

interpretation

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THE DESIGN OF MONTESQUIEU'S CONSIDERATIONS

*Considerations on the causes of the greatness of the Romans and their decline**

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Introduction

Montesquieu's work on the Romans appeared in 1734, about midway between his other two great works, *Persian Letters* (1721), and *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). Like them, it was published outside of France, and anonymously. The preface to the first speaks of a "secret chain" linking its parts. The preface to the third begs the reader to seek the author's "design" in the "design of the work," and again refers to truths that will reveal themselves only after the reader has become aware of "the chain that links them to others." Yet both prefaces pretend to announce the purpose of each work *before* the reader has had an opportunity to think his way to its "secret chain" or "design." They cannot fully and openly announce, however, any purpose that depends for its fulfillment on a message esoterically conveyed. These prefaces must therefore—like the works themselves—withhold things from the reader. Beneath their stated purposes lie deeper, unstated ones.

Only the work on the Romans has no preface; nor is its purpose announced anywhere within the text itself. Why should it alone be denied a prefatory statement of intent? Does it speak more boldly and hence require no preface? Does it speak more dangerously and hence tolerate none? Perhaps its title—which is more expansive and clear than the titles of the other two—unambiguously proclaims the purpose of the work. It proffers "considerations on the causes of the greatness of the Romans and their decline." But why Rome? Why *its* greatness and decline? And if the work is meant to be a causal analysis, rather than a history, a glance at the text shows that it is, at least in part, also a history. It begins at Rome's origin, ends with the collapse of the Eastern Empire, and proceeds from one to the other with many chapters plainly historical in nature. Not all the chapters are of this kind, however: some are summations of causal analysis, pure and simple. Why, given the title, did the work require historical as well as causal chapters? The title may be expansive, but its meaning, and its relation to the purpose of the work, are far from self-evident.

Purpose can show itself in overall plan or "design." Do these twenty-three chapters have such a design? The twelfth chapter, dealing with Rome's condition immediately after Caesar's death, serves to divide the work as a whole into eleven chapters on the Roman republic and eleven on the empire. Paradoxically, however, the empire chapters do not all treat of the *Roman*

* This essay is part of a larger work on Montesquieu's early writings begun in 1965 with financial assistance, hereby gratefully acknowledged, from the Reim Foundation.

Empire. Toward the beginning of chapter 21 we are told that the correct name for the empire beyond that point is the "Greek" Empire. But why three chapters on what Montesquieu takes pains to call the Greek Empire in a work explicitly devoted to the Romans alone? And if the Greek Empire, down to the fifteenth century, is a fitting portion of the subject, why not the Holy Roman Empire of the West as it became established under Charlemagne as early as the ninth century?

If we examine the work with an eye to the distribution of historical and causal chapters, the republic half has five of the former (1, 4, 5, 7, 11) and the remaining six causal, while the empire half has only one purely causal (18), and two mixed (21, 22), with the remaining eight or nine (if one includes chapter 12) historical. By this calculation, the causal chapters are slightly more numerous in the republic half but heavily outnumbered by the historical chapters in the empire half. For reasons unknown to us, the republic half makes relatively little attempt to fill in the history of the republic, whereas the empire half is primarily devoted to filling in the history of the empire.

Just as the middle of the twenty-three chapters divides the work as a whole, so do the two middles of the two halves further divide it. Chapter 6 of the eleven republic chapters sums up the rules of conduct by which the Romans became great; chapter 18 of the eleven empire chapters sums up the new "maxims" or rules of conduct causing Rome to fall. Chapter 6 also serves as a dividing point between the chapters dealing with the Roman republic before its corruption began, and those dealing with its inner decay. And of the first five chapters, the middle one, number 3, is devoted to "How the Romans were able to extend their power," just as the middle chapter of the five devoted to the corrupt republic (number 9) examines "Two causes of Rome's ruin."

The key causal chapters turn out to be numbers 3 and 6 (causes of the republic's greatness), number 9 (causes of the republic's fall), and number 18 (causes of the fall of the Roman Empire). Moreover, just as chapter 10 deals with a particular rather than a general cause of the republic's ruin (the corruption wrought by the spread of Epicureanism), so does the chapter directly following chapter 18 deal with a similar subject the very mention of which is omitted from its title, namely the effect of the spread of Christianity—i.e., a particular rather than a general cause—on the empire's decline. And just as chapter 18, the central chapter of the empire half, conveys the general reasons for Rome's decline, so does chapter 22, the middle chapter of the section on the "Greek" Empire, point to the deepest cause of that empire's corruption.

An intricate yet basically simple symmetry seems to inform this work: but what is the design behind the design? Perhaps we can learn something from the most important theoretical teaching in the work, located, as we might expect, in chapter 18's analysis of the empire's fall. It is a general teaching about causation, in a work explicitly devoted to the discovery of "causes." We are told:

It is not chance that rules the world . . . There are general causes, moral and physical, which act in every monarchy, elevating it, maintaining it, or hurling it to the ground. All

accidents are controlled by these causes . . . In a word, the main trend draws with it all particular accidents.¹

We are given this thesis, but not the key to it—at least not plainly. Does the word “world” refer only to the human world or to all things in the universe? What are “general” as distinguished from “particular” causes, and why do “chance,” “accident,” and “particularity” all go together? Of what do “moral” and “physical” causes consist, and how are they related? Certainly the principle stated here will have to be understood to appreciate both the causal analysis of Rome’s greatness and decline and the design of the work in all its aspects, from its non-existent preface, its title, and its layout of chapters, to its inner content. The work and the principle will serve to elucidate each other.

We have already seen enough to surmise that the *Considerations*, like Montesquieu’s other two major works, contains parts linked by a “secret chain” or hidden design. In *Persian Letters*, the form of the romance or story helps hide the design: its preface could alert the reader to a deeper message. Perhaps the *Considerations*, unadorned by fictional form and standing more starkly, could not risk a preface. But why speak of “risk?” What need to conceal? To answer this question in a preliminary way, we must not unthinkingly neglect the fact that the work was published anonymously, and in Holland, not France. As we learn from Robert Shackleton, Montesquieu’s biographer, eighteenth century France was not precisely a liberal society, open to all advocacies or teachings.² Monarchy and church were still quite sensitive to criticism; the censor was still a powerful figure; and an author’s personal destiny, and that of his books, could easily be determined by factors having nothing to do with literary merit or marketability. Of this perennial problem facing the writer in non-liberal societies of the past we have again been made aware by the plight of authors under totalitarianism, who found themselves compelled to re-discover ways of evading oppressive scrutiny.

Considering only the French environment of 1734, Montesquieu could easily anticipate trouble over a work that praised pagan Rome, as distinguished from Christianity, and favored republican Rome rather than its early or later monarchical forms. How well aware he was of dangers such as these can be shown from the text itself. He tells us, in one place, that “men are never more offended than when their ceremonies and practices are flouted.” He allows (in a footnote) that he is fearful of conflicting with “ecclesiastical authors” in matters pertaining to piety. He points sharply at the crime of lese-majesty or high treason that Tiberius applied not only to actions but to “words, signs and even thoughts . . .” He shows that he appreciates how Procopius, under Justinian’s tyranny, might have written a Secret History contradicting his published works. Finally, he gives evidence of being acutely aware of the

¹ Page 169 (references are to my translation of the *Considerations*, Free Press and Cornell University 1965).

