

A photograph of Jordan Peterson, a middle-aged man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark blue suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is gesturing with his hands while speaking into a microphone. The background is dark with some blue lighting.

# JORDAN PETERSON CRITICAL RESPONSES

EDITED BY  
SANDRA WOIEN

FOREWORD BY  
MICHAEL  
SHELLENBERGER

# [ 7 ]

## Stone, Stone-Soup, and Soup

MARC CHAMPAGNE

**THE COLLECTOR:** I've studied that trinket through every scientific means available, and it is my considered opinion that [this Infinity Stone is] nothing more than a worthless hunk of polished glass!

**THANOS:** I'm not surprised to hear you say that, old friend. To open this jewel's hidden secret requires great imagination.

—JIM STARLIN, *The Thanos Quest, Book Two: Games and Prizes* (1990)

To dislodge powerful intuitions, one needs tools commensurate with the task. Whatever else he may be wrong about, Jordan Peterson is surely right that stories, not arguments, are what ultimately move (most) people (most deeply). I thus want to introduce my argument by juxtaposing three stories, one fictional, the others not.

The tale of the “stone soup” has murky origins in European and Asian folklore. It can be found in different variants, but the core narrative is about a stranger who goes around promising to make soup from a stone. Intrigued and hungry, the various people he encounters provide him with a pot and some water to boil the stone. As the stranger prepares his wondrous dish, he remarks that the flavor would come out more fully were a dash of seasoning added. His spectators oblige and the seasoning is added. After a sip to test whether the broth is ready, the stranger suggests that it might benefit

from having a few vegetables thrown in, for good measure. Farmers eager to taste the soup provide the stranger with root vegetables, celery, and so on. Finally, when the liquid has become a genuine soup, a ladle is used to fill bowls, and everyone—including the stranger—gets their fill. In some versions, the satisfied stranger leaves with the stone, while in other versions he hands over the stone to the villagers, so that they may reproduce the culinary miracle whenever needed.

Let us now switch to the non-fictional stories. The city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia is home to one of the most important pilgrimage sites in the world. A trip to Mecca that occurs during a specific five-day window of the lunar calendar is known as the Hajj, while at other times of the year such a trip constitutes the lesser Umrah. The pilgrimage site itself is built in a concentric fashion. At the outer rim, we find hotels meant to accommodate the millions of tourists who travel there every year. The next ring within is a mosque, the Masjid al-Haram, one of the largest buildings in the world. Inside, we find a large open-air space with white marble flooring, where devotees slowly spiral barefoot toward an almost-cubical structure. This structure must be circled seven times (counterclockwise). One corner of the cubical structure houses a black stone which, it is believed, came from heaven. Pilgrims jostle to kiss or touch this stone. Those who cannot get near enough point in the direction of the stone while proclaiming God's greatness.

I suppose one could draw an explicit conclusion from this juxtaposition. But, if you have to spell out the moral of a story, you haven't picked a potent enough story. The foregoing juxtaposition should thus become especially telling when we consider the third story—the shortest of the bunch: In 2017, Peterson gave a series of lectures on the Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories. His first lecture lasted two hours. In that time, Peterson managed to cover only a single line from the Bible. The end.

The lopsided gloss-to-text ratio just recounted provides a startling fact: one can understand Peterson's lectures without having read (or "believing in") the Bible. Hence, the critique I want to develop, which might be called the stone-soup objection (Champagne 2020, pp. 137–38), comes in two ver-

sions. The weak version says that if the principles of a proper life can be intelligibly discussed in purely natural terms, then one *can* forgo supernatural origins and treat the Bible as a fully-human document (it should be obvious that this applies to more than just the Bible). The stronger version says that one *should* forgo supernatural origins and treat the Bible as a fully-human document. Clearly, the stronger objection is only feasible if the weaker version is. I will argue for both. Discarding supernatural baggage is not just a matter of being more parsimonious, but of avoiding the dogmatism that comes with infallibility. Let me explain.

### **Detecting Profundity in Manifest Simplicity**

Peterson believes that the Bible contains a special kind of ageless wisdom that must be unlocked by a process of interpretation. This is nothing new. What is striking, though, is how much insight and depth he claims to discern in even the simplest Biblical lines. Peterson is a psychologist, not a priest, so he transforms all the components of his target text into tenets that seem more plausible to his audience (and which conveniently connect with his ideas in psychology).

