The historian as moralist: a study of Edward Gibbon and The decline and fall of the Roman Empire

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PART II: THE HISTORY
CHAPTER V
MORAL CATEGORIES OF THE DECLINE AND FALL

In his Essai Gibbon had set down some moral principles for the writer and for the student of literature. In his consideration of subjects fit for history, his concern was to find one which would allow him to do justice to those principles and enable him to fulfil what he saw as the role of the historian. After his experience in Rome he seemed never to have had any doubt that he had found the subject he sought, and though at first he could only contemplate it 'from an awful distance', he gradually began to assume the character of 'the historian of the Roman Empire'. Eventually he went on not only to create his own Roman Empire, but also to indicate the moral forces which he saw operating in its leaders and in its social, political and military life to bring about its ultimate collapse.

We need not expect to find in Gibbon a systematic moral philosopher; not even a philosopher in the strict use of the word.\(^1\) Though he referred to himself thus\(^2\) and habitually took what he considered to be a philosophic view of things, yet he used these terms in the widest and most general sense. He was distrustful, even scornful of metaphysics,\(^3\) and was always concerned with the practical rather than with the abstract.

2. DF, lxxi, VII, 294, n. 74: 'Yet as a mere philosopher, I cannot agree with the Greeks', and his recurring use of 'a philosopher' to introduce a point of view which is often shown to be his. Cf. also Memoirs, p. 186.
3. DF, xii, I, 423 (on the neoplatonists); lxvi, VII, p. 132; 'the fleeting shadows of metaphysics'; and cf. MW, III, p. 361.
While accepting 'the sceptical tradition running from Bayle to Hume', he was, 'like many of his contemporaries...more interested in a philosophy of common sense and concentrated on things rather than words'.

When, as a young man, he ventured to define 'l'esprit philosophique', he did so in terms of getting through to simple ideas, of grasping and combining first principles and of gaining a clearer and more extensive overview than that of the casual observer.

More instructive, however, than this early definition is a study of the uses and contexts in The Decline and Fall. Here we see that 'philosophic' stands in antithesis to such qualities as superficiality, prejudice, an unthinking obsession with mere facts, and hence the failure to perceive underlying realities and moral causes; in short, an inability to penetrate the surface and discover 'the first principles'. Gibbon's use of these terms and his appeals to philosophy and morality are essentially pragmatic. He did not indulge in abstract systems or speculations. Instead, he assumed a consensus of enlightened and right-thinking men as to what constituted 'wisdom and virtue'. Jordan compares his use of the word 'philosophy' to the present-day rather imprecise use of 'science'. 'He was not troubled the imprecision of the concept. "Philosophy" was a general word adequately describing all those things Gibbon most admired, and since neither he nor his contemporaries found any difficulty in understanding what the word or concept meant, there was no need to be more precise'.

1. Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 76.
2. Essai, chap. XLVI, p. 98.
3. Jordan, loc.cit. As he points out, Gibbon's philosophy was closer to Renaissance humanism than to that of the French intellectuals. 'Philosophy is Gibbon's term for all of the values of his humanistic faith'. (ibid., p. 77).
Gibbon's philosophic ancestry, like that of his contemporaries, was to be found in ancient Greece and Rome: amongst those philosophers who, he said, 'deduced their morals from the nature of man rather than from that of God'. He regarded the long line of Greek philosophers as constituting 'the wisest and most virtuous' of their time. After naming also Seneca, Pliny, Tacitus, Plutarch, Galen, Epictetus and Marcus Antoninus, he wrote: 'Philosophy had purified their minds from the prejudices of popular superstition; and their days were spent in the pursuit of truth and the practice of virtue'. He saw philosophy as not only inculcating practical wisdom and moderation, and thus dispelling credulity, superstition, fanaticism and persecution, but also 'purifying the mind from the basest passions', even if there were some incorrigible persons who seemed proof against its salutary influence. Commending Simplicius, one of the last Greek philosophers, Gibbon noted that while both his physical and metaphysical commentaries had disappeared, 'his moral interpretation of Epictetus' remained a classic book 'most excellently adapted to direct the will, to purify the heart, and to confirm the understanding'.

1. DF, ii, I, 33.
2. DF, xl, IV, 285.
3. DF, xv, II, 73.
4. DF, xvi, II, 127 ('Philosophy, the most dangerous enemy of superstition'.)
5. DF, xxv, III, 25 ('Philosophy alone can boast...that her gentle hand is able to eradicate the latent and deadly principle of fanaticism'.)
6. DF, xxv, III, 4 ('the principles of philosophic toleration'.)
7. Like Theodatus, DF, xli, IV, 327.
'The pursuit of truth' and the confirmation of the understanding were to be accompanied by a direction of the will, a purification of the heart, in short, by 'the practice of virtue'. Voltaire, in his Dictionnaire philosophique, had stressed this dual function of the philosopher: 'there is none in antiquity who has not given men examples of virtue and lessons in moral truth'. History, for Gibbon, would also do both. And it was primarily to the practical Romans rather than to the speculative Greeks that he turned. In Cicero, above all, he had found as a young man and never ceased to find, not only a model of style and sentiment, but also 'admirable lessons which may be applied almost to every situation of public and private life'. This admiration for the philosophic statesman of Rome he shared with the philosophers of his day, as well as with those English statesmen whose political roots were in the Roman republic. It was his revered 'philosophic historian', David Hume, who confessed: 'I desire to take my Catalogue of Virtues from Cicero's Offices'. In this same school 'the historian of the Roman Empire' was formed. And to Cicero, with his practical Roman outlook, 'the goal of philosophy was not primarily to know but to do'.

3. e.g. Voltaire, Diderot, Montesquieu; see Michael Grant, Cicero: On the Good Life. Harmondsworth, 1971, Introd., p. 42.
4. On the long unchallenged republican view of Roman history amongst English writers, Middleton's idealisation of Cicero, and the reaction against this view, see Addison Ward, 'The Tory View of Roman History', Studies in English Literature, IV, No. 3, 1964, pp. 413-456.
5. Cited by Grant, loc.cit.
Thus, while Gibbon's references to 'philosophy' cover a wide range of applications both intellectual and moral, there is a strong emphasis on the practical, the useful and the virtuous. He condemned the neoplatonists for 'mistaking the true object of philosophy', by neglecting 'the knowledge that is suited to our situation and powers, the whole compass of moral, natural and mathematical science,... whilst they exhausted their strength in the verbal disputes of metaphysics'.

For him it was in the service of the public and of mankind that philosophy proved its worth. 'The duties of a judge', he declared, 'require all the faculties of a philosophic mind'. And his ideal of philosophic service is seen in a 'philosophic monarch' like Marcus Antoninus or Julian, 'the philosophic sultan' Amurath, or even a 'philosophic bishop' like Synesius who, without fear or flattery, addressed his representations to a weak emperor in a time of national disgrace.

The philosopher, Boethius, whose great work Gibbon felt to be not unworthy of Plato or Cicero, 'stooped, or, to speak more truly, he rose' from his abstract speculations 'to the social duties of public life'. To Gibbon, 'the union of the prince and the sage, of the active and the speculative virtues, would constitute the perfection of human nature'. The emperor John the Handsome came close to this ideal, and it is interesting that Gibbon's commendation pointed to

1. DF, xii, I, 423. Cf. also lxvi, VII, 132.
2. DF, xxxviii, IV, 136.
3. DF, xlviii, V, 244; xxiii, II, 456.
4. DF, lxvii, VII, 153.
5. DF, xxvi, III, 136 and n. 138.
7. DF, xlviii, IV, 220. This ideal is seldom found; the so-called 'Imperial philosopher', Leo VI, here referred to, was something of a fraud.
the natural rather than the academic source of this ruler's exemplary virtue: 'The philosophic Marcus would not have disdained the artless virtues of his successor, derived from his heart, and not borrowed from the schools'.

The 'philosopher', the 'impartial spectator', of Gibbon's History will, like the historian himself, never be cold, detached or indifferent, but always involved in mankind. He should react and feel in response to men's virtues and vices and be the champion of liberty, toleration and 'the dignity of human nature'. Gibbon thus writes that 'a philosopher' will 'deplore the loss of the Byzantine libraries'; he will condemn 'the vanity' of the 'universal desire to obtain and hold the sceptre of domination'; he will be 'scandalised by the temporal kingdom of the clergy'; he will justly censure an example of 'base flattery'; and when he considers the destructive force of war against the slow 'advances of reason, science, and the arts of peace, a philosopher, according to his temper, will laugh or weep at the folly of mankind'. Indeed, in seeking to enter into the experience of guilt and penance which found expression in the Crusades, Gibbon admitted that 'the cold philosophy of modern times is incapable of feeling the impression

1. DF, xlvi, V, 244.
2. See e.g. DF, x, I, 299: 'were it possible for a philosopher to remain indifferent among the general calamities of human kind'. Cf. Gibbon's remark on Orosius for apparently condoning the execution of a cative heathen king: 'The bloody actor is less detestable than the cool, unfeeling historian'. (DF, xxx, III, 282, n.84).
3. DF, liv, VI, 134, n. 46; iii, I, 88.
4. DF, lxviii, VII, 206.
5. DF, xlvi, V, 259.
6. DF, lxx, VII, 309.
7. DF, xlvi, V, 68, n.61.
8. DF, lxv, VII, 86.
that was made on a sinful and fanatic world'. Such are the moral reactions which characterise 'the philosopher' in The Decline and Fall.

This theme of the decline and fall of Rome, which satisfied the aspirations of the philosophic historian, at the same time, by its very nature, made extraordinary demands upon him. While still working on his first volume, Gibbon wrote that he was 'engaged on a great Historical Work;...the subject is curious and never yet treated as it deserves'. At least twice he referred to 'the happy choice of the subject', which had raised great expectations from his public. He was sure of his subject; his only concern was that its greatness would 'leave no excuse for the feebleness of execution'. Writing in these terms to John Whitaker, the historian of Manchester, he admitted that his diffidence did not proceed 'from any false modesty, but from a real consciousness that I am below my own ideas of historical merit'.

What does he tell us of his ideas of historical merit and how do they relate to the moral categories on which a great history, such as that he was undertaking, must be based?

We have seen that in his Essai, Gibbon had ranked historians on a threefold scale. Far above that of the mere chronicler or recorder of facts, and in a completely different class, were the true historians. But the great majority of these were still either superficial or

1. DF, Ixviii, VI, 280.
3. See Letters, Nos. 325 and 328, 16/10/75, II, 90 and 3/1/76, II, 93.
4. ibid., II, 90.
undistinguished, lacking high standards and philosophical insight. It was not to this class that he aspired. It was rather to that elite, best represented by the two northern historians who had but recently removed 'the old reproach' of British neglect and shown how history should be written. Yet to find this ideal of the truly philosophic historian, he still had to turn to ancient Rome.2 Little wonder then, that having attempted so great a subject, he feared that he might fail to come up to this standard. We find perhaps the most concise statement of his ideas on the matter in his Vindication of the final chapters of his first volume. There he claimed that the historian, 'owes to himself, to the present age, and to posterity a just and perfect delineation of all that may be praised, of all that may be excused, and of all that must be censured. If he fails in this discharge of his important office, he partially violates the sacred obligations of truth, and disappoints his readers of the instruction they might have derived from a fair parallel of the vices and virtues of the most illustrious characters'.3

In this very Tacitean statement, Gibbon reaffirmed his consciousness of the historian's high responsibility and of his obligation both to his own integrity and to his public. In accordance with the instructive function of history, that obligation requires an exact and complete presentation in order to reveal what merits either praise or blame. This can be achieved by the method used in The Decline and Fall, namely to present such a 'fair parallel of the vices and virtues' of the characters. But above all, the statement in the Vindication stresses the historian's sacred obligation to truth.

2. 'Je ne connois que Tacite qui ait rempli mon idée de cet historien philosophe', Essai, LII, 66.
Here we have the most basic of the moral categories or assumptions underlying The Decline and Fall, namely a respect for 'the truth of history'. It is, in a sense, the foundation of all the rest. Closely associated with it, since it also has to do with getting at the truth about character and sometimes with questions of probability and interpretation of evidence, is what Gibbon called 'the knowledge of human nature'. Thirdly, he was most keenly aware of 'the judgement of posterity' to which the historian saw persons, and particularly those in positions of authority, being answerable. Fourthly, adherence to historic truth and to a moral viewpoint, led to a reading of history largely in terms of human 'vices and follies' though sometimes relieved by examples of 'wisdom and virtue'. Fifthly, he recognised an obligation to trace moral causes and effects, especially in the rise and fall of individuals and empires. Finally, an assumption belonging to the tradition in which he wrote, though he transcended many of its limitations, was a conviction of the instructive value of history.

The primary and fundamental category, the historian's responsibility to 'the truth of history' is what Gibbon had in view throughout the whole. Thus, for example, he tells the reader that he is sure that a certain eloquent description contains 'some facts incompatible with the truth of history'. In a note reminiscent of the statement in his Vindication, we have his admission: 'I owe it to myself and to historic truth to declare that some of the circumstances in the paragraph are founded on conjecture and analogy.' This concern for the truth of history is sometimes stated but more often implied.

1. DF, xxxvi, IV, 60, n.148.
2. DF, xxxi, III, 373, n. 184.
There are two aspects of historic truth: accuracy with regard to facts and events, and the wider responsibility of presenting a true and faithful picture of a man or his times. The two are really complementary: the latter depends on the former, though it can also be used as a check upon it. The former demands of the historian minute care in his research and use of authorities, and his fidelity to this aspect of historic truth remained a matter of great satisfaction to Gibbon. Some of the sweetest praise was the testimony to his scrupulous use of original sources, while the aspersions cast on his work in this regard were the one criticism which stirred him to reply. His Vindication was primarily a defence of his faithful observance of truth in the handling of facts and materials.

