

# Arguments with fictional philosophers: Spengler's *Kant* and the conceptual foundations of Spengler's early philosophy of history

History of the Human Sciences

2023, Vol. 36(3-4) 242–259

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DOI: 10.1177/09526951231156040

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## Abstract

Most commentators on Spengler's philosophy tend to focus on the details of his cyclical theory of world-history, according to which history should be understood in terms of the rise and fall of great cultures. I argue that Spengler's philosophy of history is itself an expression of his primary concern with philosophical analysis of the structures of human consciousness, and that an awareness of Spengler's account of the existential structures of subjective consciousness enables one to grasp the reasoning behind some of the key features of his philosophy of history, such as his cultural isolation hypothesis and critique of Eurocentric historiography. I further argue that the way to access Spengler's theory of consciousness, and the ways in which it informs his philosophy of history, is via his critical engagement with the Kant character that recurs in the first volume of *The Decline of the West*.

## Keywords

historiography, Kant, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of history, Spengler

## Introduction

Oswald Spengler is best known for his speculative philosophy of history, which analyses world-history in terms of the rise and fall of autonomous cultures.<sup>1</sup> I argue,

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however, that Spengler's primarily philosophical concern was with the structures of human consciousness, and that his exploration of the formation and operation of these structures formed the basis of a philosophical anthropology that questioned the existential possibilities of the human organism in a technological environment. And that it is this existential philosophical anthropology that underpins the cyclical philosophy of history for which Spengler is best known. I further suggest that the way to access Spengler's philosophical anthropology, and its links to his philosophy of history, is via the *Kant* character that appears sporadically in the first volume of his *The Decline of the West*.<sup>2</sup>

Spengler's engagement with *Kant* had a threefold function. It enabled Spengler to critique and dispose of certain elements of Kantian (and neo-Kantian) philosophy that he deemed unsuitable for his analysis of the structures of experiential consciousness. In so doing, this critique also facilitated the elaboration and justification of Spengler's philosophy in contradistinction to *Kant's*, and the (often surreptitious) placement of selected elements of *Kantian* philosophy in his own philosophy. By reconstructing Spengler's quarrel with *Kant's* sensible intuitions of time and space, we can see the ways in which Spengler employed his *Kant* character to develop the account of the historical contingent structures of human consciousness that formed the basis of his philosophical anthropology. And having reconstructed this philosophical anthropology in outline, we can then use *Kant* again to trace how Spengler's philosophical anthropology prompted the 'Copernican Discovery' of his philosophy of history. In closing, I will explore the nature of the *Kant* character, and his proximity to and distance from the actual Immanuel Kant, and will suggest that Spengler employed him in a self-consciously fictional manner.

## **A brief account of Spengler's philosophy of history**

Spengler argues that world-history to date can be partitioned into the history of the growth and decline of eight (possibly nine) cultures. Using a technique that Spengler terms comparative morphology, he claims to have discovered that the life-history of a culture is analogous to the life-history of an organism, and that, like organisms, all cultures have a natural lifespan and a series of developmental stages (birth, growth, maturity, death) through which they all must pass. So inevitable is the repetition of this pattern, Spengler argues, that if one grasps the method of comparative morphology, one is able to determine in advance what will inevitably happen in the future development of a culture-organism.

Furthermore, despite the species of culture-organism sharing certain structural similarities, they have no shared ancestor. Each culture is an independent development of spontaneous origin. Spengler thus dismisses the possibility of linear models of historical progress. He also denies the possibility of intercultural transmission. Cultures are 'mutually incomprehensible. The members of one culture cannot understand the basic ideas of another, and when they think they are doing so, they are actually translating totally alien concepts into concepts they have developed on their own' (Hughes, 1952: 72–3). According to Spengler's cultural isolation theory, culture is a 'unified and largely autonomous phenomenon' (Farrenkopf, 2001: 41). Those seeking to discern the structure of

history, the meaning behind the flux, must explore the internal development of a culture, not relations/interactions between cultures.

Each culture, according to Spengler, possesses an Ur-symbol peculiar to it. The Ur-symbol acts as the foundation for all cultural activities and expression within that culture. Each culture can be understood as a symbolic structure, erected around and dependent upon one master symbol, the Ur-symbol, from which all other culture-forms take their character. As each culture's Ur-symbol is unique, the symbolic structure that it underpins is likewise unique. Consequently, the cultural forms of each culture-organism are peculiar to it alone and are comprehensible only within the world view of that particular culture. That said, each culture shares certain features with other cultures by virtue of their common organic nature. Each is structured by an Ur-symbol, of which all other symbolic forms are iterations, and each will inevitably pass through the various life-stages of the organism.

## Spengler and/on Kant

### Introduction

My intention here is to reconstruct the manner in which Spengler's philosophical anthropology, and his philosophy of history, are developed and elaborated in *The Decline of the West* by means of an engagement with a Kant character, and the interpretation and modification of aspects of Kantian philosophy. This emphasis on Kant might seem somewhat puzzling given Spengler's apparently antagonistic stance towards Kant in the first volume of *Decline*. At no point in the work is there a sustained treatment of Kant's philosophy, and where it is mentioned by Spengler, it is usually in a disparaging manner. Consequently, Spengler's relation to Kantian philosophy in general, and the Kant character in *Decline* specifically, has been overlooked by most commentators.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, I suggest, the sheer frequency of Spengler's references to Kant, sporadic though they are, raises the possibility that there may be more going on here than first appears. Of particular significance is the fact that nearly all of Spengler's references to Kant's philosophy involve the same work, namely the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1999). And it is by engaging with this work that Spengler articulates the foundational features of his philosophical anthropology.

