LIFE PLANS:
DO THEY GIVE MEANING TO OUR LIVES?*

Der mensh trakht un got lakht.
(Man thinks and God laughs.) —A Yiddish saying

1. Life Planning as a Modern Idea

The concept of a life plan and the activity of life planning have become widespread in our times. In popular culture this idea serves to lure customers to buy insurance policies, to offer advice about starting a business, or to coach people who suffer from a psychological crisis. Planning one’s life looks like the panacea for the financially disorganized and the mentally disoriented, if not a central task for everyone seeking a meaningful life. A serious reform in any aspect of one’s life calls nowadays for “a plan” or “a program” as the ultimate condition for securing the desired goal. Losing weight or subjecting the financial aspects of our lives to planning seems natural, indeed rational. Doing so with regard to our psychological welfare is more problematic but no less characteristic of our culture.

The idea of a life plan has become equally prevalent in some of the philosophical theory of our time, particularly that of liberalism. Beyond the inevitable external political constraints on their behavior (such as justice, rights, and obligations), individuals are allowed and encouraged to freely pursue their lives. However, as rational human agents, seeking for themselves the good life, they are also subject to the internal constraints of rationality. Life must be structured in order to achieve one’s chosen good, and the framework for such structured activity is a life plan. John Rawls placed it as the cornerstone of his conception of the good life. The planned life can be viewed as the contemporary practical counterpart of the ancient theoretical ideal of the examined life. Both are attempts to articulate the sources of life’s meaning. Like the unexamined life, the unplanned life is a wasted life.

The idea of a life plan is quintessentially modern. It is associated with individualism and autonomy. Life can be “planned” for human beings by God, by a Lawgiver, by a Philosopher-king, by the Church, or by the Master. But “a life plan” is a program for action created by the subject herself. Its source is at least partly internal to the agent and its validity lies in its being chosen and shaped by the individual rather than merely discovered or followed. Charles Taylor’s incisive articulation of the transition from the premodern to the modern conception of the self illuminates the emergence of the idea of a life plan. While premodern individuals feared failure to live up to externally set goals (which could be naturalistically or religiously based), modern individuals fear a meaningless life, that is to say, failure to invest one’s life with subjective meaning (Taylor, 18). A worthy life for modern individuals is a life that is self-planned rather than the realization of a traditional pattern or a metaphysical, divine design. We could say that Taylor’s distinction between the traditional and the modern conceptions of the good life is captured by the double meaning of the word “plan”: a representation of a structure, as in a blueprint for a building or a map of a city, on the one hand, and a program of action, on the other. According to the first, one is guided to reach a preset destination; according to the second, one chooses both the goal and the means for attaining it. The emergence of the concept of a life plan in the second sense explains the apparent paradox that the ideal of planning one’s life gains prominence exactly when the traditional teleological view of the world loses its traditional dominance. The objective goodness of life’s ends is replaced by the authenticity of their constitution by the subject.1

2. The Meaning of Life Plans

The planned life seems natural both as a goal-oriented rational enterprise which should not be left to whim or chance and as an organic whole constituted by an inner coherent structure. Planning reflects the value of the order and organization of any project in general. And is not life itself the ultimate and most important of human projects and hence the foremost object of planning? Many philosophers take the concept of a life plan for granted, using it in the articulation of their respective theories about the good and meaningful life. We wish to critically examine the possible meanings and the coherence of the concept and to uncover the problems implied in
the extrapolation of the unproblematic concept of a plan to the more controversial concept of a life plan. We aim to put under critical scrutiny the more ambitious, theory-dependent usage of the concept rather than object to the natural noncontroversial use of the term in ordinary language.

In the following discussion we assume that planning involves a conscious and reasoned effort to control future activity by determining both the goals and the means for their achievement. We may choose or aspire to be a certain kind of person or develop a certain character, but planning typically refers to a program of particular lines of action, of what we do. Planning is instrumental and aims at reducing the extent of surprise that the future inevitably holds for us, thus making the achievement of our ends more probable.

Before examining the philosophical concept of a life plan, we would like to suggest that the concept can be understood on four levels, from the most common and "local" to the most ambitious and "global." First there is planning in life, a universal human approach to any activity aimed at achieving a goal. Second, life plans can be understood as the long-term structuring and commitments we make in managing our finances, health, and careers. These apply to the more distant future than the planning of a vacation or of a political campaign, but they still relate to a particular dimension in our lives (albeit a central one). Third, one might think of "experiments in living" of the kind described in Henry David's Thoreau's Walden. Here the object of planning becomes more comprehensive, including all aspects of life. But it is not yet a full blown "life plan" in the sense that being deliberately experimental it is temporary, part of the search for the right way for an individual to lead her life (Thoreau, 1957). Finally, there is the most far-reaching idea of planning a whole life, throughout its (adult) span and across all its dimensions. Philosophers like Mill, Royce and Rawls are attracted to this idea.

