Technology and the End of Western Civilisation: Spengler's and Heidegger's Histories of Life/Being

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Abstract

Spengler's work is typically represented as speculative philosophy of history. There is good reason, however, to consider much of his thought as preoccupied with existential and phenomenological questions about the nature and ends of human existence, rather than with history per se. In this paper, Spengler's work is considered in comparison with Heidegger's history of Being and analysis of technological modernity. It is argued that Spengler's considerable proximity to much of Heidegger's thought compels us to reconsider the nature and scope of Spengler's philosophical project.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to use the comparison of Oswald Spengler's and Martin Heidegger's respective epochal histories to argue for a reappraisal of the purpose and nature of Spengler's philosophy. Spengler is viewed typically as a speculative philosopher of history, a proponent of a cyclical theory of world history. And yet Spengler's philosophy also analyses the existential conditions of technological modernity. Spengler's analysis emphasises the metaphysical nature of the *mathematical* and its role in underpinning modern science and the technological mode of contemporary human existence. Spengler's account of the *mathematical* bears a striking similarity to that of Heidegger, as has previously been noted (Swer, 2017). I argue here that this continuity of thought extends beyond their views on mathematics and science and runs throughout their histories of Life/ Being, their diagnoses of the failings of the modern age and their suggestions regarding the nature of the age yet to come.

In this paper, I trace the remarkable continuity of thought between these philosophers with particular attention to their accounts of epochal history and modes of world-disclosure, their application and historical limitation of Nietzsche's concept of the Will to Power to modern science and technology, their analysis of the end of Western Civilisation, and their salvific conception of the withdrawal of Life/Being as creating possibilities for cultural renewal.

One of the consequences of Spengler being viewed as solely, or at least primarily, a philosopher of history is that his work has tended to be considered in relation only to thinkers or intellectual movements within that field. However, if, as I argue, his philosophy includes a significant component of what might be described as a form of existential phenomenology, then this opens up a number of possibilities for comparison with thinkers whose work is not usually considered in relation to Spengler's. Furthermore, if one shifts one's focus on Spengler from the "historical" aspects of his work to his analysis of the nature and development of modern technology, then we can appreciate the considerable proximity his philosophy has with philosophers who, unlike Spengler, are recognized as being part of the philosophical mainstream and whose phenomenological thought also had a technological agenda.

In order to indicate the merits of an existential pheno-menological reading of Spengler, I shall consider his philosophy in relation to that of Heidegger. I have chosen Heidegger over other technologically-minded philosophers with phenomenological dimensions (such as José Ortega y Gasset, Karl Jaspers, Ernst Jünger or Lewis Mumford) for several reasons. Firstly, Heidegger shares a degree of intellectual proximity to Spengler. Both were inheritors of the *Lebensphilosophie* movement in German philosophy, both belonged to the group of Weimar thinkers termed reactionary modernists by Jeffrey Herf (1984), and both sought to reconcile cultural tradition with the realities of technological modernity.[1] Secondly, several Heidegger scholars have suggested a limited Spenglerian influence on (usually early) Heideggerian philosophy, which lends support to my suggestion that Spengler's thought has an existential/ phenomenological cast to it. Thirdly, at many points in *The Decline of the West*, Spengler articulates thoughts that have a decidedly Heideggerian tone to them.[2] I suggest that there are many more points in Spengler's philosophy where he articulates claims that, if one were unaware of the identity of the author, one might well attribute to Heidegger.

I have selected three themes from Spengler's early philosophy that elaborate key insights from his existential phenomenology, namely mathematics, science and technology, which I shall use as points of comparison with Heidegger. As it is in his later philosophy that Heidegger gives these themes a more central place in his thought, I shall be comparing Spengler's views with those found mainly in Heidegger's later writings. I have no wish here to make a case for Spengler's influence on Heidegger, although I certainly do not exclude the possibility, nor is it my intention here to argue for any novel interpretation of Heidegger's later philosophy. What I aim to provide is a standard, relatively uncontro-versial account of Heidegger's philosophical views, drawn from acknowledged commentators on his work, and construed at a certain level of generality. My point is not to rewrite the way we interpret Heidegger in light of my new account of Spengler's philosophy, but rather to use Heidegger to alter the way in which we consider the nature of Spengler's philosophy.

