

The plan for a plan: How to write a life plan



Length: About 10 pages

Format: Narrative

Deadline: Thursday, April 25 (**smooth** drafts due by 5pm, Wednesday, April 10; hard copy only; no email)

Aristotle believed that a person should include a number of necessary and desirable elements in his or her plan for having a good life. These elements, he believed, should be coherently integrated over a person's whole life span, and that a good life is one that is shaped and directed through the exercise of virtue. Because man is a social animal, his idea of this type of plan included living with and working among family, friends, and fellow citizens.

No one has to agree with Aristotle, at least in terms of his views for what a good life is or should be. As a class, we are merely borrowing from him the idea or notion of developing and having a life plan. A debate with him, however, might prove profitable as you think through your own life plans. He was a really smart dude, and he had a very sophisticated philosophy on goodness (or, as we've been discussing it, "flourishing").

Very specific goals, therefore, such as "earning my MBA before I'm 30," aren't going to be very helpful. It's perhaps more important, to use the MBA example, that you are pursuing wisdom, and *how* you pursue that wisdom. It's more important, to use another example, that you will pursue the eradication of injustice than whether in that pursuit you are a poet, lawyer, teacher or even plumber.

An important note: "Happiness is something we do." Happiness is not, for our purposes, an affective state or temporal emotion. It has nothing whatsoever to do with emotions or feeling, and everything to do with action. This is critical for us to agree on, at least for our purposes in the class.

With this general description in mind, here are some themes or elements to consider for inclusion in your life plan:

- Wisdom
- Knowledge
- Experience
- Identity
- Talents and strengths
- Spiritual development

- Identification and achievement of potentials
- Lifestyle and quality of life
- Physical health
- Freedom, or liberty, or personal autonomy
- Social freedom

In terms of how to organize the narrative, you have lots of choices. If I were me, I likely would organize it this way:

- I. Introduction and explication of terms, such as “good,” “happy,” “spiritual,” “moral,” and “virtue.” Perhaps a few paragraphs about what the life plan is supposed to communicate, and how it might help me pursue a good life.
- II. Discussion of my general philosophy on what a good life entails, grounding this section in the readings and outside sources and texts, a discussion that provides context for the more specific sections coming. This discussion might include the value of, say, wisdom (over simply knowledge or information), or, as Adam suggested, of what I believe to be my morals (values) and ethics (ways).
- III. Discussion of the role of education in these pursuits. I would like every student to somehow, somewhere in their plans discuss what they believe education to be, and to discuss the role of education in their pursuits of the good life. **REQUIRED**
- IV. Section-by-section elaboration of my good life, perhaps including sections on God; Family and Friends; Education; Vocation; Lifestyle (including health); and Legacy. Or something along these lines.
- V. Discussion of goals, including how specific (or broad) they should be, to allow for inevitable change and hardship. This section could include a discussion of one’s talents, strengths and interests, and perhaps sense of identity.
- VI. Concluding section that might include lingering questions, limitations of the document and the approach taken, and perhaps my own weaknesses, flaws and areas for improvement. None of us is perfect; all of us can do better.

In terms of the format, the default is a narrative. But, you could, just to name one example of approach, write the narrative from the perspective of an author at the end of his or her life looking back, describing the good life he or she led, how it was good, and how that goodness was pursued. This would work quite well, but so would any “story of my life” as told from the past, present or future.

It might help to think as a parent, or to imagine how you might instruct a son or daughter about how to pursue a good life. You could, say, write a letter to your child explaining your philosophy of a good life, one that explains (or tries to) some of the mistakes you felt you made. This would help you to think about the kind of parent you want to be, and how you might explain your beliefs to your children.

In other words, these life plans can take any of a variety of formats, and each will be highly personalized. As Frankie wrote (last year), “the paths we take . . . reflect our personal choices and free will. Ideally, a life plan should be the first step in deciding to be an active player in your own lives.”

You can also incorporate art or other, “non-paper” elements. Along these lines, another idea, for example, is a YouTube-type video of you speaking to your future child or children, a la Jack Donaghy in the NBC-TV show, “30 Rock” (<http://www.nbc.com/30-rock/video/ep-502-jacks-message/1252219>). Of course, yours would be serious.

A few caveats, in response to blogged comments:

In the last edition of this class, a few people worried about the life plan’s effect on the spontaneity of your lives, of living “in the moment.” My response: No effect whatsoever. A life plan can only provide broad-brush outlines of what a good life, or its pursuit, might look like. Any life plan, especially one only about 10 pages, leaves plenty of room for spontaneity; it should be flexible, one that allows for a lot of change and specialization over time as you learn more about why you’re on this planet, but that is substantial enough to help you make the most of your time, even the all-important ‘present.’

Living a purely accidental life is antithetical to the purpose of the course and perhaps to any satisfying answer to, “What is a good life?” If the unexamined life truly isn’t worth living, than a life plan as an examination of one possible good life is truly worth doing, if only as an exercise in one class out of the many you will take at Berry. Give it a try. I promise not to phone you in 10 years to make sure you’re following your plan as submitted.

Others worried about not knowing enough at this stage and age to know where to begin writing a life plan. Ah, I think you do. You have priorities, values and even goals, though they might be of a very general nature. You have a sense of what in life is good and even better or less good. You’re old enough to have watched other, older people life good

lives and not-so-good lives. Think less about major or vocation and much more about what kind of person do you hope to become. Think about your soul and your character. This is what concerned Aristotle.

Still others worried about how to integrate into a life plan their sense that beyond a life following Christ and pleasing God, what else of significance is there to say? Perhaps it would help to conceive of these life plans as thought pieces that discuss how faith can inform, perhaps even produce a good life, or how a pursuit of, say, a Christ-like life in service to God is in fact the pursuit of a good life, or vice versa. There is nothing mutually exclusive about a worldview with Jesus at its center (or Buddha, Justin Bieber or Tim Tebow, for that matter) and the general idea of the life plan described here. Articulating a God-directed, kingdom-first life plan would seem to be incredibly worthwhile, especially because God has left tantalizingly vague what any one life should look like, at least in terms of geographic, vocational, or social specifics. WWJD? How about WWJT? What would Jesus THINK? How would he think?

Matthew and Meagan, to recall the class from 2012, were not too up on the whole idea, though for different reasons. Meagan didn't want to "spoil the ending" of her own life. Matthew, on the other hand, predicted so much change and revision that a plan at this early stage might prove a waste of time. These are valid concerns, but I think the flexibility of a well-conceived life plan will pre-empt any dangers in both of these areas. To avoid Matthew's prediction, take a more broad-brush approach; to avoid Meagan's 'spoiler alert,' articulate the role of true liberty and real freedom in any life that claims to be good. Given the assaults on free will and spontaneity from biologism, something we explore in the last month of the course, such a view is an important position to articulate.

Here's to examined lives, good lives, worth living!