The 'Corporate Cultural System': Examining the Twenty-First Century Business Practice of Constructing and Managing Meaning



Margarita Sanchez Montgomery
Lincoln College
University of Oxford

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Theology and Religious Studies
Hilary 2022

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Abstract

This thesis brings the fields of Business Studies and Religious Studies into dialogue to examine the contemporary corporate practice of the manufacturing and management of 'meaning.' In particular, it explores how the practitioners, academics, and consultants who make up the business community *conceptualize* companies' meaning-making activity. What do they consider corporate 'meaning' to be, how do they understand the work to construct it, and what ends do they believe it can support?

This thesis studies the language and practice of the business community across three distinct contexts in which the corporate business is perceived to participate in meaning-making activity. First, in the marketplace arena, where corporations can create meaning for consumers through the construction of a resonant commercial brand. Second, in the workplace arena, where a corporation's intentionally cultivated employee culture can stabilize, energize, or mobilize the employee community to support strategic goals. And finally, in the societal arena, where crafted corporate morals can guide a business' activities in a way that can positively impact the world.

The primary contribution of this thesis is its identification, across these discrete contexts, of consistent and coherent internal formulations about corporate meaning. I show that in each arena, the business community understands companies to construct what they perceive to be a system of symbols that promotes a particular worldview and inscribes certain patterns of behavior. While this formulation is resonant of anthropologist Clifford Geertz's theory of religion as a 'cultural system', the distinction is that the *Corporate Cultural System*, as I call it, is professionally crafted compared to the self-sustaining cultural system of Geertz.

In addition to enabling the identification of this theoretical construct for the first time, throughout, ideas from Religious Studies allow us to parse a more dimensional and critical understanding of the myths, meanings, motivations, and morals crafted within corporate contexts.

Cui dono lepidum novum labellum

To Granddad (affectionately, 'G-Dad'),
Rev. Dr. Robert L. Montgomery

For showing me the real meaning of religion, and encouraging a lifelong, joyful dance with the questions of who we are and what we believe.

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Abstract

This thesis brings the fields of Business Studies and Religious Studies into dialogue to examine the contemporary corporate practice of manufacturing and managing 'meaning.' In particular, it explores how the industry professionals, academics, and consultants who make up the business community *conceptualize* companies' meaning-making activity. Throughout, I apply ideas from Religious Studies to support the examination of such conceptualizations, unpicking perceptions of corporate myths, motivations, and morals, along with how they work and what impacts they can achieve.

The primary contribution of this thesis is its identification of consistent and coherent internal formulations about corporate meaning. I show that the business community understands companies to construct a system of symbols that promotes a particular worldview and inscribes certain patterns of behavior. This formulation, I argue, resembles anthropologist Clifford Geertz's theory of religion as a 'cultural system', with the distinction being that the *Corporate Cultural System (CCS)*, as I call it, is professionally crafted compared to the self-sustaining cultural system of Geertz. Throughout this thesis, additional theories of religion, including those posited by Max Weber and Émile

Durkheim, offer further dimension to the construct by explaining its various applications observed within contemporary business practice.

To make this argument, I study business community discourse across three distinct contexts in which the corporation is perceived to participate in meaning-making activity: the marketplace, the workplace, and society at large. This thesis is structured to mirror this method, with each of its three core chapters focusing on a different context.

Chapter One serves to introduce the core theoretical construct of the Corporate Cultural System through an examination of how corporate meaning is understood within the marketplace. I argue that within this arena, the work of meaning-making occurs at the site of the corporate 'brand'; and that the business community has focused on the theorizations of Geertz, conceptualizing the commercial brand to resemble a complex cultural system of symbols. Through several examples—including the cases of Budweiser, PlayStation, and Dove, among others—I explore the professional production (and reproduction) of brand worldviews, ethics, and symbolic systems. This construction process reveals that brand meaning is crafted to resonate with the existential desires and tensions of consumers, with the hope of influencing their engagement patterns with the corporation (chiefly, the purchase of its product). The chapter concludes with a reflection on why the business community appears to show preference for the anthropology of Geertz. I suggest his theorizations' eschewing of the authoritative status of symbols and cultures, especially when constructed, might prove useful to the business community, which tends to avoid such reflection on the power of their own positions.

Chapter Two takes on another business context, this time the more internally focused one of the corporate workplace. I argue the meaning-focused activity within this organizational arena is concerned with the crafting and intentional cultivation of a corporation's 'employee culture.' The business community's conceptualization of this culture again resembles a Geertzian system of symbols, with its hallmark of 'worldview' and 'ethos' approximating what a corporation calls its 'purpose' and 'core values.' Through the examples of Nike, Airbnb, and Hyatt, among others, I show how this formulation of the CCS in the workplace is identical to the marketplace one the first chapter discussed, but with the key elaboration that it introduces a more social dimension to the framework. I show how the crafted CCS is constructed either to 'energize' employees and support social integration within the workplace or to 'mobilize' them and ignite a strategic revolution within the organization. In these formulations, the business community appears to draw on the ideas of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, respectively—again signaling a pronounced social priority for the CCS within the workplace. This chapter concludes with a reflection on how, when confronted with question of how to organize the *corporation*, the business community turns to theorists' ideas on how to organize *society*. The result is that the corporate workplace appears to be conceptualized as a quasi-society itself, within which the Corporate Cultural System can support social maintenance and/or transformation.

The final chapter of this dissertation looks at the meaning-making activity within a third realm, that of corporate social responsibility. Here, the corporation's role in and relationship with society at large is considered. The chapter traces a comparatively recent discourse shift occurring among the business community that relocates the social

obligation of business from the periphery of corporate activity to the very core of its operation. Businesses that operate in this way are considered to reflect a more 'conscious' form of capitalism that can create prosperity for humanity and solve some of the world's biggest problems. The primary argument of the chapter is that, within this context, a familiar CCS is crafted to reflect this moral, world-changing perspective. I show how IKEA, Nestlé, and PayPal, among others construct a Corporate Cultural System in identical fashion to the practice observed within the marketplace and workplace arenas. The distinction is that the embrace of a *moral* CCS is perceived to enable a corporation to not just sell more products or make an organization more efficient: a corporation's moral cultures can positively impact the world at large—and even reinject morality and meaning into a society considered devoid of it. I conclude by commenting on how this moral instance of the Corporate Cultural System applies to both the 'outside' marketplace and the 'inside' workplace, and thus might point toward a blurring and expanding of previous boundaries of activity.

After summarizing the argument of this dissertation—that the business community understands the corporation to manufacture and manage meaning through what I call the Corporate Cultural System (CCS)—the Conclusion traces two possible implications and lines of enquiry forward. The first is the idea of an emerging theory of the firm centered around 'meaning' and its management. The second observes how the Corporate Cultural System framework might (and indeed, already appears to) escape the corporation to a wider field of activity. This epilogue continues to shed light on both why and how companies are engaging in meaning-making activity while also pointing to avenues for continued scholarly exploration.

"[Brands] tell us stories about our place in culture—about where we are and where we've been. They also help us figure out where we're going…they're now navigation and identity devices. They've transcended their transactional economic function… The zealous attachment people have to certain brands makes me wonder if Apple could be a religion."[1]

-Wally Olins, Founder and former Chairman, Wolff Olins

"We can see organizations not only as places where we gather to get work done, but as symbolic expressions, as displays of meaning as well as representations of the search for meaning…We realize that organizations are symbolic forms like religion and folklore; they are displays of the meaning of life."[2]

-Linda Smircich, Professor of Management, University of Massachusetts

"Are you infectious? As a [business] you can't always outspend established competitors, but you can out-evangelize them. You can infect people with your sense of mission and inspire them to join your crusade."[3]

-Roy Spence, Co-Founder and Chairman, GSD&M

"This idea of managing by mission and values is the most powerful thing we did as a company to be successful… It was the only way to do this turnaround. If you don't have great talent inspired by what you've set out to do, it doesn't matter how good your strategy is."[4]

-Dan Schulman, Chief Executive Officer, PayPal

"The only thing that's comparable to religions in the modern world is multi-national corporations. If you look at the structure of multi-national corporations and religion, they're eerily similar. Branding, discipline, etc. Except they do different things. Religions are feeding our soul; and companies tend to be in a more physical space selling us shoes or shipping us cement."[5]

-Alain De Botton, author, *Religion for Atheists*

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[1] Debbie Millman and Rob Walker, *Brand Thinking and Other Noble Pursuits* (Allworth Press, 2013), 141.

[2] Linda Smircich, "Is the Concept of Culture a Paradigm for Understanding Organizations and Ourselves?," in *Organizational Culture*, eds. P. Frost *et al.* (Sage, 1985), 66.

[3] "Does Your Business Have a Purpose? With Roy Spence," *Mixergy*, accessed 19 March 2021, https://mixergy.com/startup-purpose-roy-spence-jr/.

[4] Michael Porter, Mark Kramer, and Annelena Lobb, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," HBS no. 9-721-378 (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2020), 9.

[5] Alain De Botton, *Religion for Atheists*: *A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion* (Vintage, 2013), 280.

INTRODUCTION

Management and Meaning: Bringing the Disciplines of Business and Religion into Conversation

I. Overview of Primary Question and Argument

At first glance, the fields of Religious Studies and Business Studies stand in stark contrast to one other.[1] The former—constituted by theories of myths and symbols, rituals and beliefs, moralism and aesthetics—grapples with enigmatic ideas of how people experience and express the meaning of life; the latter—preoccupied with study of organizational operations and efficiency tactics, market dynamics and strategy—puts

[1] What Religious Studies is and is not is contested, but Robert Segal usefully lays out these debates along with the range of approaches (*e.g.* anthropology, economics, literature, philosophy, sociology, and theology) and topics (*e.g.* fundamentalism, magic, and new religious movements) the field encompasses in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (Blackwell Publishing, 2006). Business Studies is a similarly sprawling field, but at its most basic, offers ideas about economic activities, with various focus (*e.g.* accounting, marketing, branding, innovation, human resources, organizational management, leadership, governance, and strategy). For an overview of academic Business Studies see *e.g.,* Lars Engwall and Linda Weldin, "Business Studies and Management Ideas," in *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*, eds. Andrew Sturdy *et al.* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 160-73.

front and center the empirical study of how companies maximize the profit they generate.[2] And yet, despite the apparent contrast of these wider fields of study, the business community, made up of both industry professionals and academics, is asking questions that seem to belong more aptly in a Religious Studies department: how do companies and their managers create myths for understanding the world, draw together and energize communities of people, build 'meaning' about human lives, influence action of an audience, and even change the world?

By bringing the fields of Business Studies and of Religious Studies into dialogue, this DPhil thesis hopes to shed light on corporate activity explicitly focused on 'meaning.' Its preoccupation is with the *perception* of such meaning and its functions, or with the internal formulations of those professionals and academics expounding on or engaging in what they consider activities intended to manufacture and manage 'meaning' for various audiences. Specifically, this thesis sets out to answer how ideas from Religious Studies can help us more holistically understand the business community's conceptualizations of the myths, meanings, motivations, and morals crafted within corporate contexts, along with perceptions of how they work and what impacts they can achieve.

[2] I define 'company' rather broadly as a legal entity formed by a group of individuals to engage in and operate a business enterprise in a commercial or industrial capacity. Throughout this thesis, I will use company, corporation, and corporate enterprise interchangeably to mean the same thing (Cf. Sturdy *et al.*, *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*). As a legal entity, the corporation is bound to generate returns for shareholders, or the owners of the company. The Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is the top manager accountable to the board of directors, who represent interests of shareholders for publicly traded companies; the executive's role is often viewed as a fiduciary one, overseeing the company as if a proxy for the owners themselves.

I build my argument by looking at how these themes arise in three distinct arenas of corporate activity where the business community considers 'meaning' most prominently: branding and marketing (meaning in the marketplace); organizational management (meaning in the workplace); and corporate social responsibility (meaning in society at large). Applying the theoretical toolkit of Religious Studies, I examine the rhetoric and language of the business community within these discrete arenas to reveal, across them, a single frame for understanding the meaning-focused activity of businesses: some companies craft what they perceive to be a system of symbols that promotes a particular worldview and inscribes certain patterns of behavior. This formulation, I argue, resembles anthropologist Clifford Geertz's theory of religion as a 'cultural system', with the distinction being that the *Corporate Cultural System*, as I call it throughout, is professionally crafted compared to the self-sustaining cultural system of Geertz.[3]

The introduction of the Corporate Cultural System construct is the primary theoretical contribution of this thesis. My central argument is that this construct captures the business community's internal formulations of what corporate meaning is, the strategic purposes it is believed to support, and the process by which it is constructed.

Each chapter works to escalate this theoretical frame, augmenting it within new boundaries, audiences, and conditions of the corporation's activity—from driving brand engagement to coordinating the workforce to creating positive social impact. A range of classic theories of religion, including those proposed by Émile Durkheim to those of Max

[3] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 87–125.

Weber, enable us to parse how the CCS is produced and deployed to different ends across these corporate contexts. Overall, I hope to show that the coherent conceptualization of the CCS across these various applications makes clear a relatively recent elevation of 'meaning' and its management in modern business practice.

II. Background: The Treatment of 'Meaning' in Religious Studies and Business Studies

i. Worldviews, Webs, and the Meaning of 'Meaning'

The concept of 'meaning' is inherently an amorphous one. Many brilliant and careful thinkers on religion have set themselves the task of grappling with how meaning works in people's lives and society; indeed, defining frames of meaning has traditionally been the work of defining 'religion' itself. And yet, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith famously points out in his book *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1963), 'religion' inadequately captures the living, endlessly variable ways and traditions by which meaning presents itself in the world. He argues that it is "not presumptuous to hold that no definition… so far proposed has proven compelling, no generalization has come anywhere near to adequacy" for capturing the experience and expression of meaning.[4] Indeed, this problem

[4] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 11.

of definition, of both religion and of meaning, itself "may throw some light on the kind of thing with which we are dealing."[5]

Even admitting the challenges of pinning down what is meant by 'meaning', the approaches adopted by the fields of the phenomenology of and anthropology of religion provide a useful entry point. As a broad concern, these fields see meaning as something that cannot be understood from the outside, but rather only from within.[6] Emphasizing the experiential aspect of religion, mid-century phenomenologists like Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) and Ninian Smart (1927-2001) focused on organic morphologies of meaning that self-generate and are symbolic in nature. Eliade, one of the most renowned expositors of the experience of religion, mythology, and magic, shows that human beings encounter and participate in the sacred through religious symbols, which "express simultaneously a number of meanings whose continuity is not evident on the plane of immediate experience."[7] Smart, similarly, elevates "the symbolic life of human beings as a whole" and emphasizes the idea of worldviews. [8] In literal terms, 'worldview' refers to the picture of the world, with each culture or religion having its own kind of lens through

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[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Smith's claims about the shortcomings of the study of religion hinge on a similar notion: that attempts to understand "a transcendent and concerned reality" from the outside is filled with "subterfuge, hypocrisy, or anachronism" (*Ibid.*, 9).

[7] Mircea Eliade, "Methodological Remarks on the Study of Religious Symbolism," in *History of Religions*, eds. Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa (University Press, 1959), 99. In *Images and Symbols*, originally written in 1952 and translated from the original French in 1991 by Philop Mairet, Eliade describes symbols as "multivalent", containing "a whole bundle of meanings" (p.15).

[8] Ninian Smart, "The Philosophy of Worldviews, or the Philosophy of Religion Transformed," in *Religious Pluralism and Truth Essays on Cross-cultural Philosophy of Religion,* ed. Thomas Dean (1995), 31. This article reiterates a major thesis of Smart's *Worldviews*: *Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs* (University of California Press, 1983). Similar to Smith, Smart calls for an overhaul of the philosophy of religion that would have it abandon its traditional focus on Western (mostly Christian) theism. He calls for the extension of the philosophy of religion in favor of what he terms the "philosophy of worldviews."

which the world is seen and understood. In the hands of Smart, worldview (whether secular or religious) captures the defining human values that drive the engines of both continuity and change worldwide.[9]

These phenomenologists' way towards an explanation of meaning dovetails with the seminal work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006). Geertz's seminal essay "Religion as a Cultural System" from his anthology *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) develops the cultural dimension of the analysis of religion.[10] Like the phenomenologists, Geertz emphasizes "webs of meaning" and also the need to study them from the inside, famously saying anthropologists "don't study villages", but rather "*in* villages."[11] (His theories also incorporate a concept of worldview, as will be discussed later in this introductory chapter and throughout this thesis). However, unlike the phenomenologists, he usefully applies interpretive social science to gain access to the structures of meaning in which subjects live:

> "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 an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical."[12]

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[9] That the contents of these beliefs have the capacity to set the direction of whole civilizations reflects the idea of 'worldview' proffered by German sociologist Max Weber (1893-1920). Chapter Two will further engage Weber's thinking on the topic.

[10] For the influence of Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, and others on Geertz's work, see Robert Segal, "Weber and Geertz on the Meaning of Religion," *Religion* 29, no. 1 (1999): 61-71.

[11] *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 22.

[12] *Ibid.,* 5.

Geertz's goal and justification for the use of interpretive methods is to discover "the frames of meaning with which people enact their lives", "to discover what people think they are, what they think they are doing, and to what end they think they are doing it."[13] He argues that these meanings are found in implicit "texts": in institutions, actions, events, and customs, in both symbols and practices, which Geertz believed reinforce each other.[14] Geertz was adamant, in other words, that meaning should not be searched for in people's minds or in their hearts, but rather in symbols that are socially established.[15] Cultural analysis, then, centers upon the search for these carriers of meaning that are part of every social group. By interpreting the use of symbols, Geertz clarifies the webs of meaning in which people were suspended, and makes anthropology an exercise in interpreting the cultures of its subjects, by reconstructing their symbolic systems.[16]

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[13] Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton University Press, 2000), 16. For the main critiques of Geertz's interpretive approach to culture, see William Sewell, "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation," *Representations* 59 (1997): 35-55.

[14]These 'texts' are seen as readable, so that researchers might make sense of how others interpret their world. Geertz's famous study of the Balinese cockfights, for example, shows how the Balinese word for 'cock' has the same sexual innuendo it has in English, and he found that the deep identification of Balinese men with their roosters translates into cockfights in which individuals and entire villages are socially invested beyond the momentary value of the contest. See "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *Interpretation of Cultures*, 412-53, esp. 417 on the cock symbol.

[15] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 12.

[16] This conceptual world of symbols is important to social scientists because it is central to understanding what motivates action: for Geertz, "Culture is the fabric of meaning in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their action; social structure is the form that action takes, the actually existing network of social relations" (*The Interpretation of Cultures,* 145).

In terms of theoretical framework, this thesis draws on cultural thinking focusing on meanings and symbolism—on ecosystems of meaning that can be interpreted, from within, through the attempt to reconstruct and decipher symbolic systems. The primary distinction is that the frames of meaning with which I am concerned are *crafted*, rather than organic, self-generating ones. Indeed, corporate actors see themselves as something akin to weavers of corporate webs of significance and this dissertation will focus on the corporate process of constructing such webs.

ii. Religious Studies and the Business of Meaning

Framing the concern of Religious Studies is a tricky enterprise (indeed, most handbooks spend their time trying to etch some definition of the subject), but I am convinced by Robert Segal's description of the field as one exploring the connection between religion and "the rest of human life—to culture, society, the mind, the economy."[17] Exploring the connection between religion and business or capitalism more broadly has a long history in the field, but the topic of the corporation is primarily engaged to discuss religion's encounter with modernity. In her book *Consuming Religion* (2017), Kathryn Lofton argues that the terms *religion* and *corporation* frame similar enterprises. On the one hand, organizations "denoted as religions possess marketing strategies and consumer interests." [18] This claim follows a line of inquiry in the study of popular culture and

[17] Segal, *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion*, xviii. Cf. Walter Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2000); Graham Ward, "Introduction: Where We Stand," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Wiley, 2005).
[18] Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 7.

religion that suggests religion today is (or at least resembles) the corporate entity. Mara Einstein's *Brands of Faith* (2007), for example, sees religion as yet another branded product sold in the consumer marketplace, and Jean-Claude Usunier and Jörg Stolz's survey, *Religions as Brands* (2014), traces the historical evolution of the relationship between consumer culture and religion to arrive at the same conclusion.[19]

However, Lofton's statement also suggests that the inverse relationship between religion and the corporation is true: that the corporation is (or at least resembles) religion. Whether Proctor & Gamble, Disney, or Oprah Inc., the corporation, "inscribes practices and promotes worldviews beyond the applied scope of their product."[20] This statement can be situated within a wider conversation around secularization taking place in Religious Studies that sees our 'secular' age not as one increasingly lacking certain forms of religious polity and ideation, but as one "indelibly intertwining" the religious and the secular.[21] In this view, capitalism, popular culture, and as Lofton posits, the corporation itself, can be considered as at least 'quasi-religious' and at most a kind of modern religion.[22] Illustrating the plurality of nuanced definitions scholars have argued for, David Chidester's *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (2005) suggests "the

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[19] Mara Einstein, *Brands of Faith: Marketing Religion in a Commercial Age* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Jean-Claude Usunier and Jörg Stolz, *Religions as Brands: New Perspectives on the Marketization of Religion and Spirituality* (Routledge, 2014).

[20] Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 7. Cf. Jesper Kunde and B. Cunningham, *Corporate Religion* (Financial Times Prentice Hall, 2002); Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (University of California Press, 2011).

[21] See *e.g.*, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 15.

[22] On capitalism and religion, see *e.g.*, Francis Ching-Wah Yip, *Capitalism as Religion? A Study of Paul Tillich's Interpretation of Modernity* (Harvard Divinity School, 2010). On popular culture and religion, see *e.g.*, Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby, *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Sage, 1997).

global religion of Coca-Cola revolves around a sacred object, the fetish of Coca-Cola, which is both a desired object and the objectification of desire", while McDonalds, "anchored in a sacred institution, a 'cathedral of capitalism'… might be regarded as a powerful sectarian movement within a broader 'consumer religion.'"[23] Similarly, sociologists Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman wrote in 2010 of the rise of "bricolage" religion, inextricably connected to modern consumer capitalism and the room it created for a robust spiritual marketplace: "The erosion of the Christian monopoly", they write, "has created a "market" where "religious consumers construct strictly personal packages of meaning, based on individual tastes and preferences."[24]

As these and other examples demonstrate, the bulk of Religious Studies literature involving the corporation sets out to consider religion's encounter with modernity, and in so doing it often raises foundational questions about the very concept of 'religion' today. While I have gained much from this scholarship, it is worth explicitly stating at the outset that, though situated within the same field, I do not intend to take up the same priorities as these predecessors. My interest is not to argue that religion is some kind of business or that the business is some kind of religion, nor do I mean to investigate how religious experiences shape and are shaped by modernity. While still informed by Lofton's assertion that the corporation and religion frame similar enterprises, this dissertation follows another line of inquiry that explores the *explanatory* relationship between the corporation and theories of religion. In other words, how might the theoretical and methodological toolkit of Religious Studies usefully illuminate how

[23] David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (University of California Press, 2005), 135, 139.
[24] Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman, *Religion of Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 5.

corporations create myths for understanding the world, draw together a community of followers, support the manufacturing of identities, and build meaning about society and about human lives? This explanatory prerogative emphasizes how we can better understand the business community's perceptions of what the corporate entity is, and how it works through the lens of thinking on religions.

iii. Business Studies and the Meaning of Business

This interest in the construction of meaning systems is not unfamiliar within Business Studies. Since the foundation of the field in the early 1900s, business scholars and practitioners alike have showed deep concern for how themes of meaning—including beliefs, values, purpose, identity, belonging, community, symbols, myths, morals, social action, social structure, culture, and even religion, among others—might aid in the work of managing a business. As the quotations at the outset of this introductory chapter show, whether attempting to tug at the heartstrings of consumers by crafting brands that speak to their deepest, existential desires or writing corporate mission statements to energize the workforce around a shared purpose for their work, the study of business has always recognized 'meaning' as one of many levers of corporate management.

As we shall see, early ideas pertaining to meaning within Business Studies were rather functionalist and mechanical, focused on a top-down management and a sense that meaning could be imposed upon people to affect social action. However, this perception changed during the economic downturn of the 1970s. Business leaders were searching for ways to cope with new constraints and opportunities posed by their changing

operating environments and the cultural explanations for social phenomenon that marked the so-called 'cultural turn' in wider academic study during this period offered new ideas.[25] As an early social anthropologist in Business Studies, Malcolm Chapman remembers that while "[in] those early days, culture was engaged too broadly to succeed in distinguishing anything", it nonetheless "elevated a concern with practices and relationships to which meanings, symbols, and representations are central, and where these patterns give meaning to, and orient social behavior within, a particular group."[26] Rather than a functionalist perception of culture, a more semiotic understanding, not dissimilar from that of the scholars of religion discussed above, gained appeal. We will see throughout the following chapters a marked shift in the nature of cultural thinking held by the corporate business community around this time. Regardless of the topic of their focus, business thinkers and practitioners began to prioritize the agency of their audiences as interpreters of culture, and as a result, they demoted discussion of the practice of meaning management in favor of studying how people consume and interpret these cultures. To put it another way, how meaning is *made* by a company's audiences was elevated over how it is *constructed* by corporate actors.

We might see the scholarship in this vein as developing within three arenas, each of which concerns a discrete location of corporate activity, and which collectively overlap with the

[25]See *e.g.*, Larry Ray and Andrew Sayer, *Culture and Economy After the Cultural Turn* (Sage, 1999); Michael Rowlinson and John Hassard, "History and the Cultural Turn in Organizational Studies," in *Organizations in Time: History, Theory, Methods*, eds. Marcelo Bucheli and Daniel Wadhwani (Oxford University Press, 2013). On the cultural turn generally, see Peter Burke, *What Is Cultural History?* (Polity, 2008), 2.

[26] Ray and Sayer, *Culture and Economy After the Cultural Turn*, 4.

structure of this thesis.[27] The first of these arenas is the marketplace, where social and economic action takes place through the exchange of goods.[28] Most relevant for studying meaning-making in the marketplace is the notion of the commercial brand.[29] By 'brand', I mean the animation of the corporation in the consumer marketplace.[30] I use the term 'consumers' to indicate anyone who engages with these brand touchpoints and creates significance from them; consumers might include 'customers' or any potential or actual purchaser of a company's products, but this category is not limited to them.[31] 'Branding' is the intentional corporate activity to shape (and reshape) a brand into a particular animation that might be meaningful to consumers and thus drive engagement with the corporation or purchase of its products; in practitioner parlance, branding is often referred to as a process of "bringing the brand to life."[32]

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[27] This Introduction provides a cursory overview of these three arenas, but each chapter deals more widely and discursively with their main topics, theorists, and debates.

[28] On the marketplace, see Roger Friedland and Alexander Robertson, *Beyond the Marketplace: Rethinking Economy and Society* (Transaction Publishers, 1990), which frames the marketplace as where "the pursuit of economic meaning in society" and "the pursuit of social meaning in the economy" occur (p.3).

[29] For a synthesizing overview of research addressing the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological aspects of consumption, see Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson's article "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research", *The Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 4 (March 2005): 868–88. Chapter One engages more substantially with CCT, or the family of theoretical perspectives that explore the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings.

[30] On brand, see P. Mishra and M. Kumar, "What Is a Brand? A Perspective on Brand Meaning," *European Journal of Business and Management* 4, no. 3 (2012): 122-33. On marketing, see Philip Kotler and Kevin Lane Keller, *Marketing Management* (Pearson Education, 2015); Saïd Business School, "Marketing," accessed 17 March 2021, https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/research/research-areas/marketing.

[31] My definition of consumer and customer follows those developed by Arnould and Thompson, "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)," *passim.*

[32] Sidney Levy and Wilson Bastos, "A History of the Concept of Branding: Practice and Theory," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* (2012).

A second arena concerned with corporate meaning is the workplace. Rather than a focus on consumers, a subfield known as organizational management—or the study of behavior and performance at the organization, team, and individual levels—centers the employee audience.[33] Studies prioritize the inner workings of a business, including a corporation's 'employee culture' (sometimes called 'corporate culture'), a "detectable and distinctive organizational variable, factor, or asset" that can shape a positive, productive organizational environment or inhibit it.[34] Crafting this workplace culture is the meaning-focused corporate activity in this arena.

And finally, the third arena of corporate activity we might discern focuses on the meaning of business in society at large.[35] The body of academic work exploring this context is framed around the idea of 'corporate social responsibility', which grapples with how the activities of organizations and markets relate to issues beyond creating financial value alone. Especially recently, discussions of corporate ethics, morality, and even consciousness explore the relationship between business and society.[36] Such frames suggests that the "purpose of business is not to create profit [but instead] to create profitable solutions to the problems of people and planet."[37] The meaning-focused

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[33] On definitions, discussions, and debates within organizational studies, see Catherine Casey, *Critical Analysis of Organizations: Theory, Practice, Revitalization* (Sage, 2002).

[34] Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman, and Hugh Willmott, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 234.

[35] Andrew Crane *et al.*, *The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[36] See Saïd Business School, "Impact," accessed 17 March 2021, https://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/ research/ research-areas/impact.

[37] Colin Mayer, *Prosperity: Better Business Makes the Greater Good* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 109.

corporate activity in this arena is the development and display of corporate morals that can drive positive impact in the world in addition to growing a business' profits.

Though these three arenas of corporate activity—the marketplace, the workplace, and society at large—have adopted a language of and interest in ideas of meaning, the theme to observe for now is one of fracture. During the cultural turn, ideas about meaning were introduced broadly as a new element to contemporary debates, but the influence of this trend did not, like it did in other fields, fundamentally reshape Business Studies. Many have commented that business academia and business school curricula alike have calcified around a largely functional focus and were never fundamentally reformed or recategorized as a result of the 1970s cultural turn, as other fields were.[38] Instead, ideas of culture (and with it, the themes of meaning I am interested in) have developed independently within the various niche subfields of Business Studies and professional practice that I have overviewed.

Overall, then, we might characterize the existing, recent literature on corporate meaning as first, focused on the consumption of meaning, and second, as fractured across many niches of Business Studies. This thesis takes precisely the opposite orientation to the

[38] Malcolm Chapman, "Preface," *International Studies of Management & Organization* 26, no. 4 (December 1996): 7-9. Heavily influenced by North American thought and practice, it is not surprising that business and management studies have been strongly shaped by the behavioral and positivist tendencies in North American social sciences. See also Donald Coleman, "The Uses and Abuses of Business History," *Business History* 29, no. 2 (1987): 141-56; David Grant *et al.*, *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse* (Sage, 2004); Stephen Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 34-5, 280. It is also easy to demonstrate that this model has been overwhelmingly dominant in management education, which produces management professionals that adopt and practice particular foundations. See *e.g.*, Stewart Clegg and Anne Ross-Smith, "Revising the Boundaries: Management Education and Learning in a Postpositivist World," *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 2, no. 1 (2003): 85–98.

same topic. I examine the intentional *construction* of meaning, a topic that became less fashionable as postmodern questions of power and culture made a conceptualization of its top-down management problematic.[39] And yet, as we shall see, corporate professionals are certainly crafting ecosystems of meaning for various audiences. While study of this activity can be grouped according to the various arenas that I have defined (the marketplace, the workplace, and society), the larger suggestion of this thesis is that these arenas blur together when constructing meaning is elevated as a management priority. The result is a more holistic perspective on the corporation as an entity concerned with meaning than has previously been foregrounded in Business Studies.

To be sure, not all corporate entities exhibit the perception and practice of meaning management I attempt to illustrate. The case studies that support the development of my argument reflect a particular kind of leading-edge corporation.[40] Budweiser, PlayStation, Starbucks, Dove, Nike, Facebook, Netflix, Airbnb, Hyatt, IKEA, Nestlé, and PayPal are not your average companies; they each exhibit strong cultural capital and cache as primarily direct-to-consumer, transnational companies with an American and European orientation. Nonetheless, I hope this thesis argues that these examples might be seen as signals of an emerging conceptualization of the corporation as a meaning-focused entity.

Indeed, I hope this project might shed new light on how the business community considers the manufacture and management of meaning as fundamental to the

[39] *Ibid.* Cf. Ray and Sayer, *Culture and Economy After the Cultural Turn*.

[40] My examination of these case studies follows the method put forward in David Strang and Christian Wittrock, "Methods for Study of Management Ideas," in *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*, eds. Andrew Sturdy *et al.* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 94-100.

corporation as a whole. Though my Religious Studies approach is certainly unusual, welcoming theories of religion for an explanatory purpose contributes to a category (or, a movement, as some consider it) of business research known as Critical Management Studies (CMS).[41] CMS questions the authority and relevance of mainstream thinking and practice, focusing on 'management' as a pervasive institution, rather than as a group or as a function, entrenched within capitalist economic formations. This movement arose from the commonplace observation (discussed above) that much of the business field is organized primarily around a positivist, scientific model.[42] Working paradigms within business, as I have underscored, become held up by a network of academics, executives, consultants, and publishers who continue to affirm certain models of thinking and practice. CMS, then, is concerned with disentangling this web of influence which is somewhat unique to business scholarship; it is "the study *of*, and sometimes *against*, management rather than with the development of techniques or legitimations *for* management."[43] In its observation, explanation, and critique of the business community's internal paradigms of corporate meaning, this thesis aligns itself with this larger CMS movement.

[41] For an excellent introduction to CMS, see Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman, and Hugh Willmott, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
[42] See above, note 38.
[43] Alvesson *et al.*, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies*, 1.

III. Method Overview and Demonstration

i. Method Overview and Personal Experiences Informing This Work

As I began this project, I sought to identify an entry point to my guiding question by embarking on a wide-aperture exploration of corporate activity. I observed that language like 'meaning', 'mission', 'vision', 'purpose', 'responsibility', 'rituals', 'identity', 'culture', 'community', 'values', and 'ethics' appeared most prominently in the three parts of the Business Studies field discussed above: branding and marketing (meaning in the marketplace); organizational management (meaning in the workplace); and corporate social responsibility (meaning in society). Use of this language signaled to me the business community's interest in, and grappling with, some kind of higher-order corporate activity beyond a focus purely on business operation itself. I build my argument, then, by looking at these three distinct arenas of corporate activity where themes of meaning are particularly pronounced.

It is also important to underscore again that mine is not a reception study that looks at the experiences of consumers, employees, or any other corporate audience. Instead, I am focused explicitly and totally on the business community's *perceptions* of meaning-making activity across corporate contexts and any corresponding activity revealing those internal workings: the considerations, the objectives, the strategies, the production, the cultural texts themselves, and the selected means of distribution.[44] I therefore do not inquire how

[44]In this approach, I observe the first two phases (production of cultural texts and the dissemination of texts) of the cultural production cycle model offered by Richard Johnson in "The Story so Far: And for the Transformations," in *Introduction to Contemporary Cultural Studies,*

those who consume these cultures interpret them nor do I offer an ethnographic component studying how efficacious these crafted cultures might be.

Instead, given my chief aim of understanding the perception of professional activity, much of my argument finds its foundation in an ethnography of language, or an analysis of communication within the wider context of a community's social and cultural practices and beliefs. I focus upon the business community which, as I define it, is made up of management academics, management consultants, and corporate managers.[45] I am specifically interested in the 'big business community', or those engaged in the management of large, transnational corporations.[46] Compared with other, more theoretical social sciences, the 'practical' or 'applied' nature of business studies—and its promise of promoting competitive advantage in a value-generating marketplace—means the line between the academic and practitioner in this space is often blurred. Harvard Business School professors write popular audience books alongside successful CEOs, who often become Harvard Business School Professors once they retire. Similarly, trade publications (like *Fast Company* and *The Harvard Business Review*) offer insights from methodologically rigorous academic studies alongside memorable (but often unsubstantiated by academic standards) frameworks from practitioners. The result is not

ed. David Punter (London: Longman, 1986). I do not engage with the third and fourth phases he describes (the interpretation of texts by consumers and the place these texts then take among lived culture and social relations and inform production). It is the cycle made up of these four phases that produces *actual* meaning; I am simply interested in perceived and *intended* meaning, which Johnson's first phases reveal.

[45] My definition of the business community resembles that of many who have adopted a critical perspective of mainstream business discourse and/or the construction of management history and practice. See *e.g.*, Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management*, 269; Andrew Sturdy *et al.*, *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*, 141-250.

[46] Given this scope, I do not focus in detail on social enterprises, cooperatives, B Corporations, or small businesses, though these tyypologies do engage in meaning-minded activity and merit further study.

only a unique 'blending' of academic and practitioner ideas, but the reifying of particular ideas by a network of publications, academics, practitioners, and consultancies.[47] The following chapters, for example, show at least two occasions on which preeminent management consulting firms worked with academics to turn scholarly ideas into advisory frameworks, which the firm then introduced to leading corporate executives, who then used these frameworks to run their organizations, which academics then studied. The circle of influence is tight and tends to create centripetal force around a few core discourses at any given time—a characteristic particular to this field compared to other academic ones, where extreme power is not so centralized and connected.[48]

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[47] What I describe here elides with what is often called the 'system of management ideas', which draws on the sociology of knowledge literature to mean "a set of institutionalized high level heuristics that guide organizational and individual behaviors in managerial reality, involve distinct knowledge that is transferred across time and space, may change as a result of local adaptation or innovation, and may be selected for or against" (Michael Mol, Julian Birkinshaw, and Nicolai Foss, "The System of Management Ideas: Origins, Micro-Foundations, and Dynamics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*, eds. Andrew Sturdy *et al.* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 25). Common terms for such dynamics are 'management fads' (E. Abrahamson, "Management Fashion," *Academy of Management Review* 21 (1996): 254–85), 'management fashions' (A. Kieser, "Rhetoric and Myth in Management Fashion," *Organization* 4 (1997): 49–74), or simply 'popular management techniques' (B. Staw and L. Epstein, "What Bandwagons Bring: Effects of Popular Management Techniques on Corporate Performance, Reputation, and CEO Pay," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 45 (2000): 523–56). Within this literature, I align most with Abrahamson who, from his "sketch of management fashion" suggests "that it is largely a *cultural* phenomenon, shaped by norms of rationality and progress" (p.261).

[48]On the tight relationship between business academics, business schools, business media, management consultants, and corporate professionals, see Lars Engwall and Linda Weldin, "Business Studies and Management Ideas," in *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas*, eds. Andrew Sturdy *et al.* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 160-73. These authors outline how academic Business Studies produces ideas and disseminates them through management education, so that they find their way to practice through both media and consultancies; sometimes academics are themselves consultants to corporate clients. While this pattern overviews the diffusion of ideas, the production or sources of management ideas do not always come from academics: here, business practice and the problems faced by managers (often brought into the classroom through the popular business education 'case study' teaching method) become an object of academic study and consultant/media 'thought leadership', each offering

Though perhaps a familiar method to a Religious Studies audience, finding value in the study of practitioner language is not an approach often taken in Business Studies.[49] A clear example comes in the most recent academic compendium on ethics and business at time of writing: the tenth edition of *Ethical Theory and Business* (2019), in its nearly 600 pages, does not once discuss 'purpose', which is the dominant practitioner concept wrestling with ethics and corporate activity, as we shall see.[50] And yet, there is good reason to engage seriously with the language of business practitioners. In a highly practical domain like business, what professionals understand to be true often becomes true through their actions; if leaders at the helm of business believe a more diverse boardroom leads to better economic outcomes, for example, and if there is empirical evidence to support this belief, they will act on it.[51] Dwelling on industry perceptions like these are, therefore, highly valuable and should not be dismissed or ignored. This is neither a condemnation of academic purity, nor a defense of 'pop' or 'pseudo' business work. It is instead a suggestion that we might learn from taking this blended character of the business 'literature' seriously—to broaden the aperture of academic inquiry beyond

ideas about addressing it. These challenges faced by business practitioners often follow lines of larger social and cultural challenges and their application to the business context, from globalization to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Cf. Christopher Wright, "Thought Leaders and Followers: The Impact of Consultants and Advisors on Management Ideas," 142-53 in the same volume for a more detailed discussion of 'thought leaders' as key actors in the development, dissemination, and application of management ideas.

