Excerpts from Michelle Hutchinsons' 80K Podcast on Advising

This podcast was recorded in December 2019.

My (Vaidehi's) comments and context on each section are in purple. I've edited/summarized for length & rearranged the topics for relevance.

Some things to keep in mind while reading this:

- *Who the typical 80K advisee is: someone fairly early in their career, who may be underconfident in their abilities and may not have a clear sense of what they want to do, and who may be well-suited for at least one of 80,000 Hours' priority cause areas. Consider how similar your advisees might be to 80K's.*
- *We will be going over 80K's evaluation strategy in more depth in future sessions, but you might want to read this re-evaluation of 80K's impact metrics from their December 2019 Review and keep 80K's theory of change for advising in mind as you read this document (it might also be useful to see their process flow from their 2017 Review and more on the tier process here from their 2018 Review)*

Pipeline: On 80K's advising process

Process

- Filtering applicants
    - **Which calls are less valuable?**
        - There are people who might be impactful and have a comparative advantage in a particular area, but it's less valuable to speak to them because there's less to say.
        - It's less valuable when they don't have a good sense of how to do well in a particular area, because they don't have a good way to compare with other options. They only talk to them if there's some particularly strong reason to. Whereas for a lot of other kinds of people, I'll just say, "Well, I just don't think this is going to be a very useful call for them".

        - They might still talk to people in areas they speculate are high impact but they know less about (e.g. security)
- So we get people to fill in an application initially which gives some idea of what their possible plans are, which problems they think are most pressing, that kind of thing.
    - **On people who don't apply to advising** Yeah, so 80,000 Hours has in the past done a deliberate qualitative study of people like this, where they did interviews with people for why they hadn't applied for advising despite seeming like they were in the category of people for whom it would seem useful, and they knew about it and things like this. My impression — this was before my time — was that it came out with a fairly broad range of interesting answers.
    - So some people who felt that it wasn't really for people like them, by which they seemed to mean some kind of underconfidence thing where they thought that it was really only for people who could have really impressive jobs and they weren't impressive or something. This was typically not in fact in any way true of them. They were mostly underconfident. Then some people who, when pushed, really felt that they didn't have a good reason for not having applied, and that really resonates with me because I felt that I just didn't really think about applying that hard and decide against or something. Although I was in a slightly surprising situation by comparison in that through most of my job, talking to Ben Todd or Rob every week.
- **Call Agenda Document.** Once we've asked someone to do a call with us, we send them another document asking them things like what do they think that they're naturally most skilled at, what do they think their key uncertainties are and that type of thing. And that really helps. It makes a huge difference when someone has really thought through what it will be useful for me to know beforehand and also what the things are that they think are most important to discuss. It's still very difficult, particularly if someone has some particular thing that they want to discuss but they didn't quite realize that they wanted to or something like that.
- **On introductions** We find that in some cases the thing that was most useful was introducing people to people. Sometimes it was the ranking of options. Sometimes it was sending them resources. There's quite a few different things that seem to produce value and that kind of thing means that I think we should probably do quite a bit more testing to figure out what kinds of people we should hire. One thing that's come up recently, for example, is that it seems that I find it easier to get people to change into a more impactful career if they're working in global priorities research, which is in large part because I have a better sense of what specific roles there are. They can apply for what specific people they could talk to next, that kind of thing, which gives some evidence that we should be hiring

specialists who have been in a bunch of our different priority paths for a long while. (Connections are limited to where their networks re: SF, London & DC.)

- **Output from coaching** Usually we aim to leave people with a ranked list of options where it's pretty clear what the top two or three are. And then for each of those, a very clear sense of what are the next steps in those. How do you test whether the first one's a good fit? That kind of thing. And depending on the stage that might be, you know, "Seems pretty clear that this one's the top", and you're just going to test it by applying to these 10 jobs versus if you're much earlier on it might be something much more like, "Oh, you'd never thought of working in this particular area. How about you read this problem profile on why this area is useful"? And then you read this other post on what kinds of jobs there are in this area and then you talk to someone about it. If that seems not that good, go onto the next one and read up on that. That kind of thing.
- **On tracking impact** I find it a bit difficult to answer the changes in plan because often it can take a really long time for this to materialize. I'd say that, in general, I expect that the value's going to come in typical cases from kind of smallish tweaks to their plans. You know, someone that they can talk to who will know a bit more about better jobs they could be applying for. That kind of thing. Rather than making big shifts. So I think one thing that's less of a change in plan but can sometimes result fairly quickly is people actually applying for roles when a lot of people kind of have a general plan of changing role at some point in the nearest future, but still feel like they're getting something out of their current job, and that kind of thing. And as it's aversive to apply, it's difficult to motivate yourself to do that while you're still liking your current role.
- **On speedups** So for people who were kind of speculatively reaching out about "What kind of plans should I have?", sometimes they end up making swifter changes, surprisingly. So someone who's like, "Oh, I was gonna stay at my company for another couple of years or something." I had someone recently who was working in a tech company and enjoying it and doing well, but thinking that over the next couple of years they would change. And I suggested that they apply to DeepMind because that seemed like an obvious win if they could move immediately and takes quite a while and they'd simply immediately did that and then did in fact get a job. So that was very rewarding for both of us.
- **Feedback from 80K advisees** We tend to send feedback forms to everyone after we talk to them, and about 65% of people give us six or seven out of seven, which is a relatively good rate. We would prefer it to be better. Obviously there's definitely some calls where we just find that the person wanted something from us that we weren't able to give, particularly in the realm of very concrete advice about some specific area, or maybe at the other end of the spectrum, very generalized career advice that wasn't really about the impact of jobs. So sometimes I'll talk to people who want to know things like, "How much do I have to earn to

be happy in life?" and those are just not the kinds of questions that I'm going to be good at answering.