In this section we analyze the concept of a life plan in that last, comprehensive meaning under four headings, each based on a theoretical distinction while raising a general philosophical issue: global versus local, prospective versus retrospective, constitutive versus instrumental, and internal versus external. These distinctions aid in exploring the distinctive character of planning in the context of an entire life and call for special care in applying the common idea of planning a project to the planning of life as a whole.
I. Global vs. Local

One fundamental feature which makes a life plan different from other plans is its totally inclusive nature. Life can be described as the overall framework of an individual’s activity. Much of this activity is structured and guided by plans. These plans can be of varying scope and time span, that is to say, short-term or long-term, applying to a very specific aspect of one’s life or affecting a wide array of one’s interests and goals. But is there a “master plan,” a plan of all plans, an overall life plan that governs all these partial or local plans? As indicated above, we must distinguish between life plans in the sense of long-term or life-long projects (like investment in a pension fund or keeping a healthy diet) and a life plan in the sense of an overall integrating design of all the major dimensions of one’s life. Philosophers are usually interested in the latter and consider such an all-encompassing plan as key to the ultimate ideal of the good life. The organizing principle of plans is said to be hierarchical in the sense that the meaning and justification of a plan is embedded in its being part of a higher, more inclusive plan. But on such a view the ultimate source of validity of all plans must rest in some global plan, that of life as a whole.

The general philosophical problem in such globalization of the concept of plan would be called in logical parlance “mereological.” It involves the relation between the whole and its parts. In some cases, parts and wholes can be described with the same attribute (a red house consists of red bricks). In other cases, the parts cannot be given the same attribute as the whole (a musical chord can be harmonic, but not so the single notes constituting it). But we are interested here in cases in which the whole cannot be attributed with properties of its parts (for example, board members can be conscientious, but not the board itself), and particularly in the subgroup in which the reason for the inapplicability of the attribute is associated with the global nature of the whole. Take, for instance, “life is but a passing shadow.” Despite its rhetorical force, the metaphor makes sense only if we view “life” as being only part of a larger reality (typically, eternity). Or, “all the world’s a stage” does not make strict logical sense, since the concept of stage is meaningful only against the background of the necessary complement of an off-stage. We can see that globalizing metaphors of this kind, if taken literally, involve impossible bootstrapping, i.e., looking at a “whole” from the outside.
Life can be seen as part of a larger span in which human beings exist, and accordingly life can be planned as a preparation for some “afterlife.” In this case we understand life in “local” terms, as being part of a more inclusive history of a person and hence as the object of planning in the ordinary means-end sense. But in modern, post-Nietzschean conceptions of life as having only immanent value, that is to say no purpose or end lying beyond it, in what sense can it be subsumed under a plan? If one’s individual life is all there is for that individual, then life is analogous to human history: it consists of numerous goals (or plans), but as whole it does not have a goal (or a plan). My life is just the framework within which I am pursuing my goals. I therefore may have a series of plans—career plans, plans for political action, and family plans—but no global life plan. J.L. Mackie states that “in general people do not and cannot make an overall choice of a total plan of life. They choose successively to pursue various activities from time to time, not once and for all” (Mackie, 175). Mackie’s view may be overfragmented in the sense that people do follow life-long plans in some spheres of their activity. But he does capture the conceptual difficulty in the extension of the idea of planned activity to life as a whole. Living as such is not a project to be planned and executed.

II. RETROSPECTIVE VS. PROSPECTIVE

In an often quoted passage, Kierkegaard notes:

It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.

This alleged asymmetry is the subject of this subsection. Plans, at least in the primary sense of systematic guidelines for action, are by their nature prospective. Their success is judged in terms of a “fit” between a state of affairs in some point in time and an independent prior design or intention. Thus, the first Soviet five-year plan was formed in 1928 and tested for its success in 1933 by measuring the degree of industrialization which actually took place during those years in the light of the original goals. But “success” in human activity is not always judged in this way. In celebrating the anniversary of a friendship, one might feel satisfied with the way this aspect of one’s life has developed, although no comparison with any original intention is made. Or, assessing long after the fact one’s decision...
to immigrate to a new country, one does not typically appeal to an original plan of that immigration but rather to a wide spectrum of factors which eventually made the decision (often unplanned) turn out well, including (typically) circumstances which could not be predicted at the time of the original decision. These are retrospective evaluations, not only in the sense that like all evaluations of the success of a project they can be made only when the project is over: the grounds on which the evaluations are made emerge during the process; they are not decided at its starting point.