Consideration of the thoroughgoing similarities of their thought enables us to appreciate Spengler's philosophy anew. Spengler's philosophy now appears to be less a speculative philosophy of history and more a rival History of Being aimed at diagnosing the existential condition of modern humanity. And Spengler's philosophy, thus reconceived, and its close proximity to key elements of Heidegger's thought, raises the possibility of a non-trivial Spenglerian influence on Heidegger's later thought.

Heidegger and Spengler on Mathematics

Heidegger and Spengler operate with a rather singular understanding of the mathematical and the significance of its foundational role in technological modernity. Both philosophers characterize the *mathematical* as the fundamental metaphysical projection that characterizes an age's understanding of, and relationship to, entities. For both thinkers, the *mathematical*, in its originary sense, is a projection made upon the world that antici-pates and orders the way in which entities come to presence. It is, Heidegger asserts, "the metaphysical projection of the thingness of the things" (Heidegger, 1935-36/1967, p. 68). This metaphysical characterisation of the nature of mathematics echoes Spengler's state-ment that mathematics is "a metaphysic of the highest rank" which "contains the ultimate meaning of the world-as-nature" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 56).

Both philosophers also argue that the *mathematical*, the metaphysical underpinning of modernity, is most apparent in the methods and ascendancy of modern science. For Heidegger and Spengler, modern science, even though historically prior to modern technology, acts as the harbinger of technology, in that it prepares the way for the revelation of the entities of this world in a technological manner. Thus revealed entities now appear as mere resources for the ceaseless increase of the power of the willing subject. Spengler states that it is mathematics as metaphysics that determines the form of Faustian (Western) science and science's ultimate end, "the world-embracing spatial energy of modern technics" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 81). Rockmore sums up Heidegger's position thus: "For Heidegger, science depends on technology and not conversely … . (I)n physics the so-called demanding disclosure that typifies technology already rules, so that physics is merely the messenger, so to say, of enframing" (Rockmore, 1992, pp. 225-226).

It should be noted that this line of analysis, beginning with mathematics, then science, and then technology, is a very peculiar approach in Continental thought, and has been noted with puzzlement in Heidegger. That Spengler also has such an approach has been largely overlooked hitherto. The fact that, by following what is effectively the same analytic path, both also arrive at similar conclusions has likewise not been noted. This marked similarity, I argue, is highly suggestive,

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[1] Cooper (1999) argues for the profound influence of both Nietzsche (the metaphysics of the will to power) and Dilthey (the historicisation of Life) on Spengler's philo-sophical outlook. Insofar as both Nietzsche and Dilthey exerted an influence on Heidegger's philosophy, this might also account for some similarities between Spengler and Heidegger. For Spengler and Heidegger's relation to the *Lebensphilosophie* movement see Schnädelbach (1984, pp. 151-160)

[2] Cooper also notes "the Heideggerian tone of Spengler's pronouncements" with particular reference to Heidegger's critique of science and his destined history of Being (Cooper, 1996, p. 36).

particularly when one considers that Heidegger read, and indeed lectured on, the first volume of Spengler's *Decline of the West*, shared Spengler's philosophical focus on the diagnosis of technological modernity, and was a political fellow traveller.[3]

In this paper I draw out the implications of this shared focus on the *mathematical* and indicate the ways in which it informs and underpins their better known philosophical positions, the History of Being and Technology as the destiny of the West in Heidegger's case, and the cyclical model of world history for which Spengler is best known.[4]

Heidegger and Spengler on the History of Being/Life

The later Heidegger's account of the mathematical nature of modern science is intrinsically connected to his history of Being. History, understood here as the history of Being, is for Heidegger a sequence of epochs of Being. In each epoch, Being is realised differently by human consciousness, and this in turn means that different aspects of Being are actualised in each epoch "in the concreteness of historical becoming" (Pattison, 2000, p. 68). Heidegger in turn sought to identify the transcendental conditions that enable human forms of activity, and that make possible our experience of things. Heidegger held that these sorts of human activity were not self-originating, in that they are shaped and driven by a historical "play" of Being which itself is in no way controlled by humanity.[5] It is this movement of/in

Being that marks the instantiation of a new epoch (and, by extension, the termination of a prior epoch), and a new horizon of disclosure.

This horizon is a culturally and historically relative, and yet a priori, feature of human existence that enables entities to be intelligible as such. It operates as what Young terms the "ultimate" horizon – the limit of intelligibility for a particular epoch that underpins other, more local horizons *within* that epoch (religious worldviews, scientific metaphysics, etc.) (Young, 2002, p. 9).

