

## The Corruption of Standardized Tests

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Individualism composed of hedonism, minimalism, and consumerism will destroy any society that practices these lifestyles because the atomization of the individual pollutes their concern for the whole society. These destructive views impact every aspect of life in a community because the individuals believe they are separate from one another, and therefore allowed to live by their subjective truths because they believe their individual choices do not affect the whole, but the individuals in a society impact the larger community because everyone lives together whether they acknowledge it or not.

The atomized individual believes they express their freedom by doing what they want when they want because enacting their desires makes them feel good, and the hedonist believes life is about feeling good all the time. Alexis de Toqueville, in his book Democracy in America, explains the intense expression of the individual's view of atomized freedom is one of intoxication from the illusion of power (621). The inability to draw distinctions between the illusion of freedom and the reality of freedom enslaves the society under their primordial desires which will ultimately destroy the society because the deeply rooted problems cannot be addressed because the individuals refuse to see how the larger problems could potentially affect their microcosm.

When the deeply rooted problems expand to infect the individual's microcosm, the atomized individual will either ignore the problem, or will view the problem from a minimalist perspective. The search for individual happiness through a minimalist perspective will cause the individual to employ quick fixes which will most likely involve consumerism to cover up the

problem instead of creating dialogue with the community to dissect and diagnose the problem before enacting a potential solution.

One of the greatest underlying threats to genuine freedom manifests in the educational system through the form of high stakes standardized testing; however, before I explore the educational system in the United States, I must define “genuine freedom.” My definition originates from the author, Matthew Kelly. In his book, Rediscovering Catholicism, Kelly defines freedom as “the strength of character to do what is good, true, noble, and right.” (28) In Kelly’s book, he applies this definition to religion, however I believe his definition can also apply to secular ideas. To expand further on that definition, Kelly also explains the integral relationship between discipline and freedom. Discipline does not enslave, but frees us to reach higher levels of accomplishment, and without discipline, freedom cannot be attained. Freedom is not the ability to enact desires whenever and wherever the individual chooses without interference from authority – that is hedonism and the lack of discipline, which enslaves the individual to their primordial desires and blocks them from cooperating in life with others.

Definitions of freedom will vary between people, but one view from the distinguished sociologist, Robert Bellah, holds true. In his book, Habits of the Heart, Bellah presents how the individualistic view of freedom weakens the society by explaining that “if the entire social world is made up of individuals, each endowed with the right to be free of others’ demands, it becomes hard to forge bonds of attachment to, or cooperation with, other people, since such bonds would imply obligations that necessarily impinge on one’s freedom.” (23) Freedom therefore requires, but not limited to, the disciplines of humility, patience, dedication, fortitude, and communication to effectively live in a functioning community where genuine freedom thrives. Bellah refers to such a community that would “encompass an ability to share a vision of a good life or a good

good life, but the educational system's investment in high stakes standardized testing exemplifies the decreasing genuine freedom. Frequently school systems with low test scores employ an emergency manager like Michelle Rhee or a businessman like Michael Bloomberg to quickly enter the school district, make rash changes, and leave as quickly as they appeared. Businessmen and politicians, who lack experience in education, apply quick fix capitalist ideals to the schooling systems. Their quick fixes may have slightly improved the test scores (depending on how one views and analyses the data), but they leave the school's community in shambles and produce additional problems on top of the previous issues.

The degree at which high stakes standardized testing occupies the educational system threatens genuine freedom because of the weight the exams hold and therefore the effects on society because of their significance. Initially, standardized tests were designed to show the knowledge of the students, but now schooling has been centered on the test. The use of standardized tests as an end rather than a way to evaluate limited knowledge exemplifies the minimalism thriving in the educational system. Diane Ravitch, a leading education journalist and muckraker, explains some of the minimalist effects in her book, The Death and Life of the Great American School System. One issue schools face is the lack of the students' motivation after the test is taken. Ravitch explains that after the tests, "there was time for other subjects, but it was difficult to maintain the same level of student motivation, because teachers and students knew the tests were the primary measures of their success or failure." (76) This section reveals two prominent issues with high stakes standardized tests. One issue is the poor use of time after the exams, which depicts the minimalist view of only accomplishing the task that is weighted, rather than exploring other educational avenues. The second minimalism issue is centered on the evaluation of teachers. Rather than using peer evaluation and examining different variables that

could affect the grade performance of students year after year, the governing systems choose to use the test scores of students to evaluate the teacher's skills, which can cause the teacher to narrow the curriculum to only the subjects covered on the test. The test scores seem to provide stark and clean data to evaluate a teacher, but the numbers hide the human variable from student to student. The high stakes standardized tests threaten genuine freedom because a single numeric value characterizes an entire person in the state, federal, and university standardized exams.

