

The cultural world changed with Professor Jordan Peterson

By Judy Stove, Quadrant Online, 29 October 2018

The Canadian professor's entire moral enterprise arose from his horror at the ease with which murderous ideologies came to possess ordinary people. Most of us look only briefly at that matter and others, unsettling as they are, but Peterson explores the very bases of such thought and being

The cultural world changed after the UK Channel 4 interview which took place on January 16 this year, in which Cathy Newman “interviewed” the Canadian psychology professor Jordan B. Peterson.

The interview, or rather attempted harangue by Newman, became an instant phenomenon, mainly because Peterson's demeanour, intelligence and patience with Newman's rudeness, and real or assumed stupidity, were so impressive. The interview, contrary no doubt to the plan of Newman and Channel 4, greatly raised Peterson's already high public profile, ensured best-seller status for his second book (*12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*), and consigned Newman and Channel 4 to the ridicule of millions of viewers around the world. Whether either will recover is yet to be seen. (**online editor:** that video is embedded below)

<https://youtu.be/aMcjxSThD54>

While numerous profiles and interviews of Peterson have, over the last year, appeared in news and opinion outlets, most have been along the lines of: “Look at this wacky Canadian professor who seems to have millions of fans for some reason.” Few have attempted to come to grips with what are arguably his most important and original contributions to the ideas of the day. (A notable exception is the excellent hour-long interview by Dutch commentator Timon Dias, on the *Geenstijl* website and YouTube.) For me, writing as I have done for ten years about the importance of personal morality, in particular a return to a virtue framework, the most exciting thing about Peterson is that he is bringing talk about virtue and morality back to thousands of people in a West which has shunned and indeed ridiculed those ideas for fifty years.

I hope not to caricature Peterson in saying that in several talks and interviews, and also in his 1999 book *Maps of Meaning*, he has given an account of the development of morality which is based on evolutionary and psychological theory. According to Peterson, a moral way of life is that kind of life which maximises long-term good for both the individual and for the group. Humans are, after all, social animals.

For humans, who live in families and villages and suburbs and workplaces, morally right behaviour is that which benefits, indeed maximises long-term benefit, for the individual and for the group. It is unfortunate that this formulation sounds a little too much like utilitarianism, as widely understood, that is in “seeking the greatest good for the greatest number”. In Peterson's presentation, however, the emphasis is heavily on the individual's ability, and responsibility, to act in a morally constructive way. His view is therefore, in my opinion, closer to a “virtue ethics” position than to a utilitarian one.

For humans, this will involve sacrifices, restraints on personal desires, and trust in others to act similarly. It will involve, and indeed require, behaviour which conforms to a set of rules and expectations.

Note that this account of morality does not have anything to say about divine injunction or direction. There may, or may not, be a god or gods who supervise proceedings, and prescribe rewards or punishments, but the human systems can develop and proceed without them. The outcomes from infractions of the human systems generally include punishments and rewards in any event. The ancient question, posed earliest and best by Plato in the *Euthyphro*, as to whether an action is good because the gods direct it, or in itself, is here beside the point.

As it happens, Peterson himself has developed a religious (or quasi-religious) structure deriving from, rather than integral to, his view of the development of morality. This I shall discuss later.

For centuries, readers would have recognised the naturalistic framework from a similar formulation set out in the first century BC by the Roman philosopher, lawyer and politician Cicero, in his ethical work *De Officiis*. Clearly, Cicero had no conception of the evolutionary background which we now take for granted. Yet it was clear enough to ancient thinkers that human societies were already of great antiquity, and were based ultimately on the family. Cicero set out a naturalistic account of the origins of human virtue which is remarkably similar to Peterson's, and, like his, started from the idea that humans are members of the animal world.

Cicero begins with the premise that every animal has both a sense of self-preservation and a reproductive drive. However, only the human animal reasons about cause and effect, the present and the future: only a human surveys his life and plans his behaviour accordingly. Humans by nature gather in groups, "form public assemblies", and provide for family both immediate and extended. Family and social groupings thus develop. These natural tendencies promote the virtues—prudence, generosity, courage—which best preserve and improve the circumstances of the group.

In addition, the human mind hungers after knowledge: it desires to know what is true. It also resists submitting to others except in accordance with the rules of justice and law. These natural tendencies, again, promote the cultivation of those virtues, wisdom and justice. "From this attitude come greatness of soul and a sense of superiority to worldly conditions."

