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History's Pathologists: Oswald Spengler, Jacques Barzun, John Lukacs and the Dying of the West

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Abstract: This essay explores the perceived weakening and even possible collapse of Western Civilization as seen through the eyes of three prominent historians: Oswald Spengler, Jacques Barzun, and John Lukacs. Each of them has provoked controversy due to their pathologies of the West and their conclusion that its vital signs (identified as religion, science, and education), suggest a sick and possibly dying patient. All three developed metahistories that led, in Dermot Quinn's words, to "that architecture of greater meaning by which historical facts make themselves intelligible." That is to say, beyond their specific historical narratives, each made use of a wider lens to explain the past. This lens reveals that metahistory defies a single characterization, and, therefore, a comparative review can offer fresh perspectives on its analytical power and interpretive value. Individual analyses of its most notable representatives such as Oswald Spengler, Arnold J. Toynbee, and Hayden White are fine—indeed important—as far as they go, but Spengler, Barzun, and Lukacs demonstrate that metahistory can offer many approaches, even when their conclusions may be similar or even the same. The three historians and their works analyzed here suggest that history writ large in this fashion, studied and analyzed by those who know it best, can propose intriguing answers to the state of a civilization, age, or era worth considering.

Keywords: education, historical theory, metahistory, personalism, philosophy, religion, science, Western Civilization

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"I . . . maintain that there can be no 'proper history' without the presupposition of a full-blown 'metahistory' by which to justify those interpretative strategies necessary for the representation of a given segment of the historical process."—HaydenWhite, "Interpretation in History," 1973

I. Introduction

In launching this study, the reader is put on notice that we will not be digging with the historian's conventional spade, but rather flying in the sometimes-ethereal realms of metahistory—that heady brew of analysis, informed speculation, and lofty prognostication that presumes to peer over Jehovah's shoulder and offer a god's eye view of history. It is what Simon Blackburn has called more prosaically, "The overarching narrative or 'grand *récit*' that gives order and meaning to the historical record, in the large-scale philosophies of history of writers such as Hegel, Marx, or Spencer."[1] But Hegel's metahistory, fairly described as "obscure, subtle and contradictory,"[2] is seldom taken on its own terms and now is remembered more modestly as an influence on others such as Wilhelm Dilthy, Jürgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno, and Klaus Hartmann. Marx stands similarly, although his historical dialectic seems antiquated alongside Daniel Bell's presentation of a service-based post-industrial society and its new cadre of technocratic elites.[3] As for Spencer, his grand pronouncements failed him even in his own lifetime, becoming by 1896, "A solitary figure whose ideas had long overstayed their welcome."[4]

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[1]Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 239.

[2]Henry Thomas, *Biographical Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 115.

[3]Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

[4]John S. Haller Jr., *Fictions of Certitude: Science, Faith, and the Search for Meaning, 1840-1920* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2020), 78.

Hegel, Marx, and Spencer did not invent metahistory. They were preceded by Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (*New Science*, 1725) and Johann Gottfried von Herder's massive *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, 1784-91). For Vico, history was expressed as a cyclical spiral of progress; for Herder, it became an expression of human destiny toward providential unity.

Perhaps the leading metahistorian of the modern era was the brilliant but bedeviled, Auguste Comte. His *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (*Course in Positive Philosophy*, 1830-1842) presented a positivist world history consisting of a "Law of Three Stages"—theology, metaphysics, and positivism. Comtian history was an inexorable march from otherworldly mysticism and superstition toward an ultimate shedding of numinous and abstract speculation for a rational, positivist "reality" empirically grounded in science. Neither strictly speaking a scientist nor a historian, Comte is best remembered as one who recognized the importance of the history of science well in advance of his peers, and for all its oddities, his metahistory contained many insights. But his destructive middle-aged love affair with Clotide de Vaux sent him into mental instability, shifting his passion after her untimely death towards a vain attempt to establish his own humanistic religion complete with secular "saints" and its own special calendar of "Great Men." In the end, it is hard to disagree with George Sarton who concluded, "Auguste Comte was a great man, one of the greatest of his time, even if he was crazy."[5] Today the manifest problems with positivism—its hard verificationism, its adamant scientism, and its rejection of philosophy and metaphysics as meaningless—have forced many of Comte's views into serious retreat.[6]

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[5]George Sarton, "Auguste Comte, Historian of Science: With a Short Digression on Clotilde de Vaux and Harriet Taylor," *Osiris* 10 (1952): 328-57.

[6]See Michael Bourdeau, "Auguste Comte", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta, ed., https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/comte/. Accessed January 12, 2019; and Brian G. Henning, "Recovering the Adventure of Ideas: In Defense of Metaphysics as Revisable, Systematic, Speculative Philosophy," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 29, no. 4 (2015): 437-56.

In the twentieth century these big picture histories have been carried forward by writers such as H. G. Wells in his *Outline of History* (1920, expanded by Raymond Postgate in 1949), Arnold J. Toynbee's *A Study of History* (12 vols., 1934-1961), Pitrim Sorokin's *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (4 vols., 1937–41; rev. and abridged ed. 1957), Lewis Mumford's *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (1961), William H. McNeill's *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (1963), and Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973). But of these just mentioned only McNeill and White can be considered principally as historians, and more importantly, none of them spoke with any unanimity on the question of Western Civilization. More recently Francis Fukuyama argued for the "end of history" with the triumphal rise of liberal democracy in the wake of a post-World War II fascist-free world and the collapse of the Soviet Union.[7]

While these twentieth-century theorists all represent history of the *longue durée*, except for their unshakable faith in progress, their collective voices form a discordant cacophony of speculation and opinion. The world politically, economically, socially, and ecologically, however, no longer supports such sanguine prophecies. Toynbee's confidence that Christianity would remain a cohesive force for the West now seems unlikely.[8] Even Fukuyama has been forced to walk back his hopeful worldview.[9]

Today, pathology rather than progress seems more convincing, and here we look to Oswald Spengler, Jacques Barzun, and John Lukacs. They are surely all different from each

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[7]Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man* (New York: Avon Books, 1992).

[8]Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study in History*, abridged ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 553-54. The Pew Research Center reports a decline in religious belief. In 2007, 92% of Americans believed in god, in 2015 it had declined to 89%. See "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," Pew Research Center, November 3, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/. Accessed December 7, 2018. In Western Europe these figures are higher.

[9]See Louis Menand, "Francis Fukuyama Postpones the End of History," *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history. Accessed December 7, 2018.

other, but they are more interestingly bound by a shared belief in the West's demonstrable decline and impending death. In that sense they really *are* history's pathologists. Taken together their work spans the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with their respective pathologies representing a sustained common chord that should give us more than momentary pause, even if sung to different tunes. Of course, this raises the question of metahistory itself, which will be addressed in the "Assessment" section. The immediate object, however, is to review the ideas that seem relevant to an ailing Western culture.

Several common refrains—each very different in approach but agreeing in their conclusion—unite these three writers: religion, science, and education. Their emphases vary, but all three run through their writings like familiar leitmotifs. For Spengler, Barzun, and Lukacs (not to be confused with Hungarian Marxist, Georg Lukács), the fall of religion, the rise of science, and the loss of education forms a collective calculus of decline.

