Dear Author,

1. **Please check these proofs carefully.** It is the responsibility of the corresponding author to check these and approve or amend them. A second proof is not normally provided. Taylor & Francis cannot be held responsible for uncorrected errors, even if introduced during the production process. Once your corrections have been added to the article, it will be considered ready for publication.

   For detailed guidance on how to check your proofs, please see [http://journalauthors.tandf.co.uk/production/checkingproofs.asp](http://journalauthors.tandf.co.uk/production/checkingproofs.asp).

2. **Please review the table of contributors below and confirm that the first and last names are structured correctly and that the authors are listed in the correct order of contribution.** This check is to ensure that your name will appear correctly online and when the article is indexed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence</th>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Given name(s)</th>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>Suffix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ian James</td>
<td>Kidd</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Queries are marked in the margins of the proofs. Unless advised otherwise, submit all corrections and answers to the queries using the CATS online correction form, and then press the “Submit All Corrections” button.

AUTHOR QUERIES

General query: You have warranted that you have secured the necessary written permission from the appropriate copyright owner for the reproduction of any text, illustration, or other material in your article. (Please see http://journalauthors.tandf.co.uk/preparation/permission.asp.) Please check that any required acknowledgements have been included to reflect this.

| No Queries |
How to make corrections to your proofs using Adobe Acrobat

Taylor & Francis now offer you a choice of options to help you make corrections to your proofs. Your PDF proof file has been enabled so that you can edit the proof directly. This is the simplest and best way for you to ensure that your corrections will be incorporated. To do this, please follow these instructions:

1. Check which version of Adobe Acrobat you have on your computer. You can do this by clicking on the “Help” tab, and then “About”.
   If Adobe Reader is not installed, you can get the latest version free from http://get.adobe.com/reader/.
     - If you have Adobe Reader 8 (or a later version), go to “Tools”/ “Comments & Markup”/ “Show Comments & Markup”.
     - If you have Acrobat Professional 7, go to “Tools”/ “Commenting”/ “Show Commenting Toolbar”.

2. Click “Text Edits”. You can then select any text and delete it, replace it, or insert new text as you need to. It is also possible to highlight text and add a note or comment.

3. Make sure that you save the file when you close the document before uploading it to CATS. A full list of the comments and edits you have made can be viewed by clicking on the “Comments” tab in the bottom left-hand corner of the PDF.
   If you prefer, you can make your corrections using the CATS online correction form.
Oswald Spengler, Technology, and Human Nature

IAN JAMES KIDD

ABSTRACT Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) is a neglected figure in the history of European philosophical thought. This article examines the philosophical anthropology developed in his later work, particularly his *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life* (1931). My purpose is twofold: the first is to argue that Spengler's later thought is a response to criticisms of the “pessimism” of his earlier work, *The Decline of the West* (1919). *Man and Technics* overcomes this charge by providing a novel philosophical anthropology which identifies technology as the highest expression of human cognitive and creative capacities. The second is to suggest that in his later period Spengler presents an affirmatory account of modern technology as the final stage of human cultural evolution. I conclude that by providing a philosophical anthropology that reconciles technology with human nature, *Man and Technics* represents an important development of Spengler's theory of human culture.

This article examines the philosophical anthropology developed in the later work of the historian and philosopher Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), particularly his *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life* (1931). Scholarly interest in Spengler has tended to focus upon his earlier history of human culture and his pessimistic diagnoses of the “fate” of Western civilization. Philosophers have, moreover, showed little interest in Spengler, seeing him as nothing more than an ideologically charged pseudo-historian or merely a figure with little philosophical significance. Although the “early” period of Spengler’s work may be justly criticised for its speculative historiography and grimly prophetic tones, towards the end of his career Spengler sought to rectify the criticism against his historical determinism and cultural pessimism by utilising technology. “Technics” was here conceived as a distinctive metaphysical and cultural force, one which represented the highest realisation of human creative and cognitive faculties, such that the “essence of technics” was uniquely allied to the “soul of man.” Spengler thus sought to reconcile technology with human nature in an original philosophical anthropology.