² R. Shackleton, *Montesquieu* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 153–4.

dangers of regicide, even while evincing an unusual interest in the problems of conspirators.³

I

Roman Greatness and Decline

Montesquieu's message must be sought in the body of his carefully wrought text. Chapter 1's account of Rome's beginnings does not rely on anything mysterious or even prepossessing. We are not told where the Romans came from: they could have been almost any people. No act of foundation by the gods, or by Romulus, forms part of the story: Rome's traditional interpretation of itself seems to be put to one side. Montesquieu refers, it is true, to the greatness that soon appeared in its public edifices, and to its commencing early to build "the eternal city." Nevertheless, the only public work cited in his first footnote is the sewerage system constructed under Tarquin (and not Tarquin's first temple of Jupiter, for example): evidently, great things have very lowly or earthly origins. But Montesquieu's reference to "the eternal city" does seem traditional and uncritical, as if Rome did in fact produce such a thing. This full acceptance of pagan Rome, however, implies incredulity about other eternal cities—about Jerusalem and Christian Rome. It may even suggest some continuity between pagan Rome and the eternal Rome of Christianity, still powerful in the eighteenth century. The reference is therefore entirely untraditional from the standpoint of dominant beliefs and institutions in his own day.

We should proceed more slowly. Montesquieu introduces his subject in the first paragraph by warning his readers that they must not picture earliest Rome as a city like those they see in their own day, except for Crimean cities. Earliest Rome, then, is not like present Rome, which is of course the first contemporary city that comes to mind. Above all, it is not Christian, not spiritual in aura, not complex. But neither were the first Romans like the first humans in Genesis, living in some direct relation to the Lord. Like the crude Crimean cities, Rome was first built to "hold booty, cattle and the fruits of the field." Why did these have to be held? The earliest cities seem to have been protective sanctuaries, owing their very existence to war. In fact, after referring to Rome's houses, squares, edifices and works—*i.e.*, to its internal physical characteristics—Montesquieu explicitly admits that Romulus and his successors were almost always at war with their neighbors "to obtain citizens, wives and lands." Yet he mentions Rome's union with the Sabines without a word about the renowned rape of the Sabine women, and when he traces the origin of the triumph of the bringing back to the city of "flocks and sheaves of grain" he is too gentle: his own source, Dionysius of

³ Pages 108–9; p. 164, note 9; p. 211, note 13; pp. 129–30; p. 126, note 1; pp. 199, 190. On the general problem and its implications for textual interpretation, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and The Art of Writing* (Free Press, 1952).

Halicarnassus, speaks of bringing back “spoils and conquered peoples.”⁴ Only much later does Montesquieu confide the fact that in all their wars the Romans took a large number of slaves. Thus, in these early paragraphs he seems to understate the ferocity of early war, and to paint the Romans too favorably, concealing from the reader how inhumane they really were.

As a city, Rome originates out of war, perpetuates itself through war, grows great by means of war. Its wars form the second topic in chapter 1 and remain the overriding consideration throughout the first seven chapters—if we understand that, for the Romans, foreign policy is merely an extension of war, and an instrument for achieving conquest and subjugation. In these chapters, Rome’s internal structure and domestic affairs receive little attention, and then, for the most part, only when they have some direct bearing on foreign affairs. What is more, the chapters that deal with the republic between its origins and its collapse (2 to 10) pay hardly any attention to Rome’s great leaders, regardless of whether their influence was most felt in foreign or domestic affairs. This observation is borne out by the chapter titles. Only Pyrrhus, Hannibal and Mithridates—all enemy captains—are named in them, in contrast to the chapters dealing with the last days of the republic and with the empire. The glory of Roman republican greatness, it would seem, belongs to the republican system as such, rather than to any of its individual members. Yet we learn relatively little about that system until chapter 8. Instead, we are asked to follow, and be fascinated by, the Roman juggernaut as it moves from war to war, in conquests culminated by those of Pompey at the end of chapter 7. Chapter 1 had mentioned Rome’s houses, early buildings, and public works (“ouvrages”), but it is the aggrandizing work (“ouvrage”) of greatness wrought by Rome and brought to its completion by Pompey that dominates the scene thereafter.⁵ And since to understand Rome’s greatness is to understand the antagonists and obstacles it had to overcome, Rome’s enemies sometimes figure more largely in these early chapters than Rome itself.

As a politic observer of political affairs, Montesquieu never attempts to present a scientific definition of greatness, or indeed any definition at all. We are compelled to infer the definition from his use of the term. In so doing we find that greatness, reduced to its core, is power—the ability to coerce, overcome and subdue. It shows itself most clearly in successful warfare and the building of durable empire. But greatness thus understood does not merely depend on military skill: it has moral and political prerequisites as well. It is more available to republics than to monarchies, and more to agricultural than to commercial republics. It depends on the widespread existence in the nation of such qualities as patriotism, obedience to law, courage, honesty, simplicity—in short, on civic virtue, and on prudent leadership as well, constantly applied. In this sense, the greatness of nations, measured in terms of

⁴ *Roman Antiquities*, II, 34; IX, 35.

⁵ Compare pp. 24, 81, 95 on “work.”

power and size, depends on the greatness of the men composing them, measured in terms of virtues such as these.

Montesquieu does not explicitly raise the question as to whether these virtues are desirable in themselves or only as means to national greatness. If they are ends in themselves, and more choiceworthy than bodily or external goods, then the ultimate standard for judging nations cannot be power, which involves an external relation to other nations. This was the view of Plato and Aristotle. On the other hand, if power is the crux of national greatness, then moral virtue must bend to its command and be sacrificed whenever the maintenance or extension of power requires vice. The overall complexion of the work points in this latter direction—the path first taken by Machiavelli. “Greatness” implicitly defined in terms of power, is *the* political standard. Thus, Montesquieu makes no outward effort whatsoever to relate cities to civilization or the good life, or to adduce, in Rome’s favor, those achievements in the arts and sciences that have no bearing on its power. The only Roman art he studies is the only one it studied, as he claims: the art of war. He knew that Roman letters were an outgrowth not of the vigorous and healthy republic but of the republic grown corrupt through imperialistic expansion. And when influential philosophies of the republic and empire are mentioned, it is not for themselves but for their baneful or beneficial effects on Roman greatness or power.⁶

The political counterpart to moral virtue, as classical philosophy conceived it, was civic harmony. This notion is also rejected by Montesquieu. In the first seven chapters we learn about a number of the internal prerequisites of Rome’s republican greatness. These include its annual consuls, its mode of distributing booty, its equal partition of lands, its custom favoring poverty and strict morals, its giving public preference to virtue, its allowing preeminence to the senate, and its great love of country and obedience to law. For the first time in chapter 8, however, we are told of internal dissensions that raged in the republic from its aristocratic beginnings and changed it into a popular state. The antagonism between plebeians and patricians gradually gave way to one between the common people and the nobles, though the senate remained the bastion of power for the non-democratic element throughout. Montesquieu enumerates the various techniques employed by the senate and by the people in their own behalf. He goes on to describe the magistracy of the censors, and its role in preserving old Roman ways and reducing threats to the commonwealth, especially from the people.

Chapter 8 comes as something of a surprise: it is not clearly a chapter about either greatness or decline; it is not explicitly linked to a consideration of Roman power. In fact, it makes one wonder how a republic so fraught with dissension could steadily triumph over its enemies in the manner described in the earlier chapters; and it returns, in its opening paragraphs, to a point in time appropriate to chapter 1. But chapter 8 was necessary. To understand the most powerful republic the world has ever seen, one must know

⁶ Epicurianism, p. 97; Stoicism, p. 145.

about its internal structure and working, and in particular about its contending parts. In the same way, Rome's internal corruption and breakdown, leading to the Caesars and ultimately to a great alteration in its external power, presuppose some understanding of its civil struggles and their exacerbation by conquest itself. But the role of dissension in this great republic also has theoretical importance, as Montesquieu himself tells us in the very next chapter: "We only hear in the authors of the dissensions that ruined Rome, without seeing that these dissensions were necessary to it, that they had always been there and always had to be." Far from a political vice, Roman dissension was a necessary accompaniment of Roman power and greatness. A kind of internal war went along with external war.

