

## Article

# Sport as a Meaning-Making System: Insights from the Study of Religion

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**Abstract:** Meaning-making has been one of the primary domains of religion throughout history, and some have claimed that this is religion's central function. Yet, the modern era has seen a proliferation of other social institutions that generate meaning for people. Here we reflect on what religious meaning-making can tell us about meaning-making in secular institutions, with a particular focus on sport. Sport as a meaning-making institution is puzzling since sports are generally considered leisure activities, not serious enough to provide meaningful structure and purpose to human lives. Nonetheless, people do derive meaning from sport and we argue that because sport shares many features with religion, it offers a unique opportunity to examine a secular meaning-making institution. We offer a theoretical framework for the study of meaning-making that derives from our conceptual approach to religion as an adaptive system. We use this approach, and other anthropological research, to delineate seven general characteristics of human meaning-making systems: collective, constructed, subjective, narrative, relational, transcendent, and growth-oriented. These features of meaning-making systems highlight why sport has been so successful at offering meaning to sport enthusiasts, both fans and athletes alike. We conclude with a brief speculative evolutionary scenario that may explain our proclivity for seeking meaning, and why secular institutions will continue to fill that role when religious worldviews are not compelling.

**Keywords:** religion; sport; systems; meaning-making

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*[T]he imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence . . .*

Geertz (1973, p. 434)

*For Hemingway, there was a nada, a nothingness, confronting man . . . [i]f order is to be found in a meaningless universe, a man has to impose that order; a way of doing it was through the ritual of sports.*

Novak (1994, pp. 36–37)

## 1. Introduction

Although culture is widely considered the central concept of anthropology (Benedict 1934; Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963), it remains highly ambiguous and contested (Kuper 1999). Scholars continue to debate just what culture is, and this is most recently due to interests in facilitating cross-species comparisons of behavior (Bonner 1980; Laland 2017; Pagel 2012). For most scientists within and outside of anthropology, culture is nevertheless reducible to two necessary constituents. First, culture is learned behavior that is transmitted from one individual to another, with transmission occurring both vertically across generations (typically, parent to offspring) and horizontally (within a generational cohort). Second, culture is shared across individuals within a community or population; in fact, social groups are often recognized as a cultural community if they share a set of norms and behaviors (Boyd 2018; Richerson and Boyd 2005).

Reducing the concept to these constituents has advanced our understanding of the cognitive capacities necessary for culture to evolve across species and the extraordinary uniqueness of human culture, particularly its cumulative vertical transmission (Henrich 2016). But scientific reductionism, in its micro-focus on certain features of a phenomenon, invariably leaves many conceptual aspects aside (Sosis 2017a). In this case, scientific reduction has privileged analyses that have largely ignored what many would consider the most important aspect of culture: meaning. And while the concept of culture may remain faithfully bound to anthropology, many anthropologists would claim that what makes the discipline unique is not its attention to culture per se, but rather *how* the discipline studies culture—that is, by ethnographically uncovering meaning systems.<sup>1</sup> As Geertz famously wrote,

Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but rather an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz 1973, p. 5)

In line with Geertz, many anthropologists have studied culture by focusing on symbolic significations; in other words, what cultural symbols mean (e.g., Basso and Selby 1976; Turner 1974). Moreover, a disproportionate amount of this research has centered on what anthropologists and other scholarly observers, if not always the cultural adherents themselves, would consider religious symbolism (e.g., Myerhoff 1974; Traube 1986; Turner 1967). This interest in religious symbolism is understandable. There is arguably no institution in human history more successful than religion at providing meaning for human lives and making human lives meaningful. Thus, scholarly attention to understanding what religious symbols signify—what they mean to adherents and how they provide meaning for them—is not unwarranted.

However, looking to religious symbolism alone for understanding cultural meaning is as problematic as scientific reductionism, for it engenders analytical blind spots. One in particular is that in the contemporary era, religions no longer hold the comprehensive influence on worldviews that they once did (Taylor 2009). Many religious leaders, and some scholars for that matter, claim that modernity's widespread nihilism—or the belief that life is inherently meaningless—is the consequence of weakening religious worldviews and the decline of meaning found in religion (see Sacks 2011). At the same time, the contemporary era has witnessed a proliferation of other social institutions that generate meaning for people. Thus, an important question for anthropology and the study of culture is how secular social institutions supply people with meaning.

We address this issue here by treating meaning in secular institutions as an inverse problem and thereby one to consider by asking what prior knowledge about religious meaning-making can tell us about meaning-making in secular institutions, with a focus on sports in particular. We begin by defining sport and explaining why we have chosen to concentrate our analysis on sport. We then offer a theoretical framework for the study of meaning-making that derives from our conceptual approach to religion as an adaptive system (Kiper and Sosis 2014, 2020, 2021, 2022; Sosis and Kiper 2014, 2018). Next, we use this approach, and other anthropological research, to delineate general characteristics of human meaning-making systems. We argue that these characteristics function as inter constituent relations that can effectuate meaning when there is coherence and cohesion between them. Because sports have the potential for these relations, they can offer meaning to enthusiasts, both sports fans and athletes alike. We conclude with a brief speculative evolutionary scenario that may explain our proclivity for seeking meaning, and why secular institutions will continue to fill that role when religious worldviews are not compelling.