On talking about values and having unusual conversations I think it is absolutely crucial for me to be able to give them advice to know which kinds of things they prioritize. So I think I would need to do some of this if only to understand what their current thinking was on this. But I actually think it is very useful as well for getting people to take these kinds of questions more seriously because we're just not really encouraged to in normal life. And again, traditional careers advising, as you say, doesn't really do any of this. It just asks what kind of thing are you most passionate about. Maybe you should work on that. And I think there are a lot of ways in which people can kind of hold conflicting types of assumptions so people might have some sense of not caring that much about people existing in the future as long as people who are alive now are doing well, but actually care a lot about climate change.

And then when you talk to them about this, it turns out it's not because they think climate change is going to make a big difference on the order of 30 years, it actually is because they care about people in the future quite a lot. And I think these are the kinds of things that people just don't discuss that much.

And so having someone sit down and think through, "Okay, what kinds of assumptions might you need to get to work in this kind of area versus this kind of area" is just really useful for people. Particularly in light of the fact that there might be many orders of magnitude difference in terms of how much impact you'll have depending on which of these areas you go into.

Downsides of call length. You just don't get very much time at all to discuss different options, particularly for people who have just a huge range of things that they could go into. You end up having to spend just like a couple of minutes on each and just give some idea of, "Okay, maybe if you want to go into this, this would be the next step" or something rather than being able to go into detail.

Useful aspects of coaching/80K resources

On coaching preparation & application being useful in and of themselves.

- We have certainly tried to make them useful for people. Yeah. And we have gotten the feedback somewhat regularly that people found it a useful exercise to go through to plan

through their options. To think through specifically what their key uncertainties are and things.

- There's more that we could do in this kind of area, and one uncertainty we have is to what extent to be trying to optimize that process for being useful for that versus for making people ready for the call. Because some people say, "Actually I would have been happy to do more preparation".
- So for example. 80,000 Hours recommend people to have a number of different options of varying levels of competitiveness to try out for including having what we call "Plan Z", which is the thing that you know you could do if all else goes wrong. That's not typically going to be the kind of thing that's going to be that useful to discuss in an advising call, because it could be "Go back and live with your parents and get a job in the local library". But it's definitely a thing we think that people should have. So one of the things that we've been playing around with recently is should we actually ask people specifically on the document to list that? Not because we need to know it for the call or that we'll discuss it, just because we think it's really sensible for everyone to have.

On 80K's current guide & doing your own cause-prioritisation.

- I think our pages on how to make career decisions are extremely useful here and they often go through similar kinds of things to the things that we ask people to fill in before talking to us and then the kinds of process that we do. So particularly important things here are thinking through what your different options are and trying to increase the options set as we said. So trying to do a brainstorm yourself. Trying to ask other people, "Hey, what do you think I might be well suited to"? Read up on the 80,000 Hours website and other places for types of roles that you might not have considered. Then thinking through what the cases in favor of and against various of them are including this, "What kind of thing might I want to do in the long term? What might be most impactful in the long term"? And then trying to think, for each of the things that you might do, what the quickest, easiest way of testing whether you should rule out that option is, whether that's talking to someone who is doing that job, reading a book on it, then maybe doing an internship in it, that kind of thing. And I think through those kinds of processes, you can really get a lot of information and part of what's going on maybe that it's just a bit harder to motivate yourself to do this on your own. So, as you say, getting a friend to talk to, maybe getting someone who's happy to help keep you accountable for doing this could be pretty useful.
- **Arden Koehler:** Yeah. It seems like people could become sort of like each other's career advisors or something. They could go through it together and then try to, like, push the other person to come up with more options or do something like that. It seems like it could be something useful.

- **Michelle Hutchinson:** I can imagine that being really useful. I've actually done something like that in the past when I had a relatively hands-off manager. I worked with a friend who ran an organization who didn't have a manager and we kind of held each other to account for what things we were going to do, queried each other on, "Is this plan really a realistic one?" And I think you can get a huge amount from just having a second person that's really questioning your plan and trying to improve it with you.

Other considerations

How your background might affect advising So because of my philosophy background, it's particularly natural for me to talk through with people, "What kind of thing are you aiming for with your career? What problems are most pressing and why?" Whereas I think other people find that somewhat more of an awkward conversation to have with people. And then I also tend to be on the side of feeling that it's pretty difficult to have any real answers. And so throwing out tons of considerations at people. Helping them think through things. That kind of thing. Which some people find kind of annoying in careers advising because they're hoping that we'll have an answer. Other people appreciate it because they're helping them form their thoughts. Whereas I think maybe other careers advisors have more opinions on what they think actually the person should be doing.

