

Introduction

*It is dangerous to be sincere,
unless you are also stupid.*

- George Bernard Shaw,
“Maxims for Revolutionists,” 1903



NOT SO VERY LONG AGO, in the Year of Our LORD Two Thousand and Ten, Sarah Palin descended upon the Fox News Channel’s *Glenn Beck Program* with a warning. “It’s very, very dangerous to trust people in this business of politics,” she said, twice. “There’s so much doubt as to whom you can trust.” Dressed in a smart black jacket, a sassy black skirt, and knee-high black boots, Palin sat chummily with her host in a mushroom beige living-room studio overlooking the Statue of Liberty. “I picked this spot because of that statue, and what it means,” Beck said. He then urged Palin to recount her stint as an insider privy to the sundry machinations of American power jockeying when she was chosen as Senator John McCain’s running mate in 2008:

Well, Glenn, there were those who were [sharks], and there were others who were so amazing and awesome and sincere. And I

thank God for the people who were surrounding the campaign who fit that description! . . . Had it not been for those who were sincere and wanted to see our ticket win, to serve for the right reasons, I would have lost all hope in this political system. . . . The generation of today that is of voting age . . . can see through the insincerity. . . . We have to get the real people, the sincere people.¹

She went on to rue “these days [when] you can’t put your trust in anybody—except your spouse.” And looking back to the attitudes of the Founding Fathers and “seeing the sincerity there,” she said, “I don’t think in recent days we can find those kinds of politicians.” Beck concurred: “I have learned over the last year that I just cannot trust *anybody*.” All hope of America’s future greatness had died with the election of the man Beck and Palin were determined to portray as a foreign-born socialist usurper, Barack Hussein Obama.

In Palin’s footsteps, competitors for the position of the most powerful person in the world have continued to vie for the badge of sincerity—to be seen as the candidate who not only means what he says, but who means it the most. And despite what many voters believe to be true about the calculating quality of politics, they still demand that candidates’ avowal and action align; that the inner should match the outer; and that political strategists and politicians should say what they really believe instead of manipulating people with what they think voters want to hear.

While admiration for sincerity is understandable, the absence of the trait in politicians is perhaps the age-oldest lament, not exactly worthy of breaking-news status, and it isn’t likely to go away soon. And actually, perhaps it shouldn’t. Sincerity, after all, is not the same thing as honesty, which means saying what you know to be the truth about objective things or events, regardless of how you feel about them. Sincerity is also not the same as frankness, which means revealing one’s judgment about someone

or something, even though that judgment might offend. Being sincere is a rather more tricky state of affairs: it means 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. Sincerity, in other words, is a subjective state that need not have anything to do with reality.

But because self-presentation and impression management are necessary for people dependent on the approval of others, political leaders often resort to saying things they don't mean. In 2007 a team of political psychologists set out to measure the sincerity of that species of publicly elected persons who “extol peace while preparing to start a war, promise tax relief while planning tax increases, express concern and sympathy on issues they care nothing about, oppose a policy in public while pursuing it secretly (or vice versa).” In such situations, say the researchers, it would be useful “for everyone to be in possession of a truth detector.” Fortunately, science may now have one.

Siphoning through a bundle of metrics called Thematic Content Analysis (TCA), which measures “integrative complexity,” “non-immediacy,” and “motive imagery,” the researchers set out to assess the sincerity of President George W. Bush. After analyzing micro-gestures and emotional output and tics of verbal expression, they concluded that the former president's remarks about the case for the Iraq war “showed complete consistency among cognitive, emotional, and motivational indices; all . . . markers, show [Bush] to have been very sincere in his remarks.”² And so, while we may want leaders to really mean what they say, heightened attention to a speaker's sincerity can lead to overlooking more important criteria—such as foresight, accuracy, judgment, and competence. Perhaps it's true, as the great American sociologist David Riesman wrote in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), that “concern for sincerity in political personalities [is] a vice.”

