



Plans, Open Future and the Prospects for a Good Life

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Abstract

How we live our lives depends on how we relate to our past, present and future. The article focusses on the relation to our future. The target of my critique is a “planning conception” that imagines the future as a realm that we can rationally plan and form in light of our ends. In the first section I present an outline of the planning conception, building on Bratman’s planning theory and Rawls’ idea of a life plan. The second section highlights the attractions of the planning conception. I argue that this conception offers a prima facie intriguing view of the temporality of human life. It promises a life in which we can control the passage of time. The third section reveals severe limitations of the planning conception. I question the claim that plans are central to our self-understanding and to a good life. The planning conception tends to distort the temporality of human life with respect to past, present and future. Given this diagnosis, I sketch an alternative in the last section of the paper. I explore the temporal specifics of ways of understanding oneself as a person and argue that both the formation and the very form of these ‘ways of being’ do not follow the logic of planning.

Keywords Plans · Plan of life · Future · Temporality · Good life · Self-understanding · Ways of being

The lives of human beings are not only processes that are going on in time but also processes that have a specific temporal structure or temporality.¹ Our lives are not just extended stretches of moments ordered according to earlier and later. As self-conscious beings we know our position in time from a first-person perspective. Thus, the order of earlier and later becomes supplemented by the ever-shifting order of past, present and future. Yet in living a human life we inhabit the past, the present and the future in such a way that they undergo a

¹ Most ideas of this paragraph are inspired by my reading of Heidegger (1977).

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further transformation. The past, understood as my past, “is never dead, it’s not even past”². It forms the background of everything I do in the present and plan for the future. It colours my experience of the world and my picture of myself. The present, understood as my present, is not the vanishing now, the infinitesimal boundary between past and future. Rather, it is the temporally extended situation in which my desires, emotions, thoughts and actions take place. And the future, understood as my future, is not an empty space but something I can fear or hope for, it is the temporal dimension into which I project myself. Though our orientation in the world depends on knowing the chronological sequence of events, the temporality of our lives does not follow a strict linear order. The past impinges on the present and the future or enables a better present and future. In turn, how we see and interpret the past depends on our present and future. We cannot change the past literally, but the meaning of the past constantly changes in light of the present and the future. Similarly, how we see the future heavily influences how we experience the present. In human life, past, present and future form a unity of interdependent and intertwined perspectives. Time in the sense of temporality is something like the form of human life.³ The various ways in which this form is realized display how we live our lives and strongly affect whether we lead a life that is good and meaningful for us or not.

I cannot explore the temporality of human life and its influence on a good life in all its aspects.⁴ Instead I will focus on the future dimension of human temporality. The target of my critique is a conception of our relation to our future that dominates certain areas of philosophy and that has a considerable impact on our current culture and self-understanding. I call this conception the ‘planning conception’ of the future. According to this conception we should imagine the future as that temporal realm which we can rationally plan and form in light of our ends. The planning conception is interwoven with distinctive ideas of action, of rationality, of personal autonomy and of well-being and the good life. My aim is to better understand both the attractions of the planning conception and its shortcomings. At least in modern societies, people have to make plans for their future in order to succeed in life. But I will argue that the dominance of the planning conception threatens to overshadow our prospects for a good life, as it tends to distort the temporality of human life.

I will proceed in four steps. The first section outlines the planning conception of the future. I will take up insights from Bratman’s planning theory and highlight some core elements of Rawls’s idea of a life plan. The second section discusses the attractions of the planning conception. I will emphasize the temporal implications of the planning conception and interpret this conception as an attempt to control the passage of time. The third section expounds severe limitations of the planning conception and its negative influence on living a good life. And in the fourth and final section I will sketch an alternative to the planning conception that tries to build on temporal specifics of the ways we understand ourselves as persons or of ‘ways of being’, as I call them for short. I will show that the formation and realization of these ways of being does not follow the logic of planning.

² “The past is never dead. It’s even not past.” is an often-quoted aphorism of William Faulkner (Faulkner 2012:73).

³ ‘Form’ is here to be understood in a broadly Aristotelian sense.

⁴ For an attempt cf. Steinfath (2020).

