

# Oswald Spengler in an Age of Globalisation

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## Science Fiction: Science, Vaihinger and Spengler's Fictionalist Philosophy of Science\*

### 1. Introduction

Oswald Spengler is best known as a philosopher of history, a proponent of a cyclical account of world-history in terms of the rise and fall of culture-organisms. However, one can trace in volume one of his *The Decline of the West*, first published in 1918, a sustained consideration of philosophical issues pertaining to the nature and practice of science that I suggest can be considered to be a philosophy of science. Spengler's philosophy of science has received scant attention thus far in the secondary literature, and perhaps as a consequence so too has its peculiar fictionalist character.

From my reconstruction of Spengler's philosophy of science it appears that he viewed all scientific theories as fictions. In this interpretation I follow Merlio who, to the best of my knowledge, is the only Spengler commentator to have considered this aspect of Spengler's thought. Merlio states that for Spengler

*science has only an instrumental character. It provides working hypotheses. However the practical successes of the technics are not evidence for the truth of the theory.*<sup>1</sup>

Fictionalism as a philosophy of science amounts to the view that the underlying nature of reality can never be really (or fully) known, and that the systems of thought that we construct to explain reality are in fact fictions whose correspondence to reality we *assume*.

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<sup>1</sup> Merlio (1980), 103.

Arthur Fine (1993) helpfully distinguishes between two main types of fictionalism which he terms eliminative and instrumentalist. The former seeks to eliminate and/or replace the fictional aspects of scientific discourse and to construct a language that is thoroughly significant and capable of expressing all of science. The latter, on the other hand, withholds the language of truth, evidence and belief from the fictional part of science and argues that considerations of utility and interest are sufficient grounds for retaining those fictional aspects.<sup>2</sup> It is the instrumentalist form of fictionalism that is of interest here and the most relevant proponent of such a view was the German philosopher, and contemporary of Spengler, Hans Vaihinger.

Vaihinger's *magnum opus* was his 1911 book, *The Philosophy of ›As If‹*, in which he explores the role of fictional elements in different spheres of human thought and action; including but not limited to legal, religious, and of course scientific spheres. Central to this work is the distinction that Vaihinger introduces between hypotheses and fictions. Hypotheses, for Vaihinger, are (in principle) verifiable by observation and are chosen from among other hypotheses on the basis of probability. Through this process of observational verification and probability-based selection, Vaihinger believes, we discover that which is ›true‹. Fictions, in contrast, do not possess these attributes. With them considerations of utility are paramount. On Vaihinger's account, fictions cannot be verified and are justifiable only with reference to the extent to which they prove themselves useful in life's activities. They are chosen from among other fictions not on the grounds of probability, but on the grounds of expediency with respect to certain ends. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, they are the product of human invention and are not discovered.<sup>3</sup>

The inclusion of this information on Vaihinger's fictionalism is intended to serve two purposes. Firstly, to provide an instance of what fictionalism in the philosophy of science entails, and thereby enable us to determine whether Spengler's philosophy of science merits the title ›fictionalism‹. And secondly, to provide enough information on Vaihinger's particular fictionalist position on science to allow us to evaluate Merlio's claim regarding the extent of Vaihinger's influence on Spengler's thought.

<sup>2</sup> Fine (1993), 2.

<sup>3</sup> On Vaihinger's account, mathematics is likewise a useful fiction. He states that, »Mathematics, as a whole, constitutes the classical instance of an ingenious instrument, of a mental expedient for facilitating the operation of thought« [Vaihinger (1935), 57].

This latter issue is of relevance owing to Vaihinger's alleged importance for Spengler's position on science. As mentioned earlier, most Spengler commentators have not explored his philosophy of science. And for those who have (namely Merlio) it is immediately apparent that Spengler's philosophy of science is advocating a form of fictionalism. What is equally obvious to Merlio is that the type of fictionalism that Spengler propounds is Vaihingerian fictionalism. Merlio states that, »As a student of Hans Vaihinger, Spengler asserted (that) any theory or any science is merely a more or less fruitful fiction.«<sup>4</sup> Merlio essentially asserts that Spengler is a fictionalist about science *because* Spengler is a follower of Vaihinger. Now I would not wish to deny the possibility of a connection between Vaihinger's work and that of Spengler's. I will however suggest that the relation between Vaihinger and Spengler is both more complicated and more profound than Merlio suggests.

The historical details of Spengler's relationship with Vaihinger are rather unclear. A typical Spengler biography will feature at most two references to Vaihinger. The first will note that Spengler studied under Vaihinger in at the University of Halle.<sup>5</sup> The second that Spengler was awarded the Lassen prize by the Nietzsche Foundation, along with Vaihinger and Hermann Graf Keyserling in November 1919.<sup>6</sup> The possibility that Vaihinger might have exerted any particular influence on Spengler's philosophy is not usually considered. Given Vaihinger's fame as a proponent of fictionalism and Spengler's decidedly fictionalist approach to the nature of science, the neglect of this topic seems rather peculiar. The most likely explanation seems to be the fact that very little attention has been paid in the secondary literature to Spengler's views on science.<sup>7</sup> One reads Spengler for his philosophy of history, and focuses on the details of his cyclical model of historical change and the characteristics of the various culture-organisms. Idiosyncratic musings on the nature of science in certain chapters then appear as background trivia, rather than key aspects of his philosophy. Such an approach overlooks the fact that Spengler chose to bookend his first volume of *Decline*, in which he does most of his philosophical heavy lifting, with chapters on science (mathematics and physics respectively). It also overlooks the fact that science remains a continuous theme, to which

<sup>4</sup> Merlio (1980), 103.

<sup>5</sup> Naeher (1984), 34; Felken (1988), 18.

<sup>6</sup> Conte (2004), 94; Naeher (1984), 85; Farrenkopf (2001), 13; Koktanek (1968), 328.

<sup>7</sup> Haack (2007) is a noteworthy exception.

Spengler constantly returns, throughout every chapter of the first volume. Once one notes the centrality of scientific concerns in Spengler's philosophy, it is not difficult to detect a coherent and sustained outlook on scientific matters within *Decline*, an outlook that is clearly fictionalist. And it is at this point that the question of Spengler's relationship with Vaihinger becomes relevant.