Spengler shares Kant's interest in the structures of human subjectivity and is in broad agreement with the view that reality, as we experience it, conforms to certain forms of thought. Spengler's issue, at heart, lies with Kant's two forms of perception. Or, to be more accurate, with the forms of perception that Spengler attributes to his rather idiosyncratic version of Kantian philosophy. Spengler needs something akin to Kant's two forms of perception to underpin his account of the development and operations of experiential consciousness. However, in what he views as their 'pure' Kantian state, in which they appear (on Spengler's account) as 'universal' and 'necessary' logical structures of subjectivity, they stand as an obstacle to Spengler's historico-phenomenological project to explore the structures of subjectivity as contingent forms of thought arising in and dependent upon historically specific cultural forms of life. The vehemence of Spengler's critique might give the impression of a conceptual hostility to Kant's

philosophy, but behind it, I suggest, lies the urge to reform rather than reject *Kant*. Spengler's polemical assault on *Kant* serves a threefold purpose: to dispose of those elements of *Kant* that Spengler finds to be without use, to facilitate and justify the elaboration of his own philosophy, and to locate the (now conceptually transformed) *Kantian* elements that Spengler does deem useful within his own philosophy.

In the First Critique, Kant outlines his so-called Copernican Revolution in philosophy, the idea that the objects of the world around us must conform to our faculties of knowledge in order to become objects of the senses in the first place. In support of this notion, he seeks to establish that space and time, the dimensions in which the objects of our senses are located, are mind-dependent properties, and that the laws that govern the behaviour of those objects are based upon innate mental concepts. In support of his Copernican model of the relationship between human experience and the objects of experience, Kant outlines how mathematics (geometry and arithmetic) furnishes us with universal and necessary (i.e. synthetic a priori) knowledge of such objects. Geometry, dealing with the inherently spatial concepts of extension and figure, is said to describe the structure of Space, while arithmetic, whose concepts of number, Kant argues, involve notions of succession and motion, is connected with the intuition of Time.

On the Kantian model, the intuition of an object produces sensations by acting upon the mind's faculty of representation, thereby producing an empirical intuition, a manifold of sensations. This manifold, or appearance, has two aspects: the matter of the appearance (the secondary qualities of the sensory content) and the form of the appearance (the extension and figure). While the matter of the appearance stems from the sensations effected in the faculty of representation, the forms into which any appearance is disposed are already present in the mind. In other words, there exists in the mind a faculty for sensible receptivity by means of which the mind has the ability to become conscious of appearances and their interrelations, the pure forms of sensible intuition. There are two forms of sensible intuition: outer intuition (which represents extension and figure) and inner intuition (which represents succession and simultaneity). Kant identifies space (via geometry) with the form of outer intuition, and time (via arithmetic) with the form of inner intuition.

On this account, the only way we can explain our possession of certain synthetic a priori judgements that hold with certainty for (geometry) the structure of space or (arithmetic) relations in time is if space and time are one and the same as our outer and inner intuition. Thus, according to Spengler's *Kant*, mathematical judgements determine the form of space and time, and thereby determine the form of empirical objects and our possible experience of any and all appearances (phenomena). Or, as Spengler puts it, *Kant's* forms of intuition should be viewed as 'bringing the outer and inner Man into relation with the ideas of space and time by pure scheme' and 'allying arithmetic with the one and geometry with the other' (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 6). Things in themselves, on the other hand, cannot be determinately known, as the mind does not possess the capacity to characterise that which cannot be an object of sensible intuition. Spengler states that 'Kant postulates ... both *unalterableness of form* in all intellectual activity and *identity of form for all men* in the same' (ibid.: 60).<sup>4</sup> *Kant*, according to Spengler, holds these a priori forms of appearance (and the a priori concepts of understanding) to be universal features of human consciousness.

### *Anti-Kant (or, the critique of pure Kant)*

Spengler's account of the historically contingent structures of human consciousness is at the heart of his philosophical anthropology. And he outlines and motivates for this account in the first volume of *The Decline of the West* by means of an extended argument with the First Critique and the *Kant* character that stands in for its author. Spengler complains that *Kant* has got his forms of sensible intuition all wrong. Firstly, he argues that *Kant's* association of geometry with space and arithmetic with time is a false separation of the two subjects. Spengler states that 'arithmetic and geometry are *both* spatial mathematics and in their higher regions they are no longer separable' (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 6). Number, he argues, is not something that arises from the intuition of time, 'but is something specifically spatial, in that it is an order (or ordering) of like units' (ibid.: 64). *Kantian* time is a 'spatially-formed *representative* phantom'. It is 'only a *line*, measurable, divisible, reversible' and thus not an accurate portrayal of time as it is experienced in sensuous life (ibid.: 124).

This is Spengler's key problem with *Kant's* account of the two forms of perception, namely that *Kant* misunderstands and misrepresents the nature of time. In this respect he parallels both Husserl and Heidegger in their criticism of the representation of time as a linear progression of identical units. Spengler complains that

in *Kant's* celebrated theory there is not one word about its character of directedness... But what *is* time as a length, time without direction? Everything living ... has 'life', direction, impulse, will, a movement-quality (*Bewegtheit*) that is most intimately allied to yearning and has not the smallest element in common with the 'motion' (*Bewegung*) of the physicists. (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 122)

For Spengler, arithmetic, contra *Kant*, belongs with geometry in the spatial realm of mathematical number. The two forms of perception, he claims, are better understood if one grasps that the real opposition is not between arithmetic and geometry but between chronological number and mathematical number.

Spengler holds that there are two forms in which phenomena appear to human waking consciousness, as things-becoming or things-become. Thus there are two fundamental modes of perceiving one's environs, or, as Spengler puts it, 'Man ... has before him two *possibilities* of world-formation' (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 8). The first possibility is that of *Nature*, the second that of *History*. The natural mode of world-formation, Spengler writes, 'is the shape in which the man of higher Cultures synthesises and interprets the immediate impressions of his senses' (ibid.). The historical mode, on the other hand, is said to be 'that from which (man's) imagination seeks comprehension of the living existence of the world in relation to his own life, which he thereby invests with a deeper reality' (ibid.).