1 The Planning Conception of the Future

According to Michael Bratman, human beings are “planning agents” (Bratman 2014: 295).⁵ Not all agents are planning agents. Many animals, for instance, are acting purposefully, but it is controversial whether they are able to form plans, especially for the more distant future (cf. Clayton 2003). Similarly, young children and people suffering from dementia do have preferences and a will. Some things are more important to them than others and they can engage in means-end deliberations. However, their ability to plan seems to be underdeveloped or just non-existent. If we follow Bratman’s functionalistic theory of plans we can explain what animals, young children or people suffering from dementia lack by pointing out the tasks which plans are supposed to carry out in human life. Plans answer mainly to three problems of coordination human beings are typically confronted with.

First, human beings have many desires and preferences which cannot be realized together, at least not simultaneously. Thus, they have to decide which desires and preferences are more important to them than others. They have to order their preferences in a hierarchy and a coherent system. This first intrapersonal coordination task secures, if successful, the synchronic unity of the person. Second, the synchronic order of preferences has to be complemented by a diachronic order that allows to realize preferences successively over a longer period of time. Human agents are not nailed to their present situation but can envision near and distant future courses of events, including their own possibilities to influence how things will turn out. They can postpone the satisfaction even of urgent needs in order to first achieve other things of relevance to them. In this way human beings are able to give their lives a diachronic unity. Third, humans don’t live alone. They have to coordinate their own actions with the actions of others. This interpersonal coordination problem mirrors the first two intrapersonal coordination tasks. Bratman argues that plans are tools to solve these three problems of coordination. Other beings might solve these problems without planning. But at least we human beings use our planning abilities in order to coordinate ourselves with others, and with ourselves, at a time and over time.

On the one hand, planning is a kind of practical rationality. It is a cognitive achievement and presupposes a form of far-sightedness. On the other hand, human beings need plans because their rationality is limited and endangered (Bratman 2014: 299). We often don’t have the time and opportunity to deliberate carefully what we should do. But when we have time and opportunity for deliberation we can take advantage of the situation and plan for a future when we will lack the time for reflection. Bratman conceives plans and intentions as prior commitments that protect us against all sorts of temptations (Bratman 1999). Of course, we can and often should reconsider these commitments in light of new and better information. But we need good reasons to revise our plans. By their very nature, plans are subject to normative constraints of rationality.

Plans of the sort analysed by Bratman pervade all areas of modern life. They are connected in many different ways with things we value (Bratman 2014: 299–300). Thus, we need plans to achieve professional goals, to organize our daily family-life, to spend holidays with other people, to pursue a political career or to solve scientific puzzles. It is true that we cannot fix everything beforehand. But plans can leave room for developments not foreseeable at the time of planning. Plans for achieving a distant end are normally underdetermined.

⁵ My outline of Bratman’s theory draws on several of his papers, especially those that are collected in Bratman (2007a).

They will keep many things open until the time will have come to conceive more concrete steps.

Bratman does not explicitly understand plans as necessary for a good life. But it seems fair to say that there is a subtext in all of his papers that heavily suggests that planning is a condition for leading a good life. For instance, Bratman argues that we cannot govern ourselves without rational planning. “Self-governance” is supposed to rely on our plans and the ability to realize these plans (Bratman 2014: 299; Bratman 2007b). And as I mentioned, he thinks of plans as undergirding projects and relationships that we value and care for in many different ways. However, Bratman does not extend his planning theory to a theory of life plans. The idea of a plan of life is the centrepiece of John Rawls’ theory of the good of a person, his “weak theory of the good” (Rawls 1989: esp. §§ 63, 54).⁶ In Rawls the connection between plans and the good life, understood roughly as well-being, is as explicit as one might wish:

“The main idea is that a person’s good is determined by what is for him the most rational long-term plan of life given reasonably favorable circumstances. A man is happy when he is more or less successfully in the way of carrying out this plan.” (92–93).

Rawls is a proponent of a rational desire-fulfilment theory of well-being.⁷ His main argument for such an approach is a linguistic and metaethical diagnosis of the meaning of the adverb ‘good’ in appropriate contexts (cf. 407). But I think that Rawls’ picture also draws some of its appeal from its conjunction with a distinctively liberal idea of self-determination. There is an echo in Rawls of John Stuart Mill’s belief that “[h]e who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation” (Mill 1991: 75). In Mill’s eyes such a person will have comparatively little “worth as a human being”. Presumably, he will therefore lead a life not as good as it could be.