It is well to remind ourselves of the store Gibbon set by such 'accurate industry' in the historian. It was the 'inimitable accuracy' of Tillemont, his 'incomparable guide' throughout a great part of The Decline and Fall that won his high praise, and he paid similar compliments to the erudition of other authorities on whom he leaned heavily for his material. The reverse side of the coin appears in his attitude to Voltaire as a historian. While he respected the philosophical manner of the great man, he censured him for inaccuracies and errors of fact: he 'confounds the emperors of the East and West'; his Louis XIV is 'an

3. DF, xlvii, V, 141, n.81. In xxv, III, 50, n. 126 Gibbon said of Tillemont, 'The patient and sure-footed mule of the Alps may be trusted in the most slippery paths'. Ironically, in this same place Bury had to point out that it is not Orosius who is in error, but Gibbon's misreading of him.
4. See, e.g. Memoirs, p. 147.
5. His work is usually characterised by 'much general sense and truth' yet with 'some particular errors', DF, lxiv, VII, 9, n. 26.
6. DF, lxviii, VII, 188, n. 53.
inaccurate performance"; and, carried away by his imagination, he even fell into anachronistic blunders. Thus the Austrian Duke Leopold was made a contemporary of Richard Coeur de Lion. 'Dois-je m'arrêter?', asked Gibbon, 'à prouver qu'un duc d'Austriche qui regnoit en 1193 ne fut point battu a Montgarten en 1313, cent-vingt-deux ans après?'

Strange errors and fancies like these are more culpable than the almost unavoidable slips which any writer might make. While Sir William Temple, said Gibbon had the excuse of being deceived by an 'imposter', Voltaire's mistakes sometimes proceeded 'from want of knowledge or reflection'. Such ignorance or lack of reflection seemed to Gibbon inexcusable because they violated the historian's moral obligation to truth. Introducing the notes to the first quarto edition of The Decline and Fall he declared: 'Diligence and accuracy are the only merits which an historical writer may ascribe to himself; if any merit indeed can be assumed from the performance of an indispensable duty'.

A study of Gibbon's 'Index Expurgatorius' and some of his scholarly investigations might give the impression that the discovery of errors, even in his most admired historians and sources, had become something of a pastime with him. More fundamentally, it was part of his wider

1. 'Extraits raisonnés de mes lectures', MW, V, 247-8.
2. 'Introduction à l'Histoire générale de la République des Suisses', MW, III, 272n. Gibbon began the note with the observation: 'M. de Voltaire nous a tracé d'un pinceau léger le tableau de l'histoire générale de l'Europe. Le coloris en est toujours brillant, mais le dessein est souvent très incorrect'.
3. DF, liii, VI, 23, n. 50. Such errors in dating were also especially damaging to Voltaire's work, since his realist epistemology depended more on an accurate chronology than did Gibbon's history.
4. 'Voltaire might wonder...but he should not have owned his ignorance of the country, religion, &c...' (DF, liii, VI, 93, n. 72.)
5. Advertisement to the Notes, in DF, I, xliii.
6. MW, V, 548-579. It is dated both by Sheffield and by Craddock, 1768 and/or 1769.
concern for historic truth. Let us take examples from three authors for whom Gibbon expressed almost unqualified respect. In Hume he noted an error regarding the Sybarites, a slip in his estimate of the population of ancient Gaul, and a mistaken notion about Constantine and imports. In reference to the emperor Severus, he pointed out that Hume had not handled the campaign 'with his usual accuracy'. After praising Giannone very highly and mentioning the esteem in which his History of Naples was held, Gibbon noted two instances of obvious mistakes in this work. And despite his great and consistent praise for Muratori, we find the comments: 'M. Muratori is grossly mistaken in the interpretation', and 'Muratori's erroneous reckoning'. The same sort of correction is applied also to lesser writers. 'Diligence and accuracy', as Gibbon said, are not merits but 'an indispensable duty' for the historian. When they were called in question, his reply was: 'I adhered to the wise resolution of trusting myself and my writings to the candour of the public, till Mr. Davies of Oxford presumed to attack, not the faith, but the good faith of the historian'. This question of 'fidelity' or 'good faith' involved in Davies' view, said Gibbon, 'the ruin of my moral and literary character'. Hence

1. MW, III, 178; MW, V, 549 and 148; DF, v, I, 122, n. 32.
2. MW, V, 413, 505, 512-3.
3. MW, III, 356-7; V, 553-4.
4. 'Monsieur l'Abbé Lenglot de Fresnoy se trompe lorsqu'il nous dit que Maximilien I reçut de sa femme Marie les provinces de Groningue' (MW, V, 515); or 'M. Rapin de Thorras se trompe...' (ibid., V, 514).
5. Memoirs, p. 160. 'E' fragment; Sheffield's version has 'fidelity' for 'good faith'.
6. 'Vindication', MW, IV, 520.
the historian felt it incumbent on him to vindicate his 'innocence and accuracy'. In direct contrast to this, he confessed: 'I am less flattered by Mr. Porson's high encomium on the style and spirit of my history than I am satisfied with his honourable testimony to my attention, diligence and accuracy'. These were the 'humble virtues' which Gibbon held to be indispensable and whose loss would involve moral culpability in the historian.

The second and broader aspect of historical truth with which Gibbon was concerned, a faithful presentation of persons, periods and principles, transcended diligence and accuracy, but was a complementary obligation. Accuracy and correctness of facts are not ends in themselves but merely essentials in building up the total presentation and in enabling the historian to reach general statements of principle. Without such embracing 'moral' observations, which give depth and coherence to The Decline and Fall, historical writing can degenerate into an uninspired catalogue of facts. To the philosophic mind, said Gibbon, mere facts constitute the least interesting part of history; its real value lies in the knowledge of man, morality, and politics to be found within it. These ideas should be pursued by the historian who sees in particular facts only the proof of general principles. This was Gibbon's view expressed even before he had found his great subject, and as he later followed the depressing annals of the Eastern emperors, he was on his guard against falling into 'a minute accumulation of circumstances which destroy the light and effect

of those general pictures which compose the use and ornament of a remote history'. But what if the historian is careless in discovering, interpreting and relating his facts? Then the general principles will be false and the whole picture distorted. Take the case of Voltaire's Mohammed, who after the conquest of Mecca, imagined and perpetrated the most horrid crimes. 'The poet confesses that he is not supported by the truth of history, and can only allege, 'que celui qui fait la guerre à sa patrie au nom de Dieu est capable de tout'. Gibbon was always wary of such pseudo-philosophical treatment of persons and events. It was not enough to philosophise in a historical narrative and, where the facts proved awkward or obscure, to say in the words of the professor replying to a student's objection that the facts were otherwise, 'so much the worse for the facts'. The larger 'truth of history' depended on a reliable foundation; the research must be thorough and the facts carefully ascertained. Without this underlying accuracy the 'philosophical historian' would, like Voltaire, become superficial, or even worse, misleading.

Reciprocally, this broader 'truth of history' could assist the truly philosophic historian equipped with a sound knowledge of men and manners, to interpret and even to correct the 'facts'. Gibbon therefore felt able to judge certain facts used by an author to be 'incompatible with the truth of history'. In giving a faithful

1. DF, xlviii, V, 180. Gibbon, however, also wrote: 'I am always apt to suspect historians and travellers of improving extraordinary facts into general laws'. (ibid., xxv, III, 38, n.100). He himself was careful never to do this.
2. DF, 1, V, 391, n. 150.
3. See p. 174, n.1 of this chapter.
presentation of a character and his behaviour, particular details found in the sources must be tested against the general weight of evidence as a whole. In the case of the funeral oration on the emperor Valens by the celebrated rhetorician Libanius, Gibbon asserted: 'The truth of history may disclaim some parts of this panegyric, which cannot strictly be reconciled with the character of Valens or the circumstances of the battle.'\(^1\) Thus a canon of interpretation used by Gibbon was that the well attested total impression should be used to check the consistency of individual points alleged by historical sources. In the case of irreconcilable authorities, the best that the historian could do was to suggest a possible compromise and avoid dogmatic assertion. In such a situation it could only be said that, 'the truth of history might perhaps be found in a just medium between these extreme and contradictory assertions'.\(^2\) In weighing up the advantages offered by one of the earliest topics he considered for history, Gibbon welcomed the availability of 'two contemporary and accurate historians'; but, better still, 'what is of great importance to a lover of truth, the one a Christian, and the other a Mahomedan'.\(^3\) The philosophic historian and lover of truth could thus compare accounts from opposing sides in order to build up a complete picture in accord with the truth of history.

Where the speculative philosopher sought abstract truth, Gibbon's aim was the practical attainment, as far as humanly possible, of historic truth. It was something of a preoccupation with him and he proclaimed

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1. DF, xxvi, III, 119.
2. DF, xxvi, III, 135.
it with great insistence. Indeed, he applied the principle to both his histories, namely that of Rome and that of the historian himself. In the second of these he wrote: 'Truth, naked unblushing truth, the first virtue of more serious history, must be the sole recommendation of this personal narrative'. As his esteemed fellow historian, William Robertson, expressed it, in a letter very gratifying to Gibbon for its high praise of his second and third volumes: 'It was always my idea that an historian should feel himself a witness giving evidence on oath. I am glad to perceive by your minute scrupulosity, that your notions are the same'.

A second moral category to be found in The Decline and Fall is what Gibbon called 'the knowledge of human nature'. The historian's respect for 'the truth of history' will inform all his work and will be the touchstone of his treatment of events, causes and character. In the light of his 'sacred obligations' he will pursue his study of mankind and particular instances will both illustrate and find their general expression in the broad principles of human nature. In his Essai, Gibbon had called on the reader to join with the author in seeking to investigate, 'to fathom', the human heart, and his History gave him ample scope for doing just this. We could safely say that his fundamental concern is with man, his manners and morals and with the motives which alone determine both the goodness or badness of the action and the true character of the individual. In the statement already quoted, he gave clear expression to the view that the philosophic

2. Letter No. CXLIV, 12/5/81, in MW, II, 256.
mind is not content with a collection of the superficial facts of history, but looks beneath them for the underlying truths of human nature: 'C'est la connaissance de l'homme, la morale, et la politique qu'il y trouve qui la relèvent dans son esprit. Tâchons de suivre cette idée, et de voir jusqu'à quel point elle conduirait un écrivain, qui ne voit dans les faits particuliers que la preuve de ses principes généraux'.

Both in poetry and philosophy the tenet that 'the proper study of mankind is man', had gained wide acceptance before Gibbon began to write. Pope's Essay and Hume's Treatise stand out as but two expressions of the doctrine. Bolingbroke, in words certainly familiar to Gibbon, wrote: 'Man is the subject of every history; And to know him well, we must see him and consider him, as history alone can present him to us, in every age, in every country, in every state, in life and in death'. This, as Bond reminds us, was a commonplace of eighteenth-century thought and accords with Hume's view that it was the business of history to attempt 'to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature'. Yet it is also true, as Dorothy Koch pointed out, that 'like Voltaire and Hume in his own century and James Harvey Robinson in the twentieth, Bolingbroke envisions a "new history" which will stress more sides of life than the political'. Gibbon's view of history and his writing of it exhibit a similarly expansive and unrestricted approach: man in all

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1. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', MW, III, 126.
4. 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', Philosophical Works, vol. 4, p. 68, Sect. VIII, Pt. 1 'Of Liberty and Necessity'.
aspects, his manners, his laws, his society, his religion, his family life, as well as his government and conquests. Robertson had provided such a broadly-based historical 'view' in his survey of the 'Progress of Society in Europe', with which he introduced his History of Charles V and Gibbon several times referred his reader to 'that masterly sketch' and to 'the judicious remarks' to be found in Robertson's introduction.

Writing of the use of metals and of barter, in his chapter on the manners of the Germanic tribes, Gibbon claimed that 'to a mind capable of reflection such leading facts convey more instruction than a tedious detail of subordinate circumstances'.

It was the life of man under its varying external appearances which was of primary importance to the historian. Such a focus of attention would provide that most essential insight, 'the knowledge of human nature' which was so enlightening to both author and reader. This knowledge enabled the writer to give an authentic and morally consistent presentation of men, their conduct, character, and motives. Fielding, said Gibbon, excelled in this knowledge and he himself was almost tempted to quote from a novel of this 'great master, which may be considered as the history of human nature'. By contrast, Voltaire's Mahomet, in attributing to the prophet 'the most horrible crimes' all unsupported by 'the truth of history', was 'neither charitable nor philosophic'.

1. 'A View of the Progress of Society in Europe from the subversion of the Roman Empire to the beginning of the sixteenth century', in 3 sections preceding Book I of his History of Charles V. London, 1769.
2. DF, xliv, V, 327-8, n.158; lviii, VI, 333, n. 149; cf. also ix, I, 241, n. 42; 248, n. 68; xliv, V, 303, n. 100; lxii, VI, 465 and n. 89.
3. DF, ix, I, 238. See also the final paragraph of that chapter regarding the different concerns of history in different societies (ix, 255).
4. DF, xxxii, III, 384, n. 13. The reference is to Tom Jones.
5. DF, 1, V, 391, n. 150.
The truly philosophic historian, armed with an authentic knowledge of human nature and its ways, will not fall into such moral inconsistencies. Moreover, by this means, he will be able to expose hidden motives beneath the actions of his characters and even to reconstruct a human situation. Thus, in referring to the disunity among the Germans which was formented by Roman intrigue, Gibbon added that not only were 'many traces of this policy' to be found in the historians, but also 'many more may be inferred from the principles of human nature'. Indeed, 'the knowledge of human nature and of the sure operation of its fierce and unrestrained passions on some occasions, supply the want of historical materials'. Particularly in the case of less complicated and less sophisticated peoples, this knowledge provides the historian with a reliable guide to their reactions. In dealing with a revolt of the Gothic peasantry, Gibbon wrote: 'So strong and uniform is the current of popular passions that we might almost venture, from very scanty materials, to relate the particulars of this war'. This moral insight into human nature sometimes influenced the historian's handling of his sources: 'I have transferred the reproach of avarice', Gibbon wrote regarding one of his authorities, 'from Valens to his servants'. On what grounds, the reader may ask. The justification, with its ironic overtones, is that 'avarice more properly belongs to ministers than to kinds; in whom that passion is commonly extinguished by absolute possession'.

1. DF, ix, I, 253, n. 83.
2. DF, x, I, 256. Cf. Hume's remark in an appendix on 'The Anglo-Saxon Government and Manners': 'Though we are not informed of any of these circumstances by historians, they are so much founded on the nature of things, that we may admit them as a necessary and infallible consequence of the situation of the kingdom during those ages'. (History of England, 1841 ed., Vol. I, App. I, p. 179).
3. DF, xiii, I, 384.
4. DF, xxvi, III, 20, n. 58.
Tacitus, as the philosophic historian par excellence, declared Gibbon, exemplified this knowledge of human nature to a remarkable degree, and, he claimed, the third-century emperor of that name derived from the study of 'his immortal ancestor', 'the philosophic historian whose writings will instruct the last generations of mankind', both 'the knowledge of the Roman constitution and of human nature'. This same knowledge of human nature, he maintained, saved 'our philosophic historian', Hume, from the sort of misjudgements of which Voltaire was sometimes guilty. While an unreflective observer might find it surprising that the Persian magi should engage in persecution, Hume, said Gibbon, acutely remarked 'that the most refined and philosophic sects are certainly the most intolerant'. It was this moral philosopher's profound understanding of human nature and manners, which, according to Gibbon, convinced him of the operation of such a spirit beneath the appearance of learning and philosophy.