Merlio, one of the few authors to approach Spengler's philosophy with a focus on its scientific and technological dimensions, not only identifies Spengler's view of science as fictionalist, he also attributes it squarely to Vaihinger's influence. Merlio makes this observation in passing and does not go on to elaborate on this claim. I do wonder, however, whether the influence is so obvious. Addressing the commonalities of thought between Vaihinger and Spengler first, both Spengler and Vaihinger agree that there is a biological basis for fictionalist thought processes, in that they serve the Will-to-Power.<sup>8</sup> And while both explore the role of fiction in science and other spheres of human cognition and activity, Vaihinger operates with a far broader scope. In *The Philosophy of ›As If‹* Vaihinger identifies a range of different kinds of fictions, such as abstractive, schematic, heuristic and practical, whilst Spengler's philosophy is far less interested in classifying fictions and more interested in identifying and applying them. The philosophers also differ in the level of their analysis. Spengler operates at a general level of analysis, at the cultural or inter-cultural level, often at great remove from particular instances of everyday fictions. Vaihinger on the other hand advances no general theory of the nature and function of theories, and instead proceeds on a case by case basis, analysing fictions and their role as he finds them.

Aside from differences in methodology and the types of fiction considered, one apparent difference between Vaihinger and Spengler on science concerns the possibility of truth. Vaihinger considers scientific hypotheses to be verifiable, whilst Spengler's fictionalism is more thoroughgoing. For Spengler, science's formulae are empty symbols, its empirical data is theory-laden, and its metaphysics are historically contingent cultural products. A further significant difference concerns the purpose of their fictionalism. Vaihinger, in highlighting the idealizations and approximations commonly used in modelling physical phenomena, aims to undo the general opinion that if constructs are devoid of reality, they are also

<sup>8</sup> Although Vaihinger refers to this as the ›Will-to-Life.‹ Vaihinger (1935), xliii.

devoid of utility. Fictions, he argues, are expedient with reference to an end. Spengler would doubtless concur with Vaihinger's position up to this point, but was far more interested in analysing the end that these fictions served, namely the Faustian cultural imperative. For it was central to Spengler's philosophical project that Western humanity be made aware that it has lost sight of the *end* of science, of its goal. And it is by means of our new awareness of science's fictitious nature, that Spengler aims to draw our attention back to this end.

Whilst both philosophers seem to have little in common between their fictionalist philosophies of science, if one digs deeper into Vaihinger's philosophy of *As if*, particularly into those sections in which he provides the foundations for his fictionalist outlook by means of an analysis of the nature and functioning of the psyche in relation to the external world, then the similarities between Spengler's philosophy and Vaihinger's become striking. Whether or not this amounts to compelling evidence for a direct Vaihingerian influence on Spengler's thought, I would not wish to say. I would however argue that Vaihinger's views on the spatial *a priori*, and other aspects of Kantian philosophy, are in very close proximity to those of Spengler and that if we view Spengler's cultural *a priori* as a Vaihingerian fiction, it both clarifies certain obscurities in his phenomenology and resolves numerous problematic issues in Spengler's general philosophy. Consequently, I suggest, we should read Spengler *as if* he were a Vaihingerian.

To demonstrate the efficacy of such a reading I will detail the key elements of Vaihinger's views on the nature of the psyche and its relation to the external world in comparison with those of Spengler. I will then explore the similarities of their views on the fictional nature of science and mathematics, before moving on to consider those areas in which their views diverge significantly. These divergences, I suggest, stem not from a radical disagreement in the nature of their respective fictionalist outlooks but rather from a difference in scope. Spengler, I will suggest, is essentially a Vaihingerian fictionalist who is prepared to follow Vaihingerian thought beyond Vaihinger to its most sceptical consequences. In other words, Spengler's philosophical direction runs not counter to Vaihinger's philosophy but rather was already implicit within it.

## 2. The Basic Existential Structure of Human Experience

Vaihinger, like Spengler, offers a brief philosophical anthropological account of the formation of human consciousness as a foundation for his claims regarding the fictional nature of science. Humanity, Vaihinger claims, finds itself surrounded by a welter of sensory data, »an endless accumulation of sensational contents« which »crowd upon us more or less irresistibly.«<sup>9</sup> Like Spengler he suggests that the original human emotional response to this phenomenal world is one of fear. This sensational data, Vaihinger writes, »even cast a lasting fear over us, for we have to rule our lives according to them, in constant expectation of their appearance.«<sup>10</sup> Consider that in relation to Spengler's reference to »the presence of the alien powers that loom, threatening in the dawn, behind the screen of sense-phenomena.«<sup>11</sup> Both philosophers portray humanity as assaulted by a riot of sensory impressions, within which are found recurrent patterns whose cause or causes we cannot penetrate. Driven by the will to live and the sense that the world around is a hostile one, humanity develops its foundational mental structures. Spengler states that

*This world-fear is assuredly the most creative of all prime feelings. Man owes to it the ripest and deepest forms and images, not only of his conscious inward life, but also of the infinitely-varied external culture which reflects this life.*<sup>12</sup>

Thus, for Spengler, fear of the external world is the spur to the invention of humanity's internal (experiential) and external (artefactual) structures. Likewise, Vaihinger claims that

*the mind is inventive; under the compulsion of necessity, stimulated by the outer world, it discovers the store of contrivances that lie hidden within itself. The organism finds itself in a world full of contradictory sensations, it is exposed to the assaults of a hostile external world, and in order to preserve itself, it is forced to seek every possible means of assistance, external as well as internal. In necessity and pain mental evolution is begun, in contradiction*

<sup>9</sup> Vaihinger (1935), xlv–xlv.

<sup>10</sup> Vaihinger (1935), xlv.

<sup>11</sup> Spengler (1926), 79.

<sup>12</sup> Spengler (1926) 79.

*and opposition consciousness awakes, and man owes his mental development more to his enemies than to his friends.*<sup>13</sup>

And Spengler, speaking of the development of the ideas of space and causality, suggests that »the characteristic... of extension – limit and causality – is really wizard's gear wherewith our proper soul attempts to conjure and bind alien powers – Goethe speaks somewhere of the »principle of reasonable order that we bear within ourselves and could impress as the seal of our power upon everything that we touch'« and that »all law is a fetter which our world-dread hurries to fix upon the incrowding sensuous, a deep necessity of self-preservation.«<sup>14</sup>

For both philosophers then the rational ideational structures of human consciousness are in no sense innate characteristics of human thought. They are viewed as biological functions, capacities developed by the human organism solely to meet the practical exigencies of existence. Rational thought was thus never an end in itself but always merely a means to an end.

Furthermore, for both Vaihinger and Spengler, human consciousness is dynamic. It does not passively mirror reality but actively transforms that which it encounters. Vaihinger states that

*The psyche... is an organic formative force, which independently changes what has been appropriated, and can adapt foreign elements to its own requirements as easily as it adapts itself to what is new. The mind is not merely appropriative, it is also assimilative and constructive. In the course of its growth, it creates its organs of its own accord in virtue of its adaptable constitution, but only when stimulated from without, and adapts them to external circumstances.*<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Spengler states that »it is continuously and always... that I am endowing that which is outside me with the *whole* content that is in me, from the half-dreamy impressions of world-coherence to the rigid world of causal laws and number that overlies and binds them.«<sup>16</sup> The implication here being that, whether passive or active, human consciousness is always

<sup>13</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 12.

