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Spengler's Worldview: A Retrospective Analysis

Rudolph Zalter

Next year marks the centenary of Spengler's prophetic, prescient, and master work of history and philosophy, *The Decline of the West*. Its impact on generations of political and academic figures during the 20th century cannot be underestimated. A lifelong disciple, I find his historic predictions of the state of our world today to be a mirror image of his poetic prose, nothing short of a Biblical revelation.

Reading through the complex text it becomes clear that this monumental thesis is anchored in the subtle implications and specific connotation of one single key word -- *soul*. Without full appreciation of this key word, his world view remains a difficult concept to grasp. But we must first dissociate the implied meaning of the word from standard definitions, such as these:

American Heritage Dictionary (1975)

"Soul"

1. The animating and vital principle in man credited with the faculties of thought, action and emotion and conceived as forming an immaterial entity distinguished from but temporally coexistent with his body.
2. Theology: The spiritual nature of man considered in relation to God, regarded as immortal, separable from the body at death, and susceptible to happiness or misery in a future state.
3. The disembodied spirit of a dead human being; a ghost, shade.

The Columbia Encyclopedia, Second Edition

Pantheism declares the individuation of human soul and materialism declares the soul nonexistent. One of the most widely accepted concepts in the world is immortality and this almost always postulates the existence of a soul to live apart from the body after death.

The idea of body vs. soul is conventional in language and thought.

"Soul"

1. The principle of life, feeling, thought, and action in humans, regarded as a distinct entity separate from the body, and commonly held to be separable in existence from the body; the spiritual part of humans as distinct from the physical part.

2. The spiritual part of humans regarded in its moral aspect, or as believed to survive death and be subject to happiness or misery in a life to come: arguing the immortality of the soul.

3. The disembodied spirit of a deceased person.

These definitions are not Spengler's intended meaning of the word. To Spengler, the following excerpts from volume one of his great work come nearest to a definition:

- “A culture is born in the moment when a great soul awakens out of the proto-spirituality of ever-childish humanity and detaches itself, a form of the formless, a bounded and mortal thing from the boundless and enduring.

“It blooms on the soil of an exactly definable landscape to which plant-wise it remains bound. It dies when this soul has actualized the full sum of its possibilities in the shape of peoples, dogmas, arts, states, sciences, and reverts into the proto-soul.”

- “Every soul has religion, which is only another word for its existence. All living forms in which it expresses itself – all arts, doctrines, customs – are ultimately religious, and *must* be so. But from the setting-in of Civilization they *cannot* be so any longer. As the essence of every culture is religion, so - and *consequently* – the essence of every civilization is irreligion – the two words are synonymous.”

I would like to offer another definition, one that clarifies and extracts the implicit, though not the overtly stated, essence of the intended meaning: The “soul” is a quasi-evolutionary, transient mindset.

“Quasi-evolutionary” implies a biological, organic phenomenon that is not a response to environmental challenge nor a simple conditioned reflex, but an evolutionary mutation that transcends causality. It is an organic entity that spans a predetermined initial phase of a biphasic sequential dichotomy, generic to *Homo sapiens*, specific to members of a given particular culture.

“Transient” is a corollary of its organic nature. It implies a limited, allotted timespan (a millennium at most).

“Mindset” is a psycho-neural turn in any given member of a live culture that perceives the world in a distinct specific way and then acts in compliance with that specific outlook. It is a mental process that infuses reality with a set, specific pattern.

Alternatively, the mindset may be viewed as the working “format” of the waking consciousness, specific to any given culture.

For Spengler, the soul is a unique living expression whose existence is deduced from its fulfillment, life, covering the sequential unfolding of its potentiality over its life span. As such it is transient and spontaneous, an unplanned and unpremeditated phenomenon that has arisen in various formats some twenty-six times in the course of recorded human history, following Arnold Toynbee's calculations.

None of today's civilizations, including our own Western civilization, is in the cultural phase, excluding perhaps Russia. Thus, the impact of the soul is strictly historical, according to Spengler.

Graphically, we may say that the soul is analogous to a fully loaded but unused cassette tape. Playing out its full contents is analogous to the actualizing of all possible potentialities of the soul. And finally, the play-out time simulates the allotted lifespan of any given live culture as an organic entity. A fully wound unused cassette is thus analogous to the end of what Spengler sees as the culture phase.

