



## On Laws of History, and Other Faustian Fictions: A Fictionalist Interpretation of Spengler's *The Decline of the West*

Gregory Morgan Swer

University of KwaZulu-Natal  
School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, South Africa

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*Most interpretations of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* offer a relativist or positivist reading of his philosophy of history, with the latter being the most common. This paper argues that any positivist account of Spengler's philosophy of history is untenable, and that only a relativist interpretation is plausible. It differs from standard arguments for the relativist interpretation by arguing that Spengler's philosophy be understood as a form of fictionalism. However, rather than dismissing the positivistic elements of his philosophy of history, it argues that they form a separate (albeit fictional) philosophy of history within his relativist philosophy designed to serve a heuristic purpose.*

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# On Laws of History, and Other Faustian Fictions: A Fictionalist Interpretation of Spengler's *The Decline of the West*

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*Most interpretations of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* offer a relativist or positivist reading of his philosophy of history, with the latter being the most common. This paper argues that any positivist account of Spengler's philosophy of history is untenable, and that only a relativist interpretation is plausible. It differs from standard arguments for the relativist interpretation by arguing that Spengler's philosophy be understood as a form of fictionalism. However, rather than dismissing the positivistic elements of his philosophy of history, it argues that they form a separate (albeit fictional) philosophy of history within his relativist philosophy designed to serve a heuristic purpose.*

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## **I. Introduction**

The first volume of Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* caused a literary sensation when it was published in Austria and Germany in 1918.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the book's imposing length and dense prose, within a decade it had sold over one hundred thousand copies.<sup>2</sup> Spengler, a hitherto unknown, was propelled rapidly into both the public eye and politically influential circles within the Weimar Republic. And the success of his work sparked controversy, leading to the so-called *Spengler-Streit*, a heated debate waged in academic circles and the public sphere between 1919 and 1922 over the validity of the methods and conclusions of Spengler's *Decline*.

And yet today, and particularly in Anglo-American philosophy, Spengler is virtually forgotten, and when recalled, held in rather low esteem. R.G. Collingwood referred to his

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<sup>1</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926).

<sup>2</sup> H. Stuart Hughes, *Oswald Spengler: A Critical Estimate* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 89.

work as “pseudo-history” and “radically unsound.”<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Herf states that, “Spengler’s dubious judgments on the causes of the rise and decline of civilisations” are of interest in that they capture the apocalyptic Weimar mood “rather than for any serious insights into the past they might provide.”<sup>4</sup> William Dray, more charitably, considers his philosophy of history to be “more interesting than most” despite Spengler having “no general reputation as a philosopher.”<sup>5</sup> If he appears in contemporary philosophical literature, it is usually as a token of a cyclical model of speculative philosophy of history, often mentioned as no more than a footnote to a discussion of Toynbee or Vico.<sup>6</sup> The *Decline* nowadays, as Julian Young puts it, “is a famous book that everyone (of a certain age) has heard of and no one has read.”<sup>7</sup>

An appraisal of the current standing of Spengler’s philosophy of history is complicated by several factors. Firstly, ever since its initial publication in 1918, Spengler’s *Decline* has had a disputed disciplinary status. Even though Spengler consistently described himself as a philosopher and his book as a work of philosophy, he was often taken to be a historian. Consequently, the bulk of the secondary commentary on *Decline* tends to be of a historical or historiographical nature and is rarely of direct relevance to a philosophical assessment of Spengler’s historical outlook. Secondary works on Spengler as a philosopher are far fewer and most stem from the early to the mid-1900s. A second, related point is that Spengler’s work is not viewed as particularly significant within the field of the philosophy of history. He is held to be neither of historical importance in the conceptual development of the field nor of relevance to issues of contemporary concern.<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, secondary literature on Spengler’s philosophy of history is rather rare.<sup>9</sup> He no longer merits a section of his own in most encyclopaedias or dictionaries of philosophy, and at most receives a fleeting mention in the paragraphs on cyclical theories of history in the section on the philosophy of history. Whilst Spengler was discussed by prominent philosophers, such as the Logical Positivist Otto Neurath, the British Idealist R.G. Collingwood, and the Frankfurt School Critical Theorist Theodor Adorno, in the years following the publication of *Decline* interest in his thought has steadily diminished.<sup>10</sup> This has much to do with changes in the primary concerns of the community of philosophers of history. In the 1920s, when Spengler’s work first appeared in English, interest in the production of speculative philosophy of history was on the wane. From the 1930s onwards, interest within the field had shifted to critical philosophy of history

<sup>3</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 223 & 181.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, culture and politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 52.

<sup>5</sup> William Dray, *Perspectives on History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 4-5 & 100.

<sup>6</sup> W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1967); Dray, *Perspectives on History*.

<sup>7</sup> Julian Young, *German Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: Lukács to Strauss* (London: Routledge, 2021), 103-4.

<sup>8</sup> On the latter issue of contemporary relevance, Peter Munz, for example, notes that “metanarratives or philosophies of history” such as Spengler produced “are at present out of fashion.” Peter Munz, “The Historical Narrative,” in Michael Bentley, ed., *Companion to Historiography* (London: Routledge, 1997), 746-764; 749.

<sup>9</sup> Russell suggests that “focusing on figures such as Spengler does not enhance academic reputations.” Ford Russell, *Northrop Frye on Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2000), xv.

<sup>10</sup> Otto Neurath, *Empiricism and Sociology* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973); R.G. Collingwood, “Oswald Spengler and the Theory of Historical Cycles,” *Antiquity* 1 (1927): 311-325; R.G. Collingwood, “The Theory of Historical Cycles II: Cycles and Progress,” *Antiquity* 1 (1927): 435-446; *The Idea of History*; Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

and the more analytic epistemological issues relating to the nature of historical explanation and description that were its main concern.<sup>11</sup> If Spengler's work was mentioned, it was usually as a cautionary instance of all that was wrong with speculative philosophy of history.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, speculative philosophy of history itself was often used by critical philosophers of history as a legitimating contrast between 'inappropriate' metaphysical speculation and their own 'valid' epistemological concerns.<sup>13</sup> With the linguistic turn in the field in the 1970s, when suddenly the topic of speculative philosophies of history (or 'metahistories') was seen to be of philosophical relevance again, Spengler's fortunes fared no better.<sup>14</sup> The focus of this new interest in speculative philosophies of history centered around issues regarding the possibility and/or legitimacy of constructing new, politically progressive metahistories. Spengler was on the side of reaction, a representative of the conservative-liberal historiographical hegemony against whom the new speculative philosophies of history were to be raised.<sup>15</sup> Maligned by analytic philosophers of history, and ignored by the postmodernists, what little academic interest there is in Spengler's thought tends to concern his role in early twentieth century intellectual life and his relation to other, more significant, philosophers.<sup>16</sup>

Commentators on Spengler's *Decline* tend to fall into one of two theoretical camps, favoring either a positivist or a relativist interpretation of his philosophy of history. And,

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<sup>11</sup> On this see, for instance, F.R. Ankersmit, *History and Tropology – The Rise and Fall of Metaphor* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 44-74.

<sup>12</sup> Walsh, in his *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, the text that for many years defined the key concerns of academic philosophy of history, refers in passing to Spengler's work as a "highly impressionistic study, marred... by being over-schematic and careless of historical detail." Walsh, *An Introduction*, 161. Gardiner, another prominent figure in mid-twentieth century critical philosophy of history, deems Spengler's "so-called scientific history" to be confused owing to its failure to recognize the "nature of conceptual systems" and over reliance on picturesque metaphor and analogy. Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1952), 22-23, 57. Ankersmit summarizes the general critical perspective on speculative philosophy of history thus: "we look at speculative systems in the way we look at extra-marital sex: it is practiced by many, is supposed to be natural and exciting, but is nevertheless not exactly according to the proper rules." Ankersmit, *History and Tropology*, 48.

<sup>13</sup> David Carr, *Experience and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 80-82. Carr caustically notes, "So it turns out not only that there are two very different sorts of philosophy of history, but that one sort is better than the other and has succeeded and supplanted it. In the history of the philosophy of history at least, then, there is progress!" Carr, *Experience and History*, 82.

<sup>14</sup> Ankersmit, *History and Tropology*, 100, 184-185.

