PLANTINGA AND CRISP VS. PETERSON

How the Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism Kicks the Developmental Ladder Out from Under Jordan Peterson

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A PAPER

Submitted to Dr. Harold Netland
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the course PR 7501
EAAN
at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Deerfield, Illinois
May 2021

Jordan B. Peterson has become one of the most influential thinkers alive today. His books sell millions of copies. His podcast gets millions of plays. His legend grows by the day and yet very few thinkers have taken up the task of analyzing his more academic work, *The Maps of Meaning*,[1] which Peterson attributes as the foundation for his project at large, including his best-selling self-help books, *12 Rules for Life* and *Beyond Order*.[2] In this paper, I seek to remedy this fact by giving serious attention to and criticism of, a central aspect of Peterson's *Maps of Meaning*, which we will call his 'ladder of development', by pitting it against two forms of the Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism (EAAN). Ultimately, I argue that Peterson's project falls prey to both Thomas Crisp's version of EAAN as well as Plantinga's final version.

Peterson's Ladder

Before we can pit EAAN against Peterson's ladder of development (LoD), we need to get clear on exactly what we are talking about. An important feature for understanding LoD is to note that Peterson is a Darwinistic evolutionary psychological theorist. While he finds much value in religion, and while it appears that he might be inching closer and closer to affirming the truth of Christianity by the day,[3] fundamentally, Peterson's project is to give a naturalistic explanation to religion, grounded in Darwinism. But Peterson is not the typical popular level Darwinist who distains all things religious and mythological, in fact Peterson has very important roles in his LoD for both myth and religion.

[1] Jordan B. Peterson, Map of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief (New York: Routledge, 1999)
[2] *12 rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Random House Canada, 2018), *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2021)
[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uf7SO_BeRR8

Peterson carves the world into two different perspectives, a forum for action, which represents the first-person world of value and the world of things, or the third-person perspective. Peterson says,

> The world can be validly construed as a forum for action, as well as a place of things. We describe the world as a place of things, using the formal methods of science. The techniques of narrative, however—myth, literature and drama—portray the world as a forum for action. The two forms of representation have been unnecessarily set at odds, because we have not yet formed a clear picture of their respective domains. The domain of the former is the objective world—what is, from the perspective of intersubjective perception. The domain of the latter is the world of value—what is and what should be, from the perspective of emotion and action.[4]

Peterson seeks to unify the two perspectives on the world by way of a synthesis between neuroscience and mythology, with the latter supervening on the former.

> For it is the case that the human brain—and the brain of the higher animals—has specialized for operation in the "domain of order" and the "domain of chaos." And it is impossible to understand the fact of this specialization, unless those domains are regarded as more than mere metaphor…We live in a universe characterized by the interplay of *yang* and *yin*, chaos and order: emotion provides us with an initial guide when we don't know what we are doing, when reason alone will not suffice. "Cognition", by contrast, allows us to construct and maintain our ordered environments, and keep chaos—and affect—in check.[5]

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[4] Jordan B. Peterson, Map of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxi.
[5] Ibid., 48-49.

Peterson goes on to explicitly naturalize the mythological *yin* and *yang*, or order and chaos, as he grounds them in the two hemispheres of the brain. The left hemisphere is associated with order or *yang* as it is apparently responsible for the human organism's "operation in explored territory."[6] The right hemisphere, on the other hand, is associated with chaos or *yin* as it is apparently responsible for the human organism's "operation in unexplored territory."[7] Exploration plays a big role for Peterson's theory of thought and abstract thought. If Peterson wants to ground our ability to think in a thoroughly Darwinistic theory, he will need a story which can explain how thinking and abstract thinking would have emerges from the natural progression of evolution. Peterson uses exploration to tell just such a story,

> Thinking might in many cases be regarded as the abstracted form of exploration—as the capacity to investigate, without the necessity of direct motoric action. Abstract analysis (verbal and nonverbal) of the unexpected or novel plays a much greater role for humans than for animals—a role that generally takes primacy over action. It is only when this capacity fails partially or completely in humans—or when it plays a paradoxical role (amplifying the significance or potential danger of the unknown through definitive but "false" negative labeling)—that active exploration (or active avoidance), with its limitations and dangers, becomes necessary. Replacement of potentially dangerous exploratory action with increasingly flexible and abstracted thought means the possibility for growth of knowledge without direct exposure to danger, and constitutes one major advantage of the development of intelligence. The abstract intelligence characteristic of the human being developed in parallel with rapid evolution of the brain.[8]

[6] Ibid., 68.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 66.