[49] For examples of others interested in practitioner language, see *e.g.* N. Phillips *et al.*, "Discourse and institutions," *The Academy of Management Review* 29, no.4 (2004): 635-52; B. Parguel *et al.*, "How sustainability ratings might deter 'greenwashing': A closer look at ethical corporate communication," *Journal of Business Ethics* 102, no. 1 (2011): 15-28.

[50] Denis Arnold and Norman Bowie, *Ethical Theory and Business* (Cambridge University Press, 2019). The book brings together "leading experts", all with academic focus (p.1).

[51] James Cash *et al.*, "Report on Racial Inclusion in the Boardroom: A Workshop Convened by Harvard Business School's Leadership Initiative and Board Leadership Project," White Paper, Harvard Business School (June 2021).

academic writings and observe the coalescing trends, language, and conceptual frameworks dominating industry conversation, and therefore corporate activity.

My method of examination is discourse analysis. In this approach, I primarily follow the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), who defines discourses, or discursive formations, as bodies of knowledge that "systematically form the object of which they speak."[52] In other words, discourses do not simply describe the social world; they constitute it by bringing certain phenomena into being through the process of categorizing and making sense of reality. This thesis attempts to give definition to the "constructing knowledge" of the modern corporation's meaning-focused activity and how these ideas are put into practice.[53] These rules of formation I am after are constituted by the ideas represented

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[52]Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Psychology Press, 2002), 49. Foucault's formulations on discourse can be found across his various texts (1976, 1979, 1982, 1998, 2002). Discourses retain a wide range of "socio-historical contingent linguistic, cultural, technical and organizational resources which actively constitute fields of knowledge and the practices they instantiate" (M. Reed, "Organizational Analysis and Discourse Analysis: A Critique," in *Discourse and Organization,* eds. T. Grant and C. Oswick (Sage, 1998), 195). I particularly like Stuart Hall's definition, following the Foucault tradition: "[Discourse] governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of other. Just as a discourse 'rules in' certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it 'rules out', limits of restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves In relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it" ("Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse," in *Discourse Theory and Practice: A Reader*, eds. Margaret Wetherell *et al.* (Sage, 2001), 72). Studying discourse is a frequently used method for studying the 'system of management ideas' discussed above in note 21. See *e.g.*, Strang and Wittrock, "Methods for Study of Management Ideas," 86-103.

[53] To be sure, not all 'ideas' correspond with 'practice.' In his classic comparative study of management ideologies, M. Guillén's key finding demonstrated that ideas may be adopted without the associated techniques being implemented in workplaces and conversely, that techniques may be practiced without the supporting ideology taking hold: "generally, the ideological and technical components of [a] … paradigm reinforce each other, but the absence of either does not seem to prevent the adoption of the other" (M. Guillén, *Models of Management: Work, Authority and Organization in a Comparative Perspective* (University of Chicago Press, 1994),

in a range of texts, including practitioner oral histories, academic papers and books, formal and informal corporate documents, and branded materials. It is important to note that the discourse I try to pin down in each arena I focus on, drawing on various sources, is neither static nor cleanly codified; it is emergent and involves several competing, complementary, and even contradictory narratives. It is the combination of these various narratives that create what we might consider to be a 'dominant narrative.'

I study, then, as primary texts the business community's language, activity, and products to elucidate a dominant understanding of how the corporation produces meaning, to whom this potential of meaning is offered, and to what ends this professional activity is pointed. In this approach, two valuable primary texts are the volumes I edited, published by Routledge, that brought together over forty executives and academics to reflect on the changing nature of business.[54] *Perspectives on Impact: Making Systemic Change in the Twenty-First Century* (2019) and *Perspectives on Purpose: Building Brands and Businesses for the Twenty-First Century* (2019) convened diverse voices to observe both the seams and synergies between their perspectives: where did they diverge and where did they converge, and what might this tell us about the likely evolutionary course of their thinking and activity? While I look beyond these sources in this current study, the chapter contributions of academics and practitioners to those collections have served inevitably as a start point for this study; the process of working with contributing authors on their chapters and

283). Though I am interested in where ideas match practice, I will also note throughout this thesis when they appear misaligned.

[54] Nina Montgomery, *Perspectives on Impact: Making Systemic Change in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2019) and *Perspectives on Purpose: Building Brands and Businesses for the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2019).

the dozens of conversations that followed with many more professionals have surely formed my opinions on this topic, and indeed on the argument of this dissertation.[55]

Also informing my perspective is nearly a decade of work employed as a consultant advising executives at Fortune 100 companies on many of the topics this thesis covers, including consumer research, brand building, organizational transformation, corporate culture, innovation, brand semiotics, corporate purpose, and corporate strategy. Though examples of my own professional work are not included in this thesis, personal experience, along with my observation of thinking and activity patterns among the professional community, leave me convinced that the topic and argument of this thesis reflect practitioner paradigms. A second professional experience as an appointed Lecturer at Stanford University (since 2021) has also informed my perspective. I teach seminars on corporate social impact strategies to graduate students from the business and design schools. Part of the logic behind my appointment was that students were requesting more instruction around such themes: for the nearly one hundred students whom I have taught, the 'meaning' and 'impact' of their prospective corporate work were, anecdotally, a top priority in their career decision-making process. Though there are many ways in which companies consider, construct, and manage meaning, as I hope to show throughout this thesis, I believe they are responding, at least in part, to this very

[55] Also informing this work are my nearly five dozen interviews with corporate executives on the topic of 'reimagining capitalism', which I publish through a newsletter on the professional network site LinkedIn (Nina Montgomery, "Reimagining Capitalism, a LinkedIn Interview Series," LinkedIn (blog), https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/reimagining-capitalism). In 2020, I also participated in Professor Michael Porter and Mark Kramer's Harvard Business School Executive Education certificate program, Creating Shared Value.

real demand for *meaningful* work from top talent—whether entry-level employees or senior managers.

The final piece of autobiography informing this dissertation, and particularly its method, is my early academic study of Classical Literature and Classical Archaeology. My 50-thousand-word undergraduate dissertation at Dartmouth College explored the textual and thematic relationship between two prominent Latin poetry collections written during the so called 'Triumviral era', or the ten-year period of civil war after Julius Caesar's murder in 44 BC.[56] The aim of this analysis was to suggest that the pairing of these works was generative of deeper literary and cultural significance than previously acknowledged. An interest in cultural discourse and textual analysis continued into my Masters level graduate studies in Classical Archaeology at the University of Oxford. There, my interest was in historical narrative, or the regime-led construction of public stories about the past, present, and future. I focused on the interpretation of iconography and symbolism of various monuments and cultural artifacts to suggest their intended meaning within a historical context. Themes of constructed meaning, cultural discourse, and textual analysis have been the through lines of my academic interests, and this dissertation certainly represents their continuation.

[56] Specifically, I studied the original Latin of the *Epodes* of Horace and the *Eclogues* of Vergil, respectively. The two are widely seen as the early products of the two great Augustan poets and are most often studied as preparatory works for their later collections (Horace's *Odes* and Vergil's *Aeneid*) and the thesis aimed to counter that view. I studied their structures, intertexts, and thematic resonances, and located their ideas within the political crisis of the 30s BC. A good overview of the method applied can be found in Steven Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

ii. The Explanatory Value of Theories of Religion: Two Brief Demonstrations

If discourse analysis enables us to excavate underlying ideas within the business community, Religious Studies allows for their critical examination. In each corporate context, I will apply the theoretical toolkit of Religious Studies to examine the internal formulations that emerge. To show the potency of such an approach for the purposes of this introduction, I use two cursory examples, both from the workplace context.

A first example can be found in the way Religious Studies ideas enable the unpacking of a framework offered by business thinkers Jim Collins and Jerry Porras in their influential book, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (1994). These authors argued that the world's most enduring companies have a strong sense of 'purpose', or a "most fundamental reason for being, beyond profit", combined with a set of 'core values', or "general guiding principles" for daily action.[57] This formula, of a mutually reinforcing corporate purpose and values, is adopted widely by companies and together create what Collins and Porras called a company's 'core ideology.'[58]

I suggest in this thesis that the conceptual duplex of a company's core purpose and values strikingly resembles Clifford Geertz's theorization of religion. For Geertz, religions are a system of symbols that provides their members with both a 'worldview' (some understanding of the most fundamental context of human existence) and an 'ethos'

[57] Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: Harper Business, 1994), 73.
[58] *Ibid.*, 74.

(rituals, aesthetics, and ethical behaviors that can mobilize people and orient their lives).[59] Porras and Collins' concepts of purpose and values neatly map onto these two ideas, respectively: purpose resembles the Geertzian worldview as "models of" the world, while values resemble the Geertzian ethos as "model for" it.[60] For Geertz, the mutually-reinforcing worldview and ethos are embedded in symbols, or tangible, public vehicle of meanings or conceptions, such as objects, actions, or even ideas that help a group of people bring their culture into focus.[61] Likewise in Collins and Porras' framework, companies "translate their ideology into *tangible* mechanisms aligned to send a consistent set of *reinforcing signals*."[62] Even in this brief example, the resemblance is striking between Collins and Porras' core conceptual framework of corporate ideology and Geertz's theorization of religion as a cultural system.[63]

If this first example illustrates how theories of religion help us parse a conceptualization of what corporate culture *is*, a second is useful for understanding how the discipline enables us to glimpse the business community's beliefs about how these cultures *work*. Collins and Porras argue that purpose and core values together "indoctrinate people, impose tightness of fit, and create a sense of belonging to something special… [with] celebrations that reinforce success, belonging, and specialness… it can lead to a tight,

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[59] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 89-90.
[60] *Ibid.,* 90. Cf. Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 130.
[61] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 91.
[62] Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*, 136.
[63] Embrace of Geertz and the cultural system is not random: as I will demonstrate in later chapters, his theorizations inform some business academics' understanding of corporate culture and his anthropology provides explicit foundation for the body of work known as Consumer Culture Theory (CCT).

cult-like culture."[64] Almost three decades earlier, former IBM chief executive, Thomas Watson, captured something similar in his 1963 booklet, *A Business and Its Beliefs*:

> "These beliefs bring out the *great energies* and talents of *our people*… [It helps them] find *common cause* with each other… and *sustain* common cause. I firmly believe that any organization, in order to survive and achieve success, must have a sound set of beliefs on which it premises all its policies and actions."[65]

In these statements we see a functionalist picture of corporate culture, or "beliefs", as Watson calls them, that resembles Émile Durkheim's (1858-1917) theorizations in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). For Durkheim, religion is a "unified system of beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community… all those who adhere to them."[66] The function of religion, in other words, is social collectivity, echoing Watson's "common cause" among "our people." This community, for the Durkheimian sociologist, is not sustained by top-down hierarchy but rather through the collective energy of its adherents—a process Durkheim calls 'collective effervescence.'[67] Collective effervescence is both the cause and result of the community: each time it happens, participants renew, reiterate, and reify their experience of being members of that community. This motivational and energizing power of the collective strongly resembles Watson's "great energies" brought out of a community of employees. The goal, then, of

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[64] Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*, 93.
[65] Thomas Watson, *A Business and Its Beliefs: The Ideas That Helped Build IBM* (McGraw-Hill, 1963), 73. Italic emphasis is my own.
[66] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Free Press, 1995), 208.
[67] *Ibid.*, 212. Chapter Two will deal more substantially with the idea of collective effervescence.

this example of corporate culture is to maintain social solidarity. As Collins and Porras put it, this kind of culture "preserves the core."[68]

Through these two brief method demonstrations I hope to have preliminarily shown the value theories of religion offer for examining how business professionals and academics alike conceptualize corporate meaning-minded activity. Many of Religious Studies' classic theorizations, generally speaking, offer various ideas about and relationships between people, society, culture, and social action; as we observe the ways in which the business community understands these things, their formulations begin to resemble particular theories. Identifying this resemblance enables the unpicking of the business community's internal workings—pointing to both consistencies and incongruities in their often patchwork conceptualizations.[69]

IV. Argument and Organization of Parts

This thesis is concerned with the business community's ideological formations of how, and why, corporations manufacture and manage meaning. Three chapters collectively

[68] Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*, 93.

[69] For example, Durkheim's implicit mechanical solidarity, where social life is interpreted according to the role that parts play in sustaining the whole, does not really cut culture loose (as Geertz does) from social structure, insofar as there are functional homologies between social form, social needs, and collective belief. The business community's application of these two theories results in a somewhat odd, incompatible pairing of aspects of Geertz's religion (which is primarily about the individual but also society and which primarily produces a comprehensive picture of worldview and ethos) with Durkheim's (which is primarily about abetting society, but also the individual and which is primarily a means for social actions and winning loyalty to society). The chapters that follow will address these theoretical discrepancies.

engage with this guiding question, each examining the meaning-making paradigm within a particular arena of corporate activity. These chapters mirror each other in structure: each begins with a characterization of its arena's existing literature concerned with corporate meaning; it then examines the contemporary business community's internal perceptions of, and activities intended to, construct corporate meaning; and finally, it elucidates key themes through corporation-based case studies. Overall, my primary argument is that the business community understands the corporation to manufacture and manage meaning through what I call the Corporate Cultural System (CCS). Though intended audiences and impacts differ across contexts, the core construct of the Corporate Cultural System remains consistent.

Chapter One serves to introduce the core theoretical construct of the Corporate Cultural System through an examination of how corporate meaning is understood within the marketplace. I argue that within this arena, the work of meaning-making occurs at the site of the corporate 'brand'; and that the business community has focused on the theorizations of Geertz, conceptualizing the commercial brand to resemble a complex cultural system of symbols. Through several examples—including the cases of Budweiser, PlayStation, and Dove—I explore the professional production (and reproduction) of brand worldviews, ethics, and symbolic systems. This construction process reveals that brand meaning is crafted to resonate with the existential desires and tensions of consumers, with the hope of influencing their engagement patterns with the corporation (chiefly, the purchase of its product). The chapter concludes with a reflection on why the business community appears to show preference for the anthropology of Geertz. I suggest his theorizations' eschewing of the authoritative status of symbols and

cultures, especially when constructed, might prove useful to the business community, which tends to avoid such reflection on the power of their own position.

Chapter Two takes on another business context, this time the more internally focused one of the corporate workplace. I argue that the meaning-focused activity within this organizational arena is concerned with the crafting and intentional cultivation of a corporation's 'employee culture.' The business community's conceptualization of this culture again resembles a Geertzian system of symbols, with its hallmark of 'worldview' and 'ethos' approximating what a corporation calls its 'purpose' and 'core values.' Through the examples of Nike, Airbnb, and Hyatt, among others, I show how this formulation of the CCS in the workplace is identical to the marketplace one the first chapter discussed, but with the key elaboration that it introduces a more social dimension to the framework. I show how the crafted CCS is constructed either to 'energize' employees and support social integration within the workplace or to 'mobilize' them and ignite a strategic revolution within the organization. In these formulations, the business community appears to draw on the ideas of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, respectively—again signaling a pronounced social priority for the CCS within the workplace. This chapter concludes with a reflection on how, when confronted with question of how to organize the *corporation*, the business community turns to theorists' ideas on how to organize *society*. The result is that the corporate workplace appears to be conceptualized as a quasi-society itself, within which the Crafted Cultural System can support social maintenance and/or transformation.

The final chapter of this dissertation looks at the meaning-making activity within a third realm, that of corporate social responsibility. Here, the corporation's role in and relationship with society at large is considered. The chapter traces a comparatively recent discourse shift occurring among the business community that relocates the social obligation of business from the periphery of corporate activity to the very core of its operation. Businesses that operate in this way are considered to reflect a more 'conscious' form of capitalism that can create prosperity for humanity and solve some of the world's biggest problems. The primary argument of the chapter is that, within this context, a familiar CCS is crafted to reflect this moral, world-changing perspective. I show how IKEA, Nestlé, and PayPal, among others construct a Corporate Cultural System in identical fashion to the practice observed within the marketplace and workplace arenas. The distinction is that the embrace of a *moral* CCS is perceived to enable a corporation to not just sell more products or make an organization more efficient: a company's moral cultures can positively impact the world at large—and even reinject morality and meaning into a society considered devoid of it. I conclude by commenting on how this moral instance of the Corporate Cultural System applies to both the 'outside' marketplace and the 'inside' workplace, and thus might point toward a blurring and expanding of previous boundaries of activity.

After summarizing the argument of this dissertation—that the business community understands the corporation to manufacture and manage meaning through what I call the Corporate Cultural System (CCS)—the Conclusion traces two possible implications and lines of enquiry forward. The first is the idea of an emerging theory of the firm centered around 'meaning' and its management. The second observes how the Corporate

Cultural System framework might (and indeed, already appears to) escape the corporation to a wider field of activity. This epilogue continues to shed light on both why and how companies are engaging in meaning-making activity while also pointing to avenues for continued scholarly exploration.

Overall, in addition to its introduction of the Corporate Cultural System construct, this thesis offers additional contributions to the wider Religious Studies and Business Studies fields, respectively. As discussed above, within Religious Studies, the corporation and religion are typically drawn into dialogue to assert that religion is (or resembles) the corporation or that the corporation is (or resembles) religion. This thesis points to a third way that demonstrates the explanatory value of Religious Studies theorizations for understanding phenomena in the business world. Within Business Studies, the so-called cultural turn at the end of the twentieth century elevated the role of meaning and other related ideas—community, purpose, belonging, identity, etc.—within the study of management. However, much of the research on these topics was located in niche areas of a field organized primarily around a positivist model. This thesis muddles those traditional silos of study to look more holistically at the meaning-focused activity of corporations, offering a new vantage from which to observe the work of businesses and their managers. As such, it points to a different way of considering the categories of corporate activity and management from those driving modern Business Studies. This thesis, then, more subtly points toward alternative paradigms of study for both Religious Studies and Business Studies that may result from bringing the two into dialogue.

CHAPTER ONE

Constructing Meaning in the Marketplace: The Corporate Cultural System and the Beliefs of Commercial Brands

I. Introduction: Budweiser and the Modern Branding Enterprise

Though Budweiser, the "King of Beers" owned by Anheuser-Busch Inc., is the most valuable beer brand in the world, it is distinctly American.[1] In May 2016, just as the Presidential race between Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump was heating up, Budweiser changed its name to 'America', replacing 'Budweiser' across all advertisements and beer cans—a stunt that seemed to say Budweiser isn't just American, it *is* America.[2] A few

[1] "Budweiser," Interbrand, accessed 29 August 2021, https://www.interbrand.com/best-globalbrands. Interbrand is the brand ranking and valuation authority; it values the Budweiser brand at over $15 billion, the thirty-third most valuable of any category in the world as of 2021.
[2] Eliana Docketer, "Budweiser Just Renamed Its Beer 'America,'" *Time*, 10 May 2016, https://time.com/ 4324384/budweiser-america-rename-beer/.

years later in 2019, a document called a brand book was created by corporate managers to capture this essence of the brand (Figure 1). It opens with the declaration that, "Budweiser is more than a beer… Budweiser is the heartbeat of a country"; the manifesto continues, "Budweiser has stood the test of time as a crafted product of uncompromising quality and strength of character. We have come a long way since our first brew in 1876, but our recipe will never change. We brew with freedom, authenticity, and ambition."[3]



FIGURE 1. THE BUDWEISER BRAND BOOK, MULTI-PAGE VIEW.
("Budweiser Brand Book," *Behance*, 2019, https://www.behance.net/gallery/72320491/Budweiser-Brand-Book).

The brand book goes on to describe what it calls a 'Human Truth' about Budweiser's consumer audience: they share a common belief that they "don't think [they] have what

[3] *Budweiser: King of Beers Brand Book* (Anheuser-Busch, 2019), 8-9, 13.

it takes to make an impact."[4] The Budweiser brand, as the book articulates, is designed to speak explicitly to this existential tension, telling consumers their actions *do* matter, to "raise our Bud to ordinary people doing extraordinary things."[5] The 'Budweiser Building Blocks', or the "elements of Budweiser's brand", are how it offers this meaning to consumers.[6] These Building Blocks include two key elements, which the book refers to as 'Our Brand Ideal' (the brand's central belief about the world) and 'Our Values' (the character or personality guiding how the brand acts), respectively:

> "Our Brand Ideal: Budweiser champions the best of America… freedom to pursue and maintain your dream. Freedom to choose your own path and make your own choices. Freedom to enjoy life's simple pleasures…
>
> Our Values: We are confident, we are dependable, we are empathetic."[7]

The book goes on to give guidelines for how these two core Building Blocks might come to life through the brand's approved typography and colors, along with other style guides and aesthetic direction. These instructions are designed to inform the formal production of the brand's tangible touchpoints, including all of the brand's creative elements and executions (*e.g.* advertising campaigns, packaging) and all of its activations (*e.g.* partnerships, events). The result is a system of tangible expressions that encapsulate the company's Brand Ideal and Values. This system of symbols reflects and responds to the

[4] *Ibid.*, 15. Cf. "2021 Yong Ones Student Awards Budweiser," The One Club for Creativity, accessed 16 September 2021, http://oneclub.org/downloads/Young_Ones/2021_Young.
[5] "2021 Yong Ones Student Awards Budweiser," 4.
[6] *Budweiser: King of Beers Brand Book*, 18.
[7] *Ibid.*, 18-9.

aforementioned 'Human Truth' identified in Budweiser consumers, as if to affirm, "we see you and your actions do matter."[8]

The Budweiser example exposes several central themes related to 'meaning' relevant within the marketplace context, from producing systems of brand texts to crafting 'ideals' of the world as it should be and 'values' for it. This chapter sets out to answer how ideas from Religious Studies can help us better understand and examine this modern branding enterprise. It first traces the history of brand scholarship and practice through the lens of Religious Studies' influence on the topic. Then, applying a Religious Studies methodology to the language and internal formulations of the business community, this chapter excavates and elevates a theoretical construct capturing how the business community conceptualizes the meaning-focused activity of corporations within the marketplace. I call this construct the Corporate Cultural System (CCS) and conclude by taking a step back to reflect on the perceived ideological formations of the CCS itself. I question why the corporate world has focused on some theoretical foundations rather than alternatives. This general critique continues to shed light on both why and how companies are engaging in meaning-making activity.

[8] Richard Oppy, Vice President of Global Brands at Budweiser underscores the centrality of this human insight for the brand's strategy: "It's never been more important for brands to be truly consumer-centric. Not just talk about consumer centricity, but live it." ("Budweiser," *Interbrand*).

II. The Marketplace Context: From Brand as Symbol to Symbolic System

i. The Influence of Theories of Religion on Brand Thinking, 1940s to 2000

The broadest definition of the commercial brand sees it as the animation of the corporation; how the brand is "brought to life" and "builds a relationship" with the consumer. [9] Most definitions also acknowledge its ever-evolving or emergent characteristic as well as the fact that the "brand is not an end in itself, it is the means to achieve certain objectives of corporate strategy", whether customer acquisition or driving consumer engagement with the brand (often, resulting in purchase). [10] This point emphasizes that the brand has an objective: to build a relationship with the consumer in some manner and compel them to brand engagement, through some means. The particulars of this manner and this means have changed over time. There are many ways to frame this history, but for our purposes, it is interesting to note that ideas and currents from Religious Studies have long played a role in scholarship on the commercial brand and the consumer marketplace. In this section I trace this history, demonstrating how these ideas have influenced the way brand scholars and managers understand the brand to create meaning.

[9] For definitional nuances, see P. Mishra and Maurya Upendra Kumar, "What Is a Brand? A Perspective on Brand Meaning," *European Journal of Business and Management* 4, no. 3 (2012): 122-33. See table 1 on p.133 for a useful list of classification themes (like brand as a logo, brand as an identity system, etc.) and authors who adopt these perspectives.
[10] *Ibid.,* 128.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the emotional grip of advertising over consumers and its motivation of product purchase was largely understood through the lens of anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's claim that "advertising is the richest field of modern verbal magic."[11] Citing Malinowski, a body of work emerged explaining how advertising functioned like magical spells, turning ordinary branded objects into public symbols of love, desire, power, and prestige.[12] The advertising industry itself was considered a "highly organized system of magical inducements and satisfactions" and guru-like advertising practitioners (colloquially termed 'Mad Men') were compared to magicians as Malinowski describes them: they were masters of the populace whose removed vantage in society permitted them to circulate spell-like adverts.[13]

During this conceptual era, a new brand came to market encapsulating its premise perfectly. Dove, a cleansing brand in the health and beauty sector, introduced its first product called a 'beauty bar' to the United States market in 1957. The functional claim of the brand was that it would not dry out skin the way ordinary soap did because its formula (which emerged from military research conducted to find non-irritating skin cleanser for

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[11] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Coral Gardens and Their Magic: A Study of the Methods of Tilling the Soil and of Agricultural Rites in the Trobriand Island. The Description of Gardening* (Routledge, 1935), 236-7.

[12] *E.g.*, S. Tambiah, "The Magical Power of Words," *Management* 3, no. 2 (1968): 175–208; John McCreery, "Malinowski, Magic, and Advertising: On Choosing Metaphors," in *Contemporary Marketing and Consumer Behavior: An Anthropological Sourcebook*, ed. John Sherry (Sage, 1995), 310-29; Sut Jhally, "Advertising as Religion: The Dialectic of Technology and Magic," *Advertising & Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000).

[13] Raymond Williams, "Advertising: The Magic System," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980): 195. For Malinowki's description of the magician, see his *Magic, Science and Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1954), *passim*; *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), esp. 59-70, 142. For the advertiser as magician, see *e.g.,* McCreery, "Malinowski, Magic, and Advertising," 317. These gurus put their names on their agencies, hence why most of the big advertising shops are named after the men considered to be creative geniuses who founded them: Ogilvy & Mather, McCann, Wolff Olins, etc.

use on burns and wounds) contained high levels of natural skin moisturizers. Two famous advertising gurus, David Ogilvy and Edmund Mather, whose agency claimed their names, lead the launch of the brand. They invented the messaging, "Dove soap doesn't dry your skin because it's one-quarter cleansing cream" and placed this maxim alongside illustrations of the claim (photographs that showed cream being poured into the soap bar). [14] The simple proposition, or spell-like inducement, was cast across television, print, and billboards.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Dove's brand approach evolved to compliment the premise of another theory from Religious Studies that came to underpin the branding paradigm of the era. To explain the psychological connection brands make with consumers in the relationship-building process, marketing scholars and practitioners were influenced by Carl Jung's writings on archetypes. Specifically, ideas from *Psychology and Religion* (1938) and *Man and his Symbols* (1964) like the 'collective unconscious' and 'universal images' are easily identified, if not explicitly referenced, within thinking on brands as archetypes. As one work put it:

> "Brands are among the most vibrant contemporary expressions of deep and abiding patterns… [Brands] achieve deep and enduring differentiation and relevance by embodying timeless archetypal meaning… archetypes provide the missing link between customer motivation and product sales."[15]

[14] John Deighton, "Dove: Evolution of a Brand," HBS no. 9-508-047 (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2008), 2.

[15] Margaret Mark and Carol Pearson, *The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands Through the Power of Archetypes* (New York: McGraw-Hill Professional, 2001), 11-3. Cf. Sal Randazzo, *The Mythmakers: How Advertisers Apply the Power of Classic Myths and Symbols to Create Modern Day Legends* (Chicago, Ill: Irwin Professional Publishing, 1995), *passim*.

To offer consumers meaning, brands were thereby designed as archetypal personifications. Dove, for example, adopted the 'Innocent' archetype and advertisements from this era shifted from showing images of the product to consistently depicting the Innocent woman—an eligible bachelorette, quite literally cleansed (made pure) and moisturized (made soft and childlike) by the brand's soap bar. She is often depicted as angelic and surrounded by white doves in the sky to further connote purity. Brand archetypes were particularly powerful because they helped companies segment their audience according to people who *aspired* to or *identified* with archetypal characters and their stories. Archetypes also enabled a clean way to position brands against competitors or to differentiate multiple brands in one category owned by a single corporate conglomerate. Exemplifying the latter, Unilever owned multiple soap brands at the time, but two of the most popular were Dove (functional benefit: moisture) and Lux (functional benefit: luxurious scent). The former was positioned as the Innocent to capture the audience that identified with this story, while the latter was positioned as another archetype, the 'Outlaw', or the liberated, luxurious, and progressive woman who, unlike the Innocent, lived outside society's mores and normative expectations. Femme fatale film stars who pushed social boundaries like Sophia Loren and Marilyn Monroe were hired for Lux brand campaigns as stand-ins for this archetype.[16] This archetype-focused brand strategy enabled Lux to appeal to a different audience than Dove, ensuring

[16] Today's celebrity endorsement and influencer strategies still follow similar logic: hiring recognizable faces that capture the brand archetype and sell the aspiration it offers consumers. On the topic of 'aspiration' and its place in brand and marketing strategy, see Ana Andjelic, *The Business of Aspiration* (London: Routledge, 2021).

the two brands owned by one conglomerate did not compete for the same consumer segments.

While Jung's work still dominates psychology-focused scholarship on how brands connect with consumers to drive purchase, in the 1980s and 1990s a recognition of the commercial brand's cultural engagement led to the appeal of Paul Tillich's scholarship on the relationship between religious symbols and culture. The theory Tillich puts forward on how symbols rise and fall in *Theology of Culture* (1964) has proved particularly fruitful for explaining the way in which the complex meanings of brands evolve as would an individual or culture. For Tillich, symbols emerge from the "womb which is usually called today the 'group unconscious' or 'collective unconscious'", and when this inner situation of the human group changes, then the symbol no longer functions to open up the soul to otherwise hidden levels of reality.[17] In other words, once the experience out of which the symbol is born no longer exists, the symbol may die and be replaced by other symbols that better reflect present experience. Strong resonances with Tillich's ideas can be found throughout Douglas Holt's industry-shaping book *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (2004). According to Holt (who has held top marketing professorships at Harvard Business School and Saïd Business School at the University of Oxford), if the commercial brand becomes symbolic of the deep yearnings felt by consumers in a particular cultural moment, it earns its hallowed place in society; in order to sustain this position brand practitioners must constantly reinvigorate the brand's symbolic meaning (that is, reinvigorate the brand's positioning in the marketplace and its messaging strategy) to speak to changing consumer anxieties in changing cultural

[17] Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 58.

moments.[18] Brand producers, by this paradigm, were seen (and saw themselves) as 'myth-makers.'[19]

Dove again helps illustrate the conceptual shift within branding practice. By the end of the twentieth century, the earlier Innocent archetype took on a different cultural countenance. Rather than the bouncy, bubbly bachelorette so popular in the cultural imagination of decades past, the ideal domestic woman of the day took on more diverse, everyday, and realistic forms, as a working woman or a mother juggling children, for example. These 'busy women' became the brand's shifted focal point, and the soap bar promised to clean their stress away (rather than purify them) to maintain their innocence. The branding institution evolved during this era, building itself around practices of 'trend hunting' or 'cool hunting' (that is, studying cultural currents and continuously re-anchoring brands within these ever-changing tides, or 'tribes' as the followers of these trends are called).[20] Agencies developed trends reporting and cultural semiotic decoding capabilities to help companies understand culture and locate their brand within it.

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[18] Douglas Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Harvard Business School Press, 2004), esp. 1-10.

[19] The language of *ibid*, throughout, makes references to branding and marketing professionals as 'myth makers.'

[20] Nick Southgate, "Coolhunting, Account Planning and the Ancient Cool of Aristotle," *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 21, no. 7 (2003): 453–61; Clive Nancarrow and Pamela Nancarrow, "Hunting for Cool Tribes," in *Consumer Tribes* (Routledge, 2007).

ii. Evolving the Concept of the Brand Beyond a Symbol, 2000 to 2020

Whether magic, archetypes, or cultural icons, these examples spanning the last three-quarters of a century reflect a long-term historical norm in branding theory of drawing on ideas from Study of Religion to explain how the brand operates and resonates. Importantly, these theories consistently conceptualize the brand as fundamentally a *symbol*, or a public vehicle for providing some kind of meaning to consumers.[21] The same is true in the more recent body of work, called Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). CCT informally emerged in the mid 1980s as a group of social sciences scholars who sought to illuminate the experiential and socio-cultural dynamics that drive the consumption cycle—a preoccupation that directly challenged the dominant orientation of marketing literature around cognitive psychology and its reduction of consumption to demographic or psychographic traits of consumers (*e.g.* gender, age, personality, lifestyle).[22] With its formalization in 2005, the "family of theoretical perspectives" explicitly aligned itself with the definition of culture posited by anthropologist Clifford Geertz in the essays from his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973). In an article commonly seen as consolidating the CCT discipline, Arnould and Thompson write:

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[21] Cf. Douglas Holt, "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29, no. 1 (2002): 70–90; Sidney Levy and Wilson Bastos, "A History of the Concept of Branding: Practice and Theory," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 4, no. 3 (2012): 347–68.

[22] The consolidation of the discipline is typically marked by Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson's article "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 4 (March 2005): 868-88. See also Eric Arnould and Craig Thompson, *Consumer Culture Theory* (Sage, 2018).

> "Perhaps most important, CCT conceptualizes culture as the very fabric of experience, meaning, and action (Geertz 1973)… Consumer culture frames consumers' horizons of conceivable action, feeling, and thought, making certain patterns of behavior and sense-making interpretations more likely than others."[23]

Anchored in this definition, CCT sets out to explore the "heterogeneous distribution of meanings and the multiplicity of overlapping cultural groups that exist within a broader socio-historic [context]."[24] But despite its distinct adoption of a cultural lens, like its predecessors, CCT sees the commercial brand as a "desire-inducing marketing symbol": the brand is a symbolic resource with fluid, evolving meanings, located *within* a fluid, evolving cultural system.[25]

Contrary to this academic consensus, the branding industry, made up of corporate professionals and agency consultants, appears to recognize an expansion of the commercial brand beyond its conceptual boundaries as a symbol. Marketing and corporate communications have fundamentally changed in the first two decades of the twenty-first century: the mainstreaming of the internet and mobile technologies has made targeting the right consumers in the right place at the right time easier, and marketing departments have expanded their communications efforts beyond public relations and advertising and now host events coordinators, community managers, influencer engagement managers, culture and entertainment managers, trends experts, semioticians, and ethnographers.[26] These new conditions point to an understanding of the commercial

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[23] Arnould and Thompson, "Consumer Culture Theory," 869.
[24] *Ibid.,* 869.
[25] *Ibid.* Cf. Holt's brand as a "symbolic salve" in *How Brands Become Icons*, 8.
[26] On the transformation of the marketing industry in the last decade, see *e.g.*, Andrew Stephen, "The Role of Digital and Social Media Marketing in Consumer Behavior," *Current Opinions in Psychology* 10 (2016): 17–21. For an overview of the 'anthropological turn' in industry, see

brand as not just a product or the official, single-minded communications of a corpoation (coherently articulated through its logo, slogan, and advertising campaigns), divorced from the larger corporation and its activity; indeed, it encompasses all dimensions of corporate activity in the marketplace.

Moreover, today's industry paradigm also points to an evolved concept of the brand as an orienting cultural entity, beyond simply a symbol. Heidi Hackemer, who has lead brand management at the Chan Zuckerberg Foundation, Google, and Oatly observes that, "Today, a company's brand has much more potential than just a communications and marketing symbol."[27] Rather than a simple symbol, she describes "powerful brands" as ones that "articulate a business' *beliefs* about the world and its *values*"; the commercial brand, she says, "is not about the 'shiny wrapper' at all. It is the expression of a company's central beliefs" that "gives modern audiences thorough reasons to buy into the brand."[28] Wally Olins, founder of premier brand agency Wolff Olins, locates these brand beliefs and values within the social world:

> "Brands tell us stories about our place in culture—about where we are and where we've been. They also help us figure out where we're going…they're now navigation and identity devices. They've transcended their transactional economic function… The zealous attachment people have to certain brands makes me wonder if Apple could be a religion."[29]

Elizabeth Powell, "From Ivory Towers to the Board Room: The Development of Anthropologists in Business," *Journal of Business Anthropology* 9, no. 1 (2020): 139-54.

[27] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 63. Emphasis is my own to foreshadow conceptual parallels with the ideas of worldview and ethos.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Debbie Millman and Rob Walker, *Brand Thinking and Other Noble Pursuits* (Allworth Press, 2013), 141.

Corporate practitioners, it would seem, have therefore recognized that in its modern incarnation, the commercial brand has outgrown its simple symbol conceptual framework. They associate it with terms like "belief about the world", "values", "ethos", "zealous attachment", "transcendence", and even "religion." The remainder of this chapter attempts to observe the business community's understanding of twenty-first century corporate brand-building work and how it is considered to engage consumers.

III. The Commercial Brand as a Cultural System

i. Crafting a Brand Worldview, Ethos, and Symbolic System for the Marketplace

To begin to explain the business community's perception of the brand today, it is useful to look at the example of Apple, the technology and hardware company. Aspects of this brand include the logo of an apple with a bite taken out, Steve Jobs and Silicon Valley, the Apple Store and the iPhone, along with other products like the MacBook and AppleTV. The brand is also made up of stories, from the anti-Microsoft, counter-cultural point of view that the brand famously took at its launch, to the founding story of Steve Jobs building the company and its first product from his garage, to the mythology of Adam and Eve behind the corporate logo. Then there is the voice signature of Apple products, along with their distinct user experience and sleek product design. Other components of the Apple brand include their highly anticipated annual expo event, their CEO Tim Cook's lambasting of Donald Trump, their responses to overseas factory scandals, or their public fight with pop star Taylor Swift over artists' rights. This list is by

no means exhaustive or all-encapsulating, but we can see that the brand is made up of a complex system of symbols and includes all actions, gossip, stories, ritual practices, art forms, language, ceremonies, and other activities of the corporation itself.

Constituted by this system of symbols, I suggest here that the commercial brand, like religion, can be viewed through the lens of the cultural system, or a "pattern of meanings embodied in symbols…by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."[30] Geertz' seminal essay, "Religion as a Cultural System", from his anthology *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) enables us to explain how the brand is perceived to operate as a distinctive cultural system. The value of Geertz for our project is twofold. First, it advantageously employs a previously unutilized framework from Religious Studies which, as we have seen, is a discipline that offers useful explanation of how the commercial brand makes meaning, among other things. Second, since Geertz's notion of the cultural system provides the foundation for CCT scholarship, our suggestion that the brand is not a symbol within a cultural system but an independent cultural system itself is a natural extension of the field's current theoretical underpinnings.

The most basic unit of the Geertzian cultural system is the symbol. The symbol is a tangible, public vehicle of meanings or conceptions.[31] Symbols are objects, actions, or even ideas that help a group of people bring their culture into focus. For Geertz, religions

[30] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 89. To my knowledge, the commercial brand has not yet been characterized as a cultural system. Advertising, however, has been characterized as such: see *e.g.,* John Sherry, "Advertising as a Cultural System," in *Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs for Sale*, ed. Jean Umiker-Sebeok (Walter de Gruyter, 1987), 441–61.
[31] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 91.

are a system of such symbols that provides their members with both a worldview (the world as it is in actuality, the everyday) and an ethos (a way of life; the world as it should be). The worldview is a distinguishing feature of religion for Geertz and claims that religion involves a descriptive dimension by mapping out some understanding of the most general context of human existence. In including the idea of an ethos in his definition, Geertz holds that religions encourage certain feelings, attitudes, and experiences and seek to inculcate certain rituals, aesthetics, and ethical behaviors.[32] The ethos of a religion serves to mobilize people and orient their lives. A religion's worldview and ethos, in Geertz's phrase, provide "models of" the world and "models for" the world respectively[33]; its assumed structure of reality and approved style of life are mutually legitimizing, with the worldview and ethos justifying each other.[34] Religion, then, when defined as a cultural system, has a "double aspect" in that its symbols work in conjunction to create cultural patterns which are at the same time extrinsic (*i.e.* public) *sources* of information (*i.e.* blueprints, templates) and *shapers* of that information.[35]

Branding professionals, I suggest, understand the commercial brand in much the same way: as a "model of" and a "model for" experience and behavior, and the symbols that make up the cultural system of the commercial brand as reinforcing an ethos, making

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[32] *Ibid.,* 89-90.

