Ancient writers ascribed Rome’s political difficulties during the last century of the Republic to failures of character, specifically to *ambitio*, *avaritia*, *luxuria*, and *libido*. Sallust gives the clearest and best known account in the introductions to his monographs on Catiline and Jugurtha. The danger of decline had already been noticed by Polybius, and he indicated one point for the beginning of the process: the destruction of Carthage in 146 B.C. (6.57; 38.21 f.). No longer confronted by the external threat, Romans could relax and give themselves up instead to greed, luxury, and personal ambition. Livy seems to have accepted the same turning point: the first fifty books were devoted to the expansion of Rome down to the destruction of Carthage; those that followed paid more attention to Rome’s internal problems. At the same time, Livy was not unaware of the importance of Cn. Manlius Vulso’s campaigns in the east and his return in 187 B.C. laden with the spoils which marked the beginning of foreign luxury, including such unmentionable instruments of corruption as pedestal tables and sideboards (39.6, 7).

Views of this kind still have distinguished defenders. R. H. Smith has explored the fall of the Republic in terms of the moral failings of the upper class, and E. Badian has lashed the restored Sullan oligarchy for their unwillingness to do their duty, which opened up the way to Pompey and Caesar.¹ The *plebs* has not not escaped criticism, but with foreign booty and loss of land to the rich as the causes of corruption, its rôle is a passive one. Similar moral factors, with craving for bread and circuses among the lower orders as prominent as the luxury and sloth of the aristocracy, are invoked to explain the decline of the Roman Empire itself. It is of some importance, not only to students of Roman history, whether this view is correct. Some politicians still seek to account for our own difficulties, political, social, and economic, partly at least in the same moral terms; the Americans, who have their Senate and Capitols as a visible reminder, are particularly often shown Rome as an awful warning.

A. W. Lintott has done full justice to the ancient writers,² uncovering inconsistencies and mistakes and exposing the reasons that led them to adopt their several variations of the main doctrine. He distinguishes two processes: most authorities suggest that prosperity simply gave Romans freedom to satisfy desires which earlier they could satisfy only after long military struggles, a few that Romans learnt their corrupt
appetites from the east, acquiring them by contagion. Another problem concerns the time when *avaritia* and *luxus* on the one hand and *ambitio* and *cupido imperii* on the other first occurred. Sallust himself is inconsistent on this point. In *Catiline* 10 he may be giving *avaritia* pride of place, suggesting that, although hidden, it was leading the way all the time, while in the next chapter it is a sideline, becoming an end in itself only by Sulla’s time. Lintott goes on to show that each of the failings castigated by Roman authors goes back beyond the fall of Carthage and even beyond the triumph of Cn. Manlius Vulso. Even more impressively, he can show how two versions and datings of the beginning of Rome’s decline came into circulation. They developed from the propaganda of the Gracchan period. Faced with the catastrophe of 133 some people claimed that the elimination of Carthage had brought ambitious demagogues and would-be tyrants. The destroyer of Carthage, Aemilianus, had to find another scapegoat. He put the blame on Gracchus’ association with Pergamum and on Manlius Vulso’s campaigns. This view was reproduced by his contemporary Piso in his *Annales*, while Nasica’s claim that the fall of Carthage was the cause was eventually incorporated in Posidonius’ work. The views have become intermingled and confused in Sallust and later historians.

All this shows how powerful a hold these views had on the ancients, and what their weaknesses were. It leaves the question open why Aemilianus and Nasica would have appealed to the arguments they did; the ancients’ deep-seated preoccupation with *ambitio* and *luxuria* needs to be explained.

The most hopeful thread to follow seems to be that of *ambitio*. It has a direct relationship with other members of society, which *luxuria* lacks: any well-off Roman family might aspire to own a pedestal table, without making it impossible for others to do so; but there were only two hundred consulships available every century. Again, a writer who adopts the moral theory of decline in its ‘original sin’ version, Tacitus, writes in terms of *ambitio*: ‘From time immemorial, man has had an instinctive love of power. With the growth of our empire, this instinct has become a dominant and uncontrollable force’ (*Hist.* 2.38, translated by K. Wellesley). It is also remarkable that Sallust regards *ambitio* as the vice closest to virtue – closer than *luxuria*, at any rate. For a qualified man not to hold office was extraordinary; even to retire after holding the praetorship left him open to a charge of *socordia* and *desidia* (*Cat.* 4.1). The ambivalence of *ambitio* leads me to suggest that ancient analyses of the fall of the Republic are inadequate because they neglect a built-in tension in Roman political and social life between ambition on the one hand and on the other the principle of equality popularly known as Buggins’s turn; by examining that tension we may help to
explain both the fall of the Republic and the ancients' preoccupation with moral factors.

