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ARTICLE

"Inhuman Destiny": Naturalism, Propaganda, and Despair before Rawls's Conversion

Robert Cheah*

Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford
*Corresponding author. E-mail: robert.cheah@politics.ox.ac.uk

This article shows that John Rawls's political thought began not with Christian faith, but with a deep, secular despair about the role of propaganda and ideology in political life. I offer the first extended discussion of Rawls's earliest paper, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," which argued that democracy necessarily deteriorated into plebiscitary dictatorship as the masses willingly handed power to whomever controlled the press. I argue that Rawls's earliest work mobilized currents of reactionary political thought—especially that of Oswald Spengler—which Rawls encountered at Princeton student publications. These currents reacted against the then widespread pedagogical project of rejecting "naturalism" and fostering faith in the rationality of democracy. In this light, Rawls's later wartime personalist theology appears as a reversal of perspective, affirming the possibility of a community governed not by propaganda, but by genuine interpersonal revelation. I conclude by asking where these concerns travel and settle in Rawls's mature thought.

In mid-century Princeton, graduation was attended by an unusual tradition: the beer suit. Frustrated with the dry-cleaning costs after end-of-term revelry, graduating classes decided to design and produce unlined canvas suits specifically for the celebrations, printing on them an emblem of the graduating year. In spring 1941, they chose a cartoon tiger—Princeton's mascot—sitting atop a globe in a soldier's helmet. On the globe was a depiction of Adolf Hitler's face and mustache, and in his hair was the unmistakable profile of Franklin D. Roosevelt's broad grin, looming sinisterly over the world. The tiger's tail curled into a "3," referring to the beginning of FDR's unprecedented third term, and a fuse sprouted from the side of the globe.[1] The graduating class, however, was not alone in believing that the world was ready to explode thanks to the joint influence of Hitler and Roosevelt. Over the previous two years—a period that saw the outbreak of war in Europe, the fall of France, a presidential election, the United States' first ever peacetime draft, and the declaration of an "unlimited national emergency"—university publications had filled with expressions of anxiety about the future of democracy and Western civilization. To many of Princeton's deeply Republican and isolationist students, Roosevelt appeared a warmonger who sought to use the emergency to enlarge his own power.

[1]"War Motif Emphasized in '41 Beer Suit Design," *Daily Princetonian* (hereafter *Princetonian*), 21 March 1941, 1. See also "A Century after Their Debut, Beer Jackets Are Still in Style," *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, 2012, at https://paw.princeton.edu/article/century-after-their-debut-beer-jackets-are-still-style.

Among the many contributions to this outpouring was an article by John Rawls, then a twenty-year-old sophomore, entitled "Spengler's Prophecy Realized." Published in the June 1941 issue of Princeton's oldest and most prestigious student journal, the *Nassau Literary Magazine*, Rawls joined with his classmates in predicting a Roosevelt dictatorship. But what was more, Rawls claimed that this collapse of democracy was the inevitable consequence of the rise of science.[2] Drawing on the reactionary historical theory of the German writer Oswald Spengler, he argued that science destroyed the traditions which provided the foundations of Western civilization, and created new tools—newspapers, radio, motion pictures, the administrative state—which would-be dictators could use to transform peoples into "pawns on a chessboard."[3] Rawls predicted that Hitler and Roosevelt—new "caesars"—would usher in an age of war in which the culture of the West would be destroyed forever.

Rawls's paper is an undisciplined expression of anxieties and preoccupations. It is vague and confused but also rich and suggestive. To make sense of the paper, I situate it in relation to live debates at Princeton about the fate of democracy in an increasingly scientific world, and in relation to Rawls's religious conversion the following year. In the first section, I show that in preparation for the war Rawls's professors urged a renewed faith in democracy as an expression of the fundamental rationality of human nature. They aimed to counter a pervasive worldview they often called "naturalism," which insisted on studying both human nature and democracy on scientific, value-free terms, and allegedly encouraged skepticism about their rationality. In the second, I give an account of Oswald Spengler's thought and recover the so-far neglected context in which Rawls likely encountered it: the conservative intellectual milieu of the *Lit*. The third section turns to Rawls's paper, arguing that it mobilized Spengler's thought to reject the democratic faith urged on him by his professors. Rawls claimed that science led inevitably to a nihilism which undermined the basis of democracy and condemned the West to an "inhuman Destiny" in which power displaced truth, and that democracy was nothing more than the domination of the masses by propaganda. In the final section, I turn to Rawls's 1942 senior thesis, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, and read it as a response to Rawls's earlier despair about the survival of democracy.[4] Rawls articulated a theological anthropology which both provided a permanent basis for value and made open, non-manipulative communication the cornerstone of the community into which Christians were called by God. "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," I therefore claim, was not a mere occasional comment on current affairs, as Andrius Gališanka—the only commentator to notice the essay so far—has suggested.[5] Instead, it sheds crucial light on the politics of Rawls's conversion and the emergence of his project of theodicy.

[2]John B. Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," *Nassau Literary Magazine* 99/6 (1941), 46–54. I follow the student body in referring to the journal hereafter as "the *Lit*." The exact publication date of Rawls's essay is unclear, but this issue of the *Lit*—and Rawls's article—were discussed in the *Princetonian* by one of its editors on 9 June 1941. See David Fowler, "'Lit' Bears Mark of Current Events; Only Poetry Keeps Introspective Tenor," *Princetonian*, 9 June 1941, 1.

[3]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 48.

[4]John Rawls, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, ed. Thomas Nagel (Cambridge, 2009). The thesis was first publicly discussed by Eric Gregory in his "Before the Original Position: The Neo-Orthodox Theology of the Young John Rawls," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35/2 (2007), 179–206.

[5]Andrius Gališanka, *John Rawls: The Path to a Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), 18.

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The Rawls we see in "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" is deeply unfamiliar. On the one hand, America's most celebrated expositor of a redistributive liberal state appears in 1941 as an emphatic, even paranoid, critic of it, seeing in the New Deal only the progress of Roosevelt's dictatorial ambitions. On the other, Rawls the sometime Christian personalist adopted a fully naturalized, secular worldview in which community was impossible. In the conclusion, therefore, I set the compressed foreground of a young man's spiritual drama against the background of Rawls's later thought and his place in the history of twentieth-century ideas.

"Come, let us reason together"

On 17 September 1939, Princeton's president, Harold W. Dodds, welcomed Rawls's class at the beginning of their freshman year with a speech. His question was whether American universities were hastening the collapse of democracy. Had they "actively contributed to the undermining of our civilization"? Dodds conjured—and substantially agreed with—an unnamed set of critics who charged that excessive concentration on "mechanistic science" had "subject[ed] the free spirit of man to the domination of natural forces or his own irrational nature" and led to a "subversive pessimism" about democracy. While resisting the sharpest criticisms, Dodds admitted that the curriculum had been too narrow and affirmed the need to restore faith in democracy by returning to the study of the values that underpinned the American form of government. He began Rawls's time at Princeton by announcing a renewed emphasis on the humanities and calling for the university to "rededicate itself to its historic mission of … making democracy work."[6] In doing so, Dodds was participating in a nationwide discourse which stressed the significance of humanistic education in the defense of democracy. Its role was to defend the conception of human beings as free and rational agents from the skepticism of "mechanistic science."

The critics Dodds conjured were almost certainly Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler of the University of Chicago, who had become the "storm center of American academic life" by the late 1930s, thanks to their polemics against a scientific worldview they called "naturalism," "positivism" or "anti-rationalism."[7] Typified by John Dewey and the empirical social sciences—and constituting an intellectual fifth column in America—naturalism seemed to its critics to deny the existence of an absolute moral law, the possibility of reasoning about values, and the distinctive qualities of reason or "the human spirit" which marked humanity off from the rest of nature.[8] It was guilty not only of moral "nihilism" but also of denying the possibility of rational democratic discourse. Because of this, Adler was to declare in September 1940 that "democracy has much more to fear from

[6]Harold W. Dodds, "Text of President Dodds's Address Given at Opening Exercises," *Princetonian*, 18 Sept. 1939, 5–6.

[7]Edward A. Purcell Jr, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: Scientific Naturalism and the Problem of Value* (Lexington, 1973), 139–53, at 152. See e.g. Robert M. Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America* (New Haven, 1936); and Mortimer Adler, "God and the Professors," *Chicago Maroon*, 14 Nov. 1940, 3–4.

[8]Purcell, *The Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 139–98; see also Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933–1973* (Princeton, 2015), 27–40.

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the mentality of its teachers than from the nihilism of Hitler."[9] Hutchins and Adler were neo-Thomists, influenced by Jacques Maritain and the European antimaterialist discourses brought to light by Samuel Moyn, for instance.[10] But in applying these influences in an American controversy about democracy and scientific education, they initiated a discourse which attracted intellectuals of all stripes. The characteristic point of agreement was that educators needed to resist the pernicious influence of Dewey and reassert, in a humanistic curriculum, the existence of an unchanging, rational human nature. Only thus could educators defend what they increasingly called their "democratic faith."[11]

While liberal Protestant attacks on "naturalism" at Princeton have been noted by P. MacKenzie Bok as a context for Rawls's use of the term in his 1942 honors thesis, no attempt has thus far been made to situate these interventions within the wider discourse about science and democratic theory.[12] As Chad Wellmon and Paul Reitter have recently shown, however, Princeton played a central role in the development of a new humanistic curriculum which responded to these anxieties. A group of professors—including several of Rawls's future teachers—began to meet regularly from the early 1930s to discuss the naturalist threat to democracy. In 1936, they founded the first humanities program in the United States, which they understood to have an explicitly moral purpose, defending democracy and "human values" against the scientific outlook.[13] George Thomas's 1940 inaugural lecture at Princeton—which Bok cites as the primary influence upon Rawls's use of "naturalism"—emerged from this wider context.[14] Thomas sought to use the creation of humanity in the image of God to defend the "Greek and eighteenth century view of man as a rational being," which he took to be "an indispensable aspect of the democratic theory."[15] Strikingly for a Protestant theologian, Thomas even followed Hutchins and Adler in comparing modern American society unfavorably with the intellectual order of medieval Christendom.[16] When several of Rawls's professors—billing themselves as "the Princeton Group"—presented a joint

[9]Adler, "God and the Professors," 4.

