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Popper's Argument against Spengler's "Historicism".

Plato ... [began] a long series of *Decline-and-Fall* dramatizations of the histories of empires and civilizations. (O. Spengler's notorious *Decline and Fall of the West* is perhaps the worst but not the last of them.)

Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (56)

Karl Popper launches a famous attack on "historicist" theories, that is, theories that purport to predict the future course of human development by discovering "the 'rhythms,' or the 'patterns,' the 'laws' or the 'trends' that underlie the evolution of history" (*PH*, 3).¹ Popper sees Plato, Vico, Comte, Hegel, Marx, Mill, Spengler, and Toynbee as the chief "historicists" (*PH* 110, 118-119; *CR*, 338ff; *OSE* 383). He also sees elements of historicism in Heidegger and Jaspers (*OSE*, 270-1). Popper distinguishes more optimistic forms of historicism, as in Comte, Hegel and Marx, and more pessimistic ones, as in Plato and Spengler (*PH* 50, 52-54, 73; *OSE* 269, 383). Although Popper opposes all forms of "historicism", he singles out Spengler for particular opprobrium: "Spengler's *The Decline of the West* in my opinion is not to be taken seriously" (*OSE* 504 n45). Spengler's theory is merely a "symptom" of someone's belief "in an upper class which is facing defeat" and attempting to blame this on "the world' ... with its general law of decline and death" (*OSE* 504 note 45). Indeed, Popper states that the comparison of Spengler's theory to witchcraft, fortune telling, and soothsaying is "a just characterization" (*OSE* 504 note 45). "Neither Spengler's biological holism, intuitive understanding, Group spirit and Spirit of the Age, nor even his Romanticism," Popper tells us, "help this fortune-teller escape a very

¹ References to Spengler's works are given in parentheses in the text in abbreviated form with the volume and page numbers: e.g., "Decline, I, 26" refers to v.1 of the *Decline of the West*, page 26. References to Popper's works are as follows: *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* = LSD; *The Poverty of Historicism* = PH; *Conjectures and Refutations* = CR; *The Open Society and its Enemies* = OSE; *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* = OK; *Unended Quest* = UQ. All references to Popper's works are to page number:

pessimistic outlook” (*OSE*, 269). Popper reformulates his argument against “historicist” theories several times, but the basic idea is that since human development is influenced by the growth of human knowledge, and since one cannot predict the growth of human knowledge (because, roughly, that would require one to know something before one comes to know it), it is logically impossible to predict the future course of human history. In brief, any prediction of future human development might be thwarted by advances in human knowledge that could not have been foreseen at the time the prediction was made. This paper argues that Popper’s argument *does* refute certain forms of historicism, specifically, versions of “scientific” historicism of the sort one finds in Marx, but that it does *not* work against Spengler’s version, for lack of a better word, of *intuitive* “historicism.”

§ 1 presents a detailed version of “Popper’s Basic Argument.” § 2 shows why Marx’s theory of historical development is a paradigm case of the kind of “historicism” that *is* refuted by Popper’s argument. § 3 explains the crucial difference between Marx’s and Spengler’s respective theories that makes the former but not the latter fall to Popper’s criticism. § 4 argues that the inapplicability of Popper’s argument to Spengler’s type of theory is obvious from the beginning.

1. Popper’s Argument Against All “Historicist” theories

I have shown that, for strictly logical reasons, it is impossible for us to predict the future course of human history. ... The decisive step in [my] argument [which] I think ... is convincing in itself is [this]: if there is such a thing as growing human knowledge, then we cannot know today what we shall only know tomorrow [all emphasis, Popper’s].

Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (vi-vii)

Popper usually presents his argument against “historicism” as if it is *obviously* correct. In fact, his argument is anything but obvious. Since Popper’s formulation of the argument goes through multiple iterations before he arrives at the definitive formulation, the paper employs Popper’s own summary of the argument in the Preface to *The Poverty of Historicism* where he condenses the basic argument down to 5 steps (here called “Popper’s Basic Argument”):

1. The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge.
2. We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge.
3. We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.

4. We must, therefore, reject the possibility of a *theoretical history* (of the sort that would be analogous to *theoretical physics*).
5. The fundamental aim of historicist methods is, therefore, misguided and historicism collapses.