Chapter 9 finds the causes of Rome's ruin in the greatness of the empire and the greatness of the city of Rome—*i.e.*, in the manifold effects of increased size on Roman unity. But it accepts the Machiavellian view of the necessity of internal dissension in a free republic dedicated to military expansion, and it allows Montesquieu to speak quite generally of political union as such. Thus, just as chapter 6 is the most important chapter on the well-constructed foreign policy, so chapter 9 serves not only to treat Rome's ruin but in the process to declare the internal nature of political union. For "What is called union in a body politic is a very equivocal thing." Internal stresses and strains are not to be avoided if they contribute to the overall working of the political order, much as musical discords can contribute to harmony, or action and reaction to the orderly movement of the heavenly bodies. In this way, the essential problem of politics is likened to a problem in mechanics. A body politic must be a single body—it must have unity and coherence. But the ends of bodies politic, and their modes of coherence, do not seem to be determined by nature: political union is "a very equivocal thing." The "authors" blamed Rome's ruin on its internal conflict, but their political common sense is mistaken. With Montesquieu, the possibilities for obtaining political union are enormously expanded in the direction of that which in fact works regardless of what common sense expects. Again following Machiavelli, this Copernican revolution in politics opens the possibility of modern constitutional government founded on the institutionalized conflict of dissentient interests.

Chapters 8 to 10 convey an excellent picture of the framework of Rome as a city, and of how conquest led to the disintegration of the city's unity. But whereas the first two of these deal mainly with what are properly the general causes of Rome's greatness, chapter 10 introduces a particular cause: Epicureanism. Montesquieu does not explain what "the sect of Epicurus" was; he seems to be extremely reluctant to mention its hedonism and atheism. But the connection between morals, religion and patriotism in Rome occupies the central paragraph in the chapter, and the only direct reference to "hell" in the entire work occurs in a footnote quotation from Polybius linking oath-keeping to the "fear of hell"—a fear which Polybius thinks is "wisely established" and "fought without reason today." Judging from chapter 8, however, one wonders why the censors, whose job was to reform everything that

could change "the heart or mind of the citizen," did not succeed in repressing a doctrine that "contributed much toward tainting the heart and mind of the Romans." The answer seems to be given immediately after the paragraph on religion in chapter 10: the enormous riches derived from Rome's greatness were a necessary and general cause of the republic's corruption, and Epicureanism only an auxiliary and particular cause. Changes in accepted ideas, it would seem, are made possible by prior changes in non-intellectual conditions.

Chapter 11 deals mainly with Caesar's seizure of power, transformation of the republic, and assassination, chapter 12 with the events leading to Octavius Caesar's supremacy, and chapters 13 to 17 with the empire from Augustus to Valens. The longest continuous stretch of historical treatment in the work occurs from chapter 11 to chapter 17. It reveals a new pre-occupation with individuals and certain political and military elements of domestic affairs beginning with Sulla and ending with Valens, and proceeds systematically from one ruler to the next for the entire period of some four hundred years. Similarly, one observes that after the account of Mithridates in chapter 7 there are few descriptions of Rome's enemies and the wars undertaken against them, the most noteworthy exception being Trajan's war against the Parthians.

II

Rome and Judaea

Montesquieu takes his account of the Western Empire up to the time of its collapse under Arcadius and Honorius (c. 400 A.D.). In this account there is not a single reference to the birth, career and death of Jesus Christ. This observation may be linked to another: throughout the work not a single date is mentioned, although references to beginnings, ends, sequences and intervals of time abound. As we shall now show, these omissions have a ground and purpose. Montesquieu refuses to take his bearings by Christian chronology, and does everything in his power to cause the reader to forget Christian things. This is not merely a pedagogical device, for there is an intrinsic antithesis between Roman things and the things of the Bible, Jewish and Christian. A sympathetic study of republican Rome is, in fact, by its very nature an attack on the Bible, its leaders and its peoples. To win approval for Rome, Montesquieu must engender oblivion of and opposition to "sacred" history. He must even go so far as to suggest a natural explanation of "the sacred."

With respect to the role of the Jews in Roman history his problem is relatively simple. He barely takes notice of them. In footnotes to chapter 2, he uses Josephus, the Jewish leader who deserted the Jews, to testify to Roman military might. But the events immediately following this passage in Josephus—namely, the destruction of Jerusalem by Vespasian (78 A.D.)—go unnoticed in Montesquieu's text. In a footnote to chapter 6 (on the techniques of Roman aggrandizement), Montesquieu cites the apocryphal Book of the

Maccabees for a treaty made by Rome with the Jews, who had revolted against Syria and were then accorded the title of ally by Rome. In other words, at the height of their military prowess during the Roman period, the Jews were dependents of the Romans. The final reference to the Jews is the only one to appear in the body of the text. It occurs in a passage recounting how Justinian, the Christian emperor, used his sword and laws to destroy various non-Christian and Christian sects, including the Samaritans and the Jews,⁷ who had preserved their religion even after their conquest by pagan Rome. Thus, the Jews rise into the text only to mark their ruin through Christian persecution, whereas their original conquest by Pompey and later repression by Vespasian—in short, their sufferings at the hands of the Romans—are passed over in silence.

The conditions that prepared Rome for Christianity must be understood against the background of the conditions prevailing under the republic. The Roman senate and people lost their participation in self-rule under the empire and were compelled to submit to the rule of force—*i.e.* to tyranny. In a footnote⁸ Montesquieu tells us that he reserves the word tyranny, as did the Greeks and the Romans, for someone who overthrows a democracy. But, even if this definition were historically correct, it would imply that only the person who first establishes a tyranny is a tyrant—a usage to which he himself hardly adheres, and which would make it impossible for a European king in his own day to turn tyrant. In fact, he applies the term with great frequency to many if not most of the emperors, beginning with Augustus but going far beyond him as well. Tyranny, then, must have some relation to the scope of the powers in the hands of one man, and to the manner in which he employs them, as well as to the possible origin of such power. Montesquieu shows how all power but that of the emperor was rapidly destroyed under Augustus and Tiberius. This utter dependence on one man caused the increasing baseness of the senate and vileness of the people, especially once the latter was replaced in all its political as well as military functions. Virtue, integrity and self-reliance became things of the past, and servility the rule of the day. Very early, the people began to attach all their loves and hopes to the person of one man—as their desolation after the death of Germanicus (who lived in Jesus Christ's time) indicates.⁹

The practice of deifying close relatives seems to have begun, according to Montesquieu's account, with Caligula, whose sophistry insisted that his sister be regarded by the public as both a human and a goddess. It was used by Caracalla and Macrinus as a means of placating the hostility aroused by the murders they committed. Later, out of a desire to be worshipped like the kings of Persia, Diocletian (or Galerius) ordered that the living emperor be deified. But even before, when the emperors had begun to be chosen by the armies, and the armies were recruited from all over the empire, Rome be-

⁷ Page 191.

⁸ Page 126, note 7.

⁹ Pages 132-3.

came used to each emperor introducing laws and customs from his place of his origin, and Heliogabalus wanted to go so far as to replace all of Rome's gods with his own. Finally, the impoverishment of the people through taxation made them either take refuge among the barbarians or submit to personal servitude of some kind. In such a climate, wholly derived from the internal degeneration of the Roman empire itself and its reversal of the mores and institutions of the republic, the religion which was most adverse to the republic could take root and spread. The subservience engendered by the universal Roman empire prepared the Romans and their subjects alike for Christianity's utter dependence on one god, its universalism, its appeal to the poor and the meek, and its other-worldly promises. As to any admiration that the Christians might have evoked through courage in martyrdom, moral purity, and strange asceticism, nothing can be said, since Montesquieu has not chosen to mention, let alone depict or praise, how early Christians lived or died.

