Self-Help for Moderns

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

The doubting and disillusioned youths of today have gained an unlikely inspiration in Jordan Peterson, a clinical psychologist at the University of Toronto. From the mountains of academia, Peterson has descended bearing commandments intended to restore meaning to the lives of millennial men. The prophet speaks, and a rapt audience attends to his words: "Clean your room, bucko!"

As this maxim suggests, Peterson's advice for young men may seem shallow. A scan of *12 Rules for Life*, Peterson's self-help book, reveals such recommendations as "Stand up straight with your shoulders back"; "Do not bother children when they are skateboarding"; and "Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street." A skeptical reader might ask how a book full of such trivialities has become a *New York Times* bestseller and produced vast online communities of men grateful for Peterson's work. The answer is simple: Peterson's book contains more than meets the eye.

In Peterson's hands, each rule provides a starting point for a longer essay on a more serious topic, including the problem of evil, flattery and companionship, and the importance of honesty. Each essay, in turn, relates to the central theme of the book: that suffering is inevitable and that you should strive to reduce and alleviate it. When suffering proves intractable, you must accept the "terrible responsibility of life." That means practicing self-sacrifice, standing tall, and praying that you survive.

A self-avowed agnostic who harbors a deep appreciation for religious tradition, Peterson builds his entire project on the inevitability of suffering. He even argues that it is the ultimate truth of human life, asking:

> What can I not doubt? The reality of suffering. It brooks no arguments. Nihilists cannot undermine it with skepticism. Totalitarians cannot banish it. Cynics cannot escape from its reality. Suffering is real, and the artful infliction of suffering on another, for its own sake, is wrong. That became the cornerstone of my belief.

For Peterson, the recognition that suffering is real points toward an objective morality. We might not know what good is, but we easily see what good is not. Rule #8 ("Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie") exemplifies this approach. Many of us do not know the truth well enough to speak it, but we know

when we are speaking falsehoods. We can avoid doing wrong even when we are uncertain what is right.

In their combination of moral realism and humility about ultimate knowledge, Peterson's conclusions stand within the conservative tradition. In *The Waste Land*, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and "The Hollow Men," T. S. Eliot describes a thoroughly modern hell and guides us through the inferno with a phlegmatic stoicism. As Russell Kirk summarizes Eliot's position: "London Bridge is falling down: the outer order of civilization disintegrates. But may not ruins be shored up? And should not a man commence the work of renewal, spiritual and material, by setting his lands in order: by recovering order within his own soul?"

Peterson's hell is not entirely unlike Eliot's. *12 Rules for Life* begins by descending into the abyss of human suffering and encounters vacant minds and souls that lack the faith and courage to do anything about it. Then, much like Eliot, Peterson turns inward and embraces seemingly prosaic tools to stave off our destruction. The best you can do is to shore up the ruins of the world—beginning with your bedroom. Hence, Rule #6: "Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world."

Compared to the evils of the world, a clean room seems almost hopelessly trivial. Yet conservatives have traditionally placed faith in such small gestures. The crises of modernity may be beyond the salvific acts of a mere mortal. Indeed, would-be salvific movements have tended to exacerbate the problems they hope to solve. Yet each man is able to make the world around him at least marginally more orderly, more kind, and more humane. In Eric Voegelin's words: "No one is obliged to take part in the spiritual crisis of a society; on the contrary, everyone is obliged to avoid this folly and live his life in order." Peterson translates this insight from a theoretical to a practical idiom. You might not be able to resolve the suffering and evil in the world, but you can help ameliorate its consequences in your local environment.

It is no objection, then, to observe that Peterson's advice is far from revolutionary. As the *New Yorker*'s Kelefa Sanneh notes, "Some of his critics might be surprised to find much of the advice he offers unobjectionable, if old fashioned: he wants young men to be better fathers, better husbands, better community members." And the importance of Peterson's work lies in its reception more than its content. Somehow, this soft-spoken middle-aged scholar's scolding carries a weight far beyond that of other middle-aged moralists. A simple Google search reveals throngs of young men who testify to the life-altering effects of Peterson's lessons.

Some of Peterson's influence may be due to his choice of medium: he has succeeded, where many others have failed, in reaching young audiences through their preferred internet media. Hundreds of Peterson's lectures, interviews, and discussions are available on YouTube. *12 Rules for Life* germinated from a post by the author on the question-and-answer platform Quora. Given the densely philosophical nature of Peterson's earlier work (his 1999 book *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* is 564 pages of behavioral and cognitive psychology), his rise as an internet celebrity may be surprising, but his videos show him to be a gifted lecturer. He also displays a remarkable ability to package his ideas in compelling ways.

