

An Epistemic Thunderstorm: What We Learned and Failed to Learn from Jordan Peterson's Rise to Fame¹

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Abstract: The cultural pressure to endorse or reject public intellectuals wholesale can be problematic, perpetuating groupthink and diminishing scope for intellectual growth, societal maturation, and political imagination. On encountering public figures who appear to be both right and wrong, sometimes simultaneously, perhaps dangerously, there is scope to be more creative and less reactive in our response. In the illustrative case of Jordan Peterson, commentators often oriented their analysis within a conceptually moribund political spectrum; e.g. Peterson is “alt-right” attacking “the radical left.” Social media echo chambers lead some to read that Peterson’s “fanboys” were “misogynist trolls” while others heard that his critics were “virtue signaling snowflakes”. The tendency of print and broadcast media to seek a defining angle diminishes rather than distills complexity; for instance, Peterson’s fame was associated with a perceived crisis in masculinity, but that was not the whole story. “Petersonitis” is introduced here as a serious joke to describe the intellectual and emotional discomfort that arose from the author’s attempt to seek a fuller understanding of complex characters in a divisive political culture. In a response to Peterson’s book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, twelve relatively dispassionate perspectives on his contribution are offered as an antidote to the language of allergy and infatuation that surrounded his rise to fame. Peterson is described here as symptomatic, multiphrenic, theatrical, solipsistic, sacralizing, hypervigilant, monocular, ideological, Manichean, Piagetian, masculine, and prismatic. First person language is used to reflect the author’s experience of Petersonitis, after having been drawn to Peterson’s online video lectures, debating with him in a public forum, and gradually clarifying the nature of the limitations in his outlook and approach. It is hoped that the paper will help readers recognize, recover from, and ultimately transcend Petersonitis, and to appreciate the much wider application of the idea.

Keywords: Books, Christianity, conversation, culture, Jordan Peterson, Jungian, masculinity, media, Piagetian, postmodernism, psychology, public intellectuals, reductionism, spirituality, transgender, twitter.

¹ **Editors note.** An earlier version of this was submitted in August 2018, just after the release of our previous regular issue. The prolegomena has been added for this updated version, along with minor edits to the text.

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Prolegomena

I first heard the expression “It’s never about what it’s about” in the context of marital disputes. Couples fight about diary clashes that shouldn’t have happened, phone chargers that shouldn’t have been moved, surfaces that should have been wiped, and other domestic emotional landmines. Yet the intensity of the escalations and explosions that follow are usually about something altogether more challenging in the relationship – something requiring time and discernment to uncover. This refrain – it’s never about what it’s about – is not literally true, but it’s a useful notion more generally, and it helps when we consider: what was that Jordan Peterson thing about?

I’m sure it wasn’t about Jordan Peterson as such. The rise to fame and notoriety of this particular intellectual, spiritual and political warrior during his apotheosis in the period 2017-2018 was experienced by millions of fans and critics as a kind of epistemic thunderstorm; questions of what we know and how we know them felt unusually charged and salient. Peterson had a significant impact on literally millions of readers and viewers as individuals and a direct influence on cultural influencers including The Intellectual Dark Web and Rebel Wisdom. However, the Peterson phenomenon also represented a significant collective epistemic growth opportunity that I believe was mostly squandered. For this reason, I have done what I can to convey the deeper aboutness of the Peterson moment.

I met Peterson in January 2018 and began writing soon after to make sense of a strange cocktail of conflicted thoughts, feelings and convictions, resulting in the following paper several months later. Once I finished writing, I felt free of Petersonitis, as described below, but it lingered just a little because it proved difficult to publish. I approached several longform journalism and academic outlets, often supported by contacts, but the cultural gatekeepers I encountered wanted a clear appraisal of Peterson’s main ideas, or they wanted commentary on the world’s reaction to Peterson, both of which became well-trodden terrain as a result. Instead, I sought to examine the Peterson phenomenon as a touchstone for our capacity for epistemic and spiritual growth at a cultural level, which is part of my professional purpose at *Perspectiva*; the paper’s length and tenor stemmed from that deeper objective, and felt necessary, even if that meant it didn’t ‘fit’ into the places I wanted it to go.

I have paid little attention to Peterson for the last two years, but Patricia Marcoccia’s documentary *The Rise of Jordan Peterson* (2019) appears to share my premise that this was a teachable moment that got away. More directly pertinent to *Integral Review* is Rebel Wisdom’s interview with Ken Wilber on Peterson³ which was promising because a rigorous developmental perspective is lacking in discussions by and about Peterson. However, I felt Wilber missed an opportunity to highlight the principle limitation of Peterson’s thought, namely his ambivalence and neglect of ‘bottom right’ phenomena in the terms of integral theory’s quadrant map. Those inter-objective features of reality, including the economic and institutional structures that are driving technological and ecological systems, are arguably the preeminent issues of our time, but Peterson very rarely goes there, and when he does it is mostly to offer generic praise of capitalism.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDjCnFvz11A>

Fully developing the significance of this point would require another paper but it can be intimated with some comparisons. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* by Shoshana Zuboff is broadly about how Facebook and Google are extracting and manipulating data in a way that is destroying culture and making people unfree, while *The Uninhabitable Earth* by David Wallace Wells is about the economic logic of fossil fuel extraction destroying nature and with it, our only viable home. These critically acclaimed and high-profile books were both published in 2019, after Peterson's peak, but neither have received anything close to the same cultural attention, and neither represented the same kind of epistemic inflexion point. With that in mind, I think what my article below is *about* is an attempt to show that Peterson's psycho-spiritual offerings are valuable when they help us contextualise and transform the socio-economic logics that are precipitating ecological and technological peril, but they are positively harmful when used to distract us from them or downplay their importance.

On a more conciliatory and appreciative note, Peterson's Foreword to Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* for Vintage Classics also came out in the interim and served as a reiteration of what is driving Peterson – fear of societal collapse and an acute awareness of just how much worse everything could be. He is right about that – a functional society is a fragile achievement in need of vigilance, not a default setting to be taken for granted or casually lamented. The teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg can perhaps be thought of as Peterson's nemesis in this regard. In fact, I find it curious that Greta rose to Peterson-like levels of fame just after Peterson began to retreat from view. While Peterson appears to thrive at life's social game and regularly wins the battle for attention, Thunberg has said it is her high-functioning Asperger's and selective muteness that helps her see through the social game that everyone is caught up in. That game of performativity and pretending is arguably what is preventing us from attending to the life-giving ecological foundations that should matter to us most at this moment. Alas, the controlled urgency we need to feel to collectively attend to the fragility of human civilisation is often lost in the more palpable entertainment of culture wars and identity politics that facilitated Peterson's rise to fame.