II. Oswald Spengler

In focusing our attention on Spengler first, it might be argued that Arnold J. Toynbee deserves equal notice. However, as mentioned earlier, Toynbee was much more hopeful in his prospects for the West. In this sense, Toynbee and Spengler are historians of very different stripes. Also, it was Toynbee who served as Spengler's revisionist, a revision that can be regarded as a "bust" by comparison.[10] Toynbee's critique of Spengler smacks of "a dodged issue" and his criticism of Spengler's use of metaphor is simply a case of the pot calling the kettle black.[11] Also, Toynbee's structure has been criticized as loose, frequently offering little more than trivial examples of Spengler's deeper insights.[12] Even where

[10]Northrope Frye, "'The Decline of the West' by Oswald Spengler," *Daedalus* 103, no. 1 (1974): 1-13.

[11]*Ibid*., 11.

[12]Albert Cook, "The Merit of Spengler," *The Centennial Review* 7, no. 3 (1963): 306-16.

Toynbee attempts to build a firm structure or framework, he admitted in retrospect that his effort to apply scientific laws to history—his "nomothetic scheme"— went too far.[13]

Spengler's great masterpiece, *The Decline of the West*, has unquestionably endured. It was first published in German as *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* in two volumes in 1918 and 1922 respectively, revised by Spengler in 1922. By the time of that revision it had sold more than 100,000 copies, a huge sale for such a dense and difficult book.[14] It was translated in 1926 by Charles Francis Atkinson, abridged into a one-volume German edition in 1932 by Helmut Werner, and abridged into a one-volume English version by Arthur Helps in 1961. As a *littérateur* Spengler has been compared to James Joyce in his expansive knowledge and breadth of vision and even to the brilliant polymath Aristotle.

But Spengler's broad-strokes also make him confounding to readers. His use of history as an expression of a deeper philosophy makes his language appear vague and almost mystical. Spengler's writing seems to be balanced on a tightrope between metahistory and metaphysic, teetering between the brilliance of his encyclopedic knowledge and the murky transmutations of his hermetic alchemy. Festooned with Greek and Latin phrasings and recondite references, his prose has an unbecoming inkhornish quality, the smell of too much midnight oil spent in obscurantist pedantry.

Compounding this, Spengler's vast recall of facts and irrepressible will to dig deeply into history sometimes gets the better of him. Two examples will suffice. First, he makes the audacious claim that none of the philosophers of his generation possess any depth or influence over real life. "Not one of them counts in mathematics, in physics, in the science of government, even to the extent that Kant counted."[15] But what of Einstein in physics or

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[13]*Toynbee on Toynbee: A Conversation between Arnold J. Toynbee and G. R. Urban* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 27.

[14]John F. Fennelly, *Twilight of the Evening Lands: Oswald Spengler—A Half Century Later* (New York: Brookdale Press, 1972), 17.

[15]Spengler, *Decline of the West*, transl. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vol. (1926-28; reprint, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980) 1: 41.

Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead in mathematics, all of whom were making unprecedented contributions at the time of Spengler's writing? Even in music, Spengler waxes eloquent about how the transformation from Gothic to Baroque gave birth to the orchestra just as the geometrical mathematics of Fermat was giving way to functional mathematics of Descartes.[16] Yet the culmination of the orchestra is easily heard in Mahler's "Symphony of a Thousand" composed in 1906. With its Faustian overtones so reminiscent of Spengler's own characterization of the modern age, one wonders how this connection could have been missed, especially given the fact that Mahler's eighth symphony, as Deryck Cooke has observed, "strives so heroically to elevate man to the stature of a god."[17] If ever there was (to use Spengler's phrase) a "passionate drive into the infinite" it was this! Spengler recalls the Baroque in music but forgets the music of his own day; he notes the shift in mathematics from centuries ago, but, as we have seen, fails to recognize a single mathematician of his own generation. It appears Marc Bloch, an unfortunate victim of the Nazi regime whose defeat Spengler had predicted, was right: "the elves of antiquarianism have cut capers about the cradle of more than one serious study."

But to leave it there would be to miss the substance and significance of Spengler's achievement. Spengler sketched out a process of cultures moving toward civilizations with their eventual death and a new birth in seasonal cycles; this was the animating feature of human history. These he cast as organic and morphological archetypes, eight high cultures in all—Classical (Greco-Roman), Western (European and North American), Indian, Babylonian, Chinese, Egyptian, Arabian, and Mexican (Mayan/Aztec). These he describes in terms of "ideal types" or "souls" that define the unique ontologies of each. He spends time discussing only three of the eight: Greco-Roman = Apollinian, Arab (including Judaism, Byzantium, and Islam) = Magian, and Western = Faustian.[18] The Classical

[16]*Ibid*., 1: 230.

[17]Deryck Cooke, *Gustav Mahler: An Introduction to His Music,* 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 93.

[18]Although frequently spelled "Apollonian," I have retained the original spelling found in all editions of Spengler's *Decline*.

Apollinian spirit (drawn from Nietzsche) was defined in space and the human form. In art and architecture, the fresco and the fixed Doric column express its soul, while the Faustian soul reveals itself in Gothic spires reaching heavenward toward God himself. The Apollinian fixed space set in stone is contrasted with the Faustian "pure and limitless space." Spengler observes, "The nude statue is Apollinian, the art of the fugue Faustian. Apollinian expressions are: mechanical statics, the sensuous cult of the Olympian gods, the politically individual city-states of Greece, the doom of Œdipus and the phallus-symbol. Faustian expressions are: Galilean dynamics, Catholic and Protestant dogmatics, the great dynasties of the Baroque with their cabinet diplomacy, the destiny of Lear and the Madonna-ideal from Dante's Beatrice to the last line of *Faust II*."[19] This soul concept subsumes everything, even numbers. Spengler calls Gothic cathedrals (Faustian) and Doric temples (Apollinian), "*mathematics in stone*."[20] When the Faustian West liberated geometry from its visually spatial and algebra from representing mere magnitude, mathematics was expanded into another world of irrational numbers, function- and set-theory, and modern calculus.

The Magian soul is different, wrapped in mystery and magic. Where the Apollinian sees concrete spatial forms and the Faustian abstract all-encompassing and ever striving forms, the Magian soul is steeped in the other-worldly and the numinous. The Magian world of the Middle Eastern Jews was dramatically transformed in the historical person of Jesus Christ. This was, for Spengler, "something . . . unheard-of in the world of Magian thought—the transference of an actuality, live and experienced, on to the plane of the high story itself."[21] This was decisively transformed by Paul into the early "*cult-church of Christian nationality*."[22] Here it was that eventually "Faustian man transformed Christianity" by remaking it in the image of the West; the Magian sense of "quiet spiritual

[19]Spengler, *Decline*, 1: 183.

[20]*Ibid*., 1: 58.