Is life (or rather a life) judged according to prospective or retrospective tests? Again, the answer depends on the kind of view we entertain about the sources of life’s value. Taking our cue from Charles Taylor’s above-mentioned insight, modern people assess their lives in terms of subjective meaning rather than objective “goodness.” Unlike many forms of goodness that are defined by prospective criteria (such as the fulfillment of ends or ideals), meaning, although searched for prospectively, is typically achieved retrospectively. Meaning is something we often discover after the fact. Like the meaning of a text, the meaning of an experience or an event is a matter of interpretation and accordingly can be evaluated only after the end of the interpreted experience. Plans are projected into a future activity; meaning is invested in activity which has already taken place. In that sense, people can plan to make an interesting or useful trip to a foreign country; however, they can hope for but cannot plan to have a meaningful trip.

So although the successful or good life is partly constituted by the achievement of certain goals (like winning a Nobel Prize) and the fulfillment of potentials (like becoming an accomplished pianist), these records make life good for a given person only if they are ultimately considered as meaningful by the subject, and that can be done only retrospectively. Planning my life definitely gives structure to my future and directs my activity in a rational manner that promotes my good. But the unity that a retrospective interpretation of what I did, what happened to me, and what kind of person I was is a different way of structuring my life: being retrospective, it lacks the control over circumstances and conditions that can promote my good; but by being retrospective it benefits from the independence of the value of my life from the contingencies to which I was subjected (typically expressed by phrases like “nothing can take that from me”). There is, therefore, no necessary connection between planning and
meaning. Although a completely unplanned life would be too chaotic to have meaning, careful and detailed planning does not guarantee meaning and the deviation from a grand plan can be retrospectively viewed as a blessing.

A natural way of examining the meaning of one’s life with hindsight is treating it as a story, or in more theoretical terminology as a narrative. Stories, at least if they are good of their kind, make sense, present a coherent series of events, are interesting to their readers and have some aesthetic or moral value. It is only natural then to speak about “life stories.” But whereas plans impose on future life a certain structure, narratives highlight the meaning of past events in human life. Psychoanalysis attempts to make the subject reconstruct her past life in a way that would make it intelligible to her and consequently easier to cope with. Autobiography has a similar function, but its aim is to make others understand the meaning of one’s life. History is a similar attempt to tell the story of the past in a way which would make the actions of people and collectives intelligible and uncover causal relations between significant events. Biographies are similar to history but focus on one particular person. Fiction is the most typical kind of story creation, but unlike history and biography it typically deals with imaginary people or imagines the way that events were experienced by real people. Unlike economic planners and psychological coaches, almost all these kinds of “story tellers” or creators of narratives do not aim to shape the future but to interpret and explain the past. Even in fiction, the story is told from the retrospective point of view, namely what happened to the protagonist, and the selection of the actions and events specifically described in her life is made so as to give unity and intelligibility to her personality and life.

There are, however, philosophers who claim that life can be not only told (retrospectively) as a narrative but also lived as a narrative, that is to say, living a life amounts to writing one’s life’s story. According to this view, we are “authors” of our lives not only in the sense of having authority on, or responsibility for, how they develop but also in telling, through them, a story. The best-known proponent of this approach is Alasdair MacIntyre, who believes that only by treating it as narrative can life become intelligible and the human subject achieve personal identity. MacIntyre can make the apparently radical claim that “we all live out narratives in our lives” only because he holds that “stories are lived before they are told—except in the case of fiction.” It is not clear, though, what
the meaning of “to live out narratives” is, since on the one hand he explains it as the dependence of human action on existing practices, traditions, and the history in which the individual finds herself acting in the world, but on the other hand he refers to the active writing of the narrative. The first meaning seems to be uncontroversial and MacIntyre’s argument that the individual’s life is always embedded in a historical and social “setting” is compelling. But from the point of view of the idea of a life plan (which, we should emphasize, MacIntyre does not discuss), the relevant meaning of living out a narrative is the second.

Now, although the concept of a story (or narrative) is commonly used as something told rather than lived, MacIntyre may legitimately use it philosophically in a way that is not restricted to the retrospective sense; that is to say, one may think of story as constituting life rather than accounting for or reflecting it. The issue is not the use of metaphors but the kind of conceptual constraints on the way we understand them. Our argument so far has been that the kind of constraints on a story are of a different kind than those that apply to planning one’s future: the former are associated with aesthetic considerations of coherence, interest, beauty, or moral purposes such as teaching a lesson; the latter have to do with realizing one’s potential, serving a social goal, or advancing one’s overall welfare. MacIntyre seems to implicitly acknowledge this difference when he says “that we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives,” since “we are always under certain constraints.” But he fails to note that these are constraints in the world (moral, contingent, or practical), the consideration of which is essential to any planning, while those of fantasy, “in which we live what story we please,” are constraints of a different sort.

