

↓ CHAPTER 1

## What Is Soul? (*And What Is Soul Music?*)

*A person's soul is a person's essence, that part of our being which can soar to heaven. Gospel is the music of that essence, and the church is its home.*

—STAX MUSEUM OF AMERICAN SOUL MUSIC

*The basic thing is soul feeling. The same in blues as in spirituals. And also with gospel music. It is soul music.*

—MAHALIA JACKSON

*This sound was just pulled from the gospel roots and the blues roots . . . and they tagged it "soul music" because people just stood and sang from their guts, you know, whatever they felt, they just let it come out.*

—CARLA THOMAS

*What is "Soul"? What a question!*

—DICK HEBDIGE

I've been a musician longer than I've been a philosopher. I started piano lessons at the age of seven. My teachers were all very serious and accomplished classical musicians, and I'm afraid I was something of a disappointment to them. I think the discipline required to perform the classical piano repertoire well was just too demanding and exacting for my youthful attention span and mischievous spirit. I stuck with it for about ten years, though I was clearly not going to make it as a classical pianist. But I had a good ear—good enough to get by without really developing much sight-reading ability—and anyway I was more interested in rock & roll and boogie-woogie, styles of piano playing that were developed and transmitted primarily as oral musical traditions (not essentially reliant on notation).

One of the earliest pieces I tried to learn off the radio was Ray Charles's "What'd I Say?" This was in 1959 when I was twelve years old. The tune is a simple repetitive 3-chord 12-bar blues, but it is not easy to

play. On the record Ray's left hand holds down a Latin rhythmic figure, defining the chords, against which the right hand plays a second rhythmic figure, coloring the chords, and executes an ornate and exciting arpeggiated turnaround. Over the top of this Ray engages in a playful and passionate game of call-and-response with his group of female backup singers, the Raelettes. It was a real watershed record. Ray Charles was changing the musical landscape by bringing musical elements from the African American church together with the blues into what would soon become known as "soul music." The record was controversial, of course. Although it sold massively across the color line, becoming Ray's first million seller, it was banned in many regions as "too suggestive" in its thinly veiled celebration of sexual intercourse. Ray's deployment of gospel elements in combination with the blues was also at issue, as he recounts in his autobiography.

I got letters accusing me of bastardizing God's work. A big-time preacher in New York scolded me before his congregation. Many folks saw my music as sacrilegious.<sup>1</sup>

I didn't know it at the time, but grappling with "What'd I Say?" as a twelve-year-old piano student gave me my first glimpse of one of the central puzzles of this book. It is a puzzle lurking at the heart of soul music—a puzzle bringing one of the most profound philosophical, spiritual, and religious mysteries (the soul) together with one of America's most deeply troubling ongoing social and political issues (racism) in the dynamic flux of vernacular popular culture. And, as I shall try to show, it goes also to the heart of philosophy of music.

### "Defining" Soul Music

The word *soul* found its way into the discourse of American popular culture initially through music and spread out from there. African American essayist and playwright Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) notes that in the 1950s the word was used by jazz musicians and critics alike to characterize a movement within jazz to reclaim and revitalize a musical tradition that had been repeatedly co-opted by mainstream and corporate culture. Baraka uses *soul* to name "an ingredient so essential to African American music that its absence would cause a knowledgeable listener to question the authenticity (as African American music) of what they were hearing."<sup>2</sup> As Baraka uses the term, *soul* denotes an essence: the necessary and sufficient condition of authentic blackness. In this application the word establishes, or honors, a lineage linking African American secular

musical innovations with the work of the African American church. According to Baraka's analysis, the musicians about whom the term was first used in the 1950s—Horace Silver, Art Blakey, Max Roach, Clifford Brown, and John Coltrane—were drawing upon the distinctive call-and-response cadences of preacher and congregation and the frenzy of spirit possession characteristic of many African American church services. And they did so in conscious reaction and resistance to what they understood as the racist and therefore culturally and politically repressive conditions in 1950s America. Specifically they were aiming to restore vitality and authenticity to a music they felt had been “tamed,” or “domesticated,” and finally “stolen” for profitable mass distribution and consumption by a fundamentally racist culture industry, the music industry, serving a fundamentally racist society.<sup>3</sup>

Over the next decade the term became a potent signifier of solidarity within the African American community in the struggle for black power, and as such it was applied to all manner of cultural production and expression—from cuisine (soul food) to hairstyles (soul patch) and special recognition handshakes (soul brother). At the same time the term was also being taken up within the music industry, where it shifted from jazz to function first as a label for a distinctive style of pop music and later as a demographic (and racially specific) marketing category label, replacing the term *rhythm & blues*, which itself had replaced *race*.<sup>4</sup> It is ironic though predictable that the prevailing conventional usage of *soul* in the discourse of American popular culture, including the scholarly literature, reflects music industry practice over time and thus has by and large lost touch with the jazz references. Accordingly, what people generally understand, when they see references to “soul music,” is a style or category of pop music dating from the late 1950s.