## 2. What Is Sport?

Before explaining why we have chosen to focus our analysis on sport, it is worthwhile to clarify what we mean by 'sport'. We follow Besnier et al. (2018, p. 4) and "refrain from imposing necessary or sufficient conditions on what counts as sport" because sport, like

other concepts discussed in this article, such as culture, religion, and meaning itself (see below), is a fuzzy category without clear boundaries. For example, although one of the goals in Western sporting competitions is the determination of winners and losers, this is certainly not a universal feature of sport, as anthropologists have long noted (e.g., [Read 1965](#)).

Still, it is useful to distinguish sport from related activities, such as play and games, and thus it is necessary to establish some boundaries to circumscribe our topic of discussion, even if we do not rigidly adhere to those boundaries. Sports, we suggest, are institutionalized competitions. They differ from other types of organized competitions, such as games, because in sports the movements of competitors impact the outcome of the competition. This proviso—the manner and impact of movement—helps distinguish games, such as chess and Go Fish, from sports, such as hockey, gymnastics, and archery. Chess and Go Fish require players to move pieces and cards respectively, but the manner in which these movements are performed does not affect who wins or loses. There are of course activities that blur and challenge these borders, ranging from card games like Spit to human warfare, but this definition provides a rough estimation of our topic of inquiry.

Our definition of sport carries one implicit characteristic worth highlighting: sport is not a purely solitary affair. Although sports training is often pursued alone, to constitute what we consider sport, there must be shared experience and coordinated engagement with other people within a systematized contest. Thus, a solo jogger who runs alone, never races against competition, and does not share her passion with others is not participating in sport as we define it. We would label such an activity exercise, training, recreation, or even hobby. Returning to the issue of meaning, we do not deny that such activities are meaningful for pursuants, but rather that the pathway toward meaning-making is different for solitary activities than it is for collective activities such as sport. This brings us to our next major point.

### 3. Why Sport?

In addition to religion, people derive meaning from many aspects of life, including work, hobbies, nature, children, family, friends, science, art, music, literature, and sociopolitical ideologies. Even the horrors of warfare purportedly offer meaning for some combatants ([Hedges 2002](#)). While meaning-making in these and other modes of life deserve scholarly analytical consideration, we contend that sport offers a distinctive and promising opportunity to advance our understanding of how meaning systems emerge, how they are maintained, and how they interact with other systems. Here we highlight four reasons why sport is especially relevant for the anthropological study of meaning.

First, there is an obvious epistemic gap to fill. Anthropology, a discipline that putatively specializes in the study of meaning-making, has historically ignored the study of sport ([McGarry 2010](#)). Sport is often considered secondary to more vital areas of human activity such as kin relations, mating, political maneuvering, religion, resource acquisition, and identity construction. [Archetti \(1998\)](#) suggests that anthropology's longstanding neglect of sport is due to the discipline's conception of sport as a modern phenomenon, and thus it is widely believed to have little relevance for the indigenous cultures of ethnographic interest to anthropologists.

Sport has recently gained some traction among anthropologists working on globalization, embodiment, gender, or power ([Besnier and Brownell 2012](#); [Carter 2002](#); [Kelly 2019](#); [Klein 2014](#); [Starn 2011](#)), and the publication of [Besnier et al.'s \(2018\)](#) comprehensive monograph overviewing advances in the anthropology of sport signals increased legitimacy within the discipline. Nonetheless, few anthropologists have examined sport and its relationship to meaning-making or the social construction of cultural reality (for exceptions, see [Bunsell 2013](#); [Dyck 2003, 2012](#); [Gonzalez Abrisketa 2012](#)). This is particularly surprising since the most widely known and cited study in the anthropology of sport, [Geertz's \(1973\)](#) classic article on Balinese cockfighting from which the first epigraph above is drawn, is fundamentally about meaning-making and the social construction of cultural reality. Yet, for many anthropologists studying sport, phenomenology has replaced explorations of how

players and fans construct meaning. As Greg Downey writes in his pioneering ethnography, *Learning Capoeira*, “This book . . . is emphatically *not about meaning* . . . ” (italics in original, Downey 2005, p. 19).

Second, the fact that people derive meaning from sports is puzzling and curious. Although athletic contests in ancient societies, including competitions held by the Greeks, Egyptians, and Mayans, were believed to be gifts from the gods (Cusack 2016; Fox 2012), contemporary sports are clearly human creations. And unlike their ancient predecessors, modern sports are not considered sacred rituals; they are expressly intended for leisure. Strictly speaking, then, sport is hardly the type of activity that would be expected to generate meaning for participants, yet people find meaning in sports as both players and as spectators. Furthermore, meaning derived from sport is not shallow, as would be expected for what is ostensibly institutionalized play. As the legendary Liverpool football coach, Bill Shankly, reputedly said, “Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it’s much more serious than that”.

Third, sport has apparently replaced religion for many people, and this is because sport can give people a purpose. The observation that people can see sport as life is why many scholars highlight the parallels between sport and religion (e.g., Alpert 2015; Carter 2012; Guttmann 2004; Novak 1994; Rappaport 1999), and some of these scholars recognize that these similarities place sport and religion in competition with each other. As historian Gurock (2005, p. 8) contends:

For sports, in many ways, is a competing, secular religion complete with its own book of rules and holy in its own right. It possesses traditions to be followed, a lifestyle to be adhered to, central historical figures and personalities worthy of emulation, holidays—think of that American civic observance called Super Bowl Sunday—and even a belief system that speaks reverently about personal salvation at the end of days, the quest for immortality through victory at the finish line.

