

# World Soul – Anima Mundi: The Origins and Fortunes of a Fundamental Idea edited by Christoph Helmig

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Volume 2, numéro 1, 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087176ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v2i1.37728>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

ISSN

1549-4470 (imprimé)

1549-4497 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Hoenig, C. (2021). Compte rendu de [World Soul – Anima Mundi: The Origins and Fortunes of a Fundamental Idea edited by Christoph Helmig]. *Aestimatio*, 2(1), 180–187. <https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v2i1.37728>

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*World Soul – Anima Mundi: The Origins and Fortunes of a Fundamental Idea* edited by Christoph Helmig

Topics in Ancient Philosophy 8. Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020. Pp. viii + 364. ISBN 978–3–11–062846–3. Cloth €102.76

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The idea of a world soul, first meaningfully explored in Western philosophy in Plato's dialogue *Timaeus*, has been drawn on throughout its doctrinal history to explain the relationship between god and the cosmos with its ensouled life forms. It has played a fundamental role in accounts concerning the organization and nature of the physical universe and our human understanding thereof, and has thus featured in a range of cosmological, biological, and epistemological contexts. This collection of essays illustrates many such contexts, demonstrating that the world soul was a more or less continuous staple of ancient philosophical thought, at least until the time of the Neoplatonists. The volume follows its history chronologically, beginning with the world soul's early stirrings in Heraclitus' concept of universal λόγος, and ending with a glance at its *Nachleben* in Renaissance and early modern philosophy. Publishing a volume of topical discussions that illustrate this development is an unprecedented achievement in itself, and a welcome addition to the surveys already available.<sup>1</sup> The 14 contributions offer snapshots of the world soul's history, the overall aim being not to produce an exhaustive account but to contribute to discussions of its most pertinent aspects.

A brief yet sweeping introduction by the editor, Christoph Helmig, sets the scene by anchoring the idea of a world soul in Plato's *Timaeus* and by previewing its doctrinal path until early Christianity. Helmig flags several noteworthy stations along this path, including Aristotle's impactful criticism of the Timaean world soul, the attempts by Plutarch and Alcinous' *Didaskalikos* to align Timaeian ideas with Plato's *Laws*, and Neoplatonic attempts to

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., [Moreau 1939](#); [Schlette 1993](#); [Ziebritzki 1994](#). See also [Wilberding 2021](#).

negotiate the relationship between the world soul, the hypostasis soul, and human soul.

The world soul's "pre-history" is illuminated by Christian Vassallo in the context of Heraclitus' λόγος. The entity that may be described as Heraclitus' "world soul" emerges as an intermediary force between the cosmos and the universal λόγος that participates in the latter's ordering function and aids in translating its meaning, thereby assuming an important epistemological role. An appendix to the chapter provides an edition with commentary and translation of Philodemus' *On Piety*, in which the author reports on a reference to the world soul by Chrysippus in the context of Heraclitean cosmology.

Vassallo stands alone in exploring the notion of a world soul before Plato. Part 2 of the volume is devoted to Plato himself and to [Aristotle]'s *De mundo*, a treatise probably dating from the turn of the first millennium. Philip Karfik returns to the much-disputed question concerning the Timaeian world soul as the source of all, including disorderly, motion. Karfik argues that an additional cause of motion lies in the world soul's very own components. More specifically, its component "inequality"—which according to Karfik is a mixture of the ontologically disparate psychic components Difference and Dissimilarity (with Dissimilarity as the divisible equivalent of indivisible Difference mentioned at *Tim.* 35a)—is itself shown to be a source of motion. Against Harold Cherniss, Karfik thus identifies a source of motion in the Timaeian cosmos that does not presuppose soul itself as its principle.

Franco Ferrari discusses parallels between the perfect being in Plato's *Sophist* and the perfect animal in the *Timaeus*. Ferrari suggests—controversially so, given that his argument leads him to associate intelligible being with both soul and motion—that the *Sophist's* perfect being is to be identified with the world of Forms, with soul being its essential attribute and performing its cognitive activity. Ferrari then draws a connection between this soul and the Timaeian demiurge, interpreted here as "ensouling" the realm of intelligible Form in its creative and cognitive aspect. This demiurgic soul of intelligible being is, however, not to be identified with the world soul, which is a generated kind.