The earliest developments within this category of pop are generally agreed to be the crossover of Sam Cooke, lead singer in the gospel group the Soul Stirrers, to the pop charts in 1957 with the hit single “You Send Me.” The style comes to full flower with the breakthrough work of Ray Charles, combining stylistic elements of gospel music with rhythm & blues and rock & roll. And it culminates, climactically, in the mid- and late-1960s in the monumental work of Aretha Franklin (the “Queen of Soul”) and the still flowering genius of Stevie Wonder. Although it survives to this day as an identifiable style and marketing category in popular music (Mariah Carey, Beyonce Knowles, Mary J. Blige, Christina Aguilera, John Legend, Usher), it is widely regarded by scholars and critics to have passed through the prime of its creative artistic achievement, as well as its social and political relevance, certainly by the early 1980s. The central

puzzles with which I will be concerned in this book arise within the frame defined by these prevailing conventions. But in chapter 6, when we return to the question of soul as the essence of authenticity, the jazz references will, as we should expect, provide crucial illumination.

### The Origins of Soul Music

Like so many other musical categories (“jazz,” “folk music”), the category “soul music” can be somewhat elusive under definitional or essentialist analysis. The difficulty stems in part from the fact that, as a cultural phenomenon, soul music is continuous and deeply entangled with a myriad of other cultural variables, all of which are inextricably bound up in dynamic struggle and evolution. And so soul music might reasonably be identified or defined in terms of any number of combinations of regional, historical, generational, ethnic, and racial factors, each of which has some bearing on our eventual interpretive understanding and assessment of the music. To illustrate, let me take as my example Peter Guralnick’s 1986 landmark study *Sweet Soul Music*, which begins with a long and winding narrative of false starts and revisions in his own evolving definition.<sup>5</sup> How should we, for example, distinguish the music coming out of the American South—Memphis; Muscle Shoals, Alabama; and Macon, Georgia—from Berry Gordy’s Detroit-based Motown sound or the music produced out of Philadelphia by Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff or Chicago’s Curtis Mayfield and Jerry Butler? In the end, Guralnick draws a bright geographical line, emphasizing audience demographics as well as regional-cultural and musical-stylistic differences, and confines himself to the project of reconstructing the oral history of southern soul music. For Guralnick, Motown is not soul music. His argument for this is partly business-historic and partly stylistic. He writes:

[W]hen I speak of soul music, I am not referring to Motown, a phenomenon almost exactly contemporaneous but appealing far more to a pop, white, and industry-slanted kind of audience.<sup>6</sup>

And he continues:

Soul music is Southern by definition if not by actual geography. . . .  
[B]oth its birth and inspiration stem from the South.<sup>7</sup>

Crucial to the distinctive essential character of southern soul music are the racial and interracial dynamics of its inception. With soul music, not only were audiences integrating across long-hardened racial lines—lines

that rock & roll had softened and transgressed—but the creative process was integrated as well. If the stars and singers of soul music were primarily African American, the creative teams upon whose collaborative energy soul music also depended—the songwriters, backing musicians, and producers—were not only racially mixed but racially integrated. A distinctive and quite remarkable kind of interracial collaborative creative partnership arose and flourished in the “southern soul triangle”: Stax Records in Memphis, Muscle Shoals Recording Studios and Fame Records in Alabama, and the scene in and around Macon, Georgia, which would produce James Brown and Otis Redding as well as the southern blues-rock jam band the Allman Brothers. It was:

Not so much the white man in the woodpile, or even the white businessman capitalizing on social placement and cultural advantage to plunder the resources of a captive people, as the white *partner* contributing as significantly as his more prominent—more visible certainly—black associate.<sup>8</sup>

Stax historian Rob Bowman confirms this assessment.

While undeniably involved on a day-by-day basis in the crafting and marketing of African American culture, virtually from the beginning Stax Records was racially integrated in the studio, in the front office and, by the midway point of its history, at the level of ownership. All this took place in Memphis, Tennessee, a city that as late as 1971 elected to close its public swimming pools rather than allow black and white kids to swim side by side in the scorching heat.<sup>9</sup>

If such collaborations could theoretically have arisen in other places and times, Guralnick finds it unimaginable that they could have had the kinds of meanings they did, or produced the musical results they did, anywhere but in the American South at the precise historical moment they occurred.

Unquestionably the racial turmoil of the South was a factor, and the rapid social upheaval which it foreshadowed; in fact the whole tangled racial history of the region, the intimate terms on which it lived with its passions and contradictions, played a decisive role in the forging of a new culture, one which the North’s polite lip service to liberalism could never have achieved.<sup>10</sup>

Guralnick chooses to tell the story of a distinctive and important, but very tightly specified, musical movement—*Southern* soul music. As fasci-

nating and illuminating as that story is, Guralnick's account remains quite puzzling and ultimately at loose ends, particularly in the lines he draws and the inclusions and exclusions they would seem to imply. For my purposes it just will not do to *define* soul music as Southern to the exclusion of not only Motown but Curtis Mayfield, Jerry Butler, the Philadelphia International label, and so on. Take, for example, the O'Jays' "Love Train" (Philadelphia International, 1973)—as pure an instance of soul music as you can find. And how can you possibly marginalize Curtis Mayfield from a discussion of the music of the mid-twentieth-century American civil rights struggle? Then, too, ruling out all of Motown would result in the exclusion of Stevie Wonder from the category of soul music—someone I regard as, well, a paradigm.

