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**RHETORICAL DEVICES IN *12 RULES FOR
LIFE* BY JORDAN B. PETERSON**

ABSTRACT

Jesse Tarvainen: Rhetorical Devices in *12 Rules for Life* by Jordan B. Peterson
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This thesis focuses on how *12 Rules for Life* (2018), a self-help book written by University of Toronto professor Jordan B. Peterson, utilises language and rhetorical devices to persuade and affect the reader and how some contradictions emerge in the way the book tries to accomplish this. The self-help genre is one that engages in constant competition in the marketplace, which forms a hierarchy by itself, and combined with the marked interest in hierarchies portrayed by the book creates an interesting starting point for analysis. Not only are hierarchies presented as inherent parts of nature, but the book itself seems to form hierarchies around the quality of interpretations, where the interpretations presented in the book are placed at the top. Self-help books are also known to be sites of rhetoric, so it seems appropriate to analyse how and to what end the book attempts to affect the reader.

The analysis utilises the concept of identification, where every act that has some perceivable persuasive effect is part of the rhetorical devices employed by the speaker, in order to analyse the different forms of evidence presented to strengthen the claims made in the book, as well as to identify other forms of rhetorical devices and to analyse their possible effects on the reader. There are four main types of evidence; statistical, testimonial, anecdotal, and analogical, of which mostly the three latter ones are found in the book, testimonial in the form of the author's own expert opinion on matters discussed, anecdotal in the form of personal stories and observations made by the author, and analogical in the form of metaphors, allegories, and stories.

A further focus was placed on the way that the book seemingly distances itself from the arguments it presents, possibly in order to limit the number of counterarguments by making it difficult to hold the author accountable for any remarks he might make, as well as to allow the author to utilise the hierarchy of interpretations to discredit any such counterarguments as being misinterpretations.

The intentionality of such behaviour can be seen in the way that the author exhibits self-awareness to some of the rhetorical devices used in the book, as well as by discussing the importance of precision in one's speech. This seems to contradict the manner in which the author inserts humour in already bizarre scientific evidence of comparing the society of lobsters to that of humans, in an effort to illustrate his key arguments, which makes the reader question whether to take the presented evidence seriously or not, and whether there are other parts in the book that need not be taken as seriously. Another contradiction would be the immense usage of metaphors and similar devices, which the reader is left mostly by themselves to decipher the correct, intended interpretation. This might be due to the author claiming that he does not want people to be the embodiments of his ideology, even if he leaves little room for differing opinions.

However, whilst constructing the main arguments against the book's core ideas, said counterarguments are misrepresented and subsequently criticised in order to preserve the integrity of the arguments presented by the book. In fact, the very same misrepresented arguments about the nature and utility of hierarchies seem to be something that the book itself is actively doing, giving the impression that perhaps the author might have been aware of it themselves after all.

The conclusion is that whilst self-help books can provide solutions to the reader's existing problems in their personal lives, they can also create new problems, the existence of which the reader is required to internalise so that they can make sense of the book. However, this established formula can then be used to present things the author considers to be problems, in order to persuade the reader to adopt the author's stance on the issues as well. Furthermore in *12 Rules for Life*, Peterson constructs his core arguments in a manner in which they are thoroughly based in nature and subsequently positioned into the history of human existence by connecting different literary sources from throughout history to form a master narrative that seems to exclude any and all counterarguments by arguing that the truths presented in the book are ones that most everyone knows on some subconscious level, even if they are not aware of it, thus essentially forcing his ideas onto people.

Keywords: Rhetoric, Self-help, hierarchy, Jordan B. Peterson

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TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tämä tutkielma keskittyy siihen, millä tavoin Toronton yliopiston professorin Jordan B. Petersonin kirjoittama itseapukirja, *12 Elämänohjetta – Käsikirja kaaosta vastaan* hyödyntää kieltä sekä retorisia keinoja vaikuttaakseen lukijoihinsa, ja kuinka kirjassa esiintyy ristiriitoja tätä tavoitellessa. Itseapukirjallisuus on genrenä tunnettu siitä, että se pyrkii vaikuttamaan lukijaansa, joten on luontaista tutkia millä tavoin se tässä kirjassa ilmenee.

Analyysi hyödyntää Kenneth Burken käsitystä retoriikasta sellaisena, jossa retoriseksi keinoiksi luetaan kaikki toiminta, jolla voidaan havaita olevan vaikutusta toiseen ihmiseen. Täten tutkielma pyrkii tuomaan esille ne tekijät, joilla kirja lukijaansa vaikuttaa. Keskeisimpiä teoksessa esiintyviä retorisia keinoja ovat identifikaatio, huumori, tieteelliset tutkimukset, narratiivit, metaforat, analogiset esimerkit sekä katkelmat kirjallisuudesta.

