

HOW DANGEROUS IS JORDAN PETERSON?

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Although I had already heard of Jordan Peterson, a psychology professor and YouTube intellectual star, I had not read anything by him until earlier this year. In March a friend of mine mentioned that her boyfriend was reading Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote for Chaos* and asked if I knew anything about it. What grabbed my attention, though, was her next question, asked with genuine concern in her eyes: "How dangerous do you think he is?"

It is a fair question, especially considering how Peterson is presented in mainstream media. Articles refer to "[the cult of Jordan Peterson](#)." Writers label him "[reactionary](#)." A recent [piece](#) in *Vanity Fair* specifically cited Peterson as an intellectual force behind Kanye West's contentious [tweets](#) of April 2018, and bears the unabashed subtitle "Inside the Red-Pilling of Kanye West" while filed under the category "Far Right." The general tone is that Peterson is a thought leader of a highly dangerous kind.

Peterson does not hail from a background in journalism or activism; he is a scholar who has only incidentally become a popular figure. Despite his current role as a frequently political provocateur, Peterson is more properly understood as a philosopher than as a politico. The framework he offers does not lend itself easily to sound bites, and trying to reduce it to partisan snippets is as futile as trying to decide if Marcus Aurelius would have voted for Donald Trump.

His *12 Rules for Life* is itself a surprising hybrid of straightforward self-help language and nuanced literary and philosophical analysis. Simple little sentences like "Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them" about creative and rigorously defended readings of Plato, the scriptures, and Nietzsche. Peterson is overtly well-educated,

writing and speaking in complex and elegant syntax that requires his audience to pay attention.

Peterson's ascent to fame began where many careers today would have ended: he refused to follow a new policy at the University of Toronto that required faculty to use gender-neutral pronouns if students wanted them to. "I think [such pronouns] are connected to an apparatus of radical left political motivations [and] uttering those words makes me a tool of those motivations," he said. He believes that language is important and using pronouns based on preference, not on biological facts, undermines both language and our ability to recognize reality.

This is enough today to brand someone with an unshakeable reputation as "transphobic," a term rapidly gaining the same social stigma as "racist" or "bigot" and capable of quickly ending a career. But for Peterson, it was only the beginning. Today he has well over a million YouTube followers, an Amazon bestselling book, and speaks to sold-out venues across the North American continent. Peterson's worldview is strongly influenced by Carl Jung, and he frequently draws on Jungian archetypes. He has profound respect for history and believes firmly that humankind must constantly be on guard against its own capacity to commit vast evil. It is difficult to pin him down on religion, but his writings and videos are shot through with considerable knowledge of world faiths, and he reads texts like the Bible with attention and respect. He also advocates for such traditional ideas as personal responsibility, monogamy, and hard work as fundamental to developing flourishing individuals and societies.

DANGEROUS QUESTIONS

The question of how dangerous these ideas are is a valid one—but not for the reason people necessarily think. The problem lies not so much with Peterson as with the culture into which he speaks. American society has largely lost the ability to think about race, sex, gender, privilege, etc., with any kind of nuance. The tone of our rhetoric tends toward extremes, with little appreciation for honest attempts to find balance or a middle ground. For example, *racism* as a term is in danger of losing its meaning. The word used to refer to *discriminating on the basis of race*. But its scope has been expanded to include any questioning of the political narrative defining "white privilege." As a result, many people who

do not discriminate on the basis of race are being called racist simply because they are unconvinced by this narrative. This dissipates the potency of the charge of racism and limits our ability to differentiate between actual discrimination and rational disagreement about a not-yet-fully developed sociological paradigm.

Consider [Amy Wax](#), a professor at University of Pennsylvania Law School, who wrote an [article](#) defending the role that bourgeois society's basic moral standards can play in creating social stability, both for an individual and for a community as a whole. In one paragraph, Wax cited a few examples of behavior that does not generally lead to stable societies within our highly technological age, including nomadic lifestyles, immigrant communities that refuse to assimilate, and violence represented in much rap music. Rather than addressing her arguments and presenting a coherent defense of the cultures she cited as less stable, many people turned on her personally and sought to destroy her career. She nearly lost her position at the university and continues to battle accusations of racism for her article.

