One's Place in the Sun:
Gender, Sovereignty, and Agency

Emmanuel Levinas frequently invokes a passage from Pascal to critique the glorification

of sovereignty: "'This is my place is the sun.' That is how the usurpation of the whole world

began" (§64). This image also resonates with Foucault's rather different critique of sovereignty

as an ideal. But neither Levinas nor Foucault provide a very detailed alternative account of

human agency. My suggestion in this paper is that the efforts of recent feminist ethicists to

reconceive autonomy can be linked to the Levinasian and Foucauldian critiques, in order to

radically undermine not only the ideal of sovereignty itself but the conceptual framework that

sustains it.

In philosophical terms, sovereignty is power over oneself, the ability to govern one's own

beliefs, actions, and values. This idea of sovereignty is grounded in the claim that the

intellectually, politically, and morally mature human being is an individual who is rational,

self-conscious, and self-determining – where reason and self-determination imply some degree of

freedom over and against emotions, impulses, desires, one's own body, social habits and

customs, the influences of history, and in general all that which is merely given to us rather than

chosen by us. But we should keep in mind that the distinction between what is given and what

is chosen, the internal and the external, is itself constructed by the ideal.

Additionally, in liberal theory this ideal self has been assumed, abstractly, to be at least

potentially universal – that every human being has the capacity to live out this image of what it

means to be a mature person, and this universality guarantees a kind of formal equality – for

example, to the extent that we are all human, we all are protected by the same rights or deserve to

be considered as moral or political agents.   We can see the idea of sovereignty serving as the foundation of Hobbes' political thought, Locke's account of natural rights, Descartes' epistemological method, Kant's ethics, and Sartre's theory of freedom.   By no means do I want to unjustly conflate the differences among these various philosophical and non-philosophical accounts of the self. But I do want to sketch out where those visions overlap and reinforce each other, to the point that for many people and institutions this idea of the sovereign self seems like the only plausible conception of the human person.

Despite the profound commitments of our language, political arrangements, economic structures, moral systems, and psychological standards of normality to the concept of sovereignty, I will suggest that the ethical and political consequences of this understanding of the self should lead us to question its reign.   In brief, those problems stem from the fact within this ideal the world is divided up in sovereign subjects and passive objects, and this creates anxiety about proving we sit on the side of free agents, in such a way that we deny the physical and social conditions of our existence, and it also leads to judging some human beings as failing to achieve the status of sovereign subjects.   This polarity leaves us with little room for relating to others in morally or politically just ways, or for recognizing and dealing productively with the frequent blurring between self-determination and other-determination.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault famously describes the process by which the modern subject, the modern self, becomes what it is through a process that he elsewhere calls subjectivation.   We mature into subjects, agents, citizens, free and responsible beings by being subject*ed* to various forms of discipline.   We can only achieve positions of authority – that is, the status of being a subject – by being subjected to certain forms of discipline: by acting in ways

that count as normal, by articulating beliefs that largely agree with those of others around us, by valuing what our society values, by believing what our society believes is true. Otherwise, we risk being labeled as insane, unintelligible, or evil.

Within the framework of modern thought, this is a peculiar idea: that the one who internalizes social norms is the one who is perceived as an authoritative and autonomous agent. But this is the paradox with which modernity leaves us, as Foucault claims in *The Order of Things*. The modern idea of sovereignty exists as part of a double, over and against the thought of the non-sovereign being, the object determined by physical laws and capable of being observed, known, and managed: "man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator" (OT 312). The ideal of the human sciences – to turn the gaze of objective observation upon human societies and human individuals – entails that duality of human beings as both active, determining, knowing subjects, and passive, determined, known objects.

