processes and systems of exchange, including in the Marxist sense of 'the means of production,') physically, physiologically, etc. – and none of these factors are 'finally real' – they are all in themselves conceptually empty. While Peterson makes an argument for recognizing that gender, say, is biologically as well as sociologically and culturally constructed, the fact that he makes biology overly determinative without articulating these categories' mutual emptiness is for me strong evidence for an implicitly naïve relationship to metaphysics where he is committed to some conceptual activity that he is not aware of.

A very different track to arrive at the same place would be to affirm Peterson's sense that divinity (or reality) shows up as individual striving ... *and as everything else*. Order is divine; chaos is divine. This gives a slightly different light to the above, since the myths Peterson is speaking and interpreting *are* the myths of the individual ego's appearance, of the Mental world's coming into being, in Jean Gebser's terminology. If these are his source material, it is not only that he is reading into them, which is inevitable, but that these very stories are artifacts that articulate and delineate the rise and coming into being of individual consciousness in the evolution of humanity – of this very particular orientation of human suffering and individuality that we call the ego. It is,

I think, precisely this kind of attachment that Peterson is an avatar of. An accomplishment, to be sure. It is by no means the peak of human possibility – nor even the only conceivable mountain.

I will take the time here to return to a step-by-step account of this argument for clarity's sake. Peterson's account of what is real, what matters, his account of metaphysical truth, meaning and morality, begins with two givens: 1) every human is born into a society, and develops within it, and 2) life entails suffering. The process of individuation, of moral and intellectual growth, entails accepting this, and taking responsibility for one's suffering, and one's society, in redeeming one's suffering in the creation of meaning. Buddhism offers a different kind of 'negative metaphysics' in emptiness, which allows for the liberation from suffering, and reveals the final inadequacy of any metaphysics which are not what I am calling skillful: that is, *provisional, situational, creative, relational/communicative, and skillful*. While Peterson avows a kind of participatory metaphysics, where the relationship between 'individual' and 'society' is active, is an activity, the categories 'individual' and 'society' are themselves fixed and over-determine the possible shapes 'individuality' and 'society' can take in relationship, like jigsaw puzzle piece that must actively be put together, but which have only one possible fit. This implicit metaphysical foundation for his thought is an example of a particular kind of human suffering: that of being an ego. I think Peterson is right, actually – but his account is necessarily partial. I don't think he sees its partiality, and that contributes to the polarity associated with him. Those who reject him reject what is partial. Those for whom he has become a prophetic voice affirm what is partial as whole. So what?

## Conclusion

I'd originally started writing that Peterson understood that society was empty, but did not understand that the individual was empty. I still think underlying the complexity of Peterson's account one would find some kind of commitment like this, but realized in the course of writing that this argument would make little sense without the prior argument that *any* (reified) arrangement of these objects (individual and society, here) – no matter how complex – betrays an implicit metaphysics where neither are empty, where the conceptual line between them is an implicit metaphysic. So explicitly, Peterson is avowing a kind of participatory metaphysics, but he's not articulating a post-metaphysics, in my opinion.

Why did I find this valuable to write about? Why spend the time on an obscure argument that doesn't even touch what is most polarizing about this figure? We must find a way of accounting for and communicating suffering that allows for individual and social redemption and liberation. Without emptiness, any such account will be porting in a dualizing metaphysics. Peterson provides a complex relationship between individual and society, but the fixation of these terms against or in relationship to each other as a metaphysic creates an inflexibility that constricts possibility. As such, he is also a kind of exemplar of this way of thinking and presenting metaphysics, between a non-reflexive, naive account, and a more fully post-metaphysical one, where this line of incoherence between what is avowed and what is enacted becomes important to parse.

We need something else, and something else is possible. There is a different possibility of human being, one that allows for a skillful fluidity of individuation and mass action, where it is perfectly obvious that there are neither individuals nor societies, and so both are possible articulations of liberation. It is possible to claim one's individuality, to take decisive and



meaningful action in this life, without fueling that action by rejecting half of the world. We need an approach that allows for the differentiation of skilled action, that dualizes through action, without dualizing in concept – or demonizing what is very human. Peterson is not its avatar.

This does not mean that he's not useful, helpful, or even skillful (though not in the Buddhist sense). His articulation of individuation is half the story. Yes, society is corrupt. That is inevitable – but whether you take responsibility for your own life and suffering is not inevitable. As Peterson notes, you have the choice to blame your suffering on something external to you, or to accept life's suffering and create meaning from it. Many – men and women – have discovered within themselves a sense of agency and responsibility in their lives listening to Peterson's account of the process of individuation, even as many have felt attacked by his arguments. Surely we can articulate a metaphysics that encourages individuals to assume their own powers in a single, socially emancipative gesture.

## As if it was easy: Jordan Peterson and the Postmetaphysical Quest, by Brendan LaChance

Reporter in trench-coat: *Do you believe in God?*

Valley girl philosopher: *Like, as if!*

When asked whether he believes in God, Youtube sensation celebrity professor Jordan Peterson said, "I act *as if* God exists."

I suspect that those of us trying to calibrate our ears for the possibility of a so-called "integral postmetaphysical spirituality" perk up at such thoughtful expressions as this. We are cautious about unscrupulous claims made by dogmatists of any type. We don't like assumptions that are left unexamined. Is Peterson's little "act as if" (thinking that the *act* may be as important as the *as if* in his answer) his Boy Scout badge signaling that he belongs to our little postmetaphysical club?

Let's slow down and carve out some working definitions.

### Did someone say Medicinal Physics?

To see whether this concept "postmetaphysics" has meaningful shoulders for carrying things, it is first necessary to solidly grasp what is meant by metaphysics. My old grandpa Google says that metaphysics is that branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things. Metaphysics are the founding assumptions which undergird a philosophical framework. But grandpa G also says that metaphysics is "abstract theory with no basis in reality".

That second definition sounds to me like the one which we aspiring postmetaphysicians are most concerned with. We don't like assumptions and unquestioned principles which we suspect are abstract in a way which seems out of sync with "reality" (in quotes because it may itself be one of these abstract assumptions).

That first definition is a harder bear to wrestle with. If we are looking for the possibility that we might go beyond or do away with metaphysics, does this mean we are in search of a philosophy with no first principles? A conceptual framework which makes no assumptions? Is such a thing even possible? How could a philosophy with no first principles and no assumptions have anything at all to say?

