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

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THE TRUE COUNSEL AND CHARACTERS OF MEN

The moralist's concern is with character rather than reputation, with the essential person beneath the superficial appearance. Gibbon's criticism of the Byzantine historian John Cantacuzene's memorials of his own time brings this out. 'This eloquent work', he considered, failed to penetrate the surface of things or to get down to 'the hidden springs of action', which were presented as always pure, reasonable and virtuous. His history became an 'apology', a panegyric of the author and of his associates. 'Instead of unfolding the true counsels and characters of men, he displays the smooth and specious surface of events, highly varnished with his own praises and those of his friends. Their motives are always pure; their ends are always legitimate; they conspire and rebel without any views of interest; and the violence which they inflict or suffer is celebrated as a spontaneous effect of reason and virtue'.

'Specious', one of Gibbon's key words, gives the clue to this misreading of history and misjudgement of character. He was always on the alert, warning his reader against the specious reason or the specious appearance. The historian's business is to discover the real motives which prompt the actions of his people: these he must test against 'the truth of history' and his own 'knowledge of human nature'.

Gibbon saw each individual as having a true or essential character. It may, as in the case of Augustus or Constantine, be concealed as

2. See above chapter V, pp. 174ff.
long as a man finds it to his advantage to do so, but will reveal itself when there is no longer any need for pretence. It was this true, essential character that Gibbon sought to display. In relating the history of Constantius, he referred his reader back to the course of events in which this emperor was the central figure. 'His genuine character, composed of pride and weakness, of superstition and cruelty has been fully displayed in the preceding narrative'. The historian was only saying quite explicitly here what he frequently implied: 'Don't miss the moral point of the narrative; be careful to look beneath the surface and see this fellow as he really was'.

Thus Gibbon, though 'remarkably subtle and sensitive in his analysis of character' accepted 'the assumption of his age, indeed of European humanism, that man had an identifiable essence'. Any change in character therefore 'is only apparent, not real. The passage of time or the changing circumstances of life might reveal a man's true character, and this true character might be different from that usually attributed to him, but this is not fundamental change'. From this arises a most important moral concern of the historian: through his narrative, or more explicitly by means of a specific analysis, to 'display' the real and essential character of the individual. This character, this complex of elements, was basically something constant, given him by nature, -'nature had formed' it- though it could be seen that different elements might at different times predominate and that in exercising a moral choice men could affirm the baser or nobler side of their natures. Hence the importance of 'freedom of mind' for man to fulfil his essential humanity.

1. 'raised...above the necessity of dissimulation' is the phrase used of Constantine, DF, xviii, II, 216.
Jordan’s main emphasis in the paragraph from which the above quotation is taken, is on Gibbon as a child of his time, accepting the current assumption ‘that a man’s character could not change’ and seeing ‘human nature as unchanged by history’. Though of less importance for our study of the historian as moralist than his incidental admission that a man’s true character might differ from the common view of that character, it is still worthy of notice. In effect it only means that Gibbon and many of his contemporaries subscribed to one view of character and human personality, while Jordan and many of his contemporaries have a different viewpoint. Yet in a deeper sense, the survival of literature from an earlier age, including Gibbon’s own great work, depends very largely on the fact of human nature remaining basically ‘unchanged by history’, whatever precise meaning we may give to that phrase. The spirit of man finding its expression in great books written by men superficially very different from ourselves, still speaks to us and moves us by virtue of this fact. ‘The same passions, identified by the ancients and clearly understood by the Renaissance and the Grand Siecle and the Enlightenment, had always and would always motivate human behaviour’.¹ Gibbon could surely affirm the truth of this from his reading of his beloved Homer whose study he once decided had more moral instruction than that of mathematics.² So it was also with Xenophon, with Tacitus, and with Juvenal in whose work he found the same deep human passions moving men to action. And it is certain that if human nature were to change radically, if men were no longer motivated by these same passions we all understand, the great literature of earlier times would cease to move us on the human level and would finally become outdated.

The point is worth a further comment since it is of prime importance to the study of literature and to the reading and writing of both history and biography. In discussing the question, C.S. Lewis admitted that he had for many years held this theory of the unchanging human heart but abandoned it because he had come to doubt whether stripping off the externals was the best way to study the poetry of the past. We are likely to discard the things we see as unimportant and what is left may no longer be the work the author wrote. It is like studying Hamlet after the revenge code has been removed or, in Denis Saurat's terms, disentangling 'what there is of lasting originality in Milton's thought...the permanent and human interest' from the 'theological rubbish'. 'Milton's thought, when purged of its theology', replied Lewis, 'does not exist'. There is a better way, he maintained: 'Instead of stripping the knight of his armour you can try to put his armour on yourself...I had much rather know what I should feel like if I adopted the beliefs of Lucretius than how Lucretius would have felt if he had never entertained them...You must, so far as in you lies, become an Achaean chief while reading Homer, a medieval knight while reading Malory, and an Eighteenth-Century Londoner while reading Johnson'.

Now this, in fact, is very much the sort of thing Gibbon
recommended in his Essai: to feel like the Romans, to put ourselves in the place of the people we are studying. And yet, the basic link between other times and our own, the constant element, is after all

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our essential humanity - the human heart which, to a great extent, 
transcends not only time and race but even age and sex. Anger, 
ambition, avarice, joy and revenge are common to men and women, 
old and young though their motives and expressions may vary. In 
his work on Milton criticism, Professor A.J.A. Waldock put it like 
this: 'Mr. Lewis has a mocking chapter entitled "The Doctrines of 
the Unchanging Human Heart"; yet it is upon the basis of this very 
doctrine that literature rests and has its being. The Odyssey is 
now dated in almost every conceivable way - in every conceivable 
way (to be precise) but one: the primary human feelings are our 
own. If ever the human heart does perceptibly change, then the Odyssey 
with the rest of literature from its day to ours - will take a last 
slide into oblivion, for the sufficient reason that no reader will 
then exist who will have the slightest idea what it is about'.¹ It 
is as true of Gibbon's 'epic' as of Milton's and it is a major reason 
why it is still read and enjoyed. Hume's statement about 'the constant 
and universal principles of human nature'² seems to reflect the 
judgement of thinking men of Gibbon's day and it only expresses 
more categorically a central truth to which most of us would subscribe. 
In adapting the rise and fall of the ancient republics to the current 
state of affairs in Britain, Montagu reiterated the same maxim: 'If 
we recollect that human nature is at all times and in all places the 
same...'.³ He was not unaware of physical, social and cultural differences 
between eighteenth-century Englishmen and ancient Greeks or Romans,

1. 'Mr. C.S. Lewis and Paradise Lost', Southerly, Vol. IV, No. 2, 
Sept., 1943, pp. 7-13. The quotation is from p. 8. 
2. 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding', Philosophical Works, 
but the point of his application, like the interest and instructive value of Gibbon's *History*, was seen to depend ultimately upon this continuity and essential sameness beneath the skin.

Gibbon saw plenty of difference between civilized and barbarous peoples, between the society of 'the pastoral nations' and that of a soft and luxurious metropolis. But he saw these as surface differences, and held that men were motivated by the same basic passions which make human nature what it is. Ambition and avarice were essentially the same in the capital of the East as in the German forests or the deserts of Arabia, though the expression of these qualities might take different forms, some crude, some more refined. He also knew that the operation of these passions, by means of which the philosophic historian could often reconstruct a course of events, were simpler and more easily read amongst simple and savage races. Amongst civilized nations, he believed that 'the different characters that mark' particular peoples 'may be ascribed to the use and to the abuse of reason, which so variously shapes, and so artificially composes the manners and opinions of an European or a Chinese'. And even 'more sure and simple' in its operation than reason is instinct, so that the more instinctive and less rational a people, the more predictable are their reactions. However, 'character' as Gibbon used the word in this particular context has more to do with the superficial aspect of human life, namely 'manners and opinions', that is to say the area where most variety is to be found. By contrast 'the hidden springs of action', which are an index of the inner and 'genuine character', were, for him, relatively constant in time and universal in context.

1. DF, chap. xxvi, 'Manners of the Pastoral Nations'.
2. 'As the human heart is still the same', he wrote he could legitimately match Tertullian's observation on 'enthusiasm' with Hume's, DF, xv, II, 45, n. 116.
3. See DF, ix, I, 253, n. 83; x, I, 256 and above chapter V, p. 184.
4. DF, xxvi, III, 74.
Nevertheless in our study of the historian as moralist, it is less important that we share his assumptions, than that we recognise their significance for his interpretation of history. They are significant in two ways at least. 'These assumptions', as Bond points out, 'make possible a variety of generalisations about man, and they underlie Gibbon's belief in the usefulness of history as a liberating study'.\(^1\) It is 'liberating' and useful because it is an 'instructive' study, for, as Bond points out regarding Gibbon's presentation of character, 'the ultimate value of history rests on moral grounds'.\(^2\)

In the course of The Decline and Fall Gibbon referred to several standards by which human nature and character may be judged: we can distinguish at least five.\(^3\) There is his own notion of what would constitute an ideal character; there is what he saw as 'the popular idea' of perfection; there is the eighteenth-century concept of 'the noble savage'; there is the traditional Christian idea of human perfection; and there is a relative view which sees a man against the background of his country and times.

With regard to the first of these standards, it has been suggested that Gibbon set up, as a criterion, 'a kind of perfect man, an ideal type by means of which he can judge historical personalities...He is nothing but a supposedly ideal combination of qualities, a combination useful enough for purposes of testing, but inconceivable in "our present imperfect condition".'\(^4\) In two main places Gibbon made explicit

1. The Literary Art of Edward Gibbon, p. 90.
2. Bond, loc.cit.
3. Bond and Fuglum between them, suggest all of these standards.
reference to such an ideal, though at other times he thought in terms of a particular character who embodied this combination of admirable qualities. The essence of his ideal is a harmonious union of the speculative and the active, of self fulfilment and service to mankind, of the private and the public virtues. Above all such a character was marked by balance and moderation. The early Christians, according to Gibbon, took their virtue to excess, and this was the source of their faults or errors. Even Julian, though at the other extreme, suffered from a similar excess which to some extent marred his splendid character. This character, not that of the real Julian, but an ideal combination of those complementary qualities exemplified by Julian at his best, the calm thinker and the man of action, came as near to perfection as perhaps any in The Decline and Fall. Yet, in practice, he 'seldom recollected the fundamental maxim of Aristotle, that true virtue is placed at an equal distance between the opposite vices'.

It is in dealing with what he saw as the lack of balance in the character of the primitive Christians that Gibbon suggested his idea of perfection: 'In the most virtuous and liberal dispositions two very natural propensities' can be distinguished, namely 'the love of pleasure and the love of action'. When the former was 'refined by art and learning, improved by the charms of social intercourse, and corrected by a just regard to economy', it was the source of the greatest happiness to the individual. So too, love of action, when it is free from anger, ambition and revenge, and 'when it is guided by the sense of propriety and benevolence...becomes the parent of every virtue'. 'To the love

1. DF, xv, II, 36.
2. DF, xxii, II, 446.
of pleasure', Gibbon continued, 'we therefore ascribe most of the agreeable, to the love of action we may attribute most of the useful and respectable, qualifications. The character in which both the one and the other should be united and harmonised, would seem to constitute the most perfect idea of human nature'.