On increasing coaching capacity slowly I think when you're fairly early on in how large a team you have, it's particularly important not to grow too fast. So at the start of this year, I was the only coach and we hired another person this year, and we've just hired another who'll be joining at the beginning of next year. I think it's just really important to only gradually add more people to the team, particularly if they're really increasing the percentage of the team because it can really change the culture. You don't know how people are going to integrate. I also think this is actually a somewhat difficult type of thing to easily add people to, because as I mentioned, what kinds of things people are good at in doing this somewhat varies depending on the personality, and I don't think we yet have a really good sense of "This is exactly the most important thing that we do."

Hard to hire good coaches Those people are going to be particularly hard to hire because they typically have a good sense of what career they should be doing and those careers aren't naturally leading to being careers advisors. But this evidence also could be used simply to say we should be getting more information as generalist coaches on these other areas and building off of the other parts of 80,000 Hours. So for example, the fact that we now have this broader job board and so maybe we don't need specialists, we just need to take more advantage of things like the job board

and things. Or, maybe it indicates that we should be tweaking the model a bit more towards more of the "helping people think through their considerations" and less of the "giving concrete jobs".

80K's Case Study Model of Coaching

- So when we first started 80,000 Hours, we were doing a more in-depth process where we were doing quite a bit of research on someone, then talking to them for a number of hours, I think, and then doing quite a bit more research and getting back to them with an answer.
- I think one of the things that was going on there was, before we had a really wide body of research, we were doing research that was very directed at specific kinds of cases because we knew that those were the things that would really be used.
- We tended to call that the "case study model" because in order to really make the most of that research, we then wrote up quite a few of these case studies. Since we moved from that model to the more "talk to someone for an hour and do more of a replicable kind of thing".

Frequent advice 80K gives

I see these as 80K's general approach to career 1-1s.

- *Guidance - Trajectory Change: Generally getting advisees to think more broadly about their careers by widening their option sets, rather than giving them specific answers.*
    - *This includes considering new:*
        - *Cause areas*
        - *Interventions*
        - *Career paths*
        - *Telling the candidate about specific job opportunities (This also increases the chances of successfully transitioning to a new career path)*
    - *The Challenge of Guidance: The general challenge with widening option sets is that it's easier to get rid of options rather than add more on. Some 80K advisees are kind of disappointed because they were hoping for narrowing down their options, instead of the opposite. I think it is very important if you're thinking of what's the best career for me to have over the next 40 years to really try and get all the options on the table and get some sense of which of the best to start off with.*

    - *Once you broaden the option sets, you can then encourage experimentation a way of eliminating options.*
        - *Read about it - there will often be books on an area*
        - *Talk to people about what the day-to-day is like.*
        - *Maybe try out the work, if possible.*
        - *Apply in order to learn a little bit more about the field*
        - *Go through the application process at a later stage after you've read about it & talked to people — the kinds of application processes that would give you enough information here to be useful are quite time-consuming*
- *General Support & Encouragement: Keeping up people's motivation & giving them support for making uncertain or difficult choices and feeling better about themselves.*

Widening the option sets

Encourage people to apply more widely & to the best options first

Encourage people to apply to a range of jobs, from safe bets to competitive jobs. Generally, applying more widely is solid advice. Both overconfident & underconfident people should apply more widely: overconfident people to safer bets, and underconfident people to more ambitious and promising jobs. 80K advisees are typically underconfident. It seems difficult to know which one you are.

Apply to the best options first to avoid getting anchored to back-up options.

- It's harder to motivate yourself when you already have an offer.
- Competitive corporate jobs like consulting do early applications. If you only apply to competitive things choosing then there may be several jobs like this.
- It's useful to plan ahead and try really hard to find out which of your top options you can apply for early on and which backup options you know you can still have time to apply for after that.

On avoiding/getting over rejection

- Start out by just applying for a bunch of jobs they don't even want. Then, they can just get very used to smashing out these cover letters and doing interviews without feeling very stressed about it because they don't in fact want the position and then that will kind of

build them up to then feeling confident when they actually do apply for a job that they want.
- You can learn a lot from longer application processes about your fit for a job and the company, but there are more cost-effective ways to test your fit before that (e.g. this shouldn't be your first option)

Encourage people to apply to different kinds of organisations.

I think that people sometimes end up getting into a particular cluster of people or whatever where certain organizations seem like obviously the ones that you should want to work for and they end up feeling that those are the only roles that they are going to apply for rather than realizing that there's this huge host of different kinds of jobs that are out there that do a huge amount of good.

Example: if you're thinking of working in the biosecurity space, you might've heard of some of the effective altruist organizations working on it because you have friends who happen to work there but you might not have thought of working for places like Johns Hopkins. So I'm often trying to get people to broaden in that sense.

New career paths

Maybe that means thinking through some new kind of career paths. So perhaps they are currently a doctor and they're thinking of going into public health, and then biosecurity might seem like another type of option that they could consider that they hadn't really before.

Examples of widening option sets

Bringing up roles people have not come across.

