

# **THE DEATH AND REBIRTH OF THE WORLD SOUL 2500 BCE — 2005 CE**

## **A Concise Overview**

Ralph H. Abraham  
University of California at Santa Cruz

The individual soul is an ageless idea, attested in prehistoric times by the oral traditions of all cultures. But as far as we know, it enters history in ancient Egypt. In Part I of our account, we will begin with the individual soul in ancient Egypt, then recount the birth of the world soul in the Pythagorean community of ancient Greece, and trace it through the Western Esoteric Tradition until its demise in Kepler's writings, along with the rise of modern science, around 1600 CE. In Part II, we tell of the rebirth of the world soul recently, rising from the ashes of, again, modern science. Recent books of Ervin Laszlo are an important part of this revival of the world soul in new clothes, such as the Akashic Field.

## **THE WORLD SOUL: BIRTH, LIFE, AND DEATH**

### **1. Ancient Egypt, 2500 BCE**

We take seriously the possibility that ancient Egyptian culture began around 10,000 BCE. Thus, tentatively, we may regard it is the Ur source for the soul concepts of the Western Esoteric Tradition, including the Greek and the Indian roots. We began our story of the history (as opposed to the prehistory) of the soul in 2500 BCE, with the Great Pyramid of Cheops. "This world is alive in its entirety and infused with divine spirit." [p. 46] [All references in this section are to (West, 1995).]

Spiritual elements or bodies of ancient Egypt include the Ba, the Ka, and several others. The Ba, or soul, is "the animating principle, the vital or divine spark that vivifies all sentient creatures." [p. 63] The Ka, or double, is "the power that fixes and makes individual the animating spirit that is Ba." [p. 64] "If during life on earth, the Ka has degenerated to the point where it has been divested of all virtue, of everything truly human, then it does not reincarnate, and the Ka disperses into the various lower animal and vegetal realms. ... It may be this understanding that lies behind the curious doctrine of metempsychosis in which the deceased may be reborn as an animal or even a bush or tree." [p. 64]

Recent studies of the pyramid of Cheops, and the pyramid texts, give an idea of the journey of the soul in the reincarnation process. "After death, the Pharaoh's soul was said to become a star, to join with Orion in the sky." [p. 452] Alexander Badawy determined in 1964 that the two shafts cut 200 feet from the King's chamber to the surface were aimed at the Pole star, and Orion, in the year 2600 BCE. And according to Robert Baumol, the two shafts from the Queen's chamber were aimed at Orion and Sirius in 2450 BCE. [p. 453] The supposition is that these shafts were to facilitate the journey of the Pharaoh's soul after death and internment of his body in the pyramid, to its home in the sky.

## **2. Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato, 520 to 347 BCE**

Pythagoras of Samos was born around 570 BCE. He traveled and studied in Egypt and Babylon. Initiated into the mysteries of several traditions — Egyptian, Babylonian, and Persian — he returned to Greece and Magna Graecia in southern Italy and carried on with the reforms set in place by the Orphic religion, which became the most important religion of ancient Greece. Pythagoras synthesized spiritual and natural philosophy into the framework for classical Greek culture, including the metaphysical and sacred aspect of Number, the One (monad, unity) and its emanations. He introduced the terms philosophy and cosmos. He created a school around 520 BCE in Croton (southern Italy) that emphasized communal living, gender equality, vegetarianism, mystery initiations, Orphic poetry, harmonics, music therapy, the monochord, geometry, arithmetic, and cosmology. The school was destroyed by a rejected and disgruntled follower who led a popular revolt against the community around 500 BCE. Among the important followers of Pythagoras were Philolaus (b. 474 BCE) and Archytas of Tarentum, an important influence on Plato.

The Pythagorean doctrine is based on these three principles:

1. Ideas: matter is attracted to absolute forms, or ideas, which have an existence of their own. Mathematics is the study of these forms.
2. Souls: an animal has an immortal soul, which reincarnates (transmigrates) after death, until a state of perfection is attained.
3. Harmony: ideas and souls are related by sympathy, resonance, or musical ratio.

