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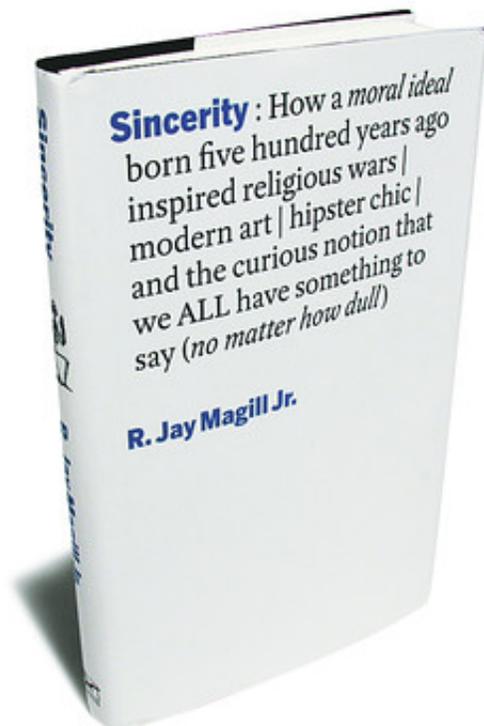
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Say It as If You Mean It

By DANIEL AKST

About sincerity nobody can say we haven't been warned. Niccolo Machiavelli, Ben Franklin, George Bernard Shaw and countless others have cautioned against its hazards, but W. Somerset Maugham may have done so most vividly. "I don't think you want too much sincerity in society," he said. "It would be like an iron girder in a house of cards."

There is good reason for caution. Extreme frankness is often called "brutal," after all, and unbridled truth-telling at all times and in all places would probably result in bloodletting. Despite such doubts, sincerity is a cherished trait. We admire it and feel badly treated when a comment or action, assumed to be heartfelt, turns out to be insincere. Sincerity—broadly speaking, the alignment of outer and inner selves—would seem to be essential to the modern conception of a virtuous life.



But how did we get here? R. Jay Magill Jr. tries to answer this question in "Sincerity," a fascinating cultural survey and intellectual investigation. The postwar world, he notes, has given us a whole field of sincerity studies. Lionel Trilling took on the task in "Sincerity and Authenticity," a series of Harvard lectures published in 1972. In Trilling's account, the focus on sincerity arose in the 16th century, with the Protestant Reformation and its emphasis on individual conscience rather than institutional ritual and doctrine. Over time, travel and trade made sincerity ever more important in judging the bona fides of strangers. According to Trilling, sincerity was eventually elbowed aside by the need for authenticity, "a more strenuous moral experience" that responds aggressively to received moral opinion. Authenticity, in this view, is sincerity plus autonomy.

Mr. Magill's own definition of sincerity is both broad and precise: "confronting one's innermost thoughts or emotions and relaying them to others straightforwardly, no matter how relevant to the topic, injurious to one's own reputation, or embarrassing—or however correct or incorrect." This sounds more like what most of us would call over-sharing, but no matter. In the author's hands, it serves to encompass a wide range of human experience.

Sincerity

By R. Jay Magill Jr.
(Norton, 272 pages, \$25.95)

Mr. Magill is especially clever about tracing his subject through the arts. The history of design, he says, can be seen as the search for a visual expression of sincerity, a claim he supports by taking the reader from the simplicity demanded by Protestantism (in rebellion against Baroque Catholicism) to the rise of abstraction in art. Decoration, after all, implies dissembling, something that would become anathema to the form-follows-function crowd. In painting and sculpture as well, we see a long movement toward the purest possible presentation of material. The apotheosis of sincerity in the arts was Ad Reinhardt's black-on-black paintings; they "achieved what modern art—and the Protestant religion—had for so long wanted to be: sincerity itself." They did this by being only themselves: paint on canvas.

In the realm of the literary arts, Mr. Magill has a field day, zeroing in on Rousseau as the source of our modern literary obsession with sincerity, which the author finds manifest in German and English Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, French Symbolism and other currents that come to look like a tidal wave in favor of finding and flaunting the unvarnished self. All such movements carry "the echo of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the subsequent romantic impulse: go forward and leap toward vigilant, violent self-expression; stress your own experience over the commercial and social developments surrounding your unique life."

Freud helped push literature in this direction, Mr. Magill says, by replacing "the traditional 'holy space' reserved for the reception and discovery of God" with "drives for sex, violence, death, and pleasure." The problem here was that, unlike Rousseau, who saw man without civilization as happy and good, Freud saw him as "a homicidal little beast who wants to have sex with his mother and murder his father." A fine reason, in other words, for moderns to be wary of sincerity. Yet the war on artifice inspired by the forces of sincerity seeped into popular culture and commerce anyway. It was abetted by the likes of H.L. Mencken and such other lampooners of cant and inauthenticity as Dorothy Parker and W.C. Fields.

Mr. Magill's range is extraordinary, and his wit, erudition and powers of observation give credence to judgments that might otherwise strike us as just a tad, well, insincere. "Our frustration with insincerity," he says, "is itself disingenuous—a kind of performance of upright moral sensibility." For much of this deeply pleasurable work Mr. Magill is properly wary of his subject. The Puritan emphasis on sincerity, he shows, led to a climate of suspicion and misanthropy, as if these energetic divines had intuited Nietzsche's later comment that "the truly sincere person ends up understanding that he is always lying." Ultimately, though, the author comes down in favor of sincerity, if not too much of it. With sincerity, as with most things, it is the dose that makes the poison.

Readers interested in the science behind sincerity might want to pair Mr. Magill's book with Dan Ariely's "The Honest Truth About Dishonesty," just published by Harper. Mr. Ariely, a behavioral economist, shows that hardly anyone comes close to the ideal of sincerity all the time; yet our false beliefs about our own honesty keep us from lying even more. It is probably too much to ask that Mr. Magill, already covering so much ground, bridge C.P. Snow's "two cultures"—science and the humanities. "Sincerity" is a delightful work just as it is. I mean that. Sincerely.

Mr. Akst, a member of Newsday's editorial board, is the author of "Temptation: Finding Self-Control in an Age of Excess," now a Penguin paperback.

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