[10]Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2015), esp. chs. 1–2; and P. MacKenzie Bok, "Inside the Cauldron: Rawls and the Stirrings of Personalism at Wartime Princeton," in Sarah Shortall and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, eds., *Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered* (Cambridge, 2020), 158–88, at 169–77. Purcell discusses Maritain only very briefly, in *Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 179–80; but see Tim Lacy, *The Dream of a Democratic Culture: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books Idea* (Basingstoke, 2013), 25.

[11]Purcell, *Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 221.

[12]Bok, "Inside the Cauldron," 164. This is a significant omission. The discourse on naturalism has been well studied in the history of American social science since Purcell's *Crisis*, which has informed standard works, e.g. Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, 1991); Mark C. Smith, *Social Science in the Crucible* (Durham, NC, 1994); David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), esp. 183–90; and Greif, *The Crisis of Man*, 16.

[13]Chad Wellmon and Paul Reitter, *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age* (Chicago, 2021), 231–3. My thanks to *Modern Intellectual History*'s anonymous Reader D for this recommendation.

[14]Thomas, arriving in 1940, was not a part of the original group of Princeton humanists, but he was hired to assist with their projects. See Bryan McAllister-Grande, "The Inner Restoration: Protestants Fighting for the Unity of Truth, 1930–1960," (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 2017), e.g. 21–2, 59–64.

[15]George F. Thomas, *Religion in an Age of Secularism* (New York, 1941), 20–21.

[16]Ibid., 11.

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manifesto on "The Spiritual Basis of Democracy" in 1941, Dewey could confidently cite it as evidence for the popularity of antinaturalism beyond its core constituency of neo-Thomists.[17]

Rawls's first sustained exposure to this problematic came in his very first philosophy course, "Elements of Ethics," taught in fall 1940 by his future PhD supervisor, Walter T. Stace.[18] Although it was intended as an introduction to moral philosophy, Stace instead delivered a series of lectures on the philosophical stakes of the war, which became the basis of the book he completed the following year, *The Destiny of Western Man*. In lectures with titles like "The Ethics of Will and Power: Schopenhauer and Nietzsche," and "The Ethics of Reason and Moderation: Plato and the Greeks," Stace cast the war as a clash between the "rationalism" of "Western" or "democratic civilization" and the "anti-rationalist" scientific nihilism of "totalitarian civilization." Stace—a former British colonial administrator who frequently advocated for American intervention in the war—encouraged his students to see that America's "cherished way of life" was gravely threatened by events in Europe.[19] While making little use of the term "naturalism," Stace developed an argument with the same structure. Importantly for the arguments Rawls would later make, Stace connected these discourses not only with the war, but also with the history of philosophy and with a square focus on human nature and reason's place in it.[20]

According to Stace, Western civilization had been "founded" by Plato and Christ upon the recognition that human beings were rational and capable of subjecting their appetites to the demands of reflection.[21] "Totalitarian civilization," on the other hand, followed Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in elevating the "will"—that is, desire, impulse, and instinct—above reason. Whether they "willed" mere hedonic satisfaction, as in Schopenhauer's case, or domination, as in Nietzsche's, reason must remain silent, confined to the strictly instrumental role of determining efficient means. To Stace, the totalitarian saw human beings as nothing more than animals; the impulses that drove them may be altered by social conditioning, but not by reasoning.[22] Though Stace was an empiricist in the model of Russell and Moore, he blamed totalitarianism on the overflow of scientific "anti-rationalism" from its legitimate, theoretical, province to the realms of morals and psychology.[23] This

[17]Princeton Group, "The Spiritual Basis of Democracy," in *Science, Philosophy and Religion: Second Symposium* (New York, 1942), 251–7, at 252, 255. John Dewey, "Antinaturalism in Extremis," in Yervant H. Krikorian, ed., *Naturalism and the Human Spirit* (New York, 1944), 1–16, at 7. At least three of Rawls's professors contributed: Thomas, the philosopher Theodore Greene, and reformation historian E. Harris Harbison.

[18]Gališanka, *John Rawls*, 199.

[19]W. T. Stace, *The Destiny of Western Man* (New York, 1942), 202; for comments showing that the writing was completed by summer 1941 see ibid., x, 214. And see, e.g., "Third Elective," *Princetonian*, 2 Oct. 1940, 4, and equivalent entries every Wednesday until 4 Dec. 1940.

[20]For Thomas, by contrast, this is a peripheral problem; see *Religion in an Age of Secularism*, 9–10. Compare Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 107.

[21]Stace, *Destiny*, esp. vii–viii, 89–103, 271–80.

[22]Ibid., 266.

[23]Ibid., 189. Some literature (e.g. Samuel Freeman, *Rawls* (London, 2007), 13) treats Stace as a Hegel scholar, as he wrote on Hegel early in his career. However, Stace was "far from happy" about this association and continuing to treat him as a Hegelian obscures his influence on Rawls. See James Ward Smith,

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tendency, he claimed, was carried furthest in America by the "perverse and stupid" philosophy of Dewey, which, Stace thought, was "in essence allied with precisely those forces of unreason which today repudiate democracy."[24]

Democracy, Stace claimed, was "the final expression of the ethos of Western civilization," resting on absolute moral principles available to reason, and committed to resolving disagreements "not by passion, or brute will, or force, but by reason alone."[25] Stace emphatically rejected any account of democracy as rule "by appeals to emotion, prejudice, interest, and even by unworthy tricks and lies."[26] Such accounts elevated will over reason and so misconstrued the guiding ideals of democracy, making it "an easy victim of fascist criticism, according to which it is nothing but a battleground of contending egoisms."[27] While the totalitarian claimed that moral reasoning was a mere cover for will, and that all rule was necessarily by "compulsion," Stace stressed the close relationship between reason and democratic deliberation, reflected in an injunction he quoted from the Book of Isaiah: "Come let us reason together, saith the Lord."[28] For Stace, reason was the defining feature of human nature, which provided a permanent ground for the possibility and desirability of democracy. While totalitarianism could not return humanity to the "animal level," the widespread "despair of reason" which Stace saw "in the most up-to-date intellectual circles" could weaken the resolve of a democratic people.[29] Stace, like his colleagues, viewed his wartime pedagogical task as remedying "this deep defeatism in regard to our values." "We can, in the deep places of our own spirits," he wrote, "justify the faith which is in us. We can replace our blind allegiance by reasoned understanding. And by doing this we increase our spiritual strength."[30]

The *Nassau Literary Magazine*

When Rawls intervened in these debates six months later, he rejected Stace's faith, drawing instead on the reactionary prognosis of Oswald Spengler and declaring the death of democracy and Western civilization to be foreordained. Spengler made his name with *The Decline of the West* (1918–22), a sprawling, two-volume study of world history. Civilizations, Spengler claimed, were organisms, each of which possessed its own distinctive character or "soul." Outside civilizations, human beings were mere animals, moved by appetite and instinct; within them, however, their thought and feeling were molded by tradition and the individual was integrated into a larger social whole. Each civilization proceeded through the same stages of growth and decay over the course of its thousand-year lifespan and, on this

"Walter Terence Stace 1886–1967," *Proceeding and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 41 (1967–8), 136–8, at 137.

[24]Stace, *Destiny*, 176–7, 196.

[25]Ibid., vii.

[26]Ibid., 163.

[27]Ibid., 166.

[28]Ibid., 162, 264; Isaiah 1:18.

[29]Stace, *Destiny*, viii, 284, also 13–17.

[30]Ibid., x.

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basis, Spengler predicted the future of the West.[31] In striking contrast to Rawls's professors, Spengler's outlook was fundamentally relativistic: every aspect of a civilization—religion, politics, morals, even mathematics—had its value and meaning only relative to its time and place in a particular life cycle.[32]

The "Western" or "Faustian" soul, Spengler claimed, was distinguished by its overwhelming will to power, expressed, for instance, in Gothic cathedrals, maritime empire, and, most of all, Western technologies. In its medieval youth until the Enlightenment, it expressed this will coherently in a thriving tradition—especially but not exclusively the tradition of Gothic Christianity—which imbued its members with an intuitive worldview and motivating set of values. In Spengler's view, science and reason—the whole activity of conscious, abstract thought—alienated inhabitants of the modern West from the primordial rhythm of "race," "blood," or "instinct"; that is, the traditions that stirred civilizations to greatness and gave form to their human material.[33] Because of this, modernity was beset by anomie and overcome by nihilism, materialism, and individualism, as the traditions which instantiated the Faustian will to power dissolved. The undisciplined appetites were let loose, and the atomized society of the West was held together only "mechanically" by law, force, or economic exchange.[34] The will to power, however, continued to find expression in "technics" or "the machine," by which Spengler referred not just to modern implements, but to means–ends rationality as an abstract historical force. In the final stage of Western history, Spengler held, this force would transform the West into a vast machine which would dwarf and consume its human material.[35] His vision of history was both conservative and tragic: only tradition and instinct could provide a sound basis for Western culture and modern rationality, but these were necessarily undermined—from the Enlightenment onwards—by the flourishing of that very culture.[36] *Decline* is thus best read as a rebuke to the orthodox German historiography of progress. Every step in the development of human reason is a step towards—and finally over—a precipice; the perfection of human reason brings not peace but the destruction of a distinctively human life altogether.[37]

Spengler was most famous, however, for describing the final crisis of the Western world. Democracy, to Spengler, was the paradigmatic political expression of the West's late civilizational malaise. It was justified by abstract rational principles and the rejection of hierarchy, but in practice amounted to little more than the

[31]Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* (1918–22), trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2 vols. (New York, 1926–1928), 1: 104. A good recent summary of Spengler's thought and significance can be found in Matthew Rose, *A World after Liberalism: Philosophers of the Radical Right* (New Haven, 2021), esp. ch. 1.

