

Rousseau and the Modern Cult of Sincerity

By Arthur M. Melzer

ANY TRUE EFFORT AT COLLECTIVE SELF-KNOWLEDGE, ANY attempt to understand ourselves as a society and a culture, must give particular attention to the question of sincerity. For the canonization of sincerity or authenticity, its elevation to the highest or most fundamental human virtue, would seem to be one of the defining characteristics of our age. This has been the observation of a long line of critics.

One might immediately object, of course, that the goal with which we are truly obsessed is rather wealth or material success. But one of the strangest things about our society is that while everyone chases money, few wholeheartedly believe in it. Virtually every American will tell you that Americans are too materialistic and sell-out too easily. Somehow, we have all internalized the old critique of bourgeois culture; we are all critics of our own lives. And on this second, critical level, when we ask ourselves what it means not to sell out, a little voice within us always gives the same reply: "be true to your inner self." This is our obsession with sincerity.

Thus, by the ideal of sincerity, I mean something very general — more general, perhaps, than is sanctioned by common usage. In the largest sense, I mean the phenomenon that Allan Bloom describes in saying that in our thinking about human happiness and human excellence, we have replaced the traditional vocabulary of virtue and vice with such new pairs of opposites as inner directed/other directed, real self/alienated self, sincere/hypocritical.¹

For example, if one asks what character trait has been the single greatest subject of condemnation and loathing by the intellectuals and artists of the past two centuries, one would have to answer: hypocrisy. Even today, as Judith Shklar remarks:

Hypocrisy remains the only unforgivable sin, perhaps especially among those who can overlook and explain away almost every other vice, even cruelty. However much suffering it may cause, and however many social and religious rules it may violate, evil

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can be understood after due analysis. But not hypocrisy, which alone now is inexcusable.²

Conversely, if one seeks to name the positive characteristic that our culture uses to define the happy and healthy soul, one would have to say: "Being Oneself." If the modern age had a theme song, it would be "I Gotta Be Me."

But also included in the ideal of sincerity is the assumption that the self that I gotta be is the private self, even the secret self. Thus the turn to sincerity also entails the "Fall of Public Man," to use the title of a recent work of sociology, that is, the demotion of the public, political realm of life and the concomitant elevation of the world of the personal, the private, and the intimate.³

Thus, for example, Lionel Trilling suggests that it was the new ideal of sincerity that was responsible for the sudden florescence — during the seventeenth century — of such sincere art-forms as autobiography, memoir writing, and portrait painting.⁴ And certainly this phenomenon continues today in our self-obsessed society, with its hunger for every form of personal disclosure and disburdening self-display from psychoanalysis to tell-all memoirs to est to Oprah Winfrey. And so when Christopher Lasch speaks of our "Culture of Narcissism," this too seems yet one more feature of our new world of sincerity.⁵

But sincerity is not to be confused with frankness or plainspokenness, an opposite virtue and very much on the wane in our age of euphemism. A person is supposed to show himself to others, not others to themselves. The frankness of one would only inhibit the sincerity of another. Nor is sincerity the same as honesty. The latter involves a self-disciplined adherence to the truth or to one's word, the former an adherence to the self.

So, in sum, if it is true that we are obsessed with sincerity — that above everything else, we loathe hypocrisy, cherish self-disclosure, and long to be ourselves — the question is: Why? How did this ideal emerge?

Sincerity as an Outgrowth of Democratic Egalitarianism

LET ME MAKE A FIRST STAB AT AN EXPLANATION — A FIRST stab that will prove inadequate and thus prepare the way for a somewhat different approach. In seeking to understand any major feature of American life usually the best place to begin is Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. One consults him, first, to see if he explicitly discusses the particular issue in question, and if he does not — as is more or less the case with sincerity — then one can at least attempt to apply his general method of explanation. This method, which, as I understand it, is a variation on a long tradition dating back to Plato and Aristotle, endeavors to understand every characteristic of a given society as an outgrowth of the fundamental political principles structuring that society — in the case of America, the principles of equality and freedom. In Tocqueville's view, for example, even our penchant for materialism ultimately derives from these more basic principles.⁶

So can we understand the ideal of sincerity as a direct outgrowth or expression of the democratic principles of equality and freedom? Ultimately, I think the answer is: No. But, it is likely that our love of sincerity springs from more than one source, and certainly one of these sources is our hunger for equality. So, let us very briefly consider this Tocquevillian explanation before moving beyond it.

To begin with the points that Tocqueville himself makes, the equality, freedom, and mobility of democratic society destroy the rigid hierarchy and ceremonious formality of aristocratic life, liberating men for a greater spontaneity, sincerity and naturalness. "Democracy loosens social ties, but it tightens natural ones."⁷ In the realm of social etiquette, to take the most obvious example, "democratic manners are neither so well thought out nor so regular [as aristocratic ones], but they often are more sincere [sincère]. They form, as it were, a thin, transparent veil through which the real feelings and personal thoughts of each man can be easily seen."⁸ Similarly, the democratic family, being more egalitarian, dispenses with cold, aristocratic formality, and appeals instead to natural affection, openness and intimacy.⁹ Above all, aristocratic societies "liked to entertain a sublime conception of the duties of man"; and these lofty morals, straining human nature, inevitably were honored more in speech than in deed. Strenuous ideals generate hypocrisy. Democratic equality, by contrast, encourages a more realistic and open acknowledgement of human selfishness and thus engenders a moral doctrine — "self-interest properly understood" — that is "wonderfully agreeable to human weaknesses." As such, it is followed more easily and so also more sincerely.¹⁰

All of these points show how a decrease in aristocratic hypocrisy and corresponding increase in sincerity are unintended by-products, as it were, of democracy and equality. They do not, however, address the precise phenomenon we are examining, which presumably was not yet present in Tocqueville's *America*: the rise of sincerity as a conscious goal, indeed as the highest ideal and virtue.¹¹

Thus, still in the spirit of Tocqueville, but beyond the letter, we might add the following points relating equality to the virtue of sincerity. Sincerity calls upon us to admit and reveal our true inner feelings, and this means especially the feelings we would otherwise want to hide, that is, the base and shameful feelings. There is no virtue, after all, in revealing our most noble impulses. Thus the ideal of sincerity serves equality, because it encourages self-unmasking, self-debunking, and the public renunciation of the pretence to superiority. Sincerity would have all of us declare: "Beneath my public mask, I too am weak."