Department of Philosophy, Durham University, 50 Old Elvet, County Durham, DH1 3HN, UK. Email: i.j.kidd@durham.ac.uk

ISSN 1084-8770 print/ISSN 1470-1316 online/12/010019–13 © 2012 International Society for the Study of European Ideas

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10848770.2011.640190
My purpose in this article, then, is twofold. The first and primary aim is to argue that Spengler sought to correct the “pessimism” of his earlier work by developing a distinctive philosophical anthropology in which technology could be harnessed to realise the creative and existential potential of human nature. The second aim is to offer a corrective account of *Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life* (1931). Although there has so far been little interest in this book, what little mention there is of it has tended either to downplay its significance, writing it off as a hasty addendum to the earlier work, or to misidentify it as a proto-environmentalist denunciation of the dangers of reckless human technocracy. My conclusion is that *Man and Technics* represents an important development of Spengler’s account of human culture by developing a philosophical anthropology that reconciles technology with human nature, offering an account of how moribund cultures can harness technics in order to offset their gradual atrophy. I thus conclude that Spengler’s later work offers new opportunities for linking the philosophy of technology and philosophical anthropology.

Spengler is best known as the author of the classic doomsday scenario *The Decline of the West* (two volumes, 1919–22). As the title suggests, he described contemporary culture in consistently grim terms, with a pessimistic account of its imminent collapse. Spengler spent much of his later career trying to reconcile the sense of the historical inevitability of periodic cultural collapse with a fiery conviction that the dynamism of “heroic men” could resist this fatalism. Writing shortly after the First World War and theorising in a social and political climate suffused with exhaustion and dejection, Spengler’s account of the destabilisation of German culture by irresistible transhistorical forces offered an attractive if somewhat inchoate solace. The “decline of the West” was due to no fault of the German people, politics, or culture, but was part of the irresistible cyclic rise and fall of cultures and civilization. The “high age” of German intellectual and cultural history—that of Goethe, Schelling, and Hegel—had come to an end, and after attaining such heights the slow decline into mediocrity and stagnation was increasingly and depressingly felt.

Although Spengler’s thesis offered some comfort to the embittered Germans in the postwar years, his mood of pessimistic fatalism seemed increasingly out of place during the late 1920s and early 1930s. As Germany’s economic and political fortunes began to change, his message of resigned passivity was increasingly alien to a more hopeful optimistic generation. The political and economic determination of the National Socialists prompted Spengler to reassess his pessimism, and he sought, I argue, to develop his ideas accordingly. The result was *Man and Technics* (1931), a small and still neglected book, which sought to reconcile the pessimism and historical determinism of *Decline of the West* (1918) with a new emphasis upon the capacity for wilful self-determination and human potentiality. In this article I chart the development of Spengler’s views on technology and human nature and their place in his philosophical anthropology. My claim is that Spengler advanced a “theory of human nature” which was at once historically and culturally situated but could be realised and transformed by a proper appreciation of the “essence of technology.”

Spengler was, as one writer puts it, “a sickly German high-school teacher of apocalyptic inclination” whose personality and ideas were both pessimistic and messianic. *Decline of the West*, with its prophesying and diagnosis of the imminent collapse of Western civilization, represented a bold claim for a reclusive Privatdozent with no formal
academic training or affiliation (Spengler failed his doctoral thesis). However, its stark
description of cultural atrophy and political dissoluteness resonated with a socially
depressed and spiritually exhausted postwar Germany. Its scholarly reception was,
however, much cooler. Although written by an obviously erudite autodidact, Decline of
the West was, as one commentator diplomatically put it, “not a respectable performance
from the standpoint of scholarship,” being “too metaphysical, too dogmatic” for the
sober standards of the academy. Subsequent literature on Spengler has focused upon the
peculiarly schismatic quality of his work: although it is speculative, historically dubious,
and obviously ideologically charged, it is also alluring, provocative, and curiously
attractive. The Dutch historian J. H. Huizinga remarked that although Spengler is often
“absurd,” he can “bewitch” his readers because “he compels us to forget that we know
better.”

Although the reasons why Spengler’s theory was so attractive are complex, my
interest lies in just one of them: the alleged historical inevitability of German cultural
collapse, and the possibility of resisting or counteracting it. Hans Jonas, one of
“Heidegger’s children,” remarked that although Spengler’s work suffers from intellectual
and historiographical lapses, there are still “fabulous perspectives and wonderful
observations in [his work], so that one sits before it with heart beating and can neither
eat nor drink.” The willingness to forgive blatant intellectual errors suggests that
Spengler had tapped deeper concerns, ones that trumped academic standards and
scholarly decorum. It was not that the German public thought his cyclical theory of
civilizations plausible or admired his originality; on the contrary, his criticisms had been
made earlier, and more sophisticatedly, by others. Spengler’s achievement was to offer
both a historical explanation of the current malaise of German culture and to point the
way forward, to offer a tempered optimism that promised redemption.

