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Our Overrated Inner Self

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In the 1970s, the cultural critic Lionel Trilling encouraged us to take seriously the distinction between sincerity and authenticity. Sincerity, he said, requires us to act and really be the way that we present ourselves to others. Authenticity involves finding and expressing the true inner self and judging all relationships in terms of it.

Authenticity now dominates our way of viewing ourselves and our relationships, with baleful consequences. Within sensitive individuals it breeds doubt; between people it promotes distrust; within groups it enhances group-think in the endless quest to be one with the group's true soul; and between groups it is the inner source of identity politics.

It also undermines good government. James Nolan, in his book "The Therapeutic State," has shown how the emphasis on the primacy of the self has penetrated major areas of government: emotivist arguments trump reasoned discourse in Congressional hearings and criminal justice; and in public education, self-esteem vies with basic literacy in evaluating students. The cult of authenticity partly accounts for our poor choice of leaders. We prefer leaders who feel our pain, or born-again frat boys who claim that they can stare into the empty eyes of an ex-K.G.B. agent and see inside his soul. On the other hand we hear, ad nauseam, that Hillary Clinton, arguably one of the nation's most capable senators, is "fake" and therefore not electable as president.

But it is in our attempts to come to grips with prejudice that authenticity most confounds. Social scientists and pollsters routinely belittle results showing growing tolerance; they argue that Americans have simply learned how to conceal their deeply ingrained prejudices. A hot new subfield of psychology claims to validate such skepticism. The Harvard social psychologist Mahzarin Banaji and her collaborators claim to have evidence, based on more than three million self-administered Web-based tests, that nearly all of us are authentically bigoted to the core with hidden "implicit prejudices" — about race, gender, age, homosexuality and appearance — that we deny, sometimes with consciously tolerant views. The police shootings of Amadou Diallo and Sean Bell, they argue, are simply dramatic examples of how "implicit prejudice" influences the behavior of us all.

However well meaning these researchers, their gotcha psychology is morally invasive and, as the psychologist Philip Tetlock has cogently argued, of questionable validity and use. It cannot

distinguish between legitimate apprehension and hateful bigotry as responses to identical social problems. A fearful young black woman living in a high-crime neighborhood could easily end up with a racist score. An army of diversity trainers now use Banaji's test to promote touchy-feely bias awareness in companies, which my colleague Frank Dobbin has shown to be a devious substitute for minority promotions.

I couldn't care less whether my neighbors and co-workers are authentically sexist, racist or ageist. What matters is that they behave with civility and tolerance, obey the rules of social interaction and are sincere about it. The criteria of sincerity are unambiguous: Will they keep their promises? Will they honor the meanings and understandings we tacitly negotiate? Are their gestures of cordiality offered in conscious good faith?

Scholars like Richard Sennett and the late Philip Rieff attribute the rise of authenticity to the influence of psychoanalysis, but America's protestant ethos and its growing intrusion in public life may be equally to blame. Whatever the cause, for centuries the norm of sincerity presented an alternate model of selfhood and judgment that was especially appropriate for non-intimate and secular relations. Its iconic expression is the celebrated passage from Shakespeare: "All the world's a stage,/ And all the men and women merely players./They have their exits and their entrances,/ And one man in his time plays many parts."

Shakespeare's "self" is inescapably public, fashioned in interaction with others and by the roles we play — what sociologists, building on his insight, call the looking-glass self. This allows for change. Sincerity rests in reconciling our performance of tolerance with the people we become. And what it means for us today is that the best way of living in our diverse and contentiously free society is neither to obsess about the hidden depths of our prejudices nor to deny them, but to behave as if we had none.

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