There are two important features of Heidegger's thought here that need to be appreciated. Firstly, from the fact that horizons of disclosure are dependent upon human social and linguistic practices (and are thereby relative to specific cultures), it does not follow that "truth" is likewise relative. As Steiner points out, for Heidegger "[i]t is not man who determines Being, but Being which, via language, discloses itself to and in man" (Steiner, 1978, p. 123). In other words, the fact that the medium of discovery is "subjective", given that the rules for meaningful and truthful utterance hold only relative to a particular domain, does not mean that what is discovered is likewise entirely dependent on humanity.

Secondly, the horizon of disclosure that provides the limits of intelligibility for a particular cultural epoch is not historically absolute. It is absolute for the inhabitants of my culture, but does not mark the limits of intelligibility as such. Young comments that, from a Heideggerian perspective, "to suppose the limits of intelligibility for my historical-cultural epoch to be also the limits of intelligibility *per se* would be the height of irrational epistemological chauvinism" (Young, 2002, p. 9). Were we to occupy a different horizon of disclosure, then the limits of intelligibility would themselves be different, and the world would disclose itself to us in a very different way. Of course, in such a world we ourselves would be different people. Thus reality, for Heidegger, has a multitude of facets that can be disclosed by each transcendental horizon. As the "truth" of one facet is disclosed, the "truths" of the other facets are concealed.[6] And, given our historical location within a specific horizon, the "truths" of other horizons remain forever inaccessible to us.

My above account of Heidegger's history of Being makes no claim to originality and would, I should hope, be accepted as relatively uncontentious by the majority

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[3]   By this I mean that both Heidegger and Spengler were what Herf (1984) terms reactionary modernists, an intellectual movement within Weimar conservatism that sought to combine reactionary politics with enthusiasm for modern technology. It should, however, be noted that Spengler, unlike Heidegger, rejected Nazism.

[4]   Comparison of Spengler and Heidegger is complicated by the fact that the work of both altered sufficiently that one can divide their work into early and later periods. While this division in Heidegger's philosophy is fairly well established, the division in Spengler's philosophy is far less well known and is often ignored entirely in analyses of his work. Whilst Heidegger demonstrates familiarity with all of Spengler's work, I wish to focus here on his philosophical proximity to Spengler's early Neo-Kantian/ existential phase, as exemplified in Volume 1 of his *The Decline of the West*, as opposed to Spengler's later phase, as exemplified in *Man and Technics*. Spengler, in his later work, advocates a biologistic Nietzschean form of Social Darwinism that characterises man as a "beast of prey". His model of world-history is no longer cyclical, but instead a linear development leading to Faustian (Western) culture as the pinnacle. His later philosophical outlook thus bears little resemblance to much of the "received view" of Spengler, which derives almost entirely from *The Decline of the West*. For an account of the "received view" see Swer (2018).

[5]   Zimmerman makes this point succinctly: "This conceptual-linguistic play determines the categories which shape the possibilities for human action, knowledge, and belief in determinate historical epochs" (Zimmerman, 1990, p. xiv).

[6]   Young explains the relationship of "truth" to Heidegger's transcendental horizons thus: "(I)n addition to what is intelligible to us, reality possesses an indefinitely large number of aspects, a 'plenitude' (*Vollzähligkeit*) of 'sides' or 'facets' (*Seiten*) which would be disclosed to us were we to inhabit transcendental horizons other than we do, horizons which, however, we can neither inhabit nor even conceive" (Young, 2002, p. 9).

of Heidegger commentators. The purpose of the summary of Heidegger's position is that we may then consider its key tenets in direct comparison with Spengler's supra-cultural history of "Life" as put forward in the first volume of *The Decline of the West*, originally published in 1918. As I shall demonstrate, Spengler's account of the world-history of cultures has strong similarities to Heidegger's history of Being.[7]

