

INTRODUCTION: THE FORMULA OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Epistemology, Metaphysics, Ethics

“They say they want the kingdom
But they don’t want God in it.”¹

The Declaration of Independence serves the role of a creed in American thought and history. It was framed after a century and a half of colonial history. Although attributed to Thomas Jefferson, its final form included edits by a committee, and delegates from the colonies signed it. The largest part of its body is a list of grievances against the king, and it describes itself as a defense of the separation between England and the colonies. However, in giving this defense, it gives a succinct foundation of the epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics on which the defense rests. These three areas form the foundation of a worldview about knowledge, God and man, and the pursuit of the good life. This foundation is stated in the well-known phrase “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.” The Declaration of Independence serves to give the beginning ideas for the country. Part of this study is to understand what role God the Creator plays in that country and what role God plays in the kingdom.

BASIC BELIEFS

Before getting into the historical analysis, we need to set the context by doing work in philosophical prolegomena. Since this study includes the idea of self-evidence, we need to get into focus related ideas about

reason, belief formation, and the laws that govern belief formation. The sections that follow provide a look at these topics. We will be studying the most basic questions that humans can ask. Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. It asks what is knowledge and how it is different from correct opinion. How can we be certain in our beliefs rather than possibly mistaken? The source of knowledge is the source of authority. Authorities are cited to justify knowledge claims, and the highest authority cannot be questioned because it makes questioning possible. The Declaration of Independence claims that there are some beliefs that are self-evident. For something to be self-evident means that its truth is evident to a person once its meaning is understood. This is different than most beliefs, which, even when their meaning is understood, require support from other beliefs to demonstrate their truth. A distinction might be made between what is self-evident and what is self-attesting. To be self-attesting means the belief proves itself. It cannot be false without violating the very laws that define thought. To be self-evident is a more subjective claim. A statement might appear self-evident to one person and not self-evident to another. Whether a statement is self-attesting can be objectively determined by understanding the laws of thought. The subjective nature of *self-evident* has reverberated in American history.

Metaphysics is the study of what is real. There is a difference between what is real and what only appears to be real. There is also a difference between what is temporary and what is permanent or eternal. Something can be real now but not real in the past or in the future. What is eternal has always been real; what is eternal had no beginning and, therefore, will have no end. The Declaration of Independence sums up its claims about what is real by affirming that humans are created by God. In making this statement, it affirms that some things – God – are eternal and other things – the creation, including humans – had a beginning. Beyond this, it does not define *God*. This has left open an ambiguity that has developed into great divisions within American thought and life.

Ethics is the study of what is good. It distinguishes between means and ends. Although there are many proximate ends, the final or highest end is that toward which all choice aims. The good is distinct from the duties, virtues, and obligations required to achieve the final end. It is also distinct from happiness, which is an effect

of achieving what one believes to be good. Because a person can be mistaken about what is actually good, there is a difference between happiness and lasting happiness. Lasting happiness is only possible if what is actually good has been attained. The Declaration of Independence forms its ethical theory around a theory of rights. Humans are said to have a right to their life and the freedom to pursue what they believe will make them happy. This tells us about the limits of government in human life. However, it does not make a statement about what is actually good or about what will bring lasting happiness. Ever since the Founding there have been internal and external struggles over how to understand the good.

In the following, we will consider the relationship between knowing what is real and the good. It is formally true that the highest good is knowledge of the highest reality. However, competing worldviews understand the highest reality differently. Here we will see competing definitions of “God,” as well as philosophical materialism, which states that only the material world is real, and pantheism, which says that all being is God. This means that what is at stake in navigating these competing claims about reality is the highest good itself. This is both intensely personal for each of us and incredibly important for a society. It is the highest good that gives meaning to life and provides unity and direction for society. If the highest good is not known, then meaning and unity are lost. Where there are competing beliefs about the good, then there will be division that prevents growth and ultimately undermines culture. Therefore, I am proceeding with the belief that the study of the good and consequently the study of knowing God is basic and must be in place if other important matters are to be known and divisions to be settled.

There can be no more important subject to set in place than good and evil. Plato discusses the good in book 7 of *The Republic*. Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* makes it the original and central question. It is not a new question for humans or in philosophy. It is a foundational question. As the founder of the Academy, Plato made it a subject that continues down in the Academy to this day. Getting the good in place is a central issue for each of us in our individual lives, in the Academy as it proposes to benefit human society and search for knowledge, and in society as it works together to pursue and increase what is good for all.

CREEDS AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

It is important for any creed to establish its beliefs in the three areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. It is also important for a creed to be succinct and direct so as to be widely understandable. However, when *succinct* is replaced with *ambiguous*, the outcome will be disagreement and division. The following is a study of how these central ideas in the American creed have been diversely understood, the challenges that have been raised by competing understandings, and the ways that unanswered and remaining challenges continue to divide Americans over knowledge, what is real, and what is good. Understanding these ideas helps us unlock the flow of American history.

A creed is an attempt to express as consciously and consistently as possible the foundational beliefs of a group. Creeds reveal the extent to which the writers are conscious of what is foundational. The foundational questions are the most basic that can be asked. They involve those just discussed about knowledge and authority, the eternal and what is real, and the good and lasting value. They also reveal the extent to which the writers are conscious of what is necessary in giving a coherent and true answer to foundational questions. A creed attempts to give a system or consistent set of beliefs. In this sense, a creed is the most conscious and consistent formulation of a foundation that the writers can give.

The American Revolution is not the beginning of American history. It is a product of patterns of thought dating to the start of the English colonies. Although the American Revolution is said to have occurred within a generation that took a more secular turn than any of its predecessors, it still relied on categories of thought and a dialectic that had been working itself out through events like the First Great Awakening. These include dichotomies that continue to form the essence of divisions in America: tradition versus individual experience; individual and collective duty versus pleasure and happiness; worldly goods versus heaven; liberty versus license. Accordingly, the American Revolution has been interpreted in competing ways: there is an economic interpretation, a political interpretation, a “spirit of the people” interpretation, and others. Each of these focuses on what is undoubtedly an aspect of the events. In order to unite them, we must bring into focus the most basic beliefs that animated the revolution. These are beliefs about knowledge, what is real, and what is good. These basic beliefs

help explain why a given economic or political theory was taken and are at the heart of understanding the spirit of a people.

