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Tara Smith

The University of Texas (USA)

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Something to Behold: The Distinct Spiritual Values of Art and Sport

**Tara Smith
(University of Texas)**

Abstract

Sports and the arts are alike, for their audiences, in their relative detachment from ordinary utilitarian concerns. Viewers' lives remain essentially unchanged at the conclusion of the match or the drama. Yet the ubiquitous interest in sports and the arts, historically and globally, along with the intensity of passion that each can rouse, raise natural questions about the benefit of engagement with these artificial realms. This paper explores the respective values of sports and the arts for the viewer.

After briefly registering some of the oft-remarked similarities in the appeal of each, the paper posits a more fundamental common dimension: the way in which both sports and the arts offer spiritual values by offering the material manifestation of important abstract ideas. It proceeds to outline the quite distinct ways in which sports and the arts do this.

First, it identifies four respects in which artworks seem to offer a more philosophical "take" on life, effectively presenting a fundamental worldview. It then observes three important respects in which sports provide messages that the arts cannot.

The paper's overall aim is not to anoint either realm as definitively superior, but to better appreciate the exact rewards that each of them can offer to a flourishing human life.

Key words: spiritual value; philosophical world view; ends in themselves

1. Introduction

The appeal of sports and the arts is worldwide and age-old. People's devotion is often intense, as both arouse passion. Yet these realms are removed from viewers' practical affairs. At the end of the opera or the end of the soccer match, the viewer's "real life" is intact, with the condition of his finances, his health, his marriage, his car, unchanged. Both art and sport are pursued as ends in themselves and seem legitimate to pursue in that way – not for a tangible external gain, but as relatively self-contained spheres. While we sometimes criticize an individual who is overly invested in one or the other, we do not ordinarily condemn the enterprises themselves.

Given their unusual, non-utilitarian place in man's experience, it is natural to wonder: what is their value? My concern in this paper is entirely with their value for the viewer or audience. Do the arts and sports play the same basic role in people's lives, merely in different

form? Can engagement in sport be a substitute for engagement with art? Do the rewards of either rely simply on personal taste, such that nothing would be lost if a person followed one and not the other? Or neither? What is the contribution that either makes to a flourishing life?

While people readily observe valuable features found in both, I wish to probe their differences. My aim is not to pit the two in competition so as ultimately to crown one of them the greatest value, but to offer reflections on the respective offerings of each. Truly, these *are* reflections – musings and hypotheses rather than hammered-down argument for definitive conclusions. My hope is that by refining our appreciation of the exact contributions that these seemingly peripheral, impractical activities have to offer, we will be in better position to take advantage of them – to know where to look for what type of reward and what to demand, when we do engage with them. If anything, I hope to enhance our respect for the important contributions that each can make to a fully flourishing life.

Before we begin, a few words about parameters. While both art and sport are contested categories, it should be adequate for our purposes to employ fairly ordinary conceptions of each. By “sport,” I mean structured, purposeful, yet playful physical activity that is regulated by set rules and frequently involves the competition of one person or team against another. The object, in sport, is achievement of an artificially created goal that is internal to the activity.¹

With art, let us begin with a few dictionary definitions. (I will refer back to these later.) The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines art as “the expression or application of creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting, drawing, or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power.” *Merriam Webster* tells us that a work of art is “created to be beautiful or to express important ideas or feelings.”

¹ See the accounts of sport in Steven Connor, *A Philosophy of Sport*, London: Reaktion Books, 2011, pp. 15-17 and Jan Boxill, “The Moral Significance of Sport,” *Sports Ethics – An Anthology*, ed. Boxill, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 1-7.

Dictionary.com adds that art concerns “what is beautiful, appealing, or of more than ordinary significance.”²

Building on these and inspired by the aesthetic theory of Ayn Rand, by “art,” I will mean a deliberately created manmade product presented for others’ experience of its aesthetic, emotional, and/or expressive qualities.³ An artist creates a self-contained object (such as a painting, play, song, story) for sensory observation, as a means of comment on existence.⁴ Iconic examples would include Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, Mozart’s *Requiem*, and Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*.

Sports and the arts are broad categories. Sport encompasses contact as well as non-contact sports (rugby as well as golf or skiing, for instance) and ball games as well as those without balls (such as gymnastics or track and field). Art encompasses the fine arts, performing arts, and literature of different types. Many of my claims will clearly apply to some forms of arts and sports more than others. The strongest parallels lie between competitive sports and the performing arts and, in other respects, between competitive sports and the narrative arts. Throughout, however, I will confine my claims about the value of sport to the sphere of competitive sport. While I will refer primarily to examples of team sports, competitive sport can obviously also be one-on-one, as in tennis or wrestling.

² In a slightly different sense, the *Oxford English Dictionary* also defines art as “Any of various pursuits or occupations in which creative or imaginative skill is applied according to aesthetic principles (formerly often defined in terms of ‘taste’) ... the various branches of creative activity, as painting, sculpture, music, literature, dance, drama, oratory, etc.”

³ According to Rand, “Art is a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist’s metaphysical value judgments.” “The Psycho-Epistemology of Art,” *The Romantic Manifesto* Signet-New American Library, 1971, p. 19. For a helpful exegesis, see Harry Binswanger, “The Objectivist Esthetics – Art and the Needs of a Conceptual Consciousness,” *A Companion to Ayn Rand*, eds. Allan Gotthelf and Gregory Salmieri, Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016, pp. 405-425.

⁴ This characterization is admittedly coarse and would require further refinement to capture all of the arts and only the arts. Literature, for instance, does not involve sensory observation in the same way that listening to a sonata or watching a dance does. I will say more later on art as comment on existence.

Finally, I will be speaking of sports and arts in their ideal form, aware that every instance will not realize their potential value to the same degree. A given tennis match or a particular painting could be a clumsy effort of poor quality and, as such, of diminished value. My concern is: characteristically, when pursued basically as they should be, what is the value that art and sports can offer to the viewer?

To set the context, I will begin by briefly noting several similar rewards that are widely thought to be shared by the arts and sports. I will then propose four aspects of spiritual value⁵ that seem distinctive to art. Since these may seem to weigh in favor of art's having superior value, I will proceed to point us to three significant values of sport that are not matched by art. We will end by commenting on their respective contributions, in light of all of these similarities and differences.

2. Similar Spiritual Value of Arts & Sports

Let us begin by noticing some of the similarities in the kinds of things that audiences typically enjoy about the arts and sports. Beyond bland allusions to “release” and “escape,” what are the specific rewards that the two realms commonly provide?

