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Order Out of Chaos: The Political Theology of Jordan Peterson

Abstract:

Jordan Peterson has risen to prominence as a genuine public intellectual on the New Right within a North American context that (unlike Europe) generally eschews the elitism of educated intellectuals. He has tried to construct a coherent ontological system in order to rejuvenate previously dead cultural forms without recourse to unenlightened fundamentalisms. Critiquing Enlightenment rationality from a post-metaphysical perspective, Peterson seeks to ground a Darwinian materialism in an affective-drive theory of subjectivity. It is only the religious imaginary that holds the key for the renewal of the West, and which can combat the dark-black shadow of nihilism that hangs over Western civilization. Synthesizing psychoanalysis with evolutionary biology, neuroscience, religious anthropology, and existentialism, Peterson forges an ontological structure that endeavors to invert the death

of God and re-establish a conservative political project upon a resurrected religious metanarrative.

Keywords:
Conservatism, evolution, psychology/psychoanalysis, death of God, nihilism, materialism, rationality, biology

The metaphor of the *dark horse* is quite apropos to describe the meteoric rise of Jordan Peterson, a clinician psychologist and professor at the University of Toronto. That his self-help book, *12 Rules for Life* (2018), which spends many of its pages unraveling the mythology of Adam and Eve, would ascend to the pinnacle of bestseller lists in North America, sell three million copies in one year, and be "slated for translation into 50 languages,"[1] is truly an event in the philosophical sense of the word. David Brooks, writing for the *New York Times*, has labeled Peterson "the most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now" (Brooks 2018). It is not unfair to say that many have given Peterson the mantel of a father figure in the West, representing its conservative conscience, with his insistence that individuals clean up their rooms and take upon their shoulders the responsibility of Being. Peterson is something truly rare in North America: a genuine public intellectual in a territory that generally distrusts the credentials of an elite education.

Peterson's signature mark is his blending of psychology and the biological sciences with the esotericism of Jungian psychoanalysis. His lecture style shifts unflinchingly from a discussion of Darwin and our common ancestry with chimpanzees to our heritage as sons and daughters of God. In 1999, Peterson wrote his magnum opus, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, which strove to ground analytical psychology in interdisciplinary knowledge. He sought to demonstrate that developmental psychology, evolutionary biology, neural science, existential philosophy, and so forth, coincide with the basic Jungian paradigm. The predecessor in this regard is Anthony Steven's *Archetypes* (1982), which tried to unify the field of ethology with Jungian psychoanalysis. Peterson's central work is an attempt to wrestle with the death of God in the (post)modern world and effect the reunification of science and the archetypal truths

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[1] *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/bestsellers/2018/02/25/national-nonfiction/ and the *Toronto Star*, https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2018/03/08/toronto-star-bestsellers-for-the-week-ending-march-10.html; https://www.jordanbpeterson.com, and https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/about/.

of religion, so as to undo the spiritual malaise and nihilism that haunt the secular West. If religion can be grounded in science, then meaning can be reignited and the false dichotomy, which modernity has erected, can be obliterated. Part of Peterson's charisma is that he can combine the personae of the scientist with the philosopher/ theologian. He is an expert in personality psychology and political psychology with a long and impressive bibliography of experimental research. Much of his research involves the overlap between personality and politics. One such study determined that "conservatives experience a wide variety of stimuli in their environment with heightened motivational salience, including positive, neutral, and low-arousal stimuli" (Peterson et al. 2016: 1182). Peterson's second book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018), is essentially a condensed version of Maps of Meaning, written for a general audience, which extends and clarifies some of his original arguments. The primary difference between the two books is that while the first stresses the problems of the culture and the group eliminating the creativity of the individual, the second stresses the aimlessness of the individual without a proper grounding in the Symbolic Order.

The publicly funded TVOntario in Canada broadcast a thirteen-part lecture series taught by Peterson in 2004 on *Maps of Meaning* and he became a regular guest on the renowned *The Agenda with Steve Paikin* on the same network (Burgis et al. 2019: 119–23). However, his work only received widespread attention after the controversy surrounding the passing of the Canadian Bill C-16, which Peterson accused of criminalizing traditionalist gender concepts in its insistent defense of transgender and nonbinary-identifying individuals. *The Rise of Jordan Peterson*, directed by Patricia Marcoccia, was released as a feature-length film in 2019, documenting the controversy surrounding Peterson. It looked as if the passage of Bill C-16 would demand the usage of nonbinary gendered language under the penalty of the Law, and it was this element *of compelled speech* to which Peterson vehemently objected. His criticism of the bill was fundamentally that the power of the State was being wielded by a minority in order to impose a deconstructionist ontology onto the vast majority of ordinary, more traditional citizens. This top-down imposition based upon a contested metaphysic was the very definition of tyranny for him.[2] Peterson was thus transformed into a heroic figure among many conservative circles, bravely facing down the domination of the progressive State. With his status as

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[2] See Jordan B. Peterson "2016/11/19: University of Toronto Free Speech Debate," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTFJmeqNhUk.

a genuine public intellectual secured, Peterson has moved virtually out of the university: using the YouTube platform to disseminate his message, taking part in a myriad of notoriously hostile interviews, going on general speaking tours around the world, lecturing to sold-out audiences, and taking part in debates with other prominent thinkers such as Sam Harris (2018)[3] and Slavoj Žižek (2019).[4]

Peterson infamously asserts the notion that postmodernism (and identity politics) shares a common genealogy with Marxism. His basic premise is that in the 1960s, after the horrors of the Soviet Union were revealed, Marxists basically shifted their domain of combat from the economic to the cultural domain. Therefore, economic Marxism became metamorphosed into the very same postmodern identity politics behind Bill C-16 that he confronted. His signal fire is that these "postmodern neo-Marxists" have infiltrated administrative positions of power and that their presence represents an existential threat to Western civilization.[5] This theory is a notable weak point in his thought, because he does not possess sufficient knowledge about continental philosophy to trace a lineage beyond vague assertions that confuse both Marx and the postmodernists. The problem is not so much the genealogy between Marxism and postmodernism as constitutive of the contemporary radical Left, since others have traced a similar history (see Sim 2000 and Woods 1998 [1986]), but rather the caricatured nature of his argument. The weakness of this argument has left the impression with many that he is not a serious intellectual.