Identifikaatio on eräs Burken retoriikan keskeisistä käsitteistä, joka tässä kontekstissa viittaa siihen, millä tavoin Peterson pyrkii esittämään itseään vakuuttavampana tuomalla esiin lukijoiden kanssa yhdistäviä ja samaistuttavia tekijöitä. Tämä käy ilmi siitä, miten kirja hyödyntää huumoria osana retoriikkaansa esittäessään kirjailijasta positiivisen vaikutelman, sekä muodostaessaan kirjailijan ja lukijan välille rennon ja epämuodollisen suhteen, mikä edesauttaa kirjailijaan samaistumista.

Toisaalta huumorin voidaan nähdä muodostavan jännitteitä, esimerkiksi silloin kun huumoria ilmaantuu puhuttaessa tieteellisestä tutkimuksesta, jossa ihmisten yhteiskunnan rakennetta verrataan hummereiden vastaavaan. Hummereista esitetyllä tutkimuksella Peterson osoittaa hierarkioiden luonnollisuuden, mutta huumori vaikuttaisi kyseenalaistavan argumentin. Tämän tekee oudoksi se, että vaikka kyseinen tutkimus totisesti vaikuttaa varsin omituiselta, on se kuitenkin keskeinen osa kirjan laajempaa narratiivia. Huumorin tarkoituksena voi olla ehkäistä lukijan huolta siitä, että argumentit olisivat kestävämpiä tai naurettavia.

Anekdootit ja esimerkit ovat myös yleisiä keinoja itseapukirjallisuuden retoriikassa, ja itseapukirjat tunnetusti tuovat näiden avulla esille ongelmia lukijoiden elämässä. Jotta lukija voisi sisäistää ongelmien olemassaolon, ongelmat esitetään erilaisten narratiivien muodossa, jolloin ne ovat paremmin tunnistettavassa muodossa. Tällaiset anekdootit näin ollen yhdistyvät laajempaan narratiiviin, jossa niitä käytetään levittämään kirjailijan omia näkemyksiä olemassaolon rakenteesta ja totuuden luonteesta.

Kirjan pyrkimys todistaa ja tukea retoriikan avulla sen esittämiä filosofisia näkökulmia on myös havaittavissa kirjan viittauksista kirjallisuuden perinteisiin. Osoittamalla kuinka klassiset teokset kuten John Miltonin *Kadotettu paratiisi* sekä Raamattu tukevat Petersonin väitteitä asettaa hänen argumenttinsa osaksi kirjallisuuden historiaa. Tämä yhdistyy myös ajatukseen siitä, että hän tieteellisin esimerkein perustaa argumenttinsa luontoon. Täten yhdistämällä monet eri aikakausien kirjalliset lähteet yhteen narratiiviin, Peterson esittää oman filosofisen näkemyksensä sellaisena, että sen olemassaolon ovat kuuluisat kirjailijat tietäneet jo vuosituhansien ajan. Vaikka esitys antaa väitteille uskottavuutta, se myös antaa ymmärtää, että väitteet eivät ole Petersonin itse kehittämiä, vaan pikemminkin yleismaailmallisia totuuksia, joita Peterson yksinkertaisesti tulkitsee, näin ollen etäännyttävän itseään tulkinnoistaan.

Eräs toinen retorinen keino, jolla kirjailija myös ottaa etäisyyttä tulkintoihinsa on analogien ja metaforien käyttö. Näillä kielitieteellisillä rakenteilla muodostetaan yhtenevyyksiä eri aiheiden välille ja tässä kirjassa niitä hyödynnetään puhuttaessa ideoista epäsuorasti, jolloin lukija joutuu itse tekemään omat tulkintansa siitä, mitä kirjailija yrittää kertoa. Näin tehdessään kirjailija välttää tekemästä selkeitä kannanottoja, joka mahdollistaa sellaisten tulkintojen hylkäämisen, jotka ovat hänen mielestään vääriä.

Johtopäätöksenä *12 Elämänohjetta* hyödyntää itseapukirjallisuuden menetelmiä muodostaessaan narratiivin, jonka sisäistäessään lukija myös sisäistää Petersonin omat näkemykset olemassaolon rakenteesta. Tieteellisellä todistusaineistolla tämä narratiivi esitetään osaksi luontoa, kun taas kirjallisilla lähteillä se yhdistetään osaksi ihmiskunnan historiaa. Tämän seurauksena narratiivia ei esitetä ainoastaan yksittäisen professorin ideana, vaan yleismaailmallisena totuutena, jonka ihmiskunta on tuntenut läpi historian. Retoriikan käyttö kuitenkin osoittaa, kuinka nämä itsestäänselvyyksinä esitetyt ideat ovatkin vain keinotekoisesti tuotettuja tulkintoja.

