

The Asymmetric Burden of Power Principle

Abstract

This paper articulates a moral constraint long practiced intuitively but rarely formalized: as power increases, the ethical tolerance for error decreases. Identical actions do not carry identical moral weight when performed by actors with vastly different capacities to cause irreversible harm.

1. The Core Principle

Moral burden scales with consequence, not merely intent. A person with minimal power can commit a wrong that remains limited in scope, while a person with authority can cause systemic damage through minor lapses. Therefore, power asymmetry necessitates moral asymmetry.

2. The Judge and the Child

A child who kicks someone causes limited harm and is corrected. A judge who speaks a sentence can remove decades of freedom with words alone. Society already recognizes this asymmetry, demanding sobriety and restraint from judges precisely because of their authority.

3. Dreams vs Actions

Internal mental events such as dreams lack agency and consequence and therefore carry minimal culpability. Real-world actions under conscious authority carry maximal moral weight due to their impact on others.

4. Psychological Dimension (Prey-Mode)

Power induces prey-mode responses in those subject to it: fear, compliance, and narrowed cognition. This corrupts consent and truth flow, increasing the ethical responsibility of the power-holder.

5. Applications

This principle applies to judges, doctors, generals, executives, and AI systems. In each case, authority magnifies error and demands stricter safeguards.

6. Conclusion

The Asymmetric Burden of Power Principle does not demonize authority. It disciplines it. Moral permission shrinks as power grows, not because power is evil, but because its errors scale.

7. Scriptural Convergence: Power and Sobriety

Long before modern ethics or neuroscience, moral law already recognized the asymmetry of power. Proverbs 31 draws a sharp distinction between rulers and the afflicted: "It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine... Give strong drink to the one who is perishing, and wine to those in bitter distress." The rule is not about pleasure or punishment, but about judgment. Impairment is tolerated where harm radius is small and forbidden where authority multiplies consequences. This scriptural insight independently corroborates the Asymmetric Burden of Power Principle.