

## REVIEW OF *80,000 HOURS*

I think this might have been a life-changing book for me if I'd encountered it at a much earlier age (and if I'd been in the right emotional state to consider its advice—which, in my case, was unlikely). I remember, at the end of college, being torn between pursuing a path I felt passionate about and a path that seemed safe. Trying instead to find where I could be most useful—with the assumption that passion would follow, and with a framework for managing risk—could have been a useful paradigm shift. I also definitely fell into the trap of “think[ing] too narrowly about what options are available to us”<sup>1</sup>, and could have used the advice about how to generate more ideas and systematically process them.

The book gives some interesting estimates to help establish the range of possibilities regarding how much good you can do in your career. Against assuming that becoming a doctor—at least one “in a rich country like the US or UK”<sup>2</sup>—is necessarily on the highest end of that range, it says:

We found that, over the course of their career, an average doctor in the UK will enable their patients to live about an extra combined 100 years of healthy life, either by extending their lifespans or by improving their overall health.<sup>3</sup>

This is contrasted with Dr. David Nalin's work on making a practical treatment for cholera, which “has saved over 50 million lives to date”<sup>4</sup>; what I find most interesting is this bit:

If Dr Nalin had not been around, someone else would, no doubt, have discovered this treatment eventually. However, **even if we imagine that he sped up the roll-out of the treatment by only five months**, his work alone would have saved about 500,000 lives.<sup>5</sup>

I also found this comment on fundamental vs applied research interesting:

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<sup>1</sup>Benjamin Todd, *80,000 Hours: Find a Fulfilling Career That Does Good*, 2nd ed., 2023, 250, [https://80000hours.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/80K\\_HOURS\\_final.pdf](https://80000hours.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/80K_HOURS_final.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., emphasis added.

...the more fundamental the research, the harder it is to commercialise, so, all else equal, we'd expect fundamental research to be more neglected than applied research, and therefore higher impact. On the other hand, applied issues can be more urgent — breakthroughs like the microscope can let us make fundamental breakthroughs faster — so it's hard to say whether applied or fundamental research has a higher impact on average.<sup>6</sup>

While the book is most geared toward young people, this table should be reassuring for those of us creeping toward middle age:

Field	Age of peak output
Theoretical physics, lyric poetry, pure mathematics	Around 30
Psychology, chemistry	Around 40 <sup>138</sup>
Novel writing, history, philosophy, medicine	Around 50
Business - average age of S&P500 CEOs	55 <sup>139</sup>
Politics - average age of first-term (US) president	55

Two pieces of job-seeking advice that I particularly liked:

1. “It’s better to have two impressive achievements than two impressive achievements and three weak ones.”<sup>7</sup>
2. Consider doing a “pre-interview project” tailored to the company you’re applying to.<sup>8</sup>

An aside: In discussing what you *shouldn't* optimize your career for, the book mentions the familiar point that higher incomes (beyond a relatively modest threshold) don't result in (much) higher happiness. I'd be interested to know whether this is true regardless of *how you spend* the higher income, or if some spending strategies allow you to continue getting substantial increases in happiness up to a much higher income threshold. For example, I feel intuitively that if you gave me an extra \$50,000 but forced me to spend it on luxury items or experiences, the boost to my happiness wouldn't last very long. But if you gave me an extra \$50,000 to invest, well, that's enough money to live for a year without working, and having it available for that purpose seems much more likely to make a real improvement to

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 182.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 186.

my life (whether I actually take that time off work, or just derive psychological safety from the option).

I listened to the audio version, which is conveniently available as a podcast.

Random rabbit hole that only matters to me: At a couple points the book defines “Strong quantitative skills” as “above 650 on quant GRE”<sup>9</sup>. First of all, this is weird because even the first edition of the book was published in 2016, five years *after* the GRE switched from the previous 800 scale to the new 170 scale. (And the book does use the new scale in another passage.<sup>10</sup>) But this caught my attention because I took the GRE on the old scale, and got a 780/800; and while I was very happy with that, I was also aware that it wasn’t even close to a top-percentile score (it was 89th-percentile, as best as I can tell; I was more proud of my 790/800 on the verbal, which was 99th-percentile). Which reinforced my existing belief that I wasn’t really suited for anything where math plays a major role. More recently I’ve started to think this self-perception led me to preclude pursuing or even considering paths that might have been achievable if I’d put enough work in. Hearing that a group I respect might have considered even a much lower score to be evidence of sufficient skills for some of the cool careers they suggest is a nice little confidence boost in that regard.

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 325 and 331.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 333.