



World Soul: A History

edited by James Wilberding, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, vii + 388 pp., US \$125.00/UK £81.00 (hbk), ISBN 9780190913441

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World Soul: A History is a multi-disciplinary exploration of the concept of World Soul from Plato to Quantum Physics. The volume, edited by James Wilberding, includes papers from a large variety of disciplines, including topics as diverse as natural science, early modern music, psychoanalysis, and Gaia theory. Some of the chapters were first presented and discussed at a workshop held at Humboldt University in 2018, but the volume includes new contributions as well.

This is only the second edited volume on the history of World Soul to be published. In addition to the first, edited by Helmig (2020), only a few other book-length studies of the history of World Soul have been written (Gregory 2020; Vassányi 2011; Ziebritzki 1994; Schlette 1993; Moreau 1939). *World Soul: A History* is the most comprehensive title on the topic to date. The collection provides a well-organized survey of the history of World Soul in a learned, yet introductory manner. It offers both an invaluable resource to those studying World Soul and a useful tool for considering continuities and divergences in the History of Philosophy as a whole.

In the volume's first chapter, Wilberding begins with Plato and the Platonists of the late-ancient period to establish some of the fundamental problems and tensions of the doctrine. These problems were very productive in the thought of the early Platonists, and while Wilberding is careful to point out that the history of World Soul is by no means confined to a 'Platonic core' (14), the early solutions and innovations involve central themes that persist through much of the tradition. Playing the accounts of the *Timaeus*, *Laws*, and *Philebus* off one another, Wilberding points out that if the purpose of World Soul is to mediate between the unchanging world of intelligence, and the mutable world of bodies, then World Soul must have two cooperating, yet distinct activities. World Soul must both contemplate the forms and administer the world of bodies. On the one hand, World Soul is a transcendent and divine principle, while on the other hand, it is immanent and pervades nature. This

tension between World Soul as a divine or a natural principle modulates throughout the rest of the history.

For example, Ricardo Salles offers a chapter on the doctrine of the Stoics, who identify World Soul with God, but portray its activity as an entirely natural process through which the cosmos is cyclically consumed and reborn in fire. Peter Adamson's chapter on World Soul in Medieval Philosophy describes the eleventh-century William of Conches who tentatively identifies World Soul with the Holy Spirit, insofar as it is a divine source of life and vitality in the world. Jessica Frazier outlines some correspondences and analogies between World Soul and principles in the tradition of Indian Philosophy, the doctrines of which emphasize less the circular stability of the western tradition, and more an unfolding, forward motion. For the Kabbalists, cosmic soul (which, author Jeremy P. Brown points out, is a doctrine similar to World Soul although only sometimes identified with it) is drawn into the Godhead itself. In contrast, thinkers of the modern period, like the Cambridge Platonists, were much more likely, as Alison Peterman explains, to understand World Soul in natural terms: a cosmic heat or dynamic, which explains the continuity of organic life. Or there is the example of Hegel, who, as Brady Bowman's chapter considers, draws the concept from the Platonic tradition, but then modifies it through a comparison with World Spirit, the more transcendent and intellectual pair to World Soul's immanent and unfolding life on earth. There are also the American Transcendentalists, and especially Emerson, as the chapter by Laura Dassow Walls describes, for whom World Soul (under the name, *Over Soul*) represents the divine as it is hidden and yet active in all living things. Thus, in World Soul's tradition one encounters the likes of the Stoics, William of Conches, the Kabbalists, and Emerson who draw the life of World Soul into the Divine, while others see World Soul in the forces of nature, like some of the Medievals, the Cambridge Platonists, and the World-Soul-like Gaia theory.

With such comparisons, however, one must be careful, for, as the volume also makes clear, thinkers in this history very rarely adapt World Soul from the writings of Plato in a straightforward way. There is often what Johannes Zachhuber (a contributor to Helmig's volume on World Soul) calls 'interference' (Zachhuber 2020). For example, Adamson provides some evidence that Latin authors in the Middle Ages occasionally used the term World Soul to name features of what would typically be understood to be an Aristotelian cosmology. Frazier shows that when Ralph Waldo Emerson writes of the *Over-Soul*, he is blending material from the Platonists with that from the Bhagavad Gita. And Brown is careful to point out that where World Soul appears in the Kabbalistic tradition, it is blended and contrasted with concepts and terms drawn from the scriptures and rabbinic writings.

However, in addition to this wealth of historical perspectives, the volume lacks a more robust discussion of the relationship between the history of World Soul and the tradition of Aristotelian cosmology – the framework that conditions and determines the interpretation of World Soul for most of the western

tradition. There are two places this would have been helpful. First, Adamson largely restricts his chapter on World Soul in the Medieval Period to thinkers who are explicitly engaging with Plato's *Timaeus* or discuss the concept by name. There are, however (as Adamson points out in a footnote), other varieties of cosmic or celestial soul in the Aristotelian frameworks of many medieval thinkers. Such analogous concepts would surely enrich a volume that is, especially in its final chapters on the Gaia Theory and Quantum Physics, less concerned with World Soul per se, and more interested in cosmic animation in general. Second, as Alison Peterman discusses, when World Soul emerges in Modern Philosophy, it is often in relation to the concept of 'celestial heat'. This, however, is a concept of Aristotelian origin (*On the Generation of the Animals*, II.3). In this case, World Soul's reception involves a combination of Platonic and Aristotelian concepts whose mingling would have developed throughout the tradition (see Zachhuber 2020 for a study of this topic). Since it was Aristotelian cosmology that often provided the framework in which a thinker interpreted World Soul, a more dedicated consideration of the explicit role it plays in World Soul's history would have been a great aid.

The volume's best qualities are the enormous breadth of material and disciplines covered, combined with the learned courtesy of the contributors. It is rare to find a book with such a wide breadth of topics by authors of such diverse specialities that are nevertheless unified by a single philosophical theme. Even so, some readers will be disappointed to find that Plato and the Platonists of the late-ancient academies are covered in only a single chapter, which considers the entire Platonic tradition up to the close of the academies through only three thinkers: Plato, Plutarch, and Plotinus. This is regrettable from a historical perspective since Plotinus was not the only or even in many cases the primary Neoplatonic influence on the Latin tradition. Chapters on the Renaissance and Middle Ages would have benefited from the support that a discussion of Proclus, for example, would have provided. Even so, this reader wishes ultimately to defend the editor's choice, for if readers desire to explore the World Soul of the Platonic academies, there is already a very good volume that covers that topic. This earlier volume, *World Soul – Anima Mundi: On the Origins and Fortunes of a Fundamental Idea* (Helmig 2020), gathers papers that focus primarily on the Platonic tradition up to the 6th century. It is as if Wilberding's volume picks up where Helmig's leaves off. The two are excellent companions, and what the one lacks the other generously supplies. Wilberding's choice, then, to give less space to Plato and earlier forms of Platonism means that *World Soul: A History* can devote more of its pages to diverse contexts. The result is a much-needed encouragement to this still-emerging field of study.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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