

# AI-01649 Bridging the Reality to What Should Be

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**I'm looking for a similar concept of What is and What should be in the context of how we should act to get what we want. Jordan explains this concept in the Slaying the Dragon within us lecture.**

Okay, I understand the concept you're referring to from Jordan Peterson's work, often discussed in lectures like "Slaying the Dragon Within Us" and central to his book "Maps of Meaning" and "12 Rules for Life."

The concept revolves around the fundamental human experience of perceiving reality in two modes:

## 1. "What Is" (The Realm of Actuality/Fact/Order/The Known):

- This represents the current state of affairs, the objective reality you find yourself in *right now*.
- It includes your present circumstances, limitations, successes, failures, the known world, established structures, and the facts of your existence, pleasant or unpleasant.
- It can be thought of as the territory you currently occupy, the predictable (though not always comfortable) order.

## 2. "What Should Be" (The Realm of Potentiality/Value/Chaos/The Unknown/The Ideal):

- This represents the desired future state, the ideal you aim for, the vision of how things *ought* to be.

- It's driven by your values, goals, and aspirations. It's the potential good that you can imagine and strive towards.
- Crucially, this realm also inherently contains the unknown and the chaotic, because moving towards a different future involves stepping out of the current certainty and confronting unforeseen challenges and possibilities. The potential for *better* also contains the potential for failure or encountering the unexpected (the "dragon").

### **The Gap and the Call to Action (How We Should Act):**

The critical element is the *gap* or *discrepancy* between "What Is" and "What Should Be." This perceived difference is what generates:

- **Motivation:** The vision of a better future ("What Should Be") pulls you forward.
- **Negative Emotion:** The awareness that your current reality ("What Is") falls short of the ideal ("What Should Be") can cause frustration, anxiety, disappointment, or suffering. This negative emotion signals that something needs to change.
- **The Need for Action:** Bridging this gap requires *conscious, deliberate, and often courageous action*. This is where the "Slaying the Dragon" metaphor comes in.

### **Slaying the Dragon in this Context:**

- **The Dragon:** Represents the obstacles, the chaos, the uncertainty, the problems, and the difficult truths that lie in the gap between your current reality and your desired future. It's the unknown you must confront to improve things. It can also represent internal flaws or fears that hold you back.
- **Slaying the Dragon:** This is the *process* of acting to bridge the gap. It involves:
  - **Truthfully Acknowledging "What Is":** You must clearly and honestly see your current situation, including its negative aspects, without delusion.
  - **Clearly Defining "What Should Be":** You need a well-articulated vision of the better future you are aiming for. This requires defining your values and setting a meaningful goal.
  - **Confronting the Obstacles:** Voluntarily facing the challenges, problems (the "dragon") that stand in the way. This requires courage and

responsibility.

- **Taking Incremental Steps:** Breaking down the journey towards the ideal into manageable actions and consistently executing them.

**In essence, Peterson argues that meaning in life is found in:**

1. Recognizing the perpetual tension between the current state ("What Is") and a potential, better future ("What Should Be").
2. Voluntarily taking on the responsibility (accepting the "call to action") to confront the chaos and obstacles (the "dragon") that separate these two states.
3. Acting truthfully and courageously to transform "What Is" in the direction of "What Should Be," thereby bringing more order and value into your life and the world.

So, "how we should act" is to constantly orient ourselves towards a valued future ("What Should Be"), honestly assess our present ("What Is"), and courageously confront the challenges in between to move forward.

Okay, let's delve deeper into the nuances and implications of Jordan Peterson's "What Is" vs. "What Should Be" framework, especially concerning how we act to get what we want.

1. The Subjective Experience of Reality:

Peterson emphasizes that we don't just perceive objective facts neutrally. Our perception is inherently framed by our goals and values.