[33] Religion as a "model for" reality is not uncommon in Religious Studies. See parallels in Malinowski's concept of a character (*Magic, Science and Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1954), esp. 108), in Mircea Eliade's concept of a paradigm (*The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Bollingen, 1954), esp. 35-7), and in Bruce Lincoln's concept of authoritativeness (*Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 25-6).

[34] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 90. Cf. Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 130.

[35] *Ibid.*, 92-3.

plausible a worldview which in turn justifies that ethos. Returning to our Apple example, on one level the cultural system of the brand offers a worldview, a picture of how things are in actuality.[36] A vision of two cosmic forces in conflict is clearly articulated in the original, symbolic advertisement for the Macintosh in 1984.[37] Through thinly veiled allusion to competitor Microsoft's market dominance as an Orwellian scenario, the advert opens with a group of bald-headed men dressed in the same monochrome uniform marching in lockstep to a room. As they congregate, they listen to a Big Brother figure on a video screen promise society's advancement through the "unification of thoughts." A blond-haired woman in a white t-shirt and bright orange shorts runs toward the screen with a sledgehammer, which she subsequently throws at the screen. As it shatters, the assembly is freed from the mind control of the Big Brother figure. The advert ends with the text, "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like *1984*", and we then see the Apple logo filled with rainbow-colored stripes. The worldview presented here suggests that there is one, evil force in the world that sees progress as the homogenization and mass control of people, and a second, good force that sees the liberation of the individual, creative human mind as the recipe for advancement. Apple, of course, is the latter and this worldview is

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[36] Apple is often evoked by branding scholarship as something 'religious' in nature. Russell Belk and Gülnur Tumbat, for example, introduce the term 'brand cult' through the lens of the Apple example in "The Cult of Macintosh," *Consumption Markets & Culture* 8, no. 3 (2005): 205–17. Rather than argue for the cult-like nature of Apple, Heidi Campbell and Antonio La Pastina demonstrate how Apple consumers' appropriation of religious metaphors and myth shaped reception of Apple's products in "How the iPhone Became Divine: New Media, Religion and the Intertextual Circulation of Meaning," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 7 (2010): 1191–207. Both of these positions focus on consumer reception of the brand, and usually of a key product, rather than its construction as a larger system of symbols, as our study does.

[37] Christoph Dernbach, "'1984' – The Famous Super Bowl Spot," Mac History, accessed 2 August 2017, http://www.mac-history.net/apple-history-tv/ads/2011-07-12/1984-the-famous-super-bowl-spot.

perhaps best encapsulated in Steve Job's original mission statement for his company: "[Apple's mission is] to make a contribution to the world by making tools for the mind that advance humankind."[38]

Reinforcing the truth and authority of this worldview, we can discern what we might call Apple's ethos, an ideal way of thinking and behaving that the brand's various symbols encapsulate: "Simplicity, elegance, beauty, cleverness, humility. Directness. Truth. Zoom out enough and you can see that the same things that define Apple's products apply to Apple as a whole."[39] This Apple ethos is an ideal way of life and is infused in every aspect of every symbolic object it creates (*i.e.* the intuitive navigation of the iPhone or the white, clean design of the Apple Store) and in the symbolic actions it takes (*i.e.* the minimalist "one man, one screen" approach it takes to its annual expo). This ethos both shapes and serves as a template, providing a "general order of existence" that reinforces the belief that the Apple worldview and ethos are the right way to live.[40]

ii. Developing a Brand Blueprint for Producing Cultural Texts: The Case of PlayStation

Apple's conceiving of the brand as a system of symbols is not an anomaly. The following case study of gaming corporation PlayStation helps illustrate more tangibly this industry

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[38] David Vik, *The Culture Secret: How to Empower People and Companies No Matter What You Sell* (Greenleaf Book Group, 2013), 32. The vision of an oppositional power is typical in brand building: as Heidi Hackemer asks, "what is your brand's spiritual enemy" (Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 67).

[39] Paul Fidalgo, "The Apple Ethos Is Bigger Than Apple Itself," iMortal, accessed 17 August 2016, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/imortal/2014/08/17/the-apple-ethos.

[40] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 90.

norm of crafting a corporation's worldview and ethos and embedding it in texts for consumers to make meaning from. Since its inception in 1994, PlayStation (a brand of parent company Sony Corporation) has released premium console hardware and software designed for superior video gaming experiences. They launch a new product every few years and these releases are highly anticipated and coordinated with the release of their competitors' systems, namely those of Nintendo and Microsoft's Xbox. The comparison between these products in terms of technology specifications, customer experience, units sold, and overall profit is colloquially termed the 'console wars.' The release of the fifth-generation console, the PlayStation 5, was set to take place in 2020 and, in anticipation, the company's executive committee invested in the development of what is called a 'brand blueprint' for the corporation in 2019.

Most companies have a brand blueprint (sometimes called 'brand platform' or 'identity'), which serves as instruction for brand resource creation; it offers shared guidelines, a common reference for the controlled production of brand texts across the organization and by partners. As the brand consultancy Twenty-First Century Brand, captures it, "The Brand Blueprint is a universal reference that helps bring the brand to life with consistency across every facet of the company"; it "articulates what the brand aspires to stand for in the hearts and minds of consumers and its communities."[41] In other words, the brand blueprint becomes doctrine of sorts that brings clarity and structure to the elusive brand.

[41] "Our Approach," *TwentyFirstCenturyBrand*, accessed 26 August 2021, https://twentyfirstcentury brand.com/.

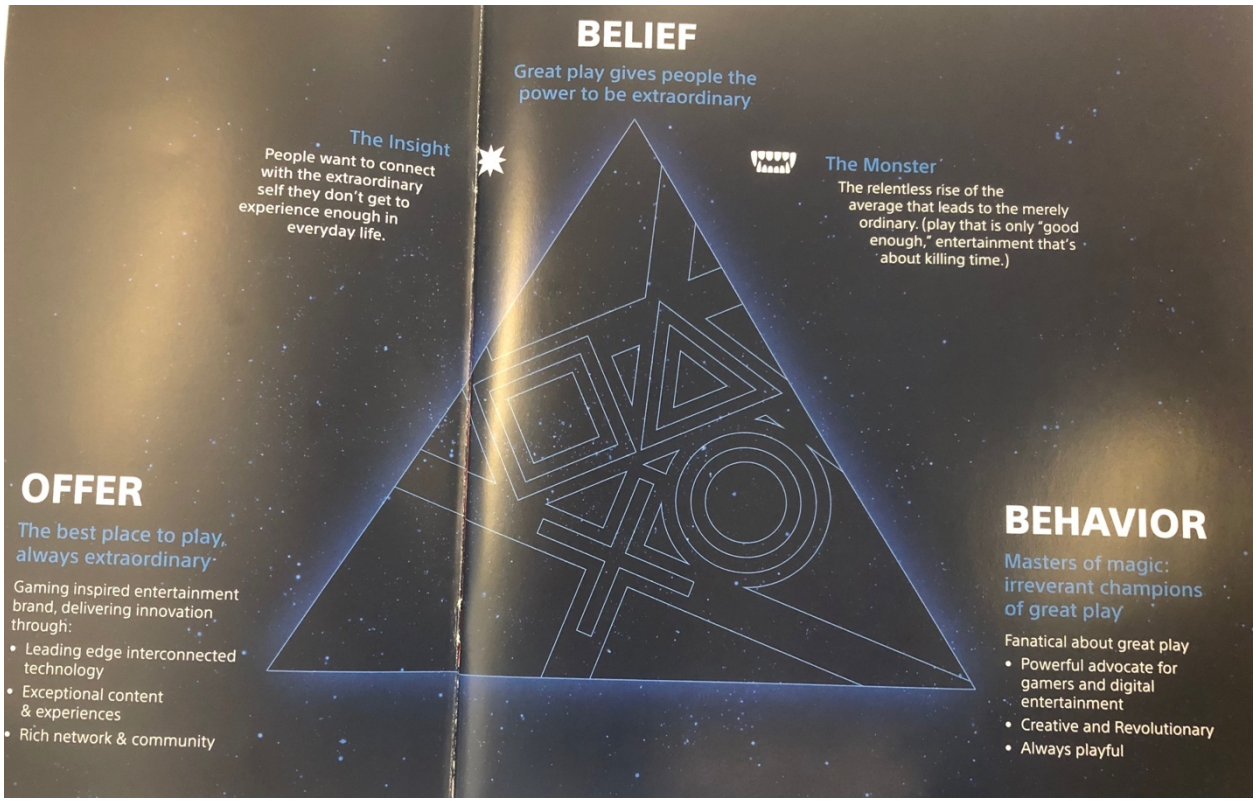

FIGURE 2. PLAYSTATION'S BRAND BLUEPRINT.
(PlayStation, *The PlayStation Brand Book* (2019), 4).

Most brand blueprints encapsulate an approximation of a worldview (referred to by practitioners as the 'brand belief', 'brand vision', or 'brand mission' statement) and an ethos (referred to by practitioners as 'brand values' or 'brand behaviors'). The Budweiser example refers to its worldview as Our Brand Ideal and its ethos as Our Values; the Apple example encapsulates its worldview in a mission statement and its ethos in the brand's values. PlayStation, as I will discuss momentarily, refers to them as the brand 'Belief' and 'Behavior', respectively. Regardless of language nuances, a brand blueprint articulates the worldview/belief and ethos/behaviors, often in simple models and through highly evocative words and visuals. It is frequently plastered on the walls of corporate

headquarters and circulated through internal documents. PlayStation's document was called the PlayStation Brand Book. Circulated to employees in 2019, the document articulates PlayStation's brand blueprint through a triangle image, with 'Belief,' 'Behavior,' and 'Offer' occupying each corner, respectively (Figure 2). The triangle shape underscores the connection and mutual influence these three aspects of the brand have on each other.

The PlayStation brand 'Belief' (a stand-in for worldview in the brand as a cultural system formulation I have offered) is that "great play gives people the power to be extraordinary." This belief is built from what the brand book calls the core 'Insight' about PlayStation's consumers: that "people want to connect with the extraordinary self they don't get to experience enough in everyday life." The brand's Belief, then, might be seen as emerging from the insight about their consumers' core desire. The brand book's next page contains an image from a visually stimulating first person shooter game, overlaid with the Belief articulated in a longer, manifesto-like form that:

> "Highly imaginative interactive entertainment isn't just play: it's great play. And great play can inspire, excite, immerse, and bring joy to us like nothing else.
>
> Great play connects gamers to their 'extraordinary self', the self they don't experience enough in everyday life.
>
> It's why the new worlds that live at the intersection of screen and imagination can be incredibly rewarding. While the worlds may be imaginary, the experiences are real and enduring.

> And it's why we're passionate about the power of great play and fanatical about delivering it."[42]

As is typical with the worldview of Geertz's conception, and as we also saw with the Apple example, the PlayStation Belief takes on almost cosmic opposition to an evil, growing force, which it calls 'The Monster', that threatens the "great play" worldview. PlayStation names this threat as mediocre or ordinary gaming experiences:

> "For us, 'good enough' is never good enough. We fight against the relentless rise of the average that leads to the merely ordinary. We fight for the magic that happens when we activate our imagination and ignite our spirits through really great play. Because what you can experience (through play that's great) is greater than you could ever imagine (through play that's not)."[43]

The brand 'Behavior', a stand-in for ethos, is articulated as "masters of magic; irreverent champions of great play." The brand book outlines five ways these masters of magic act in the world, and these Five Behaviors are collectively discussed as "summarizing how we behave when we're being true to our belief" (Box 1 reproduces the Behaviors/ethics in full).[44] That is to say, the PlayStation brand Behavior is framed as the way of acting in light of their Belief.

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[42] PlayStation, *The PlayStation Brand Book* (2019), 5-6.

[43] *Ibid.* It is not my intention to argue that modern corporate brands are religions, but if one were interested in this argument, language like this ("fanatical", "ignite our spirits", etc.) can be found in most formal brand documents.

[44] *Ibid.,* 7-15.

Box 1. PlayStation's Five Behaviors

1. We are POWERFUL. Bold and confident, but never flashy. PlayStation has a history of delivering the outstanding and unprecedented in both our software and hardware. We exceed expectations, challenge perceptions, innovate within the industry and defy convention. Our power gives us the confidence to act with boldness and even intensity at times, but never arrogance.

2. We are PLAYFULLY IRREVERANT. A mischievous edge with a cheeky streak. Life's not long enough to take ourselves too seriously. So, if there's an opportunity to play we'll gladly take it. If there's an opportunity to be mischievous, we'll probably take that too. It's an attitude we've had since day one, going against the grain, doing things our own way. Maybe we have a problem with authority? Maybe we just don't think it's a problem…

3. We are INTRIGUING. One of a kind and a bit mysterious. Unique, special, one of a kind. We don't follow trends, we set them. We're an exciting brand with depth and possibility. No one is really sure how we got to where we are today and where we're going mean we'll have great stories to write.

4. We are PIONEERING. Adventurous and fearless, there are no limits. Our boldness and willingness to go beyond is what sets us apart from our play-it-safe competitors. That's why we're always ready to take those risks and be controversial, to influence culture, and to be fresh and daring. Because that's where the biggest rewards are found.

5. We are UNCONVENTIONAL. Always original and often unpredictable. PlayStation is an exciting place to be because there is nothing more thrilling than the unknown and unpredictable. We are a brand that lives to break molds, mix it up and astonish people. We like to live way out on the edge.

(PlayStation, *The PlayStation Brand Book* (2019), 7-15).

These Behavior guidelines for brand activity are framed as eternal, as tradition and heritage, with the implication that this character of activity should be revered and continued: "PlayStation has a history of delivering the outstanding…", "It's an attitude we've had since day one…", "[what] we've always done." This sense of character consistency is further emphasized by the language of 'always' throughout: "we're always ready to take those risks…", "always original and often unpredictable." Also noteworthy is that much like the PlayStation Belief/worldview sets up an 'other' opposing force to the brand, the outlined Behaviors/ethics underscores how PlayStation's way of behaving sets them apart as unique to other brands: PlayStation "[does] things our own way…", "[that's] what sets us apart from our play-it-safe competitors", and "[we are] unique, special, one of a kind." Distinction is a key feature.

Overall, we see the tight pairing of PlayStation's Belief/worldview and Behavior/ethos as mutually reinforcing: when they act as the "champions of great play…the experiences people have with us bring out the extraordinary in them."[45] These "experiences" that emerge from the worldview and ethos working together create the Offer, or the third point of PlayStation's brand blueprint triangle, which I will suggest in the next section approximates Geertz's "meaning making texts" for the individual. PlayStation offers players "the best place to play, always extraordinary" through diverse types of brand products and experiences that all encapsulate the brand's worldview and ethos, providing resources for individual meaning-making.

[45] *Ibid.,* 16.

IV. Constructing Brand Meaning to Engage Consumers

i. Crafting Brand Beliefs to Resonate with Consumer Desires and Tensions

Thus far, I have argued that the brand is best viewed through the lens of Geertz's theory of religion as a 'cultural system.'[46] By this interpretation, the commercial brand is no longer seen as simply a single symbol or signifier but conceptualized as a system of symbols that promotes a particular worldview and inscribes certain patterns of behavior. However, fundamental to Geertz' cultural system is that it is fluidly and organically reproduced over time. For Geertz, culture "denotes an *historically transmitted* pattern" of meanings embodied in symbols.[47] Compared to this view of a naturally transmitted system of symbols, the cultural system of the corporate brand is continuously monitored and re-manufactured over time by direct intervention from brand managers. It is, fundamentally, a *crafted* cultural system. Given this inherent nature, the commercial brand introduces us to an alternative view of the cultural system as a *crafted* entity, offering consumers *crafted* resources from which they can interpret meaning and construct lines of action.

[46] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 87–125. Geertz elaborates, saying culture is "a system of *inherited conceptions* expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." Italics are my emphasis.
[47] *Ibid.,* 89. Italics are my emphasis.

This alternate model of the cultural system and its emphasis on 'crafting' accounts for a limitation in Geertz's theory.[48] Despite his definition of culture as "historically transmitted", Geertz's larger theorization of the cultural system—of the tight fit between publicly available symbolic systems and the moods, motivations, affects, and activities these symbols shape—only provides the tools for analyzing a snapshot of culture at a particular time within that process. His is a synchronic intellectual operation and consequently is often criticized for not thoroughly acknowledging a process by which the cultural system's implied (re)production of cultural patterns occurs.[49] Our alternate model of the cultural system and its emphasis on 'crafting' accounts for this limitation in Geertz's theory.

This section looks at the process of continuous crafting of the brand as a cultural system. This interventionalist manufacturing and management reveals how the business community understands the process of crafting the brand as a cultural system supports its ability to influence consumers' engagements with the brand. However, before discussing the process of crafting a brand cultural system, we must clarify *who* the craftspeople are. While in the history traced above the work of brand craft belonged to the 'Mad Men' or a small team of 'myth-makers', there is a much larger set of actors involved in the modern brand practice since the activities of the entire organization contribute to the brand cultural system. These contributors include everyone from CEOs

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[48] Talal Asad argues that, among other things, Geertz ignores varying social conditions for the *production* of knowledge in "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz," *Man.* 18, no. 2 (1983): 237-59. I will discuss this shortcoming and its implications in the concluding section of this chapter.

[49] On this criticism, see *e.g.,* William Sewell, "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation," *Representations*, no. 59 (1997): 35–55.

and marketers to employees and even customers themselves.[50] However for our interest in the intentional process of manufacturing brands, the most important category, which I will refer to as the 'formal producers' of the crafted cultural system, includes a company's leadership, brand teams, and agency partners. These producers are the master architects of a brand's worldview and ethos, crafting, at the highest level, the intended brand meaning and desired corresponding social action. Thomas Ordhal, Chief Strategy Officer at a leading brand strategy agency Landor, describes these producers as formulating "the *why* behind everything the brand does." [51] Their job is to set strategy and define the future of the brand, which requires extensive knowledge of business goals and brand assets. Additionally, this community of formal producers are the ones responsible for making "critical decisions – those that could fundamentally alter the brand."[52]

An important foundation of the formal producers' work is codifying a brand blueprint (the worldview and ethos formula) to guide the production of brand texts that, together, resemble a cultural system. Crafting a brand's worldview and ethos follows a fairly standard pathway: although there are variations on the theme, most reflect a pathway that we might dissect into four key steps, from exploratory research through to production:[53]

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[50] Resonances between my categories of producers can be found, with modifications, with Thomas Ordahl's three categories of brand managers (experts, practitioners, and employees) in his chapter for Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 109-16.

[51] *Ibid.,* 112.

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] I have framed the following process within our brand as a cultural system language, but I have not arbitrarily imposed this frame on the process; the dominant process, across academic and practitioner discussion, reveals conceptual coherence with the brand as crafted cultural system premise.

1. *Exploration*: The corporation conducts market research with target customer segments to understand who they are, what they need, and perceptions of the brand in question and its competitors.[54] Alongside consumer research can be research of cultural narratives (semiotics) and trends, consumer research, and market landscaping from a business perspective.

2. *Ideation:* The corporation develops potential brand blueprint (multiple options of a worldview and ethos pairing), often encapsulated in advertisements, manifestos, packaging ideas, etc. (cultural texts) generated for the purpose of research to validation and learn in the next phase.

3. *Validation and Refinement:* The corporation takes cultural texts into research contexts (using both qualitative and quantitative methods) with consumers to optimize the worldview and ethos for resonance with the individual consumer. The process between exploration and validation is continued iteratively, with the brand blueprint being refined until it is confirmed to "mean" what it is intended to.

4. *Production:* Corporate managers codify the brand blueprint and distributed it across the organization. Brand texts, meant to encapsulate the approved worldview and ethos, are created across the organization and distributed through various channels to employees and consumers. These brand texts collectively contribute to the symbolic system of the brand.

This process requires significant input from the brand's intended consumer audience(s). These audiences, importantly, are predetermined by brand producers. They are the cohort or set of cohorts, called segments, that a corporation sees as its customers or desired customers. This audience input, beginning in the exploration phase and considered throughout, has the primary objective of identifying people's desires or aspirations with which the brand can 'hook' them.

[54] I am assuming in this description that target customer segments have already been identified. If not, that is often the first step of the exploration phase, followed by deeper study of each as I articulate here.

Considering first the uncovering of human desires, a key part of this intellectual formulation is that producers simply give the people (specifically, the customer) what they want. There are many methods for discovering consumer desires, and consumer research practices have developed to identify and analyze these needs.[55] Techniques are far ranging, encompassing both qualitative techniques (such as focus groups, in-depth interviews, cultural semiotics studies, trends spotting, and ethnography), as well as quantitative ones (such as customer surveys, and analysis of secondary data).[56] Most companies have a research function and the landscape of research consultancies is large and diverse, ranging from specific methods experts to industry specialists (*e.g.* agencies that work solely on film, technology, or consumer packaged goods).

Another popular take on surfacing consumer needs and reflecting them in the brand a corporation delivers is called 'human-centered', or 'user-centered', design, a practice that seeks to "understand what is *desirable* from a *human* point of view."[57] The leading global design agency IDEO, based in San Francisco, is often credited with making human-centered design a mainstream business practice. The consultancy's former CEO, Tim

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[55] See M. Hamersveld and C. de Bont, *Market Research Handbook* (Wiley, 2007) for an overview of the field.

[56] On the history of qualitative market research, its major debates, and future directions, see M. Imms, M. Callingham, and G. Ereaut, *Qualitative Market Research: Principles and Practice* (Sage, 2002); Lawrence Bailey, "The Origin and Success of Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Market Research* 56, no. 2 (2014): 167–84. On how market research can provide an important perspective into the making of a consumer society, see Douglas Ward, "Capitalism, Early Market Research, and the Creation of the American Consumer," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 1, no. 2 (2009): 200–23.

[57] Tim Brown, *Change by Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (HarperCollins, 2009), 2. For an overview and history of human-centered design, see F. Ritter, G. Baxter, and E. Churchill, "User-Centered Systems Design: A Brief History," in *Foundations for Designing User-Centered Systems: What System Designers Need to Know about People* (Springer London, 2014), 33–54.

Brown, describes how the practice of human-centered design "is a deeply human process in and of itself" since "design thinking relies on our ability to be intuitive, to recognize patterns, to construct ideas that have emotional *meaning* as well as functionality, to express ourselves in media, words, and symbols."[58]

Echoing Brown's search for "emotional meaning", the brand craft process, especially when adopting a "human-centered" lens, is often framed as building 'empathy' for the customer.[59] The adjective 'empathic' in relation to design was introduced in the late 1990s when companies started to realize that only listening to customers' responses on questionnaires was not enough to develop successful brands.[60] Through the process of 'empathy building', professionals "attempt to get closer to the lives and experiences of users, in order to increase the likelihood that the brand's messaging, product, or service designed meets the user's needs."[61] A subtle linguistic distinction from the more distant 'sympathy', the dominant empathy-focused language surrounding this process of brand production emphasizes the desire for extreme closeness of relationship between the brand and its consumer. Several interview methods have been adopted to achieve this

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[58] *Ibid.*

[59] Empathy has been discussed and developed in brand design, cognitive science, philosophy, and psychology literatures. See *e.g.,* I. Koskinen, *et al., Empathic Design, User Experience in Product Design* (IT Press, 2003); R. Coleman, C. Lebbon, and J. Myerson, "Design and Empathy," in *Inclusive Design: Design for the Whole Population*, eds. J. Clarkson *et al.* (Springer London, 2003), 478–99; M. Kouprie and F. Visser, "A Framework for Empathy in Design: Stepping into and Out of the User's Life," *Journal of Engineering Design* 20, no. 5 (2009): 437–48; B. Hanington, "Empathy, Values, and Situated Action: Sustaining People and Planet through Human Centered Design," in *Routledge Handbook of Sustainable Design* (Routledge, 2017). For critique of empathy in the design process, especially with respect to ethics, see A. Heylighen and A. Dong, "To Empathise or Not to Empathise? Empathy and Its Limits in Design," *Design Studies* 65 (2019): 107–24.

[60] K. Battarbee and I. Koskinen, "Co-Experience: User Experience as Interaction," *CoDesign* 1, no. 1 (2005): 5-18.

[61] M. Kouprie and F. Visser, "A Framework for Empathy in Design," 437.

closeness. Chief among them is the consumer ethnography, where the corporate researcher 'shops along' with customers to study their choices in the aisle, for example, or enters their homes for observation and interview. Some more emergent methods go as far as to 'co-create' with consumers, a form of participatory text production that removes the researcher's interpretation of people's desires altogether and instead lets consumers create their own sample brand texts.[62]

These methods dominating modern industry betray how practitioners understand the process of brand production: though formal producers might be responsible for the actual craft of the brand's intended meaning and eventually its resources, they are conceptualized as simply the vessel through which human desires and wants are made real. The emphasis is on satisfying individual's desires; producers are, distinctly, not manipulating, nor are they guiding new desires or behaviors. Instead, in their crafting of the brand's cultural system, they are perceived to be offering supply to the already-manifest demand of the individual, which was uncovered during the exploration phase. This origin of the brand as a cultural system again finds parallels with Geertz's origin of religion. Geertz asserts that religion arises primarily to provide meaning: "Whatever else religion may be, it is in part an attempt… to conserve the fund of general meanings in terms of which each individual interprets his experience and organizes his conduct."[63] By

[62] Theories of brand co-creation with consumers is a growing current in CCT literature. See, for example, Mary Jo Hatch and Majken Schultz, "Toward a Theory of Brand Co-Creation with Implications for Brand Governance," *Journal of Brand Management* 17 no. 8 (2010): 590–604; Cassandra France, Bill Merrilees, and Dale Miller, "Customer Brand Co-Creation: A Conceptual Model," *Marketing Intelligence and Planning* 33, no. 6 (2015): 848-64.
[63] Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 127.

this view, religion as a cultural system arises out of the human need for meaning.[64] Translated to our brand context, we see a similar conceptualization in professionals' understanding of the brand as a cultural system arising to fulfil human desires.

In addition to understanding *desires*, practitioners also speak about uncovering consumer *tensions* as a critical part of the brand production process. As Heidi Hackemer puts it, the most "meaningful brands" in the marketplace "lean into the love, pain, and tension" that people feel.[65] Douglas Holt helps explain how this approach works to produce meaning for consumers. He argues that best insight to originate a brand out of is one where the consumers' beliefs and aspirations are in tension with the world as it actually is. This tension is confusing for people, and leaves a meaning gap for the brand to fill:

> "In their everyday lives, people experience tears that threaten their understanding of the world as personal anxieties. Brands smooth over these tensions, helping people create purpose in their lives and understand how to act, even when under stress…[Myths] reside in the brand, which consumers experience and share via ritual action…Great brands provide their consumers with little epiphanies—moments of recognition that put images, sounds, and feelings on barely perceptible desires."[66]

The brand, for Holt, is best when crafted as if it had emerged to soothe over existential tensions consumers experience, enabling them to make sense of the world again. Budweiser, for example, became the most desirable beer in the 1980s according to Holt because "the brand addressed one of the most acute contradictions of the day": the country's economic and political meltdown in the 1970s, along with the increasing

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[64] For this perspective on the origin of religion according to Geertz, see Robert Segal, "Weber and Geertz on the Meaning of Religion," *Religion* 29 no. 1 (1999): 61-71.
[65] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 71.
[66] Holt, *How Brands Become Icons*, 8-9.

independence of women left American working men feeling emasculated and ignored.[67] This was compounded by the fact that many of their vocations as skilled manual laborers, their primary source of masculine identity, were becoming obsolete, replaced by overseas labor or technology. Budweiser targeted this acute tension, bringing back dignity and masculinity to the working-class American man through their "This Bud's for You" branding—a tip of the hat to its consumers for their hard work while reviving ideals of manhood. Holt argues that this formula offers a retrospective explanation for the brand's otherwise unexplained success in the 1970s. Though this resonance was perhaps 'accidental', the example of Budweiser in 2019 with which I open this chapter shows a very intentional attempt to identify and sooth over existential consumer tensions, captured in the brand's Human Truth. This approach to branding has become built-in to the contemporary professional production process.

Holt's 'tension-hunting', rather than desire-hunting, points to something akin to searching for the "bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable ethical paradox" Geertz identifies as experiences from which religion sprouts.[68] In these moments, "if they become intense enough or are sustained long enough", people experience "radical challenges to the proposition that life is comprehensible and that we can, by taking thought, orient ourselves effectively within it."[69] Religion as a cultural system arises to not only explain, make bearable, and justify these threatening experiences, but also to

[67] *Ibid.,* see Chapter 5 for an overview of the Budweiser case study.
[68] Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 100. Geertz enumerates at least three other sources, or 'cultural systems', in addition to religion that can do the work of making the world comprehensible: common sense, ideology, and art (see Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, chapter 8; Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (Basic Books, 1983), chapters 4–5.
[69] *Ibid.*

prescribe ways of acting in the light of its explanation, alleviation, or justification; in other words, it offers both "models of" reality (worldview) and "models for" behavior (ethos). The brand as a cultural system is perceived to work similarly: the crafted worldview and ethos are often designed to soothe over specific tensions, or threatening experiences to people's ability to orient themselves in the world.

In the end, the purpose of this human-centered, empathy-driven, desire- and tension-seeking brand production process is to craft the content of a brand's worldview and ethos in a way consumers will find meaningful. Once this is solidified into the brand's blueprint, the next step is to produce a symbolic system that encapsulates those meaningful ideas for consumption.

ii. The Production (and Re-Production) of the Brand Cultural System

With the brand blueprint strategy set by formal producers, other groups act as its generators, performers, or executors, 'bringing the brand to life', or producing it, through their activity. A first group of these actors lives inside the organization: the corporation's employees.[70] Here, the brand cultural system becomes a centripetal force for operation, with the brand blueprint made public through what is often colloquially referred to as a corporation's 'brand Bible' (*e.g.* the Budweiser and PlayStation Brand Identity brand books). In their various capacities, employees use these guidelines to produce new texts that contribute to the brand as a symbolic system: the marketing team creates campaigns

[70] Thomas Ordhal, "Building the Brand Community," in *Perspectives on Purpose,* ed. Nina Montgomery (Routledge, 2019), 112.

encapsulating these ideas, the innovation and product teams weave the brand's worldview and ethos into new offers, the community engagement team elects partners sharing the corporation's beliefs, etc. More concisely, employees "represent the brand on the front lines of consumer interaction. While every employee may not require access to the full range of brand assets and technical guidelines, they must be able to speak for the brand, make quick decisions, and react appropriately to customer requests."[71] April Britt, Director of Global Brand at FedEx, affirms this: "people within the organization are our advocates. It is fundamental that we help everyone understand what is sacred to our brand – who we are and what we stand for."[72]

Formal production includes a range of 'brand expressions', as Thomas Ordhal, Chief Strategy Officer at Landor, calls them. I reproduce in full and adopt Ordhal's three categories of expressions, or 'resources' in our frame:

> "*1. The sacred [resource]*. The brand has sacred elements – verbal, visual, behavioral, experiential – that fundamentally define a brand, making it what it is. They are inviolable. And what's sacred for one brand may not be for another. For the Salvation Army it could be the sound of the ringing bell and the red kettle. For Singapore Airlines it's the scent of warm towels. Taking away or altering these expressions detracts from the essence of the brand.
>
> *2. The interpretive [resource]*. For brands to be agile and responsive, there must also be room for interpretation. The elements that fall into this group can be adapted based on context, market, or geography. The five rays at the top of IBM's Smarter Planet logo are sacred and remain constant. But the central icon underneath – the interpretive element – can take on almost any form, from raindrops and flowers to snowflakes and apples, as long as it's contextually relevant. Google invites interpretation through its Google Doodles, improvisations on its basic wordmark. Most are created by Google staffers, but fans are also invited to

[71] *Ibid.*, 118.
[72] *Ibid.*, 114.

> submit design ideas commemorating people or events. Google selects the best Doodles to appear on its homepage throughout the year.
>
> *3. The exploratory [resource]*. Other aspects of a brand can be opened up for even more creativity and risk. These exploratory expressions may be freely adapted or altered by [producers], provided they use good judgment in representing the brand's values. Opening the door to experimentation can result in unexpected and inspired ideas… Take Disneyland's water art. It was a park custodian who first drew water cartoons of Disney figures on the ground for visitors to enjoy; now the practice is encouraged among all staff. One park worker reflected, "At first I was doing it because it was more fun than cleaning, but then I realized how much guests really liked it. I cried on my last day working because I drew Minnie Mouse for a little girl who hugged me to say thank you because she didn't speak English."[73]

Recognizing various types of brand resources or texts a consumer might engage underscores the dynamic experience of a brand. This designed variety is clearly captured in the 'Starbucks Brand Expression' guide, a "theory" intended to provide a "high-level overview of how the Starbucks brand comes to life."[74] The guide distinguishes between multiple kinds of brand texts, with some resources considered "sacred": the brand's famous Siren logo, for example, is described as "our muse, the face of our brand. Her image and our strong wordmark are our most recognizable brand assets."[75] The Siren logo must not be altered or adulterated, according to the official instruction. In addition to sacred symbols like the Siren, the Starbucks Creative Expression guide also distinguishes between two other brand texts typologies: what is calls the "functional" and the "expressive", approximating the "interpretive" and "exploratory" resources

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[73] *Ibid.*, 113-4. 'Resource' at the end of each category title is my own addition for clarity and argument connectivity.

[74] "Starbucks Brand Expression Guidelines," Starbucks, accessed 26 August 2021, https://creative.starbucks.com/.

[75] *Ibid.*

respectively in Ordhal's framework. The former are brand texts that communicate information or core brand experiences that change infrequently (like the drinks menu and restaurant signage) while the latter tend to be more colorful and variable, often associated with seasonal or promotional experiences (Figure 3). Each comes with separate instruction on font, colors, creative guardrails, and store placement. Also interesting is that these two typologies are seen as ends of a spectrum rather than discrete designations. Brand managers seem to acknowledge the wide spectrum of resources that a brand produces, offering a centralized framework for decentralized production.

The Starbucks example illustrates one level of the reproduction of the brand as a cultural system: that of the individual resource, or the crafting of various symbols, myths, and rituals, that make up the brand as a cultural system. However, a second level of reproduction is that of the brand as a whole. That is, the strategic decision of formal producers to transform the holistic, guiding brand blueprint to offer a novel worldview and ethos. The four stages of the crafting process described above would simply begin again. A new brand blueprint and corresponding document would be created and disseminated, and new brand texts and other symbolic resources would be produced according to the document's direction.

Interestingly, these 'rebranding' efforts are typically communicated as a continuation of, or even renewed reverence for, a brand's mythological past. Starbucks, again, provides a typical example. When reclaiming the role of Chief Executive Officer at Starbucks in 2008, Howard Schultz found that the essence of the brand he had originally built— to life the idea of a 'Third Place' for community between work and home—was no longer



FIGURE 3. STARBUCKS' BRAND EXPRESSION GUIDELINES, ON A SPECTRUM FROM FUNCTIONAL TO EXPRESSIVE.
("Starbucks Brand Expression Guidelines," Starbucks, accessed 26 August 2021, https://creative.starbucks.com/).

an integral part of the Starbucks customer experience: "the company's founding *beliefs* and *values* about community had been lost in blind assumptions about opening more stores."[76] What was left was "mechanics with little meaning", and customers were voting with their feet.[77] In his book *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul* (2011), Schultz describes the memo he wrote to the Starbucks management team: during the corporation's rapid growth, "we had to make a series of decisions that, in retrospect led to a watering down of the Starbucks Experience, and what we might call the commoditization of our brand."[78] To rescue Starbucks from decline and reverse the brand's commodification, Schultz proposed a "renewed commitment to the brand's core *beliefs* and *values* [that] would offer consumers more meaningful experiences at the coffee house."[79]

In his language we again see the beliefs-plus-values formula at the heart of the brand as a cultural system model I've proposed. However, his language of "renewed", suggesting a return to the brand's original beliefs/worldview and values/ethos, is a misnomer. Schultz's strategy was to instead create a new brand blueprint, encapsulated in the Brand Expression guide referenced above. The worldview espoused in this 'rebrand' was not concerned with creating a Third Place, but instead captured a mission "to inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time."[80] This new brand worldview was framed by Schultz as a "recommitment", a "renewal", a

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[76] Howard Schultz and Joanne Gordon, *Onward: How Starbucks Fought for Its Life without Losing Its Soul* (Harmony, 2012). Cf. Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 75.
[77] *Ibid.,* 77.
[78] *Ibid.,* 75.
[79] *Ibid.* Italics are my own emphasis.
[80] "About Us: Starbucks Coffee Company," Starbucks, accessed 17 August 2021, https://www.starbucks.com/about.

"return" to the Starbucks beliefs and values—"bringing the soul of the company back, finding our voice."[81] In other words, the corporate brand shifted onto a new trajectory (focused on 'inspiration' and 'nurturing' rather than a 'Third Place'), but it was framed as a continuation, or a revival of sacred texts; the new brand cultural system was not framed as a revolution, but instead masked as a natural, organic evolution.

This apparent consistency of cultures over time, despite change, is characteristic of most brand production and reproduction practice. Both the Budweiser and PlayStation cases reviewed above featured language like "who we've always been", emphasizing the brands' endurance and a long, consistent history, even as a new direction for the brand cultural system was being introduced. The result is a symbolic system intentionally crafted to appear steady, reliable, and unchanging, while still maintaining the sense of being dynamic and organically forming.

iii. Driving Brand Engagement, Interpretation, and Social Action

Though the activity of professional managers is to manufacture, monitor, and manage a brand's symbolic system, the meaning or significance of this system is interpreted by people: in this case, the particular audience of a brand's consumers. The CCT field frames one of its "key research questions" as concerned precisely with how these ideas of culture, interpretation, and behaviors are related: "how do consumers make sense of and

[81] Schultz and Gordon, *Onward*, 3.

meaning from these messages and formulate critical responses?"[82] In this research program, consumers are conceived of as interpretive agents whose meaning-creating activities range from those that "tacitly embrace the dominant representations of consumer identity and lifestyle ideals portrayed in advertising and mass media to those that consciously deviate from these ideological instructions."[83]

As I have shown, the wider business community theorizes the brand's public symbols as sources of information for individual interpretation, akin to a program or even recipe for action, and it is through these webs of meaning that action is "produced, perceived, and interpreted" by members of a common culture.[84] It is useful, then, to unpick a bit further the link between a brand's designed cultural texts and the repertoire of behaviors it attempts to support. In both processes of production and reproduction, the manager's chief aim is to knit together more tightly the brand system's "models of" and "models for" the social world. This relationship of mirroring or circularity, of complimentary and mutual tuning between a system's worldview and ethos, helps us further understand the brand as a cultural system (like religion as a cultural system) as sense-making, integrating, and stabilizing: it creates *continuities* in ethos and consequently reinforce *continuities* in behavior patterns. But the brand system, because of its crafted nature, offers an example

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[82] Arnould and Thompson, "Consumer Culture Theory," 874. On the consumer as 'interpretive agent' (how they interpret brand messages and formulate a critical response), see *e.g.*, Jeff Murray and Julie Ozannem, "The Critical Imagination: Emancipatory Interests in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research* 18 (1991), 129–44; William Hetrick and Lozada Héctor, "Construing the Critical Imagination: Comments and Necessary Diversions," *Journal of Consumer Research* 21 (1994): 548–58; Elizabeth Hirschman and Craig Thompson, "Why Media Matter: Towards a Richer Understanding of Consumers' Relationships with Advertising and Mass Media," *Journal of Advertising* 26 (1997): 43–60.

