
Faith and Responsibility in Individual Sovereignty

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Abstract

This paper deals with two conceptual problems of individual sovereignty as pointed out by Duffel [3] and Duffel [2], that I call as “theoretical problem” and “aberration problem” respectively. The concept of sovereignty in general, and individual sovereignty in particular, suffered serious theoretical problems that seem irresolvable. But arguably it is a concept with great operational success as proven by four centuries of Western civilization dominance. How can a concept achieve such an operational success yet conceptually flawed? The second problem of sovereignty is related to the objections that it places too much weight on rights. To address both these conceptual problems this paper will resort to the teaching of Jordan Peterson, and speculates that what underpins the concept itself is that of faith as opposed to reason, and argues for the return to the more classical version of it that focuses more on responsibility. It concludes that Christians ought to give more serious thought on individual sovereignty as its manifestation is arguably the greatest gift from Judeo-Christian tradition to mankind, especially in the sphere of socio-politic.

Keywords: Individual Sovereignty; Human Rights; Judeo-Christian; Jordan Peterson.

1. Introduction

This paper views the concept of individual sovereignty to be having a theoretical problem, yet an operational success. Let's start with the operational success first. Ward explains how the term ‘individualism’ is doctrinally associated with various intellectual movements such as Epicurian thought, Judeo-Christian tradition, Renaissance, Protestant Reformation, middle-class liberalism of John Locke, and the laissez-faire economic philosophy of Adam Smith, all of which defines what we now know as the West to form what McKenna terms as “Western Synthesis” with its dominance for the last four centuries [9; 11; 25].

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As Proser puts it “Because it (individual sovereignty) was the foundation of all Western law; the entire canon of Western civilization would collapse if it was dismissed” [20].

The manifestation of the concept has transformed the political, economic, social, and legal spheres of the Western civilization, and without it we would live in a world with no democracy, free market, abolition of slavery or Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It has given birth the technological-economic miracles from Industrial Revolution to Information Revolution, and ushered the world into a new era of prosperity. Duffel wrote an excellent paper concerning serious theoretical problem of the notion of individual sovereignty [3]. It is such a mystery that a concept could have a successful application yet theoretically flawed. By tackling this problem, I hope we can have more appreciation of the concept, especially its religious origin and the role of faith in its adoption. The first introduction of the word “individualism” was in an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson written in 1835, and five years later, the first written critique of it appeared as Alexis de Tocqueville used the word in a pejorative sense, “implying a threat to society akin to selfishness”[25]. Tongdong wrote an article in a book “The East Asian Challenge for Democracy” discussing four problems of democracy, three of which are caused by “selfish and radical version of individualism, ..that celebrates narrowly defined self-interests above all else” [24]. Duffel wrote at length concerning this second problem with the concept and claimed that it has suffered a serious aberration [2]. This misunderstanding of the concept can lead to the rejection of it, especially from the East. Even the Catholic Church have had hard times accepting it when in 1791 Pope Pius VI deemed human rights as “contrary to religion and society” and Pope Gregory XVI in 1832 denounced the “whole idea of rights pertaining to individuals” as “pestilence more deadly to the state than any other”, and lastly, the Vatican remained cold at the time of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, though later endorsed it [7]. Duffel argues that contemporary understanding of moral or natural rights has deviated from “medieval understanding of rights” and indeed we are living in a generation that puts too much emphasis on rights (from civil rights, human rights, gay rights, transgender rights, etc) and movement like Social Justice Warrior gains traction [2]. Against such backdrop arose a powerful cultural force, a man whom Tyler Cowen called as “the most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now”, which is Jordan Peterson [1]. I will address the two problems of the concept of individual sovereignty as brought up by Duffel and put them in the light of the teaching of Jordan Peterson [2; 3]. By doing this I hope we can appreciate the role of faith and responsibility in the very concept of individual sovereignty, the former to tackle the first problem, and the later for the second problem.