Changes in basic beliefs over time explain changes in the country. History studies change, and it is understanding the changes in basic beliefs that helps unite understanding the changes in other areas of human life. A basic belief is a belief that is presupposed by another belief. The most basic beliefs are those beliefs that are presupposed by all other beliefs in a belief system or worldview. Humans are never totally conscious or completely consistent, so it might be tempting to say that humans do not have worldviews. However, as challenges arise to a person's or group's belief, this forces greater consciousness and consistency in expressing the meaning of beliefs and how they relate to each other. The alternative is to say that all beliefs are equally true or can be held with any other belief so that in the end, it doesn't really matter what you believe. This is a form of nihilism.

This process of challenges to basic beliefs will help us understand the changes in American thought. People rely on their basic beliefs to give meaning to their lives. When a basic belief is challenged as false or meaningless, this threatens the meaning of life. This threat cannot go unanswered because it is a threat to everything else a person understands. Of the various needs, the need for meaning is basic. Although people may say they find meaning in how they feel or in what they choose to do, behind feelings and actions are beliefs. Even the statement that I find meaning in my feelings is a belief. The role of beliefs in interpreting experiences for meaning is unavoidable. That beliefs are ordered from more to less basic is also unavoidable. Therefore, in order to understand how people find meaning and how meaning is actually to be found, we must look at basic beliefs and critically analyze them for coherence.

MEANING AND REASON

In order to make progress in our thinking about the self-evident, we will need to also take time to think about reason, meaning, and the relationship between beliefs from basic to less basic. Meaning can have different meanings. To say something is meaningful can be to say it has purpose. Or it can be rich in significance. However, both of these presuppose the kind of meaning that a belief has. A belief, expressed in a

sentence or judgment, combines concepts to affirm or deny something about them. It is meaningful insofar as it has not put these concepts together in a way that is contradictory. Meaning is had when the laws of thought are used. These have classically been called *reason* and refer to the laws of identity (*a is a*), excluded middle (either *a* or *non-a*), and noncontradiction (not both *a* and *non-a*). Concepts are formed when we distinguish *a* from *non-a*. Judgments are made when we relate concepts to each other. Arguments are made when judgments are used to support a conclusion. Reason cannot be questioned or doubted since it is by the laws of thought that questions and doubts are formed. It would be a category mistake to ask “how do we know the laws of thought are true?”

The point of taking the time to define *reason* and *meaning* is that both of these terms play a role in how basic beliefs are formed and used to interpret experience and what it means for something to be self-evident. It is also because both of these terms are a part of the unfolding challenges to the foundation expressed in the Declaration of Independence. We will see competing ideas about how *reason* is defined and conflicting accounts of what is *meaningful*. In each of these, the formative meaning of *reason* as the laws of thought used to form concepts, judgments, and arguments will be found throughout. Similarly, the critical use of reason as the application of the laws of thought to test a belief for meaning or an argument for validity is an important part of how we will progress in our study.

Defining *reason* also helps us in thinking about the dichotomy between reason and religion that persists in American thought. We will be examining this in more detail as we go, but here, it is important to notice at the start that *reason* and *religion* are often posed as in conflict when *reason* means something other than the laws of thought used formatively and critically. *Reason* can mean thinking confined to the material or physical world, it can mean common sense, or it can mean intuition. In each case, it is set in contrast to *religion*, which usually means either beliefs based on scripture or beliefs about the afterlife.

We will continue to think of reason as the laws of thought and its formative and critical uses while recognizing that it is also used to interpret experience and to construct a worldview. Limiting it to these last two uses is common and will be seen in many of the thinkers

we consider. Similarly, we will first be thinking of religion as natural religion or what can be known from general revelation. General revelation is what all persons can know at all times. Scriptures, or special revelation, assume that some things can be known from general revelation. Some of the significant conflicts we will consider in American history involve attempting to give a definition to religion. As *religion* is increasingly defined in a way that includes the religions of the world, as opposed to those that have special revelation, it is understood to involve the use of our basic beliefs to interpret experience. This definition is not in conflict with reason; reason is used to form beliefs and, therefore, reason is fundamental to religion. Religious beliefs can be tested for meaning. Religious beliefs must be tested for meaning because the goal of basic beliefs is to give meaning to experience. One of the first challenges after the American Revolution was about whether special revelation is necessary or if natural religion is sufficient.

We will also notice patterns or repeating dichotomies in American thought. These stretch to early conflicts in New England between the Old Side and New Side in the First Great Awakening. Roughly these involve the conflict between tradition and form on the one hand and personal experience on the other. They continue in a similar pattern as Americans work through the influence of stoic thinking about virtue and epicurean thinking about happiness. And again, these are seen in the Second Great Awakening between the Old School and the New School. They come down to the present as tradition and personal experience continue to be dichotomies: ways of thinking about how to organize individual life, religious life, and political life. They are sometimes expressed as a conflict between common sense and intuition. In each case, reason is used interpretively and constructively but not critically to identify presuppositions behind interpretations and constructions.

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE AND THE CONSTITUTION

The Declaration of Independence has been contrasted with the Constitution by some as a Christian or at least Deist document, whereas the Constitution is merely secular. This is because the

Constitution does not contain an explicit reference to God. The Constitution begins with “we the people” as the source of authority without grounding this in the reality of God the Creator. However, others have seen this in reverse and argued that the Declaration is a typical secular Enlightenment document, whereas the Constitution with its checks and balances relies on Christian teachings about the fallen nature of humans and the need for taking this into account when framing a government.