[32]Spengler, *Decline*, 1: 21.

[33]For an account of *Decline* as a "metaphysical history of reason" see Julian Potter, "The Spengler Connection: Total Critiques of Reason after the Great War," in Matthew Sharpe, Rory Jeffs, and Jack Reynolds, eds., *100 Years of European Philosophy since the Great War: Crisis and Reconfigurations* (London, 2017), 83–103, esp. 87–90.

[34]Spengler, *Decline*, 2: 103, 400–16.

[35]Ibid., 497–507; see also, Greif, *Crisis of Man*, 47–51.

[36]Spengler, *Decline*, 2: 311.

[37]Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, rev. edn (Middletown, 1983), 241.

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rule of money, as oligarchs and party leaders made use of the press to extend their power over the unthinking crowd and the governments it elected. The high-minded slogans of democrats, he thought, only concealed a regime of empty materialism and cynical manipulation.[38] Indeed, democracy represented the capitulation of politics—the domain of power and strength—to "uninstinctive and meddlesome" rationality and the mechanical realm of production and exchange.[39]

Spengler foresaw the rise of "caesars"—Nietzschean supermen still animated by the dying will to power—who would take advantage of modern technology and rational social organization to restore the supremacy of "blood" over "money" and "mind." These virtuoso politicians would see that "the people is nothing but an object and the ideal nothing but a means," but they would exploit the weakness of democracy for a grander purpose than personal enrichment.[40] They could not reverse cultural decline and restore a pre-rational society of instinct and tradition, but for a brief time their personal will to power would exert a "race-forming" influence as a pale imitation of the dead tradition, creating new values and transforming whole nations into instruments of their will as they sought global domination.[41] A series of increasingly destructive wars between the caesars would destroy the West sometime around the year 2200, but Spengler looked forward to the coming age of mechanized dictatorship nevertheless: caesarism and empire would be the final glorious expression of the Faustian will to power.[42]

Decline was an intellectual sensation in the wake of the First World War. It circulated widely among the German middle class, helped to galvanize the "Conservative Revolution," and drew responses from many of the Weimar Republic's leading intellectuals.[43] When translated into English from 1926, it repeated its success and gained widespread coverage in the American popular press: a 1934 review of his work in *Time* began, "When Oswald Spengler speaks, many a Western Worldling stops to listen."[44] From the mid-1930s, however, Spengler fell from favor in the United States—taken for a prophet of Nazism, despite his own break with the regime.[45] By the end of the decade, he had become little

[38]Spengler, *Decline*, 2: 447–64.

[39]Ibid., 442.

[40]Ibid., 455, 447.

[41]Ibid., 443.

[42]Ibid., 506–7.

[43]Udi Greenberg, "Revolution from the Right: Against Equality," in Peter E. Gordon and Warren Breckman, eds., *The Cambridge History of Modern European Thought* (Cambridge, 2019), vol. 2, 233–58, at 235–7. For a recent account of Spengler's significance to the resurgent far right see Rose, *World after Liberalism*.

[44]Petri Kuokkanen, "Prophets of Decline: The Global Histories of Brooks Adams, Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee in the United States 1896–1961" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Tampere, 2003), 65–82; "Spengler Speaks," *Time*, 12 Feb. 1934, 63–4.

[45]Greenberg, "Revolution from the Right," 253. Much recent work on Spengler has emphasized his break with Hitler, aiming to retrieve a thinker who should not be tarred as a Nazi. See, e.g., David Engels, "Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West," in Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (Oxford, 2019), 3–21, at 6, 14; and John Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics* (Baton Rouge, 2001), esp. 236–40 and conclusion. I cannot respond to this at length here, but see Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge, 1985), ch. 3, for an account that emphasizes Spengler's contributions to, and similarities with, the ideology of National Socialism.

more than a synecdoche for reactionary cultural pessimism and the glorification of power and unreason.[46] At Princeton, however, Rawls encountered one of Spengler's most enthusiastic American readers, the modernist poet and literary critic Allen Tate, who served between 1939 and 1942 as faculty adviser to the *Nassau Literary Magazine*.

Tate is primarily remembered today for his role in two movements. The first was "southern Agrarianism," which sought to defend the "traditional society" of the Old South against the encroachments of liberalism, science, and modernity.[47] The second was the New Criticism, a school of literary criticism—led in the United States by former Agrarians—which argued that texts need to be understood in virtue of their formal properties rather than their context or authorial intent.[48] For Tate, both movements were ways of resisting the mechanical outlook of the modern world, and while it is difficult to discern precisely the nature and extent of Tate's debt to Spengler, Tate developed his cultural criticism in dialogue with Spengler's thought.[49] In his reviews of Spengler, he largely accepted his predictions, and even claimed that Spengler had restored philosophy to a position of intellectual authority it had not occupied since the Reformation.[50] Like Spengler, Tate held that the Western mind tended towards a "self-destroying naturalism" which undermined tradition and transformed human beings into objects or animals.[51] The progress of Western thought reduced society to a spiritless mechanism lacking a "specifically human role" and populated only by "economic slaves."[52] Tate likewise shared Spengler's antipathy towards democracy, writing from Princeton to a friend to express his hope that America would remain neutral and Germany would succeed in extinguishing "democracy (i.e., laissez faire capitalism)" in Europe.[53] Most importantly for our purposes, Tate continued to recommend and discuss Spengler into at least the early 1940s.[54]

[46]Kuokkanen, "Prophets of Decline," 83–4.

[47]See e.g. Paul K. Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville, 1988).

[48]Mark Jancovich, *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* (Cambridge, 1993). For background see Thomas A. Underwood, *Allen Tate: Orphan of the South* (Princeton, 2000); this biography, unfortunately, ends before Tate's arrival at Princeton.

[49]No studies have set out to chart Tate's use of Spengler, and it is often difficult to tell when Tate derives an idea from Spengler rather than from other conservative sources—e.g. T. S. Eliot or Charles Maurras. Many scholars, however, mention Agrarian engagement with Spengler. Mark G. Malvasi notes the relevance of Spengler to Tate's politics in *The Unregenerate South: The Agrarian Thought of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson* (Baton Rouge, 1997), 98 ff. Dupree argues that Tate's understanding of time, science, and history is indebted to *Decline*; see Robert S. Dupree, *Allen Tate and the Augustinian Imagination: A Study of the Poetry* (Baton Rouge, 1983), 26–30, 42–50. See also Peter Nicolaisen, "The Southern Agrarians and the European Agrarians," *Mississippi Quarterly* 49/4 (1996), 683–700.

[50]See Allen Tate, "Fundamentalism," *The Nation*, 5 Dec. 1926, 532–4; and Tate, "Spengler's Tract against Liberalism," *American Review* 3 (1934), 41–7.

[51]Allen Tate, *Reactionary Essays on Poetry and Ideas* (New York, 1936), 176.

[52]Tate, "Spengler's Tract," 46–7; see also Allen Tate, *Reason in Madness* (New York, 1941), ix, 3–10, 220.

[53]Thomas Daniel Young and John J. Hindle, eds., *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence of John Peale Bishop and Allen Tate* (Lexington, 1981), 166–7, at 167.

[54]Huntington Cairns, Allen Tate, and Mark van Doren, *Invitation to Learning* (New York, 1941), 401, 420; Tate, *Reason in Madness*, 205.

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In the *Lit*'s 1942 centenary issue, one of the student editors, David Peaslee, wrote a retrospective on the period since Tate's arrival, noting that an informal course taught by Tate had shaped the sensibility of the magazine, which was dominated "by men under [his] tutelage."[55] Under "Mr. Tate's influence" a new sense of purpose had arisen at the magazine, which now sought to participate in "the momentous struggle of an enfeebled culture to withhold the ravages of a cancerous science that presses now for our very lives."[56] It is likely that Tate discussed Spengler at his informal meetings. As the magazine filled with discussions of his wife's latest novel, volumes of poetry by his friends, and essays on early New Critical symposiums, a review appeared of a new volume of selections from *Decline*.[57] More importantly, while Peaslee did not mention Spengler by name, he virtually quoted from *Decline* when characterizing the cultural situation to which the *Lit* responded. He outlined the destructive scientific tendency of the Western mind, for instance, through an idiosyncratic discussion of perpetual-motion devices paraphrased directly from Spengler's final chapter. And immediately before discussing Tate, Peaslee offered Spengler's most famous prediction: "Science, once the savior, promised now destruction of civilization and man himself in a staccato series of devastating wars."[58] Mark Jancovich has argued that the Agrarians conceived of their move into academic literary criticism as an attempt to find an institutional setting for their social critique—Tate's cultivation of a circle of protégés at the *Lit* appears continuous with this project.[59]

A full portrait of the *Lit* cannot be given in the space available, nor can Rawls's place at the journal be established beyond all doubt. Rawls's essay, however, fit into this intellectual milieu and was counted by Peaslee among the essays that most clearly showed the *Lit*'s common project.[60] The magazine has not so far been considered as a context for Rawls's early thought, even by those historians who have discussed the papers he published there.[61] Doing so, however, reveals a context sharply at odds with the democratic faith of his professors, and the established story of Rawls's early thought. Spengler and Tate shared in widespread concerns about the effects of science on Western civilization but claimed that science and reason undermined the unreflective social tradition that prevented the West from descending into chaos. In its absence, the people of the West blindly pursued their appetites; reason ushered in a world governed, ultimately, by force.[62]

[55]David Peaslee, "Science vs. Art in the Lit," *Lit* 100/3 (1942), 97–104, at 99.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Gerhart Niemeyer, "Today and Destiny," *Lit* 99/1 (1940), 57; see, for example, Gilbert T. Dunklin "Literature as Taught," *Lit* 99/2 (1940), 20–22; and J. D. Bennett, "Literature and the Undergraduate," *Lit* 99/2 (1940), 24–6; D. Peaslee, "Selected Poems. By J. P. Bishop," *Lit* 99/4 (1941), 59–63; and Joseph D. Bennett, "Green Centuries: By Caroline Gordon," *Lit* 100/4 (1941), 43–5.