[83] *Ibid.*

[84] Geertz 1973, 7.

where there is understood to be a particularly tight coherence between the cultural system's various resources, since each has been designed and manufactured to complement, and never conflict, with other formal resources available. Since the resources of a naturally transmitted cultural system "provide a workable set of ethical criteria, normative guides to govern our action", the fact that the brand is crafted for complete coherence between its system of symbolic resources offers perceived consequences on the action they influence.[85]

Ann Swidler's elaboration of Geertz's model provides a useful start point for thinking about how the brand as a cultural system might influence action. Rather than providing the ends of action, the causal significance of culture comes from its providing of cultural resources, a repertoire or "toolkit" of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews.[86] From these resources, people can construct "strategies of action", or "persistent ways of ordering action through time."[87] Since organic cultural systems contain diverse or even conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and therefore templates, people can construe from these resources multiple lines of action. This means that culture is typically not considered a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction: "Culture

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[85] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 106. Though Geertz acknowledges that cultural resources influence action, his insistence that culture should be studied for its meaning—and not, as his predecessors emphasized, for its effects on action—has led some to criticize his theory of the cultural system for not going far enough to discuss the mechanics by which these resources cause action. Ann Swidler helps us better understand those mechanics in her elaboration on Geertz presented in "Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 2 (1986): 273-86.

[86] Swidler, "Culture in Action," 273. Swidler's theory of the causal effects of culture differs from other models, most notably the Parsonian theory of values, the Weberian model of how ideas influence action, and the Marxian model of the relationship between ideas and interests. For an overview of these alternative theories' shortcomings in her view, see Swidler, "Culture in Action," 275-6.

[87] *Ibid.,* 273.

influences action through the shape and organization of those links, not by determining the ends to which they are put."[88] When we consider the highly coherent resources of the brand symbolic system through the lens of Swidler's thesis, we land at a slightly different conclusion about the cultural system's directional implications for action. Since the resources of the brand as a cultural system are designed to be consistent and complementary, our alternative model of the crafted symbolic system suggests it at least attempts to construe particular lines of action and determine particular ends for consumer behavior.

iv. The 'Real Beauty' Cultural System Over Two Decades: The Case of Dove

For the business community, the lines of action a brand as a cultural system offers for consumers are straightforward: "buy me." Further illustrating this argument, the following case study examines how Dove brand developed and produced a symbolic system in the mid- to late-2000s.[89] Much like it did earlier in this thesis, Dove provides an excellent, seminal example of this now typical approach to crafting a brand worldview

[88] *Ibid.,* 277. CCT scholarship echoes this view that culture, owing to its internal fragmentation and complexity, does not determine consumer action as a causal force. See Arnould and Thompson, "Consumer Culture Theory," 869.

[89]This case study draws on a few key sources, including the Harvard Business School case on the brand (John Deighton, "Dove: Evolution of a Brand," HBS no. 9-508-047 (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2008)) and Dove's brand book from 2004 (*Beauty without Artifice: The Dove Brand Book*, Dove, accessed 27 August 2021, https://www.slideshare.net/JonathanBates2/dovebrandbookbook). The following context can be found in the HBS case: Dove was owned by a leading global manufacturer of packaged consumer goods, Unilever, that operated in the food, home, and personal care sectors of the economy. It operated on every continent and had particular strengths in India, Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. The case I overview focuses on its branding efforts in the US market in the early 2000s through the early 2020s.

and ethos.[90] It also reveals, through the language and activities of brand formal producers, a conceptual understanding of the brand as a cultural system that offered interpretive texts for individuals to spin significance from. If they find significance in these texts, the brand cultural system is conceptualized as influencing consumers to engage with the brand.

In February 2000, Unilever embarked on a five-year strategic initiative called "Path to Growth." An important part of this initiative was a plan to winnow its more than 1,600 brands down to 400. Among the surviving brands, a small number would be selected as 'Masterbrands', and mandated to serve as umbrella identities over a range of product forms. Dove was named one such Masterbrand, which meant, "no longer could Dove communicate mere functional superiority because functionality meant different things in different categories. Unilever decided, instead, that *Dove should stand for a point of view*."[91]

The process Dove underwent to find its "point of view" adheres to the process of corporate attempts to produce a cultural system described above: it began, as this excerpt indicates, with exploratory research that uncovered key insights about both human desires and tensions. In terms of the human desires of the brand's audience, Dove's 2004 brand book— titled *Beauty Without Artifice*—describes their target female customer as someone who is "real, she knows who she is", who "has limits to her beauty quest because she prefers the uncomplicated, and finds beauty in simplicity of routine"; she is

[90] Dove's 2004 "Campaign for Real Beauty" is often cited as a seminal moment for a new kind of brand conception: According to the Harvard Business School case study on the campaign, "the world of communications has changed dramatically since the first Dove marketing campaign in 1957" (Deighton, "Dove," 2).
[91] Deighton, "Dove," 2. Italic emphasis is my own.

"optimistic and more mature, accepting of herself, whether she is 20, 30, or 50."[92] Though she desires this "uncomplicated, natural beauty unique to her", she experiences tension. Silvia Lagnado, the Greenwich, Connecticut-based global brand director for Dove, led a worldwide investigation into women's responses to the iconography of the beauty industry, and unearthed deep discontent: "'Young, white, blonde and thin' were the almost universal characteristics of women portrayed in advertising and packaging, but for many women these were unattainable standards, and far from feeling inspired they felt taunted."[93]

This exploratory phase was followed by an ideational one, where prototype brand texts (*e.g.* different advertising images or text options) were developed containing various articulations of a worldview and ethos around the brand's core consumer insight—of the gap between the kind of beauty portrayed in advertising and how women felt about their own beauty. Consumer testing of these prototypes revealed that the most resonant brand text was one of 'real' women, illustrating a diversity of bodies and a diversity of 'beauties.' This sentiment was refined into a pithy brand worldview: "Dove [seeks to]… make more women feel beautiful every day by broadening the narrow definition of beauty and inspiring them to take great care of themselves." The orienting belief baked into this statement is that there are many kinds of beauty. Dove recognizes, and exists to support women in recognizing their own, unique beauty. The enemy of this worldview is the

[92] *Beauty without Artifice*, 15-20. The brand book's intention is described thusly: "This book has been developed by the Dove Global Brand Teams (Skin, Hair, Deodorants)—to inspire our efforts to build Dove into a $4 billion beauty care brand by 2006. It is dedicated to all those whose past efforts have made the brand what it is today, and to those whose future efforts, passion, imagination, and perseverance will make this brand even greater" (p.12).
[93] Deighton, "Dove," 3.

beauty industry which has defined beauty in a single, narrow way: "young, white, blonde and thin."

According to the brand book, Dove's belief in 'Real Beauty' could be brought to life by what it refers to as 'The Dove Way.'[94] The Dove Way approximates the brand's ethos and consists of both Dove's "values and personality."[95] The brand book outlines five key values, or ethics, by our formulation, that make up The Dove Way:

> "Dove is Real. Dove seeks real meaning. Real relevance. Dove is firmly connected to the real world.
>
> Dove is a Keeper of Promises. Dove's promises are tangible, perceivable, and provable.
>
> Dove is Beautifully Uncomplicated. Dove is confident enough to be uncluttered.
>
> Dove is Optimistic. Dove is a Bearer of Good News.
>
> Dove is Timeless**.** Dove is not the flavor of the month. Rather, it is iconic. It is enduring."[96]

These values/ethics are directly connected to the characteristics that the brand's market research illuminated about Dove customers, suggesting that the brand is attempting to mirror its target audience's desires and beliefs back at them. In addition to these values

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[94] *Beauty without Artifice*, 21.
[95] *Ibid.* The brand book even includes a quote from The Great Gatsby to describe what 'brand personality' means: "Personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures."
[96] *Ibid.,* 22.

at the heart of all brand gestures, the brand book goes on to describe other aspects of The Dove Way. This includes clear guidelines for Dove's "tone of voice" and "style."

According to the brand book, "The Dove Mission [worldview] and the Dove Way [ethos] come together to inform everything we create in the name of Dove, to inspire a vision to guide us as we take Dove into new categories, and to allow us to speak with one voice."[97] More concretely, the document "served as an anchor to the variety of creative initiatives that unified 'The Campaign for Real Beauty.'"[98] Echoing this idea of a brand cultural system, Philippe Harousseau (Vice President of Brand Development at Dove at the time) said this about the controlled production of cultural texts based on this brand blueprint:

> "If you are not crystal clear what the brand's mission is, you cannot control what happens when people amplify it. Everyone working on Dove knows these words by heart. They know that the mission statement does not say Dove is about women feeling more beautiful, but… about more women feeling beautiful. Our notion of beauty is not elitist. It is celebratory, inclusive, and democratic."[99]

The first formalized brand text produced based on the blueprint was the now famous print advertisement featuring six 'real' women cheerfully posing in plain white underwear—a more refined version of the prototype image that tested so well with consumers during the ideational phase (Figure 4). This same, seminal image, but with different women, has been produced and reproduced in Dove's various marketing

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[97] *Ibid.,* 2. Similar statements can be found throughout: *e.g.* "This brand book guides us to build Dove into a true beauty care icon, while honoring our unique point of view on beauty, steering away from puffery, cluttered messages and clichés. It guides us to give our consumers beauty promises and products that hold real meaning and performance" (p.12).

[98] *Ibid.*

[99] *Ibid.*

campaigns for over a decade. It is what we might consider a 'sacred' text. It is also an example of 'co-creation' of brand texts by Dove with consumers: rather than feature aspirational, archetypal women (using models or influencers), the advert featured various women who used Dove products. This again is a symbolic choice bringing to life the worldview of 'Real Beauty' over aspirational beauty.

This foundational brand blueprint launched a multi-year production effort to animate the Dove brand as a cultural system. One famous brand text was the Super Bowl advert in February 2006 known as "Evolution."[100] This long-format advertisement featured "the face of a young woman as cosmetics, hair styling, and Photoshop editing transformed it from plainness to billboard glamour."[101] The point was clear and captured the brand blueprint: the beauty industry does not celebrate real beauty, but Dove does. It was as if the advert was saying "we see you, the real you, and you're beautiful—no makeup, hair styling, or photoshop needed." Within three months, the video had been viewed three million times and the popularity of the brand's activity was the subject of considerable newspaper, radio, and television coverage.[102]

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[100] AdAge, "*No. 1 Dove: Campaign for Real Beauty*, 2015," YouTube, accessed 27 August 2021, https://www. youtube.com/watch?v=wpM499XhMJQ. The video was originally posted on video-sharing site YouTube given its unusual length, although it was also truncated for traditional television advertising spots.

[101] Deighton, "Dove," 4.

[102] *Ibid.* Some of the other notable texts produced to animate the brand blueprint, its guiding worldview and ethos, include the following (these examples are collected from Deighton, "Dove," 5-10): In late 2006 the Dove brand builders in North America announced a contest, titled 'Real Ads by Real Women', to invite consumers to create their own ads for Dove Cream Oil Body Wash, a new product scheduled to be launched in early 2007. The winning commercials aired during a commercial break on the 79th annual Academy Awards broadcast on network television on February 25, 2007; The Dove media team built coverage and interest with more than 200 local news programs and more than 60 national broadcast and print outlets covering



FIGURE 4. DOVE'S ORIGINAL 'REAL BEAUTY' PRINT ADVERTISEMENT.
(Deighton, "Dove: Evolution of a Brand," 3).

On this, Harousseau remarked, "You just can't buy that kind of exposure. You can't buy pop culture."[103] This interest in producing a Dove cultural system whose texts seep into wider, naturally occurring cultural systems is also underscored by Dove's marketing director for the United States, Kathy O'Brien, who told the press that the company wanted the ads to "change the way society views beauty", and "provoke discussion and

the campaign. Unilever established the global Dove Self- Esteem Fund to raise the self-esteem of girls and young women. In the U.S., the fund supported Uniquely ME!, a partnership with the Girl Scouts of the USA that helped build self confidence in young girls aged with educational resources and hands-on activities.

[103] *Ibid.,* 4.

debate about real beauty."[104] Similarly, Todd Tilleman, the General Manager for Unilever's North American Skin Business, commented that the brand, "blatantly debunked the dream that supermodel beauty was within your grasp. We were saying that the beauty industry was portraying an unattainable and stereotypical image of beauty, and yet there we were in the beauty industry."[105]

The production of Dove's brand cultural system grew the business over time. In September 2006, Landor Associates identified Dove as one of ten brands with the greatest percentage gain in brand health and business value in the three-year period from 2003 to 2006, and it calculated that the brand had grown by $1.2 billion in that time.[106] By 2017, Dove was the world's number one cleansing brand in the health and beauty sector, with sales over $2.5 billion a year in more than eighty countries.[107]

In addition to successfully (if the performance of the business is any indication) reflecting individual desires in a brand blueprint and texts, the Dove example also serves to illustrate how a brand as a cultural system is crafted to appear as if naturally evolving over time—imitating Geertz's "historically transmitted" premise of the organic cultural system's transformation. Like the PlayStation and Starbucks examples, revolution of the Dove brand blueprint (of the worldview and ethos pairing guiding all brand activity) was cast as a natural evolution of the brand rather than an intervention by producers. In their 2004 brand book, Dove's history was recast to appear as if the new real beauty focus was

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[104] *Ibid.*

[105] *Ibid.*

[106] *Ibid.*

[107] Deighton, "Dove," 12. It competed with brands like Procter and Gamble's Ivory, Kao's Jergens, and Beiersdorf's Nivea.

not new at all. The guiding insight of the work, for example, was "the yearning for the real", and the book explains that "Dove can answer this yearning" because the brand has "always been firmly rooted in reality. From its earliest beginnings as a cleansing bar, Dove delivered real benefits, real satisfactions, both functionally and emotionally."[108] In other words, Dove recasts its history ever so slightly to center what we might consider 'Real Confidence' rather than 'Real Beauty.'

This same approach of emphasizing consistency amid change was taken in 2020 with the revolution of the brand blueprint again. The brand mission on the company's website now emphasized that the brand "believes beauty should be a source of confidence, and not anxiety," and that "we are here to help women everywhere develop a positive relationship with the way they look, helping them raise their self-esteem and realize their full potential."[109] If we excavate behind the language of this revised brand blueprint, it appears to be guided by a new insight around how anxiety, and particularly the anxiety around appearance, inhibits women's potential and society's more broadly as a result. This is a pivot from the 2004 brand blueprint's centripetal force of Real Beauty. But as expected, this revolution of the brand blueprint—of the worldview and ethos guiding all brand activity—is framed as consistency: "Since our founding, Dove has always wanted women and girls of all ages to see beauty as a source of confidence, not anxiety. Because

[108] "Dove Brand Book," 17.

[109] "Our Vision," Dove, accessed 18 June 2020, https://www.dove.com/us/en/stories/about-dove/our-vision.html.

when women and girls choose not to participate fully in life, society as a whole misses out."[110]

What might be observed, then, with this case study is that a guiding worldview and ethos were crafted to reflect the aspirations and soothe the anxieties of a particular, selected audience. These mutually reinforcing aspects of worldview and ethos were codified by formal producers and used by a range of corporate actors as a blueprint to produce cultural texts, the accumulation of which constitutes, alongside consumer co-created brand texts, the ever-emerging cultural system of the Dove brand. As the guiding worldview and ethos are shifted by producers over time to engage evolving consumer anxieties, the pairing informs the crafting of new texts and the subtle recrafting of the larger brand cultural system, or the centripetal worldview and ethos itself. Despite being a revolution of the brand, the entire process is framed as a continuation of the past, with the intention that the brand appears stable, consistent and constant to consumers.

[110] *Ibid.* In addition to the language of consistency ("since our founding" and "always"), the visual language of the brand appears similar to the 2004 guidelines, helping smooth over any sense of disruption. That sacred text of diverse women in white underwear, for example, was reproduced in a number of 2020 adverts. In 2021, the brand made a 'remake' of the Evolution film, this time turning attention to heavily edited 'selfies' on social media that peddle unrealistic and undesirable beauty expectations ("Dove Turns Attention to Heavily Edited Selfies in Latest Campaign," *Campaign Asia*, accessed 29 August 2021, https://www.campaignasia.com/article/dove-turns-attention-to-heavily-edited-selfies-in-latest-campaign/469159).

V. Conclusion: Identifying the Corporate Cultural System, its Priorities, and its Problems

This chapter's examination of the business community's internal workings points toward an apparently consistent theorization of the brand as a cultural system, in which a mutually reinforcing worldview and ethos are crafted by managers, and in which a range of actors produce a series of brand texts encapsulating a professionally codified "model for" and "model of" the world. I have argued that corporate actors' roles in manufacturing, monitoring, and manipulating the brand system and its intended meaning over time have elaborated on the foundations of Geertz's theory of religion as a cultural system. However, rather than the Geertzian system in which symbols are fluidly and organically reproduced over time, the corporate brand as a cultural system is, fundamentally, a crafted one. The intentional production of the brand as a cultural system occurs in accordance with corporate objectives at any given time and with the ambition of creating ever more continuity between the official worldview and ethos. In this unusual coherence between symbols, these crafted cultural systems are conceptualized to influence consumers toward desired behaviors of brand engagement. I call the theoretical construct this chapter has proposed the *Corporate Cultural System (CCS)*.

Having identified these internal workings, we might next pause and consider them, asking why Geertz seems to occupy such substantial influence on how the business community choses to formulate its approaches to meaning-making activity in the marketplace. In other words, what does the selection of his anthropology reveal about the priorities of management academics and professionals? A first observation, noted earlier, is that

Geertz's ideas of a semiotic and interpretive culture serve as the foundation for Consumer Cultural Theory, the body of work focused on the *consumption* of brand meaning in the marketplace: "Geertz's famous axiom" helps justify "why consumer culture theorists do not study consumption contexts; they study in consumption contexts to generate new constructs and theoretical insights and to extend existing theoretical formulations."[111] The *construction* of the brand itself as a cultural system to be consumed might be a natural extension of this already-existing theoretical foundation. If so, ideas about the construction and consumption of the brand elide nicely.

The preference for Geertz's theory of religion in explaining the construction of brand meaning might betray another priority. The CCS formulation stands in contrast to explanations of culture that foreground power, domination, or rational interests. Though it is not my intention to offer a full critique, Geertz's anthropology has been generally criticized, among other things, for a "failure to understand how social change can ever occur" and for inadequately explaining the "authoritative status" bestowed upon symbols.[112] On this second point, Geertz's ideas about religion as a cultural system separate cultural products from their historical production and from the relations of power and domination in which they are necessarily enmeshed.[113] The relationship

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111 Arnould and Thompson, "Consumer Cultural Theory," 869.

112 Talal Asad, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion,* ed. Michael Lambek (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 118. Cf. Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion," 237-59; Sewell, "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History," 35-6.

113 Rhys Williams holds up two theoretical oppositions to Geertz, which in turn fuel scholarly developments of his work. First, Geertz's approach to culture stands in contrast to that of Marxism and functionalism, which saw the 'real' forces of society (and of human action) for these approaches are found underneath or behind culture within social structure. Geertz criticized this posture arguing "its psychology is too anemic and its sociology too muscular" (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, 202). A second theoretical opposition Williams overviews is one concerning religion's

between meaning and power, by this view, are far more complicated than Geertz imagines.

A skeptical reader might speculate this shortcoming is convenient for the business community.[114] Choosing Geertz as a foundation perhaps enables this audience to avoid uncomfortable consideration of issues pertaining to their own position and activity—of their intentions and other dynamics of power and instrumentalism. As this chapter showed, the 'manager' and the authoritative 'culture' itself are almost invisible aspects of the conceptual framework of the Corporate Cultural System. Indeed, practitioners considered the brand to be shaped by consumers' true needs, never shaping them: the process of empathetic, human-centered research considers the brand as simply "giving the people what they want", and furthermore, consumers possess the agency to interpret the CCS and choose whether to engage with the brand thereafter. The framing of power within this CCS construct as benevolent, or the eschewing of it all together, might reflect

relationship between power in society, with some arguing that there is a significant difference in how religion and culture work. Williams charts how religion as a 'cultural system' remains and important idea, but that the meaning of this phrase has become "more diverse, more nuanced, and more controversial" as contemporary cultural scholarship elaborates its foundation. See "Religion as a Cultural System': Theoretical and Empirical Developments Since Geertz," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, eds. Mark Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan (Wiley, 2005), 97-111. For discussion of the brand in Marxist terms, see Ron Shachar, Tülin Erdem, Keisha Cutright, and Gavan Fitzsimons. "Brands: The Opiate of the Nonreligious Masses?," *Marketing Science* 30, no. 1 (September 24, 2010): 92–110.

[114] Cummings *et al.* might see the apparent preference for scholars like Geertz as yet another example of the business community's "own ideological distaste for theoretical issues, such as those raised by Marxist historians" (Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 280. Cf. Donald Coleman, "The Uses and Abuses of Business History," *Business History* 29, no. 2 (1987): 141-56.

the possibility of the business community's 'theoretical expediency' in their choice of Geertz as foundation.

Nonetheless, the marketplace context that this chapter took as its focus has fruitfully allowed us to identify the Corporate Cultural System theoretical construct for the first time. The following two chapters of this thesis aim to demonstrate an identical formulation appears within two other, discrete arenas of corporate activity. Chapter Two focuses on the workplace arena where organizational managers craft corporate cultures to coalesce and mobilize employees. Chapter Three then focuses on the wider context of society at large, where corporate action based on a sense of morality, or elevated consciousness, is thought to create positive impact in the world. Collectively, these three chapters and the arenas they examine represent distinct audiences and boundaries of corporate meaning-making activity. Nonetheless, despite these contextual differences, the Corporate Cultural System framework that I have laid out in this chapter can be identified across all contexts. The process of constructing symbolic systems with a tailored worldview and ethos, I argue, appears to be a widespread management idea and practice. Equally widespread is the theoretical avoidance of authority.

CHAPTER TWO

Constructing Meaning in the Workplace: The Corporate Cultural System and Employee Coordination

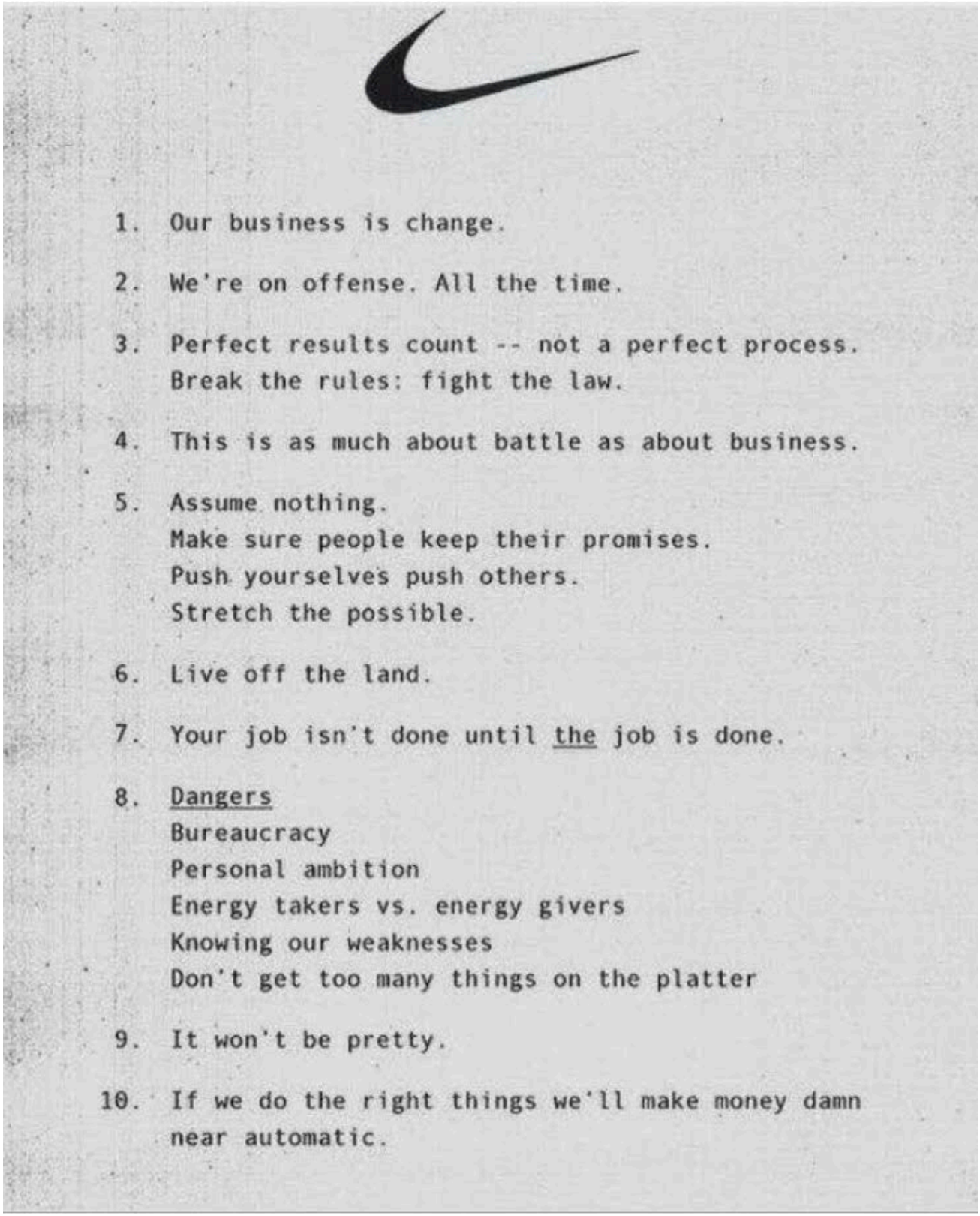
I. Introduction: Nike and the Modern Management of Organizations

When most people think of Nike, they think of the famous swoosh logo, the "Just Do It" tag line, or the Greek goddess of victory that the brand is named after. Of Michael Jordan and other athletes in the corporation's adverts, or of their favorite football team dressed in Nike-branded uniforms. Or perhaps they conjure their own experience of training using the Nike Runners Club app, competing in the London Marathon in their Nike trainers, and being handed a Nike-sponsored medal upon crossing the finish line. They might think of the corporation's famous co-founder and former CEO Phil Knight who, according to the brand's mythology, borrowed $50 from his father in 1962 and created a company with a simple mission: import high-quality, low-cost athletic shoes from Japan. These symbols, myths, and rituals make up the symbolic system of the Nike

brand in the marketplace; each captures Nike's brand worldview ("just do it") and ethos ("be powerful" and "champion athletes", among other).[1]

Though this is the way Nike is known to the world and the way it offers meaning to consumers, it is a different world of Nike that this chapter seeks to explore. Rather than the external brand-building work of the corporation, it takes as its preoccupation the corporate entity itself: the organization, its management, and its employees. This internal, workplace context is also one where meaning is perceived to be at play. As Phil Knight said of working at Nike, "I wanted it to be meaningful. And purposeful."[2] In the 1980s, he and his co-founder Bill Bowerman captured this purpose of work for his employees thus: "To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world", defining athlete as "if you have a body, you are an athlete."[3] They additionally codified Nike's "Ten Commandments" (Figure 5)—the values that all employees understood as an important part of what their day-to-day workplace experience might be like and how they might be expected to contribute. Among these values, Knight lists what he perceived to be "dangers" to the corporation's employee experience, including "bureaucracy", "personal ambition", "energy takers", "knowing our weaknesses", and "too many things on the platter", or lack of shared focus.[4]

[1] Phil Knight, *Shoe Dog: A Memoir by the Creator of NIKE* (Scribner, 2016), 32.
[2] *Ibid.*, 3.
[3] "Breaking Barriers," Nike, accessed 20 August 2020, https://purpose.nike.com/.
[4] *Ibid.*



1. Our business is change.

2. We're on offense. All the time.

3. Perfect results count -- not a perfect process.
   Break the rules: fight the law.

4. This is as much about battle as about business.

5. Assume nothing.
   Make sure people keep their promises.
   Push yourselves push others.
   Stretch the possible.

6. Live off the land.

7. Your job isn't done until the job is done.

8. Dangers
   Bureaucracy
   Personal ambition
   Energy takers vs. energy givers
   Knowing our weaknesses
   Don't get too many things on the platter

9. It won't be pretty.

10. If we do the right things we'll make money damn near automatic.

Figure 5. Nike's 'Ten Commandments.'
("Nike's Original Business Principles," *Aozata*, 20 February 2020, https://www.aozata.com/nikes-original-business-principles/).

This chapter explores precisely these themes Knight and the Nike example raise—of purpose, values, bureaucracy, social solidarity, energies, and coordination—all within the context of the corporate workplace. These themes find their root in the literature of organizational management, or the study of "structures and systems used to mobilize and organize collective effort."[5] The field focuses on how best to organize and coordinate the workforce and this concern elevates a *social* or collective dimension: "Our organizations allow us to do together what can't be done alone. No single human can build a car, launch a satellite, create an operating system, train a doctor, erect a building, or mobilize a movement. Even Jesus needed twelve disciples."[6]

In this chapter, I examine how the business community understands meaning to play a role in this organizational management context. My argument is that professionals conceptualize and construct a Corporate Cultural System intended for the employee community to support the coordination of labor. This conceptualization of the CCS applied within the workplace is analogous to the one discussed in Chapter One, with two key elaborations: first, the workplace CCS focuses inward, within the corporation and on the employee experience, rather than outward into the marketplace; and second, it

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[5] Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini, *Humanocracy: Creating Organizations as Amazing as the People Inside Them* (Harvard Business Press, 2020), 2.

[6] *Ibid.* Following much of the Business Studies field, I use the terms 'employees' and 'workforce' to broadly mean the group of people who, through legal contract, receive compensation of diverse forms from a corporate entity in exchange for work performed in the corporation's interests. There are many categorizations across the literature, but for our purposes, 'managers' and 'executives' are more senior directors of the company who shape the nature of the company's strategies and therefore the work requiring performance, but they can also be considered employees by this definition. As such, I strip from these ideas any political or class undertones from my use of 'employees' (which terms like 'labor' tend to hold). This choice reflects how the term is generally used by the business community. See *e.g.*, Edgar Schein, "Culture: The Missing Concept in Organization Studies," *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1996): 229-40; Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management,* 229ff.

foregrounds an interest in *social* dimensions of meaning that the CCS creates for the employee community. As they did in the previous chapter, theories from Religious Studies enable us to examine and critique these ideas more closely, as do a range of case studies, including those of Netflix, Facebook, Airbnb, and Hyatt.

I make my argument across three sections. The first section traces a brief history of organizational management to show that meaning has traditionally been located within a company's corporate culture, where it is seen as a tool able to support greater efficiency within the workplace. I identify two primary perspectives on company culture and meaning developed by the field, one that sees culture as unified and as regulating social behavior, while another is more concerned with the employee experience of it, viewing culture in a more interpretive, semiotic way. Across these contours of organizational management thinking, I show that scholars have borrowed ideas from Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Clifford Geertz as foundational to their discipline.

Building on this intellectual foundation, the following section looks at the language and activity of the contemporary business community as it relates to corporate culture and meaning. Through a range of examples and case studies, I excavate a coherent conceptualization of corporate culture as a Geertzian system of symbols containing a worldview and ethos—or as it is called within this context, a company's purpose and values—respectively. This formulation of culture suggests that professionals craft a Corporate Cultural System within the workplace context to provide meaning to employees, similar to how they crafted the CCS within the marketplace context to provide meaning to consumers. Moreover, as argued in the previous chapter, the

Corporate Cultural System discussed here is a constructed, invented one; it is intentionally designed and disseminated by a firm's managers for interpretation by employees.

Having focused on the conceptualization of corporate culture, a third, final section looks more closely at how the CCS makes meaning. I show how the manufacturing and management of the CCS is considered to offer social meaning to the employee community and generate value for businesses in the process. Drawing on Émile Durkheim's theorizations, the CCS is thought to promote social solidarity and unleash the collective energies of the employee communities, driving increased stabilization, regulation, and productivity within the workplace. Additionally, the CCS is thought to support a process of organizational change, where the firm undergoes a reorganization and restructuring journey to align with new business goals. Drawing on Max Weber's ideas, the CCS is believed to shape an employee work ethic and thus shape the spirit of the company as it transforms. Though Geertz, Durkheim, and Weber make an unlikely theoretical combination given their differences, I show that the CCS construct in the workplace combines aspects of each, perhaps elaborating on the intellectual roots of the organizational management discipline that I hope to have shown each has individually influenced.

To conclude this chapter, I summarize my argument and draw parallels between the CCS crafted in the marketplace and in the workplace. I then take a step back to reflect on how the business community, over a hundred-year history of searching for answers to their fundamental question of "how do corporations best organize?", continue to search for

answers in the work of Weber and Durkheim that consider "how do societies organize?" Though, as I hope to argue, the business community draws on different ideas from these social scholars over time (perhaps to fit the management priorities and fashions of the time of writing or working), Weber and Durkheim's sociologies nonetheless remain foundational to conceptualizations of the corporation and workforce meaning.

II. The Workplace Context: Theoretical Influences on Corporate Culture

i. The Influence of Max Weber on 'Efficient' Organization Design

Most evolutionary narratives of organizational management begin their history with the turn of the twentieth century.[7] Increasing division of labor and industrialization created a great challenge of inefficiency for corporate managers. Thus, a focus on how growing firms might become more efficient became an assumption of the study and practice of 'management', an idea traditionally credited to Frederick W. Taylor.[8] His was a scientific

[7] See *e.g.*, R. Daft, *Organization Theory & Design* (Cengage Learning, 2013); F. Landy and J. Conte, *Work in the 21st Century. An Introduction to Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (Wiley, 2013). The first significant wave of organization design research spanned 1940s to 1960s, with contributors including Dick Beckhard, Kurt Lewin, and Rensis Likert. Newer theorists constituting a second wave, from roughly 1970s to 1990s, and included Ed Lawler, Chris Worley, Edgar Schein, and David Cooperrider. For an overview of these various ages, see P. Sorensen, T. Yaeger, and R. Narel, "The New Golden Age of Organization Development Research and Knowledge," *Organization Development Journal* 35, no. 1 (2015): 47-55.

[8] Taylor was the first to popularize the word 'management' in his seminal document, *Principles of Scientific Management* (Harper and Brothers, 1911). Most handbooks locate the start of modern management thinking with this document. See *e.g.*, Morgen Witzel and Malcolm Warner, *The Oxford Handbook of Management Theorists* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 2; Andrew Sturdy, Stefan

perspective, one that asserted a mechanistic-industrial worldview and saw planning, organizing, directing, and controlling as the staples of management.[9]

Complimenting Taylor's scientific view of management was a second school of thought on the 'organization' (or, the social relationships, processes, and structures of the firm) and its optimal design. This school largely drew on the thinking of German sociologist and historian Max Weber.[10] In *Economy and Society* (1921), he describes the concept of 'bureaucracy' as a highly structured, formalized, and impersonal organization that is best for large-scale administration.[11] Bureaucracy constitutes the most efficient and rational

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Heusinkveid, Trish Reay, and David Strang, *The Oxford Handbook of Management Ideas* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.

[9] Peter Drucker's seminal book, *The Concept of the Corporation* (Transaction Publishers, 1946), echoes Taylor, stating that management and organization must be "measured by the yardstick of efficiency" (p.44). In the 1960s and 70s, Harold Koontz built his efforts to order management theory around this: "increasing efficiency" was the "goal of all managers" and it should also be the reason for developing management theory ("Management Control: A Suggested Formulation of Principles," *California Management Review* 12 (1959): 47). More recently, William Kinicki and Brian Williams begin their textbook chapter on management history with "the name of the game is to manage work more efficiently" (*Management: A Practical Introduction* (McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2011), 42).

[10] *E.g.,* two of the world's best-selling introductory management texts say Weber "considered the ideal organization to be a bureaucracy" (James Stoner *et al.*, *Management* (Prentice-Hall, 1995), 10), and that bureaucracy is "his ideal type" (S. Robbins and M. Coulter, "Organizational Structure and Design," in *Management*, eds. Stoner *et al.* (Prentice Hall, 1995), 37). Others have noted that this framing fundamentally misreads Weber (see *e.g.*, Stephen Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 125). Weber's "ideal" does not mean "best" as most of these interpretations suggest, nor was 'bureaucracy' a singular, monolithic organizational form as is often framed. Indeed, Weber conceived of three ideal types of authority: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal, each of which sponsored different or competing forms of organization. Here we see management scholars plucking useful aspects of theory and sometimes mischaracterizing their excerpts. This theme and its implications are discussed in further detail in the conclusion of this chapter.

[11] Max Weber, *Economy and Society,* trans. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Bedminster Press, 1968), 973. Though this work's original date is unknown, it was likely written around 1915, but was published posthumously in the early 1920s. But it was translated to English after Weber's death by Talcott Parsons and published in 1947. Correspondingly, Weber's major contribution to the management field is often dated at 1947. Weber describes bureaucratic administration in

way in which human activity can be organized, and systematic processes along with clear hierarchies are necessary to maintain order, to maximize efficiency, and to eliminate favoritism. In Weber's words, "the fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production", and this mechanical perspective of bureaucratic organization appeared to compliment Taylor's and bolstered the nascent field of management studies focused on maximizing efficiency.[12] Weber is therefore generally described as a booster of Taylorism, in addition to being an organization theorist or management expert in his own right.[13] Together, these two thinkers are credited with inventing what is often called the Classical school of thought in organizational management studies, a tradition focusing on efficiency that is still easily traced in the bulk of modern scholarship and practice.[14]

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, after nearly seventy years of the Taylor/Weber-inspired Classical tradition continuing to shape various waves of management thinking, a body of literature emerged that introduced a company's 'culture' as the latest tool to enable

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this way: "Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs—these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration" (p.973). He also repeatedly makes the link between this kind of organization and corporations: "the bureaucratic structure goes hand in hand with the concentration of the material means of management… This concentration occurs, for instance, in a well-known and typical fashion in the development of big capitalist enterprises, which find their essential characteristics in this process" (p.980, cf. p. 947).

[12] *Ibid.*

[13] Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management*, 119.

[14] On the enormous influence of this work on the field, see Cristina Giannantonio and Amy E. Hurley-Hanson, "Frederick Winslow Taylor: Reflections on the Relevance of the Principles of Scientific Management 100 Years Later," *Chapman University Digital Commons* (2011). For an overview and critique of the organizational effectiveness construct and influence, see George Mitchell, "The Construct of Organizational Effectiveness," *Journal of Voluntary Action Research* 42, no. 2 (2012): 345; P. McCullough and S. Faught, "Paradoxes of Organizational Effectiveness," *International Journal of Business and Social Science* 5 no. 9 (2014): 264-73.

managers to achieve performance efficiency.[15] 'Corporate culture' (sometimes 'employee culture') was not a novel topic, but it was around this time that the meaning it produces for employees became associated with organizational process.[16] This culture was distinguished from a company's social structure and regarded as a more or less cohesive "frame of reference or beliefs, expressive symbols and values, by means of which individuals define their environment, express their feelings and make judgements."[17] This idea—that culture could inform process, and that process can always be optimized for efficiency—resulted in a "boom in the study of corporate culture… and the role of rituals, symbols, beliefs, and myths within the corporation" to improve corporate process and therefore efficiency.[18] From this boom, two primary perspectives might be sketched. The first, which I call the 'strong culture' perspective, saw corporate culture as a uniform system of beliefs that can support the cohesion and regulation of the workforce; the second, which I call the 'flow culture' perspective, elevates the experience of corporate culture and sees it as a symbolic system interpreted by employees. I overview the foundations, development, and agendas of both in turn.

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[15] Schein, "Culture: The Missing Concept in Organization Studies," 269.

[16] For process-emphasizing definitions of corporate culture, see Edgar Schein, "Defining Organizational Culture," *Classics of Organization Theory* 3, no. 1 (1985); Adrian Furnham and Barrie Gunter, "Corporate Culture: Definition, Diagnosis and Change," *International Review of Organizational Psychology* 8 (1993): 233-61.

[17] Mats Alvesson, *Understanding Organizational Culture* (Sage, 2012), 5. Alvesson suggests that to understand corporate culture, "making a distinction between a company's culture and social structure is helpful" (p.5).