2. Theoretical Problem of Individual Sovereignty

The concept of individual sovereignty could be seen as a fusion between the theory of sovereignty and individual liberty as in libertarianism [6]. Of all the various definitions of sovereignty, Duffel synthesizes the core meanings of it to be “supreme normative power with a domain” and calls this definition as strong conception of sovereignty, a definition that he claims the “classical thinkers on the subject had in mind”, such as Hobbes and Rousseau [2]. Delineating this concept, especially the three elements within this definition (supreme, normative power and domain) he argues for the utility of this strong conception for two reasons: 1) Individual sovereignty needs normative implication in different contextual situation where such concept functions, and 2) The weaker notion seem a lot weaker to do the concept of sovereignty any justice [3]. Duffel

ends up concluding: “it is not possible for a human being to be a sovereign” [3]. The concept of individual sovereignty is so central to contemporary debates about rights since rights-holder is simply deemed as sovereign individual [2]. Modifying this basic concept of sovereignty to solve the theoretical problem would make “any theory in which sovereignty functions as a basic concept indefensible”, even collapsing any moral theory that is rights-based [2]:

No theory can be rights-based if the relevant rights are derived from the supposed sovereignty of human beings. Similarly, we may say that no theory in which popular sovereignty functions as a basic concept is sound (no moral or political theory can be sovereignty-based) [2]

It seems that the partial answer to this theoretical problem already given in the title of the very paper Duffel wrote which is “Sovereignty as a Religious Concept” [3]. He argued that inherently, sovereignty is a religious concept, i.e. secularized religious concept, echoing Schmitt the father of political theology that made the famous claim “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concept” [3]:

By saying this, I do not mean merely that the concept was one that was first used in a religious context and was later transferred to other realms. My claim is more radical: I would like to argue that if we take the concept of sovereignty seriously, we will find that there is only one legitimate candidate for the label of 'sovereign' and that is God. The radicalism of the thesis can be seen if we consider one of its implications, namely that the use of the concept in political discourse is illegitimate (unless it is used to refer to God) [3].

Duffell accentuates further his claim by explaining that most theorists have believed that the concept of sovereignty has been broadened to include individual human beings (from God) and such “broadening” of the concept is theoretically problematic, as it is broadened to peoples, princes and individual [3]. What exactly the religious concept secularized (or broadened) as sovereignty? It is none other than *Imago Dei*, as also explained:

The belief that God created each human being in his image, for example, has been secularised in the idea that each human being is a sovereign: a claim that, as we will see, is basic to one tradition of natural rights theories [3].

The concept of *Imago Dei*, is quite established as a consensus to be interpreted as human sovereignty. This consensus has been traced by Jonsson (1988) to be since the beginning of the 20th century, and is virtually unanimous among scholars [12]. The secularization of *Imago Dei* later leads to the secularization of God’s creative power in the concept of property rights as explained by Balagangadhara [3]. This leads us to conclude that whatever religion that Duffel refers to as the religion that the term *Imago Dei* originates from, as fortunately also clarified by him. In answering the question why the notion of sovereignty not abandoned though having irresolvable theoretical problem, Duffel points out that this problem is a problem of particular cultural tradition [3]. Quoting Hinsley that claims the concept of sovereignty had not figured at all in the history of non-European societies, except by importation, Duffel places the importance of the influence of christianity on the culture of the West as the determinant factor that made sovereignty a secularized religious concept [3]. To be exact: “At least it would tell us where to look for an answer, namely in the influence of religion on the culture of the West” [3]. The West, that both in terms of place and values today refers to an ambiguous political, economic and cultural entity that has become synonym with Judeo-Christian [11]. The term Judeo-Christian first appeared to depict connection between Judaism and Christianity in antiquity (in the *Literary Guide* in 1899) and then evolved to “refer to values or beliefs shared by Jews and Christians to a common western religious outlook”, thus has become a shibboleth [14; 22]. Mimouni claims that F.C. Baur was the first person to use this term in the

printing form, who was a German Protestant theologian [13]. In due course, this term has achieved considerable currency first in America and later, Europe [14].

Judeo-Christian values give birth to the notion on Individual Sovereignty, as explained by Hill:

The move from a widely accepted concept of human inequality to a belief in universal equality was a long process of cultural evolution. Judaism and Christianity provided a metaphysical concept, all humans are bearers of God's image, that shaped that evolutionary path [4].

Stassen gives an account how the concept human right actually could be originated from the church by explaining how the term of human rights appeared more than a half-century before John Locke and used by the Puritan Revolution to fight for religious liberty [23]. Judaism holds that human dignity is based on *Imago Dei*, and Rabbi David Wolpe asserts this insight as "Judaism greatest gift to the world" [26].

