

Father McKenzie level? Adam Smith on the effects of specialization on character: a solution

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Abstract. I propose a solution to a problem raised by E.G. West’s paper “Adam Smith’s Two Views on the Division of Labour.” Smith seems committed to the views that the division of labour makes people more and less intelligent.

In his article entitled “Adam Smith’s Two Views on the Division of Labour,” E.G. West tries to identify a contradiction between book I and book V of Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. The division of labour usually involves specialization and the contradiction is about the effects of specialization on the characters of people. Regarding book 1, which recommends specialization to achieve a goal, West writes:

Smith argues that the dexterity of the workman is improved. This alone presumably has a favourable effect on his intelligence. (1983: 163)

Then he quotes from book V, where Adam Smith complains about the effects of the division of labour:

The man whose life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of

such exertion and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. (Smith cited in West 1983: 164)

Smith seems to be committed to the division of labour's making people more intelligent and more stupid. How can that be?

Here is a solution, though it may not fit very well with Smith's text.¹ If I specialize in one field and encounter another field, I tend to make analogies with my own field and experiences within it. For example, if I am a footballer and I look into philosophy, I will say that this philosopher is comparable to this footballer and that philosopher is comparable to that footballer. Some of these analogies are valuable – and so specialization has made me more intelligent. But sometimes there is just no adequate analogy and the analogies I make are misleading – and so specialization has made me more stupid than I would otherwise be! Probably it works both ways, but it is easier, given some preconceptions, to start with a footballer looking into philosophy.

References

Raphael, D.D. 1985. *Adam Smith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

West, E.G. 1983 (originally 1964). Adam Smith's Two Views on the Division of Labour. In J.C.

Wood (ed.), *Adam Smith: Critical Assessments* Volume III. London and Canberra: Croom Helm.

¹ D.D. Raphael seems interested in addressing the problem while sticking closely to the text (1985: 51-52). He quotes the same material from chapter V as West's paper, but the source identifying the problem is not acknowledged.