MYTH, MEANING, AND ANTIFRAGILE INDIVIDUALISM

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To Jean-Luc, Louis-Cyr, and Joseph-Arthur,
who are named after mythical heroes
and look like angels when they sleep

Asking people to give up all forms of sacralized belonging and live in a world of purely 'rational' beliefs might be like asking people to give up the Earth and live in colonies orbiting the moon. It can be done, but it would take a great deal of careful engineering, and even after ten generations, the descendants of those colonists might find themselves with inchoate longings for gravity and greenery.

—Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012, p. 307)

[W]e are dividing, and polarizing, and drifting toward chaos. It is necessary, under such conditions, if we are to avoid catastrophe, for each of us to bring forward the truth, as we see it: not the arguments that justify our ideologies, not the machinations that further our ambitions, but the stark pure facts of our existence, revealed to others to see and contemplate, so that we can find common ground and proceed together.

—Jordan B. Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018a, p. 361)

Acknowledgements

Contents

Preface

This book will look at how humans use stories to generate meaning, so it seems only fitting to start with a story. I first heard the name 'Jordan Peterson' on March 16, 2017. I can pinpoint this exact date because a prominent lecture was held at the university where I was teaching. After the lecture, a former student asked me what I thought of the lecturer's argument. I had kept mostly silent during the talk, but I confessed that I simply could not believe academics were still peddling vast utopian schemes. This is as old as Plato, so as a professional philosopher I have trained myself in the subtle art of shutting up and smiling politely whenever someone explains their latest 'redistribution' scheme. But after two hours of this, my impatience had risked becoming visible. My student, who shared my impatience, thus tried to cheer me up by telling me about a professor at the University of Toronto who was finally standing up before the crashing wave of social justice hysteria. My response was: that's great, but he won't last. Still, my student was mature and not prone to endorsing just any figure, so his vote of confidence in Peterson left a mark.

A few weeks later, when work slowed down a bit, I Googled Peterson. I eventually came upon a video of him speaking to a class, with his friend Bruce Pardy at his side. Peterson was explaining why no one has a right to not be offended—or something along those lines. I was impressed by what I heard and saw, so I remember telling my partner:

'Hmmm. So far, the UofT prof that my student recommended looks legit…'

When another window of free time opened, I watched a more involved video. I eventually purchased what was at that time his only book, *Maps of Meaning*. The more I studied Peterson's ideas, the more I realized that he was adopting a principled stance. I articulate some criticisms of that stance in the second part of this book. Still, such disagreements aside, here was a thinker who actually *had* a systematic worldview, the lucidity to *explain* it, and the courage to *act* on its basis. These days, such people are in short supply.

Because of this rare combination, Peterson has emerged as a 'public intellectual'—in the strictest and finest sense of that expression. He is public in that he applies his academic training to real-life issues that affect people from all walks of life. He is an intellectual in that he has earned this wide following the hard way, by consistently engaging with real ideas and putting forth real arguments.

The world in which Peterson makes his argumentative interventions is an increasingly confused and confusing one. Indeed, '[p]eople now think nothing of reinventing themselves as a particular set of attributes, however absurd, ideally demonstrating their status as first class victims of a set of social arrangements that have been the reference points for virtually all human societies for tens of thousands of years, which they claim must therefore be overthrown by next Tuesday' (O'Hara 2019, p. 47). In speaking against the foolhardy political implementation of some of these trends, Peterson stands before his detractors with a fortitude reminiscent of Socrates.

Interestingly, Peterson's ideas in psychology help to explain his massive appeal. As he writes: 'The capacity to maintain territorial position when challenged is […] indicative of how "convinced" a given animal is that it can [should] hold its ground […]. This integration constitutes power—*charisma*, in the human realm—made most evident in behavioral display'

(1999, p. 191). The reason why Peterson looks like he believes what he says is that he really believes what he says. In fact, some have suggested that Peterson's *12 Rules for Life* 'are, first and foremost, directed at himself' (Day 2018, p. 13; see, for example, the remarks about not lying in Peterson 2018a, p. 205). This palpable authenticity can be quite attractive. Of course, there is no valid inference from the premise 'A is willing to lose his job for the sake of creed B' to the conclusion 'Creed B must be true/good'. But in ordinary social interactions, we make that leap all the time.