This is an essentially secular or pagan standard based on the principles of the thinkers of Greece and Rome in contrast to that based on the Fathers of the Church, for whose other worldly teaching, Gibbon referred his reader to the work of the Swiss professor of law, Jean Barbeyrac, *Sur la morale des Pères*. The Gibbonian, the classical model of human perfection was very much of this world, its two aspects being self-realisation and social service. The key notions in Gibbon's presentation of it are found in the terms 'natural', 'liberal', 'active', and 'harmony'; and unlike the Christian idea, it is characterised by balance and moderation. Thus Gibbon spoke of 'very natural propensities' to be found 'in the most virtuous and liberal dispositions'; of 'worldly philosophers who, in the conduct of this transitory life, consult only the feelings of nature and the interest of society'; of those activities which, though rejected by the Fathers, occupy 'the leisure of a liberal mind', namely 'the acquisition of knowledge, the exercise of our reason or fancy, and the cheerful flow of unguarded conversation'. He frequently stressed the active virtues and the active lives of some of the respected figures in *The Decline and Fall* but it was when the personal and the public, the individual and the social, the speculative and the active qualities were 'united and harmonised' that 'the most

1. DF, xv, II, 37.
2. DF, xv, II, 36, n. 89. When in Lausanne, Gibbon had studied Barbeyrac's comments on Grotius and Puffendorf. See Memoirs, p. 78 and n. 26, p. 276.
3. e.g. Trajan, 'that virtuous and active prince', i, I, 5.
perfect idea of human nature' was to be found.\(^1\) One emperor who seemed to him to approach this ideal was Antoninus Pius. Gibbon referred to Julian's 'philosophical fable', the Caesars, in which the preference was given to that emperor's 'useful and benevolent virtues'.\(^2\) It appeared to Gibbon that Antoninus 'enjoyed with moderation the conveniences of fortune, and the innocent pleasures of society: and the benevolence of his soul displayed itself in a cheerful serenity of temper'.\(^3\) This 'innocent enjoyment' of moderate luxury and of 'the pleasures of society' were what Gibbon found absent from the early Christians who consequently lacked 'moderation'. Antonius, however, displayed not only this quality, but also active virtue by diffusing 'order and tranquility over the greatest part of the earth'.\(^4\)

Gibbon again gave explicit expression to his standard of human perfection in order to show how far another 'Imperial philosopher', Leo VI, fell short of 'this ideal excellence': 'The union of the prince and the sage, of the active and speculative virtues, would indeed constitute the perfection of human nature'.\(^5\) What were the weaknesses which vitiated the realisation of the ideal in Leo's case? Apart from his inconsistent approach to the subject of matrimony, he lived in vain pomp and ease; his apparent clemency and peace were the outcome of 'softness and indolence' and 'his mind was tinged with the most puerfile superstition'. It is all

\(^1\) *DF*, xv, II, 36-7.
\(^2\) *DF*, xxiv, II, 505-6.
\(^3\) *DF*, iii, I, 84.
\(^4\) *DF*, loc.cit.
\(^5\) *DF*, xlviii, V, 220.
summed up in the rhetorical questions Gibbon posed concerning this emperor: 'Did he reduce his passions and appetites under the dominion of reason?...Did he subdue his prejudices, and those of his subjects?' Because he did not, his character was stained with superstition, prejudice and indulgence. Here, too, was an unbalanced and immoderate character. His mind was not controlled by rational principles; reason was not allowed its proper role.

Gibbon was certainly aware of the limitations of reason: this can be seen in many of his comments. He had learned, perhaps under the influence of Hume, to distrust unaided reason in the conduct of life. But when it was guided by experience and informed by such resources as our 'knowledge of human nature', reason was a necessary governor of the 'fierce and unrestrained passions' which can otherwise take control. Maurice, an emperor very unlike Leo VI, ruled not only 'over the East' but also 'over himself', and he did so by 'expelling from his mind the wild democracy of passions, and establishing...a perfect aristocracy of reason and virtue'. 'The freedom of mind' was necessary for man's full development: political freedom was essential for his fulfilment in society. But democracy could run wild, as in France, and an enlightened and rational elite were perhaps the best safeguard of those cherished qualities, 'reason and virtue'. This is a point of view very characteristic of Gibbon, especially in his later years. As in the

1. DF, loc.cit.
2. e.g. DF, xvi, II, 147; xxx, III, 285.
3. DF, x, I, 256.
5. cf. 'all the inconveniences of a wild democracy' (DF, iii, I, 73) and the use of 'wild' in relation to democracy in a letter to Lord Sheffield, 27/10/1792, Letters, III, 283. Gibbon was for moderation in politics as in life, as a safeguard 'against the opposite mischiefs of despotism and democracy (ibid., III, 307).
macrOs! so in the microcosm: as in the state, so too in the man, but especially in a man charged with the responsibility to rule. Of a very mixed character, whose 'government exhibited a singular contrast of vice and virtue', Gibbon wrote: 'When he listened to his passions he was the scourge, when he consulted his reason, the father of his people'.

Gibbon's portrait of the ideal man is of one with a liberal mind, purged of prejudice and superstition, his passions and appetites under the direction of 'right reason', his virtues displayed in a balanced character none being taken to excess; a just proportion maintained by that cardinal virtue of moderation. A grateful recollection of his tutor Pavillard during that most fruitful period of his own development, was that 'he was rational because he was moderate'.

Above all such a balanced character would combine the best of both the scholar and the man of action. It was thus in the great days of ancient civilization, Gibbon's model of the society in which citizens develop their human potential to the fullest degree. This Greco-Roman ideal contrasted sharply with those barbarians, 'hardy veterans' whom Constantine raised to the consulship for their merit and services. In these newcomers to public office, who lacked a 'humane' and 'liberal' education, 'the powers of the human mind were contracted by the irreconcilable separation of talents as well as of professions'. Herein could be seen the divorce from the ancient classical ideal of versatility: 'The accomplished citizens of the Greek and Roman republics, whose characters could adapt themselves to the bar, the senate, the camp,

1. DF, xlviii, V, 255.
2. Memoirs, p. 72. Pavillard, according to Gibbon, combined 'a clear head and a warm heart'.

or the schools, had learned to write, to speak, and to act, with the same spirit, and with equal abilities'.

Diametrically opposed to this essentially pagan or humanist ideal is the Christian concept of perfection, an antithesis which Gibbon brought out in his study of the growth of the early church. As these men and women of the primitive church 'emerged from sin and superstition', they devoted themselves 'to a life, not only of virtue, but of penitence. The desire of perfection became the ruling passion of their soul'. Wherein did their idea of perfection contrast with that of the 'worldly philosophers' who represented the best of Greece and Rome? Gibbon indicated several major differences. In contrast to the pagan ideal, the early Christians were other-worldly, they practised self-denial rather than self-fulfilment, they were anti-social and unpatriotic, they took their virtues to excess, and both the motives and the expression of their virtue were personal and private rather than public. The fact that we are really dealing with two irreconcilable views of the nature and destiny of man comes out more in Gibbon's later treatment of the development of Christian doctrine.

After suggesting what seemed to be 'the most perfect idea of human nature' in terms of a union of love of pleasure and love of action, Gibbon reversed the picture to reveal a character which was the negation of this ideal: 'The insensible and inactive disposition, which should be supposed alike destitute of both, would be rejected, by the common consent of mankind, as utterly incapable of procuring any happiness to the individual, or any public benefit to

1. DF, xvii, II, 193.
2. DF, xvi, II, 34-7.
3. DF, xv, II, 35.
4. As in chaps. xvii, III, 162ff; xxxiii, III, 430-1; xxxviii & xlvi.
the world'. Here is a hypothetical statement of the Christian ideal which Gibbon proceeded to expose. 'But it was not in this world', he continued, 'that the primitive Christians were desirous of making themselves either agreeable or useful'.¹ We might, by contrast, note his summing up of an actual character of the opposing school. Marcus Aurelius, while 'he was severe to himself', not unlike these early Christians, was nevertheless, 'indulgent to the imperfection of others, just and beneficent to all mankind'.²

Not only, in Gibbon's view, were the early Christians indifferent to the world and to 'the charms of social intercourse', but in their desire for mortification, they were immoderate, and confused the use and abuse of innocent pleasure. 'The unfeeling candidate for Heaven' was taught not only to resist grosser delights but also elegance and luxury in dress and houses, in fact 'the most finished productions of human art'.³ Gibbon proposed that in view of the close interconnection between soul and body, it was best 'to taste with innocence and moderation', those enjoyments of which the body was susceptible. 'Very different', he said, 'was the reasoning of our devout predecessors; vainly aspiring to imitate the perfection of angels, they disdained every earthly and corporeal delight'. In their attempt 'to exalt the perfection of the gospel above the wisdom of philosophy', the zealous church fathers forsook moderation and carried self-denial to an unwise and indeed impossible extreme.⁴ Here again it was a case of imbalance between right reason and the human passions and feelings.

1. DF, xv, II, 37.
2. DF, ii, I, 85. 'His life was the noblest commentary on the precepts of Zeno'.
4. DF, xv, II, 36.
In their flight from their former way of life, they forgot the golden mean and a reasonable approach to the idea of perfection. Their own ideal of perfection became their 'ruling passion'; 'and it is well known, that while reason embraces a cold mediocrity, our passions hurry us, with rapid violence, over the space which lies between the most opposite extremes'.

It is against the character and ideal of the 'saint' in Christianity that we see Gibbon pouring out his greatest scorn and using his keenest irony. If the designation 'saint' was to be taken as the peculiar mark of Christian perfection, then the lives of the saints might be assumed to be a living expression of this ideal. On the contrary, they seemed to Gibbon to represent, in most instances, a denial of all that is best in human nature; 'the character of a saint' appeared to be synonymous with such a denial. Hence he wrote that Louis IX possessed 'as much reason and humanity as may be reconciled with the character of a saint'.

An examination of the title of 'saint' as used in The Decline and Fall is instructive. Gibbon's viewpoint soon becomes clear. There is not one complimentary use of the term to be found. Sometimes the tone is neutral, sometimes mildly derogatory, but mostly contemptuous; and it is the contempt of moral disgust. At the very least, sainthood represented to Gibbon a stunting of the full development of character.

1. DF, xv, II, 35.
2. The recorded lives of saints were often a 'dark fund of superstition...fabulous and florid legends'. (DF, liii, VI, 67, & n. 7) 'The sixty-six lives of St. Patrick...must have contained as many thousand lies'. (ibid., xxx, III, 286, n. 96).
3. DF, lix, VI, 346.
according to his humanistic ideal; at the worst it meant savagery, sedition, 'religious madness', ¹ superstition, hypocrisy, and a false set of moral values.²

There were some called saints, like Athanarius, Gregory Nazianzen and Louis IX, whose character Gibbon found admirable in many respects. But their natural goodness or usefulness was seen not in, but in spite of, their sainthood. Gregory had been granted 'the title of saint... but the tenderness of his heart and the elegance of his genius reflect a more pleasing lustre' on his memory.³ Louis 'was canonised in Rome; and sixty-five miracles were readily found and solemnly attested, to justify the claim of the royal saint. The voice of history renders a more honourable testimony, that he united the virtues of a king, an hero, and a man'.⁴ That is to say, this 'best of kings' possessed naturally the requisites of the Gibbonian moral ideal, a good heart and understanding combined with an active spirit. It was the saintly side of his nature, his superstition, his religious zeal, those qualities to be applauded by 'a monkish historian', which formed 'the most despicable part of his character'.⁵ What Gibbon, for his part, applauded were the inconsistencies of a saint, the lapses, we might say, into natural human feelings of pity, kindness and tolerance. Both Martin of Tours

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1. 'Savage saints' (DF, xxxvii, III, 78), 'seditious saints' (III, 88). Maron, a saint or savage, displayed his religious madness.' (xlvi, V, 166).
2. e.g. DF, liii, VI, 268, where the productiveness of the husbandman is contrasted with all 'the merits and miracles' in the calendar.
3. DF, xxvii, III, 159.
4. DF, lix, VI, 374.
5. DF, loc. cit.
and Ambrose 'pronounced without hesitation the eternal damnation of heretics; but they were surprised, and shocked, by the bloody image of their temporal death, and the honest feelings of nature resisted the artificial prejudices of theology'.

It was the basic tenets of this theological system, original sin, eternal damnation, and many of its ethical principles which tended to produce an ideal abhorrent to Gibbon. The framers and prisoners of this 'rigid system of Christianity' appeared to him very unattractive in character. This is the usual picture of the monk and the saint in The Decline and Fall: 'indeed, there is in almost all of Gibbon's references to saints a sharply drawn antithesis between the merit of sainthood and humanity'. In so far as sainthood represented the traditional Christian ideal of perfection, the same antithesis applies to that Christian ideal as a whole.

Gibbon did not present the ideal of 'the noble savage' as such, but did allude to 'a pleasing vision' which was entertained by some about the life of pastoral peoples. Though he praised certain pleasing characteristics of the Germanic races, their loyalty, their domestic life and their simplicity in contrast to the laziness and luxury of degenerate civilizations, he was under no illusion about the idealised picture drawn by some writers of the manners and behaviour of the hardy tribes of shepherds and nomads. He saw such a picture as a literary or philosophic construct and he devoted the bulk of a chapter

1. DF, xxvii, III, 163.
2. DF, xxxiii, III, 493.
4. See chap. xxvi.
to demolishing it. 'The sober historian', he wrote, sees the falsity of this 'pleasing vision', 'and is compelled, with some reluctance, to confess that the pastoral manners which have been adorned with the fairest attributes of peace and innocence, are much better adapted to the fierce and cruel habits of military life'. So, he continued, in order 'to illustrate this character, I shall now proceed to consider a nation of shepherds and warriors;' and a similar picture, he pointed out, was presented by both ancient and modern sources.

