

Champagne, Marc. *Myth, Meaning, and Antifragile Individualism: On the Ideas of Jordan Peterson*. Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2020.

To some, Jordan Peterson is like the mythical heroes he discusses, while to others, he is a type of anti-hero, and to others yet, he is a downright villain. Regardless of one's position on Peterson, most people can agree that he has many potent ideas. Thus, it is not surprising that some people want to understand the works of a controversial, notable, and expansive thinker like Peterson, but do not have the time or energy to do so. This is where Marc Champagne's book *Myth, Meaning, and Antifragile Individualism* acts as a helpful aid. When Peterson burst into public consciousness propelled by the success of his second book, *12 Rules for Life*,¹ few had read his first book, *Maps of Meaning*.² Champagne takes these books, along with Peterson's lectures and interviews, and uses his expertise to make these ideas digestible.

As a scholar with joint Ph.D.s in philosophy and semiotics, Champagne is well qualified to distill the essential wisdom from Peterson's work. His book is an excellent starting place for anyone who wants to understand Peterson better, partly because Champagne makes a valiant effort to understand Peterson and partly because of its breadth and clarity. It unites Peterson's ideas with ideas in philosophy, psychology, and religion under the theme of "how humans use stories to generate meaning" (p. 1).

The book is divided into two parts: exposition and evaluation. The first ten chapters seek to understand Peterson's worldview; the second part, comprising four chapters, evaluates Peterson's ideas. The structure is revealing, for it demonstrates an honest and thorough attempt to understand Peterson before criticizing him and Champagne does a commendable job of not conflating the two throughout. Champagne takes the high road by explicating Peterson's ideas before subjecting them to critique.

The first four chapters do the lion's share of unpacking the ideas of myth, meaning, and antifragility. Champagne begins by laying out Peterson's tripartite conception of meaning. First, there is *what is*. Second, there is *what should be*. Third, there is *how we should act* (pp. 17-18). Meaning is thus broken down into description, prescription, and corresponding action; once we see what is and what should be, actions

¹ Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018).

² Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1999).

should be directed at achieving the goal. Maps are meant as guides. When they lead us to the desired destination, they work; when they don't, they need to be revised. Maps are rarely complete. In most cases, they are in various stages of progress and must continually be improved. Furthermore, narratives hold together this tripartite account of meaning. Since our lives are essentially ongoing dramas with each of us playing the main character, individual stories are numerous. This is where Peterson turns to Carl Jung, for Jungian archetypes aid in the understanding of narrative patterns found in enduring stories and myths.

Peterson maintains that all human experiences fall into one of two categories: chaos or order. In Peterson's words, "Order is where the people around you act according to well-understood social norms, and remain predictable and cooperative. . . . Chaos, by contrast, is where—or when—something unexpected happens."³ Faithfully portraying Peterson, Champagne likens order to explored territory and chaos to territory of the unknown. Yet, dealing with the unknown is what can make or break a person. This is where the concept of antifragility comes into play. Nassim Nicholas Taleb develops the concept of antifragility in his eponymous book, maintaining that "antifragility is beyond resilience or robustness. The resilient resists shocks and stays the same; the antifragile gets better."⁴ The concept of antifragility is captured in that familiar Nietzschean maxim that "what doesn't kill me makes me stronger." Antifragility also requires exposure to adversity like steel requires exposure to fire. As we become antifragile, we get better. For Champagne, getting better is synonymous with learning (p. 27), which he relates to the pursuit of knowledge and the climate of open inquiry where one may encounter facts and beliefs that are not only different from one's own, but at times, are downright shocking.

Champagne connects themes of order, chaos, and antifragility to Peterson's use of stories. We use stories, especially myths, to recount the ventures of individuals such as Odysseus and Hercules in hopes that others will emulate their virtues. As Champagne writes, "standard hero mythology, for instance, recounts the story of a person who leaves their comfort zone, faces the unknown, restores order, and returns to share this accomplishment" (p. 31). This shows how societies and others learn from the actions of such antifragile individuals. Moreover, certain themes emerge from narratives, myths, and stories. Following Jungian parlance, themes—when applied to certain personas—are called archetypes, such as the hero or jester archetype. Archetypes are predictable and hallmarks of order. It is order, coupled with meaning, that allows us to understand the world and to formulate an accurate map of reality to guide our actions.

³ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, p. xxviii.

⁴ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014), p. 3.

After unpacking the ideas surrounding myth, meaning, and antifragility, Chapters 5-8 illustrate an overall commitment to individualism and cover seemingly disparate themes, such as Jean Piaget, free speech, and pragmatism. In Chapter 5, Champagne appeals to Piaget's notion of games. Some games are better than others, because they elucidate maps of the world that allow for human flourishing. This is where individualism is paramount. Champagne writes, "The crucial choice, according to Peterson, is whether we will treat other people primarily as individuals or as members of a group. This choice is crucial because treating others as individuals yields a viable game, whereas treating others as a member of a group yields a game that is bound to collapse" (p. 68). This quotation not only succinctly summarizes Peterson's commitment to an individualist ethic, but also shows why Peterson believes that collectivist games like identity politics will ultimately fail: groups outlive individuals and, as a result, so do group grievances. Thus, the game of individualism leads to success, whereas the game of collectivism, relying on the cult of irresponsibility and the absence of atonement, is bound to collapse.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the power of language and captures Peterson's Rules 8 and 10: "Tell the truth—or at least, don't lie" and "Be precise in your speech." Champagne shows that Peterson is concerned with accurate speech for a variety of reasons: most fundamentally, precise and true speech creates order because it helps the individual to achieve one's aims and become more antifragile. Since true speech is at the root of self-improvement, Champagne reminds us that "[t]he chief precondition of any betterment project is the freedom to seek and speak the truth" (p. 83). Additionally, much to the chagrin of postmodernists, truth is objective: "Truths are not decided by vote" (p. 83). As such, free speech protects against abuses of power since the inability to speak the truth creates an environment for the seeds of totalitarianism to be sowed. Looked at this way, dogma is not only an enemy of social progress, but also an enemy of self-improvement. Champagne ends this chapter with a pithy statement summarizing the views therein: "If you wash your hands, the whole hospital will be clean" (p. 84).

In Chapters 7 and 8, Champagne covers Peterson's identification with the pragmatist school of thought, which extends to Peterson's position on God. Pragmatism defines belief as a type of disposition to act, which aligns with Peterson's theory of meaning. First, we construct beliefs; then, we act a certain way. With repetition, these actions turn into habits, and good habits thereby help to create order. When we find good habits, we then pass this wisdom on to others through our use of narratives. As Champagne reminds us, "beliefs are . . . more or less stable patterns of action that can be observed and objectively studied" (p. 90). This explains Peterson's oft-quoted position on God: "I act as if God exists."

Chapters 9 and 10 wrap up the exposition section and make some novel contributions by clarifying Peterson’s position regarding hierarchies. Since hierarchies are maps that reveal preferences, they are everywhere. Hierarchies are not simply anthropomorphic structures of power, for they are found throughout the animal kingdom, even in lobsters, showing that it is counterproductive, at times, to rage against certain biological and evolutionary facts. These hierarchies apply to individuals, giving rise to a variety of differences as well as to ethical systems. For example, Champagne covers Jonathan Haidt’s discussion of three dominant ethical systems: the ethic of autonomy, the ethic of community, and the ethic of divinity. He ends by covering how Peterson contributes to our understanding of such value systems along with how these systems are perpetuated by narratives, which then influence the thoughts and actions of future generations.