The most sustained critique of Peterson's thought is the slim volume, *Myth and Mayhem*, which includes entries by four different authors. Unfortunately, the general style of writing is amateurish and it appears manifest that the authors do not comprehend what Peterson's philosophy actually consists of. Matthew McManus charges Peterson with being an *idealist* in the tradition of Hegel, and nonsensically likens his *Maps of Meaning* to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (McManus 2020: 47–50). His interpretation disregards the entire epistemology that Peterson constructs throughout *Maps of Meaning*—better categorized as *materialist* (Ibid 2020: 43–46). Ben Burgis's entry seems to have no inkling of conservative arguments against radical democracy such as that of Augustin Cochin or François Furet. He naïvely imagines that merely pointing out Marx's commitment to democratic socialism forecloses Peterson's criticism

[3] Pangburn, "Sam Harris & Jordan Peterson — Vancouver — 1 (CC: Arabic & Spanish)," *YouTube*, June 23, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jey_CzIOfYE.

[4] Jordan B. Peterson, "Marxism: Zizek/Peterson: Official Video," *YouTube*, April 19, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsWndfzuOc4.

[5] Speakers Action Group, "Freedom Of Speech or Political Correctness Dr Jordan Peterson," *YouTube*, April 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9XyXo-GcLsA.

that Marxism naturally leads to Stalinism. If anything is idealist, it is Burgis's reasoning in which ideals are purely logical constructs lacking material inertia in the real world (Burgis 2020: 216–19). The problem with *Myth and Mayhem* is that the depth of argumentation rarely rises above that of Peterson's critique of postmodern neo-Marxism, which it tears down effortlessly.

In contrast to *Myth and Mayhem*, Artem Smirnov (2019) offers a professional critique of Peterson's politics. He takes Peterson to task for abusing the theories of Derek Price and Vilfredo Pareto in order to ground his inegalitarianism (Ibid: 7–10). Smirnov plausibly demonstrates that he sometimes slips into "kettle logic" and contradictions (Ibid: 18). However, Smirnov does not contend with Peterson's fundamental philosophy, much as Peterson refuses to genuinely wrestle with Marxism. This is understandable, however, since Smirnov's ostensible aim is Peterson's political thought. Unfortunately, the reader is left with the impression that Price and Pareto form the core of his thought and ground ideas such as the dominance hierarchy, when they are merely tangential to his overarching project based on a Darwinian materialism.

Both of these critical engagements reveal that the structural ontology which grounds everything in Peterson's philosophy remains horribly misunderstood. Much as Marx cannot simply be consigned to the dustbin of history for his adherence to the labor theory of value, it would be a mistake to refuse an encounter with Peterson's philosophy because of his defective critique of *postmodern neo-Marxism*, and the plausible contradictions that Smirnov highlights. Despite propelling him to the status of public intellectual, politics forms only a small part of Peterson's existentialist project. In order to properly engage with his body of work, or in order to intelligently criticize him, it is necessary to comprehend the full breadth of his core ontological structure.

(a) The Nihilism of the West

The philosophical project Peterson constructs can only be understood once it is situated within a broader conservative narrative that sees the liberal-democratic project of the West as *exhausted*—and within the even longer historical event of the death of God going back to Nietzsche. According to Žižek's reading of the times, we are at an end of history, because it is difficult to imagine a form of social and political organization that is different from the liberal-democratic hegemony: "It is easy to make fun of Fukuyama's notion of the 'End of History,' but most people today are Fukuyamean, accepting

liberal-democratic capitalism as the finally found formula of the best possible society, such that all one can do is to try to make it more just, more tolerant, and so on" (Žižek 2009: 88). The twentieth-century projects of Fascism and Communism ended in disaster, so that genuine political imagination has effectively run out in the West. Located within this conjuncture is a space from which an inchoate anti-Enlightenment philosophical project has begun to emerge. The liberal dissident writer, Vladimir Tismaneanu asserts that

> [a]t the end of this most tumultuous century (the bloodiest and most violent ever) we have come to realize the precariousness of our human condition, the limits of our knowledge, and the absurdity of any grandiose project to restructure the world. However, this awareness creates a spiritual vacuum, a dissatisfaction with an environment dominated by technology and bureaucratic effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) [...] [This] leaves the individual with a sense of despondency and a profound need for identification with a creed, religion, community, militia, and so on [...] [but] universalistic redemptive paradigms have gone bankrupt in our century.... (Tismaneanu 1998: 20)

Despite the diversity among populist parties, traditional conservatism, and neo-Fascist incarnations, the emergence of this "New Right" (if it can be considered a singular constellation at all) is marked by an antagonism toward the decadence of the liberal-bourgeois world. Writing from a critical perspective, Joan Antón-Mellón identifies this antithetical relation as a crucial element of the New Right philosophy, stating that, "The NR [New Right] savages the dysfunctions of postmodernity (anomie, hyperindividualism, ultra-materialism, problems of identity) and offers its remedies for society's alienation and decadence, all of which involve, as a *sine qua non*, the recovery of the authentic 'European identity'" (2013: 54). A return to tradition, and to the deep archaic roots of Western civilization, are posited as the antidote to the problems of liberal decadence.

Within the tradition of the Right, the British conservative Douglas Murray paints a scene of contemporary Europe that is cut through with meaninglessness and "existential nihilism" (2017: 260). Europe bears the marks of Nietzsche's last man: it is rich and prosperous, but it is spiritually hollow.