So MacIntyre is right in suggesting that in order for life to be intelligible, we have to be able to tell some story behind it (either in terms of the larger social and historical setting in which it is embedded or in terms of the subjective understanding of the individual of her life). But this does not mean that the narrative perspective can be prospective. To put it succinctly: one does not plan one’s life in order to make it intelligible. The best evidence for that is that one is willing to change the course of one’s life even when it spoils a good story. In his usual sharp and elegant way, Bernard Williams argues against MacIntyre that in order to be able to tell a story about some person, there must already be some structure and unity
to that person’s life. Furthermore, the fundamental difference between the life of real people and the story of fictitious heroes is that the latter simply do not live! Because these protagonists are constructed, they are figures in a closed system in which what happens to them is inevitable in the sense that it is decided by the structure of the novel or the play. They are presented to us as “given wholes.”

The metaphor of voyage better captures the openness of human life than that of a plan or a narrative. In contrast to planned activity or a coherent text, it leaves room for adventure, for movement towards the radically unexpected and unpredictable. Ulysses’s voyage is mostly unplanned, though his final goal is indeed home. But there are people, in fiction and in real life, who leave home never to return, that is to say embark upon a life course which is completely open. Moreover, the value of the voyage is not a matter simply of reaching the destination—achieving the plan of going from point A to point B. It is what happens to the traveler in the course of the journey that counts as giving meaning to the voyage. So it is said, in a phrase that testifies to the limits of the life-plan concept, that life is a journey not a destination.

III. CONSTITUTIVE VS. INSTRUMENTAL

Planning involves strategies for achieving goals. Life planning, in the comprehensive sense of the phrase, is accordingly concerned with the achievement of an overall goal of one’s life. Thus, life plans find their natural setting in rational choice theory and in an “engineering” approach to the way rational human beings manage their lives. Utilitarianism is such a maximizing model for the value of life. It offers a global end to which all the activity of an individual is subjected as the ultimate principle of choice. One can also think of other possible supreme goals for one’s life, such as achieving a position of power, breaking an athletic record, solving a mathematical problem, amassing a fortune, etc. However, it is no coincidence that philosophers have not advocated such goals as the supreme good for human beings. For these goals are partial; they do not encompass life as a whole but only one track of it. They are too narrow, either expressing only subjective interests rather than objective values that lie beyond the restricted life of an individual, or capturing only one dominant goal rather than an overall good.
Rawls presents the idea of a life plan in the context of rational choice theory as an extrapolation of an instrumental conception of the good. The good is determined by the “rational plan” and “a person may be regarded as a human life lived according to a plan” (Rawls, 358). The life plan determines for an individual those aims and interests that would be rational for him or her to pursue. The choice of a life plan is a typically rational engagement, involving deliberation and careful attention to facts and consequences of action (which is very similar to the way Mill describes it in On Liberty). Although one might have more than one rational plan, i.e., a few life plans that are consistent with the principles of rational choice, Rawls assumes that ultimately the individual chooses one and only one plan for her life on the basis of deliberative rationality (rather than mere rational choice principles). A life plan is thus the unifying principle of people’s various goods and goals and the successful realization of it is the source of happiness. Plans should harmonize different desires that are themselves ordered in a hierarchy. But Rawls is well aware that a life plan is not a blueprint for action for a whole life course but rather a hierarchy of subplans which are less and less clear-cut the further away they lie in the future. Life plans leave much open to revision and adaptation according to emerging circumstances. And although some of our future desires and the circumstances of our life cannot be predicted, the necessity and value of primary goods for the plan’s success can be taken for granted in any long-term planning (Rawls, 359–61).

Although the basis of Rawls’s concept of life planning is instrumental in the sense that plans are rational as long as they are effective means to realize with greater likelihood the ends and aims we have (i.e., subject to principles of rational choice), he regards the choice of the ends themselves as guided by the principles of “deliberative rationality.” These include both the requirement of inclusiveness and the Aristotelian principle. Inclusiveness means that a life plan is rational only if it considers the possibility of satisfying desires that we do not yet have at the moment but may have in the future. The Aristotelian principle, which is itself a principle of inclusiveness, makes it rational for us to choose the life which would best realize our capacities. Yet, although transcending the narrow rational-choice view of life planning, Rawls is still generally thinking in instrumentalist terms. The value of realized capacities and potential lies in the satisfaction
of desires and the enjoyment associated with the exercise of these capacities. In that respect, despite his harsh critique of utilitarianism as a political philosophy, Rawls’s theory of the individual’s good life preserves a generally utilitarian tone.