Rawls stresses that a rational plan of life is not “a detailed blueprint for action stretching over the whole course of life” (410). He concedes, like Bratman after him, that the structure of a plan for the further future will reflect the lack of specific information at earlier points in time (cf. 410). Still, a plan of life will “make some provision for even the most distant future and for our death”, though “it becomes relatively less specific for later periods” (410).

I do not want to rehearse Rawls’ attempt to spell out his notion of rationality, applied to short- and long-term plans, within the framework of rational choice theory. Yet with respect to the temporal structure of life plans three points are worth recalling. First, Rawls adheres to a strict principle of temporal neutrality. He rejects pure time preference (cf. § 45), i.e. the suggestion that the mere temporal position of a moment might be a reason to favour it over another. Especially “[f]uture aims may not be discounted solely in virtue of being future” (420). For Rawls, the distance from the present as such has no rational relevance for our choices. Nevertheless – and that is the second point – Rawls is inclined to prefer “rising expectations over time” (421). He favours a life with a happy end over a life with a happy youth followed by a steady decline in later life, even if the total sum of enjoyments or satisfied desires were the same in both courses of life (cf. Velleman 1991). The “rising [...] plan appears preferable since later activities can often incorporate and bind together the results and enjoyments of an entire life into one coherent structure as those of a declin-

⁶ The next page-numbers in brackets in the text refer to *A Theory of Justice*.

⁷ The sentence immediately following the ones quoted reads: “To put it briefly, the good is the satisfaction of rational desire.” (93).

ing plan cannot.” (421) The third point worth mentioning relates to the metaethical function of the notion of a rational plan of life. Though Rawls clearly advises us in fact to consider our life as a whole and to carefully plan stretches of this life, he takes the idea of a life plan as a counterfactual criterion for judging the goodness of a life. Even if we were so blessed that we would achieve happiness solely following our spontaneous impulses, according to Rawls, our life would only be good if it were a life complying to a plan we would choose under ideal informational conditions (cf. 421). Rawls inherits this conception from Sidgwick and his ideal observer theory of the good (cf. Sidgwick 1962: 111–112). Interestingly, this comes down to a timeless view of the good. The idea of a plan of life thus turns from a schedule which allows us “to organize our activities into a temporal sequence” (410) into the ideal of a judgement *sub specie aeternitatis*.

2 Attractions of the planning-conception of the Future

Rawls’ idea of a plan of life has been criticized in the literature (Heyd/Miller 2010, Larmore 2008, Slote 1984), and those who reject Rawls’ idea will probably also cast doubt on Bratman’s planning theory. However, before taking up some of the criticism it is important to highlight the attractions of the planning conception of the future. It expresses a suggestive view of the temporality of human life.

The planning conception focusses on human beings as agents who are at least in part authors of their lives. Life does not happen to them without their participation. They do not just *live* their lives but *lead* them. A planning agent is thus not just subject to the passage of time. Instead, she tries to form the passage of time according to her own ends. Those who deplore the constant passage of time feel subdued to time. Time is, metaphorically speaking, their master. In contrast, the planning agent wants herself to master time. Obviously, she cannot stop the flow of time. Yet she can channel the course of time in conformity with her preferences and interests. This is one temporal implication of planning accounts of self-determination and self-governance found, for instance, in Mill, Rawls and Bratman.

A further implication stems from the connection between planning and temporal unity. From the perspective of a planning theory, to abandon the ambition to plan the future would threaten the synchronic and diachronic unity of the agent. The lives of those who live from moment to moment would dissolve into unrelated fragments. Not being able to plan the future would undermine the very subjectivity of the agent. Conversely, planning can be understood as an active synthesis not only of temporal moments and episodes but of the subject herself. And if we take up the quotation from Mill in the previous section we can add that a person who does not choose her own plan of life will be subject to the plans of others.

Seen from a somewhat different angle, planning is a way of appropriating the future as one’s own. The planning agent *has* a future. For her the future is not a fate approaching her from an unknown realm. It is not an external, alien force. By projecting herself into the future, the planning agent can identify with her future. In this respect, she can be in harmony with her own life extended over time.