When he returned to the story of the Huns several chapters later, in order to trace the career of Atilla, he referred to the atrocities committed by the Thuringians fighting in his army. Their inhuman cruelties served as an example of those 'fierce and unrestrained passions' of human nature to which he had already referred; and he dismissed the 'pleasing vision' with the conclusion: 'Such were those savage ancestors, whose imaginary virtues have sometimes excited the praise and envy of civilised ages'. So much for the noble savage and his relations.

There is one other ideal to which Gibbon referred, namely the brutal but romantic figure of popular fame. Such was Richard Coeur-de-Lion, whom he once considered a promising subject for history, but whom after reflection, he dismissed as morally inadequate. Richard was a popular national hero, a type; and as Gibbon admitted, 'if heroism be confined to brutal and ferocious valour, Richard Plantaganet

1. DF, xxvi, III, 75.
2. DF, loc.cit.
3. Chap. xxxv.
4. DF, xxxv, III, 493.
will stand high among the heroes of the age'. But the character of the hero and the standards of the age were weighed in the balances and found wanting. 'With the ferocity of a gladiator, he united the cruelty of a tyrant; and these qualities he used in the service of superstition. He was 'a fit hero only for monks', a judgement which is almost equivalent to endowing him with 'the character of a saint'. He lacked that necessary union of speculative and active traits; he was not even a successful leader. He 'possessed only the personal courage of a soldier'; and in Gibbon's scale of virtues the animal courage of the soldier hardly won recognition.

Yet, Gibbon well knew, that 'as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors', those 'ambitious of fame' and obsessed with 'the thirst of military glory', would be exalted as heroes and win the praise not only of poets but also of historians. To some, these conquering heroes typified the greatest of which human nature was capable. Such was the eleventh-century Turkish Sultan, Alp Arslan, who swept across the Euphrates, capturing Caesarea and subduing Armenia and Georgia. 'The name of Alp Arslan, the valiant lion, is expressive of the popular idea of the perfection of man'; this leader 'displayed the fierceness and generosity of the royal animal. Thus both the English and the Turkish 'lions' were examples of a popular but unworthy ideal.

1. DF, lix, VI, 365.
4. 'The courage of a soldier is found to be the cheapest, and most common quality of human nature'. DF, xxvi, III, 129.
5. DF, I, I, 6.
6. DF, lvii, VI, 245.
From all these ideal notions of human nature, either unattainable, illusory or unworthy, Gibbon turned for his historical judgements to an actual standard by which a man's character and attainments were measured against the age and society in which he lived. Here was a relative standard which he saw as more realistic and more in accord with the ordinary point of view of the thinking man. Moreover, this standard was applicable to both aspects of the Gibbonian ideal, the speculative and the active: 'Our estimate of personal merit is relative to the common faculties of mankind. The aspiring efforts of genius or virtue, either in active or speculative life, are measured not so much by their real elevation, as by the height to which they ascend above the level of their age and country; and the same stature, which in a people of giants would pass unnoticed, must appear conspicuous in a race of pigmies'.

It was in this way that Belisarius stood out from his times and impressed Gibbon so much. But it is interesting also to recall his borrowing of his metaphor of stature from Longinus, and his application of it to the Roman world of the second century with its degeneracy of literary and artistic standards and its debased sentiments. Against this littleness of attainment even the moderately endowed looked imposing, as did the hardy northern barbarians: 'This diminutive stature of mankind...was daily sinking below the old standard, and the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pigmies, when the fierce giants of the north broke in and mended the puny breed'.

Against this 'diminutive stature' 'the sublime Longinus' himself stood out from 'the corruption of taste' and, among the 'degeneracy of his contemporaries', 'preserved the spirit of ancient Athens'.

1. DF, xlii, IV, 364.
2. DF, ii, I, 63-4.
3. DF, ii, I, 63.
Likewise, over a century later, there was the poet Claudian who, though not deserving 'the epithet of sublime', nevertheless 'soared above the heads of his feeble contemporaries, and placed himself, after an interval of three hundred years, among the poets of ancient Rome'.

So, too, Boethius, 'the last of the Romans' in the tradition of Cato or Cicero, shone out more brightly against the darkness of a barbarous age. In dark and degenerate times this relative method of assessing character allowed a more just estimate by taking into account the extenuating circumstance of the surrounding corruption. In the case of Belisarius, Gibbon was able to say: 'His imperfections flowed from the contagion of the times; his virtues were his own, the free gift of nature or reflection'. Without this flexible, and consequently much fairer standard of judgement, Gibbon, in writing 'the annals of a declining monarchy', would have found few persons or few deeds to praise. But, as he admitted with some relief, when taking up the story of Mahmud: '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'. He did not simply apply eighteenth-century standards in judging his characters; he generally viewed them in historical perspective against the background of their own times. By doing so he was able to do justice to those, who, thought far from perfect in an absolute sense, nevertheless stood out from their contemporaries. 'In this view', he said, 'the character of Belisarius may be deservedly placed above the heroes of antiquity'.

1. DF, xxx, III, 299-300.
2. DF, xxxix, IV, 211.
3. DF, xlii, IV, 365.
4. DF, lvii, VI, 237.
5. DF, xlii, IV, 365. Cf. the superiority of Stilicho to the Roman generals 'in an age less attentive to the laws of honour or of pride'. (xxix, III, 238).
In sifting 'genuine character' from mere reputation Gibbon continually showed the moralist's concern for the underlying motive. In some instances it was more necessary for his general design than in others. In the case of Constantine it was crucial for Gibbon's presentation of his view of that emperor and of the establishment of Christianity. 'The motives of his conversion', together with the patronage of Christianity by Constantine and his sons, he therefore wrote, 'will form a very interesting and important chapter'. So too with Julian, 'his motives, his counsels and his actions as far as they were connected with the history of religion, will be the subject of the present chapter'. And, in the case of the early Christians, he suggested 'two motives which might naturally render their lives much purer and more austere than those of their pagan contemporaries or their degenerate successors: repentance for their sins and the desire to uphold the good name of their society.'

But it is by no means only in such crucial cases, on which an essential part of his intentions rested, that Gibbon laid stress upon the motive.

So consistent was his concern with motives and with 'the true counsels' of men that he often turned the motive into the real actor in a given situation. Rather than saying that Julian wished to restrain the design of his troops, he preferred to write: 'Prudence as well as loyalty inculcated the propriety of resisting their treasonable designs'; not, the Turkish prince aspired to reign, but 'The secret zeal and ambition of the Turkish prince aspired to reign'.

4. *DF*, xxii, II, 425; lix, VI, 351. Cf. 'their private ambition was insensitive of the public danger'. (lviii, VI, 319).
his statements in this form, he tended to personify motives or virtues and vices, as if to place on them the real responsibility for the action. 'The tottering houses are pillaged by intrepid avarice'; 'the office...had been usurped by the ambition of the admiral'; or, 'a motive of avarice or fear still opened the holy sepulchre to some devout and defenceless pilgrims'.

Where the motive is uncertain or ambivalent, Gibbon usually suggested alternatives, dual motives, or even a possible or likely motive in the circumstances. Thus we find, 'ambition and piety', 'prejudice as well as loyalty', Jovius 'from a selfish or perhaps a criminal motive'; Pulcheria 'from a motive either of prudence or religion', and Theodora, 'from a motive of shame or contempt'.

Sometimes it is implied that the character himself was hardly aware of the source of his action, but Gibbon still looked beneath the surface as if to remind the reader of the importance of the underlying motive. 'Julian', he wrote, 'continued to maintain the freedom of religious worship without distinguishing whether this universal toleration proceeded from his justice of his clemency'. And when the emperor did, in fact, allege certain 'motives...to justify' a 'partial and oppressive measure', these motives might be only fit to 'command during his lifetime the silence of slaves and the applause of flatterers'; they would not satisfy a philosophic historian or his readers in an enlightened age.

1. DF, xliii, VI, 465; lxvii, VII, 165; lix, VI, 380. Cf. 'The captive generals were either released by his avarice or tortured by his fanaticism'. (liv, VI, 124).
2. DF, xxi, III, 333; xxii, III, 406; xl, IV, 230. Cf. 'the motives whether of pride or policy which induced Diocletian to withdraw (xvii, II, 149). See below chap. IX on the language of the moralist.
3. DF, xxiii, II, 486, 487.
In such cases, Gibbon seems to be saying, we must read between the lines. So, in a meeting between Pope Martin V and the Eastern Emperor Manuel, their expressions were merely those of diplomacy, as 'ambition on the one side and distress on the other dictated the same decent language of charity and peace'. But beware, for we are dealing with an 'artful Greek' and a 'Roman, not less artful', and with a 'court and church' both 'hollow and insincere'. Here it is the known characters of the participants, both 'artful', the nature of diplomacy, and the prevailing 'hollow insincerity' which must guide both the historian and the perceptive reader.

On occasions 'a variety of motives might dispose' a person to a course of action, but one 'of these motives' will appear 'the most forcible'. In these situations 'the knowledge of human nature' proves indispensable to the historian. We might otherwise, said Gibbon, be inclined to exercise our curiosity and to wonder how the person could rationally follow such an obviously short-sighted course, as for example, the ruthless amassing of great wealth 'which he could not spend without folly, nor possess without danger'. We might indeed wonder, if, without a knowledge of human nature, we failed to remember that avarice is 'the blindest of human passions'.

This knowledge also saves us from misjudgements, either too severe or too charitable. Thus charity might dispose us to 'believe that the original motives of Mahomet were those of pure and genuine

2. Gibbon's opinion of civilized diplomacy was that it was characterised by insincerity and dissimulation; see, e.g. DF, xli, IV, 290; xlvi, V, 59-9.
3. DF, xvi, II, 115.
4. DF, xxix, III, 233.
benevolence'; but we should be aware that 'a human missionary is incapable of cherishing the obstinate unbelievers who reject his claims, despise his arguments, and persecute his life'.\(^1\) In the moral world there are prejudices, or natural human reactions, like the desire for vindication or revenge, and strongest of all, the motive of personal advantage and greed for power or gain. These must be borne in mind particularly when we are looking at those in, or aspiring to, positions of authority.

Though Gibbon may not have explicitly stated that 'power corrupts', his treatment of character certainly illustrates the maxim, especially in the case of the unchecked ruler invested with 'absolute power'. His definition of a monarchy\(^2\) and his references to the dangers of one-man rule bring this out forcibly. In fact he saw kings and courts as almost a special world of their own, often apparently freed from the moral restraints of ordinary men and women.\(^3\) 'The counsels of princes', he believed, 'are more frequently influenced by views of temporal advantage than by considerations of abstract and speculative truth'.\(^4\) And, thinking of the long line of rulers in the palace of Constantinople, he asserted that 'the unfortunate prince who is born in the purple must remain a stranger to the voice of truth'.\(^5\) Even when writing of his admired Julian, he admitted that his position as emperor, or rather his achievement of absolute power, rendered his motives

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1. DF, i, V, 401.
2. See opening of chap. iii, I, 65.
3. On courts and kings, see e.g. DF, 1, V, 382 ('the cold servility of courts'); iii, VI, 57 ('educated in the vices of kings'); cf. iii, V, 502, lx, VII, 385; xxvi, III, 39; xiii, 1, 319.
4. DF, xx, II, 311.
5. DF, xxxii, III, 408.
suspect. His grief, Gibbon wrote, in a dispassionate examination of the man, 'could proceed only from his innocence; but,' he added, 'his innocence must appear extremely doubtful in the eyes of those who have learned to suspect the motives of princes'.¹ In this way he was prepared to speak of Julian being 'overwhelmed with real or affected grief'.

