World Soul: Cause or Effect?
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1. Introduction
The use that the Platonists make of the idea that the world has a soul is arguably the most distinctive feature of their thought. Other systems which appeal to prior, non-material causes for the world’s coming to be tend not to think of the world as something which is ensouled. This is true for contemporary Aristotelianism, for example; it also true of early Christian cosmological systems, even those that draw quite heavily on Platonism. On the other hand, Stoicism, which does think of the world as a living, ensouled organism, denies that it has any prior cause. For the Stoics, the ‘world soul’ is identical with the world’s cause, their immanent creator-god. Platonists are unique in developing a cosmological system that involves both a demiurgic cause which is prior to and distinct from the cosmos, and also a soul which is immanent in the created world.

Nor is this is a formal or reluctant nod to the Timaeus: the world soul is, in Platonist thought, all-pervasive. Literally, in fact, since it ‘pervades’ the world; it ‘binds’, ‘surrounds’ and ‘encloses’ it; ‘organises’, ‘governs’ and ‘preserves’ it; it is the instrument of god; its reach is identical with that of ‘nature’. But it is not only important for cosmology: as the source for all individual souls, and the model of what a soul should be, it is a looming presence in discussions of psychology, epistemology, anthropology and ethics.

1 Zachhuber (forthcoming) finds vestigial hints in the Acts of John, Justin, and Origen; but nothing that plays into a systematic cosmological account. One thing which this tells us is that the question is not simply one of whether the (sublunary) world is under the providential care of god – this being something that Aristotelians of the time deny (see references in Moraux 1984: 571 n. 33 with discussion in Sharples 2002: 22-36), but which Christians certainly affirm (cf. below ad fin.).

2 SVF 2.1076.1-4 (Chrysippus); 3.31 (Diogenes, Cleanteis, Onipodes); Cornutus, Greek Theology ch. 2.

3 E.g. Atticus fr. 8.4, 18 des Places (διήκουσα).


6 ὄργανον: Plutarch, sept. 163E.

7 Atticus fr. 8 des Places.

8 Source of all souls: Apuleius, On Plato 1.9 [199]; source and model: Plutarch, virt. mor. 441F (individual soul as μόρος ἢ μίμημα); Philo, mut. 223-4 (ἀπόσπασμα ἢ . . . εἰκόνας θείας ἐκμαγεῖον.
But what is it?

This is a genuine question, because the world soul does not obviously fit into any of the ontological categories so carefully carved out in Platonist metaphysics. The talk of its ‘organising’ and ‘ruling’ the world might, for example, lead one to think that it is a cause of some sort. Yet Platonists never refer to it as such.9 (It is very telling, for example, that it is absent from Seneca’s famous attack on the proliferation of causes within Platonism: Letter 65.) In any case, it is hard to see exactly what exactly it would be the cause of. For example, it is not the cause of the cosmos’ having order. That is exhaustively explained by the matter coming to imitate the forms by the agency of the demiurge. Indeed, the world soul itself emerges as part of this process.

On the other hand, the world soul is not a typical example of the products of the demiurge’s craft. Most things for which the demiurge is officially responsible as cause are bodies – that is, matter brought to imitate some Form. But the world soul presides over the corporeal world without itself being corporeal: Platonists are quite clear that it is non-material,10 and, specifically, that it is not a case of some matter imitating some form.11

The only coherent answer to the question ‘what is it?’ turns out, in fact, to be rather surprising: the world soul is not properly any substantial thing at all. The world soul can only be (roughly put) some ancillary feature of the created cosmos.12

One way into thinking about this comes from a suggestive article written some years ago by Richard Mohr on Plato’s own view of the world soul (Mohr 1982). Some of Mohr’s starting-points relate to claims in Plato’s Statesman which are not adopted in their literal terms into mainstream Platonist interpretation – in particular, the idea that the world soul is perturbed by matter, that it can forget the job it was given to do by the demiurge, and that it ultimately needs the intervention of the demiurge to restore order (Statesman 273b-6; Mohr 1982: 42-3).

9 This pace Opsomer 2005, who argues that world soul effectively takes on the role of demiurge, as efficient cause.

10 Even the outlying testimony of Aetius 2.6.4 [ps.-Plut. 887b], which claims that the individual soul is pneuma stops short of saying that it is a body.

