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Alexander Raven Thomson was a British fascist philosopher, active from 1932 to 1955. I outline Thomson's Spenglerian views on civilization and decline. I argue that Thomson in his first book is an orthodox Spenglerian who accepts that decline is inevitable and thinks that it is morally required to destroy civilization in its final stages. I argue that this suffers from conceptual issues which may have caused Thomson's change to a revised form of Spenglerianism, which is more authentically fascist. This authentically fascist view is then seen to fall prey into the problem inherent in the very idea of permanent rebirth.

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I. Introduction

Alexander Raven Thomson (1899 –1955) is not a well-known philosopher. However, to a small group of friends and followers, he would have represented the philosophical cutting edge in his active years (from 1932 until his death in 1955). Thomson represents a case of an interesting Spenglerian, insofar as he tried to provide what I will describe as a fascist revision of Spengler, rather than an outright rejection.[1] It is not the subject of this essay to give a philosophical appraisal of fascism in general, but Thomson in particular.[2] In this paper, I

[1] The central text to which the fascists responded is of course Oswald Spengler *Decline of the West,* trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926-1928).

[2] The literature on the history and theory of fascism is large and ever expanding. Important primary sources for fascism include Giovanni Gentile "The Philosophic Basis of Fascism," *Foreign Affairs* 6/1 (1927):290-304 and Benito Mussolini "The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism," trans. Jane Soames, *The Political Quarterly* 4/3 (1933):341-356. For British fascism, and in particular the movements around Oswald Mosley, important primary sources are Oswald Mosley, *Fascism: 100 Questions Asked and Answered* (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1936) ; *Tomorrow We Live*, reprinted in *My Answer* 2nd Ed. (Wiltshire: Mosley Publications, 1946); *The Alternative* (Wiltshire: Mosley Publications, 1947) and *My Life* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1968) ; William Joyce, *Dictatorship* (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1933); Alexander Raven Thomson, *Civilisation as Divine Superman* (London: Raven Publications, 1932) and *The*

intend to outline Thomson's views and show how they are subject to internal tensions. I begin with some contextual background.

Thomson was a member first of the Communist Party of Great Britain, before quickly becoming disillusioned and joining Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF — later the British Union of Fascists and National Socialists). In 1932, his year of breaking with the Communist Party, Thomson published a book concerning philosophy of history —*Civilization as Divine Superman: A Superorganic Philosophy of History* (hereafter *Civilization*).[3] This remarkably-titled book was an outline of the processes and stages of history, in a Spenglerian framework of inevitable rise and decline. After joining the BUF, Thomson also published a book mainly concerned with economic questions, entitled *The Coming Corporate State*. This was in addition to various smaller publications in his role as in-house philosopher of the movement, concerned with technical points of the BUF party program. After the war, including a long stay in prison due to the internment of many of the BUF officials in 1940, Thomson resumed membership of a Mosley organization, called the Union Movement. Thomson published some essays in a journal edited by Mosley's wife Diana Mosley, including some in the year of his death, 1955.

Another piece of context I provide is a broad outline of what I take fascism to be. I follow Roger Griffin in thinking of fascism as broadly palingenetic populist ultra-nationalism. It is a nationalist view, with some kind of key focus on race or ethnicity (hence ultra— as opposed to civic or cultural). It is populist in the sense that it attempts to create mass movements of different classes and groups. Finally, fascism is palingenetic insofar as it focuses on rhetoric and theory in terms of 'rebirth,' 'renaissance' or some similar concept. A nearby view to Griffin's is that held by Roger Eatwell, who thinks that fascism is organized around a central concept of developing a 'new man' — a new modernist vision of humankind. This seems to me to be an allied conception to Griffin's, because the rebirth in question could be seen to

Coming Corporate State (London: B.U.F. Publications, 1935). Any list of important secondary literature on fascism in general should include Martin Kitchen, *Fascism* (London: Macmillan, 1976); Roger Griffin *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Pinter, 1991) and *Fascism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018); Roger Eatwell, *Fascism: A History* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995); Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). The literature on British fascism in particular is large as well. Important overviews of British fascism are Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1983) and Graham Macklin *Failed Führers* (London: Routledge, 2020). More specific topics are studied by Robert Skidelsky, "The Problem of Mosley: Why a Fascist Failed," *Encounter* (1969):77-87 and *Oswald Mosley* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Martin Pugh "The British Union of Fascists and the Olympia Debate," *The Historical Journal* 41/2 (1998): 529-542 ; Philip M. Coupland, "The Blackshirted Utopians," *Journal of Contemporary History* 33/2 (1998):255-272 ; Graham Macklin, *Very Deeply Dyed in Black* (London & New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007); Gary Love, ""What's the Big Idea?": Oswald Mosley, the British Union of Fascists and Generic Fascism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42/3 (2007):447-468 ; Matthew Worley, "Why Fascism? Sir Oswald Mosley and the Conception of the British Union of Fascists," *History* 96/1 (2010):68-83. Thomson has been studied, as far as I can see, by only two works. One is Peter Pugh, *A Political Biography of Alexander Raven Thomson* (PhD thesis, 2002) and the other Matthew McMurray "Alexander Raven Thomson, Philosopher of the British Union of Fascists," *The European Legacy* 12/1 (2012): 33-59. There does not seem to exist any direct philosophical appraisal of Thomson. Richard Thurlow in "Destiny and Doom: Spengler, Hitler and "British" Fascism," *Patterns of Prejudice* 15/4 (1981): 17-33 focuses on Spengler's influence on British fascism, but Thomson only receives a paragraph's attention, with most of the paper dedicated to Mosley and to the post-war fascist movements. Fascism and violence has received some philosophical attention with Thomas Sheehan "Myth and Violence: The Fascism of Julius Evola and Alain de Benoist," *Social Research* 48/1 (1981):45-73 and "*Diventare Dio*: Julius Evola and the Metaphysics of Fascism," in *Nietzsche in Italy*, ed. Thomas Harrison (Stanford, CA: Anima Libri, 1986), 279-292.

