

Summary and Guide to Jordan Peterson's

Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief

This following is a brief summary of Maps of Meaning designed as a guide for first time readers. I first read the book, back when it was called The Gods of War, in the early 90's and have read it many times since. Maps can be daunting to pick up the first time with its 469 pages of small type and 668 footnotes, so I wrote this brief summary as a guide.

The book rewards careful reading. Peterson prides himself in packing meaning into his sentences, and the reader should note that he is not trying to be academically obscure. He is trying to be clear and thorough in his explication and does not waste words. The entire book can be thought of as an attempt to make a very complicated idea – how meaning is created – comprehensible. This may at times seem repetitive, but that is actually the point. Meaning is created again and again by the same process repeated ad infinitum. This simple process is capable of incredible complexity, which the book considers in depth.

This guide is meant to help the reader navigate the book, and to quickly refresh their memory when picking up the book again. I should note that the chapter summaries at the beginning of each chapter in the book itself are very helpful. This guide could be thought of as a summary of those summaries, but mindful to include all of the important ideas. It also includes a separate section on alchemy, probably one of the more challenging sections of the book.

The footnotes refer to pages in the original 1999 print version of the book. Interested readers should also note that Peterson has posted the full version of his course on Maps of Meaning on YouTube. Professor Peterson has also kindly read this summary and made some very helpful edits.

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Contents

1. Structure of the Work.....2
2. Basic Theory.....3
3. Preface.....3
4. Chapter One: Maps of Experience.....4
5. Chapter Two: Maps of Meaning.....4
6. Chapter Three: Apprenticeship and Enculturation.....5
7. Chapter Four: The Appearance of Anomaly.....5
8. Chapter Five: The Hostile Brothers.....6

9. Conclusion: The Divinity of Interest.....6

10. Alchemy.....7

Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief is a 1999 book written by Jordan Peterson, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto and a practicing clinical psychologist. The book describes a comprehensive rational theory for how meaning is constructed, represented by the mythical process of the exploratory hero, and also a way of interpreting religious and mythical models of reality presented in a way that fits in with modern scientific understanding of how the brain works. It synthesizes a large number of ideas drawn from narratives in mythology, religion, literature and philosophy as well as research from modern neuropsychology.

Peterson's primary goal was to figure out the reasons why *individuals*, not simply groups, engage in social conflict, and try to model the path individuals take that results in atrocities like the Holocaust or the Soviet Gulags. Peterson considers himself a pragmatist, and uses science and neuropsychology to examine and learn from the belief systems of the past and vice versa, but his theory is primarily phenomenological. Peterson deeply explores the origins of evil, and also posits that an analysis of the world's religious ideas might allow us to describe our essential morality and eventually develop a universal system of morality.^[p. 12]

*"Our fundamental experience in life is not material, it's emotional, it's motivational, it's our relationship with others, our dreams and our self-consciousness."**

The book is an encyclopedic examination of a wide range of thought and stories that illustrate the process by which meaning is created, often in complex and recursive ways, but all ultimately grounded in the basic heroic framework. The book draws heavily on C. G. Jung, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Also important to the book's ideas are Jean Piaget, Mircea Eliade, Thomas Kuhn, Northrop Frye, Olga Vinogradova, Alexander Luria, Jeffrey Gray, George Orwell, Erich Neumann, Antonio Damasio, Jerome Bruner, Joseph Campbell and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Literature and myth including the Old and New Testaments, Shakespeare, Dante, Tolstoy, Goethe, Voltaire, Milton, Lao Tzu, Scandinavian myths, the Babylonian creation myth Enûma Elish and the Egyptian creation myths of Osiris and Seth play a large part as well. Peterson is also an active researcher in the study of personality, alcoholism, and drug addiction, and brings to bear his large familiarity with the latest in neuropsychological and psychological research.

Structure of the Work

The book starts with a **preface** that describes the author's own difficult intellectual journey and the origin of the book. There are then five major chapters that describe the extensive background for his theory of the creation of meaning. The **first two chapters** discuss the categorical issues we have in describing reality and the difficulty of separating subjective from empirical perspectives. The chapters also describe the neurological background for

how the brain begins to create meaning from experience, and how this is expressed and modelled in narratives. **The third chapter** is an examination of how individuals are socialized into a culture, and how that culture protects them while also limiting their freedom, sometimes oppressively. **Chapter four** discusses how anomalous information disrupts our cultural models, and how new information, such as a foreign idea, makes us self-conscious and renews our awareness of our limitations and mortality, which challenges us to rebuild our models of the world. **Chapter five** describes the three possible responses to such disruption, and how failure to engage in courageous exploration leads to atrocity, such as the Soviet Gulags. The final part of chapter five is a unique and deep analysis of C. G. Jung's extensive work on alchemy. The **conclusion** argues that mankind is adapted to the tragic conditions of life, and discusses our tremendous potential if we recognize this process, do not lie to ourselves, and diligently follow our interest wherever it leads.