> [L]ife in modern liberal democracies is to some extent thin or shallow... life in modern Western Europe in particular has lost its sense of purpose [...] "What am I doing here? What is my life for? Does it have any purpose beyond itself?" These are questions that

have always driven human beings [...] Yet for Western Europeans the answers to these questions that we have held onto for centuries seem to have run out. (Ibid: 258–59)

Even though a central axis of Murray's thought are the problems of immigration into Europe and the defense of Western culture against an internationalist/globalist trajectory, the provocative part of his thought is the rejection of *scapegoating*. The problem is not actually immigration per se, but rather that Europe's wounds are self-inflicted. The trouble with multiculturalism is a symptom of a deeper nihilism that can locate no value in the European civilizational project.

Peterson reads the nihilistic juncture of the present as part of the long-term consequences of the death of God, effected by a consequence of Enlightenment rationality. He desires a return to the deep religious mythology of the past as the antidote to nihilism. However, his conservatism is traditionalist and passionately rejects the ideals of the Far-Right trajectory, renouncing all organicist, nativist and collectivist phantasies that define the extreme of the Right (see Antón-Mellón 2013: 60–63). Whereas many on the Far Right curse the Christian heritage of Europe for being at the root of universalism and egalitarianism, Peterson agrees with the descriptive claim but inverts its negative judgment. Christianity forms the ground of the West and it has to be brought back to life, because without religion all the secular pretensions of the West are living on borrowed time. It is here that the secret of Peterson's ascendency can perhaps be found. The protests, riots, and general anarchy during 2020 in the United States—with reverberations felt in Western Europe–are symptomatic of an expanding divide between Left and Right as liberal-democratic hegemony decays. When the future seems so uncertain and foreboding, Peterson's project provides both a political defense of tradition/hierarchy and a gospel for the new century in a single stoke. The synergism of his project offers more than a mere political conservatism. Peterson takes on the personae of therapist, priest, intellectual, and scientist combined into a single figure, and that is a powerfully attractive amalgam during these dark times.

(b) Toward an Affective-Drive Ontology

Even though Peterson has been a fierce opponent of the "linguistic turn" in philosophy, he rejects any sort of one-to-one correspondence epistemology. The world for him is split primordially between *the sensory* and *the affective*—what Žižek calls a "scientific parallax" (2006: 10). The existence of a thing (the sensory) is the

thing that can be described by science—the organization of the sensory *par excellence*. Unlike other animals, human beings are capable of abstracting and classifying a nearly infinite list of properties that nature presents to the observer. However, the mere sensory relation to the world of objective science is a dead relation. The mere facticity of nature *means nothing.* To illustrate this notion, Peterson gives the example of a rat in a cage confronted by the introduction of an iron block. Once the rat explores the block and realizes that its mere existence has no meaning for it, the animal will ignore it. The block signifies nothing for the rat, except the raw space that it has stolen from the cage. Peterson recognizes that the being of the thing, its significance, is (partially) projected onto it by the subject. Being is phenomenologically composed of both objective and subjective aspects—that is, not merely *the sensory*, but also *the affective* (Peterson 1999: 420). Emerging from the psychoanalytic tradition, his conception of reality is similar to Žižek's in his insistence that, "fantasy is on the side of reality: it is, as Lacan once said, the support that gives consistency to what we call 'reality'" (Žižek 2008: 44). Concrete reality does not exist apart from our fundamental projections onto its mere existence. Peterson states that

> [w]e do model facts, but we *concern* ourselves with valence, or value... sensory and affective. It is not enough to know that something is. It is equally necessary to know what it *signifies*. It might even be argued that animals—and human beings—are *primarily* concerned with the affective or emotional significance of the environment. (Peterson 1999: 22)

The world is not merely objective, but its being is something generated out of a subjective engagement with it. It is the presence of this *subjective projected surplus* that situates Peterson as a "post-metaphysical" philosopher.

This projection is primarily *affective* at its core and therefore *pre-linguistic*—not a product of the neocortical regions of the central nervous system. Catherine Malabou declares that the studies in affective neuroscience have demonstrated the "importance of the emotional brain. All the cognitive [symbolic] operations closely depend on it. Affects function initially at a primitive biological and cerebral level that does not involve consciousness. There therefore exists nonconscious affects, and the brain is their place of origin [...] [a] primordial emotionality" (2013: 211). Imagine a bedroom filled with lots of knickknacks and books on the furniture, a few clothes scattered on the floor, and a bed that is made but still rumpled.

Is this a chaotic environment, or is this an orderly space? Well, it depends on the gaze of the subject. *Orderliness* is a defined trait of personality. People whose personalities are orderly cannot tolerate disorganization in their lives and their environment. While partially constructed through object-relations in childhood, personality appears to be significantly engendered by genetics and biology— that is, built into the structure of our brains. Whereas an orderly personality might see the room as chaotic, another might see it as a perfectly decent and habitable domain. The affective projection generates, what Žižek calls a "*parallax gap*, the confrontation of two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible" (2006: 4). Personality generates a parallax shift that brings a different world into being.

> Because there's so many facts, we need a mechanism that screens facts for us a priori so that we don't drown in them, and that's what your temperament does. That's what your personality does. It actually provides the framework within which you perceive relevant fact, and this is a deep idea. It's a really deep idea because it tells you something about the nature of perception itself and the nature of facts and the nature of values.[6]

It is the multiplicity of different combinations of personality traits that construct a different world for different people. To deploy a second example, the being of a female body is not the same body for a heterosexual man as it is for a homosexual man. The cathexis of the libido brings a different body into being for the heterosexual man, than the absence of cathexis for the homosexual man.

Peterson has conducted much of his research in the field of p*olitical psychology*, which generally strives to demonstrate that the left-right axis in politics is partially determined by unconscious personality. That is, politics is not wholly determined by rational enquiry or deliberation, but by something more primitive. "[P]olitical psychology has linked political orientation with psychological variables that are, in and of themselves, irrelevant to political positions (e. g., disgust sensitivity). Such results begin to locate the source of political attitudes in more fundamental differences between people in personality and temperament" (Peterson, Burton, and Plaks 2015: 97). So, for example, those on the Left who orient themselves toward internationalism and open-border policies are those whose

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[6] Jordan B. Peterson, *Discovering Personality*. "Transcript Lecture 1: Introduction to Personality Psychology."

personalities are *open to novelty* within the mundane events of their ordinary lives. Those on the Right who form attachments to the nation and want closed borders are those whose personalities are *orderly*, reserved and grounded in routine. The world is split, it is parallax, and it is marked by a radical multiplicity, because of the psycho-biological realities of human affectivity.

