"Sincerity" and "Authenticity" in Modern Society

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There have probably been few if any previous elections in which the "sincerity" of the presidential candidates was as much of an issue as in 1972. In the middle of this political morality play, in October, the Harvard University Press published Lionel Trilling's new book, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. This is not to suggest that there is an immediate connection between the turbulence of the political scene and the (one presumes) tranquil refuges in which men of letters write books. (In any case, the present book contains lectures given by Trilling in the spring of 1970.) There are less immediate connections, though, and it is worth uncovering them for a better understanding of letters as well as politics.

Trilling's book, brief though it is, presents a masterful account of what could be described as a descent into the depths of the literary mind of the West. These "depths" are not to be taken metaphorically. Trilling's account begins with a world of still shining surfaces and intact edifices, which form the stable background against which Shakespearean heroes try to be true to their own selves. The account ends in the post-Freudian world of what Trilling calls "the authentic unconscious," a world in which all edifices are transparent and in which there are no more surfaces. It is the alleged "true self" of Western man that thus descends into "depth psychology." The drama is of world-shattering intensity. It begins with Western man understanding himself as the being that is a little lower than the angels, and it concludes with anthropologies such as those of Norman Brown and R. D. Laing, in which the "true self" is revealed in madness. Trilling describes all this with calm detachment. His account can be read as the story of Western man's loss of self, or alternatively as the story of his progressive liberation from myth and self-alienation. Only on occasion does it become clear that Trilling tends toward the former, the pessimistic interpretation.

The word "sincere," both in French and in English, originally meant no more than "pure," "unalloyed," as in "sincere wine" or "the sincere Gospel." It came to be applied to persons metaphorically, first to mean a consistency in virtue, then the absence of pretense. It was in this latter sense that sincerity became an absorbing interest in the 16th century. Whether in Shakespeare or in Machiavelli, there is the per-
sistent question as to whether individuals are what they pretend to be. The longer this question is asked, the more it leads to a systematic interest in the hidden motives of action, to the "depths" presumed to lie below the surfaces of observable social life, indeed to "psychology." In the 17th and 18th centuries sincerity becomes both codified and *bourgeoisé*. The prototype of the sincere person becomes the "honest soul," who is identical with the *bourgeois gentilhomme*. In literature as in social experience, this character moves about the stage of what is now understood to be "society"—no longer the hierarchical, cosmically grounded order of Christendom, but a highly dynamic and ever-changing reality. The sincerity of the social actors now becomes the only means by which this unreliable reality can serve as an order of sorts. Still, in this universe of discourse the "true self" of the individual continues to be linked to the performance of public roles. This accounts for the "theatricality" of this world, from the elaborately staged scenes in the Versailles of Louis XIV to the (literally) ludicrous events of the French Revolution. In other words, to be true to oneself still means that certain social roles are truly (that is, sincerely) performed.

The idea of authenticity emerges from the disintegration of sincerity. As Trilling describes the transformation, one may almost say that authenticity emerges as the opposite of sincerity. Now the "true self" is no longer placed on the stage of public roles, but on the contrary is made manifest only in resistance to these roles. In other words, while sincerity presupposes a symmetrical relation between self and society, authenticity implies a fundamental opposition between them. The *ens realissimum* of the individual is transposed from the external reality of social interaction to the recesses of inner space.

The age of authenticity, in Trilling's account, matures with the 19th century, heralded by Hegel and his praise of the "disintegrated consciousness." Hegel repudiates the "honest soul" because it is bound to the external structures of society and therefore represents an inferior phase in the movement of the human spirit toward freedom. Estrangement from society is the first step toward liberation, toward attaining the "true self." The contrast is clear: Sincerity is discovered *within* social roles, authenticity *behind and beneath* them. Needless to add, in the course of this transformation the quest for the "true self" becomes more violent and eventually more desperate.