Both are frequently praised for their aesthetic qualities. In sport, as in art, we observe displays of remarkable grace, symmetry, or balance, as the postures and movements of the human body dazzle. The glides and twists of skiers and skaters, the graceful, rhythmic arcs of the swimmers' strokes, the sinuous circuits of the inside basketball shooter's progress toward the basket, the acrobatic leaps and masterful control of the wide receiver – all shine with brilliance, at times. Even the trajectory of the ball or the unfolding of team members' orchestrated movements to execute a designed scheme can deliver an aesthetic satisfaction akin to the experience of certain music or dance.⁶

⁵ To be defined in section 2.

⁶ For an appreciative exploration of the aesthetic dimensions of sport, see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.

Similarly, both realms can provide the apparent realization of perfection. While people are normally reluctant to attribute perfection to any human actions (“nobody’s perfect”),⁷ critics, commentators and fans unabashedly enthuse about “flawless execution” in an athletic contest, “the perfect pass,” “the perfect call,” or, in the arts, the “sublime grace” of the brushstroke, the “impeccable rendering” that captures the subject, the “exquisite harmony” of sound and sentiment in marrying that particular lyric to that particular passage of music. Our artistic and athletic vocabulary employs such superlatives in ways that, far from seeming to exaggerate, still seem to fall short of capturing their mark.

A third common feature lies in the social dimension of sport and art. Fellow fans of a team or a game, like lovers of opera or of a particular novelist, often enjoy a palpable sense of camaraderie. Regardless of whether one literally wears the colors of “Steeler Nation,” aficionados identify and bond in ways both subtle and conspicuous, be it through exuberant hugs and high fives with strangers at the stadium or in the quiet, knowing glances exchanged by those on line for the author’s reading. Many fans prefer to attend events in person (or to watch the game at a sports bar or to view the opera telecast at the cineplex), despite considerable cost and inconvenience, precisely for this social feature of the experience. At the same time, fans can also feel a sense of community when not in one another’s physical presence. Many a fan, in the privacy of his breakfast nook, will feel with his fellow Steelers fans or Sondheim fans – in suffering or in celebration – as he reads the morning’s report on the latest game or the review of last night’s opening.

Both sports and the arts are also often commended for their educational potential. Athletes are invoked as role models (at least, some athletes); displays of admirable traits on the field and in fictional characters invite audiences to glean lessons. Literature teachers probe for the moral of the story; sport commentators relish tales of comeuppance or of virtue rewarded as byte-sized morality plays. Consider routine media features on individual athletes’ overcoming personal hardships and long odds through laudable discipline, perseverance, and courage. However saccharine these can be, the point is simply that people draw lessons from sports and

⁷ For a contrarian view in defense of the attainability of moral perfection, see Tara Smith, “Morality Without the Wink: A Defense of Moral Perfection,” *Journal of Philosophical Research* 29 (2004), pp. 315-331.

the arts and point to these as a generous source of their value. (Indeed, artistic and athletic organizations in quest of funding will frequently emphasize their educational applications.)⁸

As we noted in opening, the arts and sports are both pursued as ends in themselves rather than for an external advantage, such as a paycheck or promotion.⁹ The goods that they offer are internal to the experience. At the same time, an athletic contest or an artistic presentation frequently assumes a “larger than life” quality that belies their place at the margins of practical affairs. In both realms, the work is presented – and received – as if it carried much greater than run-of-the-mill significance. The viewer’s experience feels intensified during the dramatic heights and depths of the symphony or the story or while watching the game – *the* game, as we naturally refer to it, implicitly conveying the sense that it displaces more mundane concerns. The experience of an artwork or an athletic contest can be an emotional ringer, for a viewer, precisely because he invests as if a great deal hinges on what he attends.

Part of this results from the way that art and sport are presented, deliberately set off as special by robes of ritual, ceremony, tradition. We frame artistic works in various ways, just as we literally frame many paintings (often, quite elaborately). We raise the statue onto a pedestal, we raise a curtain over the drama, we play an overture before beginning in earnest. At games, people sing a National Anthem, or an *alma mater*, or conduct a formal coin toss or choreographed player introductions. All of these are means of infusing gravitas to the occasion, ways of underscoring: this *matters*. Our rituals are forms of respect.

One could no doubt identify further parallels between the arts and sports or explore any of these noted, in much more depth. This should suffice, however, to indicate the natural bases for thinking that much of the value for viewers in the two realms is the same. What is worth calling

⁸ Some, of course, dispute rosy portraits of sports building character traits. See, for instance, Peter French, *Ethics and College Sports*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004; Jennifer K. Stoll and Jennifer M. Beller, “Do Sports Build Character?” in *Sports in School*, ed. John Gerdy, New York: Teachers College Press, 2000; Mark Edmundson, “Do Sports Build Character or Damage It?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 15, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/article/Do-Sports-Build-Character-or/130286/>

⁹ They are what philosophers sometimes call *autotelic*, designating a phenomenon whose meaning or purpose is contained within itself.

attention to is the fact that in offering these things, both the arts and sports offer *spiritual* value. Let me explain.

Human beings are not only bodies, but minds, consciousnesses. One need not posit metaphysical dualism to recognize these intimately entwined dimensions of a human life. Our well-being, accordingly, comprises more than our physical condition. Human flourishing is not strictly material, a matter solely of money or physical comfort or bodily strength. Rand takes the “spiritual” to designate that which pertains to one’s consciousness.¹⁰ Correspondingly, we can think of spiritual values as goods that promote the health of our psyches, the types of things that contribute to a person’s intellectual or emotional or psychological well-being.¹¹ Spiritual values pertain to a person’s beliefs and attitudes, to his motivations and outlook (all of which matter, in fact, to his ability to flourish physically).¹² Material goods such as food, shelter, clothes or medicine are obviously necessary for human well-being, but equally necessary are such things as knowledge, education, friendship, courage, confidence or self-discipline. Self-esteem and the esteem of people whose judgment one respects can be spiritual values. Such things as work that one finds rewarding, or being understood, or optimism or a sense of purpose can also qualify. In general, spiritual values nurture those psychological propensities

¹⁰ Rand, "The Objectivist Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness*, New York: Signet/Penguin, 1964, p. 35. I explain the concept more fully in *Ayn Rand's Normative Ethics – The Virtuous Egoist*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 32, 203-205 and I examine the relationship between physical survival and flourishing in *Viable Values – A Study of Life as the Root and Reward of Morality*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, chapter 5.

¹¹ Here, I will use these terms interchangeably, although they can obviously be discriminated more carefully. For simply introducing the concept of spiritual values, however, it is most important to call attention to the relevance of the entire category of phenomena of consciousness to a person’s optimal well-being, rather than to attend to refinements within that category.