Both Ray Charles and Sam Cooke receive extensive treatment in Guralnick's book. They are the subject of a "prologue" and are treated as the two main progenitors of the style. But although Ray Charles was southern by birth (in Florida), he had relocated to Seattle and was already touring nationally with his own big band when he began recording for Atlantic Records, an upstart independent label at the time, based not in the South but in New York City. "What'd I Say?" (1959) reached #6 on the pop charts. But in the same year the Isley Brothers released "Shout (Parts 1 and 2)"—every bit as clear, as powerful, and as widely recognized an instance of African American gospel music penetrating into rhythm and blues and pop music. But the Isley Brothers came out of Cincinnati and recorded for the major label RCA. Sam Cooke made music history by crossing over from a successful career in gospel music as lead singer for the close harmony gospel group the Soul Stirrers. And he wrote the first soul music anthem of the civil rights struggle, "A Change Is Gonna Come," released posthumously in 1964, a year before passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. But if you see the essence of "soul singing" as the fully surrendered embodiment of spirit possession in the gospel music tradition, how do you categorize Sam Cooke stylistically? If Ray and Aretha would scream and shout, Sam Cooke was a controlled "crooner." You won't hear anything even close to a scream or a shout in "You Send Me," "Cupid," "Another Saturday Night," "Twistin' the Night Away," "Wonderful World," or any of Sam Cooke's recorded work. Stylistically, Sam Cooke is much closer to Marvin Gaye, a Motown artist who after all took Sam Cooke as a model. Gaye also delivered an anthem of the civil rights struggle, albeit at a later and less hopeful point in its history, "What's Going On?" (1971). Marvin Gaye doesn't even turn up in Guralnick's index. Aretha Franklin does, of necessity, and indeed Guralnick devotes an entire chapter to her arrival on the soul scene. Born in Mem-

phis but raised in Detroit, where she blossomed as a singer in her father Reverend C. L. Franklin's church, she was first brought to the attention of John Hammond at Columbia Records in New York. There she recorded ten albums over an artistically and commercially frustrating six-year period, after which she, too, recorded for Atlantic Records, where she really came into her own. As Guralnick recounts it, Aretha made one fateful trip to the southern soul triangle as a recording artist. The recording sessions, organized by Atlantic Records' producer Jerry Wexler, were to take place at the Muscle Shoals studio in Alabama (Stax in Memphis having bowed out for financial reasons), and although they produced basic tracks for two well-known hit songs, they wound up in an ugly altercation on the first day and totally fell apart on the second. The two basic tracks that were produced ("Do Right Woman—Do Right Man" and "I Never Loved a Man") both had to be finished in New York.<sup>11</sup> So much for the southern connection in Aretha's case. So many exceptions and anomalies I suspect simply prove the rule that rigid essentialist definitions and classifications applied within the dynamic processes of culture formation run an ever increasing risk of being arbitrary.

Other critics and scholars approach soul music as a national phenomenon situated historically more than geographically. For Gene Santoro, jazz and popular music critic for the *Nation*, the story of soul music is primarily a tale of the rise and fall of a cultural movement, with music functioning at or near the center. Santoro's narrative revolves primarily around the success story of black entrepreneur Berry Gordy's conquest of the white pop music market with his Detroit-based Motown sound but with culturally parallel developments occurring simultaneously in other cities. The movement in question is of course the civil rights movement, which Santoro reads as progressing hopefully, as expressed in the crossover popularity of black music, until the late 1960s, when the political agenda of civil rights begins to fragment internally, while soul music becomes increasingly co-opted by commercial imperatives.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, British scholar Brian Ward describes a complex national, though regionally differentiated, process of cultural formation—the simultaneous urbanization of Southern rural black music and the secularization of black church music. And he reads the history of post–World War II black popular music as a running record of changes in mass black (and white) consciousness during the peak years of the civil rights and black power movements.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, ethnomusicology professor Portia Maultsby presents the story of soul music within the conceptual framework of the civil rights struggle, beginning with the sit-ins and freedom rides of the 1950s on

through the black power movement of the mid-1960s, after which soul music succumbs to the commercial corruption of disco.<sup>14</sup>

For Nelson George, the black music editor at *Billboard*, soul music is where the black audience went when it gave up on rock & roll. On George's reading of America's cultural path, rock & roll was already the commercial co-optation of black music and of the dream of cultural integration. When black people saw what had happened by the early 1960s to the music of Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, and Little Richard, when they saw what the industry and the audience for rock & roll had become and had come to demand, black listeners turned elsewhere. So where Guralnick and Santoro find reason to celebrate the breakdown of racial segregation in soul music, George identifies soul music with the resegregation of popular music culture.<sup>15</sup>