Moreover, to the planning agent the future is open in an existentially important manner. It is not open because it is unknown. Rather, the pertinent openness is a kind of “performative” openness (cf. Ismael 2011). The planning agent does not have a predominately prognostic relation to her future. From her first-person perspective her future depends on her decisions,

and these are not events that the agent predicts as an observer might predict what the agent will do next. Decisions are made or performed by the agent as author of her life. Deciding means literally making up one's mind (cf. Frankfurt 1988: 172). And insofar as the future of the agent depends on her decisions it is as open to her as her decisions themselves. Foretelling her own future would mean foretelling her own decisions, and that would contradict the performative nature of decisions. The existential relevance of a performatively open future can be learned from the opposite case of a person who is completely unable to plan for her future. Such a person will live under the depressing impression that her future is closed or sealed. However, the planning agent cannot handle a completely open or uncertain future. Planning presupposes a sufficiently stable environment that gives the agent the security she needs for planning, especially where the more distant future is concerned. Though the planning agent does not have a prognostic relation to her own decisions she will not be able to make reasonable decisions without appropriate predictions of how things will turn out in time. Too much uncertainty paralyses any attempt to plan one's actions. Thus, the performative openness of the future has to be allayed by a sufficient degree of epistemic reliability.

For a planning agent her future has priority over her past and her present. But that does not mean that only the future counts for the planning agent. One of the attractions of the planning conception is its distinctive perception of the past and the present of the agent. Tellingly Rawls believes that a person who leads her life according to a rational plan will never have to regret her past (421–422). Of course, every human agent will make mistakes. That is the price of not being an ideal observer or adviser with unlimited information and perfect rationality. But a rational agent will not have to blame herself for things which turned out differently than expected. She can stand by her past decisions if she can say to herself that she did everything 'to the best of her knowledge', i.e. in compliance with the best reasons subjectively available to her at the time of choosing. In this way the planning agent can not only appropriate her future but also her past. Moreover, the past can be integrated into a story of the agent's life that receives its meaning from the chain of diachronically interlocking reasons for action.

With respect to the third dimension of biographical time the planning agent will see her present as the extended situation of her decisions and planning. It is here and now that the agent has to decide what to do and which intentions and plans she will be pursuing. That is not a trivial point. A planning agent will focus all her attention on the situation at hand in order to make the best out of her predicament. A successfully planning person will not be distracted and will not be tempted to procrastinate on important choices. She is not wavering and not plagued either by ambivalence or by indifference.⁸ Or to put it differently: the planning agent will identify with her present; in this way she will be one with herself, a synchronically unified person.

The picture painted thus far delivers both an attractive account of the possible temporality of human life and an appealing view of the good life. Someone who is able to inhabit her future, past and present in such a manner that she can agree with all three temporal dimensions of her life seems to fare well and to live a meaningful life, at least if she is also lucky enough to enjoy living in more or less favourable circumstances.

⁸ According to Harry Frankfurt, ambivalence and indifference are the main threats to the unity of the self and to leading a good life. In Frankfurt these threats can be overcome through caring about something (cf. Frankfurt 1999). Caring about and planning are to be distinguished. It would be worth exploring their differences.

3 Limits and Drawbacks of the Planning Conception

The attractions of the planning conception help to explain that, apart from having its adherents in philosophy, it has also left deep traces in today's culture more generally. However, a closer look reveals severe limitations and drawbacks of the planning conception that may well eclipse its advantages.

Plans and planning undeniably play an important role in human life. Especially in modern life people face countless needs for intra- and interpersonal coordination which cannot be managed without a considerable amount of planning. A life without any planning is probably not only today almost unimaginable. But the planning conception of the future, as I understand it, does not simply want to shed light on an important ability and praxis of human life. Bratman comes at least close to seeing planning as the central competence of human beings. According to him we are basically just that: "planning agents". And for Rawls plans are more than suitable means to realize goals we care about. The idea of a plan of life is the linchpin of his theory of the good for a person. It is this centrality of plans for our self-understanding and for a good life that seems to be highly questionable.⁹