I would argue that the force and motivation that drives the adoption of individual sovereignty is not so much reason as faith. The term secularization need to be understood not as the "disappearance of the grip of religion on the public life, but is a phenomenon that is internal to religion itself", as fortunately Duffel explains [3]. Such secularization need not to be viewed as contradiction with faith, since it doesn't mean the rejection of the transcendental. I would argue that it takes a step of faith to believe that all men and women are created equally in the image of God, since such an equality is not at all obvious. To quote Duffel:

Contemporary scholars writing on sovereignty can be roughly divided between those who believe that we should get rid of the concept (because it is inherently confusing, or essentially contested) and those who grant many of the criticisms of the first group, but add that we nevertheless cannot do without the concept, since much of our thinking about politics in general, and the state in particular, seems to be structured by this notion [3].

As a proud member of the second group, I would argue that the force of faith is behind such secularization of *Imago Dei*, such strong moral force that abolished slavery on the face of the earth [4], surely amounts to something more than theoretical reasoning. This warrants us to explore more about the role of faith in its conception.

3. The Role of Faith in Individual Sovereignty

Jordan Peterson views the West as a very functional culture that gives mankind such list of infrastructure: "the comparatively uncorrupt political and economic systems, the technology, the wealth, the lifespan, the freedom, the luxury and the opportunity" [16]. He sees Bible as "...for better or worse, the foundational document of Western civilization (of Western values, Western morality, and Western conception of good and evil)" [16]. He continues:

It's the product of processes that remain fundamentally beyond our comprehension. The Bible is a library composed of many books, each written and edited by many people. It's a truly emergent document—a selected, sequenced and finally coherent story written by no one and everyone over many thousands of years. The Bible has "been thrown up, out of the deep, by the collective human imagination, which is itself a product of unimaginable forces operating over unfathomable spans of time. Its careful, respectful study can reveal things to us about what we believe and how we do and should act that can be discovered in almost no other manner [16].

For Peterson, faith is not the "childish belief in magic", but instead the "realization that the tragic irrationalities

of life must be counterbalanced by an equally irrational commitment to the essential goodness of Being, that we can start by *not thinking*”, ... “by refusing to subjugate your faith to your current rationality and its narrowness of view” [16]. I would argue that the adoption of individual sovereignty requires such faith beyond reasoning that facilitates the secularization of *Imago Dei* into sovereignty, that has within it some aspect of irrationality.

Peterson explains that from the viewpoint of Judeo-Christian thought, “man is understood most profoundly in terms of his relationship to God”, “as made in the image of God, rather than in light of his cognitive abilities or his place in nature” and warns that “..our capacity for critical reasoning have undermined our faith in the tradition of our forebears [15].

Peterson in a conference hosted by Independent Institute, quoted a sentence from Declaration of Independence “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” [17]. He views that the terms “self-evident” is an axiomatic statements, whose substructure is metaphysical, since it is actually not so self-evident to accept that all men are equal. Referencing to the first chapter of the book of Genesis, the creation story, he summarizes three proposition: 1) There is a communicative consciousness that interacts with chaos to bring about order (existence) , 2) Consciousness of men has the capacity for attention and speech (Gen 1:1-3), and 3) That men and women created in the image of God (Gen 1:27). Peterson explains that the third proposition is what makes the truths in the Declaration of Independent self-evident, though at first glance it seems absurd. Taken together, all three propositions would mean that human being is co-creator of reality with God.

The role of faith can be seen from Peterson’s conclusion that things that are created as the consequences of the Logos are good, where Logos is explained as truthful speech. Peterson explains it as “an act of both courage and faith” [17]:

It’s like you’re going to make the case—like God makes at the beginning of the Bible— that being is, in fact, good. You can’t see it because, well, you get to see all the things about it that aren’t so good. That’s not the point. It’s a metaphysical presupposition. It’s a decision to act that way: I’m going to act as if being is good, and to further that. The implicit idea is, well, there isn’t any way that you can make things work out better than to do that [17].

Peterson explains that the founding fathers who wrote the Declaration of Independence, in claiming that these “truths” as self-evident were actually venturing into some kind of a game: “Let’s assume these things are true, let’s move on from there, and see what happens” [19]. It is quite obvious that for Peterson, the founding fathers were being adventurous in claiming the truths of human equality as self-evident that takes the role of courage and faith as in the creation story.