At the time of writing in the summer of 2020, Peterson appears to be convalescing after an extended period of ill-health relating to depression and withdrawal from benzodiazepines. At a personal level, I wish him a speedy and full recovery. If I have a regret about the following article, it is that with hindsight it looks like I was trying not only to outsmart Peterson, but to be seen to be out-smarting Peterson. In that sense, my approach was perhaps unconsciously hubristic or foolhardy, but it was nonetheless a wholehearted effort. Peterson himself is currently not prominent in public discourse but may soon become so again. And many others might rise to fame in a similar way. I am grateful to Integral Review therefore for giving me a formal platform to be able to share what I think the Peterson phenomenon was about.

Introduction

Jordan B. Peterson is easily misunderstood. He is a clinical psychologist and Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto but is now known as a forceful cultural commentator who emphasizes the value, depth, and dignity of individual responsibility in an embattled manner, as if civilization is at stake. His magnum opus is not the self-help bestseller, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, but a much deeper inquiry into myths and archetypes, *Maps of Meaning*, published two decades earlier. Peterson's online academic lectures derive from this earlier textbook and are where his intellectual quality is most evident; these videos are viewed in their millions by his fans but mostly ignored by his critics (Peterson, 2018a). Peterson's news interviews, public debates, online discussions, and social media comments on the other hand typically relate to identity and ideology and are often much less judicious, though they attract widespread attention. He is possibly the best-known public intellectual of the time, though some argue that his fame is symptomatic of a global intellectual crisis rather than a product of the quality of his thought (Robinson, 2018).

Reaching a settled view on Peterson's contribution is difficult because it manifests in so many ways. While he has built an impressive academic career respecting data and nuance, he is often undiscerning in his political diatribes. Critics of any aspect of Peterson's work tend to be typecast by his fans using their icon's favored dramatic terms and tenor. They are often assumed to be LEFTIST NEOMARXIST POSTMODERNIST FEMINIST SOCIAL JUSTICE WARRIORS who think only of GROUP IDENTITY, abdicate INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY, and know nothing of BEING – Peterson's favored term for human existence. The online Peterson phenomenon is powerful because it is built on academic prestige, fueled by personal charisma, and driven by oppositional identities.

On January 16, 2018 I spent three hours with Jordan. We had a civil but charged hour-long discussion at the Royal Society of Arts in London. I arranged additional shorter interviews for my organization *Perspectiva*, which, like Peterson, seeks to increase awareness of the relationship between psychological and spiritual sensibility and societal challenges. That evening, thinking the day had gone well, I made the mistake of reading the RSA Video YouTube comments where I am “the host” but verbally flogged like an insubordinate outcast. The conversation has now been viewed over 200,000 times – modest by Peterson's standards – but there have also been several spin-offs on Conservative online platforms viewed in their millions, including vintage clickbait titles like “Leftist Host SNAPS at Peterson – Instantly Regrets it!” I have been approached by strangers at the hairdressers, the gym, the library, and in the playground of my son's school, who recognize me from the Peterson video. The encounter, including preparation and reflection, gave me an appreciation for Peterson's quality and intensity, the vituperative loyalty of his fans, and the atmosphere of allergy and infatuation that surrounds his work.⁴ It also gave me acute *Jordanpetersonitis*.

Jordanpetersonitis
Jawh-duhn-pee-ter-suhn-awy-tis/
Complex noun. Also, abbr.: “Petersonitis”

⁴ RSA Replay. January 16. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD-VCRNIp-U>

1. *Intellectual and emotional discomfort caused by the perceived need to reach an informed view on the significance of Jordan Peterson's cultural contribution, but being unable to, despite considerable effort.*

Petersonitis is not a casual slur, but a serious joke to recognize the cultural indigestion caused by Peterson, and an attempt to redirect the public conversation. We are probably past “peak Peterson” but we must go beyond describing Peterson’s work or even offering a conventional critique – because the Internet is saturated with both. *Petersonitis* serves as a conceptual tool to investigate a confounding experience that may contain the seeds of cultural maturation. The pressure to pick sides is ultimately much more important than the complex public character of Peterson himself, but is well illustrated through the Peterson phenomenon:

Symptoms:

- *Mesmerized intellectual excitement at the spectacle of passionate thinking, laced with confusion at what exactly is being said.*
- *Moral dumbfounding, arising from the intuition that Peterson is wrong in important ways even when his reasoning is persuasive.*
- *Emotional exhaustion caused by too many hours expecting answers from an anguished face on a computer screen.*

I am not alone in calling for this broader reflection in the context of reactions to Peterson. *The Guardian*'s Oliver Burkeman (2018), for instance, took the rare step of devoting a column to resolutely *not* forming an opinion on Peterson:

My wishy-washy ambivalence about Peterson has hardened into defiance: why the hell should I be obliged to decide, as seemingly every writer who encounters his work thinks they are, whether Canada's most controversial professor is A Good Thing or A Bad Thing? This sort of pressure ... is a symptom of our hyper-partisan times, in which everything is politics ... and it's your responsibility, as a good citizen, to adopt and then feverishly defend one sharply defined, absolutist viewpoint, come what may. (np)

2. *Derivative and general application: Feeling frustrated by the cultural obligation to approve/disapprove of a complex thinker for reasons of social or political identification, rather than to form a more discerning view.*

In the process of taking a political view on Peterson, as if casting a vote, we seem to be killing precisely the kinds of breadth and depth of perspective that might revitalize political imagination. As the writer Norman Mailer put it in the context of loving Jorge Luis Borges despite his reactionary political views: “I detest having to think of a writer by his politics first. It's like thinking of people by way of their anus” (Whalen-Bridge, 2008).

This counter-pungent preference is particularly important in the context of Jordan Peterson, because at the surface level, his politics are unsophisticated and divisive, and the language of

infatuation and allergy towards him bifurcates accordingly. For some, he is reenchanting masculinity, reviving Christianity, and providing meaning and direction for thousands of lost souls; for others he is a crypto misogynist authoritarian offering banal advice with footnotes to dangerously entitled people. The answer is probably not to take either side or find a place in between, but to try an entirely different approach.

One of Peterson's favorite sources of insight is psychoanalysis, where a comprehensive diagnosis sometimes functions like a cure. What follows is not another attempt to reach a balanced view of Peterson's work – "he's right in some ways but wrong in others" – but to back up one level of abstraction and reflect on why such "balance," by tacitly endorsing the polarity that calls for it, offers neither catharsis nor transformation (Cooper, 2018).⁵ Here, Peterson is not just another intellectual with some good and some bad ideas, but a test case for approaching difficult thinkers who intrigue us in some ways and annoy us in others.