That Gibbon himself was one of those who had 'learned to suspect the motives of princes' is clear enough from his portraits of them, though he endeavoured to curb a possible prejudice in this direction even in the case of rulers he found distasteful. As a rule, he believed, self-interest seemed to determine the policy of persons in high places, even if the absolute monarch found that his own interest tended to coincide with that of his nation, so that, 'were he totally without virtue, prudence might supply its place and dictate the same rule of conduct'.² Though the people might applaud some of these policies since they also benefited from them, the motive still remained self-interest and no more, and the moral value of the action must be ignored. An absolute monarch like Septimius Severus sometimes bent his policy 'in favour of the poor and oppressed'. Is he then to be praised for his compassionate and benevolent behaviour? Gibbon's answer as far as Severus was concerned was that he followed this apparently virtuous course of action, 'not so much indeed from any sense of humanity, as from the natural propensity of a despot to humble the pride of greatness and to sink all his subjects to the same common level of absolute dependence'.³

1. DF, xxii, II, 426. 'It may seem ungenerous', he said, 'to distrust the honour of a hero, and the truth of a philosopher'; but Julian was in fact, he continued, the victim of superstition.
2. DF, v, I, 132.
It is only as a rare exception that Gibbon failed to indicate, or at least to suggest, a possible motive; yet not even in such instances did he merely gloss over the omission, but rather drew attention to it, pleading inadequate sources or remoteness of time and place. On one such occasion he excused himself on the ground that 'at the distance of fourteen centuries, we may be satisfied with relating the military exploits of the conquerors of Rome, without presuming to investigate the motives of their political conduct'. 1 So also in a case of the supernatural, he would not presume 'to investigate the nature or motives', but contented himself with the 'more humble task' of an actual description of the city. 2 Where it is beyond the power of the historian to discover the motive, 'we may suspect' it, he felt, from a consideration of the most plausible arguments, aided by our knowledge of the constant principles of human nature and the ways of monarchs. 3 This we are tempted to do and we find the historian offering his own suggestion based on his understanding of the characters and the particular circumstances of the occasion. 'We are too imperfectly acquainted with the court of Constantinople', he frankly confessed, 'to form any judgement of the real motives which influenced the leaders of the conspiracy; unless we should suppose that they were actuated by a spirit of jealousy and revenge'. 4

The supreme importance of Gibbon's concern with 'the real motives' is in determining the moral value of a character and an act. Readers are aware and critics have noted that he habitually summed up his characters in sets of virtues and vices, merits and defects, but we

1. DF, xxxi, III, 330.
2. DF, xvii, II, 158.
3. DF, xvi, II, 129.
4. DF, xviii, II, 234.
should remember that these are never rigid or predetermined. The basic question, stated or implied, is always, 'What prompted the action?' With this in mind we must ask: 'Is liberality a virtue? The answer is: 'We must look at the motive'. The liberality we see might be the free expression of a generous nature; it might be merely the prodigal open-handedness of an irresponsible prince towards his boon companions; or, worst or all, it might be the use of 'donatives' to purchase the support of followers, a method used by aspiring or ambitious emperors with the praetorian guards. Of an apparently liberal edict of Caracalla, Gibbon wrote that, 'His unbounded liberality flowed not, however, from the sentiments of a generous mind; it was the sordid result of avarice'. Again, while the valiant Belisarius was fighting Justinian's battles, the emperor himself, 'invited by his patience and liberality, the repetition of injuries'. Here neither the patience nor the liberality is meritorious.

The same overt act must be interpreted differently according to what inspired it. Consider the assumption of the consulate by two emperors: the 'artful' Augustus acted from expediency and 'prudence', Julian from his own 'choice or inclination'. The retirement of Diocletian from the imperial throne was, as Gibbon saw it, a philosophic decision more characteristic of the emperor Marcus Antoninus; 'Reason had dictated, and content seems to have accompanied his retreat'. By contrast, he saw the same decision on the part of Charles V as occasioned, or hastened by, the failure of his schemes and by disappointed ambition. Diocletian, on the

1. DF, vi, I, 171.
2. DF, xlii, IV, 364.
4. DF, xiii, I, 415, 418.
other hand, had accomplished all his designs and resigned the empire at 'the full tide of uninterrupted success'.  

1. Gibbon did, however, refer to his illness.

His motive was therefore more worthy and the lesson in the 'vanity of human greatness' more instructive.  

2. In reaffirming his decision when offered the opportunity to resume the throne, he wisely refused 'to relinquish the enjoyment of happiness for the pursuit of power'.  

Near the end of The Decline and Fall we are shown the double abdication of Amurath II, as 'the most striking feature in the life and character' of this Turkish sultan. Surely here was a case of a ruler thoughtfully weighing up the true priorities and philosophically obeying the voice of true wisdom. But again one must look beneath the surface to the real reason: 'Were not his motives debased by an alloy of superstition, we must praise the royal philosopher, who at the age of forty could discern the vanity of human greatness'.  

4. Even a historian can be deceived in such a case; and Voltaire, according to Gibbon, was in fact deceived by the sultan's action. Casting, as Gibbon wrote of him elsewhere, 'a keen and lively glance over the surface of history', he expressed his admiration for 'le Philosophe Turc'. But it was not only superficiality, said Gibbon, that affected the consistency of Voltaire's moral judgements; it was also bigotry:

1. DF, xiii, I, 416. Gibbon did, however, refer to his illness.
2. 'Diocletian acquired the glory of giving to the world the first example of a resignation which has not been very frequently imitated by succeeding monarchs'. DF, I, 415.
3. DF, xiii, 418 and n. 119. Gibbon was quoting the younger Victor.
4. DF, lxvii, VII, 146.
5. DF, li, V, 446, n. 65.
'Would he have bestowed the same praise on a Christian prince for retiring to a monastery? In his way Voltaire was a bigot, an intolerant bigot'.

The primacy of motives in connection with moral judgement runs throughout Gibbon's work. Those which influenced the early Christians in their way of life, or which urged Constantine to adopt the new religion, are perhaps the most prominent, but there are numerous less sustained instances at every stage of the narrative. A man is condemned for base motives or exonerated by good ones. As he rose to supreme power, Severus, like Constantine, 'concealed his daring ambition'. During his campaign in Italy he hardly ate or slept, he marched on foot and in armour like his troops, whose hardships he shared, while he encouraged them in the field. A very admirable picture of a worthy and disciplined character. But his motive gave the lie to this. It was only 'whilst he kept in view the infinite superiority of his reward' that he acted thus. And later, having achieved this reward, 'his conscience, obsequious to his interest, always released him from an inconvenient obligation', even on those rare occasions when he bound himself by an oath or a treaty. On the other hand, though Martin of Tours deviated from his 'generous resolution' of toleration,


2. DF, v, I, 123, 127.
yet he was, in Gibbon's eyes, redeemed from this lapse, since 'his motives were laudable and his repentance was exemplary'. When we turn to Chrysostom, we find that though 'the profane imputed to an ambitious motive' the archbishop's extension of his pastoral jurisdiction, yet he himself might have been 'conscious of the purity of his intentions' in terms of 'a sacred and indispensable duty'.

A more striking instance of motive reflecting on Chrysostom's character is seen in his protection of the fallen minister Eutropius. His character might well be misread by those who merely glanced at the surface of history and it is a testimony to Gibbon's impartiality and attention to 'the truth of history', that he cleared Chrysostom of all blame. While the condemned Eutropius was grovelling before the archbishop in his cathedral, Chrysostom effectually sought to turn the anger and vengeance of his opponents into mere contempt in order to save the trembling wretch from destruction: 'the orator, who was afterwards accused of insulting the misfortunes of Eutropius, laboured to excite the contempt, that he might assuage the fury of the people'. And this actually resulted in a victory for 'the powers of humanity' over insane hatred.

Motives and character are seen in reciprocal relation in Gibbon's presentation of his historical figures. Worthy or unworthy motives provide criteria for determining whether a character is good or bad; but more commonly, since most characters are a mixture of both good and bad, they enable us to decide the moral value of any particular action. They also allow us to recognise various degrees of

1. DF, xxvii, III, 163.
2. DF, xxxii, 398.
3. DF, xxxii, III, 390.
4. Such a mixture is pre-eminently seen in the portrait of Julian, where Gibbon's praise and obvious admiration did not prevent his censure.
culpability. Conversely, however, we find Gibbon sometimes determining doubtful motives on the basis of known character. Once the general picture of the man has been built up, his motives may be interpreted in terms of his established character. Augustus became for Gibbon a type of the 'artful' tyrant, whether in Rome, Constantinople, or even in the Moslem world. In his treatment of Augustus he built up a character marked by 'art' or dissimulation, on the basis of which this emperor's motives could be explained. 'The tender respect of Augustus for a free constitution which he had destroyed can only be explained by an attentive consideration of the character of that subtle tyrant. A cool head, an unfeeling heart, and a cowardly disposition prompted him at the age of nineteen to assume the mask of hypocrisy which he never afterwards laid aside'. Having established an underlying and 'true character' for Augustus, Gibbon could then interpret his policies and actions in terms of his 'artful system'. In the light of this, 'his moderation', that almost indispensable virtue exhibited by all Gibbon's most admired figures, could be seen not as the expression of a moderate and benevolent nature, but simply as 'inspired by his fears'.

This approach can be observed in a number of minor characters and in what are often little more than passing comments on such characters. The vices of a profligate bishop, said Gibbon, 'were admitted as a proof that his zeal was inspired by the sordid motive of interest'. Similarly the character of Rufinus seemed to justify

1. See e.g. DF, xiv, I, 460: 'The death of Severianus will admit of less excuse, as it was dictated neither by revenge nor by policy'; or the extenuated condemnation of the earlier tyrannical emperors in contrast to that of the cruelty of Maximin (vii, I, 186, 184).
2. DF, iii, I, 78.
3. DF, loc.cit., though note his praise for this moderate policy as such, e.g. i, 1, 2.
4. DF, xxvii, III, 163 and n. 60. The reference is to the cruelty of the persecuting bishop, Ithacius.
the accusations'; or 'the character and language of the Archbishop of Milan may justify the suspicion' that his conduct would be moved by opposition to an imperial law.\textsuperscript{1} 'The virtues of that prince', Gibbon wrote of Decius, 'will scarcely allow us to suspect that he was actuated by a mean resentment against the favourites of his predecessor'.\textsuperscript{2} Character, once established, especially in terms of a 'ruling passion', becomes marked by such epithets as 'artful', 'subtle', 'moderate', or 'unworthy', and hidden motives, and even probable actions, where these are historically obscure, are suggested by Gibbon on the basis of consistency with that character. The pre-eminent example of this is the portrait of Constantine, which is worth considering in some detail both because it illustrates Gibbon's approach so well and also because of the importance he placed on the presentation of this character in the theme of decline and fall.\textsuperscript{3}

In what is the most carefully written and most thoroughly revised section of The Decline and Fall, Gibbon devoted a chapter to the deeds of Constantine, his foundation of a new capital and his system of administration, and in the following chapter\textsuperscript{4} he proceeded to delineate the real character of 'that extraordinary man' in sharp contrast to his historical reputation.\textsuperscript{5} This carefully executed portrait has a dual significance in the work. Firstly, Gibbon felt obliged to present the true Constantine, a very different character from either the 'saint' and hero of Christian story, or the 'most abhorred' of tyrants who

\textsuperscript{1} DF, xxix, III, 236; xxvii, III, 168.
\textsuperscript{2} DF, xvi, II, 120-1.
\textsuperscript{3} DF, xiv, I, 476. See also Memoirs, p. 159 for the peculiar trouble he took with this part of his History.
\textsuperscript{4} DF, chaps. xvii, and xviii.
\textsuperscript{5} See opening of chap. xviii, II, 214. Julian is also referred to by Gibbon as 'that extraordinary man' (xxiv, II, 558).
dishonoured the empire by his 'vice and weakness'. In place of this confusion, he hoped to present a more authentic figure, 'which the truth and candour of history should adopt without a blush'. His revaluation of the first Christian emperor was thus to be in the interest of the truth of character and of history. But, in the second place, Gibbon saw such a presentation of Constantine's character as being vitally connected, not merely with the establishment of Christianity, but also with the decline of the Roman Empire.

The true character of Constantine was thus seen by Gibbon as inextricably linked to his great theme of imperial decline, and central to the character were 'the motives of his conversion as they may variously be deduced from benevolence, from policy, from conviction, or from remorse'. The centrality of the leading motive, 'the ruling passion of his soul', is kept before us as Gibbon reaffirmed it in the portrait of the aspiring general, of the co-emperor and finally of the sole ruler of the empire.