The early Spengler's account of the mathematical nature of modern science is intrinsically connected to his history of "Life". Life, for Spengler, represents the ultimate source of the "metaphysical structure of historic humanity" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 3). It is "pure becoming", "incapable of being bounded", and "lies beyond the domain of cause and effect, law and measure" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 95). And history, or rather "real" history as opposed to scientific "historiography", is viewed by Spengler as a sequence of cultures. In each culture, Life is realised differently by human consciousness, and this in turn means that different aspects of Life are actualised in each culture and made concrete. Spengler writes: "Each Culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, decay, and never return. There is not *one* sculpture, *one* painting, *one* mathematics, *one* physics, but many, each in its deepest essence different from the others …" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 21). Spengler sought to identify the structures of human experience in their historical concreteness as they manifested themselves in each individual culture, and to explain their operation in the formation and evolution of a cultural unit. Spengler held that the structures of human consciousness were neither self-originating nor fixed, in that across history they are shaped and driven by the creative flux of Life, an irrational and infinitely generative force. He writes that "These cultures … grow with the same superb aim-lessness as the flowers of the field" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 21). It is this ongoing process of Life's self-manifestation that drives the emergence and demise of historical cultures. The "endless becoming" of Life results in the instantiation of a new culture, and with it a new Ur-symbol, and the withdrawal of Life results in the termination of an existing culture.

The Ur-symbol is a central concept in Spengler's early philosophy. It is what underpins the very existence of

a culture. It imparts to each culture "its specific style and the historical form in which it progressively actualises its inward possibilities" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 174). A Spenglerian modification of the Kantian categories of time and space, it acts as each culture's leitmotif, providing a symbolic background against which entities become intelligible, and which in turn both enables and is expressed by further symbolic structures: linguistic, conceptual, and so forth. The Ur-symbol is a culturally and historically relative, and yet *a priori*, feature of human existence. It provides the essential existential structure that underpins experience, expression and understanding within a cultural unit (see Swer, 2019a). It too operates like a Heideggerian "ultimate" horizon, in that the cultural forms of each culture-organism are peculiar to it alone, and are comprehensible *only* within the worldview of that particular culture.

Spengler arrives at similar conclusions as Heidegger regarding the subjectivity of culture-specific horizons and their historical limits. Spengler too holds that, even if horizons of disclosure are relative to specific cultures, it does not follow that "truth" is likewise relative. Whilst what constitutes "truth" within a culture might be contingent, in that it depends upon the particular form of Ur-symbol that each culture develops, it nevertheless is not a human creation. Nor does the fact that all entities are grasped within culturally-relative limits of under-standing mean that the entities thus grasped are onto-logically dependent on that culture.

Although he admits of the possibility of slight variations over time, Spengler insists that, within a culture, the structures of intelligibility are universal. And yet he also insists that the symbolic parameters that provide the limits of intelligibility for a particular culture are not historically absolute. Were we to occupy a different culture, it would possess a different Ur-symbol which would structure human experience in a manner peculiar to that culture. Consequently, the limits of intelligibility would themselves be different. This, incidentally, is the reason for Spengler's notorious cultural isolation thesis, the claim that symbolic forms cannot cross cultural borders without loss of meaning. Given the impossibility of escaping a culture's experiential structures, one can never access the structures of meaning of any other culture. Reality, for Spengler, is multi-faceted, and each culture reveals one aspect of it. Spengler claims that "the horizon within which it has been able to make phenomena self-explanatory, and therefore the whole of the 'nature' or world-extended that is confined in the given limits and amenable to its particular sort of mathe-matic, are not common to all mankind, but specific in each case to one definite sort of mankind" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 59). And, as the "truth" of one facet is disclosed, the "truths" of the other facets are concealed. Hence Spengler's statement that, "In other Cultures the phenomenon talks a different language, for other men there are different truths" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 25).

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[7] Inwood has also noted the similarity between Spengler's cultures and Heidegger's history of Being, saying that, "Being is finite not simply in the sense that it needs something else (God, etc.) to reveal itself, but also in the sense that its revelation, in a human civilization, has a beginning, a fruition and an end. Heidegger here endorses Spengler's view that a 'culture' undergoes a growth and decay analogous to those of a living organism, though the culture on which Heidegger focuses, the 'western history' that began with the Greeks, has a longer life than any postulated by Spengler" (Inwood, 2000, p. 71).

In this sense, for both Heidegger and Spengler, the way that entities disclose themselves as objects through the *mathematical* projection of modern science is not wrong, in that the occurrent properties that an object possesses (or, perhaps better, in that entities appear as objects that can possess properties) do exist in actuality. But this scientific "truth" about entities does not in any way exhaust the possibilities for other "truths" in other horizons of disclosure, and may in fact even represent a narrowing of "truth" of the entity within its own historical horizon. And yet, this metaphysical develop-ment is itself something peculiar to our horizon of disclosure; it is a "destining" suited specifically to us, and is thus not a development possible for those within a different horizon.[8] "Nature", by which Spengler means the scientific worldview of a particular historical period, "is a possession which is saturated through and through with the most personal connotations. *Nature is a function of the particular Culture*" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 169). It is a "destining" suited specifically to us, and is thus not a development possible for those within a different culture.