11 Plutarch criticises the view of (the Old Academic) Crantor on just these grounds. Crantor apparently said (roughly) that the soul is a blend of intelligible and perceptible natures; but this, says Plutarch, amounts to saying that it is a blend of form and matter, and that (he concludes) would give not world soul, but just world. See an. proc. 1012D-F (Crantor) and (for the refutation) 1013C.

12 One might object: perhaps Platonism did not answer the question coherently? But one would have in this case to suppose that their Aristotelian and Christian opponents missed this incoherence as well – at least they never draw attention to it, and that even though they themselves must have been quite conscious in refusing the notion of a world soul for their own cosmologies.
But the bigger point, which converges with my worry about the status of the world soul as cause, subsumes these details in any case: if the world soul is something that really can initiate movement itself, grapple with matter and impose order on it, then, as Mohr says, ‘it becomes indistinguishable in function from the Demiurge’ (46). On Mohr’s reading of Plato, the Platonists are right to deny the world soul status as a cosmological cause: there is no room left for it in Plato’s aetiology.

So Mohr’s solution is to say that the world soul is a regulating mechanism – ‘rather like the governor on a steam engine’, he says (41-2). It does not initiate motion, but it maintains it; specifically it maintains the dynamic order produced in matter by the demiurge.

This is a helpful first step towards understanding Platonists, but I think that they are more radical still in their reading of Plato. Mohr is clear that Plato’s world soul is immanent, but not essentially so: it is in principle capable of discarnate existence: ‘it is not to be confused as being merely the functioning or actualization of a body of a certain type’ (47). This leaves it unclear to me how the world soul is instantiated, but in any case I do not think it can be what Platonists thought. One reason for this is the way in which they identify the world soul with structural features of the cosmos as a whole. On the one hand, Platonists typically say that the world soul extends throughout the cosmos (Atticus identifies it with nature: fr. 8 des Places); but on the other hand, they associate it especially with the heavens: Apuleius for example calls it ‘heavenly soul’ (On Plato 1.9, 199). Alcinous explains most clearly what is going on (Didaskalikos 14.4):

τῆς δὲ ψυχῆς ταθείσης ἐκ τοῦ μέσου ἐπὶ τὰ πέρατα, συνεβή αὐτὴν τὸ σῶμα τοῦ κόσμου κύκλῳ διὰ παντὸς περιέχειν καὶ περικαλύψαι, ὡστε ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ αὐτὴν παρεκτεῖναι καὶ τὸτον τὸν τρόπον αὐτὸν συνεδεῖν τε καὶ συνέχειν, κρατεῖν μέντοι τὰ ἐκτὸς αὐτῆς τῶν ἐντός. Ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἐκτὸς ἀσχίστος ἐμεινεν, ἤ δὲ ἐντὸς εἰς ἔπτα κύκλους ἐπιμήθη ἢ ἀρχῆς νεμηθείσα κατὰ διπλάσια καὶ τριπλάσια διαστήματα· ἐστι τε ἢ μὲν περιεχομένη ὑπὸ τῆς ἀσχίστου μειώσεως σφαῖρας ταὐτὸ παραπλησία, ἢ δὲ σχισθείσα θατέρῳ.

Soul is stretched from the centre to the limits, so that it keeps every part of the body of the cosmos together as it surrounds and encloses it, its [sc. the soul’s] exterior parts governing its interior parts. For the exterior part remained undivided, but the interior is cut sixfold,\(^\text{13}\) into seven circles, distributed according to double and triple intervals. What is enclosed by the undivided, fixed sphere is like the ‘sameness’; what is divided is like the ‘difference’.

\(^{13}\) δξαχή Runia (Mnemosyne 39, 1986, 131-3): ἢ ἀρχῆς mss.
Alcinous is evidently here describing the spheres that make up the cosmic system; but he identifies them as parts of the soul’s structure, with the fixed sphere at the outer limit of the cosmos (the circle of the ‘same’, typically identified in psychological terms most closely with intellection) having a special place in determining the character of the cosmos as a whole – but the movements of the other spheres playing their role in its internal character as well. What is more, Alcinous presumably subscribes to the common view that the combined movement of the heavenly spheres, or to be more accurate of the celestial bodies carried on them, in turn determines climatic conditions on earth – and so the biological diversity, generic and particular, attendant on it. So, if nature as a whole, including life on earth, is identified as the ‘life’ or soul that the cosmos has, it also makes sense to talk about the heavens (the cosmic spheres) as its ‘seat’. And this is possible because this life, the ‘soul’ of the cosmos, is nothing over and above the cosmos itself. It is, to be precise, a fact about the cosmos, namely the complex but orderly motion that underpins the natural order, and is guaranteed by the movements of the celestial spheres.