Likewise, religious studies scholars Bain-Selbo and Sapp (2016, p. 2) argue that “the human drives and needs that compel some to be part of a particular religion are the same drives and needs that compel some to be part of sport”. As a result, “Sport can function like a religion in that it meets the same needs and desires . . . promised by formal religions” (ibid).

Fourth, sporting activities are inherently community oriented, much like religious practices. As philosophers Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly suggest, “Sports might be the place in contemporary life where Americans find sacred community most easily” (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 192). Sport communities develop shared cultures with characteristic forms of discourse, dress, ritual, and moral rules that distinguish them from others. Novices are readily aware of these distinctive norms, such that their successful integration consists of learning the community’s jargon, values, and behaviors (Donnelly 1985; Donnelly and Young 1988; Downey et al. 2015). Because sport communities bring together individuals from differing backgrounds, they provide an exceptional social arena for examining the effects of community-building on meaning-making.

## 4. Theoretical Background

### 4.1. Social Construction and Religion

One of the most extraordinary features of humanity is that we create the cultural worlds in which we inhabit, and despite being their creators, we perceive these cultural worlds to be real, we engage with them accordingly, and remarkably, we derive meaning from them. How we accomplish this has fascinated and challenged scholars in diverse fields, including philosophy, semiotics, sociology, history, psychology, theology, cognitive science, and political science (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Elder-Vass 2012; Lincoln 2014; Searle 1995, 2010). The social construction of reality is also of paramount importance for our two focal disciplines: anthropology (D’Andrade 2006; Fuentes 2016; Geertz 1973) and the evolutionary sciences (Laland 2017; Plotkin 2003; Wilson 2009). A striking inference

from these various fields is that religion has played a pivotal role in the development of our constructed social worlds (Berger 1967; Harari 2015; Rappaport 1999; Wildman 2009).

Starting from this premise, we have developed a framework over the last decade that captures the process by which religious systems construct reality (e.g., Kiper and Sosis 2014, 2022; Sosis and Kiper 2014, 2018). With our colleagues Candace Alcorta, Benjamin Purzycki, John Shaver, and Connor Wood, we have proposed that religion supports and maintains social constructions because its core elements function as processes that can both transform the information and energy of human participation and respond to environmental feedback. That is to say, religion is an adaptive complex of traits incorporating cognitive, neurological, affective, behavioral, and developmental elements that together have individual and group effects (see Sosis 2019 for review and references). These traits are derived from pre-human ritual systems and were selected for in early hominin populations because they contributed to the ability of individuals to overcome ever-present ecological challenges (Rappaport 1999). In particular, they served to maximize the potential resource base for early human populations by fostering cooperation and extending the coordination of social relations across time and space. Accordingly, we have advanced the claim that the religious system is a complex adaptation that dynamically serves to support extensive human cooperation and coordination, and social life as we know it.

While our ongoing research program attempts to assess key predictions from this claim (e.g., Purzycki and Sosis 2022), our systemic approach has revealed that religious systems typically maintain eight core elements: ritual, taboo, authority, moral obligation, myth, sacred values, supernatural agents, and of central importance to the argument put forth here, meaning (Sosis 2019). Furthermore, the interactions between these eight core elements provide the structure of religious systems and have the potential to yield individual and group-level effects. Group-level effects include shared cognitive schemas, ethos, symbolic meanings, material culture, historical memory, and group identity, which are emergent properties that can powerfully shape individual lives. Such group-level effects are the very cultural properties that anthropologists have found to produce societal order (Mosko and Damon 2005), and they do so by creating structured and stable social worlds that individuals inhabit and navigate. As the most salient features of religious systems, group-level effects are collective phenomena that give form to the initial population and generations thereafter, thus providing the basis for sustained communal engagement.

The systemic approach to religion is especially fruitful when considering social norms, that is, the expectations and patterns of behavior that characterize communities. Social norms emerge from the group-level effects of cultural systems and this is no small matter when it comes to religion. Because we humans are able to conceive of alternative ways of engaging, understanding, and organizing life, our social norms—and the way we pattern our lives—are always at risk of modification. However, this potential instability is minimized because, as Rappaport observes (Rappaport 1999), our social norms get internalized and naturalized through our ritual participation in cultural systems. In so doing, we come to view the norms in which we are entwined as a natural part of our existence (Berger 1967). And this a critically important point: the naturalization process of social norms appears to be a necessary condition for the emergence of comprehensive meaning systems; for humans are generally unable to construct durable meaning systems if they perceive the world as arbitrary and capricious (Douglas 1975, 1982; Geertz 1973).

#### 4.2. Social Construction and Sport

While much work has focused on how rituals create and support religious systems (e.g., Rappaport 1999), far less attention has been given to how rituals produce secular social constructions. Yet rituals spawn many secular institutions, including governments, kin networks, and of interest here, sporting worlds. Intriguingly, these secular systems are structurally similar to religious systems. Sport systems, for example, maintain seven of the eight core elements of religious systems, with belief in supernatural agents being the only exception.<sup>2</sup>

The proximity between sport and religion prompts us to consider sport in a new light. Most scholars have considered sport as an institutionalized activity originally derived from play (e.g., Guttman 2004). In Johan Huizinga's influential treatise entitled *Homo Ludens*, religion and play are characterized as "temporary worlds within the ordinary world" (Huizinga [1938] 2016, p. 10), and others have agreed, speculating that the human fascination for sport and religion stems from their alterity (e.g., Sutton-Smith 1997). Contrary to these views, Richard Schechner cautions against compartmentalizing conceptions of sport and play: "It is wrong to think of play as an interruption to ordinary life . . . Ordinary life is netted out of playing" (Schechner 1993, p. 42). From our vantage point, imagining sport and play to be separate from *real* life, and implicitly inconsequential, has deprived researchers of a valuable cultural niche for examining social dynamics, community construction, and how people derive meanings within these vibrant and organic communities.