Human waking consciousness, for Spengler, has the capacity to order phenomena into either the world-as-nature or the world-as-history, the world constructed under the form of space or under the form of time (Destiny). *Kant's* cardinal sin, for Spengler, is his attempt to bring Time with Space under one general critique. Such an attempt, Spengler states, is 'impossible' (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 122). Space is a conception, an

abstraction from sensuous reality. This is why space can be ‘known’, or ‘cognised’. Time, on the other hand, is ‘a *word* to indicate something inconceivable, a sound-symbol, and to use it as a notion, scientifically, is utterly to misconceive its nature’ (ibid.). *Kant*, in conflating time with space, brings time under the form of space, and by doing so ‘enables time and space to be brought into functional interdependence as magnitudes of the same order’ (ibid.: 124). For Spengler this is utterly nonsensical. To talk of things being *in* time, as we talk of things being *in* space, is just to place another kind of space next to the standard one. We might, says Spengler, just as meaningfully ‘call hope and electricity the two forces of the universe’ (ibid.: 125).

The problem arises, on Spengler’s account, owing to a fundamental misconception on *Kant*’s part concerning the nature of number. For Spengler, number arose in the formation of the fundamental structures of experiential consciousness as part of the spatial ordering strategy that is the *world-as-nature*. Number is a consequence of the primordial existential confrontation that gives rise to a particular culture-world. Consequently, an account of the nature of number cannot refer, as it does for *Kant*, to a constant form of consciousness that has universal validity. For Spengler, any such account must acknowledge the historicity and contingency of *all* experiential structures. Thus, for Spengler, any account of the nature of number then must address that which for *Kant* could not have been an issue, namely its temporality. The analysis of the nature of number must, by Spengler’s lights, necessarily involve the story of its historico-phenomenological origins.

Regarding the origin of number, Spengler asks us to imagine primitive mankind, surrounded by ‘indefinable nature-impressions’ (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 57). From these ‘nature-impressions’, or the *alien*, as Spengler terms them, humanity raises certain ones to the level of deities (or numina). And in doing so, humanity also gives them a name. At the same time as these alien forces are mystically raised above the level of humanity, through the act of naming, humanity also gives them boundaries. The naming is ‘at the same time capturing and impounding ... which limits them’ (ibid.). Number, for Spengler, operates in a similar fashion, it too being a type of naming. It is ‘akin to *word*, which, in the very fact of its comprising and denoting, fences off world-impressions’ (ibid.). From being subjects to the *alien* powers of the external world, ‘both resistances which we grasp causally as things and properties, and impulses in which we feel beings, *numina* (“just like ourselves”) to be operative’, humanity struggles to exert control through designation, to ‘mark-off’ and ‘capture’ nature-impressions (ibid.: 164).<sup>5</sup> Spengler writes that ‘it is by means of names and numbers that the human understanding obtains power over the world’ (ibid.: 57). Naming and numbering then represent a desire for control, the effort to achieve mastery over the *alien* environment through the development of knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

For Spengler, the continuing use of enumeration in cultural life spurs its development. The urge to delimit the extension-world leads in turn to the effort to delimit the extended in their word forms too. And, on the basis of this conceptual development, humanity is then able to conceive of nature in terms of ‘objects and properties, relations and differentiae, unities and pluralities’ (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 57). The world-picture thus assembled is called ‘Nature’ and it is essentially mathematical in structure. It is for this reason, Spengler argues, that the laws of Nature possess such mathematical certainty. It is, in human cognition, the symbol of the truly real and the sensuous world of living

experience, from which this *Nature*-construct ultimately stems, comes to be viewed as a derivative of this ‘extension-world’. And as the sensuous world of living experience varies from culture to culture, so too does the mathematical extension-world of *Nature*. So for Spengler, unlike *Kant*, the nature of number is historically contingent and inextricably entangled with the story of its origins. And, as he also points out, ‘the origin of numbers resembles that of the myth’ (ibid.).

Mathematical number is the hallmark of the spatial world of extension, the world-as-nature. Chronological number, on the other hand, the hallmark of Time (Destiny) is, according to Spengler, nothing mathematical. Chronological number, he states, is ‘devoid of mathematical import’ and ‘distinguishes uniquely-occurring actualities’, as opposed to mathematical number’s distinguishing of ‘constant possibilities’ (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 97). Chronological number expresses the unrepeatable nature of becoming, its directional character. It is this ‘irreversibility’ that Spengler also terms ‘Time’. Chronological Time stands in contrast to the timeless character of extension. And it is this ambiguous nature of Time, time as Destiny and spatial/mathematical time, that is disclosed by the two ‘prime feelings’ of *dread* and *longing* (Swier, 2020a). Spengler explains that

because the living act of numbering is somehow or other related to time, number and time are constantly confused. But numbering is not number, any more than drawing is a drawing. Numbering and drawing are a becoming, number and figures are things become. Kant and the rest have in mind now the living act (numbering) and now the result thereof (the relations of the finished figure); but the one belongs to the domain of Life and Time, and the other to that of Extension and Causality. *That* I calculate is the business of organic, *what* I calculate the business of inorganic, logic. Mathematics as a whole – in common language, arithmetic and geometry – answers the *How?* and the *What?* – that is, the problem of the Natural order of things. In opposition to this problem stands that of the *When?* of things, the specifically historical problem of destiny, future and past; and all these things are comprised in the word *Chronology*, which simple mankind understands fully and unequivocally. (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 125–6)<sup>7</sup>

Spengler’s last point, that we already understand perfectly what Time (in the Chronological sense) actually *is* if only we just feel it and stop trying to conceptualise it, is central to his position. Time, in the sense of the experiential, precognised awareness of temporality, is for Spengler the most primary of a priori forms. A sense of Destiny, of Life’s endless becoming and directedness, just comes along with existence as a phenomenological given. It is something to which, by feeling and experience, we gain direct intuitive access.

