

## Foreword

### Spengler Among the Philosophers

*He is not only ill-informed on the history of philosophy, he is ill at ease in philosophy itself; and this means that whenever he tries to handle a fundamental problem he does so clumsily and without firmness or penetration. Brilliant on the surface, glittering in its details with a specious cleverness and apparent profundity, his "philosophy of history" is at bottom lacking in orientation, unsound on fundamentals, ill thought-out, and in consequence committed to a method which falsifies even its detail when a crucial case arises. These are serious charges; they are only made because Spengler's is a serious book which deserves to be taken seriously...*<sup>1</sup>

Spengler's *The Decline of the West* is recognised the world over as an important philosophical work. And yet it is not generally viewed as an important work *in* philosophy. Nor is Spengler particularly renowned as a philosopher. In this regard, he and his work seem to be famous for having been famous rather than for their philosophical insight and innovation. This second special issue on Oswald Spengler attempts to undermine this interpretation of his philosophical merits by focusing upon the philosophical dimensions of his work. The first two papers address the reception of *The Decline of the West* by Spengler's philosophical contemporaries, the Frankfurt School and the Vienna Circle. Whilst the following papers focus on Spengler's philosophy itself, drawing out unexplored features of his philosophical outlook in relation to ethics, authoritarianism, biology, and fictionalism.

Paulsen's paper explores Spengler's reception by the Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno. Though one might imagine that a first generation member of the Frankfurt School would be decidedly antipathetic to Spengler's philosophical outlook, Paulsen argues that Adorno's treatment of Spengler's thought was far more nuanced. Whilst opposed to the political trajectory of Spengler's philosophy, Adorno was also particularly critical of the academic consensus that Spengler's arguments were 'defeated' during the *Spengler-Streit*, the period of public debate that followed from the publication of the first volume of *The Decline* in 1918. For Adorno, Paulsen reminds us, Spengler's work was generally ignored in the subsequent years not because it was discredited, but rather it was discredited in order that it might be ignored. Spengler's liberal opponents, Adorno argues, were simply incapable of meeting the challenge posed by the ideas that drive *The Decline*. Paulsen draws our attention to Adorno's qualified endorsement of Spengler's attacks on liberal thought and of some of his cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Robin George Collingwood, "Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles," *Antiquity* 1 (1927): 314.

predictions, and to moments of proximity in their respective critiques of mass culture. Paulsen, after noting these commonalities, then makes clear the key point of contention between Adorno and Spengler. Spengler's philosophy, on Adorno's account, has a positivist core. Spengler's *The Decline* exhorts the contemporary Faustian to face the facts of a late cultural existence, to recognise that what is present also represents the full extent of what is possible. But by almost fetishising facts, Adorno argues, Spengler advocated an *amor fati* that amounts in practice to a perpetual endorsement of the socio-economic *status quo*. And thus, Paulsen observes, Adorno's critique of Spengler is of a piece with the Frankfurt School's broader critique of instrumental reason.

Reimer's paper also considers the philosophical reception of Spengler's *The Decline* in the Weimar period, but in this instance in relation to the Vienna Circle rather than the Frankfurt School. With its collective commitment to the 'scientific world conception,' positivism, empiricism, and logical analysis, it is no surprise to discover that many members of the Circle recoiled at the sight of the metaphysics-laden philosophy of history put forth in Spengler's *The Decline*. Reimer's paper focuses on Moritz Schlick and Otto Neurath, the two members of the Vienna Circle whose critical response to Spengler's philosophy was most fervent and sustained. For an age which, for good or ill, is witnessing a sudden revival of interest in *The Decline of the West*, Paulsen revivifies one of the most thoroughgoing and systematic critiques of Spengler's philosophy. Physiognomic intuition is challenged by empirical knowledge acquisition, Ur-symbols and cultural essences by constitution systems and universal science, destiny by causal relations. Reimer's account is a critical one, and notes the many areas where the Vienna Circle's critique of Spengler missed the point. It does however ultimately defend the Circle against Adorno's claim that the positivists and scientists of the Weimar period were incapable of mounting a credible defence against Spengler's philosophy. And in exploring the stronger of the Circle's responses, Reimer shows the extraordinary diversity of opinion and political outlook that motivated those works, and the wealth of material that awaits the Spengler scholar interested in the Vienna Circle's reception of his work.