This analogy, however, breaks down at the rewind mode. Unlike the playing out of a real tape recorder, what is to come in the virtual recorder is irreversible and directional conjuring the concept of time, implicitly that of destiny. Thus destiny is the true expression mode of time.

**Fully loaded virgin cassette tape analogous to the Soul
Specific potentiality and limited time span**

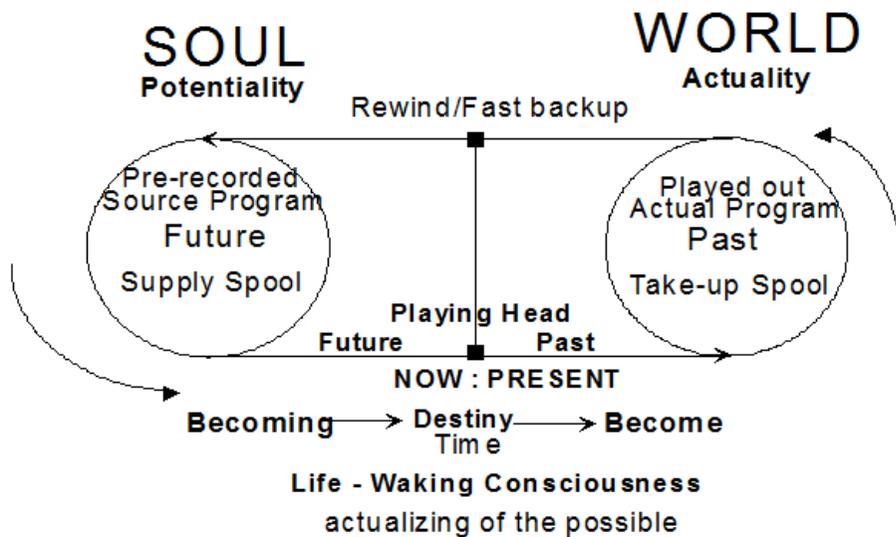


Figure 1

Spengler wrote in the first volume of *The Decline of the West*: “The world of incident is the world of once-actual facts that longingly or anxiously we live forward to as the future, that raises or depresses us as the living present, and that we contemplate with joy or with grief as the past. The world of causes and effects is the world of the constantly possible, of timelessness.”

For Spengler, “culture” refers to the transient phase and “civilization” to its post-expiration phase. Reviewers have often denoted the sequential phases that characterize the evolving nature of any given civilization in Spengler’s thought but most have failed to take into considering this dichotomy.

Yet, once the transient nature of the key word *soul* is accepted and assimilated, the dichotomy between “culture” and “civilization” is transformed from an arbitrary choice to a necessary logical, sequential phase, the organic living culture phase and then the strict and necessary successor, the civilization phase.

For Spengler the Enlightenment marked the end of the culture phase and the advent of the civilization phase. In contemporary terms we may say that for Spengler, Western culture has been fully played out, having exhausted all its potentialities, and thus we are now in the final, civilized phase of existence. The United States Constitution would be, therefore, a reflection of the post-Enlightenment phase.

At the conscious level, the potentials of the soul, fulfilled in the stream of life, are mutated to the perceptible view of nature and governed by the principle of causality. This is manifest throughout Spengler’s text by the emphasis assigned to the attributes of the living organic culture and through the stress on its reverse manifestation in the rational causal worldview.

Consciousness

Consciousness is thus the manifestation or outward display of the unique, genetically transcribed and evolved program played out on the complex neural circuitry, energized metabolically during lifetime.

The Human brain has about 100 billion neurons (100×10^9) with an estimated average of one thousand connections between each neuron and its neighbors. We have about 100 trillion connections (100×10^{12}), each capable of simultaneous calculation. That’s massive parallel processing.

Consciousness, then, is the manifest expression of the ON state, the simultaneous depolarization of trillions of neurons. Death is the OFF state, and Sleep is the temporary partial suspension of consciousness. Time is therefore a derived parameter of the ON state.

For the first time in the history of life, an organic form turned its power of perception back upon its own self, rendering it aware of its own existence.

While being unaware of the underlying physical chemical process, one is acutely aware of its overwhelming presence in the affirmative tone of 'I am.'

To invert Descartes famous dictum into "Je suis, donc je pense" is to stress that consciousness precedes thinking. It reverses the traditional idea, that thinking is the prime essence of the self. The dichotomy between organic life flowing unconsciously and the inorganic construct of its conscious counterpart is the essence of Spengler's worldview.