Federico M. Petrucci contributes a learned survey of the exegetical history of Timaeus' *divisio animae*, the division of the world soul's components that precedes its composition, described at *Tim.* 35b4–36b5. Petrucci identifies a number of programmatic points of exegesis concerning this passage that

feature in Middle and Neoplatonic authors. Petrucci shows how these exegetes drew on select material, technical *nuclei* from manuals of musical theory, and repurposed it for their own discussions at various lengths, with differing pitch, emphasis, and levels of detail. Such technical nuclei might include the geometrical, harmonic, and arithmetical means, the distinction between musical intervals and ratios, and the quantification of the Platonic series of numbers featured in this passage into a musical system. Petrucci observes that exegetes would at times find themselves pressed to reconcile, or bolster, Plato's approach and terminology with recourse to musical theory in order to safeguard and reaffirm his authority in this discipline.

Johan C. Thom's study of the pseudo-Aristotelian *De mundo* and its focus on the relationship between god and the sensible cosmos rather establishes the notion of a world soul that is *not* to be found in this text. Its anonymous author offers—as an alternative to a world soul responsible for structuring and organizing the universe—a system of cosmic delegates to which god's providential δύναμις (power) is transferred. This scenario is similar to the fragmenting of the Platonic demiurge into a transcendent and immanent principle seen in Platonic and Neopythagorean authors of the early centuries AD, a point that may be of interest for dating the treatise.

Part 3 of the volume turns to the Old Academy, the Stoics, and the Middle Platonists. John Dillon explores the doctrine of the world soul in the *Epinomis* and the Old Academy. He associates the doctrine exhibited in the former work with Philip of Opus' position and, more controversially, with Plato's own perspective (as described in the *Laws*) as well as that of Polemon. At *Ep.* 985, the reference to a "god" who is distinct from the various demonic agents must, according to Dillon, denote a rational world soul immanent in the universe. Dillon's association of Plato with the idea of a world soul that acts as a first principle while assuming the role of an encosmic demiurge is an unorthodox one, as is readily acknowledged. He arrives at this view by re-examining the description of soul in book 10 of Plato's *Laws*, which, he argues, is intended to resemble that of the Timaeian first principle or intelligible paradigm. Revisiting Aetius' report in Stobaeus' *Anthologia* and Cicero's *Acad.* 1.24–9, Dillon further claims an active demiurgic principle that resembles a rational world soul and shapes passive material also for Polemon.

Jean-Baptiste Gourinat offers a dense analysis of the Stoic notion of ἀπόσπασμα (detachment). In the context of Stoic psychology, the term refers to an individual soul, thus characterizing it, it would appear, as an autonomous portion detached from the world soul. This interpretation, however, clashes with other Stoic descriptions of the relationship between world soul and

individual soul as one between a whole and its parts. Gourinat attempts to interpret the term in a manner that reconciles both scenarios by aligning the relationship between world soul and individual soul with the Stoic model of biological reproduction. Following his analysis, individual souls may be described as ἀποσπάσματα of the semen of the universe that originally contains also the world soul prior to this soul's own development. Since the universe is a continuum, the relationship between world soul and individual souls resembles that of a whole and its parts. Nevertheless, due to their rationality individual souls may be described as possessing autonomy from the world soul in a manner similar to the autonomy possessed by children in relation to their parents.

Andrea Ulacco analyzes the imperial Pseudopythagorica with a focus on [Timaeus Locrus'] *The Nature of the World and the Soul*, one of the earliest interpretations of Plato's *Timaeus*. While setting itself apart from other texts by its format as an epitome of the *Timaeus* and by presenting itself as the source of the dialogue's cosmology, it resembles other Pseudopythagorica, such as [Archytas], *On the Principles*, in reducing the principles from which the world soul derives to form and matter. In doing so, [Timaeus Locrus] arrives at a hyломorphic conception of soul as a *compositum*. This crucial exegetical step enables soul to cognize both composition and *composita*, a strategy aimed, as Ulacco plausibly suggests, at precluding Aristotle's criticism of the Timaeian world soul's cognitive powers at *De anima* 409b3–410a15. The rapprochement of soul and matter emerges as a general point of interest in the Pseudopythagorica aimed at explaining divine immanence in the cosmos.