It is worth beginning with a consideration of Spengler’s relationship with National
Socialism. This fulfills the double aim of clarifying some standard criticisms of his work
and reputation, and filling in some of the cultural and intellectual context within which
his ideas emerged and resonated. Like many German intellectuals, Spengler initially
welcomed National Socialism as the revivifying new political force that Germany so
urgently needed. The National Socialist emphasis on German cultural heritage, the
Volk, and the need for an assertive leadership, both political and cultural, promised to recapture
the slumbering national spirit—the Volksgeist of Herder and Hegel, later eulogised by
Erich Heller—which the Weimar Republic had subdued almost to the point of
expiration. Despite this initial optimism, however, Spengler soon became increasingly (if
obliquely) critical of the frustrated promises of Nazism. After refusing honours,
professorships, and prestigious invitations to address the political elite of the Third
Reich, he found himself awkwardly explaining that any explicit involvement on his part
would compromise his intellectual distinctness: “I see more keenly than others because I
do my thinking independently of parties, tendencies, and interests,” he wrote, even as he
added that he “feel[s] lonelier than ever.” However, no one was fooled. It was clear that
Spengler would not accept the ideological tenets of Nazism, and was soon frozen out of
favour. Despite his weaknesses as a historian, he was acute enough to see the absurdities of
Nazi racial and political doctrines and unceasingly maintained that the German people
could do nothing but suffer by accepting them.
Two deeper features of Spengler’s thought and character contributed to his reticence towards National Socialism. Firstly, Spengler was possessed of a prophetic temperament and saw himself as enjoying a unique historical perspective on world history. This disinclined him from affiliation to any particular individual or movement, such as Hitler or National Socialism. If Spengler were to remain faithful to his cyclical theory of history, he could not identify any political phenomenon as anything but another stage in a rhythmic world history. Secondly, there was much in National Socialism that Spengler opposed, such as its biological racism and blind enthusiasm for technology. Although the Nazis appropriated many of Spengler’s ideas, they did so as they did with Nietzsche’s: selectively, and guided by ideological imperative rather than intellectual principle. Josef Goebbels, for instance, declared that National Socialism had created “an age that is both romantic and steellike, that has not lost its depth of feeling,” and which “has discovered a new romanticism in the results of modern inventions and technology.” This sort of remark roused Spengler’s alarm; he saw Goebbels’ praise of the “new romanticism” offered by technology as symptomatic not of a growing mastery of engineering and machinery but, on the contrary, of the relentless mastery of human beings by technology.

The German people and culture were not liberated and empowered by technology but increasingly enslaved by it. Just as agriculture and industry were transformed by technology, so too were the people themselves subjected to the values of expediency and efficiency. The outcome of this process of “total mobilisation”—‘Die totale Mobilmachung’—was the eponymous “worker” of Ernst Jünger’s Der Arbeiter (1932), which described the inexorable mechanisation of human beings into a disciplined, organised labour force: not just stout labourers in overalls sweating in factory workshops, but a totally structured workforce governed by schedules, productivity, and industrial application. Jünger welcomed this “total mobilisation” as the positive social and psychological transfiguration of an otherwise listless population. Spengler, by contrast, warned that such enthusiastic adoption of technology would simply constitute an eager surrender to technics, a process far more powerful and primordial than Jünger appreciated.

The failure to appreciate the significance of technics was a common complaint amongst other of Spengler’s contemporaries. In 1930, Walter Benjamin warned against those whose praised “technology and material” as “the highest revelation of existence.” “Their horizon is fiery but very narrow” since it lacks moral or spiritual depth; as a result, their “technology gave shape to the apocalyptic face of nature and reduced nature to silence,” resulting in “millions of human bodies… chewed up by iron and gas.” Stefan Zweig, closer to Spengler’s concerns, described in 1925 the “monotonisation of the world.” The relentless transformation of society by technology sees everything “levelled into a uniform cultural schema”: “the fine aroma of the particular in cultures is evaporating, their colourful foliage being stripped with ever increasing speed, rendering the steel-grey pistons of mechanical operation, of the modern world machine, visible beneath the cracked veneer.” By embracing the modernist values of efficiency and organisation, German culture thus committed itself to what Caesar had called “nure in servitium”—the rush into servitude—a “passion for self-dissolution [that] has destroyed every nation.”

