

The Jargon of Authenticity

David Ferraro

Mindfulness and positive psychology as ideology

Accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative: 'try not to think'

It would be tempting, perhaps, to describe 'positive psychology' as the latest fad in a discipline not short of buzzwords and passing fashions. Tempting, but not true, since this particular trend has thoroughly infiltrated almost every form of psychotherapeutic mental-health treatment, and many other areas besides, and is implemented in the corporate world, the public sector and educational settings. The function of this doctrine of optimism in times of crisis calls for explanation, remembering that here, as elsewhere, the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas.

One can get a sense of what the doctrine is all about in 'Positive Psychology', a pamphlet published by Australian mental-health research and advocacy centre the Black Dog Institute. The aim of such a psychology, according to the pamphlet, is 'wellbeing'. (One should carefully note that the construction of the subject of positive psychology is ontological—based on well-being—and not ethical and oriented around well doing or well saying.) This need for wellbeing seems implicitly, at least, to derive from meaninglessness, since 'meaning' is everywhere posited as a key goal of positive psychology. The 'meaning' in question is in turn reducible to a set of practices or 'strategies', including those aimed at 'enhancing pleasure; such as committing to regular acts of self-congratulation, seeking novelty and being 'absorbed' in all this to the extent that you 'try not to think, just sense'. Beyond this are further recommendations for wellbeing, such as practising forgiveness, thanking mentors and engaging in 'mindfulness', to which we shall return shortly. Perhaps the most famous exponent of the positive psychology approach is Martin Seligman, whose strategies are promoted in his book *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. Pitted against contem-

porary meaninglessness is a terminology involving 'authenticity', the immediacy of 'presence', a pathologisation of the 'negative', and acceptance and commitment (though generally much more of the former than the latter).

Such rhetoric recalls that which was pilloried in Theodor Adorno's brief and incisive work *The Jargon of Authenticity*. Adorno's tome was a critique of German existentialism, particularly that of Jaspers and Heidegger. By examining both the language of the philosophers and the conceptual machinery of their project, Adorno argued for German existentialism to be grasped in terms of ideology. In dismantling the jargon—of 'authenticity', 'wholeness', 'immediacy' and the like—he was able to reveal its underpinnings as a series of religious gestures, but devoid of religious content. This was an ideological mystification of human domination, with affinities to at least two other discourses of note from the twentieth century: mass advertising, and the philosophical apologetics for German fascism.

One need not be particularly radical to observe that an approach that eschews context and history greatly favours oppressors over the oppressed.

The conceptual heir of the German ideologues is, arguably, today's positive psychology movement, a predominantly Anglophone appropriation of the Continental European tradition of existential-humanistic psychology, with some pop Buddhism and patronising glibness added for good measure. ('Critical positivity ratios; anyone?') What I wish to show here is that Adorno's critique applies to this movement as it did to the German existentialists, and that both jargons operate ideologically in a similar manner: as a method of pacification and obedience, for the promotion of personal narcissism and consumerism, and in service of crypto-fascist and militaristic functions.

Mindfulness and the marketing of immediacy

At the heart of positive psychology is mindfulness. It derives from certain Buddhist tenets aimed at a pacification of the mind. (For summaries, see Virginia Heffernan's 'The Muddled Meaning of Mindfulness' in *The New York Times Magazine* and Brad Warner's 'Why I Avoid Using the Word "Mindfulness"' in *Hardcore Zen*).

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The Jargon Of Authenticity

Robert R. Redfield



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Table of Contents The Jargon Of Authenticity

1. Understanding the eBook The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - The Rise of Digital Reading The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Personalized Recommendations

- The Jargon Of Authenticity User Reviews and Ratings
- The Jargon Of Authenticity and Bestseller Lists
- 5. Accessing The Jargon Of Authenticity Free and Paid eBooks
 - The Jargon Of Authenticity Public Domain eBooks
 - The Jargon Of Authenticity eBook Subscription Services
 - The Jargon Of Authenticity Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating The Jargon Of Authenticity eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - The Jargon Of Authenticity Compatibility with Devices
 - The Jargon Of Authenticity Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Interactive Elements The Jargon Of Authenticity
- 8. Staying Engaged with The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers The Jargon Of Authenticity
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection The Jargon Of Authenticity
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Setting Reading Goals The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of The Jargon Of Authenticity
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of The Jargon Of Authenticity

- Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements
 - Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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