### The Originators of Soul Music

Geography, even if not definitive of the category, remains a key factor in understanding soul music, which is to say that distinctive regional stylistic variations are discernable and significant and that regional circumstances and peculiarities are important to history in all of its dimensions. There is good reason, for example, to consider Memphis, Tennessee, as an epicenter of the soul music explosion due in no small measure to its geographical location at one of America's most important crossroads. Memphis lies along the main route of northern migration on the eastern banks of the Mississippi River at the northern end of the Mississippi Delta where it intersects one of the main historical avenues of westward expansion, the present day route of Interstate Highway 40. Memphis was thus situated to become one of the major centers of emerging urban African American culture, easily on a par with the northern industrial destination cities of Chicago and Detroit. A number of innovations crucial to the history of American popular and vernacular music can be traced to this environment. These include jug band music, the first all black and the first all female radio formats, and of course rock & roll. Memphis' WDIA, the nation's first radio station to commit to a black audience with an all black on-air staff, not only established the economic viability of black-oriented radio, a model replicated nationwide, but thereby opened a crucial window for white listeners into black culture, especially black music. On the West Coast, for example, I listened regularly throughout the 1950s to Oakland's sister station KDIA. B. B. King began his career at WDIA, initially as host of a daily fifteen-minute broadcast and pitchman for the sponsor's product, in exchange for which he

was allowed to use airtime to promote his local performances and eventually to perform and record his own material. Where else but in Memphis would a frustrated country fiddle player like Jim Stewart stumble onto the materials and means of recording what would become known as the Stax sound?

However, as much as these developments reflect geography, they were also as often as not the results of trial and error and blind serendipitous encounters between unanticipated circumstances and unique and forceful individual personalities. For example, Stewart had no idea that the location he leased for his recording studio, an abandoned movie theater at the corner of College and McLemore Avenue, was in a neighborhood that would go on to supply so much of the talent that wrote and recorded at Stax and created the Stax sound. Sam Phillips, the founder of Memphis' Sun Records, as well as of the nation's first radio station with an all female on-air staff, Memphis' WHER, is perhaps the best example of the kind of improvisational go-for-broke entrepreneurship that found and developed markets for American popular music after World War II. But much the same can be said of Motown founder and owner Berry Gordy. An aspiring African American songwriter, Gordy set Motown up as a factory to produce hit records. Indeed, it functioned very much on the model of an industrial assembly line. Hit records meant to Gordy records that the emerging audience of young suburban white people would want to hear over and over. Motown did indeed work out a sophisticated and highly successful formula for the production of music aimed at white American teenagers. Guralnick's argument that as a consequence Motown's music tended to be more emotionally restrained, even "repressed"—in any case, less open and expressive emotionally than *real* (southern) soul music—may work for Diana Ross and the Supremes. But it certainly doesn't do much justice to Gladys Knight and the Pips. Santoro, like Guralnick, disdains the "black cotton candy" sound of the Supremes. But he discerns other, more "soulful" elements in the Motown sound, particularly the "enormous horsepower" of the Funk Brothers rhythm section, driven by the bebop-influenced innovations of bassist James Jamerson. And if Booker T and the MGs (the house band at Stax) was integrated, so too were the Funk Brothers. It is also worth noting that, in much the same way that members of the Beatles and Beach Boys studied each other, the Stax production teams studied Motown music through the laboratory provided by Estelle Axton's Satellite Record Shop according to Booker T's testimony.<sup>16</sup>

## The Meaning of Soul Music

The city of Memphis stood once again at the epicenter of the national movement when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated there in April of 1968, sparking violent uprisings in Detroit, Los Angeles, and other cities around the country and changing unalterably both the course of the civil rights struggle and the tone and content of soul music.

All five writers agree that stylistically soul music was a merger between gospel music and secular forms of popular music—blues, rhythm & blues, and rock & roll. All five agree that in terms of its social and political significance soul music transcended mere (disposable) pop fashion. It served as a kind of musical soundtrack to, and as such also as an integral part of, the American civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Where the accounts differ, we find as much as anything else, differing understandings and assessments of the civil rights struggle itself and of this crucial period of American cultural and political history. This is only to be expected given the points of agreement just mentioned.

## A Puzzle at the Heart of Soul Music

What intrigues me most as a philosopher about this otherwise obvious interpretive starting point is the strange tension inherent in the very notion of such a stylistic merger—a tension that manifested itself in a range of awkward responses to the music as it was being born. Was the birth of soul music a blessed event or an abomination? That depended on what you thought of the union of gospel music with rock & roll and rhythm & blues. And there were many strong feelings, not all of them favorable, especially among those best situated to recognize the gospel influences for what they were. Even stranger, as we shall see further in chapter 3, this same tension goes back to the birth of gospel music itself.

As an illustration, consider a passage from an essay entitled “Holy Blues: The Gospel Tradition,” by Mark A. Humphrey, in which the author finds this tension in the early history of both blues and gospel music.

