

## THE WORLD-SOUL IN THE PLATONIC COSMOLOGY

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In each of Plato's major cosmological works, the *Timaeus*, the *Statesman* myth and the *Philebus*, he asserts that the body of the whole universe is alive and possesses a single World-Soul which extends throughout it. I wish to offer a new interpretation of the role of the World-Soul which gives the World-Soul a special function in the economy of the Platonic cosmology and which explains why Plato would place such repeated emphasis on the existence of such an odd-sounding creature. I suggest that Plato is not viewing the World-Soul on the model of the *Phaedrus* and *Laws* X, which view soul as a self-and-other moving motion. Nor, I suggest, is Plato viewing the World-Soul on the model of soul taken as a crafting agent that initiates order. Rather I suggest that Plato views the World-Soul merely as a *maintainer* of order against a natural tendency of the corporeal to be chaotic.

It is important to notice that in each of these three cosmological dialogues Plato claims that the ordered World-Soul and the *order* of the World-Body are severally and in their synchronizations the products of the workings of a single, eternal, divine, rational Demiurge, which resides outside the universe.<sup>1)</sup> Further, in all three of these dialogues the phenomena are viewed as necessarily in flux. The erratic flux of the phenomena wholly characterizes the pre-cosmic and acosmic periods of the *Timaeus* and *Statesman* myth -- but, in addition, it remains a potent and considerable factor even within the ordered and ensouled cosmos (*Timaeus* 43a-b, *Statesman* 273c-d and add *Philebus* 43a, 59a-b and *Cratylus* 439d, which do not distinguish between cosmic and acosmic periods).<sup>2)</sup>

With these observations in tow, I suggest that the World-Soul operates in the Platonic cosmology rather like a governor

on a steam engine: the governor regulates the motions of the machine in such a way that the machine's self-sustained and independently originated motions, which owing to unpredictable conditions of combustion tend to run off to excess, are nonetheless uniformly maintained and do not destroy the machine itself. However, the governor neither initiates the motions it regulates nor is it itself the cause of its being synchronized with the machine. This synchronization, which enables the governor to govern, is derived from some external source. And like a machine-governor, the World-Soul is capable of maintaining order only within a certain range of natural disruptions (*Statesman* 273d-e).

If, as is the case, Plato believes material objects to be necessarily in a chaotic flux even in the formed and ensouled cosmos (*Timaeus* 43a-b, *Statesman* 273c-d), then it is natural that he should view one of the major functions of soul to be the maintenance of order against the natural tendency of the corporeal to be chaotic, thus saving the appearance of the continuous order which we indeed do observe in the phenomenal realm. For Plato the homeostatic conditions of the observed world cannot be explained by physical theories; rather, they have to be explained in spite of physical theories (of the sort articulated at *Timaeus* 58a-c).

WORLD-SOUL IN THE *STATESMAN*. In the *Statesman* myth the Demiurge is said to make the World-Soul, to make it rational (269d1) and to form the ordered World-Body (269d7-9, 273b6-7, 273e3). In the structure of the dialogue as a whole the Demiurge is functionally contrasted with the World-Soul as a shepherd is contrasted with a human statesman (275a-276b). The Demiurge is like a shepherd in that he constructs on his own every material component of the objects of his craft, whereas the World-Soul is like a human statesman just to the extent that all the necessary material preparations and organizations of the object of its activities are handed over to it from other sources than itself. Since this is held to be the case at the level of discourse of the divisions that make up the bulk of the dialogue, it is difficult to claim that the division of the Demiurge from the World-Soul is merely a literary exigency of the myth (as some people would claim is the case in the *Timaeus*).<sup>3)</sup> In the case of the World-Soul, it is the whole order of the world that is handed over to it (273a7-b2). This is dramatically represented by the withdrawal of the Demiurge from the world, which he

leaves in the care and control of the World-Soul. The World-Soul, though, unlike the human statesman, does not further organize the organization already handed over to it (305e ff.). Rather the World-Soul tries to maintain the orderly homeostatic conditions of the World-Body, as it is inherited from the Demiurge, against the necessary, erratic, even explosive (cf. ἐξανθεῖ, 273d1), incursions of the bodily, which tend to throw the organization of the World-Body *and* World-Soul out of kilter (273b,d). The World-Soul performs this task not by initiating order, but merely by trying to remember and preserve the orderings given from the Demiurge (273b1-2, c6). Eventually though, the bodily incursions succeed in disrupting the World-Soul's memory and the World-Soul thereupon loses its ability to maintain order. This decay necessitates the reappearance of the Demiurge to restore order both to the World-Soul and World-Body (273d-e). It seems then that the World-Soul is not being viewed as an initiator of orderly motion either in itself or in the World-Body. For this role is reserved for the Demiurge. Neither is the World-Soul viewed as the source of the disorderly motions which are said to erupt into it.<sup>4)</sup>