Yet charisma alone cannot explain the remarkable reach that Peterson has attained. To my mind, he stands out from regular pundits because he complements his critical stance with a comprehensive account of what a good life and a good society might look like. At the same time, Peterson has sought to identify what he sees as the source(s) of evil in this world. His tendency is to locate that evil in the individual's lack of responsibility, not in society's alleged oppression. Indeed, Peterson 'has for the past several years been cajoling his fans to stand up instead of stand by' (Shermer 2018, p. 19). This resonates with a lot of people. Every time a new calamity makes the headlines, mainstream commentators and journalists who put ideology before truth lose credibility, while Peterson gains a bigger audience.

In the hands of Peterson, though, such knee-jerk indignation quickly gets converted into something constructive. Peterson thinks there are right and wrong answers to moral questions, but importantly, he does not think those answers can be arrived at by the simplistic power games of group identity politics. As a result, many young people are being exposed—some for the first time—to the option of thinking clearly and taking individual responsibility (instead of emoting loudly and making grand excuses).

One of the things that Peterson's readers and listeners are being exposed to is religion. Peterson is not the only thinker

vying to rehabilitate the place of religion in Western society (see, for example, Smith 2001), but 'Peterson's Christianity […] is a Christianity *revised* for our modern secular age' (Ashford 2020, p. 23; emphasis in original). In his writings and lectures, Peterson presents an ambitious re-reading of the Bible that locates this text in humanity's evolutionary history, as it were. On his telling, the Biblical stories are a collectively authored attempt to depict the ideal person. The plots and characters that we find in stories are not devices reserved for aesthetic contemplation. Rather, they play a vital function in guiding the lives of goal-directed creatures such as ourselves. Christ, we are told, is a figure who embodies the ideal of 'speaking the truth' (whatever that means). Questions of exegetical accuracy to the side, Peterson's twist is to insist that this ideal was reached not by revelation, but by induction: different folks observed the conduct of many moral persons, abstracted out the common denominator in their actions, and then reified the resultant abstraction in a narrative format. Peterson surmises that the joint endeavour to construct a 'Logos' or leading principle predates the Old Testament. The Bible thus offers viable moral guidance because it distils a large human sample over a long span of time. Peterson blends the ideas of Jean Piaget and Carl Jung to elucidate this interplay between personal psychology and collective archetypes.

Peterson's goal is to unearth reliable interpretative patterns that range over all conceivable cases, thereby providing a meta-solution to whatever problem(s) humans might encounter. Even with free will, nature places serious constraints on what one can and cannot do (Lawrence and Nohria 2002). The best strategy for coping with the ignorance and suffering that result from our finite nature is to take personal responsibility for one's hardships and constantly negotiate between sticking with one's beliefs and revising them. This general approach to life, Peterson argues, was selected for by Darwinian mechanisms and expressed through cultural channels. Stories are meant to

give us guidance on how to survive a harsh world and achieve balance in our day-to-day lives.

This sweeping account of the human condition has attracted a lot of attention. Every day, magazine articles, videos, blogs, and editorials are released that try to assess Peterson's standing as a thinker (for a survey, see Beverley 2018). Such pieces basically come in two versions. One version says that because Peterson is an original thinker, he should not be dismissed. The other version says that because he is not original, he can be dismissed. To my mind, these two lines of reasoning are misguided, since both are preoccupied with *evaluating* him—when what is called for at this juncture is to *understand* his ideas.

Far from being a liability, I regard this as a straightforward demand of academic professionalism. Understanding an intellectual contribution takes time and effort, so there is a widespread impulse to skip this step. However, the best advice when dealing with any topic, especially a topic deemed controversial, is: take a deep breath, read what is actually written (hearsay without a demonstrable textual basis will not do), and use proven critical-thinking tools. Then, if you want, form an assessment. Note the proper sequence: *scholarship first, judgment after*. At the risk of appearing simplistic, I propose to structure this book after this exact sequence.