For this, our conceptual language needs refreshing more generally. Distantly inspired by Peterson's injunction to be precise with words, and mindful of the title of his bestseller, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, I offer twelve conceptual tonics clustered in four trios: to explain the cultural phenomenon, describe his intellectual character, consider major thematic critiques, and offer hope for cultural learning and maturation. The tonics are micro-epiphanies, not revelations, but I hope they present the phenomenon from a wider range of perspectives and thereby help people recover from, live with, or transcend Petersonitis. It is for the reader to determine which of these is the proper aim.

Prevalence:

- *Petersonitis seems to be a minority affliction. It probably affects about 10 percent of the millions of people who come into contact with Peterson's work – the floating voters. Those who strongly like or dislike him (the majority) are immune due to political markers and other identity-based antibodies.*

1. Symptomatic

Intellectual prominence on the world stage usually requires the coalescence of at least three factors: the message, the messenger, and the moment. In Peterson's case, the message is that personal responsibility is sacred; the messenger is a charismatic psychologist; and, whatever optimists like Steven Pinker suggest, for many this moment feels demoralized, rudderless, and cacophonous. Perhaps there is also a fourth factor – the missing: Peterson's message resonates most with people – typically young men – who do not feel properly attended to in public discussions.

Peterson's ascent coincided with the rise and consolidation of powerful strong male leaders around the world, and he is cut from similar cloth: self-assured, identifying enemies, offering answers, and giving people something to believe in. While Peterson shares some qualities with

⁵ Perhaps the most comprehensive engagement with Peterson's work as a whole is by political sociologist Brent Cooper (2018).

Trump (whom Peterson has said he would have voted for) or Putin, Xi, Erdogan, or Modi (Peterson, 2018b), the more challenging point is that in substance he's also like Noam Chomsky of thirty years ago, when, from a very different political vantage point, *Manufacturing Consent* offered the insight the moment was calling for, rallying students all over the world (Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

In a time of post-truth politics, Peterson emphasizes forms of metaphysical and personal truth that resist cultural assimilation. As ISIS barbarism was broadcast nightly, his online lectures illuminated what might be distinctively Christian about a civilization worth defending. In the context of economic competition from the developing world, the ominous impact of robotics on employment, and a generation likely to be poorer than their parents, his message of self-development gives people an alternative to despair and resentment that doesn't rely on forces outside their control. His rise occurred alongside a broader intellectual crisis in social democratic thinking, the eclipse of Obama, and the more general dearth of oratory and leadership. At such moments of social, economic, and political flux, when material questions do not have ready answers, spiritual questions become more salient. Who am I? What's the point of life? Peterson dared to offer some answers.

And how dare he! In a recent critique in the *New York Review of Books*, Pankaj Mishra (2018) remarked: "His apotheosis speaks of a crisis that is at least as deep as the one signified by Donald Trump's unexpected leadership of the free world" (np). In *Current Affairs* magazine, Nathan Robinson (2018) contextualizes that claim: "If Jordan Peterson is the most influential intellectual in the Western world, the Western world has lost its damn mind.... He is a symptom. He shows a culture bereft of ideas, a politics without inspiration or principle" (np).

The reasoning in these two cases and in many other critiques of Peterson is somewhat perplexing. In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill (1859/2016) wrote: "In all intellectual debates, both sides tend to be correct in what they affirm, and wrong in what they deny." This captures why the Peterson phenomenon is important. If part of the perceived problem is that Peterson is now revered by many despite his faults, surely the other part is that people who make their living from intellectual reflection seem dumbfounded as to why, unable to appreciate the value in what he offers. That is also a symptom, also a crisis.

In an atmosphere of rights inflation and ambient entitlement, Peterson's balancing emphasis on personal responsibility is timely. As the Christian tradition often feels moribund, his hermeneutic approach to Bible stories creates precious streams of revitalization. In his emphasis on knowing the truth experientially and striving to establish one's own locus of agency and authority, he saves people from pervasive groupthink. In an increasingly desacralized world, his capacity to yoke lessons from religion without being tethered to a limited conception of "belief" is necessary. Taking a stand against the pressure to conform to unthinking approaches to equalities and diversity, he has provoked public reflection on the difference between genuine care for others and the demands of political correctness. In his admiration for neglected thinkers like Piaget and Jung, he has cultivated new resources to enrich our understanding of ourselves and the world. And with his attempted integration of philosophy, biology, psychology, and theology, he is an exemplar of intellectual excitement – embodying the power of ideas.

Peterson's swift ascent to fame began with his public refusal to agree to Bill C-16, a new law in Canada requiring people to use non-binary pronouns like 'eir', 'zie', or 'they' for transgendered people. Peterson insists he is not transphobic. His principled stance against the top-down imposition of a new regulation of grammar touched a nerve that is still in spasm. That nerve apparently relates to the question of which groups have what kinds of power over the individual and who gets to decide what follows. Peterson's well-articulated public position on that issue, combined with his freely available lectures on psychology, mythology, and self-help has earned him hundreds of thousands of fans and critics.

But the root of the nerve goes deeper still. Much of Western intellectual life, including some of the mistrust between sciences and humanities, stems from an unresolved tension between two paradigmatic approaches to knowledge. Underlying many of the debates Peterson is involved in, is a broadly modernist either/or mentality: defining to exclude, reducing to explain, and narrating as if there was one story, and they are up against the both/and insistence of postmodernism, in which ideas are fuzzy edged and cross-pollinating, context is critical, and values and stories are plural. This is the underlying skirmish in which questions of gender fluidity become not niche but emblematic – are you *either* a man or a woman, or can you, somehow, be neither or *both*?

Peterson's broader loathing of postmodernism stems from treating it like a discrete cultural virus requiring mass inoculation, rather than a diverse and divergent set of ideas that one might learn to live with and sometimes through. He has a tendency to argue by shutting down both/and complexities and doubling down on either/or rhetoric; some things are true and others are false, and science is our guide. "No! Wrong!" he is fond of saying. Those with both/and sensibilities say that truth may be scientific and objective but it is also subjective and relative, and power and culture are also our guides. The either/or sensibility neglects context and perspective and uniqueness. However, in its insistence on its own exclusive truth, postmodern both/and self-righteousness subtly contains the either/or it purports to transcend. That is why "it's all relative" is an absolutist statement, and Blake's celebrated line "to generalize is to be an idiot" is, by definition, an idiotic thing to say.

The challenge is that both claims remain somewhat true. The truly inclusive approach – the real "both/and" – contains "either/or" and "both/and." Perspectivism of that kind is chastened objectivism, in which we forgo the immaturity of mad relativism but insist on putting perspective at the heart of realism. We learn from relativism but don't submit to it; we have a both/and perspective but don't lose our either/or discernment or resolve. That kind of perspective is the cultural pattern waiting to manifest, but it is palpably lacking in Peterson and in most reactions to him.

