

Who are you?

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My personal path to the University of Washington and to the honors program is unremarkable, so I hesitate to write about it. In some sense, the only things of importance I have done so far is in expanding my imagination of some of what is possible to do in the world and in finding out what actually is important to do. In junior high I discovered a website called Less Wrong, where people gather to discuss human rationality, and how best to act in ways that allow us to achieve our goals. The site is a community of people interested in discussing human cognitive biases that systematically skew our thinking, to the building of habits that we would like, to artificial intelligence and other existential risks. The site, though no longer as active as it used to be, has since branched off and merged into other websites and movements. One of these is a social movement called effective altruism. Effective altruism, as a movement, aims to do good in the world by using evidence to find the most effective ways of doing good. In practice, this means evaluating charities to see which ones make the most difference, evaluating different careers (as well as career types, so topics like directly doing good versus earning money in order to donate to do good), and then working toward these goals. In other words, effective altruism might be called applying rationality to doing good in the world (though some in the movement may object to the use of “rationality”). My most important accomplishment so far, then, has been to discover these communities and to learn as much as I can about them. But this accomplishment, in some sense, has nothing to do with my being at the University of Washington or in its honors program (since getting into a university is mostly about external achievements, not intellectual accomplishments outside of what can easily be monitored).

So one might ask why I chose to write about this aspect of my personal path when it had little to do with leading me to where I currently am. My response is that although rationality and effective altruism have only had an intellectual impact on me so far, I hope to in the future (i.e. in my time at the University of Washington and beyond) apply what I’ve learned so far. So what do I want to accomplish in the future? In some sense, I can only give an abstract outline, like “prepare myself for doing the most good in the world, and then actually do it”. Still, I can give at least some preliminary thoughts on what a more concrete plan might be. An organization called 80,000 Hours, part of the Centre for Effective Altruism, aims to help people decide which careers are best for them. The careers they list as having potential include tech entrepreneurship and software engineering. As one interested in quantitative thinking, these careers do appeal to me somewhat, at least more so than any other careers (that currently exist and are not too difficult to enter). 80,000 Hours does offer personalized help, and I intend to contact them at some point, but as for now, this means that computer science is an ideal major for me to pursue. In terms of other activities (i.e. those besides learning as much as I can about my fields of interest) I hope to pursue here, I can think of networking and creating valuable content. Networking can mean finding friends who are similarly interested in effective altruism or quantitative fields, and holding interesting discussions with them. Creating valuable content mostly means participating online in communities like Less Wrong and those related to effective altruism. It could mean writing articles, commenting and providing feedback, or otherwise interacting with people online in ways that eventually generate useful content available to a larger audience. Content

creation could also be relevant to my classes; I could, for instance, investigate a particularly interesting mathematics problem and see if I can explain it better than in the books I come across. By working toward these, I will in the process improve the world (though possibly in ways that are difficult to measure) and improve my ability to do good, so that eventually I can be an active part of the effective altruism movement (probably by earning to give).