

Means and Ends

Living a Good Life

Class 2

Spring 2025

Wesleyan University

Adapted from a lecture by Prof. Steven Horst

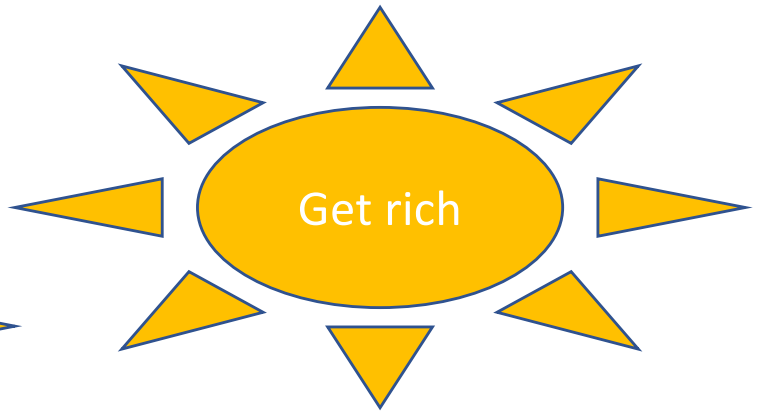
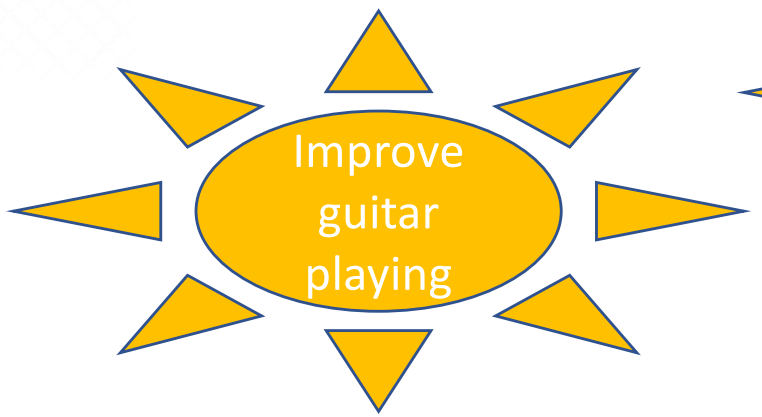
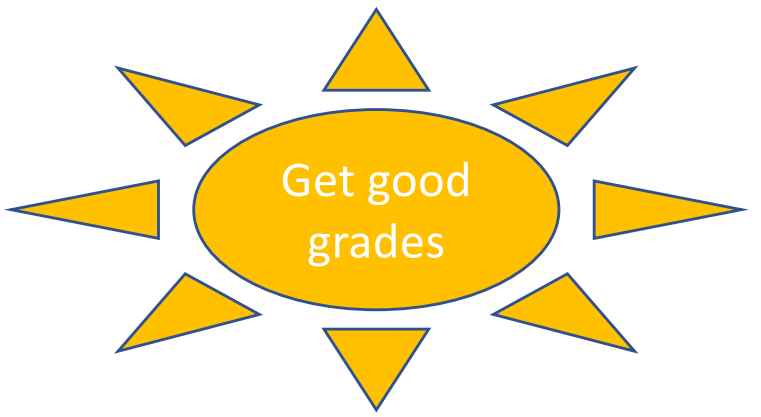
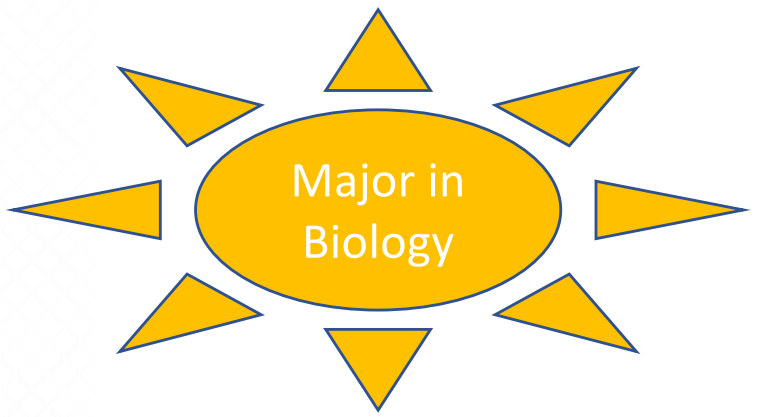
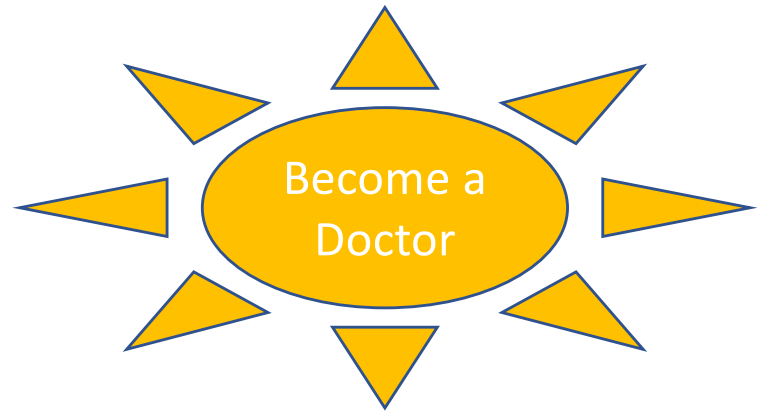
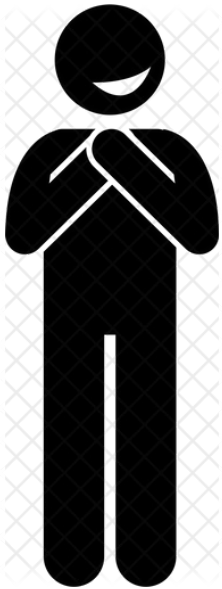
Beyond Inventory

