

American Philosophy – Winter 2019
Essay Question #2

The second paragraph of the US Declaration of Independence begins, “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.”

Questions: (1) Did Jefferson speak truly or falsely when declaring the self-evidence of: (a) the “natural equality” of people, and (b) the rights of all to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? (2) If these propositions are truly **self-evident**, why do so many people disagree with them? Consider, with regard to this second question, the following arguments advanced by Darwin’s bulldog, T. Huxley:

“What is the meaning of the famous phrase that "all men are born free and equal," which gallicised Americans, who were as much "philosophes" as their inherited common sense and their practical acquaintance with men and with affairs would let them be, put forth as the foundation of the "Declaration of Independence"? I have seen a considerable number of new-born infants. Without wishing to speak of them with the least disrespect—a thing no man can do, without, as the proverb says, "fouling his own nest"—I fail to understand how they can be affirmed to have any political qualities at all. How can it be said that these poor little mortals who have not even the capacity to kick to any definite end, nor indeed to do anything but vaguely squirm and squall, are equal politically, except as all zeros may be said to be equal? How can little creatures be said to be "free" of whom not one would live for four and twenty hours if it were not imprisoned by kindly hands and coerced into applying its foolish wandering mouth to the breast it could never find for itself? How is the being whose brain is still too pulpy to hold an idea of any description to be a moral agent either good or bad? Surely it must be a joke, and rather a cynical one too, to talk of the political status of a new-born child? But we may carry our questions a step further. If it is mere abracadabra to speak of men being born in a state of political freedom and equality, thus fallaciously confusing positive equality—that is to say, the equality of powers—with the equality of impotences; in what conceivable state of society is it possible that men should not merely be born, but pass through childhood and still remain free? Has a child of fourteen been free to choose its language and all the connotations with which words became burdened in their use by generation after generation? Has it been free to choose the habits enforced by precept and more surely driven home by example? Has it been free to invent its own standard of right and wrong? Or rather, has it not been as much held in bondage by its surroundings and driven hither and thither by the scourge of opinion, as a veritable slave, although the fetters and the whip may be invisible and intangible?

Surely, Aristotle was much nearer the truth in this matter than Hobbes or Rousseau. And if the predicate "born slave" would more nearly agree with fact than "born free," what is to be said about "born equal"? Rousseau, like the sentimental rhetorician that he was, and half, or more than half, sham, as all sentimental rhetoricians are, sagaciously fought shy, as we have seen, of the question of the influence of nature upon political equality. But

those of us who do not care for sentiment and do care for truth may not evade the consideration of that which is really the key of the position. If Rousseau, instead of letting his children go to the *enfants trouvés*, had taken the trouble to discharge a father's duties towards them, he would hardly have talked so fast about men being born equal, even in a political sense. For, if that merely means that all new-born children are political zeros—it is, as we have seen, though true enough, nothing to the purpose; while, if it means that, in their potentiality of becoming factors in any social organisation—citizens in Rousseau's sense—all men are born equal, it is probably the most astounding falsity that ever was put forth by a political speculator; and that, as all students of political speculation will agree, is saying a good deal for it. In fact, nothing is more remarkable than the wide inequality which children, even of the same family, exhibit, as soon as the mental and moral qualities begin to manifest themselves; which is earlier than most people fancy. Every family spontaneously becomes a polity. Among the children, there are some who continue to be "more honoured and more powerful than the rest, and to make themselves obeyed" (sometimes, indeed, by their elders) in virtue of nothing but their moral and mental qualities. Here, "political inequality" visibly dogs the heels of "natural" inequality. The group of children becomes a political body, a *civitas*, with its rights of property, and its practical distinctions of rank and power. And all this comes about neither by force nor by fraud, but as the necessary consequence of the innate inequalities of capability.

Thus men are certainly not born free and equal in natural qualities; when they are born, the predicates "free" and "equal" in the political sense are not applicable to them; and as they develop year by year, the differences in the political potentialities with which they really are born, become more and more obviously converted into actual differences—the inequality of political faculty shows itself to be a necessary consequence of the inequality of natural faculty" (Huxley, "On the Natural Inequality of Men," 1890).

(3) If (a) the natural equality of people, and (b) the rights of people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are truly self-evident, why doesn't Huxley appreciate the evidence in their favor? (4) If (a) and (b) are not self-evident, how might we argue for them? (4) What role might self-evident principles play in our attempt to argue for this set of rights from relatively value-neutral premises articulating our knowledge of human biology, psychology and history? (5) Does your confidence in the validity of liberal democracy depend on your successfully constructing such an argument? Would you feel less confident in the superiority of liberal democracy (in comparison to non-liberal, less democratic societies) were you to conclude that no cogent argument can be made to support the ideas of natural equality and universal rights? Why or why not?

In the course of answering these questions make sure to explain the epistemological concept of self-evidence as it features in Locke's philosophy and M. White's analysis of this doctrine.

**5-6 Pages Double Spaced
Due: 3/6/19**