Gibbon himself had evidence of this amongst the most enlightened men of Paris and had reacted strongly against bigotry and intolerance in such an unlikely quarter. He could not 'approve the intolerant zeal of the philosophers and Encyclopaedists the friends of d'Olbach and Helvetius: they laughed at the scepticism of Hume, preached the tenets of Atheism with the bigotry of dogmatists, and damned all believers with ridicule and contempt'. This experience provided the aspiring historian with a salutary lesson in 'the knowledge of human nature' to confirm that derived from his study of history.

1. DF, xii, I, 344.
2. See e.g. DF, lxix, VII, 224-5 and n. 15.
3. DF, viii, I, 219, n. 29.
Even *philosophes*, he discovered, could exhibit 'intolerant zeal', even the enlightened Romans barbarism, cruelty and superstition, and even barbarians honour, loyalty and courage. It required a true knowledge of men, exercised with due regard to the truth of history, to guard even the most philosophic against moral prejudice and hence against faulty judgements.

The historian of human manners is sometimes confronted by a 'union of the fiercest and most tender passions', Gibbon noted. Such conflicting reactions, found side by side in the Crusaders, have 'been variously considered by two philosophers: by the one (Hume) as easy and natural; by the other (Voltaire) as absurd and incredible'. These contrary judgements emphasise the need for caution in such cases. We must avoid the danger, said Gibbon, of attributing these very different passions to the same persons at the same moment. Once again in connection with the Crusades, 'some deep reasoners' had suspected the contrivance and policy of the papacy in the whole enterprise from first to last. But such a view, Gibbon protested, was unsupported by 'nature' or by fact. It was truer to say that the popes had 'followed, rather than guided, the impulse of manners and prejudice'. Here, he suggested, was the obvious explanation; and in contrast to the 'deep reasoners', he noted that 'this simple idea is agreeable to the good sense of Mosheim and the fine philosophy of Hume'.

It was Hume who, in discussing the corruption of primitive Christian theology and its relapse into a popular polytheistic mythology, 'observes like a philosopher, the natural flux and reflux of poly-

1. *DF*, lviii, VI, 324 and nn. 119, 120.
theism and theism'. Thus the philosophic mind, informed by a knowledge of human nature, is seldom caught by surprise, nor does it need to seek 'deep' explanations when a simple human explanation is available. In accordance with this principle, Gibbon followed Hume by pointing to the very simple and obvious reason of 'proximity' and familiarity to account for the low esteem in which the Romans held their Pope, whose 'name and authority' called forth such reverence from the remoter parts of Europe.

In one of his most masterly characterisations, Gibbon stated a general principle to which he aspired in his writing: 'As Athanasius was continually engaged with the prejudices and passions of every order of men from the monk to the emperor, the knowledge of human nature was his first and most important science. He preserved a distinct and unbroken view of a scene which was incessantly shifting; and never failed to improve those decisive moments which are irrevocably past before they are perceived by a common eye'. As we watch Gibbon dealing with the facts of history, which as he said, were often little more than a record of man's crimes, follies and vices, the moral order and coherence he was able to impose on this raw material was directed by this same 'knowledge of human nature' which Athanasius so forcibly exhibited and which Gibbon also learned from first hand experience as well as from the ancient writers, from Montesquieu and from Hume. The study of man and his manners and of the development

1. DF, xxviii, III, 225, n. 92.
2. DF, lxix, VII, 224-5, where Gibbon followed his own remarks with a quotation to this effect from Hume's History of England.
3. DF, xxi, II, 384.
of human society had, he claimed, with the exception of Montesquieu's work, received too little attention. But with such studies as Robertson's 'Progress of Society' and Hume's Essays Morals, Political and Literary, there had come a welcome change: 'On this interesting subject, the progress of society in Europe, a strong ray of philosophic light has broke from Scotland in our own times; and it is with private as well as public regard that I repeat the names of Hume, Robertson and Adam Smith'.

Yet Gibbon was concerned with more than a view of society and of manners: it was the man beneath the manners that interested him. Manners and customs of a particular age or nation as he knew may obscure the real nature of the individual. Historians can be misled by the externals and this he sought to avoid. The late sixth-century historian, Agathias, he wrote, 'praised the private and public virtues of the Franks,...their politeness and urbanity, their regular government and orthodox religion', and compared them favourably with the subjects of Rome. But he was deceived: 'Perhaps the Franks already displayed the social disposition and lively graces, which in every age have disguised their vices, and sometimes concealed their intrinsic merit'.

Or, if one took a superficial view of Britain after the Roman occupation, it would seem 'that the native rudeness of the country and its inhabitants was covered by a thin varnish of Italian manners'.

Again, one may find the opposite effect. 'The vices of the Lombards were the effect of passion, of ignorance, of intoxication; their

1. DF, lxvi, VI, 465 and n. 89.
2. DF, xxxviii, IV, 129.
3. DF, xxxviii, IV, 165.
virtues are the more laudable, as they were not affected by the hypocrisy of social manners, nor imposed by the rigid constraint of laws and education.¹ And those horrid scenes of 'domestic cruelty' towards animals, which Gibbon thought may imperceptibly weaken our feeling of compassion and which are a common sight among the Tartar shepherds, 'are disguised by the arts of European refinement'.² In such cases a knowledge of human nature was essential to save the historian from misjudgements and enable him to penetrate the disguises of manners and refinement.³ And it was on this knowledge that Gibbon relied for his great array of character sketches in The Decline and Fall.

In the third place, Gibbon, like Tacitus, saw men and women, especially those in positions of eminence and power, as answerable to the judgement of history or posterity. They would either enjoy lasting praise and renown or suffer 'everlasting infamy' from future generations; but it was the historian's duty to see that posterity received a faithful record so that it might rightly apportion its praise or blame. The 'great' figures of the past thus stand vindicated or condemned before the 'judgement of posterity'. In the case of Constantius, on whose imperial honour, says Gibbon, this judgement imprints a deep stain, it is invoked in the context of 'the sincerity of history',⁴ which should present a true testimony before this tribunal of future ages. The sincerity or truth of history is antithetically opposed to the false witness of the 'venal orators' or 'servile'

1. DF, xlv, V, 29.
2. DF, xxvi, III, 76.
3. A suspicious temper, like that of Theodosius, 'might naturally arise from a dark and imperfect view of the corruption of mankind.' (DF, lxii, VI, 478).
historians who obsequiously praise their unworthy patrons.\(^1\) Whenever this has happened and partisan interests have corrupted impartiality, 'the voice of history' has become 'little more than the organ of hatred or flattery'.\(^2\)

Posterity, like 'the voice of history', can be likened to an orator either in the courtroom or delivering a funeral oration, an analogy which Gibbon employed.\(^3\) But we have in his work a literal instance in the funeral of the Emperor Julian, when the ancient custom was revived by which 'the voice of praise should be corrected by that of satire and ridicule' and even 'the faults and follies of the deceased emperor' displayed.\(^4\) So too, in considering the virtues of Theodosius, Gibbon wrote: 'The orator who may be silent without danger, may praise without difficulty and without reluctance; and posterity will confess that the character of Theodosius might furnish the subject of a sincere and ample panegyric'.\(^5\)

The essential moral rule of evidence is that the orator must avoid venality, and the historian, flattery: the panegyric must be sincere, nor must the faults and follies be forgotten in the oration. Hence it is the duty of the historian, who, like his characters is ultimately accountable to the tribunal of posterity, to give a faithful

1. DF, loc.cit., and cf. xxvi, III, 128.
2. DF, x, I, 293.
3. Carl Becker, in fact, described The Decline and Fall as 'a memorial oration' (The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers, p. 118), and Bond called it 'a commemorative address on the fate of the Roman Empire'. (The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon, pp. 56-7).
5. DF, xxvii, III, 175.
and impartial presentation; he must search out the hidden springs of action, expose crimes and display virtue for the instruction of his readers both of his own and of future generations.

'The judgement of posterity', with the impartial historian as its spokesmen, is one of the great moral categories of The Decline and Fall. There may be no place in that work for the type of censure or acquittal characteristic of ecclesiastical courts and councils nor for a great 'last judgement' of mankind; but the verdict of posterity is given on the basis of human morality and in accordance with what Gibbon called 'the profane virtues'. This is the criterion to which Gibbon referred the actions of his characters. When Hadrian resolved to adopt the two Antonines, we are told that he 'resolved to deserve the thanks of posterity by placing the most exalted merit on the Roman throne'. And of the younger of these emperors, Gibbon recorded that 'his memory was revered by a grateful posterity'. By contrast, the line of emperors from Tiberius to Domitian is 'condemned to everlasting infamy'. The contemporaries of Severus enjoyed the peace and glory of his reign and therefore forgave its cruelties, but 'posterity, who experienced the fatal effect of his maxims and example, justly considered him as the principal cause of the decline of the Roman

1. Gibbon, like the Greek philosophers, deduced his 'morals from the nature of man rather than from that of God', DF, ii, I, 33.
2. In contrast to the 'venal orators' and ecclesiastical writers in the heat of controversy, we have 'the profane virtues of sincerity and moderation'.
3. 'As with Voltaire or Hume', wrote J.H. Plumb, 'Gibbon interpreted history in purely human terms. Of course he made moral judgments and he stressed the effects of chance. But his moral judgments were those of men not God and his chance was purely human, not a great external force...' ('Gibbon and History', History Today, XIX, Nov., 1969, p. 738.
4. DF, iii, I, 83.
5. DF, iii, I, 85.
6. DF, iii, I, 87.
Empire'. And in the light of this disclosure of moral 'cause' and 'effect', it is the force of posterity's judgement which must prevail.

Gibbon's continual awareness of his own obligation to posterity is exemplified both in his strict impartiality and in his careful consideration of each case on its merits. Though he felt a special admiration for 'that extraordinary man', the emperor Julian, he nevertheless set out to give, and believed that he had achieved, 'an impartial balance' of his virtues and vices. In one instance where the restorer of paganism had spared the life of a stubbornly resistant bishop, Julian's action might at first sight appear as yet another example of his characteristic moderation. But in this particular case the historian felt compelled to withhold his verdict, for 'if the bishop of Arethusa had saved the infancy of Julian, posterity will condemn the ingratitude instead of praising the clemency of the emperor'. At the opposite extreme to Julian was Ambrose, representative of a class for whom Gibbon could feel little respect. He was not only an archbishop but also a saint, and even worse, one of those ecclesiastics who challenged the authority of the civil ruler in the perennial struggle between church and state. Though we should expect to find Gibbon's sympathies all on the other side, yet since 'posterity has applauded the virtuous firmness of the archbishop', the historian not only concurred with its judgement but also brought out this admirable side of Ambrose's character. We are shown Theodosius'
recognition of the virtue and disinterested nature of this firmness, when the emperor, though publicly rebuked and humbled by the archbishop, continued to offer him increasing affection and respect. And Theodosius for his part, said Gibbon has rightly won lasting admiration, since his generous conduct after a memorable military success, 'has extorted the applause of his most inveterate enemies'.

In many such instances Gibbon appears almost as the mouthpiece or as the advocate of posterity, briefed to marshal the evidence and present the case. So sensitive was he to the voice of posterity that on one page he could record its clear decision concerning the archbishop, and on the next could suggest that it was committed to an identical response in the case of the emperor: 'Posterity has applauded' Ambrose; that verdict is already confirmed; and since 'posterity...admires the pure and singular glory' of Theodosius' elevation, in like manner 'it must applaud his unrivaled generosity in the use of victory'. With the same sensitivity and feeling of responsibility Gibbon was able to declare that 'personal merit can alone deserve the notice of posterity'. He therefore felt himself bound to follow this principle and thus to dismiss Constantius, the worthless son of Constantine, 'from the world with the remark that he inherited the defects without the abilities of his father'.

At times the historian might be obliged to indicate relative culpability or degrees of guilt. His extended view and 'the experience of history' enable him to make comparisons and to assess each case in

1. DF, xxvii, III, 186.
2. DF, xxvii, II, 185, 186-7.
3. DF, xxiii, II, 440.
terms of the measure of enlightenment of the period in question. When considering the persecution of Christians by the emperors and magistrates of ancient Rome, Gibbon observed that they were unacquainted with the inner faith and the motives which compelled their victims to refuse submission to the laws and institutions of a pagan state. It was quite otherwise with Charles V or Louis XIV who, 'from their reflections or even from their own feelings, might have acquired a just knowledge of the rights of conscience and of the obligation of faith and of the innocence of error'.

On that account these modern persecutors must be pronounced 'more criminal' than their ancient counterparts.

In another historical comparison Gibbon implied that a ruler, like a historian, can display the relevant facts of his case and make his appeal to posterity. Constantine is accused by Gibbon and by earlier historians of killing his son, Crispus, and of keeping the matter dark. In sharp contrast, Peter the Great, when he found it necessary 'to subscribe the condemnation of a degenerate son', took the proper course by submitting his compelling reasons 'to the judgment of Russia, of Europe, and of posterity'. But since 'censure...arraigns the public and private motives of princes', it is sometimes left to the impartial historian to correct a lingering misjudgement which an irresponsible censure has perpetuated. This Gibbon did in the case of Hadrian by suggesting that it was prudence and moderation rather than envy which prompted some of the policies of that very changeable emperor.

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1. DF, xvi, II, 389.
2. DF, xviii, II, 222.
3. DF, i, I, 8.
4. DF, loc. cit.; cf. Gibbon's re-examination of Constantine's conversion: 'The real or imaginary cause of so important an event deserves and demands the attention of posterity'. (DF, xx, II, 317).
The propriety of making moral judgements in history is a contentious question and opposite viewpoints have been expressed. Butterfield recoiled from the idea of a historian usurping the function of the deity and saw a real danger 'if moral judgments are incorporated into the structure of the story', particularly as in many instances 'moral judgments are apt to be political ones'. But he admitted also that 'a natural scientist is pledged to work in the way Gibbon purported to do; that is to say, he confines his explanations to causes that are "under God" for he would be committing sabotage if he brought God into his scientific argument'. And in the famous controversy between Acton and Creighton, he came down on the side of the latter and of withholding judgement against Alexander Borgia. Alexander, as W.R. Inge pointed out in an address to the Historical Association, was, in fact, one on whom Ranke, 'the most judicial of historians, passes one of his rare moral verdicts'. Yet H.A.L. Fisher, in a pronouncement very similar to Gibbon's famous understatement on John XXIII, but without its irony, wrote: 'The indulgent eye of modern criticism has withdrawn the gravest charges which were levelled against this Pontiff by his contemporaries. It is content to leave only as established sensuality and simony, worldliness, perfidy and secret poisoning'. As Inge commented, very much in the tone and spirit of Gibbon: 'I am curious to know what faults the Warden of New College would consider grave blemishes in the character of a vicar of Christ'.