<sup>15</sup> Kelley states that Spengler, "was never welcomed into the academy or the seminar room except as a curious specimen of the old-fashioned apocalyptic philosophy of history or as an eccentric pioneer of a self-proclaimed 'new history.'" D. R. Kelley, *Frontiers of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 13.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Gusejnova's paper on the relationship between Cassirer and Spengler, Dina Gusejnova, "Concepts of culture and technology in Germany, 1916–1933 - Ernst Cassirer and Oswald Spengler," *The Journal of European Studies* 36/1 (2006): 5-30, or the two recent volumes in the series, *Writings on the political culture of the Weimar Republic*, namely, Gilbert Merlio & Daniel Meyer, eds., *Spengler ohne Ende: Ein Rezeptionsphänomen im internationalen Kontext* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2014) and Manfred Gangl, Gilbert Merlio & Markus Ophälders, eds., *Spengler: ein Denker der Zeitenwende* (Frankfurt a. M: 2009).

perhaps as a consequence of Spengler's diminished status in the philosophy of history, there has been little significant variation in Spengler scholarship in almost a century. Between the first major work on Spengler in English by H. Stuart Hughes in 1952, and the most recent by John Farrenkopf in 2001, there is no real change in the interpretations of *Decline*.<sup>17</sup> The most radical development in Spengler scholarship in recent years concerns Spengler's works after the publication of *Decline*, and the formation of a consensus that Spengler's later, post-*Decline* works, differ sufficiently in outlook and content to justify a division of Spengler's thought into earlier and later stages. Much of the recent research on Spengler has focused on this later stage in his writings, whilst the interpretation of his earlier thought, of which the *Decline* Volume 1 is the key part, remains unchanged. Mentions of Spengler's work in current reference works or journal articles tend to simply recapitulate certain of the five key elements of the received view of his thought (detailed below); typically, the depiction of cultures as organisms and the existence and predictive capacity of laws of history.<sup>18</sup>

The received view of Spengler's early philosophy of history is as follows. World-history can be divided into the narratives of the growth and decline of eight cultures. Using an investigative method that he calls "comparative morphology," he argues that the historical course of a culture is analogous to the life-history of an organism, in that all cultures have a lifespan and must of necessity pass through a series of developmental stages (birth, growth, maturity, death). So certain are these laws of historical development, that one may in principle use them to trace in advance the future course of an existing culture-organism.

Furthermore, despite the species of culture-organisms sharing certain structural similarities, they have no shared ancestor. Each culture for him 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."<sup>19</sup> According to Spengler's cultural isolation theory, culture is a "unified and largely autonomous phenomena."<sup>20</sup> 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.

This is the standard account of Spengler's philosophy of history as set forth in *Decline* and is one that most Spengler commentator's, regardless of their interpretative positions, accept. The division in interpretation arises over the status of Spengler's laws of history. On one reading of *Decline*, it appears that Spengler argues that there are laws of historical change which can be scientifically established through the comparative analysis of the recurrent features in the various life-stages of every culture-organism. These laws of history are objectively true and have universal validity. On another reading, however, Spengler holds

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<sup>17</sup> John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Stephen Berry, "The Laws of History," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, Aviezer Tucker, ed., (Chichester: Blackwell, 2009), 162-171, Ernst Breisach, *On the Future of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), Kelley, *Frontiers of History*, or Daniel Little's entry for the Philosophy of History in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, Daniel Little, "Philosophy of History," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/history/>.

<sup>19</sup> Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, 72-73.

<sup>20</sup> Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline*, 41.

that all truths are necessarily relative to a specific culture-organism and possess no truth value beyond that culture. And so, on the one hand, we have the positivist interpretation of Spengler's philosophy of history, that Spengler argues that there are universal laws of human history and that he has uncovered them, and on the other, the relativist interpretation, that in the Heraclitean flux of human existence no meanings are absolute or permanent and all historical 'truths' are necessarily culture-bound, contingent and perspectival.<sup>21</sup>

Both the positivist and relativist interpretations struggle with the fact that there are sections of *Decline* that support both readings, both of the predictive powers of the universal laws of history and of the impossibility of human understanding ever being able to transcend its own time and culture. Matters are complicated further by the centrality of the comparative paradox to Spengler's argumentative strategy. Spengler held that there were certain morphological structures common to all cultures and that through systematic comparative analysis one can objectively establish the existence of those structures. In other words, the cyclical laws of history are established by means of the comparative analysis of cultures. Spengler also holds that the thought of one culture is literally incommensurable with that of another culture, a point which also he justifies through use of systematic comparative analysis. In effect, Spengler declares comparative cultural analysis to be impossible, and then uses it to establish his laws of history. And then uses comparative analysis to compare the modes of thought of two distinct cultures, on the basis of which he declares comparative analysis impossible.

It is my intention in this paper to demonstrate that the range of Spengler's philosophical interests extended beyond the cyclical type of speculative philosophy of history with which he is typically associated. I hope to show that Spengler's better known historical views are but one aspect of a larger philosophical project. Spengler's philosophy of history, I suggest, is not the point of his philosophy. Rather it forms but a part of it. If one considers Spengler's analyses of science and technology, and his account of the formation and operation of human consciousness, one can see that his thought involves philosophical elements that go beyond the philosophy of history and bear a close affinity to other themes in twentieth century philosophy, such as phenomenology, existentialism and fictionalism. And once one grasps the role that these themes play in Spengler's philosophy, I argue, one is able to view the nature and purpose of Spengler's cyclical philosophy of history in a completely new light, as a fictionalist grand narrative (that contains within it a critique of its own fictional nature) based upon a phenomenological analysis of one's connection to Life and one's own cultural historicity, that is intended to prepare contemporary Western humanity for its ultimate existential confrontation with the meaningless contingency of existence and the necessity to choose whether to affirm Life or accept cultural extinction.

To this end this paper will provide an analysis of the positivist 'received view' of Spengler's early philosophy of history. I argue against such a positivist interpretation that an existential phenomenological reading of Spengler's philosophy necessitates a relativist interpretation of his philosophy of history. I then suggest that the comparative paradox can be resolved by recognising the presence within Spengler's philosophy of two opposed philosophies of history, one positivist and one relativist. It is the incompatible yet separate claims of these two distinct philosophies of history that generate the apparent paradox. I further suggest that only the relativist form of Spengler's philosophy of history was intended to be descriptively accurate, and that the positivist form is a fictionalist narrative. This

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<sup>21</sup> The positivist and relativist readings of Spengler's work, and their proponents, have been analysed in detail in Gregory Morgan Swer, "Timely Meditations? : Oswald Spengler's Philosophy of History Reconsidered," *Prolegomena* Volume 17/2 (2018):137-154.

historical fiction was designed to persuade contemporary readers of a naturalising, pro-scientific bent, who were incapable of grasping Spengler's existential phenomenological insights, to choose the course of action that Spengler deemed culturally appropriate.

This is not to suggest that the received view is entirely wrong but rather that features of Spengler's philosophy of history that complicate the received view have tended to be overlooked or dealt in with a less than comprehensive fashion. The tension in Spengler commentary revolves around the issue of whether his philosophy of history should be understood objectively, as a science of history that seeks to uncover universal and observable law-like regularities in the course of history (the positivist view), or subjectively, as a culture-specific expression of a perspectival historical aesthetics (the relativist view).

I argue that ultimately all attempts at forming Spengler's historical views into a coherent philosophical position tend to founder on the comparative paradox, Spengler's apparently contradictory use of the comparative analysis of cultures to justify his universal predictive laws of history and his insistence on the relativity of all historical consciousness and all historical 'truths.' I argue that, once one has grasped the nature of Spengler's broader philosophical project, one can reconcile the comparative paradox by treating his philosophy of history not as either positivist or relativist, but rather as two distinct philosophies of history, one positivist and one relativist. And that whilst these philosophies of history may appear contradictory, the positivist philosophy of history found in the first volume of *The Decline* is a deliberate fiction designed to serve the agenda of Spengler's relativist programme.

## II. The Positivist Received View of Spengler's Philosophy of History

Interpretations of Oswald Spengler's philosophy of history, as put forward in *The Decline of the West*, tend to fall into one of two camps, relativist or positivist. I argue that if we reconsider Spengler's philosophy of history in the light of his existentialist philosophical anthropology, it appears as a thorough-going form of historical relativism. We should, consequently, reject the positivist interpretation supported by most secondary commentators. In support of this claim, I will recap the key tenets of the positivist interpretation of Spengler's philosophy of history and will argue that they are all either contradicted or rendered problematic by Spengler's philosophical commitment to a cultural life-world.

