

# The Anti-Wisdom of Modern Philosophy: A Passing Note

by  
Ian Watson

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 6, No.4. (Autumn 1972) © World Wisdom, Inc.  
[www.studiesincomparativereligion.com](http://www.studiesincomparativereligion.com)

## I

THE entire history of the Western world is, seen in one light, a steady drive towards a state in which only things material and only things secular are allowed to matter. And this drive is no longer limited to the West, but seems also to be overtaking the East—until there seems scarcely *anywhere* in the world which survives as a haven for another kind of thinking. Indeed, so deep-rooted has become the secular-materialist mind, that thinking in other terms has become almost impossible. And this 'secular-materialist mind' is, of course, closely related in the West to the rise of Liberalist-Individualist ideals, with us, in systematic form, at least since Thomas Hobbes and the Renaissance.

Why should all this be so? And the following remarks are a few, simple suggestions regarding the undoubted breakdown of wisdom in contemporary academies of philosophy in the West. They make no claim to be more than *scattered observations* upon this situation by one who finds himself quite out of sorts in being within it.

## II

I want, in this brief note, to centre my thoughts upon a single phenomenon—namely, the fact that theorizing about what I will for the moment call, 'the inner man', has largely vanished these days in face of an almost overwhelming quest for 'improvement' of 'the outer man'. And this relates to a breakdown in *understanding* of what is meant by 'wisdom' in the West. Indeed, loss of contact with any viable meaning of this word is now so radical, that it is, these days, almost impossible to use it without misunderstanding.

The word 'philosophy' comes, of course, from two Greek words meaning 'love' and 'wisdom'. "It will not be contested that "'philosophy' implies rather the love of wisdom than the love of knowledge, nor secondarily that from the 'love of wisdom', philosophy has come by a natural transition to mean the doctrine of those who love wisdom and are called philosophers."<sup>1</sup> And maybe so, when this was written (in the 1930's)—and of the philosophic East (about which it was written). But any relation to this, the original meaning of the term 'philosophy', and what is done in most Western academies today, is so remote, one might justifiably believe that 'philosophy' has lost its moorings, and been set adrift from its origins altogether.

Now this, I am suggesting, is, in part, due to the fact that, first of all, 'having wisdom' relates intimately to having the knowledge needed for development or (perhaps better) unfolding of 'the inner man'<sup>2</sup>—that is, *the spiritual man of the soul*: the man for whom 'love and kindness', 'sorrow and suffering', 'compassion and sympathy', 'knowledge and understanding', 'anxiety and despair', 'joy and bliss', 'remorse and guilt and shame', 'insight and enlightenment', 'a sense of beauty and a

craving for betterment', characterize the stuff of which he is made. And, secondly, in the West, there is these days genuine doubt about there being an 'inner man' at all. Words like 'spirit' and 'soul' are usually dismissed as old-fashioned metaphors for what empirical psychology has 'discovered' and called 'the psyche' or 'the mind'; where this is both thought and spoken of as, paradoxically enough, some form of intangible physical thing. Indeed, some even doubt 'the psyche' or 'the mind' to be more than a behavioural offshoot of the 'physical thing' called 'the brain'. I mean, believing that it is no more than this is, for the first time, a fully reputable position to hold. Hence, 'the soul' or 'the inner man' has, by this very modern, essentially Western 'tradition', been thought out of existence in the name of an effort to think *everything* in 'materialist', or at least 'secular', terms.

So that, finally, 'wisdom', it is thought, no longer has anything of moment with which to relate or be about. In other words, because 'the inner man' is at a discount, 'wisdom' necessarily is as well: it simply no longer has a function to perform. To paraphrase one of the prophets of anti-wisdom in modern philosophy (Ludwig Wittgenstein)—the erstwhile symbol 'wisdom' has become a loose cog in the machine of our ordinary language.

It comes, therefore, as no surprise to find among our modern heroes —'psychologists', 'neurosurgeons', 'psycho-analysts'. Whilst mellow, inward-looking gentlemen, full of years and the wisdom of silence—meditative men of the Spirit; these are, by and large, tolerated as archaic freaks, somewhat out of step with the times, And these "times" are said to be very progressive ones, moving forward, far in advance of our ancestors.