Another perspective wants to be heard. Metaphysics is philosophy that deals with the first principles of *things*. What is meant by this idea of things? Are we dealing with tangible, material objects? Not necessarily. "Things" is a colloquial term which here means *is-ness*. Metaphysics, and by extension postmetaphysics, is definable as *a theory of is-ness*. When such a theory of is-ness makes dogmatic assumptions about the nature of being, then we say, with just a hint of disdain, that such a view is metaphysical. When such a theory is self-critical towards its own assumptions, we honor it with that prefix: post. Thus, postmetaphysics is any attempt to understand is-ness in such a way that is robustly critical of its own assumptions.

Ah, now we step into the heat of the postmetaphysical jungle! (Or are heat and deep and jungle bad words in a postmetaphysical mouth?) I think there are many possible visions of what postmetaphysics could mean, and I think it is okay if we fracture off somewhat along different paths in this jungle. In the meantime, hop on this tiger with me, and we'll see if we can't hunt down Jordan Peterson in some quicksand or thicket.

## Post-metal tickets?

Another definition of postmetaphysics is philosophy which is experimental towards first principles. Experimental in several senses. First, in the scientific sense. We should try to test our assumptions, examine them, and jettison once they appear unsound. But even when an assumption seems relatively stable in a rational sense, we should experiment with different assumptions to see whether they can't do more or better. Are we seeking one set of assumptions which provides coherent uniformity or are we after multiple competing sets of assumptions which allow a kind of irrational or trans-rational vitality via their very competition?

It is worthwhile to pause a moment and ask, who cares about such matters? The answer on the one hand is simple. We who *care for is-ness* are the ones who care about such things. While this answer may sound obvious, I think it is important to notice that we ask such questions because we care! This puts the matter in a different light. We want a robust postmetaphysical take on is-ness because we care about what is. Now, exactly what it means to care and whether the manner of our care is healthy, "complete", or "integral" is precisely the meat of this kind of discussion. When we encounter a thinker who seems to care, before we decide whether their manner of caring is up to our standards, we should keep in mind that no matter how foolish or dazzlingly brilliant what they say seems to us, *it is their caring attempt*. With this recognition, we are ready to look at Jordan Peterson.

## Enter Mr. Peterson in his gentleman's attire

Jordan B. Peterson (let's hope that "B" stands for benign?) is a thinker who is very much concerned with the psychological development of important concepts like God, rationality, truthfulness, and justice. He wants a society that is capable of navigating the complicated balance between what he sees as a need for both order and chaos. Order is needed to provide stability, actionable consistency, and predictable coherence for human life. Chaos is needed to shake up order where it has become stale and tyrannical and to provide freedom, freshness of resources, etc. In his investigation of the history of Western civilization and psychology, he sees these elements, chaos and order, adjusting to and competing with one another. For him, the ideal situation for a society or an individual is a balanced arrangement between these factors. Is this what he means by God?

In his discussion with Sam Harris he says: "Part of the concept of God that underlies the Western ethos is the notion that whatever God is, is expressed in the truthful speech that rectifies pathological hierarchies, that isn't all it does, it also confronts the chaos of being itself and generates habitable order, that's the metaphysical proposition, and that's best conceptualized as at least one element of God; and so I would think about it as a transcendent reality that's only observable across the longest of time-frames."

Certain aspects of this response should jump out to a postmetaphysical ear. He is quite careful about making assertions about what God absolutely *is*, instead he describes aspects of what it means to him as a concept, he points out that much of his description is indeed metaphysical, and he says that is how he would *think* about it as opposed to asserting something he simply believes, not to mention the developmental perspective hinted at in the close.

We are confronted with someone who is at the very least quite cautious about making metaphysical claims in terms of belief. He is aware of the fact that the claims he is making are based on certain assumptions and he gives himself some wiggle-space in doing so. Is that wiggle space postmetaphysical?

## **Postmetaphysical Spirituality means doing the jitterbug around the idea of God?**

On the one hand, metaphysical claims are most frequently criticized for being unreflectively assumed to be authoritatively true. Dogmatism hurts our ears because it takes its ideas as being unquestionable, as absolute. So on this point, Peterson does seem to meet some postmetaphysical requirement. That is, his founding assumptions are placed out in the open, available for critical examination.

Is postmetaphysics that simple? So long as we can state our first principles and say they are up for discussion, are we in the free and clear? Yes!

Unless that is not enough for you of course...

From another perspective, to call this postmetaphysical sort of seems like cheating. It sounds like it might just be a clever way to disarm skeptics.

Is Peterson just pulling a fast one on us when he answers, "I act as if there is a God"? Is he just saying this because he knows how sensitive we are to anything which carries a vague scent of metaphysics? He's stuffing God in a Trojan Horse named As If? Maybe.

## **The unconscious lodging house of metaphysics**

Before I examine those questions further, let's really think about the fact that in answer to the question "Do you *believe* in God?," Peterson refrains from saying anything in terms of belief. Rather he says that his *action* presupposed a God. On Twitter he says, "God is the mode of being you value the most as demonstrated or manifested in your presumption, perception and action." He is calling something very important to our attention.

If we think about philosophy as a collection of conscious, verbal articulation of our views, then frankly, postmetaphysics should be easy! All we need to do is find those statements and positions which we think qualify as postmetaphysical and consistently state our adherence to them ad nauseum. What do you believe? Well, just ask yourself! I believe in God. I believe in no-God. I believe in rationality. Etc. But our verbal claims about what we think we believe are frequently quite out of sync with our action, and even when we are very careful about the way we make

conscious assertions, our unconscious assumptions abound. Peterson reminds us that the assumptions which undergird our action and perception very often have little to do with what we say about our own positions.

In his discussions with Sam Harris, he frequently raises this point. In Peterson's opinion, the things that Harris claims to be of high value, things like truthfulness or the idea that we should seek to bring about the greatest possible good, are values which grew out of the Christian tradition. Thus, if Harris really acts according to those values, it is *implied* that he believes in many aspects of God. Obviously, he is quite careful about the way that he phrases this, but he raises an interesting point. Assuming we are sincere in our desire for postmetaphysics, are we not also unconsciously presuming the value of metaphysics? Especially if we return to that first definition of metaphysics, it may be the case that to say anything at all is already metaphysical in that it must make a first assumption. More on that later.

## The fox

Clever Peterson! Setting all these traps to make us think we're still chained to the old traditions! Sam Harris expresses this concern in using a phrase coined by Eric Weinstein. He says that Peterson, intentionally or otherwise, sometimes engages in something called "Jesus smuggling". This is the idea that Peterson is putting on a rational-seeming front to his argument in order to smuggle Jesus into the discussion. Whereas Peterson would argue that he is trying to examine the roots of our psychological concepts in order that we may get a strong understanding of their developmental trajectory and allow them to continue to grow and evolve, Harris would counter that Peterson is simply trying to make outdated, dangerous, archaic concepts palatable to the contemporary mind. He's just trying to dress Jesus up in a laboratory coat and goggles so that the atheistic scientific community can be brought back into the claws of traditional religion.