Stephen Berry provides a succinct account of Spengler's philosophy of history that encapsulates all the central claims of the positivist interpretation. He states that Spengler explained world history by the individual histories of eight major cultures, each of which developed according to relentless internal laws – without a chance for human interventions that might change the course of history.<sup>22</sup>

He adds that

'historical necessity,' which played such a prominent role in earlier systems up to Spengler and Toynbee, was devised as an external agent, a substitute God, acting upon societies and forcing their trajectories in determined directions. This type of laws may be called 'genuine historical laws,' because they are thought to operate directly at the level of individual historical entities (populations, societies, cultures, states etc.). In contrast, a concept of laws in history that would be acceptable by modern standards refers to

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<sup>22</sup> Berry, "The Laws of History", 165.

recurrent, law-like features of historical processes which emerge as a consequence of symmetries.<sup>23</sup>

I would suggest that one inclined to a positivist interpretation might read Spengler's philosophy of history as involving 'recurrent law-like features,' rather than Berry's 'genuine historical laws.' Consequently, I will consider both readings. Aside from this minor point, one finds most of the central elements of a positivist reading in Berry's account. Namely, that

1. World-history should be understood as the history of 8 major cultures.
2. Each culture follows a determined trajectory.
3. The cyclical course of world-history is governed by "immutable laws of history."<sup>24</sup>
4. The course of human history is without *telos* or super-historical meaning and is beyond human direction.

The first point strikes me as rather uncontentious so long as one recalls that this understanding of world-history is a uniquely Faustian (western) perspective. So rather than it being the case that world-history *is* the history of major cultures, it is the case that, from a late Faustian viewpoint, world-history presents itself to us *as* the history of major cultures. Indeed, Spengler states that, "World-history is *our* world-picture and not all mankind's."<sup>25</sup> By this he means not that the picture we have of world-history is inherently Faustian but that the very notion of world-history, of the entire history of humanity as a historical process of becoming, is inherently Faustian. Spengler adds that

No doubt we feel world-history, experience it, and believe that it is to be read just as a map is read. But, even today, it is only forms of it that we know and not *the* form of it, which is the mirror-image of *our own* inner life.<sup>26</sup>

To view the history of humanity as world-history, as a sequence of discrete stories of the actualisation of a culture's potential for meaning, is natural for a member of Faustian culture. But this is the case because that is how our existential structures present the history of the world to us, and not because that is the way the history of the world actually *is*. World-history, Spengler reminds us, is the "mirror-image" of our own cultural subjectivity.

Regarding the notion of cultures having a 'determined trajectory,' some clarification is necessary. The idea that cultures have a particular course or pattern that they pass through is conflated here with the idea that cultures have a *necessary* pattern of development. For example, it might well be descriptively accurate to claim that cultures pass through certain distinct phases, but this does not justify the claim that all cultures *must* pass through those phases. This latter, stronger claim invokes claims of causal necessity and law. I will deal here with the weaker claim that all cultures have a pattern of development and will address the claim of necessity in discussing point 3.

The idea that cultures have a particular pattern of development stems from Spengler's claim that cultures, like organisms, move through life-stages from childhood and youth to senescence and death, and that these life-stages have particular characteristics. I argue however, in light of Spengler's existential phenomenology of cultural existence, that his claim that cultures are organisms must be taken as metaphorical. Thus, cultures are not to be literally interpreted as organisms but rather as being analogous in certain key respects to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>25</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 15-16.



organisms. And for Spengler's purposes, I suggest, the most important respect in which cultures resemble organisms is that they contain a sense of limit, of finitude. When treated as a temporally finite entity, cultures lend themselves to a genetic historical narrative. They are assured a definite beginning and a definite ending, which permits their treatment in terms of the formation and continuous realisation of a particular theme. In other words, a clear and self-contained chronological schema.

In this sense, the organism to which a culture is most analogous is, for all Spengler's biologicistic talk of morphological structures, that of the Faustian individual. It has a finite lifespan, contains (via its pervasive symbolic structure) its past and its future in its every present moment, and its life has an overall meaning and *telos* by virtue of its progressive actualisation of its own existential project. Spengler's culture-organisms are, on this account, 'super-Faustians.' The life-stages of the major cultures are thus the life-stages of Faustian culture, or rather the life-stages of Faustian culture as they (affectively) appear from within the Faustian life-world at a specific point in its history. Cultures, their life-stages and the cyclical model of world-history, in Spengler's philosophy of history are "an ordered presentation of the past, an inner postulate, the expression of a capacity for feeling form."<sup>27</sup> They are an expression of Faustian existence, valid only within Faustian culture, and most definitely not an objective description of trans-cultural patterns.

The third point of the positivist interpretation concerns the laws of history. On the positivist account, the development of cultures is determined by laws of history either in the form of an irresistible external force that acts upon a culture or in the sense of general rule derived from observable regularities across cultures. One of the major points of support for such a reading is Spengler's frequent use of the terms "necessity," and "destiny" with regards to the course of a culture's development. This sense, that there is something ineluctable about the way in which a culture develops, is reinforced by Spengler's related claim that one can 'predict' the future course of a culture's development. When one speaks of necessity and prediction, it certainly suggests the operations of law. And yet, much of the textual support for an interpretation of Spengler that posits the presence of historical laws is based upon a lack of clarity regarding the sense in which Spengler employs his 'lawlike' terminology.

Let us consider first Spengler's term 'Destiny.' Spengler refers to his work as a "a new outlook on history and the philosophy of destiny [emphasis removed]."<sup>28</sup> He speaks of tracing the form in which "the destiny of the Western Culture will be accomplished."<sup>29</sup> And he explicitly links "the venture of predetermining history" with the process "of following the still untravelled stages in the destiny of a Culture."<sup>30</sup> He reinforces the impression of the determinative power of Destiny by referring to it as "an organic necessity in life."<sup>31</sup> However, despite Spengler's figurative language, Destiny is not the determinative historical law that Berry and others take it to be. As Northrop Frye points out, the term Destiny has a decidedly non-mystical meaning. He explains Spengler's Destiny as the position that, "In what a culture produces, whether it is art, philosophy, military strategy, or political and economic developments, there are no accidents: everything a culture produces is equally a symbol of that culture."<sup>32</sup> It is the idea that, within the life-world of a culture, there is a cohesive unity to its productive activity. Thus, the future actions of Faustian inhabitants will be as much a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., *Decline*, 7.

<sup>32</sup> Northrop Frye, "The Decline of the West," *Daedalus* 103/1 (1974): 1-13; 5.

symbol of its culture as those of past inhabitants. Consequently, when Spengler states that, “The Civilization is the inevitable destiny of the Culture,” he is not pointing to the operation of laws of history, but rather making a point that the difference between a culture and a civilisation is a matter of degree rather than kind. That whilst there are significant differences between the civilisational stage and those that preceded it, the civilisation stage is still just as inherently Faustian as the preceding stages. As Hayden White puts it, for Spengler the difference between one cultural stage and another is a “difference in similarity.”<sup>33</sup> While Spengler’s claim that civilisation is the fate of a culture might be predictive, it is certainly no more a determinative or causal claim than to state that old age is the fate of youth. Spengler’s point here is to make us appreciate that civilisation is not something that has ‘befallen’ Faustian culture from without, but rather that it is just another stage in that culture’s self-actualisation.

