CHAPTER 1

The Love of Wisdom and the Consolations of Fallibility

In a revolutionary shift made possible by unmasking the myth of the given and undermining the metaphysics of presence, philosophers have come to recognize during the last few decades the inescapability of interpretation and the centrality of its role in the constitution of meaning. Whether we speak of alternative conceptual frameworks or hermeneutical circles, we are now very much aware of the fact that we operate in different universes, are governed by different paradigms, play different language games; we know our thoughts have been shaped by different myths, and are grounded in different presuppositions. Difference is now the starting point of philosophical discussion, and the pluralism it entails promises to remain our more or less permanent condition. This sense of living in the midst of a multiplicity of worlds, indeed an endlessly multipliable number of different universes, is characteristic not just of philosophy but of post-modern culture in general; philosophy has simply helped us become self-conscious of it so that we can now recognize ourselves *as* post-moderns, cut loose from the roots of the given, and traveling (more like tourists than pilgrims) from one universe of meaning to another.

The question I seek to address directly in this chapter, and at least indirectly in all the chapters of this book, is what it might mean to seek philosophical wisdom when one is situated in the midst of such a world—or rather such a multiplicity of worlds. If philosophers do not say much about wisdom these days, if it is not often taken seriously as an ideal to be sought or even as a theme to be examined, perhaps that is because the pluralism of post-modern culture makes this cardinal virtue of our intellectual tradition seem

impossible to achieve and therefore irrelevant to us. Why would we seek to know "not only . . . what follows from the first principles, but . . . the first principles"[1] themselves, when so many of us are convinced that there are no such originary truths, only presuppositions that govern different universes of discourse? As Richard Rorty has helped us to realize, the philosopher who thinks there is no knowledge to be had outside our conceptual frameworks and hermeneutical circles cannot continue to conceive of himself as a philosopher in the traditional sense; for, lacking any originary wisdom, all he can offer is advice about which conceptual framework best suits our practical purposes.[2]

And yet might it not be precisely now, in this pluralistic situation, when we no longer hope to ground our interpretations in the immediately given, that we have an opportunity to rediscover wisdom as an intellectual virtue because we are in a unique position to appreciate how lost we are without it? Like the sophist of old, the pragmatist would have us believe that, having given up on the given as an arche on which to build a universe of meaning, we have no basis in terms of which to evaluate the rival paradigms, the alternative frameworks of interpretation, which we find at our disposal. This is to presume that the given gave us the only access we ever had to wisdom, and that, having lost that access, we have no other open to us. But to the degree that it jumps to this conclusion, a pragmatism like Rorty's still remains profoundly under the sway of the myth of the given which it purports to have demythologized. For it still looks back to the lost myth as the one and only chance we ever had to be wise. In this book I will be trying to explore the opposite possibility—the possibility that by no longer looking to the given as its source, we might be able to take wisdom more seriously than we once did, since we will no longer mistakenly presume that the given can give us a basis from which wisdom can be derived. The demythologizing (deconstruction) of the given, I suggest, does not finally prove that philosophical wisdom is unachievable, as Rorty has claimed; the end of the myth is less like closing a door than it is like opening one. My purpose here is to put my hand on the latch to it, not to claim wisdom but to suggest that it is still possible—and profoundly wise—to aspire to it.

TRADITIONAL WISDOM AND ITS POST-MODERN UNMASKING

I did not mean to imply by quoting it that Aristotle's description of the wise person in the *Nicomachean Ethics* lays down the unrevisable parameters in terms of which any fruitful inquiry into the nature of philosophical wisdom must be carried out. In fact, we can understand the apparent impossibility of such wisdom in post-modern culture only by appreciating how profoundly this culture calls into question the parameters in terms of which Aristotle framed his description.

Philosophical wisdom, Aristotle argues, "must be intuitive reason combined with scientific knowledge."[3] We do not consider the specialist in a particular technical or theoretical field to be wise in the philosophical sense, for such specialized expertise is compatible with ignorance concerning everything outside its purview.[4] We consider a person to have such wisdom only if he[5] has an understanding of the whole *as* a whole, and that requires an understanding of the principles that govern everything—indeed, an understanding of the principles of being as such. Such principles provide scientific knowledge with a rational ground and thus enable it to justify its claim to be scientific; but precisely because they constitute the basis of science itself, such principles cannot be scientifically demonstrated themselves. They can only be grasped by "intuitive reason." These originary truths provide the Archimedian basis on which the infrastructure of meaning is reared, and for that reason they are located neither inside nor outside the system they ground; they constitute, as it were, the very baseline where system and ground meet.[6] (If the first principles were located *within* the parameters of the conceptual framework which they are meant to ground, they would be conditional on and therefore relative to the framework instead of providing it the unconditional, absolute basis it needs, if its truth claims are to be justified. If the first principles were *external* to and detached from the conceptual framework they are meant to ground, the latter would have no firm and secure foundation on which to rest.)

