

LUISS 

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Course of Political Philosophy

## Jordan Peterson and New Libertarianism

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## 1. Robert Nozick and the Libertarian Problem

### 1.1 Moral Philosophy and the Fundamentals

If one is to identify the ‘problem’ with a political theory, one must understand where said theory departs from and its foundational framework. Robert Nozick’s framework is clarified in the opening of *Anarchy, State, Utopia* with two phrases:

“[...] moral philosophy sets the ground rules for and boundaries of political philosophy [...] individuals have rights, and there are things no person or group may do to them”

Since, according to Nozick, moral philosophy is the guiding precursor of political philosophy, by giving its limits and setting its rules, one must delve into this argument *morally*. In this section we will discuss what the Nozickian ‘moral rights’ are and in the next section why they are what they are.

Ronald Dworkin, in a 1978 interview, very eloquently had this to say on Nozick’s moral values:

“[...] Nozickian rights have this force... That it is wrong, either to injure a person or take away his property for any reason, except with his consent. Unless... to do so is to protect someone else’s rights to property or person”.<sup>1</sup>

This is further elucidated in the section of *ASU* on the State of Nature. Nozick states that moral rights exist to provide a basis for assessing and containing actions of individuals and groups as well as the conduct of political and legal institutions. These very rights come before any social contract, they arise within a *state of nature*. As philosopher John Locke puts it, they are *natural rights*, which are ascribed to each individual. Nozickian moral rights arising in the *state of nature* can be further distinguished by liberty-rights and claim-rights. Liberty-rights are the absences of obligation and claim rights are moral, enforceable claims against others. Nozick argues that you have the liberty-right to everything that isn’t a *state of nature* claim-right. The claim-rights are the following:

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<sup>1</sup> YouTube. (2020). *Rawls vs Nozick*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49-hUPHXRbk> [Accessed 1 Jan. 2020].

“no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions’. Some persons transgress these bounds, ‘invading others’ rights and ... doing hurt to one another,’ and in response people may defend themselves or others against such invaders of rights.”

Everyone is entitled to safety in ‘life, health, liberty and possessions’ and everyone is entitled to self-defense. Furthermore, Nozick goes on to give an explanation that since individuals are entitled to their own possessions they may dispose of them as they see fit, even giving away their whole wealth, as long as it is a consensual transaction. This poses a first theoretical problem: why are these entitlements so obvious, what makes them self-evident?

### *1.2 Rawlsian roots*

Nozick answers the question on the foundation stones of his morality by giving a similar ‘non’-answer as John Rawls in *A Theory of Justice*. They depart from a comparable critique of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism proclaims to pursue the ‘maximal utility’ which brings us always to the purported conclusion that each agent in a utilitarian society has reason to maximize the aggregate social utility even at the expense of his own person or others. Rawls critiques this since it ignores the individuality of persons, thusly leading inevitably to a conflation of individuals which in effect are extremely distinct from one another and pursue very different goals. This is clearly stated in this passage of *A Theory of Justice*:

“... if we assume that the correct regulative principle for anything depends on the nature of that thing and the plurality of distinct persons with separate systems of ends is an essential feature of human societies, we should not expect the principles of social choice to be utilitarian”.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Nozick gives his account on the correct regulative principle by rooting himself in the distinctness of persons:

“But there is no social entity with a good that undergoes some sacrifice for its own good. There are only individual people, different individual people, with their own individual lives. Using one of these people for the benefit of others, uses him and benefits the others. Nothing more. What

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<sup>2</sup> Rawls, J. (2005). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

happens is that something is done to him for the sake of others. Talk of an overall social good covers this up ... the fact that no moral balancing act can take place among us; there is no moral outweighing of one of our lives by others so as to lead to a great overall social good. There is no justified sacrifice for some of us for others".<sup>3</sup>

Though this may be a construal of the utilitarian regulative principle on the part of Nozick by ascribing to a utilitarian 'social good', it gives us the underpinnings of his fundamental morals. That people are distinct and individuality is sacred and thus the whole apparatus to protect 'life, health, liberty and possessions' is made to protect the individual pursuit of being. This, however, poses us again with the fundamental problem: Nozick still has not answered the question of why the moral rights are 'life, health, liberty and possessions'; but simply negated the utilitarian view and proposed a new one based on a paradigm of individuality.

Many have identified this as the fundamental problem with Nozick's libertarianism. Dworkin critiques this by stating that:

"[Nozick's] notion of what basic rights people have, like the right to not lose their property without their consent is simply arbitrary. There is something appealing to it ... but for example I see nothing more appealing than the right to the concern of others."<sup>4</sup>

One must see the flaw in the fundamental translation of the concept as both Rawls and Nozick indicated a similar critical departing point and derived very different moral rights out of it. This is justly what one might identify as a problem: the bridging of the critique of maximizing social utility and sacred individuality.

### *1.3 The Invisible Hand*

Having discussed the moral background of the theory, one must now delve into the actual political sphere and thusly discuss the implications of such moral rights on a political system. Nozick does so by giving us several examples and from them extrapolating his political philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup> Nozick, R. (1999). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Blackwell.

<sup>4</sup> YouTube. (2020). *Rawls vs Nozick*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49-hUPHXRbk> [Accessed 1 Jan. 2020].

Firstly, one must look at the evolution of dominant protective agencies (DPA's) which arise from the aforementioned *state of nature*. They are associations made of people which arise out of a scenario in which the values of 'life, health, liberty and possession' are the *natural rights*. In this setting, individuals would come together to form these agencies to protect each other and sign contracts. Of course, there would be larger protective agencies which eventually will collide with smaller agencies over cases of their individuals. The larger agencies would triumph in such cases. Thusly out of this scenario a DPA would arise, this protective agency would control a large area and have power over protection of the cardinal values of its members in its territory. This, according to Nozick is the night-watchman state, or simply the *minimal state*. For this reason, anarchy would not arise out of a state of nature.

