

Guy Stevenson

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Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life

By Jordan Peterson

(Allen Lane 401pp £25.00)

There has been no small amount of Schadenfreude over Jordan Peterson's slide from public view. Famous for flagellating 'social justice types', and telling the left to 'grow the hell up', his admission last year that he had been struggling with benzodiazepine addiction was met with understandable but cruel amusement. It is a couldn't write it kind of irony that a man who came to fame teaching people to take responsibility for themselves had been propped up by valium the whole time. But the shouts of 'fraud' that followed are both unbecoming and wide of the mark. As he explains in his 'overture' to this new book, the drugs were a response first to severe health issues then his wife's near fatal cancer, and his dependence on them left him close to death also.

They may explain the missionary zeal perhaps, but it is cheap to use them to discredit his arguments, and he deserves profound sympathy for the ordeal. Back in the limelight with this sequel to his 5 million selling *12 Rules For Life*, Peterson has seemed understandably subdued – determined to stay out of the politics that landed him in trouble first time round. In the few interviews he's given since recovery, he's side-stepped questions on Trump, the Alt Right etc. And in the back matter to *Beyond Order*, we're presented with endorsements from across the political spectrum – reassured that these '12 more rules for life' will appeal to readers of *The Guardian* and the *Spectator* alike.

To some extent that's true. Much of the book is spent in the uncontroversial, valuable pursuit of balance: between conservatism and progressivism in individuals and society; and between desires to preserve social institutions and 'transform them creatively' when they ossify. Following the first book's 'antidote to chaos', here we're offered a guide to remaining 'curious' and 'creative' in our thinking and behaviour. As such, his off-putting blood and thunder – the trademark warnings to 'ignore ... at your peril' – are tempered now by a healthy (although sometimes Victorian-sounding, comically earnest) defence of 'play'. The tirades against the molly-coddled 'man child' of the twenty first century have mellowed into a strangely 60s message that sometimes it pays to be 'the fool'. Ceasing to exert control and admitting what you don't know are promoted as remedies against unthinking obedience to order. He's also disarmingly, undemonstratively humble about his success. 'Like any sensible person' Peterson says, he was 'taken aback' when his 'philosophy of responsibility' suddenly started packing out arenas, and 'plagued with doubts' about his newfound influence.

These changes aside, there's a lot in here that's consistent with the old brand – the first book, the lectures, and the confrontational interviews that landed him in your news feed. He is convinced as ever of the naturalness of hierarchies, and the futility of politics that obscure this. He's still led in his psychology by the mythical archetypes of Carl Jung, and in his philosophy by Friedrich Nietzsche's warnings against resentment. Through Peterson's usual combination of psychology, philosophy, and rough stabs at anthropology and evolutionary science, we're given more insightful analysis than his staid looking rules suggest. The book ranges impressively from the evolutionary and lasting purpose of Egyptian myths to practical advice on daily accomplishment as a 'sophisticated alternative to [elusive] happiness'.

On the difference between power and authority – and again in the pursuit of balance – Peterson is blurry but means well. ‘When people exert power over others,’ he writes, ‘they compel them, forcefully’, whereas ‘when [they] wield authority ... they do so because of their competence!’. A charismatic speaker, who has enthralled millions by his onstage performances, he of all people should understand that power works more subtly and less obviously through force than that. Here as elsewhere in *Beyond Order*, the tone is dramatic and black and white and it calls back self-consciously to the Old Testament (a book Peterson has brought alive for Millennials through an enormously successful series of YouTube lectures). Like the author(s) of that tome, he is unforgiving and far too quick to identify ‘dark motives’ – behind the drive to educate young boys to be kinder and softer for example, which brings us firmly back to his old Cathy Newman stomping ground.

