

THE JARGON OF AUTHENTICITY BY THEODOR W. ADORNO



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More valuable than ever before

By Duane M. Johnson

This book is Theodor Adorno's critique of the 'de-conceptualizing conceptualism' that was characteristic of Heideggerian philosophy in particular and of disciplines influenced by existentialism in general. While much of this book's critical content goes back to the pre-World War Two era, what the author has to say about the origins and operation of irrationalizing 'subjectivism' and the ideological habits which support it, is in our own time even more applicable than ever before.

At the book's core is the contention that, in tandem with the general philosophical retreat away from rationalism triggered by late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century criticisms (Bergson, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Husserl, etc.) of idealist metaphysics and its contingent aspirations to truth, there was a subjectivizing impulse that, in Adorno's view, was content to elevate proximally emotional states of mind and pre-rational impressions to the status of philosophical, or, more exactly, ontological absolutes. Thus, instead of now arising from what some judged to be rationalism's stillborn questing for truth (as it no longer had any objective foundations), these new categories formed a compensatory subjectivizing 'jargon' ('compensatory' in the sense that the still reigning bourgeois rationalism needed supplemental amounts of irrationalism in order to keep functioning).

Adorno describes how words like "existential", "in the decision", "commission", "appeal", "encounter", "genuine dialogue", "statement", "concern", and the signature "authentic" all coalesced to denote what, in his opinion, constituted the subjectively immediate but irrationally 'authentic' as opposed to what was now regarded as the rationally suspect. He condemns the spread of such language as a specious linguistic game that compromises critical thought's real task and duty, premised as the jargon was, in Adorno's own pithy estimation, on "the fact that the words of the jargon sound as if they said something higher than what they mean...the terms of the jargon of authenticity are...words that are sacred without sacred content" (p. 9).

One of the most fascinating things about this book is that its criticisms bear witness to a time when such language had not yet given itself "over to either the market, to balderdash, or to the predominating vulgarity" (p. xxi) or had become the "stenciled speech" (p.89) that we all now take completely for granted. Can you imagine a time when leaders, writers, and intellectuals did not routinely ornament their statements with the self-referential cant of the 'ideology of the inner sublime', namely, that gratingly psychologizing frame of reference for all things in which feelings, emotions, inner dispositions, secret impulses, repressed desires, and the 'true me' are given portentous utterance whether it is in the least bit illuminating or not?

Adorno traces the emergence of this 'jargon of authenticity' from its initial appearances among some of the prevalent movements, trends, and conventions that came to characterize philosophy, theology, and sociology in the first half of the twentieth century; and he alerts us to how easily such discourse then spread to the 'culture industry' and was taken up by advertising in general. When Adorno prepared the book for its original publication in 1964, he was well aware of how much the jargon had come to permeate every space of our culture. Suffice it to say that we have long since reached the point where few things are expressed without such language being employed.

Adorno's critique is a rigorously philosophical one--executed in accordance with the critical categories of the Frankfurt School and his own daring Neo-Marxist application of them. I strongly recommend this formidably written book to any serious student of modern thought and our contemporary world of ideas: what Adorno has to say in these pages about the ideological uses of language--though dated in some passages--is even more relevant today given that, regardless of wherever we turn, there is no escape from "the unending mumble of the liturgy of inwardness" (p. 70).

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Supplement to the Critique

By Steiner

This small text is something of a companion piece to the rather large critique of Heidegger in *Negative Dialectics*. Here, Adorno lambasts Heidegger primarily for his incessant archaism--i.e., the attempt to hear the whispers of being by pouring over the etymologies of his languages. Additionally, there are further criticisms regarding Heidegger's attempt to transform the concreteness of empirical alienation and domination by capitalism into transcendental concepts. In particular, the jargon of "thrownness" is regarded as a static, empty abstraction, wholly divorced from the socio-historical conditions that reify the subjectivity. While don't necessarily go as far with Adorno in identifying Heidegger's language with the language of advertising (for its deceitfulness), I do agree that the jargon developed into an authoritarian armor of sorts, and this is evident in the way contemporary Heidegger scholars endlessly debate the letter of Heidegger as though *Being and Time* were a holy document. Fundamental ontology never was entirely concerned with politics, and I think this becomes more evident in the late Heidegger. Nevertheless, and despite this critique, I think Adorno and Heidegger were animated by many shared problems, not the least of which, was the question of the crisis of modernity.

3 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

not what I thought it was, but pleasantly surprised

By Allison N. Schumacher

I assumed this book would have more of a universal message on authenticity, but it is well focused on theology, sociology and psychology. If you are already familiar with Kierkegaard and Heidegger, this is a good book for you.

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