

differences between common sense and the declaration of independence

Differences Between Common Sense and the Declaration of Independence

Understanding the differences between common sense and the Declaration of Independence is crucial for grasping the foundations of American governance and individual rights. While common sense offers intuitive understandings of fairness and basic principles, the Declaration of Independence serves as a foundational legal and philosophical document, articulating specific grievances and a revolutionary vision. This article will delve into these distinctions, exploring how common sense informs our daily judgments and how the Declaration codified fundamental truths and asserted a nation's right to self-determination. We will examine the historical context, philosophical underpinnings, and practical implications of both, ultimately highlighting how the Declaration transformed widely held beliefs into actionable political philosophy.

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The Nature of Common Sense

Common sense, in its most basic definition, refers to a fundamental ability to make judgments and decisions based on what is generally considered practical, reasonable, and sound. It is the innate understanding of everyday truths that most people share, often learned through experience rather than formal education. This intuitive grasp of reality allows individuals to navigate social interactions, solve immediate problems, and understand basic cause-and-effect relationships. It's the practical wisdom that guides our daily lives, influencing everything from avoiding danger to cooperating with others. The essence of common sense lies in its practicality and its widespread acceptance within a given society. It is fluid, evolving with societal norms and technological advancements, yet retaining

its core of reasonable, unlearned understanding.

Intuitive Reasoning and Practical Application

Intuitive reasoning is the cornerstone of common sense. It allows us to make quick judgments without extensive deliberation, relying on our accumulated experiences and observations. For instance, the common sense understanding that touching a hot stove will cause pain is a prime example of this intuitive, experiential learning. This practical application extends to social situations, where understanding unspoken cues and anticipating basic social consequences are manifestations of common sense. It's the ability to discern honesty from deception, to understand the importance of reciprocity in relationships, and to act in ways that are generally perceived as sensible by one's peers. Without this foundational element of intuitive reasoning, daily life would be significantly more complex and fraught with missteps.

The Role of Experience and Social Norms

Experience plays a pivotal role in shaping common sense. As individuals interact with the world and encounter different situations, they develop a repository of practical knowledge. This knowledge is then filtered through the lens of social norms and cultural expectations. What is considered common sense in one culture might be viewed differently in another, underscoring the influence of socialization. For example, understanding personal space, appropriate greetings, and social etiquette are all deeply ingrained aspects of common sense that are learned through observation and participation within a specific social fabric. These shared understandings create a framework for predictable and cooperative behavior.

The Purpose and Structure of the Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence, adopted by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776, was not an expression of everyday intuition. Instead, it was a meticulously crafted document with a specific, revolutionary purpose: to formally declare the thirteen American colonies independent from Great Britain. It served as a justification for this momentous decision, articulating the philosophical principles upon which the new nation would be founded and enumerating the specific grievances that necessitated this separation. Its structure is deliberate, moving from broad philosophical statements to specific complaints and finally to the declaration of sovereignty.

Philosophical Foundations: Enlightenment Ideals

The Declaration of Independence is deeply rooted in the philosophical currents of the Enlightenment. Thinkers like John Locke heavily influenced its core tenets, particularly the concept of natural rights. The document asserts that all men are created equal and are endowed with certain unalienable rights, including life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. These are not merely common sense notions; they are profound philosophical claims about the inherent worth and dignity of every individual, forming the bedrock of liberal political thought. The emphasis on government deriving its

just powers from the consent of the governed also reflects Enlightenment ideas about popular sovereignty.

Articulating Grievances and Justifying Revolution

A significant portion of the Declaration of Independence is dedicated to listing specific grievances against King George III and the British Crown. These were not abstract complaints but concrete actions that the colonists perceived as tyrannical and a violation of their rights. Examples include taxation without representation, the quartering of troops, the obstruction of justice, and the imposition of unjust laws. This detailed enumeration serves to demonstrate that the colonists had exhausted all peaceful avenues for reconciliation and that revolution was a necessary and justifiable last resort. It moves beyond the general understanding of fairness to provide a legal and moral case for rebellion.

The Declaration as a Formal Statement of Intent

Unlike common sense, which is informal and often implicit, the Declaration of Independence is a formal, public pronouncement. It was intended to be read aloud, to rally support both domestically and internationally, and to serve as a legal and moral justification for the revolutionary cause. It announces a definitive break from existing political authority and establishes the colonies as sovereign states. This formal aspect underscores its function as a foundational document that established a new political order based on articulated principles, rather than simply reflecting existing, unwritten understandings.