Another way in which Montesquieu reveals his attitude toward Christianity is through his praise of certain emperors. Trajan is called (the most accomplished prince in the annals of history," one who possessed "all the virtues . . .," and who was "the man most suitable for honoring human nature and representing the divine." And as if to emphasize Trajan's dissimilarity from the "prince of peace," Montesquieu does nothing but depict the obstacles Trajan had to overcome successfully waging war against the Parthians.¹⁰ Marcus Aurelius is also praised as one of the best Roman emperors, and his excellence is attributed to the Stoic sect, which seemed to have been brought forth by "human nature" itself, "like those plants the earth brings forth in places the heavens have never seen." One can hardly imagine a clearer reference to the distinction between natural and supernatural "sects." And the third emperor Montesquieu lauds without reservation is Julian, who tried to restore for himself the "old morals," and whose heroism drove back the barbarians. But we learn nothing of Julian's apostasy, or of his attempt to restore the entire system of pagan religion and morals. Nor do we hear, as in *The Spirit of the Laws*, that Julian was a Stoic and hence among those Montesquieu had earlier called the best of the Roman emperors. But perhaps the most beautiful and most complete evidence of Montesquieu's view is supplied in his reference, at the beginning of chapter 19, to Saint Augustine's having shown "that the city of heaven was different from this earthly city in which the ancient Romans, for some human virtues, had received rewards that were as vain as these virtues." Montesquieu could not agree more completely with St. Augustine as to the alternatives; he differs only in assessing them.

To Montesquieu, the tyrannical reign of Justinian is a transition from the Roman Empire of the West to the *Greek* Empire of the East. He takes pains to contrast the Christian spirit of Justinian with the ancient Roman spirit of Belisarius, his general. And for the first time in the entire work he mentions

¹⁰ Pages 141–2.

religious persecutions— those Justinian directed at non-Christians as well as at the Christians he considered heretics. As for the Greek Empire itself, its condition is emphasized in the two chapters indicating its character: the first speaks of its disorders, the second of its weakness. Its disorders consisted of “revolts, seditions and perfidies” caused by heresies, changes of ruling families, the slackening of punishments, and superstition, with the result that loyalty to the prince was non-existent, and schemes for overthrowing him never-ending. Of the three chapters on the Greeks, the middle one—on weakness—is the most important. To prove that its critique of the Eastern or Greek Empire is directed at Christianity as such, one need only remember the quotation from “a celebrated author” (Pascal) toward its beginning to the effect that “. . . sickness is a Christian’s true condition.”¹¹ Montesquieu goes so far as to use this statement to justify the inroads made by early Mohammedanism on this Christian empire: the Christian religion is at the height of its glory when its suffering is greatest—including its undergoing persecution (the first explicit mention of Christian martyrs occurs here) as well as (by implication) defeat at the hands of the Mohammedans. Therefore, when Montesquieu tells us a few pages later that “a universal bigotry benumbed the spirit and enervated the whole empire,” and speaks of “the faintheartedness, laziness and indolence of the nations of Asia blending into religious devotion itself,” we must recall Pascal and also bear in mind that Judaism and Christianity were both Asian in origin. Bigotry, smallmindedness, faintheartedness and crude superstition combined to make the Greek Empire probably the least political nation that ever existed. Montesquieu dwells upon the struggle involving the worship of icons or images and the striving of the monks for ever-increasing power. He speaks of the monstrous pretensions of patriarchs, and of endless theological disputes and schisms embroiling the entire nation. In one place, he praises the Latin clergy and popes by comparison with their Greek counterparts, but one need not know too much of Western history to realize that the same pretensions were plentiful in the West. And in speaking of the attitude a prince should take toward theological disputes, he is perfectly general: “One can no more put an end to their involvements by listening to their subtleties than one could abolish duels by establishing schools for refining upon the point of honor.” Finally, the solution Montesquieu indicates bears equally on Greek and Latin Christianity: “ecclesiastical” and “secular” power must be distinguished, but in the manner employed by the ancient Romans, who had no separate clergy and whose pontiffs were also senators.

III

Historical Causation

The work on the Romans gives the appearance of being a theoretical rather than a practical work. Its very title draws attention to the problem of

¹¹ Page 201.

explaining, or finding the causes of, Rome's greatness and decline. As we have seen, the fundamental theoretical teaching of the work is set forth in chapter 18:

It is not chance that rules the world. Ask the Romans, who had a continuous sequence of successes when they were guided by a certain plan, and an uninterrupted sequence of reverses when they followed another. There are general causes, moral and physical, which act in every monarchy, elevating it, maintaining it, or hurling it to the ground. All accidents are controlled by these causes.

To say that "It is not chance that rules the world . . ." means that something else rules it. But what are the alternatives? The one Montesquieu draws attention to is "a plan"—*i.e.*, conscious design or purpose. Another, but one he does not name in any way, is sheer necessity. No other possibility than chance, plan and necessity exists. Each is first discovered in ordinary human experience. A man can plan his action, but his getting hungry occurs by necessity, and it is accidental that on going to the marketplace he should meet a friend he had not seen for years. Now in explaining human affairs one must ascertain the role of the three kinds of causes. A complication arises, however, in connection with "plan." For men have long thought that beings other than men—more powerful beings, gods—have some effect on human affairs, and, in fact, "rule the world." And some philosophers have attributed purposes to nature itself. To say, as Montesquieu does, that "chance does not rule the world" is to leave open the possibility that divine plan and action, natural teleology, human plan and action, or necessity do rule the world. In particular, any effort to explain the causes of Rome's greatness and decline must reckon with the religious possibility. According to the Romans themselves, the gods planned, provided for, and watched over Roman destiny. According to the Christians, the destruction of Roman greatness rather than its elevation and maintenance is what the one God provided for.

We have already seen evidence to prove that Montesquieu rejects the Biblical tradition, whatever his metaphysical reasons for doing so, and it is clear that he rejects pagan polytheism as well. If, then, neither chance nor divine providence rule the world, the question remains as to whether natural teleology, human plan and purpose, or necessity, rule it, and as to what role, if any, must be allotted to chance in the complex of ruling causes. What Montesquieu actually declares is that "general causes, moral and physical" rule the world, and he makes clear, immediately afterward, that he uses the terms "chance," "particular accidents," and "particular causes" interchangeably. "General causes," we are told, control the fate of "every monarchy."

Now the word "monarchy" comes as a surprise in this context. He is, after all, propounding a perfectly general theory of causation—one that is meant to hold for all the stages of Roman history, monarchical or republican, and for all non-Roman societies as well. Two possible explanations for this peculiar usage come to mind. One is that "monarchy" is the test case for all societies. Monarchies give the impression of being ruled by the mind and

purpose of one particular man, which would put them in the category of things ruled not by general but by particular causes. To say that even monarchies are in fact ruled by general causes is to maintain, *a fortiori*, that every other kind of regime is so ruled.

Montesquieu may also have wished to draw attention to monarchies because of their special significance in the Biblical tradition. The rule of God, and all rule patterned on the rule of God—*e.g.*, that of the papacy—is monarchical. But even such rule is governed by general causes, and even such monarchies are elevated, maintained and hurled to the ground by such causes. The impermanence of every form of human rule, and its being subject to general causes, moral and physical, that engender and end it, is a corollary of Montesquieu's explicit assertion. It follows that papal predominance and the presumed rule of the Biblical God through men on earth must necessarily end, and with them, of course, the Christian monarchies of Europe.

