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## **I. Introduction**

Oswald Spengler pays considerable attention to ethics in both volumes of his classic *The Decline of the West*. He argues that the various ethical systems, such as virtue ethics, Stoa and Kantianism, convey the symbols of a certain culture. Although *The Decline of the West* received some attention from historians, it is largely ignored in philosophical ethics, despite its concerns about the human condition and its moral element.<sup>1</sup> One reason for this is that today's ethical debates deal with a specific set of questions and answers in which there is little room for a Classical type of thinker such as Spengler.

In his book *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*, Alasdair MacIntyre describes the constraints of contemporary ethical discussion, which he argues has its roots in Enlightenment philosophy. He mentions five constraints, all of which he strongly disagrees with, as I suggest Spengler would also have done: (1) Ethics deals with arguments on good and bad morality that are held to be universally binding to all people. (2) Often, these arguments are about the restrictions and duties of individual behavior vis-à-vis others. In addition, (3) ethics is an

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<sup>1</sup> For a typical historian's interpretation of Spengler's oeuvre, see Frits Boterman, *Oswald Spengler. Een intellectuele biografie* (2017). The complicated political aspects of *The Decline of the West* and its reception are considered in this book. Unfortunately, it is rather weak in the reconstruction of the non-political aspects of Spengler's work, for instance his ideas on aesthetics and economics.

abstract discipline comprising arguments. Ethicists scarcely mention occupational roles or social status; they rather reflect on ‘moral agents’ in general. Fourth, (4) ethical arguments are supposed to be distinguished from arguments from other realms, such as political, esthetic, historical, and religious. Fifth, (5) there is a shared belief that contemporary ethics, despite its internal discussions, addresses the ‘real’ issues and hence is superior to moral ideas that do not fit within its parameters.<sup>2</sup>

MacIntyre disagrees with all these five aspects, just like other communitarian philosophers, such as Charles Taylor and Jonathan Haidt.<sup>3</sup> All criticize the ‘thin’ set of questions and answers addressed in the field of ethics. Nonetheless, it remains the dominant discourse. In this paper, I attempt to make clear that Spengler, in the 1920s, had already developed a cultural philosophy that foreshadows the recent turn in ethical theory, from Taylor and MacIntyre, regarding the dominant ethical debate. At the same time, as I show in this paper, his philosophy offers the potential for cultural-ethical interpretation of some of today’s most fierce moral debates: on gender, capitalism, moral purism and even Covid-19 policies. Taken together, I argue, Spengler offers both significant meta-ethical and ethical insights that can strengthen and enrich current normative discussions.

For Spengler, (1) ethics does not deal with universal truths, but carries the Ur-symbol of a certain culture and phase.<sup>4</sup> Spengler explains, for instance, how the Aristotelian idea of a moral good life as a complete and balanced life — *eudaimonia* — is typically Ancient.<sup>5</sup> Despite its popularity, Spengler reveals that the Aristotelian idea of a moral good life is incompatible with modern Western ideals and mores of individual autonomy, willpower and existential doubt. (2) Since our cultural focus lies on the individual, it seems necessary to articulate an *ethics of the self* and not only an ethics about the relationship between the individual and society. (3) In Spengler’s philosophy, our ideals and mores are articulated in theories of ethics *and* lived realities. With this in mind, Spengler expands his analysis of ethics to that of (4) other cultural phenomena, such as the organization of work, arts and science. (5) Despite this all-compassing ambition of Spengler, he remains a relativist who even foresaw the Western universalistic arrogance regarding its own ethical ideas and intolerance of those of others. Exactly how Spengler develops this line of argument on ethics and what it has to offer for today’s moral debates, is the central focus of this paper.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, MacIntyre mentions six constraining characteristics of contemporary ethical debate, but I think his sixth characteristic – the habit of ethicists to reflect a lot on very exceptional and unworldly dilemmas – follows from 3) and 5). See: Alasdair MacIntyre, *Ethics and the Conflicts of Modernity. An Essay on desire, Practical Reasoning and Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 115-116.

<sup>3</sup> Haidt is a psychologist but fits into the tradition of communitarianism. His main work: Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind. Why People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012). On communitarianism, see Daniel Bell, “Communitarianism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/communitarianism/>.

<sup>4</sup> On the *Ur-symbol* (translated as ‘prime symbol’) see Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 174-175.

<sup>5</sup> The Ur-symbol of the Ancient culture is namely “the naked body that, free from ‘becoming’ and history, is visibly present.” This symbol dovetails with the ideal of the perfect life of the gentleman which Aristotle had in mind when describing his virtue ethics. For Spengler’s ideas on Ancient culture, see Section II; for a Spenglerian analysis of Aristotle’s virtue ethics, see Section III.

Accordingly, the paper commences with a reconstruction of Spengler's main ideas on the development of cultures into civilizations. This section also introduces his central categories: *Dasein*, *Wachsein*, *Takt* and *Es* (§ II). Then the paper describes Spengler's main cultural account of ethics by comparing the central ideas of Aristotle, Kant and Mill (§ III). It continues with a description of Western ethics as an 'ethics of force' and how this sheds light on current Covid-19 policies and especially its forceful aspects (§ IV). In the following section, the paper turns to a topic of relevance to economic ethics. The risk of cultural decline is caused partly by the dominance of Anglo-Saxon capitalism and socialism, Spengler argued, and he therefore developed an alternative economics ethics, which resembles that of the Rhinelandic model (§ V). Despite the many worldly issues Spengler discusses throughout his books, he also offers significant arguments justifying the need of an 'ethics of the self' which I will clarify with reference to the current discussion on gender (§ VI). The paper ends with a short analysis of the use and abuse of moral talk, especially in the context of work, in the spirit of Spengler's criticism of Marxian thought (§ VII).

