

# Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely

## 1. Introduction:

Power itself does not corrupt; rather, absolute power leads to corruption.

## 2. Power itself does not corrupt:

2.1. Power is a neutral tool; its ethical outcomes depend on the character of the individual

2.2. Power does not inherently corrupt; ethical self-restraint determines its exercise

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### Validation from history

3.1. Had Caligula not acquired absolute power, his personal whims could not have translated into systemic cruelty

3.2. Had Ferdinand Marcos not consolidated absolute power, suppression of dissent could not have been institutionalized

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3.4. Had IVAN IV not held absolute power, mass executions and oppression could have not occurred

4. Societal Validation of the fact that absolute power leads to absolute corruption:

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### Essay

Once a ruler was given a crown and a mirror. The crown resembled power, while mirror resembled accountability. However, after some time, the mirror got broken into pieces. Before this incident, ruler ruled efficiently and honestly. However, after this, the crown grew heavier and he started misusing his power to achieve the personal interests. His aim was no longer to serve the people, but himself. This fable demonstrates Lord Acton's saying, 'Absolute power corrupts absolutely'. There is no doubt that Acton said, 'power corrupts', but it is not true. Power itself is a neutral tool, it depends on the one who exercises it ~~whether~~ he how he uses it. However, from the despotic kings of the Roman Empire to twentieth-century Hitler, all have shown it clearly that whenever someone got absolute power, power got corrupted. Moreover, the contemporary society also validates this notion where parents and teachers exercise their

absolute power over their subordinates. Apart from these, literature and Psychology also provides the proof that absolute power leads to absolute corruption. So, one can say that power itself does not corrupt; rather, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

To begin with, power itself does not corrupt, as power is a neutral tool. The ethical outcome of power depends on the character of the individual who exercises it. For example, Ali ibn Talib (RA) had ruled after the turbulent times with fairness, justice, and honesty. If he wanted, he could have used his power to suppress non-Muslims or for his personal gains. However, he used his power for the betterment of people, not himself. This example illustrates that if a ruler has a good character and fear of accountability, then power can never corrupt. So, it would be wrong to say that power corrupts.

Similarly, power does not inherently corrupt individuals, it is the ethical self-restraints that determine its exercise. Moreover, along ethical self-restraint, institutional

Restraints also prevent power from being corrupted. For instance, George Washington voluntarily relinquished power. Had Washington wanted, he could have ruled for another term too, but he avoided accumulation of power because of self-imposed and constitutional restraints. This example depicts that along with strong character, if there are some institutional barriers preventing absolute power, power can never corrupt.

However, when individuals are given a crown without a mirror, or when mirror breaks down, then the outcome will be corruption - absolute corruption. History is full of examples where absolute power corrupted absolutely.

**Caligula**, the most infamous historical ruler, had absolute power. He had control over laws, taxes, and even life and death of individuals. Because of absolute power, he became sadistic and irrational. This is shown by his absurd act of declaring his horse as a counsil. Had Caligula not acquired absolute power, his personal whims could not have translated into systemic cruelty. This example of Caligula demonstrates <sup>that</sup> how when individuals get absolute power, they begin to misuse it for personal gains

and can even kill the ones being ruled over by them. So, Calogula misused his power because it was absolute, and it can be said that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Similarly, there had been the rulers in history who have controlled the institutions of government through absolute power. **Ferdinand Marcos** was one of those rulers. Marcos declared martial law in Philippines and used his power to suspend civil liberties, silence opposition, and control press. It was his absolute power, which led to economic mismanagement, human rights abuses, and political repression. The example of Ferdinand reveals when rulers possessed absolute power, the result will be absolute corruption. Had Marcos not consolidated absolute power, suppression of dissent could not have been institutionalized. Hence, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Moreover, when rulers have absolute power they can use it to act purely based on their ideology and ambitions. However, sometimes, their ideology or ambitions may go against human rights, but due to absolute power no one can

challenge them. For instance, when Hitler got absolute power, he suppressed opposition, controlled military, and manipulated propaganda. Adolf Hitler orchestrated the Holocaust, leading to millions of deaths. Had Hitler not acquired absolute power, unprecedented destruction, human sufferings, and spread of Nazism could have been avoided.

