



Common Sense, Rights of Man and Other Essential Writings

Thomas Paine

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English-American political activist, author, political theorist and revolutionary, Thomas Paine was one of the most influential figures during the period leading up to the American Revolution. Through his hugely influential pamphlet "Common Sense" and the series of pamphlets known collectively as "The American Crisis" he successfully advocated for colonial America's independence from the Kingdom of Great Britain. Those works are included in this collection along with "Rights of Man", "The Age of Reason", and "Agrarian Justice". In "Rights of Man" Thomas Paine responds to Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" arguing that popular political revolution is permissible when a government does not safeguard its people and their natural rights. Paine became notorious for his "The Age of Reason," in which he promotes reason and freethinking over the institutionalized doctrine of the Christian religion. Finally in his pamphlet "Agrarian Justice" he discusses the origins of property and introduced the concept of a guaranteed minimum income. In this edition we see a comprehensive collection of Paine's writings providing a window into his logic which heavily influenced early American political theory.

Common Sense, Rights of Man and Other Essential Writings Details

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From Reader Review Common Sense, Rights of Man and Other Essential Writings for online ebook

Alfred Stappenbeck says

Paine demonstrates some great critical thinking in his essay "The Age of Reason" where he extensively exposes inconsistencies and fallacies in the old and new testament. However, he stops short in applying his critical thinking skills. My primary purpose for reading this collection was to see for myself how Paine attempts to build (or convey) a theory of rights. In my reading of both "Rights of Man" and "Age of Reason" Paine implicitly takes as incontrovertible and foundationally axiomatic that God exists. This poses a problem for atheists like myself. I suspect that Paine would reply that the problem was with my judgment and not with the lack of a foundation for rights in absence of God or a creator. For support I give you these snippets from "The Rights of Man"

"The illuminating and divine principle of the equal rights of man (for it has its origin from the Maker of man) relates, not only to the living individuals, but to generations of men succeeding each other."

"...; and consequently every child born into the world must be considered as deriving its existence from God."

"The duty of man... consists but of two points. His duty to God, which every man must feel; and with respect to his neighbor, to do as he would be done by."

This last quote demonstrates three presuppositions combined together. First that God exists which Paine never offers proof of beyond referring to all that exists as if it necessarily follows that if all this exists then of course God exists but also the duty we owe to this claimed creator (failing the is-ought problem) and to others, then we have the subjective standard of the golden rule which isn't a standard at all seeing as some people do want to be hurt and hurt others. None of this is addressed by Paine anywhere that I could find. If you ignore all the God talk you do get a nice little quote later on that I believe most people have taken out of context (ie. all the God talk)

"Natural rights are those which appertain to man in right of his existence. Of this kind are all the intellectual rights, or rights of the mind, and also all those rights of acting as an individual for his own comfort and happiness, which are not injurious to the natural rights of others."

Taken out of context that is pretty cool. Taken in context it breaks down for atheists before it gets started. You might be able to argue that the duty to others he refers to earlier is to be taken as requirement of respecting others rights if yours are to be respected "... not injurious to the natural rights of others". Which might work in isolation but remember you still owe all this to an unproven creator.

We do also get a definition of civil rights, which I'm still not fully clear on.

"Civil rights are those which appertain to man in right of his being a member of society. Every civil right has for its foundation some natural right pre-existing in the individual, but to the enjoyment of which his individual power is not, in all cases, sufficiently competent. Of this kind are all those which relate to security and protection."

I believe this is explained later.

"A man, by natural right, has a right to judge in his own cause; and so far as the right of the mind is concerned, he never surrenders it. But what availeth it him to judge, if he has not power to redress? He therefore deposits this right in the common stock of society, and takes the ann of society, of which he is a part, in preference and in addition to his own."

Oswald says

As America's "first" best seller, I can see why this piece was a hit. Paine describes the political stage at the end of the 18th century and vehemently accuses the tories that were still under the British ideology. Mr.

Paine had no hair on his tongue, or his pen for that matter. It is obvious why he was hated, although I give him credit for writing about what was not so clear to some and nebulous to others.