We may recognize the Pythagorean theory of reincarnation as derived from the Egyptian. The idea of the world soul evolved in this community.

Socrates (479-399 BCE) was the agent of a major shift in which philosophy turned from nature (or *physis*) to human life. Also, he is considered among the first to emphasize the concept of the world soul.

Plato (429-347 BCE) synthesized Pythagoras and Socrates. First he became a follower of Socrates. He had the genius to grasp Socrates' meaning, and to present it brilliantly in a series of ten dialogues. Around 390 BCE, Plato had visited Western Greece (Southern Italy and Sicily), encountered Pythagorean communities, met Archytas of Tarentum, the great Pythagorean, and adopted Pythagoreanism as a second influence. Platonism consists in the joining of these two streams, the Socratic and the Pythagorean. In 387 BCE, Plato created his school in Academe, a suburb of Athens.

Plato expanded the teaching of Socrates on the perfection of the soul into a complete system. In this system, morals and justice were based on absolute ideas. Wisdom consists of knowledge of these ideas, and philosophy is the search for wisdom. In fourteen more dialogues, Plato elaborated this unified system.

Plato's theory of soul is set out primarily in six of the dialogues: *Phaedo*, *Republic II*, and *Phaedra*, of the middle group of dialogues, 387-367 BCE, *Timaeus*, around 365 BCE, which divides the middle and last groups, and *Philebus* and *Laws*, of the last group, 365-347 BCE. The development of the individual soul is given in the three middle dialogues.

The *Phaedo* is a long and detailed examination of the individual soul, its immortality, and reincarnation, given by Socrates on the day of his death sentence. The *Republic* describes Plato's mathematical curriculum for the Academy: arithmetic, plane geometry, solid geometry, astronomy, and music. At the end is the *Tale of Er*, which details the reincarnation process of the individual soul, as told by an eye witness. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates and Phaedrus discourse on love, and on rhetoric. To understand divine madness, one must learn the nature of the soul. Soul is always in motion, and is self-moving, and therefore is deathless. Then begins the important metaphor of the chariot: two winged horses and a charioteer. This metaphor of the soul is used to explain divine madness, and the dynamics of reincarnation.

The world soul is developed in the later three dialogues. The *Timaeus* is a discussion of four persons: Socrates, Timaeus, Critias, and Hermocrates. It begins with a review by Socrates of a discussion on the preceding day. This concerned the constitution of the ideal State and its citizens. Then Critias tells the famous story of

Atlantis, which was told to his great-grandfather by Solon, one of the seven sages. Then Timaeus is asked to begin the feast with a description of the creation of the Universe. He tells how God, because he was good, made the world after an eternal pattern. He brought order into the world, and soul and intelligence. The world is composed of fire and earth. Being solids, these two elements require two more, water and air, to bind them. The world is a sphere with the soul in the center. The gods made man and the lower animals, and God made the human souls of the same four elements as the body of the universe, along with part of the soul of the universe. Then he set in motion the process of incarnation and reincarnation of these human souls in mortal bodies. The created gods make these mortal bodies of the four elements. As a person becomes a rational creature through education, his human soul moves in a circle in the head (a sphere) within his mortal body.

The *Philebus* is a lecture by Socrates on wisdom and pleasure. Along the way, he introduces the world soul as the source of individual souls. The *Laws* is the last of Plato's writings. It is a long dialogue of three older men, and is unique in that Socrates is absent. The actions of the world soul are discussed in detail.

### **3. The Stoics, 300 BCE**

From Plato and Aristotle and their followers came the Stoics, for 500 years the leading school. Among other ideas, they further developed the *logos* concept of Heraclitus, Aristotle, and Philo. This became an element in the Neoplatonic cosmology of Plotinus. *Logos* has many meanings. Cognate of the verb *legein*, to say, it may mean language, speech, expression, explanation, formula, purpose, rational basis, plan.