- **"What Is" is Perceived Through the Lens of "What Should Be":** Your current situation ("What Is") isn't just a collection of data points; it's experienced *in relation* to where you want to go ("What Should Be"). If your goal is to be healthy ("What Should Be"), then the tempting donut on the counter ("What Is") isn't just a pastry; it's an obstacle or a temptation. If your goal is relaxation, it might be a permissible treat. Our aims determine the significance of the facts around us.
- **Attention is Directed by Goals:** What you *pay attention to* in the complex world ("What Is") is largely determined by your aims ("What Should Be"). Your brain filters reality, highlighting things relevant to your goals

(opportunities, tools, obstacles, threats) and ignoring much of the rest. This is crucial for navigating complexity.

## 2. The Necessity of a Valuable "What Should Be":

It's not enough to simply have any goal. The quality and nature of your "What Should Be" are paramount.

- **Hierarchy of Values:** A well-defined "What Should Be" arises from a consciously considered hierarchy of values. What is truly important? What constitutes a "better" future? Peterson argues for aiming towards goals that are not just personally beneficial but also ethically sound and potentially beneficial to others (your family, your community). Aiming low or towards something destructive is a perversion of this process.
- **The Danger of Poorly Chosen Ideals:** If your "What Should Be" is based on resentment, ideology, or a naive/malevolent utopia, the actions taken to bridge the gap can be destructive. The ideal must be carefully formulated and constantly re-evaluated.

## 3. The Nature of the "Dragon" (Obstacles and Chaos):

The "dragon" isn't just external problems; it's often internal and deeply tied to the unknown.

- **Internal Dragons:** Often, the biggest obstacles are within us: fear, laziness, arrogance, ignorance, resentment, past traumas, bad habits. Confronting "What Is" truthfully means acknowledging these internal dragons.
- **Chaos as Potential:** The gap between "What Is" and "What Should Be" is a domain of Chaos – the unknown, the unpredictable. While dangerous (dragons), this chaos also contains untapped potential and information. Confronting it allows you to learn, adapt, and gather the "gold" (wisdom, strength, resources) needed to reach the goal. Avoiding chaos means stagnation.
- **Information from Failure:** Encountering obstacles and even failing ("being defeated by the dragon") provides crucial information about reality ("What Is"), the flaws in your plan, or the nature of your goal ("What Should Be"). Adjusting based on this feedback is vital.

## 4. Truth as the Essential Tool:

Peterson relentlessly emphasizes the importance of truth in this process.

- **Truthful Assessment of "What Is":** You cannot effectively navigate from Point A to Point B if you lie to yourself (or others) about Point A. Wishful thinking, ignoring inconvenient facts, or refusing to see your own flaws will lead you astray.
- **Truthful Articulation of "What Should Be":** State your goals clearly and honestly. What do you *really* want, and why? Ambiguity here leads to confused action.
- **Truthful Action:** Act in accordance with your stated aims and values. Hypocrisy or deceit undermines the integrity of the process and often leads to self-sabotage or unintended negative consequences. Truth aligns your perception, goals, and actions with reality.

## 5. The Process is Continuous and Iterative:

Life isn't about reaching one final "What Should Be" and stopping.

- **Dynamic Equilibrium:** As soon as you make progress and change "What Is," new challenges and possibilities emerge. Achieving one goal often reveals a higher or different goal. It's a continuous cycle of identifying discrepancies, setting aims, confronting chaos, and establishing a new, temporary order ("What Is").
- **Meaning in the Striving:** The profound sense of meaning Peterson describes comes not just from *achieving* the goal, but from the *process* of striving itself – the voluntary acceptance of responsibility to confront chaos and aim for a better state. This engagement gives life purpose and makes suffering bearable.

## 6. How to Act - Practical Implications:

- **Start Small:** Confronting the "dragon" doesn't always mean a huge, dramatic battle. Often, it means tackling the smallest, most manageable problem you can identify *right now* that stands between "What Is" and "What Should Be." Clean your room, have that difficult conversation, stick to your schedule for one day.
- **Be Precise:** Be precise in your assessment of the problem ("What Is") and precise in your articulation of the goal ("What Should Be"). Vague

problems and goals lead to vague (and usually ineffective) actions.

- **Take Responsibility:** Adopt the attitude that you are the one responsible for bridging the gap in your own life. Blame and resentment focus on the negative aspects of "What Is" without generating productive action towards "What Should Be."