“Holy blues” is an evident oxymoron. . . . Holy blues is oxymoronic if we believe blues to be “the devil’s music,” a tenet held by many “reformed” blues singers and the “saints” of some African-American churches. Blues is unholy, and sacred music unbluesy. Blues celebrates the pleasures of the flesh, while sacred music celebrates release from worldly bondage. One is oil to the other’s holy water; [they are] unmixable.”<sup>17</sup>

Those who subscribe to the view Humphrey is characterizing here presuppose some distinction between spiritually healthy music appropriate to the work of the church and depraved or demonic music. And they are concerned both to prevent corruption of the healthy kind and to discourage exposure, especially among the young and impressionable, to the demonic kind. On this view, soul music would be taboo. If blues is unholy then rock & roll must also be considered a corrupting influence. After all, rock & roll is the bastard offspring of the blues and hillbilly country music. A marriage between rhythm & blues or rock & roll, with its undistinguished lineage, and the music of the *church*?! It's unthinkable! Out of the question! And yet it's exactly what happened. It's exactly what soul music is historically and stylistically.

Now one might respond, "Where exactly is the puzzle here? The view that the blues and gospel music represent or express irreconcilable social forces is hardly refuted by deriving from it the observation that soul music breaks a taboo or two. The history of American popular music is in some ways a history of broken taboos (e.g., the taboo against interracial adolescent audiences). And so is the history of the American civil rights movement (e.g., the taboo against interracial marriage). So where exactly is this view in trouble?"

The view gets into interesting trouble, or perhaps I should say "exposes a conundrum," precisely where it is historically most accurate. It locates the origins of the taboo in the central institutions of African American culture, particularly in the African American church. Note the irony: there is no institution more central to the American civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century than the African American church. According to this widespread view, again paraphrasing Humphrey, the twin populist voices of African American culture, blues and gospel music, lay on opposite sides of "a dualist divide crossed only *at peril to one's soul*."<sup>18</sup> According to this view the choices available within African American culture were mutually exclusive: "either blues or gospel music, God or the Devil, Heaven or Hell."<sup>19</sup> So soul music, which *is*, after all, a mixture of gospel music and rhythm & blues or rock & roll, happens according to this view *in spite of* one of African American culture's most central institutions. Implausible though it may be on its face, there is a good deal of historical truth in this assessment, to which we shall return in chapter 3.

But notice above all that in dividing music into the categories of the divine and the demonic it seems to be presupposed that music has the power to affect the condition of the soul in both positive and negative ways. This is a commonplace idea. Most folks don't even blink when at-

tention is drawn to it. They have long since accepted it. But it is nevertheless a very intriguing idea from the point of view of philosophy, meaning that a philosopher will find a lot to wonder about in it.

## Metaphysics and the Soul

As a professional philosopher, I am dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom. In my academic training in the discipline of philosophy I was taught to be humble, and careful, but patient and tenacious in this pursuit. In practice the very first thing this means is that you need to develop a high tolerance for unanswered questions.

It is well said that philosophy begins in wonder. When it comes to the soul there is ever so much to wonder about—starting with consciousness. What *is* consciousness? How does what we call “consciousness” arise? What happens to me when I fall asleep? What will happen to me when I die? I like to think that most of us begin wondering about these things very early in life, long before we find out that there is an academic discipline called philosophy dedicated to pondering such questions. In any case, these are the kinds of questions that lead people to talk of the soul.

As a philosopher, I should point out that talking of the soul doesn’t so much answer these questions as multiply them. What *is* the soul? If I “have” a soul, does that mean that “I” am somehow distinct from “it”? Or am I “identical with” my soul? In which case, what sense does it make for me to say that I *have* a soul or even to speak of *my* soul? I can point to my foot or my nose or my mustache. But where is my soul? Does my soul inhabit my body? Can it escape my body? Or does it animate my body by remote control? Is my soul something distinct from my mind (whatever that might be)? What is my soul up to while I’m sleeping? Will my soul survive my physical death? And so on and on indefinitely. I don’t know the answers to any of these questions. But I’ve developed an above average tolerance for unanswered questions, which is a good thing because the soul ranks right up there among the oldest and most formidable problems of philosophy.

The philosophical problem of the soul encompasses a host of questions, each ranking in its own right among the classical problems of philosophy. In addition to those already mentioned or alluded to, there is the problem of freedom of the will. In what sense and to what extent do we freely choose any course of action we might take? For example, in my preface I said that for me this book is “a matter of inner necessity.” Did I freely choose those words? And now I find myself sitting and staring at

the computer screen, cursor blinking at me as I struggle for words. Am I freely choosing these words? Oh, and by the way, what difference does it make whether we freely choose our words or not? And why is there *so much struggle* involved in working out what I have to say?

Then there's the problem of personal identity: What is this "I" that survives from one moment to the next, throughout all of the evolving stages of life from birth to death, integrating all of this lived experience as "mine"? Is it the same "I" that keeps getting in the way of my writing, editing my composition even as I compose it, interrupting my flow with questions and objections and alternative phrasings, going off on tangents, till I have to rein myself back in? How many of "me" are there? Questions enough to make one dizzy!

Although I'm used to unanswered questions, the problem of the soul is an unusually deep bundle of them. One thing that deepens the problem is that at the outset both the reality status *and* the essential nature of the soul are up for grabs. When people talk or write about the soul, often they start from the assumption that what they are talking or writing about is *real*—and go on to say various things about it. As a philosopher, I cannot start from this assumption. My starting point is wonder. For me the reality of the soul is, at least at the beginning, another one of those unanswered questions. Is the soul something "real"?