This argument does have a plausible ring to it. The first two lines are the premises. Line 3 is inferred from lines 1 and 2. Line 4 is inferred from line 3. Line 5 is inferred from line 4. Line 1 seems clear enough, e.g., an increase in human knowledge, for example, the discovery of antibiotics, has had a massive influence on the course of human history that could not have been foreseen in advance. Popper finds line 2 to be "convincing in itself" but admits that this does not "amount to a logical proof of the statement" (*PH*, vii). Popper claims that he does later provide a "logical" proof of line 2, to which we return in § III. Line 3 certainly *seems* to follow from lines 1 and 2, as illustrated by the following example. Malthus, relying on the scientific knowledge of his day, made the dire prediction that given the finite supply of resources and the trends in the growth of human population, the point would soon be reached in which mass starvation became inevitable. But Malthus' dire prediction did not come true. For he could not possibly predict what might be learned later about increasing food production, better land management techniques, population control and the like. Popper's inference from lines 1 and 2 to 3 is illustrated by Malthus' failed prediction. This seems quite straightforward. The inference from line 3 to 4 also seems straightforward. Given that, pace line 3, we cannot predict the future course of human history, but since we *do* possess a theoretical physics that *can* predict the future physical state of the universe given our present scientific knowledge of its current physical state, we can never produce a "theoretical history" that would complement our existing "theoretical physics." Finally, the inference from line 4 to line 5 also seems straightforward. Since historicism presupposes a theoretical history, but, since, pace line 4, we can never produce a successful theoretical history, historicism collapses.

In fact, however, no sooner does Popper state his argument than he qualifies it. He immediately admits that his argument "does not refute the possibility of every kind of social prediction," whereupon he gives the example of certain kinds of economic theories that *can* predict that "certain developments will take place under certain conditions" (*PH*, vii). That is, Popper distinguishes the kinds of social predications that can, in very precisely specified kinds of conditions, be made with a fair degree of certainty from the grand *epochal* kinds of predictions made by most "historicists". For example, given a precise specification of the economic conditions in the United States in January of 2016 one can predict with a fair degree of certainty that if a certain precisely specified kinds of tax

cuts are made to certain precisely specified sectors of the economy then the economy, barring catastrophes, will grow at 2-3 % over the next 12 months. That limited kind of prediction in precisely specified conditions is to be distinguished from the sort of grand epochal sorts of predictions made by many historicists, e.g., that, with Marx, feudalism will necessarily break down into capitalism, capitalism will necessarily break down into socialism and so on. That is, Popper does not take his anti-historicist argument to prevent the former very limited sort of precisely specified predictions made by social scientists, in particular economists, in conditions that closely imitate the sort of predictions made in the “hard” sciences like physics. Popper’s argument is only alleged to refute the *grand* sorts of *epochal* predictions one finds in most species of “historicism.”

Consider now Popper’s all-important line # 2: We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge. Popper finds this “convincing in itself” (that is, *self-evident*), but admits that this does not constitute a “logical” proof of the claim. He claims that he has provided such a logical proof but admits that since it is both “complicated” and “formal” (in the sense of formal logic) many people may doubt its significance (*PH*, vii-viii). Since this “logical” proof is not essential to the central argument of the present paper, but since it is important to have some understanding why Popper accepts line # 2 of his “basic argument,” we give a brief account of those reasons here. These derive from the fact that Popper is an *indeterminist*, i.e., he holds that history does not always evolve in accord with intrinsic laws or principles and, therefore, that there is no such thing as “historical necessity”. Popper illustrates his indeterminist view with a helpful contrast between clocks and clouds (*OK*, Chap. 6). We tend, Popper tells us, to divide the world into “clocks” and “clouds”. Clocks are dependable orderly mechanisms that more or less always give the same result, and if, on rare occasions, a clock “says” that it is 2 o’clock when it is actually 3 o’clock, one can take the clock apart and find the defective part that precisely explains the deviation, returning the world to perfect order again. Indeed, the image of the great clockwork of the universe underlay the great “mechanistic world view” that dominated science for so long (Randall, 1976, Chap. XI).

Clouds, by contrast, do not appear to be dependable mechanisms. They are amorphous, unpredictable, chaotic, shape-shifters. According to Popper, modern science likes to pretend that everything is really a clock, that even clouds, when we know enough about them, can be *reduced* to clocks (*mechanisms* that actually do have a perfect but unseen order). By contrast, Popper holds that we live, so to speak, in a world of clouds. As we know more and more, we might even find out, to our mechanistic distress, that the “reduction”

actually goes the other way: Even clocks may turn out to be more cloudlike, more chaotic and unpredictable, than we think.

