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### **"Self-Evident Words to the Wise"**

Our Declaration is now 250 years old, but its claims about human nature and the proper aim of government are just as true today as they were in 1776. The text says it is a self-evident truth that all men are created equal and endowed with unalienable rights. Those truths about humanity are denied by many today and have been denied by most people in the history of the world. Does that pose a problem?

Perhaps turning to a few Catholic authors can resolve the problem. St. Thomas Aquinas (citing the even earlier Catholic author, Boethius) makes a distinction between two kinds of self-evident truths. On the one hand there are “self-evident” truths known in themselves (*per se nota in se*). For example: all bachelors are unmarried men. The predicate is already contained in the subject. On the other hand, there are truths known to us (*per se nota quoad nos*) if we are wise. A rightly-educated person knows certain truths that an uneducated person does not. For example: the science of botany tells us that a tomato is a fruit not a vegetable, because it develops from a flower and contains seeds. Only if you rightly understand the pertinent qualities of subject (“tomato”) will you claim the predicate (“fruit”). Some investigation into the predicate is required; it is not contained in the obvious meaning of the subject.

The Declaration’s claims that all men are “created equal” and “endowed with certain unalienable rights” are of the latter sort: self-evident to the wise. The Declaration’s truths are known by those who rightly understand the subject. The subject is human nature (“all men”). A true account of human nature and the natural law which governs its morality has been denied and undiscovered by tyrants, bigots, and ignorant people through much of world history— but that makes it no less true, and self-evidently true.

Every new generation must be educated anew in the ideas of the Declaration of Independence. Because of the point just made about “self-evidence,” we should recognize that the Declaration itself invites us to learn more about the ideas of natural law. Thomas Jefferson acknowledged that in writing the first draft of the Declaration he utilized “the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, etc.” Cicero wrote about natural law in Latin, applying the concept to his Roman circumstances— Julius Caesar and all that. Jefferson wrote about natural law in English, applying the concept to American circumstances: “it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.” By studying Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney —and St. Thomas Aquinas— we become wiser and get a better perspective on just how unique an expression of natural law the Declaration was.



In hindsight we must count ourselves very fortunate that our founding document was written when it was, at its later date in history than other expressions of the natural law. George Washington in his Circular to the States wrote that the “treasures of knowledge acquired by the labours of Philosophers, Sages and Legislators” were open to us at our founding. The Declaration was such a great encapsulation of natural law that Lincoln considered it a “word ‘fitly spoken’ which has proved an ‘apple of gold’ to us.” As President Calvin Coolidge said on the *sesquicentennial* of the Declaration’s words: “If anyone wishes to deny their truth or their soundness, the only direction in which he can proceed historically is not forward, but backward toward the time when there was no equality, no rights of the individual, no rule of the people.”

On this *semiquincentennial* of the Declaration, we should say as Alexander Hamilton did: “Apply yourself, without delay, to the study of the law of nature.” Through education in natural law the Declaration’s words to the wise become self-evident.