One may wonder whether Rawls’s conception does justice to the way people lead their lives and make major decisions. Rawls says that the best plan for an individual is the one he would have adopted had he had all background information. It is “the objectively rational plan for him and determines his real good” (Rawls, 366). But who is the person in question? We want to suggest that the identity of this person is, at least partly, constituted by his life plans, and hence that his overall long-term satisfaction and happiness cannot be even ideally considered as relating to an independently identifiable agent who tries to maximize his own good. It is true that persons are born with certain personal capacities and inclinations, but much of what later turns out to constitute their good is formed by their successive choices, especially the more significant and far-reaching ones. The phenomenon of “adaptive preferences,” usually considered as limiting the rationality of more “local” choices, seems to be essential and inevitable in the context of life planning, of the formation of human personality as whole. It is not that I decide to study philosophy so as to maximize my life-long happiness. It is rather that by making that decision I create a new set of preferences the satisfaction of which would become considered by me as good and meaningful. Had I chosen to become a businessman, my preferences and values would have been so different that it would have been hard to compare my happiness in satisfying them to that of a successful life as a philosopher.

Defenders of the idea of life planning argue that rational plans are always subject to reconsideration and adoption of new means for the achievement of the goals and even of the goals themselves. The mark of rationality is the plan’s adaptability to unforeseen contingencies (hence the need for “contingency plans”). However, the concept of a plan must consist of what might be called constraints of revisability. Beyond a certain degree of change it is no longer the original plan that is followed but a new one. And if the succession of plans becomes too rapid, the whole point of planning is lost and all that is left is a series of ad hoc decisions. The way success is defined (in advance) for a plan is part of its
individuation as a plan, but this does not capture the way a life is evaluated as successful, either for an individual or for a society.

Rawls gives only very few examples for life plans. He mentions the choice of occupation or profession, which indeed is a “life plan” in the sense that it leads to the formation of long-term patterns of future desires and preferences. Similar examples would be the decision to start a family, immigration to another country, or the undertaking of a political cause. But these kinds of life plans are better understood as choices of the kind of persons we want to be rather than rational programs for achieving some overall purpose or aim. They are constitutive of our identity or self-perception rather than instrumental in maximizing some prior value for a person. I cannot really plan my “self.”

The Aristotelian view of the good life as virtuous activity is closer to the constitutive than to the instrumental conception of the way we form our lives. It relates to the kind of people we decide we want to be rather than to some kind of satisfaction we want to maximize. The rational agent aspires to have a certain character rather than a life according to some particular plan. The commitment to virtue constrains any activity we pursue rather than structures the activity according to a prior design. It would accordingly sound strange to speak about “planning” to become an honest or a courageous person, or even to be a good citizen, though obviously one can deliberately choose to act in ways that exemplify these virtues. I cannot plan to be a good family man but only how to be a good family man. In that respect MacIntyre is right: virtue (as against Rawlsian life plans) is the source of the unitary life and the identity of a person. In other words, what makes a life a good life is not success in achieving one’s life plan.

Living is not an implementation of some overall program. The difficulty in thinking of standard examples for “life plans” in the global sense attests to the conceptual problem inherent to the metaphor. Family, career, political engagement, and religious commitments are all long-term structuring of one’s life, but none of them can stand on its own as the sole aim to which all other subplans serve as means in a hierarchy. Moreover, some of our plans are incommensurable or even conflicting with each other in ways that cannot be resolved in terms of an ultimate superplan. But the way we manage such conflicts forms our identity and expresses the way in which we constantly form and re-form our values and priorities. The concept of
life plan understood globally suggests a unity to the dimensions of our lives that the complexity of living belies. Instead of our lives forming one unified story, there may be multiple stories that don’t necessarily cohere.\(^8\)

**IV. Internal vs. External**

The idea of a life plan, as we said, is typically modern. It emerges with moral and political liberalism. Unlike classical conceptions of the good for persons, which were anchored in the good for society or the polis, life plans are concerned with the welfare of individuals and draw their validity from their being personally chosen. Life plans are the object of autonomy: they are ultimately what autonomous individuals believe is best for themselves. And from the perspective of political liberalism, life plans are the sphere of personal sovereignty in which the state should not interfere but should also actively protect from incursion by other individuals or institutions. Life planning is a vehicle through which people freely express their unique identity and the importance of their particular preferences. My life plan is valuable partly because I have chosen it autonomously.

In originating from the private sphere, it resembles the voice of conscience which accepts no external authority. Life’s value does not lie anymore in the successful realization of a role ascribed to us by the traditional, religious, metaphysical, or political order of things but rather in the self-creation of a personal order of value.