Since Popper holds that, so to speak, we live in a world of clouds, a much more chaotic unpredictable world than the one pictured in Newtonian science, prediction over long time periods is going to be very hard indeed. It is still true that, in precisely specified circumstances (e.g., the combination of aluminum metal with mercury at room temperature in a vacuum) one can predict with great confidence what will happen over a certain specific time period. One cannot, however, normally make such confident predictions about the evolution of social systems. There are a few partial exceptions, like some of the more precise parts of economics that imitate the method of the "exact" science, but even so, one's confidence in these predictions does not extend very far forward in time. One might be able to predict with some confidence the effect of a certain precisely specified economic stimulus on the US economy over the near few years but not 10 years down the road and certainly not 50 or 100 years down the road.

As a consequence, one cannot with any confidence make the grand historical prediction that one epoch must collapse and give way to another. The world is just too messy, too unpredictable, too "cloudlike" to have any confidence in these kinds of grand predictions. Since this is the way the messy world is, "We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge." But this means that we cannot predict the future course of human history (line 3 in Popper's "Basic Argument"). That means that we can never have a theoretical history that is analogous to theoretical physics (line 4 in Popper's "Basic Argument"). But that means that "historicism collapses" (line 5 in Popper's "Basic Argument").

2. Popper's Refutation of Marxist "Historicism"

In spite of his merits, Marx was, I believe, a false prophet. ... [His] prophecies did not come true; but this is not my main accusation. It is much more important that he misled scores of intelligent people into believing that historical prophecy is the scientific way of approaching social problems.

Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (275)

On Marx's view of historical development, the driving force of *all* human history, from feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism, is *class struggle*. The key point is that each of these economic systems contains internal "*contradictions*" that are successively eliminated as history develops. There is an internal

“contradiction in the feudal system between the feudal lords who own the land and the serfs that must work for the lords. Since it is in the interest of the lords to get as much produce from the land as possible, they must give the least amount of the value of the produce possible back to the serfs that actually produced it. That creates a “contradiction” between the greedy feudal lords and the subsistence level serfs that eventually forces the serfs to revolt against the feudal landlords in order to obtain a fairer distribution of the fruits of their labor. Thus, feudalism breaks down and gives way to the next stage, capitalism.

On Marx’s view, capitalism solves some of the “contradictions” in feudalism but replaces them with new “contradictions” that must also be resolved. Progress of a kind has been made in the transition from feudalism to capitalism but much more needs to be done. In capitalism, the place of the feudal lords is taken by the capitalists and that of the serfs is taken by the workers. Capitalism solves some of the “contradictions” in feudalism in the sense that the workers, unlike the feudal serfs, *are* permitted to own their own private property, their own land, home, etc. But the “contradiction” between the feudal landlord and the serfs is replaced by the “contradiction” between the capitalist, who owns “the means of production”, the factories, machines, and so on, and the “workers” who have no choice but to work for the capitalist. Just as it was in the interest of the feudal landlords to exploit the serfs, it is in the interest of the capitalists to maximize their profit by getting the maximum production of goods out of the workers while paying them as little as possible. Thus, the capitalists must push the workers to work harder and harder for less and less pay until the “workers”, driven to the brink, revolt in order to bring about a more equitable socialist society in which “the means of production” is owned by the society as a whole and shared out equitably among the workers.

In socialism, the “contradiction” between the capitalists and the workers is (allegedly) eliminated because the workers are themselves parts of the social cooperative that “owns the means of production.” Gone are the feudal overlords who oppress the serfs and the capitalists who oppress the workers. In socialism, with these class distinctions gone, the workers are, so to speak, their own bosses, at least in theory. They are members of a cooperative group that decides for itself, not being told what to do by a *separate antagonistic class*, how production decisions are to be made and how economic resources are to be distributed in society. That is the whole point of socialism. Since there are, allegedly, no more class oppositions in socialism, Marx holds that the resources will be distributed equally among the workers.

