

## ON SINCERITY

I've tried to act a little more sincere lately. I realize that sincerity is not a cool or sophisticated thing. After all, who wants to take the risk of endorsing single-entendre principles. Who wants to risk appearing horrifically sentimental, quaint, repressed, backward, naive, etc.?

Opposite of sincerity is irony, which now gives voice to a generation too afraid to say what they mean, but afraid of forgetting they have something worth saying. Granted, irony has a role to play in speech, but it's often misused to shield those who refuse to face the world honestly.

From the 90s into the 00s, David Foster Wallace wrote about an America searching for moral orientation, first after the victory of liberal capitalism over Marxism-Leninism and, second, after recoiling from the spectacle of domestic terrorism.

To Wallace, irony was its answer. His writings chronicled the rise of irony, self-referentiality, and irreverence in selling commercial products in America, and how the popularity of this kind of advertising coincided with the postmodern ambience established by the Pynchons and DeLillos of the 80s.

DFW's observations of consumer-popular culture still ring true today, though irony and irony-like insincerity have surmounted commercial advertising and are now found equally throughout social media and casual speech. Self-effacing through one's speech or Instagram presence has dangerous effects on civil discourse/ the public will when it seeps down to these lower strata of communication. The public becomes more concerned with appearing witty, artful, aware, etc., than affecting any kind of emotional connection or solidarity.

Irony would for Wallace typify the cynical and defeatist attitude known to the culture of his day. But what was then seen as a fleeting cultural moment has become a mainstay in postmodernity, a state marked by the spell of memes and new internet viralities that shade our worldview with the same jaded snark that commercial television did Wallace's.

Wallace watched irony play the role of a tyrant in the popular consciousness. He regarded irony with disdain as it incited nihilism and shrugged the truth; for him, irony was exclusively negative in function. He criticized irony for its irreverent quality without having any redemptive qualities to back it—here we find one of its many net-negative expressions. Wallace saw irony as an empty mode of critique that could point to a problem, maybe deconstruct it, but could offer no solutions.

For Millennials, the language of irony has supplanted the language of the sentimental and sincere. Where the 20th century saw cringe-inducing one liners, heroism and the celebration of

silver linings amid struggle, the pop culture of the 21st is fraught with nostalgic throwbacks, cheap sarcasm, and ambivalence toward anything naive enough to affirm the truth.

Take, for example, the wink/wink/nudge pastiche that has found its way into many of our conversations, group chats, advertisements, TV shows, etc. This mode is implied whenever the message is too interpretive, too critical of itself, to mean any one thing for sure. What, then, can we say about its content, lesson, instruction? Though not all conversations are made of these, nor do they call for them, they are treasures of human communication that we shouldn't cede blindly.

Can we emotionally engage with anything, completely, if it only speaks tongue-to-cheek? If not, then irony's saturation in speech and pop entertainment has put aside our duty to aim toward truth, understanding, or compassion. Because what good can imprecision do for us if it causes communication to break down more often than it tightens the bonds of solidarity?

It's no surprise that children, the elderly, and the marginalized in society tend to be brutally unironic. Their earnestness comes from a place where "seriousness is the governing state of mind," according to NY Times columnist Christy Wampole. For her, the irony known to the Instagram icons, meme peddlers, and aloof hipster types are no more than coping mechanisms for the privileged; they are outlets with which they live out societal tensions that cannot be acceptably talked about in earnest. Wampole had noticed the same cultural trend as Wallace, only two decades later.

Nationalism's resurgence has seen sarcasm, irony, and internet memes express sublimated and often political insecurities. It's not uncommon to find MAGA-inspired Instagram or Facebook accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers, or anti-Trump pages in even greater numbers. Memes are both their propaganda and lingua franca.

It may be that the smartphone and the nature of social applications lend themselves well to the format of the meme. There is an argument, then, that the internet meme is technologically determined. But it is also likely that some statements can simply be expressed more easily in the form of a meme or image caption. It may be that they are our only vessels for expressing what cannot be said aloud, or for making peace with alienation or insecurity.