Wondering about this question, it occurs to me that it would help if I knew how to identify or define the soul. Consulting a dictionary, I find an etymology tracing the word through the Middle English *soul* to the Old English *sawol* and the Germanic *saiwalo* to the Gothic *saiwala*, whose origin is uncertain. There is an interpretive tradition in which the word originally meant "coming from or belonging to the sea." This reading is based in part on mythology, according to which the soul's itinerary immediately before birth and after death is the sea, and on etymological convergence with the word *sea*.<sup>20</sup> It is apparent that in all of this the metaphysical reality of the soul as a spiritual entity that animates an individual human life, while being distinct from and existing independent of the person's body, is presupposed. This etymology is followed by a list of meanings to be found in conventional modern and contemporary usage.<sup>21</sup>

- 1) The animating principle, or actuating cause of an individual life, conceived of as an immaterial entity distinct from but temporally co-existent with the body
- 2) The spiritual principle embodied in human beings, regarded as immortal, separable from the body at death, and susceptible to happiness or misery in a future state

- 3) The spiritual principle embodied in all rational and spiritual beings, or the universe
- 4) A person's total self
- 5) A moving spirit
- 6) The disembodied spirit of a deceased person
- 7) The moral and emotional nature of the human being
- 8) Spiritual or moral force

These first eight meanings are given as conceptually primary.<sup>22</sup> In conventional usage, as in the etymology, the metaphysical reality of the soul as a spiritual entity animating an individual human life while being distinct from and existing independent of the body is presupposed.

Someone looking for shortcuts might be tempted by the notion that the meaning, now that we know what it is, settles both the question of the soul's essential nature and the question of its metaphysical reality status. (How can you coherently deny, or even question the reality of something whose reality is presupposed in the very meaning of the word?) There is a famous argument in the history of philosophy and theology that starts from the meaning of a word and arrives at the metaphysical reality of a spiritual entity. In the Ontological Argument the word(s) are "Supreme Being" and the spiritual entity is God.<sup>23</sup> From the moment it was presented by Saint Anselm in the eleventh century, it has confounded logic. Those who have found the argument persuasive can't seem to agree as to precisely how the argument goes, while those who find it unpersuasive can't seem to agree as to precisely what is wrong with it. If someone were to propose a similar argument from the meaning of the word *soul* as disclosed in the dictionary to the metaphysical reality of the soul, it would be easy enough to see how the argument goes. It goes in a circle. I should like to do better.

### The Soul: A "Minimalist" Definition

If I go back to my own experience and start there, I am arrested by the following observations.

- A. I am a conscious, or sentient, being. What I intend this to mean is that I am "aware of things both inside and outside of me"—and that I manifest this awareness in and through the use of my body.
- B. I am aware that to some limited extent I am able to focus and direct my attention and awareness at will. If I cannot remember precisely how long I have been aware of this ability, I am quite sure that I have grown more acutely aware of it with age.

- C. I am aware that to some limited extent I have been able to focus and direct my attention onto this process of focusing and directing my own attention and awareness. I am able, in other words, to reflect on my own awareness.
- D. I am convinced that to some limited extent I have been able to develop, to cultivate and refine, these abilities.

So, if I may generalize from my own case, I shall assume that consciousness can be focused, directed, reflected upon, and developed to some extent at will.

- E. Next, as I observed at the very beginning, I am driven to engage in this “soul-searching” enterprise—to exercise, reflect upon, and develop my awareness—by some sort of inner imperative.
- F. Finally, I am aware also of resistance—of obstacles arising at times within me—obstructing this enterprise.

Taken together these last two observations indicate that from time to time I find myself “divided” internally and engaged in some form of inner struggle that must somehow be resolved in order for me to act.

What is it in me that is aware of these things? What is it in me that is driven to pursue these inquiries? What is the source in me of the inner imperative that drives me on? What is it in me that resists and obstructs? What is it that resolves these inner conflicts? Shall I call this my soul? Or am I being seduced and misled by these very questions—and the awkward way in which they are worded—into searching for and positing something (some *thing*) that has no inherent substantial reality? If I try to sneak up on my self and catch a glimpse of the “it,” I meet with no success. If I try to get “above” or “behind” my own awareness to observe whatever “it” is that is aware, I am never “quick enough” to observe the observer. There is nowhere I can go and look outside of my own awareness—and there is always nothing there. Perhaps this is because *I am* the observer and I am always “here.” If I reflect on my thinking and writing, again I am unable to maneuver myself into a position where I can directly observe the inner agent at work. Wherever you go, there you are. If I try to observe the observer, I am like a dog chasing its tail except that the dog can at least *see* the tail.

I am going to need the word *soul* to get anywhere in this essay. My topics would be utterly unintelligible without it. And the word will have to mean *something*. Suppose I adopt the expression “my soul” as a way of naming the locus of my awareness. This is, I take it, simply a way of talking about myself as a conscious, or sentient, being. My experience is con-

stantly unfolding in time, and my awareness is always situated in the present. This is what is meant by “locus of awareness”: a point moving through a continuum. And suppose I adopt the same expression “my soul” as a way of naming the agent of my voluntary behavior, assuming for the sake of the hypothesis that I am capable of voluntary action.