In the second part of *ASU*, which critiques the interventionist state, Nozick gives us his most famous (or infamous) chapter dedicated to distributive justice. In this chapter, Nozick explains his theory on historical entitlement. This approach to justice in holdings emerges from the same construal of utilitarianism mentioned above. While Rawls believes that imposing losses on individuals for the social good is unjust, if not seen through a distribution-sensitive lens, Nozick believes that *any imposition* of loss on an individual for the social good is unjustified. According to Nozick, if the holding came about in a permissible and title-conferring way, the possessor will be entitled to it. This is not a *positive* account however. There is no necessity that the means by which the good came to be in another's possession be particular. In fact, a *just* transaction according to Nozick is simply one which is not unjust.

To defend his historical entitlement theory, Nozick proceeds to critique the end-state and patterned principles. End-state principles hold that justice in distribution of goods can be found in arithmetical configurations, selected from a list of possible distributions. Nozick states that if one is to take a utilitarian standpoint, the just end-state distribution will simply be the one with the greatest total income. If one is to take the Rawlsian *difference* ideal, one will select the distribution where the lowest payoff is higher than the lowest payoff in any other distribution. And finally, if one is to take an egalitarian end-state, the just distribution is simply the most equal assortment of goods across the population. These distributions, Nozick states, are all fundamentally flawed since they ignore the judgement around the just nature of the distribution. He begs the question: what if a scenario with an egalitarian end-state distribution - thusly where the distribution is very equal amongst individuals - emerges from certain individuals being held down or 'enslaved'? Would this be an egalitarian

reality? He uses this example to simply expose that any end-state does not give us information about the *why*, in particular it does not explain why the distribution has become the one it has become. On the other hand, patterned theories of distributive justice escape this problem, as they consider that the just distribution is the one which grants individuals goods, by tracking certain features, such as their moral desert and economic effort. For this case, Nozick offers his famous passage on “How Liberty Upsets Patterns”. In this he grants us with a complicated explicative example. He asks the reader to imagine a scenario in which the famous basketball player Wilt Chamberlain exists in a society which redistributes goods according to whatever patterned principle imagined by the reader. Many people enjoy watching Chamberlain play, so each pays to see him play. By the end of it, there is a very unequal distribution, since Chamberlain has accrued a considerable sum of money out of his games. The conundrum is, now that the fans have paid to see him play and enjoyed the game, the patterned theory would say that still a part of that money would have to be redistributed, even though it was given consensually. Furthermore, the deeper conundrum is, before, that very money spent on Chamberlain did not have to be redistributed, but as soon as it is in his hands it is too much and thus has to be given away. Nozick writes that:

“By what process could such a transfer among two persons give rise to a legitimate claim of distributive justice on a portion of what was transferred, by a third party who has no claim of justice on any holding of the others before the transfer?”<sup>5</sup>

He uses this example to elucidate how any kind of patterned theory, as light as it may be, breaches the contractual entitlement between people, as well as their own entitlement to their goods, and how they wish to dispose of them.

He further states that:

“Patterned distributional principles do not give people what entitlement principles do, only better distributed. They do not give the right to choose what to do with what one has...”

This whole apparatus, which Nozick constructs from the state of nature to justice in holdings, has a fundamental leitmotiv running through it: Adam Smith’s *invisible hand*. If one is to look back at both the argument for the first part of *ASU* on the Dominant Protective Agencies and his critique of the State in the second, one may identify this common theme lingering and giving us a further

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<sup>5</sup> Nozick, R. (1999). *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Blackwell.

moral underpinning of his philosophy. Nozick believes that if people are left to their own devices, like in the case of the state of nature, they will self-regulate and abide by the *natural rights*. This will eventually lead them to organize themselves around those rights and form those alliances for self-convenience. Similarly, he ascribes to historical entitlement as he believes that people will self-regulate their own distribution and thusly lead society forwards automatically. For this same reason, he believes that an interference with the invisible hand would pose a serious threat on the underlying mechanisms guiding the societal good.

#### *1.4 Utopia and Individual Responsibility*

In the final section of *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Nozick deviates from his earlier critical approach and gives the reader his take on how the (pseudo) minimal state is not merely a legitimate and just system, but one which should be aspired to, a *Utopia*. He articulates the utopia as being very akin or ‘equivalent to’ the minimal state, but lacking a central authority. But the focal point of his argument is the framework which such a utopia would have. Though he is not explicit about it, one can infer that in a framework of this the same aforementioned claim-rights and liberty-rights would be enforced, insofar as individuals don’t relinquish them within the communities they enter. He argues that this is the ultimate liberation, which permits individual determination of identification and participation in communities, through which they find meaning and well-being.

Nozick states that this framework sustains this ‘discovery procedure’. This means that people may self-determine what communities to join and test them out at their will, and ascribe to them by voluntary membership. In this kind of architecture, other belief systems would be completely permitted, as long as they do not come about in manners which coerce others into participating. Once again, we see at play the invisible hand process which would guide society to find the best systems to ascribe to, and connected to it we clearly see Nozick’s final fundamental ideal: *individual responsibility*. People must take their decisions for themselves, test out and understand and go forwards and improve. And what better framework to allow such an individual pursuit of being than one that allows for other utopias to arise within it, a framework which allows *you* to propose your own ideals and live by them fully? One might ask however, what if one’s utopia coerces others, an imperialistic utopia which aims at conquering the world? Nozick gives a straightforward answer by stating that if it infringes the procedural ideal of non-coercion, which is the protector of individual responsibility, then it is not allowed by the framework.