Cicero's philosophical works had a profound influence on early modern and Enlightenment thinking about morality. But who nowadays is familiar with *De Officiis*? Only specialists, usually on ancient philosophy, and they are not normally people who would give Jordan Peterson any consideration (alas, largely because they would probably believe media caricatures of him as "alt-right").

It undoubtedly took someone who was not a philosopher, not an historian, not a student of ancient languages, to bring these strands of culture all together as Peterson has done. Specialists are too reluctant to step outside their field, and too cautious. Having been an undergraduate in the 1980s, I am old enough to remember the final echoes of a time when classical literary studies were last infused, to some extent, with "mythologism" and the deployment of "archetypes": the faint vestiges of Sir James Frazer and *The Golden Bough*; Jane Ellen Harrison and Greek religion; Gilbert Murray, in 1914, finding Oedipal echoes in *Hamlet*. Then there was Levi-Strauss, and Jung, and finally Northrop Frye, promoting the mythical interpretation of literature. I remember puzzling over Frye's "seasons" interpretations (winter = satire), wondering how it added to the literature under review, and thinking that it must be my fault that I failed to see its value.

The death knell of that kind of interpretation had been sounded in 1956, by Douglas Bush in an article in the *Sewanee Review*, "Mrs Bennet and the Dark Gods: The Truth about Jane

Austen”, which satirically applied the mythological treatment to *Pride and Prejudice*. His piece, which is hilarious if you know both the novel and the mythology, demonstrated, as it apparently needed to do, that great literature is not rendered any greater by being read through the lens of mythological symbols. (One of my favourites from the paper is that Mr Bingley, because of his mysterious comings and goings with a train of followers, must be some sort of Dionysus figure.) Ovid, say, and Jane Austen, both have profound things to say about human life and psychology, but the one is not improved with a sprinkling of the other.

That Douglas Bush and his *jeu d’esprit* have entirely faded from public consciousness is a sign of the disappearance of mythological treatments of literature. In his idiosyncratic way, Peterson is bringing them back: he finds the Oedipal mother in the fairy tale of the Sleeping Beauty, and he finds suggestive archetypes in the Harry Potter stories. This is perhaps a compliment unearned by J.K. Rowling, whose books are more generally, and justly, considered an unstructured grab-bag of mostly Greek mythological elements.

The mythological view of literature was replaced, in the 1960s and thereafter, with something much worse, and in most cases far less justifiable: the Marxist obsession with economic class; then post-Marxist and postmodernist gender focus; and finally race and colonialism, and now as appears, transgenderism, to the exclusion of any other considerations. This has been reinforced by the relentless practice of *ad hominem* condemnation of any writer whose works might be seen to be insufficiently attentive to gender and race; these people are invariably called white supremacists, and are hounded into abject apology, or unemployment. Naturally, on this kind of basis, Peterson himself has been called a Nazi.

As Peterson has said in a number of his talks, this has appalled him, particularly because his entire moral enterprise arose out of his existential despair and horror about the history of the twentieth century. Who, if he or she honestly considers the events of 1914 to 2001, or indeed to 2018, cannot be horrified? Who cannot dread the possession of ordinary people by murderous ideologies? Most of us look only briefly at the matter, because it is too terrible and too intractable, but Peterson has been moved to explore into the very bases of such ways of thought and being.

Peterson concludes that any and every person is capable of extreme evil. The answer to evil, in the end, he claims, is that each individual takes a decision which is not evil, rather than evil; that tends to the good, or at least does not tend to the bad. Social and national evils are compounded of individual evils, magnified exponentially.

On this basis, Peterson has practised what he has preached. He is best known for making two videos, in 2016, in which he said that he would not use the strange new pronouns devised for a range of gender variants, which were then proposed for inclusion in Canadian law; Bill C-16 was subsequently passed in 2017, and those variants are now established in law. Among other things, as Peterson and others have pointed out, the law, in being predicated on the view that gender, sexual expression and sexual identity vary independently of one another, instantiates a radical constructionist view of gender which is very much at odds with the facts of biology.

