

How many of us grew up playing with play-dough? Personally, blue spaghetti noodles and red ice cream cones were some of my favorite creations. Until recently I always thought of play-dough as merely a childhood preoccupation – but it seems as though I may have been wrong. Artist Martin Creed has recently given me hope of fame with his successful creation of a work entitled “*Some Blu-Tack Kneaded, Rolled Into A Ball, And Depressed Against A Wall*” – a work which consists of some blue-tack kneaded, rolled into a ball, and depressed against a wall. If I could perform this same process countless times before the age of six, then I must have the talent to create even better works of art now! Unless, of course, skill and proficiency in making play-dough balls isn’t what actually counts. And that, I am afraid, is exactly what has happened.

Today we are here to discuss principles that endure through changing circumstances. We could spend our time thinking about what things have endured in the past, or considering why something has lasted for a long time; but I believe it is far more important for us to consider those principles which must endure for our nation and our society to remain strong amidst the ever changing circumstances and ideas that surround us. Foundational to this continued strength is the principle that right and wrong, and good and bad, can be judged according to objective standards.

Pluralism, relativism, and a denial of objective standards have been gaining momentum in our culture. These ideas are not new; the sophists in fifth century Athens argued for relative truth and morality, tossing out objective standards in favor of the orator’s ability to argue for whatever position was most advantageous, and concluding with Protagoras that, “man is the measure of all things.” But such ideas are dominating our society in a way that they have not done before. I believe that few ideas are more essential to our nation, to our society, and to each individual than the recognition of objective standards of right and wrong, good and bad. Let’s proceed in this order then, from truth’s importance for our nation, to its importance for our society, and finally to its impact on each one of us as individuals.

How does our nation depend on the existence of objective standards? To begin, our nation was founded on the notion that objective standards existed. The Declaration of Independence, in which the colonies separated from England and began this country, states that the reason the colonies’ separation was legitimate was because England had violated the laws of nature and nature’s God. This statement demands that there be some standard of true laws, to which the authors of the Declaration could appeal, and by which the rulers of England could be held accountable. And so there is such a standard, wrote Jefferson – namely, that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men. If laws are merely the will of the majority, then the founders had no right to throw off the government of England. But the founders believed that they were founding a legitimate nation, and their justification was an objective standard of right and wrong which governed all men and all governments.

The continued strength of this nation also depends on objective standards. The United States relies upon the rule of law for order, but the rule of law depends upon ethical standards for what is right and what is wrong. If we, as a nation, abandon the commitment to objective standards, and instead allow individuals to decide for themselves what is right, the results are disastrous. Consider the ruling handed down less than four weeks ago by Vermont judge Edward Cashman. He slapped a mere 60 day sentence on Mark Hulett, who pleaded guilty to two accounts of aggravated sexual assault and serial rape – crimes which regularly result in sentences of 20 years and higher.

Cashman's reasoning? He doesn't believe in punishment anymore, which he says accomplishes nothing of value. This statement, shocking though it is, should not be so unexpected from a nation which more and more refuses to condemn the standards of any individual. If each person is equally right in what he or she believes to be good, then no justification remains for punishment. As Richard Weaver summarized in *Ideas Have Consequences*, "For four centuries every man has been not only his own priest, but his own professor of ethics, and the consequence is an anarchy which threatens even that minimum consensus of value necessary to the political state."

Such is the necessity of objective standards for our nation. But our society too depends upon objective truth. Many argue that our society's strength lies in its acceptance of every person and in its recognition of the worth of each person's ideas. But consider the first victim of such tolerance and acceptance: without objective standards, nearly all words and ideas lose their meaning. If a person is allowed to take any word he likes, and assign any delightful meaning he likes to that word, then the word really has no meaning at all. For if everyone uses it differently, it is impossible for the word to communicate accurately to the listener. But CS Lewis argues that our increasing reliance on self-expression has damaged our ability to communicate in a more subtle way. In *Abolition of Man*, Lewis points out that many people believe words refer only to our own feelings about a subject. Thus, when a person says that a waterfall is beautiful, the speaker is only saying something about his own feelings, and nothing about the waterfall itself. But if this statement only tells us about someone's feelings, we do not know anything more about the waterfall, nor do we know what is meant by calling it "beautiful". Whether our society attaches words to feelings instead of reality, or goes so far as to reject standards for judging the meaning of words, when it ignores principles and standards, it erodes its ability to communicate clearly.

Perhaps flowing directly from the loss of clear communication, a denial of objective standards also whittles away at our ability to reason. The mindset of relativism – the understanding that we must be open to what anyone and everyone has to say – only further erodes the foundation of reason. If everyone has something valuable to say, and no one has any standard to judge the truth of a statement, then there is left no place for critical reasoning in society. As Allan Bloom has argued in *The Closing of the American Mind*, "Openness used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason's power." Society is on a dangerous path indeed when it loses not only the ability to reason, but also any sense of the value or necessity of reasoning in favor of openness.

Finally, then, we turn to you and I. What is the impact of a relativistic mindset on us, as individuals? Individuals lose their motivation to strive for what is good and what is right. This happens for two reasons. First, without any standards for the true, the good, and the beautiful, we have no idea of what we are striving for. The goal is not set before us. But also, the relativist constantly reminds each individual that there is no reason to judge their rightness or goodness according to any standard – they are special and their opinions are worthwhile on account of their belief in them. But Syndrome – the wannabe superhero from *The Incredibles* demonstrated the fault of this philosophy when he declared, "And when I'm old and I've had my fun, I'll sell my inventions so that everyone can be superheroes. Everyone can be super. And when everyone's super...no one will be." This is precisely the point. If everyone is right, and anything an individual does is good, then there is no reason for him to improve – to become better at what he does, or to pursue truth in what he believes, or to understand beauty in what he sees. When we

abandon objective standards of goodness, we leave ourselves mired in a mediocrity where no one is excellent, nor is there any motivation to improve.

But this is not just a question of whether or not we have motivation to do better. It is, primarily, a question of impoverished minds and souls. If we do not strive for what is true, we may settle for what is false; if we do not pursue what is good, we may settle what is mediocre; if we do not seek what is beautiful, we may settle for what is merely pretty. HL Mencken has written that Americans often seem to have a desire for the ugly. Perhaps it is not so much that we desire the ugly, but that we are unconcerned about whether something is beautiful or not. But this attitude is the natural result of a mindset which says that there is no standard for the true, the good, or the beautiful.

So we return again to the question of principles – principles that must endure for the sake of the nation, for the sake of our society, and for the sake of ourselves. It is true that circumstances have changed, and it is a safe bet that circumstances will continue to change, perhaps at a pace that will only increase in the future. But through these changes, the principle of objective standards for right and wrong, good and bad, must endure. It will always be worth sacrificing our fame in play-dough art to pursue what is truly excellent.