Intensity of Petersonitis:

- *Mild: Feeling confounded that someone previously unknown in the world of ideas is suddenly so famous and won't go away. Some report that their initial impression that he is an unhappy man offering banal advice made them ill at ease with their own judgment.*

- *Acute: Sensing that his attempt to better connect our psyches with our societies could help us transcend our political polarities and culture wars, only to feel dismayed when his reactionary views and caustic manner reinforces them.*

Knowledge of minority and disempowered perspectives is morally and epistemologically necessary, but the truth is not subsumed by perspective. We can still celebrate, let's say, the industrial revolution, while remembering it was built on slavery, colonialism, and a fossil fuel frenzy with enduring consequences. And we can accept that by some metrics, the world is in better shape than ever before, but in the context of ecological and technological volatility it doesn't follow that we are going in the right direction. Moreover, the data feels obtuse when viewed from the perspective of Syrian refugees, mentally ill teenagers, the working poor, and vanishing small island states. It is possible *both* that we have never had it so good *and* that everything has to change, *and* to argue for a course of action on that premise (Rowson, 2017). If we can work towards understanding that *something* is real and we are partly right and partly wrong about it most of the time, we might, as Peterson puts it, "grow the hell up," though not in the way he seems to have in mind.

2. Multiphrenic

Peterson shifts between reflective, iconoclastic, avuncular, demagogic, compassionate, scientific, and philosophical modes of communicating. I don't think this is an act as such; the protean performance is who he is. One moment he cries in solidarity with forsaken young men on BBC Radio 5 live, and the next he eviscerates his prime minister Justin Trudeau for his enthusiastic tweet supporting women's rights in Canada, asking, "Is that the murderous equity doctrine?" This shifting quality is intriguing and spellbinding, but it makes the task of locating his judgment and motivation like trying to pin jelly to a wall (Peterson, 2018c).⁶

Peterson is multiphrenic. The concept of multiphrenia originated in Kenneth Gergen's *The Saturated Self* (1991), before social media, and it has even greater resonance today because most of us play multiple roles in life. We are saturated with myriad opinions, values, and ways of life, filtered through an array of relationships, projects, and commitments, and viewed increasingly in short nuggets: 800-word reviews, tweets, and video clips. In this world of snapshots we can choose which aspect of ourselves to bring forth, but more often that is decided for us by the medium and the context. In this respect, Peterson illustrates the sociologist Erving Goffman's theory that the self is constituted through presentation; who we are is the sum total of the parts we play for the audiences in our lives, and those parts do not always speak to each other or for each other (Gergen, 2007).

As his former colleague and friend Bernard Schiff (2018), who was responsible for hiring Peterson at the University of Toronto but who now believes Peterson is dangerous, puts it:

Jordan exhibits a great range of emotional states, from anger and abusive speech to evangelical fierceness, ministerial solemnity, and avuncular charm. It is misleading to come

⁶ Brett, Sarah. & Arthanayake, Nihal. 2018. Radio 5 live – Afternoon Edition 15/01/18 [radio show] www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09llgnl

to quick conclusions about who he is, and potentially dangerous if you have seen only the good and thoughtful Jordan, and not seen the bad. (np)

The concept of multiphrenia makes sense of why Peterson can appear quite so impressive, without always actually being so. He wields multiple intellectual weapons with panache, a compelling approach for audiences looking for fragments of meaning to tweet and practical advice to act upon rather than coherent world views to understand life as a whole. If his grasp of psychometrics and statistics from social psychology doesn't persuade one part of you, his archetypal stories from depth psychology will move another part of you. If the case studies from his practice as a clinical psychologist don't speak to your personal experience, his references to neuroscience and evolutionary biology might.

3. Theatrical

Peterson is a performer. Thoreau said people go fishing all their lives without realizing that it's not fish they are after, and millions watch Peterson not so much for the content but for the drama. They are drawn in by the resolute deliveries of choice words, the chastening paternal voice, the summoning pauses, the clipped passive-aggressive responses to challenging questions, the clenched lips, narrowing eyes, and latent rage rendered tolerable by occasional folksy charm, humor, and imploring hand gestures. His literary success is driven less by the quality of his insight (which varies) or prose (which is prolix) than the spectacle of his articulate and assertive public performances, which linger. He lectures by thinking aloud with extraordinary physical energy, constantly pounding and gesticulating, embodying the thinking process as a form of prowess, putting Rodin's inert statue to shame. He might possess what Max Weber (1947) calls "charismatic authority."⁷

In person, Peterson is civil, with flashes of conviviality, but he harbors more melancholy than most and bristles easily. In his demeanor I see some of Daniel Day Lewis's elegance but also Count Dracula's balefulness. There are also traces of Jack Nicholson's Colonel Jessop in *A Few Good Men*, especially in the film's climactic line: "You can't handle the truth!"

Peterson's insistence on truth is heartfelt, and part of the theater, including statements such as: "The Logos is symbolically represented in the figure of Christ.... The West has formulated a symbolic representation of the ideal human being. And that ideal human being is someone who speaks the truth to change the world" (Transliminal, 2017).

That's a good example of a Peterson contention: pithy, compelling, intriguing, apparently deep, even exhilarating, but also question-begging, leaving you wondering if you really understand, or want to (the notion of "ideal human being" has a dark history). Peterson may offer the truth, but it rarely feels like the whole truth.

⁷ "A certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These as such are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader ... How the quality in question would be ultimately judged from an ethical, aesthetic, or other such point of view is naturally indifferent for the purpose of definition."

4. Hypervigilant

Isaiah Berlin said that if you want to understand a thinker you need to grasp what they are fighting against. In Peterson's case that is not difficult. He fears and loathes the brutal forms of collectivism in Hitler's Germany, Mao's China, and Stalin's Russia, and his home is decorated with memorabilia of these dangers, what a *New York Times* profile described as "a carefully curated house of horror" (Bowles, 2018).

Peterson's formative influences included trying to uncover the psychological roots of ideology during the Cold War – how large groups of people could become so attached to ideas that they might destroy the world to defend them. Peterson doesn't see today's liberal order as a historical inevitability but more like a precious, even miraculous, achievement that is extremely fragile. He may not be wrong, but he holds that view in a way that feels deeply personal.

My speculation is that Peterson's odyssey has made him hypervigilant. He admits in an interview with *The Tablet* that he has experienced "derealization" every day since his rise to fame began: "When something happens to you and you can't believe it is your life." Peterson seems to have a higher than average level of threat response, which becomes even higher when he relives the genesis of his derealization at the University of Toronto. His body language tightens and tone of voice sharpens whenever he speaks of THE RADICAL LEFT or POSTMODERN NEOMARXISTS (Stanford, 2018).