Time, for Spengler, structures the original form of perception. Time has direction, an irreversibility, and this gives our perceptual field *depth*. He states that

we feel – and the feeling is what constitutes the state of all-round awareness in us – that we are *in* an extension that encircles us; and it is only necessary to follow out this original impression that we have of the worldly to see that in reality there is only one true ‘dimension’ of space, which is direction from one’s self outwards into the distance, the ‘there’ and the

future....By the depth-experience sensation is *expanded* into the world. (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 172)

Our thoughts always have a directedness. We do not view the world around us as a plane, but unidirectionally, from ourselves outwards. ‘The bodily mobility of man and beast is disposed in this sense. We move *forward* – towards the Future, nearing with every step not merely our aim but our old age – and we feel every *backward* look as a glance at something that is past, that has already become history’ (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 173). It is this depth perception, the expansion of ourselves into the world of becoming, that in time gives rise to the idea of extension, the abstract representation of depth and distance. And with this the form of Time gives birth to the form of Space. A culture’s felt understanding of Destiny gives rise to the conceptual world of extension, governed by the cultural Ur-symbol that structures the spatial, and determines all forms of cultural expression. It is the source of a culture’s ‘specific style and the historical form in which it progressively actualises its inward possibilities’ (ibid.: 174). In Spengler’s cultural Ur-symbol, I suggest, we find a highly modified version *Kant*’s form of spatial perception. The form of intuition of space, like that of Time, in Spengler’s treatment is relocated from its place in the mind and placed in the concrete actuality of a specific form of historical existence.

Under Spengler’s treatment, *Kant*’s synthetic a priori becomes a cultural a priori. It is ‘*innate* in so far as it is an original possession of the soul of [a particular] Culture’ and it is also ‘*acquired* in so far that every individual soul re-enacts for itself that creative act’ (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 174). The forms of perception can provide us with ‘necessary and universal’ knowledge of the objects of experience, but only within a specific culture and thus within a specific period of historical time. For, as Spengler puts it, ‘In other Cultures the phenomenon talks a different language’ (ibid.: 25). These a priori forms for Spengler are necessary yet historically contingent. The Ur-symbol, within a specific culture-world, is indubitable. It is not derived from experience, and consequently can be neither verified nor falsified, but rather operates as an a priori condition for the possibility of experiential knowledge. It determines meaning within a culture-world and yet itself cannot be questioned with regard to *its* meaning or proximity to actuality, and is in that sense arbitrary yet necessary. Yet it is not arbitrary in the sense that it could be subject to modification by a cultural community.

### *Spengler’s Copernican Revolution in history*

Having used an extended debate with *Kant*’s forms of intuition to sketch out the rudiments of his own philosophical anthropology, Spengler then uses *Kant* again to move from his philosophical anthropology to the elaboration of his philosophy of history.<sup>8</sup> And central to this move is Spengler’s newly coined concept of the Ur-symbol, the master symbol at the heart of every culture and the motor of Spengler’s cyclical model. An adaptation of *Kant*’s form of intuition of space, its universality is now limited to those within a particular culture-organism, and Spengler demonstrates its implications for the understanding of history by means of a further engagement with *Kant*, but this time over historiography rather than the forms of intuition.



It is not by chance that Spengler, at the beginning of *Decline*, in describing the significance of his new cultural morphology, refers to it as a ‘Copernican Discovery’ (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 18). On the one level, he is referring to his own effort to decentre world-history, to negate the belief that history must always revolve around European culture. On another level, though, I suggest that we understand this remark to be a deliberate reference to *Kant*. Spengler’s ‘Copernican Discovery’ is a deliberate echo of Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution’ in philosophy. Much of Spengler’s engagement with *Kant* can be seen as motivated by the attempt to ‘Copernicanise’ *Kant*. That is, he intends to ‘decentre’ *Kant*, to remove him from the fixed epistemological vantage point of his universal and necessary knowledge and set him in historical motion. For Spengler it is not just that *Kant* is wrong, but that he is wrong in a way that is itself emblematic of Western culture. Spengler holds *Kant*’s historical views to be incorrect from a world-historical vantage point, yet enormously accurate as an insight into *one*, historically and culturally specific, mode of historical consciousness.

So when Spengler takes *Kant* to task for his Eurocentrism, his criticism operates on two levels. On the first level, Spengler is charging *Kant* with historical inaccuracy. He takes objection to *Kant*’s employment of a tripartite ‘ancient-mediaeval-modern’ scheme of history, with its idea of linear progress culminating in the modern (for which read: Western) age. But then again, *Kant* is in good company in this error. Spengler also lists Herder, Hegel, and Nietzsche as guilty parties. The issue here concerns what Spengler terms *Kant*’s ‘provincialism’. He states that

to-day we think in continents, and it is only our philosophers and historians who have not realised that we do so. Of what significance to us, then, are conceptions and purviews that they put before us as universally valid, when in truth their furthest horizon does not extend beyond the intellectual atmosphere of Western Man? (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 22)

