

BRONIES AND THE NEW SINCERITY

"England is sick, and ... English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function: still, I suppose, to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State." -- George Gordon, Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford, speaking in 1922

England's still sick, kids, and literature couldn't save it either. With the failure of Church and literary canon, Anglo-saxon elites have started building other moral platforms to help prop up the bourgeois state and their own exalted position within it. We can all name the more familiar and annoying examples of this trend in recent years: the New Atheism, transhumanism, the TED conference, KONY 2012, the "rational" charity movement, Wikipedia, Creative Commons, and so on. And at least as bad as any of these is the New Sincerity, even though it sometimes involves innocent magic ponies.

MY LITTLE SANCTIMONY, OR, PONY 2012

My Little Pony: Friendship Is Magic is a cartoon series advertising a collectible toy franchise developed by Hasbro, Inc. Like *He-Man* and *Thundercats* back in my day, its primary purpose is to make kids harass their parents into buying them plastic figurines. The series is apparently quite successful among its target audience of six-year-old girls, but it has also found an unexpected group of fans: male nerds in their twenties. These guys, who call themselves "bronies", are unusually loud and militant even as fanboys go. For the past couple of years they've been making themselves seen and heard all over the Web, and in college rooms and office cubicles all across Christendom. Wherever bronies go, they leave an explosion of multicoloured macros and memes in their wake.

And to most bronies, I've got this to say: if you like cartoons about toy ponies, good for you. We're all struggling to get by in this cold and lonely world, and if you've found something that makes you happy, then I'm happy too. I'm happy you've found a community of like minds that share your enthusiasm; I'm happy that your creative juices get stimulated by Twinklehoofs and Snuggiefluff and company. Your pastime brings you and your buddies joy and contentment and is not harming anyone, and no one with an ounce of charity could find any fault with that.

But for many of its adherents, bronyism is not a harmless or even mostly harmless pastime. For these guys, it's a power display: a way to big themselves up and put others down, a personal triumph and a self-righteous crusade, an opportunity to act like a prig and a martyr. Here's a brony on the tvtropes forum explaining how he has ascended to a superior mode of existence, which apparently justifies his rudeness toward the people left behind:

"Being a brony, as far as I am concerned, means taking a stance of sincerity and idealism, and throwing aside cynicism, sarcasm, and irony. You can search my forum interventions if you want; you will find that I very seldom employ irony in any way, shape, or form. I am earnest. And, when people are being sarcastic at me, I behave as if I didn't understand sarcasm, because I'm not interested in that mode of communication, and I refuse to even acknowledge it; if you want to communicate with me in a meaningful way, you'll have to switch to sincere mode."

As with a lot of Internet atheists (and the resemblance is not coincidental) these bronies pride themselves on their moral courage, and congratulate themselves about it at every opportunity. Here's the same guy a few paragraphs later, celebrating his brony-bravery:

"The show stands for certain values, and the people who like those values, such as myself, are rather glad for a flagship to rally around. Back when the show came out, I couldn't believe how happy I was; it's depressing that, nowadays, it takes courage to say "let's be nice to each other and become, together, more than the sum of our parts, through the power of goodwill and understanding" with a straight face, and I'm glad for a media franchise that does it, and does it with panache."

It's not just isolated bronies on forums who are prone to moralising. The PBS Idea Channel on Youtube, which in its shameless nerd-pandering is rather like *The Oatmeal* for NPR sensibilities, has taken up the brony cause on brony terms. [According to this almost unwatchable video](#), bronies are not just the good people they claim to be, they're also revolutionaries, shaking the foundations of established hierarchies with their subversive pony-love:

"Why on earth would a grown man want to watch a television show about magical talking ponies learning the importance of friendship? It turns out the answer is actually really simple: it's a great show. Bronies want to celebrate -- actually celebrate, not ironically celebrate -- the show's themes, characters and ideas as a community. [...] They just happen to really love a show about the magical nature of friendship. [...] By unironically enjoying what's only supposed to be for little girls, bronies are actually challenging what constitutes masculinity."

I'm sorry, but I just can't swallow any of this stuff.

THE NEW SINCERITY: JUST AS BAD AS THE OLD

First of all, let's quickly dispense with the claim that bronyism is not ironic. This doesn't stand up to any kind of scrutiny. [The brony phenomenon originated on 4chan](#) (that noted bastion of tolerance and honesty), when a bunch of trolls pretended to like this pony cartoon in order to piss off a reviewer who complained that it was a commercial sell-out. Then a different bunch of trolls claimed to *actually* like it in order to piss off those who only pretended to; and then a still different group decided to seize the high moral ground from everyone else by *actually actually* liking it. From there it spiralled out of control.