[21]*Ibid*., 2: 218

[22]*Ibid*., 2: 223.

morale," demonstrated in a Christ suitable for salvation, was "recast as a *morale of imperative command*."[23]

Spengler's deterministic schema repeats again and again, and thus the Faustian West, as its very name implies in Goethe's devil's bargain, is not merely bold and brash in its presumptions to grandeur, it has also sowed the seeds of its own destruction in its will to possess *everything*. "In this phenomenal form," declared Spengler, "the destiny of the West is now irrevocably set. . . . The expansive tendency is doom, something daemonic and immense, which grips, forces into service, and uses up the late mankind of the world-city stage, willy-nilly, aware or unaware."[24]

But what does Spengler specifically believe that dooms the West? He delineated at least three pathologies, and perhaps even a fourth: 1) a decline in religion; 2) an unbridled faith in science; 3) the failure of education; and 4), an ignorance of nature. They began in the Enlightenment, proceeded at an accelerated space with the scientism of the nineteenth century, were facilitated through the rapacious applications of industrialization, and transmitted to the next generation through a system of humanistic indoctrination. Spengler summarizes it thus:

> Only the sick man feels his limbs. When men construct an unmetaphysical religion in opposition to cults and dogmas; when a "natural law" is set up against historical law; when, in art, styles are invented in place of *the* style that can no longer be borne or mastered; when men conceive of the State as an "order of society" which not only can be but must be altered—then it is evident that something has definitely broken down.[25]

Indeed, for Spengler, it has. Secular philosophies now crowd out the formerly sacrosanct privileges of religion and dare to subject it (especially Scripture) to "wiser"

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[23]*Ibid*., 1: 344.

[24]*Ibid*., 1: 36-37.

[25]*Ibid*., 1: 353.

epistemic criticisms.[26] At the same time a shallow but honest materialism helps pave the way for "mock-religion shallow and dishonest."[27] In the process, the cohesion that traditional religion once offered to society is lost. Stability and regularity is sacrificed to learned critique by intelligentsia who allegedly "know better."

Western Civilization's lost fear of God has been replaced by its rising faith in science. This was heralded in by a new class of elites, scientific initiates led by Victorian age specialists in mathematics, physics, geology, biology, and paleontology.[28] But Spengler believed that such fixations with science—the ontological elevation of empirical nature to scientistic Nature—was just another Faustian self-deception. He regarded Darwin's theory of evolution as a shallow rendering of life's struggle, a mere projection of eighteenth-century evolutionary ideas onto a Malthusian political economy that epitomized the essence of modernity—the English factory.[29] Spengler had a prescient understanding of science as power and its own ability to transform itself into a pseudo-religion.[30] Spengler's pathological role for science in the West has been noted more recently as a "flight from reason" that depicted it as a "cancer."[31] Others disagree and argue that his later *Man and Technics* (1931) absolves him of this charge by recasting technology into a "novel philosophical anthropology" that views it as man's highest expression of intellect and

[26] *Ibid*., 1: 365.

[27] *Ibid*., 2: 310.

[28] See the excellent essays on William Kingdon Clifford, Hugh Falconer, Joseph Dalton Hooker, Thomas Henry Huxley, and John Tyndall, and the broader influences of Unitarianism and agnosticism in Gowan Dawson and Bernard Lightman, eds., *Victorian Scientific Naturalism: Community, Identity, Continuity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

[29] Spengler, *Decline*, 1: 371.

[30] *Ibid*., 2: 300-301. See also Stanley Aronowitz, *Science as Power: Discourse and Ideology in Modern Society* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[31] Gerald Holton, "The Rise of Postmodernisms and the 'End of Science'," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 2 (2000): 327-341.

achievement.[32] But this is sustained only by a selective and idiosyncratic reading of the book. John Farrenkopf's assessment seems truer in elevating *Man and Technics* in importance not because of its embrace of technology but because it correctly saw its devastating consequences for Western Civilization.[33] If anything, *Man and Technics* only sharpens Spengler's criticism of science and technology. In the end, Spengler could see in science "the *beginning of a catastrophe*."[34] In fact, science and its religious/philosophical variant, *scientism*, is the supreme expression of the Faustian soul, "To build a world *oneself*, to be *oneself* God."[35]

This fascination with manipulating nature to our own ends reveals not just hubris but deep-seated ignorance of nature itself. Spengler understands this. Science and technology has unquestionably had a profound influence on modern society. It helped to foster the growth of cities into what Spengler calls the "world-city," the modern-day megalopolis. The urban behemoth is a "land-devouring demon" where the masses become "will-less tools of the ambition of leaders who demolish every remnant of order."[36] As earth and soil yields to technology and city, peasant transforms into proletariat, and along with it, grander iconoclasms in the social order. Spengler sees this most vividly in the profound shift in gender relations and what it means to be a woman. Now the peasant woman yearning for motherhood has become "the Ibsen woman"—the comrade, the heroine of literature, the darling of the salons of Paris—no longer motivated by children but by "soul-conflicts" and marriages of "mutual understanding."[37] When saintly compassion and

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[32]Ian James Kidd, "Oswald Spengler, Technology and Human Nature," *The European Legacy* 17, no. 1 (2012): 19-31.

[33]John Farrenkopf, "'Der Mensch und die Technik': An Embarrassment or a Significant Treatise?" *German Studies Review* 14, no. 3 (1991): 533-52.

[34]Oswald Spengler, *Man and Technics*, transl. Charles Francis Atkinson and Michael Putnam (n.p.: Arktos Media, 2015), 77.

[35]*Ibid*., 66.

[36]Spengler, *Decline*, 2: 427.

[37]*Ibid*., 2: 105.

selfless commitment is replaced by wily sociosexual negotiations, the end of the West is ushered forward encouraged by the Faustian woman's declining birthrate. But this Faustian spirit is finally destructive not just socially, but ecologically as well. From deforestation to pollution on land and sea, all this Faustian striving to control and dominate represents "the history of a rebel that grows up to raise his hand against his mother [Mother Earth]."[38] As Farrenkopf correctly notes, "Spengler's visionary thesis of the irrational, environmentally destructive qualities of modern industrial civilization is precisely what makes his *Man and Technics* such an important footnote to his larger *Decline of the West*."[39]

Finally, Spengler also sees pathology in education. The demand for universal education is, for Spengler, only an alliance, originally initiated from wholly innocent motives, with a "political press" manipulated by plutocratic elites dependent upon a literate—but not *too* literate—population yielding herd-like to their printed—and now, of course, electronic word.[40] The failure of education was noted in America during Spengler's own lifetime. In 1928 economic and cultural historian William A. Orton offered a scathing indictment of American education abandoning its aims for scholastic achievement in favor of those popular pursuits that "minister to the comfort and amusement of contemporary living." [41] This subversion of the "educational ideal" is nothing short of a "vindication of Spengler's pessimism," an acceptance of mediocrity. Orton concludes, "And to that we are all but come." Over thirty years later Frederick Mayer agreed that the crisis in education reflects Spengler's own indictment of the modern educational system as exemplary of civilization's decline, loss of vitality, and alienation.[42] Today it has been argued that the modern American university seems to be playing out "the Spenglerian end game" with its

[38]Spengler, *Man and Technics*, 46.