[3] All pagination in references to *Civilization* is taken from the 2018 reprint published by Black House.

be taking place on an individual as well as a national level.[4] Eatwell also highlights the ambition of fascism to provide a 'third way' between capitalism and communism, and to have an economic system (corporatism) which attempts to avoid the supposed pitfalls of either. This makes fascists difficult to place on a single spectrum of political opinion, as it is an eclectic position.

This paper is in four sections. In the first, I outline Thomson's 'early view,' defined here as the account given in *Civilization*, with special attention to the final chapter on the changing applications of morality. In the second, I give two criticisms of this view, which may account for part of the reason why it was abandoned.[5] In the third, I outline Thomson's 'mature' views, and how they represent a fascist revision of his earlier Spenglerian position and so represent, *in nuce,* an authentically fascist philosophy of history. In the fourth, I give some reasons for thinking that this mature view is an unstable position, symptomatic of the inherent instability of fascism.

II. The Early View: *Civilization* and Violence

I begin with two important foundational commitments that Thomson holds. The first is that there are discoverable laws of history.[6] The second is his broad commitment to monist non-reductionism. In Thomson's account, the basic substance ("monistic energy-time") has proceeded through various "integrations" from energy, through electricity, to basic physical stuff, to more sophisticated chemical forms, to biological forms. As a non-reductionist about these integrations, Thomson thinks that once a phenomenon has emerged at some level, it is no longer explicable in terms appropriate to the lower levels of integration — biological phenomena are not explicable solely in terms of chemistry, let alone physics, and so on. The account of levels of integration given leads Thomson to pose the question of whether there could be higher integrations than the biological — that is, whether there could be supra-biological phenomena which emerge out of biological phenomena but are not reducible to the same. Thomson answers this in the affirmative. This supra-biological phenomena he calls Civilization, or the Superman (seemingly in its literal sense of "above" man).[7] This term has Nietzschean resonance, but it is clear, in my view, that Thomson would strongly dissent from Nietzsche's individualistic streak. Mosley in his lecture "The Philosophy of Fascism" gives an

[4] It is worth pointing out that Mosley especially talks of fascism as a "faith," perhaps in doing so noting the individual's path to rebirth as part of the collective rebirth of the nation.

[5] Though I will not be making the claim that these are the reasons or providing a historically exhaustive timeline of Thomson's intellectual development. Pugh, *A Political Biography* provides ample material on this question. Pugh notes in conclusion that there is still a gap in knowledge about the exact reasons for Thomson's abandonment of his early position.

[6] In this way, Thomson appears to be a 'positivist' Spenglerian, rather than a 'relativist' one. That is, Thomson appears to believe that there is a "science of history that seeks to uncover universal and observable law-like regularities in the course of history" as opposed to someone who takes philosophy of history to be a "culture-specific expression of a perspectival historical aesthetics." Gregory Morgan Swer, "Timely Meditations?: Oswald Spengler's Philosophy of History Reconsidered," *Prolegomena* 17/2 (2018): 138.

[7] Nietzsche comes in for some oblique criticism as being mistaken about the kind of thing the superman would be. Thomson uses the examples of insects and 'hive mind' to show what kind of super-organism he has in mind. Having said that, there might be more affinity between Thomson and Nietzsche if Huddleston's reading is correct. In ""Consecration to Culture": Nietzsche on Slavery and Human Dignity," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 52/1 (2014): 135-160, Huddleston argues that, for Nietzsche, the better life is made sacrificing oneself to culture — that "the highest calling of most people is to be in the service of culture" (141) which is redolent of Thomson. Thanks to Richard Elliott for providing this reference..

account whereby fascism is a mixture of Nietzschean and Christian elements. Summing up his reflections on Nietzsche, Mosley says that fascism takes from the German thinker: "the virility, the challenge to all existing things which impede the march of mankind, the absolute abnegation of the doctrine of surrender; the firm ability to grapple with and to overcome all obstructions."[8] This is grist to Thomson's mill. Perhaps then what should be said about Thomson's (and British fascism more broadly) attitude to Nietzsche is that the philosopher evinces a certain kind of attitude which the fascists find admirable, though they find the direction of his positive thought (including its individualism and aestheticism) to be wide of the mark. Late in the book, Civilization is said to be the proper content of the figure of God, and Thomson does occasionally deploy religious language to describe Civilization.[9]

In keeping with his non-reductionism, Thomson does not think that the laws of biology apply to civilizations. This point is the central plank in the historical argument against those with a "Whig" view of history, chiefly Herbert Spencer and H. G. Wells. In Thomson's view, the Whig view of history relies on a crude implementation of Darwinist premises where they do not belong, and in doing so, obscures much about the ancient world in order to push the idea that there is a gradual and continual rise in civilization. Thomson's key point is that if we examine the historical facts, we can see both rise and fall played out multiple times across the world, rather than continuous progress.