Philosophical Underpinnings: Natural Rights vs. Innate Understanding

The fundamental divergence between common sense and the Declaration of Independence lies in their philosophical underpinnings. While common sense operates on an intuitive understanding of practicality and fairness, the Declaration articulates a set of specific, philosophical ideals that are presented as universal truths. The most prominent of these is the concept of natural rights – inherent entitlements that pre-exist government and are not granted by any earthly authority. These are not merely what people "feel" is right, but reasoned philosophical propositions about human existence and governance.

Natural Rights: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

The Declaration famously posits that all individuals possess "unalienable Rights," including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." This is a philosophical assertion, derived from Enlightenment thinkers, that rights are not bestowed by monarchs or governments but are inherent to human beings by virtue of their existence. Common sense might suggest that people deserve to live safely or have freedom, but the Declaration elevates these notions into a formal, philosophical framework that dictates the legitimate purpose and limitations of government. The "pursuit of happiness" is particularly notable, representing a broader, more aspirational conception of individual well-being

than a simple understanding of practical needs.

Common Sense as a Basis for Innate Understanding

Common sense, on the other hand, relies on an innate understanding that is often context-dependent and culturally influenced. It's the practical wisdom that allows us to understand social cues, anticipate consequences, and act reasonably in everyday situations. While common sense might suggest that it's unfair to be punished without a reason, it doesn't necessarily provide a detailed philosophical framework for the origin or scope of that fairness. The Declaration takes these intuitive feelings of fairness and elevates them into a structured argument for self-governance, grounded in abstract, universal principles.

The Philosophical Justification for Governance

The Declaration provides a philosophical justification for government itself, asserting that governments are instituted "among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." This is a political philosophy that goes beyond common sense understandings of order. While people might intuitively grasp the need for some form of societal structure, the Declaration articulates a specific model of legitimate governance based on popular sovereignty and the protection of natural rights. This is a reasoned argument for a particular form of political organization, not simply a reflection of existing societal norms.

Historical Context: Evolution of Ideas

To truly grasp the differences between common sense and the Declaration of Independence, it's essential to consider their historical contexts. Common sense, as a concept, has always existed, evolving organically with human societies. The Declaration, however, emerged from a specific historical moment – the burgeoning American Revolution – and was a product of a particular intellectual movement, the Enlightenment. Its articulation of rights and grievances was a direct response to specific historical events and a deliberate effort to forge a new political identity.

The Enlightenment and the Rise of Revolutionary Thought

The Enlightenment period of the 17th and 18th centuries was a fertile ground for the ideas that underpin the Declaration. Philosophers like John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu challenged traditional notions of divine right monarchy and advocated for individual liberty, reason, and popular sovereignty. These intellectual currents provided the philosophical vocabulary and conceptual framework for the colonists to articulate their grievances and their aspirations for self-governance. The Declaration can be seen as a practical application of these emerging philosophical ideas to the specific political realities of the time.

Colonial Grievances as a Catalyst

The specific historical grievances listed in the Declaration were not abstract complaints; they were the direct result of British policies implemented in the aftermath of the French and Indian War. Acts like the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, and the Intolerable Acts were seen by the colonists as infringements on their liberties and their right to self-governance. The Declaration served as a formal indictment of these policies, providing a clear and compelling narrative of why the colonists felt compelled to sever ties with Great Britain. This historical specificity differentiates it from the general nature of common sense.

From Grievances to a Declaration of Principles

While common sense might dictate that unfair treatment is wrong, the Declaration of Independence took these feelings and transformed them into a declaration of fundamental principles. It did not simply state that the King was acting unfairly; it argued that his actions violated inherent natural rights and that such violations justified a complete restructuring of government. This shift from individual, intuitive reactions to a comprehensive philosophical and political declaration is a key distinction in their historical development and purpose.

Practical Application: Everyday Decisions vs. Revolutionary Action

The most apparent distinction lies in their practical application. Common sense guides our day-to-day decisions, helping us navigate personal interactions, make sound judgments in familiar situations, and maintain a functional social existence. The Declaration of Independence, conversely, was a document of revolutionary action, designed to initiate a radical political transformation and establish a new nation.