The dangers posed by technology here vary from the enhanced capacity for destruction to the cultural homogenisation of societies possessed of the rationalisation that
Max Weber described as the “fate” of our age. No matter the danger, however, the cause was the same: a failure to appreciate the “essence” of technics. “Technology” was not just a set of electrical and mechanical devices, but a powerful cultural force which, so long as it remained unchecked and unsuspected, threatened to consume the German people and culture in a frenzy of devices, machines, and “total mobilisation.” One can imagine Spengler blanching at remarks such as the following by Goebbels: “The Reich of droning motors, grandiose industrial creations, an almost unlimited and unenclosed space which we must populate to preserve the best qualities of our Völke—[this] is the Reich of our romanticism.” Even if the technocratic enthusiasm of the Nazis was intended to restore and magnify Germany’s industrial and economic capacities and to revitalise slumbering creative and intellectual energies, Spengler saw it as impossibly doomed. As long as the “essence of technics” remained hidden and unrealised, it would continue to consume German culture, transforming and reshaping it, until at last it would end in mass standardisation and mechanisation.

To expose the “essence of technics” and explain its significance for human nature—and, by extension, for culture—was thus the aim of Spengler’s long essay Man and Technics. The relentless expansion of technics into German political and cultural life, courtesy of the enthusiasm of Goebbels and other Nazis for a “romantic, steel-like age,” lent new urgency to Spengler’s already charged sense of pessimism and historical inevitability. Like Heidegger after him, Spengler saw the analysis of technics not merely as a historical or philosophical study, but as a critical political and cultural project; hence Man and Technics begins by stating “the problem of technics and its relation to Culture and to History” (6). This problem was to be addressed in suitably grand terms. Despite his autodidactism and lack of academic status, Spengler was a very bold thinker: he saw his career as being devoted to the study of “the history of Man from his origins” with the aim of affording “a provisional glimpse into the great secret of Man’s destiny” (4).

That the boldness of Spengler’s vision was matched only by his status as an amateur was noted by many critics of his earlier and more famous work, The Decline of the West. Scholars slated the book. Spengler was prone to making sweeping generalisations, and relied upon a Procrustean historiography to make them conform to his theories. His language too, whilst vivid and poetic, lent an edge of elusiveness to his ideas, which, whether merely a stylistic fault or a deliberate ambiguity, depended on one’s sense of charity. But despite these scholarly reservations, the German public was captivated by Decline of the West. Its grim diagnosis of the political dissoluteness and imminent cultural collapse of the West resonated with a socially depressed and spiritually exhausted post-First World War Germany. It was not that Spengler persuaded the public that he was right; it was more the case that it dearly wished him to be so. If one accepted Spengler’s cyclical theory of human civilizations, then the decline and inertia of Germany was not the fault of political mismanagement or the weakness of its people, but was “destined” by transhistorical forces that could neither be resisted nor, it seemed, counteracted.

Spengler’s initial vision of the history of human civilization was overpoweringly pessimistic. The Decline of the West offered a complete historical apologia for the stagnation of Weimar Germany. However, the price of this was an irresistible fatalism, seeing that Spengler offered a diagnosis but no accompanying treatment. If human history and national destiny were in the hands of immutable historical processes, then the only sensible response was fatalism. Those who were consoled by Spengler’s explanation of
their current woes were surely not comforted by his further implication that nothing could be done about it. *Man and Technics* was intended, partly at least, to remedy this sense of helplessness. Here, Spengler sought to move beyond the pessimistic fatalism of *Decline of the West* by identifying a deeper process underlying historical and cultural change, which process, moreover, could be not only identified but also manipulated.

This “primordial force” was technics. Characteristically for Spengler, technics was not simply the diversifying range of mechanical and electronic devices that had been accumulating since the early nineteenth century. Indeed, Spengler is consistently critical of “the misleading notion that the fashioning of machines and tools is the *aim* of technics” (9). The pragmatic, utilitarian perception of technology as a set of labour-saving devices is characteristic of “Materialists,” whose highest ideal is “utility.” The “devastating shallowness” of such “materialism” is a consequence of its failure to appreciate the *depth* of technology; by identifying only the useful and efficient as the “legitimate element of Culture” they could not appreciate the significance and “essence” of technics (7). No better than the materialists were the “idealists and ideologues” who excluded technics from the realm of culture altogether. Whereas the Materialists at least afforded technics a value, albeit the grossly diluted one of “utility,” the Idealists sought to exclude it altogether as nothing more than machines that could spare humans their time and effort. In both cases, Spengler took issue with the dismissal of technics as something incidental to culture, and indeed as something of no possible value beyond or outside the realm of culture. True to his audacious manner, he asked: “What is the significance of technics? What meaning within history, what value within life, does it possess, where—socially and metaphysically—does it stand?” (6). Not content simply to establish technics as a phenomenon of cultural significance, Spengler pushed further, identifying it as a powerful metaphysical force that was intimately tied to the “soul of man.”