Quotes I liked:

"I have always held it an opinion (making it also my practice) that it is better to obey a bad law, making use at the same time of every argument to show its errors and procure its repeal, than forcibly to violate it; because the precedent of breaking a bad law might weaken the force, and lead to a discretionary violation of those which are good."

"In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet" re: England and American in respect to each other as he questioned why England, at the time, ruled America.

"Youth is the seed time of good habits, as well in nations as in individuals."

"Mankind have lived for very little purpose, if, at this period of the world, they must go back two or three thousand years back for lessons and examples." re: the constant use of ancient greek and roman legal precedents to justify present ones.

"When the tongue or the pen is let loose in a frenzy of passion, it is the man, and not the subject, that becomes exhausted."

"It requires but a very small glance of thought to perceive that although laws made in one generation often continue in force through succeeding generations, yet that they continue to derive their force from the consent of the living. A law not repealed continues in force, not because it cannot be repealed, but because it is not repealed; and the non-repealing passes for consent."

"A casual discontinuance of the practice of despotism, is not a discontinuance of its principles."

"A Constitution is a thing antecedent to a government, and a government is only the creature of a Constitution."

"The mind, in discovering truth, acts in the same manner as it acts through the eye in discovering objects; when once any object has been seen, it is impossible to put the mind back to the same condition it was in before it saw it."

"Government is nothing more than a national association acting on the principles of society."

"What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude."

"All power exercised over a Nation must have some beginning. It must either be delegated or assumed. There are no other sources. All delegated power is trust, and all assumed power is usurpation. Time does not alter the nature and quality of either."

"The defect was not in the principle but in the distribution of power." re: Articles of Confederation

"My country is the world, and my religion is to do good."

Rosie says

My school curriculum only had me read Common Sense, and The Crisis. But I'm okay with that. I think EVERY American needs to read these, at least once. Thomas Paine made point after awesome point about why America needs to be free from Britain, and it was really cool to read them. Sometimes I got really excited while reading it, and I am proud to be on the American side of it all. I really recommend it. I wish I could go back in time and tell Thomas Paine how cool he was.

Corinne Johnson says

I give "Rights of Man" 3 1/2 stars because I have severe mixed feelings about it. On one hand, I loved how much insight Paine gave on government and how much he made me think about what really occurs within our government, making it 4 stars worthy. On the other hand, he seemed slightly repetitive and seemed to use circular reasoning a lot and constantly landed on the same point, making it 3 stars worthy. Over all, I thought it was very insightful and very advanced thinking for the late 1700's, but he seemed to drone on at points making it a little tedious to read.

Nonfiction

Joseph says

"Common Sense": A true political and philosophical masterpiece! Written in plain english and will garner a response from anyone who reads it. I asked a person if they ever read "Common Sense" and he told me that he read it in high school. When I mentioned they should read it again he dismissed it as required high school reading. Well fuck that! Paine is the only writer who is a true philosopher who offers a true pragmatic alternative (fuck the rest of them: Jean-Paul Sartre, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, etc... all they ever did is whine about life in intellectual ways). His use of plain writing and pure logical thinking makes "Common Sense" one of the most important works of political philosophy of all time. The writing is also very poetic without being ham-fisted or long winded(i.e. "Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence"), and as inciteful and down to earth as anything I've ever heard ("Let the names of Whig and Tory be extinct; and let none other be heard among us, than those of A GOOD CITIZEN, AN OPEN AND RESOLUTE FRIEND, AND A VIRTUOUS SUPPORTER OF THE RIGHTS OF MANKIND AND OF THE FREE AND INDEPENDANT STATES OF AMERICA").

Like how Marx's "Communist Manifesto" and Mao's "Red Book" was required reading for all people in communist Russia and China respectively, "Common Sense" should be required reading for all school children all over the world. It's a work that not only explains where our inherent independent streak comes from, it shows the teeth of the American Revolution's ideals that we Americans (although in smaller numbers) still fight for today.

Liberty over tyranny.

Or even better...

Question authority, then ignore it.

Ashley says

I don't know how to review books like this one. On a personal level I liked it but did struggle with some parts of it-- more because I find that 18th century language is a little off-putting for me. However, I am so glad that I was forced to read this book for class.