First of all, Jesus smuggling is a delightful phrase. I think we should tinker with it for use within the Integral Postmetaphysical Spirituality discourse space. Terms along the lines of "nihilism smuggling", "capitalist smuggling", "tribal smuggling", or "relativist smuggling" might prove useful in interesting ways.

I am not in a position, nor am I particularly concerned to decide whether Peterson is after all just doing "a lil bitta Jeebus smugglin'!" Insofar as postmetaphysics does involve experimentally trying out and investigating archaic assumptions and insofar as integral requires exploring development as it pertains to previous phases, there is a constant danger of what I call "accidental atavism". That is, when we try to keep an open-mind while investigating and trying out older modes of thought, there is the risk that an unconscious part of ourselves will wake up and get addicted to that coffee. That is, I went back to study the Bible in order to learn what it had to teach me about the evolution of the notion of truth, and I ended up scrawling a list of inviolable commandments on an old piece of cardboard I found! I state this risk somewhat jokingly because it seems to me that people interested in this project called postmetaphysics are not highly fragile in terms of accidentally becoming dogmatic Christians again. Nevertheless, I think accidental atavism is real, and colors certain aspects of our emotional system, if not our thought itself, when we come into contact with powerful ancient ideas which take us by surprise. Reminding ourselves that we're involved in such questions because we care about is-ness suggests that atavism is

essentially *caring in an outdated fashion*. Thinking in this way helps explain why we are all so susceptible to flairs of regression. When I slip back and view the world in dogmatic terms, I still care! We instinctively care and like to feel that we are caring, and this is what can be deceptively tempting when you dive back into archaic mythologies. It is tempting because it seems obvious that these ancestors very much cared, but we can thereby lose sight of the fact that their manner of caring may nevertheless be quite maladapted to our current state of being.

## The hook

Back to the matter at hand. Should we let Peterson off the hook? Many aspects of his theory seem to share concerns with a project that wants to be integral. That is, he is highlighting the development of psychology as an important field of investigation. He's implying a nobility back into archaic and traditional narratives which is in line with Wilberian critiques of modern and postmodern "flatland". Not only that, but he is quite careful in laying out his metaphysical assumptions and builds wiggle room into them using "as if". Before answering whether to interpret views such as his as allowable in a postmetaphysical sense, we should ask whether a postmetaphysical effort is even able to make use of hooks! We assume that it is best to have few or no assumptions, but from whence do we derive this right to assume? The assumption that metaphysics is wrong for making assumptions is perhaps just metaphysics all over again.

Perhaps you are already reminding me that "post"metaphysics does not mean *no* metaphysics. But in that case what does it mean? I think it means we are on guard against any version of metaphysics which disallows competing versions of metaphysics on dogmatic grounds. Any version of metaphysics which does not leave itself open for discussion is in bad taste. The other characteristic of metaphysics which I think we try to move beyond is the sense that we are in need of a system of ideas which is constantly consistent unto itself across time. Postmetaphysics should experiment with the possibility that certain forms of inconsistency are more potent than rigid uniformity. We don't shut our eyes when we see something new just because we don't have a system for it yet. Postmetaphysics implies an attitude towards metaphysics which is adaptable, flexible, and persuadable. We can be talked out of it, and we don't expect that it will be easily viable at every moment of our lives. Where other metaphysical systems struggle to subdue and similarize the enigmatic, we are patient and allow it its distance. We do these things because, on the one hand, we know we care, but on the other hand, we're not sure we know *how* to care. To experiment here means to try to care in different ways. We avoid the dogmatic assertion that our attempt at caring is the only way to care and that all other thinkers are essentially heartless.

## That a shadow may fall

Peterson's apparatus may be postmetaphysical-lite, but I don't think that a more postmetaphysical view feels him to be in our strong opposition. I also think that due to the experimental quality of theorizing is-ness, we should consider the possibility that the best conditions for growing postmetaphysical spiritual concepts is when a great diversity of metaphysical systems are encouraged to compete alongside one another. We want paganism because it gives a surface upon which the shadow of Christianity can fall. A strong atheist metaphysical assertion may amplify our understanding of Hinduism.

Here, it is interesting to note that a hybrid community has been born in response to Peterson's lectures. Apparently there are now many people who are describing themselves as Christian Atheists. That is, they are interested in studying Christian teaching and history and perhaps even sharing many of its values and yet they maintain a conscious disavowal of the belief in God. There is something potentially postmetaphysical about an outlook such as theirs.

## **One more thing to care about**

While I don't want to decide whether Peterson counts as either integral or postmetaphysical, there is at least one more important phenomenon associated with him and his rise to public attention which I think is important for us aspiring postmetaphysical integral thinkers to wrestle with.

Peterson has been teaching and publishing videos online since at least 2013, but his popularity didn't balloon until the sparks of controversy a-lit. He did not shy away from stating his positions in bold terms and was willing to get into antagonistic disputes with protesters and television commentators. Furthermore, he frequently participates in lively debates with atheists like Sam Harris and others. Part of what he revives in his discussions of the Old Testament is contact with a fierce, antagonistic image of Jehovah. I might also add that he often describes his relationship with his own ideas in antagonistic terms. He tries to dissect his assumptions, look at them from all sides, and attack them until, to him, they prove too strong to be abandoned.

This idea of an integral postmetaphysical spirituality appears to have largely grown out of a group of people who were initially interested in the Wilberian integral model, even as many of them have of course moved away from taking Wilber to be the heart of the movement (is it a movement?). Integral thinkers tend to remain in warm relation with values like inclusion and spiritual development. But if we are sincere in our desire for philosophies which are more postmetaphysical, I think it is important that we stop and ask whether we are wishing and hoping that a postmetaphysical image of "God" will be gentle, tolerant, peaceful, and inclusive. None of these values are inherently inconsistent with a postmetaphysical framework, in my opinion. However, if we are dependent on these values in a metaphysical way, are we perhaps blinding ourselves to the possibility that an integral postmetaphysical spirituality might also generate concepts of God or gods which are violent, temperamental, inconsistent, and antagonistic? If qualities such as these are forbidden from our consideration, it is likely we've slipped back into some dogmatic habits. There is something energetic about combativeness, tension, and aggression which may have their place within the vanguard of inclusion. In other words, care is not only gentle, nice, and kind. Does postmetaphysical care imply a certain metal quality of care? Alice Cooper given a sacred heart transplant?

## **Heed the struggle**

Development of any kind seems to presuppose some version of struggle. Should we expect integral postmetaphysical theories to be an exception to this? What are the metaphysics of assuming struggle as a first concept? With a view like this you can certainly interpret Jordan Peterson in an interesting way.