Technics is “immemorially old” and “immensely general” and underlies all life and all history. Spengler posited it as a monistic metaphysical force that animated all living beings and drove them to compete and dominate one another. In one particularly vivid passage, he writes: “It is distinctive of the animal . . . that it is capable of moving freely in space and possesses some measure, great or small, of self-will and independence of Nature as a whole, and that, in possessing these, it is obliged to maintain itself against Nature.” But the significance of technics was not simply in its generative capacities. Spengler emphasised that technics did not simply “create” beings, but also endowed them with “significance, some sort of a content, and some sort of a superiority.” Technics did not simply create living beings but also invested them with a meaningful sense of “life” as something “active, fighting, and charged” (10; original emphasis). This triad of *technics, life,* and *significance* explains a remark that might otherwise seem strangely opaque: “If, then, we would attach a significance to technics, we must start from the *soul,* and that alone” (9).

Technics and the soul may seem to be odd bedfellows. Talk of the “soul” surely belongs to pagan philosophy and medieval theology, rather than to discussions of contemporary technology. However, as one might expect by now, Spengler’s account of the “soul of man” is complementary to the “essence of technics” that *Man and Technics* aims to articulate. In a sense, both the “soul of man” and the “essence of technics” are one and the same: they are both dynamic and agonistic forces, “active, fighting, and charged,” whose singular purpose is to create and transform. This is a double-edged sword.
On the one hand, both man and technics are boundlessly productive: “every discovery contains the possibility and necessity of new discoveries, every fulfilled wish awakens a thousand more, every triumph over Nature incites to yet others.” The soul of man and the essence of technics are “ever hungry...never satisfied,” and with expectable valorisation and typical equivocation, Spengler points to both “the curse that lies upon this kind of life, but also the grandeur inherent in its destiny” (35–36).

This is a typical example of the stark choice Spengler offers: one either falters before the fighting charged imperative of technics, to be swept away in a torrent of activity and commotion, or embraces it and strives to assert oneself in the face of it. Spengler makes it very clear which option he prefers. The valorisation of the dynamic, insatiable, Achilles-like life suggests yet again Spengler’s debt to Nietzsche’s Übermensch, which is not far removed from Spengler’s technically-enabled “warrior-soul.” His characterisation of technics also echoes Nietzsche’s concept of the will-to-power as a “perpetually increasing power,” under whose force “everything is also flooding forwards, and towards one goal.”

(It’s worth adding that Nietzsche criticised the animistic idea that “things (nature, tools, properties of all kinds) were also alive and animate,” because it maximised our “feeling of impotence,” making us forever in need of asserting ourselves against “things, just as against men and animals”). Borrowing heavily from Nietzsche, then, Spengler’s description of the man whose “soul” is fully asserted is stirring: “A will-to-power which laughs at all bounds of time and space, which indeed regards the boundless and endless as its specific target, subjects whole continents to itself, eventually embraces the world in the network of its forms of communication and intercourse, and transforms it by the force of its practical energy and the gigantic power of its technical processes” (39; original emphasis).

This passage makes clear Spengler’s final vision of the relationship between Man and Technics. The “soul of man” is dynamic and agonistic and finds its highest satisfaction in dynamic creation and transformation. However, it is not simply in engineering feats, artistic production, or grand state-building that the creative drives of the ‘soul of man’ can be satisfied. Spengler emphasises that it is only in our period of history that “the struggle between Nature and the Man whose historic destiny has made him pit himself against her is to all intents and purposes ended” (39). Never before have human beings developed a technics sufficiently powerful and extensive to challenge Nature itself. It was only with the “beautiful and destructive capacities of steam, chemistry, and electricity” that mankind acquired both the capacity and the motivation to set upon nature and “transform” her.18

The struggle of man and nature is not a simple form of antagonism. Spengler warned of a further double peril: the struggle between man and nature did not result from any decision, but from an inherent antagonism. Since both mankind and the natural world are manifestations of technics, both are “already, always” opposed to one another. Endorsing Hobbes’ merciless vision of a “war of all against all,” Spengler offered two arguments for mankind’s domination of nature. Firstly, man cannot avoid struggling against nature and so ought to engage in it as soon and as aggressively as possible: “The creature is rising up against its creator...The lord of the World is becoming the slave of the Machine, which is forcing him—forcing us all, whether we are aware of it or not—to follow its course” (46). Secondly, it was only through such struggle that the “soul of man” could be satisfied. Our “destiny” “dooms us” to “contend in battle with a given world and win
through or fail. . . . This battle is life—life, indeed, in the Nietzschean sense, a grim, pitiless, no-quarter battle of the Will-to-Power” (11; original emphasis). It is not that mankind is in any sense “above” nature, nor that he can exploit it for his own ends; both the human will-to-power and nature itself are manifestations of the same technics, the forces of creation and activity, and so their is a fight of equals.