Avainsanat: retoriikka, itseapukirjallisuus, hierarkiat, Jordan B. Peterson

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin Originality Check -ohjelmalla.

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1. Introduction

12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos is a self-help book written by a University of Toronto psychology professor, Jordan B. Peterson, who also runs a clinical practice (Peterson xxii). It consists of twelve rules, chosen from a list of rules originally written by Peterson for the website *Quora* to answer the question of “What are the most valuable things everyone should know?” (Peterson, xxvi). Of the 12 rules Peterson has chosen, he elaborates on them by giving each rule its own chapter and writing an essay on them, drawing from his own experiences both from personal life and his work as a clinical practitioner, as well as excerpts from a number of different literary and non-literary sources, to figure out what manner of rhetorical effects they hold and how they might contradict some of the points Peterson is making in his book.

To identify the self-help genre, Scott Cherry (2011) suggests that, “for practical purposes”, most every self-help book attempts to present itself as the definitive work in the genre, that, in fact, there “was no genre, just this self-help book” (105). However, this actually becomes a distinguishable feature of the genre, as most books are marketed as being either “the international bestseller” or “by the author of the international bestseller”, or simply by announcing the number of books sold, to distinguish themselves as being “the best” of their kind. This is also done to render any other competing self-help book obsolete by comparison, because the potential reader would not need to delve deeper into the rest of the genre (Cherry 2011, 102-03). Being an international best-seller also indicates that a book has “universal application” by retaining its appeal in different cultures and different contexts (Cherry 2011, 102).

12 Rules for Life is no different in this regard, with different iterations of the cover providing sales figures, whilst at least the Finnish cover touts it as being an “International bestseller”. Here it should be noted, that whilst Cherry highlights the importance of the article “the” in “the bestseller”, marking the book as definitely the best of its kind (103), such articles are not found in the

Finnish language, and therefore are not present in the Finnish versions of the covers either. The importance of this is that whilst as a book deeply interested in the existence of hierarchies, it would appear that self-help books as a genre are part of a hierarchy amongst themselves, all vying for the top spot, to be the one self-help book to get picked up and read. By engaging in the warfare within the genre, *12 Rules for Life* is already establishing one of its main ideas, the existence of hierarchies already in the very covers of the book. On the other hand, the manner in which self-help books such as *12 Rules for Life* advertise themselves also appears to distance them from academic texts, in the sense that those books do not tend to showcase their sales success (Cherry 2011, 109).

Another prominent feature in the self-help book genre is the attempt to solve the readers' problems. Cherry (2011) argues, that since the author of the self-help books cannot possibly know all of their readers and thus could not realistically assess their problems on an individual case-by-case basis, self-help books have a way of making the reader become aware of problems that they might have not initially considered to be problems (117-18). This is based on the assumption that readers wish to understand and make sense of the book they are reading, and in order to succeed, they are required to perceive the issues self-help books bring forth as being actual problems needing to be solved. Naturally, self-help books then provide required solutions after establishing the need for them (Cherry 2011, 117-18).

And so, since self-help literature arguably exists to have an effect on the reader, to change them for the better (Askehave 2004, 14), it is natural to take a rhetorical approach to the text, since rhetoric is an integral part of influencing others (Nielsen et al. 2015, 63). Traditionally, rhetoric has been seen as persuasion in the form of speech acts and solid arguments, but Kenneth Burke's notion of "new rhetoric" has been said to argue that persuasion is more than just speech acts, that it entails "the whole area of language usage for the purpose of inducement to action or attitude" (Day 1960, 271). The core idea in Burke's new rhetoric, was the concept of "identification, which could refer to a 'deliberative device,' a 'means' of persuasion, an 'end' of rhetoric, or even 'unconscious'

processes of the human mind” (Dillard & Shen 2013, 7). Essentially, any action that could perceivably have an impact in terms of affecting another person could be seen to be part of the realm of rhetoric (Dillard & Shen 2013, 8).

