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Why We Need Jordan Peterson, and Why He Needs Us

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Peterson, Jordan B., *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Random House Canada, 2018).

Steps from the University of Toronto's downtown campus, the Bloor and Bay St. West Indigo Books and Music storefront displays their most popular book requests. *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* by Jordan B. Peterson has been on that display since shortly after its January release. Cross-listed under the categories Health and Well Being, Psychology, and Applied Psychology, the best-selling *12 Rules for Life* offers its readers a set of "ordering principles" for the sake of individual and collective "flourish[ing]." According to Peterson, the drama of existence consists of finding ways to "stand up" in one's life both "physically" and "metaphysically" to seek out meaning and "keep the corrupting influence of mortal despair at bay."

Peterson's book draws on a wide-ranging, interdisciplinary array of sources to make his points. For instance, he uses a case study on the "neurochemistry of defeat and victory" as found in lobsters to aid psychological analyses of biblical figures and passages. Unexpected comparisons like this one are illustrative of Peterson's overall method. Leaving seemingly no stone unturned, he explores how mythology maps out clear warnings and guidelines for personal decisions; the ways evolutionary science illuminates biblical narratives; and the value of art to help us live more committed lives.

Peterson's emphasis on the importance of seeking out, and even *making*, meaning in life is the central strength of his book. It is a refreshing invitation to accountability in things both great

and small for the sake of personal and social development. "[I]if we each live properly, we will collectively flourish," he notes. Peterson has made his views on meaning in daily life, sexuality, identity, habit formation, and gender more than clear and known in countless lectures, published papers, Youtube talks, and interviews. In *12 Rules* he rehearses many of these well-known points but he also covers a lot of fresh ground (which most reviewers have sidelined for the sake of rehashing his better known, more controversial ideas).

One of the most important topics in *12 Rules* is Peterson's discussion of the crucial role that healthy family life makes to the overall flourishing of individuals, communities, and culture. This aspect of Peterson's philosophy is well worth more sustained attention. In *12 Rules* he particularly considers how the ways in which a society understands and cultivates the gender identity of children directly influences whether human dignity, individual flourishing, and family culture is promoted or hurt, within society more broadly. Peterson advances an ethical theory of family life, living, and sexuality, pointing to the family as the fundamental building block of virtuous living and ideal socio-political development. Emphasizing the importance of family stability, Peterson shows what breaks down when gender difference is treated merely as a constructed thing.

Reminding us that "ideas have consequences," Peterson examines how the denial of male and female psychological and biological differences is not only leading to a further breakdown in familial structures. He also discusses how the growing socio-political attempts to erase acknowledgement of gender and sexual differences are leading to psychological crises of identity, especially in young boys (but in girls also). Pointing to recent studies from Scandinavian societies in particular, Peterson discusses how boys and girls learn, express themselves emotionally, and establish their sense of identity in strikingly different ways. For example, the data shows that while girls thrive by "winning in their own hierarchy—by being good at what girls value, as girls" and can "add to this victory by winning in the boys' hierarchy," boys "can only win by winning in the male hierarchy." This is especially seen when we consider the typical differences in strength, expectations, and proclivities (both intellectual and emotional) between boys and girls. "If you're male… you can't just hammer a female as hard as you would a male. Boys can't (won't) play truly competitive games with girls," Peterson notes. "It isn't clear how they can win" without potentially violating various moral codes, ones which are incredibly important socialization aids in future life decisions, especially those relating to marriage, work, and family life.

Increasingly, education systems, from elementary school through to university, are favouring female behavioral patterns as well as female modes and methods of learning. While Peterson advocates for the rights and educational development of females, he emphasizes that males can't be forgotten—this leads to a host of other social problems, one of the increasingly prominent ones being absentee fathers who, for various reasons, are not being held as accountable on the one hand or who, on the other, are increasingly finding less and less social room and accommodation (particularly in the education system) for them to act, learn, and behave as boys, as men:

> *It has become a tenet of a certain kind of social constructionist theory that the world would be much improved if boys were socialized like*

> *girls. Those who put forward such theories assume, first, that aggression is a learned behavior, and can then simply not be taught, and second (to take a particular example) that, "boys should be socialized the ways girls have been traditionally socialized…." First, it is not the case that aggression is merely learned. It is there in the beginning. There are ancient biological circuits, so to speak, that underlie defensive and predatory aggression…. Most [boys] are … socialized effectively by the age of four. This is not, however, because they have been encouraged to act like little girls. Instead, they are taught or otherwise learn in early childhood to integrate their aggressive tendencies into more sophisticated behavioral routines. Aggression underlies the drive to be outstanding, to be unstoppable, to compete, to win—to be actively virtuous, at least along one dimension. Determination is its admirable, pro-social face.*