These remarks should problematise the suggestion that *Man and Technics* can be interpreted as anticipating later environmentalist concerns. Spengler is certainly no gleeful technocrat: he rejects the assessment of the value of technology by practical or economic criteria alone since both of these fail to disclose the “essence of technics.” In the final section of the second volume of *Decline of the West*, he presents an austere vision of a culture enslaved by technology and economics: “the Machine . . . insists on being used and directed, and so that end centuples the force of each individual. For the sake of the machine, human life becomes precious . . . . The machine works and forces the man to co-operate.” However, these criticisms are hardly those of conventional environmentalism: what Spengler opposes is not environmental destruction, but the corruption of individuals and cultures by pragmatism and capitalism. So when, as Thomas Parke Hughes says, Spengler criticises humans for “us[ing] technology to devastate nature and reign as a deity in its human-built replacement,” it is not because nature ought to be protected, but because man ought to be protected. Spengler is neither a Luddite “techno-sceptic” nor an early environmentalist, but a thoroughgoing anthropocentrist.

It is worth dwelling on these points because Spengler’s alleged environmentalism casts light on his view of the relationship between man and technics. After all, in *Man and Technics*, it is the natural world that provides both the subject and object of the final conflict between the “soul of man” and the “essence of technics.” There are two points to bear in mind here. Firstly, Spengler has no especial care for the natural world. It does not possess the “intrinsic value” beloved of many environmental ethicists, nor is it something with which one can or should meaningfully commune. He describes humans as having “stepped outside the bounds of Nature” and of becoming “more and more her enemy”: the history of the human relationship with the natural world is “the history of a rebel that grows up to raise his hand against his mother” (24). Environmental concern and protection would only smother the “soul of man” in its natural attempt at transformative engagement with nature. Secondly, Spengler’s discussions of technology are essentially anthropomorphic. *Man and Technics* is concerned with “man”: “It is his life we are studying, and . . . his destiny, his soul” (17n. 1). As long as humans remain “tied to nature,” limited by her seasons and rhythms, they cannot realise their highest potential and emerge as “beasts of prey.” The “Faustian man,” announced Spengler, is he who “strides forward in an ever-increasing alienation from all Nature” (23).

Thus the alienation of mankind from nature represents the final victory of technics. Spengler celebrates this as the emancipation from nature rather than the enslavement to technology. Many environmental philosophers would take issue with this, one of the most influential examples of which is Martin Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977). Heidegger had read *Decline of the West* and was intrigued by Spengler’s bold theories, even if he was not fully persuaded by them. For Heidegger technology was a particular “way of revealing” the natural world, of “rendering it manifest” as a “standing resource” of physical and biological materials available for human exploitation. In a famous passage, he describes how, under the “gaze of technology,” “the earth now
reveals itself as a coal-mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit,” and the river Rhine as a “water-power supplier.”23 I mention this remark in order to contrast it with a strikingly similar remark from *Man and Technic* where Spengler describes how “we think only in horsepower now; we cannot look at a waterfall without mentally turning it into electric power; we cannot survey a countryside full of pasturing cattle without thinking of its exploitation as a source of meat-supply” (48). In both cases, technology functions as a particular way of ‘experiencing’ or “disclosing” the natural world, which is transformed into exploitable resources and practical opportunities: rivers to be dammed, forests to be felled, mountains to be mined. In each case, though, it is not malevolence or hubris that motivates these Faustian attitudes to nature. For Heidegger, “technology” is “destined” within the “history of Being” and represents a historical inevitability that cannot be resisted by human beings, who are irresistibly “swept away” by it.24 Spengler is less deterministic, but he too sees technics as an incessant “metaphysical” force. “We are born into this time,” he says, when the final struggle between man and technics will occur, and so we are faced with “the Choice of Achilles—better a short life, full of deeds and glory, [or] a long life without content” (52–53). Spengler obviously urges us to go with Achilles and choose the former.

