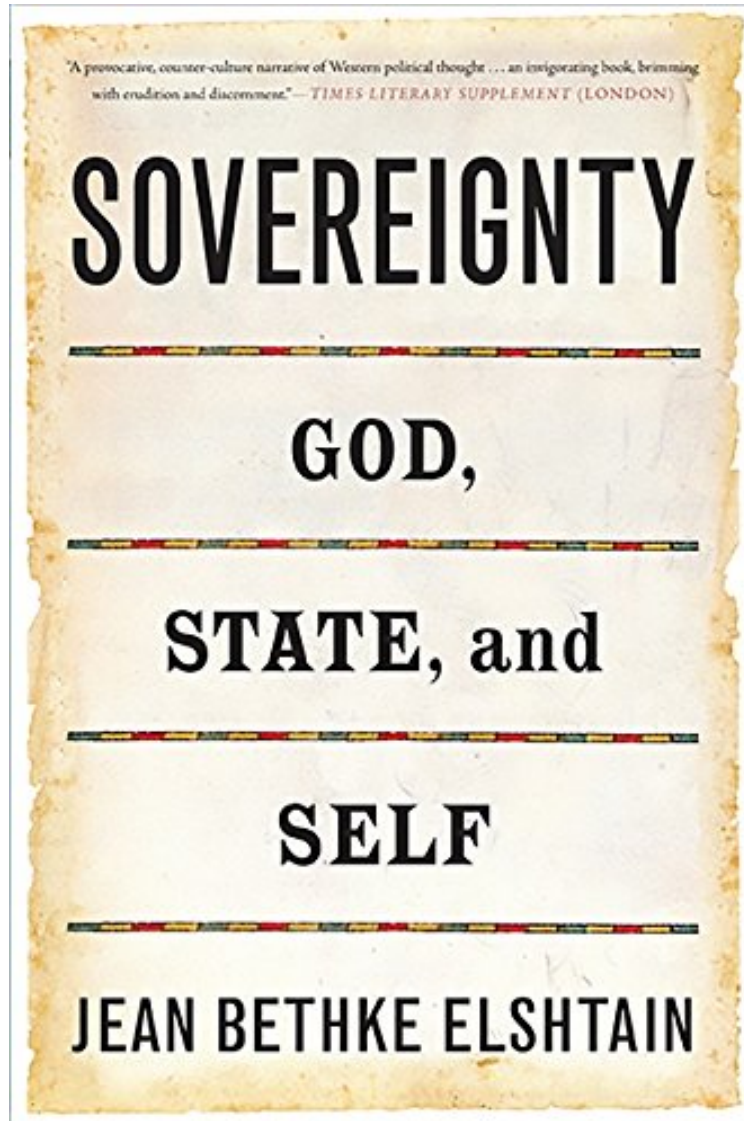


(Free pdf) Sovereignty: God, State, and Self

Sovereignty: God, State, and Self

Jean Bethke Elshtain

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Jean Bethke Elshtain : Sovereignty: God, State, and Self before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Sovereignty: God, State, and Self:

16 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Broad Subject, Narrow BookBy William RheaApplause to Jean Belthke Elshtain for taking on such a wide-ranging, cross-disciplinary topic and in the midst of it rewriting the story of political thought. One can see all the threads from her previous works coming together in this book, from war to feminism, theology to the private/public dichotomy. This was a book that needed to be written.Her arguments are largely cogent, and offhand I cannot think of a one with which I can terribly disagree. For a work of nonfiction, the