[58]Peaslee, "Science vs. Art," 97–8; cf. Spengler, *Decline*, 2: 462, 502.

[59]Jancovich, *New Criticism*, 45–54, 71–80, esp. 80.

[60]Peaslee, "Science vs. Art," 100.

[61]Bok, "Inside the Cauldron"; Gališanka, *John Rawls*, 18–20.

[62]These divergences among antinaturalists are not noted by Purcell (see *Crisis of Democratic Theory*, 221) but were perfectly clear to Tate. In 1941, he wrote dismissively to a friend of the work of Theodore Greene, a professor of Rawls's closely associated with George Thomas. See Alphonse Vinh, ed., *Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate: Collected Letters, 1933–76* (Columbia, 1998), 79–83. On Greene see Bok, "Inside the Cauldron," 159–63.

Democracy, on this account, was a symptom of decline, soon to transform into caesarism. As we shall see in the next two sections, Rawls's earliest thought was shaped by the meeting of these two intellectual currents.

"Spengler's Prophecy Realized"

Near the beginning of his 1941 essay, Rawls asserted that Spengler's prophecy was "not theory but fact which by its very actualization defies criticism."[63] He followed Spengler's predictions closely, but he sought to stress above all that democracy had become a regime of manipulation and propaganda. His essay sought to unmask democratic deliberation and even philosophical speech as weapons in the hands of the caesars, used to dominate and reshape the masses in pursuit of global supremacy.

Before turning to these themes, however, it is worth noting that Rawls's essay was immediately prompted by recent events in American politics and, indeed, was written as a critique of Roosevelt. "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" took up themes from contemporary anti-Roosevelt polemic, which cast the president as a dictator in the making. As evidence of Roosevelt's intentions, for instance, Rawls made frequent reference to the "court-packing" plan of 1937, the alleged attempt to "purge" the Democratic Party in the 1938 primaries, and Roosevelt's precedent-defying third term.[64] Rawls, moreover, seemed to borrow from James Burnham's *Managerial Revolution*, casting the New Deal as an attempt to purchase votes and transfer power into the hands state bureaucrats, as already witnessed in Germany and the Soviet Union.[65] Such views would have been familiar to Rawls at Princeton, where over 80 percent of students supported Roosevelt's opponent, Wendell Willkie, in 1940, and pro-Willkie students argued that a third term for Roosevelt would "mark the end of the principles of democracy and people's government."[66]

In his fireside chat of 27 May 1941—less than two weeks before Rawls's essay was published—Roosevelt declared an "unlimited national emergency" in response

[63]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 47.

[64]Ibid., 48–9; Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism*, 136–45; Jason Scott Smith, *A Concise History of the New Deal* (Cambridge, 2014), 142–8; Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen's Crusade against the New Deal* (New York, 2010), ch. 1.

[65]James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution, or What Is Happening in the World Now* (London, 1941). Tate is the likeliest source of Rawls's use of Burnham. Though Tate never mentions Burnham, both drew on Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means's *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (New York, 1933), to argue that capitalism and socialism alike would tend towards the centralization of economic and political power in the hands of a managerial class. Rawls cited him in "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 54, but largely ignored the Soviet Union. For a very similar analysis, also drawing on Berle and Means, see Allen Tate, "Notes on Liberty and Property," in Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, eds., *Who Owns America? A New Declaration of Independence* (New York, 1936) 80–93, esp. 86–7.

[66]"Princeton's Ballot Puts Willkie Ahead by Decisive Margin," and "Roosevelt–Willkie Forum Hears Thomas Supporter," *Princetonian*, 1 Nov 1940, 1. Willkie went on to lose by ten points. See e.g. Gareth Davies, "The New Deal in 1940: Embattled or Entrenched?", in Gareth Davies and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *America at the Ballot Box* (Philadelphia, 2015), 153–66. Rawls's parents—historically Baltimore Democrats—also deserted the Democratic Party in the election of 1940, significantly because of the court-packing controversy, according to Thomas Pogge, *John Rawls: His Life and Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 2007), 5.

to the Nazi threat.[67] Even before his announcement, Roosevelt's Princetonian critics suspected that the war would be used as a pretext for transferring additional powers to the executive.[68] Roosevelt's declaration, therefore, prompted a small controversy at the university. The *Princetonian*—where Rawls worked as a reporter—published an editorial explaining that while the largely isolationist paper had previously disagreed with interventionists "as to the best means" for preserving American democracy, all Americans must now support the decision that had been made.[69] As the headline read, "The Debate Is Over."[70] Two students—both of whom then served on the editorial staff of the *Princetonian* and the *Lit*—objected in the letters section a few days later. Roosevelt, they retorted, "wants a blank check," and his fireside chat was not a sincere argument but "part of a program to … insure national support for *whatever* decisions will be made by the expert advisers and himself in the near future."[71] Rawls's essay seems to have been prompted by this controversy, fixing on the phrase "national emergency" as a tool which makes "a so-called free people … giv[e] up their freedom to become exploited pawns in a new war."[72] But Rawls's proximate anxieties about the Roosevelt administration—about unaccountable managers, an overmighty executive, and the marginalization of Congress—combined with the background of Stace's lectures on the philosophical stakes of the war to lead him to further-reaching reflections on science and democracy.

That Rawls had these broader aims in mind is clear from the first sentence of his paper: "The influence of science is paramount in the world today."[73] Rawls did not hold, with his professors, that science was mistakenly thought to undermine the rational foundations of democracy, but that it had already uprooted the tradition of the West, leaving behind an anomic moral wasteland. To illustrate this, Rawls gave a long quotation from Bertrand Russell, describing the world as "the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms," in which human life was both purposeless and impermanent, "destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system."[74] Rawls claimed that the progress of scientific knowledge, not just its misinterpretation, revealed that human life rested upon "a foundation of despair." So, like Spengler, Rawls construed the history of the West as a tragedy: "Our strivings, our power

[67]Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (London, 2013), 336–7.

[68]See e.g. J. S. Hutcheson, "It's the People's Responsibility!", *Lit* 99/3 (1941), 40–43; and Wallace C. Murchison, "A Totalitarian America," *Lit* 99/4 (1941), 11–13.

[69]See e.g. *Princetonian*, 10 May 1940, 2. Rawls did not return to the *Princetonian* after the summer of 1941.

[70]"The Debate Is Over," *Princetonian*, 30 May 1941, 1.

[71]Laurence B. Holland and George B. Baldwin, "War Views," *Princetonian*, 2 June 1941, 2, my emphasis. See e.g. "Undergraduates Favor Aid-to-Britain Bill by Two-to-One Majority in Campus Poll," *Princetonian*, 7 March 1941, 1.

[72]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 48, 54.

[73]Ibid., 46.

[74]Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship* (Portland, ME, 1923), 6–7. Stace is the likeliest source of this reference. He would later cite an adjacent section of the text in his controversial "Man against Darkness," *New Republic*, Sept. 1948, 53–8, at 53, which declared that moral philosophy needed to be remade to do without religion. There is no mention of Russell in Stace's *Destiny*, but this essay may have been mentioned to Rawls in lectures or conversation.

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and our triumphs have lead [*sic*] to this. The beauty of the universe becomes the hideous mockery of an inhuman Destiny."[75]

Rawls followed this with an obscure discussion of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, best interpreted as an intervention in ongoing debates about the relationship between science and human nature—debates which, as we have seen, were already conducted in these terms. He described two tendencies that characterized the Western world after the destruction of tradition. The preponderant response was to "give ourselves over to nihilism, the ever-absorbing Mephistopheles, who has for us the only answer—the delight of pleasure."[76] Here Rawls described an egoistic hedonism, which he associated with Schopenhauer, suggesting that he believed that most merely sought an outlet to "cure" their "overexpanding energies."[77] Most importantly, Rawls associated the decadent pursuit of pleasure with the condition of modern democratic states, organized, he said, to promote a "negative freedom" which allowed unfettered "licentiousness." In such states, "individualism breaks forth in all its license" and politics becomes a realm in which parties pursue only self-interest, "the state be damned."[78] Eventually, this nihilism generated "its own negation"—the Nietzschean "superman" who would move beyond the pursuit of comforts and pleasures, and attempt to remake the world and its inhabitants by force.[79] Domination was the "logical intent" of the Faustian energies, sought by "the new elite, those controllers of the machine": Hitler, Roosevelt, and their administrators. This negation was both a revolt against the meaninglessness of modernity and an attempt to overturn negative democratic freedom and remake the West in the image of the caesars. Rawls, finally, ended this discussion by introducing Spengler and contending that the victory of the new elite "is itself a nihilism … after which we shall enter the final period of exhaustive expression."[80] Nietzsche's supermen give way to Spengler's decline, and the revolt against the nihilism ends with the destruction of Western civilization.