Van Baardewijk breaks new ground in Spengler scholarship by considering Spengler as an ethical thinker. In his paper, he argues that reflection upon ethical matters occupies a central place in both volumes of *The Decline of the West*, though this element of Spengler's work has typically been overlooked by commentators. On van Baardewijk's account, Spengler eschewed the idea of the universality of ethical systems and instead held that each ethical system should be understood as representative of the symbolic structure of a specific culture at a specific phase in its lifecycle. From this relativistic perspective, Spengler then offers a meta-ethical analysis of the dominant ethical systems of our time through the work of their foremost theorists. The ethics of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill are examined as culturally specific expressions of their cultures' Ur-symbols, with Aristotle representing the (Greco-Roman) Apollinian, and Kant and Mill different phases of the same Faustian (Western) culture. Spengler, van Baardewijk argues, viewed Faustian ethical systems as sharing an implicit cultural commitment to an 'ethics of force,' an emphasis on the Will and the removal of obstacles to its exercise coupled with a strong inwardly-directed focus on the Self. And he goes on to use this Spenglerian understanding of the commonalities of Faustian ethical thought to analyse some of the key contemporary ethical debates, such as those concerning gender identity and COVID-19 responses. Revealing, as he does so, that the very framing of these debates, the ethical questions asked and the answers sought, and contradictions that bedevil the issue, are all themselves culturally-specific and expressive of the Faustian cultural ethos. Van Baardewijk's paper presents Spengler to us in a new light — as an ethical thinker of keen insight whose cultural-ethics anticipate the ethical 'turn' of Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, and whose meta-ethical analyses still have the capacity to inform our understanding of the ethical dilemmas of the present. One can but hope that this paper's

perceptive examination of Spengler's thought and its application will encourage others to engage with the ethical dimensions of Spengler's works.

Al Bidh's paper explores Spengler's concept of Caesarism, the era of the politics of force and expansive power that Spengler foresaw following the collapse of liberal democracy. Al Bidh traces Spengler's development of this concept from its original formulation in *The Decline of the West* through to his later *The Hour of Decision* and *Man and Technics*. The paper reconstructs the socio-political contexts that Spengler envisaged would emerge both prior and subsequent to the advent of Caesarism. The author describes Caesarism as arising out of the perennial tension between country and city, a struggle that ceases with the rise of the world-city. The world-city, on Spengler's account, represents the triumph of the city over the country and with it the death knell of Faustian civilisation. Al Bidh traces Spengler's symptomatology of a culture-organism in terminal decline: the rise of an abstract money-economy, declining birth-rate, urban sprawl, and a spiritually-emaciated 'second religiousness.' He further stresses the importance of this religious revival which, beginning in mechanical repetition of earlier religious forms, evolves into a profound mysticism which simultaneously erodes the dominant rationalist cultural ethos and initiates 'emperor cults,' devotional formations around charismatic individuals. Thereby preparing the way for the rise of Caesarism, direct rule over a mass populace that has wearied of money and intellect and demands a form of force politics that speaks to its 'blood.' The paper concludes with a reflection upon the similarities between the situations that Spengler foretold and the current state of the Faustian West.

Pammer's paper examines the biological dimensions of Spengler's philosophy through a detailed reconstruction of Spengler's engagement with Darwinism. In *The Decline*, Pammer argues, Spengler sets out a model of history grounded in biology that continuously sets itself against any Darwinian understanding of the historical process. Pammer attributes this anti-Darwinian tendency in part to Spengler's commitment to Goethean methods in historical morphology, and in part to his detection within Darwinian theory of a causal-mechanistic mode of analysis in service to a 'progressive' teleological narrative with the arrival of humans as its culmination. Pammer goes on to consider Spengler's quasi-evolutionary theory of organic life, with its sudden saltations, with the work of the leading German Darwinian of the period, Ernst Haeckel. Whilst Haeckel's Social Darwinist interpretation of human evolution led to him postulating the existence of multiple human races, each in competition with the others, Spengler's account of race rejects the deterministic causality implicit in historical accounts based upon the operations of natural law. For Spengler, race is to be grasped through the consideration of the group as a living being with a common soul, as a psychic and spiritual reality grounded in the effects of language, shared symbolism and the landscape upon a group.

And finally, my paper revisits the longstanding conflict in Spengler interpretation between relativist and positivist readings of *The Decline*. I argue that Spengler's philosophy of history was but one aspect of his broader philosophical project, and furthermore one that was always in service to an existential project to compel Weimar Germany to choose an authentic mode of existence. And that once one grasps Spengler's existential mission, then it becomes apparent that a positivist interpretation, with its laws of history and predictive powers, is untenable. However, rather than simply denying that *The Decline* is a positivist work and endorsing an exclusively relativist reading, I claim that both a relativist and a positivist philosophy of history can be found in that work. I then revisit those sections of *The Decline* where Spengler outlines his philosophical method and make a case for his fictionalism. On this reading, the relativist philosophy of history within *The Decline* is the one that Spengler viewed as being descriptively accurate (from within Faustian culture), whilst the positivist philosophy of history represents a thoroughly fictionalist narrative. The former represents an authentic understanding of Faustian civilisation, and the latter an inauthentic one. And yet,

whichever account one selects, they both arrive at the same destination: the resolve to embrace the technological powers of the present and their expansive potential.

The topics covered in the special issue before you range from the themes of conflict and violence that recur in *The Decline of the West* and his other works, to the strife that Spengler's work fomented within the intellectual community of Weimar Germany, and lastly to the continuing conflict over the correct interpretation of Spengler's writings. And taken as a whole, the papers collected in this special issue represent a significant contribution to the ongoing reappraisal of Spengler's agonistic cultural philosophy, and testify to its enduring ability to challenge and provoke.

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