Self-Evident Truth and the Declaration of Independence

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One of the most difficult features of the Declaration of Independence is the assertion within it that "we hold these truths to be self-evident. . . ." Careful examination of the text of the Declaration reveals, however, that the truths are not in fact said to be "self-evident" but are rather, as a matter of healthy political practice, to be treated as if self-evident. Appreciating the status of the so-called self-evident truths above all brings into focus the problem of politics as civic education in this regime, especially as seen by Jefferson. It also helps focus attention on the structure of the Declaration and clarifies some recent scholarly disputes over the meaning and sources of the Declaration.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident." No statement in any public document is more familiar than Thomas Jefferson’s sonorous opening to the theoretical portion of the Declaration of Independence. And yet, just what Jefferson and his fellows might have meant by this phrase has puzzled most readers who have paused to reflect on it. Could Jefferson really believe that such claims about politics as he proceeded to list were "self-evident"? If so, why have so many political societies, both before and after the Revolution, failed to recognize them?

Frequently Jefferson’s pronouncement is taken today as evidence of the intellectual and political innocence of the simpler days of the Founding. Says Henry Steele Commager, for example, “There was indeed a simplicity in the moral standards and in political faith—a simplicity reflected . . . in the language of the time: ‘we hold these truths to be self-evident.’” Since 1776, political developments have made it clear that the Founders’ Enlightenment principles would not sweep all before them, and various intellectual developments have made it difficult to affirm confidently any moral or political truths, much less “self-evident” ones. “We would not today,” says Commager, “assume a body of ‘self-evident truths’ certainly not in the arena of government or politics.” Sanford Levinson puts it even more strongly: “it is simply not open to an intellectually sophisticated modern thinker to share Jefferson’s world.” Unable to believe in the “self-evidence” of those truths, a friendly critic of the Declaration like Eva Brann finds Jefferson to be “un- or anti-philosophical.” She claims that the Declaration “does not contain coherent, deep-rooted truths.” It is rather, she says, “a benign text” written in a “pe-
culiar, curtailed or shallow mode. . . .” What Jefferson takes to be self-evident truths are, she says, no more than opinions, “unthought out thoughts.”

And yet, for all that, the Declaration still stands somewhere near the center of the American political consciousness: when Americans discuss political issues, they appeal naturally to the terms outlined in the Declaration—equality, consent, rights. Does the appeal to self-evidence mean, as Sanford Levinson seems to think it means that “to believe in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence [today] . . . would require a leap of faith indeed”? Does it mean, therefore, that thoughtful Americans are or will be cut off from appeal to those basic commitments about politics which they have taken for granted over two hundred years?

In the following essay I should like to suggest a novel and perhaps paradoxical thesis that may speak to the various puzzlements provoked by the appeal to self-evident truths: the Declaration, properly read, does not in fact mean to appeal to or affirm its basic truths as self-evident truths. Indeed it does not mean to address the cognitive or theoretical status of the truths invoked at all, but rather, what we might call their political or practical status. Proper attention to the issue of self-evidence, moreover, leads to a better appreciation of the structure and meaning of the theoretical section of the Declaration as a whole. The end result of this inquiry should be not only less perplexity about what the Declaration means in itself and what it might mean for us but also some insights into the way the central tasks of political life came to light from the perspective of the political understanding embedded in the Declaration.

I

The Declaration's first paragraph announces the intention of the document as a whole: to “declare the causes which impel [the Americans] to the separation” from Britain. The presentation of those causes occurs as a syllogism with the conclusion that “these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States.” The major premise of that syllogism consists of a series of propositions, which if true, would yield under certain conditions the conclusion that separation is legitimate or even necessary. Those propositions are labeled by Jefferson, in accordance with eighteenth-century forms of logic, “self-evident truths,” a term used
to apply to the axioms or most basic and underivable premises from which deductive reasoning may proceed.6

The minor premises are supplied by the list of acts of the king, often called the grievances. These are “Facts” to be “submitted to a candid world,” which are as a body to establish that “the present King of Great Britain” has “in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States,” a shorthand description for the situation held in the major premise to justify “altering or abolishing” an established political order.

The parts of the Declaration are thus not disparate or disjointed as sometimes asserted,7 but are tightly constructed, like a geometric proof. The first paragraph announces what is to be proved, the second presents the major premises of the syllogism, or the “axioms” of the proof, the series of paragraphs detailing the grievances presents the minor premises, and the final paragraph draws the conclusion from the two sets of premises.