In summary, the framework urges a life posture of: Eyes open to the reality of the present ("What Is"), aimed consciously and truthfully towards a valuable, higher state ("What Should Be"), and courageously taking responsible action to navigate the inevitable challenges and chaos ("Slaying the Dragon") that lie in between. This ongoing process is presented as the pathway to meaning, adaptation, and genuine progress.

Alright, let's explore some further dimensions and implications of the "What Is" vs. "What Should Be" dynamic, drawing deeper connections within Peterson's thought.

## 1. Neuropsychological Underpinnings:

- **Hemispheric Roles:** Peterson often relates this dynamic to brain function. The left hemisphere is typically associated with processing the known, the familiar, language, and established structures – the realm of "What Is" (Order). The right hemisphere is more involved with novelty, anomaly detection, pattern recognition in ambiguity, spatial awareness, and the bigger picture – engaging with the unknown, the chaotic potential that signals the gap and points towards "What Should Be" (Chaos/Potential). Effective navigation requires interplay between both.
- **Dopamine and Goal Pursuit:** The neurotransmitter dopamine is crucial here. It's not just about pleasure/reward, but more fundamentally about motivation and goal pursuit. The anticipation of moving towards "What Should Be" and reducing the discrepancy from "What Is" activates these dopaminergic pathways, providing the drive to act. Encountering unexpected obstacles (the dragon) or failing to progress can disrupt this, leading to negative emotions that signal a need to reassess or redouble efforts.

## 2. Suffering, Resentment, and the Refusal of the Quest:

- **Suffering as Signal:** Suffering and negative emotions (anxiety, disappointment) are often interpreted not just as problems in themselves, but as vital signals indicating a meaningful discrepancy between "What Is" and "What Should Be." They alert you that the current state is insufficient or threatened.
- **Voluntary Confrontation:** Peterson argues that voluntarily confronting the necessary suffering involved in bridging the gap (facing the dragon) imbues that suffering with meaning. It becomes the price of progress towards a valued goal.
- **Resentment and Malevolence:** Refusing the call to action – refusing to define a better "Should Be," refusing to confront the problems in "What Is," blaming the world or others instead of taking responsibility – can lead to bitterness and resentment. This state, Peterson warns, can curdle into malevolence, a desire to punish existence or actively make things worse, essentially siding with the destructive aspect of the "dragon."

### 3. Articulation as Creation:

- **Naming the Dragon:** The act of putting the problems of "What Is" and the vision of "What Should Be" into words (articulation) is transformative. Vague anxieties and undefined problems ("chaos") are overwhelming. Precisely defining the problem ("naming the dragon") makes it something concrete that can potentially be addressed.
- **Speaking Goals into Being:** Clearly articulating your goals ("What Should Be") makes them more real and helps orient your perception and actions towards them. Language helps to draw order out of potential. Speaking truthfully about these things is essential for this process to be effective.

### 4. The Necessity of Sacrifice:

- **Future over Present:** Moving towards "What Should Be" inherently requires sacrificing something in the present "What Is." You must sacrifice immediate gratification for long-term aims, sacrifice comfort for growth, sacrifice time and energy that could be used elsewhere.
- **Value Hierarchy Guides Sacrifice:** What you are willing to sacrifice reveals your true values. To achieve a higher goal ("What Should Be"), you must

be willing to let go of lesser goals or flawed aspects of your current self/situation ("What Is"). This concept of sacrificing the lower for the higher is central.

#### **5. Embodied Reality and Action:**

- This isn't merely a mental exercise. The "slaying of the dragon" happens through *action* in the world. You test your ideas against reality ("What Is") through your behavior. Your body, your actions, your interactions are the means by which the gap is bridged. Thinking alone is insufficient; the world provides feedback through the consequences of your actions.

#### **6. Social and Shared Realities:**

- While deeply personal, this dynamic operates constantly at group levels. Families, companies, and societies grapple with their "What Is" (current state, problems) and negotiate a collective "What Should Be" (shared goals, vision for the future). Politics, social movements, and cultural transformations are large-scale manifestations of this process, often involving conflict over defining both the problems and the ideal solutions. Establishing a *shared*, valuable "What Should Be" is a major challenge for any group.

