

What is a life plan according to Charles Larmore? Does he think having a life plan, and living accordingly, is a good idea or not? How does he defend his view? Do you agree with him or not? Why?

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Essay 2

What is a life plan according to Charles Larmore? Does he think having a life plan, and living accordingly, is a good idea or not? How does he defend his view? Do you agree with him or not? Why?

A life plan is commonly used to lead a good life by directing meaningful action towards one's valued outcomes. The literature has widely considered that a life led according to a rational life plan is superior to a life that aimlessly unfolds. The purpose of this essay is to explicate Larmore's (1999) conception of a life plan and investigate his concern for its role in realising a 'good life'. Moreover, it aims to explore Larmore's (1999) argument against the claim that a good life *must* be led according to a rational plan. I will demonstrate that, by accounting for the value of uncertainty, Larmore reasonably concludes that a good life cannot be reduced to the object of a rational life plan. Firstly, I will define what a rational life plan is in relation to the discussions from Larmore (1999) and Rawls (1999). I will introduce the importance of a life plan in realising a good life and illustrate Rawls' (1999) conclusion that life is the object of a rational life plan. Secondly, I will discuss Larmore's (1999) argument against the notion that life is the object of a rational life plan, and contrast potential responses alluded to by Rawls (1999) and Mintoff (2010). I will propose that Larmore's (1999) defence to these responses is reasonable and show that his position offers a more plausible account of what determines a good life. Expressly, his position highlights the distinct value of unplanned events, which attests that a good life is not solely the object of a rational life plan. Subsequently, I argue that Larmore's (1999) position better mediates the barrier between living life as an object of a rational life plan and life's inherent uncertainty. In conclusion, I will discuss the underlying assumptions for evaluating a whole life and contend that Larmore's (1999) discussion accepts these assumptions without reasonable examination. I support that if Larmore's (1999) argument is to compare the value of whole lives, it must further define how a whole life should be evaluated.

1. What is a Life Plan?

A life plan is a set of rational goals that are based on one's experience and values. These goals are used to direct meaningful actions towards valuable outcomes. Larmore (1999) considers this view the *rational life plan*, derived from Rawls' (1999) notion of a life plan as an overall moral ideal.¹ The belief that one must evaluate values and use goals to lead a good/meaningful life has been echoed throughout moral philosophy. For example, it is expressed by Socrates in Plato's *Apology* that "*The unexamined life is not worth living*" (38a5-6).² To construct a life plan requires an examination of one's values and goals to help formulate the rational path on which to follow.³ Creating and following a path enables one to reach specified outcomes. A life plan is rational if its requirements are achievable given one's circumstances, and the goals align with one's experience and values (Larmore, 1999).⁴

Extensively, a good life pursues rational goals (Aristotle, 2011; Cooper, 1975; Rawls, 1999). Larmore (1999, p. 97) characterises this attitude as the notion that "*a life is something we are to lead and not something we should allow to happen to us.*". The argument that a good life is led towards a planned purpose is strengthened when compared to its opposite: a life in which events unfold aimlessly. A life whereby one does not evaluate goals and strive towards meaningful outcomes, but simply lets the unexpected unfold is inferior to the life which is examined and led towards a purpose. This position is

¹ Rawls' (1999) account of a life plan is based on Royce's (1908) formulation of a good life, identity, and rationality. Notably, Royce (1908) commits to the position that to be an individual 'self', one must live according to a plan. However, Rawls (1999) commits to the position that to have a 'good life', one must live according to a plan. A rational life plan for Royce (1908) primarily concerns identity, whereas for Rawls (1999), it primarily concerns an overall moral ideal for a good life.

² Another notable example is reflected in Nietzsche's "revaluation of all values" (WP 1059).

³ See Section 3 for further discussion on the underlying assumptions for constructing a life plan.