I'm raising this point because I think it can be quite difficult to discern when something passes the integral or postmetaphysical test. Are we making these sorts of judgments based off of blazingly clear conceptual categories? Are our emotional discernments up to date with our cognitive strategies? Are we assuming a God which is nice, bright, and shiny and does this assumption make us blind to the possibility that a postmetaphysical God is sometimes dark or dreadful?

*I know you care, but may you ask ten-thousand times: what is this care?*

*As if it was easy...*



## The Religion of Jordan Peterson, by Layman Pascal

I have plenty in common with Jordan Peterson. Not just the trivial details that we are both Canadian thinkers fond of St. Nietzsche and critical of political correctness – we also both have a problem with Christianity.

The kernel of our shared conundrum is that we read our own depth into the holy texts. The moral dream narratives of our ancestors appear before us with the intensity of personal insight. Thus, when we argue for God & myth, we are working from our own complex metaphorical understanding of human development and *not* from the average reader's relationship to literalist orthodoxy.

Actually it takes me a long, slow and clumsy effort to understand the complaints of people who were (for example) “raised Catholic” since they are sensing something vastly different from my own personal default assumptions about the rich potential of *catholicity* and the nourishing power of the vision-logic structures that are revealed from the text into my own heart. It's tough. In the physical sciences, we retroactively apply new levels of insight across the whole past of the universe. We newly discover atoms and then consider them to have existed even for people who had no notion of atoms. It is less clear what to do about psychological and philosophical discoveries. When I uncover an archetype in the Bible, I don't know if I have found a formerly hidden truth that was implicit in even the most dogmatic and primitive reading or whether I have encountered a new truth co-created by myself – true ONLY for people who likewise have grown into the same depth of perception?

I am undecided about whether the higher universal “sub-structure” of wisdom is implicit in the ancient traditions or whether it is a flower that blossoms only individually. Nonetheless, I do agree that there IS such a matrix which utilizes archetype to empower humans relative to a complex cosmos that cannot be comprehended with naive and linear models. Religion evolves when a group of people can artfully combine their cultural successes with this universal matrix of encoded limitations. Successful cultural coherence goes hand in hand with some kind of “dharma set” (i.e. insights and practices) that can be more or less presented in any given geography, era or language. While I agree with Jordan on this point, I have serious doubts about the role of books and orthodoxy...

Your granny's burger recipe is a great and endearing strategy for making “good” burgers in a stable fashion. However we can only get better and healthier burgers by experimenting. We need to take risks and be intelligently indifferent to the tradition – if we hope to educate our instincts and learn to make better spontaneous guesses than our ancestors made. Or even to make new guesses that confront our current environment with the same degree of intelligence exhibited by our ancestors. Our job is to do what they did again and not just to appreciate that they brought forth wisdom in their time and place.

Tradition is not merely a repository of heuristics for surviving in a nonlinear universe but it is equally a limitation on our ability to thrive in the unfolding nonlinear universe. Inherited instincts and complex “wisdom suggestions” found in old texts may be able to energize us to deal with situations that we share with cavemen and lobsters but they also may be inadequate to changing

situations, modern situations and to re-generating the kind of wisdom that is coded in these texts. My opinion is that we need *shamanic skills* much more than we need to heed the recorded stories of ancient shamans.

Likewise, the whole idea of “book” is a double-edged sword. For most of the history of Christianity the people of Christendom could not read. Texts are of minimal relevance to religious traditions. Yes, of course, a book can concentrate many of the sayings and images of ancient colloquial wisdom but, at the same time, it inevitably edits out the richest ambiguities, leaves aside many of the sayings and uses bureaucratic validation to enforce one set of holy insights at the expense of the rest of the living dharma. Overarching narratives can even kill the trans-rational nutrient that is contained in holy exemplars and mythic symbolism. Holy books tend to empower nominal priests at the expense of the actual cultural shamans and, in the process, turn religion into a legalistic business of “belief statements” rather than an organic, multidimensional success strategy for activating the unknowable wisdom beyond the conscious mind.

Holy books are classics. And classics have a resonance that suggests a pragmatic and evolutionarily tested utility beyond what can be codified in the left hemisphere of the brain. However it seems to me that Peterson over-emphasizes them at the expense of all other cultural classics. Not only do I think that Batman and “haste makes waste” are as good as the Vedas or the New Testament, I also more radically suspect that *new classics* are more nourishing than old classics – which are merely the codified remains of former new classics. Fresh food is more enlivening than dried meat and old wheat. The metaphors that have survived in the traditional holy books were not perpetuated by popular embrace and heuristic utility by rather by a biased, anti-evolutionary mechanism of cognitive ease, legislative exploitation and institutional prejudice. Orthodox religious texts are, for me, NOT a privileged class of access routes to the absolutely necessary unconscious wisdom of the species that must be personally assimilated by our own efforts in our own worldspace.

## Contributor Comments/Dialogue on Jordan Peterson Essays

### Comments on AV

#### *Comments on AV by BL*

I wish that we could sit in the back of a Winnebago and discuss your article in depth. I used to call them Bago-Eggo's as a child. Since I'm a little time pressed to respond to what you've shared with us, forgive me if I fly past the best of what you have offered.

Besides your referencing of Winnebago's, my favorite point in what you wrote was to think that suffering generates a metaphysics. I also particularly liked the phrase, "Metaphysics is not bad; it's constraining." It is enjoyable the way that sentence relieves metaphysics and constraint in one breath.

If we were sitting in the back of that Bago-Eggo, I'd probably hurl question after question about what you mean by emptiness! I know you've defined it in your article and I'm even more confident that you hold a definition in your heart, but that is one of those words that I seem to fall into like a hole and forget where I was over and over again. I'm not sure whether to think "Andrew's argument is obviously valid" or "Andrew is wrong, Jordan Peterson definitely understands more about emptiness than that! He's taken DMT for God's sakes!"

One thing I do know is that I like voices like Andrew's. Your writing is sober and critical in a very good sense of each word. One thing that bothered me watching some of the Peterson debates on Youtube is that they decided to skip over the question and answer segment. The audience is intelligent, let us hear from them as well! What if they'd let someone like Andrew ask a question about society or emptiness? This does actually make me a little more suspicious of Peterson in his banker's pinstripe suit. One of the dangers of emphasizing the individual at the expense of discussing society is that this often means the "moneyed" individual. But is money and individual? Now I'm digressing and drifting too far from the topic at hand. Perhaps we can discuss such things further in the online Winnebago as it moves on down the road.

#### *Comments on AV by LP*

"Suffering appears with self-consciousness and the solution to suffering is not less consciousness but more..." – Jordan Peterson (discussing the Biblical Genesis).

