

# To What Extent Are The Ideas In The "We Hold These Truths To Be Self-Evident" Paragraph of the Declaration of Independence Consistent With Epicurean Philosophy?

Post by "Cassius" of April 15, 2018 at 10:27 AM

This is to pose a series of questions about one of the most famous passages of the American "Declaration of Independence." As discussion develops on one or more of these in particular we can split the discussion into separate threads, but to start here is a list of questions:

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. "*

1. What do we know about whether this paragraph was written entirely by Thomas Jefferson, or contains modifications from others?
2. Would an Epicurean agree that what follows in the paragraph after the first phrase are "self-evident?" What does "self-evident" mean?
3. Would an Epicurean agree that "all men are created equal." It is absolutely clear that all men are NOT created equal in every respect (health, sex, race, capabilities, preferences, etc.) It is also clear to an Epicurean that men are not "created" if that term implies a supernatural god. In what respect, if any, would an Epicurean say that "all men are created equal."
4. What does it mean to say "endowed by their Creator?" Would an Epicurean use this phrasing? If so, what would an Epicurean mean by "their Creator?"
5. What are "inalienable rights"? What is a "right"? How is a right "inalienable"?" It seems clear that this cannot be read superficially, as much of what we think of as "rights" are certainly taken from people all the time and thus are not "inalienable." In what way, if any, can this phrase be reconciled with Epicurean philosophy?
6. What does the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" mean in Epicurean terms?

7. "That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." This passage is perhaps easiest to reconcile given the Principle Doctrines on "justice." How could we elaborate on this in Epicurean terms as to the meaning of "just powers" and "consent of the governed?"
  8. "That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. " Again, this passage seems directly supported by the Principle Doctrines on justice. How would an Epicurean elaborate on the meaning of this passage?
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## Post by "Hiram" of April 18, 2018 at 10:54 AM

Quote

### **Who wrote the Declaration of Independence?**

Although we know Thomas Jefferson as the true author, the Second Continental Congress initially appointed five people to draw up a declaration. The committee included Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, Robert Livingston and Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was then given the task of writing a draft for the Declaration of Independence, which from June 11 to June 28 he worked on. Before he presented the Declaration to the Continental Congress, he showed it to John Adams and Benjamin Franklin; they made revisions. He presented the draft to Congress on July 1, 1776 and more revisions were made. On the fourth of July the delegates met in what we know today as Independence Hall, but back then was known as the Pennsylvania State House, and approved the Declaration. John Hancock, the President of the Continental Congress signed the declaration along with Charles Thomson and it was sent to John Dunlap's print shop for printing.

Source: <https://www.surfnetkids.com/independenceda...f-independence/>

So it seems like this was a process not too different from how we have co-written together the narratives for videos on youtube and some of our dialogues. Jefferson wrote it with feedback from four other men who were steeped in the political philosophy of the day (Locke, Rousseau, and others).

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## Post by “Cassius” of April 18, 2018 at 10:56 AM

Yes that is exactly what would need to be analyzed in order to determine how much of the final result came about through Epicurean thinking, and how much was diluted/mutated by Christian or other ideas.

I am not aware that copies of the initial draft survive, but as we proceed with this thread if anyone has more detail on who added what, and when, that would be great to link here.

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## Post by “Hiram” of April 18, 2018 at 11:30 AM

### Quote

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, 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. —*

*Would an Epicurean agree that what follows in the paragraph after the first phrase are "self-evident?" What does "self-evident" mean?*

I don't think they are self-evident, or that Epicurus would agree that men were created (as there is no creator).

We know today that men evolved through natural selection, and that nature did not have an intention of creating men or any other particular species. Natural selection follows the path of least resistance, of greatest opportunity / advantage, if and when / insofar as species are able to adapt to their environment.

The document was written in the context of setting the grounds / seeds for a new country with a new law and a new constitutional framework. An Epicurean would consider these matters in terms of mutual benefit / mutual advantage. Within this context, I think "self-evident" implies that these are matters beyond reproach and that are not up for negotiation, that they constitute the minimum standard by which they were willing to found a new country and a new law, that the social contract would have to abide by these principles.

### Quote

Would an Epicurean agree that "all men are created equal." It is absolutely clear that all men are NOT created equal in every respect (health, sex, race, capabilities, preferences, etc.) It is also clear to an Epicurean that men are not "created" if that term implies a supernatural god. In what respect, if any, would an Epicurean say that "all men are created equal."

What does it mean to say "endowed by their Creator?" Would an Epicurean use this phrasing? If so, what would an Epicurean mean by "their Creator?"

What does the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" mean in Epicurean terms?

Men are not 'created'. If we understand nature, metaphorically, as creatrix, then we may concede this, but there is WAY too much religious baggage here to accept it in my view.