[39]Farrenkopf, "'Der Mensch und die Technik'," 545.

[40]Spengler, *Decline*, 2: 462.

[41]William Orton, "Democracy or Education?," *International Journal of Ethics* 38, no. 2 (1928): 167-179.

[42]Frederick Mayer, "Education and the Crisis of Out Time," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 43, no. 7 (1962): 300-02.

deference to the "snowflake generation."[43] Spengler would undoubtedly see this as simply another aspect of plutocrats chasing money by "keeping the customer happy."

We might dismiss Spengler's gloomy determinism if only he didn't seem so prescient. The loss of traditional religious moorings, the dystopian aspects of science, the ecological crises, the educational decline of the West compared to the East seem prophecies all too fulfilled. All this seems exacerbated by political instabilities worldwide that look very much like the West in its death throes. Robert W. Merry seems right: America, arguably the last nation of the West, cannot under such conditions remain in "autopilot" and expect to survive; we need not succumb to Spengler's helpless determinisms, but we can heed his warnings.[44] Perhaps A. L. Rowse's verdict on Spengler is correct: Spengler was simply a Germanophile responding to his own troubled times, namely, that because Germany was defeated, Western Civilization was about to end. How is this, he asked, anything but an angry complaint by a childish man?[45] Although he predicted it, Spengler never lived to see Germany's second defeat. Despite pressure from Hitler and his Reich, Spengler never yielded to what he regarded as their overblown utopian promises and racial "gibberish."[46] He died quietly alone on May 8, 1936. Well after the war American historian Charles Beard called Spengler's *Decline*, "one of the few mighty books of our time."[47] And Helmut Werner in 1959 noted in his German abridged edition that a disturbing conviction still lingered that Spengler "might have been right, after all."[48] This feeling has not diminished as America struggles with China over trade and technology, battles terrorism, attempts to navigate

[43]Michael Buhagiar, "Decline of the West, a hundred years on," *The Spectator*, July 23, 2016, http://https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/07/decline-west-hundred-years/. Accessed January 3, 2019.

[44]Robert W. Merry, "Spengler's Ominous Prophecy," *The National Interest* 123 (2013): 11-22.

[45]A. L. Rose, *The Use of History* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 79-80.

[46]Klaus P. Fischer, *History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler and* The Decline of the West (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 73.

[47]Quoted in Fennelly, *Twilight*, 71.

[48]Helmut Werner, editor's preface to *The Decline of the West*, by Oswald Spengler, English abridge edition by Arthur Helps, transl. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), xxxv.

through an unstable political and economic order at home and abroad, and struggles through a long list of looming ecological issues. Spengler's ghost haunts each of our current dilemmas with a nagging "I told you so." We might ignore him if only he would go away.

III. Jacques Barzun and John Lukacs

We can leave Spengler's murky metaphysics and its recondite nomenclature with a sigh of relief. Freed from Spengler's confounding theorizing, we no longer sail in his lofty heights but land on secure ground more easily traversed with Barzun and Lukacs, a ground familiar to both of these more contemporary historians. Barzun acknowledges Lukacs for his assistance with his *livre sur l'effrondement* (book on the collapse), *From Dawn to Decadence*, and Lukacs likewise thanks Barzun for reading the manuscript of *At the End of an Age*—kindred books from kindred spirits. Mutual friends and colleagues, they are best examined together.

Barzun's book is a magisterial tome of more than 800 pages. It covers, the Modern Era from 1500 to present. His overriding thesis is that this half-millennium appears to be ending. His preferred word to denote this, he tells the reader, is not intended as pejorative, only descriptive—*decadence*. By this he simply means a "falling off," a petering out. However, this does not mean inaction. It consists of a generation restless with concerns but with no clear way forward. It is a time bereft of possibility, its arts exhausted and its institutions functioning poorly."[49] Marked by frustration and repetition, boredom and fatigue—a pervasive ennui—settles in to characterize the entire culture.

Barzun does not propose a new philosophy of history nor does he tread the paths of Spengler or Toynbee, but rather organizes his narrative around eleven themes that have embodied Western modernity. Predominant among them are emancipation, individualism, and primitivism. Other themes recurring throughout the chapters are analysis, abstraction, reductivism, scientism, secularism, self-consciousness, specialism,

[49]Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* (2000; reprint, New York: Perennial, 2001), xx.

and separatism. Yet these, as with Spengler, can all be drawn into the three leitmotifs of religion, science, and education.[50]

Barzun's episodic treatment of Western decline forces a fair amount of sifting in order to craft a coherent narrative of the onset and growth of cultural decadence. It begins with World War I (1914-1918) in his final section IV revealingly titled, "From 'The Great Illusion' to 'Western Civ has Got to Go'." The so-call "great illusion" comes from a book by Norman Angell published in 1909 which proposed that any large-scale war waged by modern industrial powers would be mutually destructive—"suicide disguised as self-interest." Despite its convincing appeal, the inexorable inclination of collective habits, social pressures, and some fatalism brought this "illusion" to horrible and devastating reality. [51] Barzun uses this trope to reflect what has happened to the West generally in its descent into decadence. This war, more than any other single event, signaled the effective end of a vibrant civilization, and it cut across into religion, science, and education.[52]

Of course, this process began well before World War I. The stunning success of the scientific method brought with it analysis, which by its very nature breaks things down into parts that sometimes become so finely parsed that they themselves become abstractions. Barzun adds, "The ever-enlarging scope of science extends that of analysis to other parts of life, carrying secularism with it."[53] The result was that by the twentieth century "churches, internally divided, vainly tried to unite with others; theology, intellectually strong earlier in the century, was enfeebled and could not move the culture from its secular-scientific base."[54] Yet even science and technology with their stunning advances contributed to

[50]Here it should be mentioned that education concerns more than schools; it is more broadly construed as those things—the arts, music and theater—tending to edify. See Kristine L. Mackey, "The Value of Education in Today's American Society," *Student Research Journal*, 1 (2013), Athens State University, http://www.athens.edu/business-journal/spring-2013. Accessed February 1, 2019.

[51]Barzun, 706.

[52]*Ibid.*, 718.

[53]*Ibid*., 522.

[54]*Ibid*., 796.

decadence. Darwin's theory of evolution, widely accepted as a new secular gospel, was itself a muddled confusion of speculative causations.[55] Barzun had a firm grip on the Darwin phenomenon long before *Decadence*. "By substituting Natural Selection for Providence," he wrote more than forty years earlier, "the new [Darwinian] science could solve a host of riddles arising in practical life, though by the same exchange the new science had to become a religion."[56] Darwin's "stubborn modesty" and the "impressive arrogance" of Marx's deterministic dialectic made their philosophies persuasive, and for some, synecdoche for science itself.[57] While Marx's influence has certainly waned, Darwin's has not; it can be said that the implicit corollary to Darwinian science—an unreserved faith in progress—is perhaps more firmly entrenched than in its founder's day. Despite the expressed dysteleology of Darwinian evolution, progress is still in play if it is taken as something other than progressive purpose. It might also mean simply *better*—better at adaptive survival, better at reproduction, more efficient and therefore "better" than its predecessor.[58] So unflagging has been our faith in progress that we have even needed reminding that medical science cannot deliver immortality.[59]

But if progress has failed to produce coherence in biology, so too has it fallen short in physics. Einstein's revolution, coinciding with the other sea-changes just described, did not lead to any firm social foundation upon which to build. The New Physics "put an end

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[55]*Ibid*., 571.