Trilling follows this drama through the works of a number of authors, some of them preceding Hegel. The anguish of Goethe's Werther, Rousseau's self-portrayal as "a torn soul," Oscar Wilde's "truth of masks"—these, among others, are presented as anticipations and reiterations of the Hegelian theme. In all of them, the truth of man is deep within him, submerged in the inauthenticity of society (which is precisely the bourgeois world of "honest philistines"), and freed from this inauthenticity in wrenching experiences of alienation. There is a direct continuity of themes here between the *Sturm und Drang* of the romantics and the terrible freedom of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and the 20th-century existentialists.
In this perspective, the advent of the Freudian unconscious marks the final phase in the “disintegrated consciousness” celebrated by Hegel. The inauthenticity from which the “true self” must be liberated is now no longer limited to the external reality of society, but is introduced into that inner space in which the libido carries on its endless tragicomedies. Theatricality becomes psychodrama. In addition to the enemy without (society and its forbidding “reality principle”), there now lurk the enemies within, some of them introjected distortions of social reality, some of them figures rising out of the murky chaos of the id. But in a very real sense, Freud himself was still a bourgeois gentilhomme, still animated by a vision of some symmetry, however tenuous, between inner and outer space, between self and society. In this respect, the original project of psychoanalysis stands in continuity with the ideals of the French Revolution, its version of the discovery of the “true self” marked by the same faith in fraternity through reason. The celebration of libidinal insurrection in the currently fashionable radicalizations of Freudian doctrine implies a final repudiation of sincerity in favor of authenticity. In the ideology of many New Left intellectuals, authenticity and insurrection have been equated. The “true self” creates itself in the act of violent rebellion against the bourgeois order outside and the latter’s “repressive” correlates within. (There is a built-in problem in this anthropology, namely the problem of how to be authentic and, one imagines, non-insurrectional in a world in which the revolution has been accomplished. But this problem need not concern us here.)

This is the main outline of the intellectual drama depicted by Trilling. The argument is fully persuasive and the depiction would be hard to excel (indeed, in sketching the outline it was necessary to resist the temptation to follow Trilling along any number of intriguing byways). Therefore, it does not detract from Trilling’s book to say that its argument requires being rounded out by a consideration of the more mundane context of the intellectual drama. As it stands, the argument could easily be misunderstood as concerning a pale Platonic heaven, in which ideas and their purveyors knock against each other in isolation from the sweaty doings of the rest of mankind. In the early part of the book Trilling does mention two broad social forces that, he feels, assisted at the birth of sincerity. These are social mobility and urbanization. In one of the many asides that make this book a pleasure to read, Trilling points out that it was not by accident that the opposite of the “honest soul” was named the “villain”—a townsman engaged in the grubby business of clawing his way upward. But these sociological observations are only briefly made and then given up in the remainder of the book.

A sociological amplification of Trilling’s argument will have to rest on a number of presuppositions that, clearly, cannot be argued here. The most important presupposition will be that, most of the time, ideas are grounded in social experience. To be sure, there are lonely thinkers capable of creating ideas that do indeed inhabit a
Platonic heaven of abstraction. Such abstraction from the overall experience of society, however, is quite rare in cases of successful ideas. Although there can be no satisfying sociological explanation of why Hegel thought what he did—not even if each detail of his social biography were exhaustively analyzed—sociology can play a part in explaining how it happened that Hegel’s ideas threw their shadow over an entire century of Western intellectual history. If sociology is relevant in seeking to explain the impact of a thinker of Hegel’s stature, it is even more so with regard to lesser intellectual figures. In those cases, most of the time, ideas simply articulate and legitimate elements of social experience that antedated them.

To say this is not at all to suggest a simplistic social determination of ideas. Rather it is to emphasize the commonplace that the public for theories consists largely of people with much more practical concerns, and that even theorists have pre-theoretical experiences. If the question of sincerity seemed urgent to a certain public in the 16th century, there must have been something in ordinary social experience making this urgency plausible. Trilling actually gives us some indications of what this was. The same logic, however, applies to the later developments he discusses. Thus it would be unreasonably idealistic to think that the wide public existing today for interpretations of life in terms of alienation or unconscious mental processes can be explained in terms of the intrinsic if belated persuasiveness of Marxian and Freudian ideas. However powerful these ideas may be on an abstract level, their success must at least also be explicable in terms of more mundane interests. In other words, there must be some features of ordinary social experience that make it plausible for many people to interpret themselves as alienated and unconsciously motivated beings. Ideas do not triumph in history because of their intrinsic truth, but because of their affinity to pragmatic concerns and interests that usually have very little to do with the quest for truth.

Trilling’s book deals with certain developments in the Western conception of self, or, to use the more current term, of identity. Conceptions of self are related to experiences of self, and these in turn take place within the context of specific social institutions. Put differently, identity is the result of identifications, which are social and institutional processes. Conceptions of self are efforts to answer theoretically the fundamental question, “Who am I?” Even the most awesomely abstract theorist originally asked this question as a child, and he will have received answers related very specifically to his location in society. What is more, the theorist will not find a public unless his conceptualizations are relevant to the questions arising from specific social experiences in a specific social situation. Therefore, Trilling’s account of this particular Odyssey of ideas must be related to the institutional developments that have given these ideas widespread plausibility. These developments are the ones commonly called modernization. The transition from sincerity to authenticity is the ideational correlate of the modernization of institutions. The progressive sharpening of the tension between self and society
implied by the transition points directly to a progressive crisis of the institutions of modernity.