- One nice example of this is the Research Scholars Program, which is part of the Future of Humanity Institute, which is really trying to train researchers in a very flexible way because often people go through the kind of standard academic PhD type system and end up studying something pretty narrow and also don't have that much time to try it out. So this is a kind of speculative different type of program that people often haven't heard of. So I've chatted to a few different people about this.
    - For example, one person was working in policy but felt that they would be rather good at research and also were interested in doing some research in order to quite likely go back into policy in future but with a better background. So they ended up, for example, ending up at the Research Scholars Program.

Thinking through a totally different type of area

- So, like I said, talking to a doctor who's been considering maybe they should be a doctor and maybe they should work in the developing world, maybe they should go into public health. And then talking to them about biosecurity and how they might get into that. And again, because it's a very neglected type of area, it's a bit difficult to know how to get into. And then being able to put them in touch with people who are already working on this in different types of areas is pretty useful.

Having impact at organisations optimizing for impact vs setting up your own thing

- Another is talking to people about the amount of impact you might be able to have in organizations that are really optimizing for impact as opposed to setting up your own kind of thing. So I somewhat regularly talk to people who have been fairly successful entrepreneurs and are often thinking about how since they've been successful entrepreneurs, they would quite like to now give back and do something socially impactful. But their frame of reference is setting up an organization. They also don't have that much experience in the specific charitable sectors they'd be interested in and then talking to them about roles they might get at organizations,, how that entrepreneurial background will help even if the thing they are going into isn't being a founder, has been fairly useful.

Correcting wrong/stereotyped impressions about specific jobs & day-to-day experiences

- Michelle Hutchinson: So one interesting call I had recently was with someone who was very good at maths and was pretty interested in studying economics in order to work on global priorities research. But when we discussed more what the specific work would entail, it just became increasingly clear to both of us that he really enjoyed doing pure maths and that the kind of work you would do if you are an economist working in global priorities was not that much like pure maths and that he might be better trying out something like AI technical safety first. And that was kind of an interesting conversation because he was already aware of both of these options, but he'd been thinking on a kind of broad level of which of these feels the most instinctively appealing or something, rather than thinking through more of what would the day-to-day work be like. How similar would it be to some of the stuff I'm currently doing. That kind of thing.
- Another one I think is that people will frequently rule out quant trading as an option because they feel that they're not the right kind of "confident bro" type to enjoy this. But in fact there are hedge funds that are full of geeky mathematicians who really are not that keen on shouting at each other. And this is the kind of thing that you really only know if you try it out or talk to someone who's doing it. I really like that we have a podcast with Alexander Gordon Brown on this, because it gives people a bit more of a sense of what this job is actually like to work at. So I think ruling things out by specifically talking to people

about what are the relevant things to do with their day-to-day, how does that change over time and things, is important.

Comparing between causes & interventions

Michelle emphasises the difference in impact there might be between different jobs and also between different cause areas.

- I think maybe because the kinds of things that we do in everyday life are not that different from each other, I think that the instinct that people often bring to career choice and maybe other areas of life is finding a whole bunch of options which seem to do at least some good and then thinking through which of these seem the most appealing, without looking too much into how much better some are for the world than others.
- I think this is true both within cause areas, so this is something that I talked about a lot when I worked at Giving What We Can is that even if the thing you're working on is reducing the burden of AIDS, it's hugely different whether you do that by working on late stage complications of AIDS like Kaposi's sarcoma versus on giving out antiretrovirals or giving out condoms. And so even if that's the specific thing you care about, you can help hugely more people by working on some of these things than others.
- And then I think if you compare across causes, you can get, again, potentially a hundred-times multiplier by looking at an area that's hugely neglected. So at 80,000 Hours we tend to think that risks that could wipe out the whole of humanity tend to be radically under-investigated and underfunded to how much they should be for a whole host of reasons, partly being very speculative, partly that people tend to have incentives to work on things that are nearer-term rather than things that will affect the world in a hundred years. But I think thinking through what you think the comparative impact of working in these different areas are is actually extremely important if you care about helping people as much as you can.

How to frame this discussion

- I try to typically get people to flip their framing a bit of this to rather than think through, "What are a whole host of jobs that you think would do some good and then which seem most appealing?" to think through, "What things do you think are very most impactful?" and then rank them, and then at that point, start thinking through, "Okay, which of these do I think I might be personally well suited for?" because I think that difference in framing is going to really prime you for going for these jobs that are hundreds of times more impactful than others.

- And I think often it's less the case that people in fact disagree with the premise and more that they're not really thinking about it in these kinds of terms. So if you really push them on, "Do you think that this kind of role is approximately as good as this other type of role?" they say, "Oh no, I think that the second one's like a hundred times better" or something. But they're just not really used to intuiting how important it is to take that difference into consideration.
- Robert Wiblin: They'd literally say they think it's a hundred times better and that they wouldn't necessarily take it barring some good reason why they shouldn't take it?
- Michelle Hutchinson: I mean I don't usually push people super bluntly in advising and I think people would usually struggle to quantify these things at all, which seems totally right. It seems extremely difficult to quantify them. But I think people are very willing to say, "Yes, I can see why this area might be much more important, but this other area also seems fairly important and neglected and I can see a slightly more natural way into it".
- Robert Wiblin: Okay. So they're kind of categorizing things into important and not important rather than using the full spread.
- Michelle Hutchinson: And I think that makes a lot of sense for some areas of life where there isn't that much difference between things and you may as well simplify to this binary. But I think it really just doesn't make sense in the area of career choice because there's this huge spread in terms of impact.