## 1.5 Conclusion

I have thus attempted to present a synthesis of the main points raised in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, and have accordingly identified the *underpinning moral values, the bridging problem, the invisible hand and individual responsibility* as the core argumentative pivotal points of Nozickian libertarianism. One may see them as all interconnected or as completely distinct, I see them as the former. But I also believe that they all must be dissected thoughtfully to understand the whole. This is why I thought a conclusion was obligatory. What Nozick creates with *ASU* is a parallel world, which departs from suspicious origins and fundamentals and proceeds even more suspiciously, guided by forces of an ‘invisible hand’, to then create a free-for-all utopia from it. This is a gross oversimplification of course, but it serves to show that the Nozickian argument, when stripped down to its core, holds some issues, which I can only identify in their totality as the *libertarian problem*. It still remains one of the most attractive political philosophies, and thus must hold a certain amount of truths about human nature and aspirations. In the next chapter, I will delve into how libertarianism has come to be reformulated by analyzing the context to try to explain why a ‘new libertarianism’ as proposed by Jordan Peterson has become essential in the west.

## 2. A Note on Context

### 2.1 The Internet and Correctness

The internet has played a big role in shaping modern western society, and is now becoming more and more prevalent in the everyday. Reality is no longer three-dimensional, but rather multiplatform. People now live vicariously through social media or on forums and rely on the internet for much of the information they obtain. This is of course an incredible technological innovation. However, the internet has also been observed as having a strong inclination towards trapping people in *echo-chambers*. Echo-chambers are metaphorical descriptions of a situation in which beliefs are amplified or reinforced by communication and repetition inside a closed system. What echo-chambers thusly do is facilitate unipolar viewpoints which tend towards extremism. Often this happens by dumbing down and extending the idea or singular concept to its limits. A grave example of such a phenomenon occurred with many young Muslims living in the west, who

were recruited and radicalized on forums<sup>6</sup> to then become foreign fighters for terrorist organizations. In political terms, this usually leads to divisive arguments and extremes which are very complicated to resolve.

One such divisive phenomenon in the west is political correctness. Political correctness (PC) is the minimization of offense with language<sup>7</sup>. The phenomenon arose out of feminist and post-structural theorists and may have had good intentions at its origin, but was quickly taken to the extremes, catering to hypersensitive young adults and often impeding free speech. The issue was that it was validated by universities in a lot of western countries, namely the USA and Canada, where ‘safe-spaces’ were set up, designated areas where no ‘verbal aggressions’ could take place. Of course, there was an uproar on the internet around the issue. Anti-feminist speakers and libertarians started to gain traction through video-lectures as they offered different takes on the issue, advocating for free speech and discourse. Yet many of them lacked the intellectual capacity to actually articulate a valid viewpoint through and through and some of them were just provocateurs aiming at gaining popularity in an age of extremes. On both sides of the issue there were a lot of vapid and unscientific claims, which kept on dividing the masses.

In late 2015 and 2016, in countries such as the USA people had reached a breaking point, so much so that the symbolic outcry of anger manifested itself through the election of Donald Trump. This was an extreme answer to years of political division and only served to enhance it with a president who is all but inclusive. And in the age of outrage and tweeting, I believe what people need most is an intellectual discourse which makes sense, is well reasoned and grounded in truth.

## 2.2 The Self-Actualization Movement

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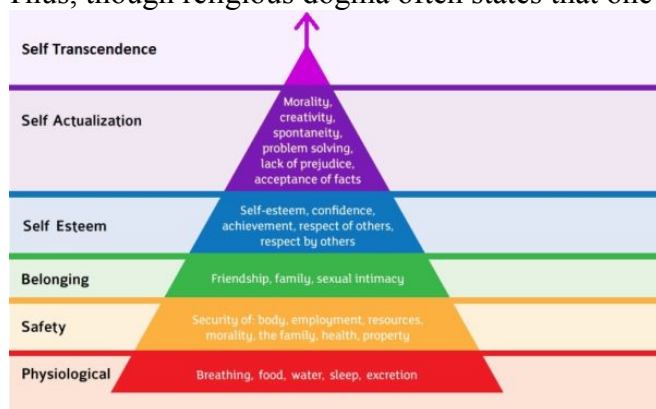
<sup>6</sup>En.wikipedia.org. (2020). *Use of social media by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant*. [online] Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Use\\_of\\_social\\_media\\_by\\_the\\_Islamic\\_State\\_of\\_Iraq\\_and\\_the\\_Levant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Use_of_social_media_by_the_Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant) [Accessed 12 Jan. 2020].

<sup>7</sup>Encyclopedia Britannica. (2020). *political correctness | Definition, Origin, History, & Facts*. [online] Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-correctness> [Accessed 12 Jan. 2020].

Another important recent development in the west has been the shift towards self-actualization as defined by Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Self-actualization is the fulfilment of our hidden potential, the aspiration to the possibility which is present within each one of us, or, it can be an aspiration to something greater even, regarding the *soul*. This is specified by Maslow himself. According to his revision of the hierarchy, he states that transcendence<sup>8</sup>, rather than simply self-actualization, should be seen as the final step of the pyramid. "A will to reach the infinite", as intended by him. This sounds very true to me, as in recent years, we have experienced a rekindling of religion and spirituality. This is possibly due to the incessant emphasis on materialism and consumption of the 90s and early 00s or, on the other hand, it is a process of development which humanity leads to once materials have been secured. This would support Maslow's model thoroughly. This resurgence is something which I believe is very significant for a western society which has grown more and more atheistic with time, and though the signs are still frail, the implications of a growing *spirituality* will have great political implications.