## II. Spengler on Culture and Civilization

The title *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* — a suggestion from Spengler's publisher — refers to the transition from a culture to fully-fledged civilization and should therefore not be misunderstood as an indication of the further downfall of a culture as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is a transition from a religious to an irreligious phase in which money and technology gain prominence. Other social philosophers of the Weimar Republic, such as Max Weber, also signaled this transition to civilization and called it the process of modernization, in which there is no longer a dense moral structure, and in which people experience 'disenchantment'.<sup>7</sup>

Spengler clearly experienced difficulties with the modern or civilized era and its focus on money and power, although he did not yearn nostalgically for a rustic traditional society.<sup>8</sup> History only has one direction and destiny, Spengler argues, but this direction differs according to the culture and thus, there is no such thing as 'one' process of modernization. It is a typical Faustian idea, Spengler argues, to interpret history in a threefold scheme of ancient-medieval-modern and therewith suggest that history only has a single modernity. Spengler, on the contrary, develops a rhythmic concept of history in which growth and decline follow naturally. With *The Decline of the West*, he wants to help us understand the potentialities and restrictions of our specific cultural-historical situation.

Spengler understands culture as a *unity of life*, encompassing art, politics, science, economics, religion and ethics.<sup>9</sup> He examines the different stages of a culture's life span and discerns what he calls the 'Ur-symbol' which resonates in its orientation. The culture of the West 'awakens' between the rivers Elbe and Tajo around the years 900-1100 and grows into

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<sup>6</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 31.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, Max Weber, *The protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> Spengler's discomfort with modern society is eloquently expressed in his chapter on the modern city. See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Perspectives of World-History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), Chapter IV.

<sup>9</sup> Very little attention has been devoted to these ideas on cultural difference in academic debate, compared to Spengler's ideas on technology and politics. An exception is the historian and psychologist of religion Joseph Campbell, whose work is indebted to the main ideas on cultural difference from Spengler. See, for instance, *The Masks of God. Creative Mythology* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968).

an area that includes Western Europe and North America. This awakening is rather intuitive than a matter of rational decision making. We can clarify this by introducing Spengler's main categories.<sup>10</sup> The awakening and unfolding of a culture has to do with the *Dasein* (Being) of people and a collective experience, an *Es* (It) which moves people in certain directions. People experience a certain yearning (*Verlangen*) on the level of *Dasein* and start establishing their cultural Ur-symbol.<sup>11</sup> Spengler believes that a culture works towards the unfolding of its primal symbol in the form of concrete *form languages*, such as certain forms of church architecture or, to use a contemporary example, the way in which a soccer club trains and plays, in a specific style or form.<sup>12</sup>

Spengler translates his epistemological categories — *Dasein* as intuition, *Wachsein* as rationality — into the social realm: a farmer in the 17th century is an example of almost pure *Dasein*, while a priest represents *Wachsein*. The first works in harmony with nature in a manner taught by his family, the latter works with books and principles. Nonetheless, there is an undertow of *Dasein* in a culture that makes it natural for people to become farmers or priests. People do not simply rationally 'decide' or 'choose' how they want to live but are 'called upon' to endorse a certain way of life from the deeper layers of collective culture, of *Dasein*. For Spengler, most of our conscious decisions in life are actually a reflection, structurization, and rationalization of certain cultural habits.<sup>13</sup> This idea is quite existentialist and also comes close to Aristotle's understanding of ethics in which people first and foremost must live in the *Polis* where they are accustomed to a certain *ethos*, before they can even start speaking about the way they want to live. I will return to the division of *Dasein* / *Wachsein* in Section VII because it sheds light on contemporary ethical discourse, especially through its focus on the articulation of a moral life — a verbalized morality — instead of a morality that is actually anchored in people's minds and hearts through habituation. *Dasein* is about our real behavior and real commitments, what Spengler calls our *Tat-Wirklichkeit* instead of our narrative and argumentative picture of society and ourselves.

The archetypal symbol of the soul of Western culture, which Spengler, in line with Goethe's *Faust*, also calls the Faustian culture, is *the striving and willing of the self in infinite space*. Ancient culture originated around 1100 BC in present-day Greece and spread to Asia Minor and the later Roman areas. The archetypal symbol of the Ancient soul is *the naked body that, free from 'becoming' and history, is visibly present*.<sup>14</sup> Let us work through a few examples in order to

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<sup>10</sup> Spengler is not known for the metaphysical and epistemological clarity of his main categories *Dasein*, *Wachsein*, *Takt*, and so on. At the same time, I agree with Swer that his philosophical framework is a lot broader than one would expect from a philosopher of history. He even calls Spengler an "existential phenomenologist," and rightly so. See Gregory Morgan Swer, "Technology and the End of Western Civilization: Spengler's and Heidegger's Histories of Life/Being," *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 19/1 (2019): 1-10.

<sup>11</sup> On yearning and dread, *Verlangen* and *Angst*, see Gregory Morgan Swer, "Longing, Dread and Care: Spengler's Account of the Existential Structure of Human Experience," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 51/1 (2020): 71-87.

<sup>12</sup> This central terminology is explored by Spengler throughout his books. See, for instance, Volume II, Chapter 1. 'Origin and Landscape. A. The Cosmic and the Microcosmos'.

<sup>13</sup> Although this philosophical scheme is relatively straightforward, its strength is often overlooked. Roger Scruton, for instance, in his focus on high culture, e.g., classical music and philosophy, and reluctance to pop culture, never seems to have grasped Spengler's *Dasein* concept. See Roger Scruton, "Spengler's Decline of the West," in *Philosopher on Dover Beach* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1990), 24-50.

