

Article review: The World Soul in Early Romanticism

Miklós Vassányi, *Anima Mundi: The Rise of the World Soul Theory in Modern German Philosophy*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2011.

1. On 15 May 1790, Salomon Maimon (1753-1800) wrote a letter from Berlin to Immanuel Kant. The Königsberg philosopher had previously singled out Maimon, a Jewish migrant from Poznan, as the most perceptive critic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*¹ and had now sent him a complimentary copy of his *Critique of Judgment*. In his letter, Maimon acknowledged receipt of this gift and proceeded to offer a somewhat unexpected intellectual inspiration emanating from his perusal of the book by confessing that he was increasingly convinced of the merits of the assumption of a world soul.²

Maimon's letter stands at the beginning of one of the more surprising and until today least recognised aspects of the intellectual revolution in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century, a renewed fascination for the ancient notion of a soul of the world. He was not the very first one to throw this phrase into the debate; Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, in his notorious *Über die Lehre des Spinoza* (1785) had G. E. Lessing say he could only imagine God as 'the soul of the all'.³ Maimon's reflections are, however, more sustained and more helpful for understanding the background of this sudden surge of interest in an idea that had been almost universally dismissed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Two important hints can be gleaned from Maimon's writing. Firstly, he is clear that the ancient concept of the world soul is incompatible not only with the philosophy of the Leibniz-Wolffian school but also with the system of Spinoza. He rejects the link, insinuated by Jacobi, between the assumption of a world soul and pantheism.⁴ By contrast, secondly, he perceives the connection between the hypothesis of the world soul and 'the enlargement of our understanding of nature'.⁵ In fact, the prompt he claims to have received from Kant's third critique towards this insight arose indirectly, as Kant commended a treatise by the noted naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Der Bildungstrieb* (1789). It was while

¹ I. Kant, *Letter to Markus Herz*, 26 May 1789, in: I. Kant, *Akademie-Ausgabe*, vol. 11, Berlin/Leipzig 1922, 49,12–15. ET: Correspondence, transl. and ed. A. Zweig, Cambridge 1999, pp. 311–2. For a fuller discussion of this matter cf. my 'World Soul and Celestial Heat: Platonic and Aristotelian Notions in the History of Natural Philosophy', in: *Archive of the History of Philosophy and Social Thought* 57 (2012), 13–31.

² S. Maimon, *Letter to I. Kant*, 15 May 1790, in: I. Kant, *Akademie-Ausgabe*, vol.11, 174,12–18. ET: Zweig, 351.

³ F.H. Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, Breslau 1785, p. 75–6.

⁴ S. Maimon, op. cit., 175,3–9; ET: Zweig, 352.

⁵ S. Maimon, 'Weltseele', in: id., *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, Berlin 1791, 179–208, here: 194 (= id., *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. V. Verra, Hildesheim 1970, vol. 3, 203–232).

reading the latter volume, Maimon claimed, that the plausibility of the world soul occurred to him.

Blumenbach (1752-1840), to be sure, does not espouse the world soul as an adequate philosophical, let alone a scientific theory; in fact, he is dismissive of attempts to link his concept of the 'formative impulse' to that notion.⁶ He does, however, quote with approval one sixteenth-century naturalist, the Florentine scholar Francesco Buonamici (1533-1603) who, he writes, has expressed himself 'quite distinctly' about the *vis formatrix*, the topic of Blumenbach's own work.⁷ It is interesting, then, that the reader who follows that reference, which is to a section in the fourth book of Buonamici's *opus magnum*, *De alimento*,⁸ finds there an extensive engagement with a contemporaneous discussion on the cosmological and biological significance of the world soul. As a strict Aristotelian, Buonamici himself rejects this hypothesis, but his quotations from a range of authorities dating back to antiquity and including the celebrated Arab thinker Averroes indicate the persistence of this notion right to the dawn of early modernity.