According to Maslow however, to reach transcendence one must go through the hierarchy of needs before it as shown by the figure<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, though religious dogma often states that one can always dedicate him or herself to God,



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs states otherwise. It rather requires that one is physiologically safe: eating, sleeping and breathing well. It requires safety of the body and mind. It requires friendship, family, relationships in order, sexual intimacy, self-esteem and confidence, and it even requires a creative outlook and lack of prejudice.

Transcendence is not easy to accomplish, especially if you depart from a difficult position. When faced with tremendous hunger one is not inclined to meditate. This is why I believe Maslow's model is quite good at depicting what humanity requires, and what it wants. It requires a

<sup>8</sup> Academic.udayton.edu. (2020). [online] Available at: <http://academic.udayton.edu/jackbauer/Readings%20595/Koltko-Rivera%2006%20trans%20self-act%20copy.pdf> [Accessed 14 Jan. 2020].

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Maslow (n.d.). *Hierarchy of Needs*. [image] Available at: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Maslow%27s\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_needs.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/c3/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs.png) [Accessed 16 Jan. 2020].

mechanism to scale the pyramid to reach transcendence. But what mechanism? For many, the only mechanism which is trustworthy in this case is individual responsibility, because any reliance on the outside or others to scale the hierarchy of needs for you, will neither work, nor aid you in its transcendence.

### 2.3 Conclusion

Having briefly analyzed the context of the modern west, I think the main aspects which facilitated Peterson's fast rise to fame are four needs which emerge out of different conflicts and developments. There is a need of *intellectual discourse, precision and thorough analysis, God and transcendence* and *individual responsibility*. I believe these ideas resonate across the western hemisphere, and it is for this very reason that Jordan Peterson's incredibly complex theory has had so much success in such a short time. I will now unpack Peterson's moral and political philosophy to the best of my abilities and try to demonstrate how he has answered the *libertarian problem*, while still being contextually appropriate.

## 3. Jordan Peterson and the Psycho-political

### 3.1 Moral Philosophy Revisited

Having analyzed the western context and its vacuums of need, we must delve into Peterson's actual thought. Jordan Peterson is a Canadian psychologist and professor at the University of Toronto who has gained a substantial amount of fame in recent years for his condemnation of Bill C-16 in Canada, a law enforcing speech regarding pronouns for transgender people. What the bill essentially dictated was a compelled use of *preferred pronouns* to refer to a transgender or genderqueer person, essentially rendering a deviance or refusal of such compelled speech prosecutable in court. Peterson sternly opposed the issue, invoking a constitutional, psychological and even literary basis to his argument. At a speech he was giving on the issue in October 2016, he was filmed as he answered the questions of protesters who were uninformed, sarcastic, ideological and attempting to smear him. His answers were so well articulated and contrasted so starkly with the tone of those protesters that they went viral on the internet worldwide<sup>10</sup>. This played into the aforementioned context of anti-PC and free speech. But regardless of the protesters and countless

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<sup>10</sup> YouTube. (2016). *Jordan Peterson Swarmed by Narcissistic SJW Ideologues after UofT Rally*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-nvNAcvUPE> [Accessed 17 Jan. 2020].

politicized journalists attempts of lumping him in clichéd definitions such as alt-right<sup>11</sup> or antifeminist<sup>12</sup> and so far and so forth, he stands on his own ground with his own convictions, which I deem a new form of libertarianism.

What are the moral rights according to Peterson? In writing this, it is quite difficult to proceed, as Peterson is a complicated author to approach, his works are incredibly exhaustive and have different levels of interpretation. Most importantly, Peterson is a psychologist rather than a philosopher and thus his convictions stem from and use language deriving out of his clinical experience. His moral rights are no exception. He has a realist and naturalistic approach to humanity, and a belief English common law as the ‘best system in place so far’. For example, he severely condemns deviations from such ‘natural evolution’ models, like ideologies such as Marxism and in particular post-modernism, which have attempted to overthrow the status quo to set in place their own model. He states this with regard to one of the most prominent post-modern philosophers, Jacques Derrida:

“Derrida famously said (although he denied it later): “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” [...] the English equivalent should have been “there is no outside text.” It remains difficult [...] to read the statement as saying anything other than “everything is interpretation” [...] It is almost impossible to over-estimate the nihilistic and destructive nature of this philosophy. [...] there are no facts.”<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, in one of this lectures Peterson states:

“we’re a bunch of primates. We’re in this room. And its peaceful and no-one is scared and that’s pretty amazing. And that means we’re all acting out our roles.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Callaghan, G. (2020). *Right-winger? Not me, says alt-right darling Jordan Peterson*. [online] The Sydney Morning Herald. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/right-winger-not-me-says-alt-right-darling-jordan-peterson-20180417-p4za14.html> [Accessed 10 Feb. 2020].

<sup>12</sup> Wright, J., Tveten, J., Canary, T., Bolton, P., Tveten, J., Canary, T. and Bolton, P. (2020). *Anti-feminist guru Jordan Peterson shatters his own ‘academic’ credentials in one moronic Twitter post | The Canary*. [online] The Canary. Available at: <https://www.thecanary.co/trending/2018/08/22/anti-feminist-guru-jordan-peterson-shatters-his-own-academic-credentials-in-one-moronic-twitter-post/> [Accessed 1 Feb. 2020].

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 312.

<sup>14</sup> Peterson, J. (2017). *2017 Maps of Meaning 01: Context and Background*. [online] YouTube. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8Xc2\\_FtpHI&list=PL22J3VaeABQAT-0aSPq-OKOpQlHyR4k5h&index=2&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I8Xc2_FtpHI&list=PL22J3VaeABQAT-0aSPq-OKOpQlHyR4k5h&index=2&t=0s) [Accessed 2 Feb. 2020].