The sense in which Spengler speaks of prediction — and it is his talk of prediction that furnishes the most obvious reason to interpret his philosophy of history as positivistic — is best understood by means of his idea of necessity and freedom. Spengler states that it is every Faustian’s duty to inform themselves “what *can* happen” and thereby “with the unalterable necessity of destiny” what “*will* happen.”<sup>34</sup> Freedom, on the other hand, is described as the “freedom to do, not this or that, but the necessary or nothing.”<sup>35</sup> This is not a reference to causal necessity or necessity of any other nomological type. Rather Spengler is referring here to the fundamental existential structure of *care* and the need for each Faustian individual to make a conscious existential choice about their future.<sup>36</sup> For Spengler it is imperative that one take stock of the existential possibilities available in the current concrete historical context, before choosing an existential project to actualize.<sup>37</sup> In this sense the present state of affairs limits the possibilities for what can, and therefore will, happen. Existential authenticity *necessitates* making an existential choice to actualize possibilities. Hence, I suggest, Spengler’s cryptic statement that, “that which is a possibility is a necessity.”<sup>38</sup> *Freedom* lies in choosing an authentic or inauthentic existence, in choosing to do ‘the necessary or nothing.’ It is for this reason that Spengler says the ‘lesson’ of his philosophy of history “would be of benefit to the coming generations, as showing them what is possible — and therefore necessary — and what is excluded from the inward potentialities of their time.”<sup>39</sup> Freedom lies in choosing to actualize that which is possible from the range of available options. Those options are limited by the ‘inward potentialities’ of Faustian culture *at that time*. The sum of those potentialities over the life-time of a culture is what Spengler means by the term Destiny. It is a feeling for the forms peculiar to one’s own culture, a “word for an inner certainty that is *not* describable.”<sup>40</sup> Consequently, Spengler’s use of the terms necessity, prediction and

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<sup>33</sup> Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 253.

<sup>34</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> Gregory Morgan Swer, “Dread, Longing and Care: Spengler’s Account of the Existential Structure of Human Experience,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 51/1 (2020):71-87. Young also notes that Spengler’s philosophy is existential in character. Young, *German Philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 104.

<sup>37</sup> Gregory Morgan Swer, “The Revolt Against Reason: Oswald Spengler and Violence as Cultural Preservative,” *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* 3/2 (2020): 123-148.

<sup>38</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

Destiny refer not to laws of history but *existential* conditions required for a care-ful, authentic being.

Prediction then is not the determination of the future with reference to a fixed sequence of cultural time-periods of predetermined duration. Rather it is an image of future possibilities “in essentials, calculated from available precedents.”<sup>41</sup> Those precedents being the cultural history of completed (and thereby irretrievable) possibilities, the possibilities present in the historical present, and the fundamental structures that give Faustian culture its unique character and will shape its future actualities. White states that, “Progress in this system, if such there be, consists only in the recombination of a finite (though unbounded) set of discrete elements and a rearrangement of hierarchies of relationships among them.”<sup>42</sup> Faustian culture, when viewed in this light, is a millennia-long effort to articulate symbolically the same theme, but with different emotional emphases. When Spengler speaks of following Faustian culture’s “broad lines into the future,” he makes no appeal to super-cultural forces, but rather suggests that he knows the existential tune that future Faustians will be playing though he knows not the particular arrangement, nor the instruments.<sup>43</sup> As he points out, “one can have a presentiment of the future but one cannot calculate it”.<sup>44</sup>

Having dealt with the stronger argument for Spengler’s laws of history, what Berry terms ‘genuine’ historical laws, let us consider the weaker one. On such an account, Spengler’s laws of history are not causal forces but refer instead to patterns of observed historical regularities based on symmetries. The interpretative question with this weaker argument becomes less an issue of textual substantiation for Spengler invoking super-cultural forces, and more an issue of reconstructing how Spengler thought such regularities might be identified.

Spengler calls for us to “bring analogy to bear” on history, for the life-stages of organisms to be viewed as “objective descriptions,” and each culture to be “set forth... as a self-contained phenomenon.”<sup>45</sup> The symmetries upon which Spengler will construct his general laws of history are to be found through the application of Spengler’s physiognomic morphology. This biologically-derived method, on Spengler’s account, employs homology and analogy to detect morphological and functional similarities between different cultures. On the basis of this analysis Spengler hopes

to show that without exception all great creations and forms in religion, art, politics, social life, economy and science appear, fulfil themselves and die down *contemporaneously* in all the Cultures; that the inner structure of one corresponds strictly with that of all the others; that there is not a single phenomenon of deep physiognomic importance in the record of one for which we could not find a counterpart in the record of every other; and that this counterpart is to be found under a characteristic form and in a perfectly definite chronological position.<sup>46</sup>

In other words, physiognomic morphology establishes ‘strict’ structural similarities between all the major cultures. For Spengler, it is the periodicity of cultural development, the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>42</sup> White, *The Fiction of Narrative*, 265. White is referring to Northrop Frye in this quotation, but in the course of a comparison of Frye’s thought with that of Spengler. The quotation applies just as well to Spengler’s outlook.

<sup>43</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 118. My translation.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 112.

life-stages, that appears as “pre-ordained.”<sup>47</sup> The life-stages have “a definite duration, always the same, always recurring with the emphasis of a symbol [emphasis removed].”<sup>48</sup> Cultures, Spengler tells us, have an “ideal” life-span of “one millennium,” and he speaks of recurrent periods occurring at intervals of fifty years and of three hundred years.<sup>49</sup> Spengler’s epochal charts map out in considerable detail structural regularities occurring with near-identical synchronicity across a variety of world-cultures.<sup>50</sup> Spengler suggests that each culture represents the formal recapitulation of a culture-archetype. Referring to the cultures, he claims that

if we set free their shapes, ... and let them march past us in the spirit, it cannot but be that we shall succeed in distinguishing, amidst all that is special or unessential, the primitive culture-form, *the* Culture that underlies as ideal all the individual Cultures.<sup>51</sup>

Once furnished with knowledge of the invariable structural features of cultures, and the timetable of their temporal sequence, it makes possible the overpassing of

the present as a research-limit, and predetermining the spiritual form, duration, rhythm, meaning and product of the *still unaccomplished* stages of our western history.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to this insight into the future course of a culture, it enables “Reconstructing long-vanished and unknown epochs, even whole Cultures of the past, by means of morphological connexions.”<sup>53</sup> The past and the future become clear with the knowledge of the eternal recurrence of cultural structures. It is on the basis of this that Spengler makes his most overtly positivist statement in *Decline*, that

it is possible to take the decisive step of sketching an image of history that is independent of the accident of standpoint, of the period in which this or that observer lives — independent too of the personality of the observer himself, who as an interested member of his own Culture is tempted, by its religious, intellectual, political and social tendencies, to order the material of history according to a perspective that is limited as to both space and time...<sup>54</sup>

Physiognomic morphology, and its homologic tables, Spengler suggests, can offer us the holy grail of historical research: general laws of cultural development that are objective, verifiable, free of culture-specific perspective, and which hold true across all cultures, and which permit us to predict the necessary structural development of cultures.

With the weaker, general law interpretation of Spengler as a positivist philosopher of history, one faces a different problem than one did with the stronger version. Here it is not the case that certain ambiguous terms have been interpreted in a fashion that is incompatible

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>50</sup> See the “Tables Illustrating the Comparative Morphology of History” at the end of the first volume of *The Decline*.

<sup>51</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 104.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 93.

with Spengler's relativist existential phenomenology. With the weaker version there is, as I have indicated, clear textual support for its interpretation. And, in this case, I will not dispute the validity of the positivist interpretation *for the sections referred to above*. There is evidence for a positivist philosophy of history, and it is largely restricted to the brief third chapter of *Decline*. I would argue though, that whilst a positivist position is present in Spengler's work, there is a coherent and plausible alternative reading of Spengler whereby his positivism is not intended literally. Such a reading, I argue, dissolves the interpretative conflict, and has some independent justification beyond that of narrative coherence. I do not suggest that Spengler here is being metaphorical and that a literal reading of the relevant passages skews his intent. Indeed, I would argue that what looks like a positivist argument is exactly as it appears to be. I suggest rather that the function this positivist section is meant to perform in *Decline* might be other than that of providing a descriptively accurate account of Spengler's philosophy of history.

Throughout *Decline*, Spengler both implicitly and explicitly undermines the very possibility of the positivist position he elaborates in the third chapter, "The Problem of World-History." He continuously stresses the impossibility of escaping the viewpoint of a specific culture-world, and yet the ability to compare and identify the common structural features of different cultures presumes the ability to understand the culture-world of a culture that is not our own. "Real historical vision," Spengler tells us, "belongs to the domain of significances."<sup>55</sup> The data of history for Spengler is the meaningful, the record of the actualisation of past potentialities. Unless one shared the experiential structures of the historical subjects under study, one would never be able to detect the significant, let alone its essential structures or their temporal intervals. And, as Spengler points out, "it is quite impossible for us to penetrate completely a historical world-aspect of 'becoming' formed by a soul that is quite differently constituted from our own."<sup>56</sup> Without this 'inside' perspective, what options remain for the positivist Spengler's comparative analysis of cultures? One cannot proceed by analogy. For without an understanding of the fundamental structures of the culture under study, one would have no way of knowing whether the features found there deemed analogous with those of our own culture are in fact so. And as Spengler states in his introduction, with the use of analogies in the absence of a sense of the significant in an alien culture "it is neither a principle nor a sense of historic necessity, but simple inclination, that governs the choice of the tableaux."<sup>57</sup> We would tend to find what we sought and what we sought would be but a reflection of our own culture. And as for the use of homology, again the detection of morphological similarities would require the ability to enter into the life-world of another culture. One might argue that the repetition of features derived from the culture-archetype would be enough to establish homology, with the archetype operating as some type of 'common ancestor' to the cultures under study. However, this could not be a plausible option given that it was the comparative analysis of different cultures that was supposed to establish the archetype in the first place.