We can illustrate this by parsing the Book of Genesis's first line. In Peterson's hands, the phrase "In the beginning . . ." supposedly means the state of disorder that humans confront, before their consciousness and language imposes some sort of cognitive order (Peterson 2017a, section 3). The next word, ". . . God . . ." supposedly means the guiding principle behind hierarchies of competence, presented in a personified form so as to give us an ideal "of what it means to be a properly functioning, properly social, and properly competent individual" (2017a, section 3). The verb ". . . created . . ." supposedly means the capacity of consciousness "to be aware and to communicate" what(ever) is before it (2017a, section 5). Finally, ". . . the heavens . . ." supposedly means an "image of perfection" that represents the possibility of our ideals and our current state—". . . and the earth"—"coming together in some sort of communication" (2017b, section 6).

Putting these segments back together, we might say that the environmental stimuli received by conscious awareness

and categorized by language give rise to distinctions and orderings that can be refined and that those refinements, when communicated to others, foster better living conditions. Agree or disagree, this is clearly different from saying “A long time ago, a perfect being built everything that we now know as the universe,” which is arguably the paraphrase many (or at least I) have in mind when reading the verse.

Is this psychological account found in the Bible—or on the stage of Toronto’s Isabel Bader Theatre? Peterson says that “There is more to this [Biblical] story than I understand or can understand. I am laying out what I can understand and then making it rational, but . . . one thing I have found about digging into these stories is that the deeper you dig, the more you find. And that’s . . . one of the things that convinced me that there was more to them than I had originally suspected” (2017a, Q&A, my transcription). Crediting simple (and often simplistic) stories with complex insights amounts to crediting a stone with flavoring a soup.

### **Cooking a Soup around the Stone One Grew Up With**

Stripped of all priming and partisanship, a sentence like “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1) is actually quite plain. We may interpret this simplicity as a strength or a flaw. Let us assume, as Peterson does, that it is a strength. Such a gloss leads to two problems. First, we must explain why we privilege this particular statement. After all, another old book could just as confidently assert that “The heavens and the earth were never created and had no beginning.” This is arguably just as profound-sounding, so why is such a contrary claim not revered? In the absence of reasons, we are told, we must have “faith.” Faith, however, is an attitude that can be directed at anything but cannot be directed at everything. Hence, we need to be told why we give a free pass to some claims and not others (the answer “Because my parents did so” is rarely found satisfying).

Detecting profundity in manifest simplicity generates a second problem. If a sentence that takes five seconds or so to enunciate can be understood only after two hours or more

of interpretation, what are we actually interested in: the sentence—or the elaborate gloss we build around it? This distinction matters, because lectures like the ones given by Peterson do not pretend to have any Divine origin, whereas the Biblical text does. This origin in turn matters, because ideas that are Divine cannot be wrong, whereas ideas arrived at by humans can be mistaken and thus possibly revised. Peterson claims that the Bible is the culmination of millennia of observations, but no amount of observations will provide one with a religious level of certainty.

Peterson is no doubt correct that “find[ing] out what the [religious] stories are about can aid our self-understanding” (2017a, section 3). Yet, when he says that “Without the cornerstone provided by that [self-]understanding, we’re lost” (2017a, section 3), we have to be clear about what exactly is bearing the load. Fortunately, the question of whether something is load-bearing can be tested: one simply removes a posit and sees whether the sense-making structure erected around it still stands. Performing that test, we may ask: does getting together at a specific location with people who share a sense of belonging enhance one’s life? Certainly. First-person reports of those traveling to Mecca, for example, amply establish this (Alnabulsi et al. 2020). Would these psychological and social benefits vanish if the object(s) or text at the center of such gatherings were revealed to have a purely natural/human origin? Done with gradual cultural adaptation, future generations could get accustomed to the idea that their beliefs rest on an entirely natural foundation (in fact, many religious followers may currently feign belief in front of their peers, to avoid opprobrium). Similarly, I do not think the intelligibility and merit of Peterson’s Biblical lectures are diminished by accepting that he addresses—and is an active participant in—a human creation.