The first paragraph also announces the motive behind the Declaration. “A decent respect to the opinions of mankind” impels the Americans to “declare the causes” of the separation. Contrary to Morton White’s presumption, such a respect does not necessarily imply that the Americans expected the rest of mankind to be persuaded by their statement or to agree with their action.8 Rather they express respect for the opinion that grave political actions such as they were taking need to be defended, if standards of right and wrong are to have any sway in the world of politics. The Americans follow Locke in not desiring to give men “just occasion, to think that all government in the World is the product only of Force and Violence, and that men live together by no other Rules, but that of Beasts, where the strongest carries it, and so lay a Foundation in perpetual Disorder and Mischief, Tumult, Sedition and Rebellion.”9 In giving reasons, the Americans admit the sway of reason, and of moral and political principle, thereby eschewing mere appeal to force or will.

One reason we suspect that the Americans, or at least Jefferson himself, did not expect all mankind to agree with the thought expressed in the Declaration is his later statement to Roger Weightman. The Declaration and American independence are to be among the means of bringing something new to the world, not something mankind already possessed or agreed with.
May it be to the world, what I believe it will be (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man [and therefore these cannot be “self-evident” to Mankind in the sense of already obvious or even obvious on first hearing]. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.10

The text of the Declaration indicates its unconcern to persuade mankind by introducing the major premise of the Americans’ syllogism with an emphatic reference to themselves. The Americans show their respect for the “opinions of mankind” by reciting what “we hold.” In the context, the “we hold” emphasizes the premises of the argument as particularly the property of the Americans, and not necessarily shared in the opinions of the rest of mankind. While the Americans show respect for the opinions of mankind of stating their reasoning, they do not necessarily expect mankind to share the premises on which their action is based. Those premises are particularly, perhaps uniquely, “ours.”

The major premises for the Declaration’s syllogism in defense of separation from Britain are held by the Americans to be self-evident truths. Wilbur Samuel Howell points to the role of self-evident truths in the important eighteenth-century logic text by William Duncan, one of the teachers of Jefferson’s teacher, William Small. Following Locke, Duncan identifies self-evident truths in terms of their function in syllogisms—they serve as the most fundamental sort of premise, what in mathematics are called axioms—and in terms of their intrinsic nature.

When any Proposition is offered to the view of the Mind, if the Terms in which it is expressed are understood; upon comparing the Ideas together, the Agreement or Disagreement asserted is either immediately perceived, or found to be beyond the present reach of the understanding. In the first case the Proposition is said to be self-evident and admits not of any Proof, because a bare attention to the Ideas themselves, produces full conviction and Certainty; nor is it possible to call in anything more evident, by way of Confirmation. . . . For what has been said it appears, that Reasoning is employed only about demonstrable Propositions.11
Thus self-evident propositions have, we might say, a dual character. In themselves, they are those propositions which result from the immediate perception of agreement or disagreement between our ideas. They are called “self-evident truths” because they bear the evidence for their truth in themselves. If one understands them properly, one sees that they must be true, and moreover, that there is no other way to establish their truth. As Duncan emphasizes, a self-evident truth “admits not of any proof. . . . Reasoning is employed only about demonstrable Propositions.”

Functionally, self-evident truths can serve as the axioms, or maxims, or most basic premises for a demonstration. Strictly speaking, as Duncan indicates, the two must be one, for the truly primitive propositions or axioms must have the character of self-evident or intuitive truths, that is, truths which cannot be derived from anything more fundamental than themselves. But Locke indicates there is a looser usage also, according to which certain general propositions, “most of them indeed self-evident, [but not all] were introduced into the Schools; which, being such as all men allowed and agreed in, were looked on as general measures of truth, served instead of principles . . . beyond which there was no going. . . .”12 According to this looser usage, then, propositions which were not themselves strictly speaking self-evident, might serve functionally in the place of self-evidents in demonstrations.

The Declaration’s “self-evident truths” are at least functionally self-evident in this sense, but are they self-evident strictly speaking and in themselves? Through the years, of course, most famously by Calhoun and by various writers cited above, their self-evidence has been doubted.13 Remarkably, the language and structure of the Declaration itself, if read attentively, supports those doubts. We must first listen to what is said: “We hold these truths to be self-evident. . . .” Not only is the “we” who holds them emphasized, but so is the fact of holding them to be self-evident. To say “we hold these truths to be self-evident” is not the same as to say “these are self-evident truths.” “We hold” insinuates a doubt as to the status of the truths; it brings to the fore the “we” in their act of “holding” the truths to be self-evident, not the truths themselves in their self-evidence. An element of subjectivity and an element of hesitation are introduced into a judgment which should be the most epistemologically solid possible. It is almost as though the text says, “We believe or judge these truths to be self-evident.” But truly “self-evident truths” have no room for “belief.” There either is “immediate per-
ception of agreement of ideas,” that is, self-evidence, or there is not. As Robert Ginsberg well says of the “we hold”:

The famous self-evident truths are not presented as self-evident truths. To do such would obviate the necessity of saying one believes in them.14

On the other hand, however, “we hold these truths to be self-evident” does not properly translate into “these are our strongly held convictions,” as focusing on the “we hold” might lead us to attempt. The text states quite clearly that they are truths, not merely convictions or deep beliefs. They are truths, held to be, or as if “self-evident.” They are truths which function as the ultimate premises for the Declaration’s syllogisms, and perhaps for the political life to rest on the principles of the Declaration. But the truths are not affirmed to be in themselves self-evident, only to be held as such by the Americans.

If the truths are not themselves self-evident, then whence derives knowledge of their truthfulness? How would the Americans prove or establish them? On the basis of the text of the Declaration itself we are simply unable to say. In his letter to Roger Weightman, Jefferson suggests that “the light of science” might be the source of knowledge of some truths similar to those affirmed in the Declaration. The Declaration necessarily points beyond itself, for it rests on premises which are not themselves defended there, although Jefferson vouches for his belief in their truth by insisting that they are truths.

As Jefferson’s letter to Weightman makes clear, the truths about politics announced in the Declaration must be “held” in order to achieve their maximum efficacy. “Monkish ignorance and superstition,” that is, false opinions, have led men to construct chains for themselves rather than to secure the “rights of man.” The truths must be held to be achieved, but the truths are themselves the product of “the light of science.” But Jefferson believed that not all men could be scientists or philosophers: “He who made us would have been a pitiful burgher, if he had made the rules of our moral conduct a matter of science. For one man of science there are thousands who are not.”15 All men must hold the truths, but not all men can hold them as truths. Not all men can be in possession of the reasoning that establishes their truth.16 Some men, perhaps most men, must hold them, in the emphatic sense, as opinions not knowledge. For most men, the truths must be as if self-evident, the basic premises or touchstones for all political reasoning.
The Declaration adopts a position between that of Socrates in the *Republic* and that associated with the Enlightenment. According to Socrates, the citizens of the just city must "hold" a lie; the citizens of the Declaration's regime "hold" the truth, but they hold it in less than a fully enlightened way. The Declaration's teaching on the role of truth in politics poses especially interesting questions of whether and in what ways truth requires the aid of nontruth, and even of whether effective political truth requires limitations on the open pursuit and dissemination of truth in society.\(^\text{17}\)

Support for our interpretation of "self-evident" in the Declaration emerges from an examination of the truths so denominated. A self-evident truth properly so-called bears its truth in itself, and neither can nor need be derived from other, anterior truths. But some of the so-called self-evident truths clearly derive from others of them.

The Declaration asserts as a truth that "to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the government." Governments are institutions made by men, and have no other bases for existence but their having been made and constituted by men for a specified purpose. If these claims are true, then the next assertion denominated a "self-evident truth" follows deductively from them: "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." The "self-evident" truths about the altering or abolishing of government follow from the truths about the institution and ends of government, and therefore cannot be properly self-evident.

Likewise the truths about the ends of government and the role of consent follow from the truths that precede them in the list. We can see that clearly enough if we discern the structural principle according to which Jefferson has organized his presentation. The series of truths presents a temporal sequence, a kind of mini-historical narrative of the political experience of the human race. It begins with the prepolitical condition before governments are "instituted among men," tells next of the institution—how and why governments come to be made—and then tells of the postinstitution phase—the corruption or falling away of government from its ends, followed by an altering or abolishing culminating in a new institution. We have then three distinct phases: civil society, precivil society, and, for want of a better term, postcivil society. We might
present the three phases, and the corresponding truth schematically as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prepolitical</th>
<th>All men are equal and have certain unalienable rights among which rights are insecure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Governments are instituted to secure these powers from consent of the governed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postpolitical</td>
<td>If government becomes destructive of those ends, there is a right to alter or abolish it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While there has been nearly interminable debate over the meaning of equality in the Declaration, the structure of the text makes quite clear what it means. By stating that men are created equal and that government, the subordination of one man to another, the establishment of rule, comes only through an institution by men, the Declaration is saying what modern political philosophers said when they posited the original condition as a “state of nature,” a state in which no rightful authority exists by nature. To say that men are created equal is to say that by nature there is no rightful rule of one man over another. To affirm that men are created equal in this context does not commit one to any extravagant claims about equality of strength, intelligence, or character. Likewise, there is little foundation for the suggestion often made that “created equal” means “possessing equal rights.” Not that the Declaration denies equal rights for all, but it affirms them when it says that all men “are endowed” with these rights. If all men possess them, then it is superfluous to say that they are equal in possessing them.