Jumping right into criticisms is easy, but how do we even know a topic is spooky if no peer-reviewed books or articles have been published on the subject? Many people have strong opinions about Peterson, but few show any demonstrable command of his written work. A community of scholars cannot reach a justifiable assessment of a stance's merit—negative or positive—if no one ever conducts serious scholarship on that stance. The goal of learning is to evaluate ideas, but such an evaluation will be mere chutzpah if it is not underwritten by a proper understanding (Bloom 1956). At some point, we thinkers have to think.

It may be hyperbolic to claim that Peterson is 'saving Western civilization' (Proser 2020) or that an intellectual movement is afoot (Weiss 2018), but there is definitely significant pushback. Instead of taking the current groundswell of dissent as indicating that certain ideas might be wrong, those in charge take it as indicating that 'another group […] needs to be educated in the inevitability of diversity or the economic utility of globalisation' (Stacey 2019, p. 1). Filling the demand for different perspectives and honest conversations, platforms such as *Quillette* and *The Rubin Report* have 'skyrocketed in popularity' by discussing 'topics you would find in a typical Peterson lecture' (Lovins 2018, pp. 7–8). In mainstream venues, however, few engage with what Peterson actually says or writes. What we find instead is a concerted effort to push Peterson outside the Overton window of acceptability by whatever means necessary (innuendo, guilt by association, smears, etc.).

Vigorous disagreements are fine, but I don't like bullies, wherever they are found (Shapiro 2013). So while my study of Peterson began as a hobby, it gradually climbed up my ladder of academic priority, culminating in this book.

Peterson has nevertheless made it hard for professional academics to engage with his ideas. Some obstacles are format related. Peterson presents many of his ideas extemporaneously in online videos, but this makes those ideas hard to cite and trace reliably. I've also had to consider secondary sources from non-academic venues that I would ordinarily not turn to (newspapers, self-published books, etc.). However, some obstacles are more substantial. Peterson often describes his contribution as a scientific one, but I think this self-description obscures more than it reveals, since it conflates two kinds of intellectual projects. On the one hand, Peterson has been publishing a steady stream of peer-reviewed articles in psychology journals. These articles, most of which are co-authored, typically present quantitative analyses of narrow, technical

topics. His most cited paper as a first co-author, for example, is about the effects of alcohol intoxication on cognitive functions (Peterson *et al.* 1990). It is doubtful that those drawn to Peterson's ideas regard this empirical study as a life-changing masterpiece. On the other hand, when Peterson published *Maps of Meaning* in 1999, he essentially presented a Theory of Everything. While Peterson is a respectable academic, his credentials (and citation count) were achieved mainly in narrow co-authored psychology papers.

Now, in Peterson's defence, one could argue that his 'detailing and promotion of hero mythology can be thought of as the original, romanticized, and richer version of the colder, clinical application of exposure-based treatments that are derived from cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)—one of the most evidence-based psychological treatments that we have for a myriad of presenting problems, including depressive, anxiety, and addictive disorders' (Stea 2018, p. 25; see Butler *et al.* 2006). Still, in the relevant fields, such as philosophy, Peterson is basically self-taught.

His allusions to science thus invite serious criticism. As many critics have pointed out, Peterson has a tendency to repackage pearls of wisdom that already enjoy wide circulation in popular culture. His critics (e.g. Robinson 2018) are thus dismayed to find an author receiving so much attention and praise for enjoining us to tell the truth (Peterson 2018a, pp. 203–30) and pursue what is meaningful (2018a, pp. 161–201). In the eyes of many, expounding such well-worn platitudes does not constitute a ground-breaking achievement.

Is Jordan Peterson an original thinker? Our first reflex upon hearing this question should be to ask: original by what standard? By taking on the language of science, Peterson has taken on the standards of science. Judged by those standards, there is some truth to the charge that many of his ideas fail to demonstrate much originality. Yet to my mind, the proper response is not to exclaim 'Gotcha!' and conveniently ignore

what Peterson has to say. Instead, the proper response is to call into question Peterson's own way of describing what he does. Peterson may insist that he is putting forward scientific work, but authors are not always the persons best placed to categorize the genre under which their writings fall.