Following Aristotle, the Stoics adopted two principles, or *archai*: one active. The other passive. These are body and soul, or matter and logos. (Hahn, 1977; pp.29, 61, 74) For the Stoics, logos makes the world by giving form to matter in a dynamical process. Like Plato, the Stoics believed that the cosmos was a living being, with a world soul.

### **4. Plotinus, 250 CE**

The main stimuli for the Neoplatonism of Plotinus (204-270) were Plato, the Middle Platonists, and to a lesser extent, the Stoics. From Plato came Plotinus' main cosmology of the three primal hypostases: the *One*, the *Intelligence*, or *Intellectual Principle*, and the *World Soul*. For Plotinus the *logos* was a supplementary structure that intertwined the three hypostases. He defined it as "a

power that acts upon matter, not conscious of it, but merely acting upon it."

This Neoplatonic cosmology, although further developed by Iamblichus, Proclus, and others, may be regarded as the main trunk of the Western Esoteric Tradition.

## **5. Spanda, 800 CE**

The Axial Age in India is represented by the older Upanishads, central to Vedanta and the Yoga schools of ancient Sanskrit philosophy. In the middle ages, many schools diverged. One of these, Kashmiri Shaivism, developed a doctrine of vibration, given in the basic texts: *Siva Sutras*, and *Spanda Karikas*.

*Spanda* means "some sort of movement". (Singh, 1980; p. xvi) The text of the Spanda Karikas suggests a sophisticated field concept applied to consciousness. (From the Sanskrit dictionary: throbbing, trembling, oscillation, vibration, or pulsation.) This may have evolved from the older Akasha concept of the Upanishads.

## **6. al-Kindi, 850 CE**

Al-Kindi (805-873) was an Islamic heir of Plato and the Neoplatonists. For him, the world soul was an emanation from the One, as light from the Sun. His astrological work, *De radiis* was an important influence on the western scientists Roger Grosseteste (1168-1253), Roger Bacon (1214-1294), Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), and John Dee (1527-1609). *De radiis* presented an astrological theory based on rays from the planets. Everything radiates, and space is full of these radiations.

## **7. Roger Bacon, 1267 CE**

In *De multiplicatione specierum*, around 1267, Bacon presents a doctrine of the physics of light. He was inspired by Plotinus, Al-Kindi, and Roger Grosseteste. This doctrine survived for three centuries, and ended with John Dee. The word *species* meant the likeness of any object, transmitted through any media.

## **8. Ficino, 1400 CE**

Ficino's originality derived from the thoroughgoing syncretism of pagan and Christian elements effected under the impulse of Plato, Plotinus, Proclus, the *Hermetica*, the Areopagite, Augustine, and Aquinas, to name only his primary wells of inspiration. Among the facets of this syncretism were:

orphic music, music therapy (Ficino's personal practice);  
 astrology (astrological psychology);  
 magic, psychology.

He was heir to the long line of astrological magic, Synesius, Proclus, Macrobius, and Al Kindi, and was followed by Bruno and Agrippa. His cosmological model combined Neoplatonic and Christian elements, and set the foundation for the whole of Renaissance philosophy. It may be summarized in the following table.

Collective	Individual Discarnate	Individual Embodied
The One ( <i>ton het</i> )		
The Intelligence ( <i>nous</i> ), Reason	Ideas	
The Soul ( <i>psyche</i> )*	Angels	Individual soul (incl. mind)
Spirit ( <i>pneuma</i> )	Stars	Individual spirit
Nature ( <i>physis</i> )	Matter	Body

The One is the undivided source of everything. The Intelligence, cosmic Mind, contains Plato's ideas, the archetypes and blueprints for creation. The Soul has three parts (rational, sensitive, and vegetative) and gives rise to individual minds, both human and angelic. Reason communicates between the Intelligence and the Soul, and Spirit (astral matter) intermediates between the World Soul and Nature, the created universe of matter, energy, and life.