> Our central nervous systems are made up of many "hard-wired" or automatized subsystems, responsible for biological regulation... subsystems that make up our shared structure—responsible, when operative, for our instincts (thirst, hunger, joy, lust, anger, etc.)... they appear to influence our fantasies, our plans, and alter and modify the content and comparative importance of our goals, our ideal futures [...]. (Peterson 1999: 38)

The field of political psychology is very much in dispute, however, because of its tendency to reduce the register of the political to the register of the psychical. Much as the idea of the *autonomy of the political* in radical thought sought to separate *the political* from socioeconomic determinism (Marchart 2007: 35–38), there is a desire to prevent politics from collapsing back in psychology. So, for example, Cristian Tileagă critiques political psychology for interpreting political practice "as [being] the result of universal habitual and automatic processes rather than as a product of human social practices... neglecting what it means to the social actors that participate in and create that world" (2013: 5–6). Thus, it is necessary to be wary that the abstractions from psychology are not mere reifications or projections of ideology.

Despite assembling his politics in direct opposition to Marxism, Peterson's drive ontology is ironically *materialist*—even if it bears no genealogical relation to the Marxist tradition. While there are many disputes about what constitutes materialism in Marx, the most cogent interpretation appears to be that related to human need. Mehmet Tabak persuasively recapitulates this interpretation of materialism:

> Acting objectively stems from the objective human needs; the material objects are human need, which can be satisfied only through human interaction with the material world and with other humans. Need satisfaction, broadly conceived, through objective activity is the general aim of human beings in history [...] human activity is always material activity, not only because the subject is essentially, at the bottom, material (objective), but also because the object of activity is material. (Tabak 2012: 36–37)

The divide that separates the two materialisms beyond this ironic similarity is quite expansive. Peterson understands material practice as driven by affect rather than economic activity. His is a materialism of Darwinian natural selection, predicated upon the millions of years of biological evolution that have structured the architecture of the brain/psyche. The world is marked by an almost infinite variety of complexity, and therefore "the brain appears to subject this complex initially transcendent reality to a sequence of filters, whose aim is the reduction of infinite patterned potential to graspable and pragmatic reality" (Peterson 2006: 159). This is what Peterson calls "an a priori interpretive structure" (Ibid: 160). It is this ancestral chain of Darwinian struggle that structured the central nervous system from the bottom up. The world that the subject brings into being is crafted through this evolutionary perceptual structure.

> The output of that structure is not wrong, but it is not absolutely correct, either—and its utility is in the final analysis judged pragmatically. Certain experiences are likely to result in the maintenance and procreation of the forms that instantiate them, incomplete though those experiences might be. Thus the final court of truth to which our judgments of reality are brought is Darwinian in nature, and not the court of ultimate truth, whatever that might mean in any case for beings as limited in capabilities as we are. (Peterson 2006: 160)

Human subjectivity, and its radical multiplicity of personality-types (centered around affects/drives) is the materiality of the phylogenetic past. "[E]volution is conservative," Peterson declares, "[w]hen something evolves, it must build upon what nature has already produced. New features may be added, and old features may undergo some alteration, but most things remain the same" (2018: 11). What human subjectivity is at the current historical conjuncture is the consequence of past historical "choices" executed by our ancestors in their practical struggle with existence. We are structured to the core of our being—in the central nervous system—by the traces of Darwinian natural selection.

Neurobiology is crucial for this "materialist theory of history," because it is the differences in neural memory which grounds his notion that *thought* is reflective of—or of a second order to—the material substrate of affects and drives.

> Procedural knowledge develops long before declarative knowledge, in evolution and individual development, and appears represented in

"unconscious" form, expressible purely in performance. Declarative knowledge, by contrast—knowledge of what—simultaneously constitutes consciously accessible and communicable episodic imagination (the world in fantasy) and subsumes even more recently developed semantic (linguistically mediated) knowledge, whose operations, in large part, allow for abstract representation and communication of the contents of the imagination. (Peterson 1999: 73)

There is a basic split in neuroscience between declarative and non-declarative memory that Peterson draws upon. Non-declarative memories are those patterns of practice that are imprinted onto the neurological substructure at an unconscious level as embodied action. The body knows how to walk, how to kiss, how to react to fear, without these patterns of action being given at the level of consciousness. These are what he calls "procedural" (a subset of the non-declarative). The declarative memory systems contain episodic memory (that is knowledge of events) and semantic memory (knowledge of symbols and/or concepts). The crucial point for Peterson is that the procedural is prior to the episodic and the semantic:

> We know how, which means how to act to transform the mysterious and ever-threatening world of the present into what we desire, long before we know how we know how, or why we know how. This is to say, for example, that a child learns to act appropriately (assuming it does) long before it can provide abstracted explanations for or descriptions of its behavior. (Peterson 1999: 73)

George Herbert Mead (1972 [1934]) concurs that the child learns to internalize the social demands, the attitude of the Other, through play and games. The child takes the role of the Other, acting out that role before it can be comprehended in semantic form. The roles of father and mother are acted out before they are comprehended in thought. It is only through the process of *doing* that semantic knowledge emerges, that the particularized other and subsequently the generalized Other can be introjected (Ibid: 152–64).

It is the weight of this phylogeny that unconsciously produces behavior. The procedural action that we engage in is infinitely more complex than our conscious awareness and representation of that action. Ethicality is not primarily a product of the rational psyche but is embodied in material practice.