From this Aristotlean point of view, the philosophically wise person is distinguished from his common-sensical counterpart by

the fact that the former grasps the first principles which govern the universe of meaning inside which the latter moves unknowingly. The philosophically wise person possesses a masterful hold on the whole by virtue of the fact that he possesses an intuitive knowledge of its guiding principles. It might be mentioned here parenthetically that the privileged status of these grounding principles as the foundation of knowledge was transferred, in our Western educational tradition, to those classical texts which were thought to be their primary locus. To be philosophically wise thus came to be associated with being not just a reader but a master of these privileged texts, the most privileged of which were the texts of metaphysics since the intuitions contained therein made accessible the principles of being itself.

If the contemporary debate about the privileged status of these texts is often acrimonious, it is because losing them uproots our tradition at its source, removes its Archimedian principle, creates an-arche, deconstructs the whole universe of (our privileged) culture. Losing them seems like a betrayal of the whole purpose of "higher" education as traditionally understood—the pursuit of wisdom itself. But to make that traditional center hold, or even to shore up its ruins, one would have to deny that our culture is only one among many and affirm that our primal intuitions are superior to those that ground universes of meaning other than our own. And how could one go about making a case for such superiority when the very principle whose superiority one intends to prove would have to be intuited at the beginning because it alone could provide a basis for one's argument? The more one reflects on that paradox, the more one is led to suspect that the real but repressed purpose of every universe of meaning is to construct a system of defenses around a primal prejudice which is treated as an absolute principle so that its ungrounded character can be disguised. How wise is someone who masters a whole universe of meaning but does not question its basis, so that he accepts as immediately given whatever its primal intuitions present to him as obvious?

Now if it is true that what lies at the basis of every universe of meaning, every "culture" in the classical sense of the term, is a prejudice disguised as an intuition, only a person able to unmask such disguises will have the wisdom not to be taken in by them. To

learn how to unmask, how to deconstruct conceptual frameworks, how to undermine the privileged position of their founding principles, one must free one's thinking from their confining parameters. That, I take it, is the purpose of what Ricoeur calls the hermeneutic of suspicion[7] which, far from being a new conceptual framework, another hermeneutical circle, deconstructs all such structures at their very base by exposing their groundlessness. The adept practitioner of this hermeneutic, far from making any claim to the kind of wisdom sought by those operating within classical culture and its unquestioned universe of meaning, argues that such wisdom is itself really a disguise for something worse than ignorance; for ignorance is only lack of knowledge but prejudice makes its lack of knowledge the dogmatic starting point of a whole system.

However, the person who has fully appreciated the import of the hermeneutic of suspicion will not pretend that it enables one to stand outside all particular cultures or universes of meaning as an unprejudiced observer of them. For one would be capable of such "objective" observation only if one attained the privileged position which the hermeneutic of suspicion argues to be impossible. According to it, there are no privileged positions, no unprejudiced observations, no pure intuitions, no direct grasping of the given, no primary texts.[8] There are only disguised prejudices and undisguised ones. The hermeneutic of suspicion teaches one to glory in one's prejudices, to be naked in one's folly, instead of trying to sublimate it into wisdom. The person who is wise in this postmodern sense is not held fast by the constraining limits of one particular universe, nor does he pretend to have achieved a transcendent vantage point outside all our universes; he lives rather in the very midst of them, aware of their irreducible multiplicity, ready to use them but not believe in them, not depressed by his rootlessness but happy to enjoy the freedom it gives him because it enables him to be at his ease in every world he enters. His pragmatic extemporizing makes him a perfect counterimage to the philosophically wise man of classical culture whose intuition of eternal verities gave him a fixed, immovable vantage point unaffected by any shifts in human affairs. The person who is wise in the postmodern sense is characterized precisely by his openness to such

shifts, his willingness to be historicized, his desire to be all too human instead of vainly seeking to be godlike.

THE FLIGHT TO INTUITION

In the hope of leavening the bitter debate between these conflicting paradigms of human wisdom, I would now like to discuss the issue which I have suggested separates them: the possibility of intuition. As John Sallis has explained with remarkable lucidity,[9] there is a profound connection between the privileged status accorded to intuition and what post-modern philosophers have come to call the metaphysics of presence. Understanding this connection may enable us to restate the post-modern suspicion of classical wisdom in a way which sheds more light on the matter than the hermeneutic of suspicion is itself able to do.