[18] Charles Dellheim, "The Creation of a Company Culture: Cadburys, 1861-1931," *The American Historical Review* 92, no. 1 (1987): 13.

ii. The 'Strong Culture' Perspective and the Influence of Émile Durkheim on Employee Regulation

A first premise of corporate culture emerged in the 1980s as interest in the role of beliefs within the organization grew. It reflects what might be observed as the 'good organizations have *strong corporate cultur*es' theorization. Adherents tend to promote culture in this way:

> "The best organizations have *strong cultures*… ones that are clear and well defined and widely shared among members, discourage dysfunctional work behaviors and encourage positive ones."[19]
>
> "*Strong cultures* are well-developed and business-specific ones in which management and staff are thoroughly socialized… [they] can underpin stronger organizational commitment, higher morale, more efficient performance… [and] higher productivity."[20]

A hallmark of strong culture (and indeed, a key management principle) is repetition, as is the promotion of a unitary corporate culture.[21] The aim is to remove dysfunctional

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[19] John Campling *et al.*, *Management* (Wiley, 2008), 43.

[20] A. Furnham and B. Gunter, *Corporate Assessment: Auditing A Company's Personality* (Routledge, 1993), 47.

[21] Lindsey Kotrba *et al.*, "Do Consistent Corporate Cultures Have Better Business Performance? Exploring the Interaction Effects," *Human Relations* 65, no. 2 (2012): 241-62. Some have pointed to the similarity between what I call the 'strong culture' perspective and that of an 'invented tradition'—that is, a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. On invented traditions, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2. For the idea applied to corporate culture, see Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management,* 308. On an example documenting the invention of culture in a company, see Dellheim, "The Creation of a Company Culture," 13-44.

behaviors and encourage unification of employee action which, the argument goes, creates efficiency gains.

For decades, strong corporate culture has been commonplace in business discourse, used by management consultants, practicing managers, and management academics as one of the most important enablers of, or barriers to, management success and to the larger pursuit of organizational efficiency. It became a leading differentiator for the preeminent consultancy McKinsey & Company in the 1980s, as a response to the rise of an upstart competitor, Boston Consulting Group (BCG).[22] While BCG introduced popular new tools like the BCG Matrix that they sold to executives to help them improve their company's performance, McKinsey branded a framework of their own, the 'Seven S's' framework (Systems, Staff, Structure, Strategy, Style, Skills, and Shared Values). Depictions of the framework put Shared Values at the center with the other six components organized around it, and together, these connected elements were thought to "reinforce one another in a strong culture."[23] The framework was developed in association with a team of professors from Stanford and Harvard and also formed the

[22] Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management*, 273.

[23] The 'Seven S's' was first published in Robert Waterman and Thomas Peters, "Structure is Not Organization, McKinsey Quarterly," *Business Horizons* 3 (1980): 2-20. It forms the basis of Richard Pascale (from Stanford) and Anthony Athos's (from Harvard) *Art of Japanese Management* (Simon & Schuster, 1981), which centered organizational culture to explain a rising observation by American executives and academics that Japan seemingly produced better managers than the West. A focus on strong, unitary cultures, as Japanese corporations were perceived to have, was thought to explain their competitive edge.

basis of Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman's *In Search of Excellence* (1982), a publication that became management's first best-seller.[24]

And yet, despite its influence, the Seven S's does not stand on defensible theoretical ground: it "emerged out of a series of meetings" between Peters and Waterman and the pair have never offered objective arguments that would be considered academic in approach or rigor (their book was intended for a practitioner, manager audience and is written accordingly, with few citations).[25] Indeed, many have criticized the strong culture approach more broadly as relatively flat at best or uncritical at worst. As Cummings *et al.* bluntly put it, "The development of management studies' understanding of culture reinforces a naïve, prescriptive, and conservative approach to what organizations should be and aim for."[26]

Rather than dismissing the strong culture perspective as naïve or superficial, some have tried to fill in the influences on this thinking in an attempt to substantiate it (or find theoretical grounds to critique it). Whatever the motive, this endeavor often leads—through stringing together sequences of logical compatibilities—to the early work of Émile Durkheim.[27] Peters and Waterman, for example, were concerned with "excellence"

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[24] Robert Waterman and Thomas Peters, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

[25] Cummings *et al.*, *A New History of Management,* 273-5. The Seven S's is "made up and bric-a-brac", exposing what we might observe as the business behind business thinking (p.274).

[26] *Ibid.,* 269.

[27] The corporate culture writers of the 1980s came to Durkheim via the human relations scholars within Business Studies, who borrowed ideas that moral order would arise from a sense of belonging to one's work group (Ken Starkey, "Durkheim and the Limits of Corporate Culture: Whose Culture? Which Durkheim," *Journal of Management Studies* 35, no. 2 (1998): 126). On the influence of Durkheim on corporate culture, see Ken Starkey, "Durkheim and Organizational Analysis: Two Legacies," *Organization Studies* 14, no. 4 (1992): 627-42, esp. 634; Peter Dahler-

in management, and argue that to achieve excellence, management must promote social integration by developing a sense of common purpose and cooperative relationships in the workplace; this is a means of counteracting the negative effects of the absence of shared norms of conduct: "In the excellent companies… values are clear; they are acted out minute by minute and decade by decade by the top brass; and they are well understood deep in the companies' ranks."[28]

Commenters have noted that this "sense of social integration" and the institutional function of top management within a corporation can counter something similar to Durkheim's concept of 'anomie', which he defines as a state of individual paralysis of social action due to the absence of effective norms of conduct.[29] This builds on the keynote claim of *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), which argues that society is integrated through sentiment, which concerns intangible notions like emotion, morality, and solidarity.[30] Durkheim's analysis of labor mostly concerns its aspects of cultural and social regulation; as he writes:

Larsen, "Corporate Culture and Morality: Durkheim-Inspired Reflections on the Limits of Corporate Culture," *Journal of Management Studies* 31, no. 1 (1994): 1-18; James Lincoln and Didier Guillot, "Durkheim and Organizational Culture," *UC Berkley Working Paper Series* (2004); Frank Dobbin, "How Durkheim's Theory of Meaning-Making Influenced Organizational Sociology," in *Oxford Handbook of Sociology and Organization Studies: Classical Foundations*, ed. Paul Adler (Oxford University Press, 2009); Phil Johnson and Joanne Duberley, "Anomie and Culture Management: Reappraising Durkheim," *Organization* 18, no. 4 (2011): 563-84.

[28] Peters and Waterman, *In Search of Excellence*, 97-8.

[29] Chester Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Harvard University Press, 1938), 118-9; Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (Free Press, 1947), 371-2.

[30] Durkheim's *The Division of Labor* is referenced widely in management thinking, providing a foundation for enquiry into many avenues of scholarship on how firms organize and specialize. See *e.g.,* Frank Levy and Richard Murnane, *The New Division of Labor: How Computers are Creating the Next Job Market* (Princeton University Press, 2004); Maria Guadalupe, Hongyi Li, and Julie Wulf, "Who Lives in the C-Suite? Organizational Structure and the Division of Labor in Top

> "We are thus led to consider the division of labor in a new light. In this instance, the economic services that it can render are picayune compared to the moral effect that it produces, and its true function is to create in two or more persons a feeling of solidarity. In whatever manner the result is obtained, its aim is to cause coherence among friends and to stamp them with its seal."[31]

The management of rational activity, following Durkheim's analysis of the conditions conducive to social solidarity, is premised on the fostering of a sense of common purpose and cooperation: "The key role of the chief executive, according to Peters and Waterman, is to manage the culture/values of the organization and to develop, in Durkheimian phrase, a sense of 'collective conscience.'"[32]

Durkheim's work on collective conscience became a root metaphor underpinning not only the logic of the 'strong culture' perspective, but also thinking on the company's strategic 'purpose.' This purpose, often formally encapsulated in a statement, reflects the clear strategic priority of the organization and was considered, at its best, a tool to coordinate the workforce with an orienting belief; identification with the purpose of one's firm, the logic goes, would engender a new normative system.[33] This is an argument made by two scholars, Chester Barnard and Philip Selznick, who both reference

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Management," *Management Science* 60, no. 4 (2014): 824-44; A. Scott, "Industrial Organization and Location: Division of Labor, the Firm, and Spatial Process," *Economic Geography* 62, no. 3 (2016): 215-31.

[31] Durkheim, *Division of Labor,* 56. For the myriad influences on Durkheim's definition of and perspective on 'labor', see Ken Morrison, *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought* (Sage, 2006), esp. 17-22.

[32] Ken Starkey, "Durkheim and Organizational Analysis," 635. Italic emphasis is my own. Cf. H. Schmid, "The Feeling of Being a Group: Corporate Emotions and Collective Consciousness," in *Collective Emotions: Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Sociology* (2014), 3-16.

[33] On corporate purpose, see *e.g.*, Fred David, "How Companies Define their Mission," *Long Range Planning* 22, no. 1 (1989): 90-7; Richard Ellsworth, *Leading with Purpose: The New Corporate Realities* (Stanford University Press, 2002); Nina Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose: Building Brands and Businesses for the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2019).

Durkheim as their inspiration.[34] What emerges from acknowledging the Durkheimian influence is a perspective that 'strong culture' companies "…recognize the dualism of human nature about which Durkheim wrote…Employees want, on the one hand, to be unique and stand out; yet, on the other, desire cession to the whole."[35] The 'strong culture' perspective, then, influenced by Durkheimian thought, elevates a unifying, shared belief system and social cohesion of employees as a way to regulate behavior and boost organizational efficiency.

ii. The 'Flow Culture' Perspective and the Influence of Clifford Geertz on the Interpretation of Corporate Cultures

But even if Durkheimian thought offers theoretical substance to the 'strong culture' point of view, some reject its picture of employees as unknowing social agents, in contrast to the epistemological privilege wielded by the objective manager.[36] Critics argue the

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[34] Peters and Waterman refer to the seminal work of Philip Selznick on leadership to support this argument and, again, it is Durkheim who provides an important reference point for Selznick in *Law, Society, and Industrial Justice* (Russell Sage Foundation, 1969).

[35] Carol Ray, "Corporate Culture: The Last Frontier of Control?," *Journal of Management Studies* 23, no. 3 (1986): 291. Cf. Richard Walton, *From Control to Commitment in the Workplace: There is a Revolution Under Way in the Management of Work* (US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor-Management Relations and Cooperative Programs, 1985), 77.

[36] A significant problem in much writing under the rubric of 'strong culture' is that it "lacks sufficient focus and depth in the exploration of meaning and symbolism, drifting instead to the superficial study of social patterns: structures, behaviors, and relations" (Mats Alvesson, Todd Bridgman, and Hugh Willmott, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Management Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 6). Such a critique might stem from similar ones levied against Durkheim himself. For many, the mechanical solidarity he describes, at least in *The Division of Labor,* relies on interpretation of other cultures at a distance, which feels faulty or simplistic. See Philip Smith, *Durkheim and After: The Durkheimian Tradition, 1893-2020* (Wiley, 2020) for an overview of major critiques and elaborations.

perspective focuses too much on delivering a semi-coherent rubric for managers to achieve "excellent", or efficient, companies, rather than studying how culture is experienced, enacted, and interpreted by employee communities themselves. This distinction is important. For many years, one of America's biggest corporations proudly exhibited the following list of values in the lobby of its headquarters: "Integrity. Communication. Respect. Excellence."[37] The company was Enron, and developing and repeating lofty values like these was the kind of instruction McKinsey or other 'strong culture' proponents might offer executives. But, as the Enron example throws into high relief, articulated values do not always translate to the way people behave, or the culture experienced: in 2001, Enron—that company supposedly built on a culture of integrity, communication, respect, and excellence—came crashing down in one of history's biggest cases of corporate fraud and corruption. Articulated culture is not always experienced culture.

Countering the network of management consultants, publishers, corporations, and academics that sustained the 'good organizations have strong corporate cultures' theorization, a group desiring more critical study of the experience and enactment of corporate culture emerged over the last three decades or so. This group of scholars finds their foundation in an alternative theorization of culture and meaning that sees culture as a "symbol-rich system by which people in an organization construct and apply meaning about their work lives."[38] With a definition of organizational culture planted firmly in

[37] Ronald Sims and Johannes Brinkmann, "Enron Ethics (Or: Culture Matters More Than Codes)," *Journal of Business Ethics* 45, no. 3 (2003): 243-56.
[38] Jim MacQueen, *The Flow of Organizational Culture: New Thinking and Theory for Better Understanding and Process* (Macmillan, 2020), 41.

semiotic soil, these scholars tend to look at organizations through a lens of cultural analysis, rather than organizational analysis, as a way to look deeper into how an organization functions at a given level:

> "We realize that organizations are symbolically constituted worlds, like novels or poems; they can be known through acts of critical reading and interpretation."[39]

> "Organizational culture is constructed with and through the narratives and conversations that we share with each other (the anecdotes we tell, the expressions we use with each other, how we treat each other, how we think about what needs to be done in an organization, etc.). All of these are carried by the stories we tell that communicate the meaning of what happens in our organizations day to day."[40]

> "As a collection of texts, bodies of work interested in how members of organizations symbolically create an ordered world… seem to signify readiness on part of scholars and the public alike to consider the proposition that organizations are speech communities sharing socially constructed systems of meaning that allow members to make sense of their immediate, and perhaps not so immediate, environments."[41]

This group of thinkers sees culture(s) in an organization as always being organically generated, and not necessarily as a unitary 'culture.'[42] While a 'strong culture' perspective dovetails well with a mechanistic view of the corporation, these definitions suggests that culture instead exists as *processes*, and can only be experienced as a 'flow.'[43] In other words, there is no such 'thing' as organizational culture; there are only processes which produce the artifacts that we can identify as the manifestations of a culture. People (in this case

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[39] *Ibid.*, 42.
[40] *Ibid.,* 7.
[41] Stephen Barley, "Semiotics and the Study of Occupational and Organizational Cultures," *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1983): 393.
[42] MacQueen, *The Flow of Organizational Culture,* 51.
[43] I borrow this language of "flow" from *ibid.*

employees) in the system, are interconnected and interactive, and the emergent product of their communication is culture. The idea that "people in an organization construct meaning about their work lives" is intended to infer a process of social construction which happens through the sharing of narratives about their understanding of reality.

A number of ontologies contribute to the development of this 'flow culture' perspective.[44] But among these influences, it is frequently noted that a particularly formative theorization for its adherents can be found in Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures*.[45] Much like it did in the marketplace context, Geertz's thinking again proves foundational within the workplace one. In particular, his "interpretive approach has deeply penetrated the study of organizational culture… [as] a useful paradigm for making sense of organizational action and experience. How do organization members and leaders draw on their systems of meaning to make sense of phenomena? How do these systems of meaning shape action, interaction, and practice?"[46] The application of Geertzian interpretivism to organizational studies suggested a level of analysis for culture that allowed researchers to see organizational culture in terms of the structures of meaning

[44] See the introductory chapter in *ibid.* for an overview of influences.
[45] M. Abdolafia, J. Dodge, and S. Jackson, "Clifford Geertz and the Interpretation of Organizations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Sociology, Social Theory, and Organizational Studies*, eds. P. Adler *et. al.* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 346-401. Cf. Tim Hallett, "Symbolic Power and Organizational Culture," *Sociological Theory* 21, no. 2 (2003): 128–49.
[46] *Ibid.,* 347.

visible in interaction.[47] As Mitchel Abdolafia *et al.* put it, "The [organizational] researcher gets to untangle the webs of meaning and the recipes for action they represent."[48]

While this study of the inter-subjective space of corporate culture is surely valuable, the 'flow culture' perspective tends to fall short on a manager's core question: beyond an interpretation of a company's culture, how might it be improved or shaped to support business goals? By contrast, interventionalist action is centered in the 'strong culture' perspective, making it naturally appealing to managers. But its demotion of how culture is experienced and enacted upon by participants falls short as well, leaving its instruction incomplete. The remainder of this chapter aims to argue that today's study of corporate culture and its professional management inherits much from both of these perspectives. It blends a semiotic and participatory perspective of a culture with an interest in manufacturing unitary, normative, and behavior regulating beliefs that bind an employee community together—and ultimately promote greater efficiency.

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[47] William Sewell, "Geertz, Cultural Systems, and History: From Synchrony to Transformation," *Representations*, no. 59 (1997): 49. For my overview of Geertz's perspective on culture, see my Introduction chapter (p.7-9) and Chapter One (p.51-5).

[48] M. Abdolafia *et al.*, "Clifford Geertz and the Interpretation of Organizations," 348. Taking to task organizational scholars who draw on Geertz's approach to culture, Phillips and Brown point out, similarly to my argument in the concluding section of Chapter One (p.90-2), that "webs of meaning structure power relationships, making some meaning possible while constraining other meanings, and bounding the range of possible actions for organizational members"; in short, Geertz's anthropology fails to "deal with the problems of power and social conflict" foundational to corporate settings (Nelson Phillips and John Brown, "Analyzing Communication in and Around Organizations: A Critical Hermeneutic Approach," *Academy of Management Journal* 36, no. 6 (1993): 1551). Cf. Hallett, "Symbolic Power and Organizational Culture," 128–49. The postmodern perspective of these authors and others question whether members of organizations with different degrees of power and influence have the same capacity to frame and shape organizational meaning, and whether or not less-powerful members adopt the same meanings as those with greater power.

III. Corporate Culture as a Cultural System

i. "What's Your Purpose, Beyond Profit?": A Worldview and Ethos for the Workplace

While Frederick Taylor might have argued the best organization starts with the 'how' of efficiency and process, modern management guru Simon Sinek believes the best organizations instead start with 'why.' In the most watched TedTalk of all time, he states that, "Every organization knows *what* they do. Some know *how* they do it. But very few organizations know *why* they do what they do."[49] This 'why' is "your purpose, your cause, your belief—why anyone should care." The value of starting with 'why' is that it "inspires people": "If you hire people to work for you for money, they'll do the job just fine. But if you hire people who share your why, they'll work for you with blood sweat and tears."[50]

Though Sinek is widely credited with popularizing the idea, starting with 'why' was in truth simply a clever repackaging of an idea already present in business thinking. Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, in their influential book *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (1994), predate Sinek's point with something almost identical: "Contrary to popular wisdom, the proper first response of the firm to a changing world is not to ask 'How should we change' but rather to ask 'What do we stand for and why do we exist?'"[51] This 'why' behind a company's existence is what Collins and Porras call 'organizational

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[49] Simon Sinek, "TedTalk: Start with Why," YouTube, accessed 3 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjriwYrGL28.

[50] *Ibid.* "This little idea explains why some organizations and some leaders are able to inspire where others aren't."

[51] Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: Harper Business, 1994), xiv.

purpose' or 'corporate purpose' (or simply 'purpose' as a shorthand). It captures a company's most fundamental reason for being, beyond profit, and the pair argue that the world's most "enduring" companies (compared to Peters and Waterman's "excellent" companies) have a strong sense of this purpose. [52] In more familiar business terms, purpose is "the overarching strategy of a company that holds the organization steady and provides a filter for making all business decisions." [53]

This articulated purpose of a company—intended to "foster innovation, rally the troops, and provide long-term orientation for all constituencies involved in the business"—is often codified by corporations into a short, pithy statement.[54] For instance, Netflix's statement is "Becoming the best global entertainment distribution service."[55] Walt Disney's purpose is captured in just four words: "to make people happy."[56] For Facebook, its stated purpose is to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together."[57] Whatever the statement is, this short sentence is often accompanied by a longer 'purpose manifesto', or statements declaring what "we believe"

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[52] As discussed above, this idea of a guiding corporate purpose finds root in Durkheim's collective conscious (see p.110). On purpose and purpose statements generally (and its related topics of mission and vision), see *e.g.*, J. Lucas, "Anatomy of a Vision Statement," *Management Review* 87, no. 2 (1998): 22-7; C. Brătianu, "Vision, Mission and Corporate Values. A Comparative Analysis of the Top 50 US Companies," *Management & Marketing* 3, no. 3 (2008): 19-38; S. Kantabutra and G. Avery, "The Power of Vision: Statements That Resonate," *Journal of Business Strategy* 31, no. 1 (2010): 37-45; W. Darbi, "On Mission and Vision Statements and Their Potential Impact on Employee Behavior and Attitudes: It's Time to Redraft Your Mission Statement," *Journal of Business Strategy* 24, no. 1 (2012): 11-4.

[53] *Ibid.*

[54] *Ibid.,* 12.

[55] "About Netflix", *Netflix*, accessed 3 December 2021, https://about.netflix.com/en.

[56] Daniel Rasamus, "Defining Your Company's Vision," *Fast Company*, 28 February 2012, https://www. fastcompany.com/1821021/defining-your-companys-vision.

[57] Kathleen Chaykowski, "Mark Zuckerberg Gives Facebook a New Mission," *Forbes*, 22 June 2017, https://www. forbes.com/sites/mark-zuckerberg-gives-facebook-a-new-mission/.

to help all employees in the business "share, understand, and connect with the purpose."[58] (As an example, see Box 2 for the long form NBC Universal manifesto published for employees in 2009).

But manifestos alone are not enough. Collins and Porras argued that the world's most enduring companies have not only a strong sense of purpose, but combine this core belief with a set of 'core values', or "general guiding principles" for daily action.[59] The usual way of talking about values is in contrast to and combination with a company's purpose: "Purpose is an organization's 'why.' Values are the 'how.' In cliché terms, values guide the walk to the purpose talk."[60] As this action-focused definition suggests, values are the approved way of acting within an organization (See Box 3 for the example of Facebook's Five Values). Importantly, values "build guardrails for behavior but not straitjackets."[61] This means "each defined behavior can, and should, be acted upon in a wide variety of possible actions." In other words, any given employee may choose to enact the values based on preference and life experience. In addition to being interpretive, for values to provide guidance their expression must include specificity. When constructing values, one manager instructs that "explicitly defining the few *right* behaviors that everyone is expected to exhibit, all of the time, is critical to creating a strong, unified

[58] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 55.
[59] Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*, 73. Without these values, purpose is nothing but words on a page: "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? The same question could be posed of purpose and the answer would be similar…A company can profess [its purpose], but if its employees do not experience it, then it does not exist" (Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose,* 90).
[60]Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 90.
[61] *Ibid.*, 91-3.

culture."[62] (Note that, this language still echoes a 'strong culture' perspective of unified, normalizing beliefs. But it also betrays an interest in people's interpretation and enactment of the culture as a 'flow' perspective might. Both the strong and flow antecedents appear to co-exist in this conceptualization).

Box 2. NBC Universal Purpose Manifesto

We are in the business to create and deliver content so compelling it entertains, informs, and shapes our world.

We believe that the talent, creativity and diversity of our people is our creates resource. We emphasize teamwork because we are smarter, more dynamic and better together

We believe in doing the right thing and treating people the right way We think integrity and honesty are the foundation of a productive work environment. We take our business seriously, but do not take ourselves too seriously.

We are passionate about what we do and take pride in what we create. We have a pioneering spirit and are willing to take risks and embrace new technologies. We like to keep score and win.

As we grow our business together, we will not just anticipate the future, but rather create, invent, and deliver it.

(Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose* (Routledge, 2019), 55).

[62] *Ibid.* The excerpt continues, "Too many values implies that no behavior is wrong and may leave open too wide a field of individual interpretation of them."

Box 3. Facebook's Five Core Values

Be Bold: Building great things means taking risks. We have a saying: 'The riskiest thing is to take no risks.' In a world that's changing quickly, you're guaranteed to fail if you don't take any risks.

Focus on Impact: To make the most impact, we need to solve the most important problems. We expect Facebook employees to avoid wasting time on minor issues and focus on truly big challenges.

Move Fast: We believe that it's better to move fast and make mistakes than to move slowly and miss opportunities. Doing so enables us to build more things and learn faster.

Be Open: Informed people make better decisions and make a greater impact—so we work hard to ensure that everyone at Facebook can access as much information about the company as possible.

Build Social Value: At Facebook, we're trying to bring the world closer together—not just grow our business. Our people focus on creating real value for the world—every day and in everything they do.

("Facebook Life", *Facebook*, accessed 2 August 2021, https://www.facebookcareers.com/facebook-life/).

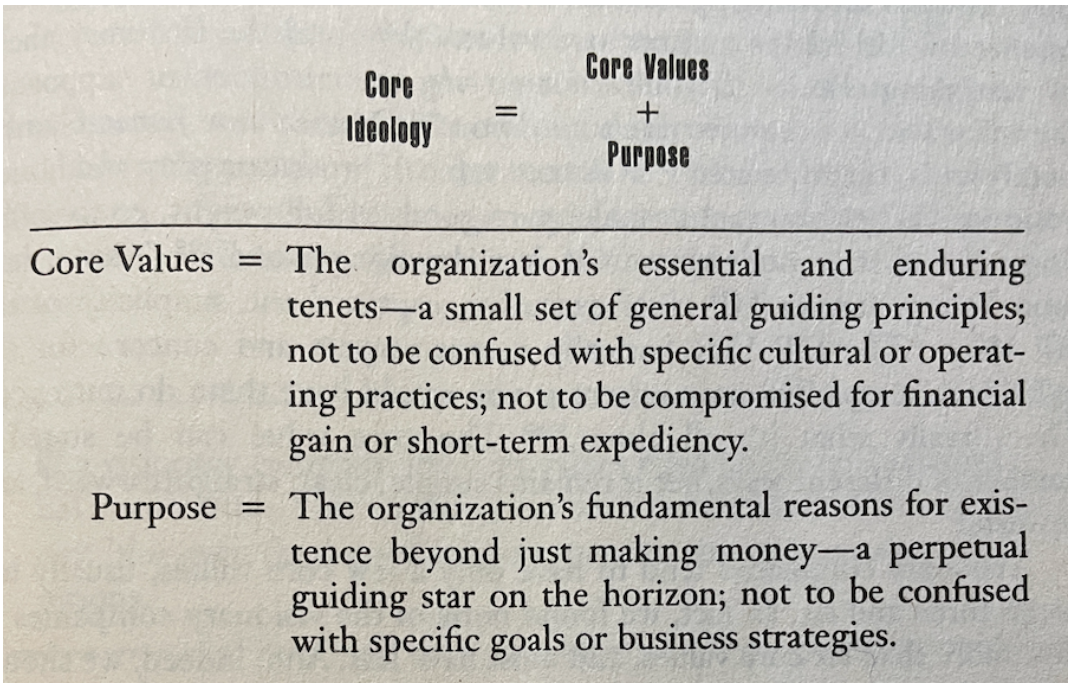

FIGURE 6. COLLINS AND PORRAS' CORE IDEOLOGY FORMULA.
(*Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (New York: Harper Business, 1994), 73).

Once crafted according to these guidelines, a company's values must be "made manifest in the countless daily deeds that a company's constituents and employee communities perform and experience, thereby propelling its purpose into existence."[63] Netflix's ten 'Real Values', designed to complement and help achieve the company's purpose, provide a good example here.[64] According to the company's CEO Reed Hastings, "it's easy to write admirable values; it's harder to live them… You must question actions inconsistent

[63] *Ibid.,* 90.

[64] "Netflix Culture," Netflix, accessed 23 December 2021, https://jobs.netflix.com/culture. Netflix's values include "judgement", "communication", "curiosity", "courage", "passion", "selflessness", "inclusion", "integrity", "innovation", and "impact." Each has three to five corresponding actions exemplified when living by that value. For the "judgement" value, for example, these actions range from "you identify root causes and get beyond treating symptoms" to "you make decisions based on the long term, not near term."

with our values" and he encourages employees to "help each other live the values and hold each other responsible for being role models. It is a continuous aspirational stretch."[65]

In this formulaic pairing of a codified corporate purpose with corresponding employee values, we spot in the workplace context a conceptual framework similar to the formulation of the commercial brand discussed in the previous chapter. The conceptualization of corporate culture, again, strikingly resembles Clifford Geertz's theorization of religion. Corporate *purpose* resembles a Geertzian worldview as "models of" the world, while corporate *values* resemble a Geertzian ethos as "model for" the world.[66] Collins and Porras name this combination a company's "core ideology" (Figure 6). In his 127-slide Netflix Culture Deck circulated to all employees, Hastings calls this same pairing of purpose and values his company's "core philosophy", one "which helps us achieve excellence."[67] For Facebook, purpose and values together are simply "our culture."[68] Despite subtle nomenclature nuances, the conceptual frame of core purpose

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[65] *Ibid.*

[66] Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 89-90. Cf. Clifford Geertz, "Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 130. The Introduction chapter of this thesis previewed this argument, see p.27-8.

[67] The deck was originally intended for internal use but Reed shared widely on the internet in 2009. A digital archive of the deck, viewed by nearly 21 million people, can be found at "Netflix Culture Deck," *Slide Share*, 1 August 2009, https://www.slideshare.net/reed2001/culture-1798664. Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, reportedly said that the Culture Deck "may well be the most important document ever to come out of Silicon Valley" (Reed Hastings and Erin Meyer, *No Rules Rules: Netflix and the Culture of Reinvention* (Penguin Press, 2020), v). Many firms, especially those employing younger talent in the technology industries, have adopted formal approaches to creating company culture, including Sandberg's Facebook.

[68] "Facebook Life," Facebook, accessed 2 August 2021, https://www.facebookcareers.com/facebook-life.

and values remains consistent: "Purpose, paired with values, creates a company's *culture*."[69]

This culture is thought to becomes manifest when purpose/worldview and values/ethos are embedded in a system of symbols. In Collins and Porras' core ideology framework, companies "translate their ideology into *tangible* mechanisms aligned to send a consistent set of *reinforcing signals*"[70] Similar to the commercial brand, this symbolic system of employee culture is intentionally crafted within the corporate organization:

> "Purpose and values should be shared, *ad nauseum*. They must be promoted at every opportunity. Culture is only experienced if it is enacted consistently… It should be illuminated in landmark company stories, like the founding, or the turnaround, or the expansion, and elucidated in everyday stories from employees, the community, and customers… Measuring employee progress in enacting the company's values should become fundamental to performance reviews."[71]

The practice of sharing purpose and values "*ad nauseum*" might reflect a vestige of the 'strong culture' perspective observed earlier that also emphasized a repetition-focused style of management. Similarly, "consistency" and a unitary culture are hallmarks of this constructed corporate culture. Both employees and the organization itself are meant to "adhere" to this singular manifestation of culture: "It's not just employees who are expected to adhere to company culture. The organization is accountable to enact them

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[69] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 90. Italic emphasis is my own.
[70] Collins and Porras, *Built to Last*, 136. Italic emphasis is my own. Cf. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 91.
[71] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose,* 94.

too. When it comes to values, they apply to *every* agent in the organization equally. These corporate actions are hugely symbolic."[72]

Corporate culture, then, appears to be conceptualized similarly to the commercial brand: as a constructed cultural system, or a Corporate Cultural System in our frame. Both the marketplace and corporate workplace instances resemble Geertz's religion, with its worldview and ethos embedded in a system of symbols. Also like the commercial brand, corporate culture is a *crafted* cultural system: the purpose and values are formally codified (in statements, manifestos, and culture documents) and coherent (there is intentionally no discrepancy about their intended meaning).

ii. The Construction of a Workplace CCS For and With Employees: The Case of Airbnb

Despite its crafted nature, the CCS of the workplace is also understood as fundamentally a participatory culture: "this strategy enables a deeply participative, fully empowered workforce that embraces [purpose] as a reason for working that extends far beyond a paycheck."[73] The following case study throws this view into higher relief, showing how

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[72] *Ibid.*, 90. This stronghold on intentional and consistent symbolic production might be to counter the dangers of what Alvesson and Sveningsson call "symbolic anorexia", or "the absence of the use of a symbolically rich material" (*Changing Organizational Culture: Cultural Change Work in Progress* (Routledge, 2015), 168). In such environments, rumors and other more informal stories and ideas are "picked up on the organizational grapevine" and can take over an organization; this makes the project of manufacturing and managing culture rather more difficult. "Working with organizational culture calls for skillful work with emotions and symbolism…and cultural thinness/symbolic anorexia must be avoided" (p.178).

[73] Henderson, *Reimagining Capitalism in a World on Fire* (PublicAffairs, 2020), 99. A similar perspective on the 'participation' of the intended audience in shaping the content of the CCS is

Airbnb management crafted the content of its worldview and ethos with employees and managers, and disseminated it through crafted symbols and rituals to shape the company's culture to support the company's growth. In a 2012 letter to his entire staff of sixty at the time, Airbnb co-founder and CEO Brian Chesky penned a letter in which he tells his early team that they cannot "fuck up the culture."[74] He elaborates on what he means by culture: "Culture is simply a shared way of doing something with passion. Our culture is the foundation for our company… The thing that will endure for 100 years, the way it has for most 100 year companies, is the culture."[75] He then elaborates on why it should not be "fucked up":

> "Why is culture so important to a business? Here is a simple way to frame it. The stronger the culture, the less corporate process a company needs. When the culture is strong, you can trust everyone to do the right thing. People can be independent and autonomous. They can be entrepreneurial. And if we have a company that is entrepreneurial in spirit, we will be able to take our next "(wo)man on the moon" leap. Ever notice how families or tribes don't require much process? That is because there is such a strong trust and culture that it supersedes any process. In organizations (or even in a society) where culture is weak, you need an abundance of heavy, precise rules and processes."[76]

found in the brand context. There, consumer focus group and other research methods during the brand craft process seek resonance with existing consumer ideas. See Chapter One, p. 62-70.

[74] Brian Chesky, "Don't Fuck Up the Culture," *Medium*, 21 October 2013, https://medium.com/@bchesky/dont-fuck-up-the-culture-597cde9ee9d4. This was the advice Peter Thiel, the successful entrepreneur and Silicon Valley investor, gave Brian Chesky, co-founder and CEO of vacation rental marketplace Airbnb, in 2012 after making a $150 million investment in the budding company. As of December 2021, the company is valued at $75 billion ("Making Sense of Airbnb's $75 billion valuation," *Forbes*, 17 December 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/greatspeculations/2020/12/17/making-sense-of-airbnb-stocks-75-billionvaluation).

[75] *Ibid.*

[76] *Ibid.* Though he describes culture as superseding process, he goes on to reveal the typical mechanical view of the organization: "if you break the culture, you break the machine that creates your products."

To support the development of this all-important corporate culture, Chesky and his co-founders Nathan Blecharczyk and Joe Gebbia hired Douglas Atkin, author of *The Culting of Brands* (2004), as its Head of Global Community.[77] Atkin believed that businesses could "learn from cults about how to create solidarity."[78] For Atkin, "religious and human cultures are constantly being renewed and reinvigorated," and he saw his role at Airbnb, as essentially chief architect of the company's culture, to "create the new company religion."[79]

He began this mandate by working with managers and employees (who are called the "AirFam") to codify the company's purpose and values, or in our formulation, worldview and ethos. The company's purpose was "not about creating a marketplace product, it was

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[77] Douglas Atkin, *The Culting of Brands: Turn Your Customers into True Believers* (Portfolio, 2005). Through this strategy, Airbnb built a reputation as the polar opposite of its sharing economy peers, such as Uber which prized ruthless competition, and WeWork which collapsed under a partying culture and toxic leadership. On the culture at Uber, see Mike Isaac, "Inside Uber's Aggressive, Unrestrained Workplace Culture," *The New York Times,* 22 February 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/22/technology.html. On WeWork's culture, see Amy Chozick, "Adam Neumann and the Art of Failing Up," *The New York Times,* 2 November 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/02/business/adam-neumann-wework-exit-package.html.

[78] The Gathering, "Douglas Atkin | BELONG: How to Create Enviable Commitment to any Brand or Company," YouTube, 15 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFLEMjru77A&ab.

[79] *Ibid*. Though not as sensational as Atkin's language, his idea of a company religion is paralleled in a growing body of academic work studying the so-called 'spiritual organization.' See *e.g.*, Marta Calás and Linda Smircich, "Introduction: Spirituality, Management and Organization," *Organization* 10, no. 2 (2003): 327-9; B. Brummans, J. Hwang, and P. Cheong, "Mindful Authoring through Invocation: Leaders' Constitution of a Spiritual Organization," *Management Communication Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2003): 346; A Rego, and M. Cunha, "Workplace Spirituality and Organizational Commitment: An Empirical Study," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 21, no. 1 (2008): 53-75; E. Bell, S. Taylor, and C. Driscoll, "Varieties of Organizational Soul: The Ethics of Belief in Organizations," *Organization* 19, no. 4 (2012): 425-39; B. Long and C. Driscoll, "A Discursive Textscape of Workplace Spirituality," *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 28, no. 6 (2015): 948-69.

to create a world where everyone can belong anywhere."[80] The company's career website in 2021 still states the same worldview, with the following manifesto:

> "Airbnb exists to create a world where everyone can belong anywhere.
>
> It's an audacious, incredibly rewarding mission that our increasingly diverse team is dedicated to achieving.
>
> Airbnb is built around the idea that everyone should be able to take the perfect trip, including where they stay, what they do, and who they meet. To that end, we empower millions of people around the world to use their spaces, passions, and talents to become entrepreneurs.
>
> Exciting challenges lie ahead—new regions, technologies, and businesses. Guided by our four core values, we'll meet these challenges creatively and with the support of our global community."[81]

The centering of the purpose/worldview on the idea of 'belonging' was intentional. "Belonging", Atkin said in a lecture, "creates the best and strongest kind of community—whether it's a company or a religion."[82] According to Global Head of Employee Experience Mark Levy, "It is the one place where our co-founder Brian Chesky is comfortable with us being homogenous—everyone should believe in our purpose which is a world where we can belong anywhere."[83]

Having established a worldview/purpose around belonging, the next task was to codify the company's values, or ethos. To do this, Atkin took all employees at the time through an exercise as a way of uncovering values that felt authentic to the experience of the

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[80] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 91.
[81] "Our Mission," Airbnb, accessed 27 December 2021, https://careers.airbnb.com/.
[82] The Gathering, "Douglas Atkin | BELONG."
[83] "How Do We Best Foster Belonging For All Employees, Feat. Airbnb," *CultureAmp*, 19 July 2021, https://www.culture amp.com/ blog/airbnb-building-culture-through-belonging.

employee community. He asked employees to imagine that the Airbnb culture was a party balloon. The air in the balloon was the culture, and "you could make more of it by blowing more air into the balloon."[84] Equally, leaks could occur and the culture could drain out. Atkin asked employees to draw the Airbnb cultural balloon and show what was inflating the culture, and what was draining it. The exercise served to give Atkin and his team "hundreds of data points from employees" about what made them feel like they belonged at Airbnb, and what did not (Figure 7 offers one example).[85]

From this fodder emerged the four Core Values of Airbnb's culture, still unchanged in 2021 (Figure 8). These values were designed to both reflect employee's experiences and weave corporate mythology. The "Be a Cereal Entrepreneur" value, for example was "a reference to the enterprising ends [of creating a cereal company] to which the Airbnb founders went to stay afloat in the early days."[86] The goal of this crafted value was to encourage entrepreneurial behavior (*e.g.* original thinking, resourcefulness) within the company. This particular value also echoed Chesky's "Don't Fuck Up The Culture" note on why culture is important for the company's success: "…if we have a company that is entrepreneurial in spirit, we will be able to take our next "(wo)man on the moon" leap."[87] The company's Core Values, then, did the work of triangulating employees' authentic

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[84] Douglas Atkin, "How To Live Your Purpose (It's Hard): #4," *Medium*, 6 April 2019, https://medium.com/@douglas.atkin/how-to-live-your-purpose-its-hard-4-don-t-fuck-the-culture4beac 943231a.

[85] *Ibid.*

[86] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose,* 91. With a collective $40,000 in debt, Chesky, Blecharczyk, and Gebbia sold cereal they named "Obama O's" and "Cap'n McCain's" during the 2008 United States Presidential election. As Alexandra Dimiziani, former Global Head of Marketing, tells the story: "They designed, packaged, and sold these cereals, glue-gunning every single box by hand… As you would expect, this Airbnb value guides the company's entrepreneurial behavior, encouraging a culture of original thinking and resourcefulness" (p.91).

[87] See above note 76.

experience of the company's culture, corporate mythologies and histories, and the company's performance objectives.