> [T]he existence of morality—that intrinsic aspect of social behavior— long precedes representation of morality and rational description of

grounds for its existence. Morality, at its most fundamental level, is an emergent property of social interaction, embodied in individual behavior, implicit in the value attributed to objects and situations, grounded (unconsciously) in procedural knowledge. (Peterson 1999: 400)

These theoretics permit him to ground a conservative politics. So, for example, lobsters compete in a dominance hierarchy, and the serotonergic neurochemistry in the brain modulates the position of an individual in relation to the dominance hierarchy. The neurobiological evidence appears to indicate that human beings partake of a similarly evolved serotonergic system and that "[t]he part of our brain that keeps track of our position in the dominance hierarchy is therefore exceptionally ancient and fundamental. It is a master control-system, modulating our perceptions, values, emotions, thoughts and actions. It powerfully affects every aspect of our Being, conscious and unconscious alike" (Peterson 2018: 14–15). What this means is that social conflict/competition is endemic to human nature: that Weber's triad of class, status, and party, or Veblen's conspicuous consumption, are expressions of an agency built into the central nervous system through millions of years of evolutionary adaptation, because they are the material practices for which nature has selected.

> [T]he dominance hierarchy, however social or cultural it might appear, has been around for some half a billion years. It's permanent. It's real. The dominance hierarchy is not capitalism. It's not communism, either [...] It's not the patriarchy [...] It is instead a near-eternal aspect of the environment [...] We were struggling for position before we had skin, or hands, or lungs, or bones [...] Dominance hierarchies are older than trees. (Ibid: 14)

What appears a mere contingent product of history is actually an affective-drive structure built over the course of evolutionary epochs. Intersubjective antagonism is not the product of social structure and it defines the limit of sociality.

(c) The Limits of Enlightenment Rationality

Syncretism marks Peterson's philosophical project, primarily in using the biological sciences to comprehend human subjectivity. The *return toward biology* is a crucial element in Peterson's ontology. The viability of a return to biology is disputed within much of continental thought, because it engenders the specter of scientific reductionism. Žižek, for example, doubts that neuroscience and evo-

lutionary biology are able to unlock the mysteries of consciousness or subjectivity. For one, there is the possibility of eliminating the importance of the social-historical dimension of subjectivity, along with the ethical domain of action, which becomes smothered by mechanical processes.

> My saying "Yes!" at a wedding ceremony can be described as a physical act enchained in a causal texture of material (neuronal, biological, and so on) reality, but this does not account for the reasons why I said "Yes!" There is a normative dimension in humans (quests for truth, for the good, for the beautiful, for the sake of it, not as parts of a survival strategy) which operates at a level which ontologically differs from factual reality, and cannot be reduced to it [...] (Žižek 2006: 176)

Žižek wants to defend the transcendent aspect of subjectivity and prevent its immersion in pure determinism. His attitude toward biological science is therefore somewhat dismissive. Adrian Johnston, however, disagrees on the significance of biology for continental thought, writing that "a truly materialist psychoanalytic metapsychology is obligated to reconcile itself with select findings of the life sciences (of course, this reconciliation should be dialectical, involving mutual modifications between these disciplines…" (2014: 141). Perhaps part of the problem is a false dilemma between an all-or-nothing relation to biology—as if one either accepts brain science as the final arbiter of truth, or as having nothing meaningful to contribute to discussions of human subjectivity. Whatever the limits of the biological sciences, the materiality of the brain and evolution does not appear to mean nothing for human subjectivity, and it is not at all clear that the turn toward biology is necessarily reductive.

Despite heavy emphasis on the hard sciences for deriving his notions about subjectivity, Peterson is fundamentally an *anti-positivist* philosopher. His foundational ontology does not permit a discrete nature that can be fully known by empirics or rationality. The ground is fundamentally *chaos* (Peterson 1999: 137–49). That is, Peterson deploys biology in order to ground mythology, which paradoxically represents the inescapable limit of science. The object is not a static or dead thing. "The 'object' always remains something capable of transcending the 'bounds' of its representation; it is something that inevitably retains its mysterious essence, its connection with the unknown, and its potential for the inspiration of hope and fear" (Ibid: 241). It is from within this conjuncture that he doubts that *values* can be derived from *facts*—that the world of social action can be reduced to the domain of science.

Having already determined that human beings "act out" something in procedure before representing it in memory, Peterson asserts that the primordial form of representation is not semantic, but episodic—that is, narrative in structure: before the word, precedes the image. "Shakespeare can be regarded as a precursor of Freud, even though he was by no means a psychologist. Drama precedes [abstract] knowledge" (Peterson 2006: 166). Religion and mythology serve the intermediary role between procedural knowledge and semantic knowledge (or abstract rationality), just as it serves in the Hegelian philosophical system. Religious myth is the imagistic representation of procedural knowledge in sensuous form.

> Myths dream ideas long before ideas take on recognizable, familiar and verbally comprehensible form. The myth, like the dream, may be regarded as the birthplace of conscious abstract knowledge, as the matrix from which formed ideas spring... Objects of experience which have been investigated can therefore come to serve as symbols of representation for description of the subject of experience, comparatively difficult to comprehend. (Peterson 1999: 299)

The difference between the Hegelian and the Petersonian rendering is that religion acts as an irreducible element to which reason is not superior. Abstract rationality is more exact, but it loses the full breadth of the embodied prior stages. The imagistic portrayal of evil in the figure of the devil provides a veritable wellspring of insights and motivational power that abstractly rational propositions about evil do not, and cannot, contain.

Religious sacrifice provides an illustrative example. The notion of sacrifice is the conception of the *future*. That is, satisfaction can be delayed in order to reap something better in the future. Freud relates this to the necessities of communal work and the demands of eros (1961: 99–103). Symbolic representation is primarily displacements of drive relations. With the birth of the future, the human being has to first imagistically represent the possibilities inherent in procedure and has done this historically through ritual sacrifice to God.

