

The interplay between modern scholarship and traditional wisdom is complex and paradoxical, as my entire argument goes to show.

#### **16.4. 'Tacit modern un wisdom'...**

Further aspects of the meaning and heuristic uses of the phrase 'expressions of traditional wisdom?' may also be captured, somewhat flippantly, if we take the multiple opposite of 'expressions of traditional wisdom', which would be something like 'tacit (taken for granted – as opposed to explicitly expressed and argued) modern (as opposed to traditional) un wisdom (as opposed to wisdom)'. It is not difficult to give a few examples (albeit, admittedly subjective, even tendentious) of such tacit modern un wisdom. I will quickly pass over such obviously spurious modern myths as that of the market and of commodification or commoditisation (according to which all is merchandise), and that of rational maximising, especially as far as the attainment of material goals is concerned;<sup>663</sup> and the myth of North Atlantic cultural superiority and independent origin – for decades now exposed in the *Black Athena* debate and its aftermath.<sup>664</sup> Let me merely outline four examples of 'tacit modern un wisdom', which in a later Section will then be contrasted, one by one, with African traditional wisdom:

1. (R) THE IMMENSELY ALIENATING MYTH OF THE HUMAN BODY AS BASICALLY AN INDUSTRIAL PRODUCT,<sup>665</sup> *i.e.*

1. uniform and standardised (hence advertisements' emphasis on young, healthy and perfect)
2. modular in its composition, so that body parts may be modified, overhauled and replaced at will
3. and saturated (ever since the times of de la Mettrie (1747 / 1999) with the imagery of the machine, so that the same language ('check-up', 'engine', 'plumbing') may be used for our body and our motor vehicle (which is said to have its own 'body').

2. (S) THE MYTH OF THE FUNDAMENTAL CLOSEDNESS OF THE HUMAN PERSON, who thus is depicted as

1. in the first place an individual, rather than a member of a group
2. whose mind, by an inveterate axioma of modernist science, is to be considered a closed system impervious to other minds except, indi-

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<sup>663</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen & Geschiere 2005; Bowles & Gintis 1993; Cramer 2002.

<sup>664</sup> Bernal 1987, 1991; Lefkowitz & Rogers 1996; van Binsbergen 1997.

<sup>665</sup> Smith *et al.* 2004; Sharp 2000; Martin 2006.

rectly, through conscious reflection upon sense impressions (including those produced by speech) that may be taken to express the movements of other minds (cf. Dennett 1991)

3. (T) THE MYTH (going back to Aristotle,<sup>666</sup> as far as the Western tradition is concerned) OF THE EXCLUDED THIRD AND OF LOGICAL CONSISTENCY. In many ways this allows us to respond adequately and pragmatically in our interaction with the non-human world (which therefore can be argued to display, most of the time, and at the meso<sup>667</sup>-level of our conscious human interaction with it, a structure similar to that of our binary logic. Yet we cannot close our eyes to the fact that, in the interaction between human individuals and between human groups, the same logic incessantly creates intransigent positions of recognised and emphasised difference which cannot come to an agreement since both sides, by their own logic, are justified to consider themselves right, yet their respective truths are mutually incompatible and in conflict. The main conflicts in our globalising world of today (e.g. those between North Atlantic military capitalism on the one hand, and militant Islam on the other hand, as rival paths through modernity; those between economic short-term maximising globalism and a future-orientated ecological responsibility; those between consumption on the one hand, and integrity and global solidarity on the other hand) remind us of the potentially paralysing and destructive implication of such consistency. In Western thought it is only recently that such post-structuralist concepts as *différance* and *differend*,<sup>668</sup> and the elaboration of ternary and multi-value logics, have created a context where we can think beyond binary logic.

4. (U) THE MYTH OF 'MYTH' AS UNTRUTH. Typically but paradoxically, again, in this discussion of 'Tacit modern unwisdom' we have taken the word *myth* itself in the modernist sense of: 'widely held collective representation that yet constitutes an untruth'. Usually such a use of the word 'myth' carries the implication that specific modern science is available to explode that myth – which implies (contentiously) that in all situations modern science is the source and the touchstone of truth.

These are some of the themes of tacit, modern unwisdom against which we can begin to appreciate the wisdom of earlier times and different continents. We

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<sup>666</sup> *Metaphysica* IV.4, 1006<sup>b</sup> and following; IV 7, 1011<sup>b</sup>.

<sup>667</sup> I take the meso-level of phenomena to be that of our normal Galilei-Newton world, at the order of magnitude of the human body: 100<sup>0</sup> (= 1) metres. At very much higher and very much lower orders of magnitude (galaxies, elementary particles), the self-evidences of our Galilei-Newton world dissolve, and the paradoxes and wonders of the theory of relativity and quantum mechanics replace the (appearance of the) transparent logical structure and the object-subject distinction of the meso-level world, bringing out the restrictive boundary conditions of the latter.

<sup>668</sup> Cf. Derrida 1967a, 1972; Lyotard 1983.