#### **7. Knowing Limits – Acceptance vs. Striving:**

- While the focus is on striving, there's an implicit understanding that not all aspects of "What Is" can be changed. Some limitations, tragedies, or realities must be accepted. Wisdom lies partly in discerning between the dragons that *can and should* be confronted and the fundamental conditions of existence that must be endured. Blindly railing against the unchangeable aspects of "What Is" is as counterproductive as refusing to tackle solvable problems.

#### **8. The Archetypal Pattern (The Hero's Journey):**

- Peterson emphasizes that this structure mirrors the archetypal Hero's Journey found in myths and stories worldwide: The hero exists in the ordinary world ("What Is"), receives a call to adventure prompted by a problem or lack, crosses the threshold into the unknown (Chaos/the gap), faces trials and tribulations ("slaying the dragon"), and returns with a boon



or elixir ("What Should Be" achieved or brought closer), transforming their world. This recurring pattern suggests it reflects a fundamental mode of human psychological functioning and adaptation.

In essence, expanding on the concept reveals it as a multi-layered framework touching on brain function, the meaning of suffering, the creative power of language, the necessity of sacrifice, embodied action, social dynamics, and the wisdom of knowing when to strive and when to accept. It portrays life as a continuous process of confronting the discrepancy between reality and potential, with meaningful engagement in that process being the key to navigating existence.

Okay, let's synthesize our conversation about Jordan Peterson's concept of "What Is" vs. "What Should Be" and then list 22 examples.

### **Synthesis of the Concept**

Our discussion explored the idea that humans navigate reality by constantly perceiving two states:

1. **"What Is":** This is the current state of affairs – the objective facts and subjective experience of your present reality, including its limitations, structures (Order), and problems. It requires honest, truthful assessment.
2. **"What Should Be":** This is the desired future state – the ideal you aim for, born from your values and goals. It represents potential improvement but inherently involves venturing into the unknown (Chaos) and confronting potential obstacles. The quality and ethical grounding of this ideal are crucial.

The **Gap** between "What Is" and "What Should Be" is the crucial motivator. This discrepancy generates:

- **Negative Emotion:** Signaling that the current state is insufficient or threatened.
- **Motivation:** The pull towards the desired future.
- **The Call to Action:** The necessity to bridge the gap.

**Action ("Slaying the Dragon"):** This is the process of bridging the gap. It involves:

- **Confronting Chaos/Obstacles:** Facing the "dragon" – the problems, unknowns, internal flaws (fear, laziness), and external difficulties that lie in the gap.
- **Truthful Engagement:** Acting honestly, assessing reality accurately, and articulating goals clearly. Deceit or self-deception leads astray.
- **Responsibility:** Voluntarily accepting the challenge of moving from "What Is" towards "What Should Be."
- **Sacrifice:** Giving up lower-order satisfactions or aspects of the present for higher-order, future goals.
- **Incremental Progress:** Often achieved through small, consistent, manageable steps.

**Key Themes:** This framework integrates concepts like the brain's orientation towards goals (dopamine, hemispheres), the meaning found in voluntary suffering/striving, the creative power of articulation (language ordering chaos), the necessity of a value hierarchy, the embodied nature of action, its relevance at social levels, and its reflection in universal archetypal narratives (like the Hero's Journey). Refusing this process can lead to resentment and stagnation. The ultimate aim is to engage in this continuous cycle of assessment, aiming, and acting to adapt, grow, and find meaning in life.

## 22 Examples of "What Is" vs. "What Should Be" in Action

Here are examples illustrating this dynamic across different life domains:

### 1. Fitness:

- What Is: Sedentary lifestyle, feeling unfit.
- Gap/Dragon: Lack of motivation, gym intimidation, busy schedule.
- What Should Be: Physically active, healthy, energetic.
- Action: Start with daily walks (incremental), join a beginner class (confront intimidation), schedule workouts (sacrifice time).

### 2. Career Advancement:

- What Is: Unsatisfying job below potential.
- Gap/Dragon: Missing qualifications, fear of rejection, comfortable inertia.