In other words, Spengler feels that *Kant* is overreaching his bounds. In a manner that should be familiar to us now, Spengler is arguing that humanity is always historically and culturally embedded, and thus there cannot be any eternal or abstract models that apply to the totality of human life. The validity of *Kant*’s supposedly necessary and universal judgements stops at the cultural border. Spengler states that

when Plato speaks of humanity, he means the Hellenes in contrast to the barbarians, which is entirely consonant with the ahistoric mode of the Classical life and thought, and his premises take him to conclusions that *for Greeks* were complete and significant. When, however, Kant philosophises, say on ethical ideas, he maintains the validity of his theses for men of all times and places.... But what he poses as necessary forms of thought are in reality only necessary forms of Western thought, though a glance at Aristotle and his essentially different conclusions should have sufficed to show that Aristotle’s intellect, not less penetrating than his own, was of different structure from it. (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 22–3)

However, Spengler is not just pointing out that *Kant* fails to grasp the cultural relativity of historical data and philosophical claims, or that *Kant*’s philosophy can meaningfully apply only to Western culture. Spengler is also making the point that *Kant* is

himself a part of a culture-organism, and thus his views are themselves symbolic products determined by a cultural Ur-symbol. When *Kant* takes ‘the spirit of the West, as reflected in his own brain, for the meaning of the world’ he is not being arbitrary, according to Spengler (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 19). He is reflecting the intellectual structures of Faustian culture, ‘making a metaphysical virtue of intellectual necessity’, as Spengler puts it (ibid.). *Kant*’s First Critique, his ethics, and in particular his concern with the nature of space and time are all peculiar to the Faustian West and its Ur-symbol, that of ‘infinite space’. Spengler states that ‘infinite space is the ideal that the Western soul has always striven to find, and to see immediately actualised, in its world-around; and hence it is that the countless space-theories of the last centuries possess ... a deep import as symptoms of a world-feeling’ (ibid.: 175).

*Kant*’s two forms of perception are thus to be understood as culturally specific responses to a culturally specific question, both driven and structured by the Faustian Ur-symbol. The question of the nature of infinite Space is not just a concern peculiar to Faustian culture; it is question that could be *meaningful* only to a member of that culture. Spengler asks,

How, then, has it escaped notice that the whole Classical world never expended one word on it [the problem of the nature of space], and indeed did not even possess a word by which the problem could be exactly outlined? ... Ought we not, in fact, to have seen long ago that the answer is in the very fact of their silence? (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 175)

The world of the Faustian culture is a ‘world-of-space’. The question of the nature of space is a response to a Faustian urge to grasp the structure of this world-of-space, that is to say, the world as it appears to them, and to them alone. Both the question and the need for such a question, Spengler suggests, would be incomprehensible to a Classical thinker, to one who does not inhabit the world-of-space. Thus, ‘we suddenly discover that the “eternal problem” that Kant, in the name of humanity, tackled with a passion that itself is symbolic, is a *purely Western* problem that simply does not arise in the intellects of other Cultures’ (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 175–6).

And not only is *Kant* typically Faustian, according to Spengler, but he also typifies a particular stage in the life cycle of that culture. Regarding ‘the tense, practical, *technical* treatment of the world-around ... that lets sensuous self-extension stiffen into rational tri-dimensionality’, that typifies the world-as-nature in Faustian culture, Spengler asserts that ‘it is only the city-man of matured Cultures that really *lives* in this glaring wakefulness, and only for his thought that there is a Space wholly divorced from sensuous life, “absolute”, dead and alien to Time’ (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 169–70). It is the view of the urban intelligentsia of a late cultural phase, when rationality is increasingly divorced from life and feeling and culture transitions into ‘civilisation’. Spengler writes that ‘there is no manner of doubt that the “space” which Kant saw all around him with such unconditional certainty when he was thinking out his theory, did not exist in anything like so rigorous a form for his Carolingian ancestors’ (ibid.). *Kant*, and the uniquely Faustian spatial comprehension of Time that he produced, can, according to Spengler, be further culturally pigeonholed as the intellectual product of the Faustian West’s terminal stage.

## Saving Kant

From what we have seen in the preceding section, it would appear that Spengler took a rather dim view of *Kant's* philosophy, the *Critique of Pure Reason* in particular. One would even be forgiven for characterising Spengler's outlook as 'anti-Kantian', as Conte (2004: 33) does. However, I have argued that despite appearances Spengler's argument with *Kantian* philosophy, particularly the two forms of perception, does not represent a rejection of *Kantian* philosophy in its entirety, but an argument for the modification and retention of certain select components. The Kantian model of the formal structures of possibilities of experience, as put forth in the First Critique, plays a central role in Spengler's philosophical anthropology, albeit heavily modified.

Hidden among Spengler's numerous criticisms of *Kant*, there is a surprising level of endorsement. 'Kant', Spengler says, 'speaks in inadequate words, which hide a mighty and scarcely apprehensible intuition, an intuition of the world as appearance or phenomenon' (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 368). Spengler, as we have seen, has numerous issues with key *Kantian* concepts, such as space, time and causality, and yet this rarely amounts to an outright rejection of these concepts. He continuously employs, in a slightly ironic fictionalist manner, Kant's concepts of noumena and phenomena. The '*alien life* of unknown powers' that humanity feels lurking behind the field of sense-impressions in a way that is 'almost indescribable' are referred to as Kantian noumena (ibid.: 397). And at no point does Spengler doubt that the world we perceive is a world of appearance, or that our perception of the world is structured and made possible by the two forms of intuition, space and time. Spengler states that 'Kant's greatness consists in his having created the idea of a "form *a priori*", but not in the application that he gave it' (ibid.: 170). But having suitably corrected *Kant*, mainly by historicising the form of the intuition of time into Spengler's 'Destiny' concept, and altering the nature and scope of the form of Space, Spengler is perfectly content to retain the *Kantian* focus on the *a priori* forms and categories of experience as the basis of his own philosophy. The two forms of perception, for Spengler, are that which determines all that appears in the lifespan of a culture. Their appearance gives life to a culture, and their loss marks the absolute death of a culture. They are the lynchpins of Spengler's philosophical outlook and the motor that drives Spengler's entire cyclical model of world-history.