Thomson is somewhat ambivalent about the status of human beings. On the one hand, they are at the sixth level of integration — as a kind of multi-celled organisms. On the other, Thomson seems to deny that natural selection properly speaking applies to human beings after the integration which brings about civilization. I think Thomson's view here has to be that human beings are unique in being self-conscious (and therefore free) social animals. Though we were formed by evolutionary (and therefore biological) laws, in being constituents of Civilization, we are no longer 'merely' biological creatures.[10] Thomson says, for example:

> …mankind has with the advent of civilization attained a higher plane of existence upon which the laws of the lower biological plane no longer hold good.[11]

And further:

> Although a large degree of free-will seems to be left to the individual, in point of fact upon the vast majority of civilised men a certain definite form of service to the community is enforced. Each is as inexorably bound down to his own particular task as any body cell.[12]

He also describes primitive societies as:

> …amorphous, lacking all political structure, and its existence is a *mere biological state of being* without any historical significance in itself.[13]

[8] Oswald Mosley, "The Philosophy of Fascism," *The Fascist Quarterly* vol.1, no.1 (1935): 35-46.
[9] An example from the first chapter — "Ever since [the formation of civilization] have the puny peasants eyed askance and with much misgiving the product of their self-sacrifice, the giant civilizations that stride in magnificent steel-clad splendour about the earth. The "superman" is come. He already orders the affairs of mankind. We are all His subjects, subservient to His will." Thomson, *Civilization*, 21.
[10] It is also true that we may be constituents of civilization, but civilizations are not reducible to us.
[11] Thomson, *Civilization*, 16.
[12] Ibid., 19. This quotation introduces an idea important to fascists — organicism about society
[13] Ibid., 27. My emphasis.

It therefore seems that Thomson thinks that there is a shift in the nature of human beings before and after society. Before society, or in primitive societies, we are merely biological creatures, a kind of complicated multi-cellular organism. After society is formed, that is, after the integration which brings about the Superman, we are historical beings as well, no longer merely biological, and therefore no longer the kinds of beings to which biological laws such as natural selection can unqualifiedly apply.[14]

I now move on to discuss Thomson's views of the laws in history. Thomson's view of laws in general is under-described, but it seems consistent with an account according to which laws are relations between universals. This would account for why e.g., natural selection does not apply to monistic energy-time at the lowest level of integration, because there exist no phenomena which exemplify the universals. In Thomson's view, there are discoverable laws of history. These laws govern the rise and fall of civilizations, according to the lifespan of the civilization itself.[15] There are a number of cycles, each with stages (and sometimes sub-stages) which civilizations proceed through. Most of *Civilization* is spent detailing the various different 'cycles' which civilizations must go through. All told, there is the political, the economic, the social, the language, the religious, and the artistic cycle. All of these different cycles play out at seemingly varying speeds, though they all have some general connection and so there could not be a civilization in the first stage of the political but the final stage of the artistic cycle, for example.[16] The stages also come in a fixed order, with the failures of the previous stage setting the scene for the next stage. The average life-cycle of a civilization (a journey through all the stages in the cycles) is estimated to be about 2,000 years.[17]

The above is sufficient to authenticate Thomson's Spenglerian credentials. Swer argues that there is an emerging consensus about the key theses within Spengler. These theses are firstly, the Cyclical Model — that human history in general has an overall cyclical pattern. Secondly, the Culture-Organisms view, which is that cultures have life-cycles just like organisms. Thirdly, Destiny, the view that the cyclical pattern of world history is formed by the operation of fixed laws of internal development. Fourthly, Cultural Isolation — that each culture is entirely self-originating and original. And fifthly, the Meaning thesis: that the cyclical pattern has no deeper meaning.[18] In my reading, Thomson in *Civilization* agrees with all but the fourth of these theses. That he thinks in terms of the Cyclical model is clear. Whilst he does not think that cultures or civilizations are organisms, he does think they have life-cycles. In thinking that there are laws of history, he seems to think that the laws of history which govern the cycles of civilizations, and he does occasionally speak in terms of inevitability or destiny.[19] Thomson however seems to relax Spengler's condition of cultural isolation — he outlines ways in which civilizations can relate to one another (by being offshoots, descendants, or colonized). In *Civilization*, Thomson seems to think that the cyclical pattern has itself no deeper meaning or teleology. The authoritative buck stops with the civilization

[14] This is presumably why Thomson speaks of the need to free history from the tyranny of biology (ibid., 16). This also accounts, I think, for Thomson's claim that eugenics is a "perfectly ludicrous subject" (15).

[15] It seems clear from Thomson's insistence that biology should be purged from history that the 'life-cycle' claim is a metaphor — otherwise Thomson would seem to hold that there are biological phenomena which are replicated at the social level.

[16] The Artistic cycle in particular is said to be "largely identical" with the religious cycle, on account of the close connection of artistic endeavour and religion. Thomson, *Civilization*, 180.

[17] Contrast this with Spengler, who thought the turnaround quite a bit shorter, at 1,000 years.

[18] Swer "Timely Meditations," 139-40. Swer argues that these the two main ways of viewing Spengler — the positivist or relativist — both capture important theses in this list but are unable to account for the consequences of all of them.

[19] Thomson, *Civilization*, 88-9.

at hand. It is this key Spenglerian thesis that Thomson came to reject. But before moving on to discuss Thomson's later views, it is important to make clear the connection between this Spenglerian view and violence.

