



The Jargon of Authenticity

Theodor W. Adorno

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Theodor Adorno was no stranger to controversy. In 'The Jargon of Authenticity' he gives full expression to his hostility to the language employed by certain existentialist thinkers such as Martin Heidegger.

The Jargon of Authenticity Details

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From Reader Review The Jargon of Authenticity for online ebook

Mike says

In this book, Adorno, who sometimes flirts with jargon of his own or at the very least uses cluttered language, relentlessly attacks and eviscerates the thought of existentialists. From the very first sentence with its use of the cloying term "gathering" ("In the early twenties a number of people active in philosophy, sociology, and theology planned a *gathering*"), Adorno hones in on Heidegger as the primary perpetrator. And from that very first sentence, the acid and bile flows freely and bitingly to the end, often highlighting the empty rhetoric used by Heidegger to puff up "Being" into a whole lot of nothing. Heidegger might counter that that is precisely what he is saying: "Being" or what he terms *Dasein* is nothingness or that its meaning is simply that it is meaningless. For Adorno, this is the height of sophistry, which is intelligence made brutal. Heidegger and other existentialists might champion the simplicity and poetry of people close to the soil such as farmers, but this comes with a heavy and brutal hand. In the end, Adorno's critique boils down to this: Heidegger and those who followed him sought to overcome the 'idle chatter' and stupidity of the 'elite masses' (which Heidegger termed "the They" in *Being and Time*), but the attempt to do so only ended up with producing another version of 'idle chatter': the jargon of authenticity. And the implied second part of the critique: we become mystified and seduced by such 'jargon' at our own peril.

Highly recommended for people intrigued by Heidegger, but also suspicious of him.

Leonard Houx says

This book--and its critique of Heidegger--is brilliant. For just a moment, Heidegger scholars should forget the ad hominem attacks on his politics and sit down and read this book. Why don't they? Are they scared of reading it?

Barnaby Thieme says

I have a special affection for this book, which cogently diagnoses a phenomenon with which I am all-too-familiar, living as I do in Northern California.

Adorno criticizes "jargon," a misuse of language peculiar to the German Existentialists. Jargon is the use of rarefied terminology for the putative purpose of introducing new distinctions into language. It involves using common terms in unusual ways or the abundant creation of neologisms.

The use of jargon is closely tied to the concept of authenticity, crucial to the Existentialists since Heidegger. "Authenticity" refers to accord between a thing's appearance and its essence. The tone of moral approval should not be missed.

Ever an austere critic with an eye for bad faith, Adorno problematizes the concept of authenticity by calling into question how one adjudicates between the authentic and the inauthentic. All too often, Adorno suggests, something is deemed "authentic" if it displays the surface tropes of authenticity that are accepted by a small subculture which regards itself as existing in a privileged position to make moral judgments.

The work of thinking through authenticity is rare, but the process of judging in terms of the category of authenticity is all too common. Such judgments frequently signify little more than a self-aggrandizing belief in one's privileged insight or perspective.

The true function of authenticity's jargon is not to introduce meaningful distinctions, but to broadcast one's allegiance to a privileged, closed group by using its special terms - a group that can be trusted to make judgments in matters of human importance. The ubiquitous showiness of jargon and the vacuous quality of its distinctions are ample testimony to this self-evident function.

The irony of the situation - that the way people use the jargon of authenticity is precisely opposed to its professed values - is not lost on Adorno. Jargon is a facile, shallow, unreflective way of thinking and communicating that frequently shows one to be more concerned with status than actual insight. A true language of authenticity seeks first and foremost to communicate.

Existentialism's jargon has persisted in California culture far more than its ideas. I see the lineage as this: German Existentialism permeates Gestalt psychology, and passes from there into the Human Potential movement through EST and countless Esalen workshops, and now through Landmark and similar organizations. Jargon is part of the air we breath in San Francisco, and I was amazed to find this obscure book, written decades ago, that diagnosed the phenomenon with such precision.

Adam says

The paragon of polemic. Adorno directs his inimitable prose and prowess toward his lifelong bete noir, and the result is philosophy written in fire.

Ian "Marvin" Graye says

My Favourite Martin

You either love Martin Heidegger or you hate him.