Intuition, whether empirical (the arche of positivism) or eidetic (the arche of idealism from Plato to Husserl), is made possible by the full availability of what-is-to-be-known to the knower. To put it in a way that prescinds from the differences between the empirical and the eidetic, intuition can only occur if the to-be-known shows itself, presents itself to the knower without withholding anything or letting anything come between it and him. In other words, intuition depends on there being something that is wholly and immediately given; for it is nothing but our grasp of the given in its givenness. On the side of the knower, intuition requires a wordless receptivity, a willingness to let the given reveal itself, a pure contemplative openness incompatible with any pragmatic concern. Intuition occurs when the pure seeing of the knower recognizes what-is-given as being just what it shows itself to be. In that moment of perfect seeing, seen and seer, known and knower, become one; the knower experiences the pure presence of what is present to him in the present.

What makes such an intuition so desirable to us? Why do we find ourselves so often hoping that the eros of inquiry will be consummated by a perfect seeing? Why are we so devoted to achieving that ocular ideal, that privileged moment of unmediated vision, that ecstasy of presence? Why do we think it would make

up for all our false starts and detours, all our wrong turns and misreadings? What sets intuition apart from other cognitive acts and makes us strive toward it as toward the shining light of truth itself? The privileged status of this mode of knowing derives, I think, from its purported unsurpassability, from the fact that the object to be known could never be more perfectly accessible to us than it would be if it were fully present to us in the present without any intermediary between it and ourselves. No grasp of the object could possibly be more re-presentative, no hold on it possibly more secure. It would seem that *whatever is revealed to us in such an ecstasy of presence could not possibly be wrong.* How could we ever discover an intuition to be wrong except by achieving a more accurate, more penetrating view of the object it pretended to reveal? But no view of the object could possibly get us closer to it than we are when, through an intuition, we become one with it in a moment of unmediated vision.

Moreover, if it is true that intuition places us in the unmediated presence of what-is-to-be-known, it would seem to provide us our most direct and dependable access to being itself. For how can we withhold the word being from that which becomes accessible to us in a transparent moment of vision? To what might the word "being" more properly apply? Indeed, the reason why intuition can promise us that it will not be wrong is because it claims to provide us a clean and decisive breakthrough to *being as it is in itself,* a direct contact with being that will enable us to finally transcend our merely subjective images and conceptions of it. Since no more intimate familiarity can be conceived than that which purportedly occurs in intuition, it is only natural to equate being with what is known through it. If intuition is the supreme mode of knowing, being must be identical to what it makes accessible—the given in its givenness, the presence of what is present in the present.

However, we would not give intuition so privileged a status or be so drawn by its promise of an insight immune to error, unless we were already aware of the possibility of being wrong and deeply disturbed by that possibility. We would not be in need of the breakthrough to being which it purports to make possible if we did not already feel cut off from being and in danger of not ever knowing it. Our awareness of this possibility and our dread of it begin to

emerge as soon as we begin to realize that there are many possible answers to each of the questions wonder drives us to raise. The very multiplicity of these possible answers requires our prefacing each of them with the word "maybe." To think means precisely to let this array of possible answers emerge, and to grope through the confusion it engenders. Each answer opens up to us a possible universe different from its alternatives. To consider any one of them means precisely to entertain it as a possibility, to conceive of it as something that might be the right answer to one's question. We are tempted to think that such a multiplicity of interpretations, such a plurality of possible worlds, is symptomatic of a particular historical condition, that it is uniquely characteristic of post-modern culture. But, in fact, this wealth of interpretations, far from being an aberration, is engendered by the process of thinking itself, whenever it responds to the compelling exigencies of its questions. The only way to prevent the emergence of this plurality, and the confusion it inevitably creates, would be to inhibit the momentum natural to the dynamism of thought.

Now precisely because it leads us to consider a multiplicity of possible answers to every one of our questions, the act of thinking itself makes it possible for us to be wrong. By enabling us to conceive of a plurality of interpretations, any one of which might answer our question, thinking creates in our minds not just a distinction but a gulf between all our possible answers and the real one. The same eros that drives us to ask a question in the first place, and explore possible answers to it, makes us want to find the answer that traverses the distance, spans the gulf, crosses the abyss which separates us from that toward which the whole process is directed: that which is to become known to us through inquiry, that which alone deserves to be called "being." As soon as one asks a question, one directs oneself toward the answer as toward a destination to be reached by crossing the distance that separates one's question from the insight that would provide a resolution to it. But it is precisely the existence of that destination and the distance separating one from it that makes falling into error possible. *Simply to ask a question is to put oneself in a radically precarious position.* For it situates one on the very edge of a chasm, where the possibility of being wrong yawns before one. The more radical the

question raised by the inquirer, the more deeply affected she will be by that vertiginous situation; indeed, if her question concerns the very meaning of her own being, the possibility of being wrong can affect her with the same dreadful foreboding we associate with the anticipation of death itself.[10] For in that case it is the meaning of her world as a whole that is at stake.