imagery is well-constructed- not surprisingly so, for her love of literature shows frequently in these pages. Consider these lines on the French Revolution: "One might say that the sovereigntism of Rousseau, with its sacralization of politics, demands human sacrifice. If ancient peoples sacrificed goats, the French Revolution sacrificed humans to propitiate the revolutionary gods" (137). Her appeal to the Augustinian tradition of personalism is, in my estimate, the best course for countering the autonomous individualism rampant in even the best of modern thinkers. What the book lacks, unfortunately, is sufficient length. Another reviewer commented that Elshtain does not sufficiently explain the connection between late medieval nominalism and the supremacy of will within the Godhead. For the record, the connection comes about because as nominalism rejected metaphysical realism and essentialism as the twin bases for grounding the common reality of imminent realities, ideas of absolute (inherent) justice tended to collapse. At the same time, the Trinity- a single essence or being or substance existing as three persons- shifted away from that traditional definition, wherein the persons of the Trinity were less hypostatic identities manifesting a single substance (the nominalist: what substance?) than three manifestations of one entity. The inherent nature of justice vanished from the late medieval mind precisely when the plurality and personhood of the Godhead lost its former vigor- thus the monistic, willing sovereign God of Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and eventually Luther and Calvin. Alas, this connection is assumed on the part of the reader. Indeed, the whole debate surrounding the problem of universals that lies at the root of the realist-nominalist split goes without a mention; and conceptualism, a third solution to the problem pioneered by Peter Abelard and back in force (in a way) with Immanuel Kant (hardly an insignificant aspect of his transcendent self Elshtain derides) isn't referenced at all. This is but one example. Personally, I found the whole section on divine sovereignty poorly explained and all-too-brief. And while I have no complaints on the factuality or clarity of the chapters on political sovereignty, I found these too brief as well and severely lacking in the non-intellectual history surrounding the rise of political sovereignty. The Peace of Westphalia is mentioned on but two pages. As a typographical note, the author should fire her editor. The book is riddled with typos- hardly a page went by without finding one. Moreover, sentences are poorly constructed with alarming frequency- dangling modifier here, split infinitives there, run-on sentences on the one hand and sentence-fragments on the other. I had to read several passages three times over, so much so that it took me a full week to read it cover to cover- something that should not have taken so long in a book concerning which I have complained of insufferable briefness. That said, these negatives are warnings for the reader, not discouragements. The absence of medieval political thought in the modern teaching of the field is a great loss, and Jean Elshtain has done us all a great service with its publication. Thread of sovereignty as a holistic concept running from William of Ockham to Thomas Hobbes to Immanuel Kant- a thread, more amazingly, that runs the same course from theology through politics through anthropology- can no longer be ignored with the publication of this important book.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A Sweeping History of a Great Concept By Christopher D. Hampson A great book from a great lecture series, and a wonderful introduction to the world of political theology and political philosophy. In her introduction, Jean Bethke Elshtain admits her surprise at being invited to give the Gifford Lecture Series - while displaying genuine happiness at the opportunity it affords to undertake something bold, something sweeping, something dramatic. The result is this book, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self*. In its pages, Elshtain offers a few master theses: that theological and theoretical conceptions of the nature of sovereignty have had a determining effect on the political landscape of the West; that the locus of sovereignty in the Western legal tradition has shifted perceptively from God to the State to the Self; and that Self-Sovereignty is ultimately problematic. Some minor theses were surprising to me. Elshtain notes, for example, that the "divine right of kings" was an early modern development that attempted to tell a story of its own history in the medieval world, but this promotional attempt is ultimately false to what preceded it. In fact, the medieval period was less totalitarian than the early modern period. Intriguing. A few critiques: First, I wish Elshtain had been a little deliberate in demonstrating that the causal relationship between theology and politics runs the way she claims it does. How do we know that it wasn't the other way round, politics affecting theology? Second, I notice that the shift from State to Self is handled a little differently than the shift from God to State. In the former instance, Elshtain emphasizes literature and culture, whereas in the latter instance, she seems to emphasize politics and law. Why the difference? Perhaps it is because we have not fully transitioned, and so state sovereignty is still politically and legally in force. In any case, a little more explanation from the Professor on this point would be appreciated. In brief, this is a wonderful introduction to political theology and political philosophy. You can hear the tenor of the lectures coming through in the prose, and it makes for a great read. Prepare to be inspired to read Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, Nietzsche, de Beauvoir, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and so on. This book is not an end, but a beginning. Jean Bethke Elshtain is particularly enthusiastic about Albert Camus, so brush up on your French, in addition to a couple of more recent voices: Hannah Arendt and Charles Taylor, to whom she is indebted for the invaluable term "incarnation." Personally, I very much appreciated how seriously Jean Bethke Elshtain takes literature, working authors normally associated with the literary world, such as Dante, Melville, or Hawthorne, into her history of sovereignty. I also appreciated a new perspective on Augustine from a scholar who, despite not being a scholar of Augustine, is nonetheless a thoughtful and well-read fan. Finally, in Elshtain's quest to problematize self-sovereignty, I recognized a friend of mine. In conversation with this individual, I had a certain intuition that the philosophy he was