<sup>14</sup> See: Volume I, Chapter VI: Makrokosmos, (2) Apollinian, Faustian and Magician Soul.

understand the heuristic value of these Ur-symbols. Mathematics, for instance, has traditionally been the science of eternal truths — a discipline of *Wachsein*. However, Spengler makes it clear that one can perceive cultural differences par excellence in mathematics.<sup>15</sup> Ancient mathematics is connected with the eye, with the visible, while Faustian mathematics ‘overcomes’ the visible. There are no fractions in Greek mathematics. This shows that the number is understood as a *body*, as size or measure and not as a *function*. The Ancients reject the number zero, which Spengler interprets as the negation of the “body present.”<sup>16</sup>

The difference between the Ancient and Faustian symbol is also evident in architecture.<sup>17</sup> The ancient soul is visible in the compact character of the Doric column, but also in the relatively simple construction of a temple. Compared to Faustian architecture, Classical architecture is actually merely repetition without much variation. Spengler reveals how innovation itself and also ‘disruptive innovation’ is typically Faustian and not simply a result of scientific research and technological process. Innovation is a cultural rather than a technological motive and can be seen in all its form languages, from music and architecture to sports.

Spengler also points to the difference between Classical and Faustian culture in art.<sup>18</sup> For him, the pinnacle of Faustian art is instrumental classical music; unbound, it ‘floats’ as it were, through the spaces. The organ music rages through the cathedral like a storm, occupying the entire space. Spengler, on the other hand, sees the pinnacle of Classical art in the sculpture of Polyklet. The Apollonian archetypal symbol — the visible body — is clearly expressed in his images. However, Polyklet did not depict individual people — as Rembrandt and Shakespeare did, namely in a *biographical way* — but stereotypes, for example, people who were good orators or warriors. It is not the person, but the societal role speaking. Spengler argues that the Western focus on individuality is a recognizable thread in chivalric knight-errantry literature, in which a lonely knight wanders around an undefined location in search of the holy grail. For the Ancients, it is not about becoming a person, about his history, but about the ‘tense moment’ — which we see in the sculpted discus thrower frozen just before the discus is released. Wandering around is not an ideal at all for Athenians, who preferred to live in cities as state members. Being alone outside the *Polis* was not only dangerous, but would also fail to confirm to the ideal of *eudaimonia*, the good life.<sup>19</sup>

A strong historical awareness is part of the Faustian way of life; we live from the past to the future, both personally and collectively. This historical awareness is expressed, for example, in a love of visiting museums, collecting things, studying history, and also in the noble family trees. Compared to us, the Ancients had a limited historical understanding; there is no long-term memory.<sup>20</sup> Given that the Faustian person lives between the past and the future, he has, according to Spengler, a primordial sense of concern or care (*Sorge*). This explains why we have developed social welfare states and also embrace myths of care, for

<sup>15</sup> See: Volume I, Chapter II. ‘The meaning of numbers.’

<sup>16</sup> On Spengler and mathematics, see: Emanuel Rutten, ‘Spenglers duiding van de wiskunde als cultuurfenomeen’, in: *Het Retorische Weten II*. Leesmagazijn 2021, pp. 83-88.

<sup>17</sup> See: Volume I, Chapter VII. ‘Music and Plastic. (1) The arts of Form.’

<sup>18</sup> See Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Volume I*, Chapter VIII. “Music and Plastic (2) Act and Portrait.”

<sup>19</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, who is clearly influenced by Spengler, wrote books on spheres in which he pays considerable attention to the human need for shelter and borders. Perhaps this need is less universal and more Ancient than Sloterdijk argues. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären I. Blasen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1998), esp. 79.

<sup>20</sup> Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Volume I*, 97.

instance that of Maria. Maria carries Jesus the child and therewith symbolizes people's care for the future. Many early modern churches are actually devoted to her, for instance the Florence Cathedral (Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore). Importantly, this focus on Maria as a symbol of care is not a typical Christian motif for Spengler, but a Faustian interpretation of Christianity.<sup>21</sup> The relation between time and care forms a significant thought-figure which Spengler identifies at the level of collective moral intuitions or *Dasein* in the West. It also sheds light on the often-misunderstood guiding concept of *The Decline of the West*. The rise of civilized culture does not mean that a culture immediately disappears from the stage of history. In fact, Western culture can play a long end game, since it focusses on time and hence on care.<sup>22</sup>

Nonetheless, the fundamentals of a culture change during a civilization phase. The transformation from culture to civilization takes place in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century BC for the Classical, and 19<sup>th</sup> Century for the Faustian culture. Spengler interprets the shift from a culture to its stage of civilization as a *Wachsein* — detachment from the life of the more fundamental *Dasein*. People no longer have a common desire to give life a 'natural direction,' and are overcome by a kind of cultural-religious nihilism. With civilization, we witness a rationalization of life and society with science and technology — of *Wachsein* — that mobilizes life and changes everything. A culture loses its originality in a civilization phase and instead refines and reproduces earlier symbols.<sup>23</sup> In poetry, painting and architecture, Spengler sees in a civilizing era, mainly the reproduction of old ideas or the transgression of old conventions, but not the creation of new ideas or conventions. At the same time, this is done on a more massive scale, due to technological innovation. Culture is about true creation and religion; civilization is about economic and technological progress. The difference is also evident in ethics, as I will show in the next section.

### III. A Spenglerian Interpretation of Aristotle, Kant and Mill

In Spengler's philosophy, Aristotle and Kant are typical late-cultural thinkers, who lived and thought at the cultural tipping point from culture to civilization. In a cultural phase, ethics is part of the general culture, intertwined with religion and society. Accordingly, Kant and Aristotle articulated ideas on basic premises which were widely acknowledged. Kant formalized the protestant culture of Prussian Germany, while Aristotle articulated the mindset of the Athenian elites.<sup>24</sup> When civilization unfolds, ethical systems change and deal with more real-world problems such as those of the economy, food, sex and politics. For Spengler, Mill is a typical exponent of the civilization phase.

