ADORNO'S JARGON OF AUTHENTICITY:

A COMMENTARY

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Introduction

Today, I would like to begin a project whose like I have never attempted before. Over the next several months, I will provide a detailed commentary on a short book that Theodor Adorno published in 1964, in the run-up to *Negative Dialectics*. That book, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, has never attracted much interest, in German or in English. It's not that readers make it through the book and then decide they don't like it. They mostly don't read it. Or they take it up and soon set it down again, thirty pages into the thing and still unsure what Adorno is up to. This is entirely understandable. The book is a roundhouse attack on a certain intellectual scene as it took shape in Germany in the 1950s and early '60s, the milieu of a right-leaning existentialism whose presiding gurus were Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers. But Adorno barely even uses the word "existentialism," which the Sartreans had come by that point to monopolize, and he is not especially interested in his opponents' philosophical positions. He is interested, rather, in how existentialism had, by 1964, degenerated into set of commonplaces, and he expects the reader to be able to recognize this sub-philosophical boilerplate. But then we are emphatically not in a position to recognize that boilerplate. History (and a foreign language) have drawn a curtain over Adorno's efforts.

Worse, the few intellectual historians who have bothered to comment on *The Jargon of Authenticity* have concluded that it is minor Adorno—or even unworthy of him. They miss the dialectical intricacy of his more famous engagements with Heidegger — the ones that take Heidegger seriously as a philosopher and offer to meet him on his own ground. By the standards of *Negative Dialectics* (or of the now published lectures on *Ontology and Dialectics*), *The Jargon* can seem merely polemical or perhaps "sociological," for which read "Marxist." But then this, of course, is precisely the interest of the volume. Adorno is tracking the fate of a philosophy when it gets picked up by people who aren't exactly philosophers, and he has changed his grip accordingly. If you want to

figure out the work that a philosophy does—in the world and not just at the seminar table—it won't be enough to read the masters. You will have to take seriously the B-listers and garbled enthusiasts, the people who seize on a philosophy's key terms and strip them of their native subtlety. This is worth our attention for at least two reasons: First, Adorno here expands his at least somewhat well-known critique of Heidegger to many other figures, including a few intellectuals (like Buber) with whom we might have expected him to have some sympathy. Heidegger, after all, makes things easy for the critical theorist, who can always just cry "Nazi!" and claim victory. But what do we say about the *Existenzphilosophen* who weren't fascists, who opposed the Nazis or were almost killed by them? Second, one suspects that all successful philosophies suffer the fate that Adorno traces here; that they are all made to yield a jargon, a bundle of memes and buzzwords. One suspects, indeed, that the list of such philosophies would include critical theory itself, with or without the capital K. And we might well be grateful for Adorno's help in thinking about this problem. Philosophy cannot realize itself unless it is taken up as a project, and by many readers at once. But if a philosophy is widely taught, the most likely effect, at least in the middle term, is that it will become the common property of the educated classes, an acquired idiom for a society's more successful members to justify their very advantages. Existentialism, says Adorno, outs itself as the "snooty crowing of come-down gentlemen." To which we must add: Speaking the lingo of critical theory is by now mostly just evidence that you went to a good school.

Some practicalities: Anyone wanting to read along could grab a copy of the 1973 *Jargon of Authenticity*, translated by Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will. We should be grateful to anyone who completed an Adorno translation fifty years ago, without the benefit of the extensive Frankfurt apparatus now available in English. But the translation is as error-prone as one would expect of such a pioneering effort, and I will often amend it without explanation.

Also: I have a companion in this project, Justin Piccininni of Williams College, who first suggested that *The Jargon* deserved a closer look. There is very little in the book that I would understand if it weren't for conversations with him.

1.

Adorno starts with an anecdote. This already marks out *The Jargon of Authenticity* as a bit unusual, since anecdote is not Adorno's usual way. He doesn't begin the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by telling you about the time that he and Horkheimer hitchhiked to Amsterdam. Even *Minima Moralia*, which one might reasonably regard as Theodor Adorno's *Diary of America*, hides its origins in lived experience behind a veneer of abstract and depersonalized utterance: *Notes from the Damaged Life*, not *Notes from* My *Damaged Life*. So we shouldn't take this first page for granted. Let's listen to Adorno tell a story.

> **In the early 1920s, a number of people active in philosophy, sociology and theology were planning a gathering. Most of them had switched from one denomination to another; what they had in common was their emphasis on newly acquired religion, and not the religion itself. They were all dissatisfied with the idealism that still dominated [German] universities at the time. Philosophy moved them to choose, out of freedom and autonomy, what has been known since at least Kierkegaard as positive theology.**

A reader might pause at this point to wonder who exactly Adorno has in mind here. *The Jargon* is Adorno's most polemical book, and surely we would learn something if we could put names to its targets. What he says here, on the opening page, is going to frame everything that comes after. Aren't we being asked to see these figures as representative, and wouldn't Adorno's points be easier to follow if we knew who they were?

Or you might just be curious: Who had sufficiently raised Adorno's ire that he was still going on about it some forty years later?

That question has an answer. We *do* know who is referring to, though *The Jargon* will let them remain anonymous. A few years ago, a philosopher in Germany — it turns out that scholars are good for something — discovered an unpublished notebook of Adorno's in the Walter Benjamin archive in Berlin, and in that notebook Adorno tells the story again—and this time with identifying marks. So the people he has in mind were a group of German intellectuals who came together after World War I to remake religion in a broadly Nietzschean spirit—to devise versions of Christianity and Judaism that could withstand Nietzschean attack—and to explain, further, how this modernist religion, a religion without metaphysics, could push Europe to remake itself, apocalyptically, after Passchendaele and the Somme. The key name here is Eugen Rosenstock, though the figure that a contemporary English-speaker is most likely to know is not Rosenstock, but Franz Rosenzweig—not Rose-tree, but Rose-branch, who was the former's closest collaborator. I should point out: Even in the notebook, Adorno doesn't write out their names; he just calls them "the Patmos people"—Patmos being the name of the publishing house that the Rosenstock circle founded in order to spread their hopes for new life in the post-Wilhelminian Pentecost.

The question now is whether filling in these names will help us understand why Adorno doesn't like them. Will it make the book in front of us any easier to read? And the answer to this is less clear than one might have hoped. If anything, finding out about Rosenstock and Rosenzweig can make Adorno's animosity harder to understand.

Let's say we start scanning these first four sentences for clues. Adorno tells us, for one, that Rosenstock and his crew had come out against the German idealists—that they had rejected the legacy of Kant and Hegel. But it is hard to see Adorno attacking them on those grounds alone. *The Jargon of Authenticity* was first conceived as a series of chapters in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* and was, in fact, included in that book's first edition, as an appendix. And that's the book where Adorno remarks that "philosophical system is the belly turned mind, just as rage is the defining mark of idealism in all its forms." Suffice

it to sat that Adorno is unlikely to call out a post-Nietzschean philosopher for being insufficiently respectful to Kant.

But then there are, of course, many different ways of opposing idealism. The next step, then, would be to try to at least catch the drift of R&R's particular anti-idealism—to try to put some substance to their discontent with the philosophical heritage. Here it will help to know about three positions that Rosenstock and Rosenzweig shared—positions that add up to a kind of anti-philosophy.

#1) Philosophers have typically erred by convincing us that we can think abstractly, outside of space and time. This is little better than a trick, a writerly illusion that falsifies the most basic coordinates of human experience and the human situation. One of the few things that we can say about human beings in general is that they have to be somewhere and that they exist in time. The task of a post-Nietzschean counter-philosophy —what Rosenzweig called the New Thinking—will be to clarify what is going on when I try to apprehend the world at some particular moment, from some particular place, and to do this is in a way that resists transcendence's every lure. Hegel, in the introduction to his smaller Logic, describes what it's like to start studying philosophy: "The mind, denied the use of its familiar ideas, feels the ground where it once stood firm and at home taken away from beneath it." And that, of course, is a vision of displacement and dispossession. Philosophy will take away your land; will put you on the run; will leave you homeless. Every twenty-year-old who picks up Fichte undergoes their own personal Nakba. The easiest way to understand what Rosenstock and Rosenzweig were up to, then, is simply to notice that they wanted to re-do philosophy without Hegel's cruel threat. It doesn't matter where you are right now, as you are reading these words. You are reading them in some particular location, and there's a good chance that you are there by choice, because you want to be. The New Thinking is content with your remaining a terrestrial being, not that you could be otherwise. You can think carefully and still stay where you are. You don't need to levitate, and you don't need to leave.

#2: A thinking that has stopped trying to abstract from time and space will have no choice but to reconstruct the primal varieties of religious experience (or else shut up about religion altogether). The idea here is that religion should be kept away from philosophy, set free from doctrine and system and argued-out theology. Once we have agreed that we are terrestrial creatures—and that we must not delude ourselves into thinking otherwise—then the question becomes whether we can discover the stuff of religion within the texture of ordinary, earth-bound experience. If we attended to experience in a more or less phenomenological fashion, could we find the raw materials of religion, non-transcendentally and before its capture by philosophy? One of the more curious consequences of that question is that it asks us to face, historically, in two directions at once. In one sense, it resembles nothing so much as the Protestant Reformation, which wanted to go back behind the whole history of the Christian church, and especially behind the tradition of Christian (Catholic) philosophy, in order to revive—to let loose upon the world again—the original spirit of Christianity (or pre-rabbinical Judaism), to turn an ossified Church back into the Jesus movement (or an archaic Israel). It can seem as though Rosenstock and Rosenzweig are proposing a radicalized version of that project, whose gambit is to get us back behind the whole history of philosophy. That's the bit they got from Nietzsche and will share with Heidegger. At the same time, though, their point is that what we call religion is a permanent feature of human experience, to be accessed at any time. We might need to scrape away layers of philosophical accretion in order to do that, but we don't need, each of us, to make a preposterous transhistorical leap to early antiquity.

#3: One of the best ways to retrieve the sources of religious experience—away from the latter's codification in theology—is to pay close attention to ordinary language. The way we speak, the way we use language, has a way of pointing to those things that we ordinarily call "religion." Examples will help: So maybe you would grant that a few people feel a religious calling, but you know equally that most people don't. Saul, you have read, was called on the Road to Damascus, but most

of us don't expect to be transformed by a blinding light while traveling to Dallas for work. You know that priests sometimes say they felt a calling, but it seems pretty clear that cashiers and construction workers don't. To this Rosenstock would respond that we have all, in fact, had the experience of being called — that we are called all the time and over and over again: "Hey, Remy!" "Oh, Clara, am I glad to see you!" "Yo, Julian! What's good?" Others address us, and our orientation in the world briefly shifts. Someone speaks my name, and I am pried open. What's more, the vocative is primary; all the other things we do with language happen after a relationship has been established via a calling. We are inclined to think otherwise only because philosophers and grammar books tend to take the indicative as the paradigmatic instance of language, but it's not. Second case in point: We create in language—we build our cultures and out customs and our institutions and our lifeworlds; we make things happen with utterance—and every such speech act follows the example of "Let there be light." Religion, in general, has thus tended to be more clear-eyed about the powers of language, less deceived than philosophy by the tyranny of the declarative sentence, the syllogism, the doctrine of predication. Socrates, God help us, is a man.