2. World Soul and Paradigmaticism

But that seems a bit deflationary, and the question naturally arises – where has the job of regulation gone? and what, on this account, does the idea of a ‘world soul’ add to the purely descriptive term ‘nature’? (To put it in Atticus’ terms: how do Platonists differ from Aristotelians at all?)

The answer to that requires us to go back to the real cosmological causes – the demiurge and the forms. As it happens, Aristotelians, like Platonists, recognise prior, non-material causes for the world’s coming to be. But these causes do not include forms, at least not as the kind of entity that Platonists want forms to be. In particular, none of the prior Aristotelian causes serve as paradigms for the physical world. The first unmoved mover, for example, is not the form of the Good, let alone the system of paradigm-forms in general. The Aristotelian cosmos, then, is caused by principles which are to some extent form-like, principles which guarantee that there is order of some sort; but the cosmos is not an imitation of these principles.

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14 See e.g. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* (esp. 1.2) – but already Aristotle, *GC* 2.10; *Meteorology* 1.2-3, 9; *Metaphysics* Λ.6.

15 Platonists differ in their views of the relationship of the Good to the (rest of the) forms: most identify the whole with the Good (or to put it another way, think that the forms are a ‘unity in plurality’: qua unity, the good, qua plurality the forms). Numenius thinks that the forms (which constitute his ‘second intellect’) are caused by the good (identified as his ‘first intellect’). Presumably the relationship between them, however, is non-accidental, so that imitation of the forms is, a fortiori, imitation of the good.
It is, on the other hand, crucial to the Platonist explanatory system, not only that there are non-material causes which have their effect on matter, but that the effect they have is paradigmatic. The motor of Platonist cosmogony is the fact that matter in some sense strives to be *like* the forms.\footnote{My broad assumption here is that one should not be misled by the ‘craftsman’ image of forms being ‘imposed’ on matter. I take that what we are supposed to think is that the forms specify the modalities by which matter can exist as bodies; and matter, being the sort of thing it is, *conforms* to them. (The discussion of Proclus’ eleventh thesis in Philoponus, *On the Eternity of the World* 403.14-467.17 Rabe provides rich conceptual material for thinking about this issue; and Atticus’ talk of matter’s being ‘ready’, ἐπιτηδεία, to receive form [ap. Proclus, *in Tim.* i. 394.17-18 Diehl; not in des Places] helps to anchor this material in the earlier period.) The role of the demiurge in all of this is to cause the forms to be, or to be imitable. Within this broad framework, I believe that all Platonist, certainly ‘Middle’ Platonist, systems can be accommodated. In this, I fundamentally disagree with Opsomer, who takes from the image of the craftsmanship the idea that the demiurge is a cause working in time directly on matter (e.g. Opsomer 2005). But this seems to me (in way which, again, Philoponus and Proclus articulate very well) straightforwardly incompatible with the consistent claims made for the incorporeality and eternity of the demiurge.}

But now we need to ask what exactly it is to be ‘like’ one of the forms. (This is a pressing question, because the wrong sort of answer will lead to the problems identified with the theory in Aristotle – the Third Man &c. Having an answer that avoids such problems is, I take it, crucial to the possibility of a philosophically credible revival of Platonism.)

Let us assume that the forms correspond, at least for the most part, with *species*. The natural world, then, is made up primarily of species-members (the rest to be explained as their concomitants: constituent parts such as hair and organs; artefacts such as webs and nests; by-products; defects, including diseases; sensibilia).\footnote{For all this, see esp. Alcinous *Did.* 9.2; Apuleius, *On Plato* 6 [193]. Note that it is, properly, individuals which imitate the form, not the species. This is clear from, e.g. Atticus 9.40-1 des Places (τὰ τοῦ θεοῦ νόημα τρισθόμενα τὸν πραγμάτων, τὰ τῶν γενομένων παραδείγματα, ἁσώματα καὶ νοητά . . .), or Apuleius, *On Plato* 6 [193] (*exempla rerum quae sunt eruntue*). And in fact the species has no reality except as a universal for Platonists (cf. below with n. 32, against the idea of ‘immanent form’). Nevertheless, forms stand in a one-to-one relationship with the species.} To take your place as a species-member is to imitate the relevant form. But what is it that makes, say, a duck ‘like’ the form in which it participates? The answer to this question had better not be anything that presupposes material instantiation: the form is not green, it does not eat fish, it doesn’t quack or walk or swim. And it had better not be that there is some third entity which we can invoke to explain the similarity, something which they both have in common. It is not clear what such a thing could be, where the logical or metaphysical space for it could lie. But even if we found room for it, we would not want to go there: that way the Third Man would lie.