Peterson sounds shrill and extreme to some, but wise and prophetic to others, and the difference seems to depend on how threatened a person feels on a day-to-day basis. Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has shown that conservatives are likely to be more concerned with threats to sanctity, order, and tradition than most liberals can even imagine, and their driving concern is often not social progress but personal survival (Haidt, 2013). In an interview with the *Radio Times*, Peterson admits: "I think, because of my proclivity to depression, that negative things hit me harder than they hit people in general" (Hodges, 2018). His main concern is to help people hold down a job and have a family; and social order – he wants us to keep creating, refining, and following the rules that allow us to have a viable economic and political system.

By offering a combination of archetypal myth and conventional vigilance, Peterson's main product amounts to what the author of *The Listening Society* Hanzi Freinacht calls "dark depth" (Freinacht, 2016). Pankaj Mishra's reference to "Fascist Mysticism" perhaps misses the point here. Peterson's focus is how we return from depression and anxiety to normality, and how we try to avoid falling again (Mishra, 2018). He places little emphasis on the numinous aspects of spiritual experience or soulful visions of transformation or transcendence.

His preferred reference points for collective meaning and action are still Mao's revolution and Stalin's gulags, and not, say Aldous Huxley's *Island Utopia*. Peterson speaks of "the evil trinity," of "equity, diversity and inclusivity" as "a mask of virtue under which is something truly awful." Petersonitis arises because while his vigilance about respecting the sovereignty of individuals over

the group is justified by history, his hypervigilance – ongoing heightened threat awareness and extreme sensitivity to group overreach – is not.

5. Sacralizing

I began the RSA public event by asking Peterson about the dream he shares near the start of *12 Rules* because I think it is the key to understanding him and his following:

I was suspended in mid-air, clinging to a chandelier, many stories above the ground, directly under the dome of a massive cathedral. The people on the floor below were distant and tiny.... I have learned to pay attention to dreams, not least because of my training as a clinical psychologist. Dreams shed light on the dim places where reason itself has yet to voyage.... I knew that the cross was simultaneously, the point of greatest suffering, the point of death and transformation, and the symbolic center of the world.

He describes how he returned to anonymity and was beginning to fall asleep when a wind was trying to blow him back to that place, from which there was no escape. He seems to have taken this experience as a kind of existential if not divine revelation: “The center is occupied by the individual. Existence at that cross is suffering and transformation – and that fact, above all, needs to be voluntarily accepted.”

Then he asks: “How could the world be freed from the terrible dilemma of conflict on the one hand, and psychological and social dissolution, on the other. The answer was this: through the elevation and development of the individual, and through a willingness of everyone to shoulder the burden of Being and take the heroic path.”

In our discussion, he seemed to think there is something sacred about individuals taking responsibility and sorting themselves out. His response was striking: “It’s not even that there is something sacred *about it*. *That is what’s sacred* ... the source of the sacred is that idea.”

There are other ways of viewing the sacred; sociologist Gordon Lynch considers it “an inherent structure in morally bounded societies,” and clearly the nature of that structure and those boundaries varies, with many forms that are not about the sanctity of individuals (Rowson, 2015). For Peterson, however, the hero myth, with its journey quality of figurative dragon slaying, is the heart of the matter – the code to living a meaningful life.

The idea is not particularly new. Peterson does with analytical psychology what Joseph Campbell’s *Hero with a Thousand Faces* did with comparative literature, and what many other thinkers have attempted before and since. Moreover, the heroic journey towards individuation as life’s meaning is arguably a distinctly male emphasis. Carol Gilligan (1982) and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (2009) among others would question the universality of Peterson’s idea of the sacred, which may instead be reflected in the aesthetic unity of skillful cooperation or fuller self-knowledge through the experience of profound and deepening interdependence.

On reflection, what Peterson is offering is sacralized Nietzscheism or mythologized existentialism. It’s not *Christian*. Peterson admits he has not read René Girard (1979), which is a

strange scholarly oversight given the extent of his research for his first book, *Maps of Meaning*. Girard's influential line is that the archaic sacred is the religious ritual ethos of violent sacrifice to pacify the tribe and appease the gods; the purpose of God in Christ is to overcome this form of the sacred and institute the reign of ongoing peaceful self-sacrifice in community, which is the new sacred, symbolized by the act of communion supper.

Without that kind of resolution, Peterson is suspended between Nietzsche and Christ.⁸ He is drawn to Nietzsche's iconoclastic freedom from herd morality, but he can't go all the way with his nihilism. And he is drawn to Christ as the Logos incarnate, the ultimate truth teller, and meaning maker, but his individualism precludes following where Christianity leads, namely to community, communion and charity. In that anguished space between Nietzsche and Christ he busks with psychometrics and archetypes, singing the blues about bearing the burden of being.

6. Solipsistic

Peterson's apparently heroic individualism is actually an existentialist isolationism. Humility and activism in synthesis is the hard-won achievement of the best of religious communities of practice and those they work with. But if, like Peterson, you write about the *Logos* but don't work in communion somehow, whether through church-going or otherwise, you don't discover that synthesis or contribute to it. Instead Peterson has found himself looking at a computer camera, wearing a headset and microphone, charging hundreds of dollars for a forty-five-minute online "ask me anything" call, whereby random people seek *his* advice about *their* life, watched not by a shared community but by the atomized masses (Bowles, 2018).

These points have political implications. Climate change, for instance, is not a discrete environmental issue but a collective action problem at every level of society, from the home to the office, all the way to the UN. It calls not merely for individual personal responsibility but also shared cultural and democratic responsibility; what we seem to lack is precisely that sense of collective ownership for the problem and our responsibility towards it.

It is not enough to trust people who are competent, as Peterson suggests we should, because the people with economic and political power who are ostensibly competent are tragically letting us down (Rowson, 2013). Activism arises from the impression that we need to walk the talk of collective action at scale. In her Nobel Prize-winning lecture, political economist Elinor Ostrom – celebrated for her studies of collective action solutions – makes the point elegantly: "Extensive empirical research leads me to argue that ... a core goal of public policy should be to facilitate the development of institutions that bring out the best in humans."

Peterson would agree with Ostrom on this point, but they may differ on the question of what "the best in humans" means. Before going on stage at the RSA we had a relatively short and focused interview in which I tried to connect Peterson's interest in Jean Piaget to human development more generally. I asked whether he felt "self-authorship" – in which our judgment is truly our own rather than a *mélange* of social conventions – was the ultimate stage of human development. Peterson built a company around the idea and comes across as quintessentially self-

⁸ I am grateful to Ian Christie for this astute way of putting it.

authoring – the locus of authority is within oneself, not the social surround. However, Robert Kegan is one of many theorists to argue there are stages beyond self-authorship; in his model, for instance, the subsequent stage is the self-transforming mind or inter-individual stage (Thomason, 2012).