Basic Theory

Peterson states:

*"The...mythic stories or fantasies that guide our adaptation, in general, appear to describe or portray or embody the three permanent constituent elements of human experience: **the unknown**, or unexplored territory; **the known**, or explored territory; and the process; **the knower**, which mediates between them. These three "elements" constitute the cosmos — that is, the world of experience — from the narrative or mythological perspective. Though the analysis of such figures, we can come to see just what meaning means, and how it reveals itself, in relationship to our actions. It is through such analysis that we can come to realize the potential breadth and depth of our own emotions, and the nature of our true being; to understand our capacity for great acts of evil — and great acts of good — and our motivations for participating in them."* [p. 99]

Preface

The book begins with a quote that is core to the message of the book:

"Something we cannot see protects us from something we do not understand. The thing we cannot see is culture, in its intrapsychic or internal manifestation. The thing we do not understand is the chaos that gave rise to culture. If the structure of culture is disrupted, unwittingly, chaos returns. We will do anything — anything — to defend ourselves against that return." [p. xi]

The preface (called *Descensus ad Infernos*, echoing Dante) describes the intellectual and emotional journey of the author that led to the book itself, and is also a mirror of the process that it describes. Peterson struggled with a long series of nightmares in the early 1980's centered on the Cold War. He was especially concerned with why people engage in social conflict, especially when we are technologically capable of completely destroying

ourselves. Around this time he began to study the works of Jung, and spent a great deal of time trying to understand his particular approach to dreams and myth. Jung notes that the archetypal contents of the collective unconscious can cause even the most rational of us to have horrible, haunting dreams. This struck a chord with Peterson, and he found a solution to his problems by drawing parallels from mythology and folklore alongside his own dreams. [p. xx]

He realized that “...beliefs make the world, in a very real way - that beliefs are the world in a more than metaphysical sense.” He also states that: “I learned why people wage wars - why the desire to maintain, protect and expand the domain of belief motivates even the most incomprehensible acts of group fostered aggression.” [p. xx]

The terrible aspects of life might actually be a necessary precondition for the existence of life, and that idea might make life comprehensible and acceptable. It is his hope that the readers of the book reach the same conclusion. [p. xx]

Chapter One: Maps of Experience

The first chapter describes the different domains of science and narrative. The world is a place of objects, which is described empirically by science; and a forum for action, which is described primarily by narratives such as drama, literature, mythology and religion. The two domains have not been well discriminated, historically, and are often considered at odds with each other. However, description of the world of objects cannot provide a guide to what we must value and, more importantly, how we should act. This information is provided by the world’s great dramatic narratives. [p. 13]

Chapter Two: Maps of Meaning

Chapter two is primarily concerned with descriptions of neuropsychological function and the phenomenology of experience. At the very base of the brain, the phylogenetically oldest part is a collection of motivation centers such as hunger and thirst. These subsystems all have their own individual goals, but must work together to attain the larger goals of survival and reproduction. The brain must coordinate and satisfy all of these goals; regulate the emotions associated with them; and achieve the overall goals of the being — which is also co-existing with other beings and their goals. To do this, it processes and remembers successful behavioral patterns and learns patterns from other individuals. These successful action patterns are organized and eventually resolved into stories and narratives.

The human brain is also very attuned to novelty. It will follow its behavioral patterns until something new or unusual grabs its attention. Peterson describes two modes in which the brain operates. One is Normal Life, which is everyday, goal directed behavior such as moving from point A (the present) to point B (a desired future), which is mediated by positive and negative emotion. New information may confirm you are moving towards point B, which are

rewards or lack of punishment; or threats or punishments may appear to hinder your progress, in which case you must correct your model. The second mode is Revolutionary Life, when something so anomalous and unexpected disrupts your model of the world that your emotions become dysregulated, you don't know how to behave, and your confidence in your entire belief systems fails. You are faced with the **Unknown**, which is the chaos that underlies our constructed world.

