

# A Precious and Significant Individual Life

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**Abstract-** Interchangeably the different determinants of the value and meaning of an artwork are basically the same as for an individual life. In both the value and meaning are ultimately determined by the parts, in their distinctiveness and in their composition, as well as, respectively, the subjective contribution of the person whose life it is and whosoever observes the artwork. However, a person and his life are inextricably correlated in a way an observer and an artwork are not. We should learn watchfulness from the fact that to tinker with the parts and configuration of an artwork will likely wipe out its value and meaning and apply that to the lives of individuals, and fully respect the distinctiveness and the subjectivity of evaluation involved. We should shun all but the idea of universal prescriptions for the good-life for individuals, just as we would do so in the case of a good artwork.

**Keywords** - Precious, Significant, Individual, Life.

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**A Life and an Artwork-** There is a very close and enlightening analogy that may be drawn between what makes a work of art quite priceless and important, and what makes a life precious and significant. The main purpose here is not to demonstrate how a life is like a work of art, but rather to use the way we extrapolate an artwork as a way of understanding what a life is. Note, the subject here is *a* life, not life in general as valuable and meaningful, whatever that may signify. Part of the contention indeed is that the latter may make no sense, and value can and should only be affixed to the life as it is for an individual. The similarity is found in the meaning and value of an artwork or a life being resolved by the particularity of its parts and their configuration, along with, respectively, the receptivity of the observer of the artwork and the character of the person whose life it is. This clearly suggests two things. Firstly, that to expect there to be a universal idea of what a precious and significant, let alone good, life is a mistake, just as it would be in the case of a work of art. Secondly, that we interfere with the parts and configuration of an individual life in acute danger of destroying its value and meaning for the person whose life it is, just as we are very likely to wipe out the value and meaning of a work of art should we meddle with its parts and their configuration. Whether the interfering is well meaning or not, makes no difference. Oddly, whereas we agree to this as being comparatively obvious in the case of an artwork, where the genuineness and veracity of the work is something most take for granted as virtually sacred, it is often abandoned or actively rejected in the case of an individual's life. The thought that people should be geared up to change aspects of their lives, and that this will have comparatively little detrimental effect, or that, likewise, they should be made to conform to some life that is a believed obvious improvement, is remarkably extensive. Yet, we should if anything be more hesitant to make such changes for people. For in the case of a person, the person he is (his personality) and the life that is his are inextricably correlated and equally constructed. To ask someone to alter what might seem to others an unimportant part of his life may be tantamount to asking him to alter his individuality, his very nature.

In certain respects it is not a unique thought to liken a person's life to a work of art, or indeed to go further and to champion that the example of a work of art, the way it is formed and considered, should be equipped as the way

one should think about a life.<sup>1</sup> One reason is to suggest that one should not just let things happen to one, but that one should vigorously construct and shape one's life. Further, it may be said that there is emancipation in seeing that one is to a substantial degree free to make of one's life what one chooses, and need not be bound by unintentional circumstances and expectations. There is also the thought that the very act of shaping one's life as one proceeds through it, perhaps forming it into some kind of logical narrative and recognisable whole, increases the value of and satisfaction derived from that life; you make your life your own, and like a work of art it is something that may be appreciated in itself as an commendable creation.

I shall not here explain on or argue with any of these contentions. My concern is with another issue. This is a significant way in which life may rightly be likened to a work of art, such that manifestation on the similarity lights up something that is necessary to the way a person comes to deem his life valuable and meaningful. This is important because it has deep and wide consequences for what should be necessitated in considering what is a valuable or meaningful life, a view that resists any kind of blueprint for what comprises the valuable and meaningful life in general, and that should give us very serious pause for thought before we try to turn any inception of the valuable and meaningful life in a universal sense into enforced policies, perhaps through state power. In short, taking into account the way in which a life is meaningful and valuable to individuals should deeply affect the way we treat people.

To make the case for taking seriously judging the worth and meaning of a life in the way one might judge the value and meaning of a work of art, one has to look at the determinants of the latter. One then has to see that the similar kind of considerations should be applied to a life. An indispensable determinant of the value and meaning of a work of art is the *individuality* of the parts and their arrangements, perhaps indeed their exclusive configuration, the overall value and meaning of the artwork deriving from the parts being just what they are and not otherwise. We have no hope of writing out a general method or program that would generate a valuable and meaningful work of art. If we look at a painting or listen to a work of art, it is just that that part is *there* and that part is *there*, that taken together make it into the valuable and meaningful work of art that it is. The parts themselves may have little importance in isolation, and only gain it by their place. A touch of red here, a tap on the timpani there.