> Our ancestors acted out a drama, a fiction: they personified the force that governs fate as a spirit that can be bargained with, traded with, as if it were another human being. And the amazing thing is that it worked... It's not very far from that to God, sitting above on high, tracking your every move and writing it down for further reference in a big book. Here's a productive symbolic idea: *the future is a judgmental father*. (Peterson 2018: 165–67)

It is this representation in ritualistic form that allows the subject to conceive of the future, conceive of delayed satisfaction and manipulate it as a mental object. The subject can now modify the procedure based upon the representation, and can generate social action that mere animals are not capable of. This means that an abstract conception of the future is the product of a dual mediating structure. First, it is grounded in drive satisfaction. Second, it can only be constructed through imagistic representation. It is the projection of a personality—that is, God, who can be bargained with—onto the process that supports the abstract rationality of the future. The abstract-semantic concept of the future is not a rationally derived notion, but is grounded on a projected, affective-drive structure. These thoughts are congruent with other theories in evolutionary biology, such as that God solves problems of cooperation by acting as an external authority, engendering a deeper sense of ethicality in the believer than would otherwise be possible (see Johnson 2016).

Mankind is that creature which can present to himself the structuring process of natural selection in its imagistic and semantic modalities. The human subject can present to himself the process of *creative adaptation* consciously that merely exists unconsciously for other animals (Peterson 1999: 400). The evolved psyche projects natural categories onto the world in order to comprehend it. The Abrahamic God is Father and not Mother, because the original object-relation with the Mother is primordial union and oneness, not the radical Otherness of God which can only be psychodynamically represented by the separateness of the Father in the early Oedipal relations (Peterson 2006: 138). Projection at its core consists of religious archetypes. The archetypal structural of the religious imaginary, which forms the core phenomenological encounter with reality, consists of a bipolarity between masculine order and feminine chaos. The archetype of the Great Father appears in mythology as the bounded domain of the *known*, which is *culture*. The archetypal Great Mother manifests in mythic narrative as the unbounded matrix of the *unknown*, which is *nature*. The hero is the archetypal figure that mediates between the order of the Father and the chaos of the Mother and is representative of the conscious historical subject (Peterson 2007: 96–97). These religious archetypes mirror the structure of *creative adaptation* in the process of natural selection and persist as the fundamental aspects of the world. Reality is composed not of things or facts, but foremost of the dichotomy between chaos and order. Religious mythology is the primordial form of representation and the deepest source of value. The *imago dei* in the Book of Genesis

is the precondition for a philosophical conception of human dignity, and it is the imagistic representation reflecting the power of the human subject to consciously bring forth *order out of chaos*, through creative adaptation. And, it is the unceasing flux of imaginatively and fantastically producing order out of chaos that precludes positivist closure in his system.

The error of rationalism is that it reverses the proper epistemological ordering. Language is a reflection of the underlying material practices, and not an independent power. Peterson states that "[t]he major advantage of increased abstraction of representation, apart from ease of communication, is increased adaptive flexibility: alterations in abstract thought can proceed 'as if' a game, without immediate practical consequences, positive or negative" (Peterson 1999: 263). Abstract rationality, generated by the enlarged prefrontal cortexes of human beings, is an instrument deployed to manipulate the procedural knowledge generated from material action and the evolved neurological structure. However, rationality does not create value. Value is primarily unconscious, derived from underlying drives, but is being made ever more conscious as it is represented in imagistic and semantic form. The aim of representation is to organize the demands of the diverse biological subsystems that generate value into a coherent hierarchy of value, so as to better act in the world (Ibid: 319).

Reason can become a deadly force, however, because reason can abstract itself from that which it is supposed to represent and become (relatively) autonomous. Utilitarianism is fully rational as a coherent system of thought, but it is a dead relation as far as living human subjects are concerned. The enactment of its dictates would be monstrous for actual being in the world, forcing one to sacrifice even one's own child to the Moloch of utility—breaking the evolutionary ethical imperative that one should favor the welfare of genetic relatives above that of non-relatives (Hamilton 1964: 19). Plato (1997: 1087–91) can suggest in the *Republic* that the family relation be extended to the community *writ large*, because he does not properly contend with familial relation as affect, as biology, and imagines that they can be manipulated through pure reason without limitation.

> The capacity to abstract has not come without price, however. The incautious, imaginative (and resentful) can easily use their gift of socially constructed intelligence to undermine moral principles that took eons to generate and that exist for valid but invisible reasons. Such "invisible" principles can be subjected to facile criticism, by the historically ignorant, once they take imagistic, written or spo-

ken form. The consequence of this "criticism" is the undermining of necessary faith, and the consequent dissolution of interpersonal predictability, dys-regulation of emotion, and generation of anomie, aggression and ideological gullibility (as the naked psyche strives to clothe itself, once again). (Peterson 1999: 254)

The long historical aim of philosophy, to separate reason from affect, is a dead endeavor, because such would require a fatal lobotomy, removing all the imaginative, creative, and phantastical functions of the psyche. It is a pretense that rationality means something without the intuitive, affective part of the psyche. Peterson is not imagining reason as an abstract faculty, but as a neurobiological substrate—the evolved prefrontal cortex and the function of the left hemisphere. Reason serves an evolutionary function, but not the primary function of the psyche. It is merely one of the angels in the psyche.

(d) Self-consciousness and the Inclination Toward Death

Evil is perfectly rational. Peterson repeatedly turns to the novels of Dostoevsky in order to demonstrate this. The narrative arc of Raskol'nikov in *Crime and Punishment* is interpreted as someone who tries to generate his own rational value system without God—without the transcendent ethic that evolved through procedural practices. Raskol'nikov wants to live by the rationality he has designed in his head, but he is confronted by dread and anxiety after the murder, nonetheless. The archaic subsystems that structure his very being do not permit him to rationalize the murder as a benevolent act, and he suffers the consequences. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan's atheism is rationally superior to the simple Christian faith of Alyosha, but the former leads to nihilism, while the latter generates life (Peterson 2018: 190–91). Transcending mere biology, the problem of evil presents itself, and it is only through the religious imaginary that the problem of evil can be overcome.