<sup>14</sup> Spengler (1926), 123.

<sup>15</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 2.

<sup>16</sup> Spengler (1926), 164–165.

acting upon the world of sense data. One immediate consequence of this view of human consciousness as active and transformative, is that there develops an inevitable gulf between reality and our perception of it. Vaihinger asserts that, »the object of the world of ideas as a whole is not the portrayal of reality – this would be an utterly impossible task – but rather to provide us with an instrument for finding our way about more easily in this world. Subjective processes of thought inhere in the entire structure of cosmic phenomena.«<sup>17</sup> And Spengler also emphasises the subjective nature of our conceptions of reality, saying that, »The possibilities that we have of possessing an ›outer world‹ that reflects and attests our proper existence are infinitely numerous and exceedingly heterogeneous.«<sup>18</sup> Spengler is more concerned than Vaihinger to stress the sheer variety of possible conceptual constructions of ›reality‹, but the fact remains that he too insists that our image of external actuality is a product of our inner reality rather than a reflection of the world as it really is.

Both philosophers maintain that human consciousness, as it develops in response to its sensory environment, is marked by a pronounced duality. And again, for both philosophers, this duality has a decidedly Kantian character. For Spengler, human consciousness develops a conceptual division between inner and outer, potential and actual, in response to the hostile phenomenal world around it. This conception of reality as a »tension of contraries« is structured, at a more fundamental level, by the forms of intuition of Time (Destiny) and Space (the Ur-symbol).<sup>19</sup> Vaihinger claims that when we consider the world philosophically our analysis leads to either an epistemological standpoint, whereby we find ourselves confronted with »sensational contents«, or to a psychological standpoint, where we encounter »sensations, feelings and strivings or actions.«<sup>20</sup> These two standpoints correspond to Spengler's two basic facts of consciousness, the *proper* (*das Eigene*) and the *alien* (*das Fremde*), our consciousness of our own inner life, and the perceptual awareness of an outer world.<sup>21</sup> Vaihinger further argues that analysis of the world is also problematized by the »rationally insoluble antithesis« between the world of »sensational contents« and the picture of reality provided by the natural sciences »which reduce

<sup>17</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 15.

<sup>18</sup> Spengler (1926), 55.

<sup>19</sup> Spengler (1926), 54.

<sup>20</sup> Vaihinger (1935), xlv.

<sup>21</sup> Spengler (1926), 53.

everything to the movement of matter.«<sup>22</sup> This irreconcilable difference between the world as it appears in our own lived-experience and the world as it appears scientifically we find mirrored in Spengler's distinction between the two possible forms of human world-formation, the experiential ›world-as-history‹ and the mechanistic ›world-as-nature‹.<sup>23</sup>

Although there is not space to discuss it here, Spengler's early philosophy is to a large extent a quasi-Kantian superstructure erected on the foundation of Kantian forms of intuition. Whilst Vaihinger also makes use of such Kantian terminology, and seems to maintain the division between the world of appearance and the world as it really is, that is between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, he also seems to part company from Spengler here regarding the reality of such Kantian notions. For Vaihinger, Kantian elements such as the thing-in-itself and the categories are themselves fictions, albeit essential ones.<sup>24</sup> He states that

*In order to explain the world of ideas which exists within us, Kant assumed that the actual world consisted of Things-in-themselves, mutually interacting, and on the basis of this interaction he explained the genesis of sensations. We must, however, remember that Kant only had the right to say, ... that we must (compelled thereto by reason of our discursive thought) regard real existence as if Things-in-themselves really existed, as if they influenced us and thus gave rise to our idea of the world. In actual fact this is all he had the right to say according to his own system; and in that case the Ding an sich was a necessary fiction, for only thus can we imagine actual reality or think and speak of it at all.<sup>25</sup>*

And Vaihinger takes a similar position with regards to the Kantian categories, arguing that they were no more than »convenient aids for bringing the mass of sensations into subjection.«<sup>26</sup> The categories, on Vaihinger's account, allow us structure our sensory experiences around conceptual nuclei, such as the subject and the object. By reducing sensory

<sup>22</sup> Vaihinger (1935), xliii–xliv.

<sup>23</sup> Vaihinger adds a further tension between the sensory and motor nerves [Vaihinger (1935), 66–67].

<sup>24</sup> Vaihinger argues that his fictionalism is inspired by Kant and even suggests that Kant, at one time anyway, endorsed just such a fictionalist interpretation of his concepts. Although I would argue that Spengler follows Vaihinger in his Kantian fictionalism, from his comments on Kant's philosophy throughout *Decline* it does not appear that Spengler shared Vaihinger's interpretation of Kant himself as a fictionalist.

<sup>25</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 76.

<sup>26</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 170–171.

data to the categories, our consciousness is able to simplify the welter of phenomena and structure it, thereby enabling us to gain ideational purchase on it. These categories though have no non-subjective reality and furthermore are in no way innate features of human existence. They

*are not forms with any corresponding objective reality. They are merely combinations of thought, formed in response to some type of objective relationship but of purely subjective origin and of no value for understanding.*<sup>27</sup>

Thus, as Fine puts it, »for Vaihinger even the Kantian categories are not to be regarded as fixed.«<sup>28</sup>

This fictionalist reading of Kantian *a priori* forms and concepts appears initially to be at odds with the interpretation with which Spengler operates. He makes several references to the ›numen‹ that hide behind the world of appearance. For example, we are told that primitive mankind »knows numina of the outer world.«<sup>29</sup> And Spengler clearly operates with modified versions of the ›prime conceptions‹ of Space and Time throughout *Decline*. Despite this, however, there is evidence that Spengler might well have shared Vaihinger's fictionalist approach to Kantian *a priori* forms and concepts.

Spengler speaks of the human ›discovery‹ of the numina as having its origin in a sense of »astonishment at *alien motion*.«<sup>30</sup> He states that

*The thoughtful percipient takes in the impression of motion in outer Nature. He feels about him an almost indescribable alien life of unknown powers, and traces the origin of these effects to ›numina‹, to The Other, inasmuch as this Other also possesses Life.*<sup>31</sup>

Spengler's claim is that one senses sequences in sensory phenomena that have not been initiated by oneself and which resist alteration, and one attributes to these phenomenal sequences a noumenal Other. These correspond to Vaihinger's account of the »regularities of co-existence and

<sup>27</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 176–177.

<sup>28</sup> Fine (1993), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Spengler (1926), 300.

<sup>30</sup> Spengler uses the term *alien* to denote the external world of sensory phenomena. Spengler (1926), 397.