We can cut a bit of slack in the resolve. Some parts may go by Unattended to; some may be removed to apparently little effect. Nevertheless, it is the parts and their being put together in the way they are that robustly determines what the final work is and its value and meaning.

In the best works of art it is hard to envision anything changed without it damaging the value and meaning of the work. The parts and the whole that is created from them become in the hands of brains as though ruled by a law of nature<sup>3</sup> rather than being a constructed artifice.

**Life , Particularity and Subjectivity** - If it is the case that it may be usually agreed by a range of sensibilities that an artwork's value and meaning will most likely be dented by changing or rearranging even the smaller parts of it, then we may mirror how much more this is true of a life. For in the case of a life, there is solitary one person that actually matters in judging its value and meaning: the person whose life it is. Not only are the parts of a life specific and arranged in turn to form a particular, perhaps exclusive, configuration, as far as its value is worried it is only the assessment of the person whose life it is that really matters in shaping its value and meaning. We may cut a bit of slack here again. There may be those who love us Intensely who have a special interest in the life we have, its parts and the way They are put together, and their appraisal carries some weight. Nonetheless in the end it is not their life (undeniably the love they have for others will be an Imperative constituent of the things that make up their life and decide its value and meaning) - they do not live our life, and certainly they cannot do so

Eventually all that matters is what the person whose life it is thinks about the portions that make up his life and how they are put together when it emanates to shaping the value and meaning of that life. If loved ones have only a Limited right to apt the value and meaning of a life, those who Distinguishes us less well, or not at all, may be seen to have even less right to apt what might come to encompass the portions that make up our life and shape them, and they will have even very less understanding of that life.

Most people suppose that arresting and imposing the constituent parts that make up their life on another individual, and expecting them to add up to a precious

and meaningful life for that individual, highly improbable and perhaps even

Anathema. Yet, people feel justified in talking in the abstract about the Elements of a good-life - a valuable and meaningful one - maybe *enroute* to guiding public policy on the matter, which may be coercive – and in so doing they may expect what is imposed or provided to improve the value and meaning of the lives of individuals.

Normal ongoing life is no different in this respect from acute cases: it is things being just thus-and-so in all their individuality and as they are sequenced that makes the life precious and meaningful for an individual, and which forms a breakable whole that is his valuable and meaningful life. The importance of this and what is at stake is undoubtedly indicated by its being uncontentious that a life devoid of value and meaning is an unbearable one.

A problem is that it is hard to know which comes first, the individual receptivity that judges the life it has as valuable and meaningful, or the constituents of that life that are judged precious and meaningful. Indeed to pose the matter like that is most likely foolhardy; the two are tangled and grow together interdependently; they cannot really be detached but may be so detached only abstractly in thought. It is strange to talk about the person you are on the one hand, and what it is that makes your life your life and makes it expensive and meaningful. It may be argued, therefore, that changing an aspect of someone's life may, however unimportant the change seem to others, wipe out the value and meaning of that life.

The relation between a person and his life is like to that between an artist and his artwork, but in the case of a life there is only one consumer of it, and in the case of the artist the artwork is an event in his life, not (except in exceptional circumstances) his whole life. This makes the association between the value and meaning of a life and the person whose life it is even closer than that between the value and meaning of a work of art and those who value it; in the latter case tampering with it may raze one artwork that is appreciated; in the former case you may wipe out an entire life.

It is argued here that noteworthy lessons as to how we should treat people may and should be erudite from the way an artwork comes to have its value and meaning, because these ways can be relocated to the value and meaning of the life of an individual person. We tend to see the point in the case of a creation, but miss it in the instance of a person's life; but we should try to bring it about that we do not miss it if the similarity holds, for otherwise we will find ourselves far too effortlessly riding roughshod over what makes a life valuable and meaningful for someone.

It is argued here that important lessons as to how we should treat people may and should be learnt from the system an artwork comes to have its value and meaning, because these ways can be transferred to the value and meaning of the life of an individual person. We incline to see the point in the case of an artwork, but miss it in the case of a person's life; but we should try to bring it about that we do not miss it if the resemblance holds, for otherwise we will find ourselves far too easily riding roughshod over what makes a life valuable and meaningful for someone.

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