Ficino's astrological magic, psychology, and medical practice were based on his understanding of Spirit, and its relation to the stars and planets. They have a contemporary revival in the work of James Hillman and Thomas Moore.

## 9. Kepler, 1600 CE

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630) was a contemporary of John Dee (1527-1609) the last emanationist, William Gilbert (1544-1603) the scholar of magnetism, the first field of modern physics, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) the champion of the cosmos as an infinite plenum, and Galileo (1564-1642) the first modern dynamicist. In his work on elliptical orbits of the planets (especially Mars), Kepler proposed a theory of universal gravitation, the second field of modern physics. In his explanation of

noncircular motion, he actually changed the word *spirit* (as in angelic influence) to *force* (that is, mechanism) in the manuscript for his most important work, *Astronomia Nova*, of 1609. And here we may locate the death of the world soul, concomitant with the birth of modern physics.

## **THE REBIRTH OF THE WORLD SOUL**

The *individual soul* has been with us at least since 2500 BCE. But we have argued that the *world soul* emerged into documented literature with the Pythagoreans, around 500 BCE, and died with Kepler, around 1600 CE, along with the birth of modern science. It has been missed. The support for our common sense of the coherence of all and everything has been lacking since modern science became our theology and cosmology. Calls for a renewed foundation for the cosmos are now multiplying, as the books of Rupert Sheldrake, Fritjof Capra, Dean Radin, and Ervin Laszlo, among others, testify.

### **10. Sheldrake, 1981**

In his first book, *A New Science of Life: The Hypothesis of Formative Causation*, of 1981, Rupert Sheldrake begins with a consideration of unsolved problems of biology, in the areas of behavior, evolution, the origin of life, parapsychology, and so on. He delineates three levels of wholism: mechanism, vitalism, and organicism. We may relate these, respectively, to Nature, Spirit, and World Soul levels of the Table above.

Building on the twentieth century organismic ideas of Whitehead, Smuts, Waddington, and others, Sheldrake poses the existence of non-energetic fields, called morphogenetic fields, that direct the emergence of form in complex systems of all kinds. In the contexts of physics, chemistry, biology, and the social sciences, these may be called morphic fields, mental fields, family fields, and so on. Although non-energetic, these fields may have measurable effects on energetic systems. Sheldrake describes the effect of a morphogenetic field on an energetic system metaphorically as *morphic resonance*. His *hypothesis of formative causation* proposes that these fields evolve from unknown seeds called morphogenetic germs. Then they evolve their structures from previous similar systems; the past intervenes in the present; morphogenetic fields have memory.

In terms of the premodern cosmologies described above, we may locate Sheldrake's morphogenetic fields in the World Soul, while the morphogenetic germs reside in the Intelligence. The entire paradigm is organismic.

## **11. Capra, 1996**

In his 1996 book, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*, Fritjof Capra synthesizes the general systems theory of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the cybernetics of Gregory Bateson and Humberto Maturana, and the environmental perspective of deep ecology into a top-down understanding of our biosphere. There is no appeal to organismic fields.

In the 2003 sequel, *The Hidden Connections: Integrating Biological, Cognitive, and Social Dimensions of Life into a Science of Sustainability*, Capra extends his biospheric big picture to include the social and economic spheres. His fully connected world-system is consistent with a vitalistic paradigm.

## **12. Laszlo, 2003-2005**

In his 2003 book, *The Connectivity Hypothesis: Foundations of an Integral Science of Quantum, Cosmos, Life, and Consciousness*, Ervin Laszlo summarizes all the most important evidence for interconnecting fields, and also proposes a new physical field, the quantum vacuum field, as the carrier wave for the integrity of the cosmos. Unlike Shelldrake and Capra, Laszlo has insisted on a single, unique field as the basis of connectedness on all levels: physical, biological, social, and universal: truly an integral theory of everything.