Additionally, most scientific research on sport has focused on its benefits such as physical exercise, learning moral rules, coping with challenges, and experiencing the merits of commitment and diligence (e.g., Edwards and Rowe 2019; Spiegelman 2017; Wankel and Berger 1990). Yet there is surprisingly little to no research on the meaning that athletes and casual enthusiasts derive from sport. If what is true for religion is also true for sport, such that sport can function as a complex adaptive system, then meaning could emerge from it. As with religion (Sosis 2020a), this emergence would depend on whether the core aspects of sport systems are fully integrated. Stated more formally, it is anticipated that sport will elicit adaptive meaning systems when the rituals, taboos, sacred values, authority structures, moral obligations, and narratives within a sport community cohesively interrelate. While empirical analyses to test this claim await future research, our goal in what follows is far more modest. As a first step, we seek to uncover the core features of meaning-making systems and explain, through a brief discussion of those features, why meanings derived from sport are indeed compelling and worthy of further investigation.

## 5. What Is the Meaning of Meaning?

Rather than deconstructing the polysemic term 'meaning',<sup>3</sup> our focal point is analyzing the shared characteristics of meaning-making systems, drawing mostly from the study of cultural and religious systems. Like the terms 'culture' and 'religion,' meaning is best approached pragmatically as a family resemblance of instantiations (Wittgenstein 1953). Accordingly, we outline seven shared features of meaning-making systems.

*Collective.* Psychology, which often dominates discussions of meaning, generally approaches meaning-making itself as a process through which *individuals* apprehend the world (Baumeister 1991; Frankl 1969; Park 2010). Indeed, Sosis recently attended a lecture where the speaker, a prominent clinical psychologist, emphasized that everyone creates their own unique meaning system, and in a concluding rhetorical flourish asserted that the world currently maintained over seven billion meaning-making systems. However, the way people actively organize their experiences is a learned behavior (Boster 2012). Consequentially, anthropologists (and sociologists) assert that meaning-making systems are not purely individual affairs, and decades of ethnographic evidence supports the proposition that meaning-making systems emerge and operate within communities (Geertz 1973). This entails that meaning-making systems function at the level of the social group and are influenced by cultural factors, as many psychologists have themselves begun to recognize (Baumeister and Landau 2018).

*Constructed.* Meaning-making systems are socially constructed but they are not usually intentionally constructed. What we mean by this is that meaning-making is typically not the proximate motivation for people's engagement in any system. Instead, people are motivated most often by immediate utilities, such as winning a competition, and the meanings derived by the collective are cultural products of several integrated activities and beliefs functioning together. For these activities to come together, the system must be dynamic, requiring continual maintenance for its persistence. Meaning-making systems are maintained, temporarily stabilized, and reinforced by community-wide beliefs, values,

and behaviors; namely collective rituals and social norms. These same mechanisms enable meaning-making systems to endure across generations and to internalize community-wide meanings for individuals within each generation (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Thus, meaning-making systems, such as religion, need to be continually constructed, and when construction fails, they will be replaced by alternative meaning-making systems.<sup>4</sup>

*Subjective.* That meaning-making systems are socially constructed does not preclude collective evaluations or competing subjectivities therein. Because meaning-making systems involve activities that center around rituals and social norms, they require acts of interpretation. For those interpretations to cohere with ideas about structural elements within the system, they must stand out from the mundane (Sosis and Kiper 2018). In this manner any act can become revered, venerated, or sanctified. Eating, for example, is merely an act of energy consumption, but it can be culturally transformed into a meaningful and even sacred experience, such as attending Holy Communion, if demarcated from the everyday. Nevertheless, as anthropologists routinely observe, ritualizing or normalizing an activity does not make it inherently meaningful for all adherents—what does is the cohesion of actions and ideas (Rappaport 1999). Therefore, meaning-making requires acts of interpretation, which is perspectival. Activities within a system will generally be interpreted as meaningful when they elicit a relatively deeper sense of self, relationships, or life events than otherwise mundane activities.

*Narrative.* As an act of interpretation, meaning-making systems tie parts of life into a greater whole. People rarely interpret their life's events to be random or unrelated. Rather, life's events are perceived to be connected and often understood as following logically and even causally from one another. This process usually contributes to identity formation (Baumeister 1991; McAdams 1993) and typically takes the structure of a narrative. Meaning-making is therefore dependent on the circulation of convincing stories. Humanity not only derives meaning from stories, but people everywhere give meaning to their lives and community by rendering events and relations in narrative form (Ricoeur 1988; Sommer et al. 2013). This is why anthropology continues to be vital for understanding the human condition and experience. Anthropologists study people's stories to provide a window into their lives. They interpret interpretation, and when anthropologists do their ethnography well, other people's meanings become meaningful to us. Admittedly, anthropological work invariably falls short. At best, as Geertz writes, the understanding of 'others' that the anthropologist can provide is more like "grasping a proverb, catching an illusion, seeing a joke, . . . or reading a poem" (Geertz 1974, p. 45).