While we use objective categories to describe the world, the brain actually appears to lump objects and experiences together based on their shared significance. From this perspective, the constituent elements of experience are the three things the world consists of, from the perspective of the brain, the **Known**, the **Unknown** and the **Knower**. The **Known**, synonymous with culture and symbolized mythologically by the **Great Father**, is a protector and also a tyrant. The **Great Father** is all the past behavioral action patterns which are effective. There is the **Unknown**, which is synonymous with chaos, and is symbolized by the **Great Mother**, who is fruitful and nurturing and also mercilessly destructive. Then there is the **Knower**, which mediates between the two, and is symbolized mythologically by the **Hero**, who embodies the exploratory process. The **Hero** also has a counterpart, the **Adversary**, who is the opposite of the creative process and seeks the destruction of the world. As an illustration, the chapter then explores the Sumerian creation myth, the Enûma Elish, which demonstrates these dynamics. Their interaction provides the "story of stories": *"The processes of revolutionary adaptation, enacted and represented, underlie diverse cultural phenomena, ranging from the rites of "primitive" initiation to the conceptions of sophisticated religious systems. Indeed, our very cultures are erected upon the foundation of a single great story: paradise, encounter with chaos, fall and redemption."* [p. 31]

Chapter Three: Apprenticeship and Enculturation

This chapter is primarily concerned with the socialization of children to culture, which is the collected wisdom of the past, and the means by which culture protects us from what we don't know and regulates our emotions. This is accomplished by ritual and play, starting with simple games that help children become accustomed to others. Piaget noted that children assimilate culture from acting out in play the behavior of adults and other children. They actually cannot articulate how they know how to act; they are acting out patterns that are "'emergent properties' of long term social interactions." [p. 75] Discipline then inculcates the child to the culture, teaches him focus, and helps make him predictable to others. Culture protects us from the **Unknown**, but it also needs to be constantly updated or it becomes rigid and pathological. [p. 232]

Chapter Four: The Appearance of Anomaly

Our moral systems are built-up over generations through behavioral interaction, and are codified into models and theories. We cannot directly access behavioral information, or

wisdom, so we represent it, initially in play and ritual and then up the chain of abstraction to drama, narrative, mythology, religion and ultimately philosophy.^[p. 80] We use models of how the world works, which are the *maps* of meaning, and surround ourselves with layers of these paradigms to protect us from the unknown, and very importantly allow us to predict the behaviors of others. When anomalous information disrupts one of these layers, it often disrupts the layers below. This also means that there is a great deal of information which is left out of our models, and this information can be reintroduced by encounters with strangers or strange ideas that challenge our concepts. This appearance of strange ideas can be fundamentally disruptive: *“These strange ideas or anomalies not only dysregulate our emotions and behaviors, they also expose us to the larger Unknown, which is always a reminder of our eventual death. Indeed, the price for our self-consciousness is the knowledge of our ultimate limitation - death.”*^[p. 284]

Chapter Five: The Hostile Brothers

These encounters with the **Unknown**, triggered by anomaly, have motivated two patterns of behavior, the **Hero** and the **Adversary**. The **Hero** courageously organizes himself and renews the social order by confronting the **Unknown**, such as St. George confronting the dragon. The Adversary, however, turns away from the **Unknown**, lies to himself and arrogantly believes that he has all the answers. The devil in *Paradise Lost* is a representation of this behavioral pattern, as is Cain in the Old Testament.^[p. 315] Interestingly, there is also the third way, which is denying responsibility for the world and refusing to join the social order. This is the path of the decadent, and it ultimately leads to a descent into chaos and self-destruction. Lies are also the key to understanding how evil comes about: *“The Lie, or belief that you do not need to engage in exploration results in rigid models, which are authoritarian and totalitarian, and provides justification for evil. Evil is causing suffering for its own sake, and springs from resentment of the tragic conditions of life.”*^[p. 311] *Evil is...hatred of the virtuous and courageous, precisely on account of their virtue and courage. Evil is the desire to disseminate darkness, for the love of darkness, where there could be light.”*^[p. 310]

Conclusion: The Divinity of Interest

In the Conclusion to the book, Peterson reverts to the first person, telling stories of his own experience to illustrate the final concept of the book - that human potential only exists in the face of limitation. He points out that there is an important difference between tragedy, such as suffering caused by an earthquake or cancer, and evil which is wilful expansion of pain and suffering. Life is tragic because without limitation life becomes meaningless. If you are immortal, and can have everything you wish for, then everything would be the same.^[p. 452]