[56]Jacques Barzun, *Darwin, Marx, Wagner: Critique of a Heritage*, 2nd ed. (1958; reprint, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981 63.

[57]See especially Barzun's chapter, "The Triumph of the Absolute," *Ibid*., 321-339.

[58]Remaining agnostic on the question of evolutionary progress, Ernst Mayr concludes that it all depends upon how you define it. See his *What Evolution Is* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 214. But Darwinian certainties are faltering of late: see, for example, biologist J. Scott Turner's *Purpose & Desire: What Makes Something "Alive" and Why Modern Darwinism Has Failed to Explain It* (New York: HarperOne, 2017); and physiologist Denis Noble's *Dance to the Tune of Life: Biological Relativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

[59]Gerald N. Grob, *The Deadly Truth: A History of Disease in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) gives some stunning examples of this misplaced faith.

to the comfortable notion that science is common sense organized," and divorced it from intelligent amateurs; scientists became special and, hence, now served as high priests pronouncing "truths" in a new priestly garb, the lab coat.[60] But these scientific and technological "truths" now offered the prospect of mass annihilation, ecological disaster, genetic tampering, soil contamination, and a host of other dark companions to their brighter accomplishments of atomic energy, ecological management, genetic medicine, and agricultural engineering.

When Anatole France first heard of Einstein's new universe, he declared it *absurd*, a word Barzun uses to describe this decadent age in his chapter, "Embracing the Absurd." In a sense *absurdity* became increasingly normalized in what Barzun calls "demotic life." An overabundance of analysis borne of scientism along with a questionable enthronement of emancipation, for which Marx and Engels were partially responsible, mark key features of this decadent age. Barzun reminds us that analysis "also depletes, since analysis omits the feature that makes the whole interesting or valuable." It also leads to obfuscating abstractions. Thus inevitable dichotomies emerge: Western nations expend billions on universal education while suppressing any mark of superiority as elitism; violence, sexual promiscuity, and pornography are decried as worse than unsightly social blights while a myriad of obscenities are winked at in the theater, on television, and on radio; the "free market place of ideas" seems to include all sorts of expressions from burning the flag to the nastiest of racial slurs but absolved in music lyrics as expressions of urban "art."[61] When a protestor at a large California university chanted during a demonstration, "Western Civ. Has Got to Go!," it was being denounced not for academic reasons but because it expressed "an ecumenical emotion" that had lodged itself within the Academy itself.[62]

By the end of the twentieth century a number of phenomena were converging to further mark the descent of the West. Increasing separatism, the end of the nation-state

[60]Barzun, *Decadence*, 750.

[61]*Ibid.*, 758.

[62]*Ibid., 765.*

with an advancing global balkanization, seemed evident. Barzun offers the misnomer of the "Nation of Islam," the immigrant enclaves increasingly dotting European cities, and separatist movements in India, Pakistan, Catalonia, and Quebec as evidence. Emancipation triumphant, and with it the legal and political constraints on lawlessness have been commensurately weakened. The rise of the welfare state brought with it the judiciary state and the attempt to impose an equity system that by its nature always falls short in its aims at a tremendous cost of human and financial capital. The onset of decadence occurred when official "good intentions exceeded the power to fulfill them."[63] This "failure of will, which is to say the wish without the act, is characteristic of institutions in decadence." This, plus the unrelenting call for emancipations of all kinds, led to a yearning for the "Unconditioned Life" in which "nothing stood in the way of every wish." Barzun's characterization of this destructive notion as "Faustian" would surely have brought a wry smile to Spengler.[64] For Barzun, this seems the predictable consequence of a scientistic secular age. Predictable too for education, where the public schools could no longer ensure functional literacy as "Methods useless for that purpose, absurd teacher training, the dislike of hard work, the love of gadgetry, and the efforts to copy and change the outer world ruined education throughout the West."[65]

This was not one great epiphany for Barzun. Like the decadence he discerned in the West generally, these observations developed over time. This is easily traced in his earlier presentations. In 1957, for example, he lectured at Princeton on "the pathology of the intellect"; in 1973 his lecture at the National Gallery concerned "the fragmentation of art"; one year later he was discussing "decay in politics and morals" at the University of California, Berkeley; and in 1980 he put it all together for the first time in a lecture at Northern Kentucky University titled, "What Are the Cracks in Our Civilization?"[66] Barzun did not suggest at that lecture that the West was in a state of imminent collapse, but he *did*

[63]*Ibid*., 779.

[64]*Ibid*., 781.

[65]*Ibid*., 793.

[66]Michael Murray, *Jacques Barzun: Portrait of a Mind* (Savannah, GA: Frederic C. Beil, 2011), xvii.

insist "that cracks—fairly wide ones—are showing in the fabric."[67] According to Barzun, the two things that principally hold a society together—habit and a common faith in the permanence and correctness of Western values—was being eroded by an increasing "remoteness and abstraction" in society, yielding an increasing feeling of meaninglessness and oppression. It is easy to see how twenty years later Barzun could talk of society "embracing absurdity" and struggling for an ill-conceived "freedom" based upon an even vaguer notion of "emancipation." The end result is decadent beliefs and actions.

Although he expresses it differently, Barzun's colleague John Lukacs says much the same in *At the End of an Age*. However, despite his persistent asseverations about not presenting a philosophy of history, he, in fact, *does*. This makes handling his pathology of the West easier to discuss because it is more systematic. But before dealing with Lukacsian philosophy, it is best to lay out his argument.

To begin, Lukacs divides history into three general groups: Ancient, Middle or Medieval, and Modern Ages. Like Barzun, he dates the Modern Age from about 500 years ago to include the Anglo-Saxon-Celtic nations, eventually including America. The era of European supremacy was over, according to Lukacs, by the conclusion of World War II (perhaps as early as the end of World War I). But Lukacs's specific focus is on what he calls the Bourgeois Age, 1714-1914. This was the age of the nation-state, money, industry, privacy, the family, schooling, representative government, science, and a heightened historical consciousness.[68] Most of these features are ceasing to exist or are being drastically transformed. Lukacs argues that the nation-state is in decline (a clear parallel with Barzun) with the rise of supra-national institutions like the European Union, which is perhaps merely a transitional appearance, and that the ubiquitous credit card culture and Internet finance has brought an end to a currency-based economy. The resentment of government and nationalism has brought about an increase in lawlessness and a rise in gangs, a "new

[67]Jacques Barzun, *Three Talks by Jacques Barzun* (Highland Hts., KY: Northern Kentucky University, 1980), 37.