Taken to an extreme, sincerity is even more leveling. On television talk shows, for example, we see a daily parade of reformed drug addicts, child molesters and other moral unfortunates who, speaking loquaciously of their crimes, end up receiving the admiration of the audience for their courageous openness and sincerity. The more horrible their secrets, the nobler they are for revealing them. Thus, on a certain level, the worse they are, the better they are: heroes of sincerity are to be found only among the most unfortunate or depraved. In short, the ideal of sincerity, when taken to an extreme, has that transvaluing power — made famous by Nietzsche — by which established hierarchies and inequalities are not only subverted but reversed.

Sincerity as a Countercultural Ideal

NOTWITHSTANDING ALL OF THIS SERVICE THAT SINCERITY renders to equality, however, it still does not seem that one can rest with a Tocquevillian explanation. One cannot adequately explain the rise of sincerity as an ideal as a direct outgrowth of the principle of equality that stands at the core of our regime. A new kind of analysis is needed.

My primary reason for saying this is that the ideal of sincerity did not first arise from within our liberal, democratic regime, but rather as a reaction against it. As is well known, sincerity was first embraced by intellectuals and artists who, standing outside and against the dominant bourgeois culture, denounced it for its rampant hypocrisy and conformism. In other words, what is crucial for understanding the virtue of sincerity and our obsession with it is to see that it is a new kind of virtue — a “countercultural virtue” if you like. It is distinguished from other virtues in at least three ways.

First, as we have just seen, it is not a direct virtue embodying the ideals of the society, but a reactive or countercultural one, embraced out of revulsion for our direct traits and primary impulses. Sincerity was canonized not because it expressed the regime and its principles, but precisely because it seemed so clearly missing from the regime.

Secondly, sincerity is, at least in its origins, not a collective virtue, stemming from the principles or conscience of the nation as whole, but rather a specialized virtue, being the discovery and unique property of the intellectual class which stands in an adversarial relation to the culture at large.

And thirdly, because sincerity is defined against the prevailing culture, it is not a “natural” virtue like courage which grows out of permanent features of the human condition, but rather a historical

virtue, which arises in reaction to particular, historically contingent conditions. Courage, for example, is recognized pretty much everywhere as a virtue and as at least a contender for the highest virtue, whereas sincerity is much less often singled out for praise and, before our time, has perhaps never been viewed as the highest virtue.

Now if it is true, in particular, that sincerity is not a natural but a historical virtue, then to understand it fully, we ought to study it historically. And if we search back to find the first emergence of the ideal of sincerity in the full modern sense, we come eventually to Rousseau. The proof of this assertion will require the whole remainder of my essay, but, for initial evidence, let me offer three observations.

One, Rousseau was the first philosopher to adopt the posture of the modern alienated intellectual — the first who stood outside society not in order to escape or transcend it, but in order to look back in criticism and blame.

Second, if we look at the content of this criticism and blame, we find that the fundamental vice for which Rousseau condemns the men of his time is precisely: insincerity and hypocrisy.¹² Indeed, he is the inventor of the critical concept of “bourgeois hypocrisy.”

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Third, if we turn to the positive goal Rousseau promotes, we find at its core a new ideal of sincerity, understood for the first time as an end in itself. This ideal, moreover, is illustrated and exemplified in the life of Rousseau himself, who was, for example, the only philosopher whose longest writing is his own autobiography. This writing, moreover, focuses not primarily on the events of his life or on his ideas but on his inner feelings and sentiments. And it is a document committed to intimate self-disclosure, recounting in excruciating detail, for example, his youthful desire to expose himself and his protracted love affair with a woman he liked to call "Mama."

So if we are seeking the historical origins of our peculiar ideal of sincerity, Rousseau, I believe, is our man. Let us then ask him our question: why are you so obsessed with sincerity?

I think he would give a two-part answer to this question — the first, concerning the unique prevalence of hypocrisy or insincerity in modern or bourgeois society; the second part, concerning the unique goodness of sincerity as such. Let us consider each in turn.

But one initial word of caution. We will be examining one particular strand of Rousseau's thought — an especially important one, but still not the whole garment. Rousseau's attack on hypocrisy is something he never mutes or qualifies. His positive ideal of sincerity, on the other hand, is something that is meant to apply, undiluted, only to those compelled or enabled to live isolated, withdrawn, private lives. It does not apply to that alternative ideal of Rousseau's works: the denatured, public-spirited citizen living in the legitimate state. There is no talk of sincerity in the *Social Contract*. To be sure, the citizen is no hypocrite, like the people Rousseau sees about him in Paris. He is sincere in the important sense that he is self-consistent and acts as he speaks. But since he places loyalty to the fatherland and the general will above loyalty to his unique inner self, indeed since he is a self-combatter, continually at war with his most natural impulses, he is not sincere in the deepest sense. Similarly, Rousseau believes that, even in private life, it is never good for a young woman to be altogether sincere. He considers female sexual modesty to be necessary precisely because it is untrue.¹³ Again, Rousseau makes it quite clear that strict honesty or sincerity is not wholly compatible with the role of the great Legislator who founds a nation, or with that of the tutor who raises Emile.¹⁴ Thus, the ideal of sincerity, while in a sense the deepest stratum of Rousseau's thought, nevertheless had an elaborately hedged and qualified status in his writings which it has mostly lost in our own time and which, at any rate, must be abstracted from in the analysis to follow.