Notice that in calling both the locus of my awareness and the agent of my voluntary behavior by the same name I am implying that the agent of my voluntary behavior is identical to the locus of my awareness. Not that this implication strains intuition at all. I already call the locus of my awareness and the agent of my voluntary behavior by the same name. It is “I” who am aware of my experience and it is “I” who do the things I do. But this identity is crucial from the point of view of morality in that conscious awareness of oneself as a voluntary agent is a necessary condition of moral responsibility.

Some may wonder what this “moral responsibility” business is and where it came from all of a sudden? I find it in observation E above. When I look into the nature of the “inner imperative” that drives me (or anyone) to engage in “soul-searching,” it is immediately apparent that the imperative is a “moral” one. Suppose someone asked: Why are you troubling yourself with this soul-searching? What does it matter whether you “know yourself” or not? Try to formulate a coherent response to such questions without a conceptual framework involving some such notion as moral responsibility. See how far you get.

Again, if I may generalize, I will use the expression “the soul” as a way of naming the locus of awareness and the agent of voluntary action in *any* conscious, or sentient, being. This way of speaking is roughly in line with conventional usage but with two important qualifications. First, it may strike some as remarkably inclusive in that it arguably applies to at least some nonhuman organisms. Second, and more important, it is also minimalist in that it leaves most of that swirling myriad of questions about consciousness and the soul unaddressed and unanswered.

### Spiritualist Metaphysics

Let’s go back to the metaphysical question of the soul’s “reality status.” Now most of the people I know, if they assign any meaning at all to the word *soul*, believe that there are such things as souls and that we each have one and that all of our individual souls are “real.” Just because you can’t *see* the soul, or find it in physical space, doesn’t mean that there is no such thing or that such things are not real. The soul is a “spiritual”—not a physical—entity. For the moment let me call this the “popular

view.” If we needed a fancy name for it, we could call it metaphysical spiritualism. It is the view presupposed in the definitive etymologies and conventional idioms compiled in the dictionary. When people talk this way about their souls, they almost always have more in mind than simply a locus of awareness and an agency of voluntary action. Adopting the minimalist usage of the words *my soul* specified above might be understood as analogous to adopting the word *zero* to refer to “the additive identity of any integer.”<sup>24</sup> Does defining the word *zero* in this way commit one to a belief in some “entity” corresponding to the word and existing in some ephemeral realm of being? Surely not without additional reasoning. So, although I’ll carry on using the expressions “my soul” and “the soul” to refer to the locus of awareness and the voluntary agent in myself and other sentient beings, notice that I’ve not put my money down about any spiritual realms or entities yet. Why do I hold back? I hold back in deference to another side of the metaphysical issue and in particular to several movements and traditions within the history of philosophy, each of which, in its way, is at odds with metaphysical spiritualism.

### Skeptical Empiricism

First, let me present the empiricist tradition in Western philosophy. Stated as simply as possible, empiricism is the view that sensory experience is the source of all knowledge. Empiricism must of course be refined and elaborated in various ways to accommodate and adapt to the limitations of everyday sensory experience. These include the apparent unreliability of the senses (the problem of illusion, etc.) and the fact that some important phenomena, such as causation, are inaccessible to direct sensory experience. So, for example, science investigates causation and other phenomena that cannot be verified directly in sensory experience by means of methodical experimentation. But the experimental method in science begins in experience, applies reasoning to generalize and extrapolate from experience, and then tests the products of that reasoning against experience, using instruments that extend and enhance human sensory capacity. Thus science, although it speculates and reaches far beyond ordinary sensory experience, is nevertheless fundamentally empirical. The empiricist tradition is basically skeptical of any claims that cannot in principle be tested in some such way. Thus, in the twentieth century a philosophical movement known as “scientific empiricism” (also known as “logical positivism”) expounded a critique of all transcendental and speculative metaphysical ideas, saying in effect that

even to talk about something that lies in principle beyond the reach of empirical science would be meaningless.

### Eliminative Materialism

Following in this tradition is a contemporary theory known as eliminative materialism, which holds that all of our inner states of awareness and intention are really nothing but as yet inadequately understood brain chemistry in action. No need to posit a mental entity (a “mind”) as separate and distinct from the body, much less a spiritual entity (or “soul”). Thus, even though I have held back from metaphysical spiritualism, eliminative materialists would no doubt be dismissing a lot of what I have offered as commonsense observations about my own experience (expressed as best I can in commonly understood terms). I talk about consciousness and freedom of the will because talking about them helps me express and make sense of my experience. But I don’t have much in the way of theory to explain what awareness is or what volition might be or where they take place or to account for the mechanisms of their occurrence. Eliminative materialists believe in science. They count on the sciences, in this case neurology, neurobiology, neurochemistry, and other brain sciences, to eventually yield complete and satisfying explanations of all the things I observe in my own experience. The eventual emergence of mature scientific accounts of brain function would, in the hopeful view of the eliminative materialist, eliminate the need for us to talk about ourselves and our experiences in the familiar but ontologically cumbersome idioms of folk psychology, as I have been doing. “Ontologically cumbersome” means that our familiar ways of talking tempt us to believe in things that aren’t real—like a soul or a locus of consciousness or a voluntary agent. And so, according to this way of looking at things, believing in the reality of the soul is like believing in unicorns or the tooth fairy.<sup>25</sup>