The problem, I think, is the following: We know that Adorno was friendly with intellectuals who were to varying degrees religious. It is, after all, hard to imagine a close reader of Walter Benjamin rejecting these three positions out of hand. Benjamin, indeed, published in the house journal of the New Thinkers, Die Kreatur; he published alongside the very thinkers that Adorno is going after here. And for a number of years, Adorno served as informal assistant to the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who must rank high on any list of T.W.A.'s consistently remarkable mentors. (Adorno on Tillich: Without him, "it is very questionable whether I would be able to speak to you today; it is even questionable whether I would have survived.") Adorno was certainly capable of taking the fight to the religious Right. He wrote an entire book, in English, about a former boxer turned radio evangelist—an anti-Semite and red-baiter who first took to the airwaves to combat the malign influence upon America of Upton Sinclair. But Rosenstock and Rosenzweig were no Martin Luther Thomas. The easiest way to figure out

what they expected from religion will be to let their modern students summarize their program.

Here's Wayne Cristaudo on Rosenstock: He held that "today so many, including so-called Christians, failed to fathom the claims about Jesus' divinity, which had to do with the overpowering of death, not in any mystical or Pythagorean manner of the continuity of the individual soul in a netherworld, but in the triumph over death and deadly forces through forming a body across time, the Church. For Rosenstock-Huessy, Jesus was proof that Caesar and Pharaoh and 'great men' were not gods and Jesus' divinization meant that after him no one else would be God, that our redemption was universal and mutual. Jesus' taking on the role of the crucified was to show us that we crucify God when we do evil to each other, and that we fail to achieve the maximum of our powers (our own divinity) in our failure to obey the law of love, and that to obey the commandment of love means being continually prepared to leave abodes ruled by death and to die into new forms of love and fellowship."Here's Cristaudo again: Rosenstock "never doubted that his desire to create new forms of community, to change the education system by bringing students and workers together, and to restructure the workplace, were as much part of one calling and project as his studies on Egypt, Greece, Christianity, the tribes, the nations, the law, and every other topic he addressed in his writings. Like Rosenzweig, he saw scholarship as a contribution to life. He held that ideas are nothing without incarnation and that everything he did was all part of one life lived in devotion, service, and prayer."

The word you might wish to circle is "redemption"—as in: "Redemption designates that future point of unity…"—since any long-time reader of Adorno will know that it's a word that he uses a lot: (From the final pages of Minima Moralia: "The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption.") At some point, Adorno and Horkheimer decided in tandem that Stalinism had made it impossible to keep using the old Marxist vocabulary. This is a book about jargon, right?—and Marx's was

the jargon that they were drawn to and sometimes spoke, until they dropped it, famously scrubbing the first edition of the Dialectic of Enlightenment to make it sound less like Chicago's Voice of Labor: "exploitation" became "enslavement" (or "injustice" or "subjugation"); "capitalism" became "the economic system"; "class society" became "society"; and so on. The question is, then: What did Adorno write instead of the words "socialism" and "communism"? And my point here is that he mostly made do with variants of "redemption" and "reconciliation," to the point where the literature on Adorno is crowded with these terms: "the redeemed future," "the redeemed world," "reconciled humanity," "a reconciled society." Adorno himself refers in Minima Moralia to those "tidings of redemption whose purest notes are heard in the Sermon on the Mount." I could also put the matter this way: In the early 1940s, Eugen Rosenstock, by then in his New England exile, took over a recently vacated workers' camp in Vermont. His plan was to extend the New Deal's jobs program to college students, on the theory that the "overprivileged"—his term—needed to learn to work for the community every bit as much as the destitute and the displaced. And that project—it was called Camp William James—is sometimes cited as the most direct precursor to the Peace Corps, which was apparently proposed to the Kennedy administration by one of its alumni.

That's the puzzle, in other words: Adorno does not begin The Jargon of Authenticity by going after some dingbat Ariosophist or the so-called German Christians—those were the people who thought the Romans had nailed Jesus to a swastika. He begins by going after the Christian intellectual who is said to have inspired the Peace Corps. And one wishes to know why.

2.

So we are sent back to the passage already quoted, to scan it again for clues:

> **In the early 1920s, a number of people active in philosophy, sociology and theology were planning a gathering. Most of them had switched from one**

> **denomination to another; what they had in common was their emphasis on newly acquired religion, and not the religion itself. They were all dissatisfied with the idealism that still dominated [German] universities at the time. Philosophy moved them to choose, out of freedom and autonomy, what has been known since at least Kierkegaard as positive theology.**

What jumps out now is that the men in question were all converts (not strictly true of the Patmos Circle, but perhaps true of the particular conference that Adorno is describing — who knows)? So maybe that's the problem. But then *why* would that be a problem? You could begin by asking yourself: Do you typically have a beef with people who leave their religion for another — or who get God for the first time? Adorno also remarks that they had all converted in a Kierkegaardian spirit, and this might seem significant. Adorno, we know, was sufficiently interested in Kierkegaard to have written his PhD dissertation about him. So maybe that's the problem — not conversion as such, just the Danish kind. Maybe that's how we can tell the difference between the religious thinkers that Adorno warmed to and the ones he had no patience for. Rosenstock and Rosenzweig were existentialists; Walter Benjamin was not. But here, too, a complication opens up. Key figures in the Patmos circle were converts in the ordinary sense: Rosenstock was born into a secular Jewish family, but converted to Christianity as a teenager. The anti-fascist Protestant minister Hans Ehrenberg likewise converted from Judaism in his 20s. His cousin Rudolf Ehrenberg wasn't exactly a convert, but was baptized Lutheran by his assimilated Jewish father, which is close. (Let's poke around the family tree: Both Ehrenbergs were cousins of Franz Rosenzweig's. And Rudolf's niece was Olivia Newton-John's mother. And Hans's nephew was the father of the British comedian who created *Blackadder*.)

The problem is that if we're talking about Kierkegaard, then conversion might not have its ordinary meaning. I'll see if I can't put across a few core Kierkegaardian positions, and I'll emphasize the ones that mattered most to the existentialists. We can begin with the idea that you have to choose yourself. Society is the domain of conformity and routine and a muddled, huddling thoughtlessness. Chances are that on any given day,

you just do what everybody else is doing. You do the expected thing. Nobody living under these circumstances, which is of course most people, is even remotely an individual. Your task, then, is to *become* an individual, and Kierkegaard has some strong beliefs about how you might go about this. The first thing to know is that philosophy won't help. Philosophy, after all, is keyed to the universal; it wants to be able to make claims that will hold true for all people at all times — and that's not a promising path for anyone seeking to individuate. Philosophy is just a more recondite way of becoming no particular person. The only way to achieve individuality is to be committed to something, to be fully dedicated to something outside yourself — though you can already tell from what I've just written that your commitment won't proceed from philosophy and to that extent won't be rationally defensible. You won't be able to give compelling reasons for holding the particular commitment that you do — reasons that other intelligent people would have to grant are cogent.

Now Kierkegaard's thinking on this matter is impeccably Protestant — and not just generically evangelical, but specifically Anabaptist, though that's one of those explanations that probably needs explaining in turn. Anabaptism is the name for the Protestant sects who oppose infant baptism — who regard it as ungodly, in other words, to baptize babies, to induct newborns into a church without their consent and with no inkling of their actual standing with God. Baptism, on this view, is meant to follow on from a conversion experience, of a kind that a young child is unlikely to have and as a seal of one's new openness to God — and as a cleansing, obviously, and a second birth. Ana- is a Greek prefix meaning "again" and refers to the early stages of the movement, when adult believers would have had to rinse away the false and infantile sprinklings of their native churches by getting baptized anew. The German word for Anabaptist means "re-dunker" or "double dipper."

The thing to know about Kierkegaard, then, is that he was profoundly hostile to what we might call "cultural Christianity" — a society in which most people are Christian by default, because they were raised that way. (The last book he saw through to publication was his *Attack Upon Christendom*.) Conversion in the specifically Kierkegaardian sense might

therefore involve leaving one church for another, but it needn't. It might just mean committing with one's whole being to the institution of which was already nominally a member. In this framework, conversion, commitment, and the second baptism group tightly together. Franz Rosenzweig thus belongs in Rosenstock's company even though he didn't convert to Christianity, precisely because he very nearly converted before deciding not to: "Also bleibe ich Jude. … It looks like I'm staying a Jew," but for real this time — which is the sound of Judaism remaking itself on the model of Baptistry, a Judaism for born-agains.

Adorno, in fact, points out one of the more distinctive features of conversion — that it is *chosen* religion, religion practiced freely and by autonomous people. But then that can hardly be the problem. Surely freedom and autonomy are the very best things about the Kierkegaardian program. Let's stick with the Anabaptists. The Amish famously tolerate among their teenagers all manner of ungodly behavior: wearing jewelry, signing up for Instagram, playing X-Box off of farmhouse generators, binge-watching *Fast and Furious* movies, gathering at the end of country roads to listen to hip-hop and drink Miller Lite. There is a general understanding, in other words, that a sixteen-year-old Amish person is not yet genuinely Amish and that the ordinary rules of Amish society therefore don't apply to them. What's at stake in this is perhaps best phrased like so: Being Amish is not an ethnicity. Americans at large tend to ethnicize the Amish, because Americans ethnicize everybody. The Amish even ethnicize their non-Amish neighbors and anyone who, like, drives a car, who are known collectively as "the English." But the Amish do not ethnicize themselves. They are not "the Pennsylvania Dutch." Young German-speakers in Lancaster County are only in some very qualified sense Amish, and their teenaged brothers and sisters are even less Amish than that, in a visible state of suspension, with the choice in front of them whether to be Amish or not. The creed of these horse-and-buggy traditionalists, then, is in core respects anti-traditional, premised on the conviction that custom is no-one's fate, that heritage has claimed no-one in advance; and this goes back to a few of the key tenets of all sectarian Protestantism: that no-one can make you believe anything, that

no-one should be forced into a church against their will or conscience. Milton called this the promise of "Christian freedom.

The other point to make here is that critical theorists and their cousins have often written in favor of conversion. It is thus hardly obvious that a radical philosopher would have to look askance at the experience of re-birth. Three examples will clinch the case.

1) The core Sartrean position begins with the idea (again) that you have to choose yourself. You have to choose yourself; *and* you have to know that you have chosen yourself, you have to keep that idea in front of you; *and* you have to be ready to keep choosing yourself ongoingly; *and* you have to grant others all possible latitude to choose themselves. Conversion actually plays two distinct roles in this scheme: First, Sartre thought of *Being and Nothingness* — most of it anyway — as a close description of what it was like for a person to live without having arrived at this understanding. And his word for that arrival — for breaking through the reifying and identitarian delusions of ordinary existence — was "conversion." A person, if she's lucky, converts out of *mauvaise foi*. Second, nothing guarantees that I will continue to choose my personhood in the future in just the same way that I have in the past. (That's a silly sentence, right? — because if there were a guarantee, then it wouldn't be a choice. Sartre framing my selfhood as a perpetual choice has already abolished the guarantee.) The possibility always stands that I will encounter an "instant," a moment of rupture, an ending-beginning, where my earlier project — my earlier personhood — is terminated and another one opens before me. The ongoing possibility and occasional reality of conversion vouches for my freedom, for a self that cannot be made intelligible via biography or some personal past.

