CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

KNOWLEDGE, TEACHING AND WISDOM

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This book arose out of a Summer Institute on Knowledge, Teaching, and Wisdom supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The principal idea behind the institute was to combine historical and systematic investigation of knowledge and wisdom with a concern for pedagogical application. The institute activity was intense and the participants put in long hours presenting their own work and interacting with each other and a large number of distinguished lecturers. This book contains some of the fruits of their inquiries. It is especially pleasing for us to present this diverse current group of philosophers undertaking the project of bringing together historical and systematic investigation, which was characteristic of the great historical figures of the past from Aristotle to Bertrand Russell, and which runs against the current of present day specialization. Before we turn to their thoughts, however, we will present, in this introduction, some of our own conceptions of the interconnections, of the web of history, analysis, knowledge and value.

I. HUMAN WISDOM AND THE ANCIENTS

As we did at the Institute, we will start with Socrates and Plato. Here, at the beginning of things, we find the connection between knowledge and wisdom, between epistemology and a theory of value. At Apology 20c4, Socrates begins his account to his jurors of how he got a reputation for wisdom. His friend Chairephon went to the oracle at Delphi and asked if anyone was wiser than Socrates. The oracle answered "no." When Chairephon told Socrates about this episode, Socrates says he was astonished—he was not aware of having any wisdom, great or small. He goes on to tell of how he came to recognize the meaning of the oracle, which he takes to be this: Socrates is wisest because he alone recognizes his own lack of wisdom.

As he completes his defense before the jury, it becomes clear that the wisdom he and all others lack is not identical to just any sort of knowledge. Twice in the Apology Socrates explicitly claims to have some significant knowledge: he knows that it is evil and shameful to do wrong and to disobey his superior, whether
god or man (29b6-7), and he also knows that certain penalties would be evil (37b7-8). In the Euthydemus, Socrates admits that he knows many things; unfortunately, however, they are all only little things (293b7-8). Indeed, knowledge of some things turns out to be entirely common: in the Ion we learn that there are things that anyone could know (532d8-e3). So not all knowledge brings wisdom, for Socrates.

But Socrates also recognize that some knowledge does bring wisdom. No doubt this is why, as he tells his jurors about his understanding of the oracle, Socrates uses the word for wisdom (σοφία) and a number of the words for knowledge (in this passage, various forms of the verbs, εἰδὼ and ἐπιστομαί) interchangeably. Socrates tests those who have a reputation for wisdom to see what they know. In one group of his fellow citizens, Socrates finds both knowledge and wisdom: the craftsmen, he says, know many fine things (πολλά καί καλά ἐπιστομαένων—22d2), and in virtue of what they knew, they were indeed wiser (σοφώτεροι—22d4) than Socrates. But because the craftsmen thought they were very wise in other, most important matters, in which they were, in fact, not wise, their folly outweighed their wisdom. This is why Socrates, with only the "human wisdom" contained in his recognition of his own ignorance, was still the wisest of men.

In the Apology and elsewhere in Plato's portrait of Socrates in the early dialogues, we find the link between knowledge and wisdom made in virtue of a conception of judgment.1 The difference between common or ordinary knowledge—which does not make its possessor wise—and the kind of knowledge which does make its possessor wise is that the latter, but not the former, sort of knowledge makes its possessor into a qualified judge of his or her subject matter, an expert. This is where we find what is called the "τεχνική-analogy" ("craft-analogy"): the wise person has the skill or ability to make all of the variety of judgments only an expert can make. Not all sorts of knowledge give this sort of ability or skill.

The most significant sorts of judgments the wise expert can make are those involving evaluation, and it is evaluative judgments that reveal the authentic expert (and, for Socrates, expose inauthentic claimants). The craftsmen had some wisdom, insofar as they had their crafts; but regarding the greatest things—the values by which one might pursue the best life (elsewhere, Socrates identifies these as "prudence, truth, and [the welfare of] the soul"—Apology 29e1-2)—these same craftsmen are culpably ignorant. They have the conceit, but not the reality, of wisdom.

It is in the understanding of value, then, and the ability to evaluate as an expert, that knowledge is made wisdom. And this understanding of value is not an addition to knowledge, it is itself the only knowledge truly worth pursuing, for Socrates—any knowledge without this is common and trifling. To know, in this most important sense, is to perceive and to become expert in judging value.