In fact it is sheer absurdity to ask in isolation the question ‘How does a duck resemble the form Duck?’ It is unanswerable, and it is so in principle. It is unanswerable for the reason that there is no possible cosmos in which *only* the form Duck gets instantiated. It turns out that
almost anything we might expect of an instantiated duck has to do with its relationship to an environment: ducks in a duck-only-cosmos could not swim, for example (there is no water), or eat (there is not food), or make a noise (there is no air to resonate), &c. &c. In fact, radically stated, there is nothing that it is to be a duck independently of everything else. A duck is an embedded part of a natural system. But so of course is the form Duck an embedded part of a system. The forms collectively are a one-in-many, as Plotinus helpfully puts it; they can only exist together in the first place, and they can only be instantiated together.

(More precisely: there is no world-independent account one can give of the instantiation of the form which, in this world, is instantiated by ducks.)

So the question why ducks are the way they are can only really be answered by asking why the whole natural system is the way it is. Nature as a whole imitates the forms as a whole. The result is going to be a one-to-one correspondence between species and form – so once we understand that, we can start to inquire into ducks. But notice that the determination of the whole natural system has to be (at least in explanatory terms) top-down not bottom-up. Nature cannot be explained by the piecemeal instantiation of forms in matter and their subsequent negotiation of a natural order.

And this is where the room emerges for the world soul. It is needed to do more, indeed, than Mohr’s ‘regulation’: it is need for the distribution of the characteristics for each species in the first place. For the only entity capable of judging how matter can imitate the forms (what imitation of the forms will mean for matter, being what it is) is the emerging cosmos itself. The demiurge and the forms are not capable of doing this: they could not possibly know what matter is like. It must be a first step in the process of cosmic formation that matter acquires the structures needed for its further disposition as a complex organism whose primary parts correspond to forms both individually and also in their relationships with other primary parts.

These structures ensure, in other words, that ducks (corresponding to Duck) can breathe, and also that air (corresponding to Air) is breathable. (The way ducks end up being will partly depend on the way that air – and water and fish and grass and everything else – ends up being as well.)

Platonists, then, talk about the world soul coming into existence before the rest of the cosmos; and I take it that this is what they mean. The granular settlement of matter in the

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18 Again, this is a claim I take to be uncontroversial for Platonists – without prejudice to what we might think of Plato. (Cf. e.g. Johansen 2014, arguing that the craftsman’s awareness and negotiation of his material is essential to Plato’ metaphor.)

19 Note that the sense of priority in the phrase ‘a first step in the process of cosmic formation’ is explanatory: the temporal creation of the cosmos is not implied by my use of it here – nor is the question relevant to the present discussion.
cosmos is the result of the action of the demiurge and forms on matter ‘translated’ and mediated through distributory structures which operate at the level of the whole cosmos; structures which, in the light of the forms, dispose order throughout the whole cosmos. Without this ‘global’ stage of cosmic ordering – which is what I am identifying as the world soul – there would, given paradigmaticism, still be chaos.20

3. Different models of soul: mathematical vs. physical

The world soul, I am arguing, is not a substance which is, even in principle, separable from the cosmos; it is rather a fact about the cosmos: the system that the cosmos embodies, especially in the movements of the heavens, to ensure that its constituent bodies come about in such a way as to produce a physical system that corresponds step-for-step with the intelligible system of individual forms. The world soul is not a stuff, or a body, or a thing in its own right at all.

Of course, Platonists do talk about its composition, following the account in *Timaeus* 35b-36b. Yet, once one gets past the fact that the *Timaeus* discusses its composition in abstraction from the cosmos to which it is later applied, one sees that the terms of this discussion can be squared quite readily with the account I have given. The component ‘parts’ or ingredients of the world soul are, for example, ‘same’ and ‘other’, disposed according to certain harmonic (which is to say, mathematical) principles. But these are not things – they are proportions and relations, which will subsequently be applied to things.