The “transgender pronoun issue”, then, was his line in the sand: his resistance to an attempt by extremist Left radicals, both outside and inside the Canadian government, to reinstate the old Soviet idea that human nature was not at all determined by biology, but only by environment and external manipulation. (The transgender activists do not put it like that; as they put it, transgender people “prefer” to be called by these pronouns, or have suffered harm because people haven’t used them, therefore everyone should use them. Of course, not even the first of

these two propositions is true; a significant number of transgender people have told Peterson that the activists do not speak for them.) The riposte of the radicals is to call Peterson and others (including liberals such as Bret Weinstein) “biological essentialists”, which is meant to be a derogatory term.

The kind of people who consciously disregard biology are not likely to be influenced by weaker considerations such as reason or consistency. If, indeed, gender is a matter only of choice, why shouldn't governments require people to choose a gender and stick to it? If nobody is “born this way”, but simply chooses it, then there is no requirement for the rest of us to observe anyone else's whim about which gender they are. If a person has chosen his or her gender for the day or the week, I would take no more notice of it than I do of the shirt they have chosen to put on.

If it's similar to changing your name by marriage or by deed poll, then what does it matter? I would not be breaking the law if I called Mrs Brown by her former name, Ms Black. Why would such nonsense have to be instantiated in law?

The answer, of course, is that everybody knows that biology is the heart of the matter, so the legal obligation to say the opposite *is* the point. The legal pressure which can be brought to bear *is* the point. The point is to *force* people, on pain of punishment, to avow what they know to be false. The point is to make people say that $2 + 2 = 5$. They are also to say it as if they mean it, and if they do not, they risk losing their job, having their business deregistered, or ultimately going to jail.

But the question of whether or not gender is a matter of choice is very much alive. I note that very recently, some well-meaning scientists have endeavoured to return the transgender debate to a biological one, by claiming that a panel of genes may be involved in the causation of gender dysphoria. Geneticist Ricky Lewis has said, “It lends legitimacy, if that needs to be added, that transgender is not a choice but a way of being.” No doubt this is in part because of the ridicule which has been invited by the transgender activists' recent contempt for biology. It remains to be seen whether they can have it both ways, so to speak.

Peterson's approach, then, is characterised by utter seriousness and consistency about moral matters, and by a commitment to facts and truth. This is in contrast with those who consider themselves his ideological opponents, who can give no better reason for their stance in attempting to compel others to use certain words, than that we “must respect” transgender “preferences”, or people will be “harmed”. To which, and to all similar claims, I insist upon saying, with Shylock, “On what compulsion must I? Tell me that!” These same people are relativists about morality; they consider that there are no absolute moral values: yet, for some reason, they are full of “musts” and “shoulds” and “need tos”. This is the essence of insincerity.

If an accumulation of individual wrong acts can result in a societal, national or global disaster, the converse, according to Peterson, is that each person, making his or her heroic journey by taking responsibility and acting rightly, may do far more good than they expect. In *Maps of Meaning*, Peterson dwelt at length on the ancient Sumerian and Egyptian hero tales of Marduk and Osiris. Following Mircea Eliade, Peterson has identified the hero, in the mists of antiquity, as a performer of virtuous deeds, and an exemplar of those deeds to others, magnified and mythologised through time. Other humans felt motivated to imitate heroic actions, forming a virtuous cycle. Peterson quotes Eliade with approval:

Osiris becomes the model for all those who hope to conquer death ... Following Osiris's example, and with his help, the dead are able to transform themselves into "souls," that is, into perfectly integrated and hence indestructible spiritual beings ...

In suggesting this, Peterson (I suspect unconsciously) echoes the ancient Greek thesis of euhemerism, named after a late-fourth-century BC thinker called Euhemerus, who postulated that the heroes of Greek mythology were based on humans who had engaged in famous exploits. (The early Christian polemicists levelled euhemerism as a charge at their pagan opponents—"Your gods are nothing but men after all!")

How long ago were these "mists of time" in which such heroic or archetypal events might have taken place? Not the least of Peterson's achievements is to place, and keep, before his audience's minds the immense length, against varying environmental backgrounds, of human and animal history. For a generation which has been taught no history, only grievances, this is an inestimable gift. In essence, the humanities courses being taught to high school and undergraduate students are, as near as possible, ahistorical. The postmodernists refuse to see any patterns except iterations of the exercise of power and exploitation, and certainly no progress. The lack of scrutiny on such matters as dates and sources which Foucault's ostensibly historical works have officially received—as opposed to the regular deployment of his name as a token of authority—is evidence of this.

