Chapter one’s dreams: the paradox of the specialist on specialization

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward   Draft version: Version 1 (26th October 2022)

Abstract. This brief paper presents a problem: the specialist on specialization must seek to know the value of specialization across different fields, but that would seem to make them non-specialized. I also propose solutions.

“Each night I process chapter one
And wonder when I shall be done”

In the opening chapter of Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations, he recommends specialization. You specialize in one task and I specialize in another and that way our ends are better achieved. So, presuming he followed his recommendation, he was a specialist on specialization. But how can there be a specialist on specialization? Because:

(a) To be a specialist on specialization, a person must assess the claim that specialization is of value across fields.

(b) To assess this claim they must know the value of specialization in very different fields, such as making a pin and philosophy.

(c) But to know this, they must be a non-specialist.

It seems then that there cannot be a specialist on specialization.

I presume the most promising place to challenge this conclusion is commitment (3). One challenge to it is “We can develop a general model in favour of specialization that applies across fields, without knowing much about most fields and so remaining specialized.” Another challenge is “It is not that they must be a
non-specialist, rather they must be a specialist in many fields, or at least *on* many fields. They must do pin-making and philosophy and other things, or at least study all these.” But regarding this other challenge, it seems to go against Smith’s vision of each adult having a single narrow specialism.

**Reference**