<sup>31</sup> Spengler (1926), 397.

succession« that force themselves upon human consciousness.<sup>32</sup> However, for Vaihinger this attribution of numina to phenomenal sequences is but part of what he terms humanity's »irresistible tendency to personification«, and the numina are not to be understood as actually possessing any reality external to human ideation.<sup>33</sup> And it appears that Spengler may well have shared this view.

Consider the way in which Spengler details the way in which »the consciousness of the Culture intellectually concretes its primary ›numina‹.«

*It imposes significant words – names – on them and there conjures (seizes or bounds) them. By virtue of the Name they are subject to the intellectual power of the man who possesses the Name, and... the whole of philosophy, the whole of science, and everything that is related in any way to »knowing« is at the very bottom nothing but an infinitely-refined mode of applying the name-magic of the primitive to the ›alien‹.<sup>34</sup>*

The above section can certainly be read not as an explanation of how humanity discovers the *existence* of numina behind the phenomena, and thereby as an endorsement by Spengler of the reality of numina, but rather as an exercise in philosophical anthropology in which Spengler imaginatively reconstructs how the *concept* of numina came into being. On such a reading the numina are ideational constructs that human consciousness imposes on certain recurrent phenomena to facilitate their conceptual and practical manipulation. Such a reading is in accord with Vaihinger's views on the fictional nature of the phenomenal/noumenal division.<sup>35</sup>

Further indications that Spengler might have employed a fictional reading of the Kantian thing-in-itself is to be found in the section of *Decline* where he recounts the consciousness's primary division of its sensational content around the poles of *proper* and *alien*, inner and outer. He claims that

*Great thinkers have bent all their powers of image-forming to the task of expressing this relation, more and more rigorously, by the aid of half-intuitive*

<sup>32</sup> Vaihinger (1935), xlv.

<sup>33</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 198.

<sup>34</sup> Spengler (1926), 397.

<sup>35</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 59.

*dichotomies such as ›phenomena and things-in-themselves‹, ›world-as-will and world as-idea‹, ›ego and non-ego‹, although human powers of exact knowing are surely inadequate for the task.<sup>36</sup>*

The above statement certainly appears to classify the Kantian ›phenomena and things-in-themselves‹ as a ›half-intuitive‹ dichotomy *derived* from the originary inner/outer division in sensory data. And later in *Decline* Spengler states that, »In the mere naming of ›thing-in-itself‹, ›atom‹, ›energy‹, ›gravitation‹, ›cause‹, ›evolution‹ and the like is for most learned men the same sense of deliverance as there was for the peasant of Latium in the words ›Ceres‹, ›Consus‹, ›Janus‹, ›Vesta‹.«<sup>37</sup> In the first place the term ›thing-in-itself‹ appears in a list of scientific entities that Spengler considers to be fictional, in the second case it is then considered to be akin to certain Roman deities whose fictional nature is obvious.<sup>38</sup> And again, elsewhere in *Decline* Spengler refers to phenomena and things-in-themselves as »obsolete distinctions.«<sup>39</sup> This is of a piece with Spengler's frequent assertion of the fundamental experiential unity of existence and rejection of subject/object dualities.

Regarding the Kantian synthetic *a priori* Spengler suggests that »the supposed constant structure of the intellect is an illusion.«<sup>40</sup> He also adds that the *a priori* »though certainly one of the most inspired *conceptions* of philosophy, is a *notion* that seems to involve enormous difficulties [my emphasis].«<sup>41</sup> Here Spengler seems to concede the utility of the Kantian *a priori*, whilst at the same time stressing its fictional nature. Now, Spengler's Ur-symbol is integral to his entire philosophical project, and I find no evidence to suggest that he viewed it as fictional. Indeed, he states quite unambiguously that the Ur-symbol, the Spenglerian cultural *a priori*, is a *priori* »in the very strictest Kantian sense of the phrase.«<sup>42</sup> I would suggest then that Spengler viewed a Time-sense and a Space-sense (of some sort) to be what he terms a »primary phenomenon«, a »basic tendency« of

<sup>36</sup> Spengler (1926) 53.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 397.

<sup>38</sup> Spengler's comment echoes Vaihinger's remark that the thinker who confuses a conceptual world with actual reality »is committing, formally at any rate, exactly the same mistake as the most primitive savage when he objectifies the creations of his thought« [Vaihinger (1935), 161–162].

<sup>39</sup> Spengler (1926), 45.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 345.

human existence that develops in primitive humanity when it attains the cultural stage. The Kantian forms of intuition of Time and Space are to be viewed as useful derivatives of this originary phenomena of consciousness, helpful conceptual placeholders with no objective existence. I suggest then that Spengler would probably have been in agreement with Vaihinger's argument that, »Mankind spent thousands of years dividing the sensation complexes into compartments arranged according to purely external characters – and this, even if theoretically useless, had yet a practical value.«<sup>43</sup>

### 3. Understanding and Ur-symbols

Vaihinger also claims that these, what one might term fundamental, fictions are not themselves capable of further analysis or subdivision. The *a priori* concepts of understanding and intuitions of appearance cannot be subsumed under some other, more fundamental, set, for beneath these most fundamental fictions there is nothing but the undifferentiated mass of sensory phenomena.

Spengler takes a similar position, stating that

*This elementary structure of consciousness, as a fact of immediate inner knowledge, is not susceptible of conceptual subdivision. Nor, indeed, are the two factors distinguishable at all except verbally and more or less artificially, since they are always associated, always intertwined, and present themselves as a unit, a totality. The epistemological starting-point of the born idealist and the born realist alike, the assumption that soul is to world (or world to soul, as the case may be) as foundation is to building, as primary to derivative, as ›cause‹ to ›effect,‹ has no basis whatever in the pure fact of consciousness...<sup>44</sup>*

On this view the basic polar conceptions of inner and outer are both ideational constructs, of apparently simultaneous creation. Both equally fictional and both equally necessary for organic existence.

Vaihinger and Spengler's views on the fundamental conceptual polarity of human consciousness have implications for their definition of the term ›understanding‹. »To understand«, Vaihinger states, »is to reduce to

<sup>43</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 170.