When we find ourselves in that mortally exposed position, we are eager not just to avert error but to repress the mortifying possibility of it. When we see the abyss that separates us as questioners from the answer that lies over there on the other side of inquiry, we dream of finding a way to close the chasm instead of bridging it, a way to abolish the distance, instead of merely traversing it. But how can this be done if the act of thinking has already exposed one to the possibility of being in error by confronting one with an array of possible answers, any one of which may be true or false? Only by means of an intuition that would not be a passageway, a medium, a bridge, at all, but a oneness between knower and known so intimate, so complete, that it would allow not the slightest cleft, breach, fissure, fault, to come between them. Is it any wonder that we come to associate the achievement of philosophical wisdom with just such an intuition of presence from which every trace of error and absence has been effaced? Only such a revelation could provide our universe of meaning with the arche it needs if it is to be irrefragable.

But this suggests that the ideal of intuition, like the metaphysics of presence to which it is inextricably bound, originates not so much in the desire to answer one's questions as in the desire to escape the precarious situation we are put in by our very status as questioners. Intuition purports to offer a foolproof way of selecting the right answer from the multiplicity of interpretations which the process of inquiry generates. But its way of doing this is to claim a direct acquaintance with what is to be known through the right interpretation, for only such direct acquaintance could provide one the knowledge one would need to make one's choice of an interpretation foolproof. If such knowledge existed, it would indeed enable us to answer our questions without running the risk of being wrong; but it would also make the entire process of asking questions superfluous since the knowledge to be reached through

that process would already be accessible to us without our having to engage in it. The desire to have the object-to-be-known intuitively present comes from our wanting to know it with an immediacy and directness which the process of inquiry, of its very nature, makes impossible. Indeed, it is precisely the experience of being caught in the throe of inquiry which gives rise to our desire to escape from the danger to which it exposes us. Intuition promises the impossibility of being wrong. But the only way it could make error impossible would be by providing us immediate access to what is to be known through inquiry; and if such access were attainable, if intuition could really deliver on the promises it makes, it would make the entire process of inquiry unnecessary. The very fact that we do ask questions suggests that the kind of direct access to reality which intuition promises is lacking. Questioning itself signifies the irreparable loss of presence. That is why, as the hermeneutic of suspicion has helped us realize, the intuition that promises to retrieve presence for us is really only a blind leap of faith by means of which we hope to traverse the abyss of fallibility to which inquiry exposes us; its "eureka" is only the joy of landing safely.[11]

One way to stake out a hermeneutical counterposition to the ideal of intuition, once we begin to recognize the hollowness of its promises, might be to say that real wisdom lies in realizing that the distance between our questions and the right answers to them is not traversable. This would lead us to say that we can always move closer and closer to the truth that lies just outside the edge of our hermeneutical circle, but we can never breach the circle itself. For the horizon toward which we advance recedes with the same speed that we approach it. We never catch up with it so as to stand in the immediate presence of what is present in the present; we are always on the way toward it, always caught in the throe of a question, always, like Socrates, in the position of knowing we do not know. But does not this way of explaining the thinker's situation put Socrates in the position of wanting to be the early Plato and never making it? The hermeneutical critique of the metaphysics of presence remains under the sway of what it criticizes as long as it continues to look forward to the parousia of final arrival, even if it indefinitely postpones it. For in adopting such a hermeneutical

perspective, we would still be directing ourselves toward the very destination that intuition would enable us to reach if we possessed it.[12] Reconciled as one may be to the fact that the parousia of presence is unattainable, one is still using it as one's absolute reference point if one understands one's position in terms of its deferral. Even when we admit that thought is moving toward an always receding destination, we continue to plot its course in exclusively horizontal terms, i.e., exclusively in terms of destinations to be reached, distances to be traversed, horizons to be thematized, absences to be presenced, concealments to be revealed. To append a warning that none of these projected closures can ever be achieved does not alter the fact that closure remains the governing objective.