The Declaration of Independence claims that it is self-evident that humans are created. It is that portion of the document that composes the heart of this book. Although it has played many roles in American history, it is the object of study here for three reasons. First, we will consider how it attempts to articulate a foundation for law and society. Second, we will study its specific claims about knowledge, God, and who God is and how these have been challenged and modified from the time of its writing. Third, we will look at the relationship among these truths, law, and authority in the United States. The conclusion from these is that law, even when considered secular, rests on claims about knowledge and about human nature in its relation to what is good and ultimate. Although God is no longer taken to be the metaphysical absolute in the way that the Declaration of Independence views God, there is of necessity another metaphysical absolute put in the place of God. If progress is to be made in overcoming long-standing disputes both in society and about the laws that govern society, then unity must be reached about knowledge, knowing God, and what is good.

Part of what makes the claims of the Declaration of Independence important is that they are said to be knowable by all. Foundational truths about God, humans, and what is good must be knowable if humans are responsible for knowing them and applying them in society and law. Challenges to what can be known are challenges that call into question not only the foundation but also what humans are responsible for knowing and doing. The Declaration of Independence implies that there are some things all humans should know about God and human by stating that these things are self-evident. To fail to know such things is called culpable ignorance.

THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

What ought I believe? This can be answered by thinking about what I should not believe. Some beliefs are false, and I can and should know this. However, it can also be a question about what I ought to know. I cannot be responsible for knowing everything. And some truths cannot be known by all persons or cannot be known without significant study. So this question can also be understood to ask about what are the most basic things that every person ought to know. If it is self-evident that humans are created, then this is something all persons can and should know. Taken from the reverse perspective, if God or the good cannot be known, then humans cannot be held responsible for knowing these things. Therefore, our study about foundational truths for law and society, and indeed for the good life, involves asking what humans can be responsible for knowing.

In my earlier book, *The Ethics of Belief After the Enlightenment*, I proposed the principle of clarity. This states that if something is not clear or not knowable, then humans cannot be held responsible for knowing it. This can be further articulated by the work of Surrendra Gangadean on clarity and basic beliefs. In his book *Philosophical Foundation: A Critical Analysis of Basic Beliefs*, he begins by saying (1) some things are clear; (2) the basic things are clear; and (3) the basic things about God and man and good and evil are clear to reason.²

We can understand the truth of each of these by considering their opposite. If nothing is clear, then this includes the claim that nothing is clear. It includes anything I say or think. If the basic things are not clear, then nothing that presupposes the basic things can be clear. And the basic things involve beliefs about what is eternal (God) and what is not (creation, humans), what is good and what is not good. We make distinctions between eternal and noneternal, good and nongood, through the use of reason.

The alternative to affirming that the basic things about God and man and good and evil are clear is nihilism. This is a total nihilism, a denial of all meaning and any distinction, including that of being and nonbeing. This nihilism is both ontologically and existentially impossible. It cannot be the case that there is no distinction between

being and nonbeing, nor can one live as if there is no distinction between good and evil (nongood).

Gangadean also gives examples of how presuppositions work and, therefore, how basic beliefs operate in our thinking. Truth presupposes meaning. What is meaningless cannot be true. We interpret our experiences in light of our basic beliefs. Our beliefs about what is finite and temporal presuppose beliefs about what is infinite and eternal. Our beliefs about what is good presuppose our beliefs about human nature.³ In order to know what is good we must first know human nature (what it is to be a human). This pattern of presuppositions will be present in our study of how American law has made decisions that presuppose beliefs about God, the good, and human nature.

We can see how the Declaration of Independence lays out the basic beliefs that are meant to be known by all and serve as the basis for the new nation. In the famous sentence about what is self-evident, we are given beliefs about God, human nature, and what is good.

There is a sense in which any society or government is grounded on such beliefs whether they are made explicit or not, whether and to what extent they can be articulated or made consistent. What makes the American Revolution stand out is that it made these explicit and that they included the claim that there is God the Creator. The United States and its history can and have been analyzed from many perspectives. But in this one, it is unique. It takes as a starting point a claim that God is knowable and that knowing God is part of knowing what is basic in human society.

The extent to which this foundation of basic beliefs was correctly articulated and understood and the ways in which it has been challenged since that time are the history that we will be considering. In order to do so, we will look at some of the influences on these claims and at some of the notable thinkers after this time that gave formative explanations of God and what is good. I do not claim that this is an exhaustive study of all thinkers that can or should be looked at. And the thinkers I do consider might be important because of their influence, or it might be that their thoughts were the expression of the currents of their day. But I have selected figures that I believe were formative and give us a sense of how belief in God the Creator and how God is known has been challenged and changed.

GOD, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE HUMAN GOOD

The Declaration of Independence stated the foundational beliefs that explained both why the colonies were striking out on their own and what would serve as their unifying principles. These were stated succinctly and needed to be expanded. The Constitution provided the frame of government that would rely on this foundation together with the Bill of Rights that would protect freedom. Jointly, these create a source of unity that would provide the means for keeping together all of the diversity that existed in the early Republic and has increased down to the present. The reality of both unity and diversity raises questions about how to preserve unity while working together within the reality of human differences. Division, which is different from diversity, arises as a critique of the unifying principles that hold a group together. Since the foundational statement in the Declaration of Independence involves claims about God, divisions about the existence and nature of God call into question what unites the system.

In the *Federalist Papers*, Madison argues that separation of church and state and preservation of a union under a constitution involve the use of faction against faction. The Bill of Rights protects against any one faction taking away the liberty of another by becoming a majority. This means that the subject of division between factions cannot be about the necessary foundation for civil government. It must be over secondary issues that do not threaten that Constitution or Bill of Rights. That the factions remain indicates that humans cannot know the actual solution to the division that would bring about unity. This could be either because the subject itself is unknowable or because humans are such that they cannot overcome the divisions even though knowledge is available and possible.

To think about what would count as a basic division and what counts as secondary divisions requires knowing how to relate beliefs to each other as more and less basic. There are basic beliefs in the psychological sense. These are what a given person believes are most important. However, here we are speaking about logically basic beliefs. A basic belief is what is presupposed by other beliefs, and the most basic beliefs are those that are presupposed by all other beliefs in a worldview. They involve the most basic questions that can be asked.

The Declaration of Independence gets to these in making statements about what is real, how we know, and what is of highest value.