As clarified in the previous section, Western culture is ensouled by an idea of the individual, willingly standing in infinite space and with a sense of time. Westerners focus on

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<sup>21</sup> See Volume I, Chapter VI: "Makrokosmos, (2) Apollinian, Faustian and Magician Soul."

<sup>22</sup> Ad Verbrugge, "Heimkehr des Abendlandes. Nietzsche und die Geschichte des Nihilismus im Denken von Spengler und Heidegger," *Heidegger-Jahrbuch* 2 (2005): 222-238.

<sup>23</sup> Spengler tries to motivate people in Western civilization to let go of the cultural forms of the past. See Gregory Swer, "The Revolt against Reason: Oswald Spengler and Violence as Cultural Preservative," *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* 3/2 (2019) : 123-148; 137.

<sup>24</sup> MacIntyre philosophizes about culture, for instance when he describes how Aristotle fits into Athenian culture, or when he identifies Kant and Mozart as exponents of German enlightenment culture. Yet, Spengler dives a lot deeper into the cultural dynamics by articulating an Ur-symbol. See: MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), esp. 37.



the individual, perceive *everyone* as an individual, and they also have a feeling of compassion. Importantly, this Western focus goes hand in hand with a mentality of struggle, victory and persistence. “Will-power, even in ethics, the passionate striving to set up a proper morale as a universal truth, and to enforce it upon humanity, to re-interpret or overcome or destroy everything otherwise constituted ...”<sup>25</sup> Thus, there is a high level of unease and ambition in Western morality, which the ancient people never had in that sense.<sup>26</sup> This unease has both a personal and a social dimension. Let us clarify this line of thought with a comparison between Kant, Aristotle, and Mill, using Spengler’s examples and expanding them in the spirit of his philosophy.

Kant argues that a human being is fundamentally free, but it also needs to struggle *within itself*, acting against its inherent needs and lower base appetites. A true realization of one’s freedom requires following the categorical imperative *out of duty* and ignoring these needs and appetites.<sup>27</sup> For Spengler, Kant is an exponent of the high culture of the West because there is, so to say, still a hunger in his philosophy to ‘stand’ for a certain idea. Compared to Mill, Kant stands for a Protestant way of life that is worth fighting for in one’s own soul. Such an internal fight is lost in the civilized phase in which morality becomes rather more pragmatic and faces dilemmas. Kant does not seriously consider the possibility of facing a moral dilemma and making compromises, for his ethics are clear-cut, one should simply follow it by means of willpower.<sup>28</sup>

Mill, on the other hand, accepts life’s incompleteness to a high degree and articulates a meta-theory in which one can measure good and bad. The unity of metaphysics and ethics, religion and morality, is ‘forgotten’ by Mill who wants to reason about real-world problems. In fact, Mill translates ethical questions into terms of pain and pleasure, thus rendering the role of reason and consciousness of secondary importance. That would be inconceivable for Kant, who stands for a certain culture in which measuring and weighing dilemmas is not an object of serious contemplation, and in which one’s pure and goodwill remains the main reason to consider people ethical. Mill is not working with such categories as duty or respect (*Achtung*) anymore, which are typical cultural notions.

Kantian thought is cultural and so is that of Aristotle, despite the major differences. The Kantian tension (or: paradox) within the self — to have respect for morality and ignore one’s appetites, pleasures and pains — would be incomprehensible for Aristotle for whom *balance* was very important and a result of good upbringing in the *polis*. A true moral person faces no internal contradictions in his philosophy. Emotions and self interest in general are all integrated into the whole of the personality of the virtuous person (the *phrónimos*). Rationality itself only plays a role in ethical deliberation for Aristotle and the same holds for willpower. For Aristotle, virtue is defined by the capacity of a person, deeply engraved in his way of living (*ethos*), to continuously act from the middle — between the two exaggerations of ‘too little’ and ‘too much.’ Courage, for instance, is a virtue that lies directly between cowardice and overconfidence. A virtuous person needs to respond rightly in a certain situation, with certain people, with certain goals.<sup>29</sup> Our whole personality needs to be coherently formed in

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>26</sup> For Spengler’s reflection on ethics, see: Volume I, Chapter X. “Soul-image and Life-feeling. (1) Buddhism, Stoicism and Socialism.”

<sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), BA 1, 2.

<sup>28</sup> See Wim Dubbink, & Luc Van Liedekerke, “Rethinking the Purity of Moral Motives in Business: Kant against Moral Purism,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 167 (2020): 379-393.

<sup>29</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106 a26-b28.



order to be virtuous. From an Aristotelean perspective, Kant's focus on the categorical imperative is odd, for there are many situations that require a specific response which would not confirm to such a universal criterion.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, Kant does not accidentally come up with his categorical imperative; it flows from his methodology and the question he poses. Here Spengler digs deep when showing that not only ethics — i.e., how we should live and how we can give arguments to justify this — as such is a cultural product, but the question (*Fragestellung*) in ethics is also important.<sup>31</sup> Kant has different aims than Aristotle with his ethics: he wants to articulate the 'laws' in the reign of freedom, something which Aristotle does not aspire. Kant wants to transcend the *condition humaine*, and therein lies the root of fundamental unease people have when acting morally, risking 'moral purity' and wanting to radically change the world. It is here that Mill's thought resembles that of Kant, for he also wants to understand 'the laws' of morality. He shares an interest in humanity as such and, unlike Aristotle, does not philosophize about humans as *zōoion politikon*, members of a certain *Polis* who share an *ethos*. As said above, there is also a substantial difference in that Mill accepts life in its complexity and is a typical civilized ethicist, using an economical-utilitarian scheme of argument, whereas Kant remains principled and cultural in his orientation on both the goodwill and the categorical imperative and allows no moral compromises.

