The Unmaking of the Disciplines

G.E.R. Lloyd, Disciplines in the Making: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Elites, Learning, and Innovation. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011[2009]. Pp. viii + 215. ISBN 978-0-19-969471-6.

In his most recent book, G.E.R. Lloyd continues his cross-cultural investigations into the unity and diversity of the human mind. While his previous book *Cognitive Variations* (Oxford, 2007) explored such basic, yet variant, phenomena as the perception of colour, space, self, etc., *Disciplines in the Making* discusses the formation, development, and definition of learned disciplines. Lloyd's main areas of expertise are the societies of ancient Greece and China which he showcases throughout in an attempt to challenge and expand notions of philosophy, mathematics, history, medicine, art, law, religion, and science in the modern Western academy. Though the approach is somewhat reminiscent of earlier comparativists such as Edward Tylor and James Frazer, the conclusions drawn are less spectacular and altogether more helpful. Still, Lloyd's endeavour is likely to be valued more for its insistence on cross-cultural understanding and interdisciplinarity than for its too brief and often highly selective exemplifications (a point conceded by Lloyd himself in the introductory chapter).

The title of the book holds the key to Lloyd's understanding of the learned disciplines he discusses. They are not—and were never—made once and for all. Rather, they are in the making, and have been so from even before they were established as disciplines. The notion that philosophy, for example. originated as a well-defined and undisputed discipline in Graeco-Roman antiquity is obviously false, and so is any similar notion of homogeneity with regard to its modern Western continuation. Discussions of the principal aims, subject-matter, and methods of philosophy are ongoing, and should lead us to question not only the nature of philosophy, but the nature of all learned disciplines in similar circumstances.

The broader view of the disciplines adopted by Lloyd tend to obscure the boundaries between them as definitions become gradually more vague and tentative. Thus, philosophy regresses to "explicit reflections on common beliefs" (26), while science is construed as a "systematic understanding of a range of natural phenomena" (155). Referring to the often made assertion that many cultures have no concept of number, Lloyd reminds us that "the lack of a concept should not be inferred just from the lack of a term for it" (29). He then goes on to search for pre-conceptual universals, coming up with candidates such as logical reasoning and morality in philosophy (25), the identification of bodily imbalances in medicine (81), the basic principle that might is right in law (126), and the actualization of a certain cognitive potential in science (160).

Here, as in most other aspects of the book, it is the underlying ideas which are of key interest rather than their exemplification. While surveying the proposed philosophical endeavours of such distinct cultures as Greece, China, India, the Islamic countries, and

even non-literate societies in little more than 15 pages hardly does any of them justice, it does drive home the point that the unmaking of an ethnocentrically defined discipline may indeed prove to be its remaking in a more inclusive sense. Still, we have to ask whether this is mere wishful thinking. In the introductory chapter, Lloyd states his belief that "all humans potentially share intellectual, creative, [and] spiritual ambitions", and that we have "every reason to expand our horizons beyond the familiarities of our modern Western experience" (4). Obviously, Lloyd is sensitive to the current shift in global powers and the need to overcome Western hegemonical assumptions, and though his arguments do not always appear fully substantiated owing to the sparse material presented in his book, many scholars younger and less sensitive in these matters than himself would do well to heed his call for increased cross-cultural understanding and interdisciplinarity.

Lloyd's considerations of the role of professional elites and the possibility of innovation within learned disciplines are among the most interesting in his book. His general assertion, repeated again and again in his discussions of the different disciplines, is that elites play a double role as both conservators and innovators. However, the double role is also a double-edged sword as becomes apparent when established elites, afraid of losing status and power, inhibit rather than further innovation. One example given by Lloyd in his discussion of mathematics is the Aristotelian ideal of axiomatic-deductive demonstration which effectively did away with any mathematical investigation that did not conform to the model (56). In contrast, no axiomatic base appears to have been proposed for Chinese mathematics which were rather seen as a guiding principle for achieving unity between other fields of inquiry (54). This trend is also found in the lure of Euclidean exactitude which resulted in the forced reconciliation between sounds and ratios in the Greek discipline of harmonics (40), and which still holds sway, one might add, in many departments of the humanities (though most would probably profess otherwise).

The overall tension between innovation and authority, Lloyd argues with Kuhn, is essential (182). When change becomes too fast and too radical, as it did in the legal and political matters of the Greek city-states (132), it causes instability and threatens to overthrow tradition. When, on the other hand, traditions resist change, as in the case of many divinely sanctioned disciplines, they become equally liable to lose momentum. Though Lloyd raises the question of how change is possible in institutionalized religion without undermining the authority of established doctrine, he does not seem to put enough emphasis on the power of interpretation and the ability of religion to assimilate to diverse cultural situations. Instead he simply chooses to contrast the supposed tolerance of polytheistic religions with the supposed intolerance, and even militancy, of monotheistic religions (149-50). He also claims that contemporary religion is segregating itself from competing disciplines such as philosophy and science by refusing to qualify its stances on subjects relating to those fields (151). An argument severely challenged by the current spread of civil religion in the Western world, and by the outpouring of books on especially Islamic and Vedic science.

The discussion of innovation in religion and its potential sub-disciplines of law, medicine, science, etc. might have benefitted from a closer look at the Indian tradition of claiming hoary antiquity and divine authority in anything from sacred hymns to manuals on love-making. Though texts are held to be eternal and unchanging once they become an accepted part of the canonical corpus, innovation continues through a refined system of textual transmission and commentarial literature. While Lloyd mentions the classical Sanskrit grammar of Pāṇini as a model for classification in other fields on a par with the mathematical works of ancient Greece (20), he fails to note that it was reinterpreted to the point of being rewritten in extensive commentarial works by acclaimed grammarians such as Kātyāyana and Patañjali. The apparent paradox of changing an unchangeable text was never really a paradox in the Indian tradition. Partly, perhaps, because the related concept of the urtext always remained slippery and highly theoretical. As Lloyd notes with regard to the understanding of what constitutes a text in modern historical studies (71), the canonical corpus of India did not so much stem from a pristine collection of archetypal texts as from the ongoing transmission of any number of similar texts by different schools of thought and tradition.

To summarize, Lloyd has written an engaging, almost personal, book, drawing, if only too briefly and selectively, on a vast storehouse of knowledge collected over a long and celebrated life of study. The concluding chapter not only reminds the reader of the problems of formation, development, and definition within the learned disciplines, but also challenges the widespread conservatism of curricula in Western universities, and the tendency of specialists to frown upon interdisciplinarity. While acknowledging the advantages of both conservatism and specialization, Lloyd proposes that future innovation will have to come from interdisciplinary studies conducted outside the hegemonically assumed borders of Western intellectual disciplines, and, indeed, outside the borders of Western countries themselves. But, as he rightly notes, interdisciplinarity has no elite, and thus no easy way of asserting the authority of its innovations.

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