'Sincerity' review: Really, truly a book on 'Sincerity'

By Special to The Oregonian

SINCERITY
R. Jay Magill
Norton
$25.95, 257 pages

Although the word first appeared in the English language in 1533, "sincerity" was not a new idea. Derived from the Latin sincerus, which had been used to describe things and not people, R. Jay Magill tells us, it connotes honesty, wholeness and simplicity. During the Protestant Reformation, sincerity became a shorthand for acceptance of Christ's message of love and faith with a pure heart.

In "Sincerity," Magill, who is an editor and writer at the American Academy in Berlin, provides a charming and thought-provoking account of the concept, from its theological origins to its (more contested) role in contemporary culture. These days, he points out, as we have come to believe that the inability to articulate feelings is the best evidence for sincerity and that irony can convey sincerity, we are torn between a conviction that social masks are necessary and useful and a longing for integrity and authenticity in human relationships.
"Sincerity" is not the last word on the subject. Magill’s forced march through the Reformation, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, Modernity, and Post-Modernity in this brief book can only scratch the surface. And the assumption that guides his narrative -- "as with art, so with life" -- leads him to focus disproportionately on painters, poets and writers and ascribe to them more influence on society-at-large than they actually had.

Nonetheless, Magill’s analysis is provocative and penetrating. By the 20th century, he indicates, it was by no means certain that the inner and outer self could be matched. After all, as Freudians suggested, civilization depended on the sublimation of repressed desires. In a commercial economy, moreover, turning wants into needs meant selling false impressions -- and having people "buy into" their own performances. Because a "premium is put on sincerity," sociologist David Riesman warned, "a premium is put on faking it." And Post-Modernism, Magill indicates, put the proverbial nail in the coffin of strong, moral, inner-directed, sincere self, redefining sincerity as "sincerity."

But he also wonders whether sincerity might be poised for a comeback. Deployed 24/7 in American popular culture, irony, he guesses, may have lost its critical power and become an agent of despair and paralysis. Along with novelist David Foster Wallace, Magill believes that it is time to risk yawns, rolled eyes, and nudged ribs by insisting that it isn’t -- or shouldn’t be -- banal as the deconstructionists say it is to ask yourself or people you know, "what do you really mean?"

Magill acknowledges that sincerity is not always appropriate, relevant or beneficial -- and that it may well involve unfortunate consequences. But he is surely right, isn’t he, that to express one’s thoughts and feelings is to be human. And that, far more often than not, sincerity beats the alternatives.

-- Glenn C. Altschuler

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