Heidegger and Spengler on Technology

This brings us to the key point of both Heidegger's and Spengler's philosophies: the analysis of the philo-sophical significance of the phenomenon of modern technology. For both thinkers, modern science is the harbinger of technology. Its disclosure of entities as objects in a manner appropriate to their application and further ordering both prepares the way for and provokes the use of those objects via technological means. The phenomenon of modern technology, as artefact and form of social organisation, is the visible manifestation of the metaphysical projection that underlies it. As such, technology is thus the visible tip of the metaphysical iceberg at whose base lies the *mathematical* projection of science. Hence technology, as artefact, is not to be understood as resulting from the application of modern science, which precedes it historically. Rather, science, in its disclosure of the world in an equipmental fashion as composed of objects suitable and ready for work, was already technological.[9]

For Spengler, one of the key respects in which modern science prepared the way for the contemporary age of planetary technological transformation was through the development and application of a *mathematical* projection that, in its pursuit of calculability, "etherealised" the world. Entities ceased to appear as sensory phenomena and were instead reconceptualised as mathematical points to be understood only with reference to their function.

Spengler states that, "the Western soul in the persons of Descartes and his generation (Pascal, Fermat, Desargues) discovered a notion of number that was the child of a passionate Faustian tendency towards the infinite … our world-picture is an actualising of an infinite space in which things visible appear very nearly as realities of a lower order, limited in the presence of the illimitable. The symbol of the West is … the idea of *Function*" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 75). This representation of the Western world as pure functionality is, for Spengler, the culmination of the mathematical project that began with the Enlightenment "objectification" of entities. In *What is a Thing?* (1935-36/1967), Heidegger traces the same process of mathematical objectification, but stops his historical reconstruction at the stage of the construction of the "object" and the knowing human "subject". His next works on science, "The Age of the World Picture" (1938/1977c) and "Science and Reflection" (1954/1977b) essentially recapitulate the same account. And yet, in "The Question concerning Technology" (1955/1977a), Heidegger has moved beyond his account of the mathematical projection of the "object" and speaks of the scientific and technological disclosure of entities in the "objectlessness of pure resource" (Heidegger, 1955/1977a, p. 19). A clue to this missing intellectual step from object to pure resource is given in the closing pages of "Science and Reflection". Here Heidegger notes in passing how the object now *vanishes* in modern atomic physics, and that "the subject-object relation as *pure relation* … [now] takes precedence *over* the object and subject, to become secured as standing-reserve" (Heidegger, 1954/1977b, p. 173). In other words, having tracked in some detail the conceptual metamorphoses required to arrive at the modern construction of the subject and scientific object, Heidegger gives a nod to Spengler's process of "etherealising" the object via relational functionality, and then he skips ahead to technology's disclosure (and treatment) of the world as pure resource.

A further commonality in their analyses of modernity lies in their use of Nietzsche's concept of the Will-to-Power in their accounts of the relentless activity of scientific research and technological application. Now, one might well object that there is nothing particularly significant in this, in that many thinkers drew on Nietzschean concepts, the Will-to-Power among them, in that intellectual era. Whilst there is certainly some truth to this, it should not distract us from what is singular in the application made by both philosophers of Nietzsche's philosophy – namely, that Spengler and Heidegger both make the philosophically unprecedented step of using the Will-to-Power *specifically* to explain the phenomena of modern technology.[10]

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[8] Rouse refers to this as Heidegger's "historicised under-standing of the intelligibility of entities" (Rouse, 2005, p. 134).

[9] For details of the role of the mathematical in Spengler's and Heidegger's philosophy, and its connection to the techno-logical disclosure of the world, see Swer (2017).

