

## The plan for a plan: How to write an Aristotelian life plan



Length: About 10 pages

Format: Narrative, unless proposed otherwise

Deadline: noon, Monday, April 19

If you choose this default life plan project, you likely will be writing something in the neighborhood of 10 pages or so, and it will need to be summative of the course in its integration of ideas and positions.

Aristotle believed that man (and woman) should include a number of necessary and desirable elements in his (or her) overall aim of and plan for having a good or “happy” life. These elements should be coherently integrated with one another over a person’s whole life span, including both short-term and long-term goals. We might call these consistently lived elements “commitments.” So, Aristotle believed in life plans.

This comprehensive life plan should also elaborate ways to achieve and integrate these aims with a view toward the most completeness (*teleiotes*) and self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*). A good life plan has virtuous activity as its cornerstone, according to Aristotle, because a good life is one that is shaped and directed through the exercise of virtue.

Is a good or worthwhile life plan possible? Aristotle states that a man (or woman) of practical wisdom is able to deliberate “about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general.” So, yes, it’s possible. Because man (or woman) is a social animal, this plan will include living with and working among family, friends, and fellow citizens, “since man is born for citizenship.”

Regardless of its final form, here are some topics we might consider including in any template or proposal for a life plan:

- Wisdom, Knowledge, Information, and their distinctions
- Experience
- Identity
- Talents and strengths
- Circumstances and conditions
- Commitments
- Attention (love)
- “Success” and its definitional possibilities
- Spiritual development
- Identification and achievement of potentials
- Lifestyle and quality of life
- Freedom, or liberty, or personal autonomy

- Social freedom

Of course, there are many possibilities not on this list. We will keep adding to it as our course unfolds. In terms of an architecture for your life plans, here's one way to organize your work:

- 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.

Your syllabus presents some animating and organizing questions, including:

- What does it mean to lead a good life?
- What is happiness?
- How can I choose between something pleasurable that I want now, and something immediately less pleasant that I really need for long-term happiness?
- How much wealth do I need for leading a good life?
- What is personal excellence, and how can I achieve it?

- Is ambition necessary, or is it a trap?
- How can I be a success in my specialized career and, at the same time, a well-rounded person with a wide range of interests and knowledge?
- What is the relationship between virtue and happiness (do I have to be saintly to be happy?)
- How do love, friendship, luck, health, and religion contribute to the pursuit of happiness?
- To be happy, what should I be doing that I am not doing now? And what am I doing now that I should stop doing?
- To what extent does personal happiness entail a relationship with a community of others?
- How do I resolve the tensions between family and work?
- What can I pass on to the next generation? (Jonas Salk: “How can I be a good ancestor?”)
- Will philanthropy make me virtuous and happy?
- How can I create the opportunity to be happy for the people who work for me?
- What is a fair distribution of financial and psychic rewards among those who participate with me in an enterprise?
- How can I create a successful business without harming others, or turning myself into a moral midget in the process?

So, how should we conceive of or organize our life plan? What will it look like. The default is a narrative, but what form or even genre is up to you. It could read as a self-help book, a declaration, a sort of contract with yourself, or a (long) letter to your children. I’m interested in your proposals. You could 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 has led, how it was good, and how that goodness was pursued and evidenced. In other words, these life plans can take any of a variety of formats, but each will be highly personalized. As a past student wrote about these, “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.”

### **A few caveats**

In the last iteration 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: Posh! 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.

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, then 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. 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 live good lives and not-so-good lives. Think less about major or vocation and much more about what kind of person you hope to become. Think about your soul and your character. This is what concerned Aristotle. This is what concerns Hamlet, Romeo, Juliet, and Macbeth.

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 Patrick Mahomes, 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 a few years ago, 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.

Finally, some practical tips:

1. Be sure that when you stipulate terms (“good”, “virtue”, “moral”, “education,” “happiness”, etc.), which is something you will want to do, that you do so based on the literature, based on the readings, based on the really smart people who have gone before us and thought deeply about these things (GoogleBooks motto: “We stand on the shoulders of giants”). Don’t just invent the definitions; don’t tailor them to your own personal proclivities (confabulation).

2. You might also consider the role of solitude in the good life. This is absent from most of the life plans, and I argue that it’s a lost virtue. Dean Kennedy would agree. How will you ensure that you have some solitude in your life? That you can and will reflect on what is good, on what life is all about, and what you’re doing with it.

3. You might also include a section on dealing with struggle, adversity, challenge, disappointment, death and loss. These are inevitable, of course, and how we deal with them can greatly affect how (or whether) we pursue the good life. So how will you deal with struggle?

4. And think about legacy. What will you leave behind? What difference will you have made, and how will it be manifest in the lives of others, in your community, etc.? This might come in your “conclusions” section, or its equivalent.

5. Consider using subheadings, like “Education” or “Choosing a career”. These help organize your paper, signaling to your reader and transitioning from section to section.

6. In the final version, cite specific authors and even specific pages. If you use C-Dog’s idea of “flow,” cite the page number from his article in which he first uses the term.

7. For me, your reader, number your pages. This makes commenting easier, and I can see at a glance where you are in terms of length.

*Here’s to examined lives, good lives, worth living!*