Freedom in itself is not the good. Some would say that whatever free persons do is good. However, insofar as a free person has choices, it is possible that the wrong choice can be made. There is a sense in which all humans are free even when they live in a place that does not have political freedom. This is illustrated in the case of Socrates. He serves as the father figure of philosophy. He was free, in the sense that all persons are free, to raise questions about how we know what is good. His inquiry led him into conflict with the rulers of Athens, who charged him with teaching gods other than those the city recognized and of corrupting the youth. In terms of their opposition to him, Socrates was not politically free to pursue his questioning. However, he had a fundamental human freedom to do so and was willing to accept the consequence of capital punishment rather than end his pursuit of wisdom.

Political freedom, and even the freedom that all persons have, is not itself the highest good but is a means to knowing and doing what is good. There is an inherent freedom that all humans possess to pursue what is good. Political freedom allows room to study basic questions but does not guarantee that humans will pursue what is good. From the political perspective, this is the best that can be given. A hierarchical structure or totalitarian regime that requires belief does nothing to advance actual belief or understanding. But the limits of a government that provides freedom become obvious when people do not pursue what is actually good. This indicates that other institutions besides the government must also be operating and healthy in order to teach and encourage pursuit of the good. The government is not total over these other institutions, nor can it define them away. It also indicates that in spite of all institutions, there is the human propensity not to pursue the good, which is itself an indication of the human condition in relation to the good and the need for redemption from the failure to seek, understand, and do what is right.

The question is not whether we are free but what we will do with our freedom. Granting that humans always choose what they perceive to be good, there still remains the problem of knowing if what appears

to be good is actually good. Freedom alone cannot tell us this. We might say that only in the context of political freedom can persons come to know the good. However, I believe this confuses inherent freedom with political freedom. Humans in all ages can come to know what is good and are free to question even what a dictatorial government requires them to believe. Political freedom removes some of the obstacles to pursuing the good but does not guarantee that humans will use this political freedom to do so.

As we begin this study, I would like to articulate what I will call the principle of unity. It says:

(Principle of Unity) If unity can be achieved about the most basic questions humans can ask, then unity can be achieved on less basic questions that presuppose what is basic.

The problem both for the American Founders and for us today is in articulating and securing the foundational truths necessary for the unity needed for life together. This unity protects the reality of human diversity but is attacked as divisions arise over what is actually true at the basic level.

This principle relates to the earlier principle of clarity. If nothing is clear, then this includes anything we say or think and is nihilism. The alternative is that some things are clear. It is these things on which we can have unity. They must be the most basic things, because all else presupposes what is most basic. If we cannot have unity on the most basic things, then we cannot have unity on anything that presupposes these; we have no common ground to proceed together.

Something is clear if we can distinguish it from its opposite. We can distinguish God from non-God, human from nonhuman, and the good from what is nongood. There are disagreements about each of these, and we will see in the following study that in each case, there is a denial that there is anything clear, and instead the position of philosophical skepticism is adopted about God and the good. However, if we have the hope of unity, then we must come to know what is clear about God and the good. If something is clear about God and the good, then we can show what is clear. We are responsible to know what is clear and to be able to show what is clear. If we do not know what is clear, then this is a form of culpable ignorance.

THE SELF-EVIDENT AND LAW

In his afterword to the 2012 book *Self-Evident Truths?*, Samuel Moyn asks “What could it mean to hold individual human rights to be ‘self-evident’ truths, as insurgent Americans famously did in breaking away from the British empire? And why, in the Enlightenment, for the first time, did a group of humans proclaim self-evident human rights as the first premise of their politics, and why is it still that of so many people today?”⁴ This quote illustrates a missing piece in research about the Declaration of Independence. In most of the books about the political philosophy of the Declaration of Independence, this is the kind of question that is asked. The question of human rights is the topic of numerous books each year. The idea of rights has greatly expanded since the time of the American Revolution. It is the topic of much international debate, both in theory and in practice.

However, we can question the premise that the Americans began their political quest with a proclamation about human rights. Rather, the actual beginning of this sentence in the Declaration makes a claim about it being self-evident that God created men equal. Within this claim is the idea that some things are self-evident, and the role of God the Creator is one of them. Little or no attention is paid to this portion of the sentence. However, the structure of this central claim in the Declaration follows the formal pattern of relying on an epistemology (some things are self-evident), making a metaphysical claim (God created men equal), and then making its ethical claim that gets all of the attention (there are inalienable human rights).

In the following, we will study the idea of self-evident truths, their origins in Common Sense Philosophy, and their impact on law. We will see how the claims of the Declaration about God and human nature eventually became overlooked or replaced by reliance on intuition and naturalism. This had important consequences for law in the United States. Not only that, this study will show that the multiplication of new religious movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries increasingly required that claims about self-evident truths concerning God be ignored from a political and legal perspective. Increasing divisions about these foundational beliefs undermined the ability to have unity at the basic level.

The current approach is to overlook these differences about belief in God and how God is known and instead focus on human rights. I will argue that this approach will not and cannot work, and that instead we must bring into relief the different foundations for these systems of law. Even when God and how God is known are not explicitly made a part of law, there are implicit assumptions about these matters. This is true even when the assumption is that there is no God or that God is not active in human affairs or that if there is a God, there is no knowledge of God, only opinion.

Finally, we will consider contemporary applications of law, the “hot-button” decisions that continue to divide our country. My argument will be that the Declaration of Independence asserted that some things about God and human nature are self-evident and that if this claim is taken seriously, it will go a long way to resolving disputes that continue to divide. In either case, decisions about these kinds of cases make assumptions about God and the knowledge of God.

THE DECLARATION AND FOUNDATION

“Basic human rights lie right at the centre of our core values in Western society today.”⁵ This quote summarizes how the Declaration of Independence is studied. Indeed, in contrast to the Declaration of Independence, the U.N.’s Declaration of Universal Human Rights overlooks any mention of God and simply starts with assertions about rights. The Declaration of Independence stands out as unique not only because of its significant impact in world history but because of how it begins. In our current study, we will fill this gap and provide much-needed research on what can arguably be said to be the most important claims in the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration of Independence has been studied from almost every perspective imaginable. So, too, have the lives and political philosophies of the principle contributors to that document. The present study will contribute to this by looking at the Declaration as a creed that sets forth the basic beliefs of the nation and studying how these were understood and challenged in the time since the Revolution.