Consciousness is something that cannot be explained by standard science materialistically or deterministically, but it is, according to Peterson, self-evident. We act like we’re conscious and we treat everybody around us as conscious. Individuals are spirit that confronts the potential of reality and transforms it into the actuality of reality as a consequence of our ethical decision. Peterson explains that’s why there is an insistence that human being is created as the image of God because “we’re partaking in the same process continually”. Peterson claims that actually we believe this politically (at least the West) since any political system that doesn’t believe in the

sovereignty of the individual will fall into catastrophic tyranny. This sovereignty is real enough, that we can't organize human relationship without believing this, especially in dealing with the ones we love (our family) that we deem as sovereign human being with consciousness. Peterson claims that nothing more real and meaningful than the idea individual sovereignty which mostly predicated not on rights but responsibility.

Peterson claims that the view that all human being has an equally inherent value, a divine spark before God, is the least obvious, improbable thing that human being ever formulated. He sees it as a miracle that when the least obvious concept when used to organize social relationship works wonder. For him, it's a miracle.

Your right as a sovereign individual, who has the capability to determine the destiny of the state itself doesn't exist as a concept, I don't think there's anything there that speaks about inherent value either. It is the least obvious concept that human being ever come up with. If you want a miracle for an idea, I can't think of one that's more unlikely than that [18].

4. Responsibility in Individual Sovereignty

The second conceptual problem of individual sovereignty is presented in Duffel, a problem I call "abberation problem" [2]. Duffel claims that today's conception of right, which in the same vein with liberal concept of natural rights has deviated from its medieval predecessors. Echoing Duffel that claims rights theory is sovereignty based, Duffel acknowledges the "central issue to contemporary debates about rights is the conception that rights-holder as a sovereign individual" [2; 3]. Hence, the theory of sovereignty is instrumental in an understanding of concepts of rights.

In deriving theories of sovereignty from the concept of sovereignty of the prince, Duffel begins with an account of historical change of ideas of rights and contrasting medieval concept of natural rights and its liberal counterpart. Later, he makes a comparison between that change with the change in history of ideas on the sovereignty of prince, and the analogy seems parallel. He reasons that a better understanding of individual sovereignty can be pursued by understanding the sovereignty of rulers.

In discussing the liberal conception of natural rights, Duffel presents its advocates such as Waldron, Lyons, Dworkin, Raz, Tuck, and Villey, and citing Turney he shows how they have deviated from pre-seventeenth-century theories of natural rights, and this deviation has been started by Hobbes and Rousseau.

The medieval version of natural rights sees it as based on natural law, a law consists of the fundamental principles that order the universe and shape human nature, akin to moral principles, and have its proponents such as Thomas Aquinas and Augustine [10]. Authors such as Tuck and Villey has claimed that natural right is not compatible with natural law, a claim refuted by Tierney with a counter claim that "the idea of natural rights derived from natural law can be found at every stage in the history of the doctrine" [2]

The medieval version of it is not rights as arbitrary will that reigned uncontrolled, but one with right reason as in the rational natural law. Citing Ockham, it is "not an assertion of naked will but a power conformed to reason", and referring to Gerson it (*ius* or law) is associated with *synderesis* which is "superior kind of reason, a capacity for moral discernment akin to our conscience" [2]. He went on:

“Other definitions of *ius* contained even more explicit references to the good. Rufinus, for example, wrote that ‘Natural *ius* is a certain force instilled in every human creature by nature to do good and avoid the opposite’. This meaning of *iura* persisted in most of the classical rights theories. According to Suarez ‘*ius* is called a moral power (*facultas*) which anyone has concerning his own property or something due to him’. Grotius defined *ius*, apart from its objective meanings, as ‘a moral quality of a person enabling one to have or do something justly’ [2].

So, in its classical sense, there exists an internal restriction to rights, not only a restriction due to rights of other people, but a general moral obligation. And this is not the idea of rights that we have nowadays, as Duffet puts it:

The restriction of each individual’s freedom is necessary because the kind of freedom that Kant envisaged was the private self-will of a person, the ability to do as we please. My suggestion is that this is the way we now commonly understand the idea of a right. To have a right is to be able to make independent decisions about the thing to which one has a right. This understanding is in agreement with the kind of conception of *ius* that Tierney finds in Hobbes, where the idea of rightness is excluded from the definition of *ius*. According to Tierney, this was an aberration (Hegel would probably agree). If this account of medieval natural rights theories turns out to be correct, the Hobbesian understanding of rights is a deviation from the medieval tradition; a deviation that Hegel saw growing popular from Rousseau onwards [2].