In 2004, in his book *Science and the Akashic Field*, Laszlo proposes the quantum vacuum as the modern version of the Sanskrit *akasha*, an ether with memory. And in the present, book, *The Reenchanted Cosmos*, he develops the worldview and ethical implications of the Akashic “A-field.” This field, as Shelldrake’s morphogenetic field, may be associated with the Intelligence of the Platonic cosmology as outlined above.

## **13. The new sacred math**

All three of these pioneers of spiritual revival are dynamical-literate. They use the concepts of the new sacred math -- catastrophe theory, chaos theory, bifurcations, neural networks, complex dynamical systems, emergence, complexity, agent based models and the like -- to formulate and evolve their ideas.

These new developments in computational mathematics provide the means for modeling and simulation of universal fields of information without the assumption



of physical energy fields and specific communication means. For all these reasons we believe that the world soul is now being reborn from the ashes of inadequate hypotheses, such as the mechanical clockwork universe. A renaissance of premodern cosmology emerges in our postmodern culture, as the degenerate poverty of the received paradigm of modern science turns to compost.

### **References for “Life, Birth, and Death”**

Allen, Don Cameron. *The Star-crossed Renaissance: the Quarrel about Astrology and its Influence in England*. New York: Octagon Books, 1941/1966.

Allen, Michael J. B., *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981.

Couliano, Ioan P., *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984/1987.

Damiani, Anthony J., *Astronoesis*. Burdett, NY: Larson, 2000.

Deck, John, *Nature, Contemplation, and the One, a Study in the Philosophy of Plotinus*. Burdett, NY: Larson, 1967/1991.

Dyczkowski, Mark S. G., *The Stanzas on Vibration: The Spandakarika with Four Commentaries*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992.

Gilbert, William, *On the Magnet*. New York: Basic Books, 1958.

Gregory, John *The Neoplatonists, a Reader*. London: Routledge, 1991/1999.

Hahm, David E., *The Origins of Stoic Cosmology*. Ohio State Univ. Press, 1977.

Hamilton, Edith, and Huntington Cairns, *Plato, Collected Dialogues*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961.

Hillman, James. *Archetypal Psychology: A Brief Account, together with a Complete Checklist of Works*. Dallas: Spring Publications, 1983.

Kraut, Richard, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992.

Lindberg, David C. *Theories of Vision from al-Kindi to Kepler*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1976.

Lindberg, David C. *Roger Bacon's Philosophy of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983.

Lindberg, David C. *Roger Bacon and the Origins of Perspectiva in the Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996. .

Moore, Thomas, *The Astrological Psychology of Marsilio Ficino*. Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1982.

Sandbach, F.H., *The Stoics*. New York: Norton, 1975.

Sheldrake, A. Rupert, *A New Science of Life*.

Singh, Jaideva, *Spanda-Karikas: The Divine Creative Pulsation*. Delhi: Motilal Benarsidass, 1980.

Turnbull, Grace H., *The Essence of Plotinus*. New York: oxford Univ. Press, 1948.

West, John Anthony, *The Traveler's Key to Ancient Egypt, A Guide to the Sacred Places of Ancient Egypt, 2nd edn*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1985/1995.

### **References for “Rebirth”**

Sheldrake, Rupert. *A New Science of Life: The Hypothesis of Formative Causation*. Los Angeles: Tarcher, 1981.

Capra, Fritjof. *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*. New York: Anchor, 1996.

Capra, Fritjof, *The Hidden Connections: Integrating Biological, Cognitive, and Social Dimensions of Life into a Science of Sustainability*, New York: Doubleday, 2002.

Laszlo, Ervin. *The Connectivity Hypothesis: Foundations of an Integral Science of Quantum, Cosmos, Life, and Consciousness*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003.

Laszlo, Ervin. *Science and the Akashic Field: An Integral Theory of Everything*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2004.