[10] It should be noted that Ernst Jünger also took a similar approach. Jünger, however, occupies an unusual inter-mediate position between Spengler and Heidegger, in that he was massively influenced by early Spengler and was,

For both philosophers the Will-to-Power is depicted as a historical phenomenon, that is to say, specific to one particular epoch/culture rather than eternally present as a force in human history. Spengler exhorts, "Consider the historical horizon of Nietzsche. His conceptions of decadence, militarism, the transvaluation of all values, the will to power, lie deep in the essence of Western civilisation and are for the analysis of that civilisation of decisive importance". And yet, Spengler argues, Nietzsche's insights are culturally specific: "Strictly speaking, he never once moved outside the scheme, nor did any other thinker of his time" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 24). For Spengler, as for Heidegger, modern technology appears as an end of era phenomenon, one that manifests itself solely in the terminal stages of Western Culture. And, for both thinkers, this decline stems from humanity's loss of awareness of its fundamental relation to Life/Being. Humanity's essential, ontological nature has been forgotten beneath a metaphysics of power. The triumph of technology and humanity's alienation from its authentic self are both symptoms of the withdrawal of Life/Being. And yet, for both thinkers, in a very Kantian fashion, Life/Being is present in the mode of its absence. Its withdrawal holds out the possibility of recovering that which has been forgotten by humanity. For Spengler, the decline of an age is reflected in its transition from Culture to Civilisation, from symbolic and spiritual vitality to senescence. And yet, even in its civilizational stage, he maintains that a people still have possibilities to reappraise and renew. "*Pure* Civilisation, as a historical process, consists in a progressive taking-down of forms that have become inorganic or dead" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 32). The time of the decline of the West is also an opportunity for a Culture to slough off cultural accretions and symbolic forms that no longer serve it.

Ultimately, what separates the two philosophers stems from the different answers they give to the question of whether humanity can establish a new relationship with technology. Heidegger answers in the affirmative, arguing that we can ready ourselves for a return of Being and the instantiation of a new epoch beyond the metaphysics of the Will-to-Power.[11] Spengler's answer is also affirmative, although vastly more fatalistic and limited in scope. Spengler argues that we can achieve an authentic understanding of ourselves as finite beings who find themselves thrown into a transcendental, yet historically contingent and finite, horizon of disclosure. We can recognise ourselves as bound to the possibilities held open by a specific Ur-symbol, and can choose to will some of the few remaining existential possibilities before the culture comes to an end. Those options will, however, due to our historical situation, necessarily be technological.

Spengler argues that "he who does not understand that … our choice is between willing this or willing nothing at all, between cleaving to *this* destiny or despairing of the future and of life itself; he who cannot feel that there is grandeur also in the realisations of powerful intelligences, in the energy and discipline of metal-hard natures, in battles fought with the coldest and most abstract means … must forgo all desire to comprehend history, to live through history or to make history" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 38). He then goes on to urge the youth of his day to "devote themselves to technics instead of lyrics" (Spengler, 1918/1926, p. 41). And yet, by reconnecting them with the Ur-symbol that underpins Western modernity, we can, to an extent, re-enchant the bleak utilitarian world of industrial technology and enjoy a last Indian Summer of authentic cultural expression.[12] And we can then face our cultural death clear-eyed and resolute, knowing our fate rather than having it come upon us like a thief in the night.

Spengler holds that there is no point waiting for a Heideggerian second coming of Being/Life. For Spengler, Being/Life is not, as it is for Heidegger, like a sea that withdraws and returns again. It is better understood as a river that periodically changes its course. The city on its former banks atrophies and dies, and an entirely new city flourishes along its new course. On Spengler's account, Western civilisation is a culture, and a culture can choose to die either well or badly (authentically or inauthentically), but it cannot choose not to die. Heidegger then offers us hope in the resurrection of Being, as opposed to Spengler's tragic resolve in the face of overwhelming cosmic forces and death.

Epochs and Cultures

There is much more that could be said regarding the similarities between Heidegger and Spengler in respect of the nature and fate of technology. However, any attempts to explore these topics will, I suggest, first have to consider the historical scope of their respective theories, in particular the notions of epochs and cultures. I think

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in turn, a major influence on the development of Heidegger's later philosophy and its analysis of technology in particular. I hope to unpack the complex intellectual relations between these three philosophers of technology in a future paper.

[11] "Only a god can save us. The sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare a readiness, through thinking and poetic creation, for the appearance of the god or for the absence of the god in the time of decline [*Untergang*], for in the face of the god who is absent we flounder" (Heidegger, 1966/1992, *Der Spiegel* interview). Through reflection on our benighted condition in an age of technology, we can make a turn towards dwelling poetically on the earth and thus "foster the saving power". In this way, we can be "summoned to hope" in its "growing light" (Heidegger, 1955/1977a, p. 33). Heidegger's salvific quietism therefore stands in stark contrast to Spengler's pessimistic fatalism.