2. This brief exploration into the background of the re-emergence of interest in the world soul in German romanticism and early idealism would suggest that Maimon, F. W. J. Schelling, and Franz Baader (1765-1841) did in the main not draw their inspiration for this conceptual revival from philosophers of the preceding two centuries but, where they did not reach back all the way to Plato or ancient Platonists, were influenced by a range of medieval and Renaissance thinkers as well as contemporaneous naturalists. It may be a fair summary of the book by Miklós Vassányi, a revised PhD dissertation from the Catholic University at Leuven, to say that overall it confirms this narrative.⁹ Its value, however, lies in the incredible wealth of detailed scholarship that it brings to bear on our knowledge of debates about the world soul and, more generally, natural philosophy in the centuries leading up to the intellectual revolution of early romanticism.

Vassányi's book is not an easy read and this not only because of his sometimes heavy-handed scholarship and somewhat quirky English. More importantly the work, in order to be appreciated, must be read from its end, but the author does not tell us that. Its focal question really only emerges when the narrative reaches Part IV, the discussion of Baader's and Schelling's theories of a world soul, but by then the reader has already ploughed through more than 350 dense pages covering an incredibly wide range of modern and early modern theorists. Yet to understand the principles of Vassányi's choice of sources and his approach to them, one has to be aware that he is ultimately searching for the factors that can explain that and how interest in the world soul resurfaced in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century.

He identifies three main bodies of texts that have to be scrutinised for potential clues in this search. Their analysis makes up three main parts of the book. Firstly, Vassányi studies discussions in the predominant philosophical school of the

⁶ J.F. Blumenbach, *Über den Bildungstrieb*, Göttingen 1789, ²1791, 35-6.

⁷ *Ib.*, 38.

⁸ F. Bonamico, *De alimento*, Florence 1603, IV 19, 527-531.

⁹ In what follows, page numbers in the main text refer to this book.

time, inspired by Leibniz and systematised by Christian Wolff. Secondly, he investigates eighteenth century natural theology in all its shapes and including its critics and opponents. Thirdly, he offers an overview of the more marginal thinkers of the time including their sixteenth century sources: Jacob Böhme, Friedrich Christoph Öttinger, Baruch Spinoza, Giordano Bruno, the Cabbala and a few others. The third part also includes discussions of the Jacobi-Lessing conversation and its aftermath.

It is evident that this systematisation is not exactly neat, but it can be appreciated from Vassányi's ultimate aim which is, as I said, to elucidate as completely as possible the factors contributing to late eighteenth century developments. Clearly, discussions about the world soul among professional philosophers had to be considered even though it emerges from Vassányi's detailed presentation that, a few texts by Leibniz apart (45-62), no one seriously endorsed the theory. It is, at first sight, more difficult to see why the lengthy discussion of natural theology is needed. After all, practically none of these thinkers even mention the world soul (122). Vassányi's point is this: romantic interest in the world soul is predicated on a particular vision of the natural world, and thus far the genesis of a 'religious' perception of the cosmos is crucial for understanding their point of departure. The third part, finally, unites all those writers whom the early romantics actually used to develop their ideas even though these thinkers do not necessarily form any coherent group of individuals among themselves.

Vassányi's book, then, should not be read as a history of the concept of the world soul from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth century. As such it would not pass muster, since it includes too many details without any obvious relation to the topic and arranges the material in an idiosyncratic order (Bruno, for example, the earliest author the book discusses at length, is the subject of the penultimate chapter). Instead, it should be appreciated as an in-depth exploration of the intellectual background of early romantic interest in the world soul.

A reader who is able to perceive this purpose – and it must be admitted that the author is not very helpful in making it clear – will be rewarded by an extraordinary wealth of scholarly information and penetrating analysis. Vassányi reads sources in at least seven languages including Hebrew, the early modern Dutch of Spinoza's early works, and the idiosyncratic Latin written by Giordano Bruno. His willingness and ability to enter into the thought world of a range of radically different but equally complex thinkers, from Leibniz and Ploucquet to Kant and Schelling, from Bruno and Böhme to Jacobi and Baader is highly impressive. The chapter on Spinoza is masterly: Vassányi concludes (just as Maimon did, by the way) that Spinoza's philosophy was incompatible with the theory of the world soul, but then goes on to show in detail how readers of Spinoza disagreed on this very question: Pierre Bayle in his *Dictionnaire* aligned Spinoza with the tradition affirming a world soul, while Johann Georg Wachter and Leibniz rejected that identification albeit for different (and not purely scholarly) reasons.