A first point of criticism draws attention to the social conditions of planning. The only example that Rawls gives for a life plan concerns the choice of a profession or occupation (413). But it is obvious that the successful pursuit of a professional career depends on a complex social system. Such a system defines, for instance, professional roles with its attending duties and rights, provides the necessary opportunities and security for training and working in a job, and forms the background of myriad rules and customs we have to take for granted before we can even think of choosing a profession. Rawls, of course, knows of these social conditions of plans; his whole theory of justice presupposes a complex society as a system of cooperation and a "social union of social unions" (§ 79). Still, it is worth remembering the fact of the social embeddedness of our plans as an antidote against overblown ideas of individual sovereignty. We are at most co-authors of our life (cf. MacIntyre 1981: 213). The claim that 'every man is the architect of his own fortune' is an illusion. But social stability and social institutions do not only enable personal planning. They have also the function to relieve the pressure of excessive planning. In a "well-ordered society" people can take for granted most of their everyday life; they don't have to plan because they can rely on habitual routines that shape their usual activities. Planning is thus both a privilege and a burden.

If we focus on the individual level of making plans we will have to bear in mind a further limitation which has its roots in the temporality of human life, and more specifically, in its past. As we have seen, Rawls believes that a rationally planned life promises a past that we don't have to regret. We can always look back and assure ourselves that we did everything for at least subjectively good reasons. Yet that is a rationalistic fantasy. It ignores that we are born into a life that we have never chosen. We are not *causa sui*, creators of ourselves. We are always already in the thick of a confusingly intricate life. And that affects the kind of

⁹ An anonymous reviewer urged me to strictly separate plans, even long-term plans, on the one hand and the idea of a life plan on the other hand. To my mind, this distinction is not a very sharp one. Rawls' only example for a life plan is the choice of a profession. Other examples might be the decision to start a family or to convert to a different religion. However, all these decisions relate to distinct spheres of one's life. One can be a good teacher, but a bad husband and father. The target of my critique is a life consumed by plans. Though I don't deny the importance of plans in our lives I question our self-understanding as *essentially* being planning agents. This self-understanding finds its most paradigmatic expression in the idea of a life plan but it is not confined to this idea.

rationality on which we can draw. In the end our reasons are grounded on a shifting base that we cannot justify and give reasons for. We live against a backdrop, given with the social and natural circumstances of our life, that we can contest in all its components, but cannot question as a whole. Every critical reasoning has its own presuppositions, a sort of blind spot, that cannot be the object of this very reasoning. We therefore have to live with a past that is in essential respects inscrutable and that can be a source both of tragedy and of unexpected happiness. Moreover, we cannot deny any ethical responsibility for those parts of our past that are beyond our control. On the contrary, we have to accept all sorts of contingencies as part of our lives. As we cannot externalize all of our life beyond the tiny bit that we have actively chosen we can never be sure that we won't have reason for regret and self-reproach. Apart from our constitutive inability to justify everything we do there is a more trivial, yet nevertheless important reason for the limits of justifiability that also has its roots in our temporality: As finite beings we just do not have enough time to question everything.

But the planning conception lacks not only the right understanding of the biographical and collective past. It also distorts the view of our future. Paradigmatically, planning means setting ends for the nearer or more distant future in a present situation, relying on the knowledge and experience gathered in the past. That leads to a conception of the future that tends to exclude or make unthinkable a radically new and unexpected future. Admittedly, both Bratman and Rawls leave enough leeway for adjusting plans to unplanned events and developments. Especially our plans for the distant future will lack precision, and a life plan is not thought of as a blueprint for the whole of life. That notwithstanding, plans are made to fence in the future. The inability to conceive of a future radically beyond all expectations may explain why Rawls considers even the "limit decision to have no plan at all, to let things come as they may", as a theoretical example of "a plan that may or may not be rational" (413). This comes close to the paradoxical attempt to make the unexpected part of one's plans. You know you cannot plan everything but you then try to build this knowledge into your plans in such a way that the unexpected appears foreseeable all the same. This way of thinking expresses a desire to control the future as far as possible. I believe that this stance on leading a life hampers the cultivation of a more laid-back attitude of openness to an unforeseeable future which can be of great importance for leading a good life. From a different angle I come back to this point when discussing the form the present takes from the perspective of the planning conception.