For Peterson then, the emergence of human thought was developed in order to aid the human organism in exploring new territory of the world without the risk of actually going out and exploring bodily. Abstract exploration is much less costly than physical exploration and aids in the human endeavor of mapping new territory and creating order out of the chaos of the unknown.

From the origins in mapping unexplored territory, and in concert with the rapid evolution of the human brain, the human capacity for abstract reasoning and imagine grew more powerful. With this new power, humans were finally able to abstract moral principles as well as gain other knowledge associated higher order disciplines. Mankind was finally able to systematically analyze their own behavior, myths, stories, religions, etc., in order to gleam practical, moral, and theoretical truths. This brings us at last to Peterson's LoD. Peterson recounts the historical evolution of mankind's knowledge as such:

> Behavior is imitated, then abstracted into play, formalized into drama and story, crystalized into myth and codified into religion—and only then criticized in philosophy, and provided, *post-hoc*, with rational underpinnings. Explicit philosophical statements regarding the grounds for and nature of ethical behavior, stated in a verbally comprehensible manner, were not established through rational endeavor.[9]

Thus, as Peterson makes explicit, ethical behavior is not grounded in rational reflection, but in human action as it has been passed down through the generations in various formats. It is only once the human capacity for abstract reasoning was developed that man could reflect back on human behavior and philosophically analyze it. Thus our "know-how" knowledge historically predates our "know-what", or know-that knowledge, i.e., our propositional knowledge. Thus,

[9] Ibid., 78.

while we can only know and reflect on our know-how knowledge system because we have made it explicit through our know-what by a process of abstraction which was originally purposed for abstract exploration, still our know-how system predates and gives rise to our know-what system. Peterson says,

> The knowing-what system, declarative (episodic and semantic), has developed a description of knowing-how activity, procedure, through a complex, lengthy process of abstraction. Action and imitation of action developmentally predate explicit description or discovery of the rules governing action. Adaptation through play and drama preceded development of linguistic thought, and provided the ground from which it emerged. Each developmental "stage"—action, imitation, play, ritual, drama, narrative, myth, religion, philosophy, rationality—offers an increasingly abstracted, generalized and detailed representation of the behavioral wisdom embedder in and established during the previous stage. The introduction of semantic representation to the human realm of behavior allowed for continuance and ever-increasing extension of the cognitive process originating in action, imitation, play, and drama. Language turned drama into mythic narrative, narrative into formal religion, and religion into critical philosophy, providing for exponential expansion of adaptive ability.[10]

Thus, with the addition of language, the pace toward the ability to explicitly analyze our history and inherited wisdom and knowledge increased exponentially. With the necessary tool of abstract reasoning finally at our disposal, mankind has finally reached the point of critical philosophy and can now scrutinize and explicitly abstract know-what knowledge out of our

[10] Ibid., 79.

know-how knowledge. With this picture of Peterson's LoD, we can know move to drive a wedge between the know-what and know-how knowledge of Peterson's project.

Thomas Crisp's EAAN vs. Peterson

First up against Peterson's LoD is Thomas Crisp's EAAN, which is a weaker form than Alvin Plantinga's in that it grants the naturalist lower level reasoning capacities such as inference to the best explanation and merely targets our abstract metaphysical beliefs. In setting up his objection to abstract naturalistic metaphysics, Crisp list three important theses which we will apply to Peterson's Lod:

> **Evolutionary Thesis**: If naturalism is true, if there is no need to appeal to God or anything like God in explaining or understanding the world, then it is highly likely that we humans and our cognitive faculties are the product of unguided evolutionary processes of the sorts described by contemporary evolutionary theory.[11]

This evolutionary thesis certainly applies to Peterson's LoD as he wishes to ground his entire project in neuroscience without appeal to God or anything like God, indeed to concept of God arises historically in Lod.