But the act of raising a question and taking it seriously brings us to a place that cannot be found on any two-dimensional map: it situates us at the edge of a precipice, and exposes us to the possibility of a mortal fall. As long as we think that we can avoid that possibility by finding a way to cross over to being itself, we are governed by a horizontal ideal of wisdom. But our reflections suggest that there is an alternative to that ideal. For instead of seeking an intuition of presence, we can entrust ourselves to the eros of questioning itself and plunge into the abyss which it opens up to us, instead of trying to leap across it. Indeed, are not the most radical questions precisely those that pull the ground out from under our feet? Perhaps, then, the distinguishing mark of the philosophically wise person is not that she occupies a privileged position which others envy but that she allows radical questions to deprive her of the arche on which she would like to be able to securely ground her world.

If we turn our thought *down* into the abyss opened up by such questions, instead of trying to throw our thought across it, will we be led to the same conclusions as the post-modern practitioners of the hermeneutic of suspicion? Once we recognize the fallacy we commit in searching for an intuition of presence to answer our questions, what is to prevent us from thinking, like Rorty, that it is a fallacy to search for a "right" answer in the first place?[13] Is the very idea of there being a "right" answer itself derivative from the metaphysics of presence and the horizontal ideal of wisdom? Because we are under the sway of that ideal, we are accustomed to

thinking that, when confronted with a multiplicity of theories, interpretations, conceptual frameworks, hermeneutical circles, we are supposed to pick the one most in accord with what we would know reality to be like if we had an intuition of it. But if such intuitions are nonexistent, it is impossible and foolish to evaluate our theories in terms of how closely they approximate it. Does this mean that our original mistake lies in bringing to our theories the inappropriate demand that one of them show itself to be the "right" one? It would seem that the only alternative to that mistake is to evaluate theories in terms of their usefulness instead of their rightness, to select the one that helps us do what we want, without trying to determine if it gives us the kind of privileged access to being which we would get from an intuition, if we could have one.

But what is most striking about this contemporary pragmatic alternative[14] to the classical ideal of wisdom is that it too offers us a way to avoid the very possibility of being wrong. For if there are no right answers but only alternative ways of "coping" and "dealing with" the world, if every universe of meaning is only an elaborately devised therapy,[15] then the decision about which therapy to adopt would not place one in a precarious position; for one would only have to decide what one wanted. This therapeutic pragmatism, schooled in the hermeneutic of suspicion, does not pretend to offer, like any of the wisdoms it critiques, a way to leap over the abyss that separates the questioner from the answer she seeks; it simply tells us to walk away from the precipice, to return to what we were doing before we made the mistake of taking our questions seriously enough to seek true answers to them.

But there is only one place to go when one retraces one's steps back from the precipice to which we are exposed by our questions. For one can stop thinking of alternative theories as possible answers only by ceasing to take seriously the questions which generate them; and one can only stop asking questions by refusing to wonder. And that is not something we need philosophy to help us do. Philosophy originates, in fact, precisely in that act of wonder which, from a strictly practical, common-sense point of view, is spendthrift and superfluous. The practical person who does not allow wonder to disrupt him is completely unaware of any universe of meaning other than his own. Far from helping him become

tolerant of and open to alternative ways of understanding the world, his pragmatism leads him to construe every theory as a possible strategy for achieving the results he seeks. It does not offer, any more than intuition does, a kind of wisdom which takes seriously the multiplicity of our worlds and the possibility of being wrong.

THE THROE AS ARCHE

It may seem at first like mere question-begging to say that the kind of wisdom needed in our pluralistic situation cannot come from intuition or practicality but only from the very wisdom generated in and by the pluralistic situation itself. But what I mean to suggest by this is that the pluralistic situation, which is not an historical aberration but a condition that always emerges from the ordeal of inquiry itself, both calls for and makes possible a kind of knowledge which becomes accessible to us only when we let ourselves be caught in the throe of that situation instead of trying to escape it.

I have suggested that the act of thinking generated by a question engenders in its turn a multiplicity of possible answers. In an effort to talk about what happens when that multiplicity emerges, I have employed the image of a gulf separating the questioner from the answer which the dynamism of questioning itself drives her to seek. Now if one is to continue to be governed by this eros, if one is to keep exploring the possibilities it opens up, the next step cannot be a leap over that gulf, as urged by the metaphysics of presence, nor can it be a retreat backward, in the direction of that practicality which the wonder at the root of all questions disrupts. The only way to move forward is to step over the edge of that precipice which both the flight to intuition and the retreat to practicality attempt to avoid. One cannot continue the process of inquiry except by openly accepting the dangerous possibility to which inquiry makes us liable: the possibility of being wrong. One could avoid that possibility if there were no truth to be reached through questioning as contemporary pragmatism suggests, or if what is to be known through questioning were directly accessible through an immediate intuition. But if, as I have argued, what is to be known

through questioning can only be known by taking the steps which the process of questioning opens up to us, such knowledge is accessible to us only through a mortifying acknowledgment of the possibility of our inescapable fallibility. For only in and through such an acceptance of her fallibility does a questioner recognize that there is a right answer which is not and can never be immediately accessible to her.