Although the Declaration of Independence is held in high esteem, it makes a startling claim that few today would actually accept. This is that some things are self-evident, and among these are that humans are created. From the claim that this Creator endows humans with rights, we can infer that this is a personal creator along the lines of theism or deism. And yet, if God exists, is it self-evident that God exists? In the following, I will explore this question and its importance for both religion and law in the United States.

Although events were already set in motion for a revolution by the time the Declaration of Independence was written, it states the founding ideas that serve to explain the origin of the new country. It is written to the world to explain why the colonists decided on independence. In order to justify their decision, it gives principles that it takes to be basic and universal. These are its claims about what is self-evident, about God and human nature, and about human rights and the pursuit of what is good.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence occur in the middle of a longer account about religion and freedom:

The American revolution of religion actually began forty years before the Declaration of Independence during the Great Awakening, evangelical revivalists defied civil and ecclesiastical authority to preach the message of the New Birth without regard to existing institutions and laws. They ignored parish boundaries, preaching wherever people gathered. They allowed lay exhorters to preach, bypassing church boards that licensed ministers. And they continued to dispatch unlicensed itinerants on preaching tours after legislatures passed regulations to curb such activity. Empowered by their New Birth experiences, many laypersons rejected the authority of pastors they deemed to be “unconverted,” removed themselves from established congregations, and formed their own Separate churches ... Whether Churchmen or Dissenters, all Patriots united in resisting British attempts to curb their religious freedom.⁶

The idea of religious freedom is at the heart of the original colonies. Even Jamestown, which is usually thought to be merely a profit-seeking venture, was part of the larger conflict between Protestant England and Catholic Spain and France. By the time of the Revolution, the Congregationalists and Anglicans had been joined by Dissenters. The founders were concerned to avoid the religious strife and wars that had ravaged Europe. One of the ways that they sought to do this was to give religious freedom rather than requiring subscription to a state religion.

With Jefferson and Madison leading the legislative fight, most historians have credited them with winning the battle for religious freedom. However, they themselves recognized that their success would have been impossible without the thousands of Dissenters who over the previous forty years had poured into the state, many of them emigrating from Pennsylvania. Jefferson noted that by 1776 a majority of Virginians were Dissenters.⁷

The problem for organizing a republic was the need for a virtuous citizenry. However, if there were competing beliefs about what is good, then there would be endless divisions. The imposition of order from the top down had not avoided war or given unity. People were willing to violate the law to keep their conscience and beliefs about what is good. The solution decided upon by the Founders was to use this propensity for divisions to secure a kind of peace.

The delegates knew that social concord in a republic depended on a virtuous citizenry, but the question was how to ensure public virtue. The Puritan Fathers had believed that God through divine Election produced men who could be trusted with the franchise and office holding. Leaders of the Great Awakening had agreed, emphasizing the necessity of a spiritual conversion to transform willful, selfish people into obedient servants of God and man. Though many delegates expressed their belief that religious instruction promotes morality and thus good citizenship, few had faith that religion alone would produce virtuous citizens ... In the end, the delegates agreed with Madison that men and women could not be relied upon to act always as virtuous citizens. But they could be relied upon to act out of self-interest, and the great diversity

of competing interests presented a fair prospect of preventing any one interest from oppressing the others.⁸

Protestantism had in its history the affirmation of the freedom of conscience. However, as divisions grew among the Protestants, the hope for unity in the church was lost. Without that unity, it was not obvious how there could be unity in the state. Rather than work for this unity first, the Founders encouraged the idea of competition between groups within the context of the state.

With almost unanimous consent, the Founders agreed, going beyond the planters' notion of religious liberty: the "Protestant sense of liberation from the shackles of Rome (or in the case of an independent America, Canterbury)." Rather, they embraced the "liberal idea of free competition among a variety of sects ... qualified by concern lest liberty degenerate into license."⁹

This promised stability in the midst of differences about what is good.

The centrifugal force of myriad sectarian interests, it was feared, would render futile any attempt at defining a common faith. The Founders were more optimistic, believing that a free, competitive religious market would both ensure religious vitality and prevent religious wars. In other words, they believed that religious liberty, not religious regulation, was the more effective bond in a pluralistic society.¹⁰

This approach still requires a framework in which liberty will operate. The concern that liberty not degenerate into license assumes that there is some check to that process. The Declaration of Independence provides the outlines of such a framework by giving the basics that will serve as common ground in the operation of the government and unity in society.

COMMON GROUND

Common ground is what is taken for granted as the background for getting along and continuing life together. What is common ground is the same for all persons. It is universal, and it is knowable. There is a

responsibility to know what is common ground, and ignorance of this is no excuse. It is culpable ignorance.

The Declaration of Independence gives what it takes to be common ground in each of the areas of epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. It makes the assertion that we can know because it affirms what is self-evident. The failure to know what is self-evident is inexcusable. However, misidentifying what is self-evident will result in a failure to have common ground built on a lasting foundation. We will see the common ground stated in the Declaration of Independence challenged in the centuries following its writing. These challenges call into question whether God can be known and in what sense it can be said there is a creator at all.

The idea that we can begin with what is self-evident and knowable is in contrast to skepticism and fideism. Skepticism says that we cannot know. It says that there are only competing opinions and that all opinions are equal. Fideism agrees that we cannot know but says that we must believe something. Fideism can come in varying degrees, from the bald affirmation of blindly believing to accepting a belief that seems more plausible than its competitors while not yet counting as knowledge.

In contrast to skepticism and fideism, the Declaration of Independence affirms that there are foundational truths and that they can be known. The history of the United States is one of testing and challenging the foundation in the Declaration of Independence and revealing its shortcomings. These challenges begin with a rejection of the idea that anything is self-evident and then continue to the idea of God the Creator.