*Relational.* Meaning-systems are relational insofar as they pose an inherent dialectic. Tensions within cultural systems—notably, conflicts between the elements of cultural systems and their collective effects—produce meanings (Nuckolls 1996). As anthropologist Roy Wagner writes, "Meaning in human cultures is contingent upon symbolic, or representational, forms and can only be invoked or dealt with through symbols" (Wagner 1972, p. 4). What this entails is that there is always a contrast between the signaler and that which is signified, and that is why cultural information is often transformed into metaphors, from which new meanings emerge (also see Rappaport 1999). In a similar way, meaning systems are always in tension with other meaning systems, or at least minimally, in tension with nihilism. Regardless of the specific relations, one thing is certain from ethnographic literature: meaning systems, and the meaningfulness they instill, are everywhere distinguished from the mundane or that which is deemed relatively unimportant.

*Transcendent.* Meaning-making systems are emotional-cognitive frameworks for transcendent purpose, in contrast to functional purpose. Whereas functional purposes are necessary engagements in daily activities, transcendent purposes are extraordinary goals that create feelings of importance in the world, often empowering individuals to persist and even overcome difficult circumstances (Frankl [1946] 2006). For instance, eating with the expressed purpose of satisfying hunger is unlikely to foster meaning-making, but eating the same meal in order to gain strength so that one may fulfill God's commandments, on the

other hand, likely will. In successful meaning-making systems, individuals have reasons or experiences to transcend themselves.

*Growth-oriented.* In the contemporary world, the most important form of transcendence in meaning-making systems is growth. Successful meaning-making systems not only encourage people to experience a connection to something larger than themselves, but they do so by enabling people to achieve that connection through their own efforts. As science fiction writer Kurt Vonnegut insightfully observes, “We have to continually be jumping off cliffs and developing our wings on the way down” (Vonnegut 2014). If denied possibilities for growth, we create challenges for ourselves that provide us with opportunities to learn, solve, and grow. As we will explore below, growth appears to be the critical factor for understanding the success of secular meaning-making systems, and sports’ ability to offer meaning to its enthusiasts.

## 6. Sport as a Meaning-Making System

As noted above, sport is an apparently unlikely arena of human activity to find meaning. We typically associate meaningfulness with seriousness, priority, and profundity, whereas sport is entertainment and thus perceived as trivial, marginal, and insignificant. But as philosopher Kass (2017, p. 197) argues,

Sport is a species of play, but not a frivolous activity. It is true that our games serve no utilitarian purpose; they do not feed the hungry, or cure the sick, or shelter the cold. But sport, like all play, is valuable as an end in itself, not just for the sake of victory or profit or some other result. It belongs to the domain of human activities that are done for their own sake—not the realm of necessity, but that of leisure, of freedom, of cultivation.

Or, as Novak (1994, pp. 32–33) puts it,

Play is the most human activity . . . [it] is not tied to necessity, except the necessity of the human spirit to exercise its freedom, to enjoy something that is not practical, or productive, or required for gaining food or shelter.

Of course, many ancient peoples, as we have mentioned, would not understand sport as leisure and would not see sport as impractical. Moreover, professional athletes certainly have utilitarian goals when they compete, and contemporary sports enthusiasts, whether as casual players or devoted fans, often derive meaning from sport. A closer look at sporting activities reveals that each of the seven characteristics of meaning-making systems delineated above are evident. As we now describe, these characteristics enable meaning to emerge in sporting activities, and the meanings that people derive from sport are no less serious or profound than meanings derived from religious activities.

Some features of meaning-making systems require little comment. It is obvious that secular meaning-making systems, including sports, are socially constructed as well as subjective. Sports, like all human activities, are not inherently meaningful. “Meaning,” writes Novak, “is largely conferred by human intention and human love; it is not totally discovered waiting in the world (Novak 1994, p. 231). Minimally, meaning in sport is achieved through participation, either as a player or competitor, or as a fan. But it is also clear that participation alone is insufficient to produce meaning. Anyone who has endured grade school gym classes, with their introduction to a plethora of sports year after year, knows that simply playing a sport is rarely a meaningful experience. There are probably as many grade school children who have found playing volleyball in gym class to be a meaningful experience as children who, after studying ancient Greek culture, decide to worship Zeus. In other words, exposure or participation alone does not necessarily emotionally affect people and produce meaning—other factors are necessary.

Sports, like religions, are collective affairs. However, unlike religions, sports are collective in two distinct ways, only one of which arguably parallels religious practices. First, and similar to religious practices, playing sports is not a solitary activity but one undertaken within a community. Granted, some athletic training is of course pursued alone (as with



religious prayer, which is sometimes private), but most people who train alone for a sport minimally join a community for competition. Second, and unlike religions, sports have fans, and fandom is a collective but often anonymous affair. We as anthropologists find this feature remarkable. The collective effervescence classically described by Durkheim [1912] (Durkheim [1912] 1995) to highlight the transcendent experience of collective religious ritual is most frequently experienced in the modern world in sports stadiums and arenas.<sup>5</sup> The shared rituals, beliefs, hopes, and myths of fans tie them together in an anonymously bonded community. The strength of these bonds, as compared to communities of the same religion who are unknown to each other, is an open question.