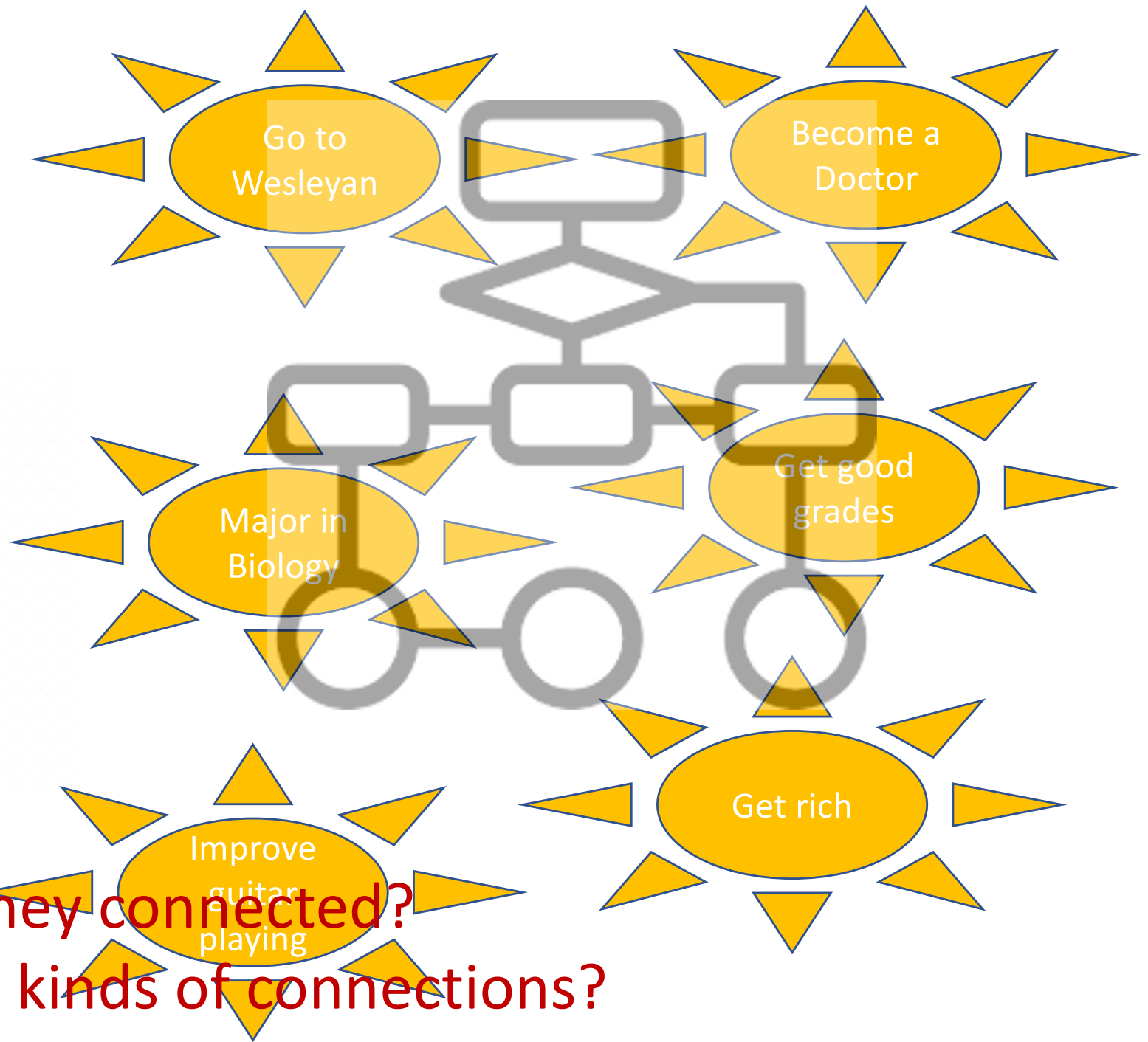
- **First exercise: Inventory of Desires**
 - First exercise in self-examination.
 - “First” not only in time, but the beginning of a series of further exercises that build on it.
 - Encouraged to write down reflections, questions that occur as you do these exercises for later synthesis
- **Today:** some ways to take it further
 - **Mapping** relations between desires
 - **Practical/Instrumental reasoning** – applying explicit reasoning to your desires and how to pursue them

Your Inventory of Desires



- Go to Wesleyan
- Become a doctor
- Make lifelong friends
- Major in Biology
- Get good grades
- Be a starting point guard
- Become rich
- Become famous
- Find a spouse who is a good match
- Have children
- Lead a low-stress life





Are they connected?
What kinds of connections?