What we have here is not the absence of irony, but instead the limit of irony repeatedly applied on itself to infinity. Bronyism is not unironic: it's post-ironic, trans-ironic, hyper-ironic. It is irony that has entered a maniacally oscillating state, resembling a hangover or perhaps a caffeine overdose, in which the perpetrators are no longer even sure if they're in on their own joke. It's irony folded back on itself so often that it has arrived at sincerity, or something like it, and has thus supposedly won redemption.

This kind of irony is also known as "The New Sincerity", and in the wider world is exemplified by the works of Wes Anderson, Zach Braff, Miranda July, and Dave Eggers and the *McSweeney's* crowd, and works like *Juno*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *The Sound of Young America* and other cultural lowlights of the last two decades. Under their surface of mildly self-critical whimsy, all these works are in the business of providing feelgood sermons for deserving liberals, empowerment for the already empowered. They all exploit the New Sincerity's built-in redemption narrative: irony redeemed by sincerity, phony liberal guilt and self-loathing overcome by the revelation that you're a genuinely good and superior and blameless person after all.

The New Sincerity combines the worst of two worlds: all the tedium of hipster irony with all the sanctimony of evangelical Protestantism. This is precisely the attraction for its admirers, who think it combines the *best* of these worlds: hipper-than-thou posturing without the sneer, Protestantism without the theology. As the synthesis of two different but equally nauseating kinds of smugness, the New Sincerity is a natural gathering point for today's beacons of bourgeois morality. "God" never features in their moral admonitions, but otherwise they're as bad as any Victorian moralist: reaping the rewards of privilege and empire, while chiding the less fortunate with their insufferable rectitude.

This might be a relic of my papist schooling, but I don't believe sincerity, new or old, should be counted among the cardinal virtues, and I think it's sad to see anyone older than a teenager hanging it out for admiration. What good does your sincerity do anyone in this day and age? At least for 17th century Calvinists, saved by faith alone, the quest for sincerity had a spiritual urgency about it: if their faith was insincere, their souls would burn for literal eternity in the literal fires of Hell*. Today's liberal WASPs face no such threat. Nothing is riding on their sincerity, and their struggle to find it is nothing but vanity. Their sincerity is simply a display of fidelity to a constructed self, which is largely built out of consumer choices and hypocrisy. It's the ultimate assertion of bourgeois individualism and bourgeois values.

In political terms, this sincerity is reactionary, and in moral terms, it's irrelevant. If the self you've constructed is good, then being sincere to it can motivate you to good deeds; but all too often, the self

you've constructed is a pampered, narcissistic manchild, and being sincere to it is a moral zero. Sincerity exists in the moral realm of intentions, and unless you're a sociopath like [Orson Scott Card](#), what matters more in any moral system are actions and their consequences. Good acts are always better than sincere ones.

Lest anyone declare I'm trying to out-moralise the moralisers and out-prig the prigs: you can stop projecting now, bronies. I'm not trying to knock you off my perch, I'm trying to drag you back down to my level. I'm no model for anyone. I'm lost, like you once were. I'm still searching for meaning and belonging, I'm still struggling with how to be conscious and human in the 21st century and not go insane, and I'm not making any progress. I don't know the answer, but I do know this: the New Sincerity ain't it.

(RE)DEFINING MASCULINITY

The sincerity of bronies might not be worth shit, but maybe there's something to the claim that they are redefining masculinity. But even if they are, why is that a good thing? Who needs masculinity? Instead of redefining it, why not throw it in the dustbin? A redefinition of masculinity could only be worthwhile if it sought to undermine the existing concept, and the notions of power and authority it entails, but bronyism does no such thing. It merely seeks to redraw the boundaries — in a way that tramples over someone else's territory.

Definitions are inherently exclusionary: defining masculinity is all about making a demarcation between what is masculine, and what is not. And bronyism is all about separating the men from the girls. The very concept assumes there is something special, and superior, about a grown man's appreciation of these magic pony cartoons, something that elevates itself above the feelings of the show's target audience. At the same time, bronyism rests on a sentimentalised and objectified image of what little girls are made of, which marginalises them and denies them a voice. "See us," bronies seem to be saying, "we're not just sugar and spice and all things nice. We're something more: we're real men." In this way, bronyism assumes and even seeks to legitimise existing gender stereotypes.

The brony community is largely an all-male club, and from what I can see, it certainly isn't free from stereotypical meathead behaviour. It grew out of a sort of macho contest to see who could be the biggest pony fan, and the same kind of behaviour carries over into the present day: there's an undeniable tough-guy posturing about the forum posts quoted above. What's more, it's not at all difficult to find examples on the Web of [bronies acting like bigoted assholes](#). Good job redefining masculinity, guys!

* Here I'm stealing an idea [from "Ramon Glazov"](#) (who is most likely one of John Dolan's avatars).

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