### **Hastening the Erosion of Religion by Prizing Intelligibility and Practicality**

Peterson explains that his motive for assessing the Bible “is to extract out something of value that’s practical. One of the rules that I have when I’m lecturing is that I don’t want to

tell anybody anything that they can't use. I think of knowledge as a tool" (2007a, section 4). Tools, however, are distinguished by their function and functions can be realized by different things. It does not matter, for example, if a garlic presser is made of copper, aluminum, or stainless steel. If it presses garlic, then it is a garlic presser. Why doesn't Peterson direct his interpretive prowess toward, say, Islam's Quran or Thelema's Book of the Law—also cryptic tomes allegedly originating from a divine source and thus ripe for a Petersonian treatment? Tradition gives ideas a head start, but what book should one consult to tell one what book one should consult? We humans are responsible for our claims, arguments, and interpretations, so it is an abdication of our responsibility to credit a text with ideas that we have formulated ourselves.

So what if, instead of listening to a-Peterson-lecture-about-the-Bible, people listened to a-Peterson-lecture, full stop? We would likely still hear about evolution, Jung, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, ideology, motivation, consciousness, lobsters, dragons, chaos, order, hierarchies, the hippocampus, Piaget, parenting, Nazis, psychedelics, dreams, gulags, and Solzhenitsyn. The Bible would doubtlessly show up too, if and when appropriate. But, with the specter of infallibility gone, that text would receive interpretive charity, not credulity. Importantly, large portions could be skipped.

All texts, religious or otherwise, must be interpreted. But, interpretation is something *we* (humans) do, so its practice, no matter what the intent, risks exposing the non-divine roots of religions. Fanatics may prefer literal interpretation, but for the mainstream Western public, the authority of the Bible is no longer a given. Peterson notes that one of his favorite thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche, "believed that the Catholicization of the phenomena of life and history produced the kind of mind" capable of maximal coherence and thereby "capable of transcending its dogmatic foundations, and concentrating on something else" (2017a, sect. 1). Nietzsche had in mind medieval philosophy/theology, but the Protestant Reformation's emphasis on individual readings also contributed to this intellectual shift. Whatever the historical details, a lot of people found that they could make soup (live a moral and rewarding life) without any stone. In

this way, “Nietzsche believed that Christianity died of its own hand” (2017a, section 1). It’s nevertheless hard to let go, so salvage attempts like Peterson’s attract a lot of attention.

The irony is that, the more Peterson makes sense, the less you have to read the Bible. The stone-soup is thus a transitional stage in an unfinished learning curve. So, while Peterson and his followers see themselves as champions of religious belief, they are actually hastening its erosion. Indeed, Peterson’s explanatory prowess risks exposing the Bible as *dispensable*.

Many Christians celebrate Peterson’s work, but leaders of other faiths, knowing better, would see his engagement with religious ideas as subversive (for instance al-Andalusi 2019). Peterson thinks “part of the reason that Islam has its back up with regards to the West” is that it realizes the “questioning mind of the West poses a tremendous danger to the integrity of their culture, and it does. Westerners, us—we undermine ourselves all the time with our searching intellect” (2017a, section 1). By prizing regular standards of intelligibility and practicality, Peterson is at the forefront of this undermining.

### **Foundations that Were Under Our Feet All Along**

Is this gradual transition from stone-soup to soup something to be feared or celebrated? According to Peterson, Nietzsche “knew that, when we knocked the slats out of the base of Western civilization by destroying this representation—this God ideal—we would destabilize, and move back and forth violently between nihilism and the extremes of ideology” (2017a, section 1). Two things are worth noting.

First, unless we cherry-pick historical events, it is by no means obvious that things are currently worse. As a social scientist, surely Peterson ought to know that, if secular collectivist regimes resulted in atrocities (Cheng 1995; Solzhenitsyn 2018), it’s inconclusive to blame secularism as the culprit. Not only is the sample geographically and historically tiny, a contrast is required with secular *individualism*—which is quite another story. In any event, Peterson undercuts his own arguments when he defines “God” as whatever one values most (in Paikin et al. 2009, minute 18),



since this permissive definition would entail that there has never been a Godless society, Communist ones included.