Neither Wampole or Wallace was the first to classify irony as a social coping device. Hannah Arendt, a German Jew and political philosopher, shared such an instrumentalist view. That is, that irony could provide an escape from the gruesome reality in Nazi Germany. For her, irony was an anesthetic; for others, it was a means to separate themselves from the regime and thus absolve themselves of even the most unimaginable crimes.

Under Nazism, Arendt found that Germans could be liberated, in an existential sense, by carrying out their duties to the regime while “holding more than one meaning in [their] mind.” Arendt became infamous in the United States when she wrote that Nazi commander Adolf Eichmann acted ironically when he followed Hitler’s orders to slaughter millions of civilians.

Today, irony is watered down. It has returned to the fray in the form of cooler-than-thou snark, throwbacks, and satire. We have 90s junk-culture nostalgia brought to you by ephemeral genres like vaporwave, alt-right-inspired anti-comedy, and heroin chic fashion trends. We have major industry players in the media that speak to their audience only in internet memes. At their core, movements such as these are about tearing down an institution or convention, and not bothering to rebuild anew.

By contrast, former eras portrayed a kind of false sincerity that thinly concealed the emptiness inherent to a world marked, even for them, by total connectivity and total isolation. The underlying isolation/connection tension remains today, although without its silver lining. Postmodernity ushered this phase in, as if we decided to shun the mendacity of 20th-c sentimentalism and instead celebrate the bleak and the defeated. It became the norm to view sentimentality as something to be overcome or resisted, or as something to be left behind so that its deceit can be seen in rear view.

It takes a rare emotional skill to avoid postmodern cynicism while also staying clear of the emotional manipulation that false sincerity projects. It’s a fine line to walk, which might explain why sincerity is so often rejected altogether. Maybe it’s true that most of us will happily take cynical entertainment over entertainment that’s trying to program a belief into us. But what is more certain is that, be it cynicism or optimism, it is one of entertainment’s primary features to instill beliefs into its audience. There are messages and motives nonetheless, regardless of whether they are sincere. The point is to choose carefully which agenda we want to be exposed to. Which message we want to believe in. To choose.

If irony’s agenda espouses cynicism toward such humanistic ideals, the agenda of sincerity is to reclaim those ideals. Where irony is skeptical, distrusting, and pessimistic, sincerity urges us to get along, to find likeness, to believe in the purpose of doing those things; to devote oneself to the pursuit of that ideal.

And we have reason to be optimistic about that. Today’s popular culture finds its humour less in mockery or irreverence than in the awkward, raw sincerity behind their attempts to find themselves in their viewer (as better essays have already pointed out, we can see how Bojack Horseman, Rick and Morty, Jimmy Fallon, Nathan for You, New Girl, Kimmy Schmidt, et al. are carrying this out). Their messages are sometimes bleak, obvious and shallow; melodramatic as they are, they are making some sincere claim toward the truth, or a higher purpose, or

redemption, or the Good. They deconstruct cultural conventions but in such a way that lessons are still drawn after the fact; since they are critical and experimental as much as they are sincere, these TV shows/comedians/etc. have the unique ability to uncover something about the soul, both sad and hilarious, underneath. Here we find where irony cannot go, and where new, instructive stories can be told.

If we are to move past our current default setting—if we are to affect any sort of larger cultural change—we'll have to get used to sappy old sincerity, or at least find a way to rekindle its newer brand. We'll need to make it known that what we once tried to replace is, on second thought, worth preserving. That it's worth taking the risk of appearing quaint, repressed, naive, and sentimental. Because opposite of detachment is honesty, a pretenseless antidote to empty cynicism and ambivalence.

To choose sincerity is to reclaim those values we've abandoned. The kind that unite and instruct. Those that tell the stories we need to hear. Those that need to be told: be hopeful, there is good, You are loved.