The New Prevalence of Hypocrisy

ROUSSEAU WOULD SAY THAT IF HE SEEMS TO BE OBSESSED with insincerity, constantly railing and fulminating against hypocrisy, that is only because hypocrisy is the most fundamental and characteristic feature of the men of his time. Many others, in fact, had pronounced the same judgment, including Montesquieu, who wrote a brief essay entitled "A Praise of Sincerity." In this work, which is roughly contemporaneous with Rousseau's writings and thus a useful term of comparison, Montesquieu calls flattery and false politeness "the virtue of the century; it is the whole study of today."¹⁵

He attributes this regrettable phenomenon partly to the natural preference men always have for pleasant flattery over troublesome frankness and partly to the particular influence of the French monarchy of his time, which produced and propagated the courtier spirit.¹⁶

Rousseau's description of, as well as his explanation for, the same phenomenon is far more radical. He describes how:

Everything being reduced to appearances, everything becomes factitious and deceptive: honor, friendship, virtue, and often even vices themselves about which men finally discover the secret of boasting; how, in a word, always asking others what we are and never daring to question ourselves on this subject, in the midst of so much philosophy, humanity, politeness, and sublime maxims, we have only a deceitful and frivolous exterior.¹⁷

This condition of hypocrisy is certainly not natural or historically universal, according to Rousseau, who maintains, on the contrary, that men are naturally good. Therefore, this vice must result from certain corrupting social conditions. It is not a natural vice but a historical one. Furthermore, according to Rousseau, the historical cause of our hypocrisy is not anything isolated or relative to a particular form of government. The French courtliness criticized by Montesquieu is only one manifestation, if a particularly egregious one, of a much broader phenomenon. The true source of our hypocrisy is to be found in the fundamental structure of modern society as such.

To understand this, let us begin somewhat further back. Rousseau adopts but radicalizes the theoretical individualism of the thinkers he is attacking, the early modern thinkers like Hobbes and Locke whom Rousseau blames for the new prevalence of hypocrisy. Human beings, in his view, are not by nature social, but rather solitary and selfish. They can, however, be artificially transformed and made into social beings by properly devised political institutions — those which are able to engender sympathetic fellow feeling and a patriotic love of the common good. To the extent that a society succeeds in thus denaturing human beings and transforming them into patriotic citizens, these human beings will live happily, healthily, and free of hypocrisy.

But, according to Rousseau, the defining characteristic of modern societies is precisely their conscious renunciation of this difficult effort to transform men into citizens. Encouraged by the theoretical individualism of such thinkers as Hobbes and Locke, modern or bourgeois societies attempt the experiment of leaving men as they are, as naturally selfish individuals, and uniting them by showing them that cooperation with others is in their own selfish interest.¹⁸

The crucial modern claim, then, is that selfishness of the proper kind actually fosters sociability. The more that people are selfish, after all, the more they feel the need for things, and the more they need things, the more they depend on other men to supply them, and the more they depend on others, the more they must be willing to serve others so that these others will serve them in return. In this way, sociability can be generated from selfishness.

But in Rousseau's view this grand modern experiment is an unmitigated disaster. He agrees that materialism, individualism, and selfishness can indeed be used to hold people together in society through bonds of mutual self-interest, but such a

society will have the precise and unavoidable effect of forcing each of its members to become a phony, an actor, and a hypocrite.

The reason for this is beguilingly simple. The whole idea of generating sociability from selfishness relies — obviously — on a contradiction within human selfishness: The more I am selfish, the less I love others, but the more I need them. Thus the more I care only about myself, the more I am driven to seek the services of others. And this elemental contradiction of human selfishness is what creates the modern character: the other-directed egoist, who is prevented by his need to use others from ever being himself.

Think it through. The egoistic individual is forced by his very selfishness to appear just and benevolent towards others — so that they will help him — but, because he is selfish, he never sincerely desires to be this way for its own sake. The same thing that makes him need to appear moral — his selfishness — makes him dislike being moral. In short, among selfish but mutually dependent human beings, it is necessarily bad to be what it is necessarily good to seem. In such a society, there is an unavoidable gulf between seeming and being; and this is why it becomes psychologically necessary that all men become phonies, actors, role-players, and hypocrites.

From now on we must take care never to let ourselves be seen such as we are: because for every two men whose interests coincide, perhaps a hundred thousand oppose them, and the only way to succeed is either to deceive or to ruin all those people. That is the fatal source of the violence, the betrayals, the deceptions and all the horrors necessarily required by a state of affairs in which everyone pretends to be working for the others' profit or reputation, while only seeking to raise his own above them and at their expense.¹⁹

In sum, the modern commercial republic, generating sociability from selfishness, necessarily creates a society of smiling enemies, where each individual pretends to care about others precisely because he cares only about himself.

So this is the first half of Rousseau's answer to our question: why is he, and we in his footsteps, so obsessed with sincerity? His answer is that, for the reasons just given, hypocrisy is everywhere, it is the universal and essential characteristic of the man of our time, the modern bourgeois. And indeed since Rousseau, the concept of "bourgeois hypocrisy" and the irritable tendency to find it everywhere has been a staple of Western literature and philosophy.²⁰

The Character of Bourgeois Hypocrisy

BEFORE GOING ON TO THE SECOND HALF OF ROUSSEAU'S response to our question, it is necessary at least briefly to evaluate this first argument, which, despite its considerable influence, would seem to be too extreme. Why must we all be secret enemies, one wants to ask, given the relative harmony that exists among our selfish interests? Rousseau anticipates the objection:

If I am answered that society is so constituted that each man gains by serving the others, I shall reply that this would be very well, if he did not gain still more by harming them. There is no profit, however legitimate, that is

not surpassed by one that can be made illegitimately, and wrong done to one's neighbor is always more lucrative than services.²¹