Pre-modern societies are everywhere characterized by a high degree of symmetry between self and society, between subjectively experienced and institutionally assigned identity. Eric Voegelin has definitively described what this means in his analysis of archaic civilizations in terms of “compactness.” This “compactness” was ruptured by various events long before modernity. But even medieval civilization (itself an attempt to create a new order following the ruptures brought about in classical antiquity and by Biblical religion) provided experiences of symmetry that are close to incomprehensible today. If medieval civilization had one key principle, it was that of the *analogia entis*—the hierarchy of being linking each individual to the institutional order, to the order of angels, and finally to the divine ground of the universe. In this hierarchy both self and society possess a *reality* that, ultimately, is cosmically guaranteed. It should be quickly added that this need not at all mean that the individual is happy with his lot: Reality need not bring happiness. In this situation, rather, the individual experiences a world that is fully real, knows his own location in that world, and consequently knows who he is. The reality of the self and the reality of the social world are mirror images of each other. Because of the idiosyncracies of the individual and the accidents of his biography, the symmetry between the two realities is never perfect, is always a relative symmetry. Compared to what happened later, though, we can speak here of symmetry of a very high degree.

With the rise of modern institutions, these experiences of symmetry have been progressively shattered. Consequently, any conceptualizations of this symmetry have become progressively implausible, precisely because they have been deprived of their ground in ordinary social experience. All the major institutional developments commonly ascribed to modernity have contributed to this. The rationalization of economic life, beginning with the rise of mercantile capitalism, shattered the unity of life and work (a unity that was at the heart of the medieval hierarchy in terms of everyday experience). The order of Christendom, as experienced in the institutions of the feudal system and of the church, disintegrated under the impact of the dynamic new formations of the state and of a society of classes, as well as of progressively voluntaristic religious groupings. Social mobility, urbanization, and modern communications (beginning with the printing press) tore more and more people out of the closed worlds of face-to-face community and thrust them into situations where they had to rub elbows continuously with unpredictable, often incomprehensible strangers. Autonomous and immensely powerful worlds were created by technology and bureaucracy, which became the dominant institutional forces following the industrial revolution.

As Trilling points out, there is a peculiarly modern experience of “weightlessness” (Nietzsche said that the death of God has made
men "weightless"). But the "weightlessness" of the self was preceded by an increasing "weightlessness" of institutions. This certainly does not mean that institutions have become less powerful: It is not power but reality that the institutions have lost. Indeed, the more powerful they became in their impact on the individual's life, the less real they came to seem to him. Institutions with vast power and defective reality take on the aspect of "weightless" phantoms. These can be perceived in a malignant mode, as figures of nightmare and alienation. They can also be perceived benignly, as occasions for freedom. In either case, they no longer serve as firm anchors for the individual's understanding of self.

One major effect of the modernization of institutions has been the pluralization of the worlds of social experience. More and more, and earlier and earlier biographically, individuals are thrown back and forth between grossly discrepant social contexts. Consequently, what experiences of symmetry there are, are unclear and unreliable: The mirrors are constantly shifting. As a result, both image and reflection take on an aspect of vertigo, that is, of unreality. As the individual becomes uncertain about the world, he necessarily becomes uncertain about his own self, since that self can be subjectively real only as it is continually confirmed by others. Put differently, as the social identification processes become increasingly fragmented, the subjective experience of identity becomes increasingly precarious. If nothing else, the old question, "Who am I?" then attains a new measure of urgency. The contemporary German social theorist Arnold Gehlen has given the term "subjectivization" to this new interest in the self, and he has very persuasively linked it to what he calls "under-institutionalization," that is, to the increasing inability of modern society to provide a stable order for its members.

Sociologists distinguish between primary and secondary socialization, between the processes by which the self is initially formed in childhood and subsequent modifications of this self in adult life. The modernization of institutions at first affected only secondary socialization. The family not only remained a firm context for primary socialization, but was even strengthened in this part. As Philippe Ariès has shown in his *Centuries of Childhood*, the early bourgeoisie produced a new family ethos and with it a new social experience of childhood highly conducive to the emergence of strongly profiled selves. In other words, the reliable world of the bourgeois family was interposed between the self and the fragmenting institutional order. This permitted a confrontation between a fully real self and the less than fully real world of institutions. The integrated self provided the "weight" (or, to use Williams James's term, the "accent of reality") for society. This was precisely the situation in which sincerity was not only an interesting question but a genuine possibility.