The value placed in a number also causes issues related to the school's operation. To attain good results, a state might choose to lower the standards. Ravitch explains how in 2009 a study conducted by the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago revealed that the claimed significant increase in test scores in Chicago's schools from 2004 to 2008 was exaggerated. The study concluded that the "huge increases reflect changes in the tests and testing procedure – not real student improvement." (158) In 2006, the state began using a new testing company which had a lower passing score than the previous company. Ravitch states that the change in the testing company produced "the illusion of remarkable gain." (158) The illusion of prosperity is a slippery slope because policy or anything concrete cannot be founded on illusions, yet the illusion in Chicago's school system influenced the appointment of Arne Duncan, Chicago's school superintendent, as the U.S. secretary of education under the Obama administration (158). Chicago is not alone in cheating the system. Ravitch sites numerous examples of schools encouraging low-performing students to stay home on testing days, or suspending them before the test, or inappropriately assigning the lower performing students in the special education group—not to mention the schools who have literally cheated by giving the answers to the students, or correcting wrong answers before submitting the papers (156). The

standardized test centered schooling creates monsters within our community by pinning the success or failure of students and teachers on one annual, flawed test.

In addition to the problems with evaluation through the standardized tests, centralization on the tests in the educational system creates a standardized test culture which produces polluted and confused minds. Students in elementary, middle, and high school learn proscribed test taking skills to deduce the right answer rather than learning how to approach a situation with a critical and creative mind. Ravitch explains that students generally lose interest in school when more time is allocated to test preparation than education when she states that “we may be training (not educating) a generation of children who are repelled by learning, thinking that it means only drudgery, worksheets, test preparation, and test-taking.” (231) The problem associated with the generations of children who believe education consists mostly of test preparation and test-taking involves the progression of time.

The generations of test centered children will eventually grow up and create the standardized test culture. The third grader who learned how to correctly fill out a scantron sheet and guess “C” when they did not know the answer will later be the adult with responsibilities who lacks the necessary skills of critically and creatively thinking. Chris Hedges, author of Empire of Illusion, overlaps and expands on Ravitch’s discussion. Ravitch examines the public school system consisting of kindergarten through high school. Hedges investigates the end of high school, the collegiate level of education, and the careers. The same standardized test taking focus spreads past high school and into the universities. Hedges explains how his high school son took the SAT the first time and received low marks for critical reading. They paid \$7,000 for a tutor from the Princeton Review as a part of the deluxe SAT preparation package (101). The tutor taught Hedge’s son tricks on how to take the exam, such as “ ‘stop thinking about whether

the passage is true. You are wasting test time thinking about the ideas. Just spit back what they tell you.' ” (101) His son’s critical reading score increased by 130 points. Hedges doubts that his son increased his critical reading skills by learning to “regurgitate a passage rather than think about it or critique it,” and he doubts that a test with regurgitation at its foundation could effectively evaluate critical reading skills. High school students across the country take the SAT or ACT entrance exams for college. The families that can afford a \$7,000 tutor for test-preparation will most likely pay for it, but the students of the families that cannot afford the test-preparation will go without the extra tricks. Hedges views the economic gap in regards to test preparation as a major issue in elite universities because they rely heavily on standardized tests (102). Hedges states that the elite universities have “the demand for perfect grades, [so they] fill their classrooms with large numbers of drones and a disproportionate percentage of the rich and well connected.” (102) The test centered society produces economically equal, machine-like minds rather than creative and critically thinking minds. The drones will eventually enter the careers which yield responsibilities that affect the lives of others, like politicians.

The narrowed ideals observed by the students early in their education propagates the test centered madness throughout their education, into their careers, and into other facets of their life. In the standardized test centered culture, the meaning of the passage does not matter because the regurgitated answer is correct, and all other answers are incorrect. The focus on only one right answer destroys the potential for debate and innovation. Niels Bohr, the physicist responsible for the modern understanding of atomic structure and quantum mechanics, is quoted for saying that there are “two sorts of truth: profound truths recognized by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth, in contrast to trivialities where opposites are obviously absurd.” The energy invested in trivial truths produces a trivial culture. The standardized test culture easily disregards

profound truths because the profound truths consume too much time in a market culture focused on mass production and even more focused on mass consumption. Living with “the strength of character to do what is good, true, noble, and right” is too difficult for the minimalist and impresses upon the hedonist perspective (Kelly, 28). Eventually, freedom is lost in the culture when the society views minimalistic thoughts as profound truths. The peoples’ confusion leads to illusions about values and morals. Hedges states the inevitable downfall of any society based in the confusion: “A culture that does not grasp the vital interplay between morality and power, which mistakes management techniques for wisdom, which fails to understand that the measure of a civilization is its compassion, not its speed or ability to consume, condemns itself to death.” (103) The focus on standardized tests, beginning in elementary school and progressing throughout schooling, veils the profound truths and confuses generations, thus fueling the demise of our society through the decreasing freedom because of the propagation of minimalistic, hedonistic, and consumeristic individualism in the school systems.

The school systems are one of the most profound institutions that organize and influence a large proportion of the population in multiple generations. The standardized test centered schools are one of the greatest threats to the freedom of the country because the schools affect a plethora of people in mass numbers. The test centered schools propagate the test centered culture which thrives on individualism composed of hedonism, minimalism, and consumerism. These ideals confuse the population and lead them to their demise because society acts based on individualistic illusions. A society with illusions as the foundation will crumble just like a house built upon sand. The members of the individualistic society must recognize the illusions, and they must look beyond their individualistic desires to hold the society together.

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