For better or worse, national polls hint at our contradictory feeling that sincerity is both desirable in political figures and a criterion that misses the mark. In the run-up to the 2008 presidential election, *Forbes.com* published a list of the “Most Sincere Presidential Candidates.” Beating out, among others, Barack Obama, Dennis Kucinich, Bill Richardson, Hillary Clinton, John McCain, Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Michael Bloomberg was . . . “Fred Thompson, the most sincere of the 14 presidential candidates of both political parties.”³ The survey attributed the *Law and Order* district attorney’s high ranking both to his real-life courtroom experience and, more so, to his “honing sincerity on television.” More recently, the second question on a January 30, 2012, *USA Today* / Gallup poll about the frontrunners for the GOP presidential nomination asked whether each was “sincere and authentic,” an evaluative category that coexists with “leadership qualities” and the “ability to manage government effectively.” Perhaps it’s no wonder that in a number of past polls about the most sincere president in history, former actor Ronald Reagan is often the winner. Yet “sincerity is not necessarily a central requirement for a president,” *Forbes* wrote in the 2008 poll. “Still, any president who expects to use the power of that office effectively should present at least an appearance of sincerity in dealing with his administration, Congress, or voters.”⁴

Niccolò Machiavelli—no surprise—had exactly the same advice for his imaginary prince in 1513, writing that sincerity is indeed useful when you want to appear moral to the people who support you. But actually being sincere is inadvisable: “Those princes who have accomplished great deeds are those who have thought little about keeping faith and who have known how cunningly to manipulate men’s minds,” Machiavelli counseled. “They have surpassed those who have laid their foundations upon sincerity.”⁵ Amoral, ruthless politics underneath the cover of smiling

innocence was the key to advantage and power. Rule number one: Do not appear as you are.

Machiavelli was drawing on a long tradition, of course: Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* observes, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." Plato himself justified the "noble lie," which placed lofty public goals ahead of personal morality. Aristotle observed the same in the *Rhetoric*, and the *raison d'état* (reason of state) has long been creed among the powerful, from Richelieu, Clausewitz, and Metternich to Kissinger, Rumsfeld, and Rove. In fact, the use of sincerity as a ruse has been so integrated into political life over the last five centuries that not to engage in deceptive tactics or to recognize their utility has become a sign of political immaturity or lack of worldliness. It's what separates old hawks from young doves.

Even in America, "the only country in the world which was founded in explicit opposition to Machiavellian principles," as political theorist Leo Strauss believed, sincerity might have been more promoted than practiced.⁶ John Dickinson, author of *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania* (1768), insisted that colonists set out to discover the distinction between men of "sincerity" and men of "policy," and suggested the latter be fought in kind. John Adams, for all his Founding Father sincerity, confided in his diary and other writings that deception and strategy were non-negotiable parts of political statesmanship. "Dissimulation," he wrote, "is the first Maxim of worldly Wisdom." Benjamin Franklin balanced his forays into grand strategy with the overt promotion of sincerity, ranking it second in his "Thirteen Virtues" (1730), directly after silence. Even our Honest Abe, that earnest Kentucky darling, was maligned by his opponent in the 1858 debates for having sneak-attacked the audience with his "usual artless sincerity." Stephen Douglas begged the crowd "not to be deceived by his seeming innocence, his carefully cultivated spirit

of goodwill!" In each of Abe's little homilies, Douglas warned, "lurk concealed weapons."

Sophisticated thinkers have long vacillated between ridiculing sincerity when it appears (e.g., George Bernard Shaw's observation that sincerity was dangerous unless one was stupid) and complaining that others don't take the virtue quite seriously enough. The esteemed Columbia University professor and literary critic Lionel Trilling, for one, cared enough about sincerity to trace its swift decline as a political, moral, and literary value in our own time. "The word sincerity has lost most of its former high dignity," he observed in his compact and commanding book *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971), based on the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures he delivered at Harvard in 1969-70. "When we hear it, we are conscious of the anachronism which touches it with quaintness," he wrote. "If we speak it, we are likely to do so with either discomfort or irony."⁷

Trilling's contemporary, the critic Patricia M. Ball, had signaled its decline even earlier, in an influential 1964 essay in the *Modern Language Review*, writing that sincerity, once the critical benchmark of the finest Romantic and Victorian literature, was "in its sadder days of exile."⁸ Critics like Herbert Read, Marshall Berman, and Henri Peyre had all likewise seen the writing on the wall and took an extended view of sincerity's travails: Read's *Cult of Sincerity* (1968) lamented the rise of a noisy nineteenth-century industrialism that drowned out the inner voice and instigated the decline of sincerity as a critical standard for literature; Berman's Marxist-inspired *Politics of Authenticity* (1970) delineated the French political theory that he thought birthed our obsession with being fully ourselves; and Peyre's *Literature and Sincerity* (1963) traced the rise and fall of sincerity as a literary and moral demand since the sixteenth-century *Essays* of Michel de Montaigne, arguably

the first author with a burning desire to show himself as he really was, faults and all.