In his rough draft of the Declaration, Jefferson is perhaps clearer: “all men are created equal and independent,” a phraseology very closely echoed in Adams’s Massachusetts Bill of Rights, “all men are born free and equal.” The Virginia Bill of Rights also has the very similar “that all men are by nature equally free and independent.” All four texts in turn follow Locke in the way they understand equality. Being equal by nature means, according to Locke, that no man is “subjected to the will or authority of any other man.” Locke in several places uses more or less the identical formula used in some of the American documents: “Men being . . . by Nature, all free, equal and independent.”

If by nature there is no subjection or subordination of one to
another, then if there is to be just subjection, it must derive from an act of submission by the men themselves. That is, “governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Locke states this point in a somewhat fuller way:

Men being, as has been said, by Nature, all free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this Estate, and subjected to the Political Power of another, without his own consent.21

The truths about the institution of government then follow from the truths about prepolitical society as the truths about the postpolitical situation follow from the truths about the institution of government. Therefore, neither the second nor the third set of “self-evident truths” is properly speaking self-evident.

But in the Declaration all three sets are equally held as self-evident. That suggests that the first set of truths, the truths about the prepolitical situation, are no more inherently self-evident than the others. The reading that some might be tempted to supply in the face of the above analysis—that the text means to affirm only the first or “prepolitical” truths as self-evident—is not grammatically viable. All the truths are presented in perfectly parallel clauses so it is impossible to read the text as granting some a different status from others.

That these truths were not understood as self-evident in themselves, but functionally and politically self-evident only, is suggested by a variety of other facts. Neither Jefferson nor any other thinker of his generation referred to these propositions as self-evident in any other place, so far as I know, or so far as any other scholar of the period has shown, even though the members of the revolutionary generation frequently discoursed on the very truths outlined in the Declaration. For example, the closely parallel theoretical statements in the Virginia and Massachusetts bills of rights do not designate their corresponding propositions as “self-evident truths.” Nor did the “self-evident truths” formula appear in Jefferson’s rough draft of the Declaration, a most striking omission if he believed the propositions to be epistemologically grounded in their self-evidence.

Rather, he said in the earlier version: “We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable.” Few matters resist definitive treatment as much as the interpretation of the significance of shifts in textual language from one draft of a text to another. Often we can hardly be certain whether a given shift intends to say better what was said
the first time, or to say something different. Nonetheless we may attempt some observations about the two versions of the Declaration. Both drafts employ the significant “we hold” locution. The first draft’s “sacred and undeniable” is a good deal looser and more ambiguous than “self-evident,” which has a more precise history of philosophic usage, including the important lengthy discussion of self-evidence in Locke’s Essay. To call the truths “undeniable” is to make no commitment on their epistemological groundings, other than to assert strongly their truthfulness. An undeniable truth could well be a derived truth. Since, as we have shown, Jefferson understood the truths in the Declaration to be derived truths, the earlier version seems more apt than the later in this respect. On the other hand, to call the truths “sacred” is misleading in many ways. Surely they are not meant to be sacred in the sense of derivative from sacred revelation, as an eighteenth-century audience might interpret the phrase; they are presented rather as deliverances (somehow) of reason. Jefferson uses “sacred” in an attempt to find an emotionally powerful way of conveying the fundamentality to the Americans of the truths to follow.

I would suspect that Jefferson shifted away from his initial formulation in two stages. First, he decided against “sacred” probably on grounds of both meaning and rhetoric. It was potentially a very misleading term, and thus to be avoided, and in its reach for emotional charge it broke with the rhetorical placidity and dignity of the document as a whole. Having deleted “sacred,” Jefferson had to do the same for “undeniable,” but in the first instance perhaps, for reasons of euphony. The phrase, “to be undeniable” with which he would be left after the departure of “sacred” contains the infelicitous juxtaposition of “be,” ending in a long vowel, and “undeniable” beginning with a short vowel, a juxtaposition which requires an awkward transition for the tongue and ear between the two words, and which, most importantly, leaves the key word “undeniable,” and especially its key part, “un,” unaccented and thus underemphasized. The sibilant sound with which both “sacred” and self-evident” begin flows more smoothly and places the emphases of sound where the emphasis in meaning occurs.

