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[Essay]

A Valuable and Meaningful Individual Life

John Shand*

Abstract

Analogously the determinants of the value and meaning of an artwork are fundamentally the same as for an individual life. In both the value and meaning are determined by the parts, in their particularity and in their configuration, as well as, respectively, the subjective contribution of the person whose life it is and whomsoever observes the artwork. However, a person and his life are inextricably linked in a way an observer and an artwork are not. We should learn caution from the fact that to tinker with the parts and configuration of an artwork will likely destroy its value and meaning and apply that to the lives of individuals, and fully respect the particularity and the subjectivity of evaluation involved. We should eschew 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.

1. A Life and an Artwork

There is a close and illuminating analogy that may be drawn between what makes a work of art valuable and meaningful, and what makes a life valuable and meaningful. The chief purpose here is not to show how a life is like a work of art, but rather to use the way we understand 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 mean. Indeed part of the argument is that the latter may make no sense, and value can and should only be attached to the life as it is for an individual. The analogy is found in the meaning and value of an artwork or a life being determined by the particularity of its parts and their configuration, along with, respectively, the sensibility of the observer of the artwork and the character of the person whose life it is. This suggests two things. Firstly, that to expect there to be a universal idea of what a valuable and meaningful, let alone good, life is is a mistake, just as it would be in the case of a work of art. Secondly, that we

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meddle with the parts and configuration of an individual life in acute peril of destroying its value and meaning for the person whose life it is, just as we are likely to destroy the value and meaning of a work of art should we tinker with its parts and their configuration. Whether the meddling is well meaning or not, makes no difference. Oddly, whereas we accept this as being relatively obvious in the case of an artwork, where the authenticity and integrity of the work is something most take for granted as virtually sacrosanct, it is often neglected or actively rejected in the case of an individual's life. The thought that people should be prepared to change aspects of their lives, and that this will have relatively little detrimental effect, or that, similarly, they should be made to conform to some life that is a supposed obvious improvement, is remarkably widespread. Yet, we should if anything be more reluctant 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 linked and mutually constructed. To ask someone to change what might seem to others an inconsequential part of his life may be tantamount to asking him to change his personality, his very nature.

In certain respects it is not an original thought to liken a person's life to a work of art, or indeed to go further and advocate that the example of a work of art, the way it is shaped and considered, should be adopted as the way one should think about a life.¹ One motive is to suggest that one should not just let things happen to one, but that one should actively construct and shape one's life. Further, it may be said that there is liberation in seeing that one is to a considerable degree free to make of one's life what one chooses, and need not be bound by accidental 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 intelligible 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 admirable creation.

I shall not here elaborate on or argue with any of these contentions. My concern is with another matter. This is an important way in which life may

¹ The idea that one may shape one's life overall as one may a work of art, is explored with great skill as part of a consideration of Nietzsche's thought, in Nehamas (1985). This is rather a different point to the one being made here about the determinants of a valuable and meaningful individual life.

rightly be likened to a work of art, such that reflection on the similarity illuminates something that is essential to the way a person comes to consider his life valuable and meaningful. This is important because it has deep and wide ramifications for what should be involved in considering what is a valuable or meaningful life, a view that opposes any kind of blueprint for what constitutes the valuable and meaningful life in general, and that should give us serious pause for thought before we try to turn any conception of the valuable and meaningful life in a universal sense into enforced policies, perhaps through state power. In short, considering 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 value 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.² One then has to see that the same kind of considerations should be applied to a life.

An essential determinant of the value and meaning of a work of art is the *particularity* of the parts and their arrangements, perhaps indeed their unique configuration, the overall value and meaning of the artwork deriving from the parts being just what they are and not otherwise. We have no expectation of writing out a general formula or program that would generate a valuable and meaningful work of art. If we look at a painting or listen to a symphony, 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 significance 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 determination. 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 strongly determines what the final work is and its value and meaning. In the best works of art it is hard to imagine 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 genius as though ruled by a law of nature³ rather than being a constructed artifice. Just as we find it

² Pioneering work on the way that the features we ascribe to a work of art - such as grace, strength, or liveliness - are grounded in, but irreducible to, the particular parts is found in, Sibley (1959) and (1965).

³ Kant (1991 [1790]), p. 168.

hard to imagine, as we stand on the earth, a stone doing anything but falling when released from our grasp, we find it hard to imagine, in the best works of art - the most valuable and meaningful - the artwork unfolding in any other way from the way it does or being formed in any other way than the way it is. What is involved in being an artist is the working and shaping - often a lengthy process of reworking and reshaping - to create something that is as good as the artist thinks it can be.

When others view the work of art, they may come to a consensus that the artist has done a good or wonderful job, and has created something of real value and significant meaning. An analysis of the work may aim to shed light on how this has been done. Some prefer not to bother with this, but instead are happy to intuit the overall effect *gestalt*; some fear that an analysis will destroy the mystery of the artwork and the way it works its magic, and distract from the value they derive from the work⁴. For others, understanding how it is done is both fascinating in itself and enhances their experience of the whole. However, this may be, both groups can agree that little could be changed about a great work of art without its value and meaning being in peril. Various people may come to agree on the value and meaning, and so a work might become generally regarded as a great one.