There are two additional aspects of the tendency of the planning conception to underrate the radical openness of the future. The first is a consequence of the teleological nature of plans. When we plan, we strive to achieve certain ends. These ends are ends also in the sense of endpoints. To achieve an end terminates our striving. If we then take this understanding of plans as a model of leading a life we almost inevitably fall prey to a false appearance of a completable future. As long as we live, there is always something left to do. Admittedly, the planning conception can try to capture the ever-changing character of life. But the most likely way to incorporate the unsealed nature of life into the planning conception will lead to the proliferation of ends. Once you have achieved an end you will need a new goal to give purpose to your life. That was Hobbes' recipe for a good life:

"Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is that the object of man's desire is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time, but to assure forever the way of

his future desire. [...] I put for a general inclination of all man-kind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.” (Hobbes 1994: 57–58).

In hindsight Hobbes’ advice looks rather like a blueprint for burn-out than a way to happiness.¹⁰

The second aspect that the planning conception tends to disregard is the transformative power of living. The planning agent tries to shape her future according to her present preferences or to preferences that she thinks she is likely to develop in the future. Despite the flexibility of plans for adjustments to unpredicted events that I have already mentioned, the planning conception operates with a basically static view of the planning agent. Rawls, for instance, presupposes a given set of aims when he conceptualises a plan of life as a coherent order of the most important aims of the person. Yet in a course of a life not only the circumstances of living will change; the subject herself will necessarily undergo deep changes that she cannot forecast. This is an essential feature of the temporality of human life, and it presents a challenge for those trying to live a good life to not lose track of themselves while becoming transformed through new experiences. The planning conception assumes that plans are the best tool for creating a diachronic unity that prevents a fragmentation of the self which regularly causes suffering. But overemphasizing this method suffocates the self-transformative dynamics of living. In the next section I will argue that there is a better way of achieving a kind of personal unity.

Before turning to an alternative, we should pay attention to what becomes of the third dimension of biographical time, i.e. of the present. In his convincing critique of the idea of a life plan Charles Larmore has beautifully remarked that.

“[b]eing surprised by a good of which we had no inkling is itself an invaluable element of what makes life worth living. Our lives would be the poorer if our happiness unfolded perfectly according to a plan.” (Larmore 2008: 252)¹¹

Larmore’s observation leads to an understanding of the present of our life that eludes the planning conception. For a planning agent the present is the place where she has to take decisions and make her plans. Conceived of in this way, the present is completely in the service of the planned future. The thoughts of the planning agent are always ahead of her present predicament. Consequently, she cannot stay in the present or dwell upon it. She is therefore in danger to miss her present and with it a rich source of happiness. In addition, there is a second way in which the planning conception inspires a one-sided view of the relation between future and present. Life confronts us not only with the challenge to imagine meaningful ends to be reached in the further future. We also have to figure out how to spend our time here and now on a day-to-day basis.¹² Seen in light of this task, the pursuing of ends can reverse the relation between using means and aiming at ends, and with it, the relation between present and future. Given the need to figure out how to spend our time here and now, pursuing ends can turn into a means of spending time (Frankfurt 1999b), and the future comes to serve the present.

¹⁰ For a similar observation cf. Setiya (2017): 127–129, 132–139. Setiya describes succinctly “the self-subversion of the project-driven life” (138). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to Setiya’s book.

¹¹ Cf. Emerson’s nice saying: “Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping, if it were not.” (quoted in: Heyd/Miller 2010: 7).

¹² This is a main theme of Calhoun (2018): esp. 13–18.

4 The Temporality of ways of Being

The critique of the planning conception of the future and of life more generally amounts to a double claim: that the planning conception distorts the temporality of human life and that it thereby clouds the prospects for a good life. But even if this critique is on the right track it cannot deliver by itself a viable alternative to the planning conception. Those who still find the planning conception attractive may retreat to the more modest claim that planning is not all in life but that life is almost nothing without planning. One could then try to strike a compromise and suggest a way of living that combines planning with other attitudes to the future and to one's own life. Sometimes we will need careful planning; sometimes we should accept that things turn out differently than we could have imagined. We need, or so one could argue, a mixture of active rational planning and a more open and perhaps more passive stance towards the twists and turns of life.¹³ We should seek a middle way between the life of a drifter who has no overarching purpose in life and the frantic planner whose life lacks the joys of unforeseeable experiences and pleasant surprises. There is certainly some truth in such pragmatic advice. It is, however, philosophically unsatisfactory because it does not explain sufficiently the intuition that our life is, if all things go well, a temporal unity and not a bunch of unconnected elements.