By opening his paper with this dialectical back-and-forth between nihilism and domination, Rawls both encapsulated the dynamic he saw at work at the end of Western history and implied that these were the only modes of expression available for the Faustian energies. Conspicuous by its absence was any role for moral reflection. Though he was exposed to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in Stace's lectures, he mobilized them to reject Stace's view, arguing that, in his time at least, human beings could not be governed by reason, but only by force. At the end of Western history, Rawls sought to unmask democracy as—in Stace's words—"nothing but a battleground of contending egoisms," in which reason and morality were impotent.[81] The progress of abstract rationality undermined the background of tradition against which alone a rational moral life was possible.

Rawls focused on showing that under the surface of reason and open discussion, democracy was in fact a regime of propaganda and manipulation which led directly

[75]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 46.
[76]Ibid.
[77]Ibid.
[78]Ibid., 47.
[79]Ibid., 46.
[80]Ibid.
[81]Stace, *Destiny*, 166.

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and inevitably to caesarism. The technologies of the modern mass media—"the press, radio, and motion-pictures"—were held by Rawls to eviscerate the critical faculties and make resistance to caesarism futile. From Spengler, Rawls quoted the contention that "democracy has by its newspaper completely expelled the book from the mental life of the people."[82] In the same passage, Spengler went on to contrast "the book-world, with its profusion of stand-points that compelled thought to select and criticize," with a modern public, transfixed by a single newspaper which "spellbinds the intellect from morning to night" with a dazzlingly entertaining array of images, headlines, and provocations. "Under the bombardment of this intellectual artillery," Spengler contended, "hardly anyone can attain to the inward detachment that is required for a clear view of the monstrous drama." Rawls agreed, using much the same imagery to depict a public incapacitated and overwhelmed by these technologies: "The consciousness of whole peoples, having been subjected to a barrage of pictures, newsreels, newsstories, radio broadcasts and other means of controlling and distorting information can have no conception of the truth." The result, Rawls asserted, was that, "instinctively wishing to believe something, the public accepts propaganda—there is nothing else available for belief." The new machines—including the political machinery of party and government propaganda departments—rendered democracy not a regime in which autonomous citizens controlled the state through collective reasoning, but one in which the "efficient control of sources of information" allowed new caesars to dominate the masses and achieve absolute power.

So pessimistic was Rawls's account of democracy that he could develop it with citations of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. The passages Rawls cited emphasized that power was gained and exercised by preying on the psychological weaknesses of the masses. He quoted, for instance, the assertion that "the great masses' receptive ability is only very limited, their understanding is small, but *their forgetfulness is great*."[83] Adding his own gloss, Rawls wrote, "those who think are too few to count."[84] Familiarity with *Mein Kampf* was not unusual—it was read by, and marketed to, Princeton students, as a means of understanding the war in Europe and the ideology of Hitler's Germany.[85] Stace cited it on several occasions.[86] Rawls's citation, however, stands out. While Rawls looked on Hitler's ascendency in Germany with terror, his citation of *Mein Kampf* took up Hitler's account of democracy uncritically. In 1941, Rawls saw Hitler as a virtuoso politician, articulating the insight which allowed him to seize and consolidate power: when addressing the public, truth is irrelevant; what matters is what works. His power was maintained by promising the German people wealth and power, flattering them with racial

[82]All quotations in this paragraph are from Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 48; and Spengler, *Decline*, 2: 461.

[83]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 48. Rawls cites from the Reynal and Hitchcock edition prepared and heavily annotated by German émigré scholars under the direction of Alvin Johnson at the New School for Social Research. See Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York, 1939), 234. For details on this translation see James J. Barnes, *Hitler's Mein Kampf in Britain and America: A Publishing History, 1930–39* (Cambridge, 1980), esp. 82–6.

[84]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 48.

[85]"Europe Today!", *Princetonian*, 9 March 1939, 2.

[86]E.g. Stace, *Destiny*, 205–6, 224.

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theories, and whipping them to a fury against enemies within and without. In *Mein Kampf*, Rawls declared, Hitler had articulated "*the* philosophy of propaganda."[87]

The view that Rawls groped towards in "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" was that as instrumental rationality was perfected, thought was subordinated to power. He spelt this out most clearly in his account of philosophy itself as a tool for the control of the masses. The example Rawls gave at greatest length concerned the Nazi misuse of Nietzsche. While antipathy to Nietzsche has been taken as a consistent feature of Rawls's thought, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" was attentive to the difference between Nietzsche and the Nazi representation of him. Indeed, he referred to Nietzsche as "the gentlest of men," employed to justify "the most brutal of revolutions."[88] "It is a case," Rawls contended, "of the great fact-men utilizing everything for their own ends; Nietzsche is merely another instrument for the education of Nazi youth. And the propaganda ministry skillfully suppresses what is in Nietzsche that does not conform to their wishes." Nietzsche was invoked as an authority in discourses which aimed not at truth but at making the German people into a more perfect "instrument" for Hitler's use. "Ideas for them are only a means for power," Rawls claimed; "truth is a side issue."[89]

This comment was applied only to the Nazis in the first instance, but Rawls was drawing a more general point from Spengler about the role of ideas in politics. Spengler asserted that theories were tools, which worked not by rigorous proofs—which the public could not follow in any case—but by the "sacramental hypostasis in their keywords." "Freedom, justice, humanity, progress" are simply slogans to be judged on the response they provoke from the crowd. Thus Spengler asserted that "documents like the *Contrat Social* and the *Communist Manifesto* are engines of highest power in the hands of forceful men who have come to the top in party life and know how to form and to use the convictions of the dominated masses."[90] A theory is a tool, and "whether these doctrines are 'true' or 'false' is … a question without meaning for political history." Careful refutation belongs only "to the realm of academic dissertation."[91]

Rawls did not develop his own account of how propaganda worked, but his discussion of democratic philosophy clearly recalled these passages. He claimed, for instance, that the democratic period has seen the "theorizing of all minds," but that "thought gradually becomes regulated [relegated] to academic circles; philosophy is only classroom philosophy."[92] Justifications of democracy—such as those offered in Stace's lectures—were merely "stereotyped phrases." When he turned

[87]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 48, emphasis mine.

[88]This is not just an assessment of his character. In a footnote, Rawls alludes to Brinton's distinction between "gentle" and "tough" Nietzscheans. Brinton claimed that gentle Nietzscheans distorted Nietzsche beyond recognition. While Rawls acknowledged that Nietzsche's ambiguity made him an easy source for Nazi propagandists, he seemed to disagree. See Crane Brinton, *Nietzsche* (Cambridge, MA, 1941), 184–5. For an account of Brinton's role in Nietzsche's American reception see Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (Chicago, 2012), 241–3. On Rawls's opposition to Nietzsche, see Bok, "Inside the Cauldron," 173 n. 69.

[89]All quotations in this paragraph are from Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 54.

[90]Spengler, *Decline*, 2: 453–4.

[91]Ibid., 453.

[92]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 47.

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to American attempts to refute Nazism, Rawls thought "the Nazis must laugh." They knew that their "theories" were "pure propaganda" but "in our glib denunciation of the Germans," Rawls claimed, "we, too, are victims of the press."[93] Rawls's point here, as in his discussion of propaganda in general, is that once science has undermined the tradition which organically moved the people of the West—and brought about new technologies for the control of information—reason, truth, and morality no longer play any significant role in history. "The intellect loses control over the deed," and power determines what passes for truth; as he put it, in a dictum he quoted twice from Spengler, "what the press wills is true."[94] The effects of science were summed up in the only sentence in his own voice that Rawls saw fit to italicize: "*Science, which aimed at the goal of truth, succeeds only in perfecting the instrument by which all truth is destroyed*."[95]

Though he never set out to articulate his own political views or advocate any particular course of action, the Rawls glimpsed in "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" is strikingly at odds with the established accounts of his early thought. Thomas Pogge has contended that Rawls never associated with isolationists at Princeton, but this essay both places Rawls among isolationist students and shows him accepting their account of Roosevelt as a would-be dictator seeking to enter the war to enlarge his own power. Though he stopped short of advocating isolationism in "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," this is not surprising in an essay which supposes that American entry into the war was a foregone conclusion.[96] Likewise, Rawls has often been cast as a defender of the New Deal state, with Anne Kornhauser, for instance, interpreting his mature project as an attempt to systematize and underpin the "moral order" that Roosevelt announced in his January 1941 State of the Union address.[97] Yet here—only months later and despite Roosevelt's explicit commitment to "freedom from want"—Rawls depicted the New Deal simply as a means for purchasing votes and manipulating public discourse, undermining the very possibility of collective, democratic deliberation. "Federal or state monetary and labor programs," he asserted in an apparent reference to the American administrative state, were only a means of keeping "the body busy and the stomach full," and the growing apparatus of the state was interpreted primarily as a means of managerial control.[98] Finally, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" reveals that Rawls's earliest skepticism about the state had its roots in prewar conservatism, rather than—as on Katrina Forrester's account—in postwar liberalism.[99] Indeed, the essay substantially reads as an unmasking of liberal democratic shibboleths.