For all his criticism of *Kant*, Spengler's engagement with *Kant's* philosophy was, in some significant respects, a conservative one. Spengler's criticisms of *Kant's* conception of Time and his Eurocentrism should not be allowed to overshadow the significant degree to which Spengler's philosophy is in agreement with that of *Kant*. *Kant's* identification of the forms of Time and Space, and their role in human experience, is fundamental to Spengler's philosophy. He takes issue not with the existence or role of these formal structures, nor even their necessary presence in every historical instance of human consciousness. Rather, he argues that while the form of intuition of Space is universal, its particular cultural instantiation alters. And for all Spengler's criticism of *Kant's* philosophical parochialism, once *Kant's* universal claims are limited solely to a historical phase of Faustian culture Spengler is usually to be found in broad agreement with *Kant's* insights. Spengler's philosophy, in short, was an attempt to bring *Kant* into accord with Spengler's 'Copernican Discovery', to correct what Spengler took to be its omissions

and distortions, while preserving its insights into the way human consciousness constructs a world. For the Kantian purist doubtless, what remains of Kant in Spengler's philosophy is altered beyond all recognition or redemption. For Spengler, on the other hand, his reformulation of *Kantian* philosophy is (from his perspective) a great improvement but still, at heart, the same *Kantian* model. Rather than being anti-*Kantian*, as he is often portrayed, Spengler is better understood as a *Kantian* heretic. For all his modifications and additions, Spengler's metaphysics and epistemology remain, by his own lights, recognisably *Kantian* in inspiration.

### **'Torturous' prose and the character of Spengler's Kant**

My argument, that there is a *Kantian* dimension to Spengler's philosophy and that it is central to his philosophical outlook, finds a distinct lack of support in the secondary literature, as far as I can determine. There are several reasons that may explain this lack of attention to Spengler's *Kantian* dimension, namely, the problematic nature of Spengler's writing style, the problematic structure of *Decline*, the problematic sequence of Spengler's more existential/anthropological thoughts, and the problematic status of *Kant* within Spengler's philosophy.

The first point, concerning the apparent invisibility of Spengler's *Kantian* dimension, lies in Spengler's narrative style. Costello describes *Decline* as 'torturously convoluted, repetitive, and opaque', while Fernandez-Armesto refers to it as 'a demanding work which tortured readers with grisly predictions, difficult allusions and contortionist's prose' (Costello, 1993: 49; Fernandez-Armesto, 1995: 490). Craig (1978: 489–90) characterises Spengler's prose as 'clotted and pedantic'. Even Huizinga, who is kinder about Spengler's prose style than most, describes the experience of reading *Decline* thus: 'The critical reader cannot help feeling that he is being driven up a perilous slope by a herdsman in whose eyes there is the fixed stare of the maniac' (Huizinga, 1968: 164). It should be noted that Spengler's prose style was not without its admirers. Ernest Quesada (1924: 4), for instance, found Spengler's writing to be 'diaphanous in general' and 'full of eloquence'. However, whether one finds Spengler's prose style invigorating or aggressively Byzantine, it cannot be disputed that *The Decline of the West* does not read like a standard philosophical text. Nor does it lend itself easily to analysis as such. As Hughes notes, to those readers 'trained in a smoother and more continuous style of exposition, the *Decline* may look like a disconnected series of massive, boldly-hewn segments of undifferentiated thought and deeply-colored imagery' (Hughes, 1952: 67).

Putting it bluntly, *Decline* is not an easy read, and its reading is rendered yet more difficult by the next point, the structure of the book. Spengler has no obvious logical sequence to his arguments. Ideas are introduced, vanish, and reappear later on in a slightly different form. In the less historical, more philosophical sections of the work, on which I focus, Spengler's presentation becomes even less user-friendly. He marshals an impressive array of neologisms that often seem to play no further role in his work, and if they do, they are often put to work in arguments pages and pages before Spengler deigns to define them, if he does at all.<sup>9</sup>

For many readers, who approach Spengler specifically for his views on the cyclical nature of history, it is by no means apparent how many of his obscure philosophical

sections relate to the grand narrative of *Decline*. However, if one skips the ‘metaphysics’, which Mazlish (1966: 344) describes as ‘largely a farrago of pretentious and contradictory nonsense’, and sticks to the detailed historical sections, everything seems to make a lot more sense. And this, I argue, is what most commentators on *Decline* tend to do. Hughes seconds this view, saying that ‘especially in the English-speaking countries, they [the metaphysical bits] have been tossed aside in cavalier fashion as the indigestible bottom layer that necessarily goes along with any of the heavier importations from Germany’ (Hughes, 1952: 69). And Fennelly reports that in his correspondence with Anton Koktanek, the author of Spengler’s biography and the most famous exegete of Spengler’s thought, Koktanek stated that ‘essentially an understanding of Spengler may be reached without this philosophical-metaphysical element’ (Koktanek, cited in Fennelly, 1972: 62). I suggest, however, that it is in this ‘indigestible bottom layer’ that we will find the evidence for Spengler’s philosophical anthropology, his analysis of the limitations and capacities of the human being understood as both a natural and a social entity. And it is Spengler’s engagement with *Kant* that guides us to it.