The moment we let go of the label 'science', we lift the overbearing expectation of novelty that comes with that activity. For instance, if Peterson claims that 'ideas x, y, and z have implicitly guided human actions for as long as humans have existed', is it really a reproach to say that x, y, and z are things we already know? Peterson's account *predicts* that the deep-seated myths and moral insights that he discusses will, when rendered explicit, seem familiar to us. It cannot be a criticism of his account, then, to point out that this prediction bears out. What Peterson says indeed sounds familiar, but if we understand Peterson's main claim, we see that this is not a flaw—it's the point.

Originality is nice when it can be had. However, there are other attributes one can look for in ideas, including clarification, edification, systematization, and even inspiration. The age-old myths and archetypes that inform our conceptions and guide our actions are thus definitely worth discussing, despite our prior familiarity with them. In fact, one could argue that they merit careful study precisely because they are closely wedded to our lives. Sometimes, we must learn something new that we do not know. Other times, though, we must learn anew something that we already know. If we uncritically demand novelty and change from all theories, we risk blinding ourselves to this genuine intellectual possibility, which I see Peterson's work as exploring.

Peterson agrees with Friedrich Nietzsche that our civilized culture is an outgrowth of our animal nature. As a result, the foundations for knowledge and ethics posited by the best philosophies are 'in fact, far less a discovery than a recognition, a remembering, a return and a homecoming to a remote,

primordial, and inclusive household of the soul, out of which those concepts grew originally' (Nietzsche 1966, p. 27; quoted in Peterson 1999, p. 79). Peterson argues that, owing to their evolutionary pedigree, many established social practices and institutions deserve to be maintained. Now, one may take issue with the specific practices and institutions that Peterson singles out as worth keeping. However, one cannot define inquiry in a way that automatically blames Peterson for failing to be reformist (or reformist enough). He is not trying to be.

Deplorably, the label 'conservative' is something one gets 'accused' of these days. Indeed, what Roger Scruton said about academia in the 1960s arguably applies today:

> To be a conservative, I was told, was to be on the side of age against youth, the past against the future, authority against innovation, the 'structures' against spontaneity and life. It was enough to understand this to recognize that one had no choice, as a free-thinking intellectual, save to reject con-servatism. The choice remaining was […] [d]o we improve society bit by bit, or do we rub it out and start again? On the whole my contemporaries favoured the second option […]. (Scruton 2009, p. 3)

For reasons that I will explain in the final chapter, I find the label 'conservative' (and that of 'liberal') to be confused and unhelpful. Still, it can have a sensible definition, provided we keep in mind that '[a]s an epistemic stance, all that *political* conservatism claims is that we do not have a predictive science of politics on grounds of *complexity*; and that it is epistemically prudential, for a whole tissue of reasons, to preserve the existing, albeit flawed, advantages, rather than to instigate a wholesale trading in of inherited practices for the completely unknown' (Marsh 2018, pp. 167–68). Formulated this way, conservatism cannot be laughed out of court. At the very least, if one is going to hold Peterson accountable to standards that

privilege novelty and change, one must provide non-circular arguments for why those standards are relevant, applicable, or worthwhile.

All too often, critics simply take it for granted that demonstrating originality is of paramount importance. Scientists are expected to make original contributions, so it certainly doesn't help that Peterson aligns himself with scientists. I submit, though, that this entire way of approaching his work is unhelpful. He is scientifically informed, yes; but the core claims that have won him a wide following are philosophical, not scientific.

A philosophy is a set of explicit or implicit views about what there is (metaphysics), how one knows this (epistemology), and what one should do, both as a person (ethics) and as a society (politics). Everyone has a philosophy; the only choice is whether one adopts it critically or uncritically. Our parents or guardians and surrounding culture determine our first philosophical commitments (for better or worse), so to read with an open mind is to shop for better and better replacement parts. At the moment, those wishing to acquaint themselves with Peterson's philosophy in a written format can turn only to his two books, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018) and *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (1999). *12 Rules* is meant to be accessible, but the book's size and many digressions make it a poor spokesperson for the claim that Peterson's thinking is systematic. As for *Maps of Meaning*, one must already be convinced that Peterson is worth reading before committing oneself to such a hefty and opaque text. These obstacles may explain why 'many of his most ardent supporters have not read much, if any, of his published material' (Day 2018, p. 5). There is a pressing need, then, for a clear and concise commentary on Peterson's ideas. Sometimes, the best way to learn about someone's ideas is by reading someone *else* discussing those ideas (getting a fresh perspective doesn't hurt, either).