First, the tension shows clearly in the language. If *ambitio* is the prototypical failing of Romans, what is the opposite but related virtue? It is of course *virtus* itself, which Sallust, *Cat.* 11.2, regards as the true way to *gloria, honos, imperium*. It happens that the two are juxtaposed in our earliest literary sources, Plautus (*Amph.* 76: 'virtute ambire oportet'), Titinius (Fr. 11), and Lucilius (1119), this last author offering a near definition of *virtus* as 'commoda patriae primum putare' (1196 f.).

Next, two legends may be invoked, at least in their developed form. A temple was vowed to the horseman Castor (and probably to his brother Pollux) in 499 B.C. and consecrated in 484. It is not essential to regard the Dioscuri, with Alföldi, as patrons of a ruling caste of nobleman cavalry, though that is a view that would add point to the interpretation: Castor and Pollux remain symbols of outstanding *virtus*; above all, their mutual devotion was complete, and each gave way before the other as his day in Elysium came to an end: a better model for Romans, one might think, than their founding twins Romulus and Remus, although they are equally relevant to our theme. Remus jumped over the *pomerium* wall that Romulus had laid down, and Romulus murdered his brother.

The tension I have postulated is to be seen clearest in the developed Roman Republican constitution. The consuls were held to have taken over the *imperium* of the kings, which was conferred on them by the *comitia curiata*, was symbolized by the twelve *fasces* borne before them, and gave them authority over civilians at Rome and soldiers abroad. But their powers were limited because there were two of them and in theory at least one could neutralize the other, as for example Bibulus tried to neutralize Caesar in 59 B.C. by finding religious obstacles to action. In the field commanders held command on alternate days; it was a tenaciously held system that could survive the disaster of Cannae. Again, in relation to the senate, the consul was an independent executive, the senate an advisory body only. It was Cicero, not the Senate, who gave the order for the Catilinarian conspirators to be executed in 63 B.C. But when his year of office was over the consul returned to the ordinary benches, to be asked his opinion among the first from that time onwards, it is true, but only as a group of senior peers.

The tension shown in the most striking features of the constitution helps to explain more obscure features of Roman political and social life. There was something intrinsically degenerate, ancient writers make us feel, about living in tall mansions, wearing silk clothing, dining off
exotic delicacies served on gold plate. We are left like Tiberius Caesar (Tac., Ann. 3.53 f.) to marvel at the naivety of legislators who try to improve morals by legislation. But scholars have looked behind the façade: Lintott has pointed out the connection between *luxuria* and *ambitus*: men displayed their riches in order to impress the electorate and secure the offices that were their due; while new candidates might have nothing to recommend them but their wealth. But it is D. Daube⁴ who interprets sumptuary legislation best, as ‘the protection of the non-tipper’: upper class Roman society was like a club in which those who are unable or unwilling to keep up with the scale of tips set by some leading and unscrupulous members were to be protected from being penalized. On the view that I am putting forward sumptuary legislation is to be seen along these lines as an effort to maintain equality between members of society and so to preserve the integrity of the group as a whole.