representing was problematic, but had a hard time explaining exactly why. Jean Bethke Elshtain gave me the words to say it, and it is this, more than anything, that helps me feel that this book cleaves to reality in a way that guarantees its usefulness to the general reader. As she puts it, "In the world of hard self-sovereignty, the self stands alone, sans any mutually constitutive relationship to the world. This does not mean that hard sovereign selves refuse to marry or shun friends. No; rather, the point is that such relationships are seen as incidental to the self, not essential definitive of one's identity. The messiness, incompleteness, paradox, and shortcomings of the world are treated with a kind of scorn. The self is proud, characterized by superbia. The self lives in a world shorn of transcendence. There is only an empty sky. What occupies the vertical site of transcendence? The self, outside, above the world, a place where one rises above the 'herd' and seizes one's projects with nary a backward glance" (204).²⁹ of 30 people found the following review helpful. Worth the Effort By G. D. Geiss This work will be valuable if you have any desire to understand (if I may paraphrase a Jamesian title) the varieties of sovereign experience. Tracing the origins of sovereignty back to the "birth", if you will, of the nation-state in the late Middle Ages, Professor Elshtain aptly demonstrates how misguided it is to label this period "The Dark Ages". In as much as this time was (as she puts it) "God drenched", with its unquestioned interweaving of the religious and the political on a much broader framework than prevails today in the form of the decaying Holy Roman Empire and the Catholic Papacy at the head of a "world-wide" Christian community, all such tracing must begin with theological notions of Divine Sovereignty. Interestingly, one finds here diversity of opinion and approach, not the staid uniformity that is often the harbinger of current views on this Age generally and Catholic theology specifically. Initially there arose an image of God as a "bound" (the author's word) sovereign. Mighty? Yes, but operating only within the "bounds" of His own Creation, thus avoiding arbitrariness and allowing access by our limited human intelligence and understanding. This is a view of Divine Sovereignty that the author ascribes to the works and thoughts of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. [As a personal aside, I am not sure how our educational system can claim "educated" graduates while avoiding (as I believe it does) virtually all confrontation of these two towering intellects.] As I understand it, this is a sovereign concept based on authority, legitimized and in fact delimited by Creation itself. It is a sovereignty of mutuality and reason and of "natural" law discernible by and accessible to all- believers and unbelievers alike. Thus, even if one denies a Creator and ascribes the universe to some great accident precipitating the big bang, one could still appreciate the balance and mutuality of a sovereignty of this sort as applied to the "state". This, of course, is a far cry from where we are (mostly) today. This book traces from theorist and thinker to theorist and thinker the shift from this "bound" version of sovereignty to one of will, arbitrary and unfettered; a sovereignty of power writ absolute, able to undo all or any part of creation at any time- to run time backwards, remake lost virginity, anything at all by simply willing it so. Such power is likely accessible only by "revelation", not by reason. As the vision of God's sovereignty morphed, so too that of the state until we arrived at the absolute monarch and his collectivist successors: the French Revolution's Committee of Public Safety, Communism, and National Socialism. It is a fascinating ride- rather like watching a (very) slow motion train wreck. One of the things I think could have been done better (or perhaps just more completely) was to explain the necessity of the conclusion that God's sovereignty was "unbound" will that is ascribed to nominalism generally and Thomas Ockham specifically. I don't think it's entirely clear why the fragmenting, abstract denying nominalist ideas necessarily lead to absolute Divine Will as that seems, in some ways anyway, more abstract than the "bound" authority version. I see the revelatory argument, but am not (probably due to my own ignorance) sure that it's a necessary part of the nominalist credo. As she moves into more modern times, Professor Elshtain has, in my view, more difficulty in assessing the limited and/or shared sovereignty concepts of the English system or American Constitutionalism. Again, I'm not so sure she's adequately assessed the theoretical foundation of current democratic sovereignty as it relates to legitimacy, authority, and interlocking webs of rights AND duties held jointly and severally at the individual and local levels. Still, she asks (rightfully) some tough questions about the source of those "rights and duties", suggesting that issues of morality, will, power, and "natural" law must still arise and that failure to deal satisfactorily with them by acknowledging the interlocking, mutually dependant and arising moral claims can lead down frightening roads indeed. As she progresses into a discussion of "self sovereignty", I must confess a certain reservation and even antipathy toward Professor Elshtain's less than even-handed accounts of folks like Descartes, Emerson, and Nietzsche. I confess that the last of these is versus my own idiosyncratic reading of the mercurial, probably lunatic level genius of Herr Nietzsche who's refusal to be clear when he could, instead, be dramatic or literarily entertaining as well as his dogmatic insistence on inconsistency allows considerable variation in assessments. Still, her's is one of the most sensationalized and essentially propagandistic readings I've seen put forward by an otherwise seemingly sensible observer. I don't know if this can be explained as her reaction to Nietzsche's vitriolic (he's seldom anything else) condemnation of Christianity and the Christian God, but it seems so unbalanced as to warrant skepticism about any conclusions she draws concerning his views on the self as sovereign, a position to which, as a dyed in the wool determinist, I'm not sure he would actually admit. Concerning such theories of self sovereignty as Professor Elshtain discusses, one can only say, that regardless of whether you accept the Augustinian view of the "Fall" from grace and Eden as their origin, still, humans are limited creatures. We are very finite beings with finite life-spans, finite brains (which evolved in finite survival modes), finite imaginations, and finite capacities to understand