¹² See my discussion of this in *Viable Values*, chapter 5.

and abilities – the beliefs, attitudes, desires, motivations, dispositions – that are most conducive to successful living. This is what makes them valuable.¹³

My larger claim, again, is that both sports and the arts offer significant spiritual value to their audiences inasmuch as they present material manifestations of certain ideas. None of the four common values that I have just recounted (sports' and the arts' aesthetic, perfection-based, social, and educational dimensions) directly affect a viewer's material condition. All of these, rather, affect his consciousness, his ways of making sense of the world. However aware a viewer may or may not be of their impact, that is the character of the values that he gains from his encounter in viewing artwork or sport.¹⁴ Without necessarily intending to, the athlete or artist effectively demonstrates certain qualities and associated beliefs.

In sports, we observe specific qualities in action – a particular player's resilience or poise, for instance, or his decisiveness or cleverness. Further, we see the types of consequences that these qualities tend to beget. With the arts, the situation is a little different. Yet the way that MacBeth is depicted or that the field worker is painted or that the story ends or that the musical notes resolve (or don't) convey discrete themes. They imply broader opinions about broader subjects. *Life is a stream of random accident*, one play seems to say. *Man is master of his destiny*, suggests another. *Good guys finish last; good guys prevail; a man's ambition is invariably thwarted by a tragic flaw of character; everything happens for a reason*.

Whether such messages are true or false, trite or profound, the arts and sports present certain abstractions that it can be beneficial to be shown, rather than told. Actions speak louder than words. Images, sounds, sensory experience speak to different parts of us and impress ideas

¹³ Material values and spiritual values are not mutually exclusive categories. Physical things can obviously affect a person's psyche (certain chemicals in drugs or coffee, endorphins), just as non-physical events can affect his body. Learning especially good or bad news, or being made afraid, for example, can trigger sweating, blushing, deflated energy, diminished appetite, and so on. By the same token, a given material good can impart value to a person that is both material and spiritual. A significant pay raise, for example, can be a boost to a man's morale as well as to his income.

¹⁴ I elaborate on this in regard to sports in "What Are We Cheering? Sport and the Value of Valuing," *Fair Play – Journal of Philosophy, Ethics and Sports Law*, volume 2, no. 2, October 2014, pp. 22-51.

upon us in different ways. *Seeing* difficult things done provides powerful evidence that they can be done. Intellectually, a fan might understand that it is difficult to beat Arsenal at home (or substitute whatever team this might apply to, in a given period). He might understand that, in professional tennis, it is difficult consistently to beat so many opponents across so many weeks and divergent tournament conditions (as Djokovic has, for instance). Watching those things take place, however, like watching comebacks and upsets or a player defying the odds or living to regret earlier miscues, provides compelling realizations of these facts. The displays make certain abstract ideas more real and more credible – *because I saw it, because I experienced it*. (We will return to this point a little later.)

Because both sport and art offer their audiences significant spiritual values, we can easily be seduced into assuming that their benefits are essentially the same. Yet their differences are significant. So let us turn to those.

3. Major Differences in Spiritual Value

3.1. Art Makes a Statement

First, art is *about* other things. Whether the subject of a given work is narrow or broad – a bowl of fruit, the coming of Christ, the battle of Waterloo, the intensity of first love – an artwork refers to people, situations, experiences. (Indeed, it usually *has* a subject.¹⁵) Sport, by contrast, is not about anything; that is not its business. Baseball does not collect observations about assorted aspects of life and wrap them up in a point; its culmination is not a thought or opinion. In art, we search for the theme: What did the movie mean? What does the song say? An athletic quest, however, is not commentary. It often invites commentary, but it is not itself a point of view. Art makes a statement,¹⁶ while sport is an activity, a contest, rather than a vehicle of communication. A game is not trying to transmit a message; the players are trying to win. A

¹⁵ What the exact subject is is sometimes contested, and some dispute whether art necessarily has a subject. Admittedly, the subject of musical pieces is sometimes harder to identify, and non-figurative painting also challenges ideas of an artwork's subject. For our purposes, though, I leave aside such debates. What is most important to grasp is that in the main, works of art – poems, plays, novels, paintings, sculpture, opera, much dance – center around a subject.

¹⁶ I do not mean that it should be didactic. More on this, later in the paper.

message might be attached, by some, but it is not inherent in the enterprise. A game that fails to say anything is not thereby a defective specimen.

In this vein, philosopher Alva Noe maintains that people's aesthetic responses typically involve judgments; they are not simply likes and dislikes. An aesthetic response is a cognitive achievement, he contends, somewhat akin to getting a joke.¹⁷ Notice how this view reflects the fact that art makes a statement. A viewer could not "get" what is not there to be gotten – what is not expressed and to be understood (or misunderstood). The American painter Georgia O'Keeffe also recognized art's propositional character.

It was surprising to me to see how many people separate the objective from the abstract. Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense. A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree. It is lines and colors put together *so that they say something*. For me that is the very basis of painting. The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint.¹⁸

Beyond art's making a statement, I think, art makes a particular kind of statement, one that pertains to the basic nature of existence.¹⁹ An artist expresses a "take" on things, but it is a take of special depth that reflects a fundamental worldview. Unlike the historian or the journalist, art does not simply chronicle events that happened. Art conveys what *happens*. (In this vein, Ezra Pound famously characterized literature as "news that stays news" and Rand described Victor Hugo as "not a reporter of the moment but an artist who projects the essential and

¹⁷ Alva Noe, "How Art Reveals the Limits of Neuroscience," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 11, 2015, pp. B 9-11 and *Strange Tools – Art and Human Nature*, New York: Hill & Wang, 2015.

¹⁸ Georgia O'Keeffe, *Some Memories of Drawings*, New York: Viking Press, 1976. Also at https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Georgia_O%27Keeffe

¹⁹ I take this idea from Rand, who discusses it in "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," especially pp. 15-20; "Art and Sense of Life," especially pp. 35-36; and "Art and Cognition," especially p. 45; all in Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto*, New York: Penguin, 1975.

fundamental.”²⁰) A work of art implies: *this is the way it is – at core, in essence. What is depicted here conveys what is real in human experience, what is important, what is possible; it is what we can expect our experience to be.* As Theodore Dalrymple puts it, “Art, in its highest expression, explains our existence to us.”²¹

This is not part of sport.

Consider: Why do we recite poetry at funerals? We do not recite a box score. We do not read a narrative account of even a truly great game. Sport displays certain “good practices” of life (as well as bad, to be sure), while art offers a transcending view of life – testimony, appraisal. Art proposes, you might say; sport demonstrates.