Indeed, the entire talk of a comparative morphology of cultures, with each culture understood as "an organism of rigorous structure," smacks of a scientific approach to history.<sup>58</sup> And this is an approach that Spengler vilifies throughout *Decline*, arguing that to approach history in such a way is to view and treat history like Nature, which results in

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 104.

the baneful mistake of applying the principles of causality, of law, of system — that is, the structure of rigid being — to the picture of happenings. It was assumed that a human culture existed just as electricity or gravitation existed, and that it was capable of analysis in much the same way as these.<sup>59</sup>

Such an approach is unhistorical in that it renders the dynamic process of historical becoming static and timeless. Spengler states, in what appears to be a deliberate negation of his earlier positivistic statement concerning a culture-organism's 'rigorous structure,' that "the laws of nature are forms of rigorous and therefore inorganic necessity."<sup>60</sup> To reduce history to a system "by reasoned classification... requires us to *distinguish* and in distinguishing to dissect and destroy."<sup>61</sup> Spengler further adds that this very approach to history is symptomatic of a late Faustian outlook in which the life-world of the inhabitants has been progressively colonized by the world-as-nature.

The image of the past is mechanized and materialized and from it is deduced a set of causal rules for present and future. We come to believe in historical laws and in a rational understanding of them.<sup>62</sup>

Spengler categorically rejects such an approach. For him there could never be a science of history. And even if there could, there could never be an 'objective' science of history.<sup>63</sup>

And so the positivist philosophy of history present in Spengler is ruled impossible by its own architect. Spengler's claims concerning the absolute nature of cultural isolation preclude the possibility of attaining a historical perspective outside one's own culture-world, let alone within the culture-world of a different culture. And without this possibility, there seems no way for the comparative analysis of cultures to proceed that does not ultimately reveal itself to be the transformation of the history of other cultures into Faustian experiential categories. Furthermore, as the last quotation indicates, Spengler seems to suggest that the very positivist philosophy of history that he puts forward is itself an inherently Faustian cultural product, typical of current inauthentic civilisational thought. Spengler in effect negates his own positivism.

It might be objected that the form of cultural isolation that I am attributing to Spengler is in fact far stronger than the one Spengler advocates. Spengler states that "each Culture must necessarily possess its own destiny-idea" which "cannot be felt by one sort of men exactly as it is felt by another."<sup>64</sup> The use of the term 'exactly' might seem to suggest that the semantic barrier between cultures is partial, or at least a matter of degree. Later, Spengler again states that

it is quite impossible for us to penetrate completely a historical world-aspect of 'becoming' formed by a soul that is quite differently constituted from our own. Here there must always be an intractable residue, greater or smaller in

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>63</sup> Spengler shares with Heidegger the view that science is not objective. It is rather an expression of a historically contingent metaphysical orientation and as such is amenable to existential critique. Gregory Morgan Swer, "Oswald Spengler and Martin Heidegger on Modern Science, Metaphysics and Mathematics," *Idealistic Studies* 47/1 & 2 (2017): 1-21.

<sup>64</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 129.

proportion to our historical instinct, physiognomic tact and knowledge of men.<sup>65</sup>

Spengler here does not say that penetrating the meaning-structures of another culture is impossible, but rather than ‘complete’ penetration is impossible. Perhaps the positivist project of inter-cultural homology could be actualized by restricting its scope to the more ‘tractable’ bits of world-history? Spengler does concede at one point that there might be universally valid cultural features. He states that

There are doubtless certain characters of very wide-ranging validity which are (seemingly at any rate) independent of the Culture and century to which the cognizing individual may belong...<sup>66</sup>

Spengler however immediately adds that

along with these there is a quite particular necessity of form which underlies all his thought as axiomatic and to which he is subject by virtue of belonging to his own Culture and no other. Here, then, we have two very different kinds of *a priori* thought-content, and the definition of a frontier between them, or even the demonstration that such exists, is a problem that lies beyond all possibilities of knowing and will never be solved.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, even if universally valid inter-cultural features do exist, one would still be unable to perceive them from outside the perspective of a specific culture-world. Reality, for the inhabitant of a culture, is always constituted and sustained by the praxis of a cultural community who share common experiential structures. It is a precondition for the possibility of meaning and as such, cannot be set aside or suspended.<sup>68</sup>

White has suggested that Spengler’s *Decline*

was intended to reveal the fundamental differences between civilisational forms, rather than the similarities which made them instances of generic forms of civilisation (an assertion often overlooked by those who have classified Spengler as a Positivist historian in the same tradition as Toynbee) ... He sought to show how we are isolated within our peculiar modalities of experience, so much so that we could not hope to find analogies and models for the solutions of the problems facing us, and thereby to enlighten us to the peculiar elements in our own present situation.<sup>69</sup>

This observation of White’s provides a further reason for concluding that Spengler is unlikely to have intended his positivist historical argument to be taken seriously, or at least, at face value. The entire point of Spengler’s early philosophy was to address the existential

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., *Decline*, 60.

<sup>68</sup> Restivo seconds this, saying that: “Spengler argues that there is no way to define a boundary between these two kinds of thought content; indeed, there is no way even to demonstrate the existence of such a boundary. As a consequence, we must press our inquiries forward without any *a priori* restrictions based on the demarcation of truths or facts that are and are not independent of human contexts. In other words, since the demarcation problem is insoluble, we must proceed as if no boundaries exist.” Sal Restivo, *Science, Society and Values* (Bethlehem: LeHigh University Press, 1994), 194.

<sup>69</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 256.

crisis that he perceived at the heart of Faustian technological modernity.<sup>70</sup> Throughout *Decline* he stresses the historically unprecedented character of Faustian culture, its pervasive dynamism and uniquely technological civilisation. The positivist project considered here would appear to fly in the face of Spengler's main purpose. Rather than compel the inhabitants of Faustian civilisation to recognize the historical novelty of their current situation, it seems to dissolve cultural difference in pursuit of structural isomorphism and trans-cultural laws. White's comments direct our attention back to Spengler's primary purpose, the existential needs of the *Faustian* technological present, and remind us that everything that Spengler writes is presumably directed to this end. If this is the case, then we may ask how his positivist philosophical dead end relates to this overriding agenda. For if, as I have argued, Spengler's positivist philosophy of history was not intended to be viewed as veridical, what then was its purpose?

### III. Spengler's Positivist Philosophy of History as Historical Fictionalism

Spengler argues that with cultures "there I found nothing, however small, that does not embody in itself the entire sum of fundamental tendencies."<sup>71</sup> Like the symbols of Spengler's culture-worlds, I suggest that there is little in *Decline* that is accidental. In other words, I do not believe that the presence of the positivist component of Spengler's *Decline* is due to inconsistency or conceptual confusion on the part of the author. Rather, *Decline* should be read as if both Spengler's advancement of an argument for a positivist philosophy of history with (weak) historical laws and his near simultaneous advancement of relativist critique that contradicts the very possibility of such a philosophy were intended. I argue that the comparative paradox, whereby Spengler appears to appeal to the comparative analysis of cultures to justify both trans-cultural historical laws *and* the claim that the comparative analysis of cultures is an impossibility, is a consequence of the presence of both a relativist and a positivist philosophy of history in *Decline*. Though the two outlooks are conceptually incompatible, the purposes they serve within the text are closely connected. The reason for this is because the positivist account that Spengler puts forward is contingent upon his relativist philosophy of history. This positivist strand should be read as a narrative *within* the larger narrative of *Decline* written in the voice of another character.