But again, it is important to emphasize, that sport communities, whether as fans or players, do not inherently create meanings that are embraced by all community members. There are many casual fans who do not derive meaning from spending an afternoon rooting for (say) the Yankees or the UConn Women's basketball team. And of course, there are many casual players of sports, other than grade school children in gym class, who do not derive meaning from their athletic endeavors. Factors other than being collective, subjective, and constructed are evidently necessary.

We maintain that what is needed for sports to become a meaning-making system are factors that push individuals beyond themselves. Each of the remaining features of meaning-making systems described above—narrative, relational, transcendence, and growth—do precisely that and they are each evident in sport communities.

Growth, or more specifically, self-growth, is the key to understanding how humans derive meaning, especially from sport. After all, to be human is to grow (Sosis 2017b), and as Geertz recognized, imposing meaning onto changes and experiences across the lifespan is the fundamental condition of human existence (Geertz 1973, p. 434). For whatever reason (and we speculate below about one possibility), people find meaning by transcending themselves and personal growth is the primary way that people influenced by Westernized cultures transcend themselves. This is not restricted to religious transcendence, although religions have offered deeply meaningful experiences to many throughout history, and they continue to do so. However, the academic bias for examining religion for meaning has distracted many scholars from perhaps the greatest takeaway from ethnographic research: humans can derive meaning from nearly any type of life-affirming growth.

Sports provide opportunities for such growth, or as philosopher Leon Kass put it, occasions for "cultivation". Sports enthusiasts are able to grow because "the ultimate competition in sports is not with others but with oneself" (Novak 1994, p. 161). Additionally, players and fans are able to transcend their lives by connecting to something larger than themselves, whether that is the history of the sport or the anonymous community of competitors and athletes. "Sports," Novak notes, "are carriers of traditions" (Novak 1994, p. 133). Sport communities tell and retell shared myths; stories of heroes and rivals, stories of spectacular successes and defeats. Novices in sport communities learn, adopt, and identify with these stories (Donnelly and Young 1988). But people not only tell stories in sport communities; they create stories, often weaving together narratives of their own development, progress, and achievements in the sport. Defeat, redemption, dedication, sacrifice, and victory are enveloped in these narratives. Such themes are not dissimilar to those that appear in religious myths. Recognizing these parallel themes in religion and sport, Novak intriguingly describes sports as a "salvific religion" (Novak 1994, p. 232).

Furthermore, these narratives are relational: players not only compare themselves—positively and negatively—with others, but participants in sport communities often compare themselves with other sport communities to justify their allegiances, why they are fans or players of one sport rather than another (Sosis n.d.). This is again similar to the ways that religious adherents explain their religious commitments. Given that the features of meaning-making systems are evident in sport communities, sports are places, albeit not utopian, where meaningful lives can flourish.

In a related way, sport provides ample opportunity for formulating social identity through group membership (Lee et al. 2016). While personal identity concerns how one

is distinguished uniquely as an individual from others, social identity entails how one is identified within and among groups (Tajfel 1979). One of the most enduring forms of social identity across cultures is religious membership (Tajfel and Turner 2001), but belonging to a sport community is also becoming prominent worldwide (e.g., Haslam et al. 2015). For social psychologists, group membership contributes to a sense of meaning by increasing self-esteem (Mael and Ashforth 1992), though often at the cost of having strong ingroup favoritism (Taylor and Doria 1981)—something that any sports fan knows all too well. Yet, the fervor of some fans suggests that identity formation in sport may go beyond social identity and constitute identity fusion, where persons see their individual and group identities as one and the same (Swann et al. 2012). In such conditions, individuals may experience the gains or losses of their group on a personal and visceral level, and this can result in a willingness to make (often extreme) self-sacrifices for the ingroup (Whitehouse 2018). If fan bases are akin to religious communities, they likely form social identity—and reinforce group commitments—through collective behaviors, such as gameday rituals. These highly conspicuous behaviors and collective expressions of values are likely to invoke *communitas*, and thus shared feelings of meaning.

To further illustrate the importance of these factors in meaning-making, we examine social situations in which these features of meaning-making systems are absent. Specifically, we turn to sociologist Oldenburg's (1999) analysis of "third places". Third places are spaces outside of home and work (hence, third place), where people congregate and make community. Oldenburg's work largely focuses on cafes and bars, and notably, does not consider sport communities. However, many sport subcultures (see Donnelly 1985) or small sporting communities—boxing gyms, softball leagues, neighborhood basketball courts, and so forth—share nearly every defining characteristic of Oldenburg's third places: they are spaces that are inclusive, local, fun and playful, unimpressive to the uninitiated, and lack individual anonymity, where everyone knows everyone. But unlike Oldenburg's third places, conversation is arguably not the primary activity in sporting communities; playing sport is. In many of these places, conversation and camaraderie are likely a close second, and some people undoubtedly participate more for the social opportunities rather than the physical aspects of the sport.

Oldenburg probably excluded sport communities from his analyses because sports are not entirely status-leveling, which for him is another defining characteristic of third places. Sports create status differentials on the court, field, pitch, track, rink, diamond and so forth. However, like third places, sports do level other forms of status such as education, class, and income. This minor difference between third places and sport communities reveals something highly significant and informative about the social conditions that can foster meaning-making. Third places are about community, but they are organically designed such that people can "easily join and depart one another's company" (Oldenburg 1999, p. 22) and they support relationships in which "people do not get uncomfortably entangled in one another's lives" (ibid.).