Hence, the aberration problem that I refer earlier. In discussion about sovereignty of rulers, Duffel argues that the important issue is the relationship between a ruler and law, whether a prince’s rule is limited by any ideas of justice, common good, natural law, necessity and the like [2]. He sees it as natural to expect the problems with natural rights doctrine in general to be reflected in the special case of rights of the princes, and from the princes to individuals. Quoting Pennington:

A prince who was ‘legibus solutus’, whose will was the source of all positive law, whose decrees abrogated any custom, who exercised ‘plenitudo potestatis’ and, occasionally, ‘potestas absoluta’, became a being who was no longer constrained by *vague notions* of cause, necessity, the public good, natural law, and reason [2].

I would argue that these vague notions have been becoming more vague in our generation due to this aberration problem, and Jordan Peterson has endeavored to make those notions as clear as possible. Noble notions such as: natural law, conscience, *ius*, *synderesis*, cause, necessity, public good, reason, etc; could be summed up in one word that Peterson is famous for: responsibility.

The concept of natural law warrants further elaboration. In its classical sense, natural law was the law, originating in nature or God, that governed every element in the universe and consequently provided the principles of right action for man. Universal and eternal, it is the opposite of local, mortal, positive law [10]. Aristotle is seen as the one that laid the framework for the development of natural-law doctrine:

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) held that what was “just by nature” was not always the same as what was “just by law,” that there was a natural justice valid everywhere with the same force and “not existing by people’s thinking this or that,” and that appeal could be made to it from positive law [27].

The reason why I need to emphasize the aspect of “nature” in the natural law theory is because Jordan Peterson always talks about responsibility in context of the ultimate reality of life, which are death, suffering, and the problem of evil. For Peterson, “the willingness to take on that responsibility is identical to the decision to live a meaningful life” [18]. Peterson endorses that “We must have something to set against the suffering that is intrinsic to Being”, and take responsibility for it, because “It’s there we find the meaning that justifies life and its inevitable suffering” [18]. For Peterson, the reality of pain and suffering has to do with the biblical doctrine

of the fall in a mysterious way: “Pain matters, more than matter matters. It is for this reason, I believe, that so many of the world’s traditions regard the suffering attendant upon existence as the irreducible truth of Being” [16].

The idea that life is suffering is a tenet, in one form or another, of every major religious doctrine, as we have already discussed. Buddhists state it directly. Christians illustrate it with the cross. Jews commemorate the suffering endured over centuries [16].

To my opinion, Peterson brings the “nature” in natural law a step further in acknowledging that: “Life is suffering. That’s clear. There is no more basic, irrefutable truth.” and “Pain and suffering define the world. Of that, there can be no doubt” [16]. The nature and reality of suffering makes the pursuit of meaning in life essential for making the life worth living. This very of life is what makes the insistence on rights unproductive, if not dangerous.

5. Conclusion

This paper could be seen as Duffel meets Peterson. The two conceptual problems with the concept of individual sovereignty that Duffel points out can be appreciated more by considering the role of faith and responsibility in its conception. The first problem, which is the theoretical problem is not one that can be solved with reason. Like, Duffel acknowledges, it is a problem within a very specific tradition, and as Peterson argues, the substructure underpinning it is not scientific or materialistic but metaphysical or religious. It is inherently a religious concept that has been secularized, and that particular religion is Judeo-Christian with its concept of the *Imago Dei*.

As Peterson often points out, the manifestation of individual sovereignty is a miracle. It is a concept so flawed theoretically, yet when operationalized it works wonders. A miracle indeed. It is the greatest gift of Judeo-Christian tradition to mankind. The blessings that it has brought to the world should be undebatable. It has suffered a lot of setback and misunderstanding, even the aberration that Duffel alludes to. It was even misunderstood and criticized not just by those in the East but even by institution like Church herself. In a world that’s increasingly ever more polarized politically, we need a more accurate picture of individual sovereignty that insists rights with rightness. Thus, I hope that the risk of this concept being misunderstood, not to mention rejected, could be reduced. Because the risk of losing individual sovereignty, as Peterson often points out, is really to our great peril.

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