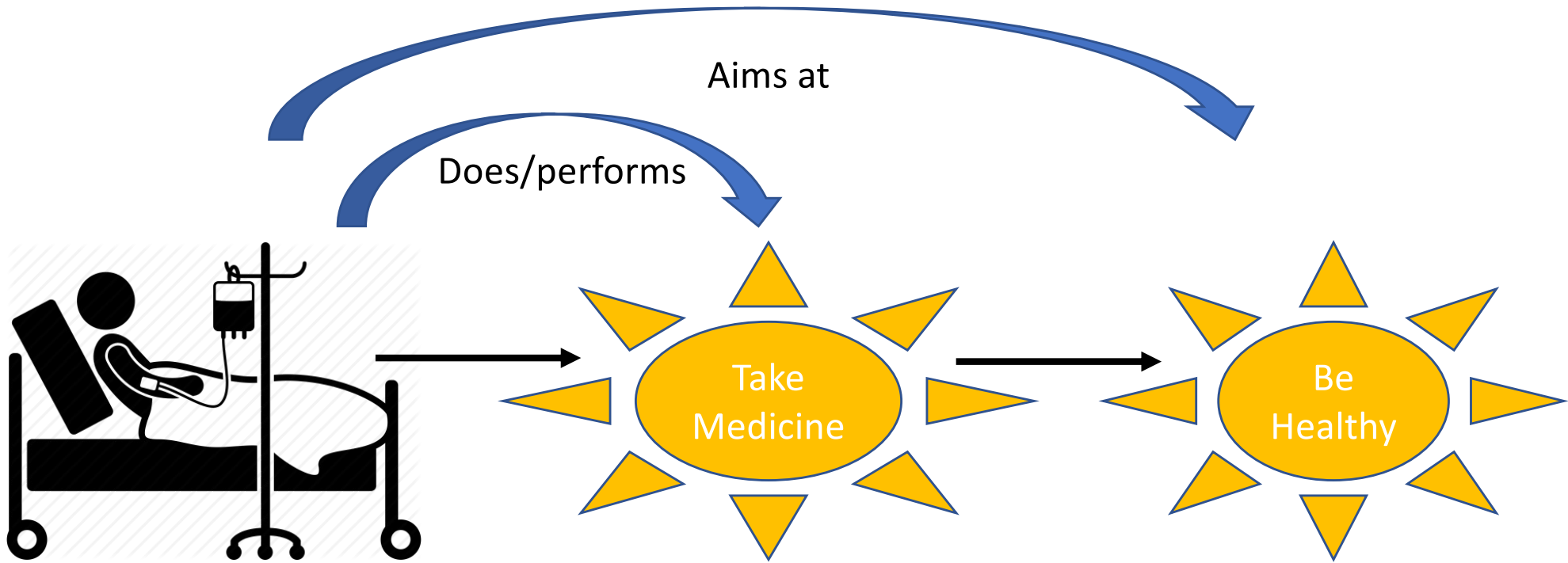
Analyses of Desire
and Action in Plato
and Aristotle

Plato, *Gorgias* 467c-468c

SOCRATES:

“Do you think that when people do something, they want the thing they’re doing at the time, or the thing for the sake of which they do what they’re doing? Do you think that people who take medicines prescribed by their doctors, for instance, want what they’re doing, the act of taking the medicine, with all its discomfort, or do they want to be healthy, the thing for the sake of which they’re taking it?

... we want, not those things that we do for the sake of something, but that thing for the sake of which we do them.”