While sporting communities are similar, it is the structured competition—deliberately avoided in third places—that cultivates meaning. For players, maintaining and striving toward athletic mastery invariably contributes to their identities and elicits meanings in ways that the purely social atmospheres of third places do not. In our rapidly and endlessly transforming world, we seem to seek meaning in historically grounded social environments—such as sports—that while stable, are also changing. We would add, similar to Rappaport's observations about religion (Rappaport 1999), through discourse, especially mythic narratives, sport communities are able to provide an experience of timelessness for those who are immersed in them. Importantly, these rooted and stable communities, built on performance and narratives, afford opportunities for us to grow and create meaning.

## 7. Why Are We Obsessed with Meaning?

Humans will find order and meaning in the world even where evident patterns are absent (e.g., Whitson and Galinsky 2008), whether it is faces in the clouds, moving dots on

a screen, or interpreting coincidence as fate (Guthrie 1995). Moreover, we create stories out of random events (McAdams 2008), and we live by the stories we construct. Although there is surely variance in people's need to interpret life's events, it is fair to say that humans seem incapable of living without meaning. Unlike any other species, we not only construct the social worlds we inhabit, but we imbue them with meaning. Why has natural selection endowed us with such an appetite for meaning-making?

We suggest that transcendence, which we consider the key feature of meaning-making systems, offers a possible clue. Humans are a group-oriented species. The extent by which humans have been shaped by group selection pressures remains debated (Borrello 2005; Wilson 2019), but there is little debate about the importance of group-living in human evolution. We are a social species and the selective pressures that have shaped humanity have all arisen in group contexts. Our attraction to meaning—our embrace of frameworks that help us to perceive our lives as connected to something larger than ourselves—may have evolved to keep us group-oriented.

As cultural evolutionists have correctly noted, because of cumulative cultural evolution, humans are unable to survive without local cultural knowledge, and that knowledge is stored and exists within groups (Henrich 2016). Groups are necessary for our survival, but groups are not fixed or natural kinds; they too are social constructions. In our evolutionary history, hominins evidently needed some way to ensure that individuals remained connected to the groups in which they were living. Venturing out to live independently would seldom, if ever, have been a fitness enhancing strategy. A critical insight from the evolutionary sciences is that selection rarely relies on human rationality to solve social problems. Consider, for example, the complexity of religion as a mechanism to solve problems of coordination and cooperation—adherents are generally unaware of the ultimate functions of their behaviors (Sosis 2009). Indeed, social mechanisms appear to work best when their functions are veiled and unperceived by individuals (Berger 1967).

One set of mechanisms that may have evolved to avoid the evolutionary dead end of a solitary life are emotional-cognitive dispositions that orient individuals toward the groups in which they live. Group-living is so vital to human survival that dispositions in which groups themselves become meaningful to individuals, such that the group orientation provides order and purpose, could be favored by selection. Because groups are diversely structured and transient, mechanisms for group-attachment would have to be general enough to accommodate such variant experiences. Historically, such mechanisms, including dispositions to perceive group membership as meaningful, may have kept individuals connected to the groups in which they found themselves. But in modern contexts, our communities are increasingly amorphous and not clearly circumscribed. Hence, these dispositions to connect with something larger than ourselves—which historically was always a group—are now oriented toward any type of transcendence, especially individual growth. In other words, such dispositions may incline people to find meaning whenever and wherever they can transcend themselves.

## 8. Conclusions

Earlier we noted that some scholars see sport as a religion (Bain-Selbo and Sapp 2016; Gurock 2005; Novak 1994). Unlike these scholars, we would not characterize sport as a religion (also see Magdalinski and Chandler 2002). Instead, sport and religion share common features, and we see complementarity rather than conflict as the more common relationship between sport and religion. But the sociological assessments of these scholars concerning the replacement of religion by sport might be accurate, and it is undoubtedly true that sport and religion can be directly incongruous. Although tension is often seen negatively, it is nevertheless productive, oftentimes driving humans forward. This seems to be one of the most valuable lessons that sport offers: competition, which is filled with conflict and tension, can create excellence. Countless interviews and autobiographies by athletes, whether professional or amateurs, convey the important interplay of their

religious convictions and athletic passions. These athletes often credit both their religious and athletic commitments for their triumphs on and off the field.

Our contemporary world is likely too complex and varied for any one idea or activity to fully support the meaningful goals that we as humans evidently require to lead thriving lives and keep nihilism at bay. This is true even for those who are religious. Religions today rarely have the exclusive attention of their adherents, and thus even religiously committed individuals must navigate multiple meaning systems in their lives. Sports, and the communities of individuals who pursue them, provide one avenue that can complement other meaning-making pursuits, including religions.

Victor Frankl, drawing on his concentration camp experiences during World War II, famously argued that the human search for meaning is our primary motivation in life. Echoing Nietzsche's words, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how," Frankl observed, "It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future . . . [t]he prisoner who lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed" (Frankl [1946] 2006, pp. 73–74). Frankl's profound insight was that meaning could emerge from any corner of human experience: family, love, religion, work, and even play. What seems to matter, according to Frankl (1969), is not what gives our lives meaning, but rather that we have something—anything—that gives us purpose. Research on meaning-making, however, has largely ignored meaning derived from secular leisure activities, such as play and sport, which are perceived as shallow or trivial and thus unworthy of scholarly attention. Yet it is clear that many people, possibly the majority of people in some societies, derive meaning from such interests. Here we hope to have begun a conversation that seeks to remedy this deficiency in our knowledge of meaning-making in sport, and secular meaning-making systems in general.