That this is in broad terms how Platonists were thinking is confirmed by the kinds of debate that Platonists had between themselves about the nature of the world soul. The battle-lines are helpfully described by Proclus:21

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20 One might think that the problem to be solved here – the co-existence of sets of individuals corresponding to the forms – might not arise, or might not arise with such urgency, in a world where there was no movement or interaction between what I am calling its primary parts. But that is merely to raise another question, which is why there is movement in the world. After all, one might have wondered whether a stationary world might not have been better – especially since movement is regularly associated with decay. (It is not enough to appeal to the nature of matter: many Platonists believe that matter is not inherently in motion; and those who do might at least have countenanced the possibility that creation would proceed by setting up countervailing motions that cancelled it out.) But in fact this question has a simple answer. If the world is to imitate the system of forms it must imitate their systematicity; but whereas the incorporeal forms have interrelationships and entailments while being eternal and unchanging, physical objects can only enjoy comparable interrelationships (relationships that is which link their essences, and not merely their relative disposition to one another) by inter-acting, that is, moving and behaving with reference to one another.

Among earlier thinkers, some made the soul’s substance mathematical, as being something between the physical and the metaphysical. Of these, some say that it is number, and construct it from the monad (as indivisible) and the indefinite dyad (as divisible); but others make it geometrical, having its being in a combination of the point and the interval – the former being indivisible, the latter divisible. The former view is held by followers of Aristander and Numenius and many other commentators; the latter by Severus. Those considering it [i.e. the soul’s being] as physical call the irrational soul that pre-exists the rational ‘divisible substance’, and divine soul ‘indivisible’; and from the two they make the rational soul: the one as bringing order, the other as underlying. Such are Plutarch and Atticus. And they say that the soul is ungenerated as far as its substrate is concerned, but generated in form.

Note that Proclus’ division more or less traces a line between those who think that matter is essentially passive, so that movement needs to be brought to it, and those on the other hand who think that matter is essentially active, so that the creation of the soul is really a question of eliciting orderly rather than disorderly movement from matter. (Numenius may seem to be an exception to this; but I shall return to him below to explain why he is not.) We can be fairly confident about the division, I think, because it fits Plutarch’s own account of his rival theories, which mostly align with the ‘arithmetical’ view.22

Perhaps the most significant thing about this overview of the debate, of course (helpful because it elevates us above the complex business of squaring the theory off with the concretising metaphors of substance and blending in Plato’s text) is that no-one is speaking of

\[22\text{ An. proc. 1012D–1013B, 1023B-D. The exception is Crantor (1012D; cf. below) – and Eudorus (but only insofar as he saw something plausible in Crantor’s view: 1013B).} \]
the soul either as a pre-corporeal entity, or as a body of any sort, or as some new and mysterious substance *sui generis*. The mathematicians’ description of soul as ‘something between the physical and the metaphysical’ might sound like it is pointing in this direction; but when they characterise the soul as numerical or geometrical, it becomes clear that they are thinking of it precisely as having the ontological status of (or, more simply: *being*) mathematical as they appear in, for example, Plato’s image of the Line:23 that is, as features of some physical object which we can abstract in thought, but which have no independent existence. The mathematicians, that is to say, suppose that ‘soul’ merely names the quantitative structure that matter has in virtue of which it moves in the way that it does. In contrast to them, the ‘physicists’ think that soul is a prior, radical feature of matter – the movement that matter possesses in its own nature, which takes on orderly rather chaotic patterns under the influence of the forms.

Proclus implies that the arithmetical view, held by Aristander and Numenius and (he says) *many others*, was the most popular – an implication that might have some support from Plutarch’s own admission that his (‘physicist’) view was at odds with that held by ‘most Platonists’ (*an. proc.* 1012B).24 But the attractions of the arithmetical view (and the geometrical one too) are not obvious. After all, one prerequisite of the theory is that it explains the movement that the cosmos has; but it is not clear how this can be achieved simple by adding number or shape to matter, if matter is conceived as entirely passive and without quality.25 So the majority view might have more to do with repugnance at the idea (at the other extreme) of endowing matter with movement that is its own than it does with the independently compelling nature of the alternative.

In any case, I am going to finish by consider two views found among people who did think that motion was essential to matter – the first, exemplified by Plutarch and Atticus, because I want to show how the general picture of the world soul that I am outlining here works to makes sense of some crucial testimony in their case, testimony which serves to create a very distorted picture of their entire metaphysical systems if it is not applied to a correct understanding of the soul; and the second, adopted by Numenius, because of his exceptional position in Proclus’ taxonomy. If I am right, how can Numenius, who thinks that movement is

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23 Cf. Plutarch, *an. proc.* 1023B.