Carl O'Brien examines the relationship between the world soul and Fate in the translation and commentary of the approximately early fifth-century author Calcidius. Calcidius' world soul is integrated into a metaphysical structure that, in relevant aspects, combines Timaeian doctrine with the Numenian hierarchy. A highest god, identified as the good, is followed by a secondary hypostasis represented by the demiurge, with soul as the third hypostasis. Calcidius associates the world soul with Fate as the agent responsible for dispensing god's providential power into the sensible world. Later in the commentary, however, he describes soul as obeying Fate, an apparent inconsistency that, O'Brien suggests, may be due to Calcidius' failure to distinguish between Fate as activity and Fate as essence. Discussing the well-known parallels between Calcidius, [Plutarch's] *On Fate*, and Nemesius' *On the Nature of Man*, O'Brien observes that the author's overall perspective aligns with a Middle Platonic rather than a Neoplatonic outlook. Calcidius is described as a "Christian" [211, 222], and although O'Brien notes in passing

that this characterization may be in doubt, the extent of the controversy, while certainly not a primary focus of the contribution, is perhaps understated. The rather interesting relationship between Calcidius' translation and his commentary is addressed,<sup>2</sup> even if the subtle exegetical dynamic between these two components of his exegesis in the context of the world's createdness is perhaps somewhat more complex than a "standard Platonist interpretation" [217].

Opening part 4 of the volume, Damian Caluori elucidates Plotinus' cosmology by focusing on the Neoplatonist's association of the demiurge and his creative role with the world soul. While the world soul's creative agency is non-cognitive, soul does practice theoretical and practical thinking. It does *not* practice discursive thinking, which is required only for solving problems—yet no problems arise under the watch of a perfect craftsman, such as soul itself. When considering the relationship between the world soul and the hypostasis soul, Caluori argues that Plotinus conceives of the former as one among other individual souls: unlike the hypostasis soul, the world soul is individuated, like its subordinate counterparts, by focusing its practical thinking on the specific body of which it is in charge, the difference being that its thinking is taking place in the intelligible sphere. Plotinus thus removes the world soul from the physical sphere. Interestingly, Caluori notes that Plotinus' description of the world soul and its role within the physical universe is similar in many respects to the description of the cosmic impact of god's δύναις in the pseudo-Aristotelian *On the Cosmos* (see the contribution by J. C. Thom for comparison). In the case of Plotinus' world soul, the subordinate cosmic agents that execute divine power are the rational souls. Placing the world soul in the context of Plotinus' and Porphyry's embryological theories, James Wilberding explores its role in the creation and development of human embryos: more specifically, its relationship to the parents'

<sup>2</sup> Work on this topic has been done since Switalski's study from 1902, cited by O'Brien on several occasions. Calcidius has certainly taken "liberties" [215] with the translation. It may be useful, nevertheless, to provide some context for the rendering "substantia" (for the Greek «οὐσία»), which is singled out by O'Brien, who observes that the term's original connotation of "being" is lost in the Latin rendering. It may be of interest here that Calcidius uses the term "substantia" as denoting "the essential nature of a thing", often interchangeably with "natura", and to describe different ontological categories. Similar uses are found in Apuleius, Augustine, and Boethius. See Hoenig 2018, 171 and 171 n46.

and the embryo's soul. Plotinus' world soul, Wilberding argues, despite several passages in the *Enneads* that appear to ascribe to it a more extensive role, is responsible merely for external factors that affect the constitution of an individual soul's body, including region, climate, and the revolution of the heavenly bodies. It is a descending soul that plays an active role in the embryo's formation. Porphyry in his *Letter to Gaurus*, on the other hand, puts the mother's soul in charge of fetal development, a theory that has the additional advantage of accounting for maternal resemblance. Similar to Plotinus, he assigns a relatively limited role to the world soul, which merely ensures the descent of an individual soul into a suitable body at the moment of birth. Perhaps the most salient point of disagreement between Plotinus and Porphyry concerns the notion of a body's "suitability" as a receptacle for soul, with Porphyry emphasizing the receptacle's physiological fitness and Plotinus its ethical fitness.

