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What is Sovereignty?

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The notion of sovereignty is old and continues to play a role in politics. But it is a complex notion, and it is not clear how best to understand it. A commonplace distinction is often made between “internal” and “external” sovereignty, the first pertaining to the governance of a state, the second to a state’s independence from other states. It is said that states are or ought to be the ultimate authorities internally while being independent of the authority of other states. The notion of external sovereignty figures centrally in international relations and associated areas of government and law. But the relation between the two and indeed the concept unifying them are not always clear. Many questions in politics and law turn on how we understand the concept. The rights of states or international agents to intervene in the “internal” affairs of a state may depend on how we conceptualize the central notion of sovereign authority. And the autonomy of peoples, such as American Indian tribes, or the powers of branches of government may also be affected by our understanding of the notion.

I propose an analysis of the concept: something – the monarch-in-Parliament, the state, the nation, the People – has sovereignty insofar as it is the ultimate source of authority within a realm. I explicate this understanding and show how the “internal” and “external” conceptions are related. I then discuss what is problematic about the concept and how it is not easy to determine who or what might possess it. I suggest that it may be that no one or nothing is in fact sovereign, that nothing has all of the authority that makes up sovereignty. This sceptical position will have implications for the justice of intervention as well as for controversies about the authority of different branches of government.