We are endowed with nature with certain instincts and faculties and tendencies, and (a very strong case can be made) with a sense of morality and justice, but not with rights, inalienable or not.

Rights are born from the laws or rules we create to facilitate co-existence. The only way in which we could say that they come from "the Creator" or "Nature" is if we ourselves are understood to be co-creators or part of nature, and you could make that case, but it's best to speak clearly, and the original language seems to indicate a Creator in the deist sense, which is an error.

"Life, liberty, pursuit of happiness" - I want to go back to the idea of negotiating a new social contract for a new country, if I was Thomas Jefferson and if I had to negotiate the terms under which I, as an Epicurean, wanted to or was forced to co-exist with others OF RELIGIOUS CONVICTION, these ideas would definitely belong there. I would not care if others believe that these "inalienable rights" come from "the Creator" if, for the sake of mutual benefit, these rules are agreeable to me and others, even if I'd rather not word these principles as inalienable rights coming from a Creator.

In other words, this is a Charter for religious and non-religious people of various convictions and faiths to co-exist, and what pass for "inalienable rights" are acceptable to a non-religious person.

Life is safety; liberty is autarchy; and pursuit of happiness is self-explanatory and a natural extension of liberty; these are natural pleasures, and necessary to happiness and life in Epicurean terms.

Quote

*That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —*

*This passage is perhaps easiest to reconcile given the Principle Doctrines on "justice." How could we elaborate on this in Epicurean terms as to the meaning of "just powers" and "consent of the governed?"*

As for "just powers", PD 37 speaks of them in terms of mutual advantage, and these powers may change and evolve and apply differently in different situations and to different people:

37. Among the things held to be just by law, whatever is proved to be of advantage in men's dealings has the stamp of justice, whether or not it be the same for all; but if a man makes a law and it does not prove to be mutually advantageous, then this is no longer just. And if what is mutually advantageous varies and only for a time corresponds to our concept of justice, nevertheless for that time it is just for those who do not trouble themselves about empty words, but look simply at the facts.

Concrete examples in our own constitutional framework is how states have their rights and their form of sovereignty, versus how the federal government has its own rights and form of sovereignty and its own jurisdiction, versus how the different Indian Nations and Reservations have their own rights and forms of sovereignty, their own schools, police, etc. all according to mutual benefit.

#### Quote

*That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. "*

Again, this passage seems directly supported by the Principle Doctrines on justice. How would an Epicurean elaborate on the meaning of this passage?

This is an application of PD 37-38:

38. Where without any change in circumstances the things held to be just by law are seen not to correspond with the concept of justice in actual practice, such laws are not really just; but wherever the laws have ceased to be advantageous because of a change in circumstances, in that case the laws were for that time just when they were advantageous for the mutual dealings of the citizens, and subsequently ceased to be just when they were no longer advantageous.

The Declaration only mentions "safety and happiness", which is a good start, but in the Letter to Menoecus we find mention among the things that are needful and natural also of health of the body and tranquility of mind, of avoiding bodily uneasiness (threats, enslavement, exploitation, plagues, serious disease), which seems to imply that an Epicurean system of government would also be invested in public health, including mental health:

Quote

And of the necessary desires some are necessary if we are to be happy, some if the body is to be rid of uneasiness, some if we are even to live. He who has a clear and certain understanding of these things will direct every preference and aversion toward securing health of body and tranquillity of mind, seeing that this is the sum and end of a blessed life.

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**Post by “Hiram” of April 18, 2018 at 11:33 AM**

Will write this as a post on SoE.

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**Post by “Cassius” of April 18, 2018 at 11:35 AM**

Great comments, Hiram! I especially think that this observation "We are endowed with nature with certain instincts and faculties and tendencies, and (a very strong case can be made) with a sense of morality and justice, but not with rights, inalienable or not" is of huge significance, and once we understand that our entire perspective on justice changes.

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**Post by “Hiram” of April 18, 2018 at 11:46 AM**

Do you have more commentaries re: these observations? I will write a piece on this.

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**Post by “Cassius” of April 18, 2018 at 1:50 PM**

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/385-to-what-extent-are-the-ideas-in-the-we-hold-these-truths-to-be-self-evident-para/>

I am not sure that I have written anything that develops this that would be useful. There is a lot of raw material in the [Thomas Jefferson collection](#) I put together, especially in the "earth belongs to the living" argument in [the letter to James Madison](#) - I thought I had on my page but don't! Especially the part about "I set out on this ground which I suppose to be self evident, "that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living;" that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it. The portion occupied by an individual ceases to be his when himself ceases to be, and reverts to the society. If the society has formed no rules for the appropriation of its lands in severalty, it will be taken by the first occupants. "

This is a huge topic for which there is a lot of material. Almost every time I type something I think "this is why I wanted to set things up as a forum like this so we can start talking and lay the groundwork where we can return and find it and build on it. "