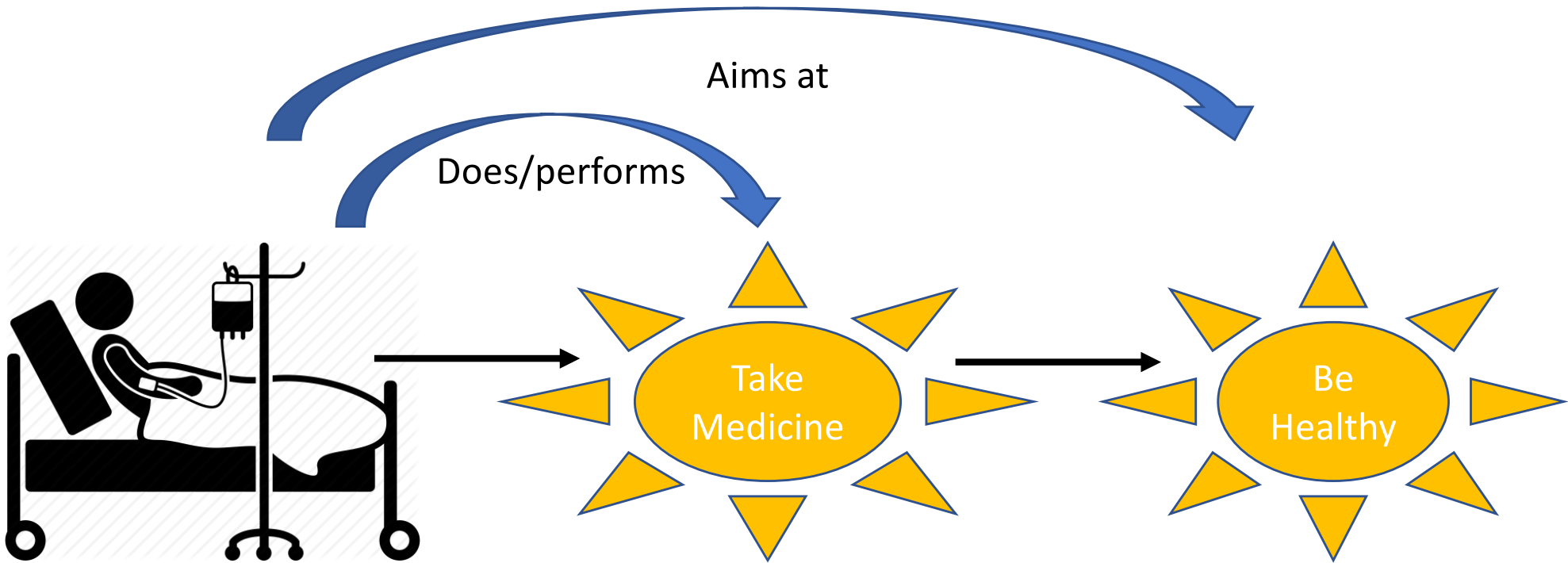
Action

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1-2

Means and Ends

“Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim.... the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth.”

- Aristotle’s saying that all of our actions and pursuits are for the sake of some end or goal (and typically something we see as beneficial to achieve)