At the time of its writing, atheism was rare. Deism, belief in God the creator but not ruler, was becoming popular in some circles. Yet even among Theists who believed that God is both the creator and the ruler, there were divisions about the nature of God. These divisions included disagreements about what it meant for God to be sovereign, about God's plan of salvation and how redemption is applied and accomplished, and about how God acts to bring about the triumph of good over evil. These are traceable to disagreements about how to know God, about what is the highest good, and about the role of natural evil in history.

Given these disagreements about the nature of God, we can anticipate that the use of the term “creator” in the Declaration is ambiguous. Minimally, it refers to God the creator and to nature’s God, so as to distinguish it from atheism, from dualism (God organizes but does not create), and from pantheism (the belief that all is God and, therefore, there is no creation and no creator). Beyond this, it seems to offer only a vague idea of God that is agreeable to either deism or theism and that does not address the various divisions among theists mentioned earlier.

It could be thought that more precision is not necessary for this kind of document. It is sufficient to relate God to man and human rights without giving more information. To understand why this is not the case, we need to think about the relationship between God, the good, and law. Ultimately, the Declaration is arguing that the actions of the colonists are “legal” or “just” in relation to a natural law that governs all nations and people. Obviously their actions are “illegal” from the perspective of English law. Therefore, the Declaration appeals to a higher law, a law that is the standard of judgment above any national law. It references this in the phrase “the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God.”

Metaphysics is the study of what is real. Not all descriptions of reality support the idea of a natural moral law. For instance, if pantheism is the true account of reality and all is God (all is one), then good and evil are both part of God. In the attempt to separate church and state, there has been a continued attempt to keep the state out of the arena of personal beliefs about what is real. However, the state itself assumes some things about reality and about what it is to have a good society. It makes assumptions about human nature and how humans resolve disputes. In this way, metaphysics is inseparable from law and the state.

Why not consider the assertion that some things are self-evident and that among these are the existence of a Creator, a kind of rhetorical flourish? For practical purposes, this seems to be how it has been read. The great weight of emphasis has been on the ideas of equality and human rights. However, the idea that the claim is a mere rhetorical addition to the rest of the document, which is to be taken at its word, sets a strange juxtaposition between this sentence and the arguments advanced in the body of the work. Those arguments take the ideas of

self-evidence, human nature, equality, and rights as supporting premises in their argument.

There is also the relationship among claims about human rights, human nature, and the origin of human nature. In philosophy, these are called the areas of ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology. The claim that there are human rights is a claim about ethics, about how humans ought to live. As such, it presupposes what it is to be a human and what is good for a human. A significant part of understanding what it is to be a human is understanding the origin of human nature. Competing theories of origins give competing views of what it is to be a human. Therefore, the assertion that humans are created, and created equal, is a bold claim about the origin of humanity. The reality of human nature and the Creator are part of the study of metaphysics.

Presupposed in these claims about ethics and metaphysics is epistemology. This is the study of knowledge. How do we know about human nature and God? The Declaration of Independence takes the position that some things are self-evident. We will look at this idea in more detail. At this point, we can see that this famous sentence follows the pattern of giving an epistemology that supports a metaphysics, which in turn supports an ethical theory. To study this presuppositionally, we must begin with the first step in that chain and ask what it means for something to be self-evident.

SELF-EVIDENT AND SELF-ATTESTING

In order to set the context for thinking about what is self-evident, we have taken time to consider reason and the relationships between beliefs. We can wonder what the intended meaning of the term “self-evident” was. Was it intended to mean that these are beliefs the authors and signatories took to be obvious? Because the Declaration is a document written to the world, giving arguments to justify the actions of the colonists, any reading that says this is just a statement about what the authors believed must be incorrect. It is part of an argument intended for the world to read.

Perhaps we could read “self-evident” to mean common sense or common consent. These beliefs are things that the authors and signers

believed everyone agreed on or are at least things that everyone in the colonies agreed on. Although it might be true that they were commonly held beliefs, since they are used to justify the actions of the colonists to the world, they must be more than that. The Declaration is stating that what the colonists are doing is reasonable because it follows from premises that are also reasonable. The premises must be more than what the colonists hold or else their argument becomes self-centered: what we are doing is reasonable because we think it is reasonable. Instead, these claims are premises that are meant to be agreed upon by everyone.

Therefore, “self-evident” seems to mean something that everyone will take to be self-evident. This requires an examination of what it means for something to be self-evident. This is perhaps the most difficult part of the sentence. The authors and signers of the Declaration of Independence were not ignorant of the fact that some people did not believe in a creator. Nor were they ignorant of the many theistic proofs of God’s existence that had been given by philosophers over the centuries. To claim both that there is a creator and that this is self-evident requires work to understand.

For an idea or belief to be self-evident means that once the concepts are grasped, the truth of the belief is understood. The best examples of what is self-evident are the laws of thought. These are identity, excluded middle, and noncontradiction. The law of identity says: *a* is *a*. The law of excluded middle says: either *a* or *non-a*. The law of noncontradiction says: not both *a* and *non-a*. These three are all interconnected and are restatements of the act of grasping the concept *a*. Once we understand that whatever something is, that’s what it is, we also understand that it isn’t what it isn’t. Simply understanding the concepts involved is enough to understand the truth of these claims.

Some might want to distinguish between what is self-evident and what is self-attesting. What is self-evident could refer to what appears to be true to a given person. In this sense, people can disagree about what is self-evident. By way of contrast, something is self-attesting when it proves itself. Something is self-attesting when it establishes the basis for thought itself; therefore, it cannot be questioned because it makes questioning possible. We have seen and will continue to study how reason as the laws of thought is self-attesting. However, what the Declaration of Independence claims to be self-evident is not

self-attesting. Because of this, it left the door open for significant divisions about what it claimed to be foundational.