But does this statement remain true if one looks, not only at immediate profit, but at one's long term self-interest? Should one not rather conclude with Adam Smith that, for people in the middle classes, who have no significant power other than their reputation, success "almost always depends upon the favor and good opinion of their neighbors and equals; and without a tolerable regular conduct, these can very seldom be obtained. The good old proverb, therefore, that honesty is the best policy, holds, in such situations, almost always perfectly true."²²

Indeed, honesty would seem to be precisely the characteristic bourgeois virtue. If Rousseau failed to see this, it is because (his terminology notwithstanding) the world he observed was late aristocratic, not bourgeois. And honesty does not flourish in corrupt aristocracies, as Montesquieu pointed out and Smith goes on to argue:

In the superior stations of life the case is unhappily not always the same. In the courts of princes, in the drawing-rooms of the great, where success and preferment depend, not upon the esteem of intelligent and well-informed equals, but upon the fanciful and foolish favour of ignorant, presumptuous, and proud superiors; flattery and falsehood too often prevail over merit and abilities.²³

More generally, in traditional and aristocratic societies, where people are bound to one another with a hundred duties not of their own choosing, doubtless one of them is honesty; but should a person find it necessary on occasion to lie — like the "wily Odysseus" — his standing as a man of honor and virtue need not be fundamentally compromised. But in a bourgeois society, where this web of duties has been swept away and where people face each other as free, atomized, but needy individuals, almost all serious human relationships are voluntarily contracted on the basis of free promise or consent. Here, agreement and trust are everything. Precisely here, then, a man is only as good as his word. Thus, as W.E.H. Lecky remarks in his *History of European Morals*:

Veracity is usually the special virtue of an industrial nation, for although industrial enterprise affords great temptations to deception, mutual confidence, and therefore strict truthfulness, are in these occupations so transcendently important that they acquire in the minds of men a value they had never before possessed. Veracity becomes the first virtue in the moral type, and no character is regarded with any kind of approbation in which it is wanting....This constitutes probably the chief moral superiority of nations pervaded by a strong industrial spirit.²⁴

Even if all of this is granted, however, Rousseau would not be without reply. Under the right social and economic conditions, he might argue, people's long-term self-interest may indeed incline them to behave honestly, especially if this calculation is buttressed by additional moral or religious impulses (as in fact Locke, Smith, Tocqueville, and Weber, among others, all assume). But the question is: what is the character of this bourgeois honesty and respectability? No matter how deeply ingrained, Rousseau suspects, at bottom it is false. It still grows out of the

fundamental contradiction of selfish sociability or egoistic other-directedness. It is not a virtue embraced for its own sake as something intrinsically good, but only for the useful impression it makes upon others. It is only a necessary evil. Each man earnestly praises it in public — to encourage others to be honest and to convince them that he is so — but in private he knows that it contradicts his heart's desire. Thus, the bourgeois may indeed be honest, but he is not sincere; his whole moral posture is a mask worn for others, an act, a role, a lie.²⁵

This is the account of bourgeois hypocrisy in its toned-down form, the form that flourished in most of the nineteenth century. In the last fifty years, however, the old, straitlaced honest bourgeois seems gradually to have given way to a new type, closer in many respects to Rousseau's original model. Such writers as C. Wright Mills, Eric Fromm, and above all David Riesman have argued that the increasing bureaucratization of the corporation and the state have revived some-

thing like the old courtier spirit. The "inner-directed" man of early capitalism — whose hypocrisy always remained a somewhat controversial hypothesis — is being replaced by the "other-directed" man — whose eager posturing, conformity, and hollowness are far more widely acknowledged.²⁶

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At any rate, without trying to settle here the precise degree of prevalence of bourgeois hypocrisy, it should be possible, in light of the preceding discussion, at least to characterize more exactly this new kind of hypocrisy identified by Rousseau and how it differs from earlier forms. Wherever there is a lofty and strenuous moral ideal, as in aristocratic societies or piously Christian ones, there will inevitably be moral hypocrites. But in most cases such persons might more accurately be called "boasters" because their claims ultimately stem from a genuine (if wavering) admiration for the prevailing moral ideal, and they err only in exaggerating the degree to which they attain it.

The new, bourgeois hypocrisy is fundamentally different. The skeptical unmasking of Christian and aristocratic moral hypocrisy is the very precondition for the emergence of the new hypocrisy of interest. Liberated from the pretense to aristocratic self-sufficiency and to divine protection, the bourgeois faces, unprotected, his mortal exposedness, his selfish neediness and therefore his utter dependence on others. Thus, when he raises his exaggerated claims to honesty, he does so not from a genuine faith in or admiration of honesty (as a Christian or aristocratic hypocrite might), but from a calculated desire for the material benefits of being thought honest. Unlike the moral hypocrite, that is, he has no genuine desire to be

what he endeavors to seem; on the contrary, a contradiction exists between his claims and his motive for asserting them. His other-directedness is egoistic. He pretends to care for others precisely because he cares only for himself.

That is why the bourgeois hypocrite seems so particularly loathsome. The claims he makes for himself are surely less grandiose and probably even less false (as judged by behavior) than the aristocratic or Christian hypocrite, but they are more profoundly insincere. He is no longer merely boasting; he is dissimulating, acting, role-playing. His public claims constitute a direct denial of his true self. For this reason, his hypocrisy is actually worse the more it is successful, for it involves a falsification of the inner life, a fundamental self-betrayal. That is why, in confronting this new hypocrisy, Rousseau and those who follow him invent a new vocabulary of criticism, unknown to earlier moralists, involving such terms as inner nothingness, emptiness, hollowness, phoniness, inauthenticity, and so forth.

