

## Chapter one of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* again: a pin factory assumption

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*Abstract.* This paper argues that Adam Smith's attempt to use the pin factory example to illustrate a general phenomenon – the value of the division of labour – seems to depend on an assumption. Put simply, the assumption is that the skills and knowledge involved in one task are not relevant to doing another task, or if they are relevant they would just be developed by specializing in the other task.

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*What does a mermaid do?*

—*She sings and she swims*

*And makes hairpins too*

Chapter one of book one of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* uses the pin factory example to illustrate the benefits of the division of labour. He describes the situation of a man trying his hand at making pins with no experience:

...a workman not educated to this business (which the division of labour has rendered a distinct trade), nor acquainted with the use of the machinery employed in it (to the invention of which the same division of labour has probably given occasion), could scarce, perhaps, with his utmost industry, make one pin in a day, and certainly could not make twenty.

Then he describes how the process was actually carried out in his day:

One man draws out the wire; another straightens it; a third cuts it; a fourth points it; a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations; to put it on is a peculiar business; to whiten the pins is another; it is even a trade by itself to put them into the paper; and the important business of making a pin is, in this manner, divided into about eighteen distinct operations, which, in some manufactories, are all performed by distinct hands, though in others the same man will sometimes perform two or three of them.

Smith's example is meant to apply to a number of other fields. The goals of these other fields are best achieved by a division of labour. Now the uncomplicated application to some field, let us call it "field X," depends on an assumption:

*(Irrelevance-or-anyway assumption)* In relation to field X, the knowledge and skills involved in specializing in one task are either irrelevant for doing another task, or they would develop from specializing in the other task anyway.

The knowledge and skills involved in straightening out the wire, say, are irrelevant for making the head of the pin, or if they are relevant they are also developed through specializing in head-making, otherwise the head-maker would have to learn wire-straightening.<sup>1</sup> And an analogous situation applies in a number of other fields.

Perhaps this assumption applies to pin-making when divided into the tasks Smith identifies. An example he gives of another field is philosophy and here the situation is more complicated. Smith writes:

Like every other employment too, it is subdivided into a great number of different branches, each of which affords occupation to a particular tribe or class of

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<sup>1</sup> Obviously wire-straightening skills are relevant for what one does with the product of the head-making task, but by "irrelevant" here I mean that one can do the head-making task given the starting materials without wire-straightening skills.

philosophers; and this subdivision of employment in philosophy, as well as in every other business, improves dexterity, and saves time. Each individual becomes more expert in his own peculiar branch, more work is done upon the whole, and the quantity of science is considerably increased by it.

In philosophy, there are clearly large gains from specialization, but it is by no means clear that the assumption identified applies to this field. So-and-so specializes on Descartes, in particular the Cartesian circle. Another philosopher specializes in methods for philosophers who work on what the government should do. If a low specialization philosopher says, “The argument for the reflective equilibrium method suffers from an unnoticed problem closely analogous to the Cartesian circle,” are they wrong? Before investigating their case, it is not unlikely that they are. (They are applying their skill in spotting Cartesian circle-like problems, which no one in the second specialism identified appears to have. See also Williams 1975.)

I anticipate this: the eventual result of investigating how advice to specialize applies to philosophy will be a concession, albeit perhaps a grudging one. There are gains which less specialized philosophers give us that the field is probably not going to get in any other way.

## References

- 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>
- Williams, B. 1975. Rawls and Pascal’s Wager. *Cambridge Review* February 1975.