2. 'Historicism and Religion', inaugural address, History, No. 80, March, 1936, pp. 289-302. The reference here is to p. 301.
3. DF, lxx, VII, 300.
Inge's main point is this: 'History deals with human nature...
A description of the behaviour of human beings from which all moral
judgments are excluded is not a true picture'. Both Acton and Creighton
saw history in terms not unlike Gibbon's record of 'the crimes and
follies of mankind', relieved by some good men and actions here and
there. But one clamoured for moral judgements, the other refrained.
'It is possible', Inge admitted, 'to take either side in this contro­
versy; but Creighton's last words remind us that it is possible to condemn
crime without usurping the prerogative of God in judging the criminal.
To pass no moral judgments is virtually to ignore the difference between
right and wrong. It does not satisfy the reader, but shocks him'.

Convinced of this, Gibbon did not refrain from passing judgement,
or confirming what he felt to be the judgement of history, declaring
guilty those who committed offences against humanity and on occasions
absolving from blame or praising the benefactors of mankind. In this
way he felt it 'proper to punish and dismiss' an 'unworthy' ruler
before proceeding to an account of the following reign. Of Theodosius,
on the other hand, he wrote that 'he honourably deserves' the epithet
'great'. He characterised others as 'imperial monsters' because of
their 'inhuman and absurd cruelty' and his revulsion at monks and hermits
was largely for this same reason since the torments they inflicted
on themselves and others indicated that 'cruel and unfeeling temper'
usually associated with a tyrant. Gibbon held that history could
neither justify nor ignore the tyrants and persecutors and their evil
deeds. As a moral censor he condemned the conduct of the Romans,

1. Inge, op.cit., p. 301.
2. DF, xii, i, 375.
3. DF, xxvi, III, 129.
4. DF, xxxi, III, 302; xxxvii, IV, 80.
5. DF, xvi, II, 87.
particularly their administration, as 'weak and wicked' violating not only the laws of nature and of nations, but also justice and all feelings of humanity.  

Similarly, the slave trade, which 'reduces the human species to the level of cattle', Gibbon declared to his contemporaries, 'accuses the guilt of Europe'.

Given the view of posterity and its relation to 'the voice of history' as presented in The Decline and Fall, the historian's moral obligation becomes quite clear. Sometimes he is called upon to praise, sometimes to condemn, and on occasions to consign a worthless character to oblivion; but always to see that justice is done to the figures of the past. These persons must often look to posterity alone for a just verdict on their behalf. After the dust of controversy, prejudice or false flattery has settled, 'the voice of history' can speak with impartiality to applaud their motives or their true worth, to accuse their villainy, or it may be, to declare them the guiltless victims of slander and tyranny. Since, according to Gibbon, the history of nations can be described as 'the paths of blood', it is not surprising that the blood of these victims often cries out for vengeance and that justice requires the historian to vindicate their innocence to future generations. In the fifth century the friends of the fallen Stilicho suffered under the cruel persecution instigated by his enemy Olympius. Like their patron, 'they died in silence', but 'the despotic power which could take his life without a trial, and stigmatise his memory without a proof, has no jurisdiction over the impartial

1. DF, xxv, III, 60; xxix, III.
2. DF, xlii, IV, 400; xxv, III, 55; and cf. Gibbon's letter to Sheffield, No. 759, 15/5/90, III, 192-3, referring to his support of the slave trade as being likely to result in a 'triumph...over justice and humanity'.
3. DF, lvii, VI, 236. Cf. also iv, I, 93: 'From such motives ("love of power, contention, pride of victory, revenge") 'almost every page of history has been stained with blood'.

We are thus brought back to the idea of impartiality, so essential to Gibbon's view of the role of the historian and are reminded that with him it did not mean a cold detachment. It meant, as we have seen, scrupulous fairness within the limitations of his sources, and often a correction of those sources, where the tone of hatred or flattery was evident. It meant involvement in the history he was writing, and the measure of his involvement is often apparent in his sense of outrage which provoked him to use the strongest language. Like the faithful orator discharging his responsibility to this audience, the impartial historian confirms the moral judgement of posterity, transmits it and clarifies it for his readers, and in so doing appeals to their own response of censure, praise or indignation. In this he sees himself serving that noble use of history as an instructive force. Referring to one of his important sources, the historian Procopius, he reminded his reader that he was a rhetorician who, in the course of a long public career, was influenced by 'the vicissitudes of courage, of servitude, of favour, or disgrace', to compose successively, 'the history, the panegyric, and the satire of his own times'. At best, however, he 'appears to disdain the prejudices of the people and the flattery of courts when he is 'excited by the generous ambition of pleasing and instructing posterity'.

1. DF, xxx, III, 296.
2. The accusations against Stilicho are 'vaguely stated in the language of flattery and hatred' (DF, xxx, III, 296); and cf. the remarks on history being often equated with these qualities, DF, x, I, 293.
3. See below, chap. IX, 'The Language of the Moralist'.
4. DF, xl, IV, 224.
Gibbon's celebrated remark that history 'is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind',

introduces a fourth moral category in The Decline and Fall. In its immediate context it might appear as a cynical aside appended to the statement that the reign of the virtuous Antoninus had 'the rare advantage of furnishing very few materials for history'.

It is, in fact, amply illustrated by much of the history of the Empire which he recorded. The reader is struck by the frequency of the terms, 'crimes', 'follies', and 'vices' in his account of the steady decline to which they are mostly applied.

Gibbon's mentor, Tacitus, likewise saw the period he was to record as one characterised by crimes and horrors: 'The history on which I am entering is that of a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles,


2. Jordan (op.cit., p. 80) refers to the saying in a discussion of Gibbon's 'philosophy of history' which includes his 'faith in man's ability to make sense of his experiences and to order... his life'. Unlike the few who exemplify this, the 'heroes', spiritually outside their age, 'most men are fatalistically trapped by history and live lives determined by events which they cannot understand, let alone control. This, he says, 'is the meaning of his remark that history is but a catalog of the crimes and follies of mankind'. Neither the connection nor the 'meaning' is made very clear. Byron's comment on Coleridge comes to mind: 'I wish he would explain his explanation'. (Don Juan, I, 2).
torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace...In Rome there was more awful cruelty. High birth, wealth, the refusal or acceptance of office - all gave ground for accusations, and virtues caused the surest ruin...Slaves were corrupted against their masters, freed men against their patrons; and those that had no enemy were crushed by their friends'.

So he wrote at the beginning of the Histories; and when he came to his Annals, he gave his reader a similar warning of the monotonous frequency of unpleasant themes, 'a series of savage mandates, of perpetual accusations, of traitorous friendships, of ruined innocents...everywhere monotony of subject and satiety'.

In the long catalogue of corruption and the anatomy of cruel tyranny, Gibbon, like those from whom he learned much, the historian Tacitus and the satirist, Juvenal, also found a spate of material. The pages of The Decline and Fall show how this side of human nature runs throughout the work.

'We are fatigued', Gibbon wrote early in his story, 'with the disgusting relation to Nero's crimes and follies'. A little later he suggested: 'The vices and follies of Elagabalus might appear to have been adorned by fancy and blackened by prejudice. Yet confining ourselves to public scenes displayed before the Roman people and attested by grave and contemporary historians, their inexpressible infamy surpasses that of any other age or country'.

Referring to the ostentation of a section of the Roman nobility in the fourth century, Gibbon cited Ammianus' charge that they 'assume an unbounded licence

1. Histories, I, 2, tr. C.H. Moore, Loeb ed. 1925. Tacitus went on, however, to admit examples of virtue also.
3. After a thorough study of the Satires, he wrote: 'J'ai fini Juvenal que je regrette beaucoup de n'avoir pas plutôt connu, et qui sera désormais un de mes auteurs favoris'. (JB, 17me, Sept. 1763).
4. DF, iii, I, 82.
5. DF, vi, I, 160.
of vice and folly'.\textsuperscript{1} A few pages further on he noted that the same historian 'exposes with equal indignation the vices and follies of the common people'. He then went on to refer to Juvenal's equally strong expressions about the crowds and their obsession with chariot racing, and maintained that both the historian and the satirist 'painted from life'.\textsuperscript{2} 'The crime and folly of the court of Ravenna' epitomised for Gibbon Roman degradation in the face of Alaric's advance on Italy.\textsuperscript{3} And, after surveying the depressing story of the Byzantine emperors, he tried to rise above the sordid scene and take a broad moral view from a more elevated position: 'A being of the nature of man, endowed with the same faculties, but with a longer measure of existence, would cast a smile of pity and contempt on the crimes and follies of human ambition so eager in a narrow span to grasp at a precarious and short lived enjoyment'.\textsuperscript{4}

By the time we reach, in the forty-eighth chapter, this echo of the original remark found in the third, we are convinced that Gibbon has substantiated his claim. The catalogue of vices, follies and crimes, either referred to generically or described specifically, has continued throughout the story of the Western Empire and becomes even more oppressive in his survey of Byzantine affairs. So conscious is the author himself of this effect that, confronted with two royal assassinations in a single year, he experienced something of Tacitus' reaction to the 'monotony' and 'satiety' of such shocking events. 'I am at a loss, he admitted, 'how to vary the narrative of similar crimes'.\textsuperscript{5} Actions of this kind make up

\textsuperscript{1} DF, xxxi, III, 312.  
\textsuperscript{2} DF, xxxi, III, 322nn. 61, 62.  
\textsuperscript{3} DF, xxi, III, 339.  
\textsuperscript{4} DF, xlviii, V, 258.  
\textsuperscript{5} DF, xxv, III, 66.
such a large part of Gibbon's account that we find him again and again obliged to use one of these pairs of terms, 'vices and follies' or 'crimes and follies', as he viewed the sorry line of characters passing before him.

It is significant that in almost every instance he applied the terms to despotic rulers or to the parastic court clustered round them. There was a similar association in the mind of Tacitus as he recorded the history of the early empire. 'These moral diseases, in Tacitus' view, are all consequent on the loss of freedom'.¹ For Gibbon also, irresponsible autocracy seemed to be the basic evil for a nation or society, since only within an atmosphere of liberty could human nature realise its true dignity and exercise its moral choice. Often, especially in the Eastern Empire, the sycophantic nobility had surrendered their honour to purchase the favour of the ruler. It was so when Michael III, a true successor to Nero or Elagabalus, sat on the Byzantine throne. Here was a ruler who presented a unique 'imitation of their vices' and 'who considered pleasure as the object of life and virtue as the enemy of pleasure'.² In this situation the real power lay in the hands of his mother, the empress of Theodora. 'With Theodora, all gravity and wisdom retired from the court; their place was supplied by the alternative dominion of vice and folly'.³

The struggle between the two antithetical forces, 'wisdom and virtue', 'vice and folly', can be seen played out on the stage of

2. DF, xlviit, V, 212-3. Alexander, uncle and governor of the young emperor, Constantine VII, 'emulated the reputation of Michael', 'in a rapid career of vice and folly'. (V, 222).
3. DF, xlviii, V, 213.
Gibbon's History. Herein lay a salutary lesson for the rulers of every age. When he reflected on the arbitrary rule of the Byzantine emperors, themselves slaves of their own ceremonies and prisoners of the palace, the philosophic historian observed an inexorable law which operated to remove these rulers one after another. Here, in essence, is the story of the Eastern Empire as told by Gibbon. It is best summed up in the memorable sentence near the end of that long chapter covering six hundred years and sixty emperors: 'The grave is ever beside the throne; the success of a criminal is almost instantly followed by the loss of his prize; and our immortal reason disdains the sixty phantoms of kings who have passed before our eyes and faintly dwell in our remembrance'.

The fact, long recognised, that Gibbon did scant justice to the culture and civilisation of Constantinople, is not the question here. Our immediate concern is his moral view of the unscrupulous ambition of despots and its inevitable result: 'The exercise of boundless despotism is happily checked by the laws of nature and necessity. In proportion to his wisdom and virtue the master of an empire is confined to the path of his sacred and laborious duty. In proportion to his vice and folly, he drops the sceptre too weighty for his hands', as some minister or favourite imperceptibly takes over from him 'the task of the public oppression'.

In such a situation the people are at the mercy of the tyrant's whims and excesses. The reign of the Fatamite caliph Hakem, who was 'delivered by his impiety and despotism from the fear of either God

1. DF, xlviii, V, 259.
2. DF, liii, VI, 94-5.
or man', thus became 'a wild mixture of vice and folly'. On the other hand, while the Empress Theodora exercised a somewhat similar influence over the court during the reign of her young son, the weak and vicious Michael III, his uncle, the Caesar Bardas, was able in some measure to restrain the general depravity. As a generous patron of literature, he was instrumental in opening a palace school for which 'a particle of the treasures of his nephew was sometimes diverted from the indulgence of vice and folly' for the pursuit of nobler things.

It is not surprising that the historian, like his reader, tended to become weary of the uniform tale of vicious, criminal and foolish actions as he wrote 'the annals of a declining monarchy' and 'exposed... the vices of a declining empire'. No wonder that, like Tacitus, he lamented his thankless and unrewarding task. In tracing the development of Roman jurisprudence, he welcomed the opportunity of leaving these depressing annals 'to breathe the pure and invigorating air of the republic'. There was once more a sense of relief when he reached the period of Mahmud the Gaznevide whose rule brought his subjects 'the blessings of prosperity and peace': 'From the paths of blood, and such is the history of nations, I cannot refuse to turn aside to gather some flowers of science or virtue'. The monotonous succession of evil rulers and the consequent lack of relief is felt more heavily in the second part of The Decline and Fall where the focus has moved

1. DF, lviii, VI, 264.
2. DF, liii, VI, 109.
3. DF, xlv, IV, 471 and xxxiv, III, 454. The second reference is to 'the freedman of Onegesius' giving his frank view of Roman ways to the historian Priscus, but this view is in fact a summary of Gibbon's own account of the decline of manners.
4. e.g. Annals, IV, xxxii, 'nobis in arto et inglorius labor'. See also p. 200 of the present chapter.
5. DF, xlv, IV, 471.
6. DF, lvii, VI, 236.
to Constantinople. In introducing his rapid survey of emperors from Heraclius in the seventh century to the 'Latin conquest' in the twelfth, Gibbon gave his frank opinion that 'the subjects of the Byzantine empire, who assume and dishonour the names both of Greeks and Romans present a dead uniformity of abject vices, which are neither softened by the weakness of humanity nor animated by the vigour of memorable crimes'.