2) For a while, Zizek was pushing a theory of what he called subjective suicide. Let's start with the idea that all of us spend nearly all of our lives cocooned in ideology, social convention, and pseudo-sociological delusion — a set of more or less specious understandings of "how the world works." Eventually, though, any one of us is going to have experiences that the social-symbolic order does not cover, and Lacanian wisdom holds that these experiences are bound to be deeply unpleasant, since anything that is compatible with that order will immediately get

incorporated into it, absorbed into one of the pat narratives that we already tell about ourselves and our society, which means, in turn, that anything that lies outside that order is incompatible with it, ergo a threat to our ordinary understandings of the world and ourselves. Most of the time, these encounters with the Real don't amount to much; they aren't much more than eerie smudges on the screen of your experience. It is always possible, though, that an encounter with the Real will, for an interval, sunder your ties with the social-symbolic order, propelling you out of your accustomed social "reality," and in the process obliterating all of your socially entangled perceptions of yourself: your "identity." Lacan himself gives this experience the innocuous name of "the act," which makes it all the more alarming to realize that the technical term for the resulting condition is "psychosis." Zizek seems to get it right, tonally, when he calls it subjective suicide, though we might also just say: Sometimes you snap. Here's Zizek: 'The act differs from an active intervention (action) in that it radically transforms its bearer (agent): the act is not simply something I "accomplish"—after an act, I'm literally "not the same as before." In this sense, we could say that the subject "undergoes" the act ("passes through" it) rather than "accomplishes" it: in it, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not).' This, then, is the Lacanian account of conversion: your temporary reduction to nothing; psychotic Anabaptism.

3) Badiou's theory of the "truth-event" is the Lacanian act's benign double. Sometimes — not often — we have an experience that strikes us as surpassingly important, something that hits us as anomalously true and real and right, an experience that leaves us feeling transformed and that suspends the normal order of the day: "This changes everything." For Badiou, then, ethics is simply a matter of attending to those experiences — being open to them, letting ourselves be changed by them, and then resolving to stay changed, not to let ourselves bend gradually back to the norm and expectation and set-point. Until you have been called, there is simply no way for you to live morally. All ethics is an ethics of conversion.

All I mean to say here is that radical philosophy furnishes some rather attractive defenses of conversion, which means we'll have to account for Adorno's not following them.

Adorno also remarks that the Patmos group was religiously mixed; its members didn't have a religion in common. He doubtless has this one gathering in mind, but his point would hold just as well for the New Thinkers at large. The Rosenstock-Rosenzweig correspondence is often held up as one of the twentieth century's great feats of Judeo-Christian dialogue. Die Kreatur was published under the direction of three editors: a Protestant, a rogue Catholic, and a Jew (that last would be Martin Buber). It is hard to see these efforts as anything but a benignly ecumenical exercise. By the time Adorno wrote these words, Germans had been attacking each other on confessional grounds for more than four hundred years, often lethally: Schmalkadic Wars and Kulturkämpfe and Judenhetze. It will come as a surprise, then, to realize that this interdenominationalism is a big part of what is bothering Adorno.

We'll have to keep reading to figure out why. The men in question had all taken a religious turn. A new passage:

> **However, they were less interested in the specific doctrine, the truth content of revelation, than in a disposition or cast of mind. To his slight annoyance, a friend [of mine], who was at that time attracted by this circle, was not invited. He was—they intimated— not authentic enough. For he hesitated before Kierkegaard's leap, suspecting that any religion conjured up out of autonomous thinking would subordinate itself to the latter, and would negate itself as the absolute which, after all, in terms of its own conceptual nature, it wants to be.**

I'm going to fill in a few details, and then we can see what they add up to. We know from Adorno's papers that the friend in question was Siegfried Kracauer. If you're reading that name for the first time, you could, just for now, think of him as the other Walter Benjamin, a second German-Jewish

intellectual, close to Adorno, a good decade his senior, transfixed by popular culture in a way that Adorno manifestly was not, determined to remake thought around the experience of modern cities, and with a great many illuminating things to say about photography and film. (But then Adorno met Kracauer in his late teens, which means that in T.W.A.'s biography, he came first. Benjamin appears as a kind of second Kracauer. Also: You have to be able to imagine a Benjamin who was able to hold down a job at a major newspaper and who managed to make it out of France.)

Apparently one of the Patmos people told Kracauer that he was inauthentic. I'm sure you don't need to be told that no-one was accusing him of being watered down to suit American tastes, like he was a corrupted version of Kracauer the way they cook it back home. The existentialist doctrine of "authenticity" tends to involve variations of the following claims:

-You need to know that you choose yourself, that you choose your identity, choose your way of living, choose your fundamental commitments. However you are, you weren't just born that way.

-Equally, then, you need to be willing to own yourself — to be candid about your commitments and to take responsibility for your personhood, for your way of being in the world. The German word for "authenticity" — the one in Adorno's original title — is *Eigentlichkeit*, which comes from the word *eigen*, which is the everyday adjective that designates something of one's own: "I brought my own book." "I brought mein *eigenes Buch*." Its closest cognate in German is *Eigentum*, which means "property" — what you own. To be "authentic," then, is to be your own person and to be willing to own the person that you are.

-If your fundamental commitments line up in some sense with those of your culture — and it is the hallmark of right-wing existentialism that it considers this always your best option — then the task in front of you is to be in some now fully committed way what up until now you had been unthinkingly. If you wake up at 17 and realize that you have been raised more or less as a Jew and that other people regard you as Jewish, then it is up to you to commit to your Judaism and to adopt it as a project. (And

yes, equally: If you wake up at 17 and realize that you have been raised more or less as a Russian, then it is up to you to commit to your Russianness…) This is where the existentialist notion of "authenticity" rejoins vernacular concerns with race and ethnicity and bad Chinese food: You go from being an x to being a *real* x.

And then there's this bit about "the Kierkegaardian leap." That's what English speakers usually refer to as a "leap of faith," though Kierkegaard scholars love to point out that he never actually used that phrase. They also tend to object that the term, having first been invented by K's Anglo-Saxon readers, then gets extracted from the ironies and pseudonymous obliquities of his writing and turned into some kitschy, blog-ready philosopheme — which is, of course, all the more reason for us to pay attention to it. The version that has come down to us mostly gets routed through the existentialist philosopher Karl Jaspers, who was one of the key figures in the Kierekegaard revival who will turn out to be one of Adorno's prime targets in this book. It's his version of the leap we need to know about here.

The first point to make about Jaspers is that he was a dualist: He thought that the human mind was bifurcated into two fundamentally different domains. Unlike many of his existentialist cousins, Jaspers had no objection to science and reason as such. They aren't really the problem; they're just grand as far as they go. There's no reason to call into question what the scientists have figured out about non-human nature. Science will pass all but the most stringent epistemological tests. But when I say that they are "grand as far as they go," then I am implying, of course, that they also have limitations. They can't go just anywhere. Crucially, science and reason can't tell us how to live — can't tell us what to care about — can't tell us what kind of people we want to be. I can become quite learned — I can bone up on string theory and evolutionary biology and the latest research into the Haitian Revolution — and I can reflect carefully on what I've learned. But none of this amassed knowledge can tell me what to do with my life. That's the dualism: There are some problems, a great many problems, that we can approach with the tools of science; and there are other problems that we have to learn to think about in some fundamentally different way. For anyone interested in the history of

philosophy, one of the more unusual features of Jaspers is that he thought of himself as a Kantian; he knew himself to be devising an existentialist Kantianism or to be offering Kierkegaardian answers to Kantian prompts. Kant's first Critique vindicates science (and other types of empirical knowledge), while insisting that the mind will nonetheless press on, riskily, to some non-empirical notion of the world, the self (or soul or psyche), and God. Existentialism, then, picks up where science leaves off. What, after all, are we supposed to do about all those issues where science and knowledge can't help? Maybe now's the moment to pause to ask yourself: What is your basic orientation to the world? What other orientations would be possible? What are your fundamental commitments? Jaspers's point — and this is how the "leap of faith" has often been understood — is that you are going to have to choose those commitments — some commitments, maybe an overriding commitment — and make your peace with your knowledge that this commitment is in some sense groundless: sorely under-justified. You've chosen this commitment; you could have chosen another. Jaspers has a lot to say about the dualism of science and commitment: about the danger of treating existential matters as matters of knowledge and the even graver danger of trying to duck those fundamental existential choices.

This last must be the accusation that was leveled against Kracauer, more or less: that he refused to grant that all convictions, including nominally secular ones, resemble religious belief; that he couldn't bring himself to announce a commitment of a basically religious kind; that he thought maybe he could get by without commitments; that he was no leaper. Of course, Adorno also gives us — and implicitly endorses — Kracauer's counterclaim: "He suspected that any religion that has been sworn to out of autonomous thinking would subordinate itself to the latter, and would negate itself as the absolute which by the light of its own concept it wants to be." There are a few different issues that need to be teased out here. Adorno shares Kracauer's exasperation with what looks like a contradiction in the existentialist position. To see this, we'll need to bring into play the opposite of autonomy, which is heteronomy — the condition of being ruled from without — not giving-yourself-the-law, but having-the-law-imposed-upon-you. Adorno's premise is plausible

enough: He seems to think that religion is fundamentally an exercise in heteronomy, for which the Christian's ordinary word is "revelation." The law comes to the Christian from some external source: from the Catholic's gradual training into Church tradition and discipline; from the scripturalist's painstaking study of Holy Writ; from the spiritualist's resolve to wait for God's "leading." Adorno's point is that you can't sincerely arrive at heteronomy non-dogmatically and via your own independent judgments. The existentialist gambit is to say that you can be a freethinker and still submit, and that your submission will not abrogate your status as a freethinker. And to this Adorno responds that if you retain a sense of yourself as a freethinker — if, following Jaspers, you never forget that you have chosen your commitments and could have chosen otherwise — then your commitment will always be provisional and indeed revocable and in that sense not really a commitment at all, certainly not an "absolute" one, one that you couldn't imagine re-negotiating.

Of course, we can run the contradiction the other way. The heteronomy that the young existentialist agrees to mimic will require that he relinquish his freedom, punctually, over and over again, even as he tells himself that he is doing so freely. Existentialism thus resembles nothing so much as the voluntary servitude first described by La Boétie in the 1540s — or the condition that made Spinoza shudder, the confusion of people "who fight for their bondage as though it were their freedom." Equally, we could think of this existentialism as a bizarre reversal in the history of Left Hegelianism. In the 1840s, Bauer and Feuerbach and others began arguing that religion was the very model of alienation: Humans had invented God; assigned to him their own most distinctive powers (the powers of spirit, of creation, their ability to make and remake their world); and then subordinated themselves to this distorted avatar of their own disavowed eminence. Left Hegelianism was obviously an invitation to drop the God-act; to recognize that God was a projection of the power of thinking human activity and so to affirm that power directly. The existentialists then arrived on the scene and took these arguments on board, only to say: That! Do that! Kneel to the god of your own making, even as you freely concede that this is what you are doing. Existentialism

thus enshrines the alienation that it was supposedly designed to combat. It is the resolve to stay alienated even once you have gained insight into the sources of your alienation.