Aristotle's ethics is intertwined with the social status of the Athenian elites and not the study of morality of all human beings. A virtuous person, seen from an Aristotelean perspective, is someone who stands within the situation, in between other people, responding virtuously to others with the right feeling.<sup>32</sup> It is about his happiness (*eudemonia*) within the realm of the polis, that the moral person also takes care for. Aristotle never wrote seriously about people working in the mines or even those who lived outside Athens. He did not even think that people inside the polis but outside the elite could become happy in his ethical sense of the word *eudaimonia*.<sup>33</sup> All of this changes radically in the modern world and in modern ethics; Spengler argues that there is a strong tendency in Western morality to consider the whole world and want to change this whole world for the better.

#### IV. Ethics of Force. A Spenglerian Look at Covid-19

Spengler believes the West has an 'imperative' culture that is already clearly present in its culture phase and is thus amplified in its civilization phase. He identifies this tendency in Kant's phrase 'Act, so that ...'. Spengler redefines Kant's categorical imperative as: "Act as though the maxims that you practice *were to become by your own will the law for all*."<sup>34</sup> With this analysis, Spengler distances himself from Nietzsche's interpretation of the weak ethics ('slave morality') of the Christian Church in the West.<sup>35</sup> Spengler argues that there is always an actor in Western culture who *should do* something. That could be the state, the neighbor, or the capitalist system. 'Faustian' means in any case to demand something from everyone, including

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<sup>30</sup> This concreteness and sense of reality might explain the popularity of Aristotelian ethics in current empirical research in ethics. See, for instance, Van Baardewijk, De Graaf, "The Ethos of Business Students," *Business ethics: A European Review* 30/2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/beer.12326>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 341. The English translation of the opening passage of Spengler's ethics analysis (see footnote 26) is not as clear as Spengler's own text (see page 434 of the German original).

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106 b9-35.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1144a7-8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 350.

future generations. Interestingly, Spengler seems to be quite positive about this tendency in Western culture. The tolerance of Athenian philosophers also implied a certain *carelessness* of the whole world with its focus on the ‘here and now.’ Western culture, on the other hand, focusses on care, but also forces this care onto people and institutions, thus endorsing an *ethics of force*.

Let us take a look at some examples to clarify this. We tolerate different religions in today’s West, but a church cannot really neglect certain issues, for instance abortion. We tolerate different perspectives on health but find it very hard to accept that some people do not want vaccines. Hence, tolerance is understood in a rather intolerant way when it concerns the fundamental idea of a human being, such as religious belief or health.

This is a type of analysis of the imperialism — or ethics of force — of modern Western morality that can also be found in the work of Michel Foucault on the power mechanisms in society and morality since the Enlightenment.<sup>36</sup> I argue that Spengler delves deeper into the phenomenon of culture than Foucault, which enables him to understand morality not simply in terms of disciplinary and power relations. Power certainly plays a role in ethics, especially in the Western world, but Spengler’s idea of the Ur-symbol helps us to understand the attractiveness of this ideal. It is about the *shared belonging of the Western culture*, not simply about oppression. I think Spengler’s positive account of an ethics of force sheds light on the embarrassing Western history of colonization, a history in which capitalistic motives went hand in hand with religious and cultural ideas about ‘cultivating’ the world.<sup>37</sup> Hence, colonization was not simply about economic exploitation, but was rather a result of a Western view on the world in which the West itself was supposed to be the ideal example.

A contemporary example of the ethics of force, was the approach to Covid-19.<sup>38</sup> In the international media, journalists often spoke of Covid-19 policies in terms of ‘hammering’ down the virus, which is an indication of our combative understanding of the virus and is a typical Faustian way of looking at health and disease. In the first place, because our health-policy focus is *on the virus as an enemy* and not so much on health as part of the entire way of living we have endorsed in the modern world. The virus was analyzed in a typical Faustian and ‘civilized’ way, by measuring all sorts of things: infections, hospitalizations, intensive-care beds, deaths, and so on. The World Health Organization stimulated just such a quantitative understanding of the virus, measured in scientific models. If one ponders this from the perspective of Aristotle, as is done by Ad Verbrugge, it becomes clear how Faustian this strategy really is.<sup>39</sup> For Aristotle, health is an internal good which he distinguishes from external goods, such as owning a house, having the right friends, and a nice family. He argues that both internal and external goods are *relative goods* that are relative to a moral way of life. A person is not virtuous when focusing excessively on, say, power or family. Internal and external goods need to be anchored in a virtuous life that is part of the flourishing *polis* and its members.<sup>40</sup> According to Verbrugge, this puts into perspective our forceful approach to Covid-19 in which we do not judge really *qualitatively* how to deal with the virus. Such an *ethical*

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<sup>36</sup> Michel, Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

<sup>37</sup> However, Spengler himself was not embarrassed by colonization. On the contrary, he argued that Germany was rather late in developing colonies. See his interpretation of Cecil Rhodes. Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Perspectives of World-History*, 475.

<sup>38</sup> See Ad Verbrugge, “De weg van de minste weerstand. Een filosofische bespiegeling over de coronacrisis,” in *Pandemische Chaos. Het coronabeleid onder de loep*. ed. Dick Bijl (2021), 193-214.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 194-195.

<sup>40</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1323a24-27.

*weighing*, in which we faced the dilemmas surrounding lockdowns for instance, is almost unthinkable. In other words, we endorsed an ethics of force, in this case directed at eliminating danger; not an ethics of ‘the good life’ of the whole of communities, including the function of schools and workplaces.