Although self-help books are commonly thought to be part of the literary realm of non-fiction (Askehave 2004, 8), Peterson utilises rhetorical devices and supports his claims by providing evidence not commonly associated with non-fiction. Dillard & Shen (2013) argue, that there are four different main forms of evidence; statistical, testimonial, anecdotal and analogical (21). Statistical evidence is based on “statistics such as frequencies and percentages”, testimonial evidence is based on “personal experience, eye-witness account, or personal opinion to support the claim (including expert testimony)”, and anecdotal evidence is based on “person’s observations of the world”, “personal interpretation or opinion” that often is “subjective in nature”. Analogical evidence, in turn, supports arguments by comparing two ideas or situations with one another. Out of these four the first two are considered to be the strongest forms of evidence (Dillard & Shen 2013, 21), however, in his book, Peterson resorts to mostly the latter two, occasionally providing his own expert testimony, even if at times it is unclear whether his claims are based on expertise or his personal opinion. The line between testimonial and anecdotal evidence is especially ambiguous, since Peterson shares his personal experiences whilst simultaneously analysing most of it in retrospect through his expertise in clinical psychology, such as the part when Peterson discusses his time working in a Saskatchewan railway line crew (Peterson 327-28), or when talking about meeting with his childhood friend Ed slightly later in life (Peterson 73-75). This can make it difficult to pinpoint where his professional objectiveness ends and subjective opinions begin.

Analogical evidence is present in *12 Rules for Life* in the form of analogies, metaphors and allegories, which will be talked about somewhat interchangeably, since despite clearly being individual linguistic devices they share similar persuasive effects (Dillard & Shen 2013, 27). However, there are some marked differences between some of these devices, as some of the many

stories and story-like elements are explicitly fictional whilst the fictionality of others is left ambiguous. When it comes to separating the fiction from non-fiction, the main difference is fictional devices having their subjects and events in a fabricated, hypothetical realm of existence, whereas non-fiction aims to describe real-life subjects that exist in the real world. That in mind, the main focus of this thesis will be placed on apparent contradictions between the act of using these devices and one of the 12 rules in the book, namely that of rule 10 “Be precise in your speech” (Peterson 259), as precision would seem to diminish when topics are discussed in indirect terms, which in turn would leave more room for interpretation. Additionally, other forms of rhetorical devices inherent in the book are commented upon and how the book seemingly avoids counterarguments by a premediated use of rhetoric.

It is quite possible that Sigmund Freud, a psychoanalyst who “dazzled the imagination of his contemporaries with metaphors and narratives” (Illouz 2008, 23), could be a strong inspiration to the style and rhetoric Peterson aims to achieve. Peterson does not hide his disposition towards Freud either, mentioning him in his book on more than one occasion, even going as far as calling him a genius (Peterson 243). And thus, in similar vein, Peterson could be seen as attempting to cross the gap between professional psychology and mainstream pop culture, just as Freud did with his works (Illouz 2008, 23). To achieve this, Peterson likewise utilises colourful language, metaphors, analogies, excerpts from famous authors, humour, short stories from his personal experiences among others, to make the text more readily accessible to person not well-versed in the language of professional psychology.

2. Intentionality

Whilst we can assume that the text itself is meant to influence the reader in some capacity due to it being a self-help book, we can argue that the language and the content of the book are also intended

to evoke certain kinds of reactions from the reader. This is perhaps clearest from Rule 12, “Pet a Cat When You Encounter One on the Street” (Peterson 335), where Peterson begins the chapter by talking about the dog he owns. The reason for this, he quickly states, is to avoid “minimal group identification”, a phenomenon where people showcase preferential treatment towards the members of a group they themselves identify with. Thus, he wants to avoid upsetting a particular group, since “the mere mention of a cat in the title would be enough to turn many dog people against me” (Peterson 336-37). Similarly, he attempts to find common ground with readers in the political sphere by mentioning his more “left-leaning” beliefs (Peterson 312), despite Peterson having been considered by some as the “leading antileft thinker” (Raatikainen 2018a, 90). From the author’s openness about his thought process behind the discrepancy between the title of the chapter and the initial content of it, we can assume that it is quite likely that the rest of the content in the book is similarly premeditated.

This line of thinking is also fortified by the aforementioned rule about the precision of one’s speech. With the rule, Peterson encourages readers to articulate their thoughts precisely to best represent their aims and wants (Peterson 282-83). Combining this with the portrayed self-awareness by Peterson, it would be highly likely that when writing, he has paid attention specifically to ensure that nothing is present in the book by accident and everything serves a very specific purpose. Self-help books in general actively try to “seduce” the reader (Cherry 2011, 120), sometimes by seeking common ground with them, other times by “flattering” their readers, convincing them that they already possess all the necessary tools to change their fortunes (Cherry 2011, 123), to “rely on yourself for guidance” (Peterson 158). All this aims to seem to make the reader more receptive to the ideologies that the self-help books offer.