After finishing Part I, any reader—whether academic or layperson—should have not only a deeper understanding of Peterson’s systematic worldview, but also a more accurate understanding of the philosophical roots of some of the general controversies surrounding Peterson. Take, for example, the issue of free speech. Champagne shows that Peterson is rightly concerned with the stifling of open inquiry nowadays that is salient in our institutions of higher learning. Such suppression of speech, which then in turn stifles thought, is encouraged by speech codes and censorship that have permeated academia. The culture of limiting speech has made its way into the wider society, as seen by big-tech censorship along with other manifestations of cancel culture. Moreover, it also explains why risk-analysts such as Taleb extol antifragility: failing and trying again makes one stronger. Rent-seekers are rightly bemoaned because they try to exert control over others without themselves taking risks. In short, people in Twitter mobs have nothing to lose, for it is too easy to engage in character assassinations and other techniques like boycotts without taking any risks whatsoever.

Despite the book’s many laudable qualities, the use of some conceptual terms from behavioral economics would have elucidated certain points of discussion, making for a welcomed emendation. Throughout the book, concepts such as overconfidence and preference ordering are implicitly discussed, but the connection to this literature is never made. For instance, Chapter 13 is titled “Beliefs that have dibs on our imagination can be mistaken.” A more apt title might be “The Woe of Overconfidence.” Daniel Kahneman calls overconfidence, especially in its optimistic form, “the most significant of the cognitive biases.”⁵ According to Kahneman, overconfidence “is a feeling, one determined mostly by the coherence of the story and by the ease with which it comes

⁵ Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), p. 255.

to mind, *even when the evidence for the story is sparse and unreliable*”⁶ (italics mine). This cognitive bias manifests not only in most people thinking they are better than average—better drivers, better looking, more intelligent—but it also shows up in financial crises and medical errors. Due to its ubiquity, a cultural epidemic of overconfidence is occurring in terms of identity politics. People no longer just think they are better looking than average, but as with the “secular woke,” who Champagne discusses, they also think they are more virtuous—more morally superior—than average.

Another missed opportunity can be found in the discussion of hierarchies that forms the heart of Chapters 9 and 10. While Champagne notes that the term hierarchy is enough to turn off some types of people, he could have discussed preference ordering as an alternative. Preference ordering is a term from economics, which is also used in discussions of ethics, especially in utilitarianism. For example, John Harsanyi appeals to the von Neumann-Morgenstern utility function to order preferences and to determine differences between the intensity of preferences.⁷ Weighing preferences isn’t an esoteric activity only performed by economists and ethicists. We do it every day when we make choices such as A over B over C, revealing an ordering and a transitivity of preferences; every preference-ordering scheme reveals a type of hierarchy. Preference ordering perfectly captures the concept of hierarchy, especially if one wants to avoid use of that word, since “[a] hierarchy . . . is a map that tells one what to prefer” (p. 106).

In Part II, Champagne critically examines Peterson’s position on topics such as religion, social justice warriors, and fallibility, which nicely builds on the earlier themes of myth, meaning, and antifragility. While reading Part I, at times, one wonders whether Champagne can distill Peterson’s ideas better than Peterson—who tends toward verbosity—can himself. Yet, moving on to Part II, certain issues are left unclear.

The first issue of unclarity involves the religion-or-induction dilemma that Champagne formulates against Peterson. Champagne believes that religious insights such as the Ten Commandments were arrived at by revelation, and he seems to imply that Peterson’s inductive account is misguided because they are not called the “ten observations.” He writes, “Peterson can keep his inductive account and drop his religious commitments, or keep his religious commitments and drop his inductive account” (p. 135). In making this argument, the reader, at first,

⁶ Daniel Kahneman, “Don’t Blink! The Hazards of Confidence,” October 19, 2011: accessed online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/magazine/dont-blink-the-hazards-of-confidence.html>.