There's another problem that follows on from this last and which Adorno has already insinuated at least twice: These early existentialists weren't interested in any one religion, weren't interested "in any specific doctrine." So Jaspers says that we choose are commitments freely, and this will tend to imply that commitments are always plural — not that *I* will have multiple commitments, but that other plausible commitments were available and that I could have chosen differently and that I have to be prepared to let other people choose differently. Their choosing freely means they don't have to choose as I do. This is Jaspers's big innovation on Kierkegaard, who when all is said and done only had this one ardent version of Protestantism in mind. And though we might congratulate Jaspers for having figured out how to make Kierkegaardianism liberal, we might for that very reason fret that he has led us straight into the quagmire of multiple and contending Absolutes. We begin to sense the scope of the problem if we look again at Badiou, whose ethics is designed above all to undo liberal society's general neutralization of commitment — its insistence that we not really believe what we claim to believe, or its grudging permission to believe anything we want provided we promise in advance never to do anything about it. Badiou, in other words, wants to teach members of a liberal society how to be fanatics again; he wants us to recover our lost capacity for militancy and Schwärmerei. The peculiar character of his argument, though, is that he is sticking up for fanaticism in general — for no particular fanaticism — and certainly not for communism specifically, which is what you might have thought he was after. And "fanaticism in general" is, of course, a broken-backed concept, a contradictory fusing of zeal and indifference: extreme and passionate dedication to a cause that doesn't care anything about the cause. Badiou's ethics thus incorporates the flaccidly noncommittal pluralism that it was designed to overcome, offering only a hollowed-out militancy remade on the model of its liberal enemy. Or to put the point more plainly: A genuinely religious person can't care about religion in general, because he will be committed to the specific claims (rites, beliefs) of some particular

religion. Particularity is built into the thing. Religion can only appear as "religion" to someone whose underlying premises are secular.

3.

We should be able to pick up the pace. Adorno has just said that it should be impossible for a free and independent mind — a mind that accepts the basic principle of all philosophy, which is that thought is to bow to no authority; that it is to accede to no position if authority is the only thing the position has going for it — it should be impossible for such a mind to submit to revealed religion. But that is exactly what the followers of Kierkegaard seem to be demanding. The Patmos people make the perverse demand that a freethinker freely submit to a paradoxically optional Absolute.

He goes on:

> **The ones who closed ranks [against Adorno's friend Kracauer] were anti-intellectual intellectuals.**

That's probably clear enough from what I've just written. I'll just add that the phrase "anti-intellectual intellectuals" could serve equally well for a long tradition of skeptical anti-philosophers — thinkers who draw on stores of deep learning and use the methods of philosophical argument in order to discredit philosophy, reason, knowledge, or science. If you want to talk a philosopher out of philosophizing — if you want to persuade him that the problems that matter to him can't be solved by philosophical means or that philosophy is actively making his life worse — you are presumably going to have to give him some sound arguments. You will have to learn to turn philosophy against itself. Kierkegaard said that his philosophy was a course in retrieved simplicity. Anyone reading Kierkegaard is learning to abandon the intellectual sophistication that is required to read Kierkegaard.

Next sentence:

> **They proved to themselves their higher unity by shutting out the person who did not make a profession of faith in their manner, the way they all bore witness to one another.**

A few small things: Adorno was one of the first philosophers to pay close attention, on dialectical grounds, to the dynamics of exclusion — to pay close attention to what any particular conceptual formation has to exclude in order to maintain its integrity and to worry about the fate of the excluded terms. You can already see this in *The Dialectic of Enlightenmen*t, whose simplest, unsuperseded observation is that enlightened people have a way of dealing cruelly with anyone they deem unenlightened. There is even a whisper of Schmitt's enemy-thesis in this sentence: We've already been told that the intellectuals in question had joined different denominations and religions. Their affinity was to that extent fairly abstract and could only be brought into focus via a scapegoat.

More:

> **What they championed spiritually, they entered into the ledger as their ethic, as though a person's adhering to the doctrine of some higher being were enough to elevate his inner rank, as though the gospels had nothing to say against the Pharisees.**

What I've translated as "entered into the ledger" is a single word in German: *buchen* — they've "booked" their religious commitments; they bring a bookkeeping mentality to their own spiritual accomplishment. They're keeping score. They want credit. The bit about the Pharisees is easy enough to parse: If I call someone "pharisaical," I might just mean that they are being self-righteous, holier-than-thou. But I might also mean something more specific: that they are rigidly enforcing the external forms of religion and caring not enough about the spirit, that they want above all to be seen to be religious. It may come as a small surprise to realize that Adorno is in this instance siding with the gospels.

In this last as in so many other respects, it is easy to get Adorno wrong. Many of us have read maybe two chapters of the Dialectic of Enlightenment in college and have him pegged accordingly — as the guy who thought that Francis Bacon led to Hitler. You'll have to read rather further in Adorno to realize that in his thinking, the familiar Counter-Enlightenment positions don't come off any better than the scientists or the lumières. If anything, they come off quite a bit worse.

That's what makes the opening pages of The Jargon so instructive. The intellectuals who denounce the Enlightenment are most often promoting some version or another of religious revival, and that's an option that Adorno rejects out of hand. Elsewhere, in an important essay on Schönberg, he writes that "our epoch refuses to vouchsafe us a sacred work of art" and that "sacred art has become impossible." We'll want to know why he thinks that, given that he felt at least some affinity with religion — the kind of affinity that any heterodox Marxist might feel for Christian socialism or liberation theology. And we should note: It's not that he thought that religious art was available but pernicious. He thought that the path to a genuinely religious art was blocked (and that attempts to fashion such art were therefore doomed and perhaps for that reason alone retrograde). Still, it's a puzzle. "It would be advisable to think of progress in the crudest, most basic terms: that no one should go hungry anymore." That, too, is Adorno, making it clear that he was pretty close to Brecht after all. And one might think that Judaism and Christianity are helpfully crude in just this way — the way of the-last-shall-be-first-and-we-hold-all-things-in-common. Why wouldn't someone trying to imagine the redeemed society avail himself of their accumulated historical power?

The short answer is that Adorno is pretty sure this power has been dispelled for good. At heart, the claim that sacred art has become impossible is just Adorno's restatement of Walter Benjamin's great argument about the death of the aura. The simplest way to put this would be to say that art will never be special again, and if you still think that art is sort of special, that's only because you have never lived in a world where artworks were genuinely special: singular and hummingly charismatic. The fancier way to put it would be to say that all art has

undergone a many-sided process of decontextualization. The passage from church to museum deconsecrates the object in a single blow, removing it from the web of practices in which it was formerly suspended, stripping it from the believers who perceived it as sacred to begin with and handing it over to an endless parade of schoolchildren and tourists. Ceremonial pipes go unsmoked. Greek icons end up unkissably behind glass. Sacred art has become impossible because framing an object as art is all it takes to negate its sanctity.

But then museums are just part of the story. Walter Benjamin was interested above all in the fate of art after the 1880s, when photography was mainstreamed, and as of the 1920s, when sound recording took off. And the point here, of course, is that photographs and records decontextualize art all over again. They do so rampantly, in fact, by reproducing any artwork a thousandfold. Anyone who walks into the Sistine Chapel is likely to have seen its ceiling a hundred times already, before seeing it now, "for the first time," and is unlikely to feel that they are in the presence of God. They're just happy they got to hear the band play its greatest hit. Fresh experience gets shelved in favor of the three-dimensional augmentation of the already-known. In the age of the postcard and the dorm-poster, you can't remember when you first saw Girl with a Pearl Earring or Starry Night or The Birth of Venus. You have never not seen them.

So that's most of Adorno's point: Art this routinized is going to have trouble conveying the sacred. The last time I listened to Bach's Easter Oratorio, I was vacuuming the house. To this, he adds the simple observation that the churches are much weaker than they used to be. Science now carries most of the intellectual authority. Thus Adorno: "How is cultic music possible in the absence of a cult?" How is ritual music possible when so few people attend the rites? An artist who wanted to create in a religious idiom would be speaking a language that most people no longer understand. And such art wouldn't be sacred. It would just be … there.

So what happens when artists try to create religious art all the same? They can travel the path of the subject, but if they do that they will inevitably miss their target. A devotional poem about the Christian's

ardently pious inner life is not a poem about God; it's a poem about a Christian. Alternately, then, they can travel the path of the object, which would mean rejuvenating some of the old religious iconography, only to suffer the fate of Chagall's etchings of Moses and Jeremiah and Rachel — images whose storybook naïveté preemptively invites viewers to regard the Hebrew Bible as folklore. Anyone who knows their Adorno might remark at this point that he advocated an iconoclasm, which we might hold out as a third option, the path of neither subject nor object. A big part of his project, in fact, is to update the old Judeo-Protestant ban on images. Short version: 1) He is preoccupied, on dialectical grounds, on the gap between things and the concepts, words or terms that claim to capture them, and so fixated on the way in which representation is likely to betray its objects. 2) He subscribes to the Marxist prohibition on spelling out how communism is likely to function, which irritates many readers of Marx, but is, in fact, altogether defensible. If the whole point of communism is for people to make their own society together — and to remake it ongoingly — then the society they build and re-build obviously can't be spelled out for them in advance. Their constituent power has to remain the gap in your thinking. The point is easy to defend on political grounds, but aesthetically something of a mess, since iconoclasm is an unpromising platform for anyone looking to make sacred art. Adorno's essay on Schönberg's Moses und Aron boils down to his amazement that the composer had had the gumption to devise an opera, of all things, on the subject of iconoclasm, a Gesamtkunstwerk on a biblical theme whose lesson is that we should stop trying to represent sacred things, a Singspiel in which anyone who sings turns out to be sinful for that very reason.

We're in a good position to appreciate the book's next sentence:

> **A full forty years later [after the Patmos incident — in the 1960s, therefore, as Adorno was writing *The Jargon of Authenticity*], a retired bishop walked out on a conference at a Protestant academy because an invited speaker had cast doubt on the possibility of sacred music today.**

At least we can be pretty sure who that invited speaker was.

> **He too felt absolved from, or had been warned against, getting mixed up with people who do not toe the line; as though critical thought had no objective foundation but were instead a kind of subjective lapse.**

It would be easy to mishear Adorno as voicing the liberal intellectual's familiar complaint against believers, which is that they are intolerant. But that's not really what he's saying here. In fact, we might as well correct a second misapprehension while we're at it. It is common for readers to complain that Adorno is finally apolitical or even anti-political — that he talks often enough like a Marxist and still manages to land upon a pessimistic quietism. It's not hard to see where readers get that idea, given that he rejected what were in his lifetime all the available political options. But what we see here is Adorno hewing to one of the classic Marxist positions — the one that *affirms* the priority of the political. Critique has an "objective foundation." In this instance, that means: The position of religion really has changed — socially, structurally, and as it were objectively. Under those conditions, no one can rescue religion simply by doubling down on belief, by promising to believe all the harder. Big changes in the social order cannot be overcome by adjusting one's subjectivity.

