

The advice to become a narrow specialist: two personal worries

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Abstract. There are philosophers and literary figures who write on a variety of topics. I suppose I do as well. Here I present two personal worries about the advice to become a narrow specialist.

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There are philosophers and literary figures who write essays on a variety of topics. I suppose I do as well. I imagine joining a queue with figures past and present. Then I get to the door for entering the club. But the person guarding the door looks at me skeptically and asks, “Do you qualify as a general practitioner?” That’s the term!

“There are questions over whether I qualify? What do you mean? I write on a much wider variety of topics than others I know.”

I have been thinking about objections to the advice to become a narrow specialist, advice famous from the Enlightenment (Smith Bk. 1, Ch. 1). And I detect two problems here. The advice risks discouraging some suitable candidates from entering this generalist league, to change metaphors, because it tells them to be a narrow specialist. (If you don’t think I’m suitable, the lesson may apply to someone else!) And when others follow the advice, it can give a candidate an illusion of not being too narrow.

Reference

Smith, A. 1904 (originally 1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: Methuen. Available at: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWN.html>