Common Sense in Daily Life

On a daily basis, common sense informs our interactions with family, friends, and colleagues. It dictates how we should behave in public spaces, how to manage our finances prudently, and how to assess risks in our environment. For example, the common sense understanding that it is important to be polite to customer service representatives or to save money for future needs influences our immediate choices and behaviors. These are practical, often unarticulated, rules that govern our personal and social lives.

The Declaration as a Call to Action and Justification

The Declaration of Independence was a catalyst for action on an unprecedented scale. It was a formal declaration of war and a justification for armed rebellion against a powerful empire. Its "practical application" was to mobilize an army, rally public support, secure foreign alliances, and ultimately establish a new form of government. The principles it espoused were intended to guide the formation of institutions and laws for a nascent nation, not merely to inform individual choices in mundane

situations. The courage and conviction required to act on the principles articulated in the Declaration far exceed the scope of everyday common sense.

The Stakes of Each Application

The stakes involved in applying common sense are typically personal and localized. A lapse in common sense might lead to a minor inconvenience or social embarrassment. The stakes involved in the Declaration of Independence were the lives of thousands, the future of a continent, and the establishment of a new republic. It represented a conscious decision to risk everything based on deeply held philosophical convictions and a specific set of perceived injustices. This vast difference in the magnitude of consequences highlights the distinct roles of common sense and the Declaration.

The Role of Grievances in the Declaration

While common sense might include a general sense of fairness and a dislike for injustice, the Declaration of Independence meticulously details specific grievances. These are not vague feelings of dissatisfaction but a structured indictment of particular actions taken by the British Crown and Parliament. This specificity is crucial to the Declaration's purpose as a justification for separation and as a legal and historical document.

Specific Acts of Tyranny

The Declaration enumerates a litany of specific actions by the British government that the colonists viewed as oppressive and a violation of their rights as Englishmen. These include imposing taxes without colonial consent, quartering large bodies of armed troops among them, cutting off their trade, depriving them of trial by jury, and transporting them beyond the seas for trial for pretended offenses. These are concrete examples of perceived injustices that provided the immediate impetus for revolution.

Common Sense vs. Enumerated Violations

Common sense might tell us that being subjected to unfair laws is wrong, but it does not provide the historical context or the legal arguments for why specific acts, like the imposition of stamp duties or the closure of colonial ports, constituted an unacceptable violation of fundamental rights. The Declaration provides this detailed accounting, moving beyond general feelings of unease to a reasoned, documented case against British rule. It translates abstract notions of fairness into actionable, historical claims.

The Declaration as a Legal and Political Manifesto

The inclusion of specific grievances transforms the Declaration from a philosophical treatise into a potent legal and political manifesto. It served as evidence for the world, demonstrating that the colonists had legitimate reasons for their rebellion. This detailed articulation of wrongs is a key

difference from common sense, which relies on intuitive understanding rather than documented proof to guide everyday judgments.

Common Sense as a Foundation for the Declaration

While distinct, the differences between common sense and the Declaration of Independence do not imply a complete separation. In fact, common sense can be seen as an underlying foundation upon which the more formal principles of the Declaration were built. The intuitive understanding of fairness and the innate sense of injustice that people generally possess likely contributed to the widespread acceptance of the Declaration's arguments.

The "Common Sense" of Natural Rights

The idea that people possess inherent rights, like the right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness, can resonate with a basic, common sense understanding of human dignity and the desire for a just existence. While the philosophical articulation of these rights comes from Enlightenment thinkers, the underlying appeal to what many people intuitively feel is right and just makes the Declaration's message powerful. The notion that a ruler should not arbitrarily oppress his subjects is a sentiment likely shared by many, even if they cannot articulate it in philosophical terms.

Intuitive Opposition to Unfair Taxation

The rallying cry of "no taxation without representation" taps into a common sense understanding of fairness in any contractual or representative arrangement. The idea that one should not be compelled to pay for something without having a voice in its imposition is a principle that resonates on a fundamental level. This common sense principle provided fertile ground for the more elaborate political arguments against British taxation policies presented in the Declaration.

The Role of Shared Experience

The colonists shared common experiences of British rule, and these shared experiences likely informed their collective sense of what was reasonable and what was not. The cumulative effect of policies perceived as unjust, when viewed through the lens of practical, everyday life, could foster a widespread sentiment that the current system was fundamentally flawed. This shared practical understanding, akin to common sense, contributed to the willingness to consider radical solutions like independence.