ourselves and each other. The abrogation of the moral obligation to recognize this and account for it in our actions, our organizations, and our lives generally is unsupportable. Actions based on that abrogation represent a tendency toward usurpations of authority that can never be legitimized and attempts to do so need, by all who recognize in the universe something greater than ourselves, a whole greater than the mere sum of its parts, to be resisted. You may not enjoy all of this book, but the account it renders of its main topic and the questions raised thereby should be carefully considered by all with a claim to a humanist bone in their body, whether religiously mediated or not. It's worth the effort.

In this seminal work in the fields of political history and political theory, Jean Bethke Elshtain shows how the powerful notion of sovereignty—complete independence and self-government—has irrevocably sculpted contemporary notions of God, state and self. Elshtain examines the conceptual underpinnings of sovereignty, considering the early modern ideas of God that formed the basis for the modern paradigm of the sovereign state, and making the unprecedented claim that political theories of state sovereignty fuel contemporary understandings of sovereignty of the self—arguing, in other words, that when we understand why we have the politics we have, we will understand what makes humans themselves tick. The implications of Elshtain's monumental thesis go as far as to suggest that self-sovereignty, which understands the self to be an independent, self-sufficient entity, undermines the bedrock on which human communities are fundamentally sustained. In thoughtful, provocative prose, Elshtain explores the connections between our political and ethical convictions, changing forever the way we understand the notion of sovereignty.

From Booklist *Starred * Dismissed by most political theorists as a mere encumbrance, theology serves Elshtain well in this historical analysis of the two incarnations of sovereignty that have forged the modern world: the nation-state and the individual self. Originally delivered as the Gifford Lectures of 2005/06, Elshtain's insightful investigation explains how political thinkers such as Machiavelli and Hobbes first endowed the nation-state with absolute sovereignty over society by politicizing the innovative theology of nominalist philosophers such as William of Ockham, who elevated God's sovereign will above His discernible reason. Readers thus confront the perilous political dynamics in a nation-state as powerful and as capricious as Ockham's God. Elshtain traces the lethal consequences of this modern theopolitics in the bloody atrocities of the French Revolutionaries, the Nazis, and the Soviet Communists. Inevitably, the deified modern state fractured into millions of divinized modern selves, each intent on establishing and defending its own godlike sovereignty. Champions of modern selfhood celebrate the unprecedented autonomy of the liberated individual; Elshtain, however, warns that a self that claims its godhood by severing restraints imposed by ancestors, religious orthodoxy, and community will ultimately destroy the cultural ecology necessary to a meaningful life. An illuminating though sobering new perspective on the conjunction between religion and politics. --Bryce Christensen

About the Author Jean Bethke Elshtain is the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Professor of Social and Political Ethics at The University of Chicago. She is the author of over four hundred essays in scholarly journals and journals of civic opinion, and some one hundred and seventy five book reviews, and was a contributing editor at The New Republic. Among her books are *Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy* (Basic, 2001), *Just War Against Terror* (Basic, 2003) and *Democracy on Trial* (Basic, 1995). She lives in Nashville, Tennessee and Chicago, Illinois.