This connection is then the following. In the final chapter of the work, Thomson gives an account of morality. Morality in the abstract is summed up as the command to serve the Superman.[20] Thomson says further:

> The superman has a paramount claim upon our services, for it is only through Him that we can attain to the highest expression of our possibilities. Communal service is the whole basis and foundation of morality, and this communal service must not be animated by any calculation of personal benefit.[21]

This general or abstract moral claim, however, requires interpreting at each historical period within the civilization's lifespan. The historical periods in question are set by the Political cycle. Characteristic of late-stage ('senile') civilization is plutocratic democracy. In this stage, the superorganism of civilization is such that we should try to enjoy it as much as we can, as there is no "serious moral alternative."

However, at some stage, when the Plutocratic turns to the Anarchic, the civilization decays to an extent that those attuned to the situation will be able to glimpse the new civilization on the horizon. This is where Thomson seems to me to use his philosophical history to license acts of violence. He says:

> In superorganic language the coming civilization of the future is conceived, but its birth must involve the destruction of the parent to make place for its new rejuvenated vitality and growth. The moral code of the material destruction of civilization on idealistic grounds has its basis in the service of the superorganism of the future, and the renunciation of the superorganism that has outlived its period of usefulness.[22]

So, at some stage in the lifespan of a civilization, it needs to be destroyed. This destruction is done for the sake of the incoming, new civilization, and is done in its service. I think the qualification "material" to "destruction" is key — it is about destroying the economic and political systems of civilization. Thomson is not overly specific about what kind of activities he thinks are appropriate here, though earlier, when discussing the Anarchic stage, he says the following:

> Great cities are reduced to uninhabited ruins, even local towns are deserted, while country villas, as the luxurious abodes of the hated plutocracy, are burned to the ground…Civilization being already extinct in spirit, its material outward form also returns to dust and ashes.[23]

These are the kinds of things which Thomson thinks that we (qua constituents of civilization) are called to do. We are supposed to engage in a kind of cultural euthanasia, to destroy in order that the future may come sooner.[24] It is important to see the radical nature

[20] Ibid., 182.
[21] Ibid., 182.
[22] Ibid., 187.
[23] Ibid., 96.
[24] This is another sign of divergence from Spengler, who seemed to think of violence as, to use Swer's phrase a "cultural preservative" — that is, violence might be able to somehow prolong the life of a

of Thomson's claim. It is not that it would be prudent for us to try to bring in the new civilization as soon as possible. It is that we are *morally obligated* to do so. Of course, we cannot go on being destructive forever, and civilizations do not build themselves. But it seems clear that Thomson's vision is of a call from the future, to move us to commit acts of violence, sanctified by the coming Superman.

III. The Early View's Problems

There are many issues one might have with this picture. One might take issue with philosophical history itself.[25] One might question Thomson's data, or his interpretation thereof. I intend here to draw attention to two internal issues that threaten the stability of this view. The first concerns the nature of historical inevitability when put together with free will. The second concerns the nature of the moral claim of the Superman. I take these in order.

The first problem is fairly easy to pose as a question: How is it possible that there exist both laws of history, and that human agents are free? I call this problem, following Berlin's classic essay, the problem of historical inevitability.[26] The problem is as follows. According to one position that Thomson holds, there are laws of history, which outline the progress and decline of civilizations. These laws can be used to explain the phenomena in history, and predict phenomena in the future. If these laws are strong enough that they count as real laws (as opposed to generalizations) then it appears that our actions do nothing, insofar as the historically inevitable was due anyway. If the laws are not that strong, then it is difficult to see why we should think of them as laws regarding the progress of history.

For a believer in historical inevitability, Berlin says: "We are soldiers in an army, and no longer suffer the pains and penalties of solitude; the army is on the march, our goals are set for us, not chosen by us; doubts are stilled by authority. The growth of knowledge brings with it relief from moral burdens, for if powers beyond and above us are at work, it is wild presumption to claim responsibility for their activity or blame ourselves for failing in it."[27]

Thomson would presumably dissent from this description, as the growth of historical knowledge regarding Civilization would not bring relief from moral burdens — if the moral burdens are service to the Superman. However, they would bring a new clarity about how to make sense of life in an anarchic age, with the outcome that acts hitherto outlawed might then be legitimized.

But there is a deeper problem. In order to maintain the sense of being morally obligated to perform certain actions, Thomson needs it to be the case that we are free. But we are not free enough to have meaningful effect on the processes of history. The Superman is coming, and there is nothing that we could do to halt that process. Thomson then needs to walk a very fine tightrope, on the one hand holding that we are free enough to respond to the call of the Superman from the future, but on the other hand thinking that the march of history pays no heed to the moral decisions of mere individuals. One way out of this is to concede, as Berlin thinks a believer in inevitability must, that human agents are unfree, or that free will is an illusion. Thomson does suggest this when he writes:

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civilization, rather than hasten its demise. Another apt metaphor might be cultural regicide — we subjects kill the ruler to gain a better one. Thanks to Victor Braga Weber for suggesting this metaphor.

[25] I have in mind a historian like A. J. P. Taylor, who said in his "Accident Prone, or What Happened Next," *The Journal of Modern History* 49/1 (1977):17, that history "enables us to understand the past better, no more and no less" — that is, someone who thinks that the idea that philosophy of history is misguided.