People are more willing to switch careers if they truly believe they can have more impact

- I talked to someone recently who had been working on improving the criminal justice system in the US for quite a long while and they had been aiming to do good for many years throughout. They deliberately had gone to a university where they could finish their undergraduate early because they felt that was just messing around before they were actually helping people. Then they had worked in criminal justice and then gone to law school. And when I was talking to them they were really very happy to think through, "Is this actually the most impactful cause that I could work on? How should I weigh up the fact that I already have a lot of capital in this area compared to switching areas?" That kind of thing. Which, I just feel it's so nice to talk to people who are that flexible and happy and are so much interested in figuring out dispassionately what's the best thing for them to do.

Encouraging/supporting people

People are surprised that 80K provides a lot of encouragement.

- Underconfident advisees may feel wary of applying to particularly competitive options, particularly given that they might know statistical evidence of people, in general, being overconfident. So they don't even try to apply to those positions. And so talking to them and saying, "Well, it's worth at least trying out, even if it's pretty unlikely."

They also provide encouragement for trying different kinds of options and for feeling better about the types of options that you go for.

- Encouragement to feel better about themselves & reduce interpersonal comparisons
    - And also just to generally remember that the kinds of people that we're talking about who are trying to help the world as much as possible are just typically doing hugely important things. Many of them, for example, are giving away large amounts of money that can buy bed nets to save multiple lives per year. It's absolutely incredible that we're in a position to do that and that people are willing to do that when they could be keeping the money for themselves. I think it's really important that people realize how important that is and don't just feel bad for the fact that they could be doing something else even better or different.

Understanding personal fit & aptitude for a job, & getting over interpersonal comparisons

- **Interpersonal comparisons**
    - I think the types of people who are trying hard to have as much impact as they can in the world are just very prone to compare themselves to the absolute most impressive person they can find.
    - And also people tend to see the ways in which they're falling short compared to other people rather than the ways they're doing well compared to other people.
- **On understanding the difference between things you could do in theory and things you could do if you were simply a different person**.
    - And particularly for the people who are around you and doing similar kinds of jobs, it's actually quite useful to have some sense of, "Oh my colleague's doing really well at this particular thing because they did a statistics MOOC in their spare time. Maybe I should do that,"and generally learning from them, versus, "Oh, actually they're just a different kind of person". Partly because that could be in ways that we usually think of as malleable. So it could be that some of my colleagues work several hours a day longer than me but that actually be a total mistake for me to try and work longer hours because I would get more burnt out or whatever. So I think part of this is coming from a kind of sensible intuition misfiring.

    - Arden Koehler: ... it seems very common for people to feel good or bad about the kind of person that they are. So even if it ultimately is a matter of, like, something that's not malleable, it's just like, "Oh, I'm this kind of person," maybe people shouldn't feel good or bad about that, but it seems like they do.
- **On reasons why people feel bad**
    - Acknowledging you can't do something things (from the bullet above) causes you to anticipate that your life will be less fun. And so that's a reason to care. Although I suppose then feeling bad about it as well maybe isn't going to help with the situation, but it's pretty normal.
    - Wishing that you could help people more.
        - Michelle: If you happened to be the kind of person that could do more work or was tons smarter or something, then other people would benefit from that if you have a job that's really trying to maximize your impact. So this wishing that you could do these things that you, in fact, can't is more of a wish fulfillment about ways in which the world could be a bunch better.
- **Identifying which traits are more malleable than others to feel better about things they can't change**
    - Robert Wiblin: There's this great book on mental health called, I think, "What You Can Change and What You Can't", which is kind of about this. So it's looking at different mental health problems and how often they improve and which ones are just very hard to shift. It's actually kind of old now and a lot of the conclusions are out of date. But I liked that idea because it means that it could potentially reassure people like, "Well you know, I'm struggling with a particular mental health problem, but this is one of the things that people just tend to have to work around and I shouldn't feel like culpable for the fact that I haven't managed to improve it because kind of most people don't."
- **Using a comparison to height** "Hey you're feeling worried about being this kind of person. You don't feel worried about not being taller even though that might be useful.". And I found that very reassuring. (There is a long discussion in the podcast)

On feeling good about current impact

- I think that often because there are so many different options for people to be doing and people are doing this thing where they compare themselves to other people, they feel that some of their backup options would leave them being, in some sense, useless. But in fact, for most people, it's really incredible how much good we can do.
- E.g. partly just by virtue of being born in a rich country. So, people on the median income in the UK donating 10% of their earnings can typically save a life from malaria or help people

hugely from deworming or help through a whole host of other ways. And I think it's pretty incredible to think that any of us could help others to that degree and we absolutely shouldn't feel bad if that's what we're doing with our lives.