At this stage of modernization there emerged the classical solution to the problem of identity in a pluralized world—the division of
social experience into a public and a private sphere. In the public sphere, the sphere of the great modern institutions (notably the state and the economy), the individual relates to a plurality of experiences, none of which he fully identifies with. These fragmented experiences produce discontents, which in certain cases can well be described as alienation. The private sphere serves (one is almost tempted to say, "is designed") to provide a balance to these discontents. The individual cannot "be himself" at work or in his dealings with various bureaucratic agencies; he "goes home" to his private life from these frustrations and, if that private life has been satisfactorily constructed, he can "be himself" there. The central institution of this private sphere continues to be the family, though it has been vastly changed from what it was in the pre-modern period. Indeed, the family now becomes above all an institution for the production and maintenance of identity, and it is progressively robbed of (or, if one prefers, freed from) other social functions, such as its old economic and educational functions. Other institutional formations surround the family in its identity-maintaining activity. Some of them are also old institutions changed to meet new demands, such as the newly "privatized" church. Others are new institutions, such as the rapidly spreading voluntary associations, each one of them operating as an "identity workshop" for its adherents. As the public sphere continues to slide into unreality, the private sphere emerges as the major plausibility structure for the self and ipso facto for an increasingly sophisticated concern with subjectivity. The rise of the novel (not accidentally the bourgeois literary form par excellence) may be seen as the foremost literary expression of this state of affairs.

This classical solution to the problem of self and society under modern conditions has worked remarkably well for large numbers of people. Undoubtedly it still works very well for many people today. The noise made by intellectuals, with their professional penchant for dramatic desperation, should not be allowed to detract from this fact (quite apart from the likelihood that many of these same intellectuals are more desperate in their writings than in their lives). Yet there is a built-in instability to this solution, and this has become more evident in the more recent phases of modernization. Precisely because the private sphere has no vital functions for the society at large, and because it is effectively segregated from political and economic life, it possesses a strange quality of arbitrariness. This term can be taken literally: In his private existence, the individual is the arbiter of his fate. He is free to a degree that, even in the most libertarian society, would be intolerable in the state and in the economy. He can marry whom he chooses (and he normally chooses in accordance with his personal notions of self-fulfilment), and he can have several consecutive choices. He can, within very broad limits, organize his home life as he sees fit, and raise his children by his own lights. He can exercise a choice of "religious preference" and similar choices within a broad and freely available spectrum of ideologies, moral and aesthetic practices, and therapeutic
cults. Put simply, whatever may be the frustrations of the individual’s experiences in the public sphere, in his private life he is free to a historically unprecedented degree—and this freedom has been steadily growing in the modern societies of the West.

This freedom, however, must endemically introduce more and more instability into that very private sphere that is the sole remaining ground for a stable self. The social history of the family since the industrial revolution is paradigmatic for this. It is in this sociologically very precise sense (and not in the perspective of “moral decay” or some other pejorative designation) that one must understand the interrelation of, for instance, divorce, permissive child-rearing, sexual emancipation, the loss of religious certitudes, and the faddisms of the ideological marketplace. Whether one regards all or any of these as morally deplorable or as humanly liberating, what they have in common is their social location in an increasingly unstable private sphere. All are both results and accretional causes of this instability.

Quite simply, this has meant that the private sphere has become more and more affected by pluralization, and has more and more lost its capacity to provide a stable social foundation for a “weighted” self. In consequence, the private sphere has been weakened in its function of interposition between the reality of the self and the unreality of the institutional world. Inevitably, this has threatened the reality of the self and deepened the turning inward that Gehlen calls “subjectivization.” If nothing “on the outside” can be relied upon to give weight to the individual’s sense of reality, he is left no option but to burrow into himself in search of the real. Whatever this _ens realissimum_ may then turn out to be, it must necessarily be in opposition to any external social formation. The opposition between self and society has now reached its maximum. The concept of authenticity is one way of articulating this experience.