In the quote from Pascal, then, finding one's place in the sun can be read in two ways – first, as being able to observe all of reality, and secondly, as being subject to disciplinary regulation – to being examined, known, judged in comparison to others. We can illustrate this in terms of Bentham's Panopticon: in the first sense, we act as guards in the Panopticon. In the second sense, having a place in the sun would be the equivalent of having a cell in the prison known as the Panopticon – in which the prisoners are constantly under the burden of being visible, and so come to rehabilitate themselves. But the paradox is that both roles – of guard and prisoner – are symbiotically bound together. The problem with this polarity is that we misunderstand the relationship between freedom and determinism, in ourselves and others, and

therefore do not pay enough critical attention to the ways in which we are shaped by our culture and our history.

Although Emmanuel Levinas' thought generally has a very different trajectory and methodology, he raises a related set of problems with the ideal of sovereignty – this time, more directly ethical implications. For Levinas, the sovereign self has the characteristic activity of usurping the whole world by treating it as a thing, or a series of things, to be possessed – or at least possessed by thought. The conscious, knowing self reduces the world to what is intelligible, what can be captured in an idea. This positions the knower as an active subject who imposes his or her will upon the world but is not fundamentally destabilized by anything that might be encountered there (OB 99). Consciousness is directed out towards objects but ultimately confirms the centrality and dominance of the ego, a gravitational force that intellectually consumes and digests the world around it. That is Levinas' worry about the usurpation of the world: establishing one's place in the sun has the effect of turning the rest of the world into objects for me.

But ethics, for Levinas, is precisely the opposite of this narcissism. To be responsible is to respond, and in that moment not to first and foremost attend to who I am and what my obligations are, but instead to feel compelled by another's need. That complex passivity – the sense of being compelled to respond – is for Levinas the primordial ground of ethics. When we encounter another person's face, we encounter a demand that is not placed on us by mere objects or ideas. We are exposed to a face, made vulnerable by its vulnerability, drawn into responsibility and decentered by this exposure.

In this way the ethical becomes a critique of my freedom, the freedom I have to master

the world around me through knowledge or to act as I please.   This conception of ethics

deliberately inverts a dominant tradition in ethics, which first establishes the freedom of the

subject, and only then attributes to that subject moral responsibility.   Ethics even becomes a

challenge to the sense in which I am master of myself.   In his later works, Levinas refers to this

destabilization of the sovereignty as a trauma or a "denucleation" – a wound in the boundaries of

the self, so that "the subject is . . . not at home with itself" (OB 49).   We are forced out of the

self-centeredness of sovereignty through our ethical response to others.

Levinas claims, against Heidegger, that the primary philosophical question should not be

"what is Being?" but "what right do I have to be?"   At some point we confront that question,

perhaps particularly at moments when we realize that our lives and the comforts within it depend

on historical or contemporary forms of exploitation and oppression.   In a 1985 interview,

Levinas describes this more concrete dimension of the problem of usurpation:

> My place in being, the *Da-* of my *Dasein* – isn't it already usurpation, already violence
> with respect to the other?   A preoccupation that has nothing ethereal, nothing abstract
> about it. The press speaks to us of the Third World, and we are quite comfortable here;
> we're sure of our daily meals.   At whose cost, we may wonder. (VF179)

Much in our culture trains us *not* to pay attention to the question "what right do I have to be?"

and the emphasis on individual sovereignty is part of that training – the belief that the world is

fundamentally open to our comprehension and control, and that our position as consumers of the

resources of that world is unquestionable.

Levinas returns repeatedly to the idea that the fact that human beings live in time limits

sovereignty.   Pascal's image emphasizes establishing one's *place* in the sun, pretending that all

beings can be called simultaneously before one's view, as if the knowing subject were not

immersed in and affected by the passing of time.

> We have been accustomed to reason in the name of the freedom of the ego – as though I had witnessed the creation of the world, and as though I could only have been in charge of a world that would have issued out of my free will. . . . But the subjectivity of the subject come late into a world which has not issued from his projects does not consist in projecting, or in treating this world as one's project. This 'lateness' is not insignificant. (OB 122)

This passage plays on the contrast being having projects and being subjected: are we the ones who throw, who create the world, or are we instead the ones thrown out into a world that not only already exists but to which we are subjected? Time challenges the presumption of the sovereign self, both by limiting its synchronic, synthesizing surveillance and by disturbing its self-mastery. We come too late to be self-created, or to patrol the boundaries of our self with all due vigilance.