“Self-evident truths” met Jefferson’s euphonic requirements as well as conveying something of what he wanted by way of indicating fundamentality, without violating the overall rhetorical tone of the text. The “we hold” introduction served partially to neutralize the blurring of meaning imported into the text through calling the truths
“self-evident” when they were not understood to be so in fact. For any readers who perceived the paradox in the use of “self-evident” in this context, there was the added advantage of Jefferson’s being able to convey subtly the problem within the new political philosophy that healthy political life requires that the results of the most advanced philosophic and scientific speculation be “held” in order to be effective by a community which was not itself philosophic or scientific. While, I suspect, the expression of that paradox or problem was not the only consideration that moved Jefferson towards “self-evident,” the quite elegant way in which his revised language expresses it has to be seen as one of the rhetorical triumphs of the rhetorically triumphant Declaration.

Analysis of the language, the logic, and the historic connections of the text all point to the same conclusion: the truths announced in the Declaration are not in fact self-evident, nor are they pronounced to be. They are rather to be held as if self-evident within the political community dedicated to making them effective. The truths must serve as the bedrock or first principles of all political reasoning in that regime. While they stand as the conclusion of some (unspecified) chain of philosophical or scientific reasoning, they must stand at the beginning of all chains of political reasoning.

II

The reading of “self-evident truths” presented above is, to say the least, far from standard. But then it is difficult to say what reading is standard, for scholars have had great difficulty settling on a proper reading. One can discern several typical approaches in the literature. Apart from those who merely ignore it as too mysterious, or dismiss it as too naive, stand some who attempt to supply a historical or philosophical analysis of the concept. Three such attempts in the recent literature are especially worth noticing, two of which attempt to understand “self-evident truths” in an essentially Lockean way, and one of which, recognizing the failure of a Lockean approach, attempts to find a non-Lockean interpretation. Because of the effort to understand self-evident truths in relation to Locke, a consideration of the recent scholarship helps toward some judgment on the recently debated issue concerning Locke’s influence on the Declaration.

Martin Diamond attempts the most straightforward Lockean reading:
By self-evidence, the Declaration . . . means that the evidentness of the truths is contained within the truths themselves. That is, these truths are not to be reached at the end of a chain of reasoning: they are not the fruit of supporting evidence, inference, and argument.22

Diamond concludes from this fine description of self-evidence, and from his observation that the text identifies all the truths of the theoretical section as self-evident, that they must all be independent of each other and independently self-evident. But, as we have seen, this conclusion is certainly false, and in adhering to it, Diamond fails to see the structure and logic of the text, and thus misses the way in which the structure pins down and specifies with great precision the meaning of many of the otherwise ambiguous terms employed in the text, such as "equality."

Morton White deploys a more complex version of a Lockean reading. Departing from many recent scholars who doubt the importance of Locke for the Declaration,23 White has "little doubt . . . that Jefferson had read Locke's Second Treatise carefully before writing the Declaration and that he had been influenced by what Locke had said there, in particular by passages in which Locke freely uses the concept of self-evident truth."24 White claims that "Locke's rationalistic doctrine of self-evident moral principles was accepted by Jefferson when he was writing the Declaration," or, in another place, "when the word 'self-evident' appeared in the Declaration, it was used as it had been by Locke and by other rationalistic theorists of natural law."25

Given the connection he sees between the Declaration and Locke, he attempts to understand the doctrine from Locke's philosophic and political writings. That is, he attempts to show how Locke's doctrine of natural law relies on self-evident truths.

But contrary to White's repeated claims, Locke does not identify the fundamental truths of the law of nature, or, more broadly, of politics, as self-evident truths. The evidence shows, I think, that with only one possible exception, White has systematically misread Locke's texts. He, for example, finds Locke's early Essays on the Law of Nature to present a "doctrine of self-evident principles," wherein moral truth is grasped by "intuitive reason."26 But Locke never says that. The closest he comes is the claim that the natural law is "discernible by the light of reason," that "our mental faculties can lead us to the knowledge of this law." Locke emphasizes, even in the very passages White quotes into his text, that the laws of nature are "se-
secret decrees of nature”; he refers to them as “the secret and hidden laws of nature . . . much less easy to know” than “matters that relate to the practice of ordinary life.” Now to say that a certain kind of knowledge is available to human reason, rather than altogether unknowable or available only through revelation, is surely not to say that the knowledge is self-evident. To emphasize that the knowledge in question is very difficult to come by and that it is hidden and secret, argues strongly that it is not self-evident. Indeed, Locke affirms that reason “attains” to knowledge of the law of nature, “through sense experience,” and not through an immediate intuitive grasp.