[26] Isaiah Berlin "Historical Inevitability," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 41-117.

[27] Ibid., 77-78.

> Although a large degree of free-will seems to be left to the individual, in point of fact upon the vast majority of civilized men a certain definite form of service to the community is enforced. Each is as inexorably bound down to his own particular task as any body cell.[28]

This organicist remark might be enough to suggest the following picture. This is that in the anarchic stage, when the call of the future Superman begins to be heard, that enough are bound to their particular tasks so as to bring the new Superman about. In other words, in the anarchic age, the "definite form of service" which is "enforced" turns out to be the destructive patterns that Thomson later on suggests are the proper morality of such an age. But even assuming this is Thomson's view, it seems unstable. The general commitment of fascists to the efficacy of individual wills, and a 'revolt against destiny' seems to not sit well with the proposal under consideration. It would be more in line with the general fascistic outlook to have a view according to which the inevitable decline could be postponed by radical action. Indeed, it is this commitment which comes to the surface in Thomson's later view. But first, we should turn to a second issue for Thomson's early view, which dovetails with the first.

The second problem is also fairly simple to state: How is it that we owe a moral duty to a non-existent being? Of course, there are numerous theories of how to account for duties to future *persons* (that e.g., part of our obligation to preserve the planet is explained by our duties to the unborn generations). But Thomson's issue is not a duty to a non-existent person, but a non-existent Civilization, a kind of corporate entity. Standard accounts of 'intergenerational justice' as it is known, seek to justify the view that future persons should be counted in our moral deliberations. Thomson's view needs to be that we have an analogous duty to the future Civilization, though one which is not reducible to duties to future persons. It is however very unclear that sense could be made of such an idea. Thomson is then caught between thinking that we have duties to a future corporate entity, but being unable to describe this apart from in the language of duties to other persons. But given that it is not the future person to whom I owe this duty of bringing into existence, but the corporate entity, it is difficult to see how to articulate the account. As an example: imagine a revolutionary leader talking about the duty they feel to the new nation they try to bring into existence. It seems that the talk of duties in this context would be parsed as duties to the people of the nation, rather than the nation itself (with the talk about the nation adding emotive gloss, say). I might conceivably have a duty to a currently existing corporate entity to sustain it in the future or work for it in the future. But the idea of having a duty to a future corporate entity is somewhat mysterious.

Here we also confront similar issues to those we saw with the previous objection. Thomson says that we owe duties to Civilization because "it is only through Him that we can attain to the highest expression of our possibilities." We then owe duties to a future Civilization because the future Civilization is a better expression of our possibilities than the already-existent, exhausted 'senile' Civilization. But this seems like resignation, rather than rebirth. This is resignation to the laws of history and the inevitable rise and decline, rather than the assertion of individual or collective will so as to change the processes of history, as was envisaged by fascists. So, even if there is sense to be made of the idea that we can have duties to future corporate entities which are not reducible to duties to future individuals, Thomson's view remains in large part too pessimistic to be authentically fascist, which may well explain why he quickly rejected such a view after the publication of *Civilization*. Pugh says: "In its acceptance of Spenglerian destiny, it [the book] failed crucially to posit any concept of redemption, following its predecessor in the appreciation of perpetual historical rotation. The acceptance of the future as a preordained series of events that merely awaited the appropriate

[28] Thomson, *Civilization*, 19.

participants exhibited none of the vitalism, the struggle, that informs fascist ideology."[29] However, it is clear that part of Thomson's aim is to ground a theory of morality in his philosophical history, a morality which would license acts of violence, and give violence a place within the moral code, rather than seeing violence as antithetical to moral behaviour. This remains in place even after the rejection of this early view. I now turn to the later view to show how Thomson begins to formulate an authentically fascist revision of Spengler.

IV. The Later View

After the experience of internment during the war, Thomson joined Mosley's newly-formed Union Movement, a kind of internationalization of fascism.[30] Thomson resumed his publishing activities, writing this time a series of essays in the UM's outlet, *The European*. In this section, I will explore some of these papers in more detail. There are several papers from this period. In chronological order they are: "'Dark Ages" and the Inner Light" (1953), "Nemesis of Nonsense" (1954) "Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford" (1954), "Spengler and Marx: A Study in Social Pathology" (1954), "Russia and the West" (1955) and "Automation and Egalitarianism: The Nemesis of Levelling Down" (1955). There are also unpublished manuscripts.[31] Some serve to confirm Thomson's stance as a committed anti-liberal and collectivist thinker, as well as one inclined to grand metaphysical vision, as opposed to the piecemeal approach emerging from the rise of early analytic philosophy, represented primarily by the Vienna Circle. For example, Thomson's article "Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford" involves a sustained attack on this new degree program — he says that the course is confined to "propagating belief in "logico-positivism," whatever this latest piece of donnish jargon may mean, and in condemning all those thinkers from Plato to Hegel who have regarded society as possessing a life and purpose of its own."[32] Popper comes in for specific criticism as the "high priest" of logical positivism, as rejecting historicism, and by doing so, Thomson sees Popper as giving undergraduates the impression that "society is a mere mechanism for the gratification of the needs of the individual" which he regards as "out-dated and unscientific."[33]

Thomson's two most important articles from this period are "'Dark Ages'" and "Spengler and Marx." In these articles, Thomson begins to develop what I regard as a fascist revision of Spenglerian themes. In the former article, Thomson again reiterates his point that Spengler took the biological analogy too far, and that we should not think of societies or civilizations in general as troubled by biological phenomena.[34] Again Thomson refers to his favourite model — the insect hive. He argues that insects have developed a system of social equilibrium, and to the extent that they have done this, it is surely possible for humankind to

[29] Pugh, *A Political Biography*, 46. See also Mosley, *My Life* (1968), 331 who says that Thomson's conclusions were too pessimistic and that "his concept of the immediate future seemed to me an almost ant-heap collectivism…his collective ideas seemed to go much too far in eliminating individual influence." Mosley puts this down to Thomson's prior allegiance to the Communist Party.