However, liberal theorists, from Mill and Royce to Rawls, Dworkin, and Raz, recognize that meaningful individual choice, especially in the global sense of a life plan, necessarily takes place in a social setting. This creates an irresolvable duality of the external and the internal sources for the validity of life plans which is yet another facet of Thomas Nagel’s general philosophical problem about the interplay between the first-personal and the third-personal points of view. Life plans must have objective grounds, that is to say, can be considered plans only if they are not completely fictitious, only if they consider strategies of maneuvering in the real world and facing its resistance to our wishes and aspirations. But life plans are also typically subjective in the sense that beyond their rationality and objective compatibility with reality, they must be given meaning by the subject. The individual can always try to transcend the subjective point of view in assessing her
life (prospectively or retrospectively), but she will always be forced again to return to the question whether what she considers as objectively valuable gives meaning to her life. On the other hand, trying to completely supersede the objective by acting only on subjective choice amounts to an irrational way of leading a life, often associated with some radical versions of existentialism. It cannot in any case be considered as life planning.

Following Nagel (who does not discuss specifically the idea of a life plan), we might say that although the source and scope of a life plan is typically individual, its meaning must in some way transcend the purely subjective. In other words, as self-transcending beings, we aim at making the internally chosen life plan externally worthy too. So although we do not accept any external authority in deciding how to live, a meaningful life plan is necessarily conceived by its own subject as having some value which lies outside that life. Although constantly under the risk of absurdity and despair, we still look at our life plans from the outside so as to secure for them some external value or meaning. The problem of transcendence arises only with regard to life plans in their global sense, since local (or sub-) plans can always be made intelligible in terms of the more general plan in which they are embedded. This is why the threat of the absurd looms only over life as a whole rather than some aspect or part of it. Thus, once the traditional conception of the good as anchored in the external order of things is abandoned in favor of an internally-based “life plan,” the aim of giving it meaning involves some sort of bootstrapping, i.e., granting an objective meaning to a subjectively-based project. As Nagel points out, even the external point of view must be endorsed as subjectively valid to count as providing meaning to our life (Nagel, 214–23).

We should end this section by noting that the four distinctions on which the analysis of the concept of life plan is based are related and even dependent on each other. The global nature of life taken as a whole makes it impossible to evaluate in instrumental terms; and for the same reason whatever makes it meaningful must come from an internal point of view. Moreover, meaning comes retrospectively, whereas planning is prospective. And if the resources for defining the very criteria of life’s value are themselves a matter of the individual’s choice, then this choice becomes in a serious sense constitutive of the individual’s identity. Taken together, these four distinctions entail that, at least in its philosophically ambitious sense, applying the concept of a plan to a whole life is a problematic concept and a potentially misleading metaphor.
3. The Good of Life Planning

The idea of a life plan has an obvious normative dimension to which we turn in the final section of this article. It is associated with the modern values of individualism, self-reliance, authenticity, autonomy, and with the more traditional ideal of rationality and prudence. Is life planning good? We can approach the problem by focusing on the two opposite extremes on which there is wide agreement: an overplanned and an underplanned life. Take, on the one hand, the overcalculative person who manages her life like an accountant or like a military strategist, and does so on an ambitious level which covers all aspects of her life—career choices, financial behavior, family relationships, etc. Such a person would be judged as obsessive, missing much of life’s fun, not to speak of lacking depth and chances for the emergence of new sources of satisfaction. On the other hand, think of a feckless person who leaves everything to contingency, who makes at most ad hoc decisions with no consistency or long-term consideration of their consequences. Such a life appears irresponsible, pathetic, and silly. While the overplanned life risks a total sacrifice of any particular moment or experience to some abstract overall aim, the underplanned life means living exclusively in the present, denying any character to the life and the subject of the life in question. Typically, such extreme types are hard to find in real life, although fiction provides us with neat examples. It is thus trivially true that the good life for people must combine some measure of planning and some measure of spontaneity or passive acceptance of unplanned conditions. But the question is not only the right proportion between the planned and unplanned factors in our life (which might very well be also a matter of individual differences), but the issue of the general value of planning in our attempt to make life good and meaningful. We suggest discussing this question in the light of four possible sources for the value of such life plans: maximization, aesthetic unity, commitment and identity, and finally, personal autonomy.

The most straightforward justification of planning is the maximization of some value. Economic or financial planning are obvious models for such a justification. Once the relevant values are identified as those making life good, planning serves as a general (and necessary) means for their maximization (or at least for satisficing them).