24 Cf. also Syrianus as quoted and discussed below; Syrianus links Plutarch, Atticus and Democritus in what seems to be a corollary of the ‘physicist’ view. The invocation of the otherwise unknown and unattested Democritus may show that he has to scrape the barrel to find names to associate with it.

25 One might, just to begin with, expect that the ‘mathematicians’ but not the ‘physicists’, would view time as a dimension (a topic for future reflection).
essential to matter, be placed on the side of those who think the soul is mathematical (specifically arithmetical)?

4. Plutarch and Atticus

On my reconstruction, Plutarch and Atticus think that world soul is the *orderly* movement that matter globally acquires on the way to imitating the republic of Forms. (On its own, matter possesses ‘raw’, *disorderly* movement.) But this relatively minimalist interpretation will seem at odds with a famous passage of Syrianus, which is typically understood to be telling us (a) that Plutarch and Atticus took forms to be universals (‘universal principles’), and (b) that the soul is host to these forms (i.e. universals) – perhaps even that it *essentially* contains them (Syrianus, *On the Metaphysics* vi.1, 105.32-106.5 Kroll = Atticus fr. 40 des Places):

There are things in the realm of the complex and divided and plural, of what sink into generation and the material; but there are other things which are perfectly simple, and single in form, and untouched by generation and matter. What is so amazing if we separate these things that are so different from each other? So we don’t envy the Platonists Plutarch and Atticus and Democritus for this, that they think that the universal principles subsisting eternally in the substance of soul are Forms. It is true that they distinguish these [sc. ‘universal principles’] from those things that perceptible objects have in common; but one must not go on to confuse the thoughts of the soul and the so-called enmattered intellect with paradigmatic and matterless forms and demiurgic thoughts. As the divine Plato says, our intellect is unified and numerically one in its discursive thought, and is recollection of those things that we saw when we once walked
with god; but the divine is unchanging in respect of them. They should follow the same division, if they wish to be Platonists.

Note, first of all, that Syrianus does not, after all, say that forms are in the soul – that is simply sloppy reporting.\textsuperscript{26} What he says is that forms are in soul-substance (ἐν οὐσίᾳ τῇ ψυχικῇ); that is, I take it, they are as it were component part of the (orderly) soul.

But secondly, Syrianus is not most naturally taken to be saying that the forms are universal principles (which are in the soul) either.\textsuperscript{27} The claim (underlined for ease of reference in the passage as quoted above) that τοὺς καθόλου λόγους . . . εἶναι τὰς ἱδέας most naturally reads the other way round, as I have translated it: that the universal principles (namely those in soul-substance) are forms. That is actually important, not only for understanding Plutarch and Atticus, but more broadly for understanding Platonist views of the world soul. The usual reading of this line tells us that the forms we know and love are reduced to mere universals in the system of Plutarch and Atticus – making them outliers in Platonist ontology (a fact which obviously has enormous and destructive ramifications for the reconstruction of their metaphysics). On my reading, what is assumed is that there are universal principles in the substance of soul – and the point of the line is to tell us that Plutarch and Atticus, unlike others, suppose that these universal principles are identical with the forms (but not that the forms are only to be understood in these terms).

I take it that the picture we are being offered is something like this. Plutarch and Atticus believe that matter on its own has ‘raw’ chaotic motion; but under the influence of the forms (which are in the usual way real, prior and transcendent) this motion starts to take on order. Insofar as the forms are the principles of this order, Plutarch and Atticus can think that it makes sense to think of them as constitutive of the substance of world (sc. orderly) soul. The forms in fact just are (are numerically identical with) the principles of orderly soul in virtue of which it is orderly. And of course it is certainly not as if matter is at this level of analysis imitating the forms, for the result of that would be a body, and the soul is not a body, or the imitation of any form.

The orderly movement that matter now has, however, is what is responsible for the distribution of qualities around the cosmos such that the cosmos and its parts do imitate the forms. So the forms operate in effect as ‘universal principles’: the internal reference-points for the soul’s allocation of shared qualities to concrete individuals. (These shared qualities – the

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\textsuperscript{27} As far as I am aware, the universal assumption: see e.g. Schoppe 1994: 172; Baltes 2000: 267.
‘things that perceptible objects have in common’ – must be the qualities that unite members of
the same species, and in virtue of which, then, each individual is said to ‘imitate’ the relevant
form.) So for Plutarch and Atticus, the forms really do fulfil the role of universals: that is to say,
the mental categories which determine how the soul thinks about matter.