Second, even if one could somehow link secularization with selected atrocities, an oscillation between apathy and militancy ensues only if the corner stone is not replaced with something better. Make no mistake: better replacements *are* possible. One may take issue with the particular account put forward by Nietzsche, but there is no valid inference from the premise ‘A viable replacement of x did not work in this first attempt’ to the conclusion ‘No replacement of x is possible.’

“Nietzsche’s idea,” Peterson says, “was that human beings were going to have to create their own values” (2017a, section 1). Peterson believes that this cannot be done, but—in keeping with his claim (Peterson 1999, p. 73) that we act out ideas long before we notice and verbalize them—he is blind to the fact that creating values is exactly what he does when he weaves his various sources together on stage. His audience members nod approvingly, not because they have reached some universal bedrock, but because they have heard the stories in childhood. Going back to the sentence parsed earlier, another group raised on “The heavens and the earth were never created and had no beginning” would presumably feel an equally strong simpatico connection with this contradicting claim. Things sound intuitive only because they were implanted in our minds before our critical thinking faculties hit puberty. He who controls education controls imagination.

Ideas indeed play themselves out in historical time. But, precisely for that reason, assessing whether an idea is worthwhile depends on when we render the verdict. Atheism is a relatively recent arrival. So, on an elongated timeline, it is too early to tell. Luckily, one does not have to convince the whole globe in order to gauge whether something is true. On a personal scale, the verdict can come much sooner. Peterson has an unfortunate tendency to set up a false alternative between theism and anything-goes nihilism, but those bereft of theistic conviction (like the people documented in Everett 2009) are doing just fine, both morally (Saslow et al. 2013) and existentially (Lacewing 2016).

This should come as no surprise. The supernatural, being unreal, has no causal effect on the world apart from our

actions and choices. That is why stones need actual ingredients. So, whatever measure of control we have over our destiny is already there. We do not need any kind of grand leap in our nature, since we have been the discoverers of the insights all along. What remains is for us to own up to this (scary but emancipatory) fact.

### **Playing the Game of Life Without Any Trump Card**

Because the stone that prompts cooking sessions is merely a prompt, one might be tempted to view it as harmless. Alas, things are not that simple because, even if we remove a stone, we do not thereby remove its need. On his daughter Mikhaila's podcast (2021, minute 36 onward), Peterson recognizes that humans "have a profound religious impulse. I am not saying that it is good or that it is bad. I am saying that something has to be done with it." I agree. Unlike me, however, Peterson describes himself as "a rather staunch admirer of traditional Christianity . . . in its Catholic form" because this is supposedly "as sane as people can get" (my transcriptions). Yet, as his daughter immediately pointed out, some Catholic doctrines are "a little 'out there'." Indeed.

In reply, Peterson acknowledges "the strange irrationality that goes along with a religious belief," but he insists that "we need something structured and irrational to protect us from even less structured and more irrational beliefs." Judging from the conversation, meaninglessness and fear of death are the main threats we must protect against. To keep these at bay, "[w]e cannot live in a fully rational world because we are not smart enough. We need something to fill in the gaps." If Peterson's account is correct, it can never be soup all the way down.

I am sympathetic to (and have in fact defended) the claim that the non-rational elements of our lives cannot be fully eradicated, even in principle (Champagne 2015; Champagne 2019). Hence, nothing in the rejection of religion commits one to a triumphant belief in the exhaustive powers of reason. Yet, while reason has limits, we should not stuff our hopes and fears into the residual gap. A worthwhile distinction

should thus be made between the non-rational (unrelated to reason) and the irrational (against reason). Accepting the former does not entail accepting the latter.

According to Peterson, “[t]he advantage of codified religion is that there is a unifying force behind it,” whereas “what you get now [in secular society] is this fragmentation and search for replacement for religious values” (Mikhaila Peterson podcast). It is tautologically true that traditional ideas enjoy wide(r) social dispersion. There are obvious advantages to this. Yet, what Peterson’s account neglects to mention is that, when the cornerstone of a tradition is considered sacred, it drags with it something that his commitment to open inquiry and dialogue ought to shun, namely dogma. Despite warning in his book *Beyond Order* (2021, p. 29) that established social structures can become tyrannical once contestation/revision is removed, Peterson informs us that some religious stories “cannot be improved upon” (p. 54). This is where he and I part ways.

