

**G. E. R. Lloyd**

*Disciplines in the Making: Cross Cultural Perspectives on Elites, Learning and Innovation.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2009/2011.

viii + 215 pages

\$55.00 (cloth 978-0-19-956787-4); \$29.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-19-969471-6)

Many people know G. E. R. Lloyd as a distinguished historian of ancient Greek science and medicine. Fewer know his Sinology, in the tradition of the historian of Chinese science and technology, Joseph Needham. Lloyd also has an easy familiarity with the giants of sociological and ethnographic theory from Weber, Durkheim and Malinowski through Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach to Clifford Geertz. Moreover, he is conversant with recent French social theory (Foucault, Bourdieu, French classicists such as Detienne, Gernet, and Vidal-Naquet) and important contributors to the history of science (Crombie, Daston, Galison, Hacking, Latour, and Shapin). The task Lloyd has set for himself in this little book requires just such depth and breadth of scholarship.

Lloyd's aim is to provide a comparative study of the way that various cultures organize experience in eight areas, which he calls learned disciplines (1). These areas are philosophy, mathematics, history, medicine, art, law, religion and science. He is interested in how these disciplines are constituted and defined and in the role of elites involved in them in determining innovation and its limits, objects of interest and membership criteria for practitioners. While Lloyd starts from the Euro-American identification of these as primary fields of learned interest, he does not assume that parallel fields in other cultures will be exactly the same (or even always present), nor even that cultures need to be literate to develop them. This study treats each attempt at comparison as problematic, partly because reflexive classificatory schemes vary across cultures, partly because the practices to which they are applied also vary. In many cases, Lloyd's study of the constitution of a given discipline is simultaneously also a study of the emergence of the field. Thus, the classical periods in Greece and China (and in South Asia, and the Islamic world to a lesser extent) loom large in his account. These are sometimes compared to practices in small scale, non-literate societies.

Determining whether an activity that occurs in one cultural context can be described as being of the same kind as one taking place in another can be complicated by the difficulty of delimiting the field in even *one* tradition. This can be illustrated by Lloyd's initial example, philosophy. We recognize a more or less clear European tradition in the field, with origins in Greek "investigations," called "philosophy" only some generations later. As Lloyd notes, the boundaries of the field now are disputed by those who claim to be philosophers in the present day (5), and there is considerable semantic variability between the English word 'philosophy' and its cognates in other modern European languages (6-7). While there have been recent tendencies towards convergence among philosophic traditions, often associated with the translation and migration of texts, these texts can be used differently in their new environments than they were where first produced (French responses to J. L. Austin are one good example, Dummett's use of Brentano and Husserl are another). When a body of scholars in another

society classifies its own work differently, discusses a differently populated set of subjects, has a different origin narrative and operates in a different institutional scheme, a claim that they are doing what some set of European-American thinkers does becomes contestable. Thus some people claim that certain major schools of Chinese thought may well count as a kind of “wisdom,” but that they cannot count as philosophy. Before Buddhist influences there was relatively little discussion by Chinese scholars of what could be called theory of knowledge, or logic or ontology; entry into the field involved learning canonical texts and emulating their style; and many practitioners functioned mainly as court advisers, local officials or career bureaucrats. Similar skeptical objections can be raised against claims that philosophy was practiced in South Asian intellectual traditions. Lloyd replies by proposing a broad conception of philosophy as a form of *reflective* discussion and debate about matters of common concern and commonplace beliefs. The precise delimitation of a discipline generated from it is not readily achievable, since the practitioners in each community (and these communities include non-literate ones) take their efforts in different directions reflecting their varying values and concerns. When organized groups of thinkers can direct the investigation to particular subjects, develop entry credentials for their group, and evolve measures of success in the practice, then the activity can deepen its powers of reflection and develop new tools for carrying it on. However, these advances come at a cost. As disciplinary elites become established, they not only enable common efforts regarding their subjects: they also become the police of disciplinary activity. Their rejection of a new practice or subject can unduly restrict the range of disciplinary activity and produce unreflective intolerance of new activities in the field.

This view of the role of disciplinary elites is Lloyd’s main comparative thesis, and he offers evidence of it across his eight fields. The fields themselves are a heterogeneous lot, however. Sometimes it is fairly easy to make the case that the same type of activity is institutionalized in distinct ways across several cultures. Thus, although early Chinese texts in *mathematics* include topics we now associate with astronomy, calendar making, divination or physics (46–7), they also include some high level work, both practical and theoretical, in arithmetic and geometry. Some of these topics—harmonics, for example—also show up in early Western delimitations of the field. On the other hand, not only are different topics emphasized with divergent sets of results: methods differ as well. While Greek contributors (and many influenced by them) pursued axiomatic organization of their subjects, Chinese authors sought demonstrative techniques that could be used in multiple analogous areas of study (55–6).

Similarly, if one considers history to be a scholarly narrative about the past, and concedes a wide range of not necessarily mutually exclusive aims for such narratives, then one can identify historical writing in various cultural traditions and do useful cross-cultural historiography by taking note not only of variances in investigative methods, but also of the range of aims preferred by the historians and their audiences. Narrative aims may vary from historian to historian and society to society, differences in authors’ values affect the selection of materials, the actors identified may be collectives as well as individuals and the subjects included may extend to matters of astronomy or geography when an historian sees them as necessary means to accomplish a narrative aim. Nevertheless, there will be enough in common in the scholarly narrative practices to allow useful comparisons.

Some of the eight fields are not so easy to delimit, however. We cannot always identify cultural practices that match what Euro-Americans call *art*, so Lloyd looks for objects and activities that are judged by local standards involving some recognition of the fine, the “beautiful” or the “pleasant” in their apprehension, however much that assessment may be mixed with considerations of good function, propriety, edification, sacredness or the like (105–9). Then Lloyd looks for the various ways that connoisseurs’ judgements may differ from or influence those of the ordinary perceiver and how these may influence production and selection.

Of all the fields addressed, religion is the most problematic. Although many religious institutions include scholars, one need not be a scholar to participate in “religious” activity. While some easy-to-identify religions have defined doctrines (and doctrinal disputes often involving community elites), many lack official revelation or prescribed ritual practice. Some activities commonly categorized as religions even lack commitments to personal supernatural beings. Lloyd sees no fixed, “crisp” necessary and sufficient conditions for an institution’s being a religion (143–4), but follows Pascal Boyer (*Religion Explained*, 2001) in holding that religious beliefs generally show certain recurring features, often blending common ideas of agency, causality and the like with other, counter-intuitive ones (145). It is hard to see what distinguishes a society’s religious ideas from much of its other non-scientific ideology.

What marks the realm of *science* in a society, on the other hand, is identified as reliance on one or more of the “styles” of scientific reasoning noted by Crombie and Hacking. This broad standard allows for the development of systematic science first in Europe, then world-wide, but also includes differently institutionalized scientific activity in many social settings.

Finally, *medicine* includes those practices and associated beliefs that a society engages to maintain and restore what it understands to be good health. It, and fields like it, often involves competing views of the goal to be achieved and the activities of competing elites—each with its own practice-justifying goals and rationales—vary accordingly. While one of these approaches may claim dominance in a society, the others are open as options for those seeking treatments that meet their needs. Whoever has the means to select can judge by the criteria she or he selects whether the treatment has been effective. When one approach enjoys favour, the others will have to respond to its success. This leads to one lesson discoverable in Lloyd’s account: competing elites and practices can invigorate some disciplines.

**Thomas Mathien**  
University of Toronto