If we accept that there are only two kinds of beings in the universe – free, sovereign ones and unfree, determined ones – then Levinas' insistence on the significance of time may lead us to believe that we are *only* products of our society and its particular history, customs, and presuppositions. But this is not what Levinas means:

> To say that the person begins in freedom, that freedom is the first causality and that the first cause is nobody, is to close one's eyes to that secret of the ego, to that relation to the past which amounts neither to placing oneself at the beginning to accept this past consciously nor to being merely the result of the past. (TT 49)

Neither pole in this dichotomy accurately describes our position as human beings: we are partial creators and partial creatures, and the two states are intermingled at any given point. For Levinas, the ideal of sovereignty is a misunderstanding of ourselves, and a misunderstanding that results in moral violence towards others by denying the force of responsibility to others.

The practical implications of the idealization of sovereignty have played out with particular significance in the lives of women, and for this reason recent feminist theory has

focused on generating an alternative understanding of autonomy.   For Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau (among others), the sovereign self was unquestionably male – women were not capable of self-determination and thus unfit to participate in the public sphere or be recognized as citizens.   The last hundred and fifty years have seen the slow erosion of that prejudice, and we have recently pretended that when Locke spoke of the rights of man or when Jefferson claimed that "all men are created equal" that they really meant men and women. But to make that quick translation is to believe ourselves more sovereign than we are – that is, able to transcend the history of thinking about the proper places of men and women.

Much of the justification for excluding women from the public sphere has taken the form of pointing to women's reproductive role, and asserting that they naturally were more tied to their bodies (rather than their minds), more suited for nurturing and caring for others, and more submissive, more passive, weaker, more vulnerable, more in need of protection and guidance. That is, femininity symbolizes all those elements of human life that threaten the sovereign power of the liberal self.   In psychoanalytic terms, women and specifically mothers represent the mute and irrational presence of the given – a power the child depends upon and yet must struggle to separate from in order to reach maturity (Freud 58ff.).

Emphasizing the sovereignty of the self repeats this separation at a theoretical level by denying the concrete reality of dependence and interaction that is the primary experience of human infants and children.   So Hobbes' image of human beings growing like mushrooms from the ground in the state of nature achieves in intellectual terms a denial of the mother's influence. Speaking of modern political and moral theory, Seyla Benhabib comments, "this is a strange world: it is one in which individuals are grown up before they have been born; in which boys are

men before they have been children; a world where neither mother, nor sister, nor wife exist" (157). This ideal misrepresents the way in which moral judgment, intellectual maturity, and psychological normalcy could not possibly be achieved in the absence of intimate relationships with others.[1]

This is the idea that leads Annette Baier to describe human beings as "second persons," who depend on relations with others for selfhood: "A person, perhaps, is best seen as one who was long enough dependent upon other persons to acquire the essential arts of personhood. Persons are essentially *second* persons, who grow up with other persons" (84). Without being addressed by others – held, spoken to, sung to, read to, played with, comforted, corrected – we would not *be* persons. That work of caring for children can of course be performed either by women or men, but rejecting the importance of the parent-child relationship, as a precondition of maturity, has historically meant rejecting the importance of the mother's relation to the child – or being profoundly suspicious of it. Descartes described infancy as a state in which our intellectual immaturity sets us up for prejudice and error – when we are "governed by our desires and preceptors" (*Discourse on Method* VI, 13). Seeing the state of childhood as a liability, rather than an important precondition for maturity, reveals a great deal about the anxieties that are created by the ideal of the sovereign self.