The idea of a “supreme value” beyond the reach of all human reasoning may sound noble, but it can be (and routinely is) invoked to justify any action. No matter how important a thing is—girls receiving an education, wearing (or not wearing) what one wants, making a living in an office tower without being smashed by a plane—the Divine will always be more important. Many people may think that the 9/11 hijackers misunderstood God’s message, but this exact objection is mirrored, since those hijackers thought many people misunderstood God’s message. Of course, no one can verify what God wants, so objections can always be met with an appeal to mystery. God is the ultimate trump card.

The fact that adherents of some religious traditions are more peaceful than others is a comparison liable of changing depending on the circumstances. Such score-keeping may be historically significant, but it is not philosophically significant. Importantly, the looming possibility of belief-sanctioned violence is not present in secular discourse. No one has ever been beheaded for penning a negative movie review or publishing a drawing of Pinocchio. Horrible acts do happen. But, when we acknowledge that the soup comes from *our* ingredients, we acknowledge our ability to be wrong and/or do evil. No secular account of human nature can accommodate

a concept like “Papal Inerrancy” or “Infallible Imams” (and the edicts that such concepts license).

Peterson says that “the Bible exists in that space that is half into the dream and half into articulated knowledge” (2017a, sect. 3). This is true—not because the Bible enjoys some special status—but rather because *all* human experience is part dream and part articulate knowledge. Surely psychology has taught us that. Peterson is also correct when he states that interpreting stories “can aid our self-understanding” (2017a, section 3). Discussing a good movie after a viewing also has that effect. Peterson would be ill-placed to deny this since, in his hands, even Disney movies become further evidence of his psychological theories—minus, of course, the looming possibility of blasphemy.

Peterson’s arguments invoke many truths then infer conclusions far stronger than what those premises allow (see the excellent analysis of “Jesus-smuggling” by Woodford 2020). The concepts of value hierarchy and topmost value can be brought down to Earth and made compatible with our ability to err. All one needs to do is match the religious devotee’s enthusiasm while acknowledging that one’s yearning for a full life, no matter how ardent, cannot guide one about what to do next. That, like most things, requires fallible inquiry.

### **A Learning Curve that One Must Learn**

The stone stage, which I have barely touched upon, rejects inquiry in favor of literal interpretation. If a text says that the universe was created by someone in six days, then the universe was created by someone in six days. If a text says that seventy-two perpetually-virgin wives are waiting for one in another world, then that is indeed what awaits one in another world. Why, one might wonder, should anyone believe such outlandish claims? Literal interpretation has an answer to that too: the text insists that it is saying the truth. Problem solved.

Most religious traditions have this auto-certifying feature, so comparison with competing creeds is usually frowned upon. However, even if you ban everything that might lead you to think otherwise, you cannot ban your own mind. The “stone-soup” stage thus begins with the realization that

implausible tenets need to be interpreted non-literally. One way to transition while saving face is to consider the previous stage, not wrong, but “extremist” or “fundamentalist.” As Peterson’s success shows, many Christians are currently in the stone-soup stage. There are early indications that others may be taking baby steps into it as well:

What does it mean to be Shi’i? How should believers see themselves, the texts that they read and the contexts in which they live? More critically, what is the relationship between our rational faculty and knowledge, and how does the Imam with his infallible knowledge intervene in the epistemic process? . . . Two central issues remain . . . : that proper rational inquiry needs to be critically engaged in evaluating intellectual traditions . . . and that the revelation in the words of both the Qur’ān and the *hadīth* [or record of the Prophet Muhammad’s words and actions] directly addresses our reality both within and without. Out of these two methods a hybrid version will probably emerge that seeks to integrate philosophical inquiry about the nature of existence, selfhood and knowledge with a deep contemplation of the texts transmitted from the Imams. The primary task of that hybrid will be to articulate a clear and coherent hermeneutics that can effect this reintegration. (Rizvi 2012, p. 503)

It’s only a matter of time before this “hybrid” project sees the emergence of a homegrown Peterson.