*Man and Technics*, as mentioned earlier, was intended to remedy the pessimism and determinism of *Decline of the West*. Spengler had been stung by the accusations of his pessimism, insisting that his message was not all one of doom; and he decided to illustrate the positive, redemptive aspect of his thought by focusing upon technology. As Herf remarks, Spengler had initially argued that “culture was primary and that religion, politics, art, and technology could be understood only in its light.”25 Here, technology was a cultural epiphenomenon, a secondary manifestation that could tell us nothing meaningful about that culture. However, this placed culture out of human hands, and surrendered it to cyclical historical processes which could not be controlled. In response, Spengler identified culture with ‘technics’, and so reconciled technical advances and German traditions. On this new rendering, culture is a manifestation of technics, this pulsating metaphysical force that gives rise to art, politics, and machinery; and, of course, technics also became something that could be harnessed, commanded, and directed by human creative and practical agency. “The technics of government, war, and diplomacy have all this same root and have in all ages a profound inward relationship with each other” (34). This “root” is the technical imperative to create, transform, and overcome all things by turning them to its own designs. Technics is Nietzsche’s “revaluation of all values” achieved through diesel and steam and engineering. As Spengler put it, “Technics is the tactics of living; it is the inner form of... the procedure of conflict [which] is identical with Life itself [and] is [its] outward expression” (9).

The imperative of technics to transformation and revaluation must be understood in terms of their aims. Spengler had emphasised that the aim technics was not to be understood in terms of horsepower or mechanical capacity. Its aim was not stronger engines or faster cars. What really matters—pride, discipline, will—cannot be quantified or measured. Indeed, Spengler scorns the enumerating spirit manifested in economics and capitalism, calling for a “battle of blood and tradition against mind and money.”26 He sought to revitalise the German spirit by decoupling its anti-capitalism from its suspicion of technology. The bond between the two had been forged by the Romantics who had initiated a “profound interrogation” of capitalism, questioning not “the statistics of
economic deprivation” but “the spiritual and cultural quality of life under capital,” and had found it wanting. Spengler thus shared the Romantic scorn for wealth and luxury, seeing little depth or meaning in it, and especially no hope for the cultural transformation he desired. But he held that technology, unlike capitalism, could be reinterpreted as both a contemporary innovation and a continuation of older cultural values. There was, for him, no fundamental contradiction between culture and technics.

The culture that Spengler valorised was German Kultur. The Schwarzwald and Harz Mountains had “forged hard races, with intellects sharpened to the keenest, and the cold fires of an unrestrained passion for fighting, risking, thrusting forward” (39). These “passions” could manifest themselves in agrarian pastoralism, martial culture, or mass industrialism, such that the “German soul would be at home on the farm, on the battlefield, and in the factory.” No matter whether the German soul was embodied in farmers, soldiers, or workers, Spengler’s aim was to provide an account of human nature—at least for the German Volk—that would preserve the depth and heritage of its culture so as to be reconciled with, and so capable of incorporating, the positive—mainly technological—innovations of the time. This explains why Spengler sought to identify “the soul of man” with the “essence of technics.” For him the great Romantic intellects and passions that had produced Goethe, Schelling, and Nietzsche had now taken on a new form in machinery, industrial infrastructure, and restless productivity.

These superabundant technological activities were not of value in themselves, of course. The factories and shipyards could churn out mass-produced vehicles, manufactured goods, and refined materials for all eternity; but this was not the meaning of technics. The significance of technics lay in the designing and realising of grand designs, in ceaseless creative energies: “Always it is a matter of purposive activity, never of things” (9; original emphasis). So long as Faustian man remained productive and creative, his “active, charged” soul realised its “essence,” the “ever hungry . . . never satisfied” nature which was both the “curse . . . and grandeur” of its “destiny” (35–36). Spengler warned that to forget that the true aim of technics was “activity” and not “things” was to commit oneself to inescapable frustration, seeing that all things were doomed to be overcome by the omnipresent strife it generated: “Faustian civilization and one day will lie in fragments, forgotten—our railways and steamships as dead as the Roman roads and the Chinese wall, our giant cities and skyscrapers in ruins like old Memphis and Babylon” (51). Of course, as Stephen R.L. Clark has pointed out, Spengler’s vision of irresistible surrender to the insatiable imperative of technics may be over-demanding. After all, “technology’ need not . . . be thought of as a route towards full mastery,” but as “the making of occasional aids . . . within a fluctuating, changeful universe that we cannot control,” such that one need not embrace the “vision [of] Machines for making more machines.”