⁴ Expressly, a *rational* life plan is one where the outcomes and steps can be achieved by an individual, and the goals align with one's subjectively evaluated perception of a good life.

shared by Aristotle, who believed that human flourishing requires taking control of one's own life: "For not to have ordered one's life in relation to some end is a sign of extreme folly." (Aristotle, 2011, p. 1214b7-13.). After an evaluation of which events should be realised for a good life, a life plan can be constructed to provide a rational path towards the realisation of these valued events. The function of a rational life plan is to realise a good life, and a good life is determined by whether it realises its rational life plan. Therefore, as Rawls (1999) argues, life is the object of a rational life plan. Larmore (1999) refers to the hard notion that a good life *must* be led according to a rational plan as the *supreme value of prudence*. This essay will similarly define the *supreme value of prudence* as a position claiming that a good life is determined only by whether it is lived according to a rational life plan.

2. Larmore's Argument Against the Supreme Value of Prudence

2.1 The Limitations of a Life Plan

Larmore (1999) contends that life's uncertainty conflicts with the desire to live according to a life plan. Expressly, human life inevitably has a degree of uncertainty, and a life plan attempts to remove uncertainty. The *supreme value of prudence* assumes that only a life plan can enable one to fulfil good life outcomes and significantly increase life's holistic value. To realise value, one must create a life plan to control uncertainty. However, the human condition is naturally overwhelmed with uncertainty due to our lack of cognitive/informational capacity to perfectly predict future events. For instance, one may plan to have children by 30 years of age but fail to predict that they are infertile. Subsequently, the life plan is destroyed because one lacks pertinent information about their fertility. Larmore (1999) emphasises that many life events are uncertain and can potentially devastate plans, goals and the expected good in life. Evidently, there is a conflict between the uncertainty within the human condition and the attempt to live according to a life plan. If a good life must be led by a rational life plan, uncertainty presents a barrier towards fulfilling a good life.

Larmore (1999) argues that solely living according to a rational life plan is not the best means to achieve a good life. Embracing a level of uncertainty is required for a better life. He claims that the uncertainty of some life events possesses a distinct value that is lacking in lives that are lived strictly according to a life plan. For example, imagine taking on an uncertain interstate job opportunity that does not align with one's life plan.⁵ The unexpected good that may be derived from this event is potentially life enhancing. It is only through experience of unexpected events that one can derive value from uncertainty. If uncertainty can yield positive value, reducing uncertainty will diminish potential value. Therefore, a life that is lived strictly according to rational goals does not necessarily reflect a good life. Some unplanned events can provide significant value, and, if one strives to plan all events, the potential discovery of unforeseen value is diminished. Larmore (1999) claims that the holistic value of a life lived with an amount of uncertainty is superior to a life lived strictly according to a plan. A balance between embracing uncertainty and prudence provides a greater potential holistic life value.

In summary, Larmore (1999) believes that there is a conflict between the inherent uncertainty of the human condition and the requirement of a rational life plan for a good life. A good life cannot be reduced to the object of a rational life plan because value can be derived from unplanned life events. Larmore (1999) defends that a good life is lived according to a balance of prudence and uncertainty. This position eliminates the barrier of uncertainty towards fulfilling a good life. Explicitly, Larmore (1999) assumes that unexpected events have a special 'objective' value that can only be attained through the experience of uncertainty.⁶ If so, the holistic value of a life is not determined solely by

⁵ Larmore (1999, p. 110) considers an example of unexpectantly having children. The future happiness that may be derived from this event is life changing. He emphasises that only through the experience of being an unexpected parent can you attain the value afforded by uncertainty.

⁶ Larmore (1999, p. 99) means objective value in the sense that it can be discovered through experience.

following rational goals (namely, the supreme value of prudence). A good life contains an amalgamation of expected and unexpected value and is, therefore, *not* an object of a plan.

"It is the life lived with a sense of our dual nature as active and passive beings, bent on achieving the goals we espouse, but also liable to be surprised by forms of good we never anticipated." (Larmore, 1999, p. 111)

2.2 Two Responses to Larmore's Argument

I.