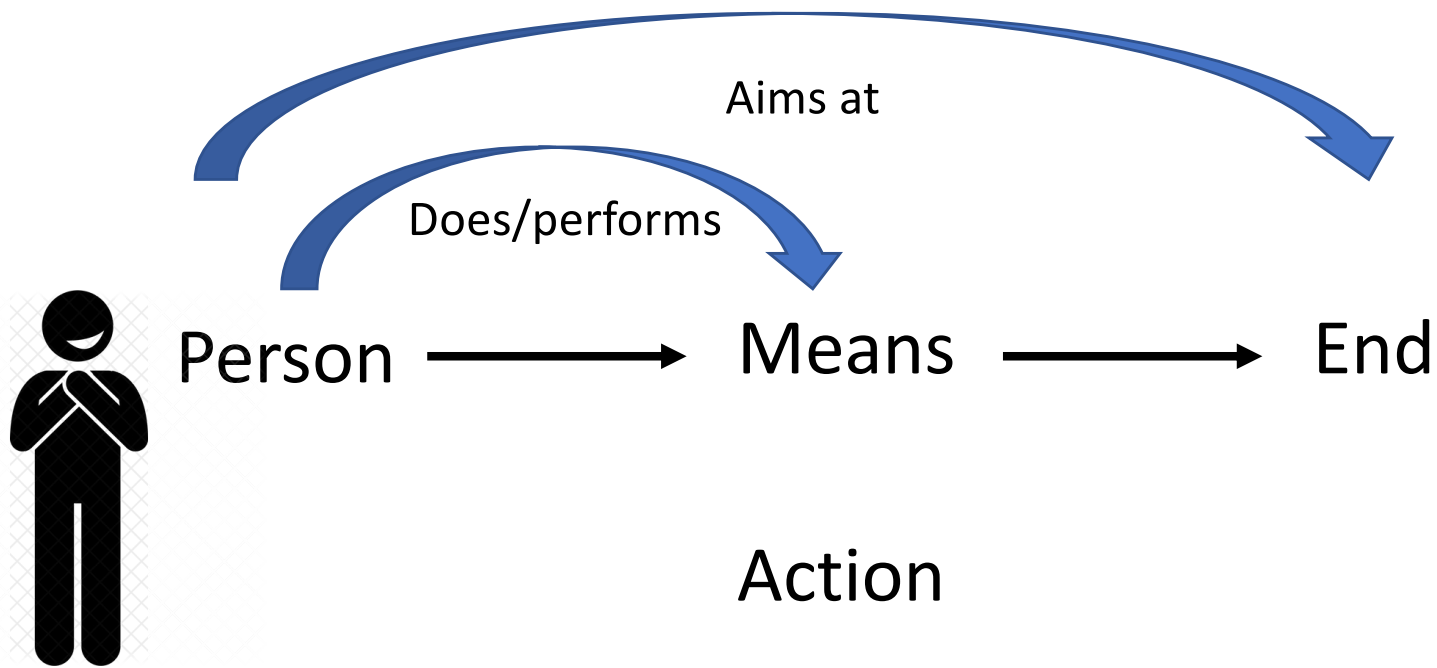


Action

Means

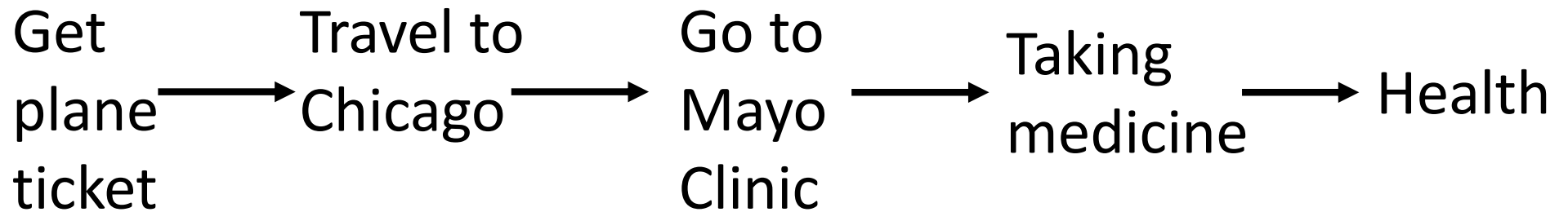
End

Means/Ends

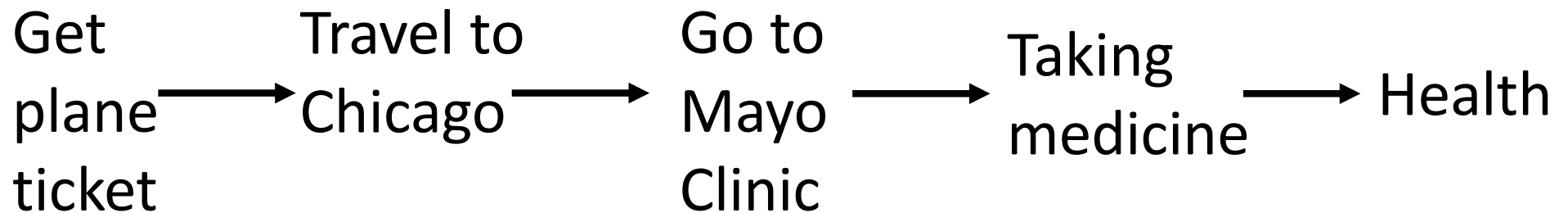


“Instrumental Reasoning”

Can be a chain of intermediate means...



Can be a chain of intermediate means...



What do we ultimately want? — the end/goal
But do we also want all of the means to the end?
(even if only because they are means to the end?)

Plato *Republic*, Book II 357a-358a

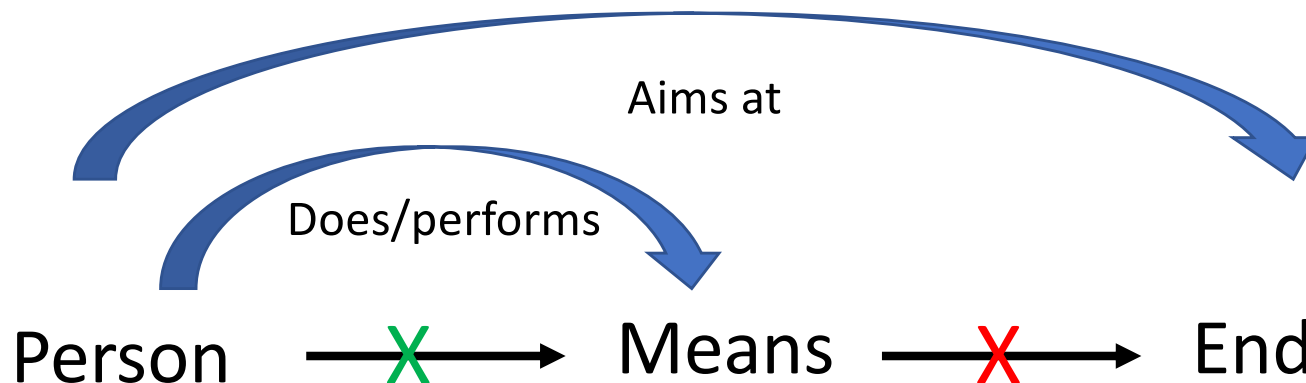
- **Glaucon:** ..Tell me, do you think there is a kind of **good** we welcome, **not because we desire what comes from it, but because we welcome it for its own sake** -- joy, for example, and all the harmless pleasures that **have no results beyond the joy of having them?**
- **Socrates:** Certainly, I think there are such things.
- **Glaucon:** And is there a kind of **good we like for its own sake and also for the sake of what comes from it** — knowing, for example, and seeing and being healthy? We welcome such things, I suppose, on both counts.
- **Socrates:** Yes.
- **Glaucon:** And do you also see a third kind of good, such as physical training, medical treatment when sick, medicine itself, and the other ways of making money? We'd say that these **are onerous, but beneficial to us, and we wouldn't choose them for their own sakes, but for the sake of the rewards and other things that come from them.**

Things desired:

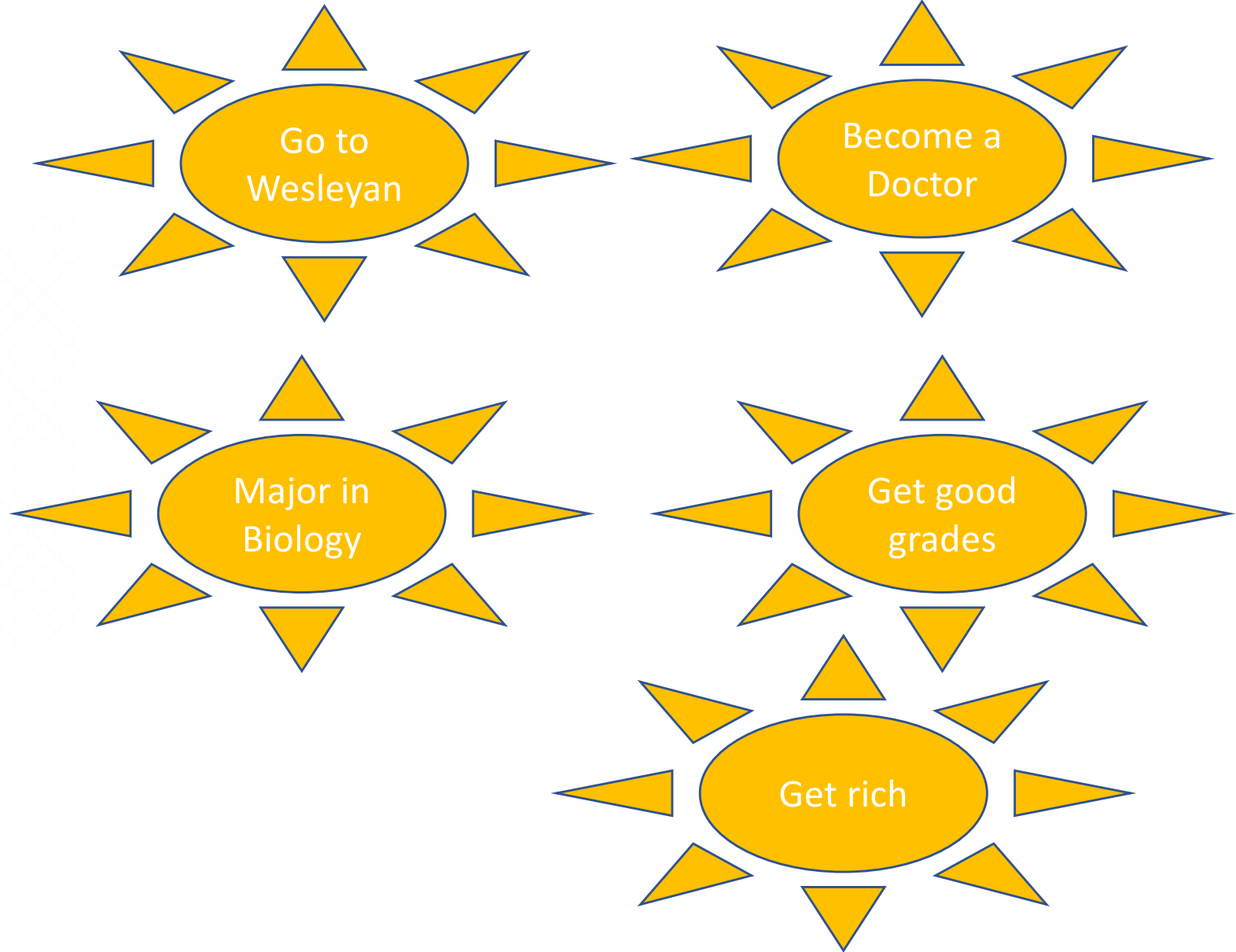
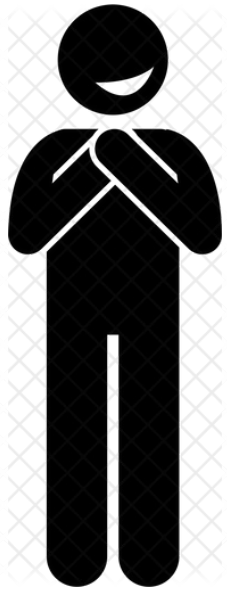
1. **Only for their own sake, not for something further**
2. **For their own sake and for something further**
3. **Only for something further that comes of them, not for their own sakes**

Practical/Instrumental Reasoning

- Two ways we might fail to achieve what we aim at
 - Pick the wrong means – means do not lead to that end
 - Unable to do what we choose as means (e.g., can't get the medicine, can't get into medical school)
- Frames crucial questions: what do you need in order to
 - Pick right means?
 - Successfully perform the means/action?