Notwithstanding Rawls's apparent contempt for the democratic public and his endorsement of tradition as the only source of social stability, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" is not a rejection of democracy itself. Indeed, it is not clear that Rawls consistently read Spengler as a critic of democracy at all, for he referred

[93]Ibid., 51–3.
[94]Ibid., 48, 51.
[95]Ibid., 53.
[96]Pogge, *John Rawls*, 9.
[97]Anne M. Kornhauser, *Debating the American State: Liberal Anxieties and the New Leviathan, 1930–1970* (Philadelphia, 2015), 178–9.
[98]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 48.
[99]Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice* (Princeton, 2019), ch. 1.

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to caesarism and war as the "*fears* of Spengler," rather than his great hopes.[100] Instead, Rawls used Spengler to illustrate his view that democratic ideals were not realizable under modern conditions. The text reads as a lament for democracy, seeming to look back longingly on an unspecified time when democracy was not a mere charade.[101] Rawls ended by turning to this point directly and addressing those who "find this picture too pessimistic for our common hope of a bright future." These optimists were "guilty," Rawls charged, "of what the poet [Robinson] Jeffers has written: 'Man is an animal like other animals, wants food and success and women, not truth …'."[102] This quote aptly summarized the account of human nature Rawls adopted in "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," but its force lay in the accusation of wishful thinking. Those who, like his professors, hoped to save democracy were led not by a desire for truth, but by mere animal drives—in this case, it seems, for psychological comfort. As Roosevelt's power grew and Nazism spread across Europe, Rawls denied the truth of their comforting pieties: faith in democracy was not warranted.

"Spiritual suicide"

The senior thesis that Rawls finished a year and a half later, *Sin and Faith*, reads as an emphatic reversal of perspective. While Rawls continued to see war and spiritual "death" as the outcome of a naturalistic view of humanity, he no longer viewed naturalism as the inevitable product of modernity. Instead, he redescribed it as a long-standing theological error, and offered in its place a theological anthropology which made an all-embracing ethical and spiritual community possible. Rather than telling a story of inevitable decline, Rawls called now for a religious revival. The contrast between these two views, moreover, sheds light on Rawls's conversion, allowing us to move beyond speculation and see more clearly the political stakes of Rawls's personal journey from despair to faith. Rawls's thesis emerges as an attempt to vindicate the possibility of democratic social relations, finally joining his professors in their project of increasing the "spiritual strength" of the West.

Rawls introduced *Sin and Faith* as "a strong protest against a certain scheme of thought … called naturalism."[103] In introducing this term for the first time in his work, he knowingly departed from the meanings attached to it by most contemporary writers. Rather than focusing on science, materialism, or hedonism, Rawls outlined a theory of "relations." "Naturalism," he wrote, "is the universe in which all relations are natural and in which spiritual life is reduced to the level of desire and appetition." As he develops the view in more detail it becomes clear that he takes naturalism to be the view on which all relations formed *by human agents* towards other things are based fundamentally on appetites, conceiving of all other *relata*—including other human beings and even God—as objects to be, for instance, used, possessed, controlled, discarded, or avoided at will.[104] This amounts,

[100]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 47, my emphasis.

[101]Ibid.

[102]Ibid., 54; Robinson Jeffers, "Theory of Truth" in *The Collected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers*, ed. Tim Hunt, vol. 2 (Stanford, 1988), 608–10, at 608.

[103]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 107.

[104]Ibid., 107.

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as Paul Weithman has emphasized, to an account of human nature.[105] In framing his thesis as a critique of a view of human beings as essentially appetitive isolated individuals, transforming the world into mere objects, he recalled the discourse on naturalism so prominent at Princeton. Indeed, in claiming that that the naturalistic subject was ultimately motivated only by the "expected state of relief" from desire upon acquiring their object, his view bears a striking resemblance to his own earlier Schopenhauerian account of the masses attempting vainly to "cure" their "overexpanding energies."[106]

Against naturalism, Rawls posited the possibility of "personal relations." As *persons*—possessed of "personality" or "spirit"—human beings were capable not only of appetites, but also of relations of love, hate, envy, jealousy, pride, and so forth.[107] These relations necessarily obtained between persons, and involved non-appetitive motivations—the desire, for instance, to help or hurt someone, to be admired or to punish.[108] The personality was the aspect of humanity which bore the image of God, and in virtue of which God called on humanity to establish personal relationships of "community," with Him and with all other persons. These were relations of love—ideally encompassing all persons—in which all would be moved not by egoistic desires, but by the moral imperatives that spontaneously arose from the recognition of other persons as their equals.[109] "Love," Rawls wrote, "is an intense and full personal contact" in which "the very center of the spirit" is revealed to the other.[110] The establishment of community "completes man's nature" and, indeed, fulfills the purpose of creation.[111]

Anything that tended to destroy community, Rawls called sin. For the most part Rawls considered two forms of sin: egoism and egotism. Egoism consisted in treating all relations as natural relations, and therefore treating "other people as so many objects to be used as instruments for [one's] own appetitional satisfaction."[112] Egotism, on the other hand, involved the personal or communal aspect of the sinner and acknowledged the personality of others. It sought, however, not to establish relations of love, but to dominate and abuse the other to glorify the egotist himself. Egotism was equated with pride and original sin by Rawls, and it was this self-worship that led sinners to use others as mere objects. Importantly, Rawls associated egoism with the hollow materialism of capitalism and socialism, and egotism with the Nazi revolt against it.[113] To overcome the crisis of Western civilization, then, would require answering God's call to enter community, in which the personal aspect of human nature would find its proper expression.

Despite redefining naturalism—focusing no longer on science, but on personality, community, and sin—Rawls retained much of the structure of the critique of

[105]See Paul Weithman, "On John Rawls's *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*," in Weithman, *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith* (Cambridge, 2016), 3–26.
[106]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 184.
[107]Ibid., 180.
[108]Ibid., e.g., 220.
[109]Ibid., 206–7.
[110]Ibid., 251.
[111]Ibid., 122, 245–7.
[112]Ibid., 123.
[113]Ibid., 211 n. 45.

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naturalism he had encountered in Stace's lectures and elsewhere. Above all, he took the contrast between an appetitive and a spiritual conception of human nature to be central to the crisis which faced Western civilization. But Rawls's act of redefinition allowed him to broaden his critique: the error he targeted was traced back to Plato, and its influence could be found in the work of theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, who relied too heavily on ancient Greek categories. Indeed, much of *Sin and Faith* is taken up with rejecting misunderstandings of the Christian faith, especially those which represented God as a proper object of human desire.[114] Most strikingly of all, Rawls rejected accounts of salvation as conformity to natural law, describing this as an egotistical attempt to merit salvation through works.[115] By focusing on the human desire for God or the possibility of earning salvation, Rawls held that much theology neglected community entirely. In doing so, it too had invited a descent into sin and was partly responsible for the spiritual crisis that precipitated Nazism and war. Through this redefinition, then, Rawls centered the establishment of community as the only solution to the crisis of the West.

Rawls's disavowal of Spengler was made explicit when he introduced a third form of sin: despair. "Despair," Rawls wrote, "seeks to escape from community into nothingness. It is a sin which is caused by the result of sin … a further sin committed once egotistic and egoistic sin has disrupted community." In a footnote he added that "the signs [of despair] can be seen in Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Spengler."[116] Rawls's use of "despair" throughout the text is ambiguous and apparently inconsistent, but in this discussion he took his cue from Søren Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*. Kierkegaard defined despair as the rejection of God, the attempt to find salvation apart from, or even in rebellion against, Him.[117] In Rawls's account, this became the turning away from God's call and the denial of the possibility of community, embodied in Schopenhauer's pessimism as much as in Nietzsche's exhortations to find salvation in power. Spengler's antidemocratic fatalism—his acceptance, even celebration, of a mechanical world presided over by egotistic strongmen—marked a final step in the West's alienation from God.

It is worth pausing here to note how the categories of sin structured Rawls's understanding of the crisis facing the world, and especially how they altered his understanding of Nazism. On Rawls's view, capitalism and communism alike were naturalistic doctrines, which reduced human beings to merely economic agents.[118] Nazism constituted a despairing "revolt" against "egoistic aloneness"; it

[114]See ibid., 107 for the most forceful statement.

[115]Ibid., 230; see also Eric Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), 49–72.

[116]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 123.

[117]See e.g. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London, 1989), 98–105. Rawls cited Kierkegaard on despair in *Sin and Faith*, 208. Confusingly, Rawls cites Kierkegaard's account of despair in his discussion of "aloneness." This was first pointed out in Robert Merrihew Adams, "The Theological Ethics of the Young Rawls and Its Background," in Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 24–101, at 69.