The formalized Airbnb purpose/worldview and values/ethos provided the foundation of the company's workplace Corporate Cultural System. With this set, the manufacturing of a symbolic system that brings these ideals to life began: "You can't just put your purpose and values on a mug. You must live it."[88] Chesky echoed the sentiment: "[We must uphold] our core values in everything we do. Culture is a thousand things, a thousand times", reinforcing purpose.[89] A task force within the employee experience team called Ground Control was established to manage culture and bring it to life throughout the workplace environment, internal communications, employee recognition, celebrations, and events. Of his team's efforts, Levy says, "It's one of those things in that they are not 'forcing fun', they are reinforcing and supporting how we bring the culture alive."[90] This notion of "bringing the culture alive" echoes language Chapter One discussed about "bringing the brand to life"; in both cases, the construction of the symbolic system containing the crafted worldview and ethos is what makes the culture 'real', and able to be experienced and interpreted.

Additionally, the company designed a number of rituals to help inculcate and celebrate purpose and values. During the recruitment process, for example, all prospective employees must go through two Core Values interviews. Levy explained, "These interviews focus on our Core Values to determine how in their life they have lived these

[88] The Gathering, "Douglas Atkin | BELONG."
[89] Brian Chesky, "Don't Fuck Up the Culture."
[90] "How Do We Best Foster Belonging, Feat. Airbnb."

values in order to make sure that anyone who comes to Airbnb is going to be successful in living these values."[91] Another example: to help all employees understand, viscerally, the "Be a Host" value, they are each asked to go through the experience of being a host on the platform when they first join the company. They are also given a $2,000 Airbnb credit coupon to experience being a guest. One final example comes from an initiation ritual performed at the annual all-company meeting called One Airbnb: everyone forms a human tunnel through which new employees run and jump into a bean bag. "The ritual represents a rite of passage for newcomers to make them feel they *Belong Here,"* said Levy.[92]

According to Levy, symbols and rituals like these "really break down the walls and integrate our community."[93] The Airbnb case, then, serves to not only show the conceptualization and corresponding construction process of a Corporate Cultural System in the workplace. It also points toward the social meaning the CCS is thought to provide the employee audience: ideas of belonging, integration, cohesion, uniformity, and community have been central to the case. The next section further explores how the workplace CCS is thought to create such social meaning for the employee community.

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[91] *Ibid.*

[92] *Ibid.*

[93] Brian Chesky, "Don't Fuck Up the Culture." Atkin similarly emphasizes the social solidarity aspect of corporate culture: "The self-story is what we tell ourselves about who we are, what others are like, how the world works, and therefore how one does (or does not) belong…This is what cult cultures offer and what companies can offer…a strong belonging organization requires community, interaction, ideology, symbolism, commitment, seduction, deviance management, and leadership" (The Gathering, "Douglas Atkin | BELONG").

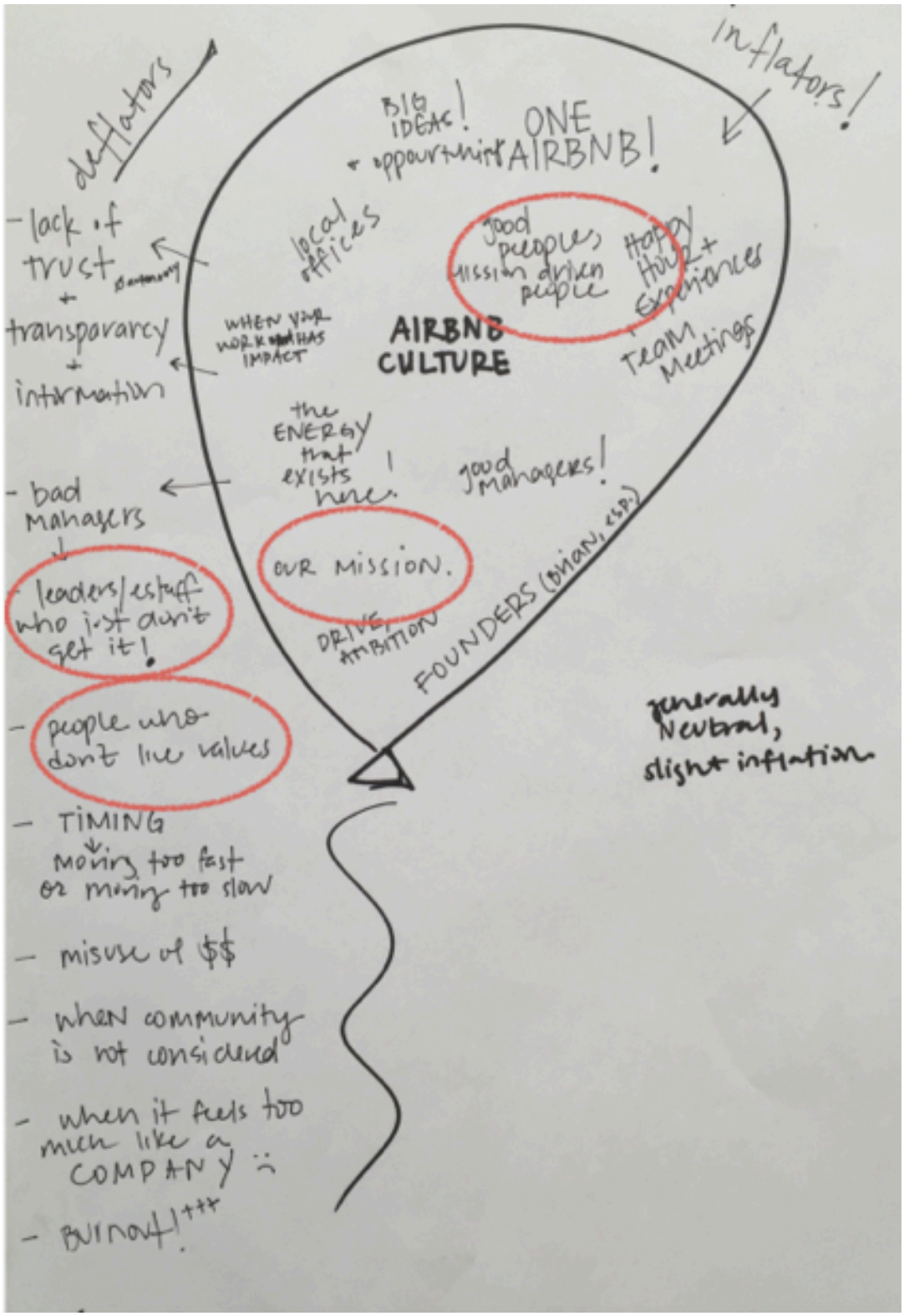

FIGURE 7. EXAMPLE OF AIRBNB'S 'CULTURE BALLOON.'
(Douglas Atkin, "How to live your Purpose (it's hard): #4," *Medium*, 6 April 2019, https://medium.com/@douglas.atkin/how-to-live-your-purpose).

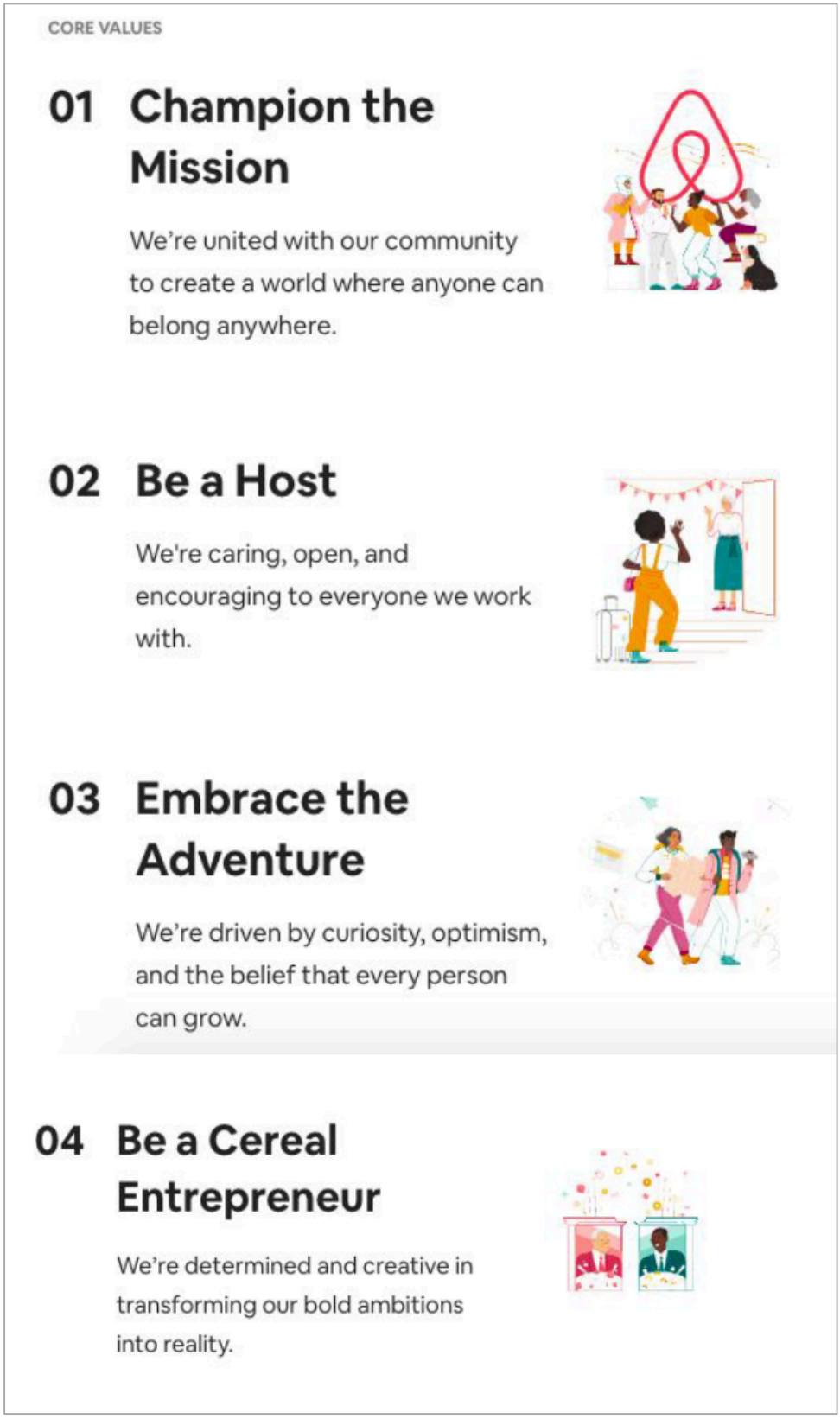

FIGURE 8. AIRBNB'S 'CORE VALUES'.
("Careers at Airbnb," Airbnb, accessed 10 December 2021, https://careers.airbnb.com/)

IV. Constructing Organizational Meaning to Energize and Mobilize Employees

i. Social Meaning in the Workplace

When asked why Netflix succeeded in revolutionizing the entertainment and technology industries, Hastings puts it bluntly: "our company culture."[94] Like Airbnb's Chesky, Hastings saw a direct link between corporate culture and corporate performance. But how, exactly, do these leaders and the wider business community understand corporate culture to lead to better business outcomes? Rebecca Henderson, the John and Natty McArthur University Professor at Harvard Business School, offers a good starting point, drawing the connection this way: "Shared purpose and a company's culture create a sense that one's work has *meaning*."[95]

Greater meaning comes, in one sense, from the way in which a firm's purpose can "create a strong sense of identity" and offer individuals the ability to "live a life in accordance with one's deepest values" through their work.[96] Though many explore how employee

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[94] Hastings and Meyer, *No Rules Rules*, i. By 2019, seventeen years after Netflix went public, its stock price had gone from $1 to $350 (p.vi).

[95] Henderson, *Reimagining Capitalism,* 93. Italic emphasis is my own.

[96] *Ibid.* Topics tend to include self-actualization, individual identity, wellbeing, creativity, and perceptions of work as 'worthy' or 'meaningful.' See *e.g.*, Helen Stuart, "Employee Identification with the Corporate Identity—Issues and Implications," *International Studies of Management & Organization* 32, no. 3 (2002): 28-44; Fahim Shaker and Nooruddin Ahmed, "Influence of Employer Brand Image on Employee Identity," *Global Disclosure of Economics and Business* 3, no. 2 (2014): 157-66; R. Gopinath, "Prominence of Self-Actualization in Organization," *International Journal of Advanced Science and Technology 29*, no. 3, (2020): 11591-602; Haley Allison Beer, Pietro Micheli, and Marya L. Besharov, "Meaning, Mission, and Measurement: How Organizational Performance Measurement Shapes Perceptions of Work as Worthy," *Academy of Management Journal* (2021).

culture promotes individual identity construction, both in the way it makes meaning and in the way it enables greater efficiency, corporate culture is more often discussed in terms of the *social* meaning it creates. Henderson and Hastings both articulate this emphasis:

> "Purpose and corporate culture turbocharge the ability to *work in teams*. Employees who are deeply identified with the firm's purpose share a *common* set of goals. They are also likely to be significantly more *'pro-social'*—that is, to be temperamentally inclined to trust others and to enjoy working with them… it is easier to *align their activities* when everyone is fundamentally pro-social."[97]

> "Our version of the great culture is a dream team in pursuit of ambitious *common purpose*, for which we spend heavily…When highly capable people *work together* in a *collaborative* context, they inspire each other to be more creative, more productive and ultimately more *successful as a team* than they could be as a collection of individuals."[98]

From setting shared goals to creating successful teams, this section examines how social meaning is perceived to work; in other words, how employee culture as a Corporate Cultural System is considered to coordinate the workforce. Close study of the business community's own language and perceptions on this question reveal two primary formulations. First, the workplace CCS can *energize* the employee community, creating a sense of social solidarity and thus stabilize the workplace; second, it can *mobilize* employees, unleashing a transformation movement within the organization. Though this distinction between the energizing and mobilizing aspects of employee culture is somewhat artificial (indeed, both tend to be muddied and co-mingled in practitioners' language), pulling them apart allows us to usefully see two central logics of the CCS's application within the workplace. I will take each in turn and hope to show the ideas of

[97] *Ibid.* Italic emphasis is my own.
[98] "Netflix Culture." Italic emphasis is my own.

Durkheim and Weber are again useful for explaining how the business community understands the CCS to 'energize' and 'mobilize' employees, respectively. Interestingly, in both scenarios, the theories originally selected from these authors as underpinnings of the organizational management field in the 1900s are swapped out for others from their oeuvres that might offer more fashionable conceptualizations of human agency.

ii. Durkheim, *Redux*: Constructing the CCS to Energize the Employee Community and Promote Social Solidarity

"Are you infectious?"[99] This is the question Roy Spence, founder and CEO of The Purpose Institute and author of *It's Not What You Sell, It's What You Stand For* (2011), proports to ask his executive clients. "As a business you can't always outspend established competitors, but you can out-evangelize them. You can infect your people with your sense of shared purpose and inspire them to join your crusade."[100] Shared purpose therefore "infects", "inspires", and even "evangelizes" employees. This is not simply the religiously tinged language of a self-styled corporate guru. As early as 1963, Thomas Watson, the chief executive of the multi-national IBM, wrote a booklet called *A Business and Its Beliefs* that foreshadows similar themes to those Spence captures nearly six decades later: "[A company's] *beliefs* bring out the *great energies* and talents of *our people*. It helps them find *common cause* with each other."[101] Tom Andrews frames these beliefs as the very essence of the corporation itself: "At its core, the corporate organization is just a group

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[99] "Does Your Business Have a Purpose," Mixology, accessed 26 December 2019, https://mixergy.com /startup-purpose-roy-spence-jr/. Cf. Roy Spence, *It's Not What You Sell, It's What You Stand For: Why Every Extraordinary Business Is Driven by Purpose* (Portfolio Trade, 2011).
[100] *Ibid.*
[101] Thomas Watson, *A Business and its Beliefs: The Ideas that Helped Build IBM* (McGraw, 1963), 73. Italic emphasis is my own.

of individual strangers who cooperate with each other on the basis of a fiction… a set of beliefs and ideas around which a group of human beings are *energized* and *choose to cooperate*."[102]

Spence, Watson, and Andrews all stress the idea of "energies", and particularly the energies of the employee community that holds a company's beliefs. The formula they imply is consistent: a company's beliefs stir employee energies, which in turn drive a sense of solidarity and cooperation. Organizational psychologist Adam Grant employs the concept of 'collective effervescence' for this idea of social energy:

> "[It is] the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose… Collective effervescence is the synchrony you feel when you slide into rhythm with… colleagues in a brainstorming session [for example]."[103]

Grant explicitly borrows the idea of collective effervescence from Émile Durkheim, the same theorist to whom his predecessors looked for inspiration. However, rather than finding explanatory power for management ideas in Durkheim's *The Division of Labor*, Grant's search for explaining the coordination of labor looks to the French sociologist's

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[102] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 74.

[103] Adam Grant, "There's a Specific Kind of Joy We've Been Missing," *The New York Times*, 10 July 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/10/opinion/sunday/covid-emotionshappiness.html. Grant is not the first or only management scholar to apply the notion of collective effervescence to corporate culture, but given his public persona, began to popularize it within more mainstream industry discourse in a series of 2021 publications. Cf. R. Cross, W. Baker, and A. Parker, "What Creates Energy in Organizations," *MIT Sloan Management Review* (Summer 2003): 51-6; Naidu Esha *et al.*, "Creating the Sacred from the Profane: Collective Effervescence and Everyday Activities," *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 15, no. 1 (2020): 129-54; Katherine Sobering, "The Emotional Dynamics of Workplace Democracy: Emotional Labor, Collective Effervescence, and Commitment at Work," in *Organizational Imaginaries: Tempering Capitalism and Tending to Communities through Cooperatives and Collectivist Democracy* (Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021).

later work. Durkheim introduces the idea of collective effervescence in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), defining it thus:

> "The stimulating and invigorating effect of society is particularly apparent in certain circumstances. In the midst of an assembly that becomes worked up, we become capable of feeling and conduct of which we are incapable when left to our own individual resources. When it is dissolved and we are again on our own, we fall back to our ordinary levels and can then take the full measure of how far above ourselves we were."[104]

Durkheim's emphasis is on the idea that energies arise from the momentary collective congregation and dissipate when the collective disbands. This notion lives within his wider theorization of religion, which offers one of the earliest arguments for the centrality of culture and solidarity (or "harmony" as Grant names it) in social life.

The crux of Durkheim's analysis of religion is that the real source of religious power lies in the social group and in collective life: "Religious forces are in fact only transfigured collective forces, that is, moral forces; they are made of ideas and feelings that the spectacle of society awakens in us."[105] He ultimately concludes that, "religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan."[106] Like Durkheim's religion, the CCS is not just a social creation but something that represents the power of

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[104] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (Free Press, 1995), 212. Durkheim saw religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community… all those who adhere to them" (p.327). Though he never cites it formally, Durkheim's focus on energy and action might be influenced by ideas from his time on the topic of 'dynamogenesis', or the way that energies in people would be uplifted in various social contexts when offered stimulus (see *e.g.,* Robert Jones, "Practices and Presuppositions: Some Questions About Durkheim and *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 80-100).

[105] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 327.

[106] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 44.

society itself; the celebration of sacred things, then, is the celebration of a society's power.[107] In the Airbnb case, rituals such as having new employees run through a human tunnel formed by current employees reifies the power of Airbnb itself; it celebrates 'One Airbnb', as the name of the event encapsulates. The Airbnb ritual is meant to make everyone feel like they "Belong Here."

Though collective effervescence can be felt in a brainstorm according to Grant, it tends to be orchestrated in bigger, all-company moments, like the One Airbnb example. This oral history of an all-hands event at NBC Universal is particularly rich, and worth reproducing in full:

> "We broadcast our Global Town Hall [across our offices] and bring people together to participate in and celebrate these moments. Some spun up impromptu local events and sent us picture to share throughout the organization. The organic, unofficial nature of these efforts where employees were coming together and really *feeling* the purpose and values makes them some of the most powerful moments. All aspects of [this event] were designed to give people permission to take ownership of purpose and buy into it on their own terms, really *feeling* it alongside the colleague they know and work with, rather than hearing it as a mandate passed down through the chain of command."[108]

In these moments—some orchestrated, some organic, some company-wide, some locally-based—employees are "energized" and "feeling the purpose and values", and they feel connected to each other and to their culture as something that is "all of ours" a result.

The perceived value of such social solidarity generated by the CCS can be categorized as threefold. First, energized employees are considered to be harder working ones.

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[107] Cf. Kathryn Lofton, *Consuming Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 18.
[108] *Ibid.,* 57. Italic emphasis is my own.

Employees can "get religious about their work" when a CCS is deployed, "they get the fire in the belly for which there is no substitute. They embrace the shared purpose because it's their purpose too and they want to succeed—together."[109] Harder working employees are more efficient: a company pays less for more output (in this case, that often means labor hours). Additionally, employees that align with the purpose of their company tend to be more committed to their employer, meaning higher retention rates and lower recruitment costs.[110] A second business value of social solidarity is that, when "in rhythm" with colleagues as Grant puts it, there is greater efficiency in work processes; with less miscommunication and misdirection, harmonious companies where employees work in symbiosis are more productive. A third value of the social solidarity the CCS offers is the promotion of behavioral consistency, or what Heidi Hackemer calls a company's 'cultural instinct': "when everyone in a company—from marketing creatives and software engineers to financial wizzes and operational gurus—knows its ethos in their bones. It's the instinctual knowledge of what is 'right' or 'wrong' when executing on behalf of the company and the brand."[111] Company culture and the instinct it produces among the workforce, in other words, enables employees to act autonomously and make decisions independently: it "creates a workforce that can move quickly and efficiently, and function in ways that are aligned with the overall company ethos and purpose."[112]

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[109] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 14. Cf. Freya Williams, *Green Giants: How Smart Companies Turn Sustainability into Billion-Dollar Businesses* (American Management Association, 2015).

[110] Ezekiel Nongo and Darius Ikyanyon, "The Influence of Corporate Culture on Employee Commitment to the Organization," *International Journal of Business and Management* 7, no. 22 (2012): 21-8.

[111] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose, 64*.

[112] *Ibid.*

This diffusion of decision-making unlocks the red tape of traditional bureaucratic organizations, while still ensuring efficiency as the chief aim.

The contemporary business community, given its interest in the social energies that the CCS creates, seem to find Durkheim's works useful in formulating how culture creates social meaning and efficiencies, just as their predecessors did. However, their alignment with his later work rather than his earlier work (which was the basis of the 'strong culture' perspective) is insightful. It is important to note that most commentators draw a line between Durkheim's earlier and later works, pointing to foundational distinctions in his theorizations of culture.[113] Specifically, many note that Durkheim's view changes in his later works as he developed a cultural theory whose core is the study of systems of symbolic classification which centered religion, and particularly religious ritual, as the model for Durkheim's understanding of social life. There is also a stronger sense in this later work upon the active agency of individuals in making meaning, rather than broader social structure shaping social life.[114] The relevance of Durkheim's later work for the business community, then, enables a less instrumentalist, less heavy-handed approach to

[113] When discussing his four major books, *The Division of Labor* (1893), *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), *Suicide* (1897), and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), commentators tend to mark a shift in Durkheim's thinking after *Suicide*. Justification tends to come from a 1907 letter in which Durkheim himself speaks of a "revelation" and a "dividing line" in his thought, upon which many makes the case that Durkheim developed an "almost completely new ontology" which we see in *Elementary Forms* (see *Durkheim and After*, 42). But Durkheim appears to contradict himself in a footnote where he insists on deep continuity in his work, suggesting such a decisive break in his work might be overstated (*Elementary Forms*, 210). Nonetheless, also marking a split seems to be a shift in Durkheim's method to focus on more detailed textual analysis, which Smith even calls performed "in the manner of Geertz" (p.42).

[114] Philip Smith, *Durkheim and After* (Wiley, 2020), 42-4.

culture. The result is a formulation of the CCS as crafted with and by employees and managers alike, rather than imposed top-down on employees as a social mechanism.[115]

In my argument that Durkheim's later work appears to have influenced the CCS construct, scholars of Durkheim might pause at the dismissal of his hallmark claim on totems, or "the very archetype of sacred things" that capture and hold a sacred force that flows through it and that gives energy to that which it touches.[116] In response, I would suggest that, given professionals' apparent Geertzian view of culture as a symbolic system, they might be less fixated on a singular totem-like symbol. They might find Durkheim's concept of 'collective representations' a more apt analogy to the way they perceive their construction of the CCS.[117] Collective representations are shared ideas, classifications, myths, and symbols that express collective realities. As Philip Smith comments, the verb "to represent" in Durkheim's original French is reflexive ("represent to oneself") and so the idea also "captures the way that society thinks about or imagines itself into existence."[118] These collective representations motivate individuals, powering them up through a sense of sacred energy and collective belonging. Durkheim's concept of collective representations and Geertz's formula of a cultural system superficially elide

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[115] In *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Free Press, 1964), Durkheim argues that sociology is the study of 'social facts', or the empirical regularities in social life that are "external to individuals" and "external to individual consciousness" (p.xlvii, xlviii). The picture Durkheim gives of social facts is one of control and domination, and for this reason his sociology tends to be characterized as having a functionalist focus (see *e.g.*, p.9-10).

[116] Durkheim, *Elementary Forms,* 118. Totems are the expression of the collective conscious of a society.

[117] On collective representations, see *Ibid.,* esp. 15, 329-50.

[118] Smith, *Durkheim and After*, 51.

well enough for the two theorists' ideas to be situated together conceptually in this context, in spite of the differences between these theorists' approaches.[119]

In sum, the modern business community understands a primary function of the CCS as energizing employees in a way that stimulates social cohesion and reifies the power of the company itself. Much as Durkheim believed was true for religion, Spence, Watson, Andrews, Grant and others in the business community appear to believe that, above all, the Corporate Cultural System within the organizational context emphasizes community: it binds people together (social cohesion), promotes behavioral consistency (social control), and offers strength during transitions and tragedies (meaning and purpose). These cohesive bonds of social order result from the common values of the corporation: values that must be maintained in order to maintain social stability. This maintenance work is the work of managers. In the preference for Durkheim's later theorizations of religion over his earlier work that influenced the 'strong culture' perspective, we might also see the modern business community's priorities of a more semiotic, less instrumentalist perception of culture as a tool for social maintenance.

iii. Weber, *Redux*: From Bureaucracy to 'Humanocracy', and the Spirit of the Company

While the CCS is perceived to *energize* employees, it appears to also have another application within the workplace. In his book *Activate Purpose: How to Harness the Power of Movements to Transform Your Company* (2021), consultant Scott Goodson argues that by

[119] For a perhaps complimentary point by those who want to find a 'cultural sociology' in Durkheim's work, especially the American Durkheim tradition, see *Ibid.*, 181-206.

"activating purpose" you can "start a movement inside your organization": what he calls "Movement Thinking" is "designed to capitalize on our natural human desire to belong to a bigger idea that galvanizes us to change the world around us…and this movement culture is contagious!"[120] David Adkin emphasizes that this movement culture has an end within the corporate context: it "mobilizes people to seek the same action at the same moment on a single, leverageable point."[121] Often, that single, leverageable point is a new era of the company's strategy. Rather than promote social solidarity and stability, in other words, this movement culture of the workplace corresponds with a company's process of social change. This process is known as 'organizational transformation' (sometimes 'corporate change' or 'corporate transformation') and indicates the interventionalist act taken by management to shift the direction of the company.[122] Often taking years to complete, the change process begins with a new strategic approach set by leadership and results in a reorganization and sometimes restructuring of the corporation, to achieve its vision of a new strategic era.

A company's culture is seen as a critical component in the management of this corporate change process, and by some accounts as the most critical.[123] Transforming organizations

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120 Scott Goodson and Chip Walker, *Activate Brand Purpose: How to Harness the Power of Movements to Transform Your Company* (Kogan Page, 2021), 5-6.

121 The Gathering, "Douglas Atkin | BELONG."

122 See Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, chapters 4, 5, and 6; K. Weick and R. Quinn, "Organizational Change and Development," *Annual Review of Psychology* 50 (1999): 361-86; Jeff Hiatt and Timothy Creasey, *Change Management: The People Side of Change* (Prosci, 2003). Alvesson and Sveningsson overview different kinds of organizational change of varying degrees, including "fix and maintain", "build and develop", "move and relocate", and "liberate and re-create" (*Changing Organizational Culture,* 17-8). The change I'm concerned with is most similar to this last archetype, which he describes as "the most advanced form of change…seen as transformation of an all-encompassing kind. Transformations are the renewal of an entire organization" (p.18).

123 Culture is critical to organizational change processes because "poor alignment between a given change effort and an existing culture (of which values are a significant element) sets up a

is "essentially all about culture change and commitment to a new purpose", and the change process therefore typically begins with a formal change in a company's north star, led by executive leadership.[124] Returning to the Facebook example usefully encapsulates how shifts in the company's purpose inaugurated different strategic eras of the company. In 2004, Facebook was searching for rapid growth by expanding globally. The purpose it offered employees at the time reflected this strategic priority: Facebook exists "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected."[125] In 2011, the market evolved and personal connections (rather than open connection with anyone, as the previous purpose statement emphasized) became the orienting priority. In accordance, the company repositioned the purpose of its work: "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life."[126] In 2017, the company changed its purpose yet again: Facebook exists to "give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together."[127] This new purpose emphasized community and shared humanity—a strategy that the firm adopted amidst claims that its algorithms and advertising-focused business model were responsible for political and social divisiveness

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conflict… between what we're being told to do now and what we've been told to practice as the right way to do things all this time" (MacQueen, *The Flow of Organizational Culture,* 2). Cf. Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), 3; Bernard Burnes and Philip Jackson, "Success and Failure in Organizational Change: An Exploration of the Role of Values," *Journal of Change Management* 11, no. 2 (2011): 133-62. Kurt Lewin's classic "Changing as Three Steps" (1947) paradigm is often critiqued for not elevating the importance of culture in change processes (*e.g.*, Stephen Cummings, Todd Bridgman, and Kenneth G. Brown, "Unfreezing change as three steps: Rethinking Kurt Lewin's legacy for change management," *Human Relations* 69, no. 1 (2016): 59).

[124] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose,* 76. For a similar wholesale renovation of the CCS in the marketplace to serve a new strategic direction set by leadership, see Chapter One, p.76-7.

[125] Gillian Reagan, "The Evolution of Facebook's Mission Statement," *Observer*, 13 July 2009, https://observer.com/2009/07/the-evolution-of-facebooks-mission-statement/.

[126] *Ibid.*

[127] Chaykowski, "Mark Zuckerberg Gives Facebook a New Mission."

(and, as some argued, led to a number of authoritarian regimes rising to power around the globe). Still unable to shake its negative image (which was affecting their ability to hire and retain top talent), the company changed its name altogether to Meta in 2021 and created a new purpose to help employees look to a new future they might help create rather than dwell on the company's controversial past: "The metaverse is the next evolution of social connection. Our company's vision is to help bring the metaverse to life, so we are changing our name to reflect our commitment to this future."[128] As these examples illustrate, corporate transformation may be instigated by a number of factors, but in each case, the dawn of each new corporate era corresponds with the architecting of a new guiding corporate worldview/purpose.[129]

However, as Goodson and Atkin suggest, change is not perceived as something enforced from the top down even if instrumentalized by leadership. Change is instead conceptualized as driven by employees themselves, from the bottom up. When a company's culture is "activated", the employee community, acting in accordance with its shared beliefs, shapes the new incarnation of the company over time to reflect those beliefs. Gary Hamel calls this the "spirit" of the people inside the organization and suggests that in corporate change processes, managers' role is to "unleash this [employee] spirit from the shackles of bureaucracy", which bogs down the ability to change.[130] By

[128] "Connection is Evolving and So are We," *Meta*, accessed 23 January 2022, https://about.facebook.com/meta/.

[129] See Alvesson and Sveningsson, *Changing Organizational Culture,* 14-5 for forces, internal and external, that can prompt organizational change.

[130] Hamel and Zanini, *Humanocracy*, 6.

doing so, employees are driven instead by beliefs and ethics, and "create organizations as amazing as the people inside them."[131]

Before unpicking this logic of how change happens within the organization, it is worthwhile to pause and take note of a shifted conceptualization of the organization underlying it. Foregrounding the "human factor", Hamel proposes an alternative to Weber's bureaucracy that he calls "humanocracy."[132] First suggested in his classic *The Future of Management* (2007) and later consolidated in *Humanocracy: Creating Organizations as Amazing as the People Inside Them* (2020), Hamel argued that bureaucratic organizations are "inertial, incremental, and uninspiring" and "turn human beings into semi-programmable robots… bureaucracy shriveled our souls."[133] He posited that Weber-inspired bureaucracy was a product of its time and usefully guided twentieth century organizational design, but that as we move into the twenty-first century, "we shouldn't

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131 *Ibid*., 82-4.

132 Gary Hamel*, The Future of Management* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2007) and *Humanocracy*. Hamel's 'humanocracy' is framed as an evolution of Weber's bureaucracy that, as I have shown, is a centerpiece of classical organizational thinking. But as discussed in note 10 of this chapter, the business community often mischaracterizes Weber's original ideas about bureaucracy, and Hamel is no exception. He appears to make a strawman of Weber, claiming (falsely) that his work "[saluted] bureaucracy" and was an "anthem to it" (*Humanocracy*, 4). Hamel's argument follows others who complain that Weber's "love of bureaucracy… went too far in advocating a machine-like organization" (E. Dale, *Organization* (American Management Association, 1967), 12); that he did not pay "attention to the human factor in organizational design" (D. Schwartz, *Introduction to Management: Principles, Practices, and Processes* (Harcourt Brace, 1980), 19); or, most pessimistically, Weber promotes the evils of de-humanization (e.g., G. Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Pine Forge Press, 1996). And yet, in his political analysis, Weber makes it clear that of the various ideals he theorizes, a best-case scenario might be a charismatic (or innovative) organization in tandem with a bureaucratic organization (Weber, *Economy and Society*, 386-92). I suggest Weber's perspective is not far from what Hamel describes as 'humanocracy.' Cf. Stephen Cummings and Todd Bridgman, "The Relevant Past: Why the History of Management Should Be Critical for Our Future," *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 10, no. 1 (2011): 82.

133 Hamel, *Humanocracy*, 2, 4.

content ourselves with organizations that are authoritarian and joyless… we must do our part to emancipate the human spirit."[134]

Hamel is not alone in his emphasis on human innovation and imagination as a competitive advantage to organize for. Hastings echoes the same claims, arguing that as Netflix began to grow, "policies and control processes became so foundational to our work that those who were great at coloring within the lines were promoted, while many creative mavericks felt stifled and went to work elsewhere."[135] Rather than rely on the typical management picture of Weber's bureaucracy, Hastings designed his company and its culture to make manifest "a core philosophy of people over process."[136] A similar logic can be found in the concept offered by the research entity of Boston Consulting Group in a book entitled *The Imagination Machine: How to Spark New Ideas and Create Your Company's Future* (2021). According to the book, "most leaders agree that imagination in business is crucial for success. But they struggle to cultivate this capability."[137] It goes on to describe

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[134] *Ibid.,* 2. Importantly, 'humanocracy' is not just a kinder, more inspiring form of organization: Hamel argues that 'inspiration' is the most critical competency a business can develop to gain advantage in the twenty-first century marketplace. This is because a firm's growth is driven not by cutting costs or squeezing the corporate machine; there is a limit to this, bureaucracy can only get so efficient. Instead, unlimited growth is unlocked by the creativity and innovation organizations foster through their culture; the more effectively and efficiently a firm can innovate, the more value it will capture. Humanocracy, therefore, is framed as an efficiency-first model, but it believes innovation rather than operational processes is the core competency to design efficiencies around. Cf. Gregor Cerinsek and Slavko Dolinsek, "Identifying Employees' Innovation Competency in Organisations," *International Journal of Innovation and Learning* 6, no. 2 (2009): 164-77.

[135] Hastings and Meyer, *No Rules Rules,* 21.

[136] "Netflix Culture," *Netflix*. Cf. Knight's warning against bureaucracy at Nike in his 'Ten Commandments' discussed in the introduction of this chapter.

[137] "Creating an Imagination Machine," Boston Consulting Group, accessed 2 January 2022, https://www.bcg.com /en-gb/featured-insights/imagination-machine. Italic emphasis is my own.

a process for "systematically harnessing imagination" that involves crafting the "seduction of the big idea" and creating an "epidemic" of the idea until it becomes "the new ordinary."[138] Their point is that employees' imagination can be harnessed as an engine for corporate *transformation*.

Recentering then on the process of corporate transformation, this idea of unleashing the 'spirit' of employees becomes critical to modern conceptualizations of the change process. Though Hamel apparently rejects Weber's bureaucracy, he makes the link between the corporate change process and the Weberian conception of social change famously put forward in *The Protestant Work Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (1905).[139] Social change, for Weber, centers on culture, a complex system of 'ideas' that shape an individual's motives for action, as determining the course of change from the 'inside out.'[140] This actor-based sociology of ideas sees culture as having more influence when it is clearer, more coherent, and more deeply held. The unit of analysis in Weber's theory of social change is the individual actor, and the power of the individual's ideas, or

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[138] Martin Reeves and Jack Fuller, *The Imagination Machine: How to Spark New Ideas and Create Your Company's Future* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2021). The book is structured around this "life cycle of ideas" that can transform a company.

[139] *Ibid.,* 16-7. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, eds. and trans. Talcott Parsons and Anthony Giddens (Routledge, 2001). This work was originally published in 1905 and famously translated by Talcott Parsons in 1930. A similar argument is also articulated across other essays in Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. and trans. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford University Press, 1958). For a similar connection between the modern organization and this Weberian classic, see Emma Bell and Scott Taylor's analysis of academic and practitioner texts and accounts of organizational practice, in which they consider that "this discourse represents a revival of the Protestant ethic, in a way that involves re-visioning the ambivalent relationship between self and organization" ("The Elevation of Work: Pastoral Power and the New Age Work Ethic," *Organization* 10 no. 2 (2003): 329-49).

[140] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, *passim*, esp. 96, 116, 122-3.

internalized beliefs and values, is outlined in Weber's famous image of religious ideas acting like railway 'switchmen' at the junction in tracks of history, changing its direction:

> "Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men's conduct. Yet very frequently the 'world images' that have been created by 'ideas' have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. 'From what' and 'for what' one wished to be redeemed and, let us not forget, 'could be' redeemed, depended on one's image of the world."[141]

Weber proposes analyzing culture by trying to understand 'ideal type' worldviews that shape the motives of groups.[142] Identifying how a worldview motivates action (*i.e.* how one committed to a certain worldview would act under its sway) is explanation in Weberian terms. He famously argued that the Protestant work ethic was a shaping force behind the unplanned and uncoordinated emergence of modern capitalism: as believers acted according to the implications of Protestant and particularly Calvinist ethics, these ideas indirectly encouraged the development of capitalism.[143] The 'spirit of capitalism' does not refer to the spirit in the metaphysical sense, but rather a set of values, the spirit of hard work and progress that was integral to the Protestant ethic and became woven into the very fabric of capitalism itself.

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[141] Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 280. On main issues and debates surrounding Weber's perspective on personal agency, see Colin Campbell, "Distinguishing the Power of Agency from Agnostic Power: A Note on Weber and the 'Black Box' of Personal Agency," *Sociological Theory* 27, no. 4 (2009): 407-18.

[142] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* 56.

[143] In Weber's words "The religious valuation of restless, continuous, systematic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means of asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith, must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of… the spirit of capitalism" (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* 116).