- There is a tension between being satisfied and wanting to have more impact.
- Robert Wiblin: I wonder whether they could kind of batch that into one day a month. So on the first of every month, you're gonna think about how you're not accomplishing enough and how you can do more good. But then the rest of the time you just have to also spend some time appreciating everyday what you managed to get done.
- Arden Koehler: I mean I guess I think you don't really have to necessarily do them on different days as long as you're vividly imagining the amount of good that you could do if you were to have more impact. It doesn't really seem like keeping in mind the amount of good that you're doing right now is necessarily going to be demotivating for making that change.

Challenges of advising/Misconceptions on 80K

People take advice too seriously

- Michelle: … I think some people definitely seem to err on the side of expecting me to have answers when I definitely don't. I think I even fell into this before I joined 80,000 Hours where I had this sense that the people in 80,000 Hours had answers and that when I joined I would be told them, which is pretty surprising because it's not like I thought you had any answers, Rob.
- On the other hand, I think there are also plenty of people who are just generally pretty skeptical of the kinds of things that we're doing or who have a fairly set track in mind rather than wanting to explore, for whom I end up feeling like I have to push somewhat hard to try and get them to think outside the box a bit more. I think the personality of the person doing the advising makes a big difference here as well, where I find that it feels very difficult to me to get the appropriate level of feeling like I am giving concrete, useful information because to me it always feels like I'm kind of speculating and these questions are hugely hard and then sometimes I rub up against people who just feel like they have way more answers in the world. But I think in general it is easier when talking to people than it is in written content to get people to realize the level of uncertainty you have.
- Robert Wiblin: Yeah, that makes sense. It's a benefit of the podcast as well over written articles. I guess I haven't done advising in a couple of years, but I remember one of the biggest challenges was talking to people for half an hour, maybe an hour at the most, and

then there's so much information you have to collect. It's like, what things do they enjoy? What things are they good at? What are actual concrete options that they have ahead of them? It just takes a lot of the call to get that kind of information. And even by the end, you don't really have enough to make confident recommendations because you could easily be missing some important piece of information. Did you find that as well or maybe have we found a better way of getting a lot of information out of people before the calls now?

More than just the priority paths

- I think people often assume that we're only really excited about our priority paths which are listed explicitly on the website which is definitely not the case. One of the things that's going on there is that it's pretty difficult to figure out where people can have most impact. And so we've tried pretty hard to find some examples where we think some particular type of role could absorb quite a lot of people and still be amongst the most important things.
- But I think actually, it's the case that most of the most important roles are plausibly going to be ones where there's only a few people who could easily go into them. Or only a few people are needed. Or they're just the type of roles or careers that we haven't yet found or haven't yet worked out are particularly impactful. And those are obviously very difficult to describe.
- **And so what I ideally want is for advisees to be thinking through what they think is the best possible option for them to go into and to have tons of people exploring different roles depending on what their particular background and skill set is, and then using these analytical tools to compare carefully between them and really squarely aim for impact in them**.
    - E.g. "niche paths", which describe some of the various different, more specific types of things people could do where maybe they're ones that we think we'd just like one or two people working in them.
    - Maybe there's something like journalist, which is actually pretty difficult to get into and so not necessarily a good thing to aim for unless you already have quite a bit of evidence that you'll be good at it. Or maybe they're just things where we're not really sure at all whether they'll be very impactful, but we think there's a good shot that they will be and so we'd be very interested to have people explore them further.
- I'm really glad that we have more content on this now. Both for combating that perception, and also for giving people specific ideas**.** Because I think it is just really difficult to freeform try to figure out what's most impactful in an area where most people haven't looked into it at all yet, compared to going into some well-trodden path where you'll have collaborators

and other people sketching out for you what would be best and worst to do in this. So the more we can do to 'processify' this, the better.

On people looking to have their options validated

I think sometimes that is the case. It might be a bit more the case for particular causes than particular jobs. In particular, where perhaps someone has a relatively good corporate job and would like to go into, say, sustainability consulting or something because it's going to feel more rewarding and do more good, then I'm in a position of trying to say, "Well that does sound a bit better than a standard corporate job, but actually it sounds hard to have a lot of impact in sustainability consulting. Have you considered something really quite different"? And I think that can be pretty disappointing for people. … I mean I did have one person send me an email recently who actually, fairly quickly after my session with them, who was considering sustainability consulting, ended up getting a different job which was the one that I thought would be much higher impact, who said that the advising was the medicine that he didn't want but needed.

But it is a much more difficult balance to strike because you really can just end up putting people off the general way that we approach having an impact or something. If people come in thinking that we're going to be, for example, more optimizing for the cause area that they care about or something and then they find me pushing quite strongly towards, "Hey, maybe this thing is like a hundred times more impactful and it really matters that we help people as much as we can," and they end up disillusioned with 80,000 Hours more broadly. So I find it very difficult to figure out exactly what line to tread between being pretty frank about which things I think are really important and being kind and supportive and helping people in the way that's actually going to be useful to them rather than the way that I might have wanted or something.