[118]Rawls cited Peter Drucker's *End of Economic Man: A Study of the New Totalitarianism* (New York, 1939) in this section, which likewise drew on Kierkegaard to cast Nazism as a response to despair bred by capitalist and communist "theories of economic man." See Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 211 n. 45; he repeats this framing without reference to Drucker at 218. See also Ian F. McNeely, "Peter Drucker's Protestant Ethic: Between European Humanism and American Management," *Modern Intellectual History* 17/4 (2020), 1069–97.

recognized the human need for personal relations, but sought to satisfy these with the egotism of the "closed group."[119] Rawls saw the phenomenon of closed groups repeating in the history of the West—in the Catholic Church, renaissance humanism, and even college clubs—but in all cases the principle was the same: membership of an exclusive group provided a sense of prideful superiority to the members.[120] In Nazism, the criterion of membership was biological and this "iron-bound" exclusion permitted unrestrained egotism. Nazism is no longer given the quasi-sociological explanation of "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," in which propaganda machines manipulate the unthinking masses, instead it is cast as a spiritual problem, a sinful revolt against a materialistic world in which only the appetites were satisfied.[121] Thus, Rawls asserted, "Nazism is profound, but profound in the sense that the devil is profound. It is conscious of spirituality, but it knows only the spirituality of egotism which leads to destruction. Therefore the Nazi method of salvation is in the end self-destruction, since it bases itself upon sin which leads to aloneness and annihilation."[122]

Neither Spengler nor despair constitute major topics in the body of the text, but in articulating an account of human nature which made community not only possible, but the very purpose of creation, Rawls's thesis as a whole rejected despair and tried to show that the only solution to the crisis of Western civilization was the reestablishment of community. In his final discussion of sin, Rawls once again traced the path from naturalism to egotistic violence. As in "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," he claimed that persons feel "lost, alone, out of place" in a world of "atoms," "impulses," and "automatic drives," turning to hedonistic excess, and eventually to "power, force, will, rage, creative frenzy." In both works, then, Rawls held that naturalism tends toward spiritual "death" and a politics of domination. In "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" he resigned himself to this fate, which he regarded as the necessary outcome of modern skepticism and technological development.[123] *Sin and Faith*, however, acknowledged that "our world is a world of sin," but asserted that to accept that "the world will *always* be this way"—that is, to despair and deny the possibility of community—is "to commit spiritual suicide."[124] With naturalism reinterpreted as a spiritual problem, it could be given a spiritual solution. Thus, turning the page after Rawls's account of "death," the reader is confronted with his account of faith, by which humanity is "brought back to life to form a community."[125] If persons could come to see that they are capable of relations of givenness and fellowship, and could open themselves to God's call to enter such relations, the world of sin could be transformed into a community united in love and faith. Read together, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" and *Sin and Faith* sketch out the dilemma faced by Western civilization: it could either accept naturalism and face an inhuman destiny of violence and despair, or reject

[119]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 211.

[120]Ibid., 196–9.

[121]Ibid., 201, 211. Drucker, *End of Economic Man*, 6–9, explicitly rejected attempts to explain Nazism with reference to effective propaganda as "stupid" and "dangerous."

[122]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 218.

[123]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 211–13; compare Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 46.

[124]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 210.

[125]Ibid., 221.

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naturalism, return to God, and realize a community in which human nature would be completed.[126]

In using Spengler to set out this dilemma, Rawls followed Emil Brunner, the neo-Orthodox theologian he acknowledged as his most significant influence.[127] In *Man in Revolt*, which Rawls read closely, Brunner interpreted *Decline* as an account of the disaster wrought by anthropocentric humanism.[128] Having set human reason up as the measure of all things and denying dependence upon God, the West had destroyed the "specifically human" aspect of its culture that resided in its religious tradition. Virtually quoting Spengler, he asserted that modern man has thus "become the slave of his own machine."[129] Brunner too drew on Kierkegaard in this connection, depicting the West as a culture in despair, and Spengler as the chronicler of its crisis.[130] As he put it on the very first page of his earlier book, *The Theology of Crisis*—another source of Rawls's—"The famous book of Oswald Spengler, 'The Decline of the West,' has called to our attention … that the disintegrating tendencies of our modern world have led us to a decisive point where the issue can be only one of two things: either new life or death."[131] Though Spengler played little role in Rawls's thesis, he would have encountered in Brunner's writings a theology which presented itself as a solution to the crisis of Western civilization as diagnosed by Spengler.

"For repentance to emerge," Kierkegaard wrote, "a person must first despair with a vengeance, despair to the full, so that the life of spirit can break through from the ground up."[132] Rawls had indeed despaired to the full, and he seems to have thought of his own conversion in these familiar terms, describing an intense "dialectic of contrast" between the aloneness of the sinner and the saving love of God during the conversion experience.[133] It is worth clarifying my use of "conversion" with reference to Rawls, as he might be thought to have only shifted from a conventional Episcopalianism to a more committed variety of the same.[134] For Rawls, however, denominational change was not definitive of conversion.

[126]This is consistent with his dilemma of becoming either "Christian" or "pagan" which Rawls adopts from T. S. Eliot in "Christianity and the Modern World," 149. Bok, "Inside the Cauldron," 186, attributes this formulation to Maritain despite Rawls's explicit reference to Eliot as the source, which may indicate his continuing engagement with forms of reactionary social critique promoted at Princeton by Tate. See T. S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London, 1939), 8–13.

[127]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 108.

[128]Brunner was not alone among neo-Orthodox theologians in treating Spengler this way. See e.g. Paul Silas Peterson, *The Early Karl Barth: Historical Contexts and Intellectual Formation, 1905–1935* (Tübingen, 2018), 179–81; and Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Chicago, 1929), 132–3.

[129]Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1939), 33–4, 181.

[130]Ibid., 172–81, 191; see also Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 98.

[131]Emil Brunner, *Theology of Crisis* (New York, 1931), 1.

[132]Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 91.

[133]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 234. This pattern of conversion is a familiar feature of the Lutheran tradition, to which Kierkegaard belongs and with which Rawls identified himself, despite recent work which has highlighted Rawls's ambivalent relationship with reformation theology, e.g. Bok, "Inside the Cauldron," 165–6. See Marilyn Harran, *Luther on Conversion: The Early Years* (Ithaca, 1985).

[134]Rawls himself uses these terms in "On My Religion," in Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 259–69, at 261. I would like to thank the anonymous readers at *Modern Intellectual History* for drawing my attention to the need for this clarification.

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Conversion was a personal encounter with God, in which He "penetrates into and shatters man's aloneness, thereby restoring him and calling him back to community."[135] Rawls strongly implied throughout his section on the conversion experience that he was speaking about his own conversion, contrasting, for instance, the sudden conversion of St Paul on the road to Damascus with "*others of us* [who] are converted over a much longer space of time."[136]

The conversion experience was, in Rawls's view, the "womb of Christian theology," suggesting that his theology grew out of the contrast between his earlier despair about the possibility of democracy under modern conditions and the prospect of community offered by faith. Rawls now heeded the call of his professors to "recover and reaffirm the spiritual conception of man," with a polemic against naturalism which would have been clearly legible in its context as a defense of democracy.[137] "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" claimed that the rational or spiritual aspects of human nature were irrelevant in a world dominated by "high-technics and power."[138] *Sin and Faith* took human nature to contain within it the permanent possibility of moral action, and a form of motivation which could militate against the rule of desire and move one to resist caesarism. Rather than reason, it was the human capacity to answer God's call to community which made possible a future in which "right relations" were restored and persons no longer sought to use one another to satisfy their greed or vainglory.[139] Rawls's conversion was not merely another move in an argument, finally providing a compelling response to Spengler.[140] But with this context restored, Rawls's theology—sometimes held to lack a "sense of the political"—can be seen as an attempted vindication of democracy.[141] His conversion, then, responded to and resolved his earlier despair about modern democratic politics.

That Rawls's theology amounted to a defense of democracy is not a completely novel view.[142] But what the contrast with "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" reveals is the significance of "communication" in his theology. In *Sin and Faith*, Rawls stressed that open communication between persons—aimed not at using or manipulating the other, but at genuine self-revelation—was at the heart of the community into which we were called by God. Faith, as he defined it, is an "*openness*," to God and to others.[143] Communication could, of course, be perverted by egotism, and lies, Rawls said, were the prime example of this: "Speech is something for community. A lie is so damnable because it abuses the use of signs."[144] Language—and indeed faces and bodies—were given to humanity by God for the purpose of

[135]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 124; at 125 he writes, "restoration to community is called conversion."

[136]Ibid., 234, my emphasis.

[137]Princeton Group, "Spiritual Basis," 255; Bok, "Inside the Cauldron."

[138]Rawls, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," 54.

[139]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 250–51. The dualism of the "rational and irrational" was meant to be superseded by Rawls's contrast between the personal and the natural; see ibid., 118–19.

[140]Rawls describes, for instance, a state of emotional unease that precedes conversion and has, on the face of it, nothing to do with democracy. Ibid., 222–3.

[141]Joshua Cohen and Thomas Nagel, "Introduction," in Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 1–23, at 20.

[142]See e.g. Bok, "Inside the Cauldron," 165–9; David Reidy, "Rawls's Religion and Justice as Fairness," *History of Political Thought* 31/2 (2010), 309–43, at 333–4.

[143]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, *passim*, but esp. 250–51, emphasis mine.

[144]Ibid., 155, also 224.

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establishing community through communication. Lies misuse these outward signs to manipulate and mislead for some ulterior purpose. In "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," Rawls had depicted all forms of speech—including philosophical speech and democratic discourse—as tools of power aimed at manipulating the masses, making them "tools," "instruments," or "pawns." The caesars produced arguments, ideals, and principles in order to seize power, and their abuse of language ended eventually in the violent destruction of the world. When end of the world appeared in *Sin and Faith*, however, it was transformed into a Christian eschatology: "Creation moves towards that great day," he said, when "men will be open to one another, looking up to God in rejoicing and thanksgiving."[145] Though Rawls does not discuss propaganda at length, he held that when community was restored to the world, manipulation would be banished.[146]

I have so far avoided the well-established lens of Rawls's later project of "theodicy" or "reasonable faith," but it is helpful to recall that discussion in accounting for Rawls's conversion. Paul Weithman has emphasized that the religious aspect of Rawls's mature work consisted in his attempt to present the world as a whole such that it is worthy of devotion.[147] While "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" lacked this aspect, it addressed the same question, asking whether the world could be thought good. Before his conversion, Rawls could only see the world as worthy of *revulsion*. Rawls saw democracy reduced to cynical manipulation and consumed by the violent passions of the crowd, and he predicted that it must end in death. On Weithman's reading of Rawls's later project, we would find ourselves alienated, contemptuous of our fellows, and resigned to injustice if we believed that the world and human nature were hostile to the realization of our ideals.[148] So indeed Rawls appeared in "Spengler's Prophecy Realized."