> **Principle of Reason**: If for some source of information S, you have good reason to doubt the reliability of S, and have no good reason to discount this reason for doubt, then the rational attitude toward matters about which S is your only source of information is doubt.[12]

This principle is pretty straight forward, there is nothing specific to Peterson's project which would cause him to reject the Principle of Reason.

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[11] Thomas Crisp, "On Naturalistic Metaphysics" in *Blackwell Companion to Naturalism* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 4.
[12] Ibid., 6.

> **Thesis of Unreliability**: The probability that we humans command much by way of reliable insight into abstract metaphysical matters, given naturalism and that we and our faculties are the product of evolutionary processes of the sort described by contemporary evolutionary theory, is inscrutable (that is, we have no way of knowing its value).[13]

This last thesis is the one which needs the most treatment. Before we seek to apply this the Thesis of Unreliability to Peterson's LoD, it's important to establish that LoD is an abstract metaphysical matter. Here, Crisp's definition of naturalistic metaphysics is helpful,

> Naturalistic metaphysics, let us say, is metaphysics such that the structures that it postulates to explain the appearances are populated entirely by "natural" entities, forces, and processes: entities, forces, and processes completely describable without appeal to a mind or minds whose activities explain the origin, structure, and ongoing existence of the cosmos.
>
> And such is the project of explaining the mental, the moral, and the physical in naturalistic terms: naturalistic metaphysics. It's the attempt to get behind the mental, moral, and physical appearances, to understand the nature and structure of the realities underlying them, all the while postulating only natural entities, forces, and processes. And as it occurs in the pages of philosophical and scientific journals and books, it's mostly highly abstract metaphysics.[14]

Surely, under Crisp's definition above, Peterson's LoD is an exercise in naturalistic metaphysics. But why think that the Thesis of Unreliability ought to apply to LoD? Well, as we've noted above, Peterson grounds or originates the abstract reasoning required for reasoning about metaphysics, such as LoD, in earlier man's abstract exploration. Now, in keeping with Crisp's

[13] Ibid., 4.
[14] Ibid.

desiderata we might grant Peterson the abstract exploration, perhaps that is plausible given the evolutionary account of our faculties—it seems plausible that saving oneself the risk of bodily exploration through using your mind to engage in abstract exploration has various survival benefits. It might even make sense that our ancestor's faculties which produced abstract exploration were generally reliable. But why think that those same faculties would be able to generally arrive at truth in regards to "abstruse metaphysical matters" like LoD?[15] What possible story could Peterson give for the necessity of our ancestors to reliably produce true beliefs about metaphysics? Perhaps Peterson would argue that the capacity to arrive at generally reliable metaphysical beliefs is a "spandrel", i.e., "a non-adaptive byproduct of some adaptively selected trait, just as, for example, reliability on abstract mathematical matters is plausibly thought of as a non-adaptive byproduct of the adaptive ability to do simple arithmetic."[16] But how could we ever determine the probability that the cognitive faculties which evolved specifically for the abstract exploration needed to map new territory reliably producing true metaphysical beliefs? As Crisp points out, the probability is inscrutable and thus, since the probability is inscrutable, it could easily be a 0% chance that the faculties which evolved for abstract exploration also produce generally reliable metaphysical beliefs. Thus, we have no reason to believe that our cognitive faculties can produce reliable metaphysical beliefs as a spandrel from abstract exploration.