What we are given is a two-fold picture, a sort of diptych hinged chronologically about the accession of the emperor, the dark colours of the latter part being suggested in the former, though at first glance the contrast seems so complete as to be almost contradictory. It was only the veil of dissimulation that for some years obscured the real Constantine. In his early life and military career he outshone his rivals, but the achievement of absolute power revealed

1. DF, xviii, II, 214.
2. DF, xiv, I, 476.
3. DF, xvi, II, 138.
the cruel and degenerate ruler for whom pretence was no longer necessary. This later and undisguised Constantine was, in Gibbon's view, 'corrupted by his fortune, or raised by conquest above necessity of dissimulation'.

When we are first introduced to the tall and majestic general, we are told that 'his mind was engrossed by ambition', though 'his active spirit' had been tempered in his youth by 'habitual prudence'. His prudence is seen in his later alliance with Maxentius against their common enemy Maximian where he revealed himself as an 'artful prince'. Even a single act of apparent generosity is shown as ambiguous, or at best, as 'partial'. Gibbon could still, however, refer somewhat leniently to this period as 'his most innocent and even virtuous', though it is a relative standard since Constantine's virtues 'were rendered more illustrious by the vices of Maxentius'.

In the next scene of Constantine's rise to undisputed power, we see an aspirant, 'whose ambition had been hitherto restrained by considerations of prudence rather than by principles of justice'. Constantine and Licinius divide the empire between them but neither can renounce, as might seem the wisest policy, 'any further designs of ambition', and in the next move, Constantine, though probably not in this instance the aggressor, is marked out by his 'aspiring temper'.

1. DF, xviii, II, 216.
2. DF, xiv, I, 429.
3. DF, xiv, I, 436, 441.
4. DF, xiv, I, 444-5.
5. DF, xiv, L, 447.
6. DF, xiv, I, 463. Gibbon, however, using character as a guide to conduct, suggested Licinius as the probable aggressor, largely because of his 'perfidious character'.

1. DF, xviii, II, 216.
2. DF, xiv, I, 429.
3. DF, xiv, I, 436, 441.
4. DF, xiv, I, 444-5.
5. DF, xiv, L, 447.
6. DF, xiv, I, 463. Gibbon, however, using character as a guide to conduct, suggested Licinius as the probable aggressor, largely because of his 'perfidious character'.

1. DF, xviii, II, 216.
2. DF, xiv, I, 429.
3. DF, xiv, I, 436, 441.
4. DF, xiv, I, 444-5.
The portrait of Constantine thus shows ambition as his motive from first to last, though disguised by prudence or dissimulation till the time was ripe. Then, as sole ruler, 'the master of the Roman world' is shown as 'not insensible to the ambition of founding a city which might perpetuate the glory of his own name'.

In the final summing up of Constantine's character, Gibbon stated explicitly, on the basis of what had been shown of his career: 'He loved glory, as the reward, perhaps as the motive of his labours. The boundless ambition...from the moment of his accepting the purple at York, appears as the ruling passion of his soul'. This 'boundless ambition' which made Gibbon's Constantine, 'both as a father and as a king,...impatient of an equal', led him into both political tyranny and domestic crime. It brought about the murder of a worthy son, Crispus, already invested as Caesar and sharing the administration, but threatening to outshine his father, the emperor. And even this dark design was covered with 'the veil of ceremony and dissimulation'.

The presentation of Constantine's character in terms of its ruling motive has been examined in some detail both because of its vital importance in The Decline and Fall and also because it offers the most careful and extended case-study in Gibbon's method which we

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1. DF, xvii, II, 150. Gibbon emphasised the idea by repeating it a few pages later (p. 160): 'The master of the Roman world, who aspired to erect an eternal monument to the glories of his reign'.
2. DF, xviii, II, 215. This may be justified, Gibbon added, by a number of circumstances including 'the consciousness of superior merit'.
3. DF, xviii, II, 221.
have been considering. As Jordan in his study of 'The Age of Constantine' points out, 'It is important for Gibbon's notions that Constantine's duplicity be firmly established. His interpretation of Constantine's motives (especially his motives for converting to Christianity) rests on his ability to satisfy his "boundless ambition". It is equally important for Gibbon's philosophy that Constantine be a hypocrite when he converts to Christianity'.

In Gibbon's delineation of the 'artful' Constantine, however, we sense also a comparison with that other predominantly 'artful' character, Augustus, the cunning founder of autocracy, whom the historian can use as a touchstone for later emperors. There are many 'artful' characters in The Decline and Fall, or at least characters who are described as displaying this side of their nature. They range from monks, courtiers, prelates and popes, the prophet Mahomet and his wife Ayesha to absolute rulers who above all seemed to exemplify this quality. But it was the emperor Augustus who, for Gibbon, appeared to embody it and who devised an 'artful system' which became almost the archetype for his successors in both the West and the East. Though August does not properly belong to the period of decline and fall as seen by Gibbon, yet with his 'artfulness' and 'prudence' he is used as an implicit, and sometimes explicit, standard of comparison.

1. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 199.
2. For monks, see DF, xxv, II, 30; for a courtier, like Cleander, iv, I, 99; a prelate, xlvii, V, 157; a pope, Gregory VII, lvi, VI, 214; Mohamed, l, V, 357, 358; Ayesha, l, V, 407; and emperors, apart from Diocletian and Constantine, see Manuel, lxvi, VII, 101.
3. DF, iii, I, 80.
for later rulers. Augustus, Diocletian and Constantine, however, form a sort of triumvirate characterised by their crafty policies and their 'prudence', a quality which, with Gibbon as with Fielding, is often very close to pretence: the character prudently restrains or disguises his real nature so long as it is expedient to do so.

Augustus, as the original 'subtle' or 'crafty tyrant' becomes a paradigm of later autocrats in The Decline and Fall, both in terms of his dominant trait and of the system of political deception he initiated. His artfulness and prudence are seen as the essentials of aspiring despots anxious to disguise their real nature and intentions and preserve their reputation. His system, based on deceiving the people, was essentially that employed by other emperors in their particular circumstances; they were inspired by the same motivation.

'That artful prince', Diocletian 'framed a new system of Imperial government...and as the image of the old constitution was religiously preserved in the senate, he resolved to deprive that order of its small remains of power and consideration'. Even Julian saw the advantage of 'the artful system by which' he 'proposed to obtain the effects, without incurring the guilt, or the reproach, of persecution'. Augustus is

1. Jordan says, 'only Augustus and Constantine are consistently referred to as "artful" in The Decline and Fall', op.cit., p. 200, though he should also include Diocletian. See DF, xiii, I, 379 ('motives of prudence' of 'the artful Dalmatian'), 380 ('that artful prince'), 409 ('the most artful policy' of 'that artful prince', his 'prudent measures'), xiv, I, 426 ('the arts of Diocletian'.)
2. DF, iii, I, 78, Augustus as 'subtle tyrant'; he is also referred to as 'crafty'. In xxvii, III, 171, 'crafty tyrant' is applied to Maximus with his 'perfidious arts', who 'now displayed his genuine character'.
3. Gibbon also recognised the moderation and wisdom of Augustus, especially in recommending to his successors a policy of peace, rather than military expansion, i, I, 2,3,9.
4. DF, xiii, I, 409.
5. DF, xxiii, II, 502.
also shown artfully restoring the dignity while destroying the independence of the senate, so that 'the principles of a free constitution are irrecoverably lost'.

His 'crafty' policy is seen pre-eminently in the mock humility with which he bowed to the senate's will and accepted with a show of reluctance, the powers of proconsul and imperator which it bestowed on him. In this act Gibbon saw him expressing his true character but worse still, bequeathing such political deception to his successors and to the empire. 'The memory of this comedy, repeated several times during the life of Augustus, was preserved to the last ages of the empire, by the peculiar pomp with which the perpetual monarchs of Rome always solemnised the tenth year of their reign'.

In Gibbon's chapter on the constitution of the empire in the Antonine age, Augustus, with his artful character expressed in the system he devised, hovers in the background. His principles are those which will pervert later rulers and undermine the empire. Even if he was moderate, it was for an unworthy motive. 'When he framed the artful system of the Imperial authority, his moderation was inspired by his fears. He wished to deceive the people by an image of civil liberty, and the armies by an image of civil government'. The character and system of Augustus continue to throw their shadow over later emperors and are felt as an implied standard of reference especially for Diocletian and Constantine. He is introduced again

1. DF, iii, I, 66.
2. DF, iii, I, 67-8.
3. DF, iii, I, 78.
in the famous chapter on Roman jurisprudence as having levelled the Romans 'by the equality of servitude' and of setting his successors an example in dealing with 'the mischief of popular assemblies'.

Finally he is used in a contrast with an emperor of a later age, Charles IV, but again the common feature of both is dissimulation and the disguise of their true character. 'If we annihilate the interval of time and space between Augustus and Charles, strong and striking will be the contrast between the two Caesars; the Bohemian, who concealed his weakness under the mask of ostentation, and the Roman, who disguised his strength under the semblance of modesty'.

Augustus, though not actually on the stage of history presented in The Decline and Fall, is an indispensable source of comment on others and is, with his counterpart Constantine, perhaps the best illustration of Gibbon's development of character in terms of dominant qualities and motives.

In analysing character, Gibbon also warned against the danger of our being deceived by what he called 'specious' or 'apparent virtues'. It is possible for a person, particularly a prince, to mislead by concealing his vices; it is also possible for the observer to be misled by concentrating his 'specious virtues'. Does a character appear to change considerably over a period? This may be due, as Gibbon's Constantine shows, to his dropping a false appearance imposed by prudence to disguise a ruling and selfish passion. But it may also be due to a too casual reading of what seem at first sight to

1. DE, xlv, IV, 477.
2. DE, xlxi, V, 330.
be the characteristics of a virtuous nature, but are in fact merely superficial, not the outgrowth of the inner man. In comparing the abdications of Diocletian and Charles V, Gibbon suggested that despite deep differences, the characters of both emperors were marked by 'specious virtues' which 'were much less the effect of nature than of art'.

A certain degree of 'artfulness' was to be expected in most rulers, not just in blatant cases like Augustus and Constantine. A good example of the discovery of these 'specious virtues' is to be seen in Gibbon's reference to 'the remarkable alteration of...character or conduct' in the emperor Gratian. He suggested to his reader that this was not to be put down, as one might readily suppose, 'to the arts of flattery', with which he had been surrounded from his infancy. The judicious reader with moral discernment, the sort of reader Gibbon always had in mind, would want to look deeper: 'A more attentive view of the life of Gratian may perhaps suggest the true cause of the disappointment of the public hopes. His apparent virtues, instead of being the hardy productions of experience and adversity, were the premature and artificial fruits of a royal education'. Without the proper soil, essential to moral growth, these courtly 'virtues' soon withered and disappeared. But in all fairness even to an artful

1. DF, xiii, I, 416.
2. DF, xxvii, III, 140. The 'apparent virtues' of Gratian were 'his gentle and amiable disposition', 'the graceful affability of his manners' and his 'liberality', while literary men, soldiers and clery praised his 'taste and eloquence', 'his valour and dexterity in arms' and his 'humble piety'.

character like Constantine, Gibbon pointed out the difficulty of
deciding between the specious and the real, admitting that the former
may on occasions develop into the latter. 'As real virtue is sometimes
excited by undeserved applause, the specious piety of Constantine, if
at first it was only specious, might gradually, by the influence of
praise, of habit, and of example, be matured into serious faith and
fervent devotion'.

Gibbon's consistent practice in The Decline and Fall shows his
feeling of moral obligation to arrive at a fair assessment of character
in order to present, as he said of Constantine, 'a just portrait', in
which the real motives are discovered, in which the historian achieves
impartiality, and which is agreeable to the truth of history. Writing
of another historian's failure to always satisfy this moral obligation,
he warned his reader, 'a lover of truth will peruse with a critical
eye the instructive anecdotes of Procopius. The secret historian
represents only the vices of Justinian, and those vices are darkened
by his malevolent pencil'. Though no great admirer of Justinian,
Gibbon sought to do him justice, judging his actions on their individual
merits and motives and, as with his other characters, giving him the
benefit of the doubt where the record of history was not clear cut.
Thus he obviously had in mind his own very different standards when
he wrote of those shown by Procopius: 'Ambiguous actions are imputed
to the worst motives; error is confounded with guilt, accident with
design, and laws with abuses; the partial injustice of a moment is
dexterously applied as the general maxim of a reign of thirty-two years'.