Those who love him embrace him with a messianic fervour that excuses otherwise aberrant behaviour (like anti-Semitism and Fascism) in the quest to salvage something of his philosophy (ostensibly of care).

Of those who hate him, I can't think of anybody more concerted than Theodor Adorno.

The Ringleader

Heidegger is just one of the targets of "*The Jargon of Authenticity*". Karl Jaspers also features. However, it quickly becomes apparent that Heidegger is the ringleader around whom the others revolve, and Adorno becomes more and more hostile towards him as the book progresses.

"*Jargon*" is a philosophical analysis of alleged flaws in Heidegger's philosophy as well as a literary analysis of the language used by Heidegger to promote his ideas. Thus, it's concerned with both what Heidegger has to say and how he says it:

"The jargon of authenticity is ideology as language, without any consideration of specific content."

Adorno starts with a story about a number of people active in philosophy, sociology and theology some call *"the Authentic Ones"*.

The story sometimes sounds like a myth, so it's difficult to tell whether it's true or not. However, it describes a dynamic of Heidegger's strategy that is consistent with some of my own personal observations, so I'll give it some credence, at least on a metaphorical level.

Publish or Perish

"Being and Time" originated in a desire to publish a philosophical work, so that Heidegger could obtain an academic position. Hence its ambition and the exaggeration of its claims, and the fact that, having won his position, he never returned to finish the schema of the greater work.

The tone of the work is that there was once an ancient understanding of *"Being"*, which has since been forgotten. Heidegger's role is to reconstruct a remembrance of being and beings past. Thus, his strategy is to place himself in the role of an oracle or a medium between the truth and us. To the extent that he speaks on behalf of the truth, he speaks on behalf of God. Thus, he assumes the hubris of religion to elevate his own authority and credibility.

The word of the preacher is presented *"as if his and God's were one without question"*.

I've always wondered whether Heidegger was more in the business of hermeneutics than actual philosophy. He was trying to find lost meaning, i.e., meaning that had been lost or obscured over time. He was reading the same words that others before him had read, only his interpretation differed.

Putting Themselves in the Right

Adorno makes the same point:

"What 'the Authentic Ones' fought for on a spiritual and intellectual plane, they marked down as their ethos, as if it elevated the inner rank of a person to follow the teaching of higher ideals; as if there was nothing written in the New Testament against the Pharisees."

[It's interesting that one of the connotations of *"Pharisee"* is a hypocritically self-righteous person.]

Adorno mentions that *"people of his nature"* have a tendency called *"putting-themselves-in-the-right"*. Religion tends to the absolute.

The authentics were *"anti-intellectuals"* who embraced a hodge podge of religious and philosophical ideas.

Adorno claims that, in philosophy, Heidegger's use of the word *"authentic"* *"moulded that which the authentics strive for less theoretically; and in some way he won over to his side all those who had some vague reaction to that philosophy"*:

"Through him, denominational demands became dispensable. His book acquired its aura by describing the directions of the dark drives of the intelligentsia before 1933 - directions he described as full of insight, and which he revealed to be solidly coercive. Of course in Heidegger, as in all those who followed his language,

a diminished theological resonance can be heard to this very day. The theological addictions of these years have seeped into the language, far beyond the circle of those who at that time set themselves as the elite."

So, step one in Heidegger's employment strategy was to attach himself and his ideas to an elite who would carry him to his destination (whatever the denominational differences in detail).

Sacred Language

Adorno describes the language of authenticity as "*sacred*":

"The sacred quality of the authentics' talk belongs to the cult of authenticity rather than to the Christian cult, even where - for temporary lack of any other available authority - its language resembles the Christian. Prior to any consideration of content, this language moulds thought. As a consequence, that thought accommodates itself to the goal of subordination even where it aspires to resist that goal. The authority of the absolute is overthrown by absolutised authority."

Now, step two in Heidegger's career path involves the embrace of Fascism:

"Fascism was not simply a conspiracy - although it was that - but it was something that came to life in the course of a powerful social development. Language provides it with a refuge. Within this refuge a smoldering evil expresses itself as though it were salvation."

True and Revealed Language

So Heidegger co-opts and appropriates both religious and political power in order to promote himself and his hermeneutics.