[68]John Lukacs, *At the End of An Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 15.

kind of feudalism."[69] At the same time the decline of currency encourages an abstract economic system (another parallel with Barzun) based on popular beliefs of value, "the increasing intrusion of mind into matter" with today's increasing materialism representing only "the mental confusion of our times" in which the production of consumption is more important than the production of goods.[70] In addition, Spengler's "Ibsen" woman has come into full view with the rising divorce rate, increased abortions, sexual "liberation" and its accepted promiscuity, with a predictable decline of the so-called "nuclear family" and the birth rate. All these things present "grave symptoms suggesting vast social change."[71] Add to this the school inflation/education deflation paradox along with the end of 500 years of print culture, the book, and a society of words in favor of a society based upon imagery, and you have the general outlines of what Lukacs sees as an unprecedented transformation of the West's social order.

As for religion, Lukacs, the most overtly Christian of these three historical pathologists, acknowledges the sharp decline in church attendance. He believes it reasonable to expect this to continue, although he also notes that Christianity has waxed and waned through the centuries and it is unlikely to disappear.[72] Nevertheless, historian Christopher Dawson's argument that religious belief is a critical factor in any culture cannot be ignored.[73] Lukacs openly praises Dawson for his recognition of this fact, calling him a "historian of great erudition," and so any evidence of religious decline denotes a serious—perhaps fatal—pathology in any civilization.[74]

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[69]*Ibid*., 17.

[70]*Ibid*., 18.

[71]*Ibid*., 23-24.

[72]*Ibid.*, 30.

[73]Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (1948; reprint, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

[74]*Remembered Past: John Lukacs on History, Historians, and Historical Knowledge: A Reader*, ed. Mark G. Malvasi and Jeffrey O. Nelson (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2005), 780.

Besides these observations, Lukacs, like Spengler and Barzun, also voices his skepticism over science, technology, and the idea of progress. The threats of atomic and biological weapons as well as the increasing pervasiveness of applied science make the limitation, control, and in some cases, the prohibition of technology imperative. Such pressing demands demonstrate, for Lukacs, the bankruptcy of progress as an unfettered ideal. Nothing has exemplified this secular faith more than Darwinian evolution, more of a nihilist creed than a scientific theory. Now this may seem extreme; Huxley's agnosticism seems more temperate. Perhaps, but Lukacs argues that acquiescing to Darwin's insistence that human and animal species are different in degree but not kind would make human moral and ethical values and all legal enforcements a useless sham.[75] Lukacs also echoes Barzun's distrust of Marx and Freud's abstractions and determinism. He rejects their primitive notions of mechanical causality, which he sees as dangerous reductionisms leading toward an ultimately destructive scientism.

While Lukacs's principal thesis is that the present age is ending, a subsidiary theme, harkening to French physicist Louis Victor de Broglie, is that our ideas of causality and our relationship to the physical world need an overhaul in light of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Schrödinger's indeterminacy. For de Broglie and Lukacs, the New Physics has profound philosophical implications. Thus, one of the more interesting aspects of *At the End of an Age* is its construction of a fairly coherent and complete philosophical system best referred to as a theory of correspondences based upon Lukacsian personalism. This requires some unpacking.

Lukacs believes that one of the most significant aspects of this vast alteration of civilization is the need for a new historical awareness. To some extent, this appears to be happening.[76] Lukacs suggests that there is a rising "appetite" for history, though many professional historians and educational administrators seem to be ignoring it.[77] Properly

[75]Lukacs, *Age*, 121.

[76]*Ibid*., 42.

[77]*Ibid*., 79.

channeled, might there be an intellectual renaissance of sorts? Lukacs seems hopeful. For him, history is *not* a science, it is not repeatable, and it does not deal in regularities, only probabilities. But historical thinking should hold primacy over scientific thinking because the latter—science—is actually dependent upon history itself; remove the past and it (and just about everything else) ceases to exist. Because history is neither cyclical nor unchanging, it cannot be meaningfully construed in Spengler's dogmatic and deterministic metaphysical categories. Like Barzun, Lukacs insists that history is not an abstraction; history is concrete, and more importantly it is wholly dependent upon *human participation* for its realization. Neither an objective nor a subjective pursuit, the historian needs *honesty*.[78] Lukacs ends his book with a chapter, "At the Center of the Universe," a prologue he more recently developed into a book.[79]

Here is the core of Lukacs's philosophy. He believes reality *requires* an observer. Although we did not create the universe, it must be realized that all meaning of, and about, the universe is a product of our perception of it. Put another way, "This human inseparability of the knower from the known means the inevitable participation of the knower *in* the known."[80] This is *personalism*, a philosophical system in which the person "is the ontological ultimate and for which personality is thus the fundamental explanatory principle."[81] There are many variations on this, but for Lukacs (and for all *personalists*) humans dictate reality. The universe and all that is in it may indeed exist apart from humanity, but not in any meaningful sense. Thus, the logical corollary: "the primacy of mind over matter—that what is important is what people think and believe and that the

[78]*Ibid*., 90.

[79]John Lukacs, *We at the Center of the Universe* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2016).

[80]Lukacs, *Age*, 209.

[81]John H. Lavely, "Personalism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, ed., 8 vols. (New York: Collier Macmillan, 1967) 5: 107-110.Personalism has had an especially strong following in America starting with the Methodist theologian and Boston University professor Borden Parker Bowne in 1882. See the thorough review in W. H. Werkmeister, *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1949), 103-121, 317-342.

entire material and institutional organization of the world is largely a superstructure of that."[82]

Exactly how this works is shown in an interesting schematic listing of a statement about the nature of history and historical inquiry matched to a corresponding historical example (drawn from what Lukacs knows best, Hitler's Germany), then a corresponding conclusion about the nature of reality and its corresponding example in physics.[83] A couple of examples will suffice: "The limits of historical knowledge [means that] we will never know exactly why Hitler became ruler of Germany [which relates to] the limits of scientific certitude [because it is] impossible to determine the position and the speed of the particle in the same instant" or (contra-Spengler) "History involves the study of the relationships of men, of nations, of classes, of movements [means that] Hitler and National Socialism influenced the course of Stalin and Communism and of Mussolini and Fascism more than any of the reverse combinations [which relates to] not the 'essence' of 'factors' but their relationship matters [because] modern physics proceeds best by examining not different objects but different groups of connections." More about this history/physics connection shortly.

To take this further would go beyond the purpose of this essay, which is to examine Lukacs's conviction that we are witnessing the end of the West as we know it. Here Lukacs provides much more than Barzun's cultural retreat—*end* is much more definitive than *decadence*. Thus, Spengler's inevitable *decline*, Barzun's likely *weakening*, and Lukacs's probable *demise* of the West should come together to offer an overall prognosis.

IV. Assessment

There are those who agree with Spengler, Barzun, and Lukacs that we are living in the twilight of the West's setting sun. The prognosis is not good. David P. Goldman writing

[82]Lukacs, *Age*, 148.