Unsurprisingly then, the act of overtly discussing his transparency and the alignment with different groups of readers both serve specific rhetorical functions. They both develop the relationship between the author and the reader, transparency giving an impression of Peterson stating his intentions clearly, without having anything to hide, and establishes a need to achieve mutual

understanding between the two. However, the manner of transparency that Peterson practices could, in fact, work to hide some of the inconsistencies of his arguments. By being forthright with matters such as the reasoning behind Peterson discussing dogs in a chapter seemingly about cats, the reader might be less inclined to question the omission of other things, such as when Peterson apparently leaves inconvenient diary entries out of the analysis of the Columbine high school shooters (Manne 2018, 16), which will be talked more about in later chapters. Through the apparent transparency, the reader is conditioned to trust that Peterson has brought forward all the necessary information.

The mutual understanding is also evident not only in the way that he wants to avoid unnecessary conflict with the “dog people”, but also how he subsequently apologises to “all the cat people who now feel slighted, because they were “hoping for a cat story but had to read all this dog related material” (Peterson 337-38). Peterson is expecting a specific reaction from the readership and positions himself in a manner to express his understanding of them in anticipation. By aligning himself with his readership, or at least not in opposition with them, Peterson arguably aims towards the positive effects of the same minimal group identification that he tried to avoid in its negative capacity. By having the audience look favourably upon him, as one of their own, they probably are more receptive towards the ideas that Peterson brings forth, and therefore easier to influence.

3. Ambiguity

Another way of forming a more personal relationship with the reader can be seen through the usage of humour throughout the book, such as “When my son, Julian, was about three, he was particularly cute. He’s twenty years older than that now, but still quite cute” (Peterson 338). Through the usage of humour, Peterson establishes an informal setting between the reader and the author. It also invites the reader to have a positive attitude towards Peterson, who avoids a stereotypical image of an uptight professor. Peterson actually laments the apparent diminishing appreciation for what he describes as

“competitive humour”, essentially dark humour, the further he climbed the educational and social ladder (Peterson 252-53).

Conflict emerges when these jokes appear in the midst of scientific research Peterson presents to illustrate his ideas. The first Rule of his book discusses dominance hierarchies, as in nature’s way of deciding what kind of individuals rise to the top of their respective societies. Here he uses lobsters as an example, and more specifically research done into the structure of lobster social life and their mating habits. During his explanations, Peterson makes humorous remarks, such as describing the end result of a lobster female seducing a lobster male as “the lobster equivalent of *Fifty Shades of Grey*” (Peterson 10), or how the dominant lobsters terrorise the subordinate ones at night “just to remind them who’s their daddy” (Peterson 9).

Peterson does acknowledge the “comical” reasons for the relevance of the research (Peterson 11), however, combined with the jokes told during the illustration, this brings into question how seriously we are to take the rather bizarre scientific piece. On one hand, Peterson is treating the subject with utmost importance to his overall ideas, but on the other hand he is also treating it with humour due to its relative eccentricity. In some sense he is obfuscating the boundary between the serious and the less serious, as even when treating his bizarre argument of drawing comparisons between human society to that of lobsters with a certain sense of irony, he still uses it to further his own arguments, as it is a part of the greater narrative that he creates throughout the book. Even if the reader might not internalise the ideas entirely, it still has an effect and might condition them to be more receptive towards similar but more digestible ideas later on in the book. Finally, by having a rather flippant relationship with his argument, Peterson safeguards himself from counterarguments by affording himself the possibility of appealing to the humorous aspects instead, making it difficult to have him be accountable for such odd remarks.

Furthermore, the presence of sarcasm in other areas of the book further affects the way we start reading it, since they represent fictional content in the text that is not meant to be taken literally:

He knew exactly what he was doing. Up yours, Daddy-O – that was his philosophy. He had already concluded that adults were contemptible, and that he could safely defy them. (Too bad, then, that he was destined to become one.) That was a hopeless future his parents had saddled him with. To his great and salutary shock, I picked him bodily off the playground structure, and threw him thirty feet down the field.

No, I didn't. I just took my daughter somewhere else. (Peterson 125)

This extract was part of a longer personal story to discuss the nature of children, but whether it is based on an actual event or a made up one, there are elements that either way are fabricated, namely the part about throwing a kid down the field. Peterson does immediately after state that the final part of this story was not true, but it still opens up the questions concerning the boundaries between what is meant to be taken more seriously and what is to be taken less so. When we start, rightly or wrongly, to assume irony in the text we are reading, we begin to question whether the things said are to be interpreted literally, or whether we are talking about things indirectly (Nielsen 2015, 67-68).