In the final stage, the Marxist formula changes slightly. Since all history is driven by class struggles, and since there are no class differences in socialism, the transition from socialism to communism is not driven by class struggle. Since Marx thinks of socialism as a kind of preliminary form of communism, it need not undergo the massive revolutionary change one sees in the transition from feudalism to capitalism or from capitalism to socialism. The problem with socialism is only that vestiges of the old capitalist system still cling to the socialist system. People raised in a capitalist system that values private property will retain some of these views and desires in the new socialist system. The transition to full-fledged communism, therefore, merely requires eliminating these vestiges in a piecemeal *purification* process until the full-fledged communist society *completely* devoid of private property is achieved. Since the dialectical process is driven by class distinctions, and since, in communism, these have all been eliminated, the dialectical process (historical development) comes to an end.

It is, further, important to Marx's theory that the historical process must evolve in a particular way. First, one cannot skip a step, e.g., one cannot go directly from feudalism to socialism. A society must go from feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism in that precise order. Second, capitalism will break down into socialism in the most advanced, not the least advanced, capitalist countries because it is only when its internal contradictions become most developed that they lead to its collapse into socialism. Since England was the most advanced capitalist country at the time, the socialist revolution would occur there first.

Finally, although Marx sees his historicism as a *scientific* theory, he sees his view that feudalism necessarily breaks down into capitalism which necessarily breaks down into socialism which necessarily gives way to full-fledged communism as analogous with the view in botanical science that a seed necessarily turns into a shoot which in turn necessarily turns into a stem which in turn necessarily turns into a bud which in turn necessarily turns into a blossom. In the Preface to the first German Edition of *Capital*, Marx compares his discovery of "the economic law of economic motion" of societies to Newton's discovery of the "natural laws of [physical] motion". As a scientific theory, Marx's historicist theory purports to render *precise explanations* and *predictions*. It should, therefore, like the science of mechanics, be *testable*.

Popper's main objection to Marxism is that it is, as *applied* by Marxists, unfalsifiable. That is, Marxism does make predictions, but when they fail, as they often do, Marxists create *ad hoc* hypothesis to save the theory from falsification. For example, in order to explain why the socialist revolution occurred in Russia, a feudal country

where it was not supposed to occur, some Marxist's suggest that it was due to the unique genius of Lenin that he was able to hurry the historical dialectic along and skip the intermediate stage of capitalism. Unfortunately, the whole point of Marxism is that the development of history is *not* due to the intercession of talented individuals like Lenin but only to the great impersonal economic forces of the class struggle. However, the important point for the present paper is not that there are flaws in Marxism, but Popper's explanation *why* Marxist predictions regularly fail, namely that Marxism, like all forms of historicism, fails to understand the importance of the fact that human beings cannot predict the future course of human knowledge (line # 2 of his "Basic Argument"). Just as Malthus, given the best scientific knowledge of his day, could not possibly know how the relevant human knowledge of agriculture would develop in the future, Marx, given the state of scientific "knowledge" of his day, made false predictions because he could not in his own day possibly know how human knowledge would develop in future to thwart his predictions. For example, he could not possibly know in advance that his two antagonistic classes, the capitalists and the proletariat, would, in future *blend* in such a way that some workers themselves become capitalists and some capitalists (the disaffected sons and daughters of millionaires and billionaires) become workers, thereby defusing the tension between the two "classes".

In fact, however, Marxism fails to account for the growth of human knowledge in an even more striking way. That is, *Marx himself provided the new knowledge that insured that Marxist historicism fails!* His publication of his theories about the internal flaws in capitalism itself constitutes an expansion of human knowledge that adds a new factor to the historical equation *not taken account of within Marx's theories*, namely, that capitalists can read Marx's works, learn about the internal faults in capitalism, and develop strategies to neutralize them. The irony is that capitalists, having studied Marx, and having no pressing desire for their head to end up on a proletariat pitchfork in the town square, can change their economic practices in order to prevent the socialist revolution. Thus, the great foe of capitalism, Karl Marx, in his publications, provides *a handbook capitalists can use to prevent the socialist revolution!* In Popper's terms, Marx failed to account for the fact that his own publications of his "historicist" theory insured that his "historicist" predictions failed!

3. Knowledge of Cause and Effect vs. "Knowledge" of Life

In the two possible world-forms then – History and Nature, the physiognomy of all becoming and the system of all things become – Destiny or causality prevails. Between them there is all the difference between a feeling of life and a method of knowledge. ... Yet, after all, just as the become is founded upon a becoming, so the *knowledge* of cause and effect is founded on a sure *feeling* of a destiny [all emphasis Spengler's].