Here we come across a couple of distinctive ideas, first and foremost an aversion to systems which attempt to rewrite history in their process such as post-modernism. This concept is significant since he believes that everything we have come to develop into through millennia, in particular in the modern west, is an incredible gift, which by no means should be taken for granted, as highlighted in the second quote. And secondly, with the phrase ‘we’re all acting out our roles’ we obtain the second point, which I think is crucial to understanding Peterson as a philosopher. By stating that we each have ‘our roles’ he makes a functional call, which is present throughout all his writings, and it’s what I will call his *moral obligation*. This moral obligation for me is what differentiates him so radically from Nozick, since he doesn’t believe that one *has* moral rights, but rather that one has *moral obligations* towards a series of rights which are not to be taken lightly, since they were obtained through millennia of complex development. Peterson’s moral obligations are what makes him a very peculiar libertarian, one who believes that we are indeed free to act the way we want and should keep doing so, but are obliged to follow the rules of the game for both yourself and the grander scheme.

### 3.2 The Lobster

What are these rules? First and foremost, one has the *moral obligation* to individual responsibility. Stand Up Straight with Your Shoulders Back: the title of the first chapter of Jordan Peterson’s bestseller 12 Rules for Life gives us his straight-forward concept of individual responsibility. In this chapter, Peterson focuses quite peculiarly on lobsters and their neurochemistry, but for good reason. In an interview discussing the chapter he states:

“the lobster runs on serotonin and if the lobster loses a [fight with another lobster] his serotonin levels go down and if he wins his serotonin levels go up [...] this is why antidepressants work on lobsters [...] we diverged from lobsters 350 million years ago [...] and this shows you how basic, how primordial that circuit is in you that’s sizing other people up, and looking at where they fit in the hierarchy. Well in humans what we have are hierarchies of competence rather than dominance per say.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> YouTube. (2017). *12 Rules for Life - An Antidote to Chaos & Live Q&A | Jordan Peterson | POLITICS | Rubin Report*. [online] Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJJClhGq\\_M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJJClhGq_M) [Accessed 2 Feb. 2020].

According to Peterson the mechanism which generates hierarchies between lobsters is the same one which is present between humans. This is obviously a sharply contrasting idea with Marxist and post-modern philosophies as it justifies a categorization and justifies superseding positions amongst humans. Obviously he also specifies that amongst humans it is a question of competence rather than dominance, opposing the ideas of *'power'* often proposed by Foucauldian philosophy. This presents us with a problem: are we all equals? The answer is a resounding no. According to Peterson, we are not by any stretch of the imagination, and this is exactly due to the competence hierarchies which govern us.

“In societies that are well-functioning – not in comparison to a hypothetical utopia, but contrasted with other existing or historical cultures – competence, not power, is a prime determiner of status. Competence. Ability. Skill. Not *power*. This is obvious both anecdotally and factually. No one with brain cancer is equity-minded enough to refuse the service of the surgeon with the best education, the best reputation and, perhaps, the highest earnings. Furthermore, the most valid personality trait predictors of long-term success in Western countries are intelligence and conscientiousness (a trait characterized by industriousness and orderliness)”<sup>16</sup>

Since competence is what guides us through reality we must be the best we can be for ourselves. But it also means that some people depart from different points on the hierarchy, some will definitely be disadvantaged at their birth. He retraces this to the lobsters and how they organize themselves to primordially. This impulse to be unequal is deeply rooted in us. So rooted in fact that any attempt at equalizing it will only lead to chaos and destruction. He often describes the Soviet Union to argue this point, where by attempting to equalize and abolish such hierarchies what emerged was an even greater gap between rich and poor, millions of deaths and a close brush with world nuclear war. This, according to Peterson is because hierarchies of all types are built into us. Nature is conservative and unbalanced. In fact he reiterates Solzhenitsyn's words in his book to reiterate that without tyranny and slave labor the Soviet Union would have never been able to survive. He takes this point further by talking about the modern-day equalization which occurs between men and women and the concept of equal pay:

“The biggest differences between men and women in the world in terms of temperament and interest are in Scandinavia and they've maximized as a consequence of your egalitarian policies. ...

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<sup>16</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 313.

It means the more the egalitarian your state the bigger the personality differences between men and women.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus we must not rely on political equalizations of the system, or what we often see is the exact inverse effect, or, more dramatically abuse and death. But what does this tell us about his concept of individual responsibility? Well, I believe the end of chapter one gives us a sophisticated explanation:

“Thus strengthened and emboldened, you may choose to embrace Being, and work for its furtherance and improvement. Thus strengthened, you may be able to stand, even during the illness of a loved one, even during the death of a parent, and allow others to find strength alongside you when they would otherwise be overwhelmed with despair. Thus emboldened, you will embark on the voyage of your life, let your life shine, so to speak, on the heavenly hill, and pursue your rightful destiny. Then the meaning of your life may be sufficient to keep the corrupting influence of mortal despair at bay. Then you may be able to accept the terrible burden of the World, and find joy. Look for inspiration to the victorious lobster, with its 350 million years of practical wisdom. Stand up straight, with your shoulders back.”<sup>18</sup>

The conclusive phrase and title of the chapter to Peterson isn't simply a saying or an order. It is a fundamental consideration on individual responsibility. If you, so to say, take on the “World”, with its inequality and difference, by taking on responsibility in your areas of competence, you may actually be able to change things, to improve, to break free of the chains of injustice which are often placed on each person through the suffering of being. Our past makes us who we are and thus we cannot change it, but we may transform it into something much greater. His testament to the lobsters is a genetic recall. We are our past and we are our present. We have to understand how our impulses work to be motivated to improve. Throughout the chapter he explains how to motivate yourself even when you are at your lowest and you feel most trapped. The way, for him, is by working steps, and this is elucidated in chapter two of 12 Rules for Life, titled Treat Yourself Like Someone You Are Responsible for Helping:

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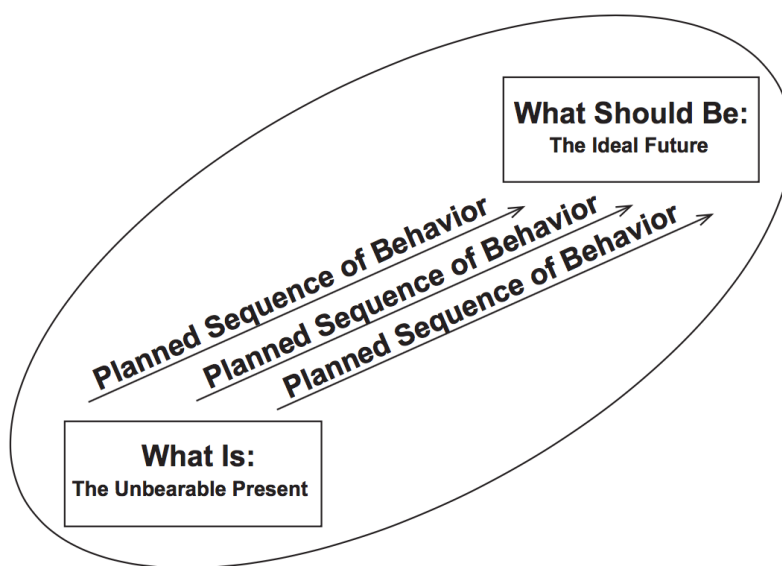
<sup>17</sup> YouTube. (2018). *Jordan Peterson on Gender Equality and Differences*. [online] Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_xjvzH24Mwo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_xjvzH24Mwo) [Accessed 3 Feb. 2020].

<sup>18</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 28.



“Strengthen the individual. Start with yourself. Take care with yourself. Define who you are. Refine your personality. Choose your destination and articulate your Being. As the great nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche so brilliantly noted, “He whose life has a why can bear almost any how. You can help direct the world, on its careening trajectory a bit more toward Heaven and a bit more away from Hell. [...] This would give you Meaning, with a capital M. That would justify your miserable existence. That would atone for your sinful nature, and replace your shame and self-consciousness with the natural pride”<sup>19</sup>

The profound simplicity of such a phrase is paramount, and this is where I feel his libertarianism



most emerges. Peterson believes that by transforming yourself, you may indeed transform the world by consequence. He elucidates this also in his book of Maps of Meaning, with a simple diagram.<sup>20</sup>

Essentially, if people pursue their own individual responsibilities by forming a

‘planned sequence of behaviors’ or by ‘refining their personality’ and articulating their destination, what is unbearable in the present moment can become the ideal future. By doing so it may not only stop at the individual, but rather go to impact others and expand into transforming the world itself. This is obviously a minimalist approach to political philosophy through psychology, however it does represent a comprehensive theory. It also is, unlike Nozick’s theory, applicable in the real world essentially at any time. We may implement Peterson’s utopia at any second, by simply individually starting to take our responsibilities rather than relying on others or restructuring the system.

<sup>19</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 64.

<sup>20</sup> Peterson, J. (1999). *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. Routledge. Page 35

Why, and mostly, how does this make it a comprehensive political theory? For this, we must return to context. Politics isn't the game we played back in the 70s. It is a much more complex and multifaceted issue warped drastically by recent developments such as the internet, lobbying, transparency, directness etc. This was most clearly observed with Trump's landslide victory, when polling across the USA had deemed it impossible. This is to say that now a figure such as Peterson has much more traction that he could have ever had, so much so that even being a psychologist and entertaining a minimalist vision focusing on the individual rather than society, he is impacting the world politically. This is superficially demonstrated by the numbers of subscribers and views on his hour-long lectures on youtube and his book being a bestseller in many countries across the world.

Where does this leave us when coming back to Nozick's *libertarian problem*? I believe with his theory of individual responsibility he adjusts it for context making it extremely useful in the present day which requires practical solutions to issues rather than grand ideologies of disenchantment as stated earlier. Unlike Nozick, he doesn't build a minimal state through thought experiments, but rather aids you now with your life by telling you to 'straighten yourself up' and 'treat yourself well', but most of all, he reminds you that regardless of where you depart from your story is up to you, and it is what you make of it that guides you.

### 3.3 *A Story of Evil*

In this chapter, I will discuss how Peterson resolves the issue presented by Nozick's invisible hand, and why it is so important.

The idea of the invisible hand is incredibly optimistic, and this is recognized by Peterson. If humans are left to their own devices and ego completely, they can muster extremely evil things. This is not to say that Peterson decries the idea of freedom or laissez-faire, but simply reiterates that there are moral obligations to be followed if we want reality not to become unlivable. In rule eleven of 12 Rules for Life he cites the story of his friend Chris, who didn't follow the rules to the core and became disenchanted with life, angry, depressed and difficult. He captures this experience in a passage describing one night when Chris came to visit his family:

"I sat down beside him. I knew him very well. I talked him down from his murderous rage. Then I went back to bed and slept. The next morning my brother pulled me aside. He wanted to speak with me. We sat down. He said, 'What the hell was going on last night? I couldn't sleep at all. Was

something wrong?’ I told my brother that Chris wasn’t doing so well. I didn’t tell him that he was lucky to be alive – that we all were. The spirit of Cain had visited our house, but we were left unscathed.”<sup>21</sup>