This, of course, is the point at which Trilling’s narrative ends. It is the point of pervasive identity crisis. On the level of social experience, youth culture and counter-culture are foremost expressions of this. On the level of theoretical explication, legitimators such as Norman Brown and R. D. Laing will have to do in the absence of a Hegel. But it would almost certainly be a mistake to look at this phase as an end point. First of all, not all groups in the society are equally affected by this crisis. In America its primary locale is the college-educated upper-middle class, while the old solution has much greater resilience in other classes. More fundamentally, however, powerful countervailing forces are produced by the crisis itself. For better or for worse, one such force is a new hunger for stability and integration, felt most acutely wherever the crisis has been most cataclysmic. Put differently, the more there is an experience of alienation between self and society, the more there emerges a hunger for symmetry.

Authenticity is a lonesome business. There is, therefore, a powerful appeal to the old sincerities. This is one of the reasons why conservative politics has made surprising comebacks in the most un-
expected places. This is particularly so in those classes of society which sense the decline of institutional stability as an external threat, without having fully experienced it subjectively. The conservative politician, in the role of “honest soul,” can ride this tide of combined anxiety and nostalgia. But among those who have gone a long way in the internalized experience of institutional decline, this type of politics is likely to be seen as a mild palliative for a desperate condition. Much more desperate remedies will seem more plausible. Indeed, nothing will do except a restoration of some new version of *analogia entis*. The correct term for this yearning, in its political expression, is totalitarianism.

The essence of totalitarianism (a term that, incidentally, makes no sense if applied to any pre-modern situation) is the intention of overcoming the modern dichotomy of private and public spheres. In its “reactionary” form, the totalitarian impetus is to restore some real or fictitious symmetry from the past. In its “revolutionary” form, totalitarianism seeks the new symmetry in a utopian future. Either vision entails a new “at-home-ness” of the self in society, in contraposition to the alienation of modernity. It is an inherent necessity of either vision that the freedom of the individual (pejoratively, but very accurately, designated as *bourgeois* freedom in the vocabularies of both “right” and “left” totalitarian ideologies) must be surrendered to this new solidarity. To be sure, there is always a multiplicity of reasons why such totalitarian visions gain credibility in specific groups. One repeated reason is that they promise redemption from the anguish of the quest for authenticity. It comes as no surprise to the sociologist that intellectuals tend to be peculiarly open to this promise.

**WHAT** does all this have to do with the political events of 1972? Not much—*not yet*. Neither Richard Nixon nor George McGovern is an embodiment of totalitarian redemption, and it is a sign of the sanity (*bourgeois* sanity, let us add) of American society that the demand for such redemption in any version is very limited. But in Trilling’s sincerity-authenticity continuum the two figures (probably for reasons that have little if anything to do with the intentions of the two men) occupy rather different positions. One may venture the hypothesis that the real issue of sincerity in the campaign was not so much the sincerity of the two candidates as that of the American institutional order. The vote for Nixon, in a very fundamental sense, was a vote of confidence in the continuing viability of the society—may one say, of the society of *bourgeois gentilhommes*? The McGovern movement, of course, did not seek revolution. Indeed, its New Left critics were quite right when they accused it of “co-opting” revolutionary impulses for very conventional political goals. Nevertheless, McGovern found his strongest base of support in just that college-educated upper-middle class in which the quest for authenticity has been most fully experienced and which, *ipso facto*, looks to politics for relief (“liberation”) from the alienation that plagues it. This constituency is pretty much co-exten-
sive with the group to whom the "greening of America" appeared to be a plausible project.

The 1972 election demonstrated, among other things, that this constituency is smaller than its ideologists had thought. American society is still much more a world of bourgeois sincerities than of the desperate drama of authenticity-versus-alienation. It is, if one prefers, less fully modernized than it seemed. Modernity exists side by side, everywhere, with multiple layers of pre-modern and early-modern experience and thought. There are people in Brooklyn who have never been to Manhattan, who worry every day about the evil eye, and who voted in this election on the basis of something they saw in a dream. All the same, it is in America that the forces of modernization have gone further than anywhere else. This is why the modern crisis of identity is furthest advanced here, both in its tangible social manifestations and its ideological articulations. It would be dangerous to assume that the mildly conservative and mildly "liberationist" options of 1972 will continue to exhaust the acceptable political field. If the crisis continues to deepen, more drastic political remedies may gain in plausibility. It is a slow-burning crisis, as old as the story in Trilling's book, but there are occasions when it breaks out in searing flames. The same crisis poses the fundamental political question of modernity—the question of how to keep in some sort of balance the reality of the autonomous individual and the reality of an institutional order. The rhetoric of 1972 has contributed little toward an answer.