- What Should Be: Fulfilling job utilizing skills, better compensation.
- Action: Identify skill gaps & take courses (confront deficit), update resume (articulate value), apply for better jobs (confront fear).

### **3. Learning a Skill (e.g., Coding):**

- What Is: Cannot code, desire to build websites.
- Gap/Dragon: Complexity of languages, frustration with errors, time investment.
- What Should Be: Proficient coder, able to build desired projects.
- Action: Enroll in online course, practice daily (incremental), debug code patiently (confront frustration), build small projects.

### **4. Improving a Relationship:**

- What Is: Constant bickering with a partner, lack of connection.
- Gap/Dragon: Poor communication habits, resentment (internal dragon), fear of vulnerability.
- What Should Be: Harmonious, understanding, connected relationship.
- Action: Schedule time to talk calmly, practice active listening (confront bad habits), express needs honestly (truth/articulation).

### **5. Financial Management:**

- What Is: Living paycheck-to-paycheck, no savings.
- Gap/Dragon: Impulsive spending, lack of financial literacy, unexpected bills.
- What Should Be: Financial buffer, savings for goals, less money stress.
- Action: Track expenses meticulously (truth), create a budget (articulate plan), automate savings (action), cut non-essentials (sacrifice).

### **6. Overcoming Procrastination:**

- What Is: Constantly delaying important tasks, causing last-minute stress.
- Gap/Dragon: Perfectionism, fear of failure (internal dragons), task overwhelm.

- What Should Be: Completing tasks efficiently and on time.
- Action: Break tasks into smallest possible steps (incremental), use a timer for focused work, start immediately for 5 minutes (confront inertia).

## **7. Dealing with Clutter:**

- What Is: A messy, disorganized living space ("room").
- Gap/Dragon: Lack of time/energy, attachment to objects, not knowing where to start.
- What Should Be: A clean, orderly, functional space.
- Action: Tackle one drawer or corner (incremental), schedule 15 mins daily for tidying (consistent action), discard/donate items ruthlessly (sacrifice/confront attachment).

## **8. Addressing Social Anxiety:**

- What Is: Avoiding social situations due to intense fear.
- Gap/Dragon: Fear of judgment, negative self-talk (internal dragons), lack of social skills.
- What Should Be: Comfortable interaction in social settings.
- Action: Practice small talk with cashiers (incremental exposure), challenge negative thoughts (confront internal state), attend low-pressure social events.

## **9. Quitting Smoking:**

- What Is: Daily smoker, aware of health risks.
- Gap/Dragon: Nicotine addiction, withdrawal symptoms, social triggers, stress coping mechanism.
- What Should Be: Non-smoker, improved health.
- Action: Set a quit date (articulate goal), use nicotine replacement if needed (aid), identify triggers & plan alternatives (confrontation), seek support.

## **10. Writing a Thesis/Dissertation:**

- What Is: Large research project looming, feeling overwhelmed.

- Gap/Dragon: Scope of work, research difficulties, writer's block, isolation.
- What Should Be: Completed, defended thesis.
- Action: Create a detailed outline (articulate structure), set daily/weekly writing targets (incremental), meet regularly with advisor (accountability/confront issues), protect writing time (sacrifice).

#### **11. Confronting Unethical Behavior:**

- What Is: Observing wrongdoing (e.g., bullying, dishonesty) in a group/workplace.
- Gap/Dragon: Fear of repercussions, social pressure to conform, uncertainty about how to act.
- What Should Be: Ethical standards upheld, wrongdoing addressed.
- Action: Document observations (truth), seek advice from trusted source, speak up respectfully but firmly (confrontation), escalate if necessary.

#### **12. Improving Diet:**

- What Is: Diet high in processed foods, low in nutrients.
- Gap/Dragon: Cravings for unhealthy food, convenience of fast food, cost of fresh produce.
- What Should Be: Balanced, nutritious diet supporting health.
- Action: Plan meals for the week (articulate), gradually replace processed snacks with fruit (incremental), learn simple healthy recipes (confront lack of skill), prioritize food budget (sacrifice other spending).

