FOREWORD

The impulse to reflect about philosophical questions has long been a prominent factor in human intellectual history. The classic account of the source of this impulse comes to us from Aristotle. Human beings by nature desire to know, he says, and the desire to know generates in us wonder. Philosophy begins in wonder, he tells us: wonder about the answers to a variety of deep questions. Such wonder, to be sure, is not felt equally by everyone, but it can become strong indeed in those whose circumstances encourage reflection on these matters.

Responding to this wonder, thinkers of many stripes down through the ages have wrestled with questions about the nature of the good, about how the world operates, about what there is in the world, and about knowledge, truth, wisdom, and the meaning of life. Since early times, of course, academic philosophers have claimed these questions as falling within their special province, and have dealt extensively with them. Yet many valuable reflections about these questions have also been contributed by other thinkers of diverse kinds, including poets and playwrights, scientists and theologians, sages and mystics.

This book by William Gerber undertakes a fresh and distinctive approach to these fundamental questions. His procedure is first of all to gather together a very rich array of thinkers, past and present, Western and Eastern. These collected quotations are the fruit of many years of his own wide and thoughtful reading. He marshals this splendid range of comments, disposing them in opposition to one another. Then, in light of these comments, he offers his own evaluation of each particular problem. This concluding phase of the exposition of each problem is, however, conducted with a guardedness and brevity which contrast sharply with the free-wheeling ebullience of the quoted comments themselves. With a fine, self-effacing modesty, he very quickly has his say. These brief verdicts of his own turn out to be sagely balanced and judicious, clearly expressed, and full of good sense.

Gerber has aimed this book at the intelligent general reader, who can come to experience the wonder of these fundamental questions, but who does not have an appetite for scholastic jargon or academic intricacies. The book presents central and important problems in a manner that stimulates and engages us, as it broadens our intellectual horizons and illuminates our understanding. Gerber himself has long been a benign and admirable presence on Washington’s philosophical scene, and we are genuinely in his debt for this most worthwhile book.

Stephen F. Barker
Johns Hopkins University