Locke’s explicit testimony shows that when he speaks of the natural law as accessible to reason he does not mean accessible as self-evident principles to the intuitive reason:

Reason is here taken to mean the discursive faculty of the mind, which advances from things known to things unknown and argues from one thing to another in a definite and fixed order of propositions. It is this reason by means of which mankind arrives at the knowledge of natural law.

White claims in one place that Locke “often said” that the law of nature can be seen “by intuition.” In fact White can find him doing so “often” (or at all) only by sliding across the gap between a law of nature accessible to reason, which Locke often affirms, and a law of nature which was self-evident, which he often denied.

Only one Lockean passage provides any support for White’s efforts to find in Locke self-evident truths about politics. Very early in the Second Treatise Locke says:

there being nothing more evident, than that Creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without Subordination or subjection, unless the Lord and Master of them all, should by any manifest Declaration of his will set one above another.

White concludes that the emphasized phrase in the passage means “self-evident,” on the basis of the observation that for Locke, “a self-evident truth possesses the greatest amount of evidence that can be supplied for a truth.” However that may be, it is nonetheless as certain as anything can be that the proposition Locke finds “nothing more evident than” is not self-evident.
We can restate the passage more schematically to make this clear: (1) If men are creatures, that is, the product of a creating and willing God, whose will for man sets the moral standards to which human life should conform; and (2) if that God has made men all of "equal rank" etc., and not by a declaration of his will set one above another, then (3) men are of equal rank and should recognize themselves to be so. To put the point most simply: the assertion that "men should also be equal amongst another" is the conclusion of an argument with the other propositions as its premises. But a proposition deduced from other propositions is not self-evident. Or, to restate the point in more strictly Lockean terms: "Where the agreement or disagreement [of ideas] is perceived immediately by itself, without the intervention or help of any other, there our knowledge is self-evident".\(^32\) Now the agreement of the ideas of "equality" and of "man" is not direct and immediate in this way, but rather depends on the intervention of a variety of other ideas, such as the idea of a creating God, of a divine will, of divine appointment, and so on. Moreover, Locke would not consider these premises or intervening ideas to be themselves self-evident, as can be seen from his effort to derive the idea of a creating God in book 4 of the Essay.\(^33\)

White’s interpretation derives its plausibility from a simple logical error. Even if no truth may have more evidence than a self-evident truth, it does not follow that every truth than which none is more evident is self-evident. White needs, moreover, to notice Locke’s distinction between self-evident propositions and self-evident truths. Locke has a great deal to say about the former, much of the point of which is to demonstrate that these are not necessarily identical to the latter.\(^34\)

Our analysis of this passage from the Second Treatise certainly coheres better with Locke’s settled conviction that, in White’s words, “there could be no self-evident practical principles” than does White’s analysis.\(^35\) Unless Locke could forget what he had written so recently and so assuredly in his Essay, he could hardly have developed the doctrine of self-evident political principles White claims to find with little textual support in the Treatises and elsewhere.

When White comes to elucidate the thought of the Declaration and the Americans, he reveals the central incoherence in his own position. As hard as he had tried to turn Locke into a theorist who relied on self-evident moral and political principles for the sake of thereby explaining the Declaration’s position on self-evidence, he nonetheless finds that the Americans did not understand the truths
in the Declaration to be what Locke (or anybody) would call self-evident. Rather they

accepted their so-called self-evident truths on the basis of an argument that they did not make explicit in the Declaration. That argument . . . rested on other premises.36

But an argument which “rested on other premises”—or on any premises—is not self-evident, as we have already seen.

While White spends much space attempting, or seeming to attempt, to establish that the Declaration is Lockean in its appeal to self-evident truths, his real concern is not to establish that thesis at all, but rather the claim that the Declaration was “rationalist” in a sense he never explains very clearly, but which he associates with a deductive ethic in which a “natural morality” is derived from claims about the “essence of man” and natural theological knowledge or claims about God. According to White’s real view, the rough draft of the Declaration better captures Jefferson’s underlying thought when it calls the truths “sacred and undeniable,” for while (White believes) the truths were derivative and thus clearly not self-evident, they were thought to be demonstrable and therefore “undeniable” in the sense that a theorem derived from axioms is undeniable.37 White thus makes his own point best when he says, “Jefferson would have been better off if he had let ‘sacred and undeniable’ stand.”38 White insists then on the moral rationalism of the documents and allows the self-evidence to drop off, or rather pushes it over the cliff himself.