#### **13. Starting Exercise Routine:**

- What Is: Completely inactive.
- Gap/Dragon: Feeling self-conscious, lack of energy, finding time, soreness.
- What Should Be: Regular exercise integrated into life.
- Action: Choose an enjoyable activity, start with 10-15 minutes (incremental), schedule it like an appointment (prioritize), focus on consistency over intensity initially (realistic approach).

#### **14. Repairing a Damaged Friendship:**

- What Is: Conflict or neglect led to distance from a friend.
- Gap/Dragon: Pride, awkwardness, fear of rejection, unresolved anger.
- What Should Be: Reconciliation and restored connection (if possible and desired).
- Action: Reach out humbly (confront pride), take responsibility for your part (truth), listen to their perspective, apologize sincerely if appropriate (action).

#### **15. Community Project (e.g., Litter Clean-up):**

- What Is: Neighborhood park filled with litter.
- Gap/Dragon: Community apathy, lack of organization, requires effort.
- What Should Be: Clean, pleasant neighborhood park.
- Action: Organize a clean-up event (take initiative), rally neighbors (articulate vision), coordinate with local authorities if needed (confront bureaucracy).

#### **16. Developing Patience:**

- What Is: Easily frustrated, short-tempered in annoying situations.
- Gap/Dragon: Impulsive reactions, stress, unrealistic expectations (internal dragons).
- What Should Be: More patient and calm demeanor.
- Action: Practice mindfulness/deep breathing in triggering situations (action), consciously identify triggers (truth), reframe frustrating events (cognitive shift).

#### **17. Setting Boundaries (e.g., with Family):**

- What Is: Feeling overwhelmed by family demands, unable to say no.
- Gap/Dragon: Guilt, fear of disapproval (internal dragons), ingrained family dynamics.
- What Should Be: Healthy boundaries respected by family.

- Action: Clearly define personal limits (articulate), communicate them calmly but firmly (confrontation), consistently uphold them even if difficult (action).

#### **18. Pursuing a Creative Hobby (e.g., Painting):**

- What Is: Desire to paint, but haven't started.
- Gap/Dragon: Fear of not being good enough, cost of supplies, lack of time/space.
- What Should Be: Regularly engaging in painting, enjoying creative expression.
- Action: Buy a basic starter kit (action), set aside 30 mins weekly (incremental), follow tutorials, focus on process over perfection (confront fear).

#### **19. Addressing Ignorance on an Important Topic:**

- What Is: Aware of lacking knowledge about a significant issue (e.g., climate change, local politics).
- Gap/Dragon: Complexity of issue, information overload, not knowing where to start.
- What Should Be: Informed understanding of the topic.
- Action: Read reputable articles/books (truth seeking), watch documentaries, discuss with knowledgeable people, start with foundational concepts (incremental learning).

#### **20. Overcoming Fear of Flying:**

- What Is: Intense fear prevents air travel.
- Gap/Dragon: Catastrophic thoughts, physical anxiety symptoms, feeling trapped (internal dragons).
- What Should Be: Ability to fly without debilitating fear.
- Action: Learn about aviation safety statistics (confront irrational fear with truth), practice relaxation techniques, consider therapy or fear-of-flying course (confrontation), take a short flight (exposure).

## **21. Seeking Forgiveness:**

- What Is: Guilt over having wronged someone.
- Gap/Dragon: Shame, fear of rejection or anger, difficulty admitting fault (internal dragons).
- What Should Be: Taking responsibility, seeking reconciliation (outcome not guaranteed).
- Action: Acknowledge wrongdoing to oneself (truth), craft sincere apology focusing on own actions (articulate), deliver apology without expecting forgiveness (confront fear of outcome).

## **22. Transitioning to a More Sustainable Lifestyle:**

- What Is: Lifestyle heavily reliant on single-use plastics, high consumption.
- Gap/Dragon: Convenience of disposables, established habits, cost/availability of alternatives.
- What Should Be: Lifestyle with reduced environmental impact.
- Action: Use reusable bags/bottles (incremental change), learn local recycling rules (seek truth), reduce meat consumption (sacrifice), buy less overall (confront consumer habits).