If in addition to regulating motions, the World-Soul were able to initiate new motion it is not clear why it must succumb to the disruptions of the corporeal. If it were able to induce new motion, it would be able not merely to keep a lid on disruptive forces but to counteract and diffuse the cause of disruption. Further, if it had self-initiated thought and reason, items in the catalogue of self-motions in *Laws* X (897a-b), and did not have its rationality derived entirely from an external source, then it is not clear why, on its own, its failures of memory are irreparable and irreversible, such that it is necessary for the Demiurge to reappear to initiate new order.

It is, then, I suggest, to the homeostatic condition of living creatures, rather than to their ability to self-initiate locomotion and to move other objects, to which Plato in the *Statesman* myth is primarily appealing when he posits the world as a living creature (ζῷον, 269d1). This sort of appeal should be contrasted with the doctrine of the autokinetic soul in the *Phaedrus* and *Laws* X. In each of these texts it is not to homeostatic conditions of living organisms, but rather to the motor powers of living bodies to which Plato appeals in order to identify that which is autokinetic with soul. It is because living bodies move themselves and other things that we know that that which is autokinetic is soul (*Phaedrus* 245e, *Laws* 895c).<sup>5)</sup>

WORLD-SOUL IN THE *PHILEBUS*. The function of the World-Soul as a maintainer of homeostatic conditions, a function which results from its vivifying effects on bodies, is also evident in the *Philebus* (30a), a dialogue in which, as in the *Statesman* and *Timaeus*, flux characterizes the phenomena (43a, 59a-b) and in which there is not the slightest trace of the autokinetic doctrine. As in the *Statesman* and *Timaeus*, the order of the world's body is derived from the transcendent rational Demiurge (28d). In addition, also as in the other two dialogues, the Demiurge is the cause of the presence of the World-Soul and its rationality in the ordered World-Body (30c-d). And so again there is no suggestion that the World-Soul is the efficient cause of the motion or the order of the World-Body.

Rather, the World-Soul here is viewed as standing to the order of the universe, as represented in the orderly years, seasons and months, as our souls stand to our bodily order, as represented by health (30b-c). The *only* actions of our soul-body complex here mentioned as being relevantly paralleled in the World-Soul = World-Body complex are physical exercise and (self-) doctoring; both of which maintain or restore from deviation the homeostatic condition of the body. Notice that nutritional and sheltering arts are significantly not on the list of parallel practices, since we may assume they both involve manipulations of the external world while the only actions relevant to the World-Soul are internally directed. (For exercise and proper doctoring dealing only with the relation of the body with itself and not with the external world, see *Timaeus* 89a-b.) Our souls are the cause of the maintenance of health or proper orderings of our bodies against a natural propensity towards disease, which is viewed as a sort of internal corrosion (cf. *Timaeus* 82a-83a). Analogously, the only actions entertained as being performed by the World-Soul are the regulations of the World-Body which maintain its order against disruption natural to it. Indeed it is to save the appearance of rational order that it is claimed that there must be a World-Soul (30c-d). Plato does call the World-Soul a cause (30a10), but it is only in the sense of maintainer that Plato is so committed.

WORLD-SOUL IN THE *TIMAEUS*. In the *Timaeus* we are told little of the nature of the functional relations between the World-Body and the World-Soul. All that we are told is that the World-Soul is the mistress and governor ( δεσπότιν καὶ ἄρξουσάν , 34c5) of the World-Body. What form this governance is to take, we are not told. I suggest, though, that it entails no more than the sort of governance I have already mentioned, namely, the maintenance of order. There is no suggestion in the *Timaeus* that

the World-Soul is either autokinetic<sup>6)</sup> or is the efficient cause of either the order or the motion of the World-Body. The form and orderly motion of both the World-Soul and World-Body are derived from the Demiurge (31b-36e). In commenting on 36d-e Cornford writes: "The above sentences reiterate the emphasis already laid at 34b on the fact that the soul extends throughout the body of the world from centre to circumference, and communicates its motion to the whole" (p.93). Now it is true that the World-Soul is so extended, but there is not a word in the text about the World-Soul communicating its motion to the World-Body. Rather we have in the text a highly detailed account of parallel structures and synchronized motions (as represented in celestial dynamics) between the World-Soul and World-Body. This synchronization is derived from the Demiurge and is not of the World-Soul's making. Note that Plato is free to have said otherwise. For, when at 34c Plato admits that his narrative order was mistaken and misleading in having spoken of the World-Body being composed prior to the World-Soul, he could have taken the opportunity to claim that it was merely an exigency of his narrative order that forced him to claim that the Demiurge rather than the World-Soul composed the order of the World-Body and initiated its orderly motions, since in the mistaken narrative order the World-Soul did not even exist when the World-Body was established. But later, the mistake in narrative order having been pointed out, the cosmological claims of 34b are allowed to stand and are reiterated: the structure and motion of the World-Soul and World-Body severally and the synchronizations between them are all workings of the Demiurge (36d-e). Taken at face value, the *Timaeus* strongly suggests that when Plato claims governance on behalf of the World-Soul, he does not mean that the World-Soul acts as a crafting agent or as an efficient cause of motion.