Andrew's angle, I think, is a very good way to probe Peterson's metaphysics. The comparison to a conventional Buddhist *negative metaphysics* reveals similarities and differences. Up to a certain ambiguous point there seems to be great deal of similarity between the two visions which point out the suffering nature of existence, the need for skillful, adaptive and even spiritual action in the world. What are the differences?

We might think of Peterson as being more of a God-and-Souls philosopher in contrast to the atheistic an-atman of the East. However (as my own years in a Buddhist sangha revealed) that distinction is murky. It is not exactly clear that Buddhism has no God or individual Souls. Rather

it has some kind of superlative nexus of dharmic principles embodied in a human-divine realizer whose teachings are for evolving individuals. Yet it merely stipulates that these things are inherently interdependent, relative & non-binding to the liberated consciousness. The soul is no more true or essential than the body.

There has been a good deal of IPS interest in OOO and other doctrines which might suggest a return of the “thing-in-itself” to the good conscience of philosophers. Does Peterson entrust himself via action to the presumption of a soul despite his fairly clear statements about the ways that personality is embedded in body, brain and society through a phantasmal or always partial lenses of motivated interpretation which precedes the cognitive perception of “what things are”? This is an open question. As is the question of how far this might be from a classical Emptiness doctrine.

Both Buddhism and Peterson have a sense of a matrix-cosmos permeated by suffering. All is *dhukka*. That is a big claim. The legendary Siddhartha made such a claim based on insight and introspection while Peterson seems to base it on the state of the art in neuropsychology – that motivation precedes knowledge and the valence of fear and frustration is the primal encounter with the misperceived and partial world. We do not learn negativity as a result of experiences which deviate from the normal but rather our brains actively work to convert stressful reality into a normalized insignificance against which we carry out our limited karmic struggle to avoid pain and reach heaven.

Peterson makes an existential bid to accept this *dhukka* (frustration, suffering, the grinding of the axle in the wheel) as primary and seek the skillful conditions of action which allow brains – and perhaps souls – to reorient themselves toward the unlimited potential of meaningfulness. Buddhism, on the other hand, makes the classical mystical assertion that there is a pre-suffering substrate of Being that can be reached by accessing part of ourselves that exists prior to individuated intentional experience. If this is a true interpretation then it bypasses or seeks to bypass the level to which Peterson usually addresses himself. The great mystic hope is that we are trapped in an unnecessary degree of individuation or self-contraction that forces identification with the motivated structure that must encounter the cosmos as suffering. As Andrew notes this is NOT the claim that Peterson is generally making.

With a certain generosity of spirit we can take either set of metaphysics as postmetaphysical and integral-friendly while noticing their uncanny similarities and their one big difference.

I think from the IPS POV (sic) the most relevant metaphysical issue lies in the comprehension of essences. The emptiness doctrine asserts that all things are inherently free of self-essence, inherently interdependent, temporalized, relational, contextually dependent for their identity. Peterson definitely treats things as contextual and interdependent in their meanings but he lays the stress not upon the objective absence of essences (and he may well believe in a withdrawn metaphysics of essences, souls, beings) but upon the subjective indirectness of knowledge. In his work, the cognition of motivated know-how precedes the relatively new and relatively superficial cognition of identities. Identities are unlocked because they are secondary to behavior in an opaque universe. Conversely the sects which originated the emptiness doctrine appear to have leveraged their beliefs in accurate human knowledge toward a place at which the objective world is described

as free of identifying essences. Again, either one might provide or imply a postmetaphysical realm for spiritual practice.

The metaphysics of Peterson and Buddhism are very close in certain respects. Yet a very subtle difference remains. Whereas Peterson has said, “there is no limit to the possibilities of consciousness and truth,” a Buddhist might say – *the truth of consciousness is limitlessness*.

A dynamic nondualist would assert that the latter unconditionality is implicit in the former conditional injunction but Peterson does not bear many of the marks we might assume follow from more complete realizations in postmetaphysical space...

*Response/Rejoinder by AV*

**Brendan:** Thank you!

I'll respond quickly to two things. I won't restate how I'm using Emptiness in the above, but I would like to take the opportunity to distinguish between two 'kinds,' or uses of it, which I think may help supplement the above. Reams and reams of virtual paper can and are spent on all of this, so it probably couldn't hurt.

So, in my article I'm using 'conceptual emptiness' as a kind of stand in for emptiness, which I think is a more encompassing... reality? Negative metaphysic? Let's call what's left over from the more encompassing emptiness when we distinguish conceptual emptiness 'substantial emptiness.' Emptiness, as a recognition, can come all at once, but I think conceptual emptiness is enfolded in substantial emptiness. (Though as I write this I am mulling it out, so the following is quite provisional.)

Conceptual emptiness is primarily about the virtual nature of the mind. That in our daily, and momentary, apprehension of what is happening around us, we are organized around a kind of imagined, conceptual reality that is largely transparent to us, baked into our being-in-the-world. When I see someone post an insult to the New York Mets on Instagram, the I that is offended is a kind of fiction, an activity that is latent but nevertheless efficacious (it affects and mediates my response to the world.) The vast majority of us are focused entirely on this virtual reality – when we look at a tree or focus on our breath in meditation, at least for a while in learning how to meditate, we aren't with our perception of the tree or feeling our breath, we're interacting with a kind of concept of tree, of breath. It's not entirely imaginal, like a dream, it's more like a heads-up-display. It is hard to separate this activity from anything else, and even harder to do so in verbal communication, since to do so we are still necessarily using concepts through language. Additionally, there's no hard line between what is physiological and what is psychological. Nevertheless, there is an additional aspect to the fuller experience of emptiness which is more about how our perceptions are contingent, emergent, and non-dual, and that no object has any endurance through time and space – everything is a momentary and fleeting, flickering manifestation of empty awareness.

That's how I try to communicate or conceptualize it, at least.

I... have no Winnebago ☹️ I look forward to future conversations, wherever housed 😊 I also love the point that “Individual” almost inevitably means a Western individual of means, but as you gesture that’s a conversation that would take way too much time and space to be done justice here.

**Layman:** Reading your bit was like reading Cliff’s Notes for my article – I feel like you’ve condensed what I was attempting to say and gotten it across in a much more concentrated manner.

And I appreciate the bit about the distinction between the God-and-Souls philosopher and the an-atman, and that an IP-MS has room for both. I think this is actually the most important underlying point, I’m sort of building a justification for that philosophically later argument. If we take emptiness seriously, (or have a well grounded and mature living-out of emptiness) I think it’s pretty clear that both are necessary living orientations for a full approach to an Integral spirituality. My argument is essentially that they are, in fact, reflections of each other.

