

A gain from “faux specialization,” from Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*

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Abstract. This paper begins with Adam Smith’s advice to specialize and draws attention to an advantage from a misleading appearance of fixed specialization, identified in Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*.

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By the shore of a lake I did awake

Took a plate from the water and ate some cake

Adam Smith famously recommends specialization and teamwork as an efficient way to achieve ends. One person performs one specialist task required for an end, another performs another specialist task, and so on. In chapter one of book one of *The Wealth of Nations*, in relation to making a pin, he famously tells us, “One man draws out the wire; another straightens it; a third cuts it...” He also recommends specialization and teamwork for the discipline of philosophy, with its aim of knowledge.

Now when evaluating Smith’s recommendation it is natural to think of the alternative as one person doing everything to meet their needs: they build their shelter, they grow their food, etc. But Smith conceives of the process of specialization as something which typically leaves one with a narrow specialism, such as being a wire-straightener, and makes it difficult to pursue most other specialisms. There are surely then other alternatives in-between the extremes of doing it all and a system of narrow specialists. One alternative involves “faux specialization,” if that is a

suitable term. Though various people appear to be specialized, the training some people have undergone in a particular direction is slightly lighter than Smith would expect and there is more emphasis on doing other things as well, so as to retain flexibility. Then they can switch easily to doing something else, which they would do in some circumstances.

Something like this situation is described in Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru*. In chapter two, her title character tells her husband:

We are going to look for another trade. These women spoil trade so easily. When they see you making a profit in one trade they leave the trade they know and join yours and of course in no time it is no longer profitable. (1978 [1966]: 21)

She describes the women who spoil trade as having a trade they know. Perhaps they do, but what I envisage is that their relationship to this specialism is not that of having undergone a training which involves thoroughly immersing themselves in one trade largely or entirely to the exclusion of other trades.¹ They learn their trade somewhat and all the while learn other things and have a readiness to switch their focus should appropriate circumstances arise. The rather unpleasant gain is in damaging the business of others.

One can envisage a comparable situation in philosophy. This person works in the philosophy of causation, this other person in the philosophy of skepticism, and so forth, but if a stranger should appear with another specialism they quickly switch specialisms to eclipse the stranger and that is a well-worked strategy that they are from early on prepared for. Leaving aside any unpleasant motives, probably it provides a useful test: the sufficiently able will survive this. Sometimes these philosophers will start rhyming and making one-line jokes too and producing economic models and more, depending on the stranger.

¹ In addition to one's specialism, Smith does envisage trading in some goods everyone wants in case people do not wish to purchase one's specialist good. See Book 1, chapter 4. This appears to be a transitional phenomenon for him though, giving rise to a monetary economy.

References

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