In the stone-soup stage, comparisons with other texts are not frowned upon but encouraged. Differences in specific religions notwithstanding, what is common to all humans who believed in religions is that a. they were humans and b. they believed. So, one reads a book like *Maps of Meaning* (Peterson 1999) or *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Campbell 2004) and discovers “that there were similarities between messiah stories in different religions and that throughout human history, civilizations produced religion and the structures of religion, which were human attempts at dealing with the challenges of life” (DeWitt 2013, pp. 188–89). This is a big concession—bigger, as we shall see, than initially realized. But, for a person at this stage of the learning curve, adopting a more plausible “stance on religion was a saving grace. By grasping the concept that there were very human motivations for the rise of religion, I could promote religion and spirituality not on the basis of its truth but on its bene-

fits to humans” (DeWitt 2013, p. 189). It is okay to believe if the belief works. Or so one thinks.

Transition to a stoneless soup gets ushered in, quite quietly, with a simple question: *why* does the belief work? It is a pesky question, to be sure. But, it is not a question that will go away. If a literal interpretation was wrong, then surely the practical success of a belief cannot be miraculous. By that point, all that remains is to realize/accept that an adoption of secularism has *already* occurred. Unbeknownst to one, the shift to a stone-soup was actually a shift to soup.

For a host of reasons, coming to terms with this can take time. There are many closets we can hide in—and more often than not we are hiding from ourselves. To ease the coming out process, the curiosity and respect for truth that prompted one to question the stone stage must be nurtured and encouraged. It also helps to have irreligious families and communities around—to break the volunteer’s dilemma and witness first-hand that living a 100% human life does not result in spontaneous human combustion. Still, even in ideal circumstances, only individuals can decide, at their own pace.

### **Learning as a Personal, Not Social, Trajectory**

A rationale is discernible in the progression from stone, stone-soup, and finally soup. What gets this learning curve into gear is the fact—and it is very much a fact—that stones have no nutritional value. Unpacking that analogy, *vague and unjustified platitudes surrounded by brilliant glosses remain vague and unjustified platitudes*. Hence, if Peterson’s lectures contain something of value, then it is he, not the Bible, that deserves credit.

Some religious believers pre-empt critical investigation by simply reciting/chanting their preferred text, over and over. This is not what Peterson does. Instead, his university background is on full display. As a result, one can comprehend a Peterson lecture without ever having read the Bible. This is likely the case for many attendees and online viewers. Since it only takes a modicum of self-awareness to realize that the stone can be removed without loss, rationally explicating the irrational is an untenable venture, destined to unravel.

When I say “destined” to unravel, I mean this in a logical sense, not a historical sense. Patterns can be discerned in time (Champagne 2016), but there is nothing inexorable about history (Popper 1961). Aside from truisms about inheriting a culture and language, collective trends are largely irrelevant, since individuals are the only agents of change and only individuals undergo experiences. So, whereas a book like *Maps of Meaning* (Peterson 1999) makes sweeping historical claims, commentators like Sandra Woien prefer to drag Peterson onto safer terrain by insisting that, in his lectures, “Peterson is not trying to provide a religious or inductive justification [...]. Instead, he is simply trying to show that Biblical stories have a psychological or prescriptive significance that should not be ignored” (Woiien 2021, p. 150). Like a placebo, the stone at the heart of this stone-soup certainly does a lot of psychological work. But, here too, a gradual disrobing of falsehoods can ensue—to the extent that one decides to think.

Jerry DeWitt, once a Pentecostal pastor, describes how he began with the belief that “God *loves* everyone.” This feelgood belief obviously clashes with the needless suffering we witness around us, so DeWitt weakened it to “God *saves* everyone.” According to this revised view, the suffering experienced in this world is merely transitional, since God will finally apply his benevolence at full capacity in the afterlife. Of course, the main drawback of this account is that it is supported by no evidence whatsoever. So, he eventually switched to saying that “God is *in* everyone.” This cleverly obviates the search for evidence by asking us to instead look inward. Of course, once we look inward, we eventually conclude that “God is everyone’s *internal dialogue*.” Healthy adult humans can indeed monitor their own actions and choices. In other words, they have a conscience. Yet, how plausible is it that, when you cogitate, you are conversing with an all-powerful deity? DeWitt (2013, pp. 235–260), recounts that, by that point, it was just a matter of time before concluding that “God is a *delusion*” (in the strict non-judgmental sense of delusional belief).