Such an analysis of Covid-19 policies *itself* might be seen as provocative and that is why anyone who tried to address it, say on Facebook or YouTube, risked being censored. That is also typical of Faustian civilization which pretends to be ethical, but at the same time is quite intolerant of disagreement. Again, this is a central paradox in normative ethics that was also addressed by Foucault. Yet, Spengler helps us understand how our unease with free speech is deeply anchored in our own culture.

## V. Spengler’s Defense of Rhinelandic Capitalism

Let us now turn to Spengler’s critique of capitalism. To understand it, we must first reconstruct his ideas on two important social philosophies, or ethical systems, of the civilization phases of Apollonian and Faustian culture: Stoicism and socialism.

Stoicism is directed to *individual self-management*, to statuesque and purely present being, without regard to future or past or neighbour. Socialism is the dynamic treatment of the same theme; it is defensive like stoicism, but what it defends is not the pose but the working-out of the life; and more, it is offensive-defensive, for with powerful thrust into distance it spreads itself into all future and over all mankind, which shall be brought under one single regimen.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the Romans had a sense for control, but not the pretense of ruling the whole of humanity: Stoicism is not imperialistic, not focused on ‘the’ way of life, but instead, tolerant towards differences. In the West, we have the ‘one best way’ of organizing, of the sciences and also regarding our humanistic ideals. The Faustian spirit wants to ‘globalize’ and change the world, which is part of its rudimentary motivation, its Ur-symbol of individuals in space. Spengler is rather critical of the ethicists who have a larger program for humanity to fit the process of globalization:

Ethical socialism is *not* a system of compassion, humanity, peace and kindly care, but one of will-to-power. ... Amongst us, sentimental morale, morale directed to happiness and usefulness is *never* the final instinct, however we may persuade ourselves otherwise.<sup>42</sup>

Spengler nonetheless appreciates the will-to-power in civilized ethics and social philosophies. Accordingly, he is ambivalent about the potentialities of Western civilization. He attempts to articulate an alternative way of using the Faustian energy for purposes that he values. In *Prussianism and Socialism*<sup>43</sup> — which Spengler published in 1918 between volume one and two of *The Decline of the West* — he makes an interesting division within the development of socialism, between what could also be called the Anglo-Saxon and Rhineland traditions.<sup>44</sup> The former goes back to the Viking tradition, which Spengler much admires for being

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<sup>41</sup> Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926): 357.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 361, 362.

<sup>43</sup> For an overview on *Prussia and Socialism*, see B.J. Lewis, “Spengler’s Prussian Socialism,” *European Review, Academia Europaea* 25/3 (2017): 479-493.

<sup>44</sup> I borrow this terminology from: Peter A. Hall, David Soskice (ed.), *Varieties of Capitalism. The Institutional Foundations of Comparative Advantage*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

individualistic and combative. Solidarity means the rich share money with the poor. Instead of this philanthropy, the Rhinelandic tradition favors a welfare state. With the process of civilization, the Viking spirit hollowed-out into rough culture-less individualism, for which Spengler has a lot less respect. In fact, he identifies the then current Anglo-Saxon way of thinking as inappropriate for the German situation. He favors the other typically Faustian tradition of knights and monastery, which is more focused on care and duty. However, he is clear that both motifs — Vikings and knights — are present in the civilized West, although the Viking Anglo-Saxon style seems to dominate.

Remarkably, Spengler argues that communism is in fact a variant of the Anglo-American Viking civilization and he dislikes its influence in Germany.<sup>45</sup> His analysis of communism is that it is a type of capitalism for the laborer.<sup>46</sup> Marx himself has a *quantitative* understanding of work, Spengler argues.<sup>47</sup> He lacks a feeling for the professional pride of laborers. This is an original critique of capitalism that fits well into contemporary debates on ‘good work,’ in which job honor has become a central category for understanding both success at work and problems such as stress.<sup>48</sup>

Marx’s terminology presupposes the work in factories on the island of England, devoted not to production but trade. Instead, Spengler favors what he calls Prussian socialism, which comes quite close to today’s concept of the Rhineland economy. Important characteristics are: (1) A minor role for banks and financial institutions. Companies should rather own each other.<sup>49</sup> (2) An important role for technological companies and technological education.<sup>50</sup> (3) A political system not along the lines of parliamentary democracy, but rather resting on the organized influence of the professions, as well as a bureaucratic elite.

All in all, Spengler was a social conservative. For him, parliamentary democracy would open the gates to Anglo-Saxon capitalism.<sup>51</sup> Spengler was a great supporter of the state, the bureaucracy. Max Weber famously argued that the state is a set of procedures, especially the

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<sup>45</sup> “Marx was thus an exclusively English thinker. His two-class system derives from the situation of a mercantile people that sacrificed its agriculture to big business, and that had never possessed a national corps of civil servants with a pronounced, i.e., Prussian, estate-consciousness. In England there were only “bourgeoisie” and “proletarians,” active and passive agents in business affairs, robbers and robbed—the whole system very Viking-like” Spengler, *Prussianism and Socialism*, 61

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “Had Marx understood the meaning of Prussian work, of activity for its own sake, of service in the name of the totality, for “all together” and not for oneself, of duty that ennoble regardless of the kind of work performed—had he been able to comprehend these things, his Manifesto would probably never have been written.” Ibid., 63.

<sup>48</sup> On meaningful work, see Douglas A Lepisto & Michael G. Pratt “Meaningful work as realization and justification: Toward a dual conceptualization,” *Organizational Psychology Review*. 7/2 (2017): 99-121.

<sup>49</sup> Spengler argues against the influence of financial firms in *The Decline of the West*. The only alternative, still present in Germany, seems to be that companies own each other, and financial markets are relatively small. Although Spengler does not really articulate this alternative, it flows from his argument. See footnote 44 for an empirical analysis of Germany’s economy and the relatively minor role of financial institutions compared to the Anglo-Saxon world.

<sup>50</sup> The *Decline of the West* ends with a chapter on the machine and the need for entrepreneurs and engineers.