As women occupy the symbolic position of that-which-is-to-be-transcended, they are culturally excluded from the possibility of achieving full sovereignty. But they simultaneously function as the necessary precondition and contrast case for sovereign subjects, as Luce Irigaray's

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[1] Indeed, in comparison with other animals, human beings require a remarkably long period to become physically mature. But the length of this immature or developmental period makes possible the more complex cognitive and linguistic behavior characteristic of the human species,

critical readings of the history of philosophy and psychoanalysis attest.[2] The subordination of women is a required screen onto which embodiment, irrationality, and emotional entanglement with others can be projected. And yet this dependence upon the non-sovereign, upon the given in its givenness, must be renounced: "Every utterance, every statement, will thus be developed and affirmed by covering over the fact that being's unseverable relation to mother-matter has been buried" (162). Buried, but not severed; that burial has profound implications how women continue to function, psychologically and politically. All of this should lead us to try to undermine the entire framework that on the one hand exalts the idea of sovereignty and on the other constructs the category of the non-sovereign – or, to use Foucault's terms – the delinquent.

However, if the ideal of sovereignty is rejected, we are left with the question of whether autonomous thought and action can be preserved. As Lorraine Code claims, it is only under the conditions of "autonomy-obsession" that "self-reliance and reliance on other people are constructed as mutually exclusive and the achievement of self-reliance is thought to require a complete repudiation of interdependence" (73-74). Feminist ethicists have for the last few decades worked on different models of how to integrate the very real need for some measure of self-determination with the recognition of how the self exists as a self-in-relation, or a second person. In societies in which women's work is devalued, in which women's access to education or adequate healthcare is restricted, in which women are trained not to speak their minds or to take positions of authority, in which women are subject to normalized forms of violence (and, as

and which is glorified as part of moral and political theories of sovereignty (Baier 84).

[2] In emphasizing the symbolic position that women hold in the glorification of sovereignty, I am not endorsing Sara Ruddick's claim that "maternal thinking" serve as a beginning point for moral deliberation. Revising our conception of the self, however, will have profound implications for how we understand the institution and practice of mothering.

far as I'm aware, women are subject to at least some of these conditions in every society), women need to be able to confront those norms both intellectually and practically.

Particularly in women's lives, there are very real dangers in giving up the glorification of individual self-determination, and instead emphasizing the moral and social importance of relationships in human lives. The very name "second persons" might give rise to these concerns: before we can establish our own identity, we are identified by being addressed by another. As second persons, the borders to ourselves are inherently permeable – we are first and foremost social selves. We find ourselves immersed in a particular situation, having been conditioned and constituted by concepts and norms we often cannot see clearly, much less choose or regulate.

The form of autonomy that remains consistent with this conception of the self is what Marilyn Friedman has termed "procedural autonomy," as opposed to "substantive autonomy." Where substantive autonomy means individual transcendence of or isolation from external influences, procedural autonomy is the capacity for critical reflection, without being coerced or manipulated by others (103). This process of trying to understand oneself then has consequences for how one lives and defines oneself. That critical reflection necessarily happens in a social context, over time, in an ongoing dialogue with the beliefs, behaviors, and ideals of others. And while it may require some distance from one's formative relationships – one's parents, teachers, friends – it certainly does not require a radical state of intellectual isolation. Of course, the question of what constitutes coercion and manipulation remains, and Friedman suggests that the ongoing process of defining oneself will have implications for what is perceived as external coercion or manipulation, and what is not.

One of the consequences of seeing ourselves as second persons is that we cannot claim supposedly unmarked or universal positions – as rational knowers or objective judges.   Our perceptions, beliefs, values, and behaviors will be shaped by our necessarily partial experiences: our personal history, our embodied location in the world, and our relations with others.   To be a "second person" is to experience oneself neither in the godlike position of observing or even recreating the world, nor in the dehumanized position of lacking any ability to observe, name, or reshape the world and oneself within it.   To be a "second person" means focusing not on one's own place in the sun, but one's place in relation to other people, within a historical tradition, within a natural environment, as part of an interlocking set of connections and influences.   In sum, it means living out a kind of finite freedom.

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