A similar explanation of change appears within the corporate organization. Hubert Joly, Harvard Business School professor and former CEO of Best Buy, was responsible for the retailer's spectacular turnaround: in 2012, everyone expected Best Buy to go bankrupt, but over the course of an eight year organizational transformation process, Joly and his team rebuilt the company into one of the nation's favorite employers, vastly increased customer satisfaction, and dramatically grew Best Buy's stock price.[144] Guiding this turn around was a restoration of his company's culture, or what he calls "the heart of business"—an insight captured in the title of his book, *The Heart of Business: Leadership Principles for the Next Era of Capitalism* (2021). During this change process, "Joly himself was transformed from a hard-charging, deeply analytical McKinsey consultant to a leader who believes in what he calls human magic, which is unleashed through pursuing a noble purpose, putting people at the center of the business, creating an environment where every employee can blossom, and treating profit as an outcome, not the goal."[145]

When describing the change process in further detail, Hamel, Hastings, and Joly all emphasize the importance of crafting corporate culture to unleash this "human spirit" that can guide the change process. Like Weber's theorization, they see employees' worldview and ethic, encapsulated in corporate culture, as providing the shaping force of organizational transformation; employees drive the emergence of change. But while the emergence of capitalism according to a Protestant spirit was unplanned, the

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[144] The story and insights of this turnaround are told in Hubert Joly and Caroline Lambert, *The Heart of Business—Leadership Principles for the Next Era of Capitalism* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2021).

[145] Hubert Joly and Caroline Lambert, "The Heart of Business: Leadership Principles for the Next Era of Capitalism," Harvard Business School, accessed 2 January 2022, https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=58756.

emergence of a new corporate era is highly coordinated. Borrowing Weber's words, the "the tracks along which action [is] pushed by the dynamic of interest" have been defined by a company's executives. The Corporate Cultural System, I suggest, is an important tool in this coordination effort because it shapes employee's shared ethic and therefore is perceived to shape the ends of corporate change. In transformation processes, a company's leadership manufactures the CCS to reflect the desired 'spirit of the company' and encourage a movement that unleashes this spirit to change the organization.[146]

iv. Constructing the CCS to Mobilize Employees as the Engine for Organizational Change: The Case of Hyatt

To give an example of this in practice, one might look to Hyatt Hotels, and in particular, the work of its Chief Marketing Officer, Maryam Banikarim, who initiated such a change movement by manufacturing and managing a workplace CCS for the company.[147] In 2015, hotel conglomerates like Hyatt were experiencing considerable headwinds; Silicon Valley startup Airbnb was bringing new innovation to a traditional hospitality space and capturing considerable market share, signaling a shift in consumer desires and behaviors when it comes to travel.[148] The company's primary differentiator was its signature service,

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[146] Though "change efforts and change are hardly the same", I examine the interventionalist management of these change efforts to elucidate the perceived 'mobilizing' role of the CCS implied by statements like Goodson's and Adkin's. For methods that instead prioritize reception and efficacy of change, see Alvesson and Sveningsson, *Changing Organizational Culture,* 7-8.

[147] Montgomery, *Perspective on Purpose*, 51. This bulk of this case study is drawn from the oral history of transforming Hyatt through purpose that Maryam Banikarim tells in her chapter of my book. To preserve her voice and storytelling in this thesis, I let her words do most of the work in this case study, with minimal commentary to simply draw links between her perspective and practice with the wider theorizations I have offered.

[148] Hyatt Hotels Corporation, commonly known as Hyatt Hotels & Resorts, is an American multi-national company that manages and franchises luxury and business hotels, resorts, and vacation

delivered to guests by its staff. But it was increasing difficult to hire and retain quality hotel employees; 'gig economy' companies such as driving ride-share company Uber offered talent equal or better pay, along with greater flexibility of hours. Hyatt's CEO, Mark Hoplamazian, had been in his role for nearly a decade but saw this new marketplace as requiring a new strategy for the business. To compete, Hyatt sought a new strategic era that could "re-engage and re-motivate our greatest asset—our employees—and remind them of the difference they were making every day so that they can deliver the best service on the market."[149]

With plans for corporate transformation taking shape, Hoplamazian hired Banikarim as Hyatt's Chief Marketing Officer. She had previously held the same formal title at NBC Universal, Gannet, and Univision, but Hoplamazian also hoped she might take on a second, less function-oriented role in support of the company's transformation efforts: that of the 'purpose champion.' The purpose champion is responsible for crafting the workplace CCS, or as Banikarim puts it, "[creating] a cultural movement at scale within the organization in support of change."[150] At Hyatt, this meant mobilizing over 100,000 employees across 750 locations worldwide.[151] Banikarim outlined three critical phases to

properties. The company was founded in 1957 and experienced relatively steady growth through a strategy of property acquisition and the development of a multi-brand portfolio. This activity allowed the firm to compete in the crowded hospitality space dominated by players like Wyndham Hotel Group, Marriot International, and Hilton Worldwide, among others.

[149] Montgomery, *Perspective on Purpose*, 51.

[150] *Ibid.,* 58. While CEOs are critical advocates and symbolic leaders of the company's transformation, the appointment of a "champion as their right hand who must be the lead activator" of it is typical. A similar relationship can be observed between Chesky (the purpose sponsor) and Adkin (the purpose champion) in the above discussion on Airbnb.

[151] *Ibid.,* 53-4.

this work.[152] The first phase she described was developing purpose and values with *resonance*, or deep connection with and relevance for the employee audience. Next was the *momentum* phase, where sustained energy and growth over time is applied. And finally, the *institutionalization* phase saw the ideas of the movement "get embedded into the infrastructure of an organization and become an instinctive part of everyday life."[153] I hope to show that this change process is synchronized with those Weber-inspired ideas described by Hamel, Hastings, Joly, and BCG; managers craft a workplace cultural system to promotes a particular employee spirit, then encourage a movement to 'unleash it' as a driver of emergent, strategic transformation.

Resembling the process that Atkin took at Airbnb, Banikarim's first phase consisted of many months of research with employees and workshops with executives to identify resonant purpose and values. Evoking Weber's Protestant work ethic, Banikarim believed a resonant purpose and values would arise from employees themselves: "Great champions of purpose are also great listeners. Purpose and values must be authentic to an organization's people, and the purpose champion needs to hear the language, sentiments, and themes bubbling up and be intent that the organization's purpose represents these views."[154] From these data points, Hyatt codified its purpose as "We care for people so they can be their best" and its values as "respect, integrity, humility,

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[152] The purpose champion role seeks to "find the right, resonant message and get people to believe it, adopt it, and then to champion it themselves. You know your job is done when purpose can live on and grow without you" (*ibid*). The three phases she overviews in her oral history are nearly identical to the "Change in Three Acts" rubric Tom Andrews offers in his chapter (see the table on p.79).

[153] *Ibid.,* 53-4.

[154] *Ibid.,* 52.

Box 4. Hyatt Purpose Manifesto

What do you need? What can I do?

So you can be your best, what can I do for you?

As members of the Hyatt family, this is what we do.

We put ourselves in someone else's shoes

and use our judgement to do whatever must be done…

To lift someone's spirits and lighten their load.

To help someone prepare for a really big day.

To practice a random act of kindness that makes all the difference.

We listen with our ears, our eyes, and our hearts.

We read between the lines and d what can be done.

We may not be perfect. But that's ok.

Being authentic beats being perfect every time.

We believe in seeing what someone truly needs.

Be they family or friends, colleagues or partners, neighbors or guests…

Because a little more care, a little more kindness, a little more thoughtfulness

allows us to go above and beyond so that we can connect in just the right way.

This is our passion. This is our Purpose:

We care for people so they can be their best.

(Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose* (Routledge, 2019), 55-6).

empathy, creativity, and fun."[155] These were articulated, as I hope to have shown is typical practice, in a symbolic manifesto (Box 4).

With phase one complete, Banikarim moved into the next phase of creating momentum, which she saw as "built by a series of symbolic moments."[156] In our frame, Banikarim began to construct the Corporate Cultural System to bring to life the company's new purpose/worldview and values/ethos. It is, again, employees who create momentum in her view: "Once purpose is uncovered, the next step is to bring people on board as new champions of purpose."[157] She assembled a small core team "who really know the organization and how to motivate it", which included the marketing team as well as key operations members and the head of human resources.[158] This small team of purpose champions worked to "infect" the organization by tapping a network of local evangelists:

> "Local champions fervently believe in the purpose and act according to its values as part of their DNA. They will often act on purpose instinctively and with no instruction… You'll never get every employee to be an ardent believer in purpose but tapping into the network of people who do fervently believe on the ground is critical to spreading the purpose movement."[159]

Together, managers and local champions worked to grow the movement "like a grassroots campaign" inside Hyatt by designing moments that "make purpose visceral" for employees.[160] According to Banikarim, the role of this group was to "build crescendos and momentum, to get the adrenaline for purpose pumping though the organization

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155 "Investor Relations," Hyatt Hotels Corporation, accessed 30 August 2021, http://investors.hyatt.com/ investor-relations/our-company/default.aspx.
156 *Ibid.*
157 *Ibid.,* 56.
158 *Ibid.,* 56. Cf. Andrew's "change cohorts" (p.79-80).
159 *Ibid.,* 57.
160 *Ibid.*

through touchpoints of different shapes and sizes."[161] Sometimes these were small touch-points, like activities put on by local purpose champions or leadership modeling behavior; other times, these touchpoints were bigger moments that brought everyone in the organization together to collectively experience shared purpose.[162] Across all these symbolic moments and actions, "the most important thing to reinforce was that purpose is *all of ours*. If purpose is everyone's, it can't be something launched only to leadership with pomp and circumstance; it has to reach every person directly."[163]

With the "purpose pulse conscious within the organization", the third, institutionalization phase began.[164] Though Banikarim's oral history offers many stories of how this was done at Hyatt, two in particular offer illustrative examples.[165] The first relates to changing old protocol that no longer fit the company's purpose and values. When Banikarim learned that an aspect of an employee's uniform was uncomfortable, she believed this was not showing the company's signature "care" to employees and changes the uniform protocol: "this became part of the lore that circulated within the company."[166] A second example concerned making decisions through the lens of purpose and values; the company had to navigate whether or not to launch a new advertisement

161 *Ibid.,* 58.
162 *Ibid.*
163 *Ibid.,* 57.
164 Schein's "mechanisms for embedding beliefs and values" is similar to Banikarim's phase of "institutionalizing" (*Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 245ff).
165 See Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 49-60 for examples.
166 *Ibid.,* 59.

during a tense cultural moment and used their purpose of 'care' to frame and navigate the decision.[167]

The process of transformation took two years at Hyatt, but what emerged was an "organization built around care", that very perspective constructed at the heart of the Hyatt CCS and that very marketplace differentiator so critical to the company's existential survival according to its CEO. Hyatt explains the value of the CCS to their investors thus:

> "Our purpose and values are brought to life by our colleagues, whom we refer to as the Hyatt family. We believe our colleagues embody our purpose of caring for people… This commitment to genuine service and care is what differentiates us and drives guest preference. The management teams at each of our managed properties lead by example, and we provide them with the appropriate autonomy to make operational decisions in the best interest of the hotel and brand. We believe the managers of our franchised properties are experienced operators with high standards who have demonstrated commitment to our values and our approach to caring for guests to enhance guest satisfaction. High levels of guest satisfaction led to increased guest preference for our brands, which we believe results in a strengthened revenue base over the long term. We also believe engaged colleagues will enhance efficient operation of our properties, resulting in improved financial results for our owners. Sustained adherence to these principles is a basis for our brand reputation and is one of the principal factors behind the decisions of our diverse group of owners and developers to invest in the Hyatt portfolio of properties around the world.[168]

This framing of purpose and values for the company's investor audience betrays executive logic for how the Corporate Cultural System supports effective corporate transformation and increased efficiency, harkening back to Taylor's central idea: Hyatt

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[167] *Ibid.*

[168] "Investor Relations," Hyatt Hotels Corporation.

employees, or "family", "embody" the company's culture and—reinforced by managers' behaviors—act autonomously in ways that deliver the company's core service of customer experience and drive the company's operations more "effectively"; this improves financial results so that owners and developers continue to invest in the company.

Visible in this example, I suggest, is a process of change like Weber's Protestant ethic, with the Hyatt reformation being driven by employees acting in accordance with crafted workplace beliefs and ethics. A difference between Weber's Protestant ethic and that of Hyatt, however, is that while Weber saw ethics as born of religion, Hyatt's defining cultural values and worldview were constructed and coordinated, tethered to strategic, efficiency-boosting ends. Social action in accordance with corporate ethics was thought to enable a new spirit of the company to emerge over time, one that supported a new strategic era of the company, set by its leadership two years earlier.

V. Conclusion: The Reinjection of Meaning into the 'Corporation-as-Society'

In the preceding chapter and this one, I have explored two distinct but complementary corporate contexts in which meaning is constructed and managed. Chapter One observed the context *outside* of the corporation's walls: the marketplace arena where consumers draw meaning from the commercial brand. Chapter Two has now observed the context *inside* the corporation, where the concept of 'meaning' is connected to a company's

employee culture. I have shown that, despite these distinct boundaries with different audiences, the contemporary business community appears to conceptualize the commercial brand and organizational culture identically: as a Crafted Cultural System (CCS), with a worldview and ethos constructed to resonate with its audience, and embedded in interlocking, albeit fabricated, symbols, myths, and rituals. While the CCS in the marketplace context is primarily intended for the consumer, the CCS in the workplace context is primarily concerned with the employee community: the meaning that it embodies is constructed to support social stabilization within, and sometimes transformation of, the organization.

Also interesting is that in both contexts, as these two chapters have hinted, there have been similar evolutions in historical thought about meaning. Both intellectual histories begin with a pronounced functionalist view of culture. In the brand context discussed previously, advertising magicians were thought to compel consumers, instinctively and unwittingly through advertising charms. Likewise in the corporate culture context studied here, managers crafted 'strong cultures' to drive a mechanical efficiency among the workforce, seen as unknowing social agents. In both cases, counterpoints to these functionalist explanations developed that promoted cultural theories granting people more agency in their experience and enactment of cultures. A preference for Geertz's anthropology appears to have emerged in both literatures in the last decades of the twentieth century into the beginning of the twenty-first: I hope to have shown that the foundations of Consumer Culture Theory rest explicitly in Geertz, as does a 'flow perspective' of organizational culture. The emergence of the Corporate Cultural System model detected in this thesis, which construes both the corporate brand and workplace

culture as a Geertzian cultural system, might simply be considered as an elaboration upon existing foundations of these respective fields.

Looking more specifically at this chapter's focus of the workplace context, the same might be said of the influence that Durkheim and Weber appear to have on explaining how the CCS engages employees inside the company's walls. I hope to have shown that both thinkers occupy hallowed reverence as 'fathers' of the management field, with Weber considered as the original organizational design thinker and Durkheim as the antecedent of the field's 'strong culture' thesis. Though thinking within the field has surely developed from these two foundations, I suggested that Durkheimian and Weberian ideas are still strongly felt in today's mainstream discourse and practice: though the CCS adopts the semiotic preference inherited from the 'flow culture' perspective, the cultural assumptions it expresses serve the same goal of their 'strong culture' predecessors—an interest, generally speaking, to sustain shareholder value logic and performance efficiency as the fundamental aim of management.

Stepping back, perhaps most interesting is that when contemplating the question of "how do *corporations* organize", management thinkers seem to have consistently borrowed ideas from social theorists who contemplate "how do *societies* organize." From Durkheim's collective effervescence to Weber's bureaucracy and ethic-led social transformation, these thinkers' ideas about society broadly are selected to explain behavior within the workplace specifically. The corporation, it seems, is conceptually modeled after the society: it is itself perceived as a society, or quasi-society of sorts to be organized and governed by executives and managers.

We might also observe that, in its original modelling of Weber's bureaucratic ideal, this 'corporation-as-society' frame chose to pursue the optimization of efficiency at a cost. Others have noted that early management scholars fixated on bureaucracy but removed it from Weber's wider theorizations about the existential harm such an ideal would manifest.[169] Indeed, across his works, Weber warned that such a design would affect people's agency and happiness because it essentially eliminated meaning:

> "No machinery in the world functions so precisely as this apparatus of men and, moreover, so cheaply… Rational calculation… reduces every worker to a cog in this bureaucratic machine and, seeing himself in this light, he will merely ask how to transform himself into a somewhat bigger cog… The passion for bureaucratization drives us to despair."[170]

With no alternative, the increased rationalization inherent in social life, particularly in Western capitalist societies, would lead to what Weber called an 'iron cage', or the entrapment of individuals in systems based purely on teleological efficiency, rational calculation, and control, where the "spontaneous enjoyment of life" is expunged.[171] With

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169 As Cummings *et al.* note: "If we explore more of what Weber wrote, rather than just what his later interpreters chose to translate and management textbook writers chose to distil, we find a far more complex figure. Weber could see why and how bureaucracy would come to be the dominant organizational form in the early decades of the twentieth century and its advantages in this context, but he was troubled by what its dominance would mean for humanity" (*The New History of Management*, 125).

170 Max Weber, *Economy and Society,* iv. Cf. "Bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized', the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation. This is appraised as its special virtue by capitalism" (p.973).

171 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 123-4. The original German term is *stahlhartes Gehäuse* (steel-hard casing); this was translated into "iron cage", an expression made familiar to English language speakers by Talcott Parsons in his 1930 translation of Weber's work. The iron cage imagery comes from Weber's conclusion of this work, where he makes a somber indictment of contemporary industrial culture. He makes clear his distaste for the celebration of the mundane and the routine he thought central to modern capitalist culture.

no escape from the "the polar night of icy darkness" of the bureaucratization of social order, individuals' happiness would be affected as they would be forced to function in a society with rigid rules and norms without the possibility of change.[172]

I suggest we might see—in the "invention" of the idea of corporate culture in the 1980s, in the "discovery" of the human worker in the "humanocracy" movement, and in the professional construction of workplace meaning through the CCS described in this chapter—a modern day correction for this 'original sin' of management scholars, who excerpted Weber's ideas about bureaucracy but ignored his wider warnings about such an organization ideal.[173] If we accept this premise, the CCS might be viewed not simply as an efficiency tool, but as an attempt to reinject meaning into the workplace where it was originally eliminated, by design.[174]

Furthermore, if we accept the business community's conceptualization of this corporation-as-society, this model inherently, and importantly, does not acknowledge the company's integration within the wider social world.[175] Indeed, any societal concerns,

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[172] Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 128.

[173] On the "invention" of corporate culture, see Cummings *et al.*, *The New History of Management*, 169. Also see Chapter 6 of the same source on the "Discovery of the Human Worker", though these authors do not connect this apparently novel interest in employees as humans as connected to Hamel's 'humanocracy' idea or as a reaction to Weber's bureaucracy (though they do blame, more broadly, the scientific approach to management of the Classical Tradition).

[174] Others have noted the contemporary 'rebellion' against the suffering of capitalism, but most bring Karl Marx's alienation, exploitation, and 'vampire capital' metaphor into the conversation to establish their points. See *e.g.*, Claudia Leeb, "Rebelling Against the Suffering in Capitalism," *Contemporary Political Theory* 17 (2018): 263-82. I have not seen others argue this point using Weber as I have.

[175] Reflecting this internal focus, the corporation has been conceptualized as many things over the decades: the *corpus*, or organizational 'body' and linguistic root of 'corporation'; the *machine*, as Taylor and Weber understood it; the *organism*, a living entity full of complex relationships and interpersonal dynamics to optimize (this notion is at the heart of the 'agile' organization

contexts, or considerations exist outside the business: the organization draws resources from this outside world (like talent, natural resources, etc.) and any impacts a business' operation might have on society are merely externalities of efficient operation.[176] The boundaries of the thing to be studied in theory or managed in practice are drawn cleanly around the organization itself—the "insides" of the company. The CCS in the workplace reflects this. The next chapter suggests that we might be seeing a recalibration of this boundary between the business and society; rather than viewing the 'corporation-as-society', I suggest that, increasingly, the business community is centering on an emerging conceptualization of the 'corporation-in-society.' As the conceptual boundaries of the business change, I argue, so too do the boundaries of their crafted cultures.

management idea, see *e.g.*, W. Aghina *et al.*, "The Five Trademarks of Agile Organizations," McKinsey & Company, 22 January 2018, https://www.mckinsey.com/businessfunctions/people-and-organizational-performance/ourinsights/the-five-trademarks-of-agileorganizations); or even the *cult*, focusing on the employee community and belonging as Atkin exemplified. But in each case, the boundaries of the organization have clear demarcations between 'inside' and 'outside.'

[176] This idea is most famously captured in Milton Friedman's essay, "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits," *The New York Times Magazine,* 13 September 1970.

CHAPTER THREE

Constructing Meaning in Society: The Corporate Cultural System and the Morality of Conscious Business

I. Introduction: IKEA and the Modern Corporate Social Responsibility

In 1976, the founder and CEO of the Swedish furniture retailer IKEA Ingvar Kamprad claimed that the company existed to "create a better everyday life for the many people by offering a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them."[1] In his 14-page "The Testament of a Furniture Dealer", Kamprad outlined the company's worldview of "standing on the side of the many, ordinary people."[2] This worldview is complimented by the company's ethos, called "the IKEA Way", which included values like maintaining

[1] Ingvar Kamprad, "The Testament of a Furniture Dealer," *IKEA*, 20 December 1976, 1. https://www.inter.ikea.com.
[2] *Ibid.,* 1.

"humbleness in the face of successes", "taking responsibility, a privilege" and exercising "simplicity, a virtue."[3] As is typical of the corporate cultural system model developed thus far, the company's articulated worldview and ethos are conceptualized as mutually reinforcing and guiding all activity. However, peppered with language like "protest", "duty", and "mortal sin", and with exhortations to "contribute to the process of democratization", the Testament read more like a manifesto crossed with a religious tome than a private sector strategy document:

> "All nations and societies in both the East and West spend a disproportionate amount of their resources on satisfying a minority of the population… a small circle of the affluent… We know that in the future we will be able to make a valuable contribution to the process of democratization… Part of creating a better everyday life for the many people also consists of breaking free from status and convention – becoming freer as human beings. We aim to make our name synonymous with that concept too – for our own benefit and for the inspiration of others. We must, however, always bear in mind that freedom implies responsibility, meaning that we must demand much of ourselves."[4]

The word "responsibility" appeared twenty-eight times and Kamprad boasted proudly, "A well-known Swedish industrialist-politician has said that IKEA has meant more for the process of democratization [in the country] than many political measures put together."[5]

Kamprad was known as a business leader who did things a little differently (another corporate value he codified is "doing it a different way"), but he is not an anomaly in

[3] *Ibid.,* 3, 6, 7.
[4] *Ibid.,* 3-4. Cf. "protest" (p.13); "duty" (p.3, 8, 16); "mortal sin" (p.10).
[5] *Ibid.,* 3.

adopting a vision that his company, through its existence, could benefit society.[6] Many companies increasingly adopt corporate worldviews with a far more moral, even salvific quality than any previously described. Electric vehicle corporation Tesla, for instance, says its "mission is to accelerate the world's transition to sustainable energy" while outdoor gear company "Patagonia is in business to save our home planet" and yogurt company Chobani is on a mission "to bring better food to more people."[7] Likewise, three major conglomerates articulate a more societally-minded scope of their impact: Nestlé's purpose is "enhancing quality of life and contributing to a healthier future. We want to help shape a better and healthier world"; Unilever's purpose is "to make sustainable living common place… we believe that to succeed requires the highest standards of corporate behavior towards everyone we work with, the communities we touch, and the environment on which we have an impact"; and Danone is "committed to bringing health through food to as many people as possible."[8] Like IKEA, these companies "envision business as a force for good, a force with the power to change the world around [them] and to deliver tangible improvement to human life and the environment."[9]

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[6] *Ibid.,* 13.

[7] "About Tesla," Tesla, 2021. https://www.tesla.com/about. Veronika, Sonsev, "Patagonia's Focus on Its Brand Purpose is Great for Business," *Forbes*, 20 February 2021, https://www.forbes.com/sites/ veronikasonsev/2019/11/27/patagonias-focus-on-its-brand-purpose-is-great-for-business/. "Chobani's Brand Purpose Is Centered Around Humanity," *Adweek*, accessed 20 February 2021, https://www.adweek.com/ brand-marketing/chobanis-brand-purpose.

[8] "About Us," Nestlé, accessed January 2, 2021, https://www.nestle-esar.com/home. "Purpose, Values & Principles," Unilever, accessed 20 February 2021, https://www.unilever.co.uk/ about/who-we-are/ purpose-and-principles/. "Mission," Danone, accessed 12 January 2021, https://www.danone.com/ about-danone/sustainable-value-creation/our-mission.html.

[9] Freya Williams, "The Business Case for Social Purpose," in *Perspectives on Purpose: Leading Voices on Building Brands and Businesses for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Nina Montgomery (Routledge, 2019), 25.

While editing my book *Perspectives on Purpose*, I noticed that some of the chapter contributions reflected this belief that companies could positively address problems of the world. It was easy enough to see: while PlayStation, for example, hoped to champion 'Great Play' (as discussed in Chapter One) or Hyatt re-focused its business on delivering 'Care' as its primary purpose (as discussed in Chapter Two), companies like Ben and Jerry's were crafting corporate cultures to fight for social and environmental justice. With most worldviews, as we have seen, reflecting a cosmic good against an evil threat, it made sense that some companies increasingly style themselves as heroically saving society from real-world threats such as inequality or climate change, for example. At the time that my book was published in 2019, I did not differentiate this emerging flavor of the corporate cultural system, crafted with a distinctly moralistic quality. Nevertheless, some of the book's contributors did hint at a distinction through references to a corporation's 'social purpose', signaling a unique aspiration to benefit all humanity. In their foreword to the book, for example, Jessica Alba and Christopher Gavigan, co-founders of The Honest Company, remarked:

> "As we built Honest and our incredible community, it was with the firm belief that—similar to the butterfly effect – all the small choices we made could add up to something quite big… This is a rallying cry and reminder that we're not playing a zero-sum game here, but a win-win. And when we structure ourselves not to compete, but to collaborate under one shared conceptual framework for social-purpose-led business, the possibilities for meaningful and lasting social impact are endless."[10]

[10] Jessica Alba and Christopher Gavigan, "Foreword," in *Perspectives on Purpose: Leading Voices on Building Brands and Businesses for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Nina Montgomery (Routledge, 2019), iii.

Also emphasizing a perceived social transformation potential of corporate brands, Michael Birkin, CEO of Kyu (a collective of creative agencies) and former CEO of Omnicom (one of the most powerful advertising and branding conglomerates in the world), noted the book's "growing understanding of the importance of [business's] Social Purpose" as one of the defining changes of the early twenty-first century.[11] The comment signals what I hope to show is a growing industry conversation centered around the potential of business as a possible platform for societal change.

In this chapter, I correct my book's under-emphasis on this particular kind of corporate cultural system, one that stretches the boundaries of the corporation into the social world. I argue that its world-changing rubric reflects ideas central to the popular academic and industry discourse that imagines a kind of capitalism that puts an obligation to society at the heart of business operation, rather than considering such responsibilities as an externality to the pursuit of profit. Companies that adopt this premise are perceived to become tremendous engines for societal change, capable of benefiting all of humanity and the planet. They are 'moral' companies—also referred to as 'enlightened', 'conscious', or 'social purpose-led'—according to the discourse, and I hope to show that each crafts a cultural system containing a worldview and ethos capturing how its conducting of business can change the world.

This formulation reflects the very same CCS theorization offered in previous chapters, but as the boundaries of the corporation expand into society at large, the CCS adopts a pronounced moral quality. These moral entities, guided by their moral cultures, are

[11] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, ii.

thought to reinject meaning into business and even into people's (citizens' and employees') lives: meaning that had been previously stripped away by the evils of bureaucratic and zero-sum business practice.[12] This societal scope of the CCS, I suggest, appears to transcend the external and internal designations guiding its application in Chapter One and Chapter Two, respectively.

II. The Society Context: Reimagining the Morality, and Consciousness, of Business

i. The Rise of the 'Reimaging Capitalism' Discourse

Business-as-usual, at least in the West, is in a proclaimed state of existential crisis. Is the chief obligation of the corporation and its managers to look after the bottom line and maximize profits for shareholders? Or must it consider a wider set of stakeholders and society more broadly in order to compete in the twenty-first century context? These questions about the very purpose of business are being asked by the world's largest forums, the CEOs of multi-national corporations, billionaire founders, and leading academics. The ideas emerging from this growing chorus are coalescing into a conversation I will refer to throughout this chapter as the 'Reimagining Capitalism' discourse.[13] In short, this discourse suggests that capitalism as it operates today does not enhance the prosperity of all people and is responsible for some of society's biggest

[12] This chapter elaborates on this theme of the CCS as perhaps helping to restore a 'lost' morality, which Chapter Two began to develop, see p.161-2.

[13] This name for the discourse is one I draw from practitioners' own language and concepts, as the remainder of the chapter will make clear.

problems. The thrust of this central claim asks how a more fair, equitable, and sustainable capitalism might be realized.

To be sure, this discourse is not new. However, I hope to show that entrance into mainstream industry thinking and practice is as recent as the late 2010s and early 2020s, and that it gained noteworthy momentum in 2019 as a number of prominent industry voices claimed that twenty-first century capitalism was not working. In April of that year, Ray Dalio, the billionaire founder of the hedge fund Bridgewater, published a manifesto on "Why and How Capitalism Needs to be Reformed."[14] In August, the Business Roundtable—a collective of 200 CEOs including the likes of Chairman and CEO of JP Morgan Chase & Co and Chairman and CEO of The Coca-Cola Company—announced a new "purpose for the corporation."[15] The Omidyar Network launched its Reimagining Capitalism program in September, laying out "five key pillars of a new economic approach."[16] In October, Salesforce.com founder and co-CEO Marc Benioff joined the conversation in a *New York Times* opinion piece titled "We Need A New Capitalism", intended to promote his book also released that month on the same topic: *Trailblazer: The Power of Business as the Greatest Platform for Change* (2019).[17] And in December, leadership of

[14] Ray Dalio, "Why and How Capitalism Needs to Be Reformed," LinkedIn (blog), 5 April 2019. https://www.linkedin. com/pulse/why-how-capitalism-needs-reformed-parts-1-2-ray-dalio.
[15] "Our Commitment," Business Roundtable, 19 August 2019, https://opportunity.business roundtable. org/ourcommitment/.
[16] "Reimagining Capitalism," Omidyar Network, accessed 19 March 2021, https://omidyar.com/ reimagining-capitalism/.
[17] Marc Benioff, "Marc Benioff: We Need a New Capitalism," *The New York Times*, 14 August 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/14/opinion/benioff-salesforce-capitalism.html; Marc Benioff, *Trailblazer: The Power of Business as the Greatest Platform for Change* (Currency, 2019).

the World Economic Forum published the "Davos Manifesto 2020", declaring the "universal purpose of a company is to benefit society."[18]

The Reimagining Capitalism discourse's momentum continued to grow into 2020, accelerated by the global coronavirus pandemic that brought public attention to the role businesses could play in 'building back better', as well as corporate attention to the fragility of many of their current structures to withstand a shock like the pandemic.[19] These examples among many, many others, show the sheer volume and velocity of contributions to this discourse that give it considerable substance and stature as a rising business ideology.

It is important to note that the Reimagining Capitalism discourse I try to pin down, drawing on these sources and others, is neither static nor cleanly codified; it is emergent and involves several competing, complementary, and even contradictory narratives. It is the combination of these various narratives that create what we might consider to be a 'dominant narrative.'[20] The following discussion of the discourse attempts to hold that multiplicity and complexity while also elevating the key ideas, themes, and figureheads

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[18] "Davos Manifesto 2020: The Universal Purpose of a Company in the Fourth Industrial Revolution," World Economic Forum, accessed 20 February 2021, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/12/davos-manifesto-2020-the-universal-purpose-of-a-company-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution/.

[19] Perhaps most indicative of the conversation's mainstreaming is the adoption of a Reimagining Capitalism subtext by the 'big three' management consulting firm: McKinsey, Bain and Company, and Boston Consulting Group. In 2020, each repositioned their core offers within the frame of a new social purpose for business, likely signaling demand from clients as well as a bet that this reimagined purpose for business represents a tectonic shift in the business world, rather than a simple passing trend.

[20] I attempt here to overview the rules and principles of formation for the Reimagining Capitalism discourse, according to the method described in the introductory chapter, see p. 19-24.

that seem to be driving momentum and influencing how professionals understand and conduct their activity. By dissecting the major theoretical reforms to the premise of business this discourse encapsulates, I hope to show the opening of a new application for the corporate cultural system: to support the enlightened corporation's engagement with and improvement of society.

ii. From Shareholders to Stakeholders, Friedman to Fink, Responsibility to Morality

The last chapter took as its start point the notion that a corporation is fundamentally a cooperation of people bound together through a sense of collective purpose. This section adopts a different, but related beginning, one that emphasizes what a corporation *does* rather than what it *is*: at its most foundational, the chief aim of a company—that cooperation of people bound by shared purpose—is to create value for shareholders by selling goods and services. Often through innovating, creating efficiencies, or increasing market share, it strives to generate more revenue and, in turn, more profits for shareholders. This pursuit of the self-interest of shareholders is the premise of modern business laid out by Nobel Prize winning economist Milton Friedman in 1970:

> "In a free-enterprise, private-property system, a corporate executive is an employee of the owners of the business. He has direct responsibility to his employers. That responsibility is to conduct the business in accordance with their desires, which generally will be to make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of the society, both those embodied in law and those embodied in ethical custom."[21]

[21] Milton Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits," *The New York Times Magazine,* 13 September 1970. Friedman was not alone in forwarding this thesis

To support this logic, Friedman invoked Adam Smith, the eighteenth-century thinker often cited as the father of modern economics. Friedman quoted Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) directly to support a self-interest focused premise for business: "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner but from their regard to their own interest."[22] Friedman and his colleagues at the University of Chicago argued that free markets are perfectly efficient, and this makes them excellent drivers of economic prosperity. Intuitively, if every firm in an industry is ruthlessly focused on the bottom line, seen as synonymous with their own self-interest, competition will drive them each to be both efficient and innovative, while also preventing any single firm from dominating the market.[23]

Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, an influential theory emerged in academia that emphasized the role of managers and executives as being only 'agents' who served shareholders' interests. In a series of academic papers building directly on the logic in Friedman's piece, financial economist Michael Jensen and his coauthors discussed a natural conflict of interest that existed within firms between shareholders—the owners of the firm—and the 'agents' they hire to run the firm on their behalf (Michael C. Jensen and William H. Meckling, "Reflections on the Corporation as a Social Invention," *Midland Corporate Finance Journal* 1, no. 3 (1983)). Because firms in many cases have hundreds of thousands or more shareholders, their power to monitor the agents is dispersed, and there is a fear that the agents would misuse the corporate assets for their own purposes. A solution is therefore to financially align the interests of the shareholders and executives; for example, through the generous share-based incentive compensation packages for executives that have proliferated since then. Within Jensen's agency theory view, not only does stock-based pay align CEOs interests with owners', but he also emphasized that the scrutiny of the market for corporate control is another important mechanism to keep CEOs in line. In a recent documentary about stakeholder management, Mr. Jensen contritely "accepts the blame" for the negative effects his work has wrought on the world (Paul Wagner, *Fishing with Dynamite*, 2019). He says that he now knows that "maximizing shareholder value is a stupid idea", and that focusing on the stock price will lead to the unfair exploitation of labor and other problems.

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] Also informing this perspective was the normative primacy of individual freedoms, or the idea that personal, individual freedom is (or should be) the primary goal of society. Freedom, in this context, is immunity from encroachment, or 'freedom *from*' interference of others in ones' decision making. This idea is deeply rooted in a post-Enlightenment, classical-liberal tradition of

Though there were examples outside mainstream business thought and practice that adopted a different perspective, this premise for business, known as the Friedman Doctrine or Shareholder Theory, became a normative theory of business ethics by the end of the twentieth century. To be sure, Friedman's was a perspective offered in an opinion piece, not a peer reviewed piece or as part of any academic endeavor. And yet, it has been so foundational, even an assumption, in much academic work since then: Shareholder Theory was, and still is, cited widely in academic work, taught widely in business schools, and practiced widely in corporate boardrooms. Upon his death in 2006, *The Economist* proclaimed Friedman as "the most influential economist of the second half of the twentieth century, possibly of it all," a reverence due largely to his work on the purpose of business.[24] A decade later, in 2016, *The Economist* called Shareholder Theory "the biggest idea in business", declaring that "shareholder value rules business."[25]

However, a growing conversation amongst academics and practitioners questions the basic tenets of the Friedman Doctrine. Leading economic and management thinkers have taken stances squarely opposed to Friedman's shareholder primacy, even going as far as to claim that "many of the biggest issues of our time, from inequality to environmental degradation, can be tied to how shareholder primacy has warped our economic and business systems."[26] A number of alternative models to the corporate dogma of

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eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was a useful intellectual well to draw from as a counterpoint to the Soviet Union's philosophy of centralized economic control.

[24] "A heavyweight champ, at five foot two," *The Economist,* 23 November 2006. https://www.economist.com/special-report/2006/11/23/a-heavyweight-champ-at-five-two.

[25] "Analyse this," *The Economist.* 31 March 2016. https://amp.economist.com/business/ 2016/03/ 31/analyse-this.

[26] Nina Montgomery, "Christopher Marquis | Reimagining Capitalism, a LinkedIn Interview Series," LinkedIn (blog), 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/ christopher-marquis-cornell-

maximizing profits and the presumption of continuous growth are being offered in its place, with most taking as their start point the need for new economic thinking to match the new marketplace dynamics of today's global society.[27] These modern contexts, they point out, are far different from those that had influenced Adam Smith's thinking, where butchers and bakers were local or regional and often family businesses; likewise, these contexts differ from those that Friedman was responding to, where rising modern corporations like Oscar Meyer sold the majority of meats and Nabisco the majority of baked goods. Today, industries are interconnected, supply chains are global, and workforces are distributed or often outsourced.

Perhaps most famous among the management academics opposing Friedman is Michael Porter, at Harvard Business School. Porter's work defines much of the modern strategy field and, though his early work is informed by a Friedman-esque maximizing shareholder value premise of business, his more recent work is a marked departure:

> "Everything we learned about business, at some level, is wrong. We thought it was very narrow. We thought it was about making a profit. We thought that was something the company controlled and was separate from government and from society. They were the enemies of business! Right now a number of fundamental forces are at work that are changing that mindset… We're in a revolution about how businesses think about their role, about how to succeed, about how to compete, about how to win, and how to sustain themselves—how to maintain

professor-b-corp-movement-nina-montgomery. Cf. Christopher Marquis, *Better Business: How the B Corp Movement is Remaking Capitalism* (Yale University Press, 2020).

[27] Perhaps most popular among these economists is Mariana Mazzucato (*The Value of Everything: Making and Taking in the Global Economy* (PublicAffairs, 2018); *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism* (Penguin Books Limited, 2021), Kate Raworth (*Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st Century Economist* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017), and Thomas Piketty (*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Belknap Press, 2013); *Capital and Ideology,* trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Belknap Press, 2020).

> their alliances with various actors in the community and with their employees among others."[28]

Echoing her Harvard Business School colleague, Rebecca Henderson argues in *Reimagining Capitalism in a World on Fire* (2020) that in a ruthlessly competitive world, only a new form of capitalism can drive the innovation and growth that will bring "extraordinary opportunity to a much wider array of people."[29]

Academics are not alone in calling for a business "revolution." Industry practitioners and communities have also joined this collective of capitalism reformers, bringing these ideas out of academia and fringe corners of practice into mainstream industry discourse. Rob Chesnut, the Chief Legal Officer at Airbnb whose title was changed, rather interestingly, to Chief Ethics Officer in 2018, told me that he saw "this rubric of shareholder value taking on almost biblical worship", compelling him to write his book *Intentional Integrity: How Smart Companies Can Lead an Ethical Revolution* (2020): "We're starting to rethink shareholder value. We're recognizing the damage done by companies… and instead of causing these huge problems, we need companies to step up and solve some of the world's biggest challenges."[30]

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[28] Michael Porter, "Creating Shared Value: Executive Education," Harvard Business School, Class Lecture, delivered 18 December 2020. Cf. Michael Porter and Mark Kramer, "Creating Shared Value," *Harvard Business Review* (2011): 1–16; Michael Porter and Mark Kramer, "Strategy & Society: The Link Between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility," *Harvard Business Review* 84, no. 12 (2006): 78–85; Michael Porter, "The Five Competitive Forces That Shape Strategy," *Harvard Business Review* (1979).