Some may think to dispute the claim that little could be changed about a great work of art without its value and meaning being in peril, on the grounds that artists sometimes alter their own works in minor ways but yet produce another masterpiece, or a work considered a greater masterpiece. But this does not challenge the position here because it would by analogy be akin to an individual person changing some aspect of their life and the life still being valuable and meaningful *to them* - it is they who have to decide what to do, and the part that is changed may seem to others utterly inconsequential and perhaps even incomprehensible in its significance. The peril is greatest to value and meaning when it is not the artist of genius or the individual whose life it is who makes such changes, although even they may make mistakes. It is others, even when well-meaning, armed with a general pattern for the good-life or the good work of art who pose the threat. In any case, none of this refutes the point that it is the particular parts and their particular configuration that determines the value and meaning of the whole for artworks and individual lives.

⁴ On this basis, contra-Socrates, the unexamined life may well be worth living, if it works.

2. Life, Particularity and Subjectivity

If it is the case that it may be generally agreed by a range of sensibilities that an artwork's value and meaning will most likely be damaged by changing or rearranging even the smaller parts of it, then we may reflect how much more this is true of a life. For in the case of a life, there is only one person that truly matters in judging its value and meaning: the person whose life it is. Not only are the parts of a life particular and arranged in turn to form a particular, perhaps unique, configuration, as far as its value is concerned it is only the evaluation of the person whose life it is that really matters in determining its value and meaning.

Again, we may cut a bit of slack here. There may be those who love us acutely who have a special interest in the life we have, its parts and the way they are put together, and their evaluation carries some weight. But in the end it is not their life (indeed the love they have for others will be an important constituent of the things that make up their life and determine its value and meaning) - they do not live our life, and indeed they cannot do so - ultimately all that matters is what the person whose life it is thinks about the parts that make up his life and how they are put together when it comes to determining the value and meaning of that life. If loved ones have only a limited right to appropriate the value and meaning of a life, those who knows us less well, or not at all, may be seen to have even less right to appropriate what might come to constitute the parts that make up our life and shape them, and they will have even less understanding of that life. When this appropriation occurs it is often based on some supposedly justifiable view of a general notion of the good-life that will show pitiful understanding of what makes *a* life valuable and meaningful, one that will crudely override the delicate balance of the highly subjectively valued concatenation of parts that goes to make a life valuable and meaningful to an individual. Just as an insensitive and philistine observer of a great work of art might suggest changing this or that to 'improve it'⁵, so others may

⁵ The composer Bruckner is a good example of someone whose works have had their value and meaning undermined, and in some cases destroyed, by others, some well meaning, some not, who thought they could improve them through alterations - usually, cuts, re-scoring, re-harmonisation - derived from incomprehension. No-one now thinks the alterations not approved by the composer (and even in some cases those that are if they are thought to have come about

suggest all sorts of things that would make life more valuable and meaningful, and then impose this across numerous individual *lives*, not seeing that the significance of the parts such individuals have put together to create the life that is valuable and meaningful *for them*. This may operate purely negatively of course, with things being taken away from a life, rather than aspects of it being substituted by others. The act of generalising about the content of the good-life, the thought that such generalising is even possible, presupposes that what is truly valuable and meaningful about the life for an individual isn't the *particularity* of it - the particularity of its parts and their configuration. It is not essentially that the value and meaning reside in the mere fact of the life *being particular* - although to a slight degree that may be true - but rather that the value resides in the *particularity it has*. Perhaps it is even the uniqueness of the life that is at issue. It is arguable that in respect of what makes a life valuable and meaningful we are concerned with an arrangement of parts into a whole that may have no counterpart. Changing any part of the life that the individual sees as important to the value of his life - the part being important partly because of the way it is related to the other parts - may totally seriously damage or destroy the value and meaning of a life for that individual; whereas the very same change may be found to be perfectly acceptable and even valuable to another. The valuable and meaningful life is both deeply *subjective* (as deep as it could be as it is the person's own life), and deeply *particular* (in its parts and their arrangement from which it follows that no substantive generalisation can be made from a life about what makes life valuable and meaningful).

So, what is presented here is partly a kind of warning. The value and meaning of a life for the individual whose life it is are both very subjective and very particular. This should lead to consider tampering with it at our peril if that valuable and meaningful life is to be preserved. It should lead us to have the greatest respect for the just-so of the way a person's life is, the way it is in its full quirkiness and particularity, and lead us to eschew, as far as we can, thinking that we can just lop off or reshape aspects of a life without destroying its value and meaning. The difficulty in grasping

through pressure on him) improve the works, or that it is these travesties that should be performed rather than the originals. And yet, we seem far more sanguine about the benefits of altering someone's life, or its being altered, as far as the affect on its value and meaning is concerned.

this is that we may not even consider that what we are doing may have this effect, because that the life of another individual should be valued and is meaningful just because its parts are what they are and arranged in a certain way and not otherwise, may necessarily be utterly baffling to us, for it is *his* life and through *his* sensibility that such a life is valuable and meaningful, and may be so uniquely to them. Without firmly impressing this upon ourselves, we may think it permissible to be cavalier with the seemingly inconsequential parts, and the configuration of those parts, that make up the lives of others; whereas in fact the parts and their configuration not only make such lives valuable and meaningful, but may leave a life utterly valueless and meaningless if parts are taken away or replaced and their arrangement reshaped.