His citing of Cain is incredibly interesting and accurate in a way, since for every Abel there is indeed a Cain lurking with his evils. What Peterson argues is that thinking that, naively, things will go well, is simply preposterous. Indeed, if you ignore the issue it will emerge much greater than earlier. On this, Peterson often cites *There’s No Such Thing as a Dragon* by Jack Kent<sup>22</sup>, a children’s book which tells the tale of a little boy who sees a dragon on the bedside. He tells his mom about the dragon, and she says that ‘there is no such thing as a dragon’. So the boy keeps on ignoring him, and the dragon keeps on growing. The little boy reiterates to his mother that there is a dragon, but his mother repeats the same phrase: ‘there is no such thing as a dragon’. Eventually, the dragon has grown to become the size of the house, filling every nook and cranny, until they cannot climb into it any more. Finally, the dragon escapes with the house and the family is left with nothing. When asked where the house had gone, the child reiterates, ‘it was the dragon’ and finally his parents understand and see the house as it really is, built on top of the dragon. As soon as this is recognized, the dragon shrinks and the family learns to live with it, small and deadly, but only when ignored. Peterson cites this story because of its archetypal quality, it tells a very moral tale. The dragon is the problem or the manifestation of chaos. If ignored and left to its own devices, chaos will grow and brew evil and invade every part of your life, so much so that your own house, individual or family will be built on it. But the story proposes a solution to it, and this is also the solution presented by Peterson when it comes to any form of evil, talk about it as clearly and as honestly as possible:

“When things fall apart and chaos re-emerges, we can give structure to it, and re-establish order, through our speech. If we speak carefully and precisely we can sort things out, and put them in their proper place, and set a new goal, and navigate to it – often communally, if we negotiate; if we reach consensus. If we speak carelessly and imprecisely however, things remain vague. The destination remains unproclaimed. The fog of uncertainty does not lift, and there no negotiating through the world.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 294.

<sup>22</sup> YouTube. (2013). *Jordan Peterson tells a funny children's story about ignoring problems*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J54FMA895OA> [Accessed 7 Feb. 2020].

<sup>23</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 278.

Thus we have to be truthful and precise, be honest with ourselves to truly progress, sometimes we have to lose arguments and disenchant the ego, we have to interrupt ourselves in an argument and truly want to arrive at a common conclusion rather than keeping the fire ablaze. This idea is fundamental and self-explanatory, but so often undermined by everyone that it must be consciously repeated. For Peterson, if we truly want to avoid chaos and evil and thus ride the wave created by the invisible hand's splash rather than be swept under it we must always know how to properly evaluate. Never undermine or overestimate and never give in to those egotistical and emotional impulses which want to triumph or cave in. This concept is not to be confused with interventionism on a political level. We are simply extremely responsible of making our own lives good, and this is not as simple as granting people with 'life, health, liberty and possessions', since they may squander these rights through their actions by self-sabotage and naiveté, and most of all, they may use them for evil, since there is no necessarily 'good' foundation to humanity, and evil's grasp is often much stronger than good's. This is elucidated in this passage:

“... human beings are evil, as well as good, and the darkness that dwells forever in our souls is also there in no small part in our younger selves. In general, people improve with age, rather than worsening, becoming kinder, more conscientious, and more emotionally stable as they mature.”<sup>24</sup>

This means that socialization, as well as the 'Word of the Sacred Eye of Horus', is what we must have to calm the violent or evil instincts which pervade us. A simple invisible hand argument based on the Nozickian rights does not hold that concept with it. Thus once more, Peterson provides us with an expansion of the Nozickian concept. But similarly to Nozick, the question of why arises once more. Why must one aspire to such a life, why should one take these ideas for granted?

### *3.4 Morality Cannot Be Generalized*

Unlike Nozick, to answer the question of why, Peterson does not give a comprehensive answer. He actually argues for the exact opposite, that ideologies, or comprehensive theories which go to cover all aspects of life are often mischievous, and actually dreadful. This is highlighted in rule 6: Set Your House in Perfect Order Before Criticizing the World:

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<sup>24</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 120.

“Do those things that you could speak of with honor. You can use your own standards of judgement. You can rely on yourself for guidance. You don’t have to adhere to some external, arbitrary code of behavior (although you should not overlook the guidelines of your culture. Life is short, and you don’t have time to figure everything out on your own. The wisdom of the past was hard, earned and your dead ancestors may have something useful to tell you).”<sup>25</sup>

This means that you have to pursue yourself unfortunately, and that there is no simple solve-all solution, as presented by Marxism or other ‘complete’ ideologies. You have to learn from culture and history to not repeat past mistakes, but the great unknown cannot be explained, it is far too complex. This is why Peterson proposes a way of approaching this chaos, rather than a solution to it. He has this to say on the matter:

“if you act properly, your actions allow you to be psychologically integrated now, and tomorrow, and into the future, while you benefit yourself, your family, and the broader world around you. [...] Everything will come together. This produces maximal meaning. [...] Meaning trumps expedience. Meaning gratifies all impulses, now and forever.”<sup>26</sup>

According to Peterson, the solution to approaching the unknown is not expedience and thus gratification, but rather *meaning*. What is meaning? Meaning, for Peterson, is the single purpose for being and what unifies all areas of Being, it is putting atop all moral obligations the one to ‘better the world’ and aspiring to it in a genuine and ‘meaningful’ way rather than in an expedient and egotistical one which he attributes to political ideologies. It is what you do when no one is looking and when no one will care that truly matters, that will give that meaning to you.

“Meaning is the Way, the path of life more abundant, the place you live when you are guided by Love and speaking Truth and when nothing you want or could possibly want takes any precedence over precisely that.”<sup>27</sup>

The significance of this concept is that it answers both the question of transcendence, which is so required by today’s uninspired youth and the *bridging problem*, emanating from Nozick’s philosophy. The *bridging problem* is the fact that social utility and individuality were not

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<sup>25</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 158.

<sup>26</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 198.