Related to this are two other distinctive features of the modern preoccupation with hypocrisy, which also point to its Rousseauian provenance. The condemnation of hypocrisy is obviously not a new phenomenon. The most prominent earlier example is perhaps the "Sermon on the Mount." But in all earlier condemnations, this vice is regarded as a moral problem of the individual, a natural human foible like cowardice or immoderation. By contrast, in Rousseau and in the view prevailing after him, hypocrisy is regarded as a social and historical problem: it is seen as a widespread deformity of character systematically produced by the evils of modern society. It is "bourgeois" hypocrisy. Consequently, hypocrisy in the modern understanding is necessarily a countercultural concept — indicting the existing social order — and the attack on it has more the character of social criticism than of moral exhortation.

Moreover, because this vice is blamed on society, the specifically modern concept of hypocrisy tends to go along with the view that only the bohemian intellectual, who is defined by his stance outside and against society, can free himself from and so recognize this deformity. And this in turn leads to the view that the intellectual has the unique ability and therefore the unique duty to act as the conscience of society and to denounce its hypocrisy wherever and whenever he sees it.²⁷

In sum, Rousseau and those who followed him were obsessed with hypocrisy because of the new prevalence of this vice, resulting from the rise of the bourgeois state, and because of their perceived duty as intellectuals to denounce it. And since Rousseau's time, this duty has been well fulfilled, producing a torrent of anti-bourgeois attacks on hypocrisy.

Sincerity as the Highest Good

THERE IS A SECOND PART, HOWEVER, TO ROUSSEAU'S explanation for his obsession with sincerity. If the first points to the prevalence of hypocrisy in his time, the second gives new arguments for the positive good of sincerity. This second part is indeed a necessary addition to the first because attacking hypocrisy does not automatically lead to praising sincerity. The mere fact that hypocrisy is bad and prevalent by no means proves that sincerity is the highest good. The "Sermon on the Mount," for example, contains a famous attack on hypocrisy, but this does not lead to a praise of sincerity as such but rather to the praise of piety, sincere piety. There is no suggestion here that

the nonbeliever could justify himself before God by emphasizing his sincerity.

Similarly, in Shakespeare and Molière we find much emphasis on the falseness of men's claims to virtue and nobility, but the opposite of hypocritical nobility is still taken to be genuine nobility — not sincerity as such. Thus, Rousseau (and we after him) is doing something fundamentally new when he makes the seemingly obvious move from blaming hypocrisy to praising sincerity — that is, not praising sincere piety, or sincere righteousness, but sincerity itself and by itself. In other words, Rousseau is the first to define the good as being oneself regardless of what one may be. And that is a radically new position — a position which is at the core of his and our unique obsession with sincerity.

To defend this new view is the point of the second part of Rousseau's answer, which consists of a defense of the goodness of sincerity as such. But this argument actually brings us into the most fundamental level of Rousseau's thought, for his defense of sincerity is really a consequence of his whole new understanding of human nature, his comprehensive redefinition of the human self.

According to Rousseau, the fundamental principle of human nature is self-love: the innate inclination to delight in, preserve, and actualize ourselves.²⁸ But this claim is certainly not new; many earlier thinkers had taken such a view. The crucial issue is: what is the self that we love in this way? What is the human self that we incline to delight in, preserve, and actualize? Here is where Rousseau will give a new answer.

Aristotle, for example, makes the famous statement: man is a political animal. And by this he means that the true human self is a public or communal self, that a human being cannot be himself by himself, that he can truly realize himself and come into his own only by performing his function within the larger political whole. Plato maintains that our truest self is our reason or mind, and that we actualize ourselves most fully through the act of philosophic contemplation. St. Augustine holds that our highest good and truest self is God; and that self-love, fully conscious of itself, is the same as the love of God.

Rousseau rejects all of these earlier accounts of the human self. The starting point for his new reflections on the self is the same as that, seen above, for his analysis of the modern state and the origins of hypocrisy: it is the theoretical individualism of early modern thought — only deepened and radicalized.

Rousseau maintains that the true foundation of the human self is not God or reason or the community but the elemental self-consciousness of the individual. Although he does not present a systematic derivation of his views, Rousseau's argument would seem to run as follows. In every act of awareness or perception, I am always simultaneously aware of the fact that I perceive. And furthermore, in thus perceiving that I perceive, I necessarily perceive myself. Therefore, there is a self-awareness which necessarily accompanies every act of awareness as such. This is the famous "sentiment of existence": the sheer awareness that I am, that I exist. And it is in this elemental self-consciousness that Rousseau locates the true human self and the foundation of our being. Somehow, a human being exists not through his relation to God or to the essence of man, but through a relation to himself. Our being is our presence to ourself, our sentiment of existence.²⁹

The precise meaning and ground of these claims is, to be sure, not altogether clear. But what can be seen fairly clearly are their consequences, which emerge if

we plug them back into the theory of self-love with which we began. The fundamental human inclination, we have seen, is self-love, which impels us to preserve and actualize ourselves. We want, as fully as possible, to become what we are, to realize ourselves, to become as alive and actualized as possible, to really live. But how, concretely, we ought to go about this depends on the true nature of the human self.

In this context, Rousseau's new definition of the self has the following meaning: the true way to actualize oneself is not through the love of God or philosophic contemplation of the cosmos, or participation in the political order, but through withdrawal from everything else and communion with one's inner self. In a word, through sincerity.

Here, in short, is Rousseau's argument for the positive good of sincerity. As we can see now, it is not merely an ethical argument praising the morally virtuous character of sincerity.