Beyond Order’s self-help is administered via a thrilling, possibly Nietzsche learnt party trick. After flipping his reader’s expectations (explaining, for example, his belief that shouldering individual responsibility in the workplace contributes to the ‘good that manifests broadly in the world’), Peterson shines the torch into your eyes: ‘it is your fault’ if you fail to transcend naivety or resentment and to live a more ‘genuine and truthful life’. Behind trite-sounding rules then – rules like ‘do not hide unwanted things in the fog’ – lie hectoring ultimatums. Struggling in your marriage? Unable to progress in the workplace? Or to find deeper meaning in the world? You can either succumb to your ‘dark, unexamined motivations-bred by failure, amplified frustrations’ or overcome by confronting them. The aim, again taken from Nietzsche, is a worthwhile one – to shock you out of the complacent belief in your inherent goodness, and in meaningful change without self-examination and effort. But the effect can be a bit like taking part in a very angry ‘choose your own adventure’ story. Rise up, he tells you, after breaking you down to the fragile and sniveling human you are: ‘understand evil and beard it in its lair’! These fantasy (and sadomasochistic) heroics account for the equal devotion and animosity he inspires – the tendency of Peterson fans to behave like religious converts, and of enemies to laugh him up or smear him as the anti-Christ.

As I’ve written elsewhere, the smear of fascism is particularly unhelpful. He opposes all racial politics, and is not as vocal about but as intolerant of the extreme right as the radical left. Here though – even after his ordeal, and despite his apparent intention to behave less politically – Peterson is dangerously ready to carve the world up into friend or foe. If you are cynical about competitive men vying for power in the workplace, then you’re not just misguided, but ‘an enemy of the practical amelioration of suffering itself’. If you’re young and inarticulately angry about the environment, you’re not simply naive but ‘ideologically possessed’, fallen dangerously prey to ‘generic, impersonal and cynical ideas’ (ideas that operate like those ‘dark forces’ mentioned earlier).

Such teeth baring remains a great shame. It goes against and devalues what is good and constructive in *Beyond Order* – the appeal for young people to understand social systems as complex and necessary, and the people who run them as human and often competent rather than faceless and always malevolent; the well meant practical and spiritual advice on how to confront problems in a relationship, and on the depth of meaning acquired through accepting rather than shirking responsibility. The ‘balance between reasonable conservatism and revitalising creativity’ he promotes here was always there in his thinking but now takes meaningful center stage. From a man with such a large following, these are potentially valuable interventions in the mess social media has made of right/left relations, and trust in authority on both sides. But they’re compromised by a fighting

stance that is bound to bring more depressing identification from groups like the Proud Boys, and misunderstanding from those who know him for his ‘take down’ of Cathy Newman.

Another problem is that to get to the good stuff we’re made to wade through a fair amount of dirge. From flat-footed pop cultural criticism of *Harry Potter* – basic dragons-and-maidens analysis that makes a joke of Peterson’s scorn for humanities scholarship – to self-help ideas that are reheated from his YouTube channel and now taste very much like platitudes. Injunctions like ‘pick the best target you can currently conceptualise. Stumble toward it’, and ‘become the hero of (your) story’ were unexpectedly compelling in the context of his biblical lectures, but drag badly on second reading. You can see why he’s so invested in these ideas – after all, putting himself at the center of his own extraordinary myth has turned him from a reasonably successful academic into the 21st century’s answer to Marshall McLuhan. You can also see from his lectures and interviews why so many young people have flocked to Peterson. In person, he wields the same forceful power he in fact warns against in *Beyond Order*. But— as with many who think in sweeping, mythical terms—that power translates leadenly into print. In the pretentiously titled ‘overture’, for example, he reads like a parody of the 19th century writers he admires: ‘I believe’, we’re told with gravitas, ‘that if I had fallen prey to resentment ... I would have perished once and for all’.

Peterson has always been as interesting for his unexpected impact as his thinking. Early on in *Beyond Order*, and without boasting, he recounts a meeting with a waiter who pulled him aside to thank him for his work. Listening to the lectures on the importance of responsibility had helped the young man to stop feeling resentful about his place in the world, to work harder in cooperation with the people around him, and to improve his work life and psychological well being. The ‘increment of humility’ Peterson writes, had ‘paid off in spades’. There’s evidence in here that the same is true of its author. Try as he might though, this much talked about and influential figure of our age cannot resist falling back into his pugilistic ways, caricaturing and baiting those already loathe to listen.