This argument may seem counter-intuitive but let us consider Spengler's historical thought in light of his broader philosophical commitments. Spengler's main objective is the analysis of Faustian civilisation. Operating with a conception of Faustian humanity based upon his view of Faustian cultural existence as a life-world, Spengler tries to compel contemporary Faustians to address their existential state. To do this, he argues for an awareness of the fictional and contingent nature of all cultural symbols, thereby freeing the Faustian from any of the metaphysical claims of their symbolic structure, past or present. Spengler then confronts the Faustian with the irrevocability of past projects of existential meaning, and the necessity of choosing a meaningful future from amongst the limited concrete opportunities furnished by present circumstances. Spengler's engagement with historical issues must be viewed as subservient to this greater philosophical directive: the analysis of the present and the formation of the future. In other words, the role of Spengler's historical thought in his early philosophy is to underpin, clarify and motivate for his existential project of the present. And viewed in this way, one cannot help but concur with White's assessment of Spengler's views on the intrinsic value of history. Spengler, he writes "taught that history was valuable only insofar as it destroyed, rather than established,

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<sup>70</sup> Swer, "Revolt Against Reason."

<sup>71</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 47.



responsibility towards the past.”<sup>72</sup> The past, on Spengler’s account, is a burden, a hindrance to the recognition of the need for authentic existential choice. Spengler’s engagement with history, in other words, was intended to be destructive.

To this end, all Spengler needs from a philosophy of history is that which is provided by the relativistic implications of his life-world phenomenology. From this we can derive the intersubjective structure of cultural existence (the Ur-symbol), the finite sequence of life-stages (understood as moods), the ultimate (in the sense of extra-cultural) meaninglessness of existence, and cultural isolation (due to the impossibility of escaping a culture’s experiential structures). From these features we can then derive the key features of Spengler’s existential position; the finitude of cultural existence and the imminence of death, the relativity and contingency of all cultural values, and the necessity for relinquishing past projects of meaning and the responsibility to fashion anew the meaning of one’s existence. Spengler’s existential phenomenology of Faustian civilisation, in effect, does not require the cyclical model of world-history. And the related notions of comparative morphology and of trans-cultural truths are decidedly surplus to requirement. So, what then is its use?

When viewed as a whole, as Paul Miklowitz notes, all Spengler’s philosophy is fictionalist. Within the life-world, as Miklowitz puts it, “the final intelligibility of the phenomena is guaranteed in advance as a consequence of the structure itself.”<sup>73</sup> Spengler holds that existence in and of itself has no meaning, and that meaning is fashioned by the structures of a culture-world. These culture-structures are themselves contingent and “grow with the same superb aimlessness as the flowers of the field.”<sup>74</sup> Thus the dynamic worldview of Faustian culture, with its eschatological narrative, is entirely contingent and so too are its attendant symbolic structures. They offer no metaphysical purchase on extra-cultural reality and are ultimately only valid *within* a culture on instrumental grounds. That is to say, they have a functional value in the reality that holds within a culture-world, a reality that itself is creatively fashioned out of the sensory disorder of the world of phenomenal appearances and structured by the (contingent) fundamental structures of Faustian culture.

This fictionalist reading of Spengler’s philosophy is strongly supported by the analysis of those sections of *Decline* in which he considers the origins of human consciousness and the development of science. These sections, and the philosophical anthropology that informs them, display a clear proximity to Hans Vaihinger’s indisputably fictionalist *Philosophy of As If*.<sup>75</sup> Vaihinger, like Spengler, posits an insuperable gulf between perception and reality and views human knowledge as largely a system of fictions, ideational constructs whose justification is their utility rather than their truth. These fictions ultimately give us only subjective knowledge of the contingent thought structures that created them, rather than knowledge of any external reality.

What Spengler offers us with his relativist philosophy of history is a (from his perspective) descriptively accurate account of the phenomenological world of the inhabitant of late Faustian civilisation, a world which by its very nature is entirely fictitious.<sup>76</sup> The life-world

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<sup>72</sup> White, *Tropics of Discourse*, 37.

<sup>73</sup> Paul S. Miklowitz, *Metaphysics to Metafictions: Hegel, Nietzsche and the End of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 140.

<sup>74</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 21.

<sup>75</sup> Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of As If* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1935); Gregory Morgan Swer, “Science Fiction: Science, Vaihinger and Spengler’s Fictionalist Philosophy of Science”, in *Oswald Spengler in an Age of Globalisation*, David Engels, Gerd Morgenthaler & Max Otte, eds., (Lüdinghausen: Manuscriptum, 2021), 197-225.

<sup>76</sup> Swer, “Revolt Against Reason,” 133-44.

described may be fictitious (in the sense that it is a human construct whose concepts do not correspond to the reality to which they refer) but, for Spengler, his genetic narrative of its character is not. On the other hand, his positivist philosophy of history was not meant to be a descriptively accurate account of the nature of world-history. Rather, I propose that we should view Spengler's positivist philosophy of history as a fiction of his own fashioning. Whilst Spengler's relativist philosophy of history was a 'true' account of the existential structures that operate within an *artificial* world, his positivist philosophy of history is a fabrication. It is a deliberate fiction.

Spengler's positivist historical account is in most parts in direct contradiction with Spengler's relativistic phenomenology and his existential project. It is however highly indicative of the Faustian worldview that he analyses at length in the course of *Decline*. Consider Spengler's characterisation of Faustian culture. Spengler tells us that the Faustian Ur-symbol is the Will-to-the-Infinite, the free movement of the Will of the subject across the entirety of reality. As a corollary, it invokes the Will-to-Power, the transformative/disclosive force necessary to render insubstantial any obstacles to the movement of the Will and its quest to unveil the 'eternal truths,' the foundations of reality. In the later days of the culture, as it enters the civilisational stage, the intellectual preferences of the Faustians become increasingly science-oriented and the tendency develops to seek to account for all aspects of existence through the use of systematic and causal analysis. This naturalising tendency is anti-historical as it excludes becoming and portrays the world in a static manner. By the height of Faustian civilisation, Faustians have exhausted the creative potential of their traditional forms of expression. Neglectful of the future, they live in an eternal present that mimics the vitality of past ages and which pays reverential heed to the dead expression forms and symbolic structures of past ages.

Spengler's positivist philosophy of history is a deliberate reflection of all these late Faustian tendencies. The cultural desire for the free movement of the Will manifests itself in a chafing against any restrictions, both spatial and temporal. Spengler's positivist history offers a clear view of the development of *any* culture. "Long-vanished and unknown epochs, even whole Cultures" of the past, and "*still unaccomplished* stages of our Western history" can be unveiled to the willing Faustian subject, giving it an unrestricted view over the whole field of history.<sup>77</sup> The positivist outlook portrays cultures as structures of determinate and fixed form, capable of precise measurement and demarcation, and to be analysed using scientifically-derived methods. It is what George Santayana termed a "botany of events."<sup>78</sup> For all Spengler's talk of cultures as organisms, the positivist representation of cultures is decidedly static and anti-temporal. The organisms revealed here are no longer living, but preserved specimens to be dissected. These "skeletons of dead systems" recur with mechanical precision, in identical form.<sup>79</sup> And finally, the Faustian present is viewed not as something historically unique or still capable of further creative novelty. It is rather exactly the same as all that has gone before, another instance of the eternal return of the same. The future is not open, but simply a continuation of the present, which itself is a recapitulation of the past. And there is nothing new under the sun.

Spengler's positivist philosophy of history is effectively a collection of the elements of Faustian civilisation that he found most objectionable and inauthentic.<sup>80</sup> And the answer to

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<sup>77</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 112-113.

<sup>78</sup> George Santayana, *The Idler and his works* (New York: George Braziller Inc., 1957), 89.

<sup>79</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 382.