Equally valuable nuggets are to be discovered in the detailed analysis of the notorious conversation between Lessing and Jacobi which the latter decided to publish only after the poet's death. Vassányi, who believes Jacobi is essentially to be trusted as a witness to this conversation (262-7), pulls all the stops of his

stupendous erudition to explore the possible background to Lessing's enigmatic statement that he can imagine God only as 'the soul of the all'. Links between some of Lessing's statements and Cabbalistic theories were perceived by contemporaries such as Herder already (274, n. 237), but Vassányi goes into great detail in pointing out possible literary sources of his ideas (268-297).

3. The picture that emerges from Vassányi's detailed study, then, is something like this. Interest in the world soul never disappeared. While the pre-eminent representatives of early modern professional philosophy went out of their way to reject such a hypothesis, the fact that they kept returning to it is in itself not without significance. Their reluctance to admit such a being may well, as Vassányi rightly points out (5), have something to do with their acceptance of a theological model which made it a mark of divine omnipotence that God creates and sustains the world without the need of intermediary beings.

At the same time, interest in the world soul persevered among a number of more esoteric thinkers who drew inspiration not least from the Cabbala as well as from each other. Yet while the Leibnizian philosophers offer extensive argumentative engagement with a world soul theory, references to the world soul among the latter group of individuals is usually more rhapsodic and less specific.

Interest in a world soul in early romanticism can consequently be explained as the confluence of these two strands, in line with the general upswing of interest at the time in a range of philosophers generally shunned by previous generations. This is most notably the case with Spinoza, but Bruno is another pertinent example for the same tendency (and Vassányi has some interesting things to contribute to the latter story: 342-53). A further factor is the 'religious' view of nature espoused by eighteenth century natural theologians. Vassányi can point to impressive evidence for the use of their thought by Schelling and Baader (120-3), although we have seen that for Maimon certainly the contemporaneous naturalist Blumenbach provided a much more powerful incentive to connect the world soul with a fuller understanding of nature.

4. This outcome is correct as far as it goes. It does, however, beg a number of important questions. First of all, Vassányi's book has relatively little to say about the overall conceptual framework within which debates about the world soul took place. Its pre-modern history is very briefly sketched at the outset of the volume (1-4), but the reader will not easily guess quite how much those earlier concerns have continued to dominate subsequent discussions. In fact, it is arguable that the world soul is one of those philosophical ideas that are quite closely tied to certain literary contexts. There is little or no evidence, as far as I can see, that philosophers ever mention or discuss the world soul at any length unless they have been influenced by a small number of classical philosophical texts, notably of course Plato's *Timaeus* (34a-37c). In a sense, therefore, the history of discussions about the world soul cannot be severed from the reception history of Plato's philosophy of nature more generally.

At the same time, however, that reception history has had its own quirks which must be understood in order to appreciate later references to the world soul even where they are traced back to Plato himself. In the first instance, Stoicism had its role to play. The Stoics' treatment of the world soul, while probably not

entirely independent of Plato's original introduction of the concept, resulted in a vision that in many ways was quite different from the Platonic theory.¹⁰ In fact, it is helpful to understand the resulting duality as a template for the subsequent history of the concept: Platonic theories of the world soul tend to inscribe it into a hierarchical cosmos as an element distinct from the first principle but needed to mediate between God and the multiplicity of the material world. Stoic theories, on the other hand, stress the identity of the world soul with God. In fact, world soul is just one of several terms the Stoics used – together with mind, fire, nature, providence, God, fate – for the active principle pervading in material form the cosmos in its entirety. In other words, the Platonic view arises from the acceptance of transcendence and postulates a separate, mediating principle in charge of the world's unity and movement, whereas the Stoic view gives expression to a vision of the cosmos as a dynamic unit that is ultimately explicable out of itself.