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[12] It should be noted that this technological Indian Summer represents a temporary stay of execution for Western culture only. Culture death can be deferred but never reversed. See Swer (2019b).

such an analysis is possible, although I limit myself here to a brief sketch of its key points. With his epochal history of Being, Heidegger in effect takes something like Spengler's idea of a cultural-unit, which has a definite beginning and an end and is culturally self-contained, and radically expands it. Spengler, at one point in *The Decline of the West*, muses that the average lifespan of a culture might be one thousand years. So, for Spengler, Western (Faustian) culture began with the Middle Ages and will come to an end at some point in the next two centuries. Heidegger, on the other hand, pushes the beginnings of our current epoch all the way back to the pre-Socratics.[13]

It might be objected that my comparison of Spengler's cultural entities with Heidegger's epochs involves a misinterpretation of the latter. Heidegger appears to view epochs as successive, discrete yet overlapping episodes within the history of Western culture. So, if I treat Heidegger's epochs as equivalent to Spengler's cultures, then it is not Western culture as a whole that is the culture entity for Heidegger, but the three epochs that have occurred in Western culture. Furthermore, unlike Spengler's cultures, Heidegger's epochs are not historically contingent, in that they "are grounded in and reflect a series of historical transformations in our metaphysical understanding of what entities are ..." (Thomson, 2005, pp. 8-9). In response, I would point out that it is precisely this grounding in the same metaphysical foundation that entitles me to treat Heidegger's epochs not as cultures in themselves but as equivalent to Spengler's life stages of a culture. The historical limits of the continuity of the underlying metaphysical tradition are the limits of a culture for Spengler, and those limits for Heidegger extend from the birth of Western culture with the Ancient Greeks to the present day. For this reason, I use Heidegger's term "epoch" to refer to the history of the metaphysical tradition, rather than stages of transition in structures of signification within the metaphysical tradition. My doing so is not without precedent. Vallega-Neu notes that: "These epochs are usually equated with the epochs of Western thought, namely the Greeks, the Middle Ages, Modern Thought, and the current epoch of technology. But all these epochs belong to metaphysics and metaphysics may be seen as one large epoch in relation to which Heidegger thinks the possibility of another beginning of history" (Vallega-Neu, 2013, p. 289).

The temporal breadth of Heidegger's epochal boundaries leads, I argue, to two particular problems, one evidential, and the other conceptual. The first concerns the lack of material for Heidegger's historical generalisation. If one were to ask Spengler whether Life/Being returns after the death of a culture in a new cultural form, he would undoubtedly respond in the affirmative. If one were then to ask him *how* he knew that it did so, he would point to certain defunct cultures, such as the Mayan or Magian. They came into existence, they flourished, and, at the end of their allotted span, they perished. Then Life began again somewhere else. These dead cultures left historical traces and, when approached from the appropriate "scientific" (i.e., morphological) angle, these traces enable us to detect the repetition of certain cultural structures. This repetition in turn enables Spengler to recognise the proximity of his own culture to the end of its lifespan, and to ascertain certain limited truths about the likely attributes (or lack thereof) of any successor cultures.

Now, if one were to ask Heidegger whether Being returns after the death of a culture in a new epochal form, he too would respond in the affirmative. However, if one were then to ask him *how* he knew that it did so, problems arise. By expanding the scope of our current epoch of Being to embrace nearly the entirety of European cultural history, Heidegger leaves himself without any predecessor epochs to provide a model for future epochal shifts, let alone for the fate of technologies within those epochs.

The second problem with Heidegger's concept of epochs of Being concerns the role of the *mathematical* in his thought. On Heidegger's account, the *mathematical* is not to be understood as a late development of the West. Heidegger in fact traces its origins to the Ancient Greeks. This suggests that the *mathematical* has underpinned *all* Western scientific thought from the outset. Thus the *mathematical*, for Heidegger, both underpins all Western science and technology (and technological artefacts) and is inherent to this epoch of Being. Or, to put it in more Spenglerian terms, it is culturally-specific. This being the case, in a successor epoch beyond the current technological mode of world-disclosure, there can be no *mathematical* projection. And, since this metaphysical projection provides the grounds and the necessity for modern technology, there can thus be no continuation of modern technology after the new sending of Being.[14] Thus, while Heidegger is no Luddite, he does not (as the anti-Luddites argue) allow for the possibility of the continuation of modern technology (understood as its use and development) after the end of this epoch.[15]

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[13] I would suggest this was motivated largely by Heidegger's enormous fondness for the Classical Greeks. And, although I argue that Heidegger's epochal model is highly reminiscent of Spengler's, it should be noted that Heidegger's epoch does differ from Spengler's in certain important respects. Heidegger's model, despite its lengthy lifespan, nevertheless maintains the traditional tripartite division of Western history [Classical – Medieval – Modern] which Spengler detested and condemned as Eurocentric. The so-called "Dark Ages" and other inconvenient historical features are simply passed over by Heidegger.

