

Individual Sovereignty

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Individual Sovereignty:

Reclaiming the Person in Modern Politics

By Tracy C. Coyle

"We must, however, acknowledge, as it seems to me, that man with all his noble qualities... still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin." — Charles Darwin

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"Genes hold culture on a leash. The leash

is very long, but it is not infinite."

—E.O. Wilson

Core Thesis

A just society is one in which law exists solely to preserve the equal sovereignty of individuals—restraining domination rather than directing behavior—and in which change is recognized as a natural condition of human life, not a threat to be domesticated.

This yields three axioms:

Rights are inherent and precede society.

Government exists to prevent domination, not to define the good.

Change is ontological; stasis is destructive.

Everything flows from these.

Part I – Foundations

1. The Person

Political philosophy begins with an assumption about what a human being is. Most systems begin in error by treating the person as something derivative: a subject of the state, a unit of labor, a bearer of granted rights, a node in a social system, or an expression of historical forces. Each of these frameworks reduces the individual to a function of something larger—society, economy, culture, or power.

My work begins from a different premise: the person is sovereign.

Sovereignty here is not a legal fiction. It is ontological. A person is a self-directing moral agent, possessed of will, imagination, and the capacity to choose. This is not a gift of society, and it is not conferred by government. It exists prior to any institution. It is what makes institutions possible.

Any stimulus can provoke a thought, but our free will determines what happens next. Do we keep the thought or dismiss it? Do we express it through action or not? These are our choices; this is free will in action. We can be coerced, threatened, or encouraged, but what happens after a thought arises is always a matter of choice.

This is not a moral ideal. It is a structural fact. Once a thought exists, it belongs to the individual in whom it arises. Only that person can decide whether it is held, dismissed, or expressed. No external will can substitute for that choice.

To say that a person always remains the author of their actions is not to say that they are ever justly burdened with the conditions under which those actions occur. Coercion can annihilate latitude without extinguishing authorship. The will remains, even when every path but one has been burned away. That is not exoneration of power. It is its final indictment.

It is the nature of thought itself that creates both ownership and responsibility. I cannot hold you responsible for my thoughts or actions. They are mine. I choose to express them. I bear their consequences. Likewise, you cannot hold me responsible for yours. You own your thoughts. You choose to express them. You bear what follows.

This non-substitutability of will is what sovereignty is. And it is structural, not performative. I can have a thought, even if it ends there, the structure for it still exists. It existed before the thought even began in our biological existence and remains as long as we do.

A being whose thoughts cannot be owned by another, whose actions cannot be chosen by another, and whose consequences cannot be borne by another is not merely autonomous. It

is sovereign.

Any system that claims authority over the will of such a being does not govern an object. It overrides a person.

An Assertion of Right rests on this fact. Rights do not arise from consensus. They are not granted by charters or constitutions. They are inherent in the nature of a person as a choosing being. Even in solitude, the individual possesses them fully—bounded only by capability, imagination, and resources.

The presence of others does not extinguish those rights. It introduces only one new condition: reciprocity.

The moment another person exists, sovereignty becomes relational. My freedom now encounters yours. My will meets its boundary not in law, but in your equal standing. This is not a reduction of rights; it is their clarification. Rights are not claims over others. They are boundaries between equals.

In the Rebuttal to Kirk, this is the point at which conservatism falters. Kirk treats society as a “spiritual corporation,” a moral organism into which individuals are born and by which they are shaped. The person becomes a participant in something prior and superior. But if society precedes the person, then the person is never fully free—only conditionally permitted. Moral order, tradition, and continuity become authorities in themselves.

This inversion is fatal. Society does not generate persons; persons generate society. Community is not an entity that grants standing. It is an emergent pattern of sovereign wills interacting over time.

A political philosophy that begins anywhere else must ultimately justify domination. If the individual is not sovereign, then something else must be—and whatever that is will claim authority over human lives. Whether it is “tradition,” “justice,” “the people,” “history,” or “progress,” the result is the same: the person becomes instrumental.

The person is not an instrument.

The individual is the irreducible unit of moral standing. Every system that denies this—whether in the name of order, equity, efficiency, or virtue—must eventually treat people as means. That is not a flaw in execution. It is a flaw in premise.