The feature of Roman society and state that I am emphasizing is not unique to Rome, but it is extraordinarily pronounced there. What was its origin? It would be plausible to find the root in gentile rivalry, which had to be diverted from destructive courses into areas of benefit to Rome (victory abroad, public benefaction at home). Rome grew by the accretion of gentes, the Claudii being a famous example; already when they arrived in Rome at the beginning of the Republic with their followers they were received, in A. Momigliano’s words,⁵ by a society of peers. It was gentile rivalry that continued to dominate political life until the end of the Republic and beyond. The gentes would hold together only if the rights of each unit were guaranteed. It is notorious that the Roman paterfamilias was a monarch in his own family, with rights of life and death over his dependants. In a certain sense the Roman senate was an assembly of kings, but in political life rights had to be limited. Nor would gentile rivalry exclude other, reinforcing factors. One is free to accept the thesis of R. E. A. Palmer, for example.⁶ Deriving ‘curia’ from *co-viria* he says that it ‘suggests a band of men who claim equality among themselves and with other bands of men,’ so that the lex curiata ‘partly assured the loyalty of the several constituencies wherein separatist tendencies might have engendered civil discontent’. There was even a tradition that the senate was based on curial representation, the senators being taken from each of the thirty curiae (Dion. Hal. II, 12 and 47).

Unfortunately the structure and history of early Rome is obscure and controversial.⁷ The XII Tables and their ban on extravagance at funerals take us back to 450 B.C.; but Romulus and Remus as a pair of twins are not attested earlier than the early third century when the Ogulnii set up a statue of them with their fostermother the wolf (Livy
While there is little room for doubt about the foundation date of the Aedes Castoris in the Forum – early in the fifth century – the question here is whether Pollux had any share in the cult at that time. As to the mutually restrictive power of the consuls, it is still a matter of dispute whether the supreme magistracy was single or dual in its earliest years. These uncertainties, and the controversies that surround reconstructions of early Roman society, make it unwise to be dogmatic about the origins of the tension I am postulating, but I suggest that it was latent in the amalgam of immigrants from the start of Roman history; that it was exacerbated by the military and economic difficulties of the early Republic, and that it was acknowledged in the XII Tables, not only by the ban on funerary extravagance, but by one on marriage between patricians and plebeians which reveals a closed caste of aristocrats able to impose equality as an aim for its members.

The conflict between ambition and equality directly involved only the highest class in society. At least three enactments laid restrictions on iteration of the consulship; iteration of the tribunate of the plebs was never expressly forbidden, although by the time of the Gracchi it was contra morem maiorum. It looks as if it was affected only by analogy with the true magistracies. This concentration on the highest class may weaken the interest and value of the idea, because it leaves the overwhelming majority of the population out of account. But two segments of the lower class have their parts to play. First, pressure from below may have made the aristocrats readier to sacrifice their private interests to the interests of their class as a whole. We can bring in another section of the lower classes by a more obvious route: many of them (magna pars, Livy 5.32.18) were attached by the vertical strands of clientship to their betters. ‘Attus Clausus’ arrived at Rome with his clients, the Fabii used theirs to the number of 300 to garrison Cremera (Livy 2.16 and 45). Clients long remained attached to their gentes, while of those of a more ambitious turn of mind some won their way: the dominant aristocracy of the late second and early first century was plebeian and not patrician. Those who entered the aristocracy accepted the values of the families whose place they took. Exclusiveness and an ability to assimilate outsiders were not contradictory features of Roman society, but complementary; taken together they made one of the strengths of the system.

This resilience carried the values of early Rome into the later Republic. The senatorial predominance of the second century that followed the Hannibalic War constituted a strong assertion of the principle of restraint, for it entailed subordinating magistrates and promagistrates to their peers. Here is the principle as enunciated by Cicero (pro Sest. 137 f.): ‘the senate’s forbears had established the
constitution in its several parts most wisely: not being able to bear the power of the kings, they created annual magistrates, and set the senate over the state as a deliberative body to last forever, making it the guardian, overseer, and champion of the republic. Their idea was that magistrates should follow the suggestions of the senate and be the agents of its authoritative policy.'