People getting frustrated with high-level abstract conversations

I try pretty hard to get a sense for people as to how much they're enjoying the conversation and how much they also agree that it's useful and that kind of thing. The hardest cases are definitely the ones where people are super polite and are happy to go along with this, but then in feedback afterwards are like, "Oh, I think it might've been more useful if we had moved on quicker." I think for most people I can get a relatively good read on, "Do they agree that this is actually a pretty helpful exercise for them?" And then in some cases it's a bit difficult because maybe the kind of thing they actually want instead is a thing that I'm going to have much more trouble providing. And so then I'm happy to move on, but we move on to a thing that they want a very specific list of jobs

for a particular niche area which I just can't provide, and so then they feel like, "Oh, we mostly did this thing that I wasn't expecting and then you couldn't do the thing I did want."

General mistakes & bad careers advice

The following sections are more about general mistakes in the broader community, rather than specifically in EA.

Common mistakes that people make in their careers

People who dismiss an area because they don't feel very passionate about it.

- I think one thing that I somewhat frequently see is people who think that some particular area is probably the highest-impact one for them to go into but don't feel terribly passionate about it and therefore relatively quickly rule it out.
- I think that seems more problematic because I think there's this really big difference in terms of how impactful different kinds of things are. But then I also think it comes back to this thing about people having some trouble introspecting before having tried something out as to how much they'll like it. So I really try hard to push people if they're in that kind of position.
- To think through specifically what kinds of things drive their motivation and whether there would be ways of being happy working in this area that they think is highest-impact that would still motivate them. Because I think people are very different in terms of what kinds of things motivate them. So some people need to be seeing the beneficiaries in front of them all the time and that's going to make it very difficult for you, for example, to work on a long-term horizon.
- Whereas other people, so I tend to be the kind of person who's very motivated by not letting my team down, which means that I can work in quite a lot of different areas. And then also by generally feeling like I'm helping people. So while I rationally think the reason that working at 80,000 Hours is high-impact is that it helps beneficiaries living many years in the future to not be wiped out; that kind of thing.
- On a day-to-day level, the thing that really keeps me going is it's great to be able to help people who are kind and want to have more impactful careers continue doing that. So I think it's really useful for people to get a sense of what their motivations might be like and then try out some of these things to see if they actually do suit them.
- Robert Wiblin: So sounds like you were saying people would kind of suspect that they wouldn't enjoy a particular role and then they kind of rule it out early on even though they don't really have very strong evidence for that and you're like, "But if it's going to be 10 or a

hundred times more impactful, then maybe they should go and double check that and actually figure out for sure whether they would enjoy it or not."

- Michelle Hutchinson: Yes, I think that's my sense. And it's particularly problematic because the less neglected an area is, the more it gets talked about and things. So people are, for example, very used to everyone around them caring lots about climate change. So they feel very passionate about climate change, whereas maybe they don't feel that passionate about preventing future pandemics. And maybe that's because they find it difficult to work on an area where they could end up having not had an impact and not know about it. But maybe it's because not very many people around them are talking that much about global pandemics.* And if they read some books on, you know, books like Spillover or something, they would realize that actually this was a thing they thought was terrible and they really wanted to do something about.

Too much focus on the next job at the expense of long-term trajectory

- One of the biggest ways in which I think this can be problematic is people going into something that is kind of robustly good at providing skills, but not the best way of getting skills for any of the things the person's actually considering.
- So people who, for example, have a PhD and then decide to go work at McKinsey without some idea of why they would want to get specifically operational or corporate skills, but simply some idea of, "Well, this is a good next step". You're never going to look bad if you worked at McKinsey. I'll get some kind of skills.
- And a specific problem, I think, with going into these kinds of consulting roles is that they don't really give you the headspace for then figuring out what direction you want to take from here, and I think some people at least would get a lot more mileage from thinking through, what kind of long-term career trajectory do I think might be most impactful for me and what would be the natural next steps here?
- You can also go too far in the other direction and you definitely wouldn't want to say, "I'm definitely going to have this long-term trajectory when I don't really know what that looks like,"but you might want to say something like, "Oh, I might be well-suited for policy, or I might be well-suited for working in a think tank. I'm going to think through what kinds of options would be best for getting to either of those and then which ones might be good for getting both or which options might be good at giving me information for whether I would want to go into government or into a think tank." That kind of thing.
- Robert Wiblin: So you think, on average, the people you're advising haven't done enough thinking about where they want to be in 10 or 20 years' time and then so they're doing

stuff that kind of just hedges their bets everywhere and it's kind of fine for any path and not particularly great for anyone.

- Michelle Hutchinson: Yes. I think that's more often the case than the reverse.
- On people who have incredibly elaborate, far-too-specific plans? I can't actually think of any that I've had that fall into that category.