What separates man from mere animal is the enlarged prefrontal cortical regions of the brain that generate higher orders of abstraction and ultimately self-consciousness. For man it is possible to take the attitude of the Other and thereby to gaze upon the self as an object. It is the reality of self-consciousness that produces the possibility for good and evil in the human subject beyond the order of mere nature. Peterson interprets the narrative of Adam and Eve as the dramatic representation of the human subject's existential

fate in relation to self-consciousness. As such, it bears a striking resemblance to Hegel's reading of the Fall (1991: 60–63). Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the awakening of self-consciousness. Unlike the animal,

> [w]e know that we are flawed in relationship to our ideals. We understand that our being is limited in place and in time. We know we are vulnerable to death, disease, and insanity. We know that we can be betrayed by our embodied being, and undermined, socially, by our peers and even by our friends. All of this makes us ashamed, fearful, and self-conscious. (Peterson 2007: 105)

The curse that Adam is burdened with by God is a representation of the fate of mankind in its self-conscious realization. Animals work on instinct, but the prefrontal cortex generates the possibility of the future for man, engendering sacrifice and alienation, a split in the basic organization of animal drives.

> [O]nce you become consciously aware that you, yourself, are vulnerable, you understand the nature of human vulnerability, in general. You understand what it's like to be fearful, and angry, and resentful, and bitter. You understand what pain means. And once you truly understand such feelings in yourself, and how they're produced, *you understand how to produce them in others*. It is in this manner that the self-conscious beings that we are become voluntarily and exquisitely capable of tormenting others [...]. (Peterson 2018: 174–75)

Existence is suffering and is marked by tragedy, because limitation is the precondition for Being in the world. How the human subject reacts against the tragedy of existence defines the ethical problematic (Peterson 1999: 464–65). The individual can either work toward the service of life and accept the limitations of being, the *sein-zum-tode*, or the individual can corrupt his soul under the power of death and work toward the negation of Being. Consciousness is caught between order and chaos and is dramatically represented as the mythological hero, charged with bringing forth order out of that chaos to create a habitable world. The hero is the positive side of self-consciousness. His dark transposition is *the adversary*—religiously represented by the figures of Cain and the devil, opposed to Abel and Christ. Cain sacrifices to God, perhaps unworthily, and is faulted by God for his sin of sloth. Faced with disappointment in the structure of Being, and in nihilistic fury, he turns against his brother Abel to spite the Lord.

Refusal of the good is, I think, most effectively and frequently justified by reference to the terrible affective consequences of (self) consciousness. This means that comprehension of the vulnerability and mortality of man, and the suffering associated with that vulnerability—apprehension of the ultimate cruelty and pointlessness of life—may be used as rationale for evil. Life is terrible, and appears, at some moments, ultimately terrible: unfair, irrational, painful and meaningless. Interpreted in such a light, existence itself may well appear as something reasonably eradicated. (Peterson 1999: 324)

Peterson reconstructs the death drive in psychoanalysis at the register of self-consciousness. Žižek notes that the death drive is "man's radical and fundamental *dis*-adaptation, *mal*-adaptation, to his environs" (2006: 231). The consequences of self-consciousness engender a *surplus*, a turning against the demands of Nature. Self-consciousness generates a radical gap in the order of nature, through the introduction of evil. This is the *Fall of Man* depicted in mythological form. The demonic individual desires revenge against God, or Being itself: "Individuals whose life is without meaning hate themselves for their weakness and hate life for making them weak. This hatred manifests itself in absolute identification with destructive power, in its mythological, historical and biological manifestations; manifests itself in the desire for the absolute extinction of existence" (Peterson 1999: 482). The ground for genuine evil is the unwillingness to shoulder the burden of a tragic life. It is epitomized by John Milton's Satan who would rather have the infernal abode of hellfire and destroy the innocence of Eden than accept his limitation and kneel before the throne of God.

Rationality, decoupled from material being that stretches into the depths of the evolutionary past, is actually the source of the nihilistic inclination toward death, because reason judges the world for its blatant lack in relation to the phantoms of its own design. That is, the world should not be so tragic.

[R]eason falls in love with itself and worse. It falls in love with its own productions. It elevates them, and worships them as absolutes... it is the greatest temptation of the rational faculty to glorify its own capacity and its own productions and to claim that in the face of its theories nothing transcendent or outside its domain need exist. (Peterson 2018: 218)

Reason damns the world and transforms it into hell: the totalitarianism of German Nazism and Soviet Communism, in Auschwitz and

the Gulag. What is denied, what is negated, is the chaotic ground of being, the transcendent capacity of the world to forever disrupt the ideological and cultural pretensions of man. The adversary cannot bear the transitory nature of the world, cannot bear the demand for *creative adaptation*. Crane Brinton, the classic historian of revolutions, noted that both the religious fundamentalist (New Model Army) and the atheistic utopian (Bolsheviks) cannot tolerate the ordinary vices, failings, and limitations of mundane individuals, and seek to purge reality of its inadequacy in revolutionary fury—an impossible phantasy (1965: 217–36). The *fascist* and the *decadent* personalities represent opposite poles of a singular adversary archetype. Even if they appear to be antagonistic toward one another, they are both united in their absolute rejection of the limitations of Being. "The fascist is willing to sacrifice painful freedom for order, and to pretend that his unredeemed misery is meaningless, so that he does not have to do anything for himself. The decadent believes that freedom can be attained without discipline and responsibility... and is unwilling to bear the burden of order" (Peterson 1999: 344). The fascist and the decadent deny the responsibility of generating order out of chaos, absolutizing either one or the other.

Christ is the archetypal figure of creative evolution, and the redemptive inversion of the devil archetype, who works towards the Good on faith, not reason. It might be rational to be an anti-natalist, since it would reduce a great deal of suffering, rational to let the human race become extinct and save the earth, as in the death drive phantasy of many environmentalists. But it comes at the sacrifice of our psycho-physical drives to multiply and bring forth life unto abundance. Rationality leads to a sickly dead thing, instead of a living being.