But already in the second century it was becoming more difficult to keep the individual in his restricted place. Rome’s commitments abroad gave him powers that had to be held for too long and too far away for the senate to check them. The senate’s agents were deciding the fate of kings and of cities that thought of themselves as equals of Rome in standing if not in power, and her superiors in culture and pedigree. Plutarch (*Sulla* 5.4) gives us a striking picture of Sulla seated between two kings in Asia Minor and dealing with them as he chose; it was long before the idea of the all-powerful proconsul died out. Even in the time of Augustus a proconsul of Asia could stalk amongst the bodies of the three hundred men he had had executed and congratulate himself on a right royal deed (*Sen.*, *de Ira* 2. 5.5). Under the Republic great generals on returning to Rome would not be happy to sink back as consulars into equality with stay-at-home lawyers and orators: their achievements earned them more than the familiar and ephemeral imperatorial salutation and triumph. We do not know what Scipio Africanus felt at the end of the Hannibalic War, when he left behind those opportunities for *dynasteia basilike* of which Polybius speaks (10. 40.7) and returned to the censorship of 199 and to the position of Princeps Senatus. Already, as Scullard writes,11 ‘the rapidity and irregularity of Scipio’s extraordinary career . . . gave good grounds for suspicion and envy.’ The principle of Buggins’s turn was reinforced in 180, when the Lex Villia Annalis was passed, stating the order in which magistracies must be held, and the conditions for holding them. What Scullard writes of Africanus might be applied to his grandson Aemilianus, of whom his biographer A. E. Astin says:12 ‘It is one of the characteristics of his career that, with conspicuous success, he placed his own advancement above both usage and the law, that in the furtherance of his own ambitions he cultivated and exploited popular favour as an instrument with which to defy the senate.’ What Marius in the next generation felt about his position may be inferred from what he did on the first day of his second consulship: he entered the senate clad in triumphal dress (*Plut.*, *Mar.* 12. 7). The senate’s shocked reaction made Marius regret his sartorial solecism: he had to go home and change. Sixty years later the senate’s conversion had gone far enough for it to vote Caesar the triumphal laurels in a durable metal facsimile.13 In A.D. 84 or 85 it specifically granted Domitian the right
to enter the House in triumphal garb (Dio 67. 4.3).

At one of the crucial points of this process lies an enigma: the career of Lucius Sulla. If the view of Roman society that I have been putting forward has any value it should make some contribution to solving that enigma. The notorious difficulty about Sulla is that during the ten years that preceded his dictatorship, when he was consul and during his proconsulship in the east, and on his return to Italy, he behaved without regard for the law and the constitution. But the apparent purpose of the reforms that Sulla put through during his dictatorship was to restore senatorial government; and after putting them through he retired completely from public life. Explanations of this change of attitude have been many and various. J. Carcopino could not believe that the leopard had changed his spots. In his view Sulla did not resign his powers voluntarily but was pushed out of them by a coalition of Pompey, Cicero, and members of the Metellan faction. A more recent enquirer, E. S. Gruen, virtually admits that he is baffled: the two parts of Sulla’s career do not cohere, a change came over him, and inexplicably he was sated with power.

Rather than thinking of a split between one period of Sulla’s career and another – as if his dictatorship had brought the enlightenment of the road to Damascus – I detect an inherent inconsistency in his thinking, or between his theorizing and his practical politics. In manoeuvring his way to the consulship, however devious and treacherous his conduct towards his original patron Marius, Sulla was acting according to accepted canons of Roman political behaviour. But the struggle for the Mithridatic command, the invasion of Italy in 83 and the seizure of the Dictatorship and the extraordinary honours that accompanied it, all advanced Sulla further along the path that led towards the liberation of individual ambitions from the restraints of law and custom, the path that Africanus and Aemilianus had trodden before him. It was personal ambition that carried him along it. But when he came to theorize, Sulla was a child of the second century B.C., and he aimed to restore the discipline and unity which were what first-century politicians saw from their side of the Gracchan and Appuleian disturbances and the Civil Wars of the eighties. Accordingly he bolstered up the principle of Buggins’s turn by providing a regular succession of magistrates for domestic and provincial posts and by keeping office-holders in line with his Lex Cornelia Maestatis. The Lex Annalis was re-enacted to prevent men reaching high office before they had been through the mill by holding all the necessary lower offices. This constitution was the work of a man born in 138 B.C. who, just as he was about to take the toga of manhood, had seen the tribunes Gaius Gracchus and Fulvius Flaccus threaten the supremacy of the
senate – the second such threat within twelve years. Sulla’s answer to the tribuniciam threat was to devalue that office and bring magistrates proper back to their role of *ministri senatus*. Naturally Sulla included a sumptuary measure in his legislation; equally naturally he regarded it as inapplicable to himself.