To emphasise how unlike Christianity Peterson's position actually is, it is worth recalling that while he, consistently with Christian doctrine, emphasises the suffering of life, the solution he offers is entirely anchored in the world, and in human society. To reiterate, humans are social animals, subject to a large degree to the same hormonal chemical influences, rewards and punishments as other animals.

The Christian consolation, by contrast, has been to offer a better world after death, which is, to put it mildly, a far less believable scenario. (We have always been able to imagine, with sufficient force, what hell might be like; speculating what heaven might be like has led intelligent people into the most embarrassing avenues.) Augustine, the man whose (along with St Paul's) fingerprints are most visibly all over orthodox Christian doctrine, said that the afterlife was the key reason for being a Christian. The old Roman religion, Augustine argued, said nothing about any god who could provide "Eternal life ... the one object for which we are Christians".

To be sure, some Christian commentators have recognised that whatever Peterson is promoting, it's not Christianity. One David Robertson, on the *Christian Today* website, offered this, with characteristic tin-ear condescension: "[Peterson] is not the Messiah. He is not even a follower of the Messiah. He just needs the Messiah." Another blustering American pastor deplores what he regards as Peterson's tendency to Gnosticism; but then, he is writing a book about what he sees as the unfortunate revival of Gnosticism, and to a man with a hammer everything looks like a nail. A local reverend here in Sydney is troubled by the very thing which I find so valuable in Peterson's moral approach: that it is works-based, not grace- or faith-based. By contrast, non-religious critic James Lindsay, in *Areo* magazine, condemns Peterson for being like a cult leader: but then Lindsay thinks nobody but himself gets religion right.

This brings us to another great, perhaps the greatest, merit of Jordan Peterson: that he is nearly always clear and intelligible. He is not trying to sound impressive or obscure. If he were, he would not have the high ground against the postmodernists, which he has. He is trying to write important truths in terms which people who may or may not have read any books to speak of

(these days this includes journalists, university students, and other people with a “tertiary education”) will understand.

To some extent, this lays him open to the “Wacky Self-Help Professor” charge. This cannot be helped. The ancient program of virtue was the original self-help. *Virtue*, after all, literally means that kind of good activity which is proper to men, or humans, *viri*. It’s for humans and by humans: it’s essentially, painfully, human.

Which of course is why Christianity has always had a love-hate relationship with it. Why Luke claimed that there was more rejoicing in heaven over a reclaimed sinner than over ninety-nine righteous persons (*dikaiois*, which is to say the just: Luke 15:7). Why St Paul oscillated between flattering his Greek audiences by taking virtue seriously, focusing on “sin” as a virtual force of its own (Romans 7:17, 20), and claiming that the Holy Spirit was requisite for achieving the key virtue of self-control (*egkrateia*: Galatians 5:22–23). Why the climax of Augustine’s long polemical career was outgunning the Pelagian heresy (which had preserved features of pagan virtue), by insisting on the vital agency of divine grace. And, finally, why John Calvin maintained that human good deeds were neither here nor there.

Peterson’s focus on the naturalistic, on the parallels between human and animal chemistry, has drawn a great deal of ignorant derision from the Cathy Newmans in both traditional and social media. In her face-saving tweets after the notorious interview, she added: “though I don’t think I’ll ever come to terms with the lobster”. Similarly, here in Australia Leigh Sales and Annabel Crabb, two ubiquitous public broadcasters, had some fun with the lobsters. Peterson’s point, both in the interview and in the first chapter of his book, is that the chemical and social interactions between lobsters are remarkably, amazingly, similar to those among humans. People who are prepared to think about the result are moved to marvel at the antiquity of such structures, and what this might mean for thinking about human behaviour and human societies.

But not the Left: Newman’s response (not that she allowed him to elaborate on the point) was incredulity. Instead of concluding that the parallels between animal and human hierarchies are fascinating and meaningful, the response of the Left is rather like that of just about everyone in 1860 to the theory of evolution: “So, Mr Darwin, do you *really* think we could be descended from the apes? How very quaint!” The subsequent, endless series of memes of Peterson in one or another crustacean form (mainly created by his supporters) is only the natural echo of those crude mid-nineteenth-century newspaper cartoons of Darwin as an ape. We are indeed in strange times when the default position of the mainstream media—which in theory, and on occasion in practice, treats science with almost undue reverence—is to ridicule a scholar who insists upon the evolutionary origins of much of human life.

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