The artist is not alone in expressing a view of life. So does the philosopher or theologian or many an essayist. Art, though, expresses such a view in a distinctive manner: not by stating theses and directly explaining them by means of evidence and arguments, but by sound or movement or rhythm or image or story that gives its viewer a *world*. When a work is expertly executed, the viewer effectively comes to inhabit the universe of *Cyrano* or the *Eroica* or *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.²²

Thus a first significant difference, again, is that unlike sport, art makes a statement.

²⁰ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, New Directions, 2010, quoted at Goodreads./com, <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/140013-abc-of-reading>; Rand, “Ninety-Three,” *The Ayn Rand Column*, Oceanside CA: Second Renaissance Books, 1991, p. 56 (essay originally published in 1962).

²¹ Theodore Dalrymple, *Our Culture, What’s Left of It – The Mandarins and the Masses*, Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2005, p. 125. Similarly, Arthur Krystal writes of fiction, “What are we or the universe doing here? What is the meaning of existence? ... Literature is, at bottom, a wondering, an attempt to get to the bottom of things, or, at least, a faithful, if oblique, portrayal of how things are.” “The Novel as a Tool of Survival,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* March 11, 2016, pp. B 14-16.

Somewhat more loosely, Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch claim that a work of art is metaphysical inasmuch as it claims universal validity for statements about ideas of “depth.” See their discussion in Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975, pp. 108-109, 115-116, 149-151.

²² On the idea that art presents philosophy not as abstract academic discussion, see Binswanger, pp. 408-413.

3.2. Art is Scripted

A second important difference of value stems from the fact that art is scripted, whereas sport is actual. Sport is “actual” in the sense that a given game or contest is an event – live, unfolding now, as the viewer watches. An artwork is the creator’s finished product – planned, premeditated, and controlled by the artist. As novelist Ann Patchett observes of her role, “It’s the closest thing to being God you’re ever going to get. ... you make the entire world.”²³ Indeed, it is by exercising this control in choosing what to depict and in what manner (tone, textures, pacing, and so on) that an artist’s work makes a statement; those are his means of expression.

Sport, in contrast, is a present event, a sequence of actions subject to the unexpected and accidental (rain delays, injuries, etc.). Suspense and uncertainty are parts of its appeal. What does happen in each moment affects what subsequently can happen. Sport fans follow a series of events, somewhat like readers following an author’s plot, but what the exact sequence is is determined before our eyes, as players act; it is not set in advance. Every time you read *Anna Karenina*, the same thing happens; every time Nadal plays Djokovic, different things happen.

What occurs in an athletic contest is real inasmuch as the constituent events are genuine and consequential to the outcome. Art, on the other hand, is artificial, the realm of pretend, a playground of the artist’s imagination. Sporting events are not staged (at least, not if the rules are honored).²⁴ When an artwork is not scripted, by contrast, it is not truly art. A random agglomeration of events, words, or images is not a comment on existence; it is not created to express anything. Indeed, such randomness *could* not express anything. To the extent that something resulted from is random accident, it could not be art. (If an artist wishes to express his belief that existence is, in its essential character, random, he can create a work of art that

²³ Ann Patchett, *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, New York: Harper, 2013, p. 50. Obviously, some art forms rely on the collaboration of several people (dancers, designers, directors, etc.), such that control over the final product (as opposed to the original script, composition, or the like) is shared.

²⁴ While some sports involve scripted routines (such as skating or gymnastics), this means only that a course of action is set to be followed; its execution, however, and athletes’ success, are not pre-determined.

does that. Indeed, he might choose to do that through the display of an apparently random collage of miscellany that he has carefully chosen to convey that message. The creation of such a work is not itself random, however; it is guided by thoughts about effective means of expressing its message.) The point is, art must be scripted, while sport cannot be. When sport is scripted in its outcomes, it is no longer truly sport. (This is why we relegate professional wrestling, whose outcomes are predetermined, to the category of entertainment rather than sport.)

Some of sport's detractors would insist that however actual an athlete's deeds, they remain trivial. "He caught a *ball*," they might moan in mockery; "he won a *game*." And here, the contrast with art is instructive. Although artworks are simply artists' fancies, fabricated projections, they matter because of what they express about issues that are real. Viewers' frequently strong emotional responses to artworks are a tipoff that they sense that something more is involved – something more than a few hours of idle "make believe."

Why should I care about MacBeth, a fictional fellow in Scotland? Why does Munch's *Scream* so agitate me? I have my own problems, after all, which are surely untouched by these contrived, pointless distractions. The fact that I do care testifies to a belief that something more is at stake. It is not proof of such a something more, of course, nor of exactly what that might be, if it is involved; one's emotions can be based on erroneous beliefs. Yet the fact of many people's frequently intense emotional responses to works of art does reveal that people hold subconscious beliefs that a message of importance is being conveyed. Fiction can move a person and stay with him far beyond events in real life, including weighty events, such as slaughters or natural disasters that inflict horrific, all too real damage. A reader may find himself haunted by the ending of a novel for days after finishing it, while the earthquake victims might be completely forgotten, as soon as the newscaster's voice fades. This suggests that we grasp, at least subconsciously, that something is being said by the artwork's script. And something deep.²⁵

²⁵ Sport fans' intense emotions are explained more readily, since most fans seek a particular outcome (such as a team's victory or a contest's suspenseful play), which anchors a range of emotional reactions to that outcome's being realized or not.

In ordinary life, a human being does not need to get a ball through a hoop or to out-run someone to a base. He can enjoy a successful and happy life without such feats. He does need to develop beliefs on the kinds of questions confronted in art, however – questions about what is real, about what is important, about what is possible. Art portrays the kinds of choices and challenges that people do confront. In this sense, it concerns “real” issues. Life-shaping issues. Action-directing ideas.²⁶

Art concerns the kind of ideas that drive human beings’ actions. Sport does not. In this respect, sports’ value is more circumscribed. Both art and sport offer the material manifestation of certain abstract ideas, as we discussed toward the end of section 2, but art does so by design, whereas sport does so incidentally. And this leads us to two deeper differences in their spiritual value.

3.3. Distinct Reasons for Being

Consider the question of purpose. Why art? Why sport? Why compose a song or *make believe*? Why hit a ball with a bat? Is it simply to amuse oneself? To pass the time? Are these merely variations on twiddling your thumbs?

Art and sport each have a different reason for being. Sport exists in order to provide its players some combination of recreation, physical exercise, play, amusement and the cultivation of certain skills, not exclusively physical.²⁷ A particular athletic contest (such as the Stoke-Arsenal match this Saturday, February 4th) is a structured exercise in trying.

Art, on the other hand, serves to convey a worldview, to concretize an appraisal of existence. A ballplayer is trying to stay in bounds, to deflect a shot, to complete a number of discrete tasks, all as means of achieving the overall object of a game (scoring more baskets than an opponent, for instance). The artist is trying to say something. Art is expressive by its nature; sport is not. Sport can be engaged in independently of an audience; soccer does not need viewers. Art does. It is a communicative venture, intended for others’ contemplation. An

²⁶ Obviously, not all art addresses issues of equal depth or scope.