Taken together, Peterson's academic neglect and wide following are 'proof of how completely at odds institutions of higher education have become with their essential purpose, and from the young people who seek the education they are meant to provide' (Blackwood 2019). Trying to rectify this, my discussion will circle around the themes of myth, meaning, and antifragile individualism, which figure prominently in Peterson's books and lectures. I am not concerned with Jordan Peterson's persona or the gossip surrounding him. I am concerned with his *ideas*.

I do not aim to change anyone's mind about anything. My hope instead is that this book can serve as a launch pad for further academic engagement with Peterson's work. Still, writing about Peterson's ideas is mission impossible. No author —Peterson included—can possibly master all the disciplines that he touches upon. So, judged by the standards of the specialist, any work covering Peterson's ideas is bound to have flaws, omissions, and shortcomings. Since fallibility is part and parcel of the human condition, I do not think one should wait for perfection before discussing ideas and arguments. In academia as in real life, we have to start somewhere. Also like real life, the hard part is to start.

There is nevertheless a risk of being mistaken and/or misunderstood, especially when the topic is so new and evolving so rapidly. Indeed, a mere three years will have elapsed between my first encounter with Peterson's name and the release of this book. I could have stretched the slingshot longer —or picked a safer topic, for that matter. But '[b]itter divides are poisoning our politics' and '[o]pportunities for course-correction are dwindling' (Murray 2019). To miss out on the issues that Peterson addresses would be to miss one of the great debates of our age.

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MYTH, MEANING, AND ANTIFRAGILE INDIVIDUALISM
On the Ideas of Jordan Peterson
Marc Champagne

Jordan Peterson has attracted a high level of attention. Controversies may bring people into contact with Peterson's work, but ideas are arguably what keep them there. Focusing on those ideas, this book explores Peterson's answers to perennial questions.

What is common to all humans, regardless of their background? Is complete knowledge ever possible? What would constitute a meaningful life? Why have humans evolved the capacity for intelligence? Should one treat others as individuals or as members of a group? Is a single person powerless in the face of evil? What is the relation between speech, thought, and action? Why have religious myths and narratives figured so prominently in human history? Are the hierarchies we find in society good or bad?

After devoting a chapter to each of these questions, Champagne unites the different strands of Peterson's thinking in a handy summary. Champagne then spends the remaining third of the book articulating his main critical concerns. He argues that while building on tradition is inevitable and indeed desirable, Peterson's individualist project is hindered by the non-revisable character and self-sacrificial content of religious belief.

This engaging multidisciplinary study is ideal for those who know little about Peterson's views, or for those who are familiar but want to see more clearly how Peterson's views hang together. The debates spearheaded by Peterson are in full swing, so *Myth, Meaning, and Antifragile Individualism* should become a reference point for any serious engagement with Peterson's ideas.

"Philosopher Marc Champagne's analytic skills are impressively on display as he presents and variously dissects, agrees with, and critiques Jordan Peterson's hugely ambitious project to integrate modern science with the essential themes of Western religious and humanist traditions. In an age of specialty, Peterson's attempt at synthesis is most welcome, and Champagne's clear overview and argued response is enormously valuable." –
Stephen Hicks, Professor of Philosophy, Rockford University.

"The first task of any critical thinker is to honestly understand the layered content and ideas of those being studied – this Marc Champagne has faithfully done in Myth, Meaning, and Antifragile Individualism. *The beauty and bounty of this finely textured book is the exquisite way Champagne has blended both 'exposition' and 'evaluation' of Peterson's ideas – do read and inwardly digest – if done well and wisely, a dialogue about Peterson will rise to a more robust and mature level."* –
Ron Dart, Associate Professor, University of the Fraser Valley.

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