<sup>44</sup> Spengler (1926), 54.

known ideational constructs.«<sup>45</sup> Human consciousness, for Vaihinger, contains a host of ideational structures fabricated by the human organism to facilitate practical action to preserve its existence. These structures rest ultimately on the fundamental categories. Vaihinger further adds that these categories are themselves fictions of an analogical type. He states that

*all conception and cognition are based upon analogical apperceptions. The only ideational constructs by means of which existing things can be apperceived are either the corresponding general conceptions or other concrete objects. But since these are in their turn inconceivable, all these analogies only give rise to an apparent understanding.*<sup>46</sup>

In other words, ›understanding‹ involves the linking of a novel intuition with a pre-existing ideational construct with which it shares certain similarities. In that both the intuition and the ideational construct are subjective constructs, ›understanding‹ always remains at the subjective level and never involves understanding of objective reality. Attributing this insight to Kant, Vaihinger argues that

*it is utterly impossible to attain knowledge of the world, not because our thought is too narrowly circumscribed... but because knowledge is always in the form of categories and these, in the last analysis, are only analogical apperceptions... By taking an entirely different path we thus reach the conclusion of the Kantian philosophy, that categories are of no assistance in grasping reality and that as analogical fictions they cannot provide us with any true knowledge.*<sup>47</sup>

Thus for Vaihinger reality is unknowable and what we think of as understanding is really just a subjective understanding. It is the process whereby we reduce sensory phenomena to analogical categories. And it is for this reason that Vaihinger insists that understanding cannot proceed as far as the fundamental categories of consciousness.

*If understanding actually consists only in this conversion, and if this conversion turns out to be merely a return to an original starting-point, then*

<sup>45</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 53.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 79–80.

*it is entirely senseless to go beyond it... The wish to understand the world is not only unrealizable, but also it is a very stupid wish. The psychical state of understanding only occurs when something has been successfully included or invested in the uniform of the categories. To desire to extend this feeling of pleasure further, to hope to understand the categories themselves, is an exceedingly stupid wish.*<sup>48</sup>

For if, as Vaihinger claims, nothing lies beneath the fundamental categories but a mass of sensory phenomena and occasional fixed sequences and co-existences, then there is no longer anything to be understood. The analogical chain is broken and understanding ceases.

Vaihinger's conception of human consciousness as operating with layers of analogical categories has significant importance for his account of the development of language. It is the imposition of analogical categories upon the sensory world, according to Vaihinger, that enables the possibility of communication by means of a shared analogy which refers to some aspect of phenomenal reality. Whilst communication in the first place, Vaihinger suggests, was contingent upon the presence of some basic analogical categories in human consciousness, its subsequent existence greatly facilitated the development of further categorial thought. The analogy to be communicated is attached to a word and the word becomes progressively less grounded in sensory impressions and more abstract in nature. As more complex conceptual relations are enabled, the incoming mass of sensory phenomena is separated, ordered, categorised. The phenomenal world becomes more structured and less random, and this in turn enables further possibilities for praxis:

*The psyche was no longer merely a helpless and passive spectator of the stream of existence and events, was no longer exclusively dependent upon mere reflex tendencies, but, as the pictures in this way became ordered and grouped according to categories, it was able to determine their re-entry and to arrange its activity accordingly.*<sup>49</sup>

It is difficult to tell precisely how closely Spengler's position on the structuring of consciousness follows that of Vaihinger. However, there are several noteworthy points of convergence. Firstly, consider Spengler's Ur-

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 171.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 176.

symbols. In Spengler's thought they are inextricably linked with a related series of categories of relation, modality, etc. such that where one finds a new Ur-symbol one finds different and related categories. For example, Spengler states that,

*the Arabian spirit possessed other world-categories than our own. They could have rebutted Kant, or Kant them, with the same subtlety of proof – and both disputants would have remained convinced of the correctness of their respective standpoints.<sup>50</sup>*

Spengler's Ur-symbol-linked categories operate in a manner very similar to Vaihinger's fundamental categories and, more importantly, they also seem to share a decidedly analogical character. Moreover, Spengler's spatial *a priori*, the Ur-symbol, also seems, like Vaihinger's categories, to be decidedly analogical in character. The Ur-symbol, Spengler tells us, enables human consciousness to conceive of an outer world and varies from culture to culture. For Classical Antiquity the Ur-symbol is described by Spengler as the »near, strictly limited, self-contained Body, for the Western infinitely wide and infinitely profound three-dimensional Space, for the Arabian the world as a Cavern.«<sup>51</sup> For the Egyptians the Ur-symbol is the inexorable, ordered march towards death, for the Chinese a wandering path through a landscape and for the Russians a »plane without limit«<sup>52</sup>.<sup>53</sup> Despite this variation, all the Ur-symbols that Spengler introduces are, I will suggest, analogies.

Consider also Spengler's insistence on the use of analogical reasoning to comprehend the true nature of organic (as opposed to mechanically conceived) existence. He states that

*The means whereby to understand living forms is Analogy. By these means we are enabled to distinguish polarity and periodicity in the world.<sup>54</sup>*

The ›polarity‹ is the tension of contraries (inner and outer, subject and object) and ›periodicity‹ may well refer to Vaihinger's unalterable

<sup>50</sup> Spengler (1926), 179.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 174.

<sup>52</sup> Emphasis removed.

<sup>53</sup> Spengler (1926), 189–190, 201.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 4.

phenomenal sequences. In any case, Spengler's emphasis on the importance of analogy in understanding the development of human consciousness through historical periods seems far more logical if one views him as committed to the analogical nature of the fundamental forms and concepts of consciousness.

Spengler's account of the development of human communication and its relationship with the elaboration of human ideational forms, though it lacks Vaihinger's analogical emphasis, is still very close to Vaihinger's account. Spengler states that

*In the soul of all primitive mankind, just as in that of earliest childhood, there is something which impels it to find means of dealing with the alien powers of the extension-world that assert themselves, inexorable, in and through space. To bind, to bridle, to placate, to ›know‹ are all, in the last analysis, the same thing... This is achieved, principally, by means of a word, the Name – the ›no men‹ which designates and calls up the ›numen‹ – and also by ritual practices of secret potency; and the subtlest, as well as the most powerful, form of this defence is causal and systematic knowledge, delimitation by label and number... When cognition has ripened to the point of words, the original chaos of impressions necessarily transforms itself into a ›Nature‹ that has laws and must obey them, and the world-in-itself becomes a world-for-us. The world-fear is stilled when an intellectual form-language hammers out brazen vessels in which the mysterious is captured and made comprehensible.<sup>55</sup>*

Here too we find the same relation between naming and the ordering of sensory impressions, the same suggestion that the development of language facilitated the development of conceptual categories, and the same link between what Spengler suggestively terms the »will-to-understanding« and the construction of a subjective conceptual world.<sup>56</sup>

Given that Spengler's account of consciousness stands in such proximity to that of Vaihinger, it seems likely that he operates with a similar definition of the term ›understanding‹, as the conversion of an intuited formation of sensory phenomena into an ideational structure. If this is the case, it gives

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 79.

a further insight into Spengler's reasons for his cultural isolation theory.<sup>57</sup> If all knowledge is really analogical and categorial, and if all the conceptual categories derive from and ultimately reduce to the fundamental intuition-forms, then it would not be possible to understand a concept that operated using an alien analogical category. In such an instance there would be an unavoidable absence of shared meaning.