4. Precision

Discussing matters indirectly through various means seems to be somewhat contradictory with one of the rules of the book; “Be Precise in Your Speech” (Peterson 259). In his essay on the rule, Peterson positions the rule to oppose the act of “remaining vague” (Peterson 275); to articulate your thoughts in order to erase the anxiety caused by the unknown; to always have a precise destination to travel towards (283). Naturally, to illustrate his point further, he tells a story about a boy and a dragon, where

the boy's mother refuses to acknowledge the existence of the dragon, which in turn grows ever larger with each passing denial (Peterson 270).

Whilst it would be perhaps incorrect to state that talking about things indirectly is not precise per se, it does create some tension due to the nature of the act, there are some internal differences when discussing one thing by talking about something completely different. For example, the previously mentioned societal structure and dominance hierarchy of lobsters is discussed in a way where parallels are drawn between the society and behaviour of lobsters and that of the humans. Now, the absurdity of the comparison calls into question the validity of such passages. However, Peterson never clearly states that the two are similar, but instead opts to discuss them in a similar context. This further blurs the line between what is meant to be taken seriously and what is not, and the reader is left to figure it out themselves. In fact, one of Peterson's subheadings in Rule 9 reads "Figure It Out Yourself", where he discusses a patient of his who had suffered greatly, but who themselves were not quite sure to what extent (Peterson 240). Peterson argued that it is better to listen and invite people to think for themselves, and that could possibly be seen as a reason to the extent that he utilises indirection with his ideas in the rest of his book as well. Peterson attempts to refrain from pushing his own ideology on his patients, so would he treat his readership any different?

Arguments have been in favour of implicit conclusions being more persuasive than explicit ones, as have been seen as being less "threatening to an individual's freedom", as well as appearing "less biased and more objective" (Dillard & Shen 2013, 25-26). However, Peterson might have other reasons for such behaviour, since leaving the task of interpreting to the reader absolves him from all the possible conclusions that they might have ended up with. Arguably, it would be difficult to criticise Peterson for readers misinterpreting his writings.

On the other hand, Peterson seems to be perfectly fine with criticising Derrida, even when acknowledging the claims that Derrida's work has been mistranslated. Peterson proceeds to ignore such claims, since the way he now is interpreting Derrida is "how Derrida's work has generally

been interpreted” (Peterson 311). However, Raatikainen (2018) speculates that Peterson still seems to base his interpretations on the misinterpretations of another scholar, Stephen Hicks, whom, Raatikainen claims, “simply does not understand what he is writing about” (Raatikainen 2018a, 91). Regardless, Peterson comments on the ideas of Jacques Derrida in Rule 11, strongly criticising Derrida’s famous quote “Il n’ya pas de hors-texte”, or “there is nothing outside the text”, which he argues to basically mean “everything is interpretation”, and calls it “nihilistic and destructive” (Peterson 310-11). He goes on to criticise how such thinking would undermine categorization itself and how such philosophy aims to explain scientific facts of nature by claiming they are nothing more than powerplays by those who would benefit from them by excluding others, e.g. “Science only benefits scientists. Politics only benefit politicians” (Peterson 310). The link here to Peterson’s own ideas is that he is trying to present his world view as something based on scientific facts, through the ideas of famous authors and scientific research, and Derrida’s philosophy would be in direct opposition to the world view that he is trying to present. Here we can see Peterson employ a refutational two-sided message (Dillard & Shen 2013, 22), a rhetorical device where he has presented his own views together with some opposing views, although the opposing views are not meant as counterarguments, but to further highlight how Peterson’s own arguments appear to be superior to that of Derrida and his followers. However, whilst giving his account of the opposing ideas, Peterson seems to be leading his readership astray, either due to a lack of understanding or purposefully by oversimplifying Derrida for emphasis.

5. Misdirection

Peterson’s social commentary being located towards the very end of his self-help book can hardly be an accident. Before the social commentary, the apparent aim of Peterson’s book has been that of helping the reader in issues ranging from childrearing to relationships to personal growth, exhibiting a marked concern for every aspect of the reader’s life, once again leaning on the relationship Peterson

has established with the reader to show that he cares about them. And so, as per Cherry's critique on how self-helps books in general operate, he has pointed out the many apparent and likely problems in the reader's personal life and subsequently provided solutions for each of these (Cherry 2011, 117-18). Therefore, I would argue that the reason his social commentary is left towards the end of the book is to frame it as yet another problem amongst the rest of them; a problem, the existence of which the reader was completely unaware until now. And the solution for this problem is to adopt the views of Peterson himself and to condemn the perceived threat, to "internalise" Peterson's own opinions of society and the nature of existence, of "Being" (Peterson 38), as a part of the larger narrative that Peterson has thus far provided for the reader (Cherry 2011, 14).