Decline of the West, I, 119

Recall that, in his "Basic Argument," Popper identifies the second premise, that we cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge, as "the most decisive step", and, accordingly, spends the most energy elucidating and defending it. By contrast, the first premise, that the course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge, is presented as something so obvious it does not merit much scrutiny. However, Popper's first premise is ambiguous. It mentions "human knowledge," but does not specify precisely what kind of human knowledge. Popper makes clear in line # 2 what kind of knowledge he means ("our scientific knowledge"). It is, therefore, curious that Popper did not specify in the first premise that he meant *scientific* knowledge. One can put this as a question: Why did Popper only mention human knowledge *generally* in the first premise when it is quite clear from the second premise that he specifically means human scientific knowledge?

The answer is that Popper wants a *fully general* conclusion about the influence of the growth of human knowledge on the development of human history. It would not do, for Popper's purposes, if it were only some *subspecies* of "knowledge," for example, the knowledge of mechanical devices, that "strongly influences" the development of human history. That is, what if there were two species of human "knowledge", call these "knowledge S" and "knowledge L", where it is only growth in the first species, knowledge S, that "strongly influences" the development of human history, while growth in the second species, "knowledge" L, does not generally "strongly influence" the development of human knowledge?

In fact, Spengler holds that there *are* two such different species knowledge. Let us distinguish "knowledge S" as *scientific knowledge* and "knowledge L" as *life-knowledge* (a certain kind of *intuitive* wisdom of about inner nature of life). Suppose further that increases in the first kind of knowledge, scientific knowledge, generally does "strongly influence" the development of human history, but only in *superficial* respects, whereas the growth of the second kind of knowledge, life-knowledge (wisdom about the inner nature of life),

concerns precisely those kinds of development that generally does not “strongly influence” the future development of human history. If these two suppositions are correct, then it would be true, as Popper infers, that we cannot predict the future development of human history *insofar as it is affected by the growth of scientific knowledge*, but it would also be true, contrary to Popper’s claim, that we *can* predict something about the development of human history insofar as the second kind of “knowledge,” “life-knowledge,” is involved. Since “life-knowledge” is a certain kind of intuitive “wisdom about life’s” inner nature, one can reformulate this latter claim as the view that *wisdom about life consists precisely in “knowing” that aspect of life which cannot be affected by the growth in our superficial scientific knowledge*. In this case, this intuitive “knowledge” or wisdom about life concerns that deeper aspect of life that is *fated* to a certain *Destiny* (*Decline*, II, 31).

Spengler makes precisely such a distinction between “knowledge of cause and effect” and a “sure feeling of destiny.” As Hughs (1991, 70) puts it,

The notion of Destiny ... stands at the very center of [Spengler’s] approach to history. “Destiny is a word whose content one *feels* [S’s emphasis]. ... “Destiny” is what operates in history, “cause” only in the natural sciences.

Spengler here distinguishes between a genuine understanding of history, which involves a *feeling* for the “Destiny” of a culture and a “scientific” understanding that looks at the history of a culture as a mere series of causes and effects. For example, a Western scientist looking at the rise of Chinese culture identifies a set of important causes in the formation of early Chinese culture. A settlement was first established by such and such a river at such and such a time, the soil at the location was of such and such a kind, the climate was so and so, and so on, and this gave rise to the Chinese culture. But this is merely a view of the rise of Chinese culture, so to speak, from the outside. A genuine *historical* understanding of the rise of this unique culture, by contrast, requires a grasp of the inner sense of Destiny, the most fundamental “world-feeling,” of that culture, which, in the case of the Chinese culture would require, for example, a sense for its unique notion of the *Tao* (*Decline*, I, 310-311 note 2). It is only by grasping the inner sense of Destiny of a culture that one can understand it properly as a *living organism* (*Decline*, I, 104-105) - that is, to *understand its history*. One does not understand the inner sense of Destiny in a culture by listing the conditions and causes that produced it. That gets it quite backwards. One can only understand the *significance* of those conditions and causes in the development of that culture by achieving a sense for that internal “organic logic” of that culture that drives it towards a certain *Destiny* (*Decline*, I, 117).

Since the notion of the latter kind of intuitive wisdom about *fated* life might be seen to be obscure, and since some people might doubt whether this kind of "knowledge" even exists, let us clarify the notion of this intuitive knowledge or wisdom about fated life by using two *analogies*.