The history Gibbon related, thus amply illustrates his famous statement in the third chapter; and in most of his chapters there seem to be few pages which do not either refer to vices, crimes and follies, or exemplify them in particular instances. Yet, while the general character of the later empire is one of degeneracy almost inseparable from the growth of despotism, there is no outright or unqualified condemnation; there are 'some flowers of science and virtue' to be discovered even amongst ignorance and corruption. Gibbon also conceded that though both reason and rhetoric had frequently associated the extensive and powerful empire of Rome with manifold evils, it had at the same time been the source of benefits and social improvements for mankind. There had, for example, been a lessening of the unequal distribution between the east with its 'immemorial possession of arts and luxury' and the harder, more barbarous way of life in the west. And even though Gibbon sometimes moralised in a traditional manner on the exchange of rugged and honest simplicity for soft oriental luxury, he showed a commonsense approach to this characteristic aspect of civilized life. His attitude was not that of a rigid puritanical protester.

1. DF, xlviii, V, 181.
2. So too, Tacitus, Histories, I, 2, admitted, 'Yet this age was not so barren of virtue that it did not display noble examples'.
3. DF, ii, I, 56.
4. DF, ii, I, 56.
5. e.g. DF, i, I, 10; ix, I, 250; xxvii, III, 195, 196; xxxi, III, 329, 353.
but of the student of society who was not misled by false utopianism. It was true that the hard working labourer supported the ease, elegance, pride and even sensuality of the rich, those 'favourites of fortune': 'Such refinements, under the odious name of luxury, have been severely arraigned by the moralists of every age; and it might perhaps be more conducive to the virtue, as well as happiness, of mankind, if all possessed the necessaries, and none the superfluities, of life'. Ideally, and history bore witness to this fact, virtue and happiness are more securely based upon the simple satisfaction of real needs than on the gratification of ever increasing desires for ease and elegance. 'But', Gibbon admitted, 'in the present imperfect condition of society, luxury, though it may proceed from vice or folly, seems to be the only means that can correct the unequal distribution of property'.

To be realistic and accommodate our absolute standards of personal excellence to the greatest good of society, it seemed preferable to achieve a more equable distribution of goods at the expense of some loss of wisdom and virtue.

The solution seemed to lie in the golden mean between wretched poverty and excessive luxury. Moderation was praised by Gibbon in his characters and he saw the avoidance of extremes as the safest path to virtue. The problem with luxury was that it was seldom moderate; it was generally 'profuse', 'extravagant' or 'intemperate'.

1. DF, ii, i, 58-9.
2. Gibbon recognised society as still imperfect but saw progress as a cause of satisfaction. And particularly in his study of the Germanic peoples, he made it clear that a simple, hardy life free from luxury did not constitute virtue nor even a desirable existence. So-called 'virtuous simplicity' was often no more than 'ignorance and poverty'. See DF, ix, i, 235-6.
3. DF, xxxi, iii, 311, 318, 359 and cf. the same thought in ii, i, 45.
The inhabitants of 'opulent' cities 'enjoyed and abused', its benefits and were in turn 'enervated' and 'corrupted' by it. Thus luxury, however it might alleviate the brutish life of uncivilized peoples, seemed in the course of history, notably that of declining empires, to suffer from abuse. Such abuse was almost inseparable from civilization. Both the Greeks of the second century and the Persians of the third, are, unlike the barbarians, described as having been 'long since civilized and corrupted'; and in each instance the process is associated with the spread of luxury. The 'pompous courts' of the Greek cities of Asia 'united the elegance of Athens with the luxury of the East...'. The Persian 'monarch and his nobles transported into the camp the pride and luxury of the seraglio', and these nobles were 'in the bosom of luxury and despotism'.

It is instructive to observe the linguistic companions with which the word 'luxury' is associated in the pages of Gibbon. Only once is it 'innocent'; in other cases it is 'selfish', 'effeminate', 'pompous or sensual', 'extravagant', 'intemperate' and is linked with 'pride', 'ease', 'riot' and with such vices as 'idleness', 'lust' and 'avarice'. Into this word 'luxury' Gibbon often seemed to inject all his contempt for eastern 'effeminacy' or 'corruption' with which he tended to associate it. Its 'progress' amongst the Romans of the late

1. e.g. DF, i, I, 1; xxxi, III, 347.
2. Gibbon uses this verb very frequently in connection with luxury; e.g. vi, I, 140; ix, I, 251; xiv, I, 449; xvii, II, 188.
3. DF, ii, I, 42; vii, I, 229.
4. DF, vi, I, 166.
6. DF, xxxi, III, 322, n. 61, 348; 327; x, I, 283; v, I, 115; cf. xxvii, III, 197 ('indolence'); vi, I, 160; xxxi, III, 310, n. 30. In his Journal for 25 Oct. 1762 (JA), Gibbon had written that both Longinus and Seneca attributed 'the decay of taste to luxury and its attendant vices'.
fourth century he could only explain in terms of 'that indolent despair' which grasps at nothing but the enjoyment of the present moment. He saw this as akin to 'the mad prodigality which prevails in the confusion of a shipwreck, or a siege' as it did then 'amidst the misfortunes and terrors of a sinking nation'. It was this 'effeminate luxury which infected the manners of courts and cities', and which, by instilling 'a secret and destructive poison into the camps and the legions', proved fatal to 'the genuine and ancient principles of Roman discipline'. And this in turn 'may be considered as the immediate cause of the downfall of the empire'.

Here we are in the realm of moral causes: vices, follies, luxury, and a mad and desperate escape to suicidal indulgence instead of a resolute recovery of the ancient virtues and discipline which had made Rome great. It seemed an almost inevitable process of history as one compared the hardy simplicity of the northern nations, or the vigorous civil and military exertions of the Roman republic with the luxury and indolence which characterised an overripe and decadent empire as portrayed by Gibbon.

This causation, or the inevitability of certain results, given certain conditions, constitutes another of the essential categories of The Decline and Fall. In seeking the lessons of history, the philosophic historian looked into his material more deeply than the unenlightened writer in order to arrive at an understanding of the

1. DF, xxvii, III, 196.
2. DF, xxvii, III, 196-7.
3. DF, xxvii, III, 197: 'the pusillanimous indolence' of 'the enervated soldiers (who) abandoned their own and the public defence'.
underlying causes of events and an appreciation of their significant effects. In a well-known but revealing comparison, the young Gibbon had likened history for the philosophic mind to what the Marquis of Dangeau could perceive in gaming: a system, connections, sequence, where others discerned only the caprices of fortune. Thus he declared, the understanding of history is to the philosophic mind that of 'causes' and 'effects'. But as he clearly showed in the course of his Essai, these were not the usual physical or mechanical ones, but psychological and moral: the broad working out of human passions like ambition, or those inevitable results which history recorded again and again in the rise and fall of nations and empires. What Gibbon did was to transfer the notion of 'cause' and 'effect' into the moral and human sphere. Deeply indebted to Montesquieu's Considerations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence, he had exclaimed in his Essai, 'What a wide field opens itself up to my reflection! The theory of general causes would, in the hands of a Montesquieu, become a philosophical history of man. He would display these causes operating in the rise and fall of empires.' Gibbon took up the challenge, working within the moral categories afforded by The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.

It has sometimes been pointed out that Gibbon does not systematically present us with a series of 'causes' of the decline and fall of the empire. Swain, for instance, says that readers 'will be disappointed if they expect to find ... a closely reasoned philosophical or sociological treatise

2. See chap. III above, e.g. pp. 106 & 111.
on the causes of Rome's collapse. Nowhere in his six volumes does he make a full and explicit statement of what, in his opinion, were the great determining causes of that catastrophe. While this is true, it is not the whole truth. There are observations and suggestions scattered throughout The Decline and Fall. Gibbon's method is not to divorce 'causes' from his narrative of events in order to present them in 'a full and explicit', but isolated statement. It is rather the method of Fielding, who called his novels 'histories', and who took the reader into his confidence in order to guide him in the discovery of reasons, motives and the true character beneath deceptive appearances. But though pointing rather than telling, Gibbon never failed to indicate the significant relationships and consequences which we might possibly overlook.

In his second chapter he drew attention to 'the latent causes of decay and corruption'. They are 'latent' because not apparent to contemporaries in a period of public happiness, but they are revealed to the reader of The Decline and Fall. And they are essentially moral causes which can be likened to 'a slow and secret poison' affecting 'the vitals of the empire'. Only two chapters further on, 'the first symptom and cause of the decline of the Roman Empire' is discovered in 'the licentious fury' of the Praetorian bands. It must be noted that only in the psychological and moral realms can something be seen as being at the same time both cause and symptom or cause and effect. A mental or moral

2. DF, I, 61-2.
3. DF, v, I, 114.
attitude produces a chain of self perpetuating consequences. 'Licentious fury', begins if it proves successful once, to reproduce its kind. Similarly Gibbon could refer to 'the spirit of chivalry' as both 'the parent and offspring of the crusades', and of the crusades as 'at once an effect, and a cause, of this memorable institution'.¹ He had pointed out in his Essai² that in the moral world there are many actions which are both cause and effect; or rather there are few, he continued, which do not partake more or less of the nature of both the one and the other.³

At the end of the third volume of The Decline and Fall, he appended his 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West' to bring out both causes and useful lessons. Here he particularly pointed to Rome's 'immoderate greatness' of which her decline was 'the natural and inevitable effect'.⁴ The value of moderation and the dangers of excess are familiar themes in Gibbon's work. Prosperity, which is there so often associated with luxury, 'ripened the principle of decay; the causes of destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest'. Given such moral conditions, which include also the acquisition of foreign vices by the legions, their revolt against imperial authority and the corruption of discipline, in an over-extended empire, the explanation of decline becomes 'simple and obvious'. These are obviously the 'general and determinate causes' of the Essai; military defeats and certain apparently accidental misfortunes being the particular causes which only hastened the inevitable collapse. 'Time or accident' simply 'removed the artificial supports' allowing the colossus to fall under its own weight.⁵ In one

1. DF, lvi, VI, 329; 295. One might think of Augustine's 'poena peccati, peccatum' as illustrative of a similar process.
2. chap. LXXXII, pp. 91-2.
3. Gibbon is proposing an organic, 'biological' alternative to the conventional 'Newtonian' view of cause and effect.
4. DF, IV, 173.
5. DF, IV, 173.
sense, therefore, it is almost superfluous to produce a set of reasons 'why the Roman Empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted so long'.

Swain, who makes reference to the 'General Observations', says that Gibbon's 'sketchy remarks on that occasion should not be taken as expressing the historian's mature views on the matter'. He continues, 'Unfortunately, however, modern commentators sometimes forget this fact and, on the basis of a few sentences in this excursus, they ascribe to Gibbon ideas which he held only momentarily if at all'. This sort of statement makes criticism difficult. The 'Observations' appeared when Gibbon was forty-four; he had studied systematically for over twenty-five years, travelled on the Continent and met many of the most eminent and most intelligent people of the day, had written several works, sat in Parliament for about seven years and been engaged on writing and revising *The Decline and Fall* for a similar period of time. Even if, as may be the case, all or part of the 'Observations' was originally written before the first part of *The Decline and Fall*, we cannot suppose Gibbon's last word to what he then felt might be his last volume, would have appeared without deliberate thought and careful revision. In the case of his early *Essai* about which he later had some reservations, he refused to let it be reprinted. He did not withdraw the 'Observations' but merely altered a single phrase to avoid unnecessary offence. No writer as careful and fastidious as Gibbon would append to his completed work a peroration containing ideas

1. DF, IV, 174.
3. It all depends on Gibbon's reference to 'the house of Bourbon', see below p. 228 and note 4, which he claimed in his *Memoirs* had been written before Louis XVI's accession to the throne, that is before 1774. He began *The Decline and Fall* in February 1773. See Memoirs, 174, n.48 and Bonnard's comment (p.328) beginning, 'If the concluding observations...were really written before Louis XVI ascended the throne...'
he considered as immature or no longer accurately expressing his views. Nor is it clear why we should accept some statements of a mature historian in the body of his history at their face value but dismiss certain critical observations on that history as unworthy of serious consideration. It is more reasonable to conclude that if Gibbon saw the value of adding such observations to his completed story of the Western empire, he would be sure that they adequately expressed his reflections on the history he had written. C.N. Cochrane, in his study of the mind of Edward Gibbon, regards the 'Observations' as the locus classicus of his treatment of causation, while Francois Furet called them 'the only genuine analytical commentary on the problem that gave The Decline and Fall its title'. And their emphasis is all on the moral factors.

In various parts of the work, we can see Gibbon assigning causes and indicating effects, as he surveyed the course of events. Some of these have to do directly with the Roman Empire, others concern the many interrelated movements, like Christianity, Islam, the Crusades, themselves seen as contributory causes of decline. In the famous chapters xv and xvi Gibbon dealt with what he discreetly called the 'secondary causes' of the rise and establishment of Christianity. These were for Gibbon essentially the primary or 'natural' causes, the supernatural causes being necessarily excluded by his philosophic view. In chapters 1 and li it is with the human reasons for the rise of Islam that he is concerned and in the following chapter there is a definite suggestion as to the 'causes' of 'the decline and fall of the

1. See Cochrane's discussion of Gibbon's views on 'the problem of causation in history' ('The Mind of Edward Gibbon', op.cit., pp. 154ff.)
2. 'Civilization and Barbarism in Gibbon's History', in Bowersock, op.cit., p. 162.
empire of the caliphs'. These 'causes' make an interesting comparison with those of the decline of Rome. Here once more we find the corruption of freedom and courage through foreign contacts; the loss of 'freedom and martial virtues' as 'the active power of enthusiasm had decayed'; the rise of faction and fanaticism, both mixed with avarice; the rule of cruel and jealous tyrants; the relaxation of discipline; and just like Rome's 'immoderate greatness', 'the most obvious cause was the weight and magnitude of the empire itself'. These moral causes of decay are so reminiscent of the decline of the Western empire, that Gibbon felt constrained to comment: 'So uniform are the mischiefs of military despotism that I seem to repeat the story of the praetorians of Rome'.

