EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION:
LOVING WISDOM

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This book considers how we may possibly regain the love of wisdom, which implies that the love of wisdom has been lost. Before proceeding any further, let us pause and examine the nature of that loss.

Aristotle famously claimed that philosophy begins in wonder. While he was doubtless correct in his assertion, what begins in wonder, even before philosophy developed, is myth-telling: about the origin of the cosmos, the creatures who inhabit it, and especially about humanity’s role in the grand cosmological scheme. The myths were already there by the time the first Western philosophers came along, and these first philosophers took over many of these mythological assumptions but modified and expanded their form. Western philosophy thus initiated a new kind of storytelling about these topics: it began with the scientific and metaphysical questions of Thales, one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece. Because of their cosmological concerns, Thales and his successors were “systematic” thinkers in that they began with a conception of “the whole” and tried to develop it consistently in light of their (partial) observations of the many “parts.” Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Socrates extended philosophy further into ethics and politics. Their practical philosophical reflections about how we ought to live in the world and conduct ourselves with others was, perhaps, less “systematic” because it focused on limited human abilities, character traits, and expectations. Still, some conception of the “world as a whole” was needed for their ethical reflections, and a mythical one, at times, served perfectly well as the frame for their ethical and political theories (as well as a way of bridging the gap between the “theory of the whole” and the actual experience of the “parts”).

Friedrich Nietzsche, in an often overlooked essay, praises this “tragic age of Greece” as a healthy culture in which philosophy thrived. Philosophy, in his view, is always “invention beyond the limits of our current experience. . . . [and in this sense] it is a continuation of the mythical drive.” But according to Nietzsche, philosophy had already lost its way by the time of Plato and Aristotle. Nietzsche attributes the difficulty, not to philosophy per se, but to cultural decadence. He says: “If philosophy ever manifested itself as helpful, redeeming, or prophylactic, it was in a healthy culture. The sick it made even sicker.” In his first major philosophical work, The Birth of Tragedy, Nietzsche attempts to, in some sense, re-capture the “tragic age of Greece,” and to bring modern (decadent) culture closer to the ancient conception of philosophy (and philosophical truth), by a series of “mythological approximations” (involving the figures of Apollo and Dionysus).
But even the ancient Greeks themselves heaped scorn on philosophy. Listen to Adeimantus as he addresses Socrates in Book 6 of Plato’s *Republic*:

The fact is that people who devote themselves to philosophy are a strange breed, if not downright evil. I’m not talking about the ones who amuse themselves with it while young and then give it up when they mature, but the ones who cling to it too long. The result is that even the best of them are rendered useless to society by the very kind of study you propose.6

This critique of philosophy is similar to the one Callicles launches in Plato’s *Gorgias*.7 Different is that, in the *Republic*, Socrates agrees with Adeimantus, saying that the objection is justified in explaining how philosophers are corrupted. Plato and Nietzsche thus concur on one crucial point: in their society, the love of wisdom that began with Thales has been lost.

In our day, Richard Rorty has announced the death of philosophy. He praises John Dewey for rejecting metaphysics and for giving society an increased appreciation for concrete problems.8 Marxists, logical positivists, existentialists, and pragmatists also reject metaphysics and give up hope for an enduring and stable basis for truth or wisdom, directing all attention to the concerns of social practice, technological action, and immediate benefit for human beings. In addition to academic philosophers, literary critics, historians, and many natural scientists have joined the chorus that regularly sings the requiem celebrating philosophy’s demise.

Perhaps philosophy is to blame. The love of wisdom is lost when philosophers sell themselves to some other enterprise. For more than a millennium, many philosophers have served as handmaidens to theology. Today, some philosophers are paid top dollar by the business community, which uses them to dress up the store window with a display of “business ethics.” Law schools, medical schools, hospitals, military colleges, and a variety of professional organizations domesticate philosophers and put them to work on their projects.

In light of these considerations, how can we regain the love of wisdom? In the essays included in this volume, discussion centers around the concepts of *mythos* and *logos*, thinking that these two ideas might help us find our way. The reason we selected the concept of *logos* is no mystery. Even Nietzsche, who was so clear about the limits of “logocentrism,” acknowledged *logos*’ fundamental role in generating the kind of philosophy suitable for a healthy culture. Thales’ claim that “all is water” not only shows him to be a natural scientist, but also “makes him the first Greek philosopher.”9 Nietzsche explicitly distinguishes Thales’ great insight from the words of a poet who might say the same thing: “The thought of Thales—even after the realization that it is unprovable—has its value precisely in the fact that it was meant non-mythically and non-allegorically.”10 Thus, even Nietzsche admits that the proper role of philosophy is to replace myth-telling with “conceptual thinking.”11