The title of the conclusion indicates the major lesson of the book, that individual subjective experience in the world is valuable in itself, in that it can provide the information that

redeems the individual as well as the larger group. Thus, the interest of the individual is adaptive and divine, and properly and courageously followed, produces meaning: *“From the mythic viewpoint, however, every individual is unique – is a new set of experiences, a new universe; has been granted the ability to bring something new into being; is capable of participating in the act of creation itself. It is the expression of this capacity for creative action that makes the tragic conditions of life tolerable, bearable – remarkable, miraculous.”*^[p. 467]

Alchemy

The book contains an extended section on Alchemy, which is integral in illustrating the thesis. C.G. Jung spent over thirty years delving deeply into some twenty centuries of alchemical writings. Peterson notes that Jung is persona non grata in psychology, and that he was warned to stay away from him by other academics.^[p. 401] Peterson speculates that the reason Jung is ignored is because of the challenge he poses to the reigning Freudian interpretations of religion and the fact that psychology would like to keep itself separate from religion. Jung, however, believed that religion was adaptive and not a neurotic tic, and that he was continuing the thinking around morality worked out by Nietzsche.^[p. 403] It is important to note that Jung was not a mystic. He considered himself a physician and scientist, and used empirical methods to examine dream and fantasies.^[p. 402] Alchemy is often viewed as the pre-scientific method that was the foundation for chemistry, but it was really a spiritual practice played out in matter. Jung saw that alchemy was a metaphor for inner spiritual growth, and the alchemist’s books were really describing the individuation process.** He saw the same archetypes in alchemy that he saw in patient’s dreams and fantasies, and noted that the lesson of these stories was to be true to yourself above all things. Peterson notes: *“The terrible central message of this mode of thought is this: do not lie, particularly to yourself, or you will undermine the process that gives you the strength to bear the tragic world. In your weakness - the consequence of your lie - you will become cruel, arrogant and vengeful. You will then serve as the ‘unconscious’ emissary of the agent of destruction, and work to bring about the end of time.”*^[p. 370]

Every aspect of the archaic world was engaged in moral endeavor. Alchemists sought to “redeem” the corrupted world of matter and create the philosopher’s stone, an object that could turn base metals into gold. The alchemists conflated the psyche with objective reality.^[p. 427] They did not have the empirical method, and thus thought symbolically and evaluated all things on whether they were “good” or “corrupt.”

The alchemical process consisted of four stages. First is the dissolution of the King of Order into the Prima Materia, which can be thought of as the Great Mother. This symbolizes the dissolution of the old order, which is dissolved in a solvent, and a return to earth. Thus the previous hierarchy of behavior is sacrificed, so that something new can emerge.^[p. 429] Heat applied to this dissolution is symbolic of passion, and the creative, sexual reunion with the Great Mother. This stage is known as the nigredo, the blackness, which we would associate with depression and psychological chaos.^[p. 431] The next stage is the peregrination, a

figurative journey to the four corners of the earth, which is a recognition of all that is within you before you attempt to re-incorporate your competing motivations back into a single hierarchy.^[p. 433] This is the key stage, and is similar to Solzhenitsyn's recognition that he himself was ultimately responsible for his imprisonment in the Gulag. Solzhenitsyn understood that he was just as capable of inflicting suffering on others as his jailers, thus recognizing the possibility of evil in himself.^[p. 433] The last stage is the conjunction, when the opposites are united and the new integration is shared with the community.^[p. 435] The journey symbolized by the alchemical process, the "story of stories," is the hero's journey. The first stage is identification with the hero, heading out into the unknown and accepting the dissolution of your beliefs. The second stage is the reorganization of your value system and integrating it with your body, which is the dragon fight and the release of reward. The third stage is bringing back the new, integrated system to the community to inoculate them against the illness you just defeated.^[p. 442] The alchemists eventually came to associate this process with Christ, but learned that you had to identify with Christ, and not just worship him as the Church taught. Active identification with Christ was placing transformation in the hands of every individual, rather than through the intercession of God. For the alchemist, matter can rise to become spirit. This is the philosopher's stone.

* 2010 Hart House, Hancock Lecture "The Necessity of Virtue."

** Bair, Deirdre. "Jung: A Biography" Little, Brown and Company, 2003, p. 399.

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