Now just as the ideal of intuition is inseparably bound up with the metaphysics of presence, an acknowledgment of the possibility of being wrong opens up a metaphysics that is not grounded in that enduring ocular myth. For if we are to take the possibility of being wrong seriously, we must cease to think of being as that which becomes accessible to us through an intuition that occurs outside the entire process of inquiry itself. But this does not require that we eliminate *being* from our vocabulary and cease seeking to know it. That fact that being is not to be equated with presence does not mean that it must be erased. It means, rather, that it must be identified with that which can never be either presenced or erased, since it can never be either immediately known or wholly avoided (unless we wholly repress our capacity to be questioners). Being is that which becomes accessible to us only in and through the throe of inquiry. Insofar as we are in that throe, we are held fast by the throe of being itself. Therefore, we can know being only by surrendering to the throe of inquiry and embracing the fallibility to which it exposes us. When we try to escape the mortifying danger of fallibility, we sever our relationship with being and wrongly identify it with presence. And this means that we can never be right about being except by realizing that our fallibility, far from being a barrier to our knowledge of it, constitutes our only possible bond with it.

To deny that this is the case, we would have to deny that the throe of inquiry, which requires acknowledging our fallibility, places us in the throe of being. We would have to claim that the very process of asking questions about being and exploring where they lead moves us away from being instead of allowing us to be governed by it. We would have to argue that being can only be known by repressing our inquiry into it. But, in the very act of arguing this, we would be affirming our argument as true and

taking the process of argumentation seriously as a way to know being. We would be caught up in the very throe whose hold on us we would be trying to break. The act of trying to answer a question opens us up to being itself *as* that which is to be known by questioning.

Thus, as soon as we ask a question—*any* question—we find ourselves at a critical metaphysical juncture, even if we do not ordinarily realize it. For we have to decide whether the whole process of inquiry on which we are about to embark is or is not to be taken seriously as our one and only access to being. How we respond when we reach this critical juncture, this jumping-off point, determines how completely we entrust ourselves to the throe of inquiry, and whether we are going to try to protect ourselves from the danger of being wrong to which it exposes us. Indeed, it is the life of the mind in its entirety that is at stake here. For the issue is whether to take the whole process of inquiry so seriously as to allow it to determine everything one thinks about everything. This requires us to make a judgment about the role that the act of thinking is to have in our lives, where "the act of thinking" refers not to a particular mental operation but to the whole process of wondering, questioning, and inquiring that unfolds when we are caught up in the eros of the desire to know.

Just such a critical judgment must be made here, at the beginning of this book. For I cannot take seriously the exploration occurring in it if I do not affirm now that being must be neither equated with presence nor erased but, rather, must be identified with that which we come to know by entering the throe of inquiry and the abyss of fallibility.[16] Given its pivotal character, given the fact that it serves in a sense as the hinge on which everything to be said in this book turns, I would like to be able to refrain from making this affirmation until I am sure of standing on absolutely solid ground. I would like to be able to postpone the beginning of the book until the end of it, so that I could use it to back myself up. But this very desire to secure an unshakable basis for my judgment derives from my not wanting to depend on the process of inquiry, and the judgment to which it leads as my only way of knowing if my judgment is right. I would like to have the truth I am trying to reach directly accessible to me prior to making a judgment so that I

could check my judgment against reality before affirming it to be true. But everything I have been saying suggests that the very reason why I ask questions in the first place and get caught up in the throe of inquiry they set in motion, is because such direct acquaintance with being is not available to me. For this reason, I have no choice but to depend on my judgment and on it alone. I cannot check to see if the conclusions I reach through inquiry conform to being because being is to be known, if it is to be known at all, only in and through inquiry. This realization, that we have no access to being outside the throe of inquiry, is the pivotal moment, the fundamental principle, the starting point of wisdom: but far from providing an arche, an unshakable ground, it requires giving up the hope of ever standing on an irrefragable foundation. To the person who experiences it, relinquishing this hope may seem like exposing oneself to nothingness itself. But only by suffering such exposure does one give oneself over wholly to the throe of questioning; and it is only by surrendering completely to the throe of questioning that one is caught up in the throe of being itself. To find being one must remain inside the process of questioning and follow where it leads instead of seeking some magical exit from it; for any such exit, precisely because it promises us a way to escape our fallibility, closes us off to being, instead of opening up a way to it.

