

On Specialization and Psychotics

Aspiring writers are frequently told that they should “become an expert in one thing” if they hope to someday make it big.

However, in our hyper-specialized modern society, the advice is fitting for just about any profession. The path to professional and/or financial success usually involves choosing a focus area and steadily adding to one’s knowledge and experience in it. Sure, there’s a risk that what you’ve chosen to specialize in will be deemed irrelevant at some point in the future, or that the market for your specialization will become overly saturated. But there’s also no reward without risk.

The trend toward specialization has been a fixture of the modern West since the Industrial Revolution, and has played a large role in its rapid technological advancement. (This is why I’m somewhat skeptical when I hear billionaires wax eloquent about how liberal arts majors will be indispensable to software companies in the future.)

Universal knowledge was the ideal in the 16th and 17th centuries, as especially seen in their production of the modern “encyclopedia”. It is in the 18th century that we begin to see a move toward intellectual specialization. Once various areas of knowledge were siloed off from one another, and allowed to develop according to their own internal logic, the fertile ground was created for the exponential growth in technology we have seen in the past 250 or so years.

But specialization is a two-edged sword. While it has (thus far) led to technological development, it has also left Western man increasingly devoid of a mature perception of reality outside his area of expertise, and unable to

articulate how his particular specialty relates to the whole. Tech CEOs are given to making pronouncements about how their latest technology is “making the world a better place”—a phenomenon [brilliantly trolled](#) by HBO’s *Silicon Valley*—but the grandiosity of these pronouncements reveals them as shallow and meaningless abstractions.

As Richard Weaver argued in [Ideas Have Consequences](#), the modern specialist shares his myopia with a rather unfortunate figure—the psychotic:

“It has been remarked that when one passes among the patients of the psychiatric ward, he encounters among the several sufferers every aspect of normal personality in morbid exaggeration... As one passes through the modern centers of enterprise and of higher learning, he is met with similar autonomies of development. The scientist, the technician, the scholar, who have left the One for the Many are puffed up with vanity over their ability to describe precisely some minute portion of the world. Men so obsessed with fragments can no more be reasoned with than other psychotics.”

To borrow an analogy from my former professor, [Bishop Robert Barron](#), the hyper-specialized person is akin to one who is staring at a dot on a canvas, unable to step back and see the dot as but one part of Seurat’s pointillist masterpiece [A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte](#).

The challenge now, as always, is to preserve one’s humanity by balancing out specialization with a thorough grounding in the humanities and a lifelong pursuit of virtue, wisdom, and contemplation. But I suspect this balance cannot be achieved on a societal level—and people hate to hear this, because we naturally want to eat our cake and have it, too—without slowing the technological progress that has been the obsession of Western man these past two centuries.

I just don’t know that many are yet willing to make that

sacrifice.

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