### Buddhist Metaphysics

Then there is the Buddhist teaching known as Anatta, or the doctrine of “no soul,” according to which we are encouraged to carefully examine our experience and notice that all phenomena are changing and ephemeral. We will therefore not find anything with which to identify the self or soul as a permanent and unchanging entity. This teaching contains striking similarities to elements in the Western philosophical

tradition just discussed, with the interesting difference that where empiricism is primarily focused on the “outer” or “real” world of intersubjective experience, the Buddhist teaching is concerned primarily with introspection. This teaching also opens into a very important puzzle in Buddhism. The puzzle is how to reconcile the doctrine of no soul with the doctrines of karma and reincarnation. Karma is the doctrine that the consequences of one’s actions will be revisited upon one, if not in this life then in a future life. But then, how are reincarnation and karma possible if there is no soul to pass from one lifetime to the next? In the accounts of the Buddha’s teaching that are passed down, the Buddha kept his silence when he was asked “Is there a soul?” and also kept his silence when asked “Is there not a soul?” Evidently a high tolerance for unanswered questions is useful to one who is trying to progress along this path.

### The Immortality Question

Thus far I have effectively ignored the elephant in the room by skirting the immortality question. Does the soul survive the death of the body? Generally speaking, metaphysical spiritualism responds to the immortality question with some version of the following story. Each individual soul entity passes through some indefinitely large number of lifetimes, of which the lifetime we’re in now is but one, an “incarnation,” meaning a lifetime spent in a physical body. There are many stories about what happens to an individual soul beyond the bounds of a given physical incarnation. All such stories offer answers to three of the questions that haunt mankind from birth to death: Where did I come from? What will happen to me when I die? And what is the meaning or purpose of this incarnation? Generally this last question is answered by saying something like this. An incarnation is an opportunity for self-expression and learning in preparation for the afterlife. What one does in the course of one’s lifetime, and what one learns and accomplishes in the development of one’s individual soul as a result of one’s lifetime experience and actions, determines the course of one’s life to come.

The philosophical problem that arises here is that, because what we are wondering about lies radically beyond the bounds of lived experience, it is essentially a matter of conjecture. What I mean by “radically beyond the bounds” is that the tools and procedures we would normally use to test and validate claims and conjectures about matters beyond our lived experience don’t even begin to work here. If I were interested in the history of my birthplace before I was born, I could find out a great

deal by going to the museum, the library, and other archives and by consulting my elders. If I wanted to check and verify the information I was getting, I could do that as well. Similarly, if I were planning to travel to an unfamiliar part of the world, I could find out a great deal about the geography, the seasonal weather, the local attractions and customs, the regional cuisine, the overnight accommodations, and so on and plan my journey well in advance. How can I find out about my soul's journey before and after its physical incarnation in me?

I should point out that a belief in the reality of the soul is not required in order to feel the weight of the immortality question. Nor does the question need to be worded in terms of the soul. Does awareness cease at the moment of death? And indeed, the questions that most deeply motivate the immortality question—Where did I come from? What will happen to me when I die? And what is the meaning or purpose of this incarnation?—are each and all agnostic about the soul. For the time being, I shall have to leave all of these questions open and unanswered, and simply resort to my “minimalist definition.” This is a good time to remember the importance of a high tolerance for unanswered questions.

### Philosophy of Music

The puzzles I find at the heart of soul music are based on the commonplace but philosophically intriguing notion that music has the power to affect the condition of the soul in both positive and negative ways. To get a sense of the philosophical intrigue, one good place to start is with the question of how we are supposed to determine what kinds or instances or performances of music are the demonic ones. Is death metal demonic? What about christian death metal? Or would that be as oxymoronic as “holy blues” is supposed to be? Or does music's demonic quotient depend on something other than such ill-defined music-marketing niche labels as these? Are there any criteria or objective standards we can appeal to in deciding controversial cases?

Also philosophically intriguing is the notion of a “collective soul.” If the essential nature and metaphysical reality of the soul both remain open questions, what clear sense can we assign to such expressions as the “soul of a nation” or the “soul of a people?” And finally we must face the question of just how music works upon the soul, whatever the soul may be. How do music and the soul interact? What is it in us individually and collectively that is so profoundly affected by music? And what is it in the music that accounts for these effects?

That music should have elaborate and systematic implications reaching deep into the soul and its travails has proven to be an intuitively beguiling yet elusive notion shrouded in esoterica. And this is where Plato comes in. As we shall see in chapters 4 and 6, Plato's *Republic* is organized around a central analogy between the individual and the collective soul, it contains fascinating commentary about the crucial value and delicate nature of musical education in the cultivation of character, and it presents Plato's unique metaphysically based moral psychology as a "Harmonics of the Soul." But before we get to those parts of the labyrinth, we have other excursions on our agenda. First we go in search of the devil, and then we go to church.