This is in contrast to claiming that the senses give us what is self-evident. Our senses are immediate in that they give us information such as sight, sound, or feeling directly and not by inference. However, this information must be interpreted, and, once we do that, we are entering into an area that is not self-evident but can be debated. Do the senses give us information of a material world that exists outside of all minds? Or do the senses give us information about ideas that exist either in our mind or in God's mind? These are two different interpretations of the information from our senses that have been debated in the history of philosophy. So we can distinguish between what is immediate but in need of interpretation and what is self-evident.

What is self-evident is also in contrast to what is sometimes called intuition. "Intuition" is a broadly used term and could mean whatever is given immediately. In this way, it could apply to the senses. But it is also used in a narrower sense to refer to the relationship between signs and reality. Someone might say he/she "felt" as if something bad were going to happen. This sign, a feeling, is thought to have some relationship to reality. However, there is not always a relationship between such a sign and reality. Nor is this relationship self-evident.

What is self-evident can also be in contrast to what is taken to be common sense. Common sense takes the condition of the perceiver for granted as if it were absolute. It assumes that appearance is reality without questioning how the perceiver understands appearance. However, what is common sense to one person or one group is not always common sense to another person or another group. As such, this is not the same as what is self-evident. Whatever is actually self-evident is self-evident for everyone who understands the concepts involved.

Hopefully this allows us to isolate what is actually self-evident and avoid ambiguously relating it to the senses, intuition, or common sense. Having done this, we can ask if it really is self-evident that all men are created equal. Or if it is self-evident that there is a creator in the first place. In doing this, we see how the Declaration relies on the relationship between human nature and human origins. This cannot merely be a claim that humans are equal because not all accounts of human

origins support the claim that humans are equal. The idea here is that humans are equal as creatures made in the image of God.

That there is God the Creator is not self-evident in the way that the laws of thought are self-evident. It is in making this assertion that the Declaration of Independence opens itself up to criticism and reinterpretation. A critic can say that it is not self-evident that God exists and from there object to the beliefs that are supported by God the Creator, such as equality and human rights. A reinterpretation can be given that understands the idea of God in a different sense than is meant by theism. We will see both of these occur as U.S. history unfolds.

METHODOLOGY

In the following study, there will be a historical as well as a philosophical methodology. The historical approach will be a consideration of challenges that have been raised to the idea of God and how God is known. These challenges elicit responses that in turn bring about further challenges. Tracing this process will take us from the writing of the Declaration of Independence to the present day. It will explain how we have arrived at our current understanding of what is self-evident and what created human nature.

The philosophical methodology will be to critically examine these challenges and their responses [for meaning]. A challenge presses believers to examine their assumptions for meaning. When assumptions are exposed as meaningless, a response will be made to try and retain meaning. We will trace how people seek to obtain meaning and preserve the meaning of their beliefs in the face of challenges. As the meaninglessness of beliefs is exposed, people will change their beliefs about what is good for other goods that they believe will bring satisfaction. In the case of believers, this is often the idea of heaven, where happiness is attained in the afterlife. In the case of atheists, this is often the idea of maximizing pleasure in this life.

The combination of this historical and philosophical approach will allow us to critically analyze where we are today in our thinking about God and the knowledge of God. Has a new insight about the creator of human nature been discovered? Or has something else been put in

the place of what is self-evident? Or, instead, have beliefs about these matters been set aside in the hopes of pleasure either in this life or in heaven? The challenge to basic beliefs about what is self-evident, what is real, and what is the highest good requires greater consistency in these areas if the good is to be realized in the lives of individuals and society.

PHILOSOPHY AND BASIC BELIEFS TODAY

Today it is taken for granted that there are not many truths that are self-evident and that those that are do not give us much information. We can consider Alvin Plantinga, who is perhaps the most famous Christian philosopher of the last few decades. He says, “the central truths of Christianity are not self-evident, nor, so far as anyone can see, are they such that they can be deduced from what is self-evident.”¹¹

He critiques what many have come to call the Enlightenment view of knowledge. This view says that we must begin with what is self-evident or incorrigible (what we cannot help believing) or evident to the senses. He says: “Evidentialism is the view that belief in God is rationally justifiable or acceptable only if there is *good evidence* for it, where good evidence would be arguments from other propositions one knows. If it is accepted apart from such evidence or arguments, then it is at best intellectually third-rate: irrational, or unreasonable, or contrary to one’s intellectual obligations.”¹² And: “Let’s say, a bit vaguely, that according to classical foundationalists, a proposition is properly basic, for a person S, if and only if it is self-evident for S, or incorrigible for S, or evident to the senses for S.”¹³

The argument that he and others use to reject what they call evidentialism is that we cannot get much information by starting with these standards. Also, if we require an argument to support our beliefs, then we will require an argument to support that argument, and so on. We cannot simply rely on reason, because we will need to give support for reason.

Even if we could give an argument to show that a given source of belief was, in fact, reliable, in making that argument we would be obliged to rely on *other* sources of beliefs. In particular, we would

have to rely on reason; but clearly we can't establish that reason is reliable without relying on reason itself; so beliefs that are produced by reason are uncredentialed.¹⁴

If we take this approach, we end up with some arguments in favor of belief in God and other arguments against belief in God:

Considering the *arguments* for and against the existence of God. On the pro side, there were the traditional theistic proofs, the cosmological, teleological, and ontological arguments, to follow Kant's classification. On the con side, there was, first of all, the problem of evil (construed as the claim that the existence of evil is logically inconsistent with the existence of a wholly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing God). Then there were also some rather opaque claims to the effect that the progress of modern science, or the attitudes necessary to its proper pursuits, or perhaps something similar lurking in the nearby bushes, or maybe something else that had been learned by 'man come of age'—the idea was that something in this general neighborhood also offers evidence against the existence of God. And it was also clearly assumed that belief in God was rational and proper only if on balance the evidence, so construed, favored it.¹⁵

However, the Enlightenment view says that we should not believe anything for which we do not have good reasons. This is our rational duty.