The Declaration as a Catalyst for Change

While common sense guides individual behavior and societal norms, the Declaration of Independence served a more profound and transformative purpose: it was a catalyst for radical political and social change. It did not merely reflect existing understandings; it aimed to create a new reality based on a

set of articulated ideals. Its impact went far beyond the immediate act of declaring independence.

Sparking a Revolution and Inspiring Others

The Declaration of Independence ignited the American Revolutionary War, a conflict that would ultimately lead to the birth of a new nation. More than that, its bold assertion of self-determination and its articulation of universal rights inspired revolutionary movements in other parts of the world, including France and Latin America. It served as a blueprint for aspiring nations and a beacon of hope for oppressed peoples.

Establishing Precedents for Governance

The principles laid out in the Declaration, such as popular sovereignty and the protection of unalienable rights, became the bedrock of American governance. They were enshrined in subsequent documents like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, shaping the legal and political framework of the United States. This proactive creation of a new political order is a significant departure from the reactive and adaptive nature of common sense.

Transforming Philosophical Ideas into Political Action

The Declaration of Independence was a monumental achievement in transforming abstract philosophical ideas into concrete political action. It took the theoretical concepts of the Enlightenment, such as natural rights and social contract theory, and applied them to the practical matter of establishing a sovereign nation. This act of translation and implementation, moving from belief to decisive action, marks a critical difference in the function and impact of the Declaration compared to the everyday guidance provided by common sense.

Enduring Relevance: Common Sense and American Ideals

The enduring relevance of both common sense and the Declaration of Independence highlights their distinct but interconnected roles in American society. Common sense continues to inform our daily lives, fostering practical wisdom and social cohesion. The Declaration of Independence, however, remains a foundational document, continuously challenging Americans to live up to its ideals and to critically examine their governance.

Common Sense in Contemporary Society

In today's complex world, common sense remains essential for navigating personal relationships, making sound financial decisions, and understanding basic safety protocols. It allows individuals to interact effectively with others and to make sensible choices in a myriad of everyday situations. The ability to discern what is practical and reasonable is a skill that continues to be vital for individual well-being and societal harmony.

The Declaration as a Living Document

The Declaration of Independence, while written in the 18th century, continues to be a relevant and aspirational document. Its ideals of equality, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are still debated, pursued, and strived for in contemporary American society. The document serves as a constant reminder of the nation's founding principles and a benchmark against which progress and societal challenges are measured. Its language continues to inspire movements for civil rights, social justice, and individual freedom.

The Interplay of Principle and Practice

Ultimately, the differences between common sense and the Declaration of Independence illuminate the interplay between innate understanding and codified principle. Common sense provides the intuitive sense of fairness and practicality, while the Declaration elevates these intuitions into a framework for governance and a declaration of fundamental human rights. Both are essential for a functioning society, with common sense guiding our individual actions and the Declaration providing the philosophical and political compass for the nation.

Frequently Asked Questions

How does common sense differ from the Declaration of Independence in terms of origin and purpose?

Common sense is a collection of widely shared beliefs and practical judgments, often unwritten and developed through everyday experience. The Declaration of Independence, conversely, is a formal, written document authored by specific individuals (the Founding Fathers) with the explicit purpose of declaring a nation's separation from colonial rule and articulating its founding principles.

In what ways do the 'truths' presented in the Declaration of Independence go beyond everyday common sense?

While common sense might suggest basic fairness or the desire for autonomy, the Declaration's 'truths' like 'all men are created equal' and the unalienable rights to 'Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness' are more philosophical and aspirational. They establish a political and moral framework that transcends mere everyday practicality, requiring deliberate articulation and justification.

How did Thomas Paine's 'Common Sense' pamphlet influence the Declaration of Independence?

Paine's 'Common Sense' was instrumental in galvanizing public opinion towards independence by using accessible language to argue against monarchy and for self-governance. It effectively translated abstract ideas into compelling arguments that resonated with the common person, creating the widespread sentiment that the Declaration then formalized.

Can common sense be seen as a foundation for the Declaration of Independence?

Yes, in a way. The Declaration draws upon commonly understood principles of natural rights and the social contract, ideas that had permeated Enlightenment thought and were becoming part of a broader 'common sense' understanding of legitimate government. However, the Declaration elevated these ideas to a formal political manifesto.