People don't reach out enough to others for advice

- Michelle: People just actually really like helping each other and so reaching out to people saying, "Hey, can I chat to you about your job? Can I get your thoughts on how I should apply for this kind of thing?" And I think that works pretty broadly.
- So I found this really useful when I was setting up the Centre for Effective Altruism originally. Reaching out to people who had already set up charities and saying, "Hey, can I pick your brain on what are the really important things to know when you're applying to Companies House and The Charity Commission for setting up an organization?" And I was pretty surprised at the time just how helpful people were.
- Then, when I was working at the Global Priorities Institute doing fundraising and doing grant applications, I was doing some on virtue ethics, which is a topic in philosophy that I knew very little about. And so I ended up sending the grant application that I had to the leading few virtue ethicists in the world, and I think two of the three of them replied and were willing to look over my application, which I just thought was really kind and somewhat unexpected.
- I think it's important to keep various things in mind when doing these kinds of reaching out that you want to make sure that your emails are really concise. That it's very clear why you're reaching out to them and specifically what you want from them so that they don't feel it's just like a cold email that went to lots of impressive people trying to generically network or something. But I think if you do those things and you give them a CV so it's clear who you are. A one-line on why you're reaching out to them specifically and a one-line on here's what I want and it's a smallish ask.
- I think it's really surprising how often people are willing to respond. And this can also generalize to things like if you're interested in trying out being a researcher and you're still at university, it can be worth reaching out to professors in your university doing the kind of research you're interested in and saying, "Hey, are you interested in having a research assistant? Here's my background. Here's why I want to work with you. I really liked your two papers, this and this. Here's the kind of skills I have that might be useful for you." That kind of thing. And it can be really difficult to do, right? Because everyone's shy. No one likes rejection. You don't really even like imposing on people and feeling that you didn't get a response and so probably imposed on them. But I think most people actually don't mind

receiving emails like this even if they don't have a chance to respond. And so it's really worth trying.

- Robert Wiblin: Yeah, I'm probably unusually in the firing line for getting random career questions in my current role. I do manage to reply to most of them. I mean definitely the ones that are kind of short and have a clear ask and where it's like obvious why I would have some relevant knowledge because sometimes I do get very long emails or it's like not clear what they want and then yeah, typically those don't get a reply. But I mean even where I don't reply, it's definitely that I'm more likely just to forget about it than to hold a grudge against the person for emailing me in the first place. I don't think I've ever done that.

Where standard career advice fails.

On following your passions vs doing useful subjects

- I also think that standard careers advice is pretty bad here. The careers advice I got in school was very much, "Study the things that you think are interesting" and so I studied physics and philosophy as my undergraduate without really ever planning to be a physicist or a philosopher. In fact, my dad knew better and he suggested I do politics, philosophy and economics as being a more balanced degree that would give more useful skills. But my school was very strongly on the side of "Go for the thing that you find most interesting" rather than the thing that's potentially going to lead to useful skills.
- Arden Koehler: Just to play devil's advocate here for a second, I mean, people are making decisions about what they're going to study. For instance, when they're very young and maybe just have not a lot of good ideas about how the world works and so they might not really be able to make decisions based on what they think will lead to an impactful career. Whereas on the other hand, if you study what is interesting or what you're good at, it does seem like there's some value in just coming out of college, like, pretty good at something as opposed to maybe having done some stuff that you weren't very interested in but you thought might maybe get you on the road to something that is going to have an impact, but you weren't really sure because you were 18 and didn't know very much.
- Michelle Hutchinson: I don't know how much I agree with this coming out being good at something. I think maybe coming out having learned some useful skills and learned more about yourself seems more valuable and this is the reason that I actually feel that American degrees are much better than British ones because in the UK we have to choose one specific subject to study for university and physics and philosophy is actually unusually broad for the UK. Whereas in the US, you take a while to choose your major, and that

seems much better. You get a proper time to try out different courses, see which ones you're good at, which ones you seem to enjoy and only then do you pick your major.

- **(Discussion on difficulty changing subjects outside of the US)**
- Robert Wiblin: Yeah. So I guess we don't wanna go all the way on the other extreme here and say it doesn't matter what people are interested in when they're considering what to study. I guess we have heard some stories of people reading our site and then walking away and thinking, "Oh, it doesn't matter whether I'm interested in what I'm doing or I'm interested in this job", which is absolutely not what we're saying. If you don't find something interesting, it's going to be very hard to motivate yourself to study it. You can do that for the first week, but then you're going to have to deal with this for years and years.
- Michelle Hutchinson: Absolutely. A reason I think that economics might've been a better option for me to study is that I hadn't done any of it at school and I actually think I might well have really enjoyed it in addition to it being useful. I definitely don't think that people should be going for something that they think they're not going to find interesting at all. And this becomes more and more important the bigger the shift is. So I think we've had the odd user shift from humanities to sciences because they've heard that they really should be doing computer science or something and making these kind of really large transitions when you've already learned about yourself that you're the kind of person that does better at the humanities, and it does seem like a recipe for burning out and not achieving your potential.

Why does standard careers advice focus on what you enjoy?

- I suppose it's easy advice to give. It's pleasing to the person to hear that at the time. So possibly that's just the lowest-effort career advice you can give if you're at a high school.
- I guess I also feel that a lot of advice is kind of throwing different things against the wall and maybe that careers advisors perceive other people as giving directive advice that's much less like this. My headmaster, for example, told me to do mathematics at Cambridge when my maths really wasn't that good. So it could be that they're trying to counteract what they see as the world imposing, "Here's the most useful thing. Do that." And they're just trying to counteract and say "No. It's very important that you're suited to the thing you do".
- Arden Koehler: It also seems relevant here that most careers advice is not aimed at doing the most good or making your career something that will have the greatest impact. It might just be more generically aimed at having a successful career or even just being happy. And it might be that "Do what you're passionate about" could be better advice for one of the latter things.