## Now What?

It may be irrational to believe in a placebo after its status has been revealed, but it is entirely rational to seek the ben-

efits it once provided. No human can tolerate meaninglessness (for long), so if nothing of substance is offered to replace the psychological and societal function(s) previously served by religious beliefs, those beliefs will come back galloping—often in even less healthy forms. Achieving a tenable alternative to religion therefore “requires (among other things) a viable theory of *values*, a viable theory of *consciousness*, a viable theory of *meaning*, and a viable theory of *aesthetic experience and ritual*” (Champagne 2020, p. 181; emphasis added). Unlike religion, there is no reason to expect or demand that these components come from a single source.

By addressing narratives that have shaped Western imaginations, Peterson is tapping into something truly primordial. Those who disagree with Peterson should therefore take notice, since countering his outlook without proposing a replacement narrative simply won’t make a dent.

If we put aside preconceptions and pay close attention (Champagne forthcoming), we realize that all the materials for a non-dogmatic drama about our challenging but exalted place in the universe are already here, in this world. DeWitt recounts that, after letting go of religious belief, he was able to satisfy his desire to help people “all without pretending that I was someone who I wasn’t or pretending to know all the answers” (2013, p. 241). Try it yourself: a bowl of soup without a stone tastes the same—and weighs less.

We’ve heard other-worldly tales for millennia, so naturally stories built solely from this-worldly materials are bound to sound new. Yet, familiarity is a byproduct of parenting and enculturation, so what counts as “traditional” or “established” can change with time. Secular mythologies and narratives may have thus far failed to rival the popular influence of religions, but this does not make their development any less important or urgent. As was said at the outset, a good story can only be dislodged by a *better* story. I cannot think of a nobler task than to essay a worldview that retains the enchantment of religion while avoiding its drawbacks. Can this be done? My own life and household attest that it can. As for a larger scale, the only way to find out is to find out.



## References

- Alnabulsi, Hani, John Drury, Vivian L. Vignoles, and Sander Oogink. 2020. Understanding the Impact of the Hajj: Explaining Experiences of Self change at a Religious Mass Gathering. *European Journal of Social Psychology* 50:2.
- Al-Andalusi, Abdullah (real name Mouloud Farid). 2019. Should Muslims Be Left-wing or Right-Wing? Why Muslims Don't Need Dr Jordan Peterson. [abdullahandalusi.com](http://abdullahandalusi.com) blog post, July 16th.
- Campbell, Joseph. 2004. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Champagne, Marc. 2015. Don't Be an Ass: Rational Choice and Its Limits. *Reason Papers* 37:1.
- . 2016. Diagrams of the Past: How Timelines Can Aid the Growth of Historical Knowledge. *Cognitive Semiotics* 9:1.
- . 2019. Consciousness and the Philosophy of Signs: A New Précis. *American Journal of Semiotics* 35:3–4.
- . 2020. *Myth, Meaning, and Antifragile Individualism: On the Ideas of Jordan Peterson*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.
- . Forthcoming. Putting Aside One's Natural Attitude—and Smartphone—to See what Matters More Clearly. In *Phenomenology and Phaneroscopy*, edited by Mohammad Shafiei and Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen. Cham: Springer.
- Cheng, Nien. 1995. *Life and Death in Shanghai*. London: Harper-Collins.
- DeWitt, Jerry. 2013. *Hope After Faith: An Ex-Pastor's Journey from Belief to Atheism*. Boston: Da Capo.
- Everett, Dan. 2009. *Don't Sleep, There are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*. New York: Random House.
- Lacewing, Michael. 2016. Can Non-Theists Appropriately Feel Existential Gratitude? *Religious Studies* 52:2.
- Paikin, Steve, Justin Trottier, Kathy Shaidle, Gretta Vosper, Jordan B. Peterson, and Rob Buckman. 2009. Advertising Atheism. *The Agenda with Steve Paikin*, TVO television program, originally aired February 19th.
- Peterson, Jordan B. 1999. *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2017a. Biblical Series I: Introduction to the Idea of God. Lecture given at Toronto's Isabel Bader Theatre, May 16th.
- . 2017b. Biblical Series II: Genesis 1: Chaos and Order. Lecture given at Toronto's Isabel Bader Theatre, May 23rd.
- . 2021. *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life*. Toronto: Random House Canada.

Stone, Stone-Soup, and Soup

- . Peterson, Mikhaila, Mark Manson, and Jordan B. Peterson. 2021. *The Mikhaila Peterson Podcast*, Episode 54. February 7th.  
<[www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGDF2tTq6xw&t=1318s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGDF2tTq6xw&t=1318s)>.
- Popper, Karl R. 1961. *The Poverty of Historicism*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Rizvi, Sajjad H. 2012. 'Only the Imam Knows Best': The Maktab-e Tafkik's Attack on the Legitimacy of Philosophy in Iran. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22:3–4.
- Saslow, Laura R., Robb Willer, Matthew Feinberg, Paul K. Piff, Katharine Clark, Dacher Keltner, and Sarina R. Saturn. 2013. My Brother's Keeper? Compassion Predicts Generosity More Among Less Religious Individuals. *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 4:1.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. 2018. *The Gulag Archipelago*. With a foreword by Jordan B. Peterson. London: Penguin Random House.
- Woien, Sandra. 2021. Review of *Myth, Meaning, and Antifragile Individualism: On the Ideas of Jordan Peterson*. *Reason Papers* 42:1.
- Woodford, Stephen. 2020. Jesus Smuggling: Is Jordan Peterson Guilty? *Rationality Rules*, February 11th.  
<[www.youtube.com/watch?v=on0Lziov00Y&t=197s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=on0Lziov00Y&t=197s)>.



“**E**veryone has a strong opinion about Jordan Peterson! Whatever yours may be, this fine book will give it a good shake-up. Genuinely diverse criticisms from genuinely alternative viewpoints.”

—RAY SCOTT PERCIVAL, author of *The Myth of the Closed Mind* (2012)

“A timely and valuable volume encompassing discussions of postmodernism, human nature, meaning, authenticity, and more. This compilation thoughtfully engages with Jordan Peterson’s most relevant and provocative ideas.”

—ROB HENDERSON, doctoral candidate in psychology, discoverer of luxury beliefs

“Illuminating and provocative in equal measure, this fine collection of essays captures countless facets of one of the most refreshingly heterodox intellectuals of our time.”

—JAMES ORR, author of *The Mind of God and the Works of Nature* (2019)

“Most often, Jordan Peterson is either lauded as a hero or condemned as a villain. In contrast, Sandra Woien has assembled a fine collection of essays that take Peterson’s work very seriously

and provide intelligent critiques. Both fans and foes of Peterson will appreciate this volume.”

—ROBERT MURPHY, author of *Choice: Co-operation, Enterprise, and Human Action* (2015)

“Supremely helpful! This collection of essays offers a critical analysis of Jordan Peterson in the very best sense. Mercifully, the authors address and transcend the polarized ideological spectrum of his haters and zealots to explore the meaning of his work in productive ways. They truly take him on (as in both pushback and engagement), using JP as a foil for further thought across a wide array of disciplines.”

—BRADLEY JERSAK, Dean of Theology and Culture, St. Stephen’s University

SANDRA WOIEN is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies at Arizona State University. Her work has appeared in *Reason Papers*, *The Conversation*, *American Journal of Bioethics*, and *BMC Medical Ethics*.

MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER, a longtime environmental activist and thinker, is author of *San Fransicko* (2021) and *Apocalypse Never* (2020).



OPEN UNIVERSE: CHICAGO, ILLINOIS  
FOR OTHER OPEN UNIVERSE TITLES, VISIT CARUSBOOKS.COM.  
COVER DESIGN: SHANE ARBOGAST, SHANEARBOGAST.COM  
PHOTO OF JORDAN PETERSON: © 2018 BY GAGE SKIDMORE

