

Phil 176: American Philosophy – Spring 2020
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.” Did Jefferson speak truly or falsely when declaring (a) the self-evidence of the “natural equality” of people, and (b) the right of all people to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? If these propositions are truly **self-evident**, why have so many people disagreed with them? Analyze, in this light, King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” How does King try to convince his audience that humanity is itself valuable in a way that demands mutual respect between all humans regardless of any perceived racial or ethnic differences between them? Is it self-evident that all people deserve mutual respect? Do you need argumentative support for this claim in order to rationally believe it or know it to be true? Must you utilize things beyond argument to convince racists to endorse this principle? Is this what King is doing in his letter? Is he appealing to a moral sense or affectively laden conscience? How is the moral sense or conscience awakened in someone whose racial animus is reinforced by his desire for the economic and political advantages he or she derives from racial segregation and/or racial inequality? How might King’s arguments have affected the audience he more directly addresses: i.e. the more “moderate” whites who were not rabid segregationists but remained unconvinced that integration was an imperative whose time had come? What in general is the relationship between an argumentative defense of a moral principle and the grounds on which one believes or knows that principle to be true? Who must we be able to convince of the truth of a principle if we are to justifiably believe it or know it to be true?

Construct and defend a thesis that addresses at least some of these questions. In the course of constructing your essay make sure to explain the epistemological concept of self-evidence as it features in Locke’s philosophy and M. White’s analysis of this Lockean conception of self-evidence.

5-6 Pages Double Spaced
Due: 5/20/20 (Upload as a pdf to Gauchospace)