## Comments on BL

*Comments on BL by AV*

I find it really interesting that our essays both circle around the question of ‘is Peterson’s approach a post-metaphysical one?’ essentially using Peterson as a way of qualifying just what it is that we mean by ‘post-metaphysical’ in the first place, trying to suss out the nuances of what a post-metaphysical approach is and looks like, and providing our own readings of his work and the core aspects (or a core aspect) of what a post-metaphysical approach may be. We both come to a similar conclusion as well, something like ‘Peterson evinces certain aspects of a post-metaphysical approach, while falling short in a few ways.’

I also appreciate that we both explicitly address the question of ‘why,’ or ‘who cares?’ (As I say it, ‘so what?’) Why do we care about that? It’s an open question – i.e., I’m not taking either your response to that or my own as being definitive in any sense.

We ask such questions because we care, and our actions display what it is that we care about. Our words, as a special kind of action, also display our care. Then, which I find fascinating, and which is the territory we’re both in some sense swimming in: parsing out the never 1:1, never metaphysical, relationship of words and actions – this illuminates an even deeper sort of care, a care that might be animating both our actions and words.

We all care about something. So I take your inquiry as something like, “What does a post-metaphysical kind of care look like, and why would we value and qualify care in such a way?” Without being too obtuse, perhaps this is not so different from asking why we care about care in the first place?

This is one of those questions that seems like an absurd abstraction, the least important of our daily concerns, a silly language game, etc. etc. We value care because that’s what valuing is. I suspect something deeper at work, and perhaps something which sheds light on the value of a post-metaphysical approach, that sheds light on what is different in a metaphysical approach to care

(‘care is care,’) and an approach which doesn’t presume the value of care, and so is able to assert this value more robustly.

If we do that, what does a post-metaphysical care look like? A care greater than contradiction? One that includes a naïve notion of care, simple and absolutely necessary, and that might include notions of its opposite – that might not be definable through our enactments of ‘caring?’

We are close to the kind of a-perspectival madness I think Peterson is reacting to. No! I can hear a voice saying. You can’t twist this all out of proportion. Care is care. The (ugly) history of our species is littered with these kinds of lies, of horrible actions taken ‘for the benefit’ of the victim of some cruelty, for the salvation of the soul of the savage! With [‘this hurts me more than it hurts you, boy’]s.

Can we really include all of these notions of care? Can care be brutal?

Might there be room for dogmatism in our notions of post-metaphysical care? For what comes unexamined?

I think – my assumption is – that we sense in this thinker a more nuanced way of approaching these questions that we feel as urgent than we tend to see in the world. Someone acting as if a God might allow for a care which is both simple and obvious and must form the basis of our caring, and who might allow for cruelty not as a contradiction of care, but inextricably wrapped up in it – and that there’s not only nothing wrong or unfortunate about this – but that this provides a basis for a meaningful life.

What do you care about?

For what God are you acting as if that God exists?

*Comments on BL by LP*

If (postmetaphysical) metaphysics are the implications of actions then Peterson is in that camp. If reality itself is *implication* then “beliefs” are an insufficient explanatory principle for action. From a postmetaphysical angle – and in the proper mood – we criticize someone for saying that God is Real. But the kernel of disquiet is not that isness is inapplicable. Isness denotes a certain unconfined intensity & precision that is necessary to make both consciousness and logic operate properly. That’s fine. The problem with the person who claims God is real is not the “is” but the claiming. Or, more indirectly, the tendency to assume that a belief claim is indicated by the content of the verbal statement. If we shift to the action, then we immediately discover that we have no knowledge about the person’s beliefs about God but clear knowledge that they believe in *saying* that God is Real. They believe in saying that just as they believe the Earth will support them when they take a step. Their metaphysical architecture is revealed as the implication of their actions and only secondarily, often delusively, indicated by their belief claims. And the funny thing about metaphysical architecture is that it includes “is” and “isn’t” and “real” and “substance” and “thing” and “number,” etc – the most basic requirements for any perception, cognition or universe. At some vanishing point we find that the most solid and reliable aspects of reality are precisely ...

implications. And if our new path is the Universal Illuminated Church of Dynamic Implication then Peterson is... a local priest? A bishop? Someone who expresses our theology within a particular set of concerns. Is this what St. Brendan is saying...?

*Response/Rejoinder by BL*

First of all, I'd like to say that I found this exercise in reviewing Peterson stimulating and fun. If more such focused inquiries are in store in the future, they have my support.

I hope that my essay means some of what Layman is saying! His words push a point in a way I hadn't exactly considered, however. I've been around enough integral ideas to be cautious about accepting someone's statements as an accurate way of getting what they're about. I took Peterson's cautious addition of "as if" to his statement about a belief in God as a kind of healthy sign. But as I could have warmly predicted Layman pushes at this point. He reminds that the issue is statements vs. action in general and cautious statements are nonetheless still statements. A good boost in favor of paying attention to action.

Andrew's response to me kicks in here in an interesting way. He opens up a line of pondering about the meaning of care. Curiously, before writing the Peterson essay, Layman had just recommended Heidegger to me and I've been engaging some of his work. He makes strong arguments for care or concern being at the heart of, well, being.

Care is something that I think can be a useful litmus test for whether I'm considering an action or a statement. Words about care can sometimes be sort of empty, something which touches on arguments Andrew made in his article. But an act of care, whether it is something someone does towards themselves or towards others is, as Peterson might say, pretty bloody well obvious.

So, what do Peterson's acts say about his cares and concerns? Well, he cares about engaging with large amounts of people. What is he doing? He's going around the world on lecture tours and calling into whatever hip podcasts will have him on. He does this dressed up in very keen suits on a diet, apparently, of only red meat! He keeps a serious face most times though his laughter is not infrequent and sounds "human" to my ears. But what are all these actions about? Does he care about fame? Does he care about helping people get their feet more firmly planted on the ground? Is he trying to sell books?

It looks like I need to think more about how to understand what it is an action says...