There is also a quite explicit concern with the 'causes' and 'effects' of the Crusades and of the chivalry with which they are so closely related. Gibbon's plan did not include a full history of the Crusades, and having dealt with the earlier expeditions, he added ironically: 'A regular story of the crusades would exhibit the perpetual return of the same causes and effects'. He was not avoiding a discussion of 'causes' but only the dullness of mere repetition. He therefore directed his reader to Fleury's 'accurate and rational view of the causes and effects of the crusades'. As with other notable movements, secular

1. DF, lli, VI, 53.
2. DF, lli, VI, 49; 51-3.
3. DF, VI, 51.
4. DF, lviii, VI, 269ff.; 329.
5. DF, lix, VI, 338.
6. As he says in the same place (p. 338), 'a brief parallel may save the repetition of a tedious narrative'
7. DF, lviii, VI, 278, n.22.
or religious, his concern was with the human and natural causes and no more. This is in marked contrast to Cardinal Baronius, one of his ecclesiastical sources, who, as he noted in an earlier volume, was 'more inclined to seek the cause of great events in heaven than on earth'. ¹ But Gibbon, in dealing with the crusaders' capture of Antioch, a subject long associated with visions and supernatural aid, made it clear that his interest, unlike that of the contemporary chroniclers, was only in 'the human causes of victory'. ² When it was a matter of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and similar physical phenomena, the philosophic historian regarded such happenings as lying outside his domain of 'cause' and 'effect': 'Without assigning the cause, history will distinguish the periods in which these calamitous events have been rare or frequent'. ³ There was more instruction to be found in the pursuit of moral explanations and moral results.

Throughout The Decline and Fall the most significant and influential movements of the centuries are examined to find their reasons and trace their consequences; and this philosophic quest has led the historian far in both time and space. 'Our curiosity has been tempted to visit the most remote countries of Europe and Asia to explore the causes and the authors of the long decay of the Byzantine monarchy', Gibbon wrote. ⁴ Here again emerges the essential difference between the historian and the 'dull annalist' or chronicler, these latter being exemplified by the sources on which Gibbon had to rely for this part of his story.

1. DF, xxxiii, III, 428, n. 25.
2. DF lviii, VI, 313.
3. DF, xliii, IV, 464. 'Their times and effects appear to lie beyond the reach of human curiosity, and the philosopher will discreetly abstain from the prediction of earthquakes...'. Perhaps the 1754 earthquake at Lisbon came to Gibbon's mind as he wrote these sentences.
4. DF, lxix, VII, 218.
He stressed the distinction. Facts and events these writers have in abundance, but the distinguishing marks of the true historian, a concern with manners, character, motives and underlying causes, are absent. 'A succession of priests or courtiers tread in each other's footsteps in the same path of servitude and superstition: their views are narrow, their judgment is feeble or corrupt; and we close the volume of copious barrenness, still ignorant of the causes of events, the characters of the actors, and the manners of the times, which they celebrate or deplore'.

There is no doubt that as he approached the end of his history, Gibbon expected the reader to have a clear idea of these matters. This had been a definite part of his design; and if he had been successful, he felt that the causes of Rome's decline must have emerged from his narrative. He even censured the 'philosophic' Montesquieu for his apparent ignorance that the Goths after Valens' defeat never abandoned Roman territory. And why did Gibbon say that this 'error is inexcusable'? Simply because 'it disguises the principal and immediate cause of the fall of the Western Empire of Rome'.

In view of all this, to point to the lack of 'a full and explicit statement' of the main causes of Rome's fall reflects a somewhat superficial view of *The Decline and Fall*. It also tends to ignore the method and obscure the function of the philosophic historian, which is

1. DF, xlviii, V, 182. The particular reference is to the Byzantine historians belonging to the Commenian family.
2. DF, xxvi, III, 139, n. 143. Gibbon also made reference to Montesquieu's *Considérations* and to the alleged omission of a cause of Rome's decline in chapter xxi, II, 414. It is interesting that Gibbon expected the word *Causes* in Montesquieu's title ('*Considérations sur les Causes de la Grandeur* &c.) to be exploited to the full.
not to foist a ready-made list of 'causes' on a receptive reader, but rather to discover with him underlying reasons and motives as they emerge through events and characters. In this process the philosophic historian assumes a philosophic reader. Together they survey the scene of human affairs which the historian presents. Gibbon wrote for the 'critical reader', 'the prudent reader', 'the thinking mind'. As he wrote by way of introduction to a long extract from the historian Ammianus Marcellinus: 'The judicious reader...will perhaps detect the latent prejudices...of Ammianus; but he will surely observe with philosophic curiosity, the interesting and original picture of the manners of Rome'. If the historian has done his part, there is no need for him to do for 'the judicious reader' what that reader can do for himself. 'Causes' should not always be abstracted and listed in isolation from the events they produced; rather they should become apparent as these events are unfolded. But from time to time the historian will comment; and, as a new turn of events reveals a further 'cause' or 'effect', he will draw the reader's attention to its significance. On the first page of his work Gibbon opened his plan to the reader. It was to describe the condition of the Roman Empire and then 'to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall'; and he suggested that the effects of these events were 'still felt by the nations of the earth'. On his last page he reminded the reader who had followed this decline and fall to its conclusion, that its 'various causes and progressive effects are connected with many of the events most interesting in human annals'; and these events covered

1. Gibbon's many words to the reader and the terms in which he addresses him are instructive. See notes 2 and 3 below and also DF, xxiii, II, 465, n. 24; xxv, III, 40-41; xli, IV, 307; Ivi, VI, 174, n. 1; lix, VI, 346, n. 34.
2. DF, liii, VI, 98, n. 82; xxvii, III, 207; xxxiii, III, 429.
3. DF, xxi, III, 311.
4. DF, i, I, 1.
5. DF, lxvi, VII, 338, Gibbon's 'Final Conclusion'.

217
the history of the intervening centuries.

Even before his experience in Rome, Gibbon had pondered this rise and decline of nations. Reading Cluveri's Italia Antiqua in preparation for his Italian tour, he expressed his astonishment at the luxury and wealth of the Etruscans but saw in that ancient people also, the softening and enervating effect of luxury. Their colony between the Alps and the Appenines was, about the year 600 B.C., also 'riche, puisannte et amolie par les delices. Sa Metropole l'etoit encore davantage. Elle panchoit deja vers sa ruine. Combien de siecles ne leur a-t-il pas fallu pour cette progression lente mais sure qui conduit une nation de la barbarie, à l'industrie, aux arts, au luxe et à la molesse? N'en doutons point'.

Since such a moral pattern is to be found in the development of nations through civilization to corruption and decay, there are lessons here for the philosophic mind. This is one of Gibbon's tenets in The Decline and Fall. Having completed the story of the fall of the Western empire and thus, as he said, having abundantly discharged his engagements with the public, he dared to look forward with the hopeful suggestion that 'the history of the Greek emperors may still afford a long series of instructive lessons'. A few pages further on, in his philosophical postscript, 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West', he wrote that 'this awful revolution may be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age'. Thus in sending these volumes to Suzanne Necker he could confidently promise her that she would find in them an interesting and instructive picture

1. JB, 26me. Octobre, 1763. Gibbon refers to him as 'Cluvier', occasionally 'Cluver'. For the various forms of his name see Bonnard's note in JB, p. 89, n. 3.
2. See the Author's Preface, P.S. March 1, 1781, DF, I, xli.
3. DF, xxxviii, IV, 171.
4. DF, IV, 175-6.
of the times. His most general and best known statement of the instructive value and use of history comes in his account of the policy of the Western emperors towards the Christians and the parallel he drew between these rulers and the monarchs of modern Europe whom he found 'more criminal' in their persecutions than their ancient counterparts. 'History', Gibbon declared, 'which undertakes to record the transactions of the past, for the instruction of future ages, would ill deserve that honourable office, if she condescended to plead the cause of tyrants, or to justify the maxims of persecution'.

There could scarcely be a more direct or forceful statement both of the task and 'office' of history and of the historian's moral duty in this regard. At the outset of his quest for a subject Gibbon had contrasted the contemptible role of the mere chronicler with the 'honourable' calling of the historian. Here, as he looked back over his first volume, he declared that 'honourable office' to be inseparable from the historian's obligation to record for future instruction and to expose tyranny and the destruction of the rights of conscience for all to see. If this record seemed often to contain little more than examples of vice and folly, then the obvious lesson for the present and for future ages was the inevitable consequence of abandoning freedom, virtue and wisdom. The English governing class, L.P. Curtis suggested, 'agreed upon fundamentals;' they 'believed in the supremacy of the moral will. Nor laws nor institutions (and so thought Gibbon) might avail to build the good society unless those laws and institutions

1. Letters, No. 498, 26/2/81, II, 262, referring to the present of volumes II and III made to her at that time.
2. DF, xvi, II, 87.
3. So also, having completed his initial plan with the fall of the Western Empire, Gibbon saw fit to recommend his finished work to the instruction of his contemporaries ('General Observations', IV, 175-6 and cf. Memoirs, p. 164.)
4. 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in F.W. Hilles, op. cit., p. 79.
were informed with the principles of freedom, virtue, and wisdom'. It was on 'the firm basis' of wisdom and virtue that the Roman republic had rested; their loss undermined the foundations of the empire. During that happy period before the decline set in almost uninterrupted, 'the two Antonines...governed the Roman world forty-two years with the same invariable spirit of wisdom and virtue'.

The chief lesson is clearly shown: true civilization and happiness flow from wisdom and virtue; barbarism and misery from folly and vice, those passions which have all too frequently taken possession of humanity and especially of its leaders, and which thus make up so much of recorded history. This has been largely the story of ambition, war and conquest and it will ever be so, 'as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors'.

The didactic or exemplary view of history is, in terms of its best known expression, 'philosophy teaching by examples'. This view, very familiar to the eighteenth century, is often associated with

1. 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in F.W. Hilles, op.cit., p. 79.
2. DF, xlix, V, 280-1.
3. DF, iii, I, 84.
4. DF, ix, I, 255; cf. also iv, I, 93.
5. DF, i, I, 6.
7. See Dorothy Koch, English Theories Concerning the Nature and Uses of History, 1735-1791, chap. 1. In her Introduction, p. xv, she refers to Edmund Bolton's Hypercritica; or a Rule of Judgment, for Writing or Reading our History's, 1722 where he cites Isaac Casaubon who "tells us, as from out of the Ancient Authors, that history is nothing but a kind of Philosophy using examples."
Bolingbroke's statement and his exposition of it.¹ Yet, as Goldsmith pointed out, Bolingbroke did not, like some of his predecessors, try to 'make history the great fountain of all knowledge; he very wisely confines its benefits, and supposes them to consist rather in deducing general maxims from particular facts, than in illustrating maxims by the application of historical passages'.² Gibbon likewise turned frequently from a narrative or a description or an analysis of manners, to speak directly to his readers, sometimes in the first person, but mainly in those general statement of comment and principle, which he abstracted from special details of his account and which rise above the particularities of time and place. In this way he not only asserted the instructive value of history but also demonstrated it throughout his work.

This is very far, however, from the old providential view which Gibbon had found in Bossuet. While rejecting a meaning, purpose or divine direction in the events and 'revolutions' he recorded, Gibbon brought out from time to time certain instructive lessons to be shared with his 'philosophic' reader. These included both that increased 'knowledge of human nature' which the perceptive study of history could furnish, and many others such as the wide consequences of our actions. On the one hand, were to be seen the certainty of retribution for the vicious tyrant, the strong probability that those who take the sword will perish by the sword, the futility and frustration of selfish ambition, and perhaps most evident of all, the assurance of the censure

¹ Bolingbroke, 'Letters on the Study and use of History', Works, II, 177, introduced the maxim thus: 'I will answer you by quoting what I have read somewhere or other, in Dionysius Halicarn...' He enlarged upon it, on pp. 179, 191, etc.
of posterity; on the other hand, there were instances of the love and esteem of the people for the just and merciful ruler, the blessing of an age of peace and prosperity, and the praise of succeeding generations for those who had contributed to the happiness of mankind.

Gibbon espoused, but without any forcing or distortion, the moral-utilitarian view expressed by Tacitus. 'The chronicling of these details', said the Roman historian, 'may yet serve a useful end: for few men distinguish right from wrong, by native intelligence: the majority are schooled by the experience of others'. The young Gibbon had experienced, and for that reason acclaimed, the use of eloquence 'to rouse the sleeping sentiments of the heart and incite it to acts of virtue' since 'it is the heart and not the head which needs to be moved. And his own eloquence was employed not in the pulpit, in public assemblies or in parliament, but in writing 'the annals of a declining monarchy'. If this faithful record, presented according to 'the truth of history' yielded often unpleasant and apparently unedifying results, then these must still be told. In the context of history as a catalogue of crimes and follies, the melancholy 'aspect of Gibbon's historical thought', Jordan maintained that 'he is saved from utter despair only by his taste for irony. There is nothing to be learned from a study of history precisely because the only lesson is despair'. Needless to say Jordan does not document this from The Decline and Fall. The fact is that while the vices, crimes and follies of mankind do not make pleasurable reading and, as Gibbon admitted, often satiate or disgust both the historian

2. See JA, 22 August, 1762 and above chap. II, p. 73.
4. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, pp. 80-1.
and his readers, history nevertheless 'undertakes to record the transactions of the past', whatever they may be, 'for the instruction of future ages'.

In the context of this his most famous statement of the purpose and use of history, Gibbon applied the lesson in two ways very characteristic of his approach: a parallel between ancient and modern times; and a moral judgement on two rulers whom he brought before the bar of posterity. In this account of the conduct of the Western emperors towards the Christians, he drew a parallel and a contrast between these emperors and two kings of modern Europe whom he found more criminal in their persecutions than their ancient predecessors.

The obligation to instruct as well as entertain can be seen in its influence on his selection and treatment of material. Though 'wars and the administration of public affairs are the principal subjects of history', he wrote, 'the number of persons interested in these busy scenes is very different, according to the different condition of mankind'. To Gibbon, manners were 'more instructive' and enlightening than mere facts or political and military events. Consequently he interrupted his narrative at this point with a chapter on the life and manners of the Germanic peoples. In the course of that chapter, after referring to their use of both money and barter, and of the value they set on their own crude artifacts, he suggested that, 'to a mind capable of reflection such leading facts convey more instruction than a tedious detail of subordinate circumstances'.