Nor is it a political argument about the social usefulness of sincerity. Rather it is an argument issuing from the deepest claims regarding the nature of human existence. Rousseau argues that sincerity is the highest good in life because it is the essential path to genuine selfhood and self-realization. What

"The true way to actualize oneself is not through the love of God or philosophic contemplation of the cosmos, or participation in the political order, but through withdrawal from everything else and communion with one's inner self. In a word, through sincerity."

piety is for St. Augustine, what contemplation is for Plato, sincerity is for Rousseau. It is the unique means through which we draw closer to Being and make ourselves most real.³⁰

Let me try to elaborate this point, and render it more precise, by distinguishing six fundamental characteristics of the new Rousseauian self and by showing how each of these, in its own way, leads to the canonization of sincerity as the royal road to self-realization. In doing this, I may be forced, in places, to extend Rousseau's ideas beyond his own formulations of them — yet not beyond the general tendency of his thought, or so I believe.

First, because the sentiment of existence is a completely internal phenomenon, the true self is emphatically private. The real me is not my social self or communal self: it is not what I am in other people's eyes nor is it my role in the community, my public activity and political participation. The real me is the one that is there when I am alone.

Rousseau is aware that the public world of honor, power, and status seems to us more real and important. But he endeavors with all his force to convince us that this is a deadly illusion: that the public world is an alienation from the true self, that the private world of feelings and intimacies is actually the more real one. Rousseau

consciously strives to subvert the public world and to make people more withdrawn, inward, intimate, self-absorbed, and introspective.

Of course, Rousseau also knows, indeed emphasizes, that for civilized, socialized and, especially, urbanized human beings it is no easy matter to get free of the social self, which does not simply disappear behind closed doors. But he believes that those who live in relative isolation, or those who are willing to retreat there, if they will commune with themselves in the company of nature and a few close friends or family members, can succeed over time in recovering contact with a good part of their natural sentiments and selves. In other words, Rousseau has a faith, if a very qualified one, in the power of introspection — a crucial presupposition of the ideal of sincerity. Self-knowledge does not require a rigorous dialectical examination of our opinions and beliefs, nor an externally applied psychoanalytic examination of the subconscious mind. The Rousseauian self is more immediately accessible. Ultimately, we can find and know and be ourselves through introspection and sincerity.³¹

Second, for Rousseau, the true self is not the rational self. We are not our intellect, our mind, but our feelings. The ground of our being is the sentiment of

existence, which is a sentiment, a feeling: “to exist, for us, is to feel [sentir].”³²

“[Reason] is not a very deep part of us: it does not control our behavior and, more importantly, it is not the ground of our being or existence.”

As for reason, in Rousseau’s view, it is a recently acquired and rather unnatural faculty. It may indeed be the most impressive or powerful of our faculties, but it is not a very deep part of us:

that is, it does not control our behavior and, more importantly, it is not the ground of our being or existence. Therefore, we do not actualize ourselves by reasoning or contemplating reality, but by communing with our sentiments and feelings. From the standpoint of Rousseauian selfhood, it is less important to be true to reality than to be true to oneself. So, the ideal of wisdom must be replaced with that of sincerity.

Third, the true self is not the moral self. Rousseau knows that human beings, though by nature solitary and free, have the capacity to invent laws, contract obligations, create ethical and religious duties, and then force themselves to comply with these. Civilized human beings are self-overcoming animals who will conquer and repress their spontaneous inclinations and natural selves in the name of certain ethical ideals. We human beings can transform ourselves into moral beings, into persons of character and principle.

Rousseau sees this as socially salutary, indeed necessary, and spends much time admiring it; but ultimately he sees it as unnatural. The true self is the spontaneous self, not this invented and forcibly imposed moral character. The real me is the one that remains when I let go and stop trying, when I just let it be. I truly find myself

when, rejecting all the strenuous talk about my higher self, and liberated from shame and guilt, I just freely observe and sincerely acknowledge all that goes on within my soul. I must “be myself” regardless of what I may be. So again, the true me is accessed through sincerity.³³

Fourth, my true self is not primarily what I have in common with others — my share of universal human nature — but rather what is particular and unique to me. For, in nature, only the individual or particular is real; everything universal is a human creation, indeed a falsification, a distorting imposition on reality. Thus everything in myself that I have in common with others probably derives from the alien influence of society; it does not really come from me. But on the other hand, everything in me that is particular, unique and idiosyncratic is likely to derive from my true inner self.³⁴

One consequence of this is as follows. If my truest being were something universal — like participation in the universal nature or essence of man — then I could come to recognize and understand myself best through a kind of rational knowledge. Then the Delphic imperative to “know thyself” would mean “know human nature.” But if the deepest thing in me is unique, then I can only know myself personally, and the whole enterprise of rational self-knowledge must be replaced by each individual’s introspection and sincerity.

Fifth, just as the Rousseauian self is not universal but rather particular, so also it does not have the character of a form or a formal cause. The elemental self-consciousness that is the ground of our being does not have any form or idea or essence: it is a pure sentiment of existence. It is a pure awareness that we are — without any specification of what we are. Thus, the human self has the character, not of a form but, as it were, of a source or a well-spring. And so self-realization does not mean arranging one’s soul in the proper order, or being in conformity with the formal essence or objective nature of man. Rather, self-realization means being in touch with our source, “connecting” with our well-spring, being “on line.” For Rousseau, being oneself does not mean corresponding to oneself but rather coming from oneself — and thus it means sincerity. For the sincere person is precisely he who always makes his true self his source and origin.