<sup>51</sup> Spengler, *The Decline of the West: Perspectives of World-History*, 464.

functional organization of work and the selection of employees based on competence.<sup>52</sup> Spengler would certainly add to this description that there was a great ‘honour’ involved in being a bureaucrat, a *Beamte*.<sup>53</sup> In any case, we know that the German bureaucracy was highly developed in Prussia and that democratic accountability, by contrast, was rather low until the Weimar Republic (1919-1933) finally introduced mechanisms of democratic control. Francis Fukuyama argues that nineteenth century Germany could be compared to today’s Singapore, with a very strong state and the rule of law, but with little democratic accountability.<sup>54</sup> This is an illuminating comparison in order to understand Spengler’s idealizations of a state-bureaucracy. Moreover, just as Singapore has a competitive economy, Spengler envisions Germany with a strong state and a strong economy, focussing not so much on finance as on technological innovation.

## VI. Ethics of the Self. A Spenglerian Look at Gender.

Many philosophers, among them Hegel and Taylor, have drawn attention to the process of individualization as part of larger modernization processes.<sup>55</sup> One obvious difference is that Spengler puts into perspective the role of philosophy itself. For him, it was for instance not Descartes who placed the individual at the center of cultural history with his famous *cogito ergo sum* argument. Rather, Descartes articulated in his philosophy a collective experience — an *Es* — that already existed in religion.

When Catholicism introduced the confession, Spengler argues, it was the ‘opening’ of the subject in religion. An opening that is further explored in Protestantism where one’s subjective conscience is the true touchstone for measuring one’s life — and not the Church father. Spengler argues that this theme of *subjective spiritual responsibility* has little to do with the original advice of Jesus. Rather, it is the Faustian interpretation of Christianity. Spengler also argues that Christianity became stricter due to the Reformation — despite the abolishment of the church hierarchies — because God himself is *always* present now, and not only mediated by the Church on Sundays.<sup>56</sup>

The Faustian experience of subjectivity can also be seen in other cultural forms, such as the works of Rembrandt who, according to Spengler, was able to truly paint an individual, mostly isolated from the direct circumstances and appearing in light and shadow. He argues convincingly that we can witness a certain unease in the eyes of the portraited people. In that sense, there is ‘existential doubt’ in Faustian culture, whereas such doubt is rare in the arts of Greece and Rome. This is not a nineteenth century Romantic topic, as Taylor would call it, but goes back to the Faustian Ur-symbolism.

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<sup>52</sup> Max Weber, *Economy and the State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 220, 221.

<sup>53</sup> Weber speaks of ‘charisma’ in relation to politics but has little eye for the role of job honour in bureaucracies.

<sup>54</sup> Fukuyama, Francis, *Political Order and Political Decay. From the French Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy* (London: Profile Books Ltd., 2014), 72.

<sup>55</sup> Although I argue that most of Spengler’s arguments foreshadow those made by communitarian philosophers in the 1990s, who argue that the mainstream philosophers endorse an overly individualistic concept of the self, these arguments do provide an ethics of the self. Philosophers such as Taylor and MacIntyre also try to develop such an ethics, mostly drawing on the work of Harry G. Frankfurt, but never seem to delve deep and constructively into the concept of personhood or soul.

<sup>56</sup> See Ad Verbrugge, “De dood van God? De Verlichting, religie en de toekomst van het Westen,” in *Tijd van Onbehagen. Filosofische essays over een cultuur op drift*, 194-251.

Contemporary ethics focuses strongly on constraints upon the individual in order to balance one's own needs with those of others, but Spengler opens up the argument for an *ethics of the self*. From the very beginning of Western culture, through such myths as that of the Arthurian knight Percival, up until today's 'soul searching' of young people, Spengler helps understand and map the origins of this cultural existentialism. The Western person needs to go *inward* in order to feel deeper motivation, in order to resonate with the Ur-symbol that he or she shares with others.

I think that today's interest in the topic of gender can be seen as an example of a normative issue that people struggle with on an individual level. The fact that current Western culture discusses gender topics is — seen from the Spenglerian perspective — a further development of this Ur-symbol which inspires people to be *individuals who choose* their own identity, rather than people who are fundamentally embedded in their bodies and biological identity.<sup>57</sup> In a Faustian culture, the person stands *above* life and nature, *willingly exercising its power over everything*. Acceptance — or *ataraxia* — is not a virtue in Western culture, because it does not transform the self, who eventually feels alone in a large almost ending cosmos, trying to make sense of the world exactly by transforming it.

With Spengler one can speculate that gender will become a far larger topic for people in the foreseeable future. In Greek mythology, the fact that for instance Athena was a non-binary God, as we would call it today, was far less of an issue than it would be for us. Westerners might be 'trans' in a deep cultural sense that has been overlooked by other philosophers and sociologists. At the same time, our 'trans culture' can hardly be seen as a surprise. Shakespeare's sonnets, for instance, provide evidence of a protagonist trying to break out of the categories of man/ women. With Spengler, I argue that it is no coincidence that these sonnets are considered to be the best Western poetry has to offer. These sonnets are full of experiences that come close to the basic idea of human life in Western culture: an individual, on the search, going beyond bodily borders.

## VII. The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk

Spengler was well aware of the role of public debate in journalism and politics. He wrote extensively about the impact of rhetoric in Marx's writings on public debate and the field of economics.<sup>58</sup> He argues that Marx uses the language of suppression and victimhood by creating an enemy *with words*, the capitalist bourgeois. Marx was surely right that some capitalists suppressed proletarians, but Spengler is also partly right that this framing itself created enemies that did not always exist before. His claim is that the proletarians never had poor lives in Germany and that this was an English projection of Marx onto the German situation.