[30] Mosley frequently says that he thinks the main fault of the fascist powers pre-war was lack of international co-operation. For an example, see *My Life* ,292.

[31] See Pugh, *A Political Biography*, ch.7 for an account of Thomson's thought in this late period which engages with the unpublished manuscripts.

[32] Alexander Raven Thomson, "Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford" *The European* 16 (1954): 18-22.

[33] Ibid., 19. Popper's work which Thomson refers to obliquely here is probably the articles on historicism, first serialised as articles in 1944-5 and published in book form as *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957).

[34] Alexander Raven Thomson, "'Dark Ages" And the Inner Light," *The European* 9 (1953):22.

follow suit.[35] The Russian thinker Berdyaev is mentioned as making a good advance on the basic Spenglerian picture. In Spengler, high culture is followed by a period of mass civilization and decline, after which follows the rise of high culture again. In Berdyaev's view, the "Dark Ages" of decline are "sometimes necessary to the advancement of culture" and they are "a period of contemplative re-creation before social man returns to his struggle with external circumstance."[36] Berdyaev's view then bestows some meaning on the cycle, whereas Spengler's original vision (in Thomson's eyes) is that the cycle is without meaning (hence the 'pessimism' of Spengler). Therefore, Berdyaev's innovation is a denial of the fifth Spenglerian thesis as outlined above from Swer. But Thomson is not satisfied with Berdyaev's revision. Instead, what follows is (for the reader of *Civilization*) a remarkable turnaround — Thomson says "…it is possible for man to gain control of the social mechanism which he has created for himself, and to direct it as he wishes without periodic oscillations from High Culture to Dark Age."[37] Thomson ends the essay with the following:

> Despite Spengler, there is no mystic "destiny" which dooms such triumphs to extinction in another night of the spirit. The Greeks knew the answer in that concept of personal and social harmony, which is a great contribution of the Hellenic mind to mankind. It is now our task to apply that solution, with the aid of modern science, to the perpetuation of European culture in the creation of a balanced and stable society in which Faith, Reason and Action shall be brought into harmony each with the others.[38]

Thomson's new view, then, is that with suitable revisions to the forms of life of human civilizations, there could in principle be a way of extending the rebirth perpetually into the future, without the hitherto-thought necessary periods of decline. Berdyaev sees meaning in the pendulum of history, where Spengler sees none. Thomson sees that the pendulum could be brought to rest. Thomson thinks then that the blending of "science and Caesarism" as Mosley puts it, which is crucial to the Mosley fascist movements, is in principle able to secure a permanent rebirth and overcome the laws of history. Thomson has then rejected his earlier view as resting on the Spenglerian mistake.

In the second of the two important papers, "Spengler and Marx," Thomson adds the following thoughts to this emerging sketch. Again reiterating his favoured criticism of Spengler, this time saying that Spengler "made the mistake of driving his organic analogy, with typical Teutonic thoroughness, to the point of assuming that, as society was organic, it must be susceptible to the laws of growth, flowering and decay."[39] But, Thomson asks, "why do civilizations die at all?" — they do not die natural deaths (the concept of natural death is a biological, not sociological concept). So, Thomson extends his earlier criticisms of Spengler's biological analogy. However, just as we saw in *Civilization*, another biological metaphor plays a role in Thomson's account. This is the role of "pathology" or "disease."

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[35] Ibid., 22

[36] Ibid., 23.

[37] Ibid., 25. In an issue of *The European*, around the same time as Thomson is writing this series of papers, as Louis Mainwaring Gardner wrote an essay "Towards Human Ecology: A Thesis in Superorganic Politics," *European* 10 (1953) 10-13 and he says that humanity is currently "living the final social paradox; man is no longer the inheritor of civilisation — civilisation has inherited man" (10). Some evidently still found Thomson's original book exciting, even as Thomson attempted to move beyond those early views.

[38] Thomson, "'Dark Ages'," 27.

[39] Alexander Raven Thomson, "Spengler and Marx: A Study in Social Pathology," *The European* 19 (1954): 21-2.

Civilizations do not get diseases in the same way that human beings or other animals do. Yet, Thomson thinks, there is a good sense to be made of the idea that there are social pathologies which cause Civilizations to wither and decay, without which they would not do so. One way of putting this is that Civilizations are not essentially senescent. Civilizations have hitherto been senescent, but this is a contingent fact, rather than a conceptual truth about what Civilizations are — they are (as social organisms) able "to escape from this iron law of nature in relation to individual organisms."[40] It follows that if one were to eradicate the pathologies, then the civilization would be healthy and thrive, and continue to do so for as long as the pathologies did not affect Civilization.