2. See above, 'The judgement of posterity' in this chapter.
3. See above, chap. III, p. 103 concerning the selection of details.
4. DF, ix, I, 255.
5. Chap. ix.
6. DF, ix, I, 238.
From this point of view he could write of 'the agreeable history of the arts', but of 'the more agreeable history of human manners';¹ and he also pointed out that there was 'room for a very interesting work' devoted to the connexion between the languages and manners of nations'.² Again and again he mentioned 'national manners'³ or gave a sketch of the manners of a particular people,⁴ or of 'the manners of the times'.⁵

Though it might appear to those who looked for a more conventional history in terms of wars and public affairs that Gibbon was turning aside from the true course of his narrative, he was ready to defend his continuing concern not only with morals as characteristic of peoples and periods, but also with the corruption or reform of morals and with significant changes in them, either under coercion or due to altered conditions of life.⁶ And he justified this in terms of 'instruction'. These minor 'revolutions', like that great revolution suggested by this title,⁷ he considered full of instruction to 'the philosophic mind'. The picture of 'human manners' such as may be displayed in the simple account of a town or a family is both 'interesting and instructive, and for this reason Gibbon indulged in such 'digressions'

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¹ DF, ii, I, 47.
² DF, i, I, 12, n. 38.
³ e.g. xxxv, III, 489; xlii, IV, 368, n. 10; xliv, IV, 529, n. 179; lvi, VI, 178.
⁴ The Germans in chap. ix (cf. also reference to 'the laws and manners of the Germans', lxi, VI, 466); the 'Digression on the Family of Courtenay', VI, 466-474; the Moors, xxxiii, III, 426, and n. 18; the Arabs, chap. 1; the long excursion on the 'manners of the pastoral nations' in chap. xxvi and Gibbon's reference back to it at the beginning of chap. lxiv, VII, 1, n.1.
⁵ e.g. xxxii, III, 378; IV, 178; xl, IV, 235-240 and 237, n. 50; xlii, IV, 371, n. 16; xliv, V, 182; liii, VI, 103 & 100 n. 90; lvi, VI, 211.
⁶ See DF, ii, I, 44; iii, I, 86; xxxviii, IV, 129, n. 66; lvi, VI, 181, 183; lviii, VI, 278.
⁷ DF, IV, 175-6.
⁸ DF, xxvi, III, 121.
as that on the Courtenay family. The famous chapter on Roman jurisprudence is the most notable example of his turning aside from his narrative to treat the manners and laws of a people. Its insertion was strongly criticised by the historian, John Whitaker. While finding in the chapter 'much learning, much good sense, and more parade of both', Whitaker listed it amongst Gibbon's many irrelevancies: 'What has such a disquisition on all the laws of all the Romans, to do with a history of the decline and fall of the empire?' There was, of course, the obvious reply that an exhaustive account of the origin and development of the system of laws which the Roman people had bequeathed to the world, was essential both to an understanding of 'that great people' even in their decline, and to an informed judgement on the legal achievement and administration of the codifier. As Carl Becker put it, expressing a commonplace of modern historical thinking: 'We cannot properly know things as they are unless we know "how they came to be what they are."'

But Gibbon had already justified the inclusion of this chapter in its opening paragraph, that is, in terms of the moral categories we have been considering. An investigation of Roman jurisprudence and its codifier he saw as necessary in the interests of historic truth and for the informed judgement of posterity. Being no mere chronicler, he felt it his responsibility to arrive at a fair estimate of the work of Justinian, whose character had long suffered from either flattery or invective. And how could justice be done without a thorough

1. DF, VI, 466-474.
2. chap. xliv.
4. ibid., p. 52.
survey of that emperor's contribution to the European heritage of Roman law?

Invoking 'the truth of history' at the beginning of the chapter, Gibbon declared: 'Attached to no party, interested only for the truth and candour of history...I shall trace the Roman jurisprudence from Romulus to Justinian, appreciate the labours of that emperor, and pause to contemplate the principles of a science so important to the peace and happiness of society'. But the statement also pays tribute to the intrinsic value of the subject as enlightening and instructive -- 'The laws of a nation form the most instructive portion of its history'.

Its omission would therefore greatly diminish the usefulness and instruction of Gibbon's work; and we can be certain that its instructive value alone would have secured its inclusion in The Decline and Fall, since no philosophic historian could forgo the contemplation 'of a science so important to the peace and happiness of society'.

The passage not only gives a very clear statement of what Gibbon considered the nature and function of history, but also shows how this concept could determine his choice of material. While he saw the historian fundamentally committed to 'the truth of history', he still enjoyed some latitude in the selection of his subject matter and in the emphases he placed on certain aspects of it. And here the instructive value of the material itself was a major determinant.

1. DF, xliv, IV, 471. Its relevance to the titular theme of the work is also made clear. The reader is left in no doubt that the codification did nothing to arrest the decline of the empire and that the government of Justinian, which united 'the evils of liberty and servitude' with legal oppression, actually contributed to it.
2. DF, xliv, IV, 471.
There was often also a measure of unsought-for freedom when dealing with conflicting sources or an inconsistent account in the same source. In such cases probability and 'the knowledge of human nature' would guide the historian, but once again, he would be influenced by the opportunity for allowing some moral lesson to come through. Gibbon had written in an early work: 'Lorsqu'il s'agit d'une histoire, dont les variations permettent quelque liberté à la critique, et même à la conjecture, l'historien choisira parmi les faits contestés ceux qui s'accordent les mieux avec ses principes, et ses vues...Lorsque la chronologie proscrit un trait de morale, Plutarch méprisoit la chronologie'.

Gibbon had not forgotten this maxim of the moralist, Plutarch. When he came to write his own History, chronology became less important than place, and both these dimensions were seen to be ultimately less important than moral values. After the completion of that work, he wrote in the margin of his Herodotus: 'Rousseau has most wisely observed that the most incredible narratives of Herodotus may be esteemed as moral lessons'. How much more interesting and instructive, we may be sure, must Gibbon have considered that most credible narrative of The Decline and Fall, verified as it was by 'the truth of history' and 'the knowledge of human nature'.

Throughout the course of his narrative, Gibbon was often aware of striking parallels and likenesses. It was not so much that history repeats itself, as that, given the more or less constant passions of human nature, similar situations may be expected to recur. Whether or not he subscribed to Hume's idea of 'the chief use of history' being...
'to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature', he did suggest that 'the different characters that mark the civilised nations of the globe may be ascribed to the use, and the abuse of reason'.

These fairly constant operations of human passions allowed the philosophic historian, as we have seen, to make some generalisations. Hence we find him remarking that the same causes have produced the same effects or that the narrative he is writing sounds almost identical with what he had written earlier or even apologising for repetition of similar material. Thus the great sweep of his span of history suggested to him many parallels, not only ancient and medieval, but also from modern times. These seemed to add relevance and presented him with a ready means by which the lessons of the past could be brought to the attention of 'the present age'. He may, for various reasons, have abandoned his early projects of writing modern history, but to him history could never be remote. The 'awful revolution' of Rome's fall could itself be 'usefully applied to the instruction of the present age'.

Just a little later in these 'General Observations', he followed up this statement with the remark that an 'Arcadius or Honorius may again slumber on the thrones of the house of Bourbon', a parallel which was resented by Louis XVI. In reply, Gibbon neither disclaimed the allusion nor examined the likeness, but pointed out that it had been written before the accession of that king of France.

1. DF, xxvi, III, 74.
2. e.g. between Caracalla's actions and those of Charles XII (vi, I, 150-2); between the Phoenicians in the ancient world and the Spanish empire in the new (vi, I, 174); concerning Diocletian, 'the parallel of Charles the Fifth, however, will naturally offer itself to our mind'. (xiii, I, 415); and there is the parallel between Constantine and Peter the Great (xviii, II, 222).
3. DF, IV, 175-6.
4. It appeared in the first edition, but was later altered to 'thrones of the South'. See DF, IV, 178 and Bury's Appendix 5 to that volume, p. 562.
The 'myth of Rome' and its lessons exercised a powerful influence over the men of Gibbon's day. Michel Baridon has traced this image in the outlook of the Augustans and it continued to hold its place throughout the eighteenth century, and indeed into our own day. To take but two instances from the period when young Gibbon was turning his thoughts to the writing of history. We find in 1759 Edward Wortley Montagu's Reflections on the rise and fall of the ancient republics adapted to the present state of affairs in Great Britain. Drawing a clear comparison with these republics, he came to a melancholy conclusion: 'As the British state and the ancient free republics were founded upon the same principles...it is impossible not to perceive an equal resemblance between theirs and our manners, in proportion as they and we alike deviated from those first principles.' And like Pitt addressing the House of Commons, Montagu saw the British constitution seized by corruption and decay. He wrote of England in the same terms as Gibbon wrote of Rome. Luxury, he said, had been imported by Charles II at the Restoration. 'The contagious influence of that bane to public virtue and liberty corrupted our manners, enervated our bodies, and debased our minds, whilst our military spirit subsided in proportion as the love of pleasure increased;...to this universal luxury and this only, we must impute the amazing progress of corruption which seized the very vitals of our constitution'. A few years later, The North Briton stressed the instructive value of history in a parallel between Rome and Britain. 'There is no study more entertaining or instructive than history: nor is there any history so applicable to our government

as that of ancient Rome. We clearly see in it the fatal rocks and shelves upon which a great and flourishing empire was wrecked'.

The Decline and Fall certainly reflected this attitude which was so much a part of the political climate of Gibbon's England. But its grand and almost universal sweep of history made it far more than a mere 'tract for the times', and its lessons were more often implicit than explicit. Still, there is no doubt that Gibbon worked with two empires in mind, and could not fail to sense the parallels as he wrote. At the time when the Lord Chancellor's request for a vindication of British policy addressed to the courts of Europe interrupted his work on the decline of the Western empire, he wrote to his friend Deyverdun: 'L'homme de lettres et l'homme d'Etat, qu'il vous suffise de savoir que la decadence de Deux Empires, le Romain et le Britannique s'avancent à pas égaux'. And he added, recalling his unbroken silence in parliament, 'J'ai contribué cependant bien plus efficacement au premier'. Again, while working on his fourth volume, and happily retired from political life so that, as he told Deyverdun, he could once more become 'homme philosophe et historien', he drew the parallel between declining


2. Gibbon sent the draft of this Mémoire Justificatif pour servir de réponse à l'Exposé de la Cour de France to Lord Chancellor Weymouth in May 1779 with a covering letter which is dated 10/8/79 (Letters, II, 224); he apparently continued to work on it in July and it was published in October. See also MW, V, pp.1ff.

Corruption and decay had been fatal to states and empires in the past, and Gibbon saw this as a moral law which continued to operate in his own day. Here was a lesson which he could be sure would strike a response from his contemporaries in England. Corruption and decay among the ruling classes in the Roman Empire was a theme which he stressed over and over again. 'Whether or not Gibbon intended his History to be a moral directed at the ruling classes of his own day - which was at least part of Tacitus' motive - cannot be easily proved...The loss of virtue, wisdom, and power by the Roman aristocracy caused Rome's fall - and let the British ruling classes beware'.

Parallels suggested themselves between Rome and Britain, particularly in the matter of constitutional liberty and colonial policy; and there seem to be references in The Decline and Fall to George III and the American revolutionaries. Gibbon's letters make clear his feelings on these issues, and it has been suggested that in discussing the Roman rebels who had presumed 'to sully the majesty of the purple', 'some may have lived in the sixth century,...but one of them was named George Washington'. Even if once deterred from writing modern history by fear of party politics, Gibbon allowed himself the right

1. ibid., No. 571, 20/5/83, II, 326.
2. Jordan, Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 226.
to draw lessons expected of a philosophic historian; and there were passages in chapter xxv of *The Decline and Fall* which were seized on by his former friends, the 'patriots', who wished 'to damn the work and the Author'.¹ Indeed, the events of the day, both at home and in America, must have seemed like a modern commentary on Roman despotism and imperial faction, especially as Gibbon sat in the House of Commons during the writing of his second and third volumes. 'Parliamentary opposition to George III and Lord North was then reaching its height, while the American Revolution was tearing the British Empire to pieces, and Gibbon could not remain untouched by the prevailing excitement. What he had heard from Burke in Parliament during the afternoon, and from Fox at the coffee-houses in the evening was still vivid in his mind as he wrote about Rome the next morning. So many Whig ideas found their way into his narrative that these two volumes may be called a Whig version of the decline and fall of Rome'.²

One of the most obvious, yet generally unheeded lessons of history, to which Gibbon and many of his contemporaries drew attention in imperial Rome, was the need for protection of public liberty against despotic rulers.³ It was apparent even in an age of 'general happiness' like that of the Antonines, with its 'honest pride of virtue'. The melancholy and disturbing fact was 'the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of a single man'.⁴ This was inherent in 'the obvious definition of a monarchy' with which Gibbon shrewdly began his chapter on the 'golden age' of the Antonines:⁵ 'a state

¹. Letters, No. 500, to Dorothea Gibbon, 13/4/81, II, 266.
². Swain, op.cit., p. 134. See also p. 135.
³. DF, iii, I, 65ff.
⁴. DF, iii, I, 86.
⁵. 'Golden' that is in relation to the 'age of iron' which preceded it. (DF, iii, I, 86).
in which a single person, by whatever name he may be distinguished, is entrusted with the execution of the laws, the management of the revenue, and the command of the army'. Such a situation, as history shows, is precarious, and 'unless the public liberty is protected by intrepid and vigilant guardians, the authority of so formidable a magistrate will soon degenerate into despotism'. This is part of Gibbon's thesis, exemplified in the story of Rome, in the Byzantine Empire, in Persia and amongst the Turks; and it is applicable also to eighteenth-century monarchies or twentieth-century dictatorships. The question of the royal prerogative was relevant to Hanoverian England just as it is to present-day Australia. Some of these lessons of The Decline and Fall are perennial.

'The character of a single man' is too precarious a foundation to support the continued happiness and well being of nations. It is a recurring thought in Gibbon. When the extensive empire of Rome 'fell into the hands of a single person', no one was safe and there was nowhere to escape. Even the happiest period of that empire turned out to be merely a short relief between the 'monsters' who preceded it and 'the monstrous vices' of Commodus who followed. And some of the best and most active minds in England, were fearful that 'the "Augustan Age" of the Georges would lead to a succession of absolute, tyrannical Tiberiuses and Caligulas', while 'to American colonials of the late eighteenth century, George III was a tyrant as odious as Tiberius'.