In this advanced stage of maturation, we gain an additional perspective on our own perceptual processes and implicit ways of knowing; we start to see our own personal ideologies. We can thereby form a more constructively critical relationship with our own world views and improve our capacity for empathy and intimacy with a wider range of people, because we cease to filter other people's experience through our own models of the world. Peterson broadly agreed with this idea intellectually, but seemed reluctant to concede the point explicitly, perhaps for pragmatic commercial reasons. That sounds like a cheap shot, but in a tweet he writes: "What's your vision? What's your strategy? What's your destiny? Take control with www.selfauthoring.com" (Peterson, 2018d).

As a trained clinical psychologist, Peterson should not only be familiar with but also skilled at inhabiting the world from the perspective of others, ready, willing, and able to set aside his own assumptions and constructions in order to view the world through another's eyes; to feel what they feel in the way that they alone feel it. And yet, the more I read and listen to Peterson, the more he sounds solipsistic. He clearly has regard and concern for the lives of others, but everything he encounters seems to be filtered through his own self-construction of the world, which he seems unwilling to critically reflect on beyond a certain point.

In the philosophical tradition, solipsism is about whether we can trust that anything outside of our own minds is real. Peterson is solipsistic in a looser and more figurative sense relating to intellectual character – he filters his definitions, anecdotes, and understanding of opposing views through his own personal coda. That only takes one so far, and it is precisely that additional self-transforming and inter-individual step that is called for at a cultural level today.

7. Monocular

Peterson is an expert and a generalist, but he is not an expert generalist. That distinction matters because of the many millions who trust his judgment in a general sense on the basis of specific intellectual authority.

The idea of an expert generalist is paradoxical but not oxymoronic. In theory, our very best philosophers, civil servants, political leaders, and writers are expert generalists – their defining skill is inclusive synthesis and their defining qualities are epistemic acumen and agility: know-how with knowledge, having enough expertise in one domain to value different forms of understanding, and knowing how to integrate them while retaining curiosity towards whatever remains unfamiliar.

With respect, Jordan Peterson is not like that at all. He is a social psychologist with an impressive publication record on psychometrics, a clinical psychologist with several years of client

experience, and a depth psychologist with a flair for mythology and theology. But he sees everything through an augmented psychological lens, rather than showing any inclination to move between different forms of knowledge.

Peterson is not the first psychologist to come across as sociologically blinkered (the reverse also applies). Alienation, for instance, is experienced psychologically as estrangement from oneself as familiar places and people become strange; anomie is a loss of the structuring principles through which to orient ourselves through life. Peterson speaks directly to the experience of alienation and anomie psychologically, but they are also sociological phenomena with political and economic causes that he more or less ignores. His inclination is to reduce emergent social, cultural, and economic phenomena to the individual, operationalized into psychometrics like IQ, “agreeableness,” or “conscientiousness.” This meta-theory – methodological individualism – is a respectable approach to knowledge, but widely contested for good reason.

Peterson is an individual-differences psychologist with related passions and convictions, and nobody can be expected to know everything. In a now famous academic paper by Kieran Healy (2017), “F*** Nuance,” the author argues against “a free floating demand that something be added.” To say that Peterson is not an expert generalist is not to say he is a negligent thinker, but to help make sense of the personal and political limitations of his ideas.

Peterson appears skeptical about the conceptual integrity and explanatory power of many features of social, economic, and ecological systems and structures: gender, class, race, place, institutions, poverty, educational inequality, social capital, culture, habitus, reflexivity, emergence, finance. Such features of our shared reality are not merely irreducible to psychometrics but they also interrelate in ways that add to the complexity of credible social explanations. It would be refreshing to hear Peterson wonder aloud with a question like: how would a good anthropologist, political economist, sociologist, or ecologist think about this phenomenon? But he never does.

When Peterson inveighs against the use of “patriarchy” for instance, he seems to examine it like a psychometric and find it wanting, rather than a theory of society as a whole that points to a phenomenon we struggle to see because it is so thoroughly endemic that it shapes what and how we see. More generally, he lacks sociological imagination. He shows almost no interest in how power, elites, class, institutions, capital, and media come together to shape the world and indeed the individual; and why we might therefore be inclined to try to reshape it for the better. This is not a minor point. As we grow in understanding of those structural and systemic effects we see that social analysis cannot be reduced to psychometrics (Wright Mills, 1959).

In fact, Peterson has no compelling story to tell of what it might mean for society as a whole to improve itself. He has no endgame, as Seth Abramson (2018) put it. His vision seems to amount to whatever emerges from billions of politically disengaged individuals steadfastly getting their shit together, with a view to dominating each other. As Peterson is fond of putting it: good luck with that.

8. Ideological

In a sense, Peterson is hiding in plain sight. The essence of ideology is being possessed by a set of ideas that we cannot think critically *about* because we see with and through them. On this point Peterson approvingly quotes Jung: “People don’t have ideas. Ideas have people.”

Peterson has spent his career researching the dangers of ideology, but the sanctity and sovereignty of the individual clearly “has” him in the Jungian sense. And yet “the individual” is a historical and cultural construct like any other. My Oxford politics tutor Larry Siedentop’s (2015) *The Invention of the Individual* makes precisely this point. The idea of the individual is a key element in the construction of social reality in the West over the last few hundred years, but it is neither a metaphysical axiom nor a cultural universal.

Peterson juxtaposes ideological thinking with religious thinking by saying that while ideology offers self-serving partial truths (e.g. nature is wonderful and beautiful), religions offer fuller truths (e.g. nature is beauty and wonder, but also cancer, tsunamis, and death). Yet he seems unaware of his own recurring tendency to create and attack strawmen. The shortcomings of his views on postmodernism, for instance, have been highlighted in a range of places, most impressively by the writer Shuja Haider (2018). Peterson lacks substantive knowledge of postmodern thinkers and conflates postmodernism and neomarxism. When he is charged with conflation, he says no, or more like “NO!”, “WRONG!”; he says the postmodernists filled their own explanatory void with Marx, or the Marxists used the fashion of postmodernism to conceal their mischief, but the overall impression is of intellectual cobbling to serve a narrative, not judicious scholarly discernment. His hypervigilance about neomarxist ideology permeating the academy makes him sound McCarthyesque, as if there is a vast conspiracy afoot, but it seems more likely he has over-extrapolated from his own experience, again. But Peterson needs, even wants, his enemies, because his ideology takes a particular binary form.

9. Manichean

Manicheism was a religious movement founded by the Persian prophet Mani in the third century; it teaches a dualistic cosmology of good and evil, light and darkness, and is used figuratively to refer to moral binaries. Peterson is Manichean. He is not a process philosopher who instinctively thinks in terms of complex systems in motion, cross-pollinating in pluralistic and unpredictable ways. He is much more absolutist and dualist in spirit. The intellectual structures he thinks with are mostly polar opposites, like pillars on a stage in which our dramas must unfold. He recognizes antinomies like good and evil, yin and yang, order and chaos, truth and falsity, individual and collective. However, he typically frames these juxtapositions as binary battles to be fought and won rather than co-constituting and porous relationships that we have constructed and might reimagine together.