Consider the following Case A! Johnny, 13 years old, has some very anti-social tendencies for theft and violence. His parents are quite worried about him. They take him to see his uncle, Bill, who has been a policeman for 35 years and seen many similar cases. Officer Bill explains to Johnny that if he continues on his present course he will surely end up in prison. Johnny is not stupid. His IQ is 135. He understands that Officer Bill has seen a lot and knows what he is talking about. Johnny agrees to accompany his parents and Officer Bill to a church where Johnny will swear before the priest that he now understands and will abandon the thug life. After Johnny does so, Johnny's parents are quite confident. He seems a changed lad. He says all the right things. Johnny could even pass a test in a criminology course about the sad statistics about the likely fate of juvenile delinquents like himself. Officer Bill, however, is not so confident. As a policeman, he has seen many similar cases before. As the four of them are leaving the church Johnny notices a collection box for charity left unattended just inside the church door. "These people are suckers," he thinks. "They operate on an honor code here!" Later late that night Johnny returns and robs the collection box. Johnny's newfound rational knowledge has not had any deep effect on him. It does not matter how many criminology tests he can pass. Johnny saw an opportunity for some easy cash and took it. These kinds of cases happen all the time. People rationally know the dreadful consequences of certain paths in life but they flock to them *like moths to a flame*. After Johnny's theft of the collection box is exposed, his parents are shocked. They were sure Johnny had meant it when he said he would reform ... and they were right. He did mean it *at the time*. But Johnny's parents thought of Johnny as too much like a *calculating machine*. They gave Johnny the necessary data and made him "calculate" out his own future. The problem is that people are not like calculating machines. What Officer Bill knew that Johnny's parents did not, and which made him much more pessimistic, is that Johnny is moved by things much more primitive and powerful than his *surface rational knowledge* (which latter Spengler calls *Wachsein*). Officer Bill had a *feeling* for Johnny's *character* and he did not get this feeling by going over a table of scientific facts.

Consider now case B! Mary has terrible luck with relationships. Every time she thinks she has found love the relationship always falls apart. It happens like clockwork. She does not understand how she

can try so hard again and again and yet keep failing. Mary, who happens to be a Popperian, realizes that she needs to know why things always go wrong so that she can control her fate. She hires a psychiatrist. After several months of expensive therapy Mary understands the problem. She has come to see, to her amazement, that it is actually she who always ruins the relationship just when she is close to getting what she wants. Mary has come to realize that she has a fear of intimacy. Her relationship with her ex, M, is a case in point. She was just a few weeks from her wedding when she went out to a pub, got drunk and disappeared for 48 hours with no memory of where she was or what she did, leading M to break up with her. She now sees that she has repeated the same pattern over and over again in all her past relationships. Armed with her new scientific self-knowledge of the causes of her failures, she knows what she must do in future relationships. She thanks the psychiatrist profusely. A year later she is in a satisfying relationship and the marriage date is set. A few days before the wedding, on a whim, she gets on a bus and disappears for a week without telling anyone where she is. When she returns, she says she is sorry but everything is fine. She had just needed some time to think. She wants to reschedule the marriage date but her partner, angry and humiliated, walks away again. These kinds of cases of *self-sabotaging* people are not uncommon.

What sort of mistake did Mary make? As a Popperian, she agreed wholeheartedly with line # 1 in “Popper’s Basic Argument” that the course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge. She believed this will of course apply to her own case as well. That is why she hired a psychiatrist to acquire the new knowledge she needed to change the course of her own unhappy history – and she did acquire the relevant knowledge. Unfortunately, that did not prevent her from failing again. As a result of this latest humbling experience, Mary has now acquired a new kind of more *pessimistic wisdom* about her life. As a highly rational Popperian she had superficially believed that acquiring new scientific knowledge about herself would enable her to solve her relationship problem. But after this latest failure, she has come to an even more profound insight. She now realizes that even though the therapist did help her to acquire relevant scientific knowledge about the *causes* of her constant failures in relationships, acquiring this kind of scientific knowledge does not change *does not change who she fundamentally is*, and, as a consequence, it does not enable her to escape her *fate*.