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At first inspection the World-Soul strikes us as perhaps the oddest of many odd components of Platonic cosmology in that it is highly counter-intuitive: the world just does not feel like an animal. Most of it is clearly inert and the parts of it which are animate do not seem to form a single composite whole which is one animal. Further, the World-Soul appears to be redundant or useless ontological baggage on most interpretations, which assimilate it either to the autokinetic doctrine or to the view of souls as a crafting agent. For if the World-Soul is merely one more autokinetic soul, it has no special function in the economy of Plato's cosmology. And similarly if

the World-Soul is viewed (incorrectly in my opinion) as mainly an agent that crafts external objects, then it becomes indistinguishable in function from the Demiurge. If it is understood, though, that Plato viewed order among the phenomena as the thinnest of veneers, made out of and spread over that which is inherently rotting, we then see that it is reasonable for Plato: 1) To assume the existence of a regulating agency which on the one hand is necessarily non-material but on the other hand is immanent in the corporeal world, thus explaining the persistence of what sensible order there is in the world and 2) to leave the original source of the order of both the World-Body and World-Soul outside the soul-body complex, thus unaffected by the natural corrupting influence of the corporeal.

If my interpretation of the World-Soul is correct, two additional oddities of its characterization are explained. Typically one of the functions of an ensouled rational creature is deliberation and practical reason. Second, typically for Plato souls are viewed as capable of discarnate existence. Yet neither of these characterizations holds of the World-Soul in either the *Timaeus*, *Statesman*, or *Philebus*: 1) Though in the *Timaeus* the World-Soul has true opinion and contemplative reason (37 b-c, esp. c1,2), we never hear here or in the *Philebus* or *Statesman* of the World-Soul deliberating or making decisions, as do the Demiurge and statesmen (*Statesman* 305e ff.; *Republic* 483c-d, 500e). The World-Soul's rationality is not that of planning or producing with the aid of paradigms, as is in large part the rationality of the Demiurge and statesman. But, if as I have suggested the World-Soul's function is that of maintenance of order rather than initiating order, this is to be expected. 2) Unlike personal souls, the World-Soul is never viewed as existing in a discarnate condition. If its function is the maintenance of homeostatic conditions of material objects, it can only do this by being present in them. Insofar as the ordered world is to exist sempiternally (*Timaeus* 38b-c), so too must the World-Soul abide in it.

Aristotle thought that through the whole of the natural world the motions of bodies on their own were constant, uniform, and orderly enough that it made sense to describe both animate and inanimate objects as moving homeostatically, as though the

whole of nature were like someone who heals himself (*Physics* II, 8, 199b30-32). Plato felt that the corporeal itself was so chaotic that *at best* ensouled objects could maintain orderly homeostatic conditions, and even then with only limited success.

Further, though the World-Soul for Plato, *in order to* have its special function as a maintainer of order, is necessarily immanent in the corporeal, it is not immanent in the corporeal as the result of its ontological status or make up, which is the same as that of human souls, which *are* capable of discarnate existence (*Timaeus* 41d-e). *In principle*, then, the World-Soul should be capable of discarnate existence. So that though *in fact* the World-Soul is immanent in the material world, it is not to be confused as being merely the functioning or actualization of a body of a certain type, as is the soul for Aristotle, which as such is not capable, even in principle, of discarnate existence (*De Anima* II, 1, esp. 413a4). There are additional reasons to suppose the World-Soul is not the actualization of a body of a certain type. One, it is a pre-condition for any matter even being the sort of thing which might be ordered enough to be considered an organ with a function. Two, the World-Soul is not the functioning of a body, but is that which makes it possible that the functions of various bodily parts are sustained. And three, unlike Aristotelian souls, the World-Soul has no limit on what sorts of body it may vivify. There is no proper matter for the World-Soul: it is present in both flesh and brass. The World-Soul, unlike Aristotelian souls, is self-substantial independently of its material inherence. The immanent World-Soul is not a step in the direction of either *Laws* X or *De Anima* II.