But in saying that the judgment I have made—that being is accessible to us only in and through inquiry—does not rest on a secure foundation, I do not mean to imply that it is based on prejudice or arbitrary choice. In making a judgment we have no resources at our disposal except those provided by the process of inquiry itself: we have nothing but the question about the given in which inquiry originates, the multiplicity of possible answers generated by thinking about it, the eros that makes us want to find the truth, and ourselves as questioners, helplessly caught in the throe of questioning. But if we would stop looking for a magical exit out of this throe, we would discover that it has a momentum of its own. We do not judge an answer to be right because it conforms to a reality which is accessible to us before our inquiry begins; we judge it right only because it fulfills that intelligent desire for insight set in motion by inquiry itself.[17] It is the demand set up by the question, as intelligently raised by the questioner, which constitutes the

criterion against which all possible answers must be checked, if we are to judge which of them gives us access to being. The word "judgment" does not refer only to the proposition which is affirmed after we have completed the process of weighing as judiciously as possible a number of different theories against the requirements of the question they purport to answer. It refers primarily to the judicial process itself during which we try to appreciate the particular merits of a theory, the scope of its explanatory power, the reasons which give it its plausibility, in addition to critiquing it for possible shortcomings, perhaps for its failure to take into account all the aspects of what is to be explained or for its failure to do so in a way commensurate with the profundity of the issue at stake. Throughout this process, there is no authority to which one can defer, and no prior knowledge against which one can check one's assessment. The act of making a judgment is a firsthand exploration of wholly unknown territory to which we cannot gain access in any other way. We can enter it only if we give up the hope of checking each step we take against a map we already have.

Understood in this light, becoming wise in the philosophical sense does not require mastering a certain set of fundamental truths, or a certain set of primary texts. It requires becoming a good judge of texts, and a good judge of whether the true judgments they purport to contain really do satisfy the exigencies set in motion by intelligence itself once it is caught in the throe of questioning. That a person has acquired such good judgment is not proven by adherence to a particular set of propositions; it is evident only in the quiet tactfulness with which conflicting theories are considered, the attentive hearing that is given to every argument, the calm, deliberate manner in which theories are both appreciated and critiqued. But good judgment is evident, first and foremost, in the humility—we might even say, in the acceptance of one's liability to nothingness—which comes with a profound realization of the fact that one's judgments may be wrong. For only the person whose thinking is conducted in the spirit of such humility realizes that the truths to which her thinking brings her are accessible to her only because she has entered fully into the dreadfully fallible throe of inquiry, and not because she has found some magical exit from it.

That there is a truth to be known through the fallible process of inquiry is itself a truth that the very fact of our fallibility requires us to affirm. For it would not be possible to be wrong unless there exists a truth to which thinking is required to be subordinate. There could be no abyss of fallibility if truth were not *above* us. Indeed, it would seem that the more conscious one is of fallibility, the more prepared one will be to acknowledge that there exists a truth which is not subject to our control or in our possession. An acceptance of one's fallibility and an unconditional affirmation of the superior status of truth itself are inseparable from each other.

But if truth is an indispensable condition for the very possibility of being in error, it would seem that we cannot possibly be wrong in affirming its existence. And if we cannot be wrong in affirming it, it would appear that we are in possession of at least one absolute truth that cannot possibly be false. But if we can possess even one such truth, it would seem to prove that we can transcend our fallible condition after all. Thus, there seems to be a kind of performative inconsistency at the very heart of wisdom as I have tried to define it. For the unconditional affirmation of truth which the principle of fallibility itself requires us to make seems to entitle us to claim that we have exactly the kind of hold on truth that fallibility precludes. And if an absolute truth is accessible to us, in the form of an unconditional affirmation of truth itself, it must be possible for us to attain, in our search for wisdom, precisely the kind of secure hold on first principles which an acknowledgment of fallibility would deny us.

That this dilemma is not an artificial one but lies close to the very heart of the question regarding the nature of wisdom is confirmed by the fact that it is exactly comparable to the dilemma faced by Socrates when he tried, in a single speech, to confess his radical ignorance and to affirm certain unequivocal truths which he thought no one was entitled to deny. There have always been readers who have claimed to detect in this apparent inconsistency the final twist of Socratic irony; they hear, hidden under the humility of his professed ignorance, the arrogance of someone who thinks he possesses a truth which no hermeneutic of suspicion can take away from him. This diagnosis of the *Apology* suggests that the kind of intellectual humility which I have equated with wisdom is

an impossible "via media" between skepticism, with its thoroughgoing admission of ignorance, and a dogmatism that claims to be in indisputable possession of absolute truth. Are we forced, after all, to choose between these extremes because the path between them, if followed far enough, always leads back to one of them?