For Spengler all cultural tokens, be they conceptual, linguistic, artefactual, etc. are symbolic. He states that

*Poems and battles, Isis and Cybele, festivals and Roman Catholic masses, blast furnaces and gladiatorial games, dervishes and Darwinians, railways and Roman roads, ›Progress‹ and Nirvana, newspapers, mass-slavery, money, machinery – all these are equally signs and symbols in the world-picture of the past that the soul presents to itself and would interpret.*<sup>58</sup>

Spengler argues that in the study of a culture we must »learn to recognize inward forms that constantly and everywhere repeat themselves.«<sup>59</sup> These repetitive cultural forms are all symbolic forms. And, on Spengler's account, these symbolic forms all reflect their culture's specific Ur-symbol. I suggest that for Spengler, like Vaihinger, the terms *symbolic* and *analogical* are effectively interchangeable. Spengler states that »All that is, symbolizes.«<sup>60</sup> And thus all that is, is to be understood analogically. We are told that Christian hymnology and the Eddas share an »implicit space-endlessness of prosody, rhythmic syntax and imagery.«<sup>61</sup> Rembrandt's colours and Beethoven's instrumentation express the infinite solitude of the Faustian soul. Valhalla speaks of solitude in the infinite.<sup>62</sup> Shakespeare's work exhibits a »ceaseless change of scene.«<sup>63</sup> Corelli, Handel and Bach produce music that is »dynamic« and »bodiless.«<sup>64</sup> All these symbolic depictions are firstly, analogical and secondly, all stand in a relation to

<sup>57</sup> Spengler insists that each culture is entirely self-originating and original with regards to its cultural content. Each culture comes into being and departs without imparting or receiving any cultural content from or to other contemporaneous, preceding or succeeding cultures.

<sup>58</sup> Spengler (1926), 160.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 104.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 165.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 185.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 186.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 220.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 231.

Spengler's master analogy of the Faustian Will-to-the-Infinite. And being analogical, as Vaihinger notes, »all knowledge gained thereby forms but a kind of simile, image, or counterpart of reality, but does not enable us to obtain knowledge of reality itself, or at least not in any adequate form.«<sup>65</sup> Spengler's Cultural symbolics form a conceptual world that is in no way a reflection of objective reality. They are analogically constructed and interrelated and, this being the case, it stands to reason that one who lacked the appropriate analogical ›key‹ to a culture's conceptual world would be unable to subjectively ›understand‹ it. If the thing to be understood (where understanding means reducing to a known ideational construct) is itself (as a culture-symbol) an ideational construct from a different set of culture-symbols, then the act of reducing it to *our own* ideational constructs will inevitably alter it. This Vaihingerian conception of ›understanding‹ conforms with Spengler's sceptical account of the nature and possibility of historical ›understanding‹.

#### 4. The Nature of Science

Vaihinger, as we have seen, argues that the human conception of the outer world is developed in response to the perceived recurrence of phenomena, and that it consists of a series of analogical structures grounded upon a fundamental polarity within the consciousness. For Vaihinger, as for Spengler, the origins of science lie within these structures of consciousness. For Vaihinger, as for Spengler, the development of all thought-constructs, scientific or otherwise, is an organic function aimed at practical utility and not the acquisition of the ›objective‹ truth of reality. Human consciousness, being dynamic and creative, conceptually transforms the sensory phenomena it perceives and recasts it in forms conducive to the functional requirements of existence. He writes that

*Just as the physical organism breaks up the matter which it receives, mixes it with its own juices and thus makes it suitable for assimilation, so the psyche envelops the thing perceived with categories which it has developed out of itself. As soon as an external stimulus reaches the mind, which rapidly responds to it as though provided with delicate feelers, inner processes start,*

<sup>65</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 30.

*a psychological activity begins, the outcome of which is the appropriation of the thing perceived for some purpose.*<sup>66</sup>

The priority of consciousness is always, for Vaihinger, to enable the ever more efficient calculation of events and the ability to act on the basis of those calculations. The thought-constructs developed to this end have as their ultimate criterion of selection not a realistic model of the objective world but practical corroboration via praxis.

*The true and final purpose of thought is action and the facilitation of action. Looked at from this point of view the world of ideas is, taken as a whole, simply a means and its constituent elements are also merely a means. What we have here is a system of expedients of thought which mutually help and support one another and whose final product is a scientifically purified conceptual world. It is just an extremely sensitive machine constructed by the logical instinct, and related to a pre-scientifically developed world of ideas as a modern iron hammer to the prehistoric stone-hammer of tertiary times, or steam-engine and railway to the crude wagon of the countryside. Both are only instruments, and though very different as regards delicacy and elegance are yet identical in kind.*<sup>67</sup>

Vaihinger here identifies scientific thought as belonging within the same field of instrumental thought as the earliest forms of human thought, and likewise aimed at improved technique for practical activity in the world. Vaihinger views the development of internal ideational constructs as directly analogous to the development of external technologies. Both being purposive rule-governed organic activities Vaihinger considers them both to be *technical* activities.<sup>68</sup>

The difference between scientific and basic conceptual thought for Vaihinger is firstly, a matter of degree. Scientific thought is conceptually refined by the continuous effort to bring it closer to the phenomenal actuality of our sensory impressions with less subjective residuum whilst accounting for that actuality with reference to the motion of matter.<sup>69</sup> A sec-

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 15: »It is in fact the essential object of science to develop only such ideas as have an objective correlate and to eliminate all admixture of the subjective.«

ond significant difference concerns the type of worldview that results from science's attempt to cleave as closely as possible to the phenomenal ›given‹. Vaihinger suggests that humanity effectively ends up with two conflictual worldviews, the phenomenal one of consciousness and the scientific one of matter in motion, and that these two perspectives are incapable of being rationally reconciled. Such theoretical questions, Vaihinger claims, are beyond the capacities of our reason which were designed with practical application in mind.<sup>70</sup>

Vaihinger differentiates in his discussion of science between scientific hypotheses and scientific fictions. Hypotheses are non-contradictory and are capable of empirical verification. Fictions, by contrast, are contradictory and cannot be empirically verified. This verifiable character of hypotheses has led some commentators to view Vaihinger as making a claim for their capacity for truth.<sup>71</sup> However, despite Vaihinger's tendency to speak of ›reality‹, and ›objective truth‹ with regards to the nature of hypotheses, he uses these terms in a fictionalist, *as if*, sense.<sup>72</sup> ›Reality‹ or ›actuality‹ for Vaihinger always means the sequences and co-existences of sense-data, nothing more. Hypotheses are verifiable in the sense that they are put forward for testing to see how effectively they model these sense-data patterns. A hypothesis that failed to do so would be rejected as ›untrue‹ whilst one that accounted for these patterns more effectively than any competitor hypothesis would be ›true‹. A scientific fiction, as opposed to a hypothesis, is a thought-construct that makes no claim to empirical verifiability (and was thus never intended to be so verified) but rather justifies itself by virtue of its cognitive efficacy.