Up to this point we have not supplied precise definitions of either "general" and "particular," or of "moral" and "physical." Montesquieu himself does not do so, and their meaning must be gathered from the concrete explanations offered in the course of the text. As for the distinction between general and particular causes, not all those that are general are of equal generality. There are causes that animate all men: *e.g.*, their passions, or human nature. Others animate the inhabitants of a given climate. Still others derive from the "general spirit" in a given nation, or from different forms of government. Thus, the institutions, spirit and situation of a given society are, for it, general causes, even though particular to it. By contrast, "particular" causes are those involving one specific event, one specific individual. Yet many particular causes of the same kind can lead to the formation of a general cause. Thus, "Many precedents established in a nation form its general spirit, and create its manners, which rule as imperiously as its laws."¹² Again, the art of war as it existed among the Romans after a certain point in their history functioned as a general cause, but it was built up through a series of particular causes: the experiences derived from constant warfare. Similarly, Montesquieu can say of Rome that "One of the causes of its success was that its kings were all great men. Nowhere else in history can you find an uninterrupted succession of such statesmen and captains."¹³ And this leads to a further point: the efficacy of particular causes, or of the actions of individuals, is not the same in all situations: "At the birth of societies, the leaders of republics create the institutions; thereafter, it is the institutions that form the leaders of republics." In short, the role of founders—who are particular causes—can be very great indeed, although the circumstances in which they act must lend some support to their action. The role of individuals can again increase once republican institutions break down, or amid monarchical institutions, but general causes will still place limits on what they can do. The Roman Republic had to perish around the time of Caesar. No human

¹² Page 198.

¹³ Page 25.

being could have given it renewed life, although it did not have to perish at Caesar's hand. In the same way, the Roman Empire could be ruled by good emperors and bad, but no one could alter it so radically that it would become a republic or even a stable monarchy, such was the power of the general causes within that empire (deriving from its history and size) working for disorder. In short, "It is an error to believe that any human authority exists in the world which is despotic in all respects. There never has been one, and never will be, for the most immense power is always confined in some way."¹⁴ It may be difficult to predict beforehand what the extent of an individual's power to cause changes may be. Montesquieu speaks of the fact that Peter I of Russia "regenerated the nation and introduced more changes in the state he governed than conquerors introduce in those they usurp." Nevertheless, there were undoubtedly limits beyond which even Peter could not go. It would therefore seem that the latitude or power of general causes is not fixed, and neither, therefore, is the latitude or power of particular causes. Accident, or particular causes in general (which include the foresight and force of individuals) do not rule the world, as Montesquieu says, but neither is their effect on the world of uniform strength.

The distinction between moral and physical causes, both general, is also difficult to elucidate. Examples can readily be given of the two types of causes, but it is not easy to establish their precise definition and relation. The clearest instance of physical causes are climate and geography. Montesquieu speaks of the climate in Macedonia being responsible for the moral characteristics of its people and for their military capacity. He cites the practice of polygamy in the East as a consequence of the climate there. He distinguishes between the military prowess of the West and the East, generally to the latter's detriment, and refers to the "faintheartedness, laziness and indolence of the nations of Asia . . ." In addition, he has recourse to the effects of geography in protecting or isolating peoples from each other. Finally, the availability or non-availability of natural resources, including such animals as horses and elephants, is undoubtedly a kind of physical cause.

If all general causes are either physical or moral, all those that are non-physical are moral. This gives the "moral" realm an unusual amplitude, for it ceases to pertain merely to standards of right and wrong, good and bad, etc. and must be used to cover all things that have their origin in the mind of man, in ideas, rather than in physical nature. Thus, Montesquieu's dichotomy implies that not only the mores and general spirit of societies but all their institutions (political, military, economic, technological, etc.) are to be regarded as "moral" causes. This has a twofold effect: first, it narrows the meaning of "physical," and thereby severs the classical connection between the whole nature of man and morality as such; second, it broadens the meaning of "moral" and thereby loses sight of morality as such in the welter of things that originate in the human mind; thus, what had hitherto been called "moral" matters are now to be regarded and explained in no other way than those

¹⁴ Page 210.

that are religious, political, technological, economic, etc. Morality itself becomes nothing but "moeurs"—*i.e.*, moral customs, changing from society to society, and time to time. The one true religion becomes "religions."

The place where physical and moral causes join is within human nature itself. There must be some connection between man's physical makeup and both his conscious experience and action. Men have certain instinctive needs, like animals; they have passions, which Montesquieu tells us, in the very first chapter, are the same at all times. They have some power of speech (as referred to in the very first paragraph of the work through the "names" that were given to places in Rome at its beginning); they have some power of thought: they create things—*e.g.*, buildings, and cities—which do not exist by nature. Instincts, passions, speech and thought must have some basis in the nature of man. But exactly how they are so based, and the degree to which they have a direct physical foundation in man, Montesquieu does not say. We cannot discover from this work whether he is a materialist, or whether with Spinoza, he believes that material and mental attributes are only different aspects of one substance. But we can say that the notion of a divine being who creates the world, or is its final end, has no place in the work. Man creates a "moral" world over and beyond anything with which he is endowed by his nature, physical or otherwise, and this world has its own laws, its own physical and moral causes, both general and particular. This much is clear, and it is fully consistent with the first Book of *The Spirit of the Laws*, properly interpreted. Compared to it, the resolution of the problem as to the exact relation between man's mind and body is of lesser consequence.

We should inquire in general, whether notions of natural teleology, attributing purpose or plan to nature, pervade the work. Of the various though infrequent uses to which Montesquieu puts the words "nature" and "natural," only one speaks of nature "ordaining" anything. Toward the very end of chapter 22, he asserts that the great distinction between ecclesiastical and secular power" . . . is founded not only on religion but also on reason and nature, which ordain that really separate things—things that can endure only by being separate—should never be confounded." The wording is meant to bring to the reader's mind the old notion of natural law, but it does so in such a way as to reveal how little that notion is used in the work as a whole. Montesquieu does not try to prove his assertion: certainly it would have been difficult to prove that "religion" (he does not say Biblical religion, or Christianity) can serve as its foundation, while "nature" can be said to do so only by virtue of its independence of any kind of supernatural hegemony. And it is true to say that the notion of natural law as a moral law discovered by reason occurs in no other place, and is, in fact, replaced, on the one hand, by the idea of the actual "mores" of nations, and, on the other, by a philosophic moral standard that is the product of reason without being required by nature.

This can be demonstrated by an analysis of the way in which Montesquieu uses the term "law of nations." There are three such uses. According to the first, it was "a kind of law of nations" for the early republics of Italy that the

treaties they made with a king did not bind them toward his successor. The second states that “. . . there was a certain law of nations—an opinion held in all the republics of Greece and Italy—according to which the assassin of someone who had usurped sovereign power was regarded as a virtuous man.” And the third speaks of Sulla’s practicing on the Romans themselves the same fierce law of nations the Romans had practised on conquered nations. All three usages have in common the fact that the “law of nations” is simply an opinion held by some societies, either about their relations to other nations, or about some special kind of domestic action. And the third example shows that it need not involve what morality demands at all. In short, it is not really morally prescriptive to nations in the strict sense but simply part of their mores, whether these are really moral or not. But the traditional conception of the “law of nations” was that of a set of written or unwritten rules of justice, dealing either with relations among nations or actions within nations, that were common to all or most nations. It was meant to be prescriptive, and to demonstrate that almost all human societies were by nature reasonable and moral. Consistently with Montesquieu’s view of the nature of man, however, the heart of the traditional conception has no place in this work. Nature does not equip man with a sense of justice, or bind him by universally applicable moral rules. There is, indeed, one place where Montesquieu does refer to “natural justice.” It is when he attributes the ferocity of the natives in the colonies of modern European nations to the punishments constantly inflicted on them: “When we are cruel in the civil state, what can we expect from natural gentleness and justice?”¹⁵ From what Montesquieu tells us about the earliest Romans, however, there is nothing to indicate that they, or any other men, are moved by some natural inclination to be gentle or just. In fact, one would conclude from the work that only a severe working *on* human nature through ideas and institutions is capable of engendering such traits in men, and even then within a limited political sphere only. In short, the nature of man does not itself furnish a sufficient guide or potency for the working of decent societies, and if man is naturally moved by anything like gentleness he is moved even more by self-love and the desire for self-aggrandizement. As Montesquieu puts it in his discussion of the overthrow of the republic: “. . . we must blame it on man—a being whose greed for power keeps increasing the more he has of it, and who desires all only because he already possesses much.”¹⁶

In several places scattered throughout the work, Montesquieu makes use of metaphors drawn from physical nature. He compares Rome’s internal dissensions to volcanoes that can be excited into activity. The development of tyrannical power under Augustus and Tiberius is compared to a river that at first slowly undermines and then violently overthrows the dikes erected against it. The growth of the Stoic sect is likened to the growth of “those plants the earth brings forth in places the heavens have never seen.” And in

¹⁵ Page 136. For the passages on “the law of nations,” see pp. 24, 110, 136.