Before jumping to that conclusion, I think we should pause to examine more carefully whether the unconditional affirmation of truth which an acknowledgment of fallibility paradoxically requires of us entitles us to claim that this truth is in our possession. It is true that our acknowledgment of our fallibility remains incomplete as long as it does not include our unconditional affirmation that truth transcends us. But we acknowledge this not to raise ourselves to its level but to clarify our inescapably subordinate relationship to it. Fallibility is precisely the condition of being always in relationship to truth but never in possession of it. We can affirm truth unconditionally and irrefutably not because we are in secure possession of it but because it has an unbreakable hold on us. Our affirmation of it is simply our acknowledgment that we cannot escape our relationship with truth except by terminating the activity of thought itself; it is not our claim to be in possession of truth but our confession that we have been caught irretrievably in its throe. We are fallible because we can neither possess the truth nor escape our relationship to it.

We *would* be able to claim indisputable possession of truth if we could have the kind of direct, immediate grasp of it which an intuition would provide. But far from pretending to rest on intuition, the principle of fallibility requires us to admit that no such direct grasp of the truth is available to us. It is of crucial importance in this regard to notice the kind of argument that leads from the principle of fallibility to the unconditional affirmation of truth. This argument asks us to reflect on what it means to be liable to error and to acknowledge that such liability would not be possible if truth did not exist. It does *not* claim that truth is directly and immediately accessible to us; it claims, rather, that we must affirm truth because of the inconsistencies into which we would fall by denying it. This might seem to be an insignificant distinction. But it means that the argument is not claiming that any truth is intu-

itively self-evident, not even the existence of truth itself. Rather, it makes an appeal to the good judgment of the reader, as Aristotle did when he argued that we commit a self-referential inconsistency when we try to deny certain propositions.[18] Such truths are not irrefutable because they are self-evident but because, try as we might, we are powerless to escape their sway, except by abandoning the entire process of rational inquiry.[19] Given the fact that we can come to know it only in this way, knowing that truth exists does not give us possession of it, if by possession one means the kind of secure hold on truth we would have through an intuition that made it directly accessible to us. The knowledge of truth gained from a self-referential argument, far from putting us on the same plane with it, makes us realize that truth is never available to us as a foundation because we are always in a subordinate position to it. We never stand on the same firm ground as the transcendent itself, as the intuitionist would like, because it is always possible that we are wrong; but neither can we rest securely in our ignorance, as the skeptic (and contemporary pragmatist) would like, because the very possibility of being wrong makes our relationship with truth inescapable. There is no firm position at all, no unshakable arche, except to be in the throe itself, held fast by a fallibility one can never transcend and a truth one can never possess. We become wise only by letting go of our secure foundations and abandoning ourselves to the abyss opened up by our questions.

On the other hand, both the dream of intuition and the metaphysics of presence are bound up with a possessive attitude toward truth, an attitude which is the exact opposite of the humility one begins to acquire by acknowledging that one is always liable to be wrong. To be in possession of the truth—would that not mean to be in such sure control of it as to be incapable of being mistaken? Were not those who claimed such control the favorite targets of Socratic irony? The alternative to such *sophos* is not a skeptical or pragmatic retreat from truth-seeking but the realization that we can never escape truth and never be in possession of it. Our fallibility prevents our ever having the kind of control over truth we would be entitled to claim if the dream of intuition could be realized. But far from cutting us off from truth, fallibility presupposes

that we have an inescapable, and inescapably subordinate, relationship to it. Both intuition and pragmatism promise an exit from the tenuous rapport of that subordination. Wisdom lies in accepting it not just as a temporary stopping point on the way of inquiry but as our permanent condition.

The pursuit of such wisdom, philos/sophos, does not begin with the securing of indisputable first principles, on the basis of which one could go on to build an impregnable universe of meaning. The only way to engage in *philos/sophos* is by giving up one's secure foothold and plunging into the dreadful throe of inquiry which is governed by truth itself. One has not fully surrendered to that throe as long as one retains even the slightest doubt about whether there is a truth to be known; but neither has one surrendered to it as long as one retains the hope of terminating one's subordinate relationship to truth by possessing it. To be fallible means precisely to always be under the sway of truth and never in control of it, to always be in the position of having to look up at it from the vantage point of that abyss into which we plunge when we realize our liability to error. But it is never an error to be in that helpless, ridiculously privileged position. For only someone secure in her fallibility knows how insecure she will always be in her relationship to truth. She alone is wise enough to know that by not claiming to have a hold on it, she allows truth to exercise its gentle but inexorable influence over her. What does one have to do to begin developing such wisdom? Only ask a question. Only be struck by wonder.[20]