Peterson first became notorious outside academia for his opposition to Canada's Bill C-16, which banned discrimination on the basis of gender identity. In a series of videos posted on YouTube, Peterson suggested that the bill could pose a serious threat to free speech. Critics have expressed concern that he perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes. Peterson, however, sees himself as offering much-needed help to the young men who

make up the bulk of his audience. In his estimation, our culture has devalued traditionally male traits, dosing boys with nihilistic apathy. His message is directed precisely to these youths: he offers a call to simple, effective, and therefore liberating action.

Times of great tumult tend to prompt the reevaluation of morals. Some five hundred years prior to Peterson's emergence, Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote a comparable book encouraging self-improvement. Where Peterson's tome aims at the hearts of disillusioned young men in the Western world, Erasmus's takes the form of a letter to Prince Charles, the heir apparent to the Holy Roman Empire. Guided by the commandment to "love thy neighbor," Erasmus offers advice that could be grafted onto Peterson's prose with little emendation. He urges Charles to "conduct your own rule as if you were striving to ensure that no successor could be your equal, but all the time prepare your children for their future reign as if to ensure that a better man would indeed succeed you." The prince is to dedicate himself to his own kingdom, live an orderly and disciplined life, and avoid flatterers. Above all, the prince is to live honestly: "While there is no denying that being a good prince is a burden, it is much more of a burden to be a bad one. Natural and reasonable things take far less trouble than simulations and deceptions."

Though Peterson's maxims may seem derivative, his values distinguish him from religious writers like Erasmus. In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre diagnosed the nihilistic impulses of modernity and presented his readers with a challenge: choose Nietzsche or Aristotle. Nietzsche instructs us to make new values in our own image, while Aristotle encourages us to adopt the morality of our forebears. Peterson picks up MacIntyre's gauntlet and suggests a third option. Instead of demanding either Nietzschean self-creation or a complete return to the old ways, Peterson suggests that elements of traditional morality be imported into the postmodern era as myths that help us make sense of the world.

Peterson, in other words, is an archetypal modern anti-modern. He suggests that you ought to believe in God because such belief helps you live an orderly life. But can a belief that you know to be instrumental—and thus false—actually serve this purpose? Peterson derides a world that is unable to recognize good and evil, yet he offers as substitute only a weaker form of the same doubt and individualism that led to our predicament. In his own "dark night of the soul," Blaise Pascal made a similar wager that faith would be better than doubt. Yet Pascal knew what Peterson does not: that it is difficult to bridge the gap between recognition of the utility of religion and true faith. The value of Peterson's work hangs in the balance. Will those who have been influenced by his advice come to believe the principles they adopt in practice? Or will they come to scorn them after a few months or years of clean bedrooms and better posture?

In one of the most reflective moments of *The Education of a Christian Prince,* Erasmus suggests that the prince ought to read the best of the pagan authors. However, he must warn his pupil:

> This writer whom you are reading is a pagan and you are a Christian reader, although he has many excellent things to say . . . you must take care not to think that whatever you come across is to be imitated straight away.

Peterson should be approached in the same spirit. He has offered meaning to a generation of young men. In the modern era, agnostic faith in the utility of traditional values is surely countercultural and may even be enough to help some people better order their lives. Even I felt the impulse to better organize my desk while reading his book. Yet

it remains unclear whether Peterson offers foundations any surer than the skeptical roots of modern dysfunction. The Christian, the conservative, the Aristotelian, or the traditionalist would do well to follow the advice of Peterson's sixteenth-century predecessor: consider the excellent parts of *12 Rules for Life*, yet take care to evaluate them according to a more rigorous standard.

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The Shambles

William Logan

The station at York curved
like a broken back, the flooded
river tumbling under the ghost
of the old bridge. In foxed plates,

a nest of beams propped up
ramshackle houses lining the arches.
We searched for something not missing,
that long-ago fall we wound our way

north minster by minster
to that fell country whose signposts
marked the rune stones. Every village boasted
a thatched windmill or tipped-over ruin.

Those were our compass points,
not the unfamiliar colors of the money
or the signs shouting COURAGE.
Even the birds rang out barbarian notes.