²⁷ I leave aside here arguments about which of these are involved essentially, or whether any other ends might also be involved.

artist might enjoy his “process” of creating a work and even benefit from it, yet for him to be making art is to be making something for others to behold. *Qua* artist, he creates a product and effectively says: *Here, look!* Spectator sport has no analogue in “spectator art” precisely because all art is intended for consumption by viewers.²⁸

Some might object to the difference I am positing not by claiming that sport *is* expressive, but by challenging my assertion that art is expressive – or at least, that it is necessarily expressive. Fairly commonplace observations lend this objection initial appeal. Not every artist shows his work to the public and some artists disavow any intentions to convey a theme. “I’m simply following the urge to put paint on canvas,” we sometimes hear, or “I’m simply recording what the characters’ voices say to me.” In light of this, can I legitimately claim that expression of a worldview is the purpose of art when it is not the purpose of all artists?

I believe so. A full explanation would require delving into contentious issues concerning the distinguishing nature of art and its proper definition. Without wading into those waters here, two observations should indicate the basic logic behind my claim.

First, the nature of an activity does not depend on the self-conception or the attitudes of those engaged in it. Nor does it depend on the self-conception of those who think that they are engaged in it. Consider a few examples. If, by virtue of living in France for a year, I am learning the language, I am learning it, regardless of how conscious I am of that fact. Whether or not I think of myself as a French-speaker at a certain stage, it may well be that I am one, by golly! By the same token, if I am studying trigonometry without learning it, I am not learning it and I do not understand trigonometry, whatever misplaced confidence in my understanding I might acquire from the sheer number of hours of effort I have exerted. Or, to take an example that features a person’s more accurate self-awareness, suppose that a particular professional baseball player plays solely for the money and that he is fully conscious of his motivation. His

²⁸ Note that while I have considered sport’s value for players here, I do so simply to illuminate the nature of the phenomenon that sports fans are viewers *of*. Thus this does not alter our main concern – the value of sports to the viewer. And the point is simply that art is transactional, two-way between art maker and art viewer (reader, listener), whereas sport is not. It needs no observers to be fully realized.

motive does not change what it is to be playing baseball; it does not alter the essence of the game.

These examples demonstrate my claim: the nature of an activity does not depend on the attitudes of those engaged in it. And the same holds for art. The attitudes or beliefs of a purported artist do not dictate what constitutes art.²⁹

The second and corollary point is that being an artist is not a matter of simple self-designation: “I call myself an artist; therefore, I am one.” Whether I am depends on whether I am engaged in a particular kind of activity; the concept ‘artist’ is logically dependent on the concept of art. One cannot designate anyone a practitioner of art without presupposing what art is – what distinguishes art from cobbling, cooking, collecting, curating, and a thousand other activities. My claim is that a core feature of art is expressiveness. Indeed, we routinely think of “artistic freedom” as freedom of expression.³⁰

As noted, a full examination of my claim would require grappling with very basic disputes about the essential nature of art. However logical my points above, art somehow feels different to many people who are uncomfortable confining art to the boundaries of definitions. Doesn't a creative activity require the absence of restrictions?

²⁹ Self-awareness and conscious intention are required for a person to engage in certain activities, of course, such as making a promise or proposing marriage. I must know what I'm doing, in order truly to be promising or proposing on a specific occasion. That is not generally the case, however. More importantly, the existence of these exceptional cases leaves intact the fact that the *nature* of an activity does not depend on the attitudes of those engaged in it. For even promising or proposing is not *defined by* the attitudes of people who engage in those activities. It is because of the attitude-independent nature of promising and proposing that particular beliefs are required for a person to be engaged in them.

³⁰ Polanyi and Prosch point out that in certain spheres, we deliberately advise the imitation of others' good practices. A student of biology, for instance, is trained to emulate certain techniques that other practitioners employ. In the arts, by contrast, we look down on imitation, dismissing certain work as “derivative” while praising the “fresh voice.” All of which supports the idea that an artwork is intended to express the artist's point of view. *Meaning*, pp. 100-103.

While this aversion to “confining” art to a definition often stems from a professed respect for it, such unwillingness to identify art’s essence actually does art and artists a disservice. For it implies that no standards govern this field; any old trash qualifies. Art is ... whatever.

The point most germane to our purposes, again, is that art is innately expressive, while sport is not. Expression is at the heart of the artistic enterprise. To be a work of art is to be a meaning-carrier. This is what unites the ancient cave engravers and flute players and sculptors and story-tellers, then and since: they strive to *say* something. And even the least fussy, least philosophically-attuned dictionary definitions of art allude to this. Recall those characterizations of art works as “express[ing] important ideas” and being concerned with what is “of more than ordinary significance.”³¹ We often distinguish art from entertainment on precisely these grounds: entertainment amuses for its duration, but it has nothing to say, it conveys no larger idea.

3.4. Art Serves a Need

Finally, let me suggest a stronger hypothesis concerning art’s unique niche in our lives. Art serves a specific need in a way that sport does not. While my thinking on this is most influenced by Rand’s claim that art serves a need of man’s consciousness,³² numerous artists, critics, and others over the years have voiced the belief that art plays a vital, matchless role in a good human life. Art provides a reward that nothing else can. The composer Richard Wagner, for instance, wrote that through art, “all men are saved” and that men “may die of hunger for

³¹ These were in some of the dictionary definitions cited in the Introduction.

³² Rand writes that art serves a need that “is not a material need but a need of man’s consciousness. Art is inextricably tied to man’s survival – not to his physical survival, but to that on which his physical survival depends: to the preservation and survive of his consciousness.” “Psycho-Epistemology of Art,” p. 17. Rand did not directly address the relative value of art and sport.

her...”³³ Fellow composer Cecil Gray sees “the salvation of humanity through art.”³⁴ The author Isak Dinesen observes that “Stories have been told as long as speech has existed, and *sans* stories, the human race would have perished, as it would have perished *sans* water.”³⁵ While some of these professions might be intended more figuratively than literally, it would be a mistake to dismiss such testimonials to the profound power of art. Others posit art’s survival value from the vantage point of evolution and species fitness.³⁶ The point is, among artists, philosophers, scientists, as well as many in art’s audiences, one finds a chorus of conviction that something deep is at stake, in art. I agree.

While sport is capable of providing significant spiritual value to viewers, it does not provide an irreplaceable value; it is not essential to human well-being. As such, sport is an optional pursuit, a matter for individual taste, whereas art is a crucial value without which a person’s life would be qualitatively inferior. The reason is that art addresses a need that is shared universally and that is rooted in man’s nature.