How does the authority of common sense compare to the authority of the Declaration of Independence?

Common sense derives its authority from widespread acceptance and practical utility in daily life. The Declaration's authority, however, stems from its status as a foundational legal and political document of the United States, endowed with the authority of a sovereign nation and its revolutionary origins.

What is the role of emotion versus reason in common sense and the Declaration of Independence?

Common sense often incorporates emotional responses and intuition alongside reason, guided by practical needs and personal experiences. The Declaration, while certainly passionate in its rhetoric, is primarily a document of reasoned argument and philosophical justification for political action, aiming to persuade through logic and articulation of principles.

How might disagreements arise between what common sense dictates and what the Declaration of Independence asserts?

Disagreements can arise when prevailing common sense might prioritize immediate security or established traditions over the more radical, universal principles espoused in the Declaration, such as equality or the right to revolution. For example, common sense might dictate obedience to authority, while the Declaration justifies rebellion against tyranny.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to the differences between common sense and the Declaration of Independence, each beginning with "":

1. In Search of Reason: A Citizen's Guide to the American Experiment

This book explores the historical context and philosophical underpinnings of the Declaration of Independence, examining how its radical ideas diverged from prevailing common sense notions of governance. It delves into the Enlightenment principles that informed the founders' thinking, contrasting them with the more pragmatic, everyday reasoning of the time. The text offers insights into how the Declaration sought to elevate public discourse beyond immediate concerns.

2. Ideals Versus Everyday: Navigating American Governance

This title investigates the tension between the aspirational ideals articulated in the Declaration and the practical realities of implementing them. It analyzes how common sense, often rooted in tradition and immediate needs, might clash with the universal principles the Declaration proclaimed. The book

provides case studies of how these differing perspectives have shaped American policy and societal development over centuries.

3. Igniting the Enlightenment: Rethinking Governance Through Declaration

This work focuses on how the Declaration of Independence acted as a catalyst for a fundamental shift in thinking about political authority and individual rights. It contrasts the common sense acceptance of monarchical rule with the Declaration's bold assertion of natural rights and popular sovereignty. The book highlights the intellectual courage required to articulate such revolutionary ideas.

4. In the Shadow of Kings: Common Sense vs. Colonial Grievances

This book examines the everyday experiences and common sense understandings of colonists leading up to the Revolution. It contrasts these with the more abstract, philosophical arguments for independence presented in the Declaration, often framed as grievances against distant authority. The narrative explores how abstract principles ultimately overcame entrenched common sense loyalties.

5. Interpreting Revolution: Reason, Rights, and the American Mind

This title delves into the diverse interpretations of the Declaration of Independence and its core tenets throughout American history. It explores how common sense understandings of liberty and equality have evolved, sometimes aligning with and sometimes diverging from the original intent of the Declaration. The book analyzes the ongoing debate over what the Declaration truly means for contemporary society.

6. Illuminating the Principles: The Declaration's Enduring Logic

This book offers a deep dive into the logical framework and persuasive power of the Declaration of Independence. It contrasts the clear, reasoned arguments presented by the founders with the often less articulated, more instinctual common sense beliefs that guided daily life. The text emphasizes how the Declaration's principles provided a new standard for evaluating political legitimacy.

7. Inalienable Aspirations: The Declaration's Bold Vision

This title focuses on the aspirational and forward-looking nature of the Declaration of Independence, which challenged existing common sense views of social hierarchy and political order. It explores how the Declaration's radical vision of equality and self-governance was initially met with skepticism by many who operated under more traditional, common sense assumptions. The book highlights the Declaration's role in setting a moral compass for the nation.

8. Implications of Independence: From Common Thought to Common Good

This work examines the long-term implications of the Declaration's principles for the development of American society, contrasting them with initial common sense reactions. It explores how the pursuit of the common good, as envisioned by the Declaration, often required overcoming ingrained common sense beliefs and practices. The book traces the impact of these ideals on subsequent social and political movements.

9. In the Spirit of 1776: Rethinking Freedom and Common Sense

This book re-examines the Declaration of Independence through the lens of the revolutionary era's prevailing common sense and intellectual currents. It analyzes how the founders sought to persuade a populace accustomed to different forms of governance by presenting a compelling, yet potentially unsettling, new vision of liberty. The text highlights the intellectual and rhetorical strategies used to bridge the gap between the familiar and the revolutionary.

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