And his [Locke's] answer, as we have seen, is that a rational creature in our circumstances ought to govern his opinions by reason—that is, proportion his belief to what is certain for him. But how are we to understand the “may” and “ought” and “should” that Locke employs in stating his project? ... his words have a *deontological* ring; they are redolent of duty, obligation, permission, being within your rights and the rest of the deontological stable.¹⁶

Another philosopher who also argues for an externalist approach is Michael Bergmann. An externalist approach is one that considers knowledge claims from the third-person perspective rather than the first-person, or internalist, perspective. In such an account the issue is whether a person is warranted to hold beliefs from their senses, whether these are senses of the external world or internal experiences like religious experiences. In this way, it is an empiricist account of

knowledge. It assumes that knowledge is from experience and then seeks to respond to skeptical challenges to empiricism. The standard skeptical challenges are that perhaps we are being fooled or tricked by an evil demon or mad scientist about what we are experiencing.

Like Plantinga, Bergmann offers a theory of warrant to explain when a person has knowledge from experience. The person need not be aware or able to prove that they have knowledge. Thus the title of his book *Justification without Awareness*. Instead, a description of the conditions of knowledge is given and holds whether the person knows it or not. This is a kind of sociological description of knowledge rather than the traditional question of epistemology, “how do I know?”

Just as Plantinga raised problems with the standards of the Enlightenment for knowledge, so, too, Bergmann raises challenges for the standard of what he calls strong awareness. He says,

The claim to be defended here is that a strong awareness requirement on justification gives rise to vicious regress problems leading to radical skepticism. Strong awareness, you will recall, is awareness that involves conceiving of the justification-contributor that is the object of awareness as being in some way relevant to the truth or justification of the relevant belief.”¹⁷

He notes two kinds of regress. One is that the requirement that a person believe that they have justification requires a further belief about that belief stretching to infinity. The other is that the justification of each belief requires an ever-increasing complexity that is implausible.¹⁸

Bergmann gives a definition of objectivity: the fittingness of doxastic response B to evidence E is objective fittingness (in the sense that fittingness from the subject’s perspective isn’t sufficient for it).¹⁹ He relies on Thomas Reid to consider the difference between learned and unlearned doxastic responses to sensations. Could the information we now receive from texture or smell have instead given us some other information? The examples considered by Bergmann and Reid are very specifically empirical examples of ordinary objects. As such, it is not clear that they help us in our question about whether it is self-evident that God the creator exists.

Plantinga said that it is not. Instead, he relies on an account of religious experience that uses an externalist account of warrant.

However, his account includes the idea of a design plan aimed at truth, which seems to import the idea of God. This becomes circular as it stands: we are warranted to believe in God because God designed us that way. However, it could be modified as a way of arguing that knowledge is not possible apart from such a design plan (knowledge requires the existence of God). This is no longer an externalist account of knowledge but is an internalist argument about how we can know that God exists. Indeed, externalism is supported and defended by internalist arguments about how we can know externalist accounts are true. As such, internalist answers to the problem “how do I know?” are unavoidable.

Bergmann relies on Reid to say that it is a first principle that our faculties are reliable.²⁰

Just as we have non-inferential knowledge about our immediate physical environment by means of sense perception and about our past by means of memory and about our own minds by means of introspection, so also we have a faculty by means of which we have non-inferential knowledge of first principles. Reid thinks of first principles as self-evident truths. He thinks some are contingent and some are necessary. The one mentioned above (concerning the reliability of our natural faculties) is contingent. And the faculty by which we know these first principles (whether necessary or contingent) he calls “common sense.”²¹

Bergmann clarifies Reid’s term “common sense.” He says,

His intention is to include only propositions that almost everyone believes (and knows) non-inferentially – things that are immediately accepted by sane persons once considered and understood. That $2+2=4$, that modus ponens is a valid form of inference, that the thoughts of which I am conscious are my thoughts, that I have some degree of control over my actions – these are examples of what Reid considers the dictates of common sense. The first two are examples of necessary truths known by common sense; the latter two are contingent truths.²²

How do we know the deliverances of common sense? Reid articulates what he calls the emotion of ridicule. “On the basis of this experience, we do two things: we dismiss as absurd the contrary of the first principle and we believe the first principle itself. Thus, non-inferential

common sense beliefs, like non-inferential perceptual beliefs, are based on experiential evidence.”²³ Bergmann believes this account is more realistic than accounts that require an argument to support believing our senses or noninferential judgments.

Bergmann says that “a person’s beliefs are justified if and only if they satisfy the proper function and no-defeater conditions.”²⁴ Bergmann considers whether his account can be used by a fanatic to justify any ridiculous religious belief. However, he does not consider the many beliefs of the world’s religions that one should not call fanatical. Under the conditions described, people can and have arrived at nontheistic positions, and religions have been believed that span millennia and influence billions of people. These kinds of beliefs can appeal to these same standards and cannot be dismissed as fanatical. Still considering the fanatic, he says, “What it does mean is that we must give up on the false hope that playing by the rules of proper philosophical exchange will enable us to resolve all serious disagreements about matters such as fanatical religious views.”²⁵ But what about nonfanatical views of the world’s religions? We will consider many competing views of “God” in the next chapters that can all appeal to these same standards.

CONCLUSION

Considering Plantinga and Bergmann has helped us see where epistemology is today. Plantinga and Bergmann treat belief in God as a matter of experience and warrant concerning our beliefs about experience. They both rely on accounts derived from Thomas Reid and Scottish Common Sense philosophy. This was the philosophy that influenced the Founders and the Declaration of Independence. So it remains for us to see if it is self-evident that God the Creator exists. There are many nontheistic worldviews that reject belief in God but are not the kind of fanatics that Bergmann addresses. Perhaps these can maintain that their nontheistic first principle is self-evident and God the Creator is not.

We are led to Thomas Reid and his ideas of first principles and what is self-evident. Can the Declaration of Independence’s claims

about what is self-evident be held as such, or must they be abandoned as incorrect? It seems to be the consensus among atheists and Christian philosophers that it is not self-evident that God the Creator exists. Indeed, it seems to be agreed that belief in God does not require arguments and that there are not conclusive arguments. Instead, theists have sought a different standard for support of belief in God. If this is where we are today, how did we get here from the claim that it is self-evident that humans are created equal? This is what we will explore in the following chapters.