## **Comments on LP**

*Comments on PL by AV*

Here's how I'm reading your essay, Layman – let me know if I'm missing something, reading too much in, or simply twisting you out of recognition:

Culture passes knowledge – whether knowledge of a more superficial kind, like burger recipes, or knowledge of the deeper structures of psychology and reality – by codifying it. In a sense, it's



what culture is. Successful culture, culture that helps its people live and navigate life/reality and pass its knowledge along in a coherent way, is abstract-able, more or less (part of what it is to codify) and can re-emerge and be embodied in different cultures, languages, times, etc. 'Classical' texts represent only one element of that codification, and Peterson places too much of an emphasis on them, disregarding that texts may over-determine us towards two related kinds of conservatism: the over-valuation of 'old knowledge' not necessarily useful for today's problems, and the reverence of a privileged (literate) authority. He sees The Bible as a more valid vehicle of cultural knowledge because it is 'tried-and-true,' across time and culture, and as such essentially represents the pith of what is most valuable to know in our (Western) culture – it is very knowledge-dense. Peterson sees these as our/Being's otherwise incommunicable depths communicating to our more-than-rational depth of interiority. Classical texts are useful, you're saying, but they are useful only because we will be reading into them, not because they necessarily represent some higher or stored notion of useful cultural knowledge – at least, not any more than a cliché or folk aphorism, and not anymore than more modern and current classics – such as Batman. We (each) need to live out our cultural knowledge in the time and environment that we uniquely find ourselves in, and there's no shortcut to that.

I'll say what I'd like based on this understanding, though I may not be hearing you, of course.

The first thing about this is... I think Peterson agrees with you. I'm not sure he'd agree with your equation of the Vedas and 'haste makes waste,' and I do think he places a singular and unique value on the Bible, but for one of your main points that a tradition must make itself anew each generation – that's central in his account of individuation. I also think he is pretty explicit about his being an interpretation of the Bible, though (I think this goes without saying!) he'll argue vociferously for his interpretation.

In his account, we are all Horus, exiled, we are all Joseph, and to come into our heritage we must bring our lives to bear on our entirely unique situation. One of the core aspects of his talks is the necessity of this living-out of the human heritage. The injunctions contained within may well be limiting in the sense you're using it, as something that keeps us from responding (perhaps even seeing) the nature of our challenges, or they may be limiting in the nature of any injunction, as a way of organizing one's living energies. But whether those are two different kinds of limitations can only be found out by accepting the task of bringing what is contained within self/tradition into the newness of one's own life in this moment.

Certainly, as a scientist, Peterson has a commitment to an endeavor whose very method necessitates the 'doing it for ourselves,' the creation of new cultural knowledge which may and quite often does find the wealth of our accumulated knowledge to be plain wrong. Not only that, he speaks often about 'new classics,' such as the Disney version of Pinocchio, and has a fondness for using other 'new' classics of the 19th and 20th century to illustrate his points.

Perhaps, even while using 'modern classics,' he is still using them to illustrate principles that he finds inherent in the world – i.e. that he's something of a neo-perennialist (what a wonderful phrase given the context of this response!) where our engagement is only necessary to climb a ladder that is already there – our 'engagement' with life is necessary, but only to move along a pre-determined track. I think you could make an argument that this is the case, at least implicitly,

and to be sure I'm making something of a similar argument in my piece, that he's 'proto-participatory,' without taking into account the full implications of what this kind of creative enaction of the world means for what Being is.

But surely there's a counter-argument there as well. Yes, he may well over-emphasize how determinative the function of particular neurotransmitters in lobsters are for any and all species that appear later evolutionarily speaking, and just how limiting earlier evolutionary choices are for future generations, but I think he does recognize that these are choices in some real way, not inevitable moves along a destined track. There's nothing inherent about serotonin; it's a happy accident.

Even the choice to speak on the Judeo-Christian tradition I think belies an orientation that recognizes how radically emergent individuality is, how un-necessary. It would be fascinating to hear his take on the role of Jesus given the talks he's already given on the Old Testament, but I think he'd be saying something to the effect that Jesus is the individual that is able to embody the whole of his tradition, which is what gives him the authority to so completely and radically rewrite it – that's what makes him the son of God. Would Peterson talk about the fulfillment of a divine plan? The inevitability of Jesus? I don't think so. It might be a subtle difference, but I have a feeling that he'd find in the wholeness of the Bible a trajectory towards this kind of total reckoning with suffering and one's heritage, that the Old Testament represents a record of the emergence of individual human consciousness out of the deeper mythic pre-history of humanity, and its reckoning with Being, something which makes a Jesus possible, but doesn't make him inevitable.

To be sure, a lot of this is implicit and not taken directly from his speech. As Brendan says in his response to me, it would be wonderful to have someone with a rich Integral background interviewing/debating him to tease some of these things out, otherwise we're simply parsing tea leaves. Without that conversation to ask some of these questions directly, we'll never know. I think there is a chance at least Peterson is making an essentially Wilberian argument: that these 'choices' are 'real,' because they've worked, that their 'working' reveals something about the nature of Being as such, and that there are more and less fundamental aspects of Being revealed by less and more superficial habits. Kosmic habits, at this point well engrained. But really, at any scope, those habits may become as disabling as they've been enabling, since there are no final, metaphysically locatable truths.

And perhaps you're saying this, and you're simply saying he's not emphasizing just how radical the possibility of newness, of emergence and creativity, really is. My parsing here (of both you and Peterson!) may simply be reading way too much into everything. Bizarrely – I literally just remembered this writing that previous sentence – I had a dream three nights ago where I got this 'corrective nugget' from you, arriving almost as a subtle-energy bullet, with the clear message 'you are reading too much into this.' A little bit of communicative gnosis, where and however it arrived. Clearly I have ignored it to this point.

And now that I find myself coming to my final point – what has interested me the most in this and what the above was a prelude to, I realize I may have misread something crucial. You're saying that we can only get healthier, tastier burgers through experimentation. I took that to mean that the

inevitable outcome of experimentation is healthier, tastier burgers, rather than that the only way to get healthier, tastier burgers is through experimentation.

So that's going to change quite a bit the conclusion here, which is about the relationship between passing cultural knowledge on and the 'matrix' or structure of Being that allows for such passing to happen – really, these two clauses are terms in the same equation, though as it's not really the idea here I'll choose to skip over that. Where I am uncertain of Peterson's view, and see it as possibly subtly metaphysical, is in whether or not Being has a discernable structure, one that is representable at all, whether through the logical and explicit nature of the 'left brain' mode, or through myth. I take your essay as saying essentially that Peterson makes the mistake, and that it is a mistake, of assuming/finding a structure: that the Bible has value because it represents a progressive accumulation of knowledge, which 'progressiveness' belies a reliable (metaphysical) structure to Being. But, you say, Being is not so simple. I had originally thought that you were making the same mistake as him, though it's why I couched much of my language above carefully, as that was surprising to me knowing you a bit. That is to say, if the only possible ultimate outcome of experimentation were healthier, tastier burgers, and this were not just a superficial truth but something itself reflective of how Being-in-culture works, then Being must itself have a reliable structure.