We read on. Adorno is still talking about the bishop who stormed out:

> **People of his type combine the tendency that Borchardt called "putting oneself in the right" with the fear of reflecting on their reflexive reactions—as if they didn't altogether believe themselves.**

In this instance Adorno's claims are easy enough to identify. Beliefs arrived at by existentialist methods could seem uniquely fragile. I have chosen a set of commitments, but I know that I have chosen them freely and that they lack strong justifications. I have *merely* chosen them. And if I keep this perspective before me, as the existentialists would have me do, one might reasonably ask whether I really believe my own beliefs. Certain types of philosophical reflection are, in fact, no longer available to me. I can't ask, for one, whether my beliefs are true or right — or whether some new experience hasn't shown them to be false. I didn't claim they were true to begin with; and new experience can't falsify them. Any questions of this nature can only prompt new confessions of their groundlessness. The first bit, meanwhile, says little more than that some of these religious types act self-righteously. The curious thing is that Adorno bothers to cite Rudolf Borchardt in order to make the point, since the point is simple enough, and Borchardt was one of those rare German Jews who became fascists if never quite Nazis. He was the very model of a freak-Right literatus, totally committed to the legacy of the European humanities; to antiquity, in fact, though opposed to the Renaissance, which he thought of as having destroyed antiquity in the guise of reviving it, and committed to channeling this other, stranger, poetic-prophetic antiquity, which channeling he combined with a virulent German nationalism. He was also Adorno's favorite alt-Right poet; his essay in praise of Borchardt has got to be Exhibit A in any attempt to depict Adorno as a mandarin of the Left. (Adorno likes the phrase "putting oneself in the right" enough to mention it in that essay, as well, though in neither case does he provide a citation. In the essay, at any rate, Adorno is explaining how much he likes a short neo-cavalier poem that Borchardt wrote in the voice of a sexually loose woman who is leaving her current lover in favor of a richer man — and one of the things he likes most about the poem is that it is non-judgmental: ironic but not satirical. Borchardt, he says, does not "put himself into the right.")

He goes on:

> **They still sense the old danger of losing, again, what they call the concrete—of losing it to that abstraction**

of which they are suspicious and which cannot be eradicated from concepts. They consider concretion to be promised in sacrifice, and first of all in intellectual sacrifice.

It might be easiest to illuminate this point without specific reference to German existentialism. Adorno often comes out against philosophies that think they can break through to something outside of thought (outside the concept, outside of abstraction) simply by *affirming* it. I affirm particularity or materiality or specificity or the individuum or the concrete —meaning: I *say* that it's what I care about; I tell others that it's what should matter to them; it's what they should give priority in their thinking. This is all pretty hapless — I will happily second Adorno on this point — because those terms are themselves all abstractions. If I say that I am intellectually committed to particularity, then I am committed to no particular particularity and am therefore not committed to particularity at all. Or more bluntly: Just saying "let's think about objects" obviously doesn't get you to the objects. You don't get to, y'know, *vote* for the object.

Adorno, in other words, shares with the existentialists (and vitalists and pragmatists and object-oriented ontologists) their suspicion of abstraction or mere thought. But he doesn't think that there is a ready exit out of abstraction; there is no short-cut to concretion. He is, for most purposes, what we might call a reluctant idealist. The task is to dialectically overcome the idealism that is our fundamental cognitive condition, on the understanding that this can't be done non-philosophically, by, for instance, kicking stones. And to that extent, he is *not* in fact the kind of anti-philosopher for which he (and other critical theorists) are often mistaken. (The first sentence of *Negative Dialectics* is "Philosophy lives on….") The existentialists seem to think that you can get closer to the stuff of the world if you just stop thinking about it. The later Heidegger settled on the idea that poetry is writing that is content not to *know* its objects, a writing that summons the objects into view while presuming to tell you very little about them. Poetry is the sacrifice of thought; it teaches us how to un-think the world.

We see here now, already for a second time, an issue that is going to recur again and again throughout the book, which is that Adorno is plainly attacking his intellectual cousins and potential allies. It is from Adorno, after all, that many of us first learned to distrust abstraction. Here's one of the most famous sentences from the opening pages of *Negative Dialectics*: "At this historical moment, philosophy's true interest lies with those things in which Hegel professed to be least interested: with the concept-less, the individual, and the particular; with everything that has, since Plato, been written off as ephemeral and insignificant and which Hegel festooned with the label of 'lazy existence.'" Adorno seems committed enough to the "concrete" that I couldn't without checking remember whether this sentence included that word. What Adorno is opposing, then, is what he sometimes calls "simulated immediacy" — the pretense that one can dispense with concepts altogether or use them in a way that somehow neutralizes their inevitable abstractness — the illusion, then, that we can throw our arms around the uncognized object and still know that we are doing that. Negative dialectics offers, at best, a highly intellectualized path back to particularity, one that requires extended feats of philosophical virtuosity, in which the thinker hijacks the apparatus of abstraction and forces it on an accelerated schedule to the breakdown that it would eventually have suffered anyway. The alternative that Adorno is warning against is the one that says that we can sidle up to the stuff of the world if only we train ourselves not to think; and by using the term "intellectual sacrifice," *sacrificium intellectus*, he is aligning the existentialists with a history of anti-intellectual religious authoritarianism, an ethos of mental submission, that was formulated paradigmatically by the Jesuits, from whom the phrase has been borrowed.

A short capper:

Heretics baptized this circle "The Authentics."

The verb is, of course, a jab. Kierkegaard's philosophical Anabaptists have been re-baptized. It is, after all, what they wanted.

4.

Heidegger enters the scene on the third page. Here's the paragraph in full:

> **This [Kracauer getting shown the door by the Rosenstock circle] was well before the publication of *Being and Time*. In that work, Heidegger introduced authenticity par excellence, in the context of an existential ontology and as a philosophical term of art; so, too, did he pour into the mold of philosophy the object of the Authentics' less theoretical zeal; and in that way he won over all those in whom philosophy strikes a vague chord. It was through Heidegger that confessional demands became unnecessary. His book acquired its nimbus by describing as full of insight — by presenting to its readers as an obligation true and proper — the drift of the [German] intelligentsia's dark compulsions before 1933. 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 obsessions of those years have seeped into the language, far beyond the circle of those who at that time set themselves up as the elite. Nevertheless, the sacred quality of the Authentics' language belongs to the cult of authenticity rather than to the Christian cult, even when — for temporary lack of any other viable authority — the Authentics end up resembling Christians. Prior to any consideration of particular content, their language molds thought in such a way that it adapts to the goal of subordination even when it thinks it is resisting that goal. The authority of the absolute is overthrown by absolutized authority. Fascism was not simply a conspiracy,**

although it was that; it originated, rather, in a powerful current of social development. Language provides it with a refuge; in language, the still smoldering disaster speaks as though it were salvation.

A reader might launch into this passage and think they have arrived at the main event, the smackdown, Adorno vs. Heidegger. *This is what I came to see*. That would be wrong — consequentially so. For anyone trying to make sense of *The Jargon of Authenticity*, nothing is more important than noticing that Adorno is taking much of the onus *off of Heidegger*, who was at most an important relay for a malign turn in German intellectual life that happened well before he started writing. Stripped of all detail, what this page is saying is that the problem goes well beyond Heidegger. Focusing too much on Heidegger lets too many other intellectuals off the hook.

I'd like to go ahead and extract three theses from this paragraph — they are, I think, the book's major claims — and pause to ask what implications they might have for anyone trying to reckon with the revival of fascism in our own generation.

Thesis #1) Anti-fascists, when studying fascist thought, should be prepared to cast the net widely. At some level, Adorno's approach isn't all that unusual. On the basis of this paragraph alone, we could think of The Jargon of Authenticity as his attempt at an Intellectual Origins of National Socialism, and we might note that the book appeared at more or less the same time as the classic volumes on that topic: Stern's Politics of Cultural Despair (1961); or Mosse's Crisis of German Ideology (1964). It's just that Adorno proposes figures of his own, alongside the agrarian ethno-nationalists and anti-Semites and pan-German Wander-birds unearthed by Mosse and Stern. He thought that the early existentialists had something important to contribute to the making of fascism — an authoritarian cast of mind that typically posed as religious and sometimes even posed as free. But unlike Mosse and Stern, Adorno was also interested in the survival, after 1945, of this proto-fascism. The fundamental task of all historical study is to judge matters of continuity and rupture — to identify what in any historical constellation has been inherited and what has been made anew. And there is perhaps no period

for which this most basic of historiographic questions has higher stakes than Germany in the 1950s. What did the Germans (and their minders) manage to remake after the war, and perhaps build from scratch? And what was carried over from the 1930s and '40s? (Who rebuilt the bombed-out cities if not Nazi architects? Who staffed the reopened public schools if not Nazi teachers?) Adorno, at any rate, is offering his own version of what we might too innocuously call the Continuity Thesis.

Thesis #2: *Even radical philosophy has a way of remaking itself as an idiom, a set of verbal commonplaces, a lingo for the educated classes*. This indicates a break with Adorno's usual method. You can pick up *Negative Dialectics* if you want to see Adorno grapple with the technicalities of Heidegger's philosophical program — if, that is, you want to watch him crawl inside of that program and flush out its impasses and contradictions from the inside. The reason, one concludes, that Adorno decided finally that *The Jargon of Authenticity* did not belong in that volume is that he is in this case not interested in philosophy qua philosophy, and certainly not interested in its subtle failures. If anything, he is interested in the *success* of modernist German philosophy, but as something other than philosophy — interested, I mean, in the making of a Heideggerian-existentialist patois that got spoken, apparently, by a lot of people who weren't philosophers — people "far beyond the circle" of adepts. What I'd like us to notice for now is that this position is doubtless repeatable. Adorno hands us a question that we might want to ask and at intervals re-ask: How does the late-modern Bildungs-bourgeoisie deploy to its own ends the philosophical argot with which its professors have equipped them? We might, for instance, want to chart the fate of critical theory itself as it moves from the classroom to Left Twitter and Left Tumblr and various workplaces. And when we ask that question, we will want to avoid a certain temptation, which will be to blame the speakers of this or that philosophical jargon for *not getting it*; we will have to choke back the lecture that we have at the ready, the one that pronounces ex cathedra that *That's not what Heidegger (or Foucault or Butler) really said*. If Adorno is right, then philosophy attains its (malleable) historical force only in reduced form, as a vulgate. It's the crude version that we should be keeping an eye on.

Thesis #3: *Fascism draws some of its intellectual energies from people who do not regard themselves as fascists and who may even take themselves to be anti-fascist*. I can specify the matter like so: Many of the intellectuals that Adorno sees as preparing the way for Heidegger and for what he is content to call fascism were Jewish — either active Jews (like Rosenzweig or Buber) or men from Jewish families (like Rosenstock or the Ehrenbergs). In fact, the one figure that Adorno has cited approvingly (Borchardt) was *way* closer to the fascists than the unnamed figures he is now attacking. This is bound to shake up our understanding of fascism. Hans Ehrenberg was a vocal member of the movement that defied the Nazi takeover of the Protestant churches. Rosenzweig and Buber made landmark contributions to the revival of modern Jewish philosophy. Adorno's argument is outrageous if wrong and disturbing if right: Your positions, as they enter the world, will not remain *your* positions. Even your anti-fascism can be transposed into a fascism. Call it the ruse of un-reason.

One way to capture the force of Adorno's theses would be to update them, speculatively, for the revival of fascism in our generation. You could, if you wanted, enter the ranks as an anti-fascist philosophical watchdog. You could tell us that members of Trump's inner circle have been reading Julius Evola, that they've met with Aleksandr Dugin. You could warn us again about Nick Land and the lure of Dark Enlightenment. You can bone up on de Benoist and the French Nouvelle Droite. But if we follow the page in front of us, then this isn't nearly enough and may be something of a distraction. For a decade, Nick Land was a professor of Continental philosophy at the UK's most famously left-wing university. Alain de Benoist was first introduced to American readers by a journal founded by Lukacsians. Fascism, if it is to succeed, will have to find a perch in ordinary discourse, including educated discourse. And some of that discourse is likely to be your own. The Benoist circle call themselves Les Identitaires.