[83]*Ibid*., 186-187.

under the pseudonym "Spengler" talks of "the great extinction of nations."[84] Before Goldman is written off as so much journalistic nonsense, it should be noted that at least one respectable reviewer concurs with Goldman that "the West is dying, a point supported by the demographic declines and transformations that have made Western societies dependent upon immigrants."[85] This is more than an isolated example. Others agree.[86] The crisis goes beyond foreign affairs and geopolitics to an unhealthy infection of destructive nihilistic philosophies argued to have developed within the West itself.[87]

Given these established concerns, the general agreement with Barzun's *Decadence* should not be surprising. While some have quibbled with Barzun's insistence that World War I marked the turning point, others seem less inclined to nit-pick.[88] That Barzun holds out hope for a reversal of Western decadence since nothing in history is "inevitable" is a

[84]The absurd premise, "Spengler channeled by David P. Goldman," is exacerbated by his rather lowbrow title, *It's Not the End of the World It's Just the End of You* (New York: RVP Publishers, 2011).

[85]Wayne Cristado, review of *How Civilizations Die* and *It's Not the End of the World It's Just the End of You*, by David P. Goldman, *Thesis Eleven* 122, no. 1 (2014): 109-115.

[86]See Christopher Layne, "The Global Power Shift from West to East," *The National Interest* [special issue: *Crisis of the Old Order*] 119 (2012): 21-31 and; Robert Skidelski, "Is Western Civilization in Terminal Decline?," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/business/2015/nov/17/is-western-civilization-in-terminal-decline. Accessed January 19, 2019.

[87]See, for example, Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), especially Part Two, "Nihilism, American Style"; Sheldon Ungar, "Is Nihilism Dead?," *Sociological Analysis* 51, no. 1 (1990): 97-103; Søren Keldorff, "New Irrationalism, New Nihilism and the Need for Relearning Democratic Values and Peaceful Co-existence," *Peace Research* 29, no. 3 (1997): 43-57; and Curtis R. McManus, *The Age of Nihilism: An Inquiry Into the Death of Western Democracy or, The Consequences of Philosophy* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2018).

[88]See Roger Shattuck, "Decline and Fall?," *The New York Review of Books*, June 29, 2000, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2000/06/29/decline-and-fall/. Accessed January 29, 2019. Favorable reviews came from William Pritchard, "Mr. Barzun and the Decky Dance," *The Hudson Review* 53, no. 4 (2001): 649-656; J. F. R. Day, "Western Civilization and Jacques Barzun," *The Sewanee Review* 110, no. 3 (2002): lxxxix-xciii; and Roger Kimball, "Barzun on the West," *The New Criterion*, June 2000, https://www.newcriterion.com/issues/2000/6/barzun-on-the-west. Accessed January 29, 2019.

relief. Barzun's treatment is certainly not burdened with Spengler's helpless and hopeless historical determinism.

Of course, neither is Lukacs's *End of an Age*. Yet this book had a somewhat harder time with the reviewers. Thomas Nickels chides Lukacs for his "curmudgeonly defenses" and "one-sided assertions," while William H. McNeill essentially dismisses the book's conclusions.[89] Others have been kinder. Kenneth R. Gaarder, calling Lukacs "brilliant, erudite, opinionated, lucid, and stimulating," acknowledges him as "an idiosyncratic and iconoclastic critic who has earned his right to speak—and speaks well for himself." For Ray Olson, Lukacs's "little book" contains "more than shelves of other historical works."[90]

Whatever critics may say, *At the End of an Age* is in many ways the most remarkable of the three works examined here. Not only has Lukacs managed to present a cogent—if rather indicting—historical analysis, he also presents a philosophy of history that should at least warrant our interest if not our embrace. Lukacsian personalism and its overarching theory of historical/scientific correspondence are unique contributions to the philosophy of history.[91]

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[89]Thomas Nickels review of *At the End of an Age*, by John Lukacs, *Isis* 94, no. 2 (2003): 407-408; and William H. McNeill, "At the End of an Age?," review of *At the End of an Age*, by John Lukacs, *History and Theory* 42, no. 2 (2003): 246-252.

[90]Kenneth R. Gaarder review of *At the End of an Age*, by John Lukacs, *Psychiatry* 68, no. 3 (2005): 294-296; and Ray Olson, review of *At the End of an Age*, by John Lukacs, *Booklist*, May 1, 2002: 488. See also the thorough and positive treatment in Mark Malvasi, "The Purpose of History and John Lukacs's *At the End of an Age*," *The Journal of the Historical Society* 4, no. 4 (2004): 511-518.

[91]Although he doesn't refer to it as Lukacsian personalism (its best description), the substance of his philosophy is presented in John Lukacs, "Putting Man Before Descartes: Human Knowledge is Neither Objective nor Subjective. It is Personal and Participant—Which Places Us at the Center of the Universe," *The American Scholar,* 78, no. 1 (2009): 18-29.

In order to see *how* unique, consider a comparison with Nobel Laureate physicist Murray Gell-Mann's own venture into history.[92] Here the differences are immediately striking. Gell-Mann's very title, "Regularities in Human Affairs," militates against Lukacs's historical approach. For Lukacs, human history is *anything but* "regular." Also, Gell-Mann's attempt to draw correspondences between physics, mathematics, and history are fundamentally different from those of Lukacs. The former is attempting to make correspondences in kind, while Lukacs's correspondences are only correlative examples. This exposes other differences. For one thing, Gell-Mann speaks of "frozen accidents" (random events) that branch out to create probabilistic regularities in physics, but human activity, even the most "accidental," is never "frozen" in time; history is too dynamic. Second, the death of a civilization cannot, as Gell-Man suggests, simply be characterized as a "decrease in complexity."[93] Was Medieval Europe less complex theologically or philosophically than Ancient Rome? Even more uncertain is Gell-Mann's infatuation with reducing civilization's characteristics to mathematical analysis. This is not new; it has been repeatedly tried with questionable results.[94] Gell-Mann fares no better. He ends by applauding Toynbee's efforts at finding historical laws as a laudable "first attempt" worth building on. But, as mentioned earlier, even Toynbee backed away from his nomothetic scheme. Gell-Mann then trails off into a fruitless examination of counterfactual history, something even Spengler could not tolerate. All in all, the historian Lukacs makes better use of physics than the physicist Gell-Mann makes use of history. The latter is too constrained by a search for law-like causes played out in an evolutionary process whose horizon is fixed on quantitative progress. Of course, whether Lukacsian personalism can sustain rigorous philosophical and scientific scrutiny goes beyond the scope of this essay;

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[92]Murray Gell-Mann, "Regularities in Human Affairs," in *History, Big History, & Metahistory*, ed. David C. Krakaur, John Lewis Gaddis, and Kenneth Pomeranz (Santa Fe, NM: The SFI Press, 2017), 63-89.

[93]*Ibid.*, 67.