It is almost a cliché to say that this book is incredibly important to American history. It is also a book that is easy to read in excerpts in other sources, so reading the whole thing was helpful and something I've been putting off far too long.

The Signet collection's introduction and footnotes are quite helpful and do unpack a lot of Paine's philosophy and contextualize it within the Enlightenment.

Reichart says

I reread this book every 8 to 12 years, often near elections, to remind myself that reasonable people possessing common sense existed hundreds of years ago against a sea of insanity, shortsightedness, and stubbornness.

“Time makes more converts than reason.”

? Thomas Paine, Common Sense

Roy Lotz says

My ignorance of American history often manages to astound even myself. I know the major events and figures. But can I rattle off the list of presidents? Can I name famous Supreme Court cases at the drop of a hat? Could I, in short, even pass a basic high school level American history test? I doubt it.

But I'm not about to start making flash cards and drilling myself anytime soon; anyway, such a task would only fill my head with the same facts and dates I've already managed to forget. No; if I'm going to learn, I'm going to learn in style. And what better way to stylishly learn than by reading primary sources?

As a friend of mine pointed out, Thomas Paine was the ultimate American. He was an immigrant, an autodidact, a populist, a democrat, and an optimist. He believed that the whole world could be a democratic paradise; not only did he believe it could happen, but was absolutely sure it would.

Paine also shared another American quality: an aversion to abstract argument. I do not mean to belittle the intelligence of an obviously brilliant man; I just wish to point out that his writing is effective in the same way as is a ringing trumpet or a beating drum—as a call to arms. Paine is a master-builder of compelling slogans, an expert craftsman of battle-cries. Although he speaks much of reason, his real target is the passions.

As an American who has imbibed these ideas since birth, reading Paine can seem almost breezy. His every point provokes a sort of knee-jerk reaction in me. I nod along, and say to myself, “Yes, of course; yes, yes, of course.” In such a suggestible state, it's easy to overlook the actual dearth of argument. Paine backs up his

claims with appeals to common sense, and with *ad hominem* attacks on his opponents. I doubt any skeptical reader could be convinced of Democracy's value by Paine alone; but I am far from skeptical in this matter, and I suspect the same is true of most others.

In any case, it's hard not to admire a man who worked his way up from the very bottom to the height of literary fame; whose every effort was bent on increasing general happiness and curtailing institutionalized oppression; who sold thousands of copies of his works without making a cent. Perhaps Thomas Paine was the ultimate American, not only insofar as he illustrated our foibles, but also as he confirmed our greatest potential.

David says

This is one of those reads that one has to take their time on. Paine makes his arguments eloquently; however, it is couched in the language of the day making for a longer read. One also has to have some understanding of the local time period in which he wrote. If one has little knowledge of the American and French Revolutions then some of the rhetoric will be lost. That being said, the essays on the Rights of Man, as well as The Age of Reason, are timeless. Paine's approach to inalienable rights -- rights everyone, slaves included, are entitled to by their birth onto this earth -- is logically constructed and moving. One can see how his writings influenced the ideas captured by the US and French constitutions. It is his essay, The Age of Reason, that is truly stunning.

Paine effectively calls into question the western world's three major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He calls them all religions based on nothing more than hearsay. His deconstruction of Christian mythology is superbly done. He surely would have been in danger around Salem with what he put to paper. I'd warn anyone with strong religious views that this essay will anger them. He pulls no punches in calling into question religion and its usefulness. Paine is devoutly pro separation of Church and State and can probably be called the first individual to actually use that term. In my opinion, this essay displays Paine's brilliance as a writer. It's a moving piece of literature.

I highly recommend this work and find it disappointing that the Rights of Man is not mandatory reading in classrooms. It is well written and applies to today's world as much as it did in the late 1700s/early 1800s.

Steve Nitzel says

I always thought this was the original Common Sense, not the one penned by Glen Beck.

Chris brown says

An excellent book. The foundations of the American political structure and two hundred years later a call to come back to basics. A call to expose how America is edging closer to ALL things that it set out NOT to be. More than a voice of the past but a herald, like a prophet in the desert, saying

"You have strayed away from something that was so clearly laid out for you, Come back."

