

Evaluating "In Defense of Being Average"

Post by "Joshua" of June 14, 2019 at 11:04 AM

I think this relates to the larger issue of whether it's good for people to be specialists or generalists. I read a "Romantic vs Classical" distinction into the argument. Take the view of the Generalist, here expressed by Robert Heinlein;

Quote

A human being should be able to change a diaper, plan an invasion, butcher a hog, conn a ship, design a building, write a sonnet, balance accounts, build a wall, set a bone, comfort the dying, take orders, give orders, cooperate, act alone, solve equations, analyse a new problem, pitch manure, program a computer, cook a tasty meal, fight efficiently, die gallantly. Specialization is for insects.

The problem with this view is that it appears to the Classical thinker as being overly Romantic; it sounds like it should sound good, but in reality it yields poor results. The Jack-of-all-trades is the master of none.

The Specialist ideal finds its expression in a character like Doyle's Sherlock Holmes;

Quote

I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skillful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order. It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent. Depend upon it there comes a time when for every addition of knowledge you forget something that you knew before. It is of the highest importance, therefore, not to have useless facts elbowing out the useful ones.

This strikes the Romantic thinker as something inhuman; the machination of man.

It's clear that the market selects for Specialists. A person with a mediocre ability in 10 different areas will very often be shoehorned into employment using one of those skills at a low level. The Specialist attaining excellence in one area will, if they have chosen a good field, find high-status employment that is satisfying and rewarding. But here's the thing; the Generalist will

almost always be better at handling adversity. First of all, because they are accustomed to mediocrity anyway; second, because when confronted by it, they have a wide range of other hobbies and activities to plug into it.

So when it comes to the Epicurean project of maximizing pleasure and happiness over a whole human life, it won't necessarily be the case that striving for excellence yields the best result.