Dirk Baltzly analyzes the nature and function of the world soul vis-à-vis hypercosmic souls and Nature in the Neoplatonist Proclus' commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*. For Proclus, the world soul primarily performs the role of an intermediary between Intellect and the cosmos. More specifically, Baltzly suggests that it may be placed between the ontologically prior hypercosmic souls and the posterior hypostasis Nature, itself the source of λόγοι that engender and animate physical objects. To mediate between the distinct ontological realms, the Proclean world soul consists of appropriately intermediate forms of Being, Sameness, and Difference. It is both monad and dyad, thus uniting in its own existence the opposing natures of the encosmic and the hypercosmic.

Marc-Antoine Gavray explores the mostly untrodden doctrinal path of the world soul after Proclus. Proclus remains an important point of reference for John Philoponus' *Against Proclus on the Eternity of the World* and *On the Soul*. Proclus' proofs for the world's eternal existence are grounded in the specific nature and function that he ascribes to the world soul, and it is here that Philoponus attacks. For instance, he rejects Proclus' conception of soul as the principle and cause of the world body's eternal motion, arguing that soul merely gives to it the *capacity* for movement which, however, remains to be actualized. From a methodological perspective, Gavray rejects the characterization of Philoponus as a Platonist, suggesting instead that the author's "Platonizing" vocabulary, his argumentative lines, and specific focus of his discussion arise merely in response to the Platonic material he intends to criticize. No dramatic shift occurred in Philoponus' thought that might have led him to abandon the topic of the world soul in his later

treatises; discrediting Proclus simply was no longer a priority. In Philoponus' time (sixth century AD), the world soul exists on borrowed time, resurfacing only when it is doctrinally expedient, or necessary, to engage with it.

Johannes Zachhuber's contribution, which constitutes part 5 of the volume, offers an epilogue to the world soul's journey through antiquity with a snapshot of its *Nachleben* in Renaissance and early modern theology and science. The initial focus is on the 18th-century philosopher Salomon Maimon and his response to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, which explores the world soul's potential as a teleological principle and agent of the laws of nature. Zachhuber attempts to re-establish the path by which soul made its way to Maimon, who associates it with the "Aristotelian School", *via* an association with Aristotle's theory of celestial heat as found in Themistius, and *via* Averroes, who defends soul's Platonic credentials against such an association. The link between the Platonic world soul and Aristotelian celestial heat acquired some significance also for Renaissance thinkers such as Girolamo Cardano and Francesco Buonamici—a possible influence on Maimon, as Zachhuber intriguingly suggests—for whom it takes on a decisive role in facilitating the generation and development of individual life.

This volume is a collection of in-depth, specialist inquiries conducted in English, Italian, and German. It does not offer, nor does it intend, a systematic approach to the doctrine of the world soul. Nevertheless, the choice and arrangement of the contributions result in an engaging narrative of the world soul's most important roles throughout the centuries—unceasingly working as a mediator between ontological realms—and of the dialogue between the various schools of thought that continuously shaped its doctrinal development.

It is advertised to historians of philosophy and specialists of ancient philosophy, as well as classicists and theologians. The last group, especially, might have enjoyed a discussion of St. Augustine's repeated (yet admittedly sporadic) engagement with the idea of a world soul until late in his career. Perhaps even a brief nod toward the doctrine's appeal to contemporary discussions of panentheism,<sup>3</sup> and to other more recent contexts that continue to negotiate the cosmic entanglement of the divine,<sup>4</sup> might engage a broader

<sup>3</sup> E.g., [Cooper 2006](#). For those interested in discovering how Plato's *Timaeus* features in topical discussions, an excellent starting point is [Baltzly 2010](#).

<sup>4</sup> The editor does acknowledge, albeit briefly, that the concept of a world soul is inspiring contemporary discussions, with reference to [Scruton 2016](#) [1]. A further obvious



readership. The importance of illustrating the ongoing relevance of seemingly remote elements of ancient teaching and learning to our own human experience is eloquently reiterated by Baltzly at the close of his study on Proclus. For such a purpose, the world soul's historical narrative is a particularly useful example, given its fundamental role in defining human relationships with the cosmos.

That said, the volume's dogmatic range offers plenty of stimulating and thought-provoking material to specialist audiences across the disciplines, and successfully advertises the doctrine of the world soul as a topic of academic inquiry that deserves further attention. The volume's few and minor formal inaccuracies do not distract from its appeal.

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context that is not mentioned might be the conception of a world soul in the writings of Sergius Bulgakov, one of its most fervent modern-day defenders. See, for instance, [Bulgakov 2002](#), 79–103.