[14] In other words, the *mathematical* projection that underpins the historical development of science and technology *is* the Enframing.

[15] The term anti-Luddite is intended to provide a contrast to standard interpretations of Heidegger's philosophy as politically conservative and thus opposed to modern forms of technology (the Luddite interpretation).

Conclusion

Spengler's and Heidegger's philosophical positions on mathematics, science and technology bear a striking proximity to one another that is all the more remarkable for being largely unnoticed.[16] One should also consider the fact that Spengler's views on mathematics, modern science, and so forth discussed in this paper were put forward in the first volume of *The Decline of the West*. This work was published in 1918, and thereby precedes Heidegger's turn to this subject matter in the 1930s by a number of years. It appears to be the case that Spengler has intellectual priority with regards to at least certain concepts typically associated with Heidegger.

One should also consider that Heidegger was fully aware of Spengler's writings and in fact delivered lectures on the first volume of *The Decline of the West* in 1920, two years after it was published (Heidegger & Jaspers, 1990/2003). Given the historical priority of Spengler's views on the relations of mathematics, science and technology, and the fact that Heidegger was familiar with his work, I feel justified in suggesting that there might be reasonable grounds for at least reconsidering the possibility of a non-trivial Spenglerian influence on Heidegger's later philosophy.

More importantly, I argue that the presence noted of the considerable similarities between Heidegger and Spengler is strongly supportive of my general claim in this paper that there is far more to Spengler's philosophy than just its philosophy of history. More specifically, the fact that Spengler's philosophy has so many points of similarity with that of Heidegger, a philosopher whose location within the field of existential phenomenology is beyond reasonable dispute, should, I suggest, require us to re-evaluate the received view on Spengler's philosophy and consider him anew as something akin to an existential phenomenologist of technology, rather than exclusively a philosopher of history.

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[16] A few commentators do consider Spengler's work in relation to Heidegger's thought, and some even consider the possibility of some influence. However, these commentaries tend to limit their points of comparison to shared political sympathies and a common sense of the West's decline (see, for instance, Thomson, 2005). Barash, on the other hand, who gives an extremely nuanced and far broader reading of Spengler's philosophical concerns than most, ends by concluding that most of the possible points of similarity between (early) Heidegger and Spengler are more apparent than real (Barash, 2003). Rockmore (1992) and Zimmerman (1990), to my mind, come closest to capturing the commonalities of thought I have outlined in this paper. Both focus on the technological dimension central to both Spengler and Heidegger and note that, for both, the decline of the West was connected with the increasing technologisation of existence. Yet Zimmerman's analysis is limited by the importation of philosophical content from Spengler's later work into his reading of *The Decline of the West*, which leads to his attribution of a very biologistic outlook to Spengler that minimises the appearance of his proximity to Heidegger. That said, Zimmerman does make the intriguing suggestion that Heidegger's development of his History of Being might have been an attempt to provide the authentic philosophy of history that he failed to detect in Spengler's work. Rockmore, on the other hand, sees the presence of Spengler's notion of Destiny in Heidegger's thought and also suggests Spenglerian stylistic themes in Heidegger's prose. His account of Spengler's influence on Heidegger's technological thought is worth quoting in full:

> Spengler's influence is … obvious in Heidegger's theory of technology. A short list of themes concerning technology which Heidegger shares with Spengler would include at least the following: the link between technology, culture, and history; the analysis of technology in terms of the concept of the instrument; the idea of struggle, including technological struggle, as ennobling; care as future-directed; the conviction that we have now arrived at a historical turning point, within which technology is a main component; and a condemnation of our enslavement by machines and technology. (Rockmore, 1992, p. 219)

Unfortunately, Rockmore does not go on to develop his claims beyond this statement. In any case, even Zimmerman and Rockmore do not mention Spengler's views on either mathematics or modern science, nor the bearing of these on Spengler's views on technology, and thus do not consider those views in relation to Heidegger's own thought on the interconnections of mathematics, modern science and technology.

Referencing Format

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