A further possibility for the absence of awareness of Spengler’s *Kant* within the secondary commentary concerns the contradictory status of *Kant* within Spengler’s philosophy. Previous analyses of Spengler’s philosophical outlook have tended to emphasise the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche and Johann Wolfgang Goethe.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Spengler’s writing tends to take on a highly critical tone in those sections of *Decline* that discuss *Kantian* philosophy. His apparent antipathy suggests that *Kant* does not play a significant role in his philosophy. Secondly, Spengler’s characterisation of *Kant* and *Kantian* philosophy often varies considerably from what many would consider to be an accurate depiction of Kantian thought. Collingwood for example claimed that ‘Spengler is at his worst in discussing philosophy’ and as evidence pointed to ‘his long rambling polemics against *what he takes to be* the philosophy of Kant’ (Collingwood, 1927: 314; emphasis added). If Spengler’s analysis of Kant is simply incorrect there seems little to be gained from its examination.

I suggest that these concerns stem from a lack of clarity concerning the exact role that *Kant* plays in Spengler’s thought. *Kant*’s significance in *Decline* lies not in what Spengler’s critique of *Kant* tells us about Kantian philosophy, but rather what it tells us about Spengler’s project. *Kant*’s significance for understanding Spengler’s philosophy of history lies in the dialectical role that Spengler’s *Kant* character plays in the development of Spengler’s philosophy of human consciousness. *Decline* does contain its fair share of anti-‘Kantian’ polemics, and yet it also contains moments where aspects of ‘Kantian’ philosophy are endorsed or, more commonly, simply applied without comment. It is this alternation between condemnation and accord that further complicates an appreciation of Spengler’s use of *Kant* in his philosophy.

*Kant*, the literary character, functions as a means to drive Spengler’s philosophical exegesis. Where Spengler wishes to clarify his own position, negative *Kant* functions as a representative of the contemporary intellectual tendencies that Spengler finds most objectionable: the ‘mechanising intellect’, provincialism and Eurocentrism, lack of mathematical comprehension, and so on (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 159, 22–3, 125–6). When Spengler states that ‘the world of to-day ... [is] made up of Kantians who know not how Kantian they are’, he does so in the midst of a summary of the intellectual tendencies

he finds most pernicious in modern society (ibid.: 120). Positive *Kant*, on the other hand, operates as a collection of concepts and insights that Spengler finds useful for the expression of his position, such as the forms of intuition or the categories. They are taken up in his narrative, and carried over his critique of negative *Kant*, where they reappear in his newly elaborated position, preserved yet transformed in light of his criticism.

In this way, Spengler's anti-*Kantian* polemics mask a critical yet highly constructive engagement with *Kant*. Not only does Spengler's philosophy make heavy use of *Kantian* concepts, but his philosophical anthropology is decidedly *Kantian* in structure. Spengler accepts and takes over the idea from positive *Kant* that consciousness plays an active role in the construction of the world, and that such a construction is governed by the forms of intuition of time and space. However, he does argue against negative *Kant* that to assume that those forms are fixed and universal is the mark of a provincial mind. And so the forms are carried over, preserved yet altered, and reappear in Spengler's philosophy as historically contingent and culturally specific.

Thus, in addition to Spengler's complicated engagement with *Kant*, a key factor in the neglect of *his* role in Spengler's philosophy in secondary literature is the fact that Spengler's *Kant* bears only a family resemblance to what most scholars would recognise as Kant's philosophy. Due to the fact that Spengler holds that the perception of Time and Space is different for the people of different cultures, Mazlish (1966: 328) states that 'Spengler's vision is not Kantian'. Costello, similarly, argues against a Kantian influence, saying that 'Spengler held, contrary to Kant, that the mental concept for space was environmentally and culturally determined and not an a priori pattern in the mind' (Costello, 1993: 57).

It might be argued that the *Kant* that appears in Spengler's work has more in common with neo-Kantian philosophy of the period than the real Immanuel Kant. Spengler's distinction between the world-as-nature and the world-as-history echoes Windelband's distinction between the *nomothetic*, or generalising, method of the natural sciences and the *idiographic*, or individualising, method of the historical sciences. And his emphasis on the primacy of intuitively given historical reality has parallels with Rickert's notion of history as the authentic experiential science. Alternatively, one may see in Spengler's organicising of Kant's intuition of time traces of Dilthey's distinction between the abstract time of the natural sciences and the qualitative time of the human sciences. I do not wish to adjudicate here the precise philosophical composition of Spengler's *Kant*. Indeed, all the influences just mentioned may be present in *Kant*.<sup>11</sup> The significant point here is that the *Kant* found in Spengler's work is a literary pastiche. It does not represent the real Kant; nor was it intended to.

Spengler rarely takes time to define his method of philosophical argumentation, but the few occasions on which he does so are rather informative. Spengler states that

any kind of understanding that is genuine critical activity is only made possible through the setting-up of a new concept as anti-pole to one already present, or through the divorce (if we may call it so) of a pair of inwardly-polar concepts which as long as they are mere constituents, possess no actuality. (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 127)

Throughout *Decline* Spengler employs this method, creating dense narratives of the symbolic structures of other cultures, the knowledge of which is explicitly deemed

impossible by his own account of the structures of experiential consciousness. The purpose of such narratives is not to inform the reader about the nature of alien cultures but to facilitate a better understanding of their own Faustian culture. A cultural counter-pole serves to reflect one's own culture. It is a deliberate fiction. And, I suggest, *Kant* operates in much the same way, as a fictional counter-pole to Spengler that allows him to clarify and articulate his own philosophy. Its value, as with all fictions for Spengler, lies in its conceptual utility, not its truth (Swier, 2021).

## Conclusion

*The Decline of the West* has structural and expository issues that significantly hinder access to the philosophical system that underpins its philosophy of history. As a consequence, Spengler's early philosophical anthropology has been overlooked in the secondary literature. I have argued that Spengler's *Kant*, rather like Dante's Beatrice, can guide us through the purgatorial structure of his text, and enable us to access both Spengler's philosophical anthropology and its role in forming his philosophy of history.