The sixth and last characteristic involves a twist. The true self is “expansive.” After one has finally retreated from all the social sources of falsehood and hypocrisy and turned back to the plenitude of the natural self, one finds that an important part of that self is a quasi-erotic inclination to “expand” the self outward in pursuit of a still greater aliveness.³⁵ The presence of other human beings alienates me from myself so long as I hold up my social self to greet and confront theirs. But when, withdrawing within, I discover my true, private self, it also becomes possible to discover and “identify with” theirs, to connect inside to inside, to be witness to the intense, trembling reality that another’s life has for himself, and in this way to excite and heighten the experience of my own life, to make my existence more real to me. To the extent, then, that the Rousseauian self seeks to connect up to some larger reality, it is to the inner flow of human life and suffering. Rousseau, one might say, replaces classical contemplation with a caring voyeurism. And once again, sincerity, both one’s own and others’, is the essential condition of this experience.³⁶

Conclusion

IN SUM, ROUSSEAU RADICALLY REINTERPRETS THE CHARACTER of human existence, arguing that the true human self, rooted in the sentiment of existence, is private rather than public, sentimental rather than rational, spontaneous rather than moral, unique rather than universal, originary rather than formal, and compassionately expansive rather than closed. And each one of these changes, in a different way, makes sincerity the key to self-actualization. This fact, together with the new prevalence of hypocrisy in the emerging bourgeois order, explains why Rousseau was so obsessed with sincerity. And I believe that an experience of hypocrisy and a conception of the self similar to Rousseau's also lies behind much of our own preoccupation with sincerity.

By way of conclusion, I would like briefly to speculate how the character of Rousseau's argument may also help us to understand one further feature of our love of sincerity. As we have seen, the hatred of hypocrisy and longing for sincerity first emerged, not as an expression of the dominant culture, but as a reaction against it, as a counter-cultural ideal employed by bohemian intellectuals in their critique of bourgeois society. But in recent decades, the ideal of sincerity has clearly become general, permeating the whole of society. Today, everyone denounces conformity and longs for sincerity. In other words, as suggested above, one of the strangest characteristics of our society is that, in some measure, everyone has internalized the intellectual critique of bourgeois life. Everyone contains some mix of culture and counter-culture. And everything that once seemed so resolutely anti-bourgeois has now come to light as only late-bourgeois.

If this observation is correct, it might be useful to look once again to Rousseau for an explanation. We have seen that the theoretical principles underlying both parts of Rousseau's analysis are largely borrowed from the very thinkers he is attacking. Specifically, Rousseau's central premise, his extreme individualism, is only an extension and radicalization of the bourgeois individualism of Hobbes and Locke. But this means that Rousseau's critique of modern culture is essentially a dialectical critique: he shows that the very principles of that culture, when thought through in all their inner tensions, lead one to a counter-cultural stance. Rousseau's main argument is indeed that modern society builds on a massive contradiction: it is based on individualism and, for this very reason, it destroys all sincere individuality. Both sides of this contradiction combine, in Rousseau, to produce an intense and redoubled longing for individuality — an obsession with sincerity.

Nothing prevents others from eventually reenacting this same dialectical process. Indeed, if one can generalize from the argument and the example of Rousseau, it would seem that bourgeois culture contains the seeds of its own critique, and that the anti-bourgeois intellectual is the inevitable outgrowth of the thing he criticizes. But if he is that, then he is also an outgrowth that will tend to spread. To generalize still further, it looks as if a society based upon Lockean individualism will tend sooner or later to generate a kind of Rousseauian anti-Lockeanism which will slowly become general while remaining in permanent and unresolved tension with the original, Lockean substratum. Some such process, at any rate, would seem to be at work in our ever-spreading and ever-frustrated longing for sincerity. φ

Endnotes

- ¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, Introduction, Translation, and Notes by Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, 1979, p. 4.
- ² *Ordinary Vices*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 45.
- ³ *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*. Richard Sennett. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.
- ⁴ *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Lionel Trilling. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 23-25.
- ⁵ *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1979. Lasch also points to the fact that practicing psychiatrists have reported "a shift in the pattern of the symptoms displayed by their patients. The classic neuroses treated by Freud, they said, were giving way to narcissistic personality disorders" (p. 238).
- ⁶ *Democracy in America*. Edited by J.P. Mayer. Translated by George Lawrence. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1969. pp. 530-34.
- ⁷ *ibid.*, p. 589.
- ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 607.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 587-89.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 525-27.
- ¹¹ It should also be said that, whereas Tocqueville sees democratic citizens as free of aristocratic formality and hypocrisy, he emphasizes that they tend to their own unique form of hypocrisy and conformism — stemming, in his view, from the tyranny of the majority.
- ¹² This fact, observed by many interpreters, is the great theme of Starobinski's study *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La transparence et l'obstacle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.
- ¹³ See *Emile*, pp. 358-60, 370-71, 385, 387.
- ¹⁴ See *On the Social Contract*, translated by Judith R. Masters, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968, p. 69; *Emile*, p. 120; *Preface of a Second Letter to Bordes*, in *The First and Second Discourses*, translated by Victor Gourevitch. New York: Harper and Row, 1986, pp. 114-15. See also Starobinski, *La Transparence et l'obstacle*, pp.125-26; and Judith N. Shklar, "Rousseau's Images of Authority," in *Hobbes and Rousseau, A Collection of Critical Essays*. Edited by Maurice Cranston and Richard S. Peters. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1972, pp. 333-365.
- ¹⁵ *Eloge de la Sincérité*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Texte présenté et annoté par Roger Caillois. Paris: Gallimard, 1949, vol I, p. 101. This essay seems to have been written sometime between 1716 and 1728. See also the passage from Duclos' *Considerations sur les moeurs de ce siècle*, quoted by Rousseau in *Emile* p. 338.
- ¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 102, 104-05.
- ¹⁷ *Second Discourse* in *The First and Second Discourses*. Translated by Roger D. and Judith R. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964, p. 180. See also pp. 156, 194; *First Discourse*, pp. 36-39; *Emile*, p. 230.
- ¹⁸ See *First Discourse*, p. 51; *Preface to Narcissus*. In *The First and Second Discourses*. Translated by Victor Gourevitch. New York: Harper and Row, 1986, p. 105
- ¹⁹ *Preface to Narcissus*, p. 105. See also *Second Discourse*, pp. 156, 172-75, 193-95; *Discourse on Political Economy* in *On the Social Contract*. Translated by Judith R. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978, pp. 216-17; *Letter to Beaumont* in *Oeuvres complètes*. Edited by Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1959-69, p. 936.
- ²⁰ It will seem strange to call the man of Rousseau's aristocratic age a "bourgeois" but that is Rousseau's own usage (see *Emile*, p. 40), adopted in full knowledge of its provocative character (perhaps on the model of Molière's comic title "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme" — only reversed). Rousseau does not accept the traditional distinction of classes. The true class division of the human species, after all, should follow the division of the truest social good — which, for Rousseau, is neither wealth nor privilege but freedom. Thus, there are three classes of men. The first is the "citizen," who enjoys "civil freedom" because, while needing other human beings, he also loves and lives for them. A second class is the asocial "savage" (and to some extent the free peasant) who, neither needing others nor loving them, enjoys "natural freedom." Virtually all the rest of humanity forms a third, slavish class midway between the other two: the social individual — archetypally, the "town dweller," the urban non-citizen — who, while needing others, loves and lives for himself alone. This is the "bourgeois." It includes the French aristocracy, for "one who believes himself