5.

We begin a new paragraph.

In Germany a jargon of authenticity is spoken— and even more so, written; the badge of societalized chosenness, elevated and folksy at once; a sublanguage playing the role of prestige dialect.

A bit of exegesis will get us going. On a first pass, the word most likely to cause trouble is "societalized," which in German is a Weberian term of art, *vergesellschaftet*. (And yes, Adorno is not immune to using jargon in his campaign against jargon.) That word — or rather its noun form, *Vergesellschaftung* — plays an important role in Weber's thinking, where it refers to social relationships that have been mediated through exchange or contract (rather than the communitarian ties of kinship and the like). We might more readily grasp the point, and even retain most of the phrase's Weberian flavor, if we swapped in the word "rationalized" or even "modernized": The jargon is "the badge of rationalized, modernized chosenness." That last word, "chosenness," is a reminder that existentialism has its origins in Kierkegaard's Protestantism, with perhaps a secondary reference to Judaism; *Existenzphilosophie* creates a secular elect or a chosen people. The elitism of the stance is irritating enough — hence, the move from "spoken" to "written": existentialism is a set of poses struck by educated people. But what really seems to be irking Adorno is that this elitism has been reduced to a verbal code and something like a method. (The word I've translated as "badge" sometimes means "identifying feature," but sometimes means "dog tags." The phrase could thus also read "the tags of societalized chosenness," where "tags" can mean both: standardized keywords entered as metadata and how you might identify a corpse.) In existentialism, the process by which you achieve your authenticity is supposed to be radically individual. No-one can help you. Sartre has that famous bit about how when you seek advice, you choose the person to advise you, which person probably won't tell you something that you didn't preselect for. In other words, you bear responsibility for whatever position you arrive it. And a lot of junk existentialism strikes heroic poses around this — the lonely-individual-struggling-to-make-meaning-in-a-fundamentally-absurd-universe. The

heroic bit probably gets at the "chosenness." Existentialists can't help but feel that they are special, that they aren't *das Man,* the They, the Anyone. Against this, Adorno means us to notice that the existentialism was itself a kind of group-think, a social trend whose followers achieved a false individualism only by using standardized terms and cycling through repeatable steps.

But that's not actually the meeting of opposites that most has him exercised here. He is plainly more interested in the twofold character of existentialist jargon, which is "at once elevated and folksy." The German terms that Adorno uses in the last clause deserve a quick look: Untersprache and Obersprache, under-language and over-language. In English, the word "sublanguage" does sometimes get used to refer to a jargon or whatever, lacking a regional base, isn't quite a dialect — "sublanguage" as in "subculture": "The use of emojis can be considered a whole sublanguage of its own." The German word isn't any more common than its English equivalent, but I did find one usage that suggests that it can mean a dialect-understood-as-inferior. Obersprache is, if anything, even less common than that, but does occasionally get used to refer to the high or official form of a language as contrasted with some putatively lesser patois. At any rate, Adorno is pointing out something unusual about Existenzdeutsch, and he must be thinking in the first instance of Heidegger. Most of the time — in English as in German — we think of jargon as relying heavily on elevated, Greek and Roman roots, the way that science and medicine do: We insist on calling snails and slugs "gastropods," which makes them sound more alien than they really are, as though we didn't have such creatures in these parts, as though all animals came from somewhere else, when even for taxonomical purposes we could just call them "belly-feet." But Heidegger makes a point of using good, sturdy German words; it's just that he uses them in non-intuitive ways — ways that have to be learned. So what Adorno means is that among the Heideggerians a down-home idiom has begun to function in mandarin ways, which — he's right — is quite unusual.

The next six sentences are best considered as a unit:

The jargon extends from philosophy and theology—not only of Protestant academies—to departments of education, adult education centers, and youth organizations, even to the elevated diction of the representatives of business and administration. While the jargon overflows with the pretense of profound human sensitivity, it is just as standardized as the world that it officially negates; the reason for this lies partly in its mass success, partly in the fact that it sends its message automatically, just from the way it is put together, thereby sealing that message off from the very experience that should inspire it. The jargon has at its disposal a modest number of words that click into place like signals. "Authenticity" itself is hardly the most conspicuous of the bunch; it serves, rather, to light up the ether in which the jargon flourishes and the cast of mind that latently feeds it. Some examples were serve for the time being: existentiell ["existentiell" when used by a Heideggerian, "existential" in ordinary German]; in der Entscheidung [in the decision]; Auftrag [the task]; Anruf [the call]; Begegnung [the encounter]; echtes Gespräch [a genuine conversation]; Aussage [an utterance]; Anliegen [a concern]; Bindung [a commitment]; one could add to the list any number of terms-that-aren't-terms with a similar ring.

.

"Terms-that-aren't-terms": Adorno is referring again to the existentialists' tendency to devise jargonized uses for ordinary German words, which all of these are, with the exception of the first.

Some — like Anliegen [a concern], which is logged in the Grimms' dictionary and which [Walter] Benjamin

could still use innocently — have only taken on their changed coloring since getting drawn into this *Spannungsfeld*, this "field of tension" — that's another one for the list.

An English-speaking reader will likely be put off by this paragraph's fusillade of German. Patience is the best counsel. The details don't matter, at least for now. You will not be quizzed on this vocabulary. Adorno is just warming up, listing in advance some of the headwords for which his devil's dictionary will eventually supply entries. At some point, you will want to know what is interesting about the word *Begegnung*, for instance, but there will be time for that later.

The importance of this paragraph lies elsewhere. For if we consider what Adorno is actually doing — and not just what is he is claiming — then we can extrapolate from these lines three questions; questions that Adorno has put to pop existentialism in Germany and that we might, following his example, put to any philosophy as it enters the educated mainstream:

1) What are its buzzwords? Faced with a philosophy in wide circulation, our first task will be to compile a lexicon and catalog its boilerplate: identity, intersectionality, lived experience, a particular way with participles (minoritized groups where once there were "minorities"; the unhoused where once there were "homeless people"; the variously assigned and identifying); Black and Brown bodies, where once there were persons; and, indeed, those capital B's themselves, which undo the de-essentializing and lower-case diminution of an earlier generation in favor of a fresh round of monumentalization presumed permanent.

That's the first question. Next we ask…

2) How have these buzzwords been taken up by the government and the corporations, "the representatives of business and administration"? A college's Queer Student Union promises to "work to improve student life for all gender identities." Amazon does them one better, "encouraging all Amazon employees to … 'speak their truth'" and promising to "provide full support of all … gender identities." Similarly, I have a pretty good

idea of what the Combahee River Collective meant by "intersectionality." But we're still going to have to work out what the secret police mean by the word: "I am a woman of color," says the CIA officer in the recruitment video, "I am a cis-gender millennial who has been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. I am intersectional."

3) How do these buzzwords standardize what they claim to promote? How, indeed, does verbal repetition introduce homogeneity into philosophical positions that typically promise the opposite? What are the protocols of routinized identity-assertion? What do we do when lived experience enters our texts mostly as a truncated verbal meme, ie, as "lived experience"?

At this point, a clarification becomes necessary. It would be possible to put Adorno's question to any intellectual scene in Western Europe or North America over the last 250 years or so — and probably to many others besides. It would be possible, I mean, to inquire for any moment about the unexpected ties between dissident philosophy and officialdom, even when these have nothing to do with existentialism. But as it happens, our American present, in the 2020s, has a lot to do with existentialism. For it is in the idiom of identity and intersectionality that Sartreanism and its cousins most obviously survive into the present — subsumed, to be sure, buried and repackaged, but no less recognizable for that. We could make the point in terms of intellectual history, by remarking that Judith Butler completed a PhD in the 1980s under an important Sartre scholar and that of the seven French theorists that Butler discusses in Subjects of Desire, their first book, only Sartre gets a chapter of his own. But we could also make the point just by examining contemporary identity practices: When a group gathers for the first time, the reason to expect each and every person in attendance to give their pronouns is an impeccably Sartrean one. To see this, one need only consider one semi-hospitable alternative, which would be to signal that anyone who wants to is welcome to give their pronouns — welcome, but not obliged. The point of the obligatory version –- the point, that is, of requiring the normie to say "he/him" — is not only to put non-binary and non-conforming people at ease, by turning the giving of pronouns into a ready habit and rule of etiquette, though of course it is that, too. Just as important, the

universal introduction-by-pronoun severs the link between gender presentation and gender identity, allowing no-one to hide behind their secondary sex characteristics; and more important still, it compels every person in the room to own their gender identification, to speak it as an identification, and to do so repeatedly, in a way that makes clear that we each maintain an identity only through free and recurring acts of affirmation. "My name is Christian Thorne, and I use he/him pronouns" — until the day I don't. Anyone with a little time on their hands can confirm the broader point for themselves. Polity's 2014 introduction to existentialism regularly slips into the idiom of identity: "We are always a 'not yet' as we press forward, fashioning and re-fashioning our identities." And conversely, K. Anthony Appiah's 2005 book on The Ethics of Identity is brimming with existentialist formulations: identity is a matter of "making a life," "the final responsibility" for which "is always the responsibility of the person whose life it is." In one thought experiment, Appiah praises a person for excelling in a particular identity "because of his commitment." It is when we recall that "lived experience" was actually Beauvoir's term — l'expérience vécue — that it begins to seem possible that some of Adorno's arguments, and not just his questions, will carry over to the present, as we watch the jargon of authenticity mutate into the jargon of identity.

6.

Adorno was just listing terms that belong to "the jargon" — and also remarking that many of them are ordinary German words, not immediately recognizable as jargon if cited out of context. He goes on:

> **The point, then, is not to compile an Index Verborum Prohibitorum of fast-selling noble nouns, but to ponder the linguistic function of such terms in the jargon.**

A reader might be wondering here about the phrase "noble nouns." That's a single, compound word in the original, which Adorno has formed by

attaching the prefix *Edel-* to the word for "noun." It is, as best I can tell, Adorno's coinage, though it follows an established pattern in German. English, like German, refers to helium and neon and the like as "noble gases," but Germans extend that formulation to many other things, in a way that English speakers don't, often marking out the high-grade or special members of some class by attaching to it the prefix *Edel-*. A German gem is a "noble-stone." Stainless steel is "noble-steel." That said, we won't want to overlook the soft oxymoron that Adorno has generated around his coinage: The terms in question are noble, sure, but they are also good business — "fast-selling." Their very nobility has been diluted or indeed hucksterized, hawked by journalists and pundits, on the lips of every pretender.

The Latin phrase, meanwhile, is Adorno's riff on the Catholic Church's Index of Forbidden Books, for which he has substituted "Index of Forbidden Words," the idea being, of course, that he is repudiating the role of censor. He wants us to keep track of the jargon, but he's not going to tell anyone to delete its terms from their vocabulary.

He continues:

> **Its lexicon consists of rather more than noble nouns anyway. At times it even seizes upon [otherwise] banal words, holds them aloft and then bronzes them in the fascist manner, which wisely commingles the plebeian with the elite.**

The first thing to notice about these two sentences is that they give one good reason to forgo censorship. The jargon, Adorno says for a second time, features many ordinary German words — one is tempted to say "common nouns," in juxtaposition to those nobles one — and it would be downright silly to interdict basic and everyday terms from the German vocabulary. A contemporary American professor could just about instruct his students to stop using (and mostly misusing) the word "ontology," but he's hardly going to tell them to stop using the word "body."