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#### NOTES

1) *Statesman* 269c-270a, 272e-273e; *Philebus* 28d, 30a-d; *Timaeus* 31b-36e. I take these texts to be doctrinally homogeneous with each other.

The account of how the Demiurge makes the World-Soul (*Timaeus* 35a) is, I think, largely inscrutable. For a reasonable attempt at an interpretation, though, see T. M. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology* (Toronto, 1970), pp. 70-74.

2) Though I think it more likely than not that Plato means what he

says, when he says there was a chaotic pre-cosmic era, nothing in this paper hangs on whether Plato believed in an initial act of demiurgic world formation. Further, though I believe that the flux of phenomena is purely mechanical in origin, so that the *Timaeus*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus* are inconsistent with the claim of the *Phaedrus* (245c9) and *Laws* X (896b1) that soul is the source and cause of all motion, again, nothing I wish to claim in this paper hangs on this issue.

3) The overwhelming tendency in Platonic scholarship has been to read the claims about the Demiurge non-literally. The Demiurge has been taken as a doublet for the whole World-Soul (Archer-Hind), or for the rational part of it (Cornford), as a general symbol for any craftsman-like activity (Cherniss), as only a hypothetical entity serving as a literary foil to the human statesman and World-Soul (Herter) and recently as a "sublation" of the World-Soul (Stanley Rosen, "The Myth of the Reversed Cosmos," *Review of Metaphysics*, 33, 1 [1979], 75-76).

4) Robinson suggests that the corporeal is merely like a virus which in itself is passive and inert and is active and disruptive only when it comes in contact with a living organism (pp. 136-7). This view though does little justice to the descriptions at 273a-b of the corporeal on its own as active and even explosive in its incursions into the World-Soul.

The majority of translators and critics take the World-Soul to be the efficient cause of the reverse rotation of the universe (Skemp, Herter). This is the result of mistakenly reading the  $\delta\upsilon\nu$  of 269d1 causally rather than descriptively, and thus as asserting the World-Soul as the cause of the reverse circuit. This cannot be the case, though, for the cause of the reverse circuit is left an open question to be answered only after 269d3 ( $\delta\upsilon\lambda\alpha\ \tau\acute{o}\delta'$ , 269d2) and when this cause is forthcoming (whatever it is), it exists *in spite of*, not because of, the presence of the World-Soul (269d7-9).

5) Robinson (mistakenly, I think) takes several reflexive phrases in the myth as referring to autokinetic soul (pp. 134, 135, 139):

i)  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\ \epsilon\lambda\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\ \sigma\tau\acute{\rho}\epsilon\phi\epsilon\iota\ \acute{\alpha}\epsilon\lambda\acute{\iota}$ , 269e5 (of the Demiurge). But  $\sigma\tau\acute{\rho}\epsilon\phi\epsilon\iota\upsilon$  cannot merely be a synecdoche for  $\kappa\iota\nu\epsilon\iota\lambda\upsilon$ , for so construed it does not fulfill the demands of the context. It is because the Demiurge moves constantly *in one direction* rather than because it is autokinetic that it is said that the Demiurge cannot cause two contrary motions. That the phrase is reflexive merely means that the Demiurge's rotation is independent and non-contingent, in contrast to the rotations of the world.

ii)  $\tau\eta\varsigma\ \alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\ \kappa\iota\nu\eta\sigma\epsilon\omega\varsigma$ , 269e4. The antecedent of  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\upsilon$ , though, is the World-Body (269d7-8), not the World-Soul, which it comes to possess (d8-9, with d1). The phrase merely describes the motion of the World-Body (or World-Body=World-Soul complex) as it is moved in the train of the Demiurge's rotation. The term  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\upsilon$  means something like "proper to itself under the best of conditions."

iii) Finally,  $\delta\iota'\ \epsilon\lambda\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\upsilon$  after Burnet, 270a5. This expression is to be taken mechanistically (as Robinson admits it might be), for the immediately ensuing account of the world's reverse motion is *described* entirely on a mechanistic model (270a6-8), even if one wishes to claim Plato *means* something else. But in the latter case the phrase ceases to be direct evidence for autokinesis. But in any case I think  $\delta\iota'\ \epsilon\lambda\alpha\upsilon\tau\acute{o}\nu$  of the BT mss should be preserved, meaning "throughout itself".

6) On *Timaeus* 37b5, which is sometimes seen as such a suggestion, see Cornford's note *ad loc.*, which has not been superseded by later discussions (*Plato's Cosmology* [London, 1937]).