I still think, playing devil's advocate (certainly, Peterson isn't that bad...) that Peterson is in fact making a similar argument as you are: that the nature of Being is not metaphysical – it cannot adequately be coded as being either 'entirely random' or as 'ordered.' That the nature of Being is inclusive both of chaos and order, of creative novelty and endurance, and this is embodied in our lives. The linguistic, conceptual paradox of, 'Being has a structure, but we can't say that.' For sure, he is talking about the Bible, and for sure, for the vast majority of people today and in the past, The Bible is essentially about this structure, revealing truths, as it were. But Peterson is doing so mostly as a corrective to Progressive naïveté in our times ('it's not that simple, you bloody idiots...') – a place where the roots of 'progressive' in 'evolutionarily progressive' and 'politically progressive' elide nicely. Being is not ordered, you must order it! He is saying.

I actually think this is why Peterson finds so much value in the Bible: it communicates truths that are beyond simple dichotomies, that are more than single principles, that are neither metaphysically 'conservative' nor 'progressive.' That are, in a sense, post-metaphysical. Is this, as you begin, merely his own perception of his own depths and maturity? Or is he making a different mistake of finding a stability and order in the tradition that is metaphysical, that is scope-independent – that is not a reflection of how similar our lives are to those who lived 2, 3, 4 and 5 thousand years ago, but a reflection of something inherently so? The very possibility of an Integral reading (and enaction) of the Bible leads me to believe, no. If it stands up to such a (rigorous) reading, it contains one. My own belief is creative – chaordic, an essay, a halting sense, not dogmatic. But it's what I am saying. Our circumstances, our environment, are similar enough to the environment of all human beings, codified and shaped not only by the literate myths of the Bible, but the myths these emerged out of, that we are wise to heed the words of our ancestors passed down to us through the ages. But, we must always do so. We must engage with these words, must evaluate them, must live them out creatively, which will itself entail the possibility – the necessity – of overthrowing, re-casting, re-enlivening them.

*Comments on PL by BL*

As one of those too specific Catholics which you mention, your words give me a healthy pause. Having been raised within a purportedly Catholic household and community and being often unsatisfied with many aspects of that, I've usually rejected that tradition with hopes of finding more fertile human soil in other parts of the community. A difficult thing, however, of having Catholic images and stories carelessly sprinkled throughout your childhood without really understanding them is that as a person with bigger numbers in the age column, many of these stories seem to linger and hover like enchanting but confusing ghosts. There is a no man's land between a field of rejected symbolic content and a secular world which I lack the childhood for. Jordan Peterson sort of steps in here with the glimmering promise that all those symbolic husks strewn about my psyche like a Dali landscape could be rejuvenated if I could just work my way into their psychological core in that Peterson kind of way. Thank God for Layman Pascals with Romantic temptations like these!

*Response/Rejoinder LP*

It pleases my depths to encounter Brendan and Andrew's words – here as elsewhere. Like them, I turn my thoughts to the childhood of my mythological sensibilities. Perhaps it could be said that I was raised at the crossroads between my father's agnostic Taoism, my mother's mystical Christianity and my grandmother's theosophical neo-paganism. Thus I succumb too easily to the terrible temptation to read the Holy Book as though it was an ultra-pagan architecture in which the vital forces of Nature and Psyche are conjoined in a globalized Judeo-Roman symbolism centered around the a-historical legend of a Taoist wonder-worker. It sounds delightful, I know, but I must caution my own first instinct in order to accomodate the experiences of many.

We are all similarly slaves of the erratic fragments of mythology that we inherit from the multi-tentacled impingement of ancestry upon our childhoods. Jordan Peterson is, I think, correct to suppose that *ideology is incomplete mythology*. That our historically recent cultural schemes and underlying political philosophies are not adequate representations of the full metaphysical or performative proto-schema that most effectively joins the soul to the culture to Nature and to the positive and negative forms of the Unfathomable.

What Peterson seldom does, however, is critique the extant records of mythology and official religious traditions in terms of how well they might present the potentially complete web of enactive mythological understanding. This issue has been the subject of many discussion at the Foundation for Integral Religion and Spirituality (FIRS). We have explored the idea that the "dharma" suggests a living network of wisdom-skills and developmental insights that may start to emerge in any historical, cultural or geographic zone. Successful local factors lead to a few people producing a few of the set of possible spiritual/maturational insights in a unique style – and then, if things keep going well, it grows little by little toward a more complete demonstration of the full complement of transrational structures. But how much is determined by this – *keep going well!*

So many things can regularly interrupt this process. Environmental stress, emotional pathology, bacterial health, complex collisions between the implications of local variants of universal truth, mismanaged of survival and aggression and love. Should we not expect that many common tendencies expressed in the dominant historical religions and mythologies represent not universal

truths but frequent perversions and common types of errors? Is it not possible that the desert cults of Sumeria, Egypt & Judea are very poor examples of the universal mythic infrastructure? That monotheism is not, in general, an indicator of a higher integration of mythological forces that raise the heroic spirit of exploration to the zenith of the pantheon but, on the contrary, already a sign of tyrannical distortion of the natural hierarchy? A hand-clenching-into-a-fist, an exaggerated emphasis, a Luciferian promotion which expresses the suppressive parent or imbalanced psyche or pathologically organized individual?

We don't know this but we also do not hear much of this possibility from Peterson. We hear intimations of his own visions, femininity and gnosticism but we seldom hear about the actual shamanic and organic flavor of the "alchemical wedding" of opposites. Where is hermaphroditic priest who is higher than the kings? Where is the trickster, shape-shifter and utterer of poetic nonsense as the embodiment of the half-chaos/half-order needed to restore vitality to the human sphere? Isn't the ritual subjugation of the Sumerian king to the priest already a decadent ritual that merely mocks the old potency of the true ceremony of Marduk in which the highest becomes lowest, the champion is humiliated, weeping and laughing predominate? Where is the image of the heroic spirit that divides and flows back together with divine cheer like Dionysus? Where is the tenderness, wildness, sexual experimentation, artistic strangeness and childlike glow of the psychedelic voyagers whose personal experience in the collective unconscious brought these myths back into most of the early tribes?

There are many flavors that I assume to be part of the universal mythic grammar of humanity that I do not hear strongly echoed in Peterson – and perhaps this is because of his over-use of limited and partial "Western desert" texts. Perhaps. The truth is that we simply do not know how much of the most important transrational structures (of embodied knowledge for an informationally opaque universe) are present in the Torah, the Gospel, the Koran, the Eddas, the latest *stained glass mandala* from the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Nor can we tell which parts that seem most evocative and pertinent and complex are actually signs of a common degradation process. The heroic spirit must revivify the naturalness of progressive culture but how many of the tales of the legendary gods and heroes are themselves rusted, ossified examples whose collective summation lead us to incomplete or perverse maps of meaning?

A cautionary note to end upon... :)