The main objection to the maximization model is that some of the deep sources of life’s meaning are nonaggregative in nature and cannot be achieved through planning in that “engineering” sense. Unlike power, riches,
reputation and even life expectancy—friendship, love, intimacy, political engagement, moral integrity, and self-awareness are not values which can be maximized or even satisficed through planning. It is controversial whether even the pursuit of happiness itself is a maximizing enterprise and whether it can be subjected to a plan.⁹

In one of the few systematic discussions of the concept of a life plan, Charles Larmore expresses similar reservations about the maximizing model of justification of the planned life (Larmore, 96–112). Some of the more meaningful occurrences in our lives not only cannot be planned, but their particular value lies exactly in their unexpectedness. Life’s contingencies and surprises are not necessarily obstacles in our pursuit of happiness: they are often the source of some of our more valuable experiences and sense of growth.¹⁰ Falling in love, touring the world, or experiencing some kind of revelation are typical components of a meaningful life that are incompatible with direct planning. Larmore, like Slote, highlights the passive aspects of the good life and the necessary openness to the good things that befall us. Larmore’s critique of the maximizing model (to which he refers as “prudence”) is compelling: following Bernard Williams’s argument, there is no “timeless perspective” from which life as a whole can be judged.

Judging life plans for their aesthetic unity views their value in intrinsic rather than instrumental terms. The merit of this approach is that if human life has no extrinsic overall goal, it can still be judged for its inner coherence and intelligibility. Whatever one’s ends in life, the life is judged as successful if these ends have been harmonized in a unified system. The natural analogy in this approach is between life and a work of art. Both are designed according to some purpose which is internal to them. Both can be evaluated only as integrated self-sustaining wholes. Life planning, accordingly, strives to secure the sense of each stage and major aspect in one’s life in terms of all other stages and aspects. The metaphors of “writing one’s life” or “living it out as a narrative” appeal to this aesthetic ideal. The idea is associated with romantic views, such as Nietzsche’s, who suggested an aestheticized conception of life. Randomness undermines life’s value not because the haphazardly led life has lesser chance to achieve an external global goal but because it makes it internally meaningless.

We have discussed in the previous section the problems associated with the aesthetic conception of life plan as narrative. Life cannot be led under the same criteria that apply to story telling or fiction since it is in-
herently open and prospective, as Williams has shown. We may add here that although for an individual's life to have meaning there must be some unity to it, this unity is provided through the principle of personal identity rather than through aesthetic structure. In other words, whereas major changes in the story of Anna Karenina would make her a different person and would make *Anna Karenina* lose its identity as that particular novel, the identity of real persons is not dependent on such strong organizing principles. Aesthetic coherence is neither required as a condition for the unity of a person's life (which is secured by personal identity), nor does it make that life valuable.

One might propose the concept of narrative identity (rather than aesthetic unity) as an essential complement to that of personal identity. A person identifies herself as having had a unique individual life, which is a product of her previous choices and circumstances rather than of her genetic makeup or any other essential or inborn property. This kind of identity is basically retrospective (expressing the sense of my life as it has so far evolved), but it also informs the way individuals make decisions regarding the future, i.e., plan their lives.¹¹

This form of justification of life plans is also intrinsic rather than instrumental. It is closely associated with the constitutive concept of a life plan described in the previous section. Having been born in France, speaking French as a mother tongue, practicing Catholicism, starting a family and making a musical career—a person cannot conceive of oneself as having a different nationality, religion, family, and profession (although metaphysically speaking one could still be numerically "the same" person). In this respect, we value our narrative identity and usually want to sustain it even when we could, abstractly speaking, have a better life under a different "narrative" (earning more money, or living in a safer country). We usually cherish who we basically are or have become and hence take measures to model our future on that basis. This is why conversions are the exceptions rather than the rule. And even when we decide to make a radical break in some aspect of our life, we treat it as the starting point of a new constant and consistent life rather than just a whim. We shudder at the idea of a Woody Allen-like identity-changing chameleon.

Finally, life planning is closely associated in modern times with the values of autonomy, choice, and control. But the exercise of autonomy does not necessarily imply the existence of a life plan in the strict global sense. First, much of what our life eventually turns out to be is decided by
the way we were raised up (think of "victims" of determined fathers such as Leopold Mozart and James Mill). Secondly, one can be said to be autonomous also when the life one leads is based on a series of partly consistent choices which do not fall under an overall plan. Autonomy is not only consistent with a partly fragmented set of goals, but is often associated in pluralistic theories of value (like Isaiah Berlin's) with the impossibility of a coherent value scheme. Furthermore, autonomy is associated (e.g. by Mill and Nietzsche) with experimentation in forms of life, that is in the typical combination of a controlled planned activity with openness to unexpected results (Anderson, 4–26). But beyond all that, one aspect of autonomy which is incompatible with planning is spontaneity. Spontaneous response to one’s situation is immediate and reflects in a pure form the present preference and inclination rather than "sacrifices" them for some future self or long-term plan. Spontaneity is often the condition for the expression of the authentic self.