But this passage is, of course, more alarming than that, since Adorno is beginning to elaborate now on his big point — that something about how educated Germans spoke, as late as the 1960s, still sounded kind of fascist. And this particular observation about fascism's verbal style — that it employed a mixed idiom that oscillated promiscuously between the demotic and the high-flown — could easily remind the reader of a second book, one that preceded Adorno's by some sixteen years: This would be Viktor Klemperer's *LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii*, or "Language of the Third Reich," a set of reflections on the idiosyncrasies of Nazi German, compiled in notebook-form during the '30s and '40s by a Jewish-at-birth literature professor and published to great acclaim in 1947. Adorno, in other words, had a model.

But the writers he is about to name are neither of them Klemperer. Once you know who he's talking about, in fact, the next sentence is downright alarming:

> **The neo-romantic poets who drank their fill of the choicest vintages, like [Stefan] George and [Hugo von] Hofmannsthal, by no means wrote their prose in the jargon; many of their intermediaries, however, did — [Friedrich] Gundolf, for instance.**

To remark now that Stefan George is usually regarded as the most important German modernist poet — and that Hofmannsthal was his Austrian twin, his sometime collaborator and lifelong frenemy, is not yet to say nearly enough. The most important thing to know about George is that he started his career as a junior member of the Mallarmé circle in Paris, slurring his name to *Shorsh* in place of the crisply Germanic *Gay-yor-guh*, and that he ended his career as the official poet of Germany's hard Right and indeed of the Nazis. He thus enters cultural history as the intermediate step between the queer aestheticism of the 1890s and National Socialism; he was the guy who, while writing poems that typically remind English speakers of Eliot or Pound or Yeats, also helped publish numerous volumes of literary history with titles like *The Poet as Führer* and

swastikas in their front matter. This is explainable: George and his followers — he was famous for having followers — united around a stalwart program to dismantle the institutions of the modern world. They wanted to roll back a whole range of depersonalized social forms: capitalism, large cities, rule-based organizations of any kind, industrialism and its technologies, mass media, mass politics. We should be careful here, since this was at one point a fairly common program and came in lots of different versions, not all of which landed on the political Right. The Rousseauvian Left could still sign onto that platform. So could the Jeffersonian republicans, on the understanding that to be a true American is not to be European, is not to be civilized; to be American is to remake yourself for the better in conditions of relative hardship (away from big cities and settled institutions &c). What made the George Circle distinctive, then, was twofold: First, it championed poetry as the alternative to (over)civilization — poetry and not, say, the frontier. The poet-prophet would play the role that Americans more typically assign to the cowboy or the Nebraska pioneer. Poetry would keep open the possibility of a life lived beyond the industrialized anonymity of mass society. That's the first distinctive point. The second distinctive point is that the George Circle thought that fascism would make the world safe for aesthetes and queer people — if not the Nazis, then at least some hypothetical other fascism that at least some of them, for a time, mistook for really existing National Socialism.

What I can add now is that Gundolf was for many years George's favorite disciple — and the one tasked with translating the Circle's program into accessible prose. It's that divvying up of duties that seems to interest Adorno here. We can give the right-wing poets a degree of credit — credit, that is, for not having resorted to a standardized idiom even when writing prose. But it was the literary historian's job to re-state the tenets of their fascist aestheticism in terms that lent themselves to codification and repetition — to take the rarefied discourse of George's "Secret Germany" and make it not-so-secret. And what Adorno thinks he has noticed is that the postwar existentialists are still talking in the accents of the fascist-bohemian middlebrow.

Adorno continues:

Particular words only become jargon through the constellation they deny, through each word's posing as unique. What the singular word has lost in magic is acquired for it in a dirigiste manner, as though measures had been implemented.

"What the singular word has lost in magic…" The place to start here is with the observation that words used to have magic but now mostly don't — that's clearly a linguistic variant of Weber's disenchantment thesis. Adorno has omitted an important explanation here that serves as the backdrop to his more targeted comments — namely, that a great many modern intellectuals have regarded poetry as a way to combat disenchantment. Let's start with one familiar understanding of magic: The sorcerer is the person who can speak something into being, via spell or incantation. Any anti-mimetic theory of literature, then, will ask us to think of poetry as a species of lesser magic. Poets do not merely write down what they see in front of them; they are the inventors of worlds. The fictioner gives ongoing evidence of the mind's creative powers. But that's not the end of it. Anyone who subscribes to speech act theory or social constructivism or the doctrine of mind-dependent social kinds is claiming to find this sublunary magic at every turn, IRL, and not just in the library. It turns out that we routinely speak things into being. The word "spell" means both "abracadabra" and "to list in their proper order the letters that make up a word." At root, the word "incantation" just means "song." "Grammar" is "grimoire." A disenchanted language, then, would be one that is unwilling to unleash the powers of alphabet, song, and grammar, content only ever to describe and transcribe and record — a language that makes nothing, backed by a theory of language that sees all words as secondary, as following on from the things they merely designate, a theory that grants language no creative force. To this we need merely add that many modern poets really have tasked poetry with keeping alive the creative force of language — word-magic — in periods when that rival view of language (as so many tokens) has come to prevail; with charming the reader beyond the constraints of analytic

understanding; and perhaps even with safeguarding the ancient and esoteric wisdom that mere science has tended to overwrite. For a period, Stefan George belonged to an esoteric circle in Munich that called themselves the Cosmics. W. B. Yeats was a wizard in the Order of the Golden Dawn.

If you go back now and look at Adorno's last two sentences, what will jump out is that Adorno is talking still about the jargon and *not* about poetry. On the basis of this passage alone, we can't say what Adorno thinks about those properly poetic attempts to restore the magic of language, though in other essays, he does express a guarded admiration for George, and especially for the intransigent, homophile nonconformity of the *poète maudit*. The point here, however, is that the jargon has its own way of trying to re-enchant language, and that this way is ham-fisted, bullying, and hopeless. The jargon inherits from the poetry to which it is adjacent the project of re-enchanting language, but is really bad at it. I'd go so far as to say that this short passage offers a theory in passing of what makes jargon jargon; it teaches you how to recognize when a word has been annexed to some jargon. The problem with jargon is that *it claims to produce the thing that it names* — that's the magic bit — without the speaker having to make any additional effort. Someone speaks the word "identity" and concludes that they have thereby fashioned a stable persona, without having to understand how selves get assembled or pausing to worry about how our ego constructs tend to come unstuck over time. I speak the word "intersectionality" and believe that I have thereby already done the hard work of solidarity. Having been told that networks of oppression typically overlap, I spare myself the labor of figuring out just *how* they are articulated — here, now — and I find myself with nothing to say about how the matted skein of domination might yet be unraveled. Each term pretends singly to some such power, even though they are all interlinked, tending, in fact, to be defined in terms of one another: "intersectionality" gets defined with reference to "identity"; anyone explaining "identity" asks first if you understand "positionality" and so on. And the terms themselves are rhetorically quite flat. Repetition alone will tend to routinize them and so strip them of their verbal mojo. The jargon will never achieve the insinuating and

uncanny character of the well-turned poetic line, that weird cadence that can make verse sound like an improvised hex: "And I will show you something different from either / Your shadow at morning striding behind you / Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you; / I will show you fear in a handful of dust." Words like "identity" and "intersectionality" have been assigned their bogus magic by professorial explanation and glossaries compiled on college websites. They are magic only by decree, pedantically enchanted.

7.

Adorno was just explaining that people who use the jargon treat individual words as though they were magic — and not in a good way. He's about to elaborate:

> **The individual word partakes of a secondary transcendence; transcendence ready-made and straight from the factory; a changeling that has been swapped in for the transcendence that was lost. Elements of empirical language are manipulated in their rigidity...**

…"massaged," I think we would say…

> **...as though they were elements of a language true and revealed; for speaker and listener alike, the empirical familiarity of these sacred words counterfeits a downright bodily proximity.**

An example should make this clear: Let's say that in a Heideggerian mood, I remark that the words "thing" and "object," which we typically treat as synonyms, are nothing of the sort. A "thing" is not an "object," as we should be able to see if we examine the two words' respective etymologies. In old English, as in the other Germanic languages, a "thing"

initially referred to a free people gathering to discuss matters of common concern — a tribal assembly, as it were — and then over time it came to refer, as well, to any one of those matters: something that might concern us, an item, an issue. The German word for object, meanwhile, is *Gegenstand* — that which stands over and against me. This suggests an entity that, while separate from me, exists only in relation to me. The precise English equivalent is "obstacle." You might want to pause here to let that one sink in. The ordinary German word for "object" invites us to see all of the world's things as obstacles. But then the word *object* is if anything even worse. It shares the prefix *ob-*, obviously — "in the direction of" or "in front of" — but in the place of *sta-*, "to stand," it has *iac-*, "to throw." An "object" is something that has been thrown at you or in front of you — a missile, a rock, a fresh obstacle, debris. At best, calling something an "object" should communicate surprise: *How the hell did this get here?* More likely, it communicates: *Duck!* Knowing this, I might now resolve to think of the stuff of the world as "things" and not as "objects" — to conceive of the world as an occasion to gather and an invitation to my concern, and not as so much litter or shrapnel.

If we now plunge back into the sentence, way be we can see what Adorno meant by "secondary transcendence." At least in this case, by championing the word "thing," I am attempting to revive an earlier set of meanings; trying to go back behind even Middle English, which had already lost the sense that "thing" could also mean "assembly"; vowing to remember the Icelandic Althing or Danish Folketing every time I so much as refer to a screwdriver or a lawn chair. I can't, of course, revive the unfathomably different social conditions under which the word "thing" meant both "object" and "tribal gathering," but I can convince myself that I am silently invoking that history every time I write the word "thing," and I can convince myself, too, that rejecting the word "object" will bring me closer to objects, will render them less alien, by training me not to conceptualize them as impediments. But attempted piecewise, via individual words, and without our doing anything to change the general status of objects in capitalist societies (mass-produced, disposable, universally exchangeable), my embrace of the Anglo-Saxon "thing" amounts to little more than philosophical cos-play. I accomplish next to

nothing by intermittently looking around my dining room with the eyes of a Norseman.

8.

The next bit is going to introduce some new terms, and it will help us understand what Adorno is saying if I spend some time first preparing the conceptual ground. His claims here turn on our perceptions of structure and system. This gets at some of the fundamental debates among critical theorists and their cousins over the last seventy-five years. If you are finding your way through critical theory for the first time, you are going to have to work out your own answers to a few fundamental questions, because the theorists you're reading will give you lots of different answers, among which you will have to choose: Do you think it is the tendency of nature, society, and language to settle into more or less stable structures? And if so, do you think structure is a good thing? The point is that anyone answering these questions in tandem has lots of different options. To wit:

1. Structure is elusive, but it would be better if we had more of it.

2. Structure is our common condition, and that's just as well.

3. Structure is our condition, and this is our doom. We should labor to dismantle the structures that ensconce us.

4. Structures and systems are themselves myths. Nothing ever coheres as tightly as those words imply. It's probably too much to even speak of "nature" or "society" or "language," since those words all imply more structure than the whirlwinds in question actually have. Our problem, then, is never "the system"; we suffer, at worst, from the mistaken perception of system.