I take it that, in the ‘mathematical’ systems, it is the mathematical entities (numbers or
geometrical shapes) which are engendered in matter as it seeks to imitate the forms; and these
numbers / shapes are the principles of the very movement that matter acquires in this process;
they are what play the functional role of universals in the mind of the soul. Superficially, then,
Plutarch and Atticus are quite unusual in allowing the forms into the substance of soul; but one
can see that this is a well motivated difference, one which is a natural adjustment to their belief
that movement is already there in matter.28

5. Numenius

But if so, then why is it not a view shared by Numenius? Numenius after all believes that
movement is essential to matter, just as Atticus and Plutarch. Yet Numenius is squarely aligned
with the ‘mathematical’ view of the soul in Syrianus.

Actually, there is a simple answer to this. Numenius is quite clear that people like
Plutarch and Atticus are wrong to think that, when the movement that matter has becomes
orderly, this is because the source of that movement has somehow taken on principles of good
order. If this were the case, he says, then much of the motivation for thinking that movement is
inherent to matter in the first place is lost. That case is built, roughly, on the various problems of
evil: we need something to explain why there is evil and disorder in the world as well as order,
and this is the role played by the principle of movement. (Think about Plutarch’s long hymn to
dualism in the Isis and Osiris.) But if you say that, at the end of the process, the principle of
movement is an orderly principle, it cannot explain disorder any more. At best it can explain
restrictions on order; but the negation (contradictory) of order is not disorder or evil, but may be
the merely indifferent.29

28 One might object that it was open to them to say that matter could have taken on mathematical entities
as the principles of order in its movement, and so kept forms out of it. (Such a move would not fall prey
to the objection Plutarch moves against the ‘mathematicians’, that soul is mathematically constructed, but
not identical with number – an. proc. 1013C; in this case, the mathematicals would be principles of soul,
not identical with soul.) Conceivably, then, Plutarch and Atticus might have worried that this would look
too much like a case of imitation of forms (and maybe that it actually does so in the case of the
mathematicians) when, as we have seen, there can be no question that the soul is the product of matter
imitating forms; or that it is an unnecessary complication to introduce mathematics when they could
explain the soul without them; and that in any case there is a certain advantage further down the line to
having forms built into the substance of soul, which is that it may allow for an account of recollection that
allows direct cognition of the forms even for the embodied philosopher.

29 For all this, see esp. Numenius fr. 52.44-70 des Places.
The upshot of this, according to Numenius, is that, if we are going to maintain that there is a principle of disorder in matter, we need to say that it is distinct and separate from any principle of order that emerges in creation. So Numenius is keen to say that the forms as they relate to the material realm are not part of a single soul-substance (as with Atticus and Plutarch).  

Rather they remain a distinct principle. Numenius refers to them in this guise as good world soul, in contrast the evil world soul which is the ‘physical’, chaotic principle inherent to matter. There are in fact two world souls (fr. 52 des Places [at §297]).

Nevertheless, the result of these two principles operating is an orderly (or relatively orderly) system of movements which governs the cosmos as a whole. I suggest that Proclus must have the formula for this resultant system of movements in mind when he says that Numenius thinks that ‘the world soul’ is arithmetical. In fact, Numenius does not believe in a world soul, but two world souls, so we already know that Proclus is simplifying in his report. His simplification is to take the system of movements resulting from the activity of Numenius’ two ‘souls’ as if it were ‘the soul’: it is this system (being itself neither the adjustment of chaos nor a lower ontological reflex of the forms, but some third thing that results from the activity of forms and chaos) which might properly be described in mathematical, specifically arithmetical, terms.

6. Conclusion and consequences

My argument has been that the world soul, for Platonists, is a ‘distributory’ mechanism which emerges in matter as it comes to imitate the forms on the way to constituting the cosmos. Specifically, soul is an orderly pattern of movement that matter acquires at this stage which ensures that perceptible qualities in general are distributed around the cosmos in such a way that for every form there is a corresponding class of physical bodies. (Those bodies, individually, are said to ‘imitate’ their form in virtue of this relationship.) The soul is no separable ‘thing’, no autonomous substance with an essence of its own.

There are many important corollaries to this view. One concerns the relationship of individuals to their forms. It might be apparent, for example, that on my view something is constituted as a member of a natural species simply by having allocated to it the appropriate set of empirical qualities (as determined by the distributory work of the world soul) – nothing else.

