

"Self-Evident" Truth

Post by "Cassius" of April 19, 2026 at 6:57 AM

We have a very old discussion of self-evident truth as referenced in the Declaration of Independence [here](#). I am starting this new thread because in the podcast we are about to tackle some very specific issues regarding "truth" where the question of whether there is such a thing as "self-evident truth" will need to be examined again.

I believe we are going to find that the issues here are very separate from that of concluding that the senses report honestly without opinion that "fire is hot" and "honey is sweet." Statements such as "all men are created equal" or that they "are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights..." are likely conclusions that are very far from what the senses alone perceive.

I expect that this issue will become relevant in discussing either or both of (1) the Stoic view of kataleptic impressions or (2) the Epicurean view of "present impressions of the mind."

So for the moment I am just setting up this thread with this background material from Grok as to how this phrase entered the American Declaration of Independence. it was not in Jefferson's initial draft, and how it entered is unclear.

Joshua has made many skeptical references in our podcast to "natural rights theory," and this concept of "self-evident truths" seems to me to be something to be also very cautious about accepting.

Quote

The phrase "We hold these truths to be self-evident" opens the second paragraph of the U.S. Declaration of Independence (adopted July 4, 1776), which continues: "...that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Immediate Derivation (Drafting History): Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration in June 1776 as the primary author for the Committee of Five (which also included John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Livingston, and Roger Sherman). In his original draft, the line read: "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable."

Benjamin Franklin (or possibly Jefferson himself, per some scholarly debate) crossed out "sacred and undeniable" and replaced it with "self-evident" during the committee's review of Jefferson's draft. This was one of dozens of edits (Congress made about 86 changes total, shortening the document by roughly a quarter

The change was deliberate and rhetorical: "Sacred and undeniable" carried strong theological/moral weight (anchoring the truths in divine or natural law with religious overtones). "Self-evident" shifted the emphasis to rational, Enlightenment-style certainty—truths so obvious they require no further proof or debate, preempting theological disputes while appealing to reason. Jefferson later described the document not as original invention but as "an expression of the American mind" and "the harmonising sentiments of the day," drawn from shared ideas in conversations, letters, essays, and foundational political philosophy texts.

Jefferson also drew phrasing and structure from his own earlier draft preamble to the Virginia Constitution and, especially, George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights (June 1776), which stated that "all men are by nature equally free and independent" and possess inherent rights to "the enjoyment of life and liberty... and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety."

Intellectual OriginsThe phrase and the paragraph as a whole synthesize several strands of Enlightenment (and earlier) thought, but they are not a direct copy from any single source. Jefferson explicitly listed influences including Aristotle, Cicero, John Locke, and Algernon Sidney.

- John Locke (primarily for the content of the truths): Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1689) supplied the core ideas of natural rights (life, liberty, and "estate"/property, which Jefferson adapted to "pursuit of Happiness"), government by consent of the governed, and the right to revolution against tyranny. Locke's state-of-nature theory emphasized original human equality.

However, Locke defined "self-evident" truths narrowly in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) as purely formal/tautological propositions (e.g., "a man is a man" or "red is not blue")—not substantive moral or political claims like human equality or unalienable rights. The Declaration's usage stretches beyond Locke's epistemology.

- "Self-evident" as a philosophical term (Scottish Enlightenment influence): The specific framing of certain moral/political truths as self-evident (axiomatic, immediately accessible to common prudence without complex demonstration) aligns more closely with the Scottish Common Sense philosophy of Thomas Reid (1710–1796). Reid, in works like *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, treated self-evident truths as first principles implicit in everyday human conduct and discoverable by the faculty of "common sense." These are foundational axioms that prudent people grasp intuitively, countering skepticism (e.g., from David Hume). Reid argued that the same understanding enabling ordinary life also reveals self-evident truths about morality and reality.

Scottish ideas were widely taught and influential in colonial American colleges and among the Founders. Reid's common-sense realism made republican self-government possible: if ordinary people can discern self-evident truths, they can govern themselves.

- Francis Hutcheson (for unalienable rights): This Scottish philosopher's *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755) distinguished unalienable rights (inherent to human nature, e.g., life and liberty) from alienable ones (e.g., property acquired through labor/exchange). This refined Locke's framework and better matches the Declaration's wording.
- Broader roots: The concept of self-evident axioms traces to classical philosophy (e.g., Euclid's geometry or Aristotle's first principles) and natural-law traditions (via Cicero, Aquinas, Hooker, and Sidney). The Declaration presents the truths as a logical syllogism: self-evident premises about equality and rights → purpose of government → right to alter or abolish destructive government.
- In short, the ideas are Lockean natural rights filtered through American revolutionary consensus and Virginia precedents; the rhetorical claim of self-evidence draws on Scottish common-sense epistemology to assert them as undeniable axioms of reason. Jefferson and the Congress packaged widely shared colonial sentiments into a concise, persuasive justification for independence. This phrasing has since influenced global declarations of rights and movements for equality.

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