4. Conclusion

Life planning is not an Aristotelian virtue. But it can nevertheless be treated as the mean between two extremes that are associated on the one hand with an overcalculative approach and on the other with a capricious and irresponsible way of life. When the careful or the carefree attitudes become exclusive principles for guiding a whole life they may both prove disastrous. Some measure of life planning is necessary for our welfare as well as for our moral integrity. Even the most openended voyage needs some scheduling, itineraries, and advance choice between alternatives in order to have any meaning and serve as a source of pleasure. But the idea of a life plan is potentially misleading when taken in the globalized sense or the essential expression of personal autonomy. There is an obvious, even trivial sense in which having life plans is the mark of a responsible, self-aware, prudent, and morally committed person. As self-forming creatures, human beings exercise the freedom to give some unity to their lives and realize long-term goals. But the uses of the metaphor of a life plan in Mill, Royce, and Rawls tend to overdramatize the idea of such unity to the point in which it becomes either conceptually incoherent or psychologically unrealistic. The critical examination of the concept of a life plan exposes the fallacy of an overinflated understanding of it. Taken literally, the concept of a life plan turns out to be a fallacious attempt to
replace the metaphysical teleological setting for the conduct of human life with an equally ordered program that is subjectively set by individuals for themselves. John Lennon seems to have got it right when saying that “life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”

David Heyd

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Franklin G. Miller

National Institutes of Health, Washington, DC

Notes

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1. The concept of life plan has of course an interesting history that for lack of space we cannot outline here. Rawls acknowledges his debt to Josiah Royce, who in turn was much influenced by the very famous discussion of the concept in J.S. Mill's On Liberty (Mill, 117). But the origins of the concept go back to at least Adam Smith and David Hume. Anthony Giddens (1991) has given an important sociological account of the concept of life planning as a response to modern threats of meaninglessness.

2. See, for instance, Matthew Arnold’s “The Better Part,” in which an anonymous skeptic argues that in a Godless world, with no afterlife, “Live we like brutes our life without a plan!”

3. Michael Walzer (pp. 23–24) suggests the equally problematic conception of life as a career, namely an overall project “in which we ourselves are the undertakers, the entrepreneurs, the managers and organizers of our own activities.”

4. Kierkegaard, p. 127 (entry 465). This passage is quoted three times in the same book by Richard Wollheim (p. 163), who disagrees with the sharpness of Kierkegaard’s contrast and the thesis that self-examination undermines the ability to lead a life. But in line with our skepticism about global life planning, Wollheim agrees that Kierkegaard is right in denying the possibility of “understanding of life in the synoptic way” which would need a “resting-place,” a place that is never available to us because it will have to be outside life (p. 165).

5. Maclntyre (p. 212). The “aesthetization” of life is an idea which goes back to Nietzsche, who treats the world as text and the ideal human life as a literary work. Nietzsche thus maintains a very strong identity condition for persons: like in works of art, nothing can be changed without losing the identity of the person; or in other words, counterfactuals don’t make sense both in the lives of fictitious characters and in real human beings. See Nehamas (pp. 164–65). Nehamas tries to defend Nietzsche’s idea of life as literature by interpreting it as Nietzsche’s own life as a writer.
6. Bernard Williams (pp. 307–10). Williams also explains how the retrospective account of our life story can make sense of a life that was lived prospectively, i.e., what makes the two fit (pp. 312–13). But this deep problem (which applies also to psychoanalysis and to historiography) lies beyond the scope of this article.

7. This should be clearly distinguished from Aristotle’s view, at least according to some convincing interpretations like John Cooper’s. For Aristotle the supreme good is not a “dominant” end that dictates all we do in a hierarchical structure of means to end. It is rather the “inclusive” idea of living a life of a virtuous person, that is to say, forming a character that can deal with whatever circumstances one faces and with whatever specific ends one happens to adopt (Cooper, pp. 83–84 and p. 103). In that respect life is not basically a planned activity in the Rawlsian liberal sense.

8. Although Josiah Royce (p. 79) defined “an individual self... as a human life lived according to a plan,” it seems that his notion of plan is closer to what we refer to here as the constitutive concept than to the Rawlsian, instrumental idea of rational planning, since for Royce life planning is a kind of commitment (“loyalty to loyalty”). The same goes for Anthony Appiah who states that “a life plan is not like an engineer’s plan” but rather consists of “mutable sets of organizing aims” (p. 16). It is a choice of living as a particular person (i.e., adopting a certain identity) rather than a blueprint for action.

9. For a good discussion of these limitations on the good of life planning, see Slote, pp. 40–45.

10. As Emerson (p. 309) noted, “Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not.”

11. David DeGrazia (pp. 179–89) holds that narrative identity is constituted by the conception one has of one’s life, particularly of the important and valuable aspects of it. The value with which we hold our past life is the basis for the projection of this identity into the future (including even that part of it in which we might become incapable of being aware of our identity).

REFERENCES