He uses a combination of noble and banal words, "*holds them high and bronzes them in the fascist manner which wisely mixes plebeian with elitist elements:*"

"Elements of empirical language are manipulated in their rigidity, as if they were elements of a true and revealed language. The empirical usability of the sacred ceremonial words makes both the speaker and listener believe in their corporeal presence."

Elsewhere I've suggested that Heidegger was like an ambitious architect who needed to sidle up to the Nazi Party in order to have the vision of his plans realised. His embrace of Fascism (like his embrace of the religious Authentics) was a calculated part of a strategy for self-advancement.

While he appealed to revelation, he was also chronically addicted to authority:

"If one adds to a statement that it is 'valid', then whatever at a given moment holds good, whatever is officially stamped, can be imputed to it as metaphysically authorised. The formula spares people the trouble of thinking about the metaphysics which it has dragged with it, or about the content of what has been stated."

The Suggestion of Theology

Adorno considers that this practice "*secretly warms up irrationalism...in the end stupidity becomes the founder of metaphysics...Theology is tied to the determinations of immanence, which in turn want to claim a larger meaning, by means of their suggestion of theology.*"

"The jargon...marks the adept, in their own opinion, as untrivial and of higher sensibility."

So the appeal to religious and political authority is designed to acquire status and power for the speaker, even if they are merely *"bleating with the crowd"*.

The jargon both joins the speaker with and separates the speaker from the crowd:

"The formal gesture of autonomy replaces the content of autonomy."

The jargon results in a pseudo-individualising:

"It seems to be invented for those who feel that they have been judged by history, or at least that they are failing, but who still strut in front of their peers as if they were an interior elite."

"They let themselves be confirmed in this attitude by a uniform mode of speech, which eagerly welcomes the jargon for purposes of collective narcissism."

"They usurp for themselves the charisma of the leader."

The jargon becomes a symbol of solidarity within the elite:

"One can trust anyone who babbles this jargon; people wear it in their buttonholes, in place of the currently disreputable party badge."

"Even those who are not sheltered are safe as long as they join the chorus."

"...they actually find something like contact, comparable to the feeling in the fraudulent National Socialist Volk-community which led people to believe that all kindred comrades are cared for and none are forgotten: permanent metaphysical subvention."

Adorno believes that the jargon is an ideological distraction from the political action that is needed to overcome the status quo:

"Nothing is done in any serious fashion to alleviate men's suffering and need. Self-righteous humanity, in the midst of a general inhumanity, only intensifies the inhuman state of affairs. This is a state of affairs which necessarily remains hidden to those who suffer here and now. The jargon only doubles the hiding cover."

A Small Divinity

Heidegger leaves Man with *"the stale reminder of self-identity as something which gives distinction, both in regard to being and meaning. This unlosable element, which has no substratum but its own concept, the tautological selfness of the self, is to provide the ground, which the authentics possess and the inauthentics lack. The essence of Dasein, i.e., what is more than its mere existence, is nothing but its selfness: it is itself."*

As Heidegger says:

"Man is he, who he is, precisely in testifying to his own Dasein."

Adorno refers to this as a cult of selfness.

It's possible to construe Heidegger in terms of how the subject once thought of itself, "*a small divinity, as well as a lawgiving authority, sovereign in the consciousness of its own freedom*".

"He has to puff himself up into selfness, in the way the futility of this selfness sets itself up as what is authentic, as Being."

Adorno concludes that Heidegger failed to see that the dignity he was striving for "*contains the form of its decadence within itself*," which becomes apparent when "*intellectuals become accomplices of that power which they don't have and which they should resist*."

Jennifer says

The bitterer Adorno with particular bones to pick against German existentialism. Worth it for several delectable sentences parodying Heidegger's farmers, characterizing mediation, and describing employment in an economy of pumped-up production as disguised unemployment.

Tijana says

Adorno - sušti otrov od ?oveka. Kako je zao, kako je samo zao prema Hajdegeru! Ali sasvim opravdano.