1. DF, xx, II, 325.
2. DF, xI, IV, 252.
3. DF, loc.cit.
Just as Gibbon regarded moderation as a cardinal, almost an essential virtue in others, so too it is the key to his own presentation of character. 'The same kind of balanced judgement is found in all the portraits of Gibbon. One of their most typical features is the delineation of virtues and vices with which each study concludes'.

He even anticipated the reader's expectation when, in his fifth volume, he wrote: 'At the conclusion of the life of Mahomet, it may perhaps be expected, that I should balance his faults and virtues'; but he confessed the difficulty of doing justice to the prophet's character darkly glimpsed across twelve centuries. Even if, at times there seems a somewhat monotonous regularity about this final weighing up of the good and bad points of character, it at least emphasises the certainty of this balanced judgement as part of a 'just delineation', 'a faithful picture' of the person concerned. 'While we applaud the justice, we should not overlook the policy of Aurelian', Gibbon wrote very typically, thus illustrating his invariable approach to characterisation.

If a historian is too much involved in the events he is narrating, or too decidedly partisan in his affiliation, he may fail to overcome personal antipathies when presenting a character and may thus betray 'the truth of history'. Zozimus stood in this relationship to the emperor Theodosius and his portrait therefore suffers from distortion: 'An historian, perpetually adverse to the fame of Theodosius, has exaggerated his vices and their pernicious effects'.

2. DF, 1, V, 400.
3. DF, xvi, II, 124.
4. DF, xxvii, III, 196.
of those criticisms of his sources, in the form of a caution to the reader,\textsuperscript{1} which serves once more as a foil to Gibbon's own balanced and impartial characterisation. However, he made the contrast quite obvious by explicitly stating his own approach: 'In the faithful picture of the virtues of Theodosius, his imperfections have not been dissembled; the act of cruelty, and the habits of indolence, which tarnished the glory of one of the greatest of the Roman princes'.\textsuperscript{2}

The emperor Alexander Severus, with 'modest firmness' and outstanding courage, subdued a tumult of the legions at Antioch and his decisive call for order averted an ugly situation. Having related, from the \textit{Historia Augusta}, this incident so indicative of the emperor's nature, Gibbon proceeded to his usual balanced assessment. Rather surprisingly, in this very section, entitled 'Defects of his Reign and Character', he inserted a very illuminating and sympathetic comment on the notable incident at Antioch, showing that he was not tied to a rigid and invariable apportioning of virtues and vices according to any formal or prearranged scheme. And again his eye was still on the motive: 'Perhaps, if the singular transaction had been investigated by the penetration of a philosopher, we should discover the secret causes which on that occasion authorised the boldness of the prince, and commanded the obedience of the troops; and perhaps, if it had been related by a judicious historian, we should find this action worthy of Caesar himself, reduced nearer to the level of probability and the common standard of the character of Alexander Severus'.\textsuperscript{3}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} See above, p. 285 and notes 2 and 3.
\item \textsuperscript{2} \textit{DF}, xxvii, III, 195-6.
\item \textsuperscript{3} \textit{DF}, vi, I, 170.
\end{itemize}
Not only must one beware of biased and vindictive historians whose values are distorted and whose balance is inclined to one particular side, but there is a special case of partiality which one must expect from ecclesiastical and 'monkish' historians, who see Constantine's character in terms of the Christian hero, or Louis IX's as that of the 'saint'. Against the 'fierce and partial writers' who have allotted all virtue to their side and all vice to that of their opponents and who have thus 'painted the battle of angels and demons', the philosophic and impartial historian must warn his readers: 'Our calmer reason will reject such pure and perfect monsters of vice or sanctity, and will impute an equal, or at least an indiscriminate measure of good and evil to the hostile sectaries, who assumed and bestowed the apppellations of orthodox and heretics'.

It is the historian's call for a balanced judgement, even if, in the absence of sufficient historical evidence, this must sometimes be artificially attempted by a sort of even-handed justice on the part of the historian himself.

Partial and sectarian writers tended to deprive moral judgements of all meaning and to create monsters with black or white labels, rather than actual moral beings whose motives and choices were sometimes good, sometimes bad. They ended up with characters as mere personifications of virtue or vices. Worse still, when monkish historians tried to present a character like Louis IX, the result was an inversion of moral values as Gibbon saw them: they concentrated on the 'monkish' or saintly virtues, which to Gibbon were vices, negations of those very qualities which the fully developed human personality should exhibit; they overlooked the real virtues altogether. Here again, the result was a figure less than human, bearing little resemblance to 'nature'.

1. DF, xxii, II, 412-3.
It was, in the case of Louis IX, 'the most despicable part of his character' that these historians were 'content to applaud', while one like 'the noble and gallant Joinville', who knew him as a man and a soldier, sharing his friendship and his captivity, 'has traced with the pencil of nature the free portrait of his virtues, as well as of his failings'.

If, on rare occasions, Gibbon tended to use a rule of thumb by which to reach a balanced verdict on a much disputed character, it was that which he laid down for his revaluation of Constantine: 'By the impartial union of those defects which are confessed by his warmest admirers, and those virtues which are acknowledged by his most implacable enemies, we might hope to delineate a just portrait of that extraordinary man', quite agreeable to 'the truth and candour of history'. It was, as Jordan points out, 'a technique familiar to the religious controversialists of the seventeenth century and perfected by Bayle. He took Constantine's virtues from his enemies and his vices from his friends'.

This technique should certainly produce a balance, but will it produce a human being? Gibbon was well aware of this problem, and his caution forms a satisfactory answer to those critics who see a rather mechanical distribution of vices and virtues at the end of each account of the life of the significant persons in his History.

1. DF, lix, VI, 374.
2. DF, xviii, II, 214.
3. Gibbon and his Roman Empire, p. 197. In a footnote, DF, xviii, II, 216, n. 2, Gibbon gave his main sources for Constantine's virtues. For Gibbon's view of Bayle's balancing 'opposite qualities' 'in his sceptical scales', see Memoirs, pp. 64-5.
'It would soon appear', he admitted, that the vain attempt to blend such discordant colours, and to reconcile such inconsistent qualities, must produce a figure monstrous rather than human, unless it is viewed in its proper and distinct lights, by a careful separation of the different periods of the reign of Constantine'. His solution, reached after the most intense concentration and revision, found expression, as we have seen, not only in 'a careful separation' of the splendid general from the later degenerate ruler, but also in the repeated resolution of these opposing aspects in terms of a single constant and ruling passion, namely 'boundless ambition'.

Gibbon saw his 'impartial' approach to the prominent figures of history as involving the correction of a traditional but unbalanced judgement, which often led him to propose a new view somewhere between the partisan extremes which had been perpetuated down to his own day. With character, as with facts, he saw that 'the truth of history might perhaps be found in a just medium between these extreme and contradictory assertions'. This was especially necessary when confronted with the protagonists of two opposing parties, who had set 'the first Christian emperor' over against 'the Apostate'. It was, indeed, in his treatment of the latter that Gibbon felt he had achieved a quite 'impartial balance' which even strong critics of The Decline and Fall accepted. It was significantly in the context of presenting this emperor's character, that he referred to the ancient Roman custom at funerals and triumphs, a custom practised at Julian's own funeral,

1. DF, xviii, II, 214.
2. DF, xxvi, III, 135.
3. See Memoirs, p. 162. 'My impartial balance of the virtues and vices of Julian was generally praised'.
by which 'the voice of praise should be corrected by that of satire and ridicule'; and while displaying 'the glory of the living or of the dead, their imperfections should not be concealed from the eyes of the world'.

Radical revaluations of traditional and accepted views of historical events and characters usually need some word of justification to pave the way for a fair reception. At the beginning of his central chapter on Julian, Gibbon presented the rationale for his reappraisal. 'The character of Apostate has injured the reputation of Julian; and the enthusiasm which clouded his virtues, has exaggerated the real and apparent magnitude of his faults. Our partial ignorance may represent him as a philosophic monarch, who studied to protect with an equal hand, the religious factions of the empire, and to allay the theological fever which had inflamed the minds of the people from the edicts of Diocletian to the exile of Athanasius. A more accurate view of the character and conduct of Julian will remove this favourable prepossession for a prince who did not escape the general contagion of the times'.

If traditional prejudices, labels like 'apostate', and popular misconceptions involved in the cliche, 'philosophic monarch', can be peeled off, the way is open for 'a more accurate view' of the man.

How did Gibbon hope to achieve this correction of perspective?

By the same technique as he applied to his characterisation of Constantine. 'We enjoy the singular advantage of comparing the pictures

1. DF, xxiv, II, 557.
2. DF, xxi, II, 456.
which have been delineated by his fondest admirers, and his implacable enemies', he wrote of Julian; and amongst these balanced sources, is the first hand account of his actions 'faithfully related by a judicious and candid historian, the impartial spectator of his life and death'.¹

So also in the case of Charlemagne, Gibbon accepted 'the confessions of an enemy...as the safest evidence of his virtues'.² Authorities from both sides and a faithful record from a historian who could be described as 'candid' and 'impartial': here we have criteria to satisfy the moral categories underlying The Decline and Fall.³

A noble and more credible Julian emerges, a man characterised by tolerance, moderation, gentleness and learning, yet also infected by ambition, superstition, and occasionally by prejudice. An index of Gibbon's commitment to this 'more accurate view' of a 'hero' whom he personally found very attractive, can be seen in his disclosure of a motive which does not flatter Julian in the least. His ban on Christians teaching grammar and rhetoric was excused by friends and supporters as well as by the emperor himself. Indeed, 'the motives alleged by the emperor to justify this partial and oppressive measure might command, during his lifetime, the silence of slaves and the applause of flatterers'. By the judgement of posterity, however, a judgement which Gibbon endorsed, 'a just and severe censure has been inflicted on the law' which discriminated so harshly against one section of the population.⁴ So too, in other instances, according to Gibbon, Julian was restrained from violating even his own 'laws of justice and toleration' only by 'the care of his reputation, which was exposed to the eyes of the universe'.⁵

1. DF, xiii, II, 456.
2. DF, xliii, V, 459.
4. DF, xxiii, II, 487.
5. DF, xxiii, II, 489.
In his characterisation we can see the historian revealing himself very clearly as moralist not only in the impartiality of a portrait with which he felt great satisfaction, but also in the scrupulous honesty which refused, unlike many of his contemporaries, to set up Julian 'the philosophic monarch' as a model for their own 'philosophic age'. As a modern biographer of this emperor has put it: 'The men of the eighteenth century tended to see Julian in their own image, as the incarnation of dispassionate reason and the foe of obsolete superstition. Gibbon was honest enough and learned enough to perceive the difficulties of this interpretation...Thus Diderot made of Julian "l'honneur de l'eclectisme" and Voltaire, who was constantly using him as an example, was embarrassed by his evident religiosity, which he tried to explain away or to ignore as unimportant'. Gibbon's obligation to 'the candour of history' allowed him to do neither; and he exposed Voltaire's admiration for Amurath, 'le philosophe Turc', as due not to honesty but to bigotry.

It has already been shown how Gibbon's view of people in history was very much influenced by considerations of the nature of the period in which they lived. Underlying his assessment of character, we find this relative standard in conjunction with those other criteria of impartiality and balance which we have been considering. There are, he felt, ages of giants and ages of pigmies; and the character of a man must be seen against the stature of his contemporaries. In this

1. Robert Browning, The Emperor Julian, p. 231. Voltaire, in his Dictionnaire philosophique, referred to him as everywhere the equal of Marcus Aurelius, and even as 'peut-être le premier des hommes, ou du moins le second'.
2. DF, lxvii, VII, 146, n. 15.
3. See above, pp. 263-264 of the present chapter.
4. See DF, ii, I, 62-4 and in particular the statement that 'the Roman world was indeed peopled by a race of pygmies'. (p. 64).
view, Stilicho towered above his age and Boethius shone out with added lustre in a dark and degenerate period of history.\(^1\) Constantine's virtues 'were rendered more illustrious by the vices of Maxentius',\(^2\) while, on the other hand, 'the vices of Chosroes' 'were frankly admitted to be simply 'those of Oriental despotism'.\(^3\) Julian's character, said Gibbon, 'did not escape the contagion of the times'.\(^4\) This phrase, which recurs in The Decline and Fall, is a further illustration of Gibbon's commitment to a judgement which is moderate, impartial and even generous, because it is essentially relative. Thus the emperor Claudius for all his admirable qualities, had 'not entirely escaped the 'contagion of the times'.\(^5\) If there is impartiality, there is also moderation in the recognition that, considering the times, the man deserves some praise for remaining relatively free from surrounding vices. And even more generous is the statement concerning Belisarius, that 'his virtues were his own', while 'his imperfections flowed from the contagion of the times'.\(^6\)

Another sort of relative judgement is invoked where it is felt that allowance must be made for circumstances which have been either too harsh or too kind to a particular character. Since a partial or imperfect view might result, it is the duty of the truthful historian to draw attention to this fact so that the reader may adjust his judgement.