30 For forms as a principle of order in the material realm, see fr. 11 des Places: this seems to me to explain the identity of the second god (which we learn from fr. 22 is an intellect containing the forms) and the third god. The third god just is the forms considered as a principle affecting matter.

31 The temporal language here is of course used without prejudice to the question of whether there was a temporal process of creation.
In particular, there is no room in this picture for ‘immanent forms’. But that seems to me right: despite a universal assumption in the secondary literature that immanent forms played a central role in Platonist thought, there is actually not a scrap of evidence for them – at least not until Porphyry. ‘Middle’ Platonists thought what Plotinus still assumed: that it is enough to suppose that natural entities are constituted by bundles of ‘constitutive properties’ (συμπληρωτικά in Plotinus’ language) as determined by nature, or world soul.

Another implication of my reconstruction concerns the identity of individual souls, because everything I say about world soul will apply, down the line, to individual soul, regularly considered as a ‘fragment’ or ‘imitation’ of the world soul. But again, this seems to me right. Metaphysically: transmigration and immortality are no objections; there is no hint among Middle Platonists that individual soul is something that can be separated from matter, or that its immortality or ability to transmigrate depends on it. Rather, the soul is always associated with some material ‘vehicle’. Epistemologically: are distributory movements in matter enough to account for the phenomenology of thought? But why not? It seems to me in general a mistake to approach Platonism with the idea that human thinking is paradigmatic for what thought is, and that we can appropriately apply that as a standard for understanding what it means for the world soul, or even the demiurge to ‘think’. Rather, we ought to consider more closely what thought does at the various levels of Platonist (meta)physics, and accept that our thinking is just what that feels like at our level of the system.

And ethically? We might not like the idea that we are ‘merely’ movements in matter facilitating the natural system. We might think that we (that is, our souls) are more important than that. But Platonists are clear that we are not (Celsus, ap. Origen, CC 4.99): The universe was not made for man any more than it was for lion or eagle or dolphin, but so that that this cosmos might come to be from everything as the finished and perfect

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32 Species, to be clear, then, are mental objects – albeit prior in the Platonist system to individuals, since the mind they are in is that of the distributing agent, the world soul. It might be interesting to note that to this (limited) extent, there is some convergence between the operation of the Platonist world soul and the Stoic creator-god (on which see Boys-Stones 2012, 232-5).

33 The assumption of immanent forms in ‘Middle’ Platonism has never, to my knowledge, been questioned, even by those who think (rightly!) that they are philosophically otiose (as already Praechter 1926: 529, from a metaphysical point of view; cf. Milhaven 1962: ch. 4, esp. 101, from an epistemological point of view); or who see that they are not readily yielded up by our texts (e.g. Helmig 2006: 162-3 on what he characterises as a failure of clarity in Alcinous); or who recognise their absence from Plotinus (see next note).


35 Cf. references in n. 8 above.

36 But see all of 4.75-99; and for a Platonic proof-text, Laws 903b-c (the universe ‘is not for you, but you are for it’: οὐχ ἑνὲκα σοῦ γιγνοένη, σὺ δ' ἑνὲκα ἐκείνου).
work of god. This is why everything was measured out: not each part for the other (except incidentally), but each for the whole. And god cares for the whole, and his providence never leaves it, nor does it become worse, and god does not turns it back towards himself in the course of time, nor does he get angry with it on account of men, any more than he does on account of monkeys or mice; and he does not threaten them. Each of them has its allotted role as a part.

This is Celsus making the point quite bluntly against the Christians: it is Christians who characteristically think of human beings as the end, or an end, of the cosmos; Christians who motivate the creation of the world by the needs of individual intellects, rather than vice versa.

But note the corollary of this thought: with individual souls there to account for the disposition of nature, Christians no longer need a world soul to do the job. It is not then, I think, an accident that no Christian, however ‘Platonist’, recognises the world soul as part of his cosmological system.

References

37 True, the argument is not explicit about the instrumental function of souls, but of human beings (and other animals). But it relies on the end for all created things being the cosmos (and not souls, or the world soul).

38 ‘Characteristically’, that is, within the terms of the immediate debate. In fact the Stoics also think that the cosmos is for humans as well as god (that is, it is for all minds that can appreciate it) (Cicero, de natura deorum 2.37; 133) – but there is no question for them of soul subserving the creator, because the world soul is the creator (see again above with n. 2).