However, despite all this, Vaihinger maintains that both scientific fictions *and* hypotheses (verified or otherwise) are fictions. The patterns of sense-data against which hypotheses are tested are themselves subjective, a product of the external world rather than an accurate reflection of it, and with the pattern as much made as found. Vaihinger states that »the immense work of modern science reduces all existence, which in the last analysis is absolutely incomprehensible, to an entirely subjective and purely fictional standard.«<sup>73</sup> The scientific worldview, just like the ordinary con-

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. xlv.

<sup>71</sup> See for instance Adair-Totef (1998).

<sup>72</sup> I suggest that when Vaihinger speaks of x being ›objective‹ (in a positive sense) he means that x corresponds to a phenomenal object, in the sense of a directly intuited content of consciousness.

<sup>73</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 53.

ceptual world which we inhabit, is built upon a conceptual polarity which itself is a fiction. Vaihinger summarises:

*We only know what is relative, changeless relations and laws of phenomena; all else is subjective addition. The division of the world into Things-in-themselves = Objects and Things-in-themselves = Subjects is the primary fiction upon which all others depend.*<sup>74</sup>

Copleston summarises Vaihinger's outlook thus: »Only sensations and feelings are real: otherwise the whole of human knowledge consists of ›fictions‹« (Copleston 1994: 366). Scientific thought is thus, for Vaihinger as for Spengler, just as fictional as all other ideational structures. It's just that some aspects are intended to be more fictional than others.<sup>75</sup>

And, again like Spengler, Vaihinger takes an equally fictionalist stance towards mathematics.<sup>76</sup> He claims that, »all mathematics... is only a device, which tells us nothing about what actually exists. It is not an end in itself, but its main purpose is to be a method and an aid.«<sup>77</sup> Its utility lies in its ability to measure space and movement in space, both of which, for Vaihinger, are fictional thought-constructs. Referring to the application of mathematics to spatial concepts, but in a statement which epitomises his entire outlook on human consciousness and its representations of reality, Vaihinger states that

*We are dealing here with a closely woven net, a fine tissue of subjective and fictional concepts in which we envelop reality. We achieve a passable success; but that does not mean that the content must necessarily take the form of the net woven round it.*<sup>78</sup>

## 5. Areas of (apparent) Discord

Despite the degree of agreement between Spengler and Vaihinger on the nature of consciousness and scientific thought, it might well be argued that

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>75</sup> This attitude, I suggest, is reflected in Spengler's historiographical views.

<sup>76</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Spengler's views of mathematics, see Swer (2017).

<sup>77</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 73.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 73.

there remain several points over which the two disagree, and that these points are of sufficient importance that they outweigh in significance the many points of agreement mentioned.

A first, and obvious conceptual discrepancy between the two appears to be over the nature of the fundamental characteristics of consciousness. For Spengler the character of the Ur-symbol varies from culture to culture, and with it the symbolic structure of all cultural expressions, including science and mathematics. Vaihinger, on the other hand, in presenting his account of the genesis and operations of fictional consciousness frequently speaks as if, like Kant, he takes a universal stance. He seems to assume that the ideational structures we currently possess are common to all people of all time-periods. They are contingent yet uniform, whilst for Spengler they are contingent and variable. Given the essential role that the variation of Ur-symbol plays in Spengler's philosophy, this would appear to be a rather significant divergence of outlook.

However, if we consider Vaihinger's work from a Spenglerian perspective, we find strong indications that Vaihinger's own position on fundamental categories was much closer to Spengler's than has hitherto been noted in that he expresses views that suggest an openness to contingency. Firstly, Vaihinger takes Kant to task for arguing that there are a predetermined number of categories.

*If the categories actually arose as we have stated, that is to say, as analogies of especial prominence in terms of which the various sequences could most suitably be conceived, then it is obvious that an indefinite number of such analogies is possible. Through natural selection those have been preserved that are most adapted to this purpose. It is therefore natural that they do not form a limited group but that, on the contrary, their number varies; and that while some are fully active, others have been preserved only in a rudimentary form.<sup>79</sup>*

Vaihinger here seems to be suggesting that there might have been more or other categories than those that Kant details. In other words, he appears to entertain the possibility of variation in the number and nature of categories. This impression is reinforced by his further statement that

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 175.

*A priori... a very large number of analogies are possible and have been employed in the course of history, Categories are nothing but analogies according to which objective phenomenal events have been interpreted. They are, therefore, in no sense innate possessions of the psyche, but analogies which have been selected and applied in the course of time, and according to which events have been interpreted. How the analogies arose it is not difficult to guess; from inner experience.*<sup>80</sup>

On this account, there is no necessary categorial structure to human consciousness and furthermore, the categories present in human consciousness may exhibit variation *in the course of time*. Regarding this potential for historical variation, Vaihinger then adds that »in all probability it will ... be found that entirely different analogies are at the bottom of the same categories in different languages.«<sup>81</sup> In other words, even the presence of the same category in different human groups (in Vaihinger's example, different linguistic groups) does not mean that they operate using the same analogy. Spengler's cultural-categories (and indeed the spatial symbols from which they are indivisible), present in all cultures but in different analogical forms, would certainly seem to meet this description. Whilst Vaihinger does not advocate explicitly Spengler's position, his philosophy does not rule out such positions and might even point in the direction that Spengler was to travel.

One area in which Vaihinger and Spengler definitely seem to part company concerns the metaphysical content of scientific thought. Vaihinger's driving concern in *The Philosophy of 'As if'* is to persuade the reader firstly of the preponderance of fictions in all aspects of human thought and secondly that these fictions should not be rejected on the grounds of their fictitious nature but accepted on the grounds of their practical utility for existence. His approach has a decidedly anti-metaphysical character in that he constantly warns against attributing any metaphysical truth to either the fictions or the hypotheses that constitute much of scientific thought, regardless of their practical utility.<sup>82</sup> Vaihinger wants us to adopt an epistemological stance towards our conceptual structures, to view them as aids to practical cogitation and action and no more. We are not to consider the

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. 172.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 173.

<sup>82</sup> Fine (1993), 5 also makes this point, saying that: »Vaihinger regards the inference from utility to reality as fundamentally incorrect.«

implications of those structures for the nature of external reality because, on Vaihinger's account, they can have none.