1. DF, iii, I, 65.
2. DF, iii, I, 89-90 'the world became a safe and dreary prison for his enemies'.
3. 'These monsters' were Tiberius, Caligula, Nero and Domitian, DF, iii, I, 87. For Commodus, see iv, I, 92.
4. See J.W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 62. He refers to Goldsmith, Boswell, Burke, the Pitts, Swift and others on this and following pages.
Indeed, in the year that the final volumes of *The Decline and Fall* were published, Gibbon, expressing once again the sentiment found in that work, exclaimed at the thought the king's insanity: 'that three Kingdoms should depend on the brain of one man!' And taking a text from Cicero, he added, in this situation, 'the Salus populi must be the first law'.

Yet there is a reciprocal relationship here. The preservation and welfare of the people depended on their own spirit and their jealous care of their liberty. The lesson is reiterated in *The Decline and Fall*. In one of his instructive parallels, Gibbon contrasted the feeble acquiescence of Roman forces in an ignominious treaty made by the emperor Jovian, with the very different conduct of the freedom-loving citizens of ancient Greece in a similar situation: the Greeks 'were inspired by the generous enthusiasm of a popular assembly' whereas the degenerate Romans were 'tamely resigning themselves to the secret deliberations and private views of a single person'. In a monarchy, where liberty is always at risk, there must be sufficient restraints and safeguards. Even good and well-intentioned rulers seemed to show that 'absolutely power corrupts absolutely' and Gibbon presented examples of this deterioration of character in Constantine and Theodosius the Great. Of the latter he wrote: 'in a station where none could resist and few would dissuade the fatal consequences of his resentment, the humane monarch was justly alarmed by the consciousness of his infirmity, and of his power'.

obsequiousness, effeminate luxury and corruption, easily become the willing slaves of such tyranny. And this is a complementary lesson to be found in Gibbon's History.¹

In view of Gibbon's fear of an unchecked monarchy so forcibly expressed at the beginning of his third chapter and elsewhere in The Decline and Fall, we might not have been surprised had one of his topical and characteristic footnotes read: 'that the power of the Crown has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished'.² In fact he voted against Dunning's motion, though he moved for an address to the king requesting that parliament be not dissolved till a way had been found to halt the growing influence of the Crown and to remedy other abuses.³ Four years later, freed from the storms of parliament and working quietly on his fourth volume in the retirement of Lausanne, he had second thoughts: 'I am not surprised that you grow sulky', he wrote to Lord Sheffield; 'your free and liberal spirit must disdain a set of Men whose aim is their restoration to power, and whose means may affect the principles of the Constitution'. And he compared the

1. A docile people as the condition of one-man tyranny finds classical expression in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar (I, iii, 103-5; ii, 151, 157).

'And why should Caesar be a tyrant then?
Poor man! I know he would not be a wolf
But that he sees the Romans are but sheep;
Rome, thou hast lost the breed of noble bloods!
..........................................................
When there is in it but one only man.

2. Dunning's motion was passed on 6 April, 1780 and Gibbon's 2nd and 3rd volumes, which end with the 'General Observations' were then being prepared for the press. See Letters, No. 470, 27/3/80, II, 240 and Memoirs, p. 161.

3. Letters, No. 613, 2, 14/2/84, II, 398, n.2.
mildness of Dunning's motion with the much stronger democratic resolutions then before parliament, 'for which you have probably voted as I should probably have done, such is the contagion of party'.

Gibbon's adherence to the instructive value of history, however, is much more than just a warning to the rulers of the nation. It involved the laying bare of the motives which reveal the true nature of men's actions and a display of the consequences of virtue or vice, of justice or selfish and immoderate ambition, in whatever nation and at whatever period they were to be found. Given this conviction of the instruction which a philosophic mind can gain from a full and 'candid' presentation of history, it is little wonder that Gibbon, like Bacon and Bolingbroke, did not favour historical abridgements. Such works tended to squeeze out the essential philosophy and instruction which alone gave life to history. If mere facts were for the philosopher the least interesting part of history, they were also the least instructive part. 'In the barren times of Diocletian', he pointed out, 'history was reduced to dry and confused abridgements, alike destitute of amusement and instruction'. To Bolingbroke, those who are capable of providing a

1. Letters, No. 613, 2, 14/2/84. II, 398. The current resolutions involved the necessity of a ministry having the confidence of the House of Commons, and certain unconstitutional practices arising from the abuse of this principle.
2. 'As for epitomes', wrote Bacon, '(which are certainly the corruptions and moths of histories) I would have them banished'. Works, ed. Spedding, Ellis and Heath, Boston, 1861 (repub. 1976), Vol VIII, p. 424.
4. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', Mémoire, III, 126.
5. DF, xiii, I, 422-3. Cf. his reference to the first thirteen books of Ammianus as 'a superficial epitome' (DF, xxvi, III, 128, n. 116).
detailed account of the actions and characters of men in every age and country, seemed to exercise a dual function: 'Whilst they narrate as historians, they hint often as philosophers', who enable the reader to discover the truth which the example illustrates. Gibbon sought to discharge this double function and, without any forcing of the message, to lead his critical and perceptive reader to a recognition of the moral lesson beneath the surface of events.

A recent commentator has written: 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire was in part a moral tale; virtue was made to reside largely offstage in an age occasionally alluded to, but antecedent to the one that excited and preoccupied Gibbon'. While this may apply to 'virtue' in a rather narrow sense of the term, it does not apply to particular virtues, which frequently appear on the stage of Gibbon's History and which are there to be applauded. Nevertheless, it is true that there is in the background a somewhat idealised notion of the republic as 'a free, a virtuous, and a victorious commonwealth'. After this 'ancient virtue' and liberty had largely disappeared, there was the brief interlude when the Antonines governed the Roman world 'with the same invariable spirit of wisdom and virtue', the basis on which the republic had rested.

Instead, 'a feeble senate and enervated people cheerfully acquiesced in the pleasing illusion' that 'they still enjoyed their ancient freedom', thought both senate and people had, in fact, already submitted to the slavery 'artfully' imposed by Augustus and his successors.

1. 'Letters on...History', Works, II, 229.
3. DF, iii, I, 88.
4. DF, iii, I, 84; cf. x, I, 278 where 'ancient virtue' is used of the senate.
5. DF, xlix, V, 280-1.
6. DF, iii, I, 86.
7. DF, iii, I, 78.
Antonines restored the freedom of the senate or introduced a representative assembly 'which gave the people an interest in their own government...the seeds of public wisdom and virtue might have been cherished and propagated in the empire of Rome'. And one could even dare to imagine that 'under the mild and generous influence of liberty, the Roman Empire might have remained invincible and immortal'.

These are the necessary qualifications which must be made to the most quoted and often casually applied passage about the 'happy' age of the Antonines as being Gibbon's ideal of perfection. It was, in fact, to use one of his favourite terms, a somewhat 'specious' age of gold. To outward appearances it seemed the most happy and prosperous period for the human race. But it was without foundation or stability, its happiness being dependent 'on the character of a single man'.

One-man rule with a virtuous emperor on the throne might preserve the semblance, but could not bring back the reality of 'ancient freedom'. So Gibbon wrote: 'if a man were called on to fix the period of greatest happiness and prosperity, he would certainly point to the Antonine age. A philosopher, however, or a philosophic historian, would not be deceived by false appearances. He would see that without 'rational freedom' there was no future and no hope. It was an age of lost opportunity, of a republic which might have been. And yet the pathetic fact remained that this short interlude was 'possibly the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government'.

1. DF, xxxi, III, 376-7.
2. DF, iii, I, 86.
3. DF, iii, I, 84.
It is in terms of this loss of 'ancient freedom', this golden age of the past, this haunting vision of a bygone happiness, this fall from 'wisdom and virtue', that The Decline and Fall may be read as 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost'.¹ 'For the story of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire', said Professor Spencer, 'had also been another story of the Fall of Man... No one can read steadily through Gibbon's masterpiece without being aware that the theme is, once again, Paradise Lost'.²

The work is epic both in theme and proportions. Gibbon had written an essay on the epic and particularly on Milton's choice of a theme at the very time that he himself was searching for a worthy subject;³ and when he finally laid down his pen over twenty years later, he knew he had produced a history of 'the greatest, perhaps, and the most awful scene in the history of mankind'.⁴ It is of course, a secular epic for an enlightened age. Its hero according to Curtis, is 'the potential character of man',⁵ its great theme, as Bond expressed it, 'the potential dignity of man, from which stems the assertion of his right to intellectual and political freedom'.⁶

More especially the tragedy is that of the corruption of Roman character and the decay of Roman society. As to the particular element whose loss was most responsible for the decline of that character and society, opinions have varied: valour, the heroic spirit, ancient

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3. Gibbon's essay on Hurd's Commentary on Horace was written in February, 1762 (MW, IV, 113ff.) and his considerations of topics are dated 14 April and 4 August, 1761 and January & 26 July, 1762. The passage on Milton's search for an epic theme is on p. 150 of MW, IV.
5. Lewis P. Curtis, 'Gibbon's Paradise Lost', in Hilles, op.cit., p. 88. 'About this character', says Curtis, 'Gibbon wrote the mightiest epic of the century'.
6. op.cit., p. 40.
virtue, the love of liberty. They are all found in Gibbon and the emphases change with the changing situation and the issue under discussion. But they can all be subsumed under what Gibbon and his contemporaries understood by 'civilization', which could flourish only in an atmosphere of liberty of mind, as an expression of the creative and heroic spirit of man, and whose stability rested on a firm foundation of wisdom and virtue. Only within such a society could man achieve his true destiny, and the greatness of a civilization could be measured by the extent to which it enabled man to realise his potential character and dignity. The tragedy of Rome was the failure and collapse of civilization.

From this point of view, Gibbon's 'Paradise Lost' can be seen also in terms of the triumph of barbarism which had overspread the ruin of the greatest civilization like the thorns, brambles and vines which had reclaimed the site of the site of Capitol in the imperial city. 'The fierce and unrestrained passions' which Gibbon recognised in human nature, belonged not only to the life of the barbarian nations but also to that of the later Roman Empire and were destructive of its civilization. When these passions were 'indulged without control', as in the sack of a great city, 'an historian' could only record the virtual disappearance of the distinction between 'civilized and savage man'. And here again we are confronted with a basic moral category of The Decline and Fall. 'For Gibbon the life of civilization is the life of virtue; its antithesis (superstition or barbarism) is vice'.

1. See e.g. Curtis, Bond, Cochrane and Fuglum in the works cited.
2. DF, lxxi, VII, 314. And see below, chap. VIII.
3. DF, x, I, 256.
4. DF, lxviii, VII, 205.
5. Cochrane, op. cit., p. 151. 'To see virtue with Gibbon as the life of civilisation, is to see also what he means by vice and degeneracy'.

If we read *The Decline and Fall* as a great prose epic, its subject, according to Bond, would be 'the fall of man from a state of intellectual, spiritual, and political freedom into the darkness of barbarism and servitude of every sort, until, at the beginning of the Reformation, man begins to emerge into the enlightenment, which, Gibbon felt, characterised his own age'. Since this embraces, within the two great periods into which the work is divided, 'a story of fall and redemption', there is, though Bond does not go on to make the suggestion, at least a potential 'Paradise Regained' envisaged within the 'Paradise Lost'. Rays of hope can be perceived in the latter part of the book. Thus, having traced the decline of Rome through four volumes and five centuries from Trajan to Heraclius, Gibbon faced the 'ungrateful and melancholy task' of continuing the story of what he saw as a contemptible line of Eastern emperors who 'dishonour the names of Greeks and Romans'. Opening up his plan of the final volumes, he confessed: 'I should have abandoned, without regret, the Greek slaves and their servile historians, had I not reflected that the fate of the Byzantine monarchy is passively connected with the most splendid and important revolutions which have changed the state of the world'. We are reminded of the 'splendid subject' of the Florentine Republic on which Gibbon once thought he would finally settle, and which was 'essentially connected' with 'the revival of arts and letters in Italy'. In his final volume he gave a glimpse of these first gleams of revival in Italy before bringing down the curtain on the Eastern Empire.

As an inheritor of the new humanism, Gibbon was aware of his own age as one of science and enlightenment. There was little likelihood, he felt, of it succumbing to 'any future irruption of Barbarians'; and even so, there was the new world of America where 'Europe would revive and flourish'.¹ Such were his observations 'to be usefully applied to the instruction of the present age', which he drew from the story of the fall of the Western Empire.²

It is its overarching effect, proceeding from its wide study of man, its tragic dimension and its didactic force which, above all else, proves a unifying feature of The Decline and Fall. That work has sometimes been said to lack structural unity. The true answer is to be found less in its narrative continuity than in an essential moral coherence. This concern with moral categories, with men and motives, with moral causes and effects, with virtue and vice, with growth and decay, with greatness and decline, supplied the real life force of the immense history. No matter where Gibbon had decided to end his narrative, the work would still have possessed this organic 'moral' completeness.

1. DF, xxxviii, IV, 178, 9.
2. DF, IV, 181. Jordan describes the second part of the 'General Observations as 'didactic and superficial', 'unconvincing' and lacking in sincerity; it 'reads like a philosophe pamphlet'. (op.cit., pp. 71, 73, 74). Yet he admits that Gibbon's 'thesis is an expression of the rational optimism of the Enlightenment'. (p.230). The 'Observations' should be read alongside Gibbon's comments on current affairs in his letters.
Whether the story is one of tragic decline or of hopeful renewal, the object of attention is civilization with its essential basis of liberty, wisdom and virtue, and in either case it is cast in the heroic mould. When he wrote his essay on Horace, Gibbon drew an analogy between the rules of history and those of heroic poetry and saw the purpose of a chorus in the epic as being 'a perpetual moral commentary upon the drama, enforcing every virtuous sentiment, rectifying every vicious one; and pointing out the important lessons which may be drawn from the catastrophe'.1 Considering his History as a 'Paradise Lost' against this background, Curtis asks: 'What else are the reflections moral and philosophical, with which Gibbon embellished The Decline and Fall? What else are the philosophic hints?'2 Only, we might truly reply, they are not embellishments in Gibbon's eyes; they are the stuff of which history is made.

1. 'On Mr. Hurd's Commentary on Horace', MW, IV, 127. On the rules of poetry and history, see pp. 125-6 and the note on p. 126 to the effect that both Bacon and Hurd 'agree that poetry is an imitation of history'.
2. op.cit., p. 88.