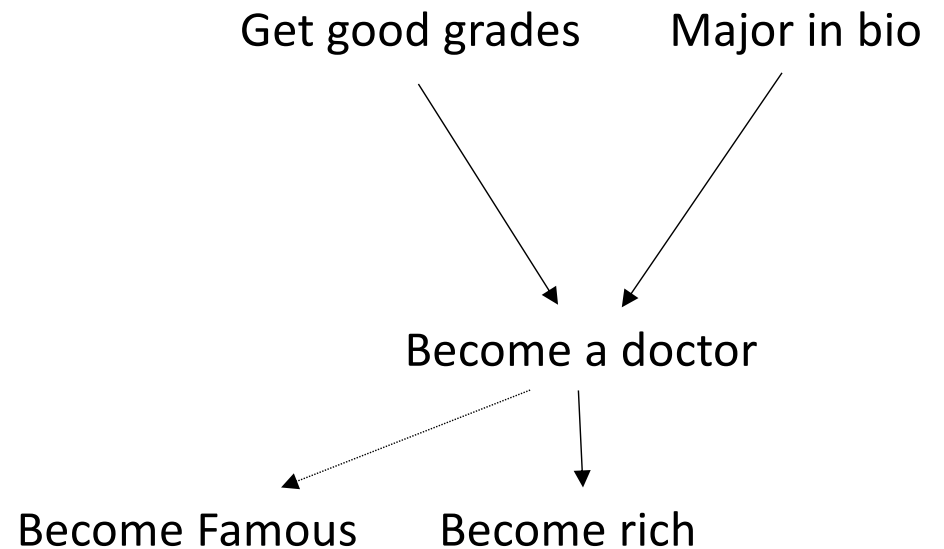


Are YOUR desires linked this way?



Applying to Desires

- Go to Wesleyan
- Become a doctor
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- Get good grades
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- Find a spouse who is a good match
- Have children
- Lead a low-stress life

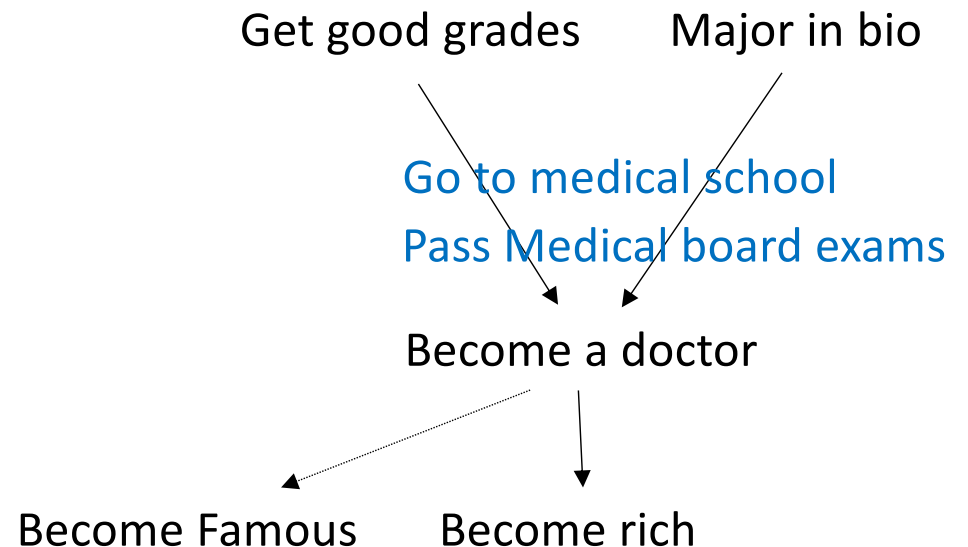


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Might notice that there are intermediate steps that you did not list:

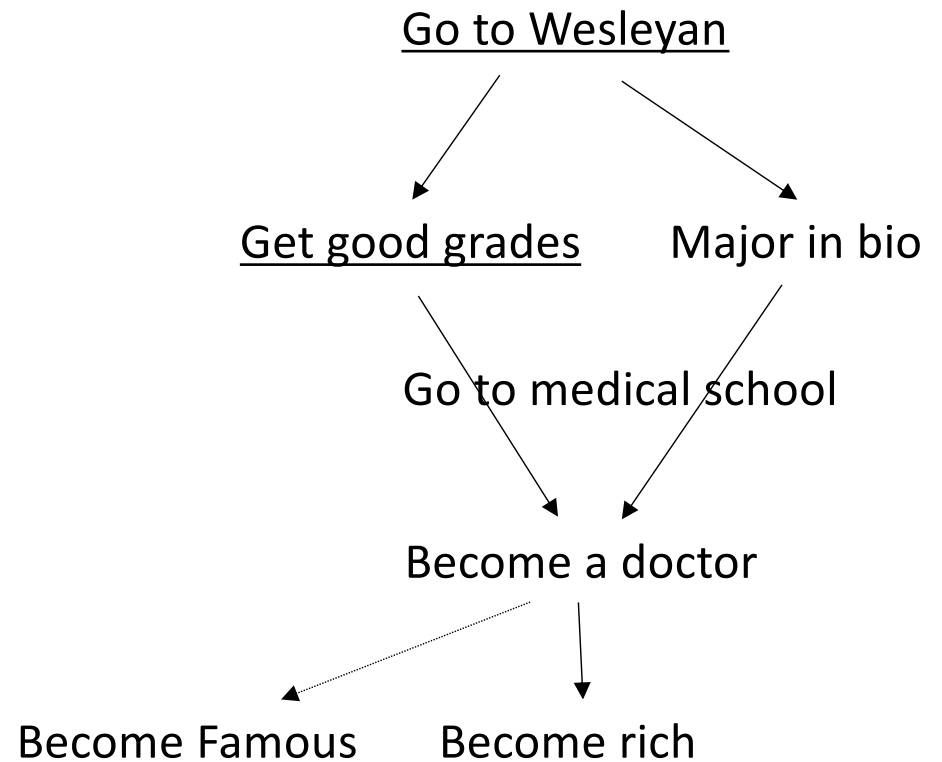
- Things you need to do to achieve your ends
- Do you need to form *desires* to do them as well in order to bring this about?