Interestingly, one can detect a clue to an alternative approach in Rawls. Near the end of *A Theory of Justice* we read:

“We should not attempt to give form to our life by first looking to the good independently defined. It is not our aims that primarily reveal our nature but rather the principles that we would acknowledge to govern the background conditions under which these aims are to be formed and the manner in which they are pursued. For the self is prior to the ends which are affirmed by it [...]” (560).

Rawls takes this suggestion as the starting point of his reversal of the dependence of the ‘right’ on the ‘good’ that is distinctive of utilitarianism. Yet in my view, it is fruitful to explore Rawls’ idea in a different direction. Instead of sticking to moral principles we may better speak more generally of how we understand ourselves as persons.¹⁴ We can then gain the insight from Rawls that this self-understanding and its manifestation in distinct ‘ways of being’ rather than aims and plans show who we are.¹⁵ The term ‘ways of being’ is admittedly elusive. It is meant to cover character-traits like virtues and vices as well as the ways how we fulfil social roles like being a mother or being a teacher and other styles of living like

¹³ This seems to be the view with which Charles Larmore wants to replace Rawls’ idea of a life plan: “The good life is a life that is not just led but met with as well, a life that is both self-directed and shaped from without. [...] Our lives go well, not only when we achieve the good we plan for, but also when unlooked for goods happen to befall us.” (248) “[...] we live well when we are not simply active, but passive too.” (250).

¹⁴ In fairness to Bratman I should mention that his conception of “policies” bears similarities to one’s self-understanding of being a certain kind of person. Policies guide our plans and bridge the gap between more or less specific plans and general ideas of how to live (Bratman 2007a: 6). Still, Bratman characterizes “policies” and “self-policies” as “plan-type attitudes” (Bratman 2007c: 208) and he believes that we can choose policies as we can decide to follow a plan. He adheres to a model of policy-formation that is still too much driven by a rationalistic ideal of autonomy which I am contesting. I thank an anonymous reviewer for asking me to comment on Bratman’s concept of policies.

¹⁵ When introducing the idea of a plan of life Rawls refers to Royce for whom “an individual says who he is by describing his purposes and causes, what he intends to do in his life” (408). But as the quote by Rawls makes clear, for Rawls himself it is moral principles that show who someone is, not “purposes” in the sense of ends aimed at in planning.

being a lover of operas or being a vegetarian. I think that inhabiting these ‘ways of being’ is more important for living a good life (also and particular for oneself) than pursuing more or less successful plans. A deeper understanding of the temporal implications of ways of being may help to support this claim.

There are two different, though overlapping, perspectives from which these implications can be unearthed. The first perspective focuses on the formation of ways of being, the second perspective concentrates on the exercise of ways of being. In order to keep things as simple as possible I will stick to the example of virtues like being just or being generous. Other examples would probably require some modifications in my argument without, hopefully, making its core dubious.

How do we become just or generous people? A defender of the planning conception might be tempted to conceive virtues as just a particular class of possible goals that can only be achieved through careful planning. But the cultivation of virtues follows a different logic. First, becoming a just and generous human being is a gradual process with no definite beginning. Though becoming a virtuous person is something you do – it does not just happen to you – it does not require a decision undertaken at a specific point in time as it is the case with planning. The formation of virtues is a process of continuous habituation and incrementally adjusting one’s way of seeing the world. Whereas planning is split in the three relatively distinct phases of deliberation, decision and putting into practice, becoming a just or generous person is normally a step by step and often only half-conscious transition from a person lacking the virtues to a person embodying them.

Second and related, becoming a virtuous person is not a movement that comes to a natural end, having arrived at a given place. Becoming just or generous is an ongoing activity. Even a person who has already become virtuous will permanently be confronted with new situations that will always make fresh demands on her judgments, emotions and actions. The person will thereby refine her ethical attitudes. Therefore, one cannot draw a sharp line between becoming and being virtuous. The process of becoming virtuous cannot be separated from being virtuous because there is no moment, perhaps with the exception of sudden conversions, where you cease to be on the route of becoming virtuous and finally reach the new state. In contrast planning is similar to the production of an artefact; it is like a ladder that can be thrown away once the goal is achieved.