According to White, “Jefferson probably believed that many of his truths were theorems,” and therefore, “he should not have made this change [from ‘sacred and undeniable’ to ‘self-evident’] nor acquiesced in it from a philosophical view. . . . I believe that Jefferson, under the influence of Burlamaqui, appealed to more fundamental truths than those that in the Declaration are finally called self-evident.”39

But his analysis of the self-evidence issue in the Declaration is no more persuasive than his analysis of Locke was. For one, it requires seeing the rough draft as not only importantly different from the final version, but as philosophically much truer to the doctrine meant to be expressed. White seems to favor the view that Franklin, not Jefferson, made the textual change.40 But Jefferson’s own recollection of what happened when he submitted his rough draft to his
fellow committeemen runs altogether counter to this view: Jefferson called their alterations "merely verbal"; they did not, in his opinion, reach the sense or meaning of what he had intended to say. And Jefferson's later recounting of the events surrounding the drafting of the Declaration were based on notes he took at the time. While Jefferson complained more than a little over the changes Congress made in the draft the committee reported out, he never complained or even remarked on the changes made by the committee. Would Jefferson allow to pass unnoticed, to pass as a mere matter of wording, a change made by others that got his philosophic point entirely wrong? Or alternatively would he himself make the change that gets his own philosophic point entirely wrong, and not notice?

White's interpretation as a whole leaves us with a quite incomprehensible document, a document which says one thing and means quite another, and does so for inexplicable reasons. The reading put forward above differs from White's in stating precisely how the Declaration only appears to say something different from what it means, and of stating equally precisely the reasons for the Declaration's use of the "self-evident" phraseology.

Garry Wills sets off in a different direction when he insightfully notices that "Jefferson cannot be using 'self-evident' in the technical Lockean sense," because the truths so called "do not have an incontestably identical subject and predicate." Wills does not take the next step however of noticing the internal evidence regarding the status of the "self-evidents" in the Declaration, but rather casts about to find in what or whose sense they might be self-evident. Eager to sever the alleged link between Locke and the Declaration on this issue, as he had attempted to do on many other issues, Wills extracts from his discussion of self-evident truths his favorite conclusion of a Scottish origin for the Declaration's chief doctrines. In this case, he concludes that Jefferson "used 'self-evident' in [the] sense" of the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, in whose work "the term was central."

There are two major difficulties, however, in Wills's identification of Reid as the source of the self-evident truths doctrine in the Declaration. Wills himself indicates one of the problems when he points out that "Jefferson's enumerated truths are . . . more specific than the kind normally offered by Reid himself to exemplify his theory." In another context he makes the point far more strongly:
Jefferson [used] Reid's own phrase "self-evident." But the moral propositions he then listed were not the jejune maxims of Reid. They were the large ends of society posited by Hutcheson, Hume, and others as objects of the moral sense's direct gratification.45

However, neither Hutcheson, nor Hume, nor the "others" who posited those "large ends" ever called them "self-evident truths," which of course is the reason Wills looks to find another Scottish philosopher, Reid, as the source of the phrase in the Declaration. Wills leaves us in a position, however, where the use of the phrase is entirely unintelligible, for while Reid used the term, he did not apply it to truths such as these. While others spoke of truths such as these, they did not call them self-evident.

A second and even more decisive difficulty with Wills's attribution of the phrase's origin to Reid is that "self-evident truths," especially in moral things, do not become a theme of Reid until his books of 1785 and 1788, long after the Declaration, where, by the way, he appealed to the notion as a way of taking issue with Hutcheson's moral sense theory.46 In his Inquiry into the Human Mind of 1764, a work with which Jefferson probably was familiar in 1776, self-evident truth was not a theme at all. It is no accident that in his entire chapter attempting to establish Reid as the source of the self-evident truths concept Wills never once explains how Reid used that concept in the only work logically able to have influenced Jefferson in the Declaration, nor how the Declaration's use might relate to Reid's use. In the headnote to the chapter, it is true, Wills does quote Reid on self-evident moral truths, but that quotation is from Reid's 1785 work. Wills, however, does not indicate a source for the quotation and leaves the unsuspecting reader with the impression that it derives from the 1764 book and thus might have influenced Jefferson in 1776.47

Neither the Lockean nor the non-Lockean interpretation of "self-evident truths" works because the truths are not in fact self-evident, and were not understood by Jefferson to be so. No attempt to treat them as if they are has succeeded or can succeed. Not listening carefully enough to what the text says, most scholars either ignore the claim about self-evidence or cast themselves adrift in a sea of speculation which produces confused and unsuccessful readings. It must also be emphasized, however, that the "holding" of the truths to be self-evident means that the evidence on which those truths rest is not contained in the document itself. That at least explains the con-
stant temptation to set out into the sea of speculation, and implies
that the full meaning of the Declaration cannot be garnered from
it, nor can the reasons which might support its claims to truth.