The same degradation has happened to the word *sexism*, which has come to refer not to egregious human rights violations perpetrated against women but to a specific set of traditional beliefs about sex and gender. Today combating sexism is less about understanding the relationship between men and women and seeking to promote justice and mutual respect than it is about pushing for certain agenda items like closing the much-disputed gender wage gap and promoting abortion rights. In 2017 the Women's March openly [banned](#) pro-life women's groups, and just a few weeks ago a *New York Times* [op-ed](#) asserted that conservative women cannot be feminists—and goes on to imply that anyone who is not a feminist is actively working to limit women's rights. To question—even to *question*—the progressive narrative about these issues is enough to be branded with the label “sexist” and “misogynist.”

THE RATIONAL AND THE PARADOXICAL

This imprecision of language is rapidly making it impossible for those who disagree to communicate with each other. But it should not take us by surprise. Most young Americans have never experienced a robust, rational, nuanced dialogue about any of these questions. In universities, high schools, and increasingly as early as elementary and

preschools, children and young people are being taught *not* to think critically about topics like gender, sex, race, privilege, culture, liberty, wealth and success, and religion; instead, they are being presented with a series of platitudes and told to accept them or be punished.

Such progressive clichés do not help young people develop a cohesive, comprehensible worldview. For example, it is a challenge to rationality to argue a) that sexual preferences, specifically homosexual preferences, are innate and unchangeable, and thus must be expressed; and b) that gender is a fluid social construct whose expression is closely tied to sexual activity and preference but can change at any moment. Are sexual preferences fixed or fluid? These two premises seem to assert both, which leaves us with a serious question to wrestle with. This inconsistency does not mean the issue is not worth wrestling with. But young people aren't encouraged to wrestle with it; they are told to accept both premises and move on.

It is the work of a lifetime to craft a perspective that is simultaneously rationally sound and spacious enough to accommodate paradoxes. No human thinker—not Plato, not Aristotle, not any of the great philosophers of history—has ever completed this work. But it is a work we all must embrace if we wish to partake in the rational part of our human nature.

Whatever else Jordan Peterson is doing, he is attempting this work. He is striving to craft a worldview that takes into account the various paradoxes of human experience, and also to give a preliminary framework to reality—both historical reality and present reality. For many young people, his videos and talks are the first time they've seen someone honestly striving to understand the world, regardless of the political fallout of what he finds.

There is, however, an element of danger in rational exploration. The danger is that we will lose a sense of proportion and end up cultivating not a rational framework but an *ideology*. An ideology fixates on a single idea and then seeks to bend reality to align with that idea. It refuses to consider new evidence; it refuses to grapple with paradox; instead it

attempts to fit reality into the predetermined box of an idea. If reality does not fit inside the box, it is reality, not the idea, that must change. Totalitarianism is ideological, subjecting everything within the state to one ruling idea.

Exercising our intellect while not falling into ideological thinking requires the virtue of prudence—not a common one these days. Jordan Peterson knows this. He is a dedicated scholar of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who railed against the ideology that was the foundation of Soviet Russia. Peterson has also studied the ideas behind Nazism and keeps memorabilia from the era in his home to remind himself of the ease with which one can slip into ideological rigidity, and the rapidity with which such rational evil becomes manifest socially. Rational thought requires prudence and humility; it requires us to consider challenges on their own terms, and to be open to the possibility that we have missed something.

MEMORIZE, REGURGITATE

The danger of our present moment is that young people have in large part not been trained in these virtues. They have been trained to memorize and regurgitate dogma; their intellects have been molded to be highly uncomfortable with nuance and with ideas that challenge their presuppositions. They are, in short, fertile ground for an ideology.

So is it possible that a young person could listen to a brief snippet of a Peterson video and, intoxicated by the spectacle of someone asserting an idea that's new and unfamiliar to him, take that single idea and create for himself an ideology that is unbalanced or even evil? Of course. It is possible within any rational framework to isolate and elevate a single notion, to make it so gruesomely disproportionate as to cease to be true.

The reality is that thinking is itself dangerous work, but that does not mean we should not do it.

So how dangerous is Jordan Peterson? Only as dangerous as the culture that has not taught the intellectual virtues of prudence and humility, and has prepared an entire generation to eschew moderation and nuance in favor of toxic ideologies. Does that mean Peterson should not be allowed to speak, for fear that his ideas will be taken out of context or radicalized by listeners incapable of intellectual humility? Absolutely not. It means that more people should speak, and disagree with each other, civilly and prudently. It means that instead of trying to silence and repress ideas that make us uncomfortable, we should cultivate the difficult habit of listening and reasoning together toward a shared understanding of the good.

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Image via jordanbpeterson.com.