The experience of unexpected events does not provide a distinct value to one's life. It only contributes towards the shaping of one's life plan. Mintoff (2010, p. 171) develops this objection which subsequently reinforces the supreme value of prudence. Explicitly, the objection is that the value of unexpected events is restricted to its function of shaping one's life plan. The significance of unexpected events rests within their power to shape one's life plan. The only way that unexpected events manifest value is through a life plan. Expressly, the utility of unexpected events is in shaping one's life plan and the function of one's life plan to realise value. The objection denies that unexpected events have distinct value in themselves. It asserts that their significance is in affording one to realise novel value through shaping one's life plan. A good life is defined by the value derived from a life plan, and the role of unexpected events is to shape one's life plan.⁷

II.

Living strictly according to a rational life plan allows one to avoid regret. Rawls (1999) observes that, if one is to always act in accordance with a rational life plan, there is no point in reproaching ourselves for not having acted differently. A rational plan equally considers all constituent events of one's life, is realisable, and aligns with one's values. Therefore, if a life plan is a path towards a good life, and every decision aligns with one's plan, every decision is justified by the plan. Consequently, one may avoid the regret of all decisions that are aligned with one's plan towards a good life.

2.3 Larmore's Defence

Larmore's (1999) writing seemingly contests the responses discussed in I and II. His position and potential defence to these responses will be explored below.

In response to I, Larmore (1999, p.106) rightly highlights the value of childhood as an objection to the view that a life's value is restricted to planned accomplishments. A rational life plan gives equal weight to all the constituent events of one's life (Rawls, 1999). Childhood is an important constituent of one's life that must be assessed when evaluating its holistic value. Furthermore, childhood is not led according to rational goals, but it adds significant value to one's life. A life plan has no role to play in the value of childhood; however, childhood has a role to play in a good life. Larmore (1999) concedes that events of childhood are significant in creating positive value throughout one's life. Childhood is clearly a major determinant in the developmental, socio-economic trajectory of life.⁸ However, Larmore (1999) would argue that childhood contains constituent events which provide significant value that goes beyond the value of shaping one's life plans. For example, according to response I, the only value from baking cookies with one's grandmother is that the event shaped one to become a chef. Larmore (1999) would argue that the event contributes value beyond the simple function of shaping one's life plan. This claim is clear in Andersson et al. (2008) study, which illuminates the significant value people nearing the end of their expected lifetime assign to the

⁷ This response is aligned with Rawls (1999) conclusion that "the rational plan for a person determines his good." This response emphasises the supreme value of prudence.

⁸ See Rueden et al. (2006) and Dye (2018) for examples of the relationship between childhood events and developmental/socio-economic trajectory of one's life.

memories and experiences of unplanned childhood events.⁹ The phenomenal value of childhood events independently contributes to a good life. The value, such as happiness or enjoyment, that manifests during the unplanned event and its recollection does not concern its contribution to a life plan.

Secondly, in response to Rawls' (1999) observation in II, one may retrospectively view that if they had acted against their plans, a far greater potential value may have been achievable. Instead of weighing one's options with ultimate regard to their life plan, balancing an embrace of uncertainty *and* a life plan can potentially afford a greater life. For Larmore (1999, p. 108) this provides for one clear sense in which an appeal to supreme prudence cannot escape self-reproach. Explicitly, this is because humans can retrospectively comprehend a greater potential value had they acted impulsively against their life plan. Notably, Larmore's (1999) position also fails to escape self-reproach, as one may also regret acting against one's rational life plan.

Larmore's (1999) position plausibly offers a response to the hard notion that a good life *must* be led according to a rational plan. By illustrating that significant value can be derived from unplanned childhood events, he demonstrates that not only planned outcomes can provide value. Therefore, a good life is not solely the object of a rational life plan. For Larmore (1999), a good life requires a balance between planning good outcomes and embracing unexpected events. I argue that his position better mediates the conflict between a rational life plan and the uncertainty inherent in the human condition. Additionally, Larmore's (1999) position and a life led strictly by a rational plan cannot avoid self-reproach.

3. Is it Reasonable to Discuss the Virtue of a Life Plan?

The discussion thus far has explored whether living according to a life plan is a good method to increase the holistic value of a life. Commonly, the discussion amongst Larmore (1999), Rawls (1999), and Mintoff (2010) assumes that an entire life may be objectively better or worse based on realised goals and life events. I will explicate below that these discussions make unreasonable evaluations about an entire life and its constituents based on the following two assumptions.

