

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

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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

Smith, A. 1904 (originally 1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: Methuen.