¹⁶ Pages 107–8.

the last sentence of the work, the ending of the Greek Empire is likened to that of the Rhine, "which is no more than a brook when it loses itself in the ocean." Apart from the reference to certain emperors as monsters (i.e., deformed human beings) and one other metaphor to which we shall turn shortly, these are the ways in which external nature is used for the sake of comparison.

There is a certain sombreness in these applications. Only one metaphor—the one about the Stoics—sounds at all optimistic, and even it derives its power from a rare situation, where plants grow (in caves) without the help of the heavens—*i.e.*, without the sun. The others are metaphors of violence, quick or slow, and of attrition. The exception to this rule occurs in chapter 9, in the context of a discussion of the causes of Rome's ruin. There Montesquieu contends that states may enjoy political union even though their parts seem to be at odds with each other, or in dissension, and chapter 8 had begun by referring to Rome's internal dissensions through the metaphor of the volcano. But a political union of seemingly dissentient parts is possible, says Montesquieu in chapter 9: "It is as with the parts of the universe, eternally linked together by the action of some and the reaction of others." This metaphor, drawn from Newtonian physics and cosmology, is the most grandiose in the work, and, seemingly, the most optimistic, since it contemplates a stable universe, even though it does not include any reference to God as the source of this stability. But the metaphor should be viewed in the light of the political subject under discussion. If the harmony of states can be modelled on that of the universe, perhaps the harmony of the universe is also like that of states—*i.e.*, impermanent, and, in the long run, incapable of being sustained. Certainly this view is more in keeping with the general outlook inherent in chapter 18's theory of history, where all political orders are said to rise and fall. In short, we can learn the nature of the universe through the study of the human world, and not simply vice versa. Improvident change and impermanence rule both, and the task of the legislator is to use and contain the antagonistic forces as long as possible, fully aware—if he is philosophically wise—that he cannot contain them forever.

When Montesquieu tells us that chance does not rule the world, he means that some combination of human providence and blind necessity (natural or human) does. The model of collective foresight and providence is the Roman senate, constantly acting in accordance with wise "maxims." These maxims were not, in their origin, the work of a moment, just as the art of war among the Romans did not spring into their minds all at once. But even the senate did not foresee that the very success of its conquests would ultimately bring about the overthrow of the republic. And when Montesquieu later attributes the decline and fall of the empire to the change in "maxims" that it introduced, he consciously exaggerates the degree to which purely mental changes were decisive within this process. On the contrary, he himself shows conclusively that there were necessary forces at work within the empire that made it a different kind of political order from the republic and hence brought about the change in "maxims" of which he speaks. In the face of such forces, only

accidents or particular causes could keep the empire going. The last paragraph of chapter 16 shows what the effect of luck was in sustaining the Western Empire, and the beginning of chapter 23 is dedicated to showing what particular causes sustained so inherently weak a government as the Eastern Empire. Circumstances, or a certain concatenation of particular causes, can, in fact, cause governments to endure long beyond the point at which they would have collapsed under their own weight.

IV

The Practical Teaching

At first one suspects that the work on the Romans is merely an exercise in historical explanation operating on a renowned society with an unusually well-documented history. According to such an interpretation, the work constitutes an attempt to bring to bear on human history the kind of causal analysis Montesquieu admired so much in the natural philosophy of Descartes and Newton, and which he was fully aware began a new epoch in human thought. To show that human affairs have their general causes, which are akin to, though not identical with, the general laws of nature supplied in modern physics, would be the work's purpose. And, paralleling the revolution in physics, as little reliance as possible would be placed on formal and final causes, and as much reliance as possible on efficient and material causes, whether moral or physical. In the process, conscious human purpose, blind necessity, and chance would each receive its proper weight, thus rendering the whole completely intelligible. Montesquieu would have shown, thereby, how modern philosophy could be extended into an area which till then had either been abandoned to chance or accident, as in Descartes and Pascal, or dominated by divine providence, as in Bossuet.

This may be Montesquieu's foremost purpose, but it is not his only one. His stance is far from that of a neutral bystander, for whom the choice of Rome as his subject was arbitrary, or merely technical. The title itself speaks of Rome's greatness and decline, and the work contains evaluations, explicit and implicit, of the various elements constituting Roman history, as well as policy recommendations, explicit and implicit, for his own times. It contains ingredients of both political philosophy and statesmanship, and these ingredients, together with their relation to the historical or causal teaching, must be understood if the whole of Montesquieu's purpose is to become clear.

As we have seen, the political philosophy incorporated into this work is a modification of Machiavelli and essentially opposed to both the classical and Christian traditions. But what practical lessons were to be drawn from this philosophy? What was Montesquieu's estimate of the times in which he lived, and of their political possibilities? These are the questions to which we now turn. Let us begin with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of modern life, judged by the standards inherent in the work. "Modern" is a term distinguished from "ancient," and "ancient" clearly refers to the pagan

world of antiquity, the world of the Greeks, Carthaginians and Romans in particular. Another way in which Montesquieu refers to “modern” times is to speak in the first person plural: “We” to mean “we moderns” (or sometimes, “we French,” “we Europeans.”)¹⁷ From these facts we can gather that “modern” stands for the period since the collapse of the Roman Empire. But it is not applied to the Greek Empire, and there is so little comment in the work on what today is called the Dark Ages (Early Middle Ages) that one remains unclear about whether the term properly includes those eras. One gets the impression, in fact, that Montesquieu uses it mainly for those recent centuries during which civilization had experienced a rebirth in the west—a period in which secular innovations of various kinds began to weaken the once unchallenged supremacy of Christian religion and to transform the barbaric rudeness of the post-Roman period.

The modern period, in the latter sense, contains many antithetical elements. Europe is dominated by monarchies. Monarchs are less absolute and arbitrary than the Roman emperors: they do not wield judicial power or kill the wealthy in order to confiscate their property. They are also more stable than the Roman Empire, and have far fewer revolutions than the Greek Empire, largely, it would seem, because modern technological conditions make conspiracies so difficult. Europe is also dominated by Christianity, though, “with the revival of letters,” the unity of the church was shattered, leading to many religious wars and civil wars. With “letters” came a resurgence of the arts and sciences, a series of such technological innovations as the compass, ocean-going ships, guns and cannon, postal service, the exchange, printing, engraving and newspapers. Marine technology, both military and non-military, has reached a pitch of perfection unknown to the ancients, and European powers, both commercial and non-commercial, have established colonial empires the world over.¹⁸

But the virtue of ancient republics is nowhere to be seen, and republican liberty as such is rare. Of such liberty, England seems to be the best example (in spite of its monarchical overlay), whereas the republics of Italy, proud of their duration, “have no more liberty than Rome had in the time of the decemvirs.”¹⁹ Modern monarchies contain within themselves elements of the feudal system, which was weak and decentralized, and which depended on an enormous economic and social gulf between nobles and commoners. Montesquieu has little to say directly of the nobility—which by itself is a way of indicating his opinion of them. Their “feudal” or anarchic tendencies, their luxury, their lawless concern for the punctilios of “honor” stand in marked contrast to the virtues of the Roman patriciate. His criticism of the excessive reliance on cavalry in modern armies is again undoubtedly a thrust against the aristocracy. Similarly, his lauding Roman infantry by comparison to modern infantry is a means of praising the democratic element in the ancient

¹⁷ Pages 34, 53 (note 15) 136–7, 198–9, 216.