1. DF, xxix, III, 237ff., especially p. 238 ('the Roman generals might yield the pre-eminence of rank to the ascendant of superior genius' in Stilicho); and for Boethius, see xxxix, IV, 211.
2. DF, xiv, I, 445.
3. DF, xlii, IV, 386.
4. DF, xxiii, II, 48.
5. DF, xi, I, 308.
6. DF, xlii, IV, 365.
Gibbon therefore took care to do so by pointing out that 'the precarious and dependent situation of Julian', in his role of general and governor of Gaul, actually displayed his virtues and concealed his vices.¹

In The Decline and Fall, the great figures of history are judged in terms of their 'true character' and their contribution to the welfare and happiness of mankind. Hence the question arises: How far is their title to greatness justified when judged according to such moral criteria? Constantine, Julian and Justinian from an earlier period, and Charlemagne from a new era,² are recalled to the bar of history to allow Gibbon to present the case for a more impartial verdict. The evidence is re-examined, the standards of the age are taken into account, and the impartiality of the witnesses is scrutinised. Thus, as we have seen in the case of Justinian, Gibbon wished to set aside the biased testimony of 'the secret historian', Procopius, who continually attributed base motives to the emperor and blamed him for the wrongs of others and even the calamities of the age.³ In his detailed assessment of the character and achievements of this emperor, whose life and work stretch across no less than five chapters of The Decline and Fall,⁴ Gibbon was really testing Justinian's claim to true greatness.⁵

1. DF, xix, II, 303. Julian had recently been appointed Caesar at Milan in AD 365.
2. The second of the three periods into which Gibbon divided his History in the original preface of 1776, opened with Justinian and ended with Charlemagne (see Preface of the Author, p. iv; in Bury's edition, I, xxxix-xl). However, as Gibbon said of Charlemagne, 'Europe dates a new area from his restoration of the Western Empire'. (xlix, V, 306).
4. Chaps. xl to xliv.
5. DF, xliii, IV, 459ff. Gibbon also used the method employed for Constantine and Julian: 'the confessions of an enemy may be received as the safest evidence of his virtues'. (xliii, IV, 459).
The clearest instance of such a re-examination is to be found in the account of Charlemagne, where Gibbon opened his case with the statement: 'The appellation of great has been often bestowed and sometimes deserved'.¹ In the first hearing, where Charlemagne's performance in family life, in administration and on the battlefield are considered, he fares badly. In the domestic sphere, it is found that 'of his moral virtues, chastity is not the most conspicuous', though it is admitted that this need not necessarily render him a bad ruler. However, in the government of his empire, it is alleged that his laws, though perhaps well-intentioned, 'were not less sanguinary than his arms'; and in the use of arms, he abused the rights of conquest, sometimes acting with callous lack of both humanity and justice.²

After this initial examination, it is nevertheless admitted that there are many counts on which the emperor is entitled to praise, above all his 'encouragement of learning', which, said Gibbon, 'reflects the purest and most pleasing lustre on the character of Charlemagne'.³ Yet in Gibbon's account this is faint praise, since he took good care to qualify the appellation 'great'. Here was yet another of those characters who, like Constantine and Justinian, had long been accepted as both great and good. Charlemagne, however, enjoyed the unique distinction of having the title 'great' 'indissolubly blended with the name'. The title of 'saint' was also added to his name in the Roman calendar, and most surprising of all to Gibbon, 'the saint, by a rare felicity, is crowned with the praises of the historians and

¹. DF, xlix, V, 302-3. Not unlike Constantine, Charlemagne is, as Gibbon noted, also accepted as a saint.
². DF, xlix, V, 303-4.
³. DF, xlix, V, 306.
⁴. DF, xlix, V, 306.
philosophers of an enlightened age.\(^1\) Hence it is all the more incumbent on Gibbon to check the credentials of this ruler whose sainthood, under closer scrutiny, appears somewhat tarnished and whose title to greatness rather doubtful. In the interests of justice and impartiality, he appealed to his relative standard of judgement: 'His real merit is doubtless enhanced by the barbarism of the nation and the times from which he emerged; but the apparent magnitude of an object is likewise enlarged by an unequal comparison; and the ruins of Palmyra derive a casual splendour from the nakedness of the surrounding desert'. The conclusion, so damning by its ironic understatement, and especially in view of what Gibbon went on to show of Charlemagne's true character, is this: 'Without injustice to his fame, I may discern some blemishes in the sanctity and greatness of the restorer of the Western Empire'.\(^2\)

Gibbon had declared in his Essai that small traits are often more revealing than brilliant deeds and that Alexander displayed his character more clearly in the tent of Darius than on the battlefield of Guagmila.\(^3\) So to in The Decline and Fall, he sought for the unpremeditated as being the most reliable actions for revealing the true character of his figures. This is well illustrated by a scene in the life of the emperor Claudius. Gibbon had previously shown that emperor exercising clemency towards the supporters of the defeated Aureolus, but reserving 'for himself the pleasure and merit of obtaining by his intercession a general act of indemnity'.\(^4\) But the historian

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2. DF, xlix, V, 303. 'In the discussion of his motives', Gibbon concluded 'whatever is subtracted from bigotry must be imputed to temper'. (p. 304).
3. Essai, L, p. 64.
4. DF, xi, I, 308.
recognised the danger in the use of such evidence of character, for
Claudius like Julian, obviously had an eye on 'the care of his reputation'
in public actions of this kind. They are unlikely to reveal pure and
unmixed motives. 'Such ostentation discovers less of the real character
of Claudius than a trifling circumstance in which he seems to have
consulted only the dictates of his heart'.¹ Then follows the scene
in which an old woman complained of the arbitrary appropriation of
her property by a general of the late emperor. Claudius recognised
himself in the general, 'blushed at the reproach', and, we are told,
'deserved the confidence which she had reposed in his equity'. He
confessed his fault and made 'immediate and ample restitution'.² Such
an anecdote, which a historian concerned only with politics, battles,
and great events might have discarded, Gibbon saw as vital to the
discovery of true character. In the light of this little scene,
the arbitrary action of the general was found to be not indicative
of a ruthless and merciless nature, but merely an isolated blemish
due to the prevailing 'contagion of the times' upon an essentially
upright man.

The emperor Valens is one, said Gibbon, whose memory has been
injured because of the triumph of the orthodox Christian party.
Accordingly, he sought with 'candour' to arrive at a juster view of
this emperor whose public acts are stained with the marks of persecution
and cruelty. With such a character, so variable and so maligned, it
is hard to reach a satisfactory verdict from reports of the striking

¹. DF, xi, I, 308.
². DF, xi, I, 308.
events of his reign; the real man is more likely to be found in private encounters: 'Whatever credit may be allowed to vague and distant reports, the character, or at least the behaviour, of Valens may be most distinctly seen in his personal transactions with the eloquent Basil archbishop of Caesarea'.

In seeking admissible evidence of real character and motives, the historian is sometimes limited by the available material. If he is dealing with kings, he must beware, as Gibbon himself frequently warned, of accepting their expressed motives at face value; and, if he is forced to use public and official pronouncements of emperors, documents which are directly concerned with enhancing their own reputation, then there must be safeguards. Recognising this in his treatment of Galerius' edict of toleration, he admitted: 'It is not usually in the language of edicts and manifestos that we should search for the real character or secret motives of princes; but, as these were the words of a dying emperor, his situation perhaps might be admitted as a pledge of his security'. This is an interesting comment on Gibbon's use of his sources. It is yet another example, not only of his treatment of each case on its own merits by admitting any relevant or extenuating evidence, but also of his duty as moralist to each individual character, from the standpoint of posterity.

1. DF, xxv, III, 28.
2. DF, xvi, II, 142.
Gibbon's deep concern with character throughout *The Decline and Fall* is declared even in marginal headings and chapter outlines. Apart from those referring to virtues and vices, to various human traits or to particular instances of these, we find over seventy which explicitly promise a treatment of character.\(^1\) In one sense the whole work is largely concerned with the actions and characters of the persons who move across its ample stage. Though we need not attribute to Gibbon a 'great-man theory' of history, his monarchs and generals, administrators and powerful religious leaders do seem for a time to hold in their hands the fortunes of nations, empires or adherents of the faith: on the nature of their character the misery or well-being of peoples appears to depend. On several occasions Gibbon stressed the pivotal importance of an individual. Having sketched his famous picture of human happiness in the Antonine age, he immediately pointed to 'the instability of a happiness which depended on the character of a single man'.\(^2\)

At a later stage he noted that 'a state or empire may be indebted for their safety and prosperity to the undaunted courage of a single man'.\(^3\) When the Goths had crossed the Danube, Theodosius hesitated whether he should involved 'his exhausted people' in further warfare. 'In this moment of anxious doubt', Gibbon declared, 'the fate of the Roman world depended on the resolution of a single man'.\(^4\)

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1. I refer to the numerous subheadings like, 'Character and Policy of Augustus', 'Character of Commodus', 'Their Characters', 'His Character'.
2. *DF*, iii, I, 86. This was, as Gibbon suggested, inevitable under the Augustan constitution. Cf. *DF*, xxxviii, IV, 177: 'The happiness of an hundred millions depended on the personal merit of one or two men'.
4. *DF*, xxvii, III, 172. Cf. also xxix, III, 240: 'The various multitudes of Europe and Asia...were overawed by the authority of a single man; and the rigid discipline of Stilicho protected the lands of citizen from the rapine of the licentious soldier'.

Martel he saw 'Christendom delivered by the genius and fortune of one man';\(^1\) while, in Charlemagne’s day, 'the union and stability of his empire depended on the life of a single man'.\(^2\) In the establishment of the Ottoman empire, Gibbon assigned the most important place 'to the personal qualities of the sultans'; for, he wrote, stating what he regarded as a general principle: 'in human life, the most important scenes will depend on the character of a single actor'.\(^3\)

Gibbon found this principle just as applicable to his own times as to those he dealt with in The Decline and Fall. Surveying the contemporary scene at the end of 1789, he saw France in a state of anarchy, deprived of her former strength and vigour. In this situation he looked in vain for a man of strong character like Richelieu or Cromwell to restore the nation’s former greatness. 'How many years must elapse', he asked, 'before France can recover any vigour, or resume her station among the powers of Europe? As yet there is no symptom of a great man, a Richelieu or a Cromwell arising either to restore the Monarchy or to lead the Commonwealth'.\(^4\)

1. DF, liii, VI, 16.
2. DF, xlix, V, 305.
3. DF, lxv, VII, 81. Referring to Bajazet’s victorious march through Hungary and Germany to Rome being checked by a painful fit of gout, Gibbon noted how such an ailment 'falling on a single fibre of one man may prevent or suspend the misery of nations'. (DF, lxiv, VII, 37).
4. Written to Lord Sheffield, 15/12/ 89, Letters, lli, 184.
Given the importance of 'the character of a single actor' in the shaping of events, we would expect certain consequences in the historian's work. And these we can observe in The Decline and Fall. In the first place, this view is reflected in Gibbon's presentation of his material; secondly, the instructive side of history finds its main illustration in the lives and characters of these actors; and thirdly, arising out of this is the moral obligation to arrive at the authentic character of the person concerned.

Firstly, then, as we study the development of Gibbon's plan and presentation, we can perceive a moral coherence worked out very largely through the interplay of character and external forces. In the earlier part of the work, this plan 'is in essence simple: it is to demonstrate the sources and the progress of Roman weakness, and, in so doing, to demonstrate those weaknesses of universal human nature which are, in the end, self-destructive'.¹ This is seen in the lives of emperors and leaders grappling with great problems in a period of continuing decline; and the struggle or failure to struggle with these internal and external problems reveals the character of the man. It shows the opposite possibilities of men, either to sink in abject indulgence and surrender, or to control and master the forces arrayed against them.