[29] Henderson, *Reimagining Capitalism* (2020), 47.

[30] Nina Montgomery, "Rob Chesnut | Reimagining Capitalism, a LinkedIn Interview Series," LinkedIn (blog), 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/rob-chesnut-airbnbs-former-chief-ethics-office.

Among the most influential in this discourse is Larry Fink, Chairman and CEO of BlackRock, one of the world's largest asset managers.[31] From 2018 through 2021, his annual letters to shareholders and CEOs explicitly countered Friedman's thesis, each launching a thousand think pieces and dominating news cycles for weeks after their respective publications. 'Friedman versus Fink' has become the shorthand for the philosophical discrepancy between Friedman's followers and those who subscribe to the Reimagining Capitalism notion.[32] This is because Fink captures so neatly the challenge of Friedman's thesis, which has become the centerpiece of the Reimagined Capitalism discourse: corporations must reconsider their role within society.

Friedman's perspective that the primary responsibility of business is to its shareholders largely divorced the company from its societal context. He argued that any *social* responsibility of business still ultimately serves the same bottom-line self-interest: "there is one and only one social responsibility of business: to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits."[33] This conceptual separation of the corporate entity from society is key to understanding Friedman's theory. Privileging shareholder value means always maximizing the operations of a company to maximize profit. Engagement with society, through lobbying or philanthropy or any other socially minded pursuit, is simply a lever managers can pull for this maximization aim. Society, then, is

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[31] "Introduction to BlackRock," BlackRock, accessed 21 February 2021. https://www.blackrock.com/sg/en/introduction-to-blackrock.

[32] For the academic engagement with this debate, see *e.g.*, M. Omran, P. Atrill, and J. Pointon, "Shareholders Versus Stakeholders: Corporate Mission Statements and Investor Returns," *Business Ethics: A European Review* 11, no. 4 (2002), 318-26.

[33] Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits." He continues: any businessperson who suggests another social purpose for business, he condemns, "are unwitting puppets of the intellectual forces that have been undermining the basis of a free society these past decades." In other words, we might write that manager off as a socialist, not a capitalist.

conceptually separated from and constraining to Friedman's purpose of business: the pursuit of profit.[34]

By contrast, the twenty-first century capitalism reformers within the business community argue that the next era of corporate growth, the "revolution" of which Porter speaks, will be unlocked not when firms maximize quarterly profits, but through corporations turning toward and helping to solve society's biggest challenges—from global poverty and climate change to gender and racial inequality. This management philosophy fundamentally shifts the boundaries of the corporation to not only acknowledge but engage with a wider societal context. Advocates of this view, Colin Mayer and Brund Roche, argue that "putting [social] purpose into practice [requires] a new definition of the boundaries of the business ecosystem of the firm… The corporate ecosystem must be enlarged to go beyond the legal boundaries of the firm and be aligned with the effective boundaries of the firm (as determined by its purpose)—to encompass all relevant stakeholders; in a word: mutuality."[35]

Resembling a pattern previously observed, academic thinking (in this case, from a collective of authors lead by Mayer) has trickled into practitioners' constructs. McKinsey's post-pandemic business positioning is to support executives in creating what

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[34] This thinking dovetails with the self-contained 'corporation-as-society' conceptualization of the corporate entity discussed in the conclusion of Chapter Two: the inward-looking company focuses on its own self-interest, maximization, and productivity, while the external world is simply resources for building and optimizing the corporation-as-society, see p.161-3.

[35] Colin Mayer and Brund Roche, *Putting Purpose into Practice: The Economics of Mutuality* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 5. On ecosystem thinking in business and organizations, see Elizabeth Altman *et al.*, "The Future of Work is Through Workforce Ecosystems," *MIT Sloan Management Review* (2021).

they call 'ecosystem businesses', or 'ecosystem strategy.'[36] This articulation of the business—of an ecosystem with many stakeholders, inside and outside the firm's walls—widens for whom companies create value: beyond simply serving *shareholders*, those stock-holding owners of the business, companies that adopt this view choose instead to serve a wider group of *stakeholders*, including customers, employees, suppliers, and communities, and even the planet, as well as shareholders.[37] As Fink argues, "the importance of serving stakeholders is becoming increasingly central to the way that companies understand their role in society."[38] As an example, Salesforce.com founder Marc Benioff, too, sees a stakeholder orientation of business as the necessary reform for businesses to change the world: "When we finally start focusing on stakeholder value as

[36] McKinsey suggests "business leaders around the world are increasingly turning to the ecosystem business model to achieve top-line goals such as growing core businesses, generating revenues from new products and services, and creating new value pools" ("A Design-Led Approach to Embracing Business Ecosystems," McKinsey & Company, accessed 26 August 2021. https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/mckinsey-design/our-insights/a-design-led-approach-to-embracing-an-ecosystem-strategy).

[37] The bibliography on stakeholder capitalism is growing daily. See, for example, Klaus Schwab and Peter Vanham, *Stakeholder Capitalism: A Global Economy That Works for Progress, People and Planet* (Wiley, 2021); Justin O'Brien, "The Moral Foundations of Stakeholder Capitalism," *Law And Financial Markets Review* 14, no. 1 (2020): 1-4; Anne T. Lawrence and James Weber, *Business and Society: Stakeholders, Ethics, Public Policy* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2016); Samuel F. Mansell, *Capitalism, Corporations and the Social Contract: A Critique of Stakeholder Theory*, *Business, Value Creation, and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Joseph Petrick, "Sustainable Stakeholder Capitalism: A Moral Vision of Responsible Global Financial Risk Management," *Journal of Business Ethics* 99, no. 1 (2011): 93-109.

[38] Larry Fink, "Larry Fink's 2020 Letter to CEOs," *BlackRock*, 2020, https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/2020-larry-fink-ceo-letter. He continues: "Over time, companies and countries that do not respond to stakeholders and address sustainability risks will encounter growing skepticism from the markets, and in turn, a higher cost of capital. Companies and countries that champion transparency and demonstrate their responsiveness to stakeholders, by contrast, will attract investment more effectively, including higher-quality, more patient capital."

well as shareholder value, our companies will be more successful, our communities will be more equal, our societies will be more just and our planet will be healthier."[39]

Critical to this rhetoric of a more interconnected, stakeholder-centric role of business, is the adoption of a more nuanced notion of corporate *responsibility*. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have for decades been the detached limb of companies, donating money to the arts or philanthropies, often for a public relations benefit. This kind of societal responsibility follows Friedman's point of view that all socially minded activity is ultimately self-serving. Though this kind of generosity-minded responsibility is still part of the reformers' discourse, their elevation of responsibility to stakeholders again puts societal concern at the center of business practice. This is the theoretical heart of the Reimagining Capitalism discourse, I would argue: a fundamental shift in the social concern of business. With this shift, a moral revolution has come to the private sector.

iii. Moral Capitalists and the Revolutionary Cry for Business to Save Society

The Reimagining Capitalism discourse theoretically combines a company's social concern and its core operation. This is often discussed as a new 'purpose' for business, countering the profit-maximizing one popularized by Friedman and his followers. Purpose, when used in this context, means something more particular than when it was used by practitioners in Chapter Two to mean a corporation's strategic 'north star.' When Colin Mayer, the former Dean of the University of Oxford business school, talks about

[39] Benioff, "Marc Benioff: We Need a New Capitalism," 2019.

purpose, for example, he means "the purpose of companies is to produce solutions to problems of people and planet." For him, purpose references the function of business broadly, and he emphasizes a society-mindedness and impact-oriented function. It is not uncommon to see this perspective on purpose conflated with words like "mission" or "vision." Such terminology is generally muddled and deployed with subtle nuance in different corners of the business community. Rather than parse out those subtleties, more instructive is the observation that these terms—moral, conscious, ethical, enlightened, wise, purpose-led, etc.—are applied either to a company's leaders or to the corporate entity itself.[40] These are not necessarily competing locations and are more often discussed in tandem. The moral revolution of business, it might be understood, is the rise of both the moral corporate leader and the moral corporate entity.

Turning attention first to the moral leader, a more moral practice of business is also often located in the 'enlightened leadership' at a company's helm. In *Making Money Moral: How a New Wave of Visionaries is Linking Purpose and Profit* (2021), Judith Rodin, the former president of the Rockefeller Foundation, outlines a thesis that bold innovators can unlock private-sector investments to tackle the world's problems, and reimagine capitalism in the process.[41] Jacqueline Novogratz, founder and CEO of the social impact investment firm Acumen, advances similar ideas in her book *Manifesto for a Moral Revolution*. She

[40] We see a similar divide between a moral corporate entity and a moral leadership in two books by former CEO of Whole Foods Market, John Mackey: *Conscious Capitalism: Liberating the Heroic Spirit of Business* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2014) and *Conscious Leadership: Elevating Humanity Through Business* (Bantam Press, 2020).

[41] Judith Rodin and Saadia Madsbjerg, *Making Money Moral: How a New Wave of Visionaries Is Linking Purpose and Profit* (Wharton School Press, 2021).

argues that "moral leaders" are needed to do the work of reimagining capitalism, describing this particular flavor of leadership this way:

> "We need a set of leaders that put others before themselves. We need leaders that are willing to do the long, hard work of reimagining and redesigning our systems to put our shared humanity and the sustainability of the earth at the center, and not profit… The leadership I'm talking about is not an easy leadership. It's not driving toward a single bottom line. It has to have the nuance and the groundedness in a belief system that we are all interconnected. That's the shift: we must understand that we are all interconnected in today's world. *I call this kind of leadership 'moral leadership'* and my book offers a set of thirteen operating principles that I think comprise it."[42]

Like Rodin and Novogratz, Porter also believes we need leaders who can foreground humanity and sustainability and demote the primacy of profit. He sees his role as a teacher as empowering "the next generation of business leaders to be moral ones, who see the purpose of business as more than just making as much money as possible."[43] Whether emphasizing a "wave of visionaries" as Rodin does, a "moral revolution" as Novogratz does, or a "next moral generation" as Porter does, the discussion about a more conscious and ethical kind of leadership tends to be focused on a crusading cohort of the enlightened. This language often becomes religiously tinged, with moral leaders stylized as almost messianic or evangelical. These moral 'gurus' impart new wisdom and empower people to choose a new way of (business) life.[44] Embodying this thinking, Novogratz, for example, says:

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[42] Nina Montgomery, "Jacqueline Novogratz | Reimagining Capitalism, a LinkedIn Interview Series," LinkedIn (blog), 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/jacqueline-novogratz-acumens-ceo-moral-leadership. Italics are my own emphasis.

[43] Michael Porter, "Creating Shared Value: Executive Education."

[44] See *e.g.,* Scott Goodson and Chip Walker, *Activate Brand Purpose: How to Harness the Power of Movements to Transform Your Company* (Kogan Page, 2021) or Freya Williams, *Green Giants: How*

> "At the heart of it all, I actually think if leaders extended the Golden Rule from "do unto others as you'd have them do unto you" to "are you giving back more than you are taking," we could unlock a new future for capitalism. We could start to see people not as consumers but as citizens, and we could start to see employees not as inputs but as contributors, collaborators…This is the moral imagination a new era of leaders will possess."[45]

The moral revolution of capitalists, in other words, can save capitalism from itself. A similar logic is true when we look at the rhetoric around the moral corporate entity. The moral corporate entity goes by many co-extensive descriptors. For economist Paul Collier, it is the "ethical firm"; for Judith Rodin and Jacqueline Novogratz, it is "moral business"; for Rebecca Henderson and Larry Fink, it is the "purpose-led corporation"; for Ingvar Kamprad, it is the "company's spirit"; for Ranjay Gulati, it is the "corporate soul";[46] for Martin Whittaker, it is the "just company"; for Rob Chestnut, it is the "smart" company that acts with "intentional integrity"; and for John Mackey, it is a company's practice of "conscious capitalism."[47] In each case, the company described becomes almost anthropomorphic— a sharp conceptual contest to the bureaucratic corporate machine.[48] Mayer usefully lays a philosophical foundation to promote the corporation's conceptual "metamorphosis to produce profitable solutions to problems of people and

Smart Companies Turn Sustainability into Billion-Dollar Businesses (American Management Association, 2015). If the book has 'how to' in the title, it is usually a sure sign of a self-stylized guru's marketable perspective or method.

[45] Montgomery, "Jacqueline Novogratz."

[46] Ranjay Gulati, *Deep Purpose: The Heart and Soul of High-Performance Companies* (Harvard University Press, 2022).

[47] Paul Collier, *The Future of Capitalism: Facing the New Anxieties* (Allan Lane, 2018); Rodin and Madsbjerg, *Making Money Moral*; Jacqueline Novogratz, *Manifesto for a Moral Revolution: Practices to Build a Better World* (Henry Holt and Company, 2020).

[48] Kamprad, interestingly, frames "bureaucracy [as] the enemy of development" and implies its dampening of the IKEA 'spirit' his Testament.

planet."[49] He suggests a new appreciation for a company's dynamic and symbiotic relationships and exchanges with its environments.[50] His build on this model is that he sees the corporation, aware of "the environment within which it operates, has evolved to become 'conscious.'"[51] This conscious entity, he argues, has "purpose and values"—or, in the language of the CCS frame, worldviews and ethics—"that are distinct from both those who own it and those who run it."[52] The corporation, in other words, is itself a conscious actor: "by viewing the corporation through [this] lens, we have literally breathed life into an otherwise moribund legal concept." The corporation is not a legal 'body', a *corpus* from which the original word is derived, but rather a *mentis*: a 'mind' with the capacity for empathy along with moral calculation and action.

Like Mayer, The Business Roundtable elevates the morality of the corporate entity, redefining "the purpose of the corporation to promote an economy that serves all Americans":

> "America's economic model, which is based on freedom, liberty and other enduring principles of our democracy, has raised standards of living for generations, while promoting competition, consumer choice and innovation. America's businesses have been a critical engine to its success.

[49] Colin Mayer, *Prosperity: Better Business Makes the Greater Good* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.
[50] *Ibid.*, see Mayer's second chapter.
[51] *Ibid.*, 13. Cf. Niaz Murtaza, "Pursuing Self-Interest or Self-Actualization? From Capitalism to a Steady-State, Wisdom Economy," *Ecological Economics* 70, no. 4 (2011): 577-84; I. Tkachenko, "On the Way to 'Conscious' Capitalism: From Marx to Modernity," *Economy of Region* 14, no. 3 (2018): 725–39.
[52] *Ibid.*

> Yet we know that many Americans are struggling. Too often hard work is not rewarded, and not enough is being done for workers to adjust to the rapid pace of change in the economy. If companies fail to recognize that the success of our system is dependent on inclusive long-term growth, many will raise legitimate questions about the role of large employers in our society…
>
> Americans deserve an economy that allows each person to succeed through hard work and creativity and to lead a life of meaning and dignity. We believe the free-market system is the best means of generating good jobs, a strong and sustainable economy, innovation, a healthy environment and economic opportunity for all."[53]

Particular to note here is the language around workers and people. Workers are "struggling", "not rewarded" for hard work, and not supported as they adjust to the "rapid pace of change." Interestingly, business is not mentioned as a source contributing to those human struggles.[54] Instead, it is framed as the savior from them. [55] Corporations are described as "employers" in society, and it is through this role that they enable economic opportunity for all by rewarding "hard work and creativity" and granting people "meaning and dignity." Implied here is that business works in the interest of people's prosperity, not its own. There is a clear consciousness baked into this corporate awareness for and sense of its responsibility to people's prosperity and not just the prosperity, or profit, of the company and its shareholders. This sentiment is succinctly captured in the World Economic Forum's statement that the corporation is "more than

[53] "Our Commitment," The Business Roundtable.

[54] I will discuss this momentarily, and the bibliography for these thinkers' ideas can be found in corresponding footnotes.

[55] Cf. The World Economic Forum argues the corporation must "harness its core competencies, its entrepreneurship, skills and relevant resources in collaborative efforts with other companies and stakeholders to improve the state of the world" ("Davos Manifesto 2020," World Economic Forum).

an economic unit generating wealth. It fulfils human and societal aspirations as part of the broader social system."[56]

This brings us to one of the central critiques of the Reimagining Capitalism discourse and of business' supposed morality. Though there is often admission that business' pursuit of profits at all costs has created many of society's problems, the Reimagining Capitalism discourse also frames business as society's sole savior. In the manifesto-like book, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (2019), Anand Giridharadas argues that CEOs, billionaire founders, and the Davos elite are crafting the Reimagining Capitalism discourse and casting themselves as heroes of society, when they are in fact its villains; they ought not be relied upon to fix its problems from which they profit.[57] Even claiming the corporation as the instrument of social transformation, he argues, further entrenches their own power and strips it from other sectors critical for social change. The result of this 'charade' is that loud declarations by large personalities simply reify old models in new, palatable packages. These paradoxes, perhaps ironically, echo Friedman's language: he says it can be valuable for corporate executives to use the

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[56] *Ibid.*

[57] Anand Giridharadas, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World* (Allen Lane, 2019). Though Giridharadas agrees with the capitalism reformers that today's economic system requires transformation to offer greater opportunity, he argues for a different approach that includes but goes beyond a new purpose for business: people and their governments need to force responsibility onto corporations through taxes and other government policies. He wants elites to pay high levels of corporate and personal income tax, offer decent wages to their workers, allow unions, fund public schools (instead of pet charter projects), and support some form of single payer health care and campaign finance reform. One simply can't arrive at a more economically equal reality when the rungs of the ladder are so far apart. For Giridharadas, all this purpose talk nods to more inclusive economics, but does not actually fix the ladder rungs. For other critiques along similar lines, see *e.g.*, Samuel Mansell, *Capitalism, Corporations, and the Social Contract: A Critique of Stakeholder Theory*, *Business, Value Creation, and Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Josef Wieland, *Creating Shared Value: Concepts, Experience, Criticism* (Springer, 2017).

"window dressing" of exercising social responsibility when it is "in [a leader's] self-interest to cloak their actions in this way;" claiming to save the world helps "gain them kudos in the short run" when "the pursuit of profits is [seen as] wicked and immoral and must be curbed and controlled by external forces."[58]

Nonetheless, the picture coming into focus is that, by serving shareholders above all else, companies have become self-interested, even evil actors destroying the world and making life devoid of meaning for people who participate and live in capitalist systems. The Reimagining Capitalism discourse, then, is a cry to restore meaning by inserting a moral perspective that business should serve people and society and not just shareholders. The reintroduction of *morality* into business practice also reintroduces *meaning* into human and social life. Or, as the World Economic Forum neatly encapsulate above, moral capitalism can grant people "meaning and dignity" and fulfil "human and social aspirations as part of a broader social system." This interest in reinjecting 'lost' meaning into life echoes an observation made in Chapter Two. There, meaning was thought to have been 'designed out' of the bureaucratic workplace; the crafting of corporate cultures in that instance appeared to be part of a rising discourse aiming to restore 'meaning' to employees, recognizing the value of their 'spirit' and seeing them as more than 'cogs' in the corporate machine. In the next section, I hope to show how the corporate production of a more moral type of culture expands upon the meaning-making ambition described in Chapter

[58] Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits." He sees this activity, of using "the cloak of social responsibility, and the nonsense spoken in its name by influential and prestigious businessmen" as "clearly harming the foundations of a free society." He calls it the "schizophrenic character of many businessmen."

Two: such cultures serve to reinject meaning not just into the workplace, but into society at large.

III. The Construction and Management of Moral Cultures for Societal Impact

i. Spotting a Moral Instance of the Corporate Cultural System

The threads of the Reimagining Capitalism discourse I have woven so far lay the intellectual groundwork for a moral vision that adherents believe can be achieved if Friedman's dominant, profit-maximizing purpose for business is overturned. In its place, these reformers seek a private sector that can play "a leading role in solving environmental degradation, economic inequality, and institutional collapse."[59] As we shift to a more tactical discussion of *how* reformers of capitalism understand their vision might be made real, it is here, finally, that the practical work of the Corporate Cultural System can be located.

Corporate cultures are perceived by the business community to play a significant role in creating and sustaining conscious companies. Mayer captures this well: "Corporate cultures," he says, "have the power to be forces of good or ill in equal measure—what [can be] described as 'saintegrity' and 'sintegrity.'"[60] Saintegrity is the perceived saint-like

[59] Henderson, *Reimagining Capitalism*, 1.
[60] Mayer, *Prosperity*, 13-4.

integrity of the conscious company while sintegrity is its more sinful counterpart, belonging to companies unconcerned with anything other than profit.[61] These are the corporate cultures that, for Mayer, seem to inform or inhibit a company's moral inclination.

Nestlé, the world's largest food and beverage corporation, offers a valuable glimpse into the internal formulations of such cultures.[62] By the late 1990s, leading companies in the processed food and beverage sector, including Nestlé, were being blamed for the global epidemic of diabetes and controversies over child labor, deforestation, malnutrition, and other social and environmental degradation issues. To confront these challenges, the corporation declared that it would operate according to a new purpose. As of 2021, that "purpose is *enhancing quality of life and contributing to a healthier future*. We want to help *shape a better and healthier world*. We also want to inspire people to live healthier lives. This is how we *contribute to society* while ensuring the long-term success of our company."[63]

This statement's language signals the moral quality of Nestlé's corporate vision, with clear intellectual underpinning from the Reimagining Capitalism discourse in ideas like "[contributing] to society" and "[shaping] a better and healthier world." This is the

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[61] Mayer, *Prosperity*, 56. Cf. Justin O'Brien, "The Moral Foundations of Stakeholder Capitalism," *Law and Financial Markets Review* 14, no. 1 (2020): 1-4; M. Ericson, *Moral Human Agency in Business: A Missing Dimension in Strategy as Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), *passim*; Steven P. Feldman, "Moral Business Cultures," *Organizational Dynamics* 36, no. 2 (2007): 156–70.

[62] The company operates in 191 countries with more than two-thousand global and local brands. For the Nestlé example that follows, I draw heavily on Michael Porter *et al.*, "Nestlé's Creating Shared Value Strategy," HBS no. 716-422 (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2017).

[63] *Ibid.* Italic emphasis is my own. Cf. "Creating Shared Value: Progress Report 2019," *Nestlé*, 2019. https://www.nestle.com/ sites/default/files/2020-03/creating-shared-value-report-2019-en.pdf.

company's worldview within our CCS frame, a cosmic vision organizing all activity. According to the company's "About Us in Society" webpage, "We want to shape a better and healthier world…*guided by our values*."[64] These values (or ethos, in our framework) also adopt a moralistic attitude—underscored in the note that the company's values "continue to adapt… for a changing world. For instance, we incorporated all ten principles of the United Nation's Global Compact… and we continue to implement them today."[65]

In the conceptualized tight pairing between the company's worldview (to "share a better and healthier world") and its ethos ("our values"), Nestlé adopts the same conceptualization of the CCS described previously. This familiar framework is reflected in the language of Nestlé's CEO, Ulf Mark Schneider, who sees "everything we do at Nestlé, from how we treat our people to what new products we bring to market, [as] manifestations of our mission to enhance the quality of life and contribute to a healthier future."[66] The executive believes, "every action we take must embody these ideals. Any action that does not align with it invalidates that mission and people will lose faith and trust in us."[67]

Like examples from previous chapters, a Geertzian structure of culture as a system of symbols is prominent in Schneider's statement, and the company's worldview and ethos are at the heart of much of the company's marketing and communications materials, its

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[64] "Business Principles," Nestlé, accessed 20 March 2021, https://www.nestle.com/aboutus/businessprinciples. Italic emphasis is my own.
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] Michael Porter interviews Ulf Mark Schneider for the Creating Shared Value Executive Education Course at Harvard Business School, 16 December 2020.
[67] *Ibid.*

executives' statements, and its innovation, among many other things we might consider cultural texts contributing to the corporation's symbolic system. The Nestlé case, however, also makes clear an important distinction. Unlike previously discussed models of the marketplace and workplace cultural systems, this specific character of the conscious corporation's worldview and ethos is markedly moral. It captures an emerging salvific quality of how the corporation believes it can benefit humanity and the planet through its activity; in the case of Nestlé, the company believes its existence can create a healthier world. In this distinct world-changing or transformative rubric for corporate symbolic systems, we find yet another instance of the crafted corporate cultural system concept developed in Chapters One and Two. The next section explores practitioners' internal formulations about how this culture works, and the ends to which it might be deployed.

ii. Born Again Corporations: Change the Culture, Change the Corporation, Change the World

Some companies are born out of a desire to improve society. From its founding, IKEA, for example, was guided by a moral worldview and corresponding ethos. The same can be said of Tesla or Patagonia discussed above. But most companies are not founded with such a conscious vision and must be 'born again' with new morality. Alexandra Dimiziani, former Head of Global Marketing of the home rental marketplace Airbnb, puts it this way: "Companies are either born with the core belief that their purpose is to solve the world's problems or they can be reborn through a newfound sense of social purpose."[68]

[68] Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, 91.

The path to reformation she describes requires embracing a societal purpose, and Rebecca Henderson helps us understand how this adoption of a moral cultural system, in our frame, can enable the moral reformation of the corporation itself: "this [moral] mission releases the creativity, commitment, and raw energy that enables *purpose-driven* firms to… drive the *architectural innovation* that's required to reimagine capitalism."[69] Her logic is identical to the process of corporate transformation discussed in Chapter Two. Just as Weber saw ethics, born of religion, as able to shape the process of societal transformation, the business community saw workplace beliefs, born of the crafted CCS, as able to shape the process of organizational transformation. A company's moral reform, I suggest, follows an identical formulation, except the moral character of the reform-driving CCS ensures the organization that emerges from the transformation process will be able to positively impact society through its operation. In short, for companies to positively impact society and reimagine capitalism, "ultimately, *social purpose is the engine.*"[70]

A brief look at three large consumer packaged goods companies referenced at the beginning of this chapter emphasizes this interest in 'societal impact' as the goal of corporate transformation, led by employees acting upon a corporation's crafted moral culture.[71] Nestlé, having embraced the moral worldview of "enhancing quality of life and

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[69] Henderson, *Reimagining Capitalism*, 96. Italic emphasis is my own. Christopher Marquis makes a similar point, recommending that CEOs should "align their governance structures and operations to [their company's] mission" (Christopher Marquis in Montgomery, "Reimagining Capitalism, a LinkedIn Interview Series," 2020).

[70] Larry Fink, "Larry Fink's 2020 Letter to CEOs," BlackRock, 2020, https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/2020-larry-fink-ceo-letter. Italic emphasis is my own. Cf. The "importance of serving stakeholders and embracing purpose is becoming increasingly central to the way that companies understand their role in society."

[71] Nestlé is the largest consumer packaged goods business in the world, with $91.43 billion in revenue in 2020. Unilever ranks fourth, with $56.52 billion in revenue. The smallest of the three,

contributing to a healthier future" to guide its corporate transformation program over the last two decades, measures its progress against and contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations (Figure 9).[72] Likewise, Unilever (the parent corporation of Dove) measures its progress to "make sustainable living common place" against the global goals.[73] Each area of impact it focuses on—like climate action, health and wellbeing, or a waste-free world—is connected back to a United Nations goal. Danone is the third of these multi-nationals and set out to reform the organization by embracing the moral worldview of "bringing health through food to as many people as possible." They, too, have tracked their progress against the United Nations' rubric.[74]

Each of these companies embraced a moral worldview to guide their organizational transformation and support the creation of desired impact. This positive impact is both

Danone saw a 2020 revenue of $26.98 billion. See BizVibe, accessed 12 January 2021, https://www.bizvibe.com/discover-companies.

[72] Porter *et al.*, "Nestlé's Creating Shared Value Strategy," 8-11. Nestlé's first announced its nutrition, health, and wellness vision publicly in 2000, and in 2004 continued this effort by embracing—through the advisory of Michael Porter and Mark Kramer—a Creating Shared Value (CSV) approach to these three issues. It is this CSV approach that is reflected in Figure 9.

[73] "Planet and Society," Unilever, accessed 12 January 2021, https://www.unilever.com/planet-and-society/. Paul Polman, the company's CEO from 2009 to 2019, used sustainability as the company's unifying force, introducing the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan in 2010 with dozens of metrics to measure progress. For Polman's book reflecting on this work, see Paul Polman and Andrew Winston, *Net Positive*: *How Courageous Companies Thrive by Giving More Than They Take* (Harvard Business Review, 2021). For commentary on his legacy, see Bill George, "The Battle for the Soul of Capitalism Explained in One Hostile Takeover Bid," LinkedIn (blog), 27 March 2017, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/cnbc-battle-soul-capitalism-explained-one-hostiletake over-george.

[74] "Our Contribution to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals," Danone, accessed 12 January 2021, https://www.danone.com/ impact/un-sustainable-developement-goals.html.



FIGURE 9. NESTLÉ'S 2020 COMMITMENTS AND PROGRESS.
("Creating Shared Value: Progress Report 2019," Nestlé, 2019. https://www.nestle.com/sites/default/files/2020-03/creating-shared-value-report-2019-en.pdf.)

on society and on the corporation's profits; a societal purpose and profit go hand in hand, according to the Reimagining Capitalism discourse. Unilever's strong commercial performance, for example is thought to be the result of their embrace of a social purpose—or in this project's framing, a moral cultural system. As Leena Nair, Unilever's Chief Human Resources Officer, told me, "We need to be able to show that all of this purpose finally leads to superior, sustainable performance. Yes, we're performing well,

but I want to prove without an iota of doubt that it is purpose that's driving our performance. That's the Holy Grail."[75]

As Nair suggests, the connection between a moral CCS and the generation of profit is hard to measure—though many are making strides to draw the causal link.[76] But it did not come soon enough in the case of Danone. Disappointed with financial performance, in March 2021 Danone's 'activist investors' removed the company's CEO, Emmanuel Faber, a prominent figurehead for conscious capitalism who committed to have all of Danone's operations covered by B Corp certifications before 2030.[77] (Kate Raworth, one of the leading economists rethinking capitalism's role in the twenty-first century, aptly noted that "only in business could 'activist' mean shareholder interests trump all").[78] This kind of response surely questions whether the moral capitalism movement is, in fact, a passing trend, or whether it indicates a more tectonic shift in business thinking and practice it formulates.

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[75] Nina Montgomery, "Leena Nair | Reimagining Capitalism, a LinkedIn Interview Series," LinkedIn (blog), 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/leena-nair-unilevers-chief-hr-officer-igniting-human-spark-nina. In Polman's eight years as CEO, Unilever's revenues grew 32 percent, averaging 3.8 percent in his last four years, making it one of the top performers in consumer products during that time. The company's stock price was also up 144 percent, with a total return to shareholders of 214 percent. See Bill George, "The Battle for the Soul of Capitalism."

[76] For an overview of the challenges of, debates surrounding, and approaches to measuring purpose, see Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose*, chapter 5; Mayer and Roche, *Putting Purpose into Practice,* chapters 10, 11, 12; Clara Barby *et al.*, "Measuring Purpose: An Integrated Framework" (2021), https://eom.org/content-hub-blog/measuring-purpose-an-integrated-framework.

[77]Leila Abboud, "Danone Board Ousts Emmanuel Faber as Chief and Chairman," *Financial Times*, 15 March 2021, https://www.ft.com/ content/8e7ae718-eb18-4d2f-bd18-59e6349540f2. B Corp Certification is a designation that a business is meeting high standards of verified performance, accountability, and transparency. For more, see Marquis, *Better Business* (2020).

[78] *Ibid.*

On that question, the jury is still out. But for the purposes of this dissertation, the verdict matters less. A wave of companies and their leaders are internalizing the call for a more moral capitalism that can sustain positive societal impacts and are reforming their companies accordingly. The moral CCS is critical to this moral reformation process.

iii. A Moral Reformation: The Case of PayPal

PayPal provides an excellent example of a 'born again' business that undergoes "architectural innovation," to use Henderson's language, by embracing a moral culture.[79] Founded in December 1998, PayPal was one of the earliest internet payment companies, enabling money to be transferred securely between and among people and businesses online.[80] While, historically, most transactions had been handled by financial institutions like banks and credit card companies, in the two decades since PayPal's founding, the digital payments ecosystem grew steadily: by 2014, digital financial services for consumers (known as fintech) had become a highly competitive industry.[81] In addition to numerous well-funded start-ups, many of the world's largest retailers, banks, credit card companies and internet titans (Google and Apple in the United States, and Alibaba, Tencent, and Baidu in China) brought their own digital payment services to market.

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[79] The following case study draws on Michael Porter, Mark Kramer, and Annelena Lobb, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," HBS no. 9-721-378 (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2020).

[80] In February 2002, the company went public and eight months later it was acquired by eBay for $1.4 billion. After 12 years as an eBay subsidiary, PayPal was spun off as an independently traded company in July 2015. PayPal also owns Venmo, a person-to-person transfer service, although the free service does not generate any revenues for the company. For a more detailed account of PayPal's history, see Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 4-6.

[81] For more on the growth of fintech and the shifting competitive landscape, see Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 1-3.

It is within this context that Dan Schulman joined PayPal as President and CEO in 2014.[82] What attracted him to the role, he commented, was "the opportunity to redefine a company."[83] He elaborates:

> "I think leaders define reality, inspire hope, and then create the path between those two things. We needed to clearly define why we needed to move into the next chapter. Business was slowing down; parts of our business were commoditizing. Our subscriber growth was slowing and engagement was low. PayPal was seen as a dinosaur. We had antiquated software—it took us six months to make a change on our website. Also, we had very high attrition rates and could not attract the right talent."[84]

Given shifting market conditions, PayPal was seen as a "dinosaur" and needed "to move into the next chapter." It is the chief executive's role, in his view, to craft a new vision, or "define reality" and "create the path" between today and the future, and "inspire hope", presumably in employees and shareholders. Schulman called this transformation 'PayPal, the Next Chapter' and its objective of placing societal concern at the heart of the corporation's operation, according to the CEO, would open up the company's future opportunity:

> "The fundamental truth is that improving the financial life of just one person or one small business can create ripples of progress across communities and economies. Financially healthy individuals and families spend their money at local businesses and start companies of their own. They invest in education for themselves and their children. They support each other and give back to their communities. Financially healthy businesses of every size create good jobs, offer solid benefits, and support the economic and cultural life of their communities. Financially healthy communities invest in transportation, education, health care, and public safety. As a leader in digital financial technology, we believe that

[82] Schulman was the founding CEO of Virgin Mobile before taking charge of mobile and online payments as Executive Vice President at American Express.
[83] Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 6.
[84] *Ibid.*

> driving the cycle of opportunity and economic expansion that begins with financial health for individuals and families is both our greatest obligation and our greatest opportunity."[85]

Schulman's language reflects the core premise of the Reimagining Capitalism discourse: it is both an "obligation" of an enlightened business and also an "opportunity" for growth. PayPal can bring a new-found societal responsibility into its core business by shifting from a shareholder to a stakeholder governance model. According to Schulman and his senior leaders: "We can bring goodness to the world and be profitable on good growth rates to satisfy our shareholders, which is necessary for us to be able to serve all of the other stakeholders. That's why this multi-stakeholder approach is so important. If you are lacking one stakeholder group, you are making other stakeholders more vulnerable."[86] The responsibility of corporations these leaders see goes beyond simply delivering shareholder profits: "The growing expectation from stakeholders is that companies need to take action to affect positive social and environmental impact. Purpose and profit are becoming increasingly intertwined."[87]

To capture this "opportunity", the company's leadership began by setting a new worldview, what Schulman calls a "social purpose", for PayPal that would guide the change process:

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[85] Dan Schulman, "How PayPal is Doing Well by Doing Good," LinkedIn (blog), 19 April 2018, https://www. linkedin.com/pulse/how-paypal-doing-well-good-dan-schulman.
[86] Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 8. This quotation belongs to John Kunze, PayPal's Senior Vice President of global consumer product and technology.
[87] *Ibid.,* 1.

> "At PayPal, our purpose is to foster inclusive economic opportunity and strengthen financial health for people, businesses, and communities around the world by democratizing financial services for consumers and commerce capabilities for merchants. We believe access to affordable and convenient financial services should be a right for all rather than a privilege for the few."[88]

Familiar to the Corporate Cultural System model, PayPal's purpose statement was set by the firm's executive management and acts as a worldview (with the classic "we believe" language), the orienting north star guiding corporate strategy. What is distinct from both the brand and the corporate culture instances is an interest in solving societal problems by embracing this belief. Globally, two billion people lack basic banking services. [89] In the United States, nearly half of families have less than $400 in savings and those among the working poor spend more than $170 billion a year on fees and interest charges to use their own hard-earned money.[90] PayPal wants to solve this problem by "democratizing financial services" as "a right for all rather than a privilege for few."[91]

As I hope to have demonstrated is typical, this worldview/purpose was reinforced by the corporation's ethics/values. Franz Paasche, Senior Vice President of Corporate Affairs at PayPal, commented in 2015, "[To achieve our transformation] we had to create values that reinforced our purpose. Our values were inclusion, innovation, collaboration, and wellness."[92] The company's hiring page echoed these same values five years later, under

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[88] See Schulman, "How PayPal is Doing Well by Doing Good" for the executive's sharing of this new mission for PayPal in preparation for the company's 2015 launch of its second IPO at a valuation of $47 billion, considerably larger than eBay's post-transaction valuation of $34 billion (for further context, see Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 8).

[89] Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 4.

[90] Schulman cites these statistics frequently as the need for this purpose. See, for example, Schulman, "How PayPal is Doing Well by Doing Good."

[91] *Ibid.*

[92] Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 10.

the rubric of 'One Team Behaviors' (Figure 10). The name alone emphasizes the shared nature of this approved ethic:

> "We're a purpose-driven company whose beliefs are the foundation for how we conduct business every day. Our One Team Behaviors demand that we hold the highest ethical standards, to empower an open and diverse corporate culture, and strive to treat everyone who is touched by our business with dignity and respect. Our employees challenge the status quo, ask questions, and find solutions. We want to break down barriers to financial empowerment. Join us and help deliver ever evolving opportunities to our ever-changing world.[93]

Emphasized here are the "every day" and "ethical" behaviors "demanded" of employees. As is typical of the purpose system's codified values, they are obligatory in practice but framed as revolutionary in spirit—"challenging the status quo," "ask questions," "breaking down barrier," "evolving opportunities to our every changing world." These phrases suggest a uniformity of revolutionary action. Also included here is the typical "join us" language that, along with the "we" and "our" framing, emphasizes collectiveness, solidarity, and a movement.

This conceptualization of a worldview and ethos that adopt an agenda of changing society reflects the moral system model that I have developed in this chapter. PayPal's moral worldview and ethos would foster an employee culture that could drive the organizational—and societal—change desired. Schulman himself says that, when it comes to a workforce, he "used to be very much about numbers all the time, and I haven't

[93] "Our Culture," PayPal, accessed 20 March 2021, https://www.paypal.com/us/webapps/mpp/jobs/culture.



FIGURE 10. PAYPAL'S 'ONE TEAM BEHAVIORS.'
("Our Culture," PayPal, accessed 20 March 2021,
https://www.paypal.com/ us/webapps/mpp/jobs/culture).

lost that, but I really believe the *values* and *culture* of a company, and how engaged our employees are, is what matters most."[94] According to Schulman, building the right company culture was crucial to the company's transformation: "We believe that to achieve our commitment to make a positive difference in the world ultimately depends on our ability to… create the right culture at PayPal."[95]

[94] Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 9. Italic emphasis is my own.
[95] Schulman, "How PayPal is Doing Well by Doing Good."

If we unpack how the "right culture" 'works' in the minds of PayPal's leadership, we see a familiar, Weber-inspired corporate transformation process: with the strategic north star set, PayPal's executives made the moral system visceral to employees to help them 'believe.'[96] The Harvard Business School case on the PayPal transformation recounts an empathy exercise that Schulman used to help his employees emotionally connect with the company's purpose: Schulman concluded, "Through this exercise, the team understood that the people paying the highest fees are those who can least afford it…We saw a huge opportunity. The exercise really *got people to buy in* to say, 'Hey, wait a second, a *social mission* at the center of the strategy actually