Critique of *Kant's* account of the forms of intuition of space and time, and of mathematics, allows Spengler to develop his own 'organic' form of the intuition of time (Destiny), and to transform *Kant's* synthetic a priori into a cultural a priori (Ur-symbol). And in so doing, Spengler sets out his account of the historical contingent structures of experiential consciousness, the conceptual foundations of his philosophical anthropology. Spengler then turns from his philosophical anthropology and, by engaging with *Kant* on history, sets out the key features of his philosophy of history, using *Kant* as an exemplar of (and means of access to) the uniquely Western mode of historical consciousness that was the central focus of all Spengler's philosophical endeavours.

The significance of *Kant's* role in Spengler's philosophy has not yet been properly appreciated. And yet, once this is grasped, one can see how Spengler's apparent antipathy to *Kantian* thought is belied by the central role of *Kantian* concepts in his own philosophy. Spengler's philosophy of history hinges upon his concept of the Ur-symbol, and this central Spenglerian motif is itself a modification of the *Kantian* forms of perception. Spengler's criticism of *Kant's* account of the form of intuition of Time results not in its rejection but its reclassification and subsumption under *Kant's* form of intuition of Space, which Spengler retains in his philosophy as the Ur-symbol. The *Kantian* form of intuition of Time is not then abolished but preserved, albeit in a more Spenglerian form, as Destiny. On Spengler's account the Ur-symbol of Space is derived from Destiny. As each culture understands Destiny differently, they develop different Ur-symbols, which in turn structure all cultural experience and expression. Thus, Spengler's cultural isolation thesis can be seen to have *Kantian* roots.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Notes

I would like to thank the journal's two reviewers for their helpful comments on this article, and Dr Carin Robinson and Prof. David Spurrett for their constructive suggestions. I would also like to thank all those who commented on an earlier version of this article at the Society for European Philosophy / Forum for European Philosophy joint conference in 2020.

1. In this article I will be focussing exclusively on early Spengler's philosophy of history. Though I do not dispute that the later Spengler also has a philosophy of history, I would argue that it is the early Spengler's philosophy, with its non-progressive cultural cycles, that most people tend to associate with his name.
2. Throughout this article Spengler's Kant character will be referred to as *Kant*, in order to differentiate it from the actual philosopher Kant.
3. Quesada (1924), in his lengthy comparison of Kant and Spengler, simply denies that any such influence exists. Farrenkopf does mention it in passing, as does Frye, though Frye argues that it is derived from Fichte's adaptation of Kant (Farrenkopf, 2001: 97; Frye, 1974: 1). Neither writer considers the influence to be of any particular significance. Strong constitutes a notable exception, arguing that 'at its very core, Spengler's work has its origins in the business of Critique, and especially in Kant's theory of knowledge – and on a scale of which Spengler himself might not have been aware' (Strong, 1980: 81).
4. All italics in quotations are present in the original text unless otherwise specified.
5. By virtue of its doing so, Spengler considers number to contain 'in its very essence the notion of a *mechanical demarcation*' (Spengler, 1926[1918]: 56–7).
6. Significantly, Spengler's account of the development of naming and numbering, which in turn gives rise to the mathematical, mechanical understanding of reality, makes mathematics itself historically contingent. Each culture will name and number differently, and thus develop different mathematics, and thereby different conceptions of the world-as-nature.
7. Felken traces Spengler's mathematics/causality versus Destiny/history dichotomy to Dilthey, and the neo-Kantians Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert, who used it to differentiate the appropriate methodologies for the natural and historical sciences (Felken, 1988: 49).
8. For a more detailed account of Spengler's philosophical anthropology and its relation to his philosophy of history see Swier (2020a, 2020b).
9. Even Fennelly, a self-confessed Spengler enthusiast, notes that 'a reader, on first approaching the *Decline*, is certain to be confused by the lack of any orderly presentation of the material' (Fennelly, 1972: 54). Hughes speculates that this may have played a part in the book's success. He comments that 'long, wretchedly organised books have been the tradition in Germany, and we may wonder whether a shorter, more lucid volume would have achieved the same reputation for profundity. In Germany, a book that is not hard to read is scarcely considered worth reading' (Hughes, 1952: 66).
10. See, for example, Costello (1993: 64–6); Fischer (1989: 94–7, 100–7); Herman (1997: 225–6); or Hughes (1952: 59–62).



11. I am not indifferent to the question of the philosophical components that constitute Spengler's *Kant*, but there is not space to discuss the matter fully here. In brief, I have argued in this article that there is a strong neo-Kantian influence on Spengler's *Kant*, and on the philosophical anthropology and philosophy of history put forward in *The Decline of the West*. Characterising Spengler as a neo-Kantian runs contrary to the interpretation of Spengler's philosophy dominant for the last century. And it also adds Spengler to the ranks of other 19th- and early 20th-century neo-Kantian philosophers of a historical bent, a tradition in the philosophy of history that, as Jensen (2013) has noted, has been largely ignored in the secondary literature. However, locating Spengler within this tradition, coupled with the necessarily limited information regarding his neo-Kantian philosophical anthropology provided in this article, might leave the reader with the impression that Spengler's philosophy is rather unoriginal when compared to that of his neo-Kantian peers; that it merely regurgitates with less clarity the ideas of Dilthey *et al.* To this I would respond that once one treats Spengler as a neo-Kantian and traces this influence beyond the preliminary stage that I have outlined in this article, it soon becomes apparent that Spengler's neo-Kantianism is far from orthodox. I would argue that it is in fact of a decidedly Vaihingerian, fictionalist variety (Merlio, 1980: 103; Swer, 2021). And that this Vaihingerian influence, once noted, recasts Spengler's *Decline of the West* as a rather singular project in *fictionalist* neo-Kantian philosophy of history.

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