However, this becomes a kind of misdirection once it is reiterated that Peterson appears to be misrepresenting and misinterpreting the core ideas of Derrida (Raatikainen 2018a, 91). Peterson frames Derrida as the ultimate naïve relativist, to whom "everything is interpretation" (Peterson 311). However, "there is nothing outside the text" does not necessarily mean that everything is only made out of text, but that our experience of reality always involves interpretation of it, and our interpretative frameworks affect how we interact with reality. In truth, Derrida actually always opposed many of the remarks made by Peterson, who is not the first one to make such claims (Raatikainen 2018a, 91). Peterson seems to turn "Derrida" into an imaginary figure (Raatikainen 2018a, 91), which allows him to externalise some of the issues with the arguments Peterson is making himself. By condemning the idea of infinite interpretations in favour of "*a seriously bounded number of viable solutions*" (Peterson 312), Peterson attempts to limit the number of possible interpretations for the vast amount of anecdotal and analogical evidence he bases his arguments on. Peterson's logic seems to eliminate any interpretation that would undermine his theories, as such interpretations could be seen as to falling outside of the category of viable solutions. In this manner he is proactively limiting the options for counterarguments to be made.

Not too dissimilar is the way Peterson represents the ideology and apparent thought process of the Columbine high school killers. He presents them as the “ultimate critics” (Peterson 148), who could not stand the injustice of the world and decided that earth would be better off without any humans. However, when Peterson presents sections from the diary of Eric Harris, one of the Columbine high school killers, he seems to do it in a rather selective manner, as Manne points out (2018). After reading through the rest of the killer’s diary, Manne argues that Peterson left out some crucial pieces of information, in the light of which the killer appears not as a “supreme adjudicator of reality” (Peterson 147), but instead as nothing more but a “white supremacist”, “homophobe” and a “misogynist” (Manne 2018, 16). Furthermore, Manne (2018) argues that the killer was “fixated on social hierarchies and desperate to be, or remain, on top of them” (16). The reason for these omissions might be that while arguing for the existence of such dominance hierarchies and their justified existence, it would cast too negative a light on such ideas to learn that they can cause such extreme, animalistic behaviour. And thus, Peterson presents his evidence in a manner that does not quite represent the exact truth, but an amalgamation of it in order to have it better fit the narrative he has created.

6. Indirection

Throughout the book, Peterson practices indirection, which is, per the definition of *Merriam-Webster*, “indirect action or procedure”, which is apparent in the way Peterson employs large quantities of material from different academic and literary sources, as well as utilising colourful language in the form of different linguistic devices, such as metaphors, anecdotes amongst others. This means that in order to discuss his own arguments, he actually does so through all the other material.

The literary sources Peterson utilises are numerous excerpts from different authors, ranging from writers such as Leo Tolstoy and John Milton to Friedrich Nietzsche to the Bible. Not

only does Peterson highlight his apparent erudition through such a wide array of authors, but this could also be seen as a form of corroboration, where Peterson uses texts by other authors to indicate how these people have also come to the same conclusions as he has on the topic. This can act as a rhetorical device to support Peterson's claims, but it can be argued that it also defends them from being discredited, since Peterson argues that they are not only his sentiments, but are shared by influential parties across history (Lee 2007, 94). Furthermore, it works to avoid counterarguments and criticism, since such notions would certainly have to be aimed towards the source material, instead of the one reporting it (Dillard & Shen 2013, 125).

Metaphors, on the other hand, are a constant throughout *12 Rules for Life*, and Dillard and Shen (2013) list a number of different rhetorical devices that the use of metaphors could entail (27). One such function of the usage of metaphors is that it makes the author appear more credible a source, since he appears more learned (Dillard and Shen 2013, 27), quite similar to how Peterson showcases his erudition through familiarity with many famous authors. Another function is that in order to form a counterargument against a metaphor, one must first understand the metaphor, and it has been argued that this reduces the number of counterarguments (Dillard & Shen 2013, 27). This particular function would seem to serve Peterson and his ideas quite well, since by using metaphors to discuss things, Peterson once more allows himself the chance to appeal to the fact that his metaphors were merely misunderstood.