A claim of need is, by its nature, a strong one. And in this case, the question seems sharp: Can we really have a need for *art*? Aren't Wagner and company being melodramatic? It might not be difficult to accept that man has spiritual needs along the lines suggested by my sketch of spiritual values much earlier. We are conscious beings who need to use our consciousness effectively, in order to meet our material needs and physically sustain ourselves. Consequently, the condition of our minds and outlooks – our thinking skills, emotional stability, self-confidence, and so on – matter in obvious ways to a person’s ability to flourish. The idea that human beings need a quotient of knowledge, pride, friendship and other spiritual values thus

³³ Richard Wagner, quoted at Goodreads.com,, <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/67810-i-believe-in-god-mozart-and-beethoven-and-likewise-their>

³⁴ Gray, quoted in Joseph Epstein, *A Literary Education*, Edinburg, VA: Axios Press, 2014, p. 262.

³⁵ This is spoken by the character of the cardinal in Dinesen’s story "The Cardinal's First Tale."

³⁶ The philosopher Denis Dutton makes this type of argument in *The Art Instinct – Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, Bloomsbury, 2009. See, for instance, pp. 5 and 25-26 for this general characterization of his view.

may seem fair enough.³⁷ Yet it is harder to vindicate a need for art, specifically. Why isn't art optional in the same way that an interest in golf is, or an interest in sport as a whole?

While I cannot fully answer that question here, I can sketch a line of reasoning that strongly supports it and is well worth investigating further.

The core of the case for art's irreplaceable value, I believe, rests in that which art distinctively provides, namely, a view of existence – a fundamental worldview, as I put it when discussing art's statement-making character in Section 3A. To explain, it is helpful to touch again on some of our earlier discussion and to set this in the context of Rand's broader thesis that man needs philosophy. The more particular claim about art is that he needs to experience philosophy *in 3-D*, so to speak. Man needs philosophy and he needs to encounter it in this perceptual form. It is the combination of what art provides and how it provides it that renders its value unique.

What a work of art provides is a belief concerning some of the most ground-floor, pivotal conditions of human existence. (Recall Dalrymple's claim that art "explains our existence to us.") Human beings go about their lives – and must go about their lives – on the basis of an at least implicit "big picture" outlook on life, a set of basic suppositions about the nature of the playing field in which we pursue our various ends as well as about the nature of the players. We operate with a set of working hypotheses concerning what is real in life and what is illusory, for instance, about what is permanent and what is transitory, what we can control and what we cannot, what we can know and what we cannot, what we should pay attention to and what we should care about. These sorts of issues are staples of philosophic inquiry.³⁸ Individual

³⁷ Bear in mind that a person does not need to be aware of a need in order to have that need. His reliance on calcium, iron or on certain non-physical goods (e.g., knowledge, self-confidence) does not hinge on his consciousness of that reliance.

³⁸ Rand elaborates on the need for philosophy as a need not for familiarity with specific figures or formal debates (such as the specific thought of David Hume or the lines of argument over free will), but the need for beliefs concerning certain of life's most fundamental questions in "Philosophy: Who Needs It," *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1982. Karen Armstrong, in analyzing the role of myth through human history, contends that human beings are "meaning-seeking beings." *A Short History of Myth*, in quoted in Michelle Valois, "From Imagination to Truth," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 9, 2015, p. B4.

works of art put beliefs about such things on display, objectifying answers on the canvas or on the stage. My suggestion is not that every composer or sculptor sets out with the express purpose, “I want to say thus and such about free will” or “I want to say that about man’s means of knowledge.” My contention, rather, is that to engage in the artistic enterprise – the deliberate crafting and presentation of an object for others’ contemplation – is to claim: *this* is the way the world is. Individual works obviously convey themes that vary vastly in their scope and significance and truth, but the point is that those themes concern philosophical issues. An artist, in the words of drama critic Terry Teachout, seeks “to tell the truth as he sees it,” “to see the world as it is, then show it to the rest of us with the transforming clarity that is beauty.” More simply, Teachout observes, “Art makes sense of life.”³⁹ Philosopher David Best concurs: art allows for nothing less than “the expression of a conception of life.”⁴⁰

It is not philosophical content alone that furnishes art’s unique value, however. The manner in which art presents its themes is also important. An artwork expresses not via linear, logical argument, by means of prose that reasons with the viewer, points to evidence, engages objections or considers alternatives. Art speaks not so much to our minds as to our senses and subconscious – to a man’s emotions, as people often remark, or to a man’s soul. Indeed, even to say that an artwork “speaks” to you can be misleadingly mild, for a powerful work can grip you, seize you; in certain encounters, the viewer seems to dissolve into the artwork, absorbed in the story, captivated by the drama, transported by the music. These metaphors seek to capture the depth of an artwork’s impact.⁴¹

Art provides a unique kind of *perspective* on our experience, Rand argues. Religions have long taken advantage of artistic forms to convey their doctrines through parables, paintings,

³⁹ Terry Teachout, remarks delivered on receiving the Bradley Prize, quoted in “Notable and Quotable,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2014.

⁴⁰ David Best, “Art and Sport,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 14, no. 2, 1980, p. 78.

⁴¹ Marcel Proust observed man’s ability to learn through agencies other than direct reasoning. See Epstein, p. 18.

music, and icons.⁴² Art is a way of making abstract ideas vivid and more easily graspable. Rand's contention is that man needs this perspective on the world. A man benefits by experiencing the abstractions of philosophy crystallized and realized in these perceptible ways. This is the unique value available in art.⁴³

Does this mean that art is propaganda? That its purpose is to promote a particular worldview? No. We need art not for philosophic content, but for its *way* of framing and presenting fundamental philosophical ideas. Man does need philosophical premises to live by, but that is not what he needs especially from art; it is not what art alone can give him. As I understand it, Rand's proposal is not that a person needs to see his own personal worldview portrayed in a work of art. Nor is it that a person needs to see true worldviews, to experience exclusively sound philosophical convictions through artistic media. There is value in experiencing art even when it does not chime with the viewer's personal worldview, she makes plain. Rather, a person needs to experience the most fundamental philosophical outlooks concretized in the unique form that a painting, a play, a song, etc., provides. The value lies in

⁴² Rand, "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," pp. 20-22.