[94]See the rigorous critique of cliometrics in Jonathan Gorman, *Understanding History: An Introduction to Analytical Philosophy of History* (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 1992). See also the quantitative fallacy outlined in David Hackett Fischer, *Historian's Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 90-94.

however, its affinity with certain aspects of the Anthropic Principle (contra the Copernican Principle, humanity's cosmic insignificance) offers some intriguing possibilities. Nevertheless, surely human history does not behave the way that Gell-Man tries to constrain it. Even science declares it, as Arthur Koestler tellingly observed:

> [In science] we have seen that this progress was neither 'continuous' nor 'organic'. The philosophy of nature evolved by occasional leaps and bounds alternating with delusional pursuits, c*uls-de-sac*, regressions, periods of blindness, and amnesia. The great discoveries which determined its course were sometimes the by-products of a chase after quite different hares. At other times, the process of discovery consisted merely in the cleaning away of the rubbish that blocked the path, or in the rearranging of existing items of knowledge in a different pattern. The mad clockwork of epicycles was kept going for two thousand years; and Europe knew less geometry in the fifteenth century than in Archimedes' time.[95]

But this does not mean there are no principles to guide the historian. Is metahistory the answer? It has certainly had its share of critics.[96] Nearly fifty years ago David Hackett Fischer warned historians of the errors to which it seems prone: the fallacy of the metaphysical question, of holism, of archetypes, and its "fatal flaw"—the holistic analogy.[97] But if this examination of three metahistorians has revealed anything it is that they are not the same. Although the bombastic Spengler appears always to be mired in a murky German idealism, Barzun is more temperate and concrete. Lukacs agrees with Barzun but goes a step further to propose a personalist philosophy of history. Metahistory is best unburdened by a search for inexorable "laws" or mysterious "souls." Dermot Quinn has written that

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[95]Arthur Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers: A History of Man's Changing Vision of the Universe* 1959; reprinted, London: Arkana, 1989), 523.

[96]See in particular, Adrian Kuzminski, "Defending Historical Realism," *History and Theory* 18, no. 3 (1979): 316-49; and Maurice Mandelbaum, "The Presuppositions of Metahistory," *History and Theory* 19, no. 4 (1980): 39-54.

[97]Fischer, *Historian's Fallacies*, 12, 65-66, 68,150-151, 254.

metahistory is simply "that architecture of greater meaning by which historical facts make themselves intelligible."[98] Quinn here is making reference to Christopher Dawson and his 1951 rebuttal to—a man Lukacs once referred to as "that most pedestrian of living English historians"—Alan Bullock.[99] Dawson's spirited defense of metahistory, in some ways a forerunner of Hayden White's pathbreaking *Metahistory* more than twenty years later, attempts to rescue the study of the past from mere antiquarianism.[100] For Dawson, Bullock's condemnation of finding patterns in history is, in fact, an abrogation of the historian's fundamental responsibility. Most good historians—and all great historians—recognize that metahistory pervades their craft and to think otherwise is self-deception. Dawson regards Bullock's flat-footed empiricism as unsatisfying, mere facts scattered across the historian's desk. Norman Davies's complaint that "Dawson's Catholic thesis" fails to "illuminate the pluralism of recent centuries," is, in Quinn's words, "standard issue secularism" based upon an *a priori* judgement of Dawson's religious commitments.[101]

Nearly the same charge has been leveled against Lukacs. William H. McNeill calls Lukacs's "inferences" regarding science "silly." For him human development is a purely natural process emerging from "chatter, grunts, and growls . . . that still communicate meanings to other primates," indeed "our more elaborate and precise symbols promote change because they also introduce error."[102] Now here is more "standard issue secularism" with the addition of incongruous logic that need not be elaborated upon here. A more thorough acquaintance with the literature should temper such Darwinian certainties.[103] But

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[98]Dermot Quinn, "Christopher Dawson and the Challenge of Metahistory," *Historically Speaking* 5, no. 1 (2003): 25-28, at 26.

[99]Alan Bullock, "The Historian's Purpose: History and Metahistory," *History Today* 1, no. 2 (1951): 5-11; and Christopher Dawson, "The Problem of Metahistory," *History Today* 1, no. 6 (1951): 9-12.

[100]Robert Doran, "Choosing the Past: Hayden White and the Philosophy of History," Robert Doran, ed. *Philosophy of History After Hayden White* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 5-6.

[101]Quinn, "Dawson," 26.

[102]McNeill, "At the End of an Age?," 252

[103]Spengler argues that evolution occurred much more rapidly than Darwin's gradual process of natural selection (see *Decline*, 2: 31), Barzun charges modern evolutionary theory with confusion and

McNiell, who sees no end only "more of the same," only serves to make Lukacs's point that we need a radical rethinking of "Progress," of history, of "Science," of our epistemic limitations, and of our place in the universe.[104] For Barzun and Lukacs the human condition is amazingly adaptive and innovative, and although the present condition of the West is far from ideal, whatever holds in store for the West, it almost certainly will *not* be "more of the same." McNeill reminds us how easily we can all be so hypnotized by the glories of the past and the fixity of the present that we mistake it for eternity.

V. Conclusion

The value of these historical pathologists is that they remind us of our mortality as a civilization. Yet we act as though we are immortal, as if history was one ineluctable linear progression to ever greater achievement. Proof of this can be seen in major research libraries that, in league with others such as Google and Hathi Trust, are all rushing to digitize the entire corpus of published literature (restrained only by copyright) without giving much thought to the implications of consigning it all to the absolute dependence of the power grid. As major research institutions toss or warehouse (often under substandard storage conditions) their journal and book collections in favor of web-based archives maintained and accessed through site-licensed aggregators and other electronic media, the West may destroy itself without so much as leaving a suicide note.

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inconsistency (see *Decadence*, 571), and Lukacs hints at the validity of Lamarck's inheritance of acquired characteristics over natural selection (see *Age*, 120). They may all be right. See: Jeffrey H. Schwartz, *Sudden Origins: Fossils, Genes, and the Emergence of Species* (New York: J. Wiley and Sons, 1999); Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb, "Soft Inheritance: Challenging the Modern Synthesis," *Genetics and Molecular Biology* 31, no. 2 (2008): 389-395; Michael A. Flannery, "Toward a New Evolutionary Synthesis," *Theoretical Biology Forum* 110, nos. 1/2 (2017): 47-62; Denis Noble, *Dance to the Tune of Life: Biological Relativity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017; and James A. Shapiro, "What we have learned about evolutionary genome change in the past 7 decades," *Biosystems* (June 2022).

[104]Lukacs, *Age*,44.

But we end our brief overview of history's pathologists not in the speculations of the present or future but in the distant past, in Aeschylus's tragic trilogy, *Oresteia* (458 BC). Here is told the epic tale of the beautiful prophetess Cassandra's marriage to Agamemnon in the division of the spoils of Troy. Her warnings to her husband of the calamity awaiting his return to Greece were repeatedly ignored or dismissed, an intransigence that cost him his life when he was assassinated by Clytæmnestra. Cassandra soon shared his fate, so while she could see the disastrous fulfillment of her prophecies, she could not save herself from them. Could it be that the fate of the West was eerily foretold in its classical mythology? Are we to play Agamemnon to these latter-day Cassandras? Is the death of the West, like our own DNA, found in its very beginning? Perhaps Spengler was right: history is organic, and if organic all too mortal after all. *Nothing* lasts forever.