In the absence of a good reason to affirm a spandrel, we have a good reason to doubt that our ancestors needed to produce reliable metaphysical beliefs, i.e., that abstract metaphysical beliefs can be wildly mistaken without affecting the survival of the species whatsoever—just read any history of philosophy book. And so, on a naturalistic metaphysic, we have a reason to doubt that our cognitive faculties reliably produce true abstract metaphysical beliefs, of which

[15] Ibid., 6.
[16] Ibid., 5.

LoD is one. Thus, following the intuitive Principle of Reason, we have a reason to doubt LoD given the truth of LoD. If LoD is true, we should doubt that it is true, if it is false, then we should not believe it.

Plantinga's EAAN vs. Peterson

While Crip's EAAN served as a local skeptical threat targeted solely against abstract metaphysical beliefs, Plantinga's EAAN is a global skeptical threat which seeks threaten all of the naturalist's beliefs by demonstrating that, on the conjunction of naturalism and evolution, the probability that our cognitive faculties would be reliable is low. Plantinga's most mature argument funs as follows:

(1) P(R/N&E) is low.

(2) Anyone who accepts (believes) N&E and sees that P(R/N&E) is low has a defeater for R.

(3) Anyone who has a defeater for R has a defeater for any other belief she thinks she has, including N&E itself.

(4) If one who accepts N&E thereby acquires a defeater for N&E, N&E can't rationally be accepted.[17]

For our present purposes, we will not go into detail about (1)-(4) but accept that the argument is sound for the sake of argument. If it can be shown that Peterson's LoD falls prey to Plantinga's EAAN, it will be on someone else to come along and argue against the soundness of the EAAN. My goal in this section is to merely show why (1) is true for LoD and then follow it through to self-defeat.

So, why think that P(R/LoD) is low? Well remember back to Peterson's quote from above,

[17] Alvin Plantinga, *Where The Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion*, & *Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 344-5.

> Behavior is imitated, then abstracted into play, formalized into drama and story, crystalized into myth and codified into religion—and only then criticized in philosophy, and provided, *post-hoc*, with rational underpinnings. Explicit philosophical statements regarding the grounds for and nature of ethical behavior, stated in a verbally comprehensible manner, were not established through rational endeavor.[18]

On Peterson's conception, the rational faculties are produced by a long string of non-rational processes which itself is only later give a post-hoc (or *ad hoc*) rational justification. If this non-rational process of LoD led to the survival and thriving of the during its non-rational stages, why think that it would ever need to produce reliably true beliefs? Apparently, It doesn't matter what kind of beliefs were produced by the non-rational portion of LoD, true or false, the beliefs helped the species get their bodies in the right places to survive. Now if this is the process which supposedly gave rise to our cognitive faculties, a process aimed at survival rather than truth, why think that our cognitive faculties would ever reliably produce true beliefs when whatever beliefs it was producing in the earlier portion of LoD successfully led to survival? The truth of the matter is hard to come by, there is one true answer to the equation 2+2= but an untold number of false answers which might be just close enough for survival. Why think that LoD would ever produce faculties that reliably produce truth? Any true beliefs produced by such a set of cognitive faculties would be true by accident and thus wouldn't constitute knowledge. Thus we have a large wedge between Peterson's know-how knowledge and know-what knowledge. Given LoD then, the probability that our cognitive faculties reliably produce true beliefs is low. All that's left to do now is plug LoD into the equation:

(1) P(R/LoD) is low.

[18] Jordan B. Peterson, Map of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief (New York: Routledge, 1999), 78.

(2) Anyone who accepts (believes) LoD and sees that P(R/Lod) is low has a defeater for R.

(3) Anyone who has a defeater for R has a defeater for any other belief she thinks she has, including LoD itself.

If one who accepts LoD thereby acquires a defeater for LoD, Lod can't rationally be accepted.

Thus, as we have sought to demonstrate, Peterson's ladder of development which resides at the heart of his project, is self-defeating on two counts. Whether on Crisp's localized skeptical threat or on Plantinga's global skeptical threat, Peterson's LoD cannot be rationally affirmed.

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Philosophia Christi vol. 22, no. 2, 2020

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