Chief among these social pathologies is individual greed. Thomson says: "Every means of propaganda and re-education must be mobilized to replace the poisonous doctrine of greed with the health-giving ideal of service. Anti-social activities at every level of society must be suppressed, for no less is at stake than the heritage of the culture of the ages, threatened by the long night of another "Dark Age"."[41] The talk of pathology situates Thomson in a long-standing right-wing tradition of social criticism according to which society is unhealthy or sick and needs to be cured.[42] One view held by e.g. Pugh and Macklin is that Thomson's immediate source for such talk is probably Francis Parker Yockey.[43] Yockey was known to associate with the Union Movement and the idea of "pathology" or "sickness" is present throughout Yockey's work *Imperium*.[44] However, in continuity with the radical right and fascist writers, members of the BUF talked, specifically about Jewish people, in terms of biological or disease metaphors. One of the most striking is J. F. C. Fuller's essay "The Cancer of Europe."[45] It is then an open question as to whether Yockey's book could be said to be the definitive or unique source of Thomson's language of pathology.

Thomson's late view, then, is the following. Spengler may be right to describe human history as hitherto a sequence of Dark Ages followed by High Cultures. He is wrong to describe this is necessitated or destined. Civilizations do not fall because that is the inevitable outcome of beginning, as death is the inevitable outcome of birth. Instead, civilizations fall for identifiable (and preventable) reasons. The prevention of the cultural pathologies which cause the decline is therefore paramount. There may well be laws of history that govern the processes or cycles within a civilization, but with the right kind of Hellenic wisdom regarding personal and social harmony, and the technical capacities opened by modern science, it is possible to overcome these laws and set civilization free from the pathologies which have previously constrained it. This may mean that the laws of history no longer have nomological status, and are different kinds of laws to those, say, of physics. It may be that the laws of

[40] Ibid., 22.

[41] Ibid., 24.

[42] Relevant here are many late 19th century figures, such as the "conservative revolution" (Stern's term) of Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, and Moeller van den Broek. See Fritz Stern *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley CA & London: University of California Press 1961), as well as Georg Mosse *The Crisis of German Ideology* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1964). Hitler's writing also fits this trend — Neil Gregor *How to Read Hitler* (London: Granta, 2005) 9, 55, for example, says that the frequent biological or medical language within *Mein Kampf* is crucial to recognising the "implicitly genocidal message" of the work.

[43] Yockey's work *Imperium* was given to Mosley and Mosley was asked whether he would sign it as the author, but Mosley declined. There seems to be a consensus amongst scholars of British fascism that Yockey was viewed by Mosley (if not by Thomson) as an eccentric or a crank. See e.g. Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley* (1975):491; Thurlow "Destiny and Doom" (1981):19 and 30, and Macklin *Very Deeply Dyed in Black* (2007),91.

[44] For more on Thomson and Yockey, see Pugh, *A Political Biography*, 238ff.

[45] J. F. C. Fuller, "The Cancer of Europe," *The Fascist Quarterly* vol.1, no.1 (1935): 66-81.

history operate in a more complicated way than Thomson previously acknowledged. Just as there are various diseases which can be overcome by human ingenuity, there can in principle be ways to overcome the pathologies of greed and individualization. Similarly, as Thomson views humanity to have "overcome" or "gone beyond" the laws of biology in the sense that such laws now no longer apply without qualification, it will be, in Thomson's view, that the laws of history (particularly those about decline and fall) will no longer apply without qualification.[46]

The connection of this new view to violence may not come as a surprise. We have seen that Thomson has already said that "anti-social activities" would be "suppressed" in order to secure the ongoing rebirth or renaissance of civilization. Quite what activities Thomson has in mind he does not say. But we can be reasonably sure that any activity sympathetic to Communism or Marxism more generally would be suppressed — earlier in the paper Thomson describes Marx as an "enemy of the social order (which must inevitably be hierarchical), in that he wishes to liquidate it."[47] It seems also reasonably clear that broadly self-interested activity not sanctioned by the state would be suppressed — e.g. businesses that are not part of one of the corporations set outlined in *Corporate State*. Thomson says, for example, that "Enlightened self-interest" as "exercised by the rich and the powerful is no less destructive of social order and of social justice than the mass greed of the mob gathering behind its self-appointed leaders to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat…"[48] Interestingly, as Thomson moves further away from Spengler on history and historical laws, the views on violence move closer together. For Spengler, as Swer has recently argued, violence can be a kind of "cultural preservative." That is, violence is a tool to extend the life of Civilizations, though not indefinitely. As Swer says: "Spengler's stay of execution is a cultural tragedy, whereby a culture buys the right to feign health through internal and external violence carried out on a mass-scale using the most rational and powerful means."[49] In contrast to his early view, where violence at the right time is a cultural euthanasia, for Thomson in the late period state-sanctioned violence is a preservative insofar as it fights the pathologies which give rise to cultural senescence.

Thomson closes with an all-too-familiar appeal. He says that though these measures may be drastic, they would "not enslave mankind, but in the truest sense liberate man from his lowest animal instincts."[50] Thomson appeals to a kind of higher nature, that notion of "positive liberty" on which Isaiah Berlin famously wrote.[51]

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[46] It is common for Thomson and Mosley to criticise Spengler's 'pessimism' and supposed lack of understanding or appreciation of the capabilities of science. However, this is at best one-sided. Spengler's late work *Man and Technics* demonstrates some of his thought about these questions, and Spengler says that technics "in man's life is conscious, arbitrary, alterable, personal, *inventive*. It is learned and improved. Man has become the *creator* of his tactics of living…" (30). This work has recently been assessed in an illuminating paper by Ian James Kidd, "Oswald Spengler, Technology, and Human Nature," *The European Legacy* 17/1 (2012):19-31. Having said that, Spengler says at the close of *Man and Technics* that "Optimism is *cowardice*" (104).