A further variation emerged in late antiquity but exerted considerable influence in Renaissance and early modernity; its after-effects are clearly perceptible still in the late eighteenth century. The fourth-century Constantinopolitan rhetorician Themistius argued in his paraphrase of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XII that the Stagirite should not have rejected the theory of the world soul because he himself admits a cosmic influence on the generation of life. The reference is probably to *The Generation of Animals* II 3 where Aristotle indicated that the heat in the seed has its origin not in the fiery element but is 'analogous to the element of the stars'.¹¹ This alignment of Plato's world soul with Aristotle's celestial heat may seem curious and even counter-intuitive, but the passage from Themistius' paraphrase is quoted and discussed at length in Averroes' *Long Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*,¹² and the resulting cross of Platonic and Aristotelian cosmology is subsequently picked up and elaborated by a range of authors in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, not least by Francesco Buonamici, the very one whom Maimon knew through Blumenbach.

There is, then, a complex history of ideas that has to be taken into account if references to the world soul at the turn of the nineteenth century are to be properly contextualised. It is therefore misleading to speak of 'the' world soul theory, as Vassányi sometimes does (49; 204), and some of his rather categorical judgments may turn out premature once the various theoretical guises under which the world soul made its appearance throughout history, are taken into consideration. Is it the case, for example, that Spinoza can be unequivocally severed from the world soul tradition (206-9) once we recognise the latter not only in its Platonic or Platonic-Aristotelian form (as Maimon did), but also in its Stoic variety? And is it not plausible also that Spinoza's influence on the early romantics contributed in its own way to their fascination with the idea of a world soul, even if it is also arguable that most of Schelling's inspiration came from studying Plato and reading the Platonist Bruno (348-53; 375-9)?

¹⁰ Cf. SVF II 633. Cf. J. Moreau, *L'âme du monde de Platon aux Stoïciens*, Paris 1939.

¹¹ Aristotle, *de generatione animalium* II 3 (736b37).

¹² Averroes, Tafsīr, 1491,4–1505,6 Bouyges. Cf. also the influential Latin translation in *Aristotelis Opera cum Averrois commentariis* (Venice 1562–1574, Reprint 1962) vol. 8, 303 E – 305 I.

The hostility of the Leibniz-Wolffian school towards the world soul, on the other hand, would seem to apply to both its Platonic and its Stoic form: against the former, these rationalists would argue that it implied an unnecessary proliferation of principles, against the latter they would insist on God's transcendence. With this attitude they stood, of course, in the honourable tradition of the theistic mainstream since late antiquity. While it would be wrong to deny any influence to speculations about the world soul on early Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers, it is generally true that they avoided the theory in both its versions as both seemed to vitiate, albeit for different reasons, against the world view mandated by creation theology within an overall theistic framework.

5. Vassányi's book, secondly, says relatively little about the precise significance of the theory of a world soul in early romanticism. By the time he has reached this period, his account has somewhat run out of steam, and the fourth part – in many ways the climax of the book's argument – is with just over thirty pages by far the shortest one of the volume. Yet the brevity of Vassányi's treatment may in itself be telling. For while it is true that talk about the world soul became *en vogue* in the 1790s, it is much more difficult to say what philosophical use these authors made of the concept or even how they understood it. Maimon, whom I discussed at the outset of this article, is practically the most explicit in this regard. Schelling, on the other hand, manages the feat of publishing a book with the words 'world soul' in the title but practically nowhere else in the work! Others like Friedrich Schleiermacher and August Boeckh seem to have been fascinated by the world soul mainly in their studies of ancient philosophy (358-9).

This paucity of serious philosophical engagement with the world soul must raise questions about the kind of interest the early romantics took in the concept. Schelling, for one, was clearly concerned with a new and 'higher' form of physics, one that moved beyond the mechanical science established by Newton and renewed by Kant. In this intuition he felt evidently encouraged by the discovery that older philosophical authors had espoused such a vision through the hypothesis of a world soul. In this sense, at the very end of *Von der Weltseele* he identified his own search for a principle uniting inorganic and organic world into a single organism with 'that being which the oldest philosophy greeted in foreboding as the *common soul of nature*' (384, n. 62). This passing reference to older traditions, however, is a gesture of which Schelling remained fond throughout his career, but it is usually wise not to read too much into them. With all his antiquarian interests Schelling was squarely a modernist, aware that he lived at a time in which European civilisation had irrevocably entered into a new phase of its existence. Quite possibly, his reference to the world soul was eventually not much more than such a nod to a venerable philosophical tradition. The climax of Vassányi's study, then, may in some ways turn out to have been an anti-climax. There are reasons to suspect that the different streams the narrative follows throughout the book do not build up to a massive reappreciation of the concept of the world soul. Instead, romantic authors cite it, allude or refer to it mainly in support of their own post-Kantian quest for a unitary principle underwriting natural philosophy and operating in an organic, teleological rather than a mechanical manner.