⁴³ Rand develops these ideas through the more specific concepts of "metaphysical value judgments" and "sense of life," but for our purposes, I leave aside those more careful refinements of her basic view. For more on the inherently philosophical nature of art, see Mary Ann Sures, "Metaphysics in Marble," *The Objectivist*, February and March 1969, in *The Objectivist* vols 5-10, Irvine CA: Second Renaissance, pp. 602-608 and 618-624; Rand, "Art and Cognition," p. 45, and Leonard Peikoff, *Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, New York: Dutton, 1991, pp. 414-428.

experiencing such outlooks in a not purely intellectual way and in an essentialized way, shorn of the insignificant.⁴⁴

Bear in mind that a given artist, whatever his views and whatever his talents, *is* necessarily selective. Patchett’s “god” chooses what to portray, what to include, what to exclude, and precisely how to render each element. In its general method of creating self-contained objects for contemplation, an artwork cuts through the comparatively chaotic, fragmentary nature of a person’s experience to give pattern and shape to its myriad cross-currents.⁴⁵ As a technique, art distills. It presents the viewer with an uncluttered universe, allowing him to “see things clean.” Art offers a stylized vision of life.⁴⁶ Thus my claim is not that art should pitch a philosophical viewpoint. My claim is that it *does* – by virtue of its selectivity concerning both subject and style, in what it portrays and how it portrays it. Properly, art is not attempting to convince you of anything. It is simply showing you, saying: “This is how I see it. Take it or leave it, but: look at it.”

A work’s value *qua* art, therefore, does not lie in being a “content provider” that offers quality philosophy. It rests in *how* it sees and portrays and thereby enables the viewer to see. Art offers significant value, yet it is, at the same time, an end in itself. While I do mean to

⁴⁴ On art as *not* for the purpose of teaching, see especially Rand, “The Goal of My Writing,” *Romantic Manifesto*, pp. 169-170. Binswanger helpfully distinguishes what he calls the cognitive and motivational roles of art, p. 409. On the value of art whose philosophical upshot does not match the viewer’s, see Rand, “Art and Sense of Life,” pp. 41-43, “The Psycho-Epistemology of Art,” pp. 19-21, and “Favorite Writers,” which makes the point by implication, inasmuch as she praises the work of particular novelists, the substance of whose philosophical themes, she has in other writing made plain she disagrees with, *The Ayn Rand Column*, pp. 113-115. Also see Peikoff, “The Survival Value of Great (though Philosophically False) Art,” lecture available at <https://estore.aynrand.org/p/105/the-survival-value-of-great-though-philosophically-false-art-mp3-download>.

⁴⁵ Polanyi and Prosch, pp. 88, 101, 108. They also quote T.S. Eliot to this effect.

⁴⁶ See Rand, “Art and Sense of Life,” especially pp. 40-42, “Art and Cognition,” especially p. 65, and Peikoff, “The Survival Value of Great (though Philosophically False) Art.” Marcel Proust observed that “style is a question not of technique, but of vision.” Quoted in Cynthia J. Gamble, *Proust as Interpreter of Ruskin: The Seven Lamps of Translation*, Marcel Proust Studies volume 9, Summa Publications, 2002, p. 189.

illuminate a unique spiritual value of art, I do not mean that art is an instrumental value in the service of philosophy or clear thinking or any other intellectual mission. In our effort to understand the value of art more closely, it would be a mistake to lose what Steven Pinker captures when he refers to music as “auditory cheesecake.”⁴⁷ At its best, the experience of a work of art is *just nice*. Being with the artwork, being *there*, in those moments, is a fulfilling experience. It *is* valuable, I think, in bearing constructive relations to worthwhile ends, but that does not disqualify the experience from also being an end in itself.⁴⁸

Finally, it is important to underscore the radical different-ness of art. As the painter Edward Hopper once observed, “If you could say it in words, there would be no reason to paint.”⁴⁹ Art expresses in a way that philosophy cannot. Art’s mode of presenting fundamental philosophical convictions is different in kind from the means of philosophy and is not reducible to those means.⁵⁰ In analyzing the value of art, as we are in this essay, we employ the very tools of

⁴⁷ Stephen Pinker, *How the Mind Works*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1997, p. 534.

⁴⁸ Rand contends that “One of the distinguishing characteristics of a work of art (including literature) is that it serves no practical, material end, but is an end in itself; it serves no purpose other than contemplation—and the pleasure of that contemplation is so intense, so deeply personal that a man experiences it as a self-sufficient, self-justifying primary...” “The Psycho-Epistemology of Art,” p. 16. Note that something can be an end in itself while also providing specific kinds of benefit. For the enjoyment of benefits does not entail that those benefits are what the thing is *for*, i.e., that it is pursued as, or valuable as, an instrument *for the sake of* something else (viz., those benefits).

⁴⁹ Edward Hopper, quoted at website of Edward Hopper House Art Center, <http://www.edwardhopperhouse.org/2011.html>

⁵⁰ The “languages” of different arts are also different from one another. Eugene Delacroix posited “the music of the picture,” “a kind of emotion which is entirely particular to painting” and which the other arts cannot convey. Delacroix, quoted in Lincoln Perry, “The Music of Painting” *The American Scholar*, Summer 2014, p. 90.

philosophical analysis that art transcends. To appreciate the truly distinctive value of art, therefore, it is crucial to appreciate this.⁵¹

Much as we can analyze works of art in ways that illuminate their value, the direct experience of an artwork – *hearing* Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, *standing before* the Winged Victory, *watching* Antigone’s drama on stage – is something else. It is in no way like what you get from an essay making even the same substantive points. *Fiction makes it real*. Art (of all forms, not only fiction) makes abstract ideas about basic human conditions more accessible, more palpable, more riveting. It packages abstractions in a scale and dimension that can grip our minds and our very beings. In this, its spiritual value is unique.

4. Is Art More Valuable?

So is art better than sport?

The answer depends on the yardstick. “Better” by what measure? “Better” for what end? Having identified certain of art’s distinctive contributions, in order to assess the relative offerings of the two, it is instructive to consider (albeit, more briefly) some of sport’s special value.