¹⁸ Pages 107, 121, 198–9, 204.

¹⁹ Pages 87–8.

republics, which was based on property-owning citizen-soldiers. As for the monarchies themselves, it appears that Montesquieu exaggerates the degree to which their power was used moderately and without arbitrariness. Confiscations still occurred, and the crime of lese majesty—on which Montesquieu dwells with such emphasis in connection with Tiberius—was in active use to still criticism. Indeed, the lack of truthfulness that Montesquieu attributes to letter-writers in his own day may have been primarily due to the fear of such public power, which, as he later tells us, uses its control of the postal service to detect conspiracies; the “false politeness” of the age to which he traces the omnipresence of lying may have itself been partly caused by the exercise of despotic surveillance.

The ultimate source of modernity's greatest defects, however, would seem to be neither monarchy nor nobility but Christianity. Christianity spawns the ferocity both of internecine warfare among Christians and of the Christian conquests among heathen peoples abroad. While encouraging civil strife on religious grounds, it also encourages that excessive obedience to church and sovereign in religious and secular matters that makes for the continuation of serfdom in particular and servility to despotism in general. It is, in fact, the bulwark of modern monarchy, and was able to make for greater political stability in the West than occurred in the Greek Empire only because of its more formidable control of heresy—at least prior to the Reformation. And its condemnation of both tyrannicide and suicide, each of which had so high a moral status among the Romans, closed still another avenue to the assertion of freedom. In fact, it has generally lowered the level of public-spiritedness (or patriotism) and courage, so that the much-vaunted power of Europe rests more on technological advantages than on moral-political dedication. In short, it seems to have made the revival of something like Roman republicanism impossible.

Amid such circumstances, what practical counsel does Montesquieu impart? The lesson one is first tempted to draw lies in the direction of political quietism or non-involvement. In chapter 15 we are called upon to confront “the spectacle of things human,” which shows how all the efforts of the Roman Republic ended in nothing but the despotic rule of monsters under the empire. At the end of chapter 19, after the Western Empire has collapsed under barbarian attack, we look “with sad curiosity” for the fate of the city of Rome, and find it pitiable. And, in marking the collapse of the Greek Empire, Montesquieu concludes his work with these words:

I do not have the courage to speak of the calamities which followed. I will only say that, under the last emperors, the empire—reduced to the suburbs of Constantinople—ended like the Rhine, which is no more than a brook when it loses itself in the ocean.

Is not the effect of such passages to encourage a melancholy withdrawal from politics, and perhaps even from the study of political matters? Yet Montesquieu's own political studies continued, and reached their apogee, thirteen years later, with the publication of *The Spirit of the Laws*. And that

work gives even much more manifest evidence of interest in practical political improvement. Perhaps the work on the Romans can tell us why.

Let us begin with the concluding paragraph quoted above. There is something peculiar in its metaphor: the Rhine is a brook when it reaches the ocean but most rivers are at their broadest when they reach the ocean. What actually happens in the case of the Rhine is that it breaks up into several branches, all of which empty into the ocean; the branch called "the Rhine," compared to the other branches, is slight indeed. The empire that is likened to this part of the river is the Greek Empire, and we have already shown that Montesquieu uses it to represent the political impact of Christianity in its purest form. The three chapters on the "Greeks," as he calls them, are, strictly speaking, irrelevant to a work on the "Romans." Their significance, and their inclusion in the work, derives from something they tell us about the Romans. What they do, in the first place, is to show us the deep inner antagonism between Roman power, which was at its height during the republic, and Christian power. But, in addition, they are a way of telling us about the Roman church and its followers in the West—the people Montesquieu refers to as the "Latins." For the name of Rome, but not its essence, has continued in the West, both in the name of the Catholic church and in the name of the Holy Roman Empire founded through the auspices of the church.²⁰ The treatment of the Greek Empire is, therefore, at the same time a treatment of those "Roman" things that have continued to wield influence in the West, but upon which direct comment was highly imprudent. Hence, to speak of the decline of the Rhine into its smallest branch, is to refer obliquely to those branches of Christianity which have not yet lost their political influence, and, in particular, to the Catholic church. It is, in fact, to recall the general lesson of chapter 18, to the effect that all "monarchies," including that of the papacy, must decline. It is to look forward to, and encourage, such decline. The power of the Greek Empire has ended; the power of the "Roman" or Catholic empire in the West, and of all its derivative branches of Christianity, will also end. What at first appeared to be a deeply pessimistic conclusion to the work is, in reality, meant to be optimistic.

In chapter 22, Montesquieu refers incidentally to two ways of affecting the independent strength of the church. One is to subject it to political discipline and alteration, as had Czar Peter I in Russia when he observed the degeneration of the Christian religion and sought, through despotic means, to regenerate the nation. The other is to occasion splits within the church, as had occurred after "the revival of letters" when men "who were bold but insufficiently docile shattered the Church instead of reforming it." In this way, the Erastianism of enlightened despots and the divisions brought about by the Reformation work toward the same end, *i.e.*, toward eliminating the independent influence of Christian churches and subordinating them to the political needs of society. In the last chapter Montesquieu shows how particular causes can support governments that are intrinsically bad, such as

²⁰ Pages 205–6, 215–16, 217.

that of the Greek Empire. He adduces three current examples of the same phenomenon: 1) some European nations maintaining themselves, in spite of their weakness, by the treasures of the Indies; 2) the temporal states of the pope maintaining themselves by the respect in which their sovereign is held; 3) the corsairs of Barbary enduring because of the utility their disturbing the commerce of small nations offers to the great nations.²¹ This is a singular and daring setting in which to view the power of the pope: the respect that supports him is likened to the effect of ravaged treasure, on the one hand, and acts of useful piracy, on the other. And if the temporal rule of the pope is a "bad government," what can be said of his vast spiritual rule? Again, the only thing upholding it in the world is "respect"—a respect that can diminish much as, originally, it was able to grow. But what will diminish this respect for the greatest spiritual authority in Christendom?

To discuss this question adequately we must take note of a similarity in the endings of chapters 21 and 22, two of the three final chapters dealing with the Greek Empire. Most of chapter 22 is devoted to explaining why the Greek Empire (a term introduced at that point) was subject to so many "revolts, seditions and perfidies." Causes deriving from the Christian religion itself, combined with ambition, seem to be the answer, and revolution became a kind of tradition there. We are told that "Many precedents established in a nation form its general spirit, and create its manners, which rule as imperiously as its laws." In the Greek Empire, in fact, these rebellious precedents formed a "general spirit" and manners that were stronger than the laws, and that led to endless overturnings of government. Montesquieu then engages in what reads like a very queer series of comments. He tries to show why "great enterprises" are more difficult "with us" than they were with "the ancients." But the term "great enterprises" is a most unusual way of referring to conspiratorial revolutions, and we wonder whether the "ancients" in question are the Christian Greeks whose innumerable revolutions can hardly be called "great enterprises," or the Greeks and Romans of pagan antiquity. Something like a double reminder is given to the reader: one, of the Christian Greek revolutions which only led to new emperors replacing the old, the other of those earlier conspiracies against tyrants that had taken place in the ancient world and at times resulted in the establishment of republics.