<sup>80</sup> It is interesting to note from the fragments of the Vaihinger-Spengler correspondence in the *Spengler Letters 1913-1936* that Vaihinger appeared to view Spengler's *Decline* as concerned,

the question of what possessed Spengler to put forward just such a philosophy of history lies, I suggest, in the function that it was intended to serve. Spengler's priority in *Decline* is to compel Faustian civilisation to confront its existential status and look to the (technological) future. Spengler's relativist philosophy of history serves this function. Spengler's positivist philosophy of history also serves this function. What is remarkable about Spengler's positivist philosophy of history, considering how generally rebarbative he must have found it, is how much of his *authentic* philosophy of history is present in it. We find the same role for death as a motivating factor for a prompt re-evaluation of the importance of certain forms of cultural praxis. We find the same insistence on the ultimate meaninglessness of human existence. We find the same assertion of cultural isolation. And, ultimately, we find the same course of action. Namely, to embrace the remaining forms of creative praxis and fashion a new future. The key difference between the outcome of the positivist and relativist accounts is as follows. The individual who accepts the relativist narrative makes an authentic existential choice to actualize their possibilities based upon a descriptively accurate account of the existential features of Faustian civilisation. The individual who accepts the positivist narrative, on the other hand, resolves to follow the predetermined course of a culture-organism. Facing the option of death today or death tomorrow, they elect to stave off the prospect of culture-death for the nonce by embracing technological forms of praxis. They do not choose the future, they accept it. Their decision is thus *inauthentic*.

However, inauthentic or otherwise, the outcome is the same. Both relativist and positivist philosophies of history lead to a rapprochement with civilisation's technological forces. Some do it because they recognize the fundamental structure of *care* and the need for an existentially meaningful existence. Others because the laws of history say they have to. Either way, from Spengler's perspective, the job gets done and Faustian culture is renewed. Spengler, I suggest, recognizes that the Faustian historical consciousness of the ultimate meaninglessness of human existence and the relativity of all cultural values is not a burden that all can face bearing. It is perhaps only the 'Great Men' of Faustian culture who can accept the death of all past certainties (except death itself) and choose to create new meanings for themselves and others.<sup>81</sup> Spengler, I suspect, holds that in this respect Faustian civilisation resembles its preceding cultural stages in that it is always a minority who write the cultural narrative into which the majority are incorporated. Spengler's positivist philosophy of history then is a noble lie, a useful fiction for the literate public. Writing, as Iain Thomson puts it, "from the margins of the academy" Spengler's positivism is a populist strategy aimed at a reading public who would have been familiar with, and receptive to, the positivist tropes that he employed.<sup>82</sup> He pitches his existential project to those sentimentally inclined to the positivist project of objective, value-free truth in a way that satisfies their narrative preferences and, through the familiarity of its mode of description, produces in them the conviction of truth. Thus, Spengler carefully sugar-coats his positivist philosophy of history in all the key concepts and buzzwords most likely to appeal to those who still cling to the old certainties of the Faustian past, who have not or cannot recognize that the metaphysical claims of its culture-symbols

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at least in part, with an analysis of historical *fictions*. Vaihinger writes in commendation, "You... bring out the ideas which govern world history... the mad ideas by which mankind allows itself to be led and misled." Oswald Spengler, *Spengler Letters 1913-1936* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1966), 111.

<sup>81</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 34.

<sup>82</sup> Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology – Technology and the Politics of Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 95.

are empty. And yet, its sceptical import is the same: the past is dead, acknowledge present options and from among them fashion something new.

I have represented Spengler's positivist philosophy of history as a deliberate fiction designed to serve a purpose contrary to its apparent one. Although it is ostensibly an argument for a positivist approach to history, I have argued that it is in fact a deliberately fallacious (by Spengler's standards) rhetorical strategy intended to lead the reader to the same existential conclusion as his relativistic/phenomenological account. Spengler in effect argues for a position he has declared untenable in order to clarify and advance the alternative he in fact favours. And moreover, he does so without explicitly indicating to the reader that this is his strategy. Lest my argument strike the reader as somewhat *ad hoc*, I suggest that this is in fact an expositional strategy that Spengler employs throughout *Decline*.

#### IV. A Clarificatory Note on Spengler's Narrative Style

In this section, I detail briefly a possible interpretation of Spengler's style of exposition that is not meant to conclusively prove my fictionalist reading of his positivism, but offer further reasons for entertaining it. I suggest that a fictionalist reading becomes far more plausible when one considers it in the light of the writing conventions of the period, and the differences between those conventions and our own.

Spengler's expositional strategy is best viewed as deriving from his views on the operations of conceptual consciousness. Spengler views human experiential consciousness as organized around two poles, what he terms a "tension of contraries."<sup>83</sup> Much of *Decline* is structured around the interplay of such contraries — or as Restivo terms them, "axiomatic distinctions" — such as 'becoming' and 'become,' 'proper' and 'alien,' 'history' and 'nature,' 'soul' and 'world,' etc.<sup>84</sup> Spengler states that this conceptual duality

is implicit in the very essence of all awareness. Just as any sense-impression is only remarked when it detaches itself from another, so 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.<sup>85</sup>

It is the first possibility for critical understanding, that of creating a conceptual anti-pole, or counter-pole as he sometimes terms it, that is of particular relevance here. Spengler argues that to understand something, we must proceed by first fashioning an opposite or counter-concept. This counter-concept throws the concept under scrutiny into sharper relief and allows the development of understanding through reciprocal movement between the two concepts, allowing for greater conceptual clarification and differentiation. Spengler employs this clarification by contrast throughout *Decline* in his treatment of different cultures. He states that

The spirit of Classical history and the spirit of Western history can only be really understood by considering the two souls as an opposition. And we can say the same of the atom-idea, regarded as the basis of the respective

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<sup>83</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 54; Swer, "Science Fiction," 131-7.

<sup>84</sup> Sal Restivo, *The Social Relations of Physics, Mysticism, and Mathematics* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), 212.

<sup>85</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 127.

physics. Galileo who created the concept of force and the Milesians who created that of *arche*, Democritus and Leibniz, Archimedes and Helmholtz...<sup>86</sup>

Spengler further states that

We might have found the constant *alter ego* of our own actuality in establishing the correspondence, item by item, from the ‘Trojan War’ and the Crusades, Homer and the Nibelungenlied, through Doric and Gothic, Dionysian movement and Renaissance, Polycletus and John Sebastian Bach, Athens and Paris, Aristotle and Kant, Alexander and Napoleon, to the world-city and the imperialism common to both Cultures.<sup>87</sup>

In both quotations, Spengler sets up a contrast between episodes in the history of Apollinian culture and those of Faustian. Given that Spengler uses the term *alter ego* interchangeably with his anti-pole terminology, we can see that Spengler is using Classical culture as the anti-pole to Faustian culture.<sup>88</sup> The *alter-ego* of a concept is a “mirror-image,” a “creation and copy of the Intellect.”<sup>89</sup> Classical culture, and I suggest all the other non-Faustian cultures in *Decline*, function as counter-poles. And the point of developing a counter-pole is not to understand the counter-pole itself, but to use it to understand its counterpart. Thus, much of Spengler’s comparative analysis of cultures can be seen as motivated not by the desire to understand non-Faustian world-cultures but to understand Faustian culture alone.

Furthermore, Spengler maintains that one can never leave the experiential structures of one’s own culture and can never penetrate those of a different culture. Consequently, we could never know what it would be like to experience the world of a different culture-member and any attempt that we made to recreate and access the culture-world of another would be unsuccessful. Any world that one experienced in such an effort would be an ersatz construct, a reflection of our own culture. And yet a significant part of *Decline* is taken up with detailed accounts of the experience of non-Faustian culture-worlds; the Egyptian understanding of life, the Magian sense of space, the Apollinian forms of art, and so on. Spengler apparently reports on these cultures from the ‘inside,’ an activity that he at numerous points explicitly states is impossible. As he indicates in his complaint that the Renaissance attempt to revive the Classical culture-world accomplished the creation of nothing “but a Southernized Gothic, an anti-Gothic,” attempts to recreate the world of another culture end up producing an image of one’s own culture.<sup>90</sup> Spengler states that “we are incapable of altering our world-feeling — so incapable that even in trying to alter it we have to follow the old lines and confirm instead of overthrowing it.”<sup>91</sup> The Renaissance recreation of Classical antiquity was the unwitting invention of a counter-pole to the Faustian culture of that time. And likewise, Spengler’s recreations of the world-cultures are, by his own definition, inventions of counter-poles to the Faustian culture of his time.

Consequently, each time Spengler provides an account of the lived experience of a different culture, he is doing several things. Firstly, he is articulating an experiential

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Spengler sometimes refers to Nature as the “counter-pole” of Destiny and at other times as its “alter-ego” (*Decline*, 142, 121).