To see that our ideal is realizable, however, presents us with "the vocation of realizing that ideal."[149] Thus, in his thesis, Rawls claimed that the elect are "to gather together with His aid all those who still remain behind, and are to help bring the totality of the creation before Him." They are called, that is, to reestablish community.[150] On this reading, "Spengler's Prophecy Realized" is not a piece of juvenilia that sheds no light on Rawls's later thought, as Andrius Gališanka has suggested.[151] Instead, it reveals the starting point from which Rawls embarked on his project of defending a democratic society, and the tensions which first generated his project of theodicy. Contrary to the assumption that this project emerged in response to the war and the Holocaust, it was motivated initially by the threat he believed the administrative state posed to democracy. *Sin and Faith* was not an attempt to redeem the administrative state—Rawls remained silent on institutional questions and his moral critique of capitalists stopped short of endorsing state

[145]Ibid., 252.

[146]Rawls includes a brief discussion of Nazi propaganda in *Sin and Faith*, 219–20.

[147]Paul Weithman, "Does Justice as Fairness Have a Religious Aspect?", in *Rawls, Political Liberalism and Reasonable Faith* (Cambridge, 2016), 213–41.

[148]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 239.

[149]Ibid., 234.

[150]Ibid., 251.

[151]Gališanka, *John Rawls*, 18.

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intervention in the economy.[152] He endeavored instead to show the possibility—even in apparently inhospitable historical conditions—of an all-embracing moral community characterized by open communication and genuine self-revelation. Contrary to Eric Nelson's depiction of the young Rawls as a committed anti-Pelagian who denied that human action could overcome sin, Rawls argued that—with the assistance of Grace—human beings could establish a this-worldly community.[153] In doing so, Rawls surmounted his earlier despair and joined with his professors in defending a democratic faith.

Propaganda and the task of philosophy

In the year that Rawls published "Spengler's Prophecy Realized," Theodor Adorno, then based in New York, published an essay on the same topic, warning that "the forgotten Spengler takes his revenge by threatening to be right."[154] Adorno and Rawls focused on, and quoted from, many of the same passages in *Decline*. Spengler, Adorno claimed, "has spilled … the secrets of culture as Hitler has those of propaganda," and revealed how the "expropriation of human consciousness through the centralized means of public communication" creates a world in which "men have become mere objects."[155] Adorno held that one need accept neither Spengler's metaphysics of "life" nor his historical determinism to see that it would be "weak and sentimental" in his wake to reassert the "official optimism" that culture was a sphere of humane values sheltered from the effects of power.[156] Instead, Adorno thought we must keep our eyes fixed on domination, and find "our only hope that destiny and force shall not have the last word" in "those, according to Spengler, whom history is going to thrust aside and annihilate." The forces set free by decay personify the "negativity" which "promises … to break the spell of culture and to make an end to the horror of pre-history."[157] Philosophy, that is, should be critical—it should draw attention to our objective alienation from our social world and it should identify and resist those forces which seek to reconcile us to it.[158]

Rawls's project of liberal theodicy is a very different response to Spenglerian fatalism—seeking to show the standing possibility of a positive ideal. In light of the apparent absence of substantial engagement with the problems of power, propaganda, and political manipulation in Rawls's mature work, however, his reconciliatory project cannot easily escape the suspicion of some readers that it is a "weak and sentimental" turning away from the problems of real politics.[159] It is especially important to emphasize here that Rawls does not just attempt to reconcile us to

[152]Rawls, *Sin and Faith*, 194–5.

[153]Nelson, *Theology of Liberalism*, 49–72. On this point I follow Bok; see "Inside the Cauldron," 174 n. 72.

[154]T. W. Adorno, "Spengler Today," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 9 (1941), 305–25, at 306. Adorno's first job the United States was with the Princeton Radio Research Project. The project was based in Newark, NJ and there is little reason to think Adorno spent much, if any, time in Princeton. See Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, 2005), 234–55.

[155]Adorno, "Spengler Today," 325, 308, 310.

[156]Ibid., 306, 324–5.

[157]Ibid., 325.

[158]Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London, 1979).

[159]For a paradigmatic example see Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, 2008), 89–94.

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human nature, as on Weithman's reading, but to "calm our frustration and rage against *our society and its history*"—a task he pursued by developing an ideal out of the institutions, practices, and norms of liberal societies and showing how it might succeed.[160] Rawls himself worried that justice as fairness could have an ideological function if it tried to reconcile persons to "an unjust and unworthy status quo," though he left open the questions whether it does this and how it might.[161] It might be thought that Rawls, having shown to his satisfaction the existence of a possible ideal, had assuaged his anxiety and saw no further need to descend into real politics. This impression is made more, not less, acute by the fact that the problems of mass politics in a secular, liberal society had loomed so large in the mind of the young Rawls—it is as though, finding little cause for hope in the violent reality of modern politics, he sought a safe harbor. As Benjamin L. McKean has put it, drawing a similar contrast with Adorno, "the aim of ideal theory is palliative."[162]

I want to end by suggesting another possibility: that Rawls translated his concerns about propaganda into his metaethical work and his account of philosophy's task. He seemed to do exactly this in his doctoral thesis, in which he motivated his account of moral reasoning with a comment that—in light of "Spengler's Prophecy Realized"—seems almost autobiographical: "in the face of … institutionally supported propaganda machines, men are likely to doubt not only the efficacy of reasonable principles, but their existence."[163] Over the next twenty years, Rawls consistently framed his methodological thought in opposition to C. L. Stevenson, a noncognitivist who argued that the moralist was no different from the propagandist, as ethical talk consisted largely in "persuasive definition"—that is, the exercise of influence by annexing one's preferred cognitive content to an emotively charged term.[164] The methodological project on which he labored until at least *A Theory of Justice* can be read as an attempt to show that ethical talk is "not ideology or conditioning—not class interests or neg[ative] association."[165] Against the view that the sense of justice is simply "a compulsive psychological mechanism cleverly installed

[160]E.g. John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 3–4. It important to observe the distinction between the projects of reconciliation and reasonable faith. Only on the Hegelian interpretation of Rawls's project is he committed to defending the institutions of an actually existing society, and so this task, he acknowledged, opened his theory to the accusation of ideology. Rawls, however, never set out the relation between these tasks, and Weithman makes no mention of the Hegelian passages in Rawls's work. To appeal only to the project of reasonable faith to defend Rawls from Geuss's critique, as Weithman does, therefore risks missing the issues at stake. See Paul Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism? On John Rawls's Political Turn* (Oxford, 2010), 365–6. For an account of how Rawls "inhabited the resulting ambiguity between Kant and Hegel," see Stefan Eich, "The Theodicy of Growth: John Rawls, Political Economy, and Reasonable Faith," *Modern Intellectual History* 18/4 (2021), 984–1009, esp. 990–96.

[161]See e.g. Eich, "The Theodicy of Growth," 1008–9.

[162]Benjamin L. McKean, "Ideal Theory after Auschwitz? The Practical Uses and Ideological Abuses of Political Theory as Reconciliation," *Journal of Politics* 79/4 (2017), 1177–90, at 1185.

[163]John Bordley Rawls, "A Study in the Grounds of Ethical Knowledge: Considered with Reference to Judgments on the Moral Worth of Character" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, 1950), 15.

[164]See e.g. C. L. Stevenson, "Persuasive Definitions," *Mind* 47/187 (1938), 331–50; and Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, 1944), 243–52.

[165]John Rawls, "Remarks Concerning Justification and Objectivity" (1966), Folder 6, Box 5, John Rawls Papers (HUM 48), Harvard University Archives (henceforth Rawls Papers), 5a.

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by those in authority," Rawls tried to show that moral convictions could be autonomously formed—indeed, they could "give expression to one's nature."[166]

By an intriguing verbal accident, we find Rawls discussing "the end of the world" in this context too. "[I] look forward to the time when all (unanalyzed) ethical talk *ceases* … with the end of the world, moral preaching evanesces, along with poverty + ignorance."[167] It is a mark of how thoroughly his views had changed that he used this language not to refer to a totalitarian apocalypse, but—even after his loss of faith—to the establishment of an ethical community at the eschaton. While a full analysis of these themes in Rawls's mature work is a task for another time, Rawls's thought seems to be animated throughout by the threat posed by power to moral autonomy. Despite turning away in his published work from any effort to analyze "propaganda machines" and techniques, Rawls envisioned a future in which the philosophical work of analysis would render moral language transparent, and so bring into harmony the exercise of moral pressure and the autonomy of those on whom it was applied. This is a neglected aspect of Rawls's work, but especially now, as interest in the political philosophy of language grows, it is worth turning back to this moment in history of political thought, when Rawls and Adorno's interests overlapped, and studying how each negotiated the problems they faced.[168] Whether we finally accept his view or not, we may learn more about our discipline—its history and potential—from Rawls's vision of philosophy as an aid to liberation.

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[166]John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 514, 253. Many of these concerns, as these citations show, find their way into the stability argument. The relationship of stability and method in Rawls's thought is beyond the scope of this article.

[167]John Rawls, "Remarks Re Analytic Questions" (1966), Folder 6, Box 5, Rawls Papers, 3b; the continuities between Rawls's Christian beliefs and his metaethics are gestured at in P. MacKenzie Bok, "To the Mountaintop Again: The Early Rawls and Post-Protestant Ethics in Postwar America," *Modern Intellectual History* 14/1 (2017), 153–85.

[168]See e.g. Jason Stanley, *How Propaganda Works* (Princeton, 2015); Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford, 2012).

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