This was his absolute power that resulted into such outcomes. His actions amplify the destructive potential of unrestrained authority.

Apart from these, some rulers came to power to bring reforms, centralize power, and modernize the state. However, as soon they got absolute authority, absolute corruption was the outcome. One of those rulers was IVAN IV. IVAN wore the crown with such promises, but when got absolute power, suppressed political rivals, killed thousands of nobles, and also his son. This ~~emo~~ example illustrates the unwanted outcomes of absolute power. The ones who desire to bring reforms also becomes the victim of ~~un~~ absolute power. So, it can be said that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Apart from history, contemporary society also supports the fact that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Parents are considered as guardians of their children. However, sometimes, parents exercise their absolute authority over their children, especially in South Asian countries. By using their absolute authority, parents intervene in individual choices and impose their decisions.

For example, in Pakistan and India, parents decide the careers of their children, ignoring what they want. As children have no right to disagree, so they have to accept the decisions of their parents. Hence, absolute power over blood relations also corrupts absolutely.

Apart from parents, teachers are considered as life sculptors, as they are the ones who nurture young minds. They also possess authority over students; however, when this authority becomes absolute, it corrupts life sculptors too. For example, many university professors harass female students and blackmail them over grades. The example of such teachers

reveal that absolute authority given to the nobles having ~~weak~~ weak moral character can lead to absolute corruption.

Apart from history and society, literature also claims that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* provides a striking example in this concept. Initially, a brave and loyal soldier, who he was admired for his service to King Duncan. However, when three witches prophesy that he will become king, Macbeth murdered King Duncan. When he got unrestrained power, he became increasingly tyrant. His absolute power resulted into political sufferings of Scotland. This literary piece depicts how individuals, who once were loyal, becomes tyrannical when get absolute power.

George Orwell's *'Animal Farm'* also depicts how absolute power corrupts absolutely. Initially, the farm animals overthrow the farmer to establish a system based on unity and equality. However, with time, the pigs, led by Napoleon, consolidate absolute power and exploit other animals. They

manipulate the rules to serve their own comfort and interests. Over time, they become indistinguishable from the humans they replaced. This literary example illustrates that even the systems created with noble intentions can become corrupt when authority is unrestrained.

Psychology explains the mechanism behind the fact how absolute power corrupts absolutely. Philip Zimbardo's 'The Lucifer Effect' demonstrates how situational factors can lead to absolute corruption. His Stanford experiment, where students were assigned the role of guardians having absolute power misused their power to abuse the prisoners. This experiment illustrates that when individuals are given absolute power under some situations, the result will be moral corruption. This insight aligns with the saying "absolute power corrupts absolutely" as it corrupts by compromising ethical boundaries.

To sum up everything, it is clear that power itself never corrupts; rather, when someone gets power without proper checks and balances or other restraints,

The result will be absolute corruption. History has witnessed the individuals like Imam Ali (RA) and George Washington who have not corrupted power because of strong character and accountability. However, on the other hand, history is also full of examples where rulers have possessed absolute power, and used it to serve their personal interests, instead of public. Moreover, Maibeth and Animal Farm also claim this fact that unchecked power leads to absolute corruption. Apart from this, The Lucifer Effect explains how situational factors can lead to ethical corruption. The contemporary society witness this in the form of parents and teachers. All these historical, societal, literary, and psychological perspectives explain supports the notion, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." To avoid absolute corruption, there should be proper accountability mechanisms, so that concentration of power in one hand could be avoided. Only by doing this, absolute corruption could be avoided. Had the mirror not broken down, the ruler would have ruled justly like he used to.