All of these scholars were thinking about sincerity and authenticity during the 1960s, when, as Trilling put it, “moral life [was] in the process of revising itself.” Drove of newly cynical citizens, searching for sincerity, were becoming allergic to politics after a decade of hyperpolitical protest, three horrific assassinations, and an undefined war in Southeast Asia, all of which had led to a “credibility gap” between voters and the federal government that has never really closed. *Sincerity and Authenticity* was published five months prior to the Watergate break-in.

Like it or not, Americans’ perception of their fellow citizens’ morality and honesty has fallen dramatically since then. A 2006 update to the authoritative Saguaro Report, a study of American social life led by the Harvard social psychologist Robert Putnam (author of *Bowling Alone*), revealed that less than a third of Americans felt that they could trust one another. And while there has been an increase in social trust in the last half-decade (more often than not among Internet users), a widely cited study found that almost half of the American population only had either one person or no one to talk to.⁹ The number of Americans lacking someone with whom to discuss important matters had nearly tripled since 1985. (A follow-up Pew Report in 2009 contested these findings but acknowledged that the “diversity of core discussion networks has markedly declined.”)¹⁰

More alone, more suspicious of the motives of our fellow citizens and public servants, and more doubting of others’ sincerity, we habitually debunk high-minded rhetoric (on both sides of the political divide) and believe that peeling off the public face reveals a rotten core of disingenuousness, cynical manipulation, and hypocrisy. The truths of these revelations are confirmed nearly every day by *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, by *South Park* and *The*

Onion, which showcase unsurprising transgressions against the public trust and basic moral standards (Anthony Weiner, Bernie Madoff, Eliot Spitzer, John Edwards, and so on). But these observations, which almost inevitably seem to be delivered in a comic format, are not just facile markers of some chuckling hip awareness or postmodern blasé knowingness. Rather, these judgments of insincerity, hypocrisy, and fake authenticity float like hypercharged electrons around the ancient moral nucleus of sincerity, nodding to its decline with a kind of resentful remorse.

The intriguing thing about our repeated moral letdowns is not that insincerity continues to exist, but that we continue to insist we are outraged by it. In many ways our frustration with insincerity is itself disingenuous—a kind of performance of an upright moral sensibility. Most of us actually do recognize how things get done in the world, for better or worse. Power and money matter. Who you know matters. Public and private do not need to align in political matters. This is called pragmatism, or realism, or realpolitik, or Machiavellianism, or, since Machiavelli, simply politics. WikiLeaks and the Occupy movement may have been arguing against the ways of the world for high-minded moral reasons, but as the intellectual historian Martin Jay recently wrote in his *Virtues of Mendacity* (2010), the political hypocrisy Americans so passionately decry “may be the best alternative to the violence justified by those who claim to know the truth.” Many a Communist dictator, Jay notes, regularly enforced the citizenry’s total transparency by spying on and slaughtering or banishing dissenters to Siberia. Like it or not, liberty includes the right to lie; freedom allows for deceit. Given the alternatives, insincerity hardly seems disagreeable.

But Americans, more than any other people, it seems, still demand the appearance of sincerity. They have long liked to imagine themselves as more down-to-earth and real than people from other countries. From the framing idea that the United

States is based on a *fundamental* human freedom to the Straight Talk Express, among other “no-bullshit” outlets, Americans often aim to “tell it like it is” and “keep it real.” Today’s political talk show hosts take us to the “no spin zone,” where they play “hardball.” Even MTV’s *The Real World* asked us at the dawn of our cool age (1992) what would happen if we “stopped being polite . . . and started getting real?” This is so because Americans feel that formality and social distance (both social constructs) are, at the end of the day, unnecessary. Formality is just a bunch of rules that ultimately cover up the real, authentic person, some fundamental being who exists prior to society rather than through it. Some more libertarian Americans believe that they would be much better off if society would just go away and leave them alone altogether so they could enjoy their freedom in peace.

Given these antisocial leanings, American demands for sincerity, it might be argued, are an attempt to surmount our otherwise weak social bonds, our lack of credence in social rituals—our lack of what Alexis de Tocqueville once termed the “sense of society.” One might even see sincerity as a fundamentally democratic demand: the person seeking it assumes he or she has the right to know even a superior’s innermost thoughts and feelings beyond his or her public mask. The person answering the demand assumes that he or she is valuable enough to warrant interest in his or her subjective world. Seen in this context, sincerity attempts to make intimates of strangers by breaking down social conventions and insisting, “We’re all in this together.” (Irony, on the other hand, is more aristocratic; it pulls away and says, “Good luck.”)