Why are "great enterprises" more difficult "with us"? Montesquieu's answer devolves upon the technological and commercial conditions of modern life. In short, conspiracies are more easily detected; there are many more ways of people learning of their existence. But the case he makes seems very limited indeed. In the first place, it says nothing about the great respect with which authority is regarded today; in fact, the statement about the "general spirit" of nations implies that traditions of disobedience and of obedience are equally man-made, equally a matter of precedent. The idea of the "divine right of kings," for example, or of popes, for that matter, simply drops by the wayside. But, as we later learn, it is nothing but "respect" that upholds papal

²¹ Page 214.

rule, and, as suggested at the beginning of this very chapter, the subjects of Western monarchies have a strong idea of "the loyalty owed to princes." Secondly, Montesquieu's technological analysis is itself strangely inadequate. He stresses the new technology of communications, but he has nothing to say whatever about the new technology of war—*i.e.*, about guns, cannon and bombs. Finally, Montesquieu does not deny that conspiratorial attempts have existed, or even that they may sometimes be justified. In fact, he exaggerates his approval of them by indiscriminately calling them "great enterprises."

We meet with a similar predicament toward the end of the next chapter. The body of the chapter is devoted to showing the various ways in which the Greek church and religion contributed to the weakness of the Greek Empire, and it concludes not only by stating, in Montesquieu's own name, that "The most vicious source of all the misfortunes of the Greeks is that they never knew the nature or limits of ecclesiastical and secular power . . . ," but by holding up the ancient Romans as a society that knew this distinction well, although it would seem that they lacked an independent clergy and vested religious decisions in high political authorities. Between the body of the chapter and its conclusion, however, a mystifying paragraph appears, telling us that no human authority exists which is despotic in all respects, since the power of each such authority is based on the "general spirit" in each nation and therefore cannot shock this spirit without weakening itself.

The topic immediately under discussion had been the way in which rulers should treat religious disputes. By this point in the chapter, the reader has become so indignant over the various evils caused by the Christian religion in the Greek Empire that he is ready to call for the most extreme forms of action. The paragraph before us begins as if Montesquieu has anticipated the very thought he has carefully established in the reader's mind—an angry desire to wipe away all traces of such a religion. Why did not the Greek emperors use main force to establish their supremacy over religion? This is the unspoken question Montesquieu answers by insisting that no human authority can be completely despotic: in other words, the "general spirit" of the nation, which attributed great importance to religion and religious men, would have made it very difficult if not impossible for the emperors to assert their hegemony over the clergy to end "the most vicious source of all the misfortunes of the Greeks . . ." Yet, much earlier in the chapter, Montesquieu himself had adduced the example of Czar Peter I as an exact parallel to that of the Greek Empire with respect to the degeneration of the Christian religion, and Peter "regenerated the nation and introduced more changes in the state he governed than conquerors introduce in those they usurp." At the very minimum, one must say that, just as chapter 21 ends by tempting the reader to conspiracies against emperors and monarchs, so chapter 22 ends by tempting him to the suppression of the church. And in both cases it is the "general spirit" of the nations involved that must be counted among the great obstacles to so doing, rather than any decree deriving from divine or natural law. And the "general spirit" is at least partly a human thing, the product of

various human forces, including precedent. In some places it is even mainly a matter of attitude and belief, and these can change and be changed. At the minimum, then, a major practical aim of the work on the Romans is to effect salutary changes in the "general spirit" of European nations.

It may even be possible to use one part of this "general spirit" against the other—*e.g.*, the part deriving from natural man against the part deriving from supernatural religion. And the example of Peter I suffices at least to show that despotic power can go very far in effecting transformations. From these and related parts of the book one must conclude that Montesquieu wanted the best of his readers to assist such transformations, and actually enticed them into thinking of the most extreme actions that might be taken in order to effect them. Only in this way could they be completely emancipated from the thralldom of an empire founded on belief and "respect" rather than arms. Montesquieu, following in the footsteps of Machiavelli, conceives of himself as taking part in a war, a great war of ideas against the spiritual forces of Christianity above all else.

We must still ascertain how seriously Montesquieu meant these temptations as a practical matter. A man so devoted to moderate government would not readily favor the extension of even enlightened despotism, and would certainly not counsel aimless regicide. But we cannot judge these matters well until we discover Montesquieu's estimate of political possibilities for Europe. In particular, was an actual revival of Roman-style republicanism possible? One indication of Montesquieu's answer is given in his view of the canton of Bern, which he says might slowly develop into a great republic.²² It alone—and it is a pathetic example—seems to symbolize republican prospects in Europe. Beyond this, all the major prerequisites for republican life are missing in Europe, where conditions are much closer to those prevailing under the Roman Empire than the Roman republic. To restore vigor to Sparta, kings Agis and Cleomenes had to have recourse to terror—a terror about which Montesquieu is silent when he mentions their achievement early in the work.²³ How much more terror would be needed to originate republican conditions where no republican tradition whatever exists. Yet another problem is presented by the size of the great European nations, which itself would prevent their developing a system like that of Rome. Montesquieu asserts that the Roman Republic could have maintained itself had its conquests been limited to Italy alone, and shows that the city of Rome became corrupt through the later extension of citizenship to other Latin and Italian cities. This suggests a solution that was to arise in the next century: republican representative government on a national (*i.e.*, Italian, French, etc.) and nationalistic basis. The example of England was at hand, but the work gives no evidence of its being used in this way. Moreover, England was not based on Roman-type virtue, and it is at least questionable how far a representative republic can imitate Rome. In addition, there is little to inform us even

²² Page 94.

²³ Pages 40–1.

of the likely destinies of the monarchies of Europe—in short, about the forces working for their maintenance or destruction. These reasons may also serve to explain why Montesquieu pays little attention to the founding and development of the Roman Republic: guiding those of his contemporaries who wish to imitate Rome does not seem to preoccupy him seriously.

One can only conclude that Montesquieu's radical teaching is not meant to have immediate practical consequences. Instead, it seeks to win the best minds both as colleagues in wisdom and as allies in the spiritual warfare necessary to preparing for whatever opportunities the future may bring. Of such prospects only one seems to loom large: the modern combination of commerce and technology, with its encouragement of worldly interests, enlightenment, humanity and liberty. If Europe has any republican future at all, it would appear more likely to follow the lines of ancient Carthage and modern England than of non-commercial Rome. But if these modern forces are opposed to Christian other-worldliness, they are hardly less opposed to a Roman-type republics based on virtue. As a whole, then, the form of Montesquieu's work on the Romans is appropriate to its political outlook. It is predominantly theoretical, and geared to a past the greatness of which was real. It takes comfort in the assurance that Christianity's influence must wane: it contributes to this waning. And insofar as it prepares for political action, it does so in the name of an as yet undescribed regime, which, like the Roman republic, will be founded on some modification of self-love and employ some kind of internal dissension. Writing at a time of increasing enlightenment, secularism and religious enfeeblement, Montesquieu was able to have confidence that the general conditions receptive to the widespread acceptance of his thought were already in existence. If the Roman Empire provided the conditions for its spread of Christianity and the long-sustained supremacy of the Christian Romans, the changes of the last two centuries in Europe almost guaranteed the ultimate victory of some form of post-Christian world. But the precise nature of that world, judging from this work, is much less clear than that of its ancient and Christian predecessors. Much will depend on those who, like Montesquieu, undertake the very "great enterprise" of overthrowing the old order through their ideas and founding the new: "At the birth of societies, the leaders of republics create the institutions; thereafter, it is the institutions that form the leaders of republics."