III

A review of the terrain we have covered and a consideration of
some of the implications of the view of the Declaration presented
here will indicate some of what we learn from better grasping the
Declaration on “self-evident truths.” Seeing the way the “self-evidence”
idea functions in the Declaration helps answer the much discussed
question of the sources of the Declaration. Scholars such as Wills
and White have searched for intellectual fathers of the text other
than Locke, in part because the deployment of “self-evident truths”
in the text seemed so difficult to square with a Lockean origin of
the thoughts presented there. While the interpretation above hardly
amounts to a full-scale argument for reasserting a Lockean prove-
nance for the Declaration, it does show clearly enough that the “self-
evident truths” are no barrier to reaffirming the traditional view
of the role of Locke.

In attempting to understand what the Declaration meant by
seeming to affirm its truths as self-evident, we were led to consider
especially carefully the structure of the text and the interrelations
of the various truths enumerated. Far from being independently
self-evident, the truths were shown to relate to each other in a pre-
cise deductive structure, a discovery of importance in itself, but even
more so because it allows us to specify quite definite meanings for
key terms such as equality, terms difficult in themselves and preg-
nant with all manner of further confusions.

A better understanding of what is actually said of self-evidents
in the text can help with our feelings of estrangement as well. The
authors of the Declaration do not believe their truths are self-evident,
and we therefore have no reason ipso facto to find their work the
product of “unthought out thought.” What Jefferson is saying is both
more interesting and more complex than the surface reading of the
text leads one to believe.

Most importantly, the Declaration itself implies that the cogni-
tive status of its truths is not the important or at least not the politi-
cally important question in any case. At the political level, our in-
terpretation allows us to see a, or the, central political problem of
this regime in the way that Jefferson himself did. The true ends
of political society can only be achieved in a regime in which the citizens hold those truths, but necessarily hold them in the mode of "self-evident truths." But how is this produced? Who has the public responsibility for the character of the opinion which prevails in society? Jefferson's own political career, with its constant and overriding concern for tending to opinion, represents one extended mode of answering these questions, as these questions provide a key for understanding his career: for Jefferson, the highest task of statesmanship in this regime is the cultivation of the necessary kind of opinion.

More generally, the so-called self-evident truths point to the need for civic education and therewith indicate a dimension of politics we tend to ignore, at the peril, perhaps, of the health of those political institutions dedicated to implementing the "self-evident truths." That the truth must be held in order to be effective means that society retains a stake in what opinions actually prevail within it. And the fact that the truths must be held for the most part as if self-evident, means that the untrammled pursuit and dissemination of truth is certainly not a sufficient, and perhaps not a necessary condition for those truths being held. Our interpretation thus points to grave reservations the Founders might have against the main current of Supreme Court doctrine on the First Amendment since the days of Justice Holmes, when some variant of official neutrality toward the content of public opinion was launched into the heart of American public law. While the Declaration does not tell us how to produce or maintain the kind of opinion it teaches is necessary for a regime dedicated to realizing the rights it proclaims, nonetheless, looking at the Declaration on self-evident truths at least awakens us to a problem where we have not been inclined to see one.

Notes
2 Commager, Jefferson, p. 82.
9 John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government* 2.1.
12 Locke, *Essay* 4. 7. 11.
15 Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787 in Koch and Peden, *Life and Writings*, 430.
19 Locke, *Two Treatises* II, 54.
20 Locke, *Two Treatises* II, 95; cf. II, 6, 7.
21 Locke, *Two Treatises* II, 95.
25 Ibid. 48, 97; cf. 77, 94.
26 Ibid. 23–53.
32 Locke, *Essay* 2. 4. 7. 2.
37 Ibid., 161.
38 Ibid., 77.
39 Ibid., 161.
40 Ibid., 77.
42 Wills, *Inventing America*, 182.
43 Ibid., 182, 190.
44 Ibid., 191.
45 Ibid., 238. One should note that no matter what Wills asserts, the "self-evident truths" phrase is not "Reid's own"—it was common currency in the pre-Scottish philosophic tradition, prominent in Locke and, for that matter, in scholasticism. Nor were the "truths" themselves the particular property of Hutcheson or Hume!