Dakle, za knjigu koja je gola filozofska polemika (i to o filozofskom usmerenju o kome pojma nemam) ovo je beskrajno zabavno štivo. Adorno secira "uzvišeni" a suštinski lažni i isprazni filozofski žargon Hajdegerovih epigona (taj deo je i danas koristan za suo?avanje sa bilo kojim pseudonau?nim i pseudofilozofskim jezikom) i onda se postepeno prebacuje na kritiku samih Hajdegerovih stavova. Ono što je meni kao laiku najlepše jeste uo?ljiva emocija: Adorno se, naime, beskrajno nervira zbog sitnih i krupnih stvari podjednako, toliko da u pojedinim momentima prosto vidim kako je morao da prekine s pisanjem re?enice (zaku?aste! sintakti?ki zeznute! konjuktivne i sa duplim negacijama!) i da popije Ranisan ili makar ?ašu hladne vode.

Što, nažalost, ne zna?i da je ovu knjigu lako ?itati, 5-10 strana dnevno i toliko. Ali vredi truda.

Nated Doherty says

this guy is such a grumpy old man...but he's also very smart. The books pretty specific to a certain period of German history, but the points it makes can be extended beyond, I think. I don't think i understood it fully, but what I got was good.

Michael says

Though largely an attack on Jaspers, this book is really an outright assault on existential decisionism and its emotive justifications from Jaspers to Heidegger. Adorno is ruthless in exposing the poverty of thought of

the existential movement and its a-historicism which results in a rootlessness that can in theory (as well as in fact) lead to ethical and political catastrophe.

Jude Nonesuch says

Need to commit to doing these reviews when I actually finish reading the book in question. Anyway, this is well interesting – I found it pretty hard going the first time I started it, but like a few other books (Ulysses, for example) I felt I was “getting it” as I went along much more once I started it a second time – I think reading the introduction certainly helped! At least you then know generally what to expect as the general topic.

So, that’s probably the first thing to address in the review. Like, on the one hand, it’s pretty niche, and pretty back-dated: this weighty language of self-actualisation and relations-between-men that served as an attempted rehabilitation of ‘German-ness’ post-war, which, if you weren’t or never had been a German post-war, you’d probably have little reason to care about.. But: two things come from this. Firstly, you easily get the idea of the kind of thing being talked about, of words emptied of their relationship to other words and standing in for themselves only, and all the extrapolations from this and the relation to bureaucracy and inhumanity all work and feel important and relevant beyond the narrow specific setting; that is, the critique of language has quite a solid theoretical basis that could be redeployed in other similar circumstances; and secondly, ultimately the book is really aimed at dismantling the philosophy of Heidegger, and this ‘jargon of authenticity’ is just the road into the topic, the sort of lie-Of-the-land where the critique takes place; & so, if you know that’s what you’re aiming at (from, for example, having read the introduction), it kind of motivates you to take this problem of post-war Germanic jargon seriously and to follow where it’s leading.

So, that’s the second interesting thing about this book: like it is very consciously in a purely “essayistic” way: there are no chapters, no sections; no headings, no waypoints; the writing follows its own thought to wherever it leads itself (or, at least, is written so as to seem as though that is what’s going on). So this I think is clearly a part of Adorno’s idea of “immanent critique”, and is his way of avoiding ‘systematic’ theories or the impulse to systematise. Yet, on the other hand, there is very much a “plan” (if not a “structure”) to the essay and this was clearly very deeply considered; the way it proceeds from addressing in turn various words from the jargon, onto Dasein and all the Heidegger stuff, culminating in the role of death in his philosophy (– more on which later!). That is, just because the paragraphs don’t have titles naming their topic, it doesn’t mean that you don’t get a similar effect when reading in any case: usually once you’re a couple of words into a paragraph you sense “ah, the topic has shifted to —this—”. I suppose the difference is that there’s no claim to have exhaustively surveyed every category and sub-category – that ‘lie-of-the-land’ analogy does quite well here again – the essay is simply a path that’s taken, there’s no claim to have mapped out the entire territory. Still from a reader experience point-of-view a heading or two would help you keep track of where you’ve got to — the absence of any such can seem a little self-conscious, is what I mean.