[47] Thomson, "Spengler and Marx," 21. Here is evident another strange feature of fascism — its mixture of populism and elitism. For more on this aspect of fascism see again Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* ,40-41.

[48] Thomson, "Spengler and Marx," 23

[49] Swer, "The Revolt against Reason" 145.

[50] Thomson, "Spengler and Marx," 24.

[51] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 118-172.

V. The Central Problem with the Late View

The issues with the late view are also numerous. The lack of detail makes it near-impossible to appraise the view in anything other than its broad outlines, but this is sufficient to see that it falls into the classic problem of all palingenetic accounts. That is to say that the ongoing palingenesis is inherently unstable. Griffin expertly gives voice to this feature of palingenesis in fascism. Griffin says:

> In a grotesque travesty of Faustian restlessness, fascism cannot permit itself to linger on a bed of contentment: its arch-enemy is the 'normality' of human society in equilibrium, its Achilles heel as a form of practical politics the utopianism which the fear of this enemy breeds.[52]

If Griffin is right that fascism cannot abide 'normality' — that is, that the ultra-nationalist palingenesis, or the rebirth of the "national community" requires an eternal vigilance against any sign of "settling down," then we can see how fascism would be inherently unstable. In reaching for the "utopianism" in a kind of "manic cultural optimism," the hopes of the fascist will inevitably be disappointed.[53] Griffin further says:

> A regime whose legitimacy depends on sustaining the myth of rebirth, and for which any social energies uncoordinated by the state are symptoms of decadence, cannot perpetuate indefinitely the illusion of permanent revolution and renewal and is condemned in practice to degenerate into an oppressive authoritarian regime[54]

Once the illusion of permanent rebirth or ongoing renewal is shattered, the only remaining feature is the suppression of what Thomson calls "anti-social" behaviour. Thomson might think that the rebirth could be continual because it is based in the ongoing effort of the citizenry to serve the Civilization accordingly. But of course, the permissible ideals of life are narrowly constrained within Thomson's system. Therefore, the very factor which is designed to support the perpetual palingenesis of Civilization involves a great deal of authoritarian oppression. But if that is true, then the "national community" (or the "cultural community") is no real community at all.[55] Thomson's position is therefore unstable in just the sense that Griffin identifies. For Griffin, the inherent instability of fascism is that it can only maintain momentum and cohesion by continually bringing events about which seem to fulfil some of the promise of permanent revolution, but in doing so cannot ever become a 'normal' society, and always requires new enemies to overcome.

To see this, consider that in Thomson's late view the laws of history regarding civilization and decline are still operating, but that human action can overcome their effects. This means that the natural state of affairs tends (at some point) towards decline. If that is so, then the natural tendency would need to be effectively combated, which would require ever-renewing efforts on the part of the constituents of civilization.[56]

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[52] Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, 40.
[53] Ibid., 47.
[I]bid., 45.
[55] Griffin also argues that fascism is "essentially racist" because of the nature of the national community.
[56] Pugh reports that in Thomson's unpublished manuscript *Homo Socialis* that Thomson envisaged a strict educational programme designed to pick out the best and brightest, and turning them into paragons of the 'new man' so central to the idea of fascist ideology (especially e.g. in the account given by Roger Eatwell).

Fascism as Thomson sees it is then in a quandary —either the rebirth is permanent, in which case it will degrade into a brutal authoritarian regime, or the rebirth is not, in which case the laws of history cannot be overcome. Thomson's fascistic revision of Spengler is then doomed either to relying on state-sanctioned violence to perpetuate itself, or to collapsing into orthodox Spenglerianism. It is important to note that Thomson himself seems to think that the measures he envisions would be drastic, but would "in the truest sense liberate man from his lowest animal instincts, in order that he may once again know the satisfaction and happiness of great social achievement — in partnership, and not in competition, with his fellow men." This is clearly an instance of the phenomenon that Berlin identifies as the way in which the "positive" conception of liberty has been turned via "historically and psychologically intelligible" steps into "an authoritarian state obedient to the directives of an *elite* of Platonic guardians."[57]

Therefore, Thomson's new view can be seen as still maintaining a core aim of legitimizing various kinds of violence, or attempting to show that violence can be a distinctly *moral* need on occasion. Thomson's views are themselves very implausible, and are beset by conceptual and empirical problems. But what is important here is that the fascist philosopher sees it as an aim of his to give some kind of philosophical authority to the kinds of activities involved in fascist organization and street violence, as well as the fascist revolution which would signal the coming of the national rebirth. Thomson also adopts the "positive liberty" model, making him just one in a long line of anti-liberal thinkers on both the right and the left who espouse such a position. To conclude, Thomson has a range of Spenglerian views. His earlier views rely on a Spengler-style commitment to laws of history and the inevitability of the same. His later views try to intellectualize the fascist view of history as a perpetual or continuing palingenesis. In both cases Thomson illustrates a key aspect of the ways in which intellectuals have supported or advocated for illiberal or totalitarian regimes. This is the way in which language is used in conjunction with the "positive liberty" model. In Thomson, the violence arrives preaching the virtues of communal service.

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[57] Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," 152.

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