6. There is one final aspect I would want to add to the factors discussed in Vassányi's book as contributing to the fascination for the world soul in early romanticism. It is undeniable that the fate of the world soul between the seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries also mirrors to some extent the changing religious landscape of the time. Vassányi observes, for example, that the natural theologians of the eighteenth century make no use of the world soul and, rightly, attributes this to the 'circumstance that practically all physico-theologists stand, in respect of theology, on Scriptural grounds' (122). It is easy to forget how religiously fraught all intellectual debates of the time were. The scandal caused by Jacobi's publication of Lessing's alleged Spinozism was, of course, not least due to the implication that Lessing was a pantheist and, as Jacobi pointed out in his own essay accompanying the transcript of his conversation with the late poet, this ultimately amounted to determinism, fatalism, and the rejection of religion.¹³ What was extraordinary about the ensuing 'pantheism controversy', however, was less that Jacobi levelled those charges against a well-loved and revered intellectual, who had recently passed away, but that an entire generation of younger intellectuals concluded from his account that Spinoza's ideas were in fact exceedingly stimulating and inspiring. While it would be wrong to speak of secularisation, as if these figures at the turn of the nineteenth century had ceased seeing themselves within the Christian tradition, it is evident and significant that they defined their own position vis-à-vis that tradition in a new and more independent way than their forbears had done.

While it is naturally difficult to quantify this as a factor in early romantic enthusiasm for the world soul, the same attitude must have played a role there too, given that the relevant sources were viewed by orthodox religion with suspicion: Bruno had been burnt on the stake; Böhme and Ötinger were marginalised at best within their own Lutheran tradition; the Cabbala was Jewish mysticism. Openly affirming this kind of intellectual ancestry was not without its subversive potential, but this precisely may also have made it attractive in the eyes of those who enjoyed transgressing the cultural, religious and intellectual boundaries that had been set by previous generations but were now felt to be overly oppressive.

Considering, then, how little evidence there is that Lessing, Herder, Goethe, Schelling, Schleiermacher, Schlegel and others engaged with the philosophical problems inherent in the tradition of the world soul – and it is arguable that they did so to a lesser extent than Leibniz and some of his followers had done – there is something to be said in favour of the suspicion that the sudden popularity of this notion was *partly* the joy of transgression more than a deep-seated conviction that engaging with the world soul was a requirement for the novel philosophy of nature for which they all were searching. If citing the world soul served to highlight the support of one tradition, it also and by the same token signalled distance and detachment from another tradition. This may seem a truism but it is arguable that in both cases the 'traditions' were not purely philosophical in character but included religious markers of identity as well.

¹³ Jacobi, Spinoza, 124-5.

Since its inception in Plato's *Timaeus*, the world soul has had a curious history. At no time did it become an unquestionably accepted concept within natural philosophy; rather, it remained controversial and even marginal throughout its history. And yet it never disappeared entirely, but persevered in philosophical and quasi-philosophical writings of small circles of enthusiasts to inspire and inform broader debates from time to time, in successive but limited periods of revival. Thus far, its re-emergence in early romanticism is arguably typical of its wider history. A long-held attitude of neglect, rejection or even scorn gives way, almost over night, to affirmation and fascination spawning literary activity in philosophy and beyond. Much like earlier revivals, however, it runs its course within a limited number of years leaving little to show as a result.

It is hard to give an unequivocal explanation for this course of events. Quite possibly, the world soul has an allure for those thinkers who, dissatisfied with scientific approaches to the cosmos, seek for a fuller understanding of its unity and purpose. If so, it would be not too surprising if the modest upswing in scholarly interest in the world soul we are seeing at the moment might indicate that another such period of revival were about to happen.

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