⁷ John Harsanyi, “Morality and the Theory of Rational Behavior,” *Social Research* 44, no. 4 (1977), pp. 623-56.

is somewhat confused. For instance, is Champagne relying on David Hume's position regarding induction? According to Hume, it is irrational to make inferences about things that we haven't observed or, for that matter, even things that we have, for induction, despite our reliance on it, is simply an unjustified way to form beliefs. Or is he interpreting Peterson's claims under a pragmatic rubric? This not only allows one to make inductive claims more easily, but also more accurately aligns with Peterson's general philosophical approach, for a pragmatist does not rely on strict logic as a Humean does. However, if it is indeed a pragmatist approach, then why can't we derive certain rules or injunctions from our observations? Doing so seems to align with pragmatism, for a pragmatist would judge an inductive inference as tenable, if it leads to successful actions and if it helps us to meet our goals and aims. Thus, under this interpretation, it seems plausible to assert that rules like the Ten Commandments can indeed be arrived at through induction, when we understand these rules as generalizations from past stories and when the use of these rules helped individuals successfully achieve their aims. As he later writes, "One could just as easily drop all pretensions of historical accuracy and say that one's interpretation of past human stories is *useful*. For a pragmatist, that should be plenty" (p. 176).

Not only is this entire dilemma somewhat unclear to the reader, perhaps it is a false one, for a third possibility exists. Peterson's popular lecture series on the Bible is titled "The Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories."⁸ Peterson also writes, "great myths and religious stories . . . were moral in their intent, rather than descriptive."⁹ These points are revealing, for perhaps Peterson is not trying to provide a religious or inductive justification at all for Biblical insights such as the Ten Commandments. Instead, he is simply trying to show that Biblical stories have a psychological or prescriptive significance that should not be ignored.

Another issue left unclear relates to the discussion of how to order the three value systems that occurs in Chapter 10. Classical liberals, such as John Stuart Mill and John Locke, would put the ethic of autonomy on top. Champagne's position is also clear: he puts autonomy over divinity and over community. Yet, Peterson's position is left unclear, and the reader is left wondering whether Peterson would put the ethic of autonomy over the ethic of divinity, or vice versa, although it is clear that the ethic of community would be last. However, out of fairness, Champagne does point out that Peterson's position has a tendency to "waffle" (p. 172). Thus, perhaps it is asking for too much for Champagne to clarify a position that Peterson leaves unclear or it

⁸ Jordan Peterson, "The Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories," accessed online at: <https://www.jordanbpeterson.com/bible-series/>.

⁹ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, p. xxvii.

might open up a different type of criticism: that of Champagne injecting his own views into Peterson's. At any rate, attempting to resolve this tension in Peterson's thought would be a welcome addition for the evaluation section.

Champagne clearly wants to reject God, yet he wants to retain meaning. In a sense, he advocates a fourth ethic: the ethic of divinity of the individual. Yet, do we really have to throw out the baby—in this case, God—with the bathwater? If we do, can we construct a narrative more compelling than the one constructed by the secular woke who he also laments? I am not completely sure that we can do this, that is, hold on to individual divinity without sliding into a type of collectivism where individuality, God, and reason are forsaken. While Champagne shows that “the most enduring narrative patterns . . . are those that offer a recipe (and inspiration) for how to overcome adversity and challenges” (p. 118), he fails to provide a convincing argument that meaning and individual divinity can be preserved without God. Perhaps he will have more to say about this topic in his future writings, for he does title the last chapter “The Story is Not Over.”

We must not forget that Peterson is a psychologist by training and his clinical practice deals with diagnosing and treating psychological problems. Likewise, Peterson has taken it upon himself to broaden his clinical practice, so to speak, by diagnosing and hopefully treating what he sees as social ills such as collectivism and lack of individual responsibility. Champagne's talented writing helps the reader to comprehend fully Peterson's project to save Western societies by helping individuals to construct maps of meaning where liberty, truth, and responsibility prevail, thereby allowing for human flourishing. He also cogently shows that Peterson's appeal isn't solely due to his ability to court controversy and heroically to tackle the fashionable totalitarian and postmodernist tendencies that divide many Western societies. It is deeper than that. Peterson has a systematic worldview; he tells a compelling story; and he provides an ideal—or, as Champagne sees, “Peterson is trying to unite various theories in a way that sheds light on the human condition as a whole” (p. 117). Thus, no matter whether one classifies Peterson as a hero, antihero, or villain, if one truly wants to understand Peterson, Champagne's book is an excellent place to start.

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