But here it is important to ask: does sincerity mean revealing one’s intentions openly and avoiding deceit (as in, “I mean this sincerely”), or does it mean pursuing one’s goals in accordance with one’s true beliefs (as in, “I sincerely believe that X is the right thing to do and will stop at nothing to do it”)? The former sees sincerity as a bond that demands openness of intention with others.

The latter is about the principle of authentic self-sameness: do not stand against yourself, or “To thine own self be true,” as Shakespeare’s Polonius reminded Laertes in *Hamlet*. It must not follow, however, that if you adhere to sincerity as an honest relationship to your interests that “thou canst not then be false to any man.” This kind of sincerity, in fact, as Machiavelli advised his prince, can lead to ever more clever ways of being deceptive.

Given its ethical implications, sincerity has found its most reliable champions and commentators in spheres other than politics: religion, art, literature, and philosophy.

Puritan theology held that without the believer’s sincere repentance and genuine spiritual transformation, not only was heaven impossible but so was belonging to the church. Believers were given the opportunity to explain to church elders the details of their “sincere conversion experience”—or else be damned to a life of wandering outside of grace. Under such existential angst, more and more people learned to feign sincerity. Some observant contemporary English and French satirists thus disparaged the trait of sincerity for its perfect ability to cover up lying and deception. The detection of hypocrisy became something of a sport in the seventeenth century, exemplified by Molière’s poisonous jab at fake religion, *Tartuffe, or the Imposter* (1664). A century later the eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, himself an odd kind of Calvinist, held true to sincerity, believing it was the sole quality that delivered man back to his state of original purity, freed from the false and oppressive protocols of social life. Rousseau’s sentiments helped to motivate not only the French Revolution, but also what would become Romantic thought in Europe and America, a movement in art and music that lasted for five decades and urged individuals to see themselves outside of their inherited roles, and outside of society altogether, as unique beings standing on the precipice of the world.

Over the decades, this ethos of sincerity evolved from seeking the truth of oneself to sharing the whole of that truth with others with unabashed pride, a trait that would come to be called, in modern times, authenticity. This insistence on being who one feels oneself to be at all times eventually found a home in modern art and literature. Artists and writers well into the twentieth century, following Rousseau, declared the importance of the self's authenticity against the inauthenticity of modern consumer society, which many critics believed had enslaved individuals in a capitalist system and then offered them illusory freedom through the purchase of its products.

This line of criticism and rebellious self-expressiveness has rolled into our own time, of course, through art, music, fashion, and literature—through Beats and hippies and punk and rap—and eventually through the messages of some of the world's largest advertising agencies and corporations themselves, such as Apple's "Think Different" and other variations of blazing your own trail, flying your own flag, having it your way, thinking outside the box, and other corporate pabulum. Alas, even today's "counterculture" fashions—beards, wacky eyeglasses, piercings, tattoos—play perfectly into this old Romantic logic of showing the authentic self to the world, into being an advertisement for oneself, into trumpeting one's inner uniqueness—one's irreplaceable soul, immortal or not.

Even irony, once the weapon of choice for the necessary lampooning of moral and political hypocrisy, now seems old. It surfaces in any television commercial with "edge," as a quaint rhetorical trick printed on snarky t-shirts, as front-and-center "zingers" on middlebrow sitcoms, or even as tired punch lines of *New Yorker* cartoons. Since the election of Obama in 2008, actually, irony has seemed to become an easy way to showcase rebelliousness and critical thought without having to do anything at all. The best kind of irony, of course, continues to remind us of our sincerity. Importantly, as this book will argue, the two are not opposite.

In fact, morally vigorous irony may be the only form of spin that can jar us into recognizing the itchings of conscience, to get us to see through the fake display of sincerity, to return us to seriousness through jokes.

Moral ideals have histories. They come from somewhere and are pushed forward by the winds of religion and politics, by individuals and mass movements. And though people have always made use of ideals and then killed them off when they were no longer useful, some ideals echo into our own time as a sort of philosophical afterimage, their continuing liveliness made apparent by our own lingering moral feelings.

The ideals of sincerity and authenticity—twin ideals that insist you say what you feel and be true to who you are in order to live a satisfying life—continue to hold enormous and undeniable sway over our lives, even absent their religious origins. They are ideals, as the philosopher Charles Taylor has written, “unrepudiable by moderns.” The ideal of sincerity, born five hundred years ago as a moral imperative, abides in us in ways silent and compelling, drawing the secular mind inward like a strange magnetic north.