In the second part of his work, as Jordan points out, Gibbon's emphasis moves still more away 'from institutions, classes, and impersonal forces to individuals...He concentrates on those characters in the past who were not overcome by circumstances...The relationship

¹ Parkinson, Edward Gibbon, p. 76. Parkinson has taken as an example of this aim, a study of volume II, on the basis of which his remarks are made.
between the individual and impersonal forces becomes the dominant theme. And the exceptional individual, able to understand his circumstances, able to order his life despite historical forces working against him, becomes the hero of The Decline and Fall.¹ The type of hero Gibbon had in mind is clearly stated in his own revision of that work, which he began towards the end of 1790 but which he never carried through. There he wrote that 'the first place in the hall of fame is due and is assigned to the successful heroes who had struggled in adversity; who after signalising their valour in the deliverance of their country, have displayed their wisdom and virtue in the foundation or government of a flourishing state. Such men were Moses, Cyrus, Alfred, Gustavus Vasa, Henry IV of France, etc. and, in Rome, perhaps above all others, Trajan.'²

Of the men here singled out as examples, one religious leader and five kings, none belongs to The Decline and Fall, so that we do not have Gibbon's direct comments on how they especially satisfied his standard. They must all at least have had, in his eyes, ideals of wisdom and virtue as well as the active attributes of valour and service to their nation. He referred to Alfred as 'the most glorious of the English kings';³ the virtues of Henry IV he saw as the antithesis of the 'savage character' of Clovis and his 'personal prowess' as comparable to that of Belisarius, Pyrrhus and Alexander.⁴ In his early work on the monarchy of the Medes, Gibbon wrote at length of Cyrus as one who

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1. Gibbon and His Roman Empire, pp. 228-9.
2. Marginal Notes from Gibbon's 2nd edition of The Decline and Fall, in Bury's 1900 ed., Introd. xxxvi. See also Craddock, The English Essays of Edward Gibbon, p. 587 for the dating of these notes.
3. DF, xxxix, IV, 216.
4. DF, xxxviii, 118, where Henry and Clovis 'suggest the most opposite ideas of human nature'; xli, IV, 335, where Henry is grouped with these generals.
had left in Asia a name which survived the ruin of his empire.¹ There
he aimed to do with Cyrus what he later did in the great portraits
of Constantine and Julian, namely to set aside an extreme and unbalanced
view and arrive at an appreciation of the true character of this philo-
sophic ruler and man of action.² Still, in contrast to Henry I,
'Cyrus n'avoi point l'âme de Henry IV dont on n'a jamais lu l'histoire
sans attendrissement; de ce prince qui pleuroit le triste sort de
ses sujets rebelles, et qui aima son peuple, comme les autres rois
ont aimé la gloire'.³ And Trajan, hero 'perhaps above all others'
in Rome, though he too suffered from this ambition for fame, 'the
vice of the most exalted characters',⁴ was nevertheless included with
the Antonines in that 'golden age' which preceded the long decline.⁵

The 'heroes' who had attracted the young Gibbon as he searched
for a subject 'fit for history', had been set aside as morally inadequate
or lacking universal appeal for a really great work.⁶ The mature
historian, reflecting on that work now completed, expressed in a sentence
in his revision, the criteria for a true hero. Even valour in a
worthy cause was not enough; there must be also those moral requisites,
'wisdom and virtue' and public service. Here was the standard of
excellence both in the state, whether republic or empire, and in the

¹. 'Mémoire sur la Monarchie des Mèdes', MW, III, 122; see also
following pages.
². ibid., p. 146. 'Il a fallu se livrer à une discussion un peu
longue, pour apprécier le vrai caractère de Cyrus'.
³. ibid., MW, III, 132.
⁴. DF, i, 1, 6. In his notes for revision, Gibbon altered 'characters'
to 'minds'.
⁵. DF, iii, I, 86.
⁶. See above, chap. IV, pp. 127ff.
ruler, whose chief concern should be the happiness and prosperity of his people.\(^1\) In this note on his finished work Gibbon underlined those qualities to which he had already given such prominence,\(^2\) and recalled the standard he had in mind as he portrayed and assessed his characters in *The Decline and Fall*.

But if history is to be not only interesting but instructive, and if it is concerned so largely with the actions and characters of its 'actors', then these will provide the main source of instruction. So a second consequence is that the philosophic historian will discern useful lessons by which the morally enlightened can profit. Gibbon, however, did not suggest that one could model one's life on these historical characters, nor that they were *exempla* in the sense that Bolingbroke proposed. His presentation is at once more subtle and complex, reflecting the complexity he saw in human nature. But he did see living instances of ambition, avarice, superstition, generosity, contentment, of vice and folly or of wisdom and virtue in the men and women who people his work. As we observe him tracing the life of Julian, we are shown where and how that emperor erred, his deception or his confusion of motives, and the pitfalls a truly 'philosophic monarch' would have avoided. We are given a severe moral lesson in the chapters on Constantine, from the glowing picture of the youth with his promise of moral greatness, through the aspiring general whose 'ruling passion'

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1. See marginal note, DF, 1900 ed. Introd. xxxvi; and above, chap. V, pp. 219-220, 238.
2. See the conclusion of L.P. Curtis' article already quoted, to the effect that Gibbon's 'entire history revolves around a formula, around three words...virtue, wisdom and power'. ("Gibbon's Paradise Lost", op.cit., p. 79).
gradually took over, to the final degeneration when this 'boundless ambition' dominated the unchecked autocrat. A similar sad and moral story is brought to us in the final scene presented by Gibbon in the life of another great figure, who becomes an example of 'the jurisdiction of conscience and the remorse of kings...After a life of virtue and glory, Theodoric was now descending with shame and guilt into the grave'.

This instructive approach is the pattern of characterisation applied to one ruler after another. As Gibbon turned his mind to the story of declining Rome, he was sure that nowhere in modern history could he discover characters who presented such 'a strong and various picture of human nature' as in the annals of the Roman emperors. 'In the conduct of these monarchs', he wrote, 'we may trace the utmost lines of vice and virtues; the most exalted perfection and the meanest degeneracy of our own species'. Nor did he fail to exploit this rich mine of human character. Indeed, as we noticed in the case of motives, which he often personified, so too, these vices and virtues, whether those of the emperors or of other men and women, frequently become the real actors, or at least the masks of the actors in his drama. It has been suggested that his real villains 'are not so much particular Roman emperors, or particular tribes of barbarians, or groups of believers, Christian or pagan: the villains are ease, sloth, and luxury; enthusiasm, zeal, and fanaticism; arrogance, pride and vanity. They are seen, as they must be, as embodied in particular persons, classes and races, philosophies and religions; but the real culprit is the uneducated, irrational, and (if we may use such an expression when writing of Gibbon's work) unregenerate human nature'.

1. DF, xxix, IV, 217.
2. DF, iii, I, 86.
3. See the present chapter, p. 265.
Yet even if such an impression is created by the recurrence of these abstract nouns on page after page of *The Decline and Fall*, its historical figures are never mere personifications of these qualities, but real men and women. They are neither wholly good or bad, they have their moral successes and failures and because of this they have a lesson for ordinary human beings living in the same imperfect world. Those who succeed usually do so by triumphing over adverse circumstances which have tested and developed their character. 'Sweet are the uses of adversity' might be written over many of his 'heroes'; and his sensitive portrait of Athenais displays not only pleasing qualities of mind and body, but also 'a virtue tried by distress'. But there were also those on whom the lessons of life were wasted. How did Gallus, for one, use his trials? 'A temper naturally morose and violent, instead of being corrected, was sowed by solitude and adversity; the remembrance of what he had endured disposed him to retaliation rather than sympathy'.

Or consider the younger Andronicus, 'who gathered the fruits of ambition; but the taste was transient and bitter; in the supreme station he lost the remains of his early popularity; and the defects of his character became still more conspicuous to the world'. The plain message of Gibbon's statements is that man can rise above his misfortunes and difficulties, though he may and, in fact, frequently does succumb to them.

There are even princes who, like Gibbon himself, were able to find instruction in the varied characters of Roman history. He celebrated the good sense of Theodosius I who not only learned but applied these

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1. DF, xxxii, III, 410.
3. DF, lxiii, VI, 516.
moral lessons: 'The annals of Rome in a long period of eleven hundred years presented him with a various and splendid picture of human life; and it has been observed that whenever he perused the cruel acts of Cinna, of Marius, or of Sylla, he warmly expressed his generous detestation of those enemies of humanity and freedom. His disinterested opinion of past events was usefully applied as the rule of his own actions'. Gibbon's own great History is also a testimony to the fact that the exemplary value of the unparalleled vices and virtues of the emperors, as well as 'the spendid theatre on which they were acted, have saved them from oblivion'.

Since the 'single actor' often plays a most important role in history, and since his character can afford such instruction to future ages, the duty of the historian is clear: he must present an impartial and authentic account of that character. But in seeking to do this, as Gibbon was well aware, he is immediately confronted by the problem of his sources. They may reflect a partisan bias which has sometimes become well established in a traditional distortion, such as the opposing presentations of Constantine.

It is often the case that prominent persons have been misjudged; that justice has never been done to their real nature. The man in an exalted position is peculiarly liable to such misjudgement because of the tendency 'to suspect the motives of princes', and of those who have risen to places of eminence over their fellow citizens. Even their virtues may be misconstrued or maliciously represented in a bad light.

1. DF, xxvii, III, 176.
2. DF, iii, I, 87.
3. See DF, i, I, 8 and cf. above p. 268-9 of the present chapter.
'It is easy for faction and calumny to shed their poison on the administration of the best princes and even to accuse their virtues by artificially confounding them with those vices to which they bear the nearest affinity'.\(^1\) Or it may be not the voice of calumny but of flattery. Thus Valentinian's favourites sometimes deceived his judgement: 'They praised his inflexible love of justice, and, in pursuit of justice, the emperor was easily tempted to consider clemency as a weakness and passion as a virtue'.\(^2\) It is when the word of flatterers and favourites is accepted by a partial or an uncritical historian that this moral distortion is perpetuated. By such a confusion of moral values, by a deliberate reversal of vices and virtues, by exaggeration or false emphases, a distortion of the true character is handed down to posterity. With a keen suspicion of the likelihood of such bias or distortion, Gibbon was always on the alert when using ecclesiastical or court historians.

He was also aware of that other danger, to which he felt church historians were especially prone, namely the application of a harsh and over rigid standard of judgement which likewise robbed a man of his 'true character'. Against such harsh and ungenerous censures the reader is warned. If Gibbon presented the Empress Theodora as 'the royal prostitute', as perhaps Justinian's most obvious weakness and the symbol of his poor judgement, he was determined not to let the narrow or self-righteous critics have the last word. His own very flexible and compassionate moral outlook enabled him to write:

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'Those who believe that the female mind is totally depraved by the loss of chastity, will eagerly listen to all the invectives of private envy or popular resentment, which have dissembled the virtues of Theodora, exaggerated her vices, and condemned with rigour the venal or voluntary sins of the youthful harlot'. In somewhat similar vein he expressed what he felt to be a true and humane estimate of Theodosius: 'The unfeeling critics, who consider every amorous weakness as an indelible stain on the memory of a great and orthodox emperor, are inclined, on this occasion to dispute the evidence of the historian Zosimus. For my own part, I shall frankly confess, that I am willing to find, or even to seek, in the revolutions of the world, some traces of the mild and tender sentiments of domestic life; and amidst the crowd of fierce and ambitious conquerors, I can distinguish, with peculiar complacency, a gentle hero, who may be supposed to receive his armour from the hands of love'.

There is no doubt that Gibbon was more interested in people than politics. Neither its systems nor its philosophies presented the living instruction he found in the great characters of history. Though he acknowledged a debt to Montesquieu, he followed a different course in his own work. Roman history was for him far more than a "case study" for a general typology of political regimes. And he saw 'second-century Rome as representing a privileged moment in human history', instructive primarily for its unequalled characters rather than its political philosophy. 'Gibbon was, in fact, indifferent to the

1. DF, xl, V, 230.
2. DF, xxvii, II, 172.
political philosophy that so excited many of his contemporaries. He wrote, as did his masters in antiquity - Thucydides, Cicero, and Tacitus - moral history. For a period to be great, it was necessary, but also sufficient, for it to have produced a certain kind of man. The emperors of the second century were his exempla; they were at once a culture and a moral'.

1. Furet, loc.cit.