Another way in which Peterson makes it difficult for counterarguments to be formed is through the powerful narrative he forms around his core arguments. By referencing influential and historical sources such as the Bible and John Milton, Peterson extends the origins of his arguments into the annals of history. When talking about the concepts of Good and Evil, Peterson remarks how it required a "millennia-long exercise of the imagination that the idea of abstracted moral concepts themselves, with all they entailed, developed" (Peterson 47), once more indicating how the ideas he is presenting here have been present throughout the course of history. Through his discussion of the

lobsters, Peterson establishes that his narrative is set to start 350 million years ago, for that is how long lobsters have apparently been around with their societies (Peterson 11). In fact, the lobsters and the structure of their society represent “order”, which alongside “chaos” are the two halves that form the concept of “Being” (Peterson 38), which is the name Peterson uses of his idea of the scientific, unchangeable existence. The capitalisation of the ‘B’ is certainly no mistake, as it is a common feature in similar books, and it has been argued that by turning ‘Being’ into a proper noun, it is thus “reified into existence as an actual entity” (Lee 2007, 96). On “order”, Peterson elaborates followingly:

Order, by contrast, is *explored territory*. That’s the hundreds-of-millions-of-years-old hierarchy of place, position and authority. That’s the structure of society. It’s the structure provided by biology, too— particularly insofar as you are adapted, as you are, to the structure of society. Order is tribe, religion, hearth, home and country. (Peterson 36)

By describing Order as being the “explored territory”, the opposite to the “unexplored territory” that is Chaos (Peterson 35), Peterson further establishes his ideas as being part of the known side of nature, there is nothing uncertain the way societies and hierarchies are set up, it all seems to be the result of Being, something which we all supposedly know and understand deep down and subconsciously, but just might not be aware of it yet, similar to the problems which self-help books are known for often presenting;

We already know all this, but we don’t know it. But we immediately comprehend it when it’s articulated in a manner such as this. Everyone understands order and chaos, world and underworld, when it’s explained using these terms (Peterson 42).

Despite Peterson claiming he would not want his clientele to adopt his ideologies (Peterson 240), here it would seem that he is almost forcing his way of thinking on most everyone. Even if they would not share his views on the structure of existence, those people, according to Peterson, would

only be unaware of the truth, and thus essentially fight against themselves and nature, not so dissimilar as to how “Derrida” is presented as opposing Peterson’s views on the scientific truth.

And so, by presenting his arguments as being essentially timeless, Peterson seems to position his claims to be inherent parts of nature, and that he is merely observing and analysing the structure and ways of the natural world. In such a case, his ideas would be set up in a way that arguing against them would be rather difficult, as one would basically have to then argue against Being itself.

7. Conclusion

Peterson in his book *12 Rules for Life* can be seen utilising common features of the self-help genre to form an overarching narrative that, whilst offering advice and help in the readers personal life, also serves to establish Peterson’s own views as something for the reader to adopt, despite his insistence that he would not want such a thing to happen. However, even when he does not want to actively push his own ideology and tell people what to think, Peterson creates an environment where there seems to only exist his interpretations and bad interpretations, forming a hierarchy of interpretations.

By establishing his version of the one true nature of Being, the one interpretation that everyone knows, regardless of whether they accept it or not, Peterson denies the possibility of counterarguments to be made, as the people presenting them are only acting against the truth that they allegedly should know. By being the one to articulate this truth in this manner, Peterson seems to place himself on the top of the hierarchy as the one whose arguments are based on and supported by the very manner in which Being operates. Ironically, this would appear to be the exact thing Peterson himself is criticising “Derrida” for claiming, that hierarchies are social constructs and generated only to benefit those who create them. Perhaps it was something Peterson himself knew all along as well, whether he was aware of it or not.

Furthermore, this study highlights how rhetoric can be used, in addition to appearing more convincing, as a way to obfuscate the speaker's actual arguments, by utilising indirect ways of discussing their arguments, such as literary excerpts and metaphors, essentially distancing themselves from the points they might be making. This is done to help them avoid being held accountable for the arguments they might be presenting, by providing them with the possibility of appealing to such things as being misinterpreted or claiming that statements were done in jest.

We can also see how the self-help genre is liable to be harnessed, not only to be used to help the readers improve themselves, but to also imprint ideas into them. As a genre, self-help literature provides a good foundation for having a profound impact on readers, as by showing willingness to read such a book, they might be looking for solutions to problems they are encountering. As a consequence, such readers could be more willing to internalise the solutions self-help books provide for the readers' existing problems, but also to problems they were not previously aware of. Thus, it might be useful to treat such books with healthy criticism and question whether the problems presented are truly all that problematic.

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