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Some things that are means to an end might also be things you want for their own sake



Applying to Desires

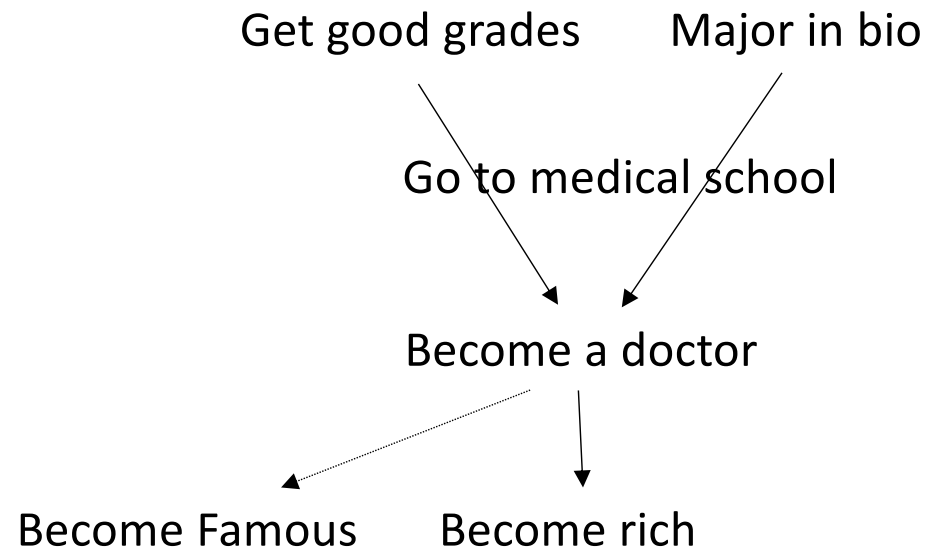
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Exercise – Part 2

Identify places where there are gaps in the chain and fill them in – what would you need to try to do in order to get the long-term goals accomplished?

Underline things that you desire in their own right.



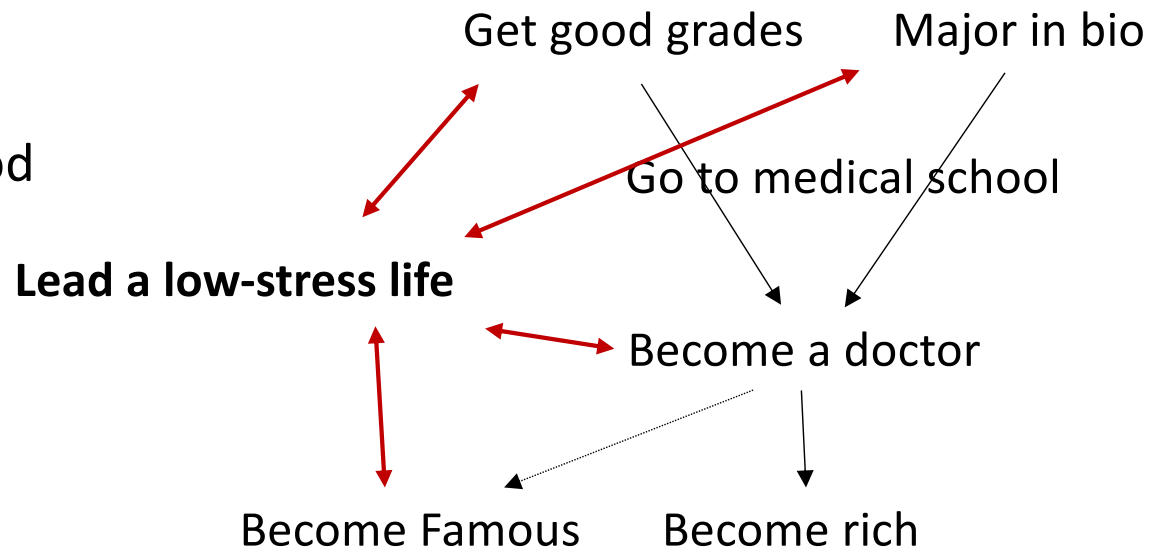
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Also potentially other kinds of relationships that are not means-ends:

Some things might be in conflict with other things – mutually incompatible or at least in tension.

(Perhaps map these tensions with a different kind of arrow)



Homework – Expand your Desire Maps

- Trace more means/ends connections
- Think about whether there are things that weren't on your list that you'd need to do to get to your intended ends, and insert them (perhaps noting their status in a particular way, like a different color). Do you need to learn to want those in order to get to your goals?
- Note which things you would want *only* as means to an end. (What further reflections might this inspire?)
- Look for pairs of items that are in conflict with one another and draw a different kind of link between them. Are they truly *incompatible* – you can't have both? Or is it simply harder to have both, so that you have additional thinking to do about how to get both?