In this day and age, morality is often *verbalized* and it seems that some people think they live morally truthfully when they reject certain practices merely in words. I argue that Spengler's criticism of Marx can help in analyzing this phenomenon. In some cases, language itself becomes the central object of ethical scrutiny, for instance in the debate about sex and gender and the appropriate pronouns. The claim is often that the wrong language creates victims and although such a claim is hard to verify, it is often simply accepted, probably because it is relatively easy to change the use of language. As argued in the previous section,

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<sup>57</sup> For a philosophical reflection on the complex relation of (gender) roles in love and pop-cultural perception of love, using Spengler's thought, see Ad Verbrugge, *Staat van Verwarring: het offer van liefde* (Boom Uitgeverij, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> Oswald Spengler, *The Hour of Decision. Part One: Germany and the world historical revolution* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1934).



there is reason enough to believe that the sex/ gender discussion resonates in our culture, but the question is whether normative arguments vis-à-vis language are as authentic as people generally think when making a moral argument. In some cases, ethical discussions on the correct language, being typical *Wachsein* discussions, seem to be an example of a rather empty virtue signalling. In other cases, moral talk can be misused in a manipulative manner to obscure processes, for instance in business. In this context, the phenomenon of greenwashing — or ethicswashing — in which a neat image is created for the outside world in nice words and images, has become highly problematic. Let us analyze this a bit further in a Spenglerian fashion in relation to moral talk *within* organizations.

What is clear in many organizations, both public and private, is that moral talk can be used by management to legitimize a certain reorganization, while ignoring the factual practices of work and the way these are organized by professionals and craftsmen.<sup>59</sup> Moral talk is often *abstract* and can therefore easily fit into the standard repertoire of management thinking: standardization, focus on innovation, sharp differentiation between management and shop floor, and so on. With such vague notions as ‘integrity’ and ‘corporate values’ businesses and institutions can be transformed into the image envisioned by organizational managers.<sup>60</sup> I believe that Spengler was aware of this dynamic, revealing that moral talk can easily obscure real-world problems.<sup>61</sup> People may talk a lot about a better world and formulate slogans about freedom or equality, but what do they actually *do* with their hands and wallets?<sup>62</sup> For Spengler, a true Faustian morality focuses on action and labor.<sup>63</sup>

He also had a keen eye for the misunderstanding of moralities in work practices by both Anglo-Saxon capitalists and Marxists, who share a quantitative view of labor and lack the subtlety — or *tact* — to experience the difference between, say, a fishermen’s work, and that of a farmer or an electrician. This analysis is still relevant for understanding the dynamics and misrecognition that people experience in the workplace. The problem of misrecognition has become intertwined with that of moral talk. Many professionals feel unease in large bureaucratic organizations with their managers voicing vague moral concepts, often obstructing a real dialogue.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> The abuse of science and morality by management to change practices is deeply discussed by Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), esp. 181-203.

<sup>60</sup> On vague moral language, see: Ad Verbrugge, Jelle van Baardewijk, Willeke Slingerland, “Oorzaken bestuurscrisis gaan dieper dan we beseffen,” *EW Podium* (2021).

<sup>61</sup> I make this argument on the basis of Spengler’s general philosophical idea that *Wachsein* can obscure *Dasein*. It becomes more concrete in (at least) three of his thought-figures: (1) his criticism of Marx (see footnote 62), (2) his criticism of democracy (see footnote 63) and (3) his criticism of media.

<sup>62</sup> Spengler mainly criticizes Marxists’ slogans and narratives, but I argue his argument is applicable to most moral talk. See Oswald Spengler, *The Hour of Decision. Part One: Germany and the world historical revolution* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1934).

<sup>63</sup> Spengler’s argument against moral talk (or idealism) resembles the one he makes against democracy. He argues that democracy sounds good on paper but unleashes capitalist forces that better be curbed. So, he thinks a true political order rests on the influence of successful people. See Section V.

<sup>64</sup> On misrecognition in relation to work in communitarian philosophy, see Russell Keat, “Colonization by the market: Walzer on recognition,” *Journal of political philosophy* 5/1 (2002): 93-107.



Spengler helps to analyze this dynamic, as I hope to have shown, without committing to an extreme political position, such as anarchy or socialism. The key insights he has to offer for discussions in business ethics are what I would call Rhinelandic; involving the quality of work, job honor, a morality of duty and professional recognition. His analysis is not about money or loans, but about the way work is organized and the way we speak about it in our offices and workplaces.

### Conclusion: Spengler's Ethics

Contemporary ethical discourse deals with a specific subset of questions and answers. One of the reasons Spengler is almost forgotten in the field of ethics is that his work does not seem to fit into the standard categories of consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics. In this paper, I nonetheless showed that he has significant insights to offer about ethics and ethical discourse itself. To sum up, Spengler's ethics consists of the following elements. (1) The categories of ethics are value-laden in a cultural context, for instance the concept of willpower itself in Kant is typically Faustian. (2) Ethics should not only care about the individual-society relation, but needs to develop categories to extend inward. Perhaps 'gender' is a step in that direction of an *ethics of the self*. (3) A Spenglerian view on ethics needs to involve a view on habits and institutions, not only on speaking and discussing premises. In fact, moral talk can be misused, for instance by managers trying to reorganize a certain way for professionals to work. (4) Spengler does not distinguish sharply between ethics and other fields, such as aesthetics or politics, which allows him to see patterns, most importantly the Western focus on 'the individual striving in space.' Spengler helps us to understand this Ur-symbol in its different manifestations, for instance in both the Anglo-Saxon and Rhinelandic economic model. (5) Typical of Western culture is its deep intolerance towards different moralities. We endorse an *ethics of force*. Western intolerance is all too evident in historical processes such as colonization, the heated debates on abortion, and also on Covid-19 policies.

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