

On the "World Soul" in Plato's *TIMAEUS*

CHARLES P. BIGGER

Louisiana State University

One might think that a myth about a world soul might be a more fitting topic for discussion in the *Tibetean Theosophical Society* than in this staid and sober journal; and let me hasten to confess that my effort to raise such a doctrine, even if it is Plato's, from the level of mumbo-jumbo may be more than a matter of linguistic confusion: it may be insanity.

But for some of us who do indeed find such things to be silly, this myth, like any myth of Plato's, cannot be so easily put out of mind. These myths rise to haunt us even after they have been exorcised by the most well-intentioned analysis, or, what is even more wonderful, "explained" by Plato's most devoted friends. They remain as lures to the practice of philosophy. And so I face the incredulity of those who find myth irrelevant, as well as the contempt of those who know that after all analysis has had its final say, the myth mocks us, the mystery remains.

To those who look with disdain on philosophical myth and to its friends, let me say that I know that myth cannot be twisted into doctrine and that as philosophy, its status is ambiguous. But it seems evident to me, at least, that it is a sort of analogical matrix from which certain types of doctrine can be generated, and these may be homogeneous or heterogeneous in type. In the latter case, this is possible because, as Plato remarked, myth is deficient in logical form and incompatible concepts can be expressed in the compatibilities of its aesthetic unity. This is one sense in which myth provides wonder, and the

effort at reconciliation may well be the historic origin of philosophy itself: it is certainly a continuing source of perhaps untrustworthy inspiration. In the case of homogeneous interpretations, one wants to say that myth gives a certain form to doctrine, that it is possible to conceive of a host of doctrines of the same analogical form. Thus medieval arguments about the nature and ontological status of angels have analogues in discussions of the foundations of arithmetic. In these senses myth is inexhaustable.

It is probably true that myth is inexhaustable in other senses; but I wish now to call attention, not to the way myth is to be understood or interpreted, but rather to the way understanding conceives itself when it intentionally engenders myth, for this is the Socratic understanding, which in closing dialectical discourse with myth and probabilities¹ leaves discourse open for dialectic. Perhaps these "likely stories" are the real dialectical hypotheses.² I suspect that the method of wisdom is the method of breaking, transforming, and reconstituting myth.

While it is certainly not true that all myth is cosmological, the cosmological themes do seem to predominate. It is certainly the theme of the greatest of philosophic myths, the *Timaeus*. It may well be that Kant gave the final set of reasons as to why cosmology cannot be rational, if reason is understood as the method of achieving certainty about first principles; but suppose the method of reason terminates in myth? Suppose with Plato that the method of rational cosmology is the method of myth, as