Unless each of these categories is fully comprehended, the flow of the historical panorama remains elusive. It can only be fully cognized by reference to its opposite, to its reverse. To this end a tabular approach to might prove helpful in bridging the gap confronting the reader.

Using the very same words of Spengler's magisterial text, the juxtaposed dichotomy of the table reinforces and explains the essential divide.

The following table is a brief illustration of a silent dichotomy that permeates this entire thesis. It offers a brief selective sample of the necessary correlation between the perceptible actual word and its life flow counterpart.

Fulfillment	Actuality
Becoming: Fact of Life	Become: Result of Life
Symbol	Notion
Time	Space
Destiny: Logic of Time Inner Certainty	Causality: Logic of Space Law-bound Reasoning
Destiny: Existence Mode of the Prime Phenomenon	Causality: Existence Mode of Objects
Morphological element destiny = Idea	Morphological element causality = Principle
Creative Art	Physical Epistemological System
Logic of Direction	Logic of Extension
Future	Past
Organism	Mechanism
World as History	World as Nature
Organic world-impression	Mechanical world-impression
Symbol and Picture	Formula and System
Ordering according to plan	Dissecting according to scheme

Fulfillment	Actuality
Organic necessity in life, that of Destiny: The Logic of Time	Mechanical necessity of cause and effect: The Logic of Space
Chronology and the idea of Destiny lead to a historical ordering of the world	Mathematics and the principle of causality lead to a naturalistic ordering of the world
World as Organism	World as Mechanism
Every Culture has its own Civilization: Strict and necessary organic Succession	Civilization as the organic logical sequel, fulfillment and finale of a Culture. It is a conclusion, the thing become succeeding the thing becoming, death following life. An irrevocable end
The old landscape of the culture	In place of a world, there is a city, a point; here a new sort of a nomad, the parasitical city dweller lives
Philosophy of Becoming Intuition	Philosophy of Being (having become) Analysis
Proper: involved in the basic fact known as feeling, i.e., the Inner Life	Alien: Related to Perception, i.e., the Outer World, the life of sensation
Life – becoming – Direction Time	Hard Set – become – Death Extension Space
In Direction: The possible is called the Future	In Direction: The actualized is called the Past
<p>Still to be accomplished LIFE [?]</p> <p>Accomplished Life: The form in which the actualizing of the possible is accomplished</p> <p>The Accomplishing: The present</p> <p>Higher History is the actualizing of possible culture</p>	
Becoming possesses the property of Direction (irreversibility)	Become possesses the property of Extension
Chronological number is linked with becoming, with life, with the necessity of destiny	Mathematical number is the symbol of causal necessity, the ultimate meaning of the world-as-nature. The essence of mechanical demarcation, akin to word
Form: world of history	Mechanical: causal picture of the world
Art: works are not calculated or thought out	Calculation and cognition are kin

Fulfillment	Actuality
Cultures are organisms, and world history is their collective biography	Systematic natural science is based on causality
Organic logic: logic of direction	Inorganic logic: logic of extension
History: The physiognomy of all becoming	Nature: The system of all things become
Destiny is the true existence-mode of the prime phenomenon	Causality is the existence-mode of objects
Destiny is the true existence-mode of the prime phenomenon	
Time is a word, made by thinking. Numbering and drawing are a becoming, numbers and figures are things become That I calculate is the business of organic logic	Space is a conception out of which the projected image time, the phantom time, is derived. Irreversible directional time is transmuted into a quantitative dimension that can be mathematically manipulated, a fourth dimension of the spatial concept What I calculate is the business of inorganic logic

The main thesis of Spengler is that the organic aspect of life is regulated by a necessary logic governing life in the time domain, while the laws governing the intellectual aspect of life are promulgated in the domain of space.

Further, each culture and each civilization is genetically endowed with a unique soul mindset that transforms its organic living and becoming life into an inorganic format depicting the world as Nature-Science.

Civilizations are thus biological phenomena. They are the expressive forms of distinct historical racial entities, the material expression of their quasi-genetic origin. This view is the exact opposite of that stipulated by the "Ascent of Man" in which a linear progression of ideas from one civilization to the next is postulated. Thus, to Spengler, history, art and science are culture-specific.