4.1. Sport Showcases Rational Value-Pursuit

First, sport, in virtue of its structure – posing a well-defined mission as participants’ paramount objective, attainable only within definite physical boundaries, firm rules of conduct, a rigid time-frame – showcases rational value-pursuit. What the fan witnesses on-field and off in the efforts of players, coaches, scouts, and trainers throughout the season and off-season is the thoughtful, systematic, dedicated effort to achieve specific goals. Given that all of us pursue complicated networks of ends on an ongoing basis – ends of modest proportions or major, differing in their difficulty, duration, significance, and other respects – the chance to witness others engaged in goal-pursuit in the compressed, crystallized form that athletic events provide can be restful and restorative. Ordinary life affords relatively few occasions in which the

⁵¹ In this vein, consider Arthur Krystal’s praise of literature for sometimes offering “passages of verse and prose whose combinations of thought and language, of form and content, are so seamlessly integrated that the pleasure one derives from understanding the text is almost physiological in nature.” Krystal, “What We Lose if We Lose the Canon,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 5, 2015.

parameters and progress of our pursuits are so clear-cut. Sport, by contrast, offers results at the end of every outing; we see efforts through to completion – success or failure. Scoreboards and clocks have a simplicity and finality that progress reports on the overall status of an ordinary person’s life (consisting, as it does, of countless partially overlapping and partially cross-cutting developments entangling its myriad component ventures) frequently cannot. Watching others achieve – or fail to achieve, but attempt the challenge and earnestly try – provides a mirror on the kind of enterprise that we are all engaged in, in multiple spheres (career, finances, physical fitness, personal relationships, and so on). Subconsciously, we identify with the goal-seeker. Watching the gratuitous form of goal-pursuit that sport presents, I think, on which nothing consequential hinges, implicitly affirms the propriety of value-pursuit, as such. It helps the fan to appreciate that striving for values is itself a value – in principle, a good, beneficial thing.⁵²

4.2. Athletic Achievements Are Actual

Second, sport offers actual accomplishments on a regular basis. The achievements within the game are not fictional or imagined; the demonstrated virtues are not simply recommended by an artist’s play or poem; they are realized in fact, in a particular performance. The reality of individual players’ feats is a positive value that a work of art cannot give you.

Art provides its audience with an artist’s vision – which may resonate deeply and may be rendered exquisitely. Yet the artist’s ideas remain ideas. In sport, by contrast, Russell *blocked* that shot; Gibson *struck out* the batter with the bases loaded. When the heat was on, under real pressure, that player came through. The tension arises because events and outcomes can go either way and when people do great things, they truly do them. That is a different kind of majesty to behold. Obviously, the skill of an artist is actual and can itself repay contemplation. The theme of his work, however, however admirable or important that theme may be, remains trapped in the imagined, the conceived. It is an item of a consciousness rather than of existential reality.

Sports’ “bests” are not a figment of someone’s imagination. They are actual. One of the values of this is inspirational: if he can do it, perhaps I can do it (the “it” being anything

⁵² I develop this thesis in “What Are We Cheering?,” note 15 above.

challenging in a viewer's own life). This can be an empowering awareness. Even more basic, however, is the value in witnessing a difficult accomplishment or a superlative performance. For the sports viewer simply to reside in a universe in which such impressive feats take place (even within the confines of a game's artificial boundaries), is to enrich his existence – the enjoyment of his experience and his sense of what life offers.

4.3. Athletic Virtues Are Objectively Good

Finally, in sport, the qualities cheered are (for the most part) objectively good ones; they are the kinds of traits that should be applauded in applications throughout our lives. Because victory is difficult in ways that arise in many spheres of action and because only certain kinds of action tend to achieve that goal, sport trains many qualities that are beneficial beyond sport (such as discipline, level-headedness, perseverance, confidence, courage, focus). Artists' themes fall all over the map, often conveying outlooks that are anathema to a particular viewer or that are, in fact, misguided or corrosive. A work's quality as art – the quality of its statement-making, its efficacy at conveying its themes – does not ensure that its statement is either valid or valuable. Sport, however, by the nature of what it typically demands for success, tends to reward good character traits. Because it challenges athletes not only physically but mentally and emotionally (in dealing with adversity, for instance, or in dealing with the unexpected, or with other agents' actions and attitudes), sport calls upon skills that are valuable in many spheres. It is healthy to celebrate those. What fans typically find in sports is not simply *a* worldview,⁵³ in other words, but a good one, inasmuch as it features elements (e.g., causality, efficacy, justice) of an orderly, navigable universe in which good traits pay benefits and success is possible through their practice. The fan observes poor efforts and failure as well, of course, but by and large, over time, it is good traits that are rewarded. In this way, sport provides a positive and motivating view of life.

5. Conclusion

⁵³ Given my earlier denial that sport provides a worldview, I should note that I use that term loosely here. While some might contend that sports does convey a certain worldview, what is salient is that it is not the view of a particular person. Even the inventor of a game is inventing a game, rather than presenting a view of existence.

All this having been said, what should we conclude? Is either art or sport better than the other?

My purpose in undertaking this paper, as I noted at the outset, was not to stage a competition in order to anoint either sphere as superior. My aim, more modestly, was to consider the respective spiritual value that each offers, given questions that naturally arise due to their relative detachment from audiences' "real life" concerns. The fairest conclusion we can draw from this discussion is that art and sport each have a distinct reason for being and correlatively, a different contribution to make. Both help their viewers to make sense of the world, albeit in different ways.

At the same time, I suspect that art does this in a way that sport cannot and that art is, for that reason, a more crucial and universal value. What I mean is roughly this. Much as many people might gain from sport, it has ready substitutes. In order to obtain the spiritual value that sport offers, sport isn't the only game in town. The qualities that athletes and games display can be found in many other areas of life. People can cultivate the same virtues through non-athletic hobbies, productive work, social organizations of all sizes and purposes. They can admire fine practitioners in fields across the gamut of human activities. We do not need sport, in particular, in order to learn or to be inspired in the ways that sports can offer. Even if play or recreation or leisure are necessary for a healthy human life, sport is but one possible means of fulfilling those broader needs.

What art offers is not so easily found elsewhere, however. An art work's "philosophical take" through art's peculiar media, is *sui generis*. What it offers is different both from sport and from philosophy. Thus while certain benefits available from art and from sport do overlap, art also provides value that cannot be found in anything else. In this respect, the value of art is irreplaceable.

These last thoughts are speculative and I do not claim to have conclusively proven them here. My aim has been simply to begin exploring some of the similarities and differences in the spiritual value offered by art and sport.

Let me conclude by circling back to our opening observations. Art and sport are strikingly alike in how unlike real life they are. Each realm offers objects that engage viewers despite their utter detachment from those viewers' own practical affairs. The fact that audiences around

the globe pursue sports and the arts so passionately suggests that they are getting something out of them. I think that they are – a number of things, only glanced here. Both art and sport, I have contended, provide spiritual sustenance – in certain ways that are similar and in others, different. My belief is that by inspecting the two side by side, we can sharpen our appreciation of precisely what value each does and does not offer and thereby better understand where to look for what – so that we can reap all of their riches most fully.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ My thinking about these issues has benefitted from discussions with a number of people at different stages, at various workshops and conferences. I particularly thank Robert Mayhew, Onkar Ghate, Yaron Brook, Elan Journo, Shawn Klein, Arline Mann, Peter Schwartz, Sandra Schwartz, Harry Binswanger, Don Watkins, an anonymous referee from the journal, and participants at the IAPS meetings in Natal in September 2015.