The moral of these two cases is that an increase in human knowledge does not, as Popper thinks, *always* “strongly influence” the development of human history. It depends on what kind of knowledge is involved. If one is talking about scientific knowledge, e.g., the knowledge how to build a better steam engine, line # 2 in

Popper's argument is probably right. An increase in scientific knowledge does tend to strongly influence the development of human history *in the specific sorts of ways that scientific knowledge can impact human development*. But will that kind of knowledge and that kind of development in human history enable the culture that has developed this new steam engine to escape its overall fate? Wittgenstein, who was influenced by Spengler (*Culture and Value*, 14), did not think so,

It isn't absurd ... to believe that the age of science and technology is the beginning of the end of humanity; that the idea of great progress is an delusion, along with the idea that the truth will ultimately be known; that there is nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge and that mankind, in seeking it, is falling into a trap. It is by no means obvious that this is not how things are. (Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 56)

The scientific knowledge of causes and effects enables one to make a kind of technical progress, but it is by no means obvious that the pursuit of this kind of knowledge is not a "trap" that actually leads humanity directly towards its fate ("the beginning of the end of humanity").

The error in "Popper's Basic argument" is now clear. Consider again the first three lines of that argument,

1. The course of human history is strongly influenced by the growth of human knowledge.
2. We cannot predict, by rational or scientific methods, the future growth of our scientific knowledge.
3. We cannot, therefore, predict the future course of human history.

Given Spengler's distinction between the two kinds of "knowledge" outlined in this section, it becomes immediately clear that Popper is not entitled to infer line # 3 from lines # 1 and # 2. For if scientific knowledge is not the only kind of knowledge human beings can achieve, and if there is another kind of "knowledge," an intuitive knowledge of the inner being of one's own culture, then it is possible to predict (prophesize) the future of one's culture. In that case, line # 3 of the argument" is false and his inference from lines 1 and 2 to 3 fails. Thus, Popper is correct that "Spengler's biological holism, intuitive understanding, Group-Spirit and Spirit of the age" and "even his Romanticism" do not help [him] to escape a very pessimistic outlook,"² but these *are* sufficient to enable Spengler to escape Popper's "Basic Argument".

² Popper's implied criticism of Spengler here is also misleading. For Popper makes it sound as if Spengler wanted to avoid pessimism but failed, when, in fact, Spengler aimed to illuminate that species of "pessimism" inherent in the nature of organic life that of necessity goes through a life-death cycle. Spengler no more fails

4. The Unique Nature of Spengler's "Historicism"

[Spengler] is not writing the sort of history that most of us have been trained to think of as the only possible kind. ... Virtually none of Spengler's critics have taken the time to digest his statements on method. Had the learned world learned to read the *Decline* a little more carefully, the bulk of the great controversy might never have occurred.

Hughes, *Oswald Spengler*, 71-72

The present paper does not argue that "Popper's Basic Argument" is a complete failure. On the contrary, the paper holds that Popper's argument, like most of Popper's work, is highly interesting and that his argument *does* refute certain species of historicism, for example, Marx's historicism. The claim is only that it does not refute Spengler's unique version of "historicism." It sheds light, not only on Popper and Marx, but also on Spengler to explain why this is so.

Although "Popper's Basic Argument" initially strikes one as quite plausible, upon closer inspection, one notices that the argument is *exclusively* focused on *scientific knowledge*. This should not be surprising. In the introduction to his *OSE* (4) Popper states that he is "mainly interested in methods of physics" and certain "technical problems" related to that. Further, Popper's easy transition from talk of "the growth of human knowledge" in the first premise of his "Basic Argument" to "the growth of scientific knowledge" in the second premise suggests that he does not believe that there is any other kind of human knowledge. Although Popper does not go that far, in the Preface to the first English edition of *LSD*, he states that "*the growth of knowledge can be studied best by studying the growth of scientific knowledge* [all emphasis Popper's]". Thus, Popper sees scientific knowledge as the *paradigmatic* kind of human knowledge. This explains why his "Basic Argument" works so well against Marx. For Marx claimed that his theory of history is not just a bit of speculative philosophy as Hegel's theory had been, but that it is a *scientific* theory of the laws of economic motion analogous to Newton's laws of physical motion (Farr, 1992, 111). As such, Marx's theory purports, like Newton's, to be able to *explain* and *predict* events and therefore that it be *testable*. It is, therefore, entirely appropriate that Popper subjects Marx's "historicism" to the standards required of a scientific theory.