If, now, you come out as an anti-systemic thinker — if, that is, you are convinced that structures exist, but announce that you don't like 'em — there are some further determinations you will have to make. What, for one, do you take to be the alternative to "structure"? Is the idea to arrange the stuff of nature or the stuff of society in some other way — a way that the word "structure" doesn't capture? You might determine, for instance, that an "organism" is not a "structure," which word suggests to you an edifice or built design. You might then conclude that organic arrangements are preferable to engineered ones. Alternately, though, you might conclude that the idea is to do away with arrangements altogether, and not just mechanical ones — to liberate the members of a structure, so that they might in an open field fashion their own temporary and shifting relationships, provided, that is, that they don't prefer simply to do without relationship.

Adorno is about to claim that the existentialists are muddled in their approach to language-as-system. We know that Heidegger, after the war, wanted to roll back what he saw as the technological takeover of language. He thought that people had increasingly come to treat language as a mere tool — as though English and German were rival communication devices, or as though language in general were some ingenious ancient technology. He also thought that modern linguists tended to conceive of all language on the model of cybernetics and binary code. And he thought that the primal, poetic vocation of language was to disclose to us the stuff of the world, to help the world manifest before us, whereas a language conceived of as mere tool was likely to tote up the world's many things and re-package them all as "information."

Here, then, is Adorno. *The jargon prizes authenticity and wants us to have a more authentic relationship with language.* But in the process…

> **The ether is sprayed mechanically about; the atomistic words are freshened up without their being changed. It is thanks to what the jargon calls *Gefüge*, "structure," that they are granted precedence over structure itself. The jargon, objectively a system,**

deploys disorganization as its principle of organization, the decay of language into words by themselves.

Let's note first: The jargon has its own word for "structure" — a stoutly German word, even though modern German is perfectly happy with *die Struktur*. This is a jab, of course, at the Heideggerians linguistic nationalism; they have swapped out the Latin word in favor of some nativist alternative. The word, in fact, is artisanal in just the way you might expect — it comes from the verb *fügen*, which means to fit together in the manner of a woodworker, to connect pieces together to make a more complex object. You could just about translate it as "joinery," but you might also think about how English-language writers sometimes use the word "fabric" as a gauzier alternative to the rectangular articulations of "structure", as in "the fabric of society."

But then what is Adorno's objection? The problem, as he sees it, is that the followers of Heidegger want to transform our relationship to language in some fundamental way, and they want to make it less technological. And yet their way of doing this, via the jargon, is both piecemeal and weirdly mechanical. What Heidegger thought it would take a poet to accomplish—the rescue of our language from the spirit of technology—the jargoneers think anyone can accomplish just by pushing any of fifteen or twenty verbal buttons. The jargon is at once too much of a system and not nearly enough of one. Not nearly enough of one, because it has given up on the ambition to transform language top to bottom. Convinced of impending verbal catastrophe, it is nonetheless resigned to changing almost nothing, rejuvenating a handful of words on an individual basis, and altering even these almost not at all. A systemic crisis requires a systemic response, and the jargon isn't that. But it is also too much of a system, it in that it amounts to a rulebook, a series of steps. Say X and you will be authentic. Say Z and you will undo the Forgetting of Being.

9.

The question that arises at this point is how we can identify a word as belonging to the jargon of German existentialism. The English-speaking reader probably won't have this problem. If you're American and reading someone under the spell of German existentialism, chances are you're going to be able to tell, even if you didn't know it when you picked up the book. And the reason you're going to be able to tell is that there will be this set of words that the author will have either left in German or gratuitously capitalized. But the German reader has to make due without these clues, since the word *Dasein* really is just the German word for "existence." German also capitalizes the noun form of Being whenever it appears. Adorno, moreover, has noticed that the words that make up the jargon of existentialism aren't, in fact, the more obviously offbeat entries in the Heideggerian lexicon; they aren't "the presence presences" or Beyng-with-a-y. For the most part, the jargon is made up of words like "queer" — an ordinary, if contested, English word that became central to the history of American Foucauldianism even though it didn't originate with Foucault himself.

So how again do you recognize a word as jargon? Here's Adorno:

> **Many of them [the terms in question] could be used in other constellations with nary a wink at the jargon: the word *Aussage* ["statement" or "utterance"], when an epistemologist needs a concise way of designating the judgments of predication...**

Here it is enough to know that the word *Aussage* ["statement"] shows up routinely in German discussions of Aristotelian or Fregean predication. It's the term for any claim that we might plausibly judge to be true or false, for which Anglophone philosophers prefer the rather fussier "proposition."

So *Aussage* has a perfectly reasonable use outside the jargon. And so does the word "authenticity" itself:

or the word *eigentlich* ["authentic"]—though here one must be careful—including as an adjective, whenever the essential is to be distinguished from the accidental...

Adorno says that "authentic" is fair game even when it's an adjective, and the reason he needs to tack on that extra reassurance is that in German, the word *eigentlich* is first and foremost an adverb, so common and conversational as to have lost much of its proper meaning. If a German says "Why not?" — in the sense of "Might as well" — he is likely to insert an *eigentlich* in the middle: "Why *eigentlich* not?" Or perhaps you've made an assumption about your German friend: "You must have hated that movie." And she responds: "Actually, no. *Eigentlich nicht*." Sometimes the word has the force of "anyway" — to indicate that you are getting around impatiently to a question that you've been meaning to ask or that you are expressing your belated confusion: "What are you doing anyway?" or "What exactly are you doing?" "*Was machst du denn eigentlich*?" The point is that no-one is going to tell Germans to stop using *eigentlich* in any of these several vernacular and semantically bleached ways. It would be silly to even try. But to that implicit concession, Adorno has added two points: First, that *eigentlich* in its dictionary form is not altogether useless; we will occasionally want to know whether a particular something is "authentic." Second, that the existentialist use of *eigentlich* is something else again, deviating importantly from its dictionary usage.

We'll also notice that Adorno is a bit nervous about the word "authentic," even before it was seized on by the existentialists: "here one must be careful" — presumably on by now familiar anti-essentialist grounds. Adorno doesn't want anybody presiding over who or what gets to count as authentic. One might wonder, then, why he doesn't just give up on the word altogether. Why include it on his list of the jargon's innocent uses, when he doesn't think the word is all that innocent? The answer is simple, which is that he knows he has used the word himself, in earlier writing, and he is pre-empting the hostile reader who might otherwise be tempted to point this out. He finds himself compelled, in

other words, to make a little confession, like so: The jargon includes ordinary words, "statement" or "authentic"…

> **or the word "inauthentic," where something fractured is meant, an expression that no longer lines up directly with what is expressed: "Radio broadcasts of traditional music, music conceived in the categories of live performance, have as their undercoat a feeling of the 'as if,' of the inauthentic."**

The point not to miss is that the quotation comes from Adorno's *The Faithful Repetiteur*, which had only just appeared in 1963, the year before *The Jargon* was published. Adorno, in other words, is quoting himself. He's caught himself using the word that this entire volume seems to be arguing against—the word that provides the book with its sneering title—and he accordingly feels compelled to account for himself:

> **In this case, the word "inauthentic" is performing a critical function, the determinate negation of something illusory.**

It's not clear to me that what Adorno is describing really is a "determinate negation." (That's Hegel's term for the idea that the mind can grasp any particular thing only in contradistinction to other relevant objects. The mind cannot apprehend the identity of an object directly, in the absence of contrast or opposition; something can be cognized as what it is only by also knowing what it is not.) If anything, all Adorno seems to be doing here is assuring the reader that he, at least, isn't using the word "inauthentic" ideologically, in order to prop up some other class of objects—in this case performances—as "authentic." He is simply combating a certain media lie—the illusion that the radio is giving us the real thing—and he is doing this, he implies, by amplifying the feeling of inauthenticity that has been part of our experience of the radio all along.

He continues:

> **The jargon, however, extracts "authenticity"—and its opposite—from out of any such context of insight and understanding.**

If I say "Everybody knows that reality television isn't real," I am not making strong claims about the nature of reality or our ability to know it. I'm not claiming to be able to give a metaphysical account of how reality is actually constituted. All I'm saying is that this thing that purports to be real is palpably fake (and that its fakeness is widely acknowledged). I also haven't introduced the word "real" into the conversation; when I say that reality television is not real, I am simply holding the genre to the standard of its own choosing. The problem, then, with the existentialists is that they *do* claim to know what makes some people authentic and others not, and they are willing to make that determination of anyone and everyone, even of people who never claimed to be authentic in the first place — people, that is, who haven't invoked the criterion.

But it turns out that you can only go so far in protecting the words from the jargon:

> **One isn't about to hold the word *Auftrag* — an "order," "errand," "task," or "mission" — against a company that has just received one. But possibilities of this kind remain crabbed and abstract. Anyone who presses them too far is headed for a blankly nominalist theory of language, in which words are nothing more than exchangeable tokens, untouched by history.**

This last sentence is trickier than it initially appears. Adorno seems to be warning his readers against nominalism—that's the idea that most words (all words?) are just names and that the concepts that these refer to don't rest on anything real. The spin-off of nominalism that most of us are

steeped in is some version or another of "the social and discursive construction of reality." It's the position you are taking any time you announce that "gender isn't real" or "race isn't real"—that these are above all ways of talking. We classify people and things one way; we could just as well classify them lots of other ways. The puzzle here is that Adorno is demonstrably a nominalist, as are nearly all critical theorists and indeed anyone who has read a lot of Nietzsche. It is genuinely odd to find Adorno shoo-ing his readers off the path to nominalism. And recognizing this should allow us to see that Adorno is not, in fact, condemning nominalism as such; he's not actually promoting the realism that wants us to believe that gender and race aren't just constructs. It is only a certain extreme nominalism that he wants to guard against—not all nominalism, just the blank and ahistorical kind. The mistake would be to treat each individual usage of a word as though it were a stipulative definition, empowered blithely to elect its own meaning: Let x mean y. And the problem with stipulative definitions is that they instruct us to ignore the entire range of ambiguous and secondary meanings that nearly any word will have accrued. They require us to suppress whatever associations come to mind and are to that extent de-contextualizing, asking us to prescind individual words from their broader verbal and social contexts. (That's what Adorno means when he says that this approach is "crabbed and abstract.") The alternative, of course, would be to let the context back in —to let the word be "touched by history." But in that case, we can't continue to use the German words enlisted by the right-wing existentialists by pretending that those sub-Heideggerian usages don't exist or don't apply. A German speaker's verbal and social context now includes the jargon, which can't be wished away.

He goes on:

> **History makes its way into every word and so blocks each one from retrieving its putative *Ursinn*, its original definition and primal sense, which is what the jargon is always chasing after.**

The last clause undertakes a characteristically Adornian reversal — so quick and dainty a spatula-flip that a reader could easily read right past it or register it only as a fleeting perplexity. Adorno, after all, wasn't addressing the people who embrace the jargon; he was addressing the ones who reject it, the ones who want to keep their language uncontaminated by the weird philosophers. What this last clause is saying, therefore, is that the two groups converge on a quintessentially Heideggerian mistake, which is to think that they can resurrect at will the earlier meanings of a word. The jargoneers want to return language to Homeric Greece and the barbarian forests beyond the Roman *limes*. The anti-jargoneers aren't as ambitious; they just want to protect the common usages that predated the jargon itself. But at heart, the impulse is the same: if they aren't careful, the opponents of existentialism will repeat the errors of their enemies.