Manichean views of the world are difficult to avoid. The human love of binaries has been widely theorized since structural anthropologist Levi Strauss revealed their cultural function. To orient ourselves by juxtaposing polar opposites is a natural way of thinking. Even so, Manichean thinking is not fit for purpose in a multipolar, multivalent, multimodal, multiethnic world, and it is compounded by our political spectrum. While the language of left and right once made some sense

of class-based attitudes to the role of the state, politics is now about so much more; attitudes towards ecological and technological phenomena in particular cannot be parsed in terms of left and right, nor can national identity or the challenge to defend liberal democracy from populism.

In that context, the ambient pressure to choose a tribe and say “yay” or “nay” to the issue of the day is the problem that obstructs meaningful progress. We are building division within people that is culturally muted, while amplifying the divisions between people that are reinforced on a daily basis. Broadcast media selects guests with opposing views to get “both sides” of an issue, as if they were coins. Oppositional identities, in which we define who we are by what we are against, become the defining characters in public debate. We are rarely allowed to be curious but disinterested. Instead we must pick a side: Are you left or right, atheist or believer, with us or against us? This kind of ambient divisiveness is part of what Rowan Williams (2016) calls “the meta-crisis” of our times; namely how ecological, economic, social, and political crises are compounded by the limited and harmful ways we encounter, conceive, experience, and discuss them.

Peterson appears to be invested in perpetuating the individual/collective binary, which significantly limits political imagination. This distinction dissolves, however, when you realize that the self is constituted through communicative interaction between individuality and sociality. Hope lies in a richer notion of a social self, which was most fully worked out by the sociologist and process philosopher, G. H. Mead, but also features in Buddhist notions of interdependence. Rowan Williams (2018) makes a similar case from a Christian perspective in his new book *Being Human*. The juxtaposition that matters most may not be the individual and the community but the individual and the person. While the individual seeks to differentiate itself from what Peterson calls “the chaos” and thereby to control it, the person accepts they are partly constituted by that chaos, manifest in relationships of all kinds. We don’t need to accept a Manichean world view of perpetual struggle. Seeing reality in process-relational terms could lead to reform in various institutions. There is deeper hope in a vision of the interplay of systems, souls, and society in which we are at once lost and found.

10. Piagetian

Peterson speaks of Piaget, the relatively neglected intellectual giant of the twentieth century, in glowing terms, a genius who revealed the foundations of morality and whose ultimate aim was to unite science and religion.

A central Piagetian notion is the *schema*, our perceptual and conceptual patterning of thought through which we take in information (assimilation) and which changes our understanding (accommodation), leading to an equilibrated state which is the thing – our mental process – that we can’t really see because we see *with* it. In Robert Kegan’s language, consciousness *is* this “subject-object relationship”; we are subject to some things that we *are*, and we can relate to some things as objects that we *have*. We grow through differentiation and integration, slowly having things we were previously had-by, including thoughts and feelings and thereby relating to them better.

This distinction matters crucially in the context of ideology, which all too often possesses people. The point goes beyond Piaget and Peterson to a whole domain of research and practice based on an entirely different conception of the human being as a process of human becoming. We are developmental processes that adapt, evolve, and transform in response to an evolving set of cultural expectations that both shape and are shaped by human development. This developmental perspective on life offers not just a new psychology but a new biology and a new epistemology, and ultimately a new ethics and politics; it is a view of life (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 2014).⁹

In the video interview for *Perspectiva*, I asked Peterson whether a fuller understanding of development might help us transcend our culture wars by encouraging people to reflect on what they are subject to in their thinking. For instance, the postmodern contention that truth is perspectival may be a necessary evolutionary stage for a culture to pass through, and for individuals to adapt to and move beyond before we collapse into mad relativism. He seemed to agree, albeit very cautiously, suggesting it was rare to see that kind of evolution of perspective in practice (*Perspectiva*, 2018). He is right, but I believe it is precisely the necessary cultural evolution that the Peterson phenomenon points us towards and improving our discussion on gender is a fundamental part of it.

11. Masculine

If the conversation between Peterson and his critics teaches us anything, it is that we are biopscho-social-spiritual beings and any useful conversation about gender will reflect that.¹⁰

Men and women are different, even if in aggregate we are much more alike than different. And men and women are not just biologically different, because when it comes to human beings “just biological” is incoherent. Biology informs epistemology and therefore ethics, and, in that context, the idea of “women’s ways of knowing” makes sense. It is not clear what kind of sense, and what follows politically, but that is a useful question to ask (Belenky, et al., 1986).

What is less useful is describing metaphysical heuristics in gendered terms. Chaos/Order is perhaps the defining binary of life in *12 Rules for Life* and Peterson identifies order as masculine and chaos as feminine, which seems gratuitous. The comparative mythologist John David Elbert (2018) draws attention to Ancient Egypt as one illustrative counter-example. It is worth quoting the extract in full to give some idea of the depths to which you have to plunge to make sense of this material and Peterson’s selective use of it.

One thing that Peterson doesn’t tell you, because he’s an absolutist – he likes everything to be flattened out into simple clear absolute unshakeable structures – is that in Egypt the valences regarding gender were reversed; the sky was female and the earth was male. The sky was the sky Goddess *Nut*, the starry expanse of the stars in which the *Pharaoh* was born in would come out of her and go back into her, become an embryo like the stars. The earth was *Jeb*, the source of earthquakes like *Poseidon* in Greek myth. And the earth was always

⁹ See also Kegan, (1982) and my reflection on the first chapter there: Rowson, (2016).

¹⁰ I develop this point in my book, *The Moves that Matter* (Bloomsbury 2019) in a section on men and women, pages 170-177.

what was opened up and dug into, the father was dug into in order to reinsert the dead *Pharaoh* who becomes a new embryo in the sky when he ascends to become one of the stars in the body of the Great Mother thus becoming intrauterine once again. So a different valence there for the Egyptians. They like the woman on top and that's the sexual metaphor there goes right through ... and they had early matrimonial traditions very strong on Goddesses and the Great Mother in that civilization.

The underlying point is there are many myths and archetypes, and the extent to which they are gendered is culturally specific. The gender question is even more vexed at the social level. How might men and women be most fully themselves, in ways truly chosen, not merely mandated, and in ways that serve everyone's interest in living what Roberto Unger calls "a larger life" – lives of greater intensity, scope, and capability? The struggle against entrenched inequalities of all kinds, including gender inequality, is secondary to that more inclusive objective (BBC, 2013).