Spengler, by contrast, never claims that his view of historical development is a science. Quite the contrary, science, along with art

by becoming a pessimist than a biologist fails in describing the life-death cycle of a frog.

and mathematics, are among the cultural formations Spengler purports to examine from his own quite different standpoint. In the Preface to the first edition of the *Decline* Spengler does say that "events have justified much and refuted nothing" of what he states in that work, but he nowhere states that this "justification" is anything like a justification in science. Spengler nowhere in the *Decline* attempts to make the kind of precise scientific predictions of the sort one finds in Marx, e.g., that the workers of the world will revolt and replace capitalism with socialism. Making those kinds of *scientific* predictions is simply not at all what Spengler is trying to do in *Decline*. Rather, in the 1922 Preface to the Revised Edition of *Decline*, Spengler explains that what he expresses in that work is what he "discovers within himself", that what one finds in *Decline* is "himself over and over again, being expressed in words, the meaning of his personality formed into a doctrine ... because truth and life are identical". He calls his discoveries "true for me", and hopefully for the leading minds of the coming time, "but *not* "true in itself". These words may be obscure, but they do make clear that he what he expresses in *Decline* does *not* purport to be a science in the sense in which Newton's *Principia* purports to be a science. But that means that in applying the criteria appropriate to a scientific theory to Spengler, Popper's "Basic Argument" simply "begs the question" against Spengler by assuming that he is doing something that Spengler explicitly disavows.

One might, of course, deny that Spengler's kind of "intuitive" knowledge of the Destiny of a culture actually exists. After all, one cannot find a course on how to acquire intuitive knowledge of the internal being of one's culture at *Harvard* or *MIT*. However, Spengler makes clear that this kind of "fate-laden ... vision" can, for "the man of a higher Culture," only be communicated "through religion and art, never through notions and proofs" (*Decline*, I, 117). That is, Spengler is *not* making predictions to rival those of the scientists but, rather, is attempting to describe *the kind of prophetic vision one finds only in religion and art*. Perhaps one might deny that this kind of prophetic vision actually exists. But, to take just one example, is anyone, including Popper, really going to argue that Kafka, whose formative period was about 1900-1914, was is not a "prophet" of the age of "anonymity", the age of the anonymity of the electric chair, of the skyscraper, of distant impersonal government decisions and so on that was only later to become clear to other minds? (Berger, 2011, 61) That is, it is clear that certain *inspired* artistic and religious figures, e.g., Plato, Picasso, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Kafka, Conrad, etc., *do* have prophetic glimpses of the future denied to most human beings and that they do not arrive at their visions by reading scientific journals. Finally, from a purely

logical perspective, the present paper is not required to demonstrate that such intuitive knowledge *actually* exists, but only to point out that Popper provides no argument against this possibility in his “Basic Argument”. *His “Basic Argument” does not even address this possibility.*

It is pointed out earlier that, curiously, Popper only mentions Spengler once, and then in a non-substantive dismissal, in *The Poverty of Historicism*. Since Popper sees Spengler as the worst of the “historicists” this is quite odd because one would have thought that Spengler’s allegedly dreadful theories would provide a rich field Popper could use to exhibit the virtues of his anti-historicist argument. The fact that Popper does not discuss Spengler at all in *The Poverty of Historicism*, where one would have expected him to do so, but only dismisses him there in one brief remark, and makes most of his comments on Spengler in his *Open Society and its Enemies*, often in footnotes or *ad hominem attacks*, is itself a positive phenomenon that deserves explanation. In fact, Popper could not possibly discuss Spengler in any detail because it would become immediately obvious that the scientific criteria assumed by Popper simply do not apply to Spengler’s attempt to develop a “morphology” a “descriptive creative physiognomic,” a new “art of portraiture” that attempts to “capture history in a moment” – in brief, *a new kind of art form* that Popper, with his single minded *worship* of science, *cannot* appreciate.³ Popper’s inherent hostility to Spengler’s new kind of artistic program, and his inability to confront Spengler’s program head on, derives, therefore, from the impoverishing effects of modern science worship commented upon by Wittgenstein:

Science: Enrichment and impoverishment: One particular method elbows all others aside. They all seem paltry by comparison, preliminary stages at best.

(*Culture and Value*, 60)

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³ The aim here is not to belittle Popper. This author assumes that Popper does have significant insight into the arts (see for example Popper’s very interesting remarks on music in UQ, §’s 11-14), but only that this is overshadowed by Popper’s belief that scientific knowledge is the paradigm of all knowledge, that, as Wittgenstein puts it, “the scientific method elbows all others aside” making them “seem paltry by comparison.”

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