Also something that might help in terms of the first thing I addressed in this review — on about page 100 there’s, finally, an actual (satirical) example of ‘the jargon’: the “Gestanzte Festansprache” (which, I would translate on the lines of the title of the Ira Gershwin collection: “Lyrics on Several Occasions” [more literally: “Template Event-Speech”]), which you might benefit from reading at the beginning rather than when the section on the actual jargon itself closes and the focus turns to Heidegger! What I mean is, how deliberately this is placed where it is shows up the self-consciousness of the planning – in fact is perhaps or presumably intended to do just that! I mean overall I think it’s a cool thing.

So the language-critique stuff is super-interesting, and really makes me wonder how much further this has been taken – sure I’m far from widely read in this area but I’m not really aware of people referring back to this – like, the idea of the “constellation” of a word sounds very much like post-structuralism to me, but I’ve never heard of people linking Adorno and post-structuralism? To what extent has this been done? The other language-critique thing which comes to mind but which I know even less about is “late Wittgenstein” — has anyone done a ‘for Dummies’ survey of the commonalities/differences between these three approaches?

On the other hand a lot of the Heidegger stuff, being that kind of ‘refute in its own terms’ kind of thing, is quite heavy and situated in arcane points-of-logic and so on so I felt somewhat like I was skimming — not least as I have no time for taking Heidegger seriously enough to really ‘grip’ any of the weighty ideas or wev. Still the overall point comes across: the claim of Dasein as a concept that precedes conceptualisation, or thereabouts. It (— in a way that reminded me of Foucault’s “History of Sexuality vol. 1”) really starts to pick up in the last 25 pages or so, though, especially once death comes into it. This (again happening after one of those obvious ‘chapter breaks’) is where he really starts lacing into Heidegger and his philosophy and it really carries the interest along; a lot of the “argument” can still remain pretty obscure mind..

One last thing to mention is how it would appear the copy-editor gave up reading after 100 pages or so.. just typos thrown in here and there throughout the last third of the book.

Anyway overall, quite cool, a bit hard work, not my most fun book but a good one nonetheless.

Scribe says

Not really sure how to rate this one, so going down the middle. I guess I glossed over the blurb and wasn’t expecting it be an out-and-out critique/criticism of Heidegger’s Existentialism, so obviously I’m not the target reader.

That said, the critique was pretty fascinating in places, especially around the beginning (e.g. on the role of jargon devoid of reality) and toward the end (e.g. the paradox of defining oneself as existing alongside “death”). It seems like these key points are still (more) relevant today as we continue to struggle with a more mediated, structured society still bound by fairly modern-industrial paradigms.

But I drifted off in the middle - the book felt more like a ranting blogpost by a very clever, but very grumpy old man at times. Short enough to put up with, but a little too convoluted and negative to really hold my interest.

Give this one a go if you’re into this kind of thing, I think :)

Rambling Reader says

I can't score this properly without reading more German philosophy.

3 stars

Thea says

It sounds obnoxious, but this book really changed my life. This guy's books are usually impossible to read without three reading guides and a scholar to explain to you what's going on - but this book is actually quite easy to understand, and even helped me to understand his overall philosophy and what critical theory actually is.

It's basic idea is that political economy affects how we feel - and that capitalism gives people the blues. Really really profound blues. That idea really blew my socks off because it's a pretty touchy feely theory in a field (i.e. political philosophy) that usually tries to leach feelings out of everything, and because I've found it to be so true in my own life.

And now as I writer, what I write about is how the political culture we live in affects how we love each other. So really I'm just a copy-cat.

Max says

Adorno's three pages on Rilke would be worth reading the book even without its devastating account of bureaucratic authenticity and its serious reckoning with Heidegger, and are probably the last thing anyone need ever say about Rilke.

Abdullah Ba?aran says

I have no idea about whether Adorno could have changed his attitude or not if he had read the interview which was published in Der Spiegel after Heidegger's death. However, i am able to specify that Adorno had critisized Heidegger and the other existansialists very well. Even though he had some redundant worries, we can see easily this attitude to Holocaust's dull.

In addition, I am glad because Kaan H. Ökten, the translator of "Being and Time" in Turkish, recommends this book in his brand-new book, named "Heidegger'e Giri? (Introduction to Heidegger)".

The book must be read for to recognize the conflict between Heidegger's dilemmas and Adorno's very strong critiques.