Peterson provides useful grist to the mill here; while he walks his talk of a forthright masculinity, his solipsism and hypervigilance often make him sound clueless about gender relations more generally. When he suggested in an interview with VICE News that men and women cannot work together well because the rules are not clear, and that one of the rules should perhaps be that women cannot wear makeup at work, he sounds about half a century out of date (Mind Temple, 2018). Similarly, in an unstructured chat over a brisk lunch with several people at the RSA it emerged that Peterson strongly disliked the Disney movie *Frozen*; in essence because he thinks it is "reprehensible propaganda." He sees it as an inversion of *Sleeping Beauty* and believes it has a political agenda – I think relating to men not being needed – though he didn't spell that out. But *Frozen* is not merely admired but *adored* by millions. It celebrates sisterly love with the best kind of postmodern ironic twist on the familiar theme of "true love" and it includes positive male characters. I have savored watching the film several times with my sons and it strikes me as fundamentally innocent and inspiring, perhaps especially for girls grappling with social and emotional expectations. If I had to choose a single thing that makes me doubt Jordan Peterson's fundamental soundness, it is that he sees political conspiracy in *Frozen* and does not like the film as a result (Redpill Media, 2018).

More usefully, Peterson highlights that men who lack orientation become depressed, then resentful, and then dangerous, and he has drawn attention to distinctly male challenges relating to knowing our shadows; how our craving for status and purpose can lead to aggression and violence. His popularity among young men also reveals an appetite for facing up to practical challenges, starting with an injunction for which he is famous: Make your bed! Tidy your room! Perhaps men in particular are responding to this message, that meaning arises from responsibility, because that message is already evident to women.

In most couples with children, even if the father purports to parent equally, it is invariably the mother who manages most of what feminists call "the mental load": play dates, keeping track of domestic supplies or dealing with difficult feelings arising from friendships at school (Barberio, 2017). Valuing this kind of undervalued and unpaid labor, typically done by women, Kate Raworth sees as a critical feature of a viable twenty-first-century economics. Such work is also a good example of the challenge of discussing gender because of the often heard argument that women do such work more "naturally" and better than men. To state that should not risk ridicule and nor

does it mean accepting the status quo as fair. The point is to move towards a clearer and wiser division of labor where effort and proclivity are recognized and properly rewarded (Maushart, 2003).

Peterson's conversation with Cathy Newman on Channel 4 is a related case in point. That discussion has been viewed over 20 million times and accentuated Peterson's fame. The debate concerned women generally being paid less than men for doing the same job, with Peterson saying that the gap is not really about gender – which he seems to view as an arbitrary variable like any other. A closer look at the data nested within gender divides reveals a range of factors including the trait “agreeableness,” with women generally being more agreeable than men, and less likely to push for pay rises. This is the truth, but it's not the whole truth – and a sense of failure in converging on the whole truth is a core element of Petersonitis.

In this case, what is valued socially and culturally is not valued financially, and that's a structural problem at the heart of the pay gap. It is “structural” because the relationship between social and cultural value and financial value is set by processes mostly still controlled by men; those processes and their outcomes are relatively beneficial to men, and those outcomes arise in a world where financial value has become the predominant value, thereby perpetuating gender power imbalances.

In the Channel 4 conversation, Peterson was better armed with facts and arguments and more fully present, but the spectacle was quintessentially a debate where both sides were competing and the more nimble side “won.” It was not a dialectic where both sides sought resolution through synthesis, nor a dialogue where each side sought to know an issue more deeply and fully by incorporating the perspective of the other. It was male against female, right against left, data against narrative, reason against emotion; it didn't resolve anything. It was a cultural touchstone because it was a cultural failure.

12. Prismatic

Which brings us full circle back to the experience of Petersonitis, and the question of how to improve conversations on thinkers like Peterson where allergies and infatuations are the norm. Peterson is prismatic in the sense that looking through the phenomenon opens up new vistas on this abiding issue. How should we relate to those like Peterson who on fuller inspection probably *should* evoke a both/and *and* either/or response? How do we bring about a cultural conversation where we can praise and critique without giving up on moral discernment or objective truth?

Politically speaking, that would mean a searching conversation with different premises and divergences. Men and women are different and they are the same; *and* we have to decide what kinds of gender roles are wise in myriad contexts. Capitalism is often part of the solution and part of the problem; *and yet* we need an economic model that works within social and ecological limits, so we can't continue to assume capitalism will survive in anything like its present form. Climate change is an existential threat to humanity and there is some doubt about some details in some climate models; *and* we urgently need a rapid global energy transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Democracy is increasingly an embarrassment, but it is also the noblest ideal we have; *and* we have to proactively reimagine it for a digital age. Human rights lack secure philosophical

foundations and they are politically under siege, *and yet* they may be a necessary moral touchstone, worth defending not in spite of but because of their constructed and negotiated nature. Artificial intelligence creates great opportunities and is a threat to civilization; *and* the question is not how cool AI can be, but who owns it, and is what they want aligned with the greater good?

Peterson appears to have little to contribute to such conversations, which is why, although I have enjoyed the ride, I ultimately feel disappointed by him, and no longer expect to learn from him about the most important questions of our time. Some would say that his role is not to model such dialogues, but the point is that such issues are not in his purview. He is a psychologist, granted, and speaking mostly to individuals looking for direction in life. If he wants to focus on the message that individual responsibility is sacred and to use his fame and wealth to further amplify what he believes in, perhaps we should just salute his inner lobster?

But no. Given Peterson's influence, that kind of oversimplified message is precisely what keeps us trapped in outdated constructs (e.g. left and right) and oppositional identities (e.g. men and women) and militates against the generative and imaginative perspectives we need. He has the charisma, clarity, and following to add psychological and spiritual depth to our collective action problems on an ongoing basis, but shows no inclination to do so. The challenges of our time are daunting precisely because they are not principally about individuals solving discrete problems but interrelated challenges arising from collective processes. We therefore need visions of individuality that are not about slaying the dragon of the collective, but more like learning to ride it. The question for the individual is how to grow morally, cognitively, and spiritually by expanding circles of belonging, developing bio-psycho-social-spiritual selves in a manner that is truly one's own because it speaks to a social milieu in which the self is created.

Set against that fuller context and perspective, our challenge is to imagine a world beyond consumerism, where 9 billion humans can survive and thrive on a planet that is technologically imperious but ecologically imperiled and politically and spiritually confused. Peterson growls: Grow the hell up and tidy your room! Perhaps we should. Our rooms after all are dramatic settings, and microcosms of the world as a whole. But I think Peterson needs to grow the hell up too. The more profound story begins when we ask who owns the room, why there is so much stuff in it, and what joy we might find and create with the people outside.

Treatment: If neither abstinence nor denial works, try writing.

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