There is nothing egoistical, narcissistic, or excessively individualistic about what is claimed here. Nothing that is said need claim that people are to an implausible degree in control of their own lives, or that forming their lives is their main self-focussed activity, or that social relations are not important constituents of what makes a life valuable and meaningful and in fact also shapes it. What is said about what it is for a life to be valuable and meaningful is consistent with our not being fully in control of what constitutes our lives. Rather it is the case that we constitute our life so as to give it value and meaning given what the world - that is to say, living in the world - throws at us. We build a valuable and meaningful life around that, sometimes in spite of that. But this merely reinforces the point made here. For just as what constitutes the valuable and meaningful life will be determined by the parts and arrangement of the parts that make up a life in their full particularity, so the effective determinants beyond my control will be particular to an individual also.

Most people suppose that imposing the constituent parts that make up their life on another individual, and expecting them to add up to a valuable and meaningful life for that individual, highly unlikely and perhaps even anathema. Yet, people feel justified in talking in the abstract about the constituents of a good-life - a valuable and meaningful one - perhaps *en route* to guiding public policy on the matter, which may be coercive - and in so doing they may expect what is provided or imposed to enhance the value and meaning of the lives of individuals. Yet this is odd, for it too is

based on the same disregard for what makes a life valuable and meaningful for an individual, and the way in which it cannot be captured in the abstract.

Evidence for this may be gleaned from lives lived in extremis. A prisoner held in solitary confinement may find that what makes his life valuable and meaningful and worth going on with are the tiniest things and rituals that other individuals may have no comprehension of the value or meaning of, and certainly could not be accounted for in any general picture of what constitutes the good-life. It may involve, say, training the small group of cockroaches that the prisoner shares the cell with. That may now be the crux of his life's value and meaning. Hard to understand by others; perhaps impossible. And for another individual in the same circumstances it may be and have to be something else. No rulebook on the good-life is going to cover this.

Another example reported recently is of a middle-aged woman who went blind overnight. She was asked what it was she missed most about not being able to see. That it is most missed suggests something that has significantly diminished the value and meaning of her life. One might speculate on what it might be. Sunsets? The sea? The blue sky? Her children's faces? None of these things. It was seeing her dog and what it did. One can see how such features of a life could be utterly overlooked when thinking about what makes a life valuable and meaningful - but it was of serious value and meaning *for her life*.

This is because what makes a life valuable and meaningful for an individual will be a particular concatenation, or bundle, that is perhaps unique; the value and meaning derives from the tiniest features that could not possibly be of general significance or value or meaning, but are only so to the person whose life it is.⁶ Normal everyday life is no different in this respect from extreme cases: it is things being just thus-and-so in all their particularity and as they are arranged that makes the life valuable and meaningful for an individual, and which forms a fragile whole that is his valuable and meaningful life. The importance of this and what is at stake is clearly indicated by its being uncontentious that a life devoid of value and meaning is an intolerable one.

⁶ One might say that what is being described here is the *haecceity* of individual lives as far as their value and meaning is concerned; a life as a unique individual, rather than something, can have a common nature shared by many lives.

A complication is that it is hard to know which comes first, the individual sensibility that judges the life it has as valuable and meaningful, or the constituents of that life that are judged valuable and meaningful. Indeed to pose the matter like that is probably foolhardy; the two are intertwined and grow together interdependently; they cannot really be separated but may be so separated only abstractly in thought.⁷ It is absurd to talk about the person you are on the one hand, and what it is that makes your life your life and makes it valuable and meaningful. It may be argued, therefore, that changing an aspect of someone's life may, however inconsequential the change seem to others, destroy the value and meaning of that life.

For example, if someone breaks a leg, it may not seem like the end of the world, nor obviously devalue his life. But say the leg mends, but is never quite as good again, and may now be more prone to injury. If what this person valued most highly, very greatly, or perhaps even beyond all else, is the carefree feeling one gets while hill-walking, then it is quite conceivable that his life has been significantly devalued, maybe stripped of the crucial features, as it fitted with other features, that made the life valuable and meaningful. To someone whose life it isn't, to someone for whom hill-walking holds few, no, or less than no, attractions, it will be a mystery of strained empathy to understand why the value of a person's life should be affected so negatively by a leg injury. They may say that there are surely lots of other things to make life worthwhile, and lots of other things could make it much worse - missing the point that what makes the life valuable and meaningful for *this* individual may have been taken away from him.

The relation between a person and his life is similar 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 connection 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 appreciate it; in the latter case tampering with it may destroy one artwork that is appreciated; in the former case you may destroy an entire life.

⁷ As perhaps with Aristotle's matter and form.

It is argued here that significant lessons as to how we should treat people may and should be learnt from the way 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 tend 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 analogy 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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