

FRIARS' BOOKSHELF

RULES FOR THE GAME

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

In a chess game, there are lots of things you can do, although you can't break the rules of the chess game and continue to play chess. Your biological nature is somewhat like that: it sets the rules of the game, but within those rules you have a lot of leeway.

—Jordan Peterson (Interview with Cathy Newman)

This concept undergirds the premise of Jordan Peterson's recent book: *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Rules, while frequently misused to moralize or pontificate, can provide the structure and stability needed to live a free and meaningful life, as illustrated in Peterson's chess analogy. This structure is critical to human flourishing because of how it integrates order and chaos with human experience. According to Peterson, order and chaos are primordial features of human existence. "Order is where the people around you act according to well-understood social norms, and remain predictable, and cooperative" (xxviii). Chaos, the antithesis of order, is the *unknown*, where conflict, suffering, and destruction ensue.

Traditions, doctrines, and group identities mitigate chaos by ensuring order, but they can become too extreme and tyrannize by ruthlessly inflicting ideologies where group identity is supreme. Yet the other extreme is nihilism, rejecting any kind of order or meaning. "People need ordering principles . . . chaos otherwise beckons. . . . We require routine and tradition. That's order.

Order can become excessive, and that's not good, but chaos can swamp us, so we drown—and that is also not good" (xxxiv). To help individuals navigate these extremes Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, argues for a set of life rules illuminated by his background in psychology, Western literature, and his own personal history and clinical practice. These rules are:

1. Stand up straight with your shoulders back.
2. Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping.
3. Make friends with people who want the best for you.
4. Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today.
5. Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.
6. Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world.
7. Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient).
8. Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie.
9. Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't.
10. Be precise in your speech.
11. Do not bother children when they are skateboarding.
12. Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street.

A review can't delve into every one of these rules, but the first, second, and sixth are particularly notable as representative of some essential aspect of Peterson's *12 Rules for Life*.

Peterson's first rule, by exhorting combativeness and responsibility, establishes the kind of mentality his rules require: "stand up straight with your shoulders back." He justifies this commonsense advice in part by appealing to lobster behavior. Lobsters arrange themselves into dominance hierarchies to compete for limited resources and avoid the damage resulting from potential conflict; the release of serotonin and octopamine in individual lobsters regulates these hierarchies. When conflicts do ensue, "high serotonin/low octopamine characterizes the

victor. The opposite neurochemical configurations, a high ratio of octopamine to serotonin, produces a defeated-looking, scrunched up, inhibited, drooping, skulking sort of lobster, very likely to hang around street corners, and to vanish at the first hint of trouble" (7). Because these chemicals also regulate human emotion and interaction, and because adopting an erect posture will increase the serotonin/octopamine ratio, adopting this erect posture enables a person to more freely engage the world and assume responsibility for himself and those he loves. "To stand up straight with your shoulders back is to accept the terrible responsibility of life, with eyes wide open. . . . It means willingly undertaking the sacrifices necessary to generate a productive and meaningful reality" (27).

Peterson's second rule raises the import of his other rules by arguing that assuming care over oneself is not a mere right but an obligation: "treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping." Sadly, people are on average better at filling and administering their pets' medications than their own. To theorize why this may be Peterson appeals to the Garden of Eden. "Seeing our nakedness" (Gen 3:7) can signify seeing our own propensity to inflict suffering and perform evil as well as recognizing our vulnerability to others (Peterson, 53–54). The result is self-disgust: we are not worth the responsibility our well-being requires; therefore, we don't take proper care of ourselves. "Perhaps it is . . . our unwillingness to walk with God, despite our fragility and propensity for evil" (57). Peterson counters this self-neglect: "it is not virtuous to be victimized by a bully, even if that bully is oneself . . . you do not simply belong to yourself. You are not simply your own possession to torture and mistreat . . . because your Being is inexorably tied up with that of others" (59–60). Treating oneself as someone cared for is to accept that relationship with God and other people, despite the imperfections that threaten that value. This even means ceasing to do those things that make us dislike ourselves.

If there were one rule that typified all the others, it would be Rule Six with its emphasis on lifting oneself out of resentment to

take ownership of one's life. "Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world." Many decry the world when they suffer at the world's hands. While speaking up about real, *specific* injustices is imperative, as Peterson writes later in Rule 10 (see 274–76), blanket criticism of the world can kindle resentment and foment unholy malice—usually only inwardly expressed—toward the world and everyone in it. Peterson gives a chilling analysis of these effects when he describes the motivations of Eric Harris, one of the Columbine shooters, for whom the human world and "Being" should be annihilated on account of its insufficiency. "People who think such things view Being itself as inequitable and harsh to the point of corruption, and *human* Being, in particular, as contemptible. They appoint themselves supreme adjudicators of reality and find it wanting. They are the ultimate critics" (147–48). If on the contrary you were to clean up your own life by gradually ceasing to do what you know is wrong and practicing good habits, you would find that "your head will start to clear up, as you stop filling it with lies. Your experience will improve, as you stop distorting it with inauthentic actions . . . You will then be left with the inevitable bare tragedies of life, but they will no longer be compounded with bitterness and deceit" (158–59). Bearing responsibility and cleaning up one's life allows one to see his life and those around him as good.

As a Catholic, I have two comments to make about Peterson's work. First, while Peterson does not write from a Christian or theological perspective, it is clear that the meaninglessness and resentment Peterson helps the reader confront are inimical to Christian beatitude. They are also universal pitfalls. Peterson's *12 Rules* provides a psychological house-cleaning cheat sheet to establish better habits, founding a better natural disposition in which grace can work. Second, while *rules* are a fitting description for Peterson's advice, we might shrink from that description because we think it implies that a person reaches his *telos* by circumscribing his life to these rules. I do not think Peterson implies this. As a stake bound to a sapling ensures the sapling's healthy and upright

growth, so these rules can help us develop virtue. They provide a kind of structure within which we can work productively with our nature to accept grace. Grace, after all, builds upon nature. These rules can help clear the haze that settles in with suboptimal thinking, bad habits, and deceit. They can help us deal with order and chaos productively and thus free us to run after Christ with greater abandon.

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