Spengler, on the other hand, is more concerned with detailing the numerous ways in which the metaphysical implications of a conceptual worldview are expressed in all aspects of cultural artefacts and activities, both practical and theoretical. Whilst Spengler also stresses the fact that the metaphysical implications of our ideational structures are entirely subjective and in no way a reflection of reality, he does not share Vaihinger's compulsion to eliminate such metaphysical speculation. Though Vaihinger concedes that objectifying the creations our own thought is what humans have tended to do, he wishes to bring the practice to a halt. Spengler, though he concedes that it tells us nothing of ultimate reality, sees the human urge to elaborate the metaphysical dimensions of our thought-constructs as a constant feature of consciousness across all cultures. He does, however, seem to hold the view that this metaphysical dogmatism is something of which we must be disabused shortly before the death of our culture. Again, perhaps, his position is in the end not that far from Vaihinger's.

One last area of divergence between Vaihinger and Spengler concerns history. Vaihinger restricts his dealings with history to episodes in the development of mathematical or scientific thought, and on the other few occasions that he makes reference to world-history, he suggests that a theory of fictions would be of little assistance there.<sup>83</sup> Spengler, on the other hand, is largely focussed on the role that fictions have historically played in the construction and development of cultural entities. To a large extent, the centrality of history or lack thereof in Spengler and Vaihinger's work stems from a difference in what one might consider the ›message‹ of their respective fictionalisms. Vaihinger's analysis of the vital role of subjective, non-realistic thought-constructs in the sciences (and elsewhere) is intended to teach us to stop worrying and love fictions. Spengler analysis of the vital role of fictions *at the world-historical level* is intended to confront us with the full range of the sceptical and relativistic implications of the centrality of fictions in human thought and their historical variation. Vaihinger wants to soothe the reader about the prevalence of fictions by demonstrating that in practical terms their acknowledgment changes little, whilst Spengler wants to shock and unsettle by demonstrating that in practical terms

<sup>83</sup> Vaihinger appears to use the term ›world-history‹ in two distinct senses. The first is the one found in Spengler and refers to the course and meaning of history at a super-individual level. The second refers to natural history. Vaihinger's comment about fictions not facilitating progress in world-history, I suspect, employs the term in the second sense.

their acknowledgment changes everything. Aside from this difference in the effect desired, I suggest, Spengler's fictionalism is essentially the same as Vaihinger's, merely historicised and deployed across the whole field of cultural activity, as opposed to just the scientific.

## 6. Further Thoughts

There are several moments in Vaihinger's *Philosophy of ›As if‹* that I find to be extremely suggestive for a novel understanding of the nature and purpose of Spengler's philosophy. These are not so much moments where Vaihinger's thought coincides with Spengler's on science, or the structures of consciousness, or the nature of understanding, as they are moments where Vaihinger points beyond the topics discussed in this section to matters that shed light on Spengler's broader philosophical strategy.

The first moment of interest arises in Vaihinger's general historical trawl of philosophers who discussed or employed (consciously or otherwise) fictions in their writings. He turns briefly to the philosophy of Parmenides and considers a point of apparent contradiction within his thought. Parmenides argues that change is an illusion and that only Being, which is unchanging, is real. He then goes on to explain how the illusory empirical world is governed by two principles. In short, Parmenides appears to discuss the Being of aspects of a realm that he has declared does not have Being. Vaihinger feels that he may be able to resolve this contradiction by interpreting Parmenides as employing fictional constructs with regards to the elements of the world of sensory appearance.<sup>84</sup> Thus the two principles are fictions, and Parmenides insistence on the not-Being of the changeable is preserved.

If Vaihinger's interpretation of Parmenides is correct, then his own work shares similarities with Parmenides in that he too declares certain things to be illusory or fictitious and then can be found employing those concepts as if they were genuine. The trick with Vaihinger is identify those concepts which he (at some point) describes as fictitious, and then read an *as if* character into his use of those concepts both when they reappear subsequently and in all previous instances of their appearance. This suggests a novel way of reading Spengler and resolving the apparent ›Parmenidean‹ contradictions in his philosophy. Such a reading would identify which concepts

<sup>84</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 138–139.

Spengler suggests might be fictitious or fallacious at some point in *Decline*, and then view their employment elsewhere, even if in an apparently ap-probatory manner, as possessing an *as if* character. This fictionalist reading would suggest that Spengler not only analyses fictions in his philosophy but also employs them *within* his philosophy. I suggest that such an interpretation may be able to resolve the paradoxical elements of Spengler's philosophy of history, namely his thoroughgoing scepticism regarding the possibility of historical knowledge and his apparent claim to be able to produce universal laws of historical change.<sup>85</sup>

The above suggestive moment in Vaihinger relates to Spengler's expository method. A second relates to the possible purpose of his philosophical project. Vaihinger at one point considers the possible implications of the realisation of the extent to which human consciousness transforms the sensory data it receives in the construction of a conceptual world. He worries that the dogmatic faith in the proximity of our image of the world, once eroded, will result in a barren scepticism. He raises the possibility that those of a high stage of civilisation might be able to accomplish what the skeptics of Classical Antiquity could not, and prove capable of bearing the knowledge that what we call reality is a fiction and that our thoughts do not mirror reality, without collapsing into skeptical despair and rejection of life.<sup>86</sup> This, it seems to me, might well be the goal of Spengler's philosophy, to preach commitment to transformative praxis in the present *despite* the awareness that our consciousness of reality is fictional from top to bottom.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis of the first volume of the *Decline* reveals the largely unsuspected extent to which Spengler's philosophy focused on the analysis of science, both in world-history generally, and in Faustian culture specifically. An awareness of Spengler's sustained philosophical interest in scientific matters also reveals the equally overlooked degree to which Spengler's philosophy of science is concerned with fictions. Merlio (1980) suggests that Spengler, a former student of Vaihinger, bears witness in his fictionalism to a Vaihingerian influence. Whilst I make no claim regarding

<sup>85</sup> Secondary literature on Spengler's philosophy tends to divide on precisely this issue into one of two interpretative camps, positivist or relativist (Swier 2019).

<sup>86</sup> Vaihinger (1935), 161–163.

the existence of such an influence, a comparison of the views of these two philosophers on the nature of scientific, and other, fictions reveals a surprising number of commonalities.

Most prominent among these is the marked similarity between their respective accounts of the origins of scientific thought in the structures of human consciousness. Despite their clear indebtedness to Kantian thought, both philosophers adopt an *as if* stance with regards to Kantian categories and forms of intuition. Both philosophers argue that purported knowledge of the external world is but a series of analogical structures of a thoroughly fictional character whose function was always practical utility rather than truth. For both philosophers science is a paradigm example of just such a fiction.

An awareness of the fictional nature of Spengler's philosophy of science, and its proximity to Vaihinger's thought, also raises the hitherto unasked question of the extent of Spengler's fictionalist commitments. In other words, whether this fictionalist outlook, so prevalent in his accounts of science, might not be present elsewhere in his philosophy, in particular in the cyclical philosophy of history for which he is best known?

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