Come back NOT to a system of the wealthiest man or woman dominates the poor but one where ALL MEN

AND WOMEN are equal in the eyes of the law and are allowed to seek out what it is that makes them happy and prosperous.

Come back not to a time where one set of religious moralities dominates outside of said religious institutions but one where one is FREE to practice their own religion WITHOUT fear that another religious code would be made law

Come back to a time where Kings, Queens, Generals, members of a Aristocracy or Corporation did not and could not Rule over the lives of the common man and give cause and make law for doing so.

When you read through you might think as I did, "Things of 200 years ago are still going on today. Have we made any progress? Yes some here, some there, but when it comes to the basics: If we knew what we were trying to get away from, trying to avoid. Why then is it still here?"

Lisa (Harmonybites) says

Given what I've read of him in the introduction of this edition of his writings and elsewhere, Thomas Paine was every bit as important to the American Revolution as George Washington or Thomas Jefferson (and as it turns out, fascinatingly enough, an important figure in the French Revolution.) The forward by Jack Fruchtman Jr. claimed Paine was no philosopher, but rather a journalist, and the introduction by Sidney Hook that he was no deep thinker. Interestingly enough, I found Paine's writings shelved not in the philosophy section of the bookstore, but the history section. What Paine was plainly, if not a philosopher, was a rabble rouser who could still inspire venom over a century later. (Theodore Roosevelt called Paine "that dirty little atheist.")

Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* published in July of 1776 helped spark the American Revolution. Reading *Common Sense* what stood out to me (and to a lesser extent the other writings) was, despite Paine's reputation as an atheist, how often he cited *The Bible* in his arguments. So often I've seen the secular left versus the religious right claim the American Founding Fathers as their own. If Paine and other first-hand sources of the Founding Age are any indication, the truth is more complicated, and they're neither atheists nor fundamentalists--but more people who took the existence of God and the soul for granted, while, given the religious pluralism of the colonies, making Reason (with a decidedly capital "R") the lingua franca between them--but there's certainly plenty of references to God and Providence in the works of Paine. The other thing that's striking in *Common Sense*--a note also resounded in *Rights of Man*--is the heady optimism, of the belief in the chance for fundamental and radical change: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." These works are also a surprisingly lively read. Even now, the words strike sparks on the page. Paine is often a gifted wordsmith.

That's possibly never better demonstrated than in his series of articles *The American Crisis*, which were read to Washington's troops during the darkest hours of the war. The first of the series has this famous opening: "These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."

And *Rights of Man*? If you want to understand the underpinnings of traditional Anglo-American conservatism, many have told me to read Edmund Burke, who many contemporary conservatives still cite as a forerunner. But if you want to understand the wellsprings of both libertarianism and liberalism right at the root, you couldn't get off to a better start than to read Paine's *Rights of Man*, which was a response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In *Rights of Man* Paine vigorously defended the French Revolution

as well as free-thinking and democracy against tradition and aristocratic privilege. In showing the absurdity of monarchy and aristocracy Paine succeeded brilliantly. His arguments are not all that well structured however. He rambled and was often repetitive in his points. (OK, I get it, William the Conqueror was a thug.) And at times Paine's words can ring hollow because of how history has overtaken this 1791 tract. So when he passionately defended the French Revolution as civilized, I immediately thought of "the Reign of Terror" ahead of France and that Paine himself was imprisoned and came close to being guillotined. When he stated his belief that within seven years no monarchy would survive in the "enlightened" nations of Europe... Well, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom are all still monarchies today and are hardly unenlightened by any stretch. (Even if practically speaking all are republics in all but name.) And Paine had a touching faith that republics would never go to war against each other.

It makes me more curious about Burke. The quotes Paine chose to represent Burke's arguments do make him sound ridiculous. Yet I know many thinkers on the right respect Burke's arguments even today as a defense of slow organic change in political institutions over radical revolution. (And given the later events of the French Revolution, I suspect he might have been more prescient than Paine.) On the other hand, I certainly was fascinated to read Paine's account of both the American and French Revolutions and how intertwined they were from someone so personally involved. So above all, the reason to read Paine's works are that they are above all history first hand, the best possible source to get a sense of the spirit of an age and of two revolutions.