First assumption: A whole life can be evaluated as better or worse, not only its constituent events.

To evaluate whether it is better to live according to a life plan, the combination of all constituent life events must be weighed and evaluated as a whole (Rawls, 1999). It is unreasonable to make an accurate value judgement about all possible life events. How should one weigh/quantify/evaluate the entirety of life events? The absurdity of this question is exemplified if asked to evaluate the value of *every* constituent life event that occurred in the previous year. This task is monumental, and it is absurd to believe that it may be applied to an entire lifetime. Due to the complexity of events within most lifetimes, it is unreasonable to expect that an individual can evaluate the large multiplicity of events rationally. Therefore, the discussion over whether a life plan is required for a good life, cannot be reasonable.

Second assumption: It is possible to evaluate a life from a perspective that is detached from one's present values.

The evaluation of something as better or worse is dependent upon subjective values which fluctuate through time, between and within individuals. Evaluation of life must be done from a present perspective. It always carries a temporal marker. Larmore (1999, p.107) agrees that "*There is no*

⁹ Andersson et al. (2008) performed a qualitative study into what constitutes a good life amongst people over 75 years of age receiving municipal care. Life memories from childhood were reported as a significant factor which brought joy and satisfaction in the present, where old friends could represent an important part of the life history and still brought values to the person's life.

escape from time". The evaluation of one's whole life compared to another, or the evaluation of a rational life plan, requires one to reason freely from their life or any moment within it. However, when individuals interact with the world they *must* do so within a temporal circumstance. Williams (1985) thoroughly develops this condition, concluding that stepping outside of subjectivity is inconceivable. It is illogical to consider that one can view from no point of view at all. Therefore, if it is impossible to evaluate different lives from a perspective that is detached from one's present values, the evaluation of a life can only ever be relevant to a particular perspective. Consequently, it is unreasonable to discern whether life lived according to a plan is a good or bad idea for another person.

Larmore (1999, p. 100-101) recognises the subjectivity and problems with the holistic evaluation of a life plan. Furthermore, he accepts these assumptions without reasonable examination. His reason for accepting the assumptions is to provide an argument against the supreme value of prudence and offer an account of the good life that is more faithful to the dynamics of human experience. Seemingly, the discussion seems to take the assumptions *arguendo*.¹⁰ Without a reasonable justification for accepting the underlying assumptions, arguments that concern a holistic evaluation of one's life are unsubstantiated. Reasonably, if an argument is to compare the value of whole lives, it must be able to define the value of a whole life and the process of evaluation.

Larmore's (1999) argument does not deny the important value that may be derived from a life plan. He emphasises that life itself is not properly the object of a plan, and that the unexpected good may provide value that planned outcomes cannot provide. Regarding a good life, Larmore (1999) argues that the good lies between leading one's life with planned goals and letting life happen.¹¹ He concludes that a life plan deserves only a subordinate role in shaping a good life. Arguably, by placing a life plan in a subordinate role rather than a primary role, his position better accounts for the dynamic uncertainty within the human condition. Furthermore, by appealing to the value of childhood events, Larmore (1999) shows that significant value can be derived from unplanned experiences. Additionally, he defends that neither position can avoid self-reproach. His position overcomes responses I and II, however, he fails to reasonably examine the two underlying assumptions of his argument. For his argument to be better substantiated, he must further defend that one can evaluate a whole life from a perspective that is detached from one's present values. In conclusion, Larmore (1999) effectively argues against the supreme value of prudence. He offers a better account of a good life, as it affords the value of unplanned events *and* the value of planned life outcomes.

¹⁰ That is, "for the sake of argument". When one assumes something *arguendo*, the person is asserting a hypothetical statement to be true for the purpose of argument, regardless of whether that statement is true or whether they believe it to be true.

¹¹ The importance of *both* extremes is explicated further in his conclusion "*We cannot hope to live well if we do not direct ourselves toward achieving goals which have a ramifying significance, which organize our various activities and give our lives meaning. But we err if we suppose that prudence is the supreme virtue, and that the good life is one which unfolds in accord with a rational plan.*" (Larmore, 1999, p. 111).

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