This article has a less explicit meta-goal as well. In his award-winning book, *The Meaning of Human Existence*, evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson, unexpectedly, argues for the "all-importance of the humanities," describing the humanities (and not the sciences) as our most "vital possession" (Wilson 2014, p. 53). Whether the humanities or the sciences is more valuable is a subjective, and futile, debate. The sciences seek to explain by uncovering natural laws and revealing patterns, trafficking in generalizations. The humanities, on the other hand, describes and interprets unique events and inner experience. Science uninformed by unique events is blind and humanities research that is unable to situate unique events in broader patterns is sterile. In other words, they are both essential for advancing knowledge.

The unmentioned meta-goal of this article is to encourage research that achieves consilience across the sciences and humanities (Wilson 1998), both methodologically and theoretically. Methodologically, ethnographic tools—encountering and documenting personal narratives, subjective experiences, and constructed identities—will be essential for the study of any meaning-making system. These qualitative data should be complemented by surveys that will elicit statistically analyzable quantitative responses aimed at uncovering generalized patterns of how secular meaning-making systems emerge and function. Theoretically, many have argued that the systemic approach advocated here provides a natural bridge between the humanities and sciences (Buskell et al. 2019; Lang and Kundt 2020; Purzycki and Sosis 2022; Sosis 2019, 2020b). Complex systems, including religious and sport communities, all exhibit nonlinearity, amplification of random fluctuations, and historical contingency. Consequently, there are always aspects of these systems that will defy scientific generalizations and require humanistic examination, such as historical or ethnographic analyses, focusing on how small random factors impact system dynamics. While our commitments to both humanistic and scientific research might appear unusual, we believe that to advance the study of such complex phenomena as meaning-making systems, a holistic approach is not simply an ambitious academic indulgence, it is a vital necessity.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sociologists would justifiably disagree with such an assessment, as the research programs of many pioneering sociologists sought to uncover meaning systems in particular cultural contexts (e.g., Goffman 1967; Weber 1930), and this tradition continues to influence areas of contemporary sociological research, such as interpretive sociology and symbolic interactionism.
- <sup>2</sup> While some regard sports heroes as mythic and possibly superhuman figures (Bain-Selbo and Sapp 2016; Mandelbaum 2004), there is a difference between them and the gods. In religious systems, supernatural agents are generally seen as creating, or at least endorsing and supporting, the social order. Nobody views modern sport in this way. Sports heroes may lobby to influence the regulations that order their sports, but everyone recognizes that the rules of sports are human constructions and they are under constant negotiation by human institutions; specifically, the national and international associations that govern respective sports (Kew 1987).
- <sup>3</sup> Admittedly, defining ‘meaning’ is no easier than defining other idioms, like ‘culture’ and ‘religion,’ that point to broad areas of human activity and experience. Yet, despite assiduous scholarly efforts—culture and religion have both generated entire books dedicated to their respective definitions (e.g., Hughes and McCutcheon 2021; Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1963; Nongbri 2013)—the meanings of these terms remain contested. Their resistance to simple definitions is all the more remarkable since culture, religion, and meaning are Western categories conceived for analytical purposes. They were originally developed to clarify concepts in order to advance their specific areas of inquiry. Not only do the definitions of these three terms continue to be debated, but their historic and geographic pervasiveness is also disputed. Some have argued that as the products of Western scholarship, these concepts, especially religion, are only relevant to contemporary Western experiences (e.g., Asad 1993; Klass 1995). And even within Western contexts, their meanings, and the meanings of associated words, have changed over time (e.g., Smith 1998). As these scholars correctly note, none of these terms are universally recognized categories, even though the referents of these terms are allegedly universal (e.g., Sosis 2009). Descriptive definitions of terms such as religion, culture, and meaning will always fail because as humanistic constructions aimed at advancing our understanding of humanity, they reflect the contradiction and ambiguity inherent in the human condition. That is, they are fuzzy concepts that cannot be captured easily within a few sentences. For example, when religion is characterized in a sentence or two, the definition is invariably either too general to exclude cultural institutions that should not be categorized as religions (e.g., nationalism and science), or too narrow so that some phenomena that most scholars and laypeople would categorize as religions are left out (e.g., Buddhism and Confucianism). Yet, fuzzy concepts such as religion do not necessarily derail academic study and apprehension. Watch any episode of *Star Trek* and it is quickly obvious that our definition of life is ambiguous and contested, yet the science of life, that is, biology, marches on rather effectively, irrespective of definitional ambiguity. For the study of religion, recognizing religions as systems, as described in the preceding section, offers a lifeline out of the definitional quagmire (Sosis 2016). Specifically, rather than trying to capture the concept of religion in a sentence or two, it is more productive to define religion as constituting the dynamic interaction of core interdependent elements that comprise the building blocks of a system. And culture itself, of course, has also been productively approached as a system (Geertz 1973).
- <sup>4</sup> This includes nihilism, which, despite itself, is often a meaning-making system. Nihilists typically justify their nihilism with rational argument and stories, using nihilism to make sense of their lives, even as they assert that life is meaningless.
- <sup>5</sup> Musical concerts are the other activity that commonly elicit collective effervescence in the modern world.

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