Wade says

Soooo boring. Gosh. Common sense should tell you to not read this book. Ever.

Abubakar Mehdi says

“Without the pen of Paine, the sword of Washington would have wielded in vain” – John Adams

This quote prompted me to read this book. I was entirely unacquainted with Paine and this book was a tremendous introduction.

Thomas Paine, born in Great Britain, was initially an unsuccessful man just like all great men. It was in his later years that He found fame and recognition for his writings. Paine was an ardent supporter of democracy, Human Rights and Republicanism. He was severe critic of Monarchy and any form of hereditary form of politics. He chiefly wrote and published propaganda pamphlets and political essays that addressed the common man and not the affluent class of citizens. His unflinching criticism for Imperialist ambitions of British Government alienated him from the British Establishment and therefore, He spent most of his last years in America and France.

In Common Sense (1776), he advocated America's Independence when even the most zealous patriots were demanding limited autonomy from the colonial establishment. Moreover, He did so in such charged language that it some American leaders thought it went too far. As the foreword mentions “Common Sense was the January heat of 1776 that balanced the

July light of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence. It might even be said that while Jefferson's abstract diction justified rebellion, Paine's explosive words got rebel men and muskets into the field.”

Paine despised monarchies and desired a greater role for the multitude.

“Society is produced by our wants, and the government by our wickedness”. In the first part of the “Common Sense”, Paine describes the basic purpose of the government as the one of protector of Human Rights and

establishment of a welfare state that exercises its authority with the general consent of public. He describes all the human beings as equals, any discrimination on the basis of race, religion, caste or creed is atrocious and petrifying to the very essence of a civilized society. Paine describes the only permissible distinctions as that of man and woman or of good or bad. Any other, He deems superfluous and undesirable. It is on this ground that He bases his vehement opposition to all forms of hereditary transfer of power and authority. How can children born in the house of a King, he debates, be superior in form or intellect then a peasants child. What distinction or qualification does he have apart from his royal pedigree? This is not only preposterous, he says, but also monstrous and destructive practice that must be abandoned. Turing his attention towards the affairs of America, he sees it as a very dynamic economy which needs to get out of British grip if its people are to enjoy greater economic progress which is in sight. He deems America mature and fit enough to have a self government. A government that is established on the basis of economic, religious and political independence. In the later part he not only exclaims that the future independent continent of America will not require any King to rule over it, but also phrases his conception of a proper democratic republic as having "the Law as king". This is an excellent example of his political fortitude and vision.

The other essays that greatly interested me were The Right of Man and The Age of Reason. In The Rights of Man, he contradicts Edmund Burke's opposition to French Revolutions with some excellent facts and ridicules his pro status quo rhetoric. Paine fervently defends the right of people to usurp power from tyrants and throw them out of their thrones.

In The Age of Reason, He describes his religious sentiments that generally detest any form of organized religion while retaining his firm belief in the existence of an Almighty One God. He mocks the Christian doctrines of Holy Trinity as well as condemns the role of church in politics. He also severely criticizes Islam and Judaism as completely contradictory to reasonable understanding of any average man. He proposes the that believing God can be possible independent of ones belief in any particular religion or a scripture.

I personally belief, that Paine was not only a tremendously successful propagandist, but also a brave political activist who desired liberation of the populace from monarchical governments and tyrannical colonialists. His prose is very clear, raw and prophetic. He uses metaphors and examples to prove his point. He addresses the common man and it is for his eyes that he writes what he writes. His narrative is fiery and scrupulous, his vision clear and his ambitions dangerous yet practical. The way is mocks Burke in Rights of Man and abuses the King in Common Sense shows that he truly was a man of remarkable aptitude. His firm belief in secular, democratic traditions is most outstanding, and so is his desire to emancipate humanity from the tyranny of a few.

Annemarie Donahue says

Too bad this book isn't a major part of our current educational system. I teach English literature and am convinced that a good dose of this at least once a day will bring our country back from the reality show addicted ninnies that we are all becoming. Wonderful book about the abuses of government, the threat of ignorance and the very real danger of irresponsible leadership.

I would like to make this part of my freshmen curriculum if I didn't think I would have to scaffold it to death and have half the parents of my district complaining.