

The search for an indubitable truth

In a book, *12 Rules for Life – An Antidote to Chaos*, that's justifiably making waves in many circles today, Jordan Peterson shares about his own journey towards truth and meaning. Here's that story:

At one point in his life, while still young and finding his own path, he reached a stage where he felt agnostic, not just about the shallow Christianity he'd been raised on, but also about most everything else in terms of truth and trust. What really can we believe in? What's ultimately to be trusted?

Too humble to compare himself to one of the great minds in history, Rene Descartes, who, five hundred years ago, struggled with a similar agnosticism, Peterson nonetheless could not help but employ Descartes' approach in trying to find a truth that you could not doubt. So, like Descartes, he set off in search off an "indubitable" (Descartes' term), that is, to find a premise that absolutely cannot be doubted.

Descartes, as we know, found his "indubitable" in his famous dictum: *I think, therefore, I am!* Nobody can be deceived in believing that since even to be deceived would be indisputable proof that you exist. The philosophy that Descartes then built upon the indubitable premise is left for history to judge. But history doesn't dispute the truth of his dictum.

So Peterson sets out with the same essential question: *What single thing cannot be doubted?* Is there something so evidently true that nobody can doubt it? For Peterson, it's not the fact that we think which is indisputable, it's the fact that we, all of us, suffer. That's his indubitable truth, suffering is real. That cannot be doubted: "Nihilists cannot undermine it with skepticism. Totalitarians cannot banish it. Cynics cannot escape its reality." Suffering is real beyond all doubt.

Moreover, in Peterson's understanding, the worst kind of suffering isn't that which is inflicted upon us by the innate contingencies of our being and our mortality, nor by the sometimes blind brutality of nature. The worst kind of suffering is the kind that one person inflicts upon another, the kind that one part of humankind inflicts upon another part, the kind we see in the atrocities of the 20th century – Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, and countless others responsible for the torture, rape, suffering, and death of millions.

From this indubitable premise he submits something else that too cannot be disputed: This kind of suffering isn't just real, *it's also wrong!* We can all agree that this kind of suffering is not good and that there is something that is (beyond dispute) not good. And if there's something that is not good, then there's something that is good. His logic: "If the worst sin is the torment of others, merely for the sake of the suffering produced – then the good is whatever is diametrically opposed to that."

What flows from this is clear: *The good is whatever stops such things from happening*. If this is true, and it is, then it is also clear as to what is good, and what is a good way of living: If the most terrible forms of suffering are produced by egotism, selfishness, untruthfulness, arrogance, greed, lust for power, willful cruelty, and insensitivity to others, then we are evidently called to the opposite: selflessness, altruism, humility, truth-telling, tenderness, and sacrificing for others.

Not incidentally, Peterson affirms all of this inside a chapter within which he highlights the importance of sacrifice, of delaying private gratification for a greater good long-range. His insight here parallels those of Rene Girard and other anthropologists who point out that the only way of stopping unconscious sacrifice to blind gods (which is what happened in the atrocities of Hitler and what happens in our own bitter slandering of others) is through self-sacrifice. Only when we accept at the cost of personal suffering our own contingencies, sin, and mortality, will we stop projecting these on to others so to make them suffer in order to feel better about ourselves.

Peterson writes as an agnostic or perhaps, more accurately, as an honest analyst, an observer of humanity, who for purposes of this book prefers to keep his faith private. Fair enough. Probably wise too. No reason to impute motives. It's where he lands that's important, and where he lands is on very solid ground. It's where Jesus lands in the Sermon on the Mount, it's where the Christian churches land when they're at their best, it's where the great religions of the world land when they're at their best, and it's where humanity lands when it's at its best.

The medieval mystic, Theresa of Avila, wrote with great depth and challenge. Her treatise on the spiritual life is now a classic and forms part of the very canon of Christian spiritual writings. In the end, she submits that during our generative years the most important question we need to challenge ourselves with is: *How can I be more helpful?* Jordan Peterson, with a logic and language that can be understood by everyone today, offers the same challenge.