the master of others is nonetheless a greater slave than they." (But see *Emile* pp. 346, 451 for the conventional use of "bourgeois").

²¹ *Second Discourse* pp. 194-95.

²² *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1969, p. 128.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 129.

²⁴ *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*. Two vols. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1879, p. 138. Cf. p. 155. See also Schopenhauer's, "The Wisdom of Life," in *The Essays of Arthur Schopenhauer*. Translated by T. Bailey Saunders. New York: Willey Books, 1935, pp. 70-73.

²⁵ Bourgeois honesty will be less hypocritical, of course, in the degree to which the "additional moral or religious impulses" mentioned above are dominant. The bourgeois virtues become genuinely and intrinsically attractive through the nobility of "self-reliance," the pleasures of sympathy and approbation, the proto-Kantian dignity of foresighted self-denial and rational self-mastery, and the religious faith that God helps those who honestly help themselves. But Rousseau, who doubted man's natural sociality, had little faith in the power of any morality outside of the total moralizing environment of the militantly patriotic city-state. In general, the more skeptical one is, the more hypocrites one sees.

²⁶ See Mills' account of the "new entrepreneur" in "The Competitive Personality," *Partisan Review*, XIII: September, 1946, pp. 433-441; and Eric Fromm's description of the "marketing orientation" in *Man For Himself: An Enquiry Into the Psychology of Ethics*. New York: Fawcett Books, 1947, pp. 75-89. See David Riesman with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denny, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950, especially pp. 17-24, 45-48.

While there is a wide consensus concerning the conformist character of contemporary American life, there remains some disagreement as to its cause. The primary non-Rousseauian line of explanation derives from Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill (augmented by Nietzsche and Ortega y Gasset) who blame equality and the tyranny of the majority more than competitive individualism.

²⁷ See, for example, *Dialogues* in *Oeuvres complètes* I, p. 936; *Letter to Beaumont*, p. 965; *Emile*, p. 474; *Letter to Perdriau*, September 28, 1754.

²⁸ *Emile*, pp. 212-13; *Second Discourse*, pp. 95, 221-22.

²⁹ Consider *Second Discourse*, p. 142; *Emile*, pp. 42, 61; *Oeuvres complètes* II, p. 1124-25; *Dialogues*, pp. 805-06.

³⁰ On the argument of the last several paragraphs, see also Arthur Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man*, pp. 35-46 and Pierre Burgelin, *La Philosophie de l'Existence de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952, pp. 115-48.

³¹ Here again we see a stark contrast with Montesquieu's *Praise of Sincerity*, the first premise of which is that self-knowledge through introspection is impossible. That is precisely why "sincerity" is so crucial: others must frankly tell us the truth about ourselves, for we have no other means of discovering it. (See pp. 99-102). In this essay, Montesquieu is really praising "frankness" about others — and precisely on the premise that true Rousseauian sincerity — that is, accurate self-disclosure — is impossible.

For Rousseau's own later misgivings about the adequacy of introspection, see *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, translated by Charles E. Butterworth. New York: New York University Press, 1979, pp. 43, 75. See also Starobinski, *La Transparence et l'Obstacle*, pp. 216-17.

³² *Emile*, p. 290 (I have altered the translation). See *Dialogues*, p. 806; *Lettres morales* in *Oeuvres complètes* IV, p. 1109.

³³ Consider *Dialogues*, pp. 668-71, 822-25; *Reveries*, p. 77. From here one sees most clearly the fundamental difference between Rousseau's new concern with hypocrisy and sincerity — his increased "inwardness" — and the apparently similar concern found in the Gospels (and in the late Stoics, like Marcus Aurelius). The latter clearly grows from a heightened longing for moral purity. It calls for inwardness, self-scrutiny and confession in order to increase our moral striving and to intensify our repentance. Rousseauian sincerity, by contrast, intends and produces the opposite effect: it encourages self-acceptance and the release from shame. It would have us acknowledge our inner weaknesses, saying: "This is the way that I am. I cannot change how I feel. I will not lie about it." It makes the acknowledgement of vice into a virtue. The only true sin is insincerity itself.

³⁴ See *Emile*, pp. 91, 94, 97; *La nouvelle Héloïse* in *Oeuvres complètes* II, pp. 563, 568.

³⁵ See *Dialogues*, pp. 805-06, 1324-25; *Emile*, pp. 67, 159, 168; *Reveries*, pp. 92, 95. See also Ronald Grimsley, "Rousseau And the Problem of Happiness," in *Hobbes and Rousseau*, pp. 437-461.

³⁶ See *Reveries*, p. 81; *Emile*, pp. 220-31. One sees from this point the essential inner connection between sincerity and compassion, that other great idol of Rousseau's thought and of our world. This connection, in turn, further grounds or justifies the ideal of sincerity, by reassuring us that "being oneself" will in fact make one, if not actively moral or "virtuous," then at least "good," that is, compassionate and disinclined to harm others.