The change from Republic to Principate seemed to mark the triumph of the individual against the group (or the triumph of one *gens* over the rest); and by the second century A.D. the tension had in one sense been quite resolved: the senate had become a chorus of yes-men responsive to every wish of an entrenched individual with supreme *imperium*, the Princeps: magistrates and private persons alike looked upon him as their lord and addressed him as such. It may be more than a coincidence that during the reign of Vespasian there came a change of style amongst the upper classes of Italy: a move away from luxury and display to frugality and plainness. Tacitus believes that a cue was taken from the parsimonious style of the Princeps himself (*Ann.* 3.55.5); the change was due also to a realistic idea of the wealth of Italians and their place in the Roman world of the late first century A.D., but another factor may have been a slight relaxation of tension between senators whose positions were equally lowly compared with that of the Princeps.

But the old structure was resilient; within the limitations imposed by the régime, struggles for preferment went on in the old style, sometimes descending to an undignified scramble in the senate house or to the scribbling of abusive obscenities on ballot papers, as Pliny tells us (*Ep.* 3.20; 4.25). Even in relation to the Princeps vestiges remained of the old ethos: in the reign of Domitian the senate tried to extract an oath from the Princeps that he would not execute any of those whom they were pleased to call his peers (*Dio* 67.2.4).

To an outside observer, then, the Roman constitution and community appears as a self-regulating device, kept in being by a system of checks and balances that not only prevented disintegration from within but made the community better able to cope with threats from without. To Romans it looked different. First, as members of the community they ascribed value to the system: anything that tended to upset the balance was undesirable and vicious; and as the system was a closed one, concerned with a single body politic, all virtues and vices would be seen in terms of that community. Secondly, they saw the community as a living being, a person. Both factors help to explain why they saw politics and history in moral terms.

Historians were members of society; they saw their function as helping to preserve the system. A. J. Woodman has pointed out that in their pursuit of elevated themes Fabius Pictor and the elder Cato
were like the Gracchan annalist Sempronius Asellio, who believed (Fr. 2) that one of the functions of history was to encourage patriotism in a practical way, to make men ‘alacriores ad rem publicam defendendum’. Like other writers, Aristophanes for example, they gave what was really a blueprint greater authority by turning it into a reality of the distant past. At the same time the fundamental principle that what motivated men who had the time and money was gloria and potentiae cupidó was so ingrained in them that they questioned only the excesses they occasioned. One may compare the failure of the ancients to develop any discipline that could be called economics: the social and economic system was essentially static and did not draw attention to itself by undergoing any fundamental changes. It might have been instructive for historians to consider how the practice of history itself had changed. The early writers avoided an interest in the individual protagonists of history, Cato excluding even the names of military commanders, for ‘Rome was not the creation of individuals’ (Cic., Rep. 2.2). A change came with Polybius; it was brought to fruition by Sallust and perhaps to excess by Tacitus in his emphasis on the rôle of a single individual, the Princeps, in the state.

The language of morals has always had greater appeal than that of austere historical enquiry: it allows historians a place in the world of action. But if those of ancient Rome had pursued their enquiries further they would have found something perhaps unacceptable to them: that the tension between individual and group was built in; that there was nothing to be done about it; and that any series of shocks was likely to unbalance it, either in the direction of Spartan austerity, if the state was strong enough, or towards one-man rule. Tacitus notices and reprehends desire for gloria and potentia as a feature of human society. That such qualities broke down society and destroyed the Republic, he saw; not the more alarming fact that that society itself was founded on them, and that individuals in displaying those qualities were responding to the demands and pressures it imposed.

NOTES

* A version of this paper was read to the Classical Association in University College, Swansea; I am very grateful to Mr. S. Mitchell and other members of the Association for suggestions and to Miss D. Nash, Mrs. S. Wolfram, and Miss K. Forsyth for helpful criticism of later drafts.
5. JRS 53 (1963), 119.


10. On patricians, plebeians, and population, see Ogilvie, *Early Rome* pp. 56 ff.


14 Sylla, ou la monarchie manquée (Paris, 1931).


16. E.g., Livy 2.32.8, with Ogilvie ad loc.; Florus I, Pr. 4 ff.


18. Tac., *Ann* 3.26, puts the golden age before the foundation of the state by Romulus; see Koestermann ad loc.