This observation leads to a third temporal difference between planning and becoming virtuous. As we saw, the planning conception works with a more or less static view of the self. The planning agent tries to order her already existing or sufficiently predictable preferences and schedules her activities according to this order. But becoming a just or generous person is a deeply self-transformative process.¹⁶ What it is to be an ethically good person is not something one can imagine before one has become that person. It requires the formation of new habits – a process which takes its own time –, and these habits and dispositions necessarily transform who one is because they “reveal our nature”. In this respect developing a virtue differs significantly from seeking the best means to achieve an already determined end.¹⁷ I think that all three temporal particularities of becoming virtuous are also true for other ways of being like being a good teacher or being a lover and connoisseur of operas.

¹⁶ On the particularities of self-transformative processes and experiences cf. Paul (2014) and esp. Callard (2018).

¹⁷ That does not mean that becoming a good person has to be a blind process that unfolds behind the back of the person. But it requires a substantive trust, especially in other people who might serve as role models.

But it might be different with ways of being like being a vegetarian because you can decide, from one day to the other, to become a vegetarian, though most people have to struggle to stick to their decision.

The second perspective on the temporal implications of virtues (and arguably other ways of being) considers these attitudes as already formed and cultivated. I have just tacitly drawn on the Aristotelian antithesis between production (*poiesis*) and praxis (*praxis*).¹⁸ Planning can be interpreted as a kind of production. It is a process heading towards an end that is not already realized and that can be, once achieved, detached from the process of planning itself. Its temporality is clearly future orientated; the future has priority over past and present. In contrast, the actualization of virtues are instantiations of Aristotelian ‘*praxeis*’. They are activities that have their end in themselves. They are not aimed at an end that is not yet realized. Rather they are abilities to do the right thing at the occasion at hand. In temporal terms this suggests a priority of the present over past and future. That does not mean that, say, a just person will not care about the past or the future. On the contrary, she will acknowledge her responsibility for what happened in the past and for what might happen in the future. But these responsibilities are integral constituents of her present self-understanding. They are parts of her ‘way of being’. It is like being a good teacher: A good teacher is a good teacher every day, but he will, of course, be concerned about the future of his pupils and admit that he made mistakes in the past.

Coming back to the quote from Rawls, we can now see how a possibility emerges that allows us to integrate different ways of dealing with time and temporality and that promises to be more than the pure summation of separate components. Once we have established the central importance of ways of being like being just or generous to who we are and to what kind of life we live, we can incorporate what remains true of the planning conception. As I have admitted above, at least in modern societies a certain amount of planning is indispensable for leading a good life. But how we plan and which plans we are pursuing will itself depend on our self-understanding as persons or on our ethical outlook, broadly speaking. This offers a prospect of relaxing the one-sided future orientation of planning in favour of a life that emphasizes the challenges of the present. The attractions of the planning conception stem in part from the picture of the unity of the self and the idea of being one with one’s time it has to offer. But these ideas square better with an approach that focuses on ways of being. Without such ways, a planning agent is never fully one with herself.¹⁹ She is always ahead of herself, never living in the here and now. An ethically good person or someone with a clear understanding of what kind of person she is and wants to be fares better in this respect. Whether or not that is enough for leading a good life is a matter of further discussion. It will depend on an analysis not only of the form but also of the content of ways of being. My examples of being just and being generous were placeholders. But I think that even a more substantive account of ways of being and their impact on a good life will have to keep an eye on the temporalities of possible contents of ways of being. Ways of being are distinctive ways of relating to others, to oneself and to the world. Yet these relations have their own temporal implications, or so one would have to argue.

¹⁸ Aristotle 1979: 1140a1-23.

¹⁹ This insight is in line with the claim of virtue ethicists since Aristotle that ethical attitudes respectively virtues are dispositions that secure the unity of the self. We need virtues to be befriended with ourselves, as Aristotle remarks rather metaphorically (Aristotle 1979: 1168b9-10).

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