<sup>27</sup> Peterson, J. (2018). *12 rules for life*. Toronto: Random House Canada. Page 201.

necessarily connected in any way. Yet, through individual meaning and thus individual pursuit of transcendence we are in fact maximizing social utility. This is simply because our roles within society are met to the best of our abilities rather than for expedience's sake and our lives are bettered rather than embittered by our honest and modest attempts at improvement.

### *3.5 Chaos and Order*

Finally, we must approach the most pertinent and significant issue. Peterson's fundamentals and the justification for them. What we have observed throughout my reconstruction of Peterson is that he doesn't beset us with moral rights, but rather guides us with moral obligations for that freedom which, according to him, we are granted in subjective ways, due to the innate hierarchies we are part of. This freedom however, is sacred since it has been worked out of incredible historical and evolutionary fluxes which have led to this very moment. What we should do with this blessing and curse is try to get the best out of it, take on as much as we can, and thusly live for the betterment of the world, aim at transcendence, have 'Meaning, with the capital M'. Once again, why? And this time, we're asking at the deepest level. Why should we indeed dedicate ourselves to the betterment of the world? Why should we neglect that beautiful egotistical pleasure which pervades us and surely is malicious but brings that short fleeting high which intoxicates us so profoundly? Why should we give up smoking? Why?

Jordan Peterson gives us a straightforward answer, which is present throughout his whole work and which the reader must have noticed lurking: God.

What is meant by God and how does Peterson construct his philosophy around him, and why in the world would God be pertinent to this whole argument? Peterson constructs God as an idea, rather than a dogmatic figure, this is obvious from his various citations coming from nearly all religions and the connections he draws between the religions. His belief is a psychological God, one we have created, but exists for that very reason, because thoughts, as well as things are real. This returns to the concept of Jungian psychoanalysis and philosophy in which Peterson is rooted. In one of his talks he had this to say on Carl Jung:

“[Jung] thought of people as four-dimensional entities essentially, that were stretched across time and that you, as a totality across time, including your potential, manifested yourself also in the here

and now. And that part of your potential, which manifested itself, was something like the voice of conscience or intuition [...] what you could be in the future beckons to you in the present and helps you determine the difference between good and evil. And I think it's an idea you have to contend with.<sup>28</sup>

What he is essentially expressing is a concept of Jungian philosophy, which pertains to the ancient oriental ideas of the Dao, which Jung was heavily influenced by. The Dao is the central concept the Taoist philosophy. What it explains is the inexplicable. It is that very thing which is unknown, the connection with the divine, the sense of perfect abstraction we feel when we are in those profound meditative states or in agonistic trances. Peterson is indirectly arguing that the divine flows through us in an incredible collective way, that it tells us what our role is in each moment, and has a function for each one of us, but we must truly want to listen and act to forward it. This idea permeates his writing and speech in nearly every word, as he treats the construction of humanity with such respect because there is indeed a lot to be humbled by. This is why he often cites naturalistic arguments; we are indeed products of nature at the very basis. The idea that we should arrive at this point with this much to show for humanity and existence at all, is inexplicable at the very basis. As much as rationality tries to dig into and shred up every particular issue and scientifically analyze something, even as simple a concept as matter is completely misunderstood. And yet, we have used it to our own advantage, progressed immensely with it, we have developed fire, wheel, motor and gun. We have started exploring the universe and left our galaxy and we have developed a concept of God to justify it all. Without understanding, we still gathered meaning out of everything. The sun made us happy and made us see and thusly instinctually we lived during the day and slept during the night. This is what I believe is the connective tissue of Peterson's work. It is this inexplicable force which has guided us here, surely through war, disease, genocide and hatred. It is for this reason that he states we should dedicate ourselves to meaning, because we were granted meaning without understanding, and anyone who attempts to give us a full understanding of humanity is simply either misguided or mischievous. This is why ideologies will not do.

Similarly, Nozick's philosophy will not work. Since unlike Peterson's philosophy it is not truly rooted in reality and I believe does not faithfully answer the necessary question of context and depth. Nozick simply gives us these arbitrary rights of 'life, health, liberty and property' which

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<sup>28</sup> YouTube. (2017). *Carl Jung was Radical - Jordan Peterson*. [online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M07zF65eje8> [Accessed 7 Feb. 2020].

don't answer the question of why? He also gives us the invisible hand argument, but what is more of an invisible hand argument than reality itself? The *state of nature* which Nozick so eloquently describes is the state out of which we emerged, and this is the society we have evolved into, who is to say that in a different historical moment we will not become something greater? What Peterson does is try to articulate a way for us to create that very utopia of individual responsibility that Nozick argues, but in this very moment, in practical ways, through reality.

So one can keep asking 'but why?' but will never arrive at the answer, because the great unknown is always lurking and we haven't even begun exploring the true Meaning. What one can do, to get closer, is try to give yourself that Meaning and be grateful for what you don't understand, since it has brought you here.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Having concluded so triumphantly with Peterson's chapter I will simply recapitulate what I believe the main findings of my analysis were and add my personal context and biases to the mix. I think that Peterson answers the questions left hanging by Nozick's libertarianism. He presents a 'new libertarian' argument at a different depth, on a psychological and minimal basis, but does so with a significant impact and importance. What emanates from Peterson's philosophy is a sense of individual responsibility and will to act out the 'best of yourself' in every moment. He does so by rooting himself in something greater than himself, something incomprehensible, which we can define as God. This very concept is what justifies Being and grants that Being with Meaning, simply because it is undeniable that rationality can only explain so much.

I must however remind the reader that I delved incredibly deeply into Peterson's writing and was undoubtedly changed and influenced by it, coming to believe a lot of what was expressed by Peterson. This may be why at times my writing seems to be partial and biased. I hope my biases have not tainted my work, and there is still something to gather from it.



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