<sup>89</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 205, 157.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 345.

perspective that he holds he is incapable of knowing. Secondly, he is articulating a perspective that he believes to be but a fictional mirror-image of his own culture. And thirdly, he is articulating this counterfeit experiential perspective in order to create a counter-pole as a means for us to better understand *our own* culture-world.

The fact that Spengler's detailed accounts on the inner experience of life in other cultures are, in effect, acts of cultural ventriloquism on Spengler's part is made harder to detect by the particular narrative style that Spengler employs in such moments. Jonathan Rée, in his analysis of the peculiarities of Hegel's narrative voice in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, argues that Hegel adopts a form of speech intermediate between direct and indirect speech that Rée terms free indirect speech. Direct speech involves the repetition of the same words that a character has spoken, and indirect speech involves the narrator conveying the meaning of a character's words or actions in their own voice. Using the indirect voice, Rée claims, would have amounted to Hegel endorsing his characters' utterances as meaningful, and use of the direct would have implied indifference to their meaningfulness.

Rée describes the indicators of free indirect speech as including

shifts of tenses into the past; the flaunting of manifest oddities or inadequacies of thought or expression; the identification of times and places in terms of the character's frame of reference rather than the narrator's; and the posing of questions which could arise only in the mind of the character.<sup>92</sup>

Hegel, Rée suggests, chose free indirect speech to express views that he deemed incorrect yet informative, and in return for this narrative flexibility left his work open to continuous misunderstanding. Rée warns that

Reckless readers of free indirect speech can easily mistake sentences which are intended to express the mind of the character for affirmations of the opinions of the narrator: the very same words might bear either interpretation.<sup>93</sup>

The bearing of all this on the issue of Spengler's narrative style is his proximity to Hegel (as understood by Rée) in this respect. I am not suggesting that Spengler's use of free indirect voice is caused by his reading of Hegel, although he was certainly familiar with Hegel's work. (Indeed, given Spengler's extremely limited list of acknowledged influences, the fact that Rée lists Goethe as a practitioner of this narrative voice is more suggestive.) Rather what I am suggesting is that Spengler employs the free indirect voice in his 'insider' accounts of non-Faustian cultures, for similar reasons, which in turn have left him and his narrative intentions open to misunderstanding.

Spengler describes the life of other cultures in a manner that moves from the statement of historical facts concerning specific cultural artefacts, to statements expressing the feeling of cultural existence in those cultures, and back again. Factual descriptions are given of historical materials, such as the mosaics of Ravenna, the portrait of Amenemhet III, or the principle of Tao.<sup>94</sup> These are accounts of the details of historical evidence that one can assume Spengler himself viewed to be as close as possible to 'objective' in the sense of being largely empirically verifiable. From these Spengler moves to evoke the significance of particular artefacts; the gold-ground of the mosaics express "the Arabian form of the Christian world-consciousness," Egyptian portrait is "a mighty emergence out of the stone-

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<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Rée, *Philosophical Tales* (London: Methuen, 1987), 88.

<sup>93</sup> Rée, *Philosophical Tales*, 89.

<sup>94</sup> Spengler, *Decline*, 329, 262, 190.

mass of the body,” and the Tao operates as an “intensely directional principle” and “derives all its meaning from a deep historical feeling.”<sup>95</sup> Here Spengler begins to speculatively revivify the material traces of past cultures by imaginatively recreating the symbolic significance and function of the artefacts in their host cultures. And from this point Spengler moves to the expression of a whole cultural world-feeling; the Magian feels “all happening as an expression of mysterious powers that filled the world-cavern with their spiritual substance,” the “Egyptian soul saw itself as moving down a narrow and inexorably-prescribed life-path to come at the end before the judges of the dead” and its existence as “that of the traveller who follows one unchanging direction,” and the Chinaman “wanders through his world... conducted to his god or his ancestral tomb... by friendly Nature herself.”<sup>96</sup> At this point, Spengler has left behind the authority of the narrator and expresses the fictional life-experience of the inhabitant of his synthetic culture-world *as if* it were real. The feeling expressed by the representative cultural character is clearly not meant to represent that of the narrator, and yet Spengler provides no explicit markers of the narrative transition. In this way, Spengler makes the fictional feel actual to his readers, and in so doing enables them to understand at a remove a world-feeling that is in fact their own. The blending of detached narrative with the perspective of the character invites the reader to identify with the other culture, whilst at the same time distancing them from their background understanding of their own culture. The relocation of sympathetic identification from Faustian culture to the ‘other’ allows the Faustian to appear for a moment as less familiar, more enigmatic, and thus in need of understanding itself. Spengler use of the free indirect voice has the effect of rendering the culturally strange familiar and the culturally familiar strange.

The way in which Spengler moves through his accounts of non-Faustian cultures also serves to demonstrate to the reader the process whereby he suggests an understanding of Faustian culture itself is to be achieved. He states that

within... History, the dates or data of the past (chronologies, statistics, names, forms) form a rigid web. ‘Facts are facts’ even if we are unaware of them, and all else is image, *Theoria*, both in the one domain and in the other. But history is itself the condition of being ‘in the focus’ and the material is only an aid to this condition.<sup>97</sup>

Accordingly, he begins with the data of history, the material traces, and proceeds to turn them into symbols. In doing so they change from ‘facts,’ things-become, to ‘truths,’ emblems of cultural forms of life.<sup>98</sup> And from these ‘truths’ Spengler fabricates the ethos, the lived experience of the culture-world in which these ‘truths’ formed symbolic structures of meaning. And from the synoptic sense of a culture’s form of life, Spengler then moves back and forth along his interpretative chain, from ethos to symbol to fact, incorporating more historical data into ‘experiential’ narrative. Although the narratives that Spengler puts together in this process are self-consciously fictional, the process of ‘re-signification’ is one that he wishes us to apply to our own Faustian culture. By viewing the objects of our own, present-centered existence not as brute facts, but as symbols with a genealogy that can be retraced and re-experienced, Spengler hopes to lead us to a re-discovery of the formative ethos of our own form of life. Spengler uses the tales of other cultures that he devises to try and make us imagine what it would be like to experience the world differently. And by doing

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 248, 262, 15.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 247, 188-189, 190.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 154.

so he enables us to take up a perspective on our own experience of the world, to look *in* our culture for the structures that Spengler ‘finds’ in other cultures, the feeling of *care*, the Ur-symbol, the life-stages, and to appreciate the unique character (in the sense of an overall narrative consistency) of our own alienated existence by casting it into relief through contrasting culture-concepts. These structures, which Spengler used in his culture-fictions to *stress* the alterity of other cultures, are the very features of our own culture that he wants us to recognize, from this critical distance, as our own.

## Conclusion

Seen in the light of the above, the technique that Spengler employs in his presentation of the positivist version of his philosophy of history is of a piece with the expository strategy that he employs throughout *Decline*. And having indicated his ‘pole/counter-pole’ method of conceptual clarification, Spengler is not at all fastidious about notifying the reader of these recurrent shifts in narrative voice. The text contains numerous accounts of worldviews that are not representations of Spengler’s own views but that operate as evocations of what the world would look like from a perspective other than that *appropriate* to our own context. The important thing to recall with Spengler’s *Decline* is that there is no perspective expressed in the book that is not an expression of Faustian experiential consciousness. All ‘alterity’ is apparent. As Restivo notes, Spengler’s

contraries share two important features: (1) they are each units or totalities (and together they form a totality), and (2) they are polarities which by virtue of being extremes establish that there is a potential for many types of ‘realities.’<sup>99</sup>

Every perspective is a reflection of our own, and every dichotomy is a contrivance. Spengler’s continuous shifts in narrative voice reflect the contingency and variability that he sees in the structures of signification of Faustian culture, and his use of free indirect speech enables him to convey this sense of flux to the reader by expressing an imaginary perspective without committing himself to endorsing either it or its reality. Ultimately the only ‘reality’ to be found in his counter-pole constructions is their instrumental value in enabling us to articulate and comprehend our own cultural forms of existence, and Spengler’s positivist philosophy of history is no exception. Like Spengler’s accounts of other cultures, it is a deliberate fiction whose ‘falsity’ is for Spengler of secondary importance in relation to its heuristic value. Much of the confusion caused by Spengler’s comparative paradox may stem from the peculiarity of his expository conventions.

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<sup>99</sup> Sal Restivo, *Mathematics in Society and History* (Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business, 1992), 4-5.



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