### III

On the other hand, there is no doubt about 'the outer man'—the *physical man of the fleshly body*. This most clearly is borne witness to by a second kind of modern hero, namely, 'the sporting star', 'the film-star', 'the pop star' (all symbols of sexual potency); 'the bustling big-businessman', 'the politician', 'the nuclear physicist', 'the social scientist'—all examples of beings doing physical things one can see and watch. Moreover, value and success are judged in terms of, 'how fast', 'how energetic', 'how many times', 'how much'. It is not, for instance, usual to assess the 'worth' of a footballer in terms of how many elevating thoughts one gets from his play, or that of an International Politician in terms of how much *better as a person* one becomes because of his intrigues. In the one case, 'worth' relates to how many opponents he leaves sprawling; in the other, to how many socio-economic 'goodies' he can contrive to cheat his International Opposition out of. How often are the headlines full of the doings of such people: and how often, of aged sages who achieve enlightenment?

Again, another sign of this stress upon 'the outer man' is the widespread move to turn Universities into Colleges of Technology. People accept the validity of technical training, training in the natural and social sciences, almost without question. They do not, however, accept training of 'the inner man' so readily as such. This tendency *must* lead to a breakdown of the Humanities as viable subjects to teach; as it precisely has done in many of the newer African Universities. There is, to my knowledge, not a single Department of Philosophy in any of the newer Universities in Africa: nor, it is significant to note, are there any in the recently re-opened academies in China.

### IV

Faced with this, one might expect a complete denial of 'wisdom' as a viable pursuit

altogether—a complete rejection, that is, of *the very possibility of inward depth, leading to superior knowledge of what matters in an absolute way*. Yet oddly, this is not so. Although many are happy to ignore what once was called 'Religion' (and this is obviously bad enough), few are wholly happy to ignore 'moral', 'social' and (to a lesser degree) 'artistic' behaviour, *all* of which bear upon 'the inner man', thought of as *something more* than merely a cluster of inter-acting molecules. For instance, 'a sense of obligation', 'good motives', 'having integrity and a sense of dignity', 'a sense of beauty', 'being loving': very few are at all happy to explain these as other than manifestations of 'the inner man', who is more, if not even *other than*, a piece of moving-matter.

Hence, whilst there is not in the West (and, these days, increasingly in the East as well) an absolute denial of 'wisdom', or of the 'inner man', there is, I would say, something akin to absolute confusion about it. Moreover, this wholly unthinking, indeed, mostly unthought of confusion is added unto by the fact that the sole (however tenuously) remaining, wholly acceptable repository of 'value-theory' in the West—namely, what is called 'morality', and philosophy, so far as it theorizes about morals—is nonetheless, increasingly characterized by an effort to cancel out 'the inner man of the Spirit', in the name of 'the outer man of the fleshly body'. More and more these days do theorists seek to 'explain' morals in terms of some non-moral, fundamentally physical thing—'happiness' (understood as 'pleasure'); or 'basic physical needs' ('drives', 'instincts' &c); or 'self-preservation'; or 'one's private feelings or emotions' (ultimately reducible, or at least traceable to physiological happenings); or 'social-convention' (usually considered attendant either upon sheer power struggles between opposing blocs, or the contingencies of socio-economic pressures). The suggestion of another form of understanding which might supply us with non-secular, *absolute* values is, by and large, either ignored or ridiculed by modern moral theorists—especially in contemporary, England-influenced philosophy.

This is thought to be an 'enlightened' approach by 'civilized man' to hard realities; and called—'progress'. In fact, it is only a scientific approach by modern man to the boundaries of empirically-verifiable fact: and far from being "progress", would seem entirely to be an effort to deny man his true humanity, by robbing him of his Divinity.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

*Having attained human birth, which is an open gateway to Brahman, one who... remains attached to the ties of the world is not fit to be called human. Pleasures of sense may be had in all lives: leave them, then, to the brutes! Never does the wise man yearn alter them.*

Srimad Bhagavatam, XI, iii.

---

<sup>1</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy; On The Pertinence of Philosophy; in Contemporary Indian Philosophy; Allen and Unwin; 1952; p. 151.

<sup>2</sup> It would not be far wrong to say that 'having wisdom' means 'having such improving knowledge'.