

Letter: Why Not Just Ask the Dolphins?

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Dear Editors:

The idea that economists should be more like “real” scientists is a handy, if trite club with which to beat upon the profession. In the recent *Economist’s Voice*, Barbara R. Bergmann picks up this cudgel to argue for more integration of economic research into actual business situations. As an analogy, she considers marine biologists studying dolphins to learn about their behavior; she concludes that we, like the aquatic scientists, should be surveying actual business people to find out the answer to thorny theoretical problems.

The dolphins apparently worked in groups, employing a sophisticated division of

labor to catch their meals. Did the marine biologists learn this by conducting a survey? No, they watched them closely, then theorized about how their behaviors maximized the number of prey fish they caught. Given the subject matter, it is difficult not to draw parallels to the scientific method of Adam Smith, who watched closely the operation of a myriad of businesses, including the canonical pin factory, then theorized about how specialization maximized the productive output of those businesses.

Their large, mammalian brains notwithstanding, I doubt many dolphins have read *The Wealth of Nations*, but somehow they, like the pin manufacturers, managed to incorporate Smith’s insights. Thus, few would be

tempted to survey the dolphins to explain their insights. If one did (and could somehow understand dolphin language), I suspect they would probably say one or more of the following: “it’s just what works,” “it’s hard-coded into our brains,” or “that’s the way our parents taught us.” Businessmen have larger egos than most dolphins, and so might proffer something that sounded more well considered about their own motives, but that wouldn’t make it any more correct or useful.

Perhaps instead Bergmann’s criticism is of modern economists, whose empirical efforts are often more abstract than Smith’s. It’s true that Smith’s anecdotal evidence for the division of labor and his off-the-cuff theorizing probably wouldn’t garner a “revise-and-resubmit” at the top journals today. Peer-reviewed publication outlets now require fully considered mechanisms, plus some material support that these theories apply broadly, not just in one or two—or even ten—factories. The availability of large-scale datasets, modern empirical techniques, and the notions of rationality and equilibrium allow economists

to do these things. That’s called progress, and its continuation is necessary to keep us ahead of those next in the evolutionary line.

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REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Bergmann, Barbara R. (2007) “Needed: A New Empiricism,” *Economists’ Voice*, 4(2): Art. 2. Available at: <http://www.bepress.com/ev/vol4/iss2/art2>.