Technologies, as one writer puts it, are embedded within “forms of life” which simultaneously “provide structure for human activity” and “reshape” it, thereby transforming the meanings of those activities. As such, much of our imperative to create and modify technologies derives from other values and interests—practical, epistemic, or whatever—rather than a mere blind urge to produce at all costs. Spengler may be right in emphasising the relentless innovatory character of technics, but he is surely wrong that it can realise itself outside of a culture or form of life which gives it its shape, purpose, and direction.
The cultural atrophy of Spengler’s Germany, then, reflected a lack of cultural energy as well as a failure to realise the “essence of technics.” Initially, he identified these causes in powerful transhistorical processes and a cyclical vision of history as the rise and fall of cultures and civilizations. However, the historical determinism of this “history of world cultures” soon degenerated into a fatalism as paralysing as the cultural crisis it was designed to resolve. In response to these criticisms, Spengler refocused his ideas; the regular historical processes of Decline of the West were abandoned in favour of the violently dynamic “will-to-power” that was the “essence of technics.” The history of human cultures was no longer seen as rhythmic and cyclical but as agonistic and antagonistic. Technics manifests itself in political institutions, economic systems, artistic styles, and increasingly in machinery and engineering; but these are not of value in themselves, since they are only expressions of the “active, fighting, charged” spirit of technics. The “soul of man” only fully realises its potentialities when it meets two conditions. Firstly, man must be engaged in a constant range of creative, transformative activities—in agriculture, war, or industry. This engagement reflected the same energetic spirit that Goethe manifested, a nature that must “pursue multiple tasks . . . simply in order to live” in the fullest sense.31

Commerce, intellectualism, and the vapidities of the “business of culture” are all hallmarks of the “domestication” that marks “herbivores” and so offends “beasts of prey.” Spengler argues that these two options—the herbivore versus the beast of prey—are the two forms human nature can take, the key difference being that “the former is a destiny that is imposed on one, the latter a destiny that is identical with oneself.”32

The cultural crisis that had roused Spengler was symptomatic of the general surrender of German culture to the capitalism, popular artistry, and democratic spirit that characterised “herbivorous” men; it emphasised practical efficiency, material value, and egalitarianism in politics and the arts. The solution was to recapture the “beast of prey” that ceaselessly prowled in the “soul of man,” the highest and ultimate expression of which was technology. Spengler thus managed to reconcile the German cultural heritage with modern technology; his history of technics traced “a path . . . from the primeval warring of extinct beasts to the processes of modern inventors and engineers, and likewise [from] the design of the machines with which today we make war on Nature by outmanoeuvring her” (10). Faustian man, fully embracing the “destiny” ordained by technics, is the one who “embraces the world in the network of its forms of communication and intercourse, and transforms it by the force of its practical energy and the gigantic power of its technical processes” (39). Only in this total and triumphant act of creative transformation would the “soul of man” be finally and fully expressed through its total reconciliation with the “essence of technics.” Thus, we should not attribute “Faustian man’s destruction of nature” simply to the “relentless striving for dominion over nature.”33 Spengler enjoins us to “dominate” and “transform” nature: it is, he says, only through such furious technological activities that the “soul of man” can be fully expressed.

Spengler thus intended Man and Technics as a philosophical anthropology that married man and machine within a broader historical framework. This was designed both as an antidote to the cultural crisis of Weimar Germany and as a philosophical statement on the proper relationship between humankind, culture, and the environment. Technology, culture, and human nature are conjoined. “Technics in man’s life is conscious, arbitrary, alterable, personal, inventive. It is learned and improved. Man has
become the creator of his tactics of living—that is his grandeur and his doom. And the inner form of this creativeness we call culture” (18).

The revitalisation of German culture could only be achieved through stern communion with technics. But, beyond that, Spengler also issued a double warning. In the course of mankind’s struggles with Nature, we have “wrested from her the privilege of creation” but have failed to understand the “essence of technics.” In consequence, “this petty creator against Nature, this revolutionary in the world of life, has become the slave of his creature. The beast of prey, who made others his domestic animals in order to exploit them, has taken himself captive” (35). Today, some eighty years after the publication of Man and Technics, the growing urgency of Spengler’s warnings can no longer be ignored. He had predicted our reality of the beginning of the twenty-first century, with “cities laid out for ten to twenty million inhabitants, spread over enormous areas of country-side, with buildings that will dwarf the biggest of today’s and notions of traffic and communication that we should regard as fantastic to the point of madness.” This prediction has arguably come true. At present, when the “technologisation” of food, healthcare, recreation and all else has grown unabated, Spengler’s warning that we will be enslaved by technics—which we still narrowly interpret as practical labour-saving devices rather than as powerful cultural forces—seems all the more prescient. Finally, his treatise on technics underscores the need for the philosophy of technology to assume a more prominent role in our current academic philosophical discourse.

NOTES

Acknowledgements: My thanks to Alex Carruth, Peter Boyce Le Couteur, Stephen R. L. Clark, David E Cooper, Arlette Frederik for comments on this paper and to Kerstin Maier for suggesting some pertinent literature.

1. Oswald Spengler, Man and Technics: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Life (1931), trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); hereafter references to this work are cited in the text.


9. Quoted in Hughes, Oswald Spengler, 127.

34. Spengler, *Decline of the West*, 249.