Referring to various examples from his clinical practice, Peterson explains that men who have not had their aggression channeled positively can have seriously damaging psycho-social problems and damage the women in their lives. Throughout his book Peterson appeals to examples from his work as a clinical psychologist to illustrate, case after case, that failure to attend to and support the learning and psycho-sexual differences of boys and girls leads to serious gender imbalances and conflicts. This concern is one of the strongest points of the book, and clearly outlines why we need practical and empathetic ways of attending to and affirming the unique capacities and qualities of men and women, especially from childhood onwards. The profoundly negative consequences of "minimiz[ing] the innate differences" between boys and girls has significant ethical consequences for society at large, he argues.

Peterson's examination of how to live an intentionally ethical life in fact covers a diverse range of topics: from education to gender, from forgiveness to accountability. He hopes that this will help encourage ethical action, even in the face of totalitarian or ideological pressures. For Peterson, we are always already implicated in political and social power dynamics of one sort or another. His thinking grew partly out of his moral horror regarding the dark history of twentieth-century totalitarian regimes and their respective origins. Peterson explains that it was mainly in poring over Solzhenitsyn that he came to the position that happiness must not be the reason for existence. Quoting Solzhenitsyn, he says that the idea we are made for happiness is an ideology too easily "done in by the first blow of the work assigner's cudgel." So, instead of being made for happiness, Peterson posits we should seek out a "deeper meaning" for existence. He settles on the idea that life has "more to do with developing character in the face of suffering than with happiness."

Peterson's conception of happiness is surprisingly underdeveloped. And this oversight is especially disappointing given that he is usually so attentive to the nuances and implications of the history of concepts and ideas. From the way he speaks about it I can only assume he equates

it with superficial consumerism, pleasure seeking or go-with-the-flow, moral complacence. If this is what happiness amounted to then I would be absolutely on side with Peterson. However, the theological Judeo-Christian tradition, not to mention the philosophical one, tells a very different story about the nature and purpose of happiness. It's a story Peterson strangely skirts, to the detriment of his overall argument.

While people attach a multitude of attributes and meanings to the term happiness, it is often understood in philosophy and Christian theology to mean, as Joseph Pieper puts it, "a basic conception of the nature of man and the meaning of human existence." For Aristotle, the just person is the happy one. For Aquinas, happiness is the act of contemplating "the Good" (the Trinity) and striving to live in accordance with the transcendental: the true, beautiful, and good. "God alone can satisfy the will of man," he writes in Part Two of the *Summa*. The Christian philosophical tradition understands happiness to consist of being-in-relationship with the Trinity, with the perfect community of persons who loved us into existence not primarily so that we would struggle for the sake of the strengthening of the will. Rather, we were made for happiness, called to love God and others and, as a result, to struggle in this fallen world as a consequence of seeking to love.

A more robust examination of the history of happiness as a philosophy helps us to better understand how, for instance, Maximilian Kolbe behaved in Auschwitz. Peterson's *12 Rules* can't produce a Kolbe. Only love of God can direct the will far beyond the noble but limited aims of struggling for meaning. Peterson refers to the Nazi and Soviet work camps to show how individuals of exceptional character challenged the entire totalitarian superstructure through their moral courage, through acts of resistance. However, the role of faith was often a profound motivating factor for these resistances (which Solzhenitsyn acknowledged). For Kolbe, among countless others, love is the purpose of moral action (and self-development a derivative effect, not the main goal). At best, Peterson psychologizes this. As a consequence, we are left in *12 Rules* with a will-to-power language that cannot, among other things, accurately describe the actions of the heroic resisters Peterson so rightly admires. The economy of grace is sheer divine gift, working in accordance with, but transcending, the human will: there's not much room made for this mystery in the Peterson lexicon (he has often acknowledged as much).

Ultimately, Peterson's dismissal of happiness as the purpose of life is a problem because it aligns his argument too closely with an emphasis on an introspective attempt at self-sufficiency. Insisting that meaning can be forged out of effort emphasizes a kind of self-reliance which, while certainly useful and even admirable at times, misses the mark in telling most of the human story. Suffering for the sake of suffering in order to "tolerate the weight of our own self-consciousness" is, I suppose, the best we can aim for if the material world is all that exists. Personally, I am not that inspired to pursue goodness simply for the sake of "bear[ing] a load" to "justify" my "miserable existence" so as to better hunger after participation in the "heroism of genuine Being." The abstract Logos, the rational ordering principle of existence is far more compelling when it is made flesh: not simply Christ as appealing psychological archetype, conveniently categorized and thus tamed and predictable. But Christ as the *personhood* of a love which transcends, because he embodies, all the "rules."

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