> The hero, the savior, is metaphorical or narrative description of the pattern by which the existence of anomalous information is accepted, mined for significance, and incorporated into the body of cultural adaptation. The devil, incarnation of evil, is embodiment, in procedure, episode and word, of the tendency that denies, rather than accepts; embodiment of the process that consciously inhibits life and its development, and brings to a halt the spirit's revolutionary process of adaptation [...]. (Ibid: 364)

The crucifixion signifies radical confrontation with the tragedy of existence, with the powers of sin, death, and the devil. This was the original, *classical theory* of the atonement, before the satisfaction and penal-substitutionary theories were crafted in the West

(wherein Christ was imagined as a sacrifice paid to God for the sins of mankind) in which the crucifixion was imagined as a struggle waged against the powers of darkness (see Aulén 2010 [1931]). Christ is the final dramatic hero because He voluntarily confronts the catastrophe of being and brings forth life out of death. As the eternal Logos, He engenders order out of chaos without resentment. It is thus that the Christian tradition holds the key for unlocking the secret of Being.

(e) Reversing the Death of God

The crucial problematic that Peterson desires to overcome is the arbitrariness of value that confronts Enlightenment rationality. "[The] moral catastrophes of the twentieth century were a consequence of disagreement between groups of people who had different rationally-derived notions of what exactly constituted an inalienable right ('from each according to his ability, to each according to his need')" (Peterson 2006: 135). The death of God was the traumatic event of the West. It is the narrative of collapse, decadence, and degeneration that situates Peterson as a conservative philosopher. Smirnov concludes that there are two reasons why Peterson is not merely a classical liberal, but a conservative:

> First, there is a fear of change and a striving to resist it, unless that change is perceived by conservatives as natural and organic. Second, there is the idea that, the laws and forces determining human behavior, and the social order itself, have a non-human origin [namely Nature as Darwinian natural selection, and/or God]. (Smirnov 2019: 22)

The Enlightenment separated the rational faculty from its biological substructure in its ever-persistent denial of mythology, Christianity in particular. Jean Jaurès, the socialist historian of the French Revolution, describes the luciferian pretensions of the radicals in opposition to the Church and religion: "In the last analysis, popular suffrage must decide, popular suffrage becomes pope, and, to a certain extent, by the transfer of sacerdotal power, popular suffrage becomes God" (2002 [1901–1908]: 128). The values that those in the West take for granted, and imagine as purely rational—that the Other can be the locus of salvation and not merely something to be eradicated—"[these] most cherished presumptions of the West remain castles in the air, historically and philosophically speaking," without the historical grounding of Christendom and religious imagination in general (Peterson 2006: 135). It is not self-evident that

you should not let undesirable children perish from exposure to the elements in accordance with the Greek practice. It is an act of faith or fidelity, to our deepest evolved instincts, imaginatively represented in myth, to value the sovereignty of the individual.

> The Christian revolution... [put] forth the entirely irrational but irresistibly powerful idea that sovereignty inheres in everyone, no matter how unlikely: male, female, barbarian, thief, murderer, rapist, prostitute and taxman. It is in such well-turned and carefully prepared ancient soil that our whole democratic culture is rooted. These unbelievably archaic ideas, first acted out, first embodied in ritual, first dramatized, then told as stories, developing more and more coherence over stretches of time of thousands of years [...]. (Peterson 2006: 175–76)

Politics properly is political theology and the proper antidote to ideological possession. Ideology is the opposite of mythology. Ideologies are the abstract, one-sided rationalizations of a pluralistic value-structure. The archetype of the devil unfolds itself in history as the self-conscious negation of evolved mythological value in the name of Reason, casting the world into perdition's flames.

> [S]omething new and radical is still almost always wrong. You need good, even great, reasons to ignore or defy general, public opinion. That's your culture. It's a mighty oak... You should do what other people do, unless you have a very good reason not to. If you're in a rut, at least you know that other people have travelled that path. Out of the rut is too often off the road. And in the desert that awaits off the road there are highwaymen and monsters. (Peterson 2018: 242–43)

The subject is guided by the wisdom of the Church, the State, the Family, and so forth, but it is her responsibility to weave the tapestry of her own life into a beautiful work of art, because each life is unique, and each individual faces their own trials and tribulations. Peterson repeats that "every fanatic and deviant cannot be allowed to run amok and break every rule, merely to demonstrate his 'freedom.' 'All impulse, no responsibility' is the slogan of the criminal and the psychopath, not the redemptive hero" (2006: 150). The *redemptive-heroic consciousness* generates a more habitable order for the community. Revolutionary heroes are few and far in between. It is this mundane process of adaptation through which God engenders order out of chaos. And the human being, as self-conscious subject, can cooperate with and further this divine project. Such is the sacred vocation of mankind.

The ontology of Peterson—whatever the veracity of his integrating biological science and philosophical thought into a synergistic whole—brings about a problematic that is of paramount significance. In a word, unless philosophical thought is to become a gnostic endeavor devoid of all materiality, the register of *the biological* is something that needs to be contended with. Peterson presents a daring ontology in which the death of God plunged the West into a nihilistic abyss by splitting the psyche and discarding everything intuitive and subjective as contingent, with the charge that it was non-rational. Recognition of the religious dimension of the human subject, that the religious imaginary is a drive-complex embodied through evolutionary adaptation, is the solution to the death of God and the antidote to the pathologies of unbridled reason. Peterson's ontological structure is meant to light the way toward the reintegration of the schizophrenic psyche. Political theology, religious imagination, and mythology are the only structures of thought carrying an affective valence majestic and powerful enough to rouse the soul from listlessness (Ibid: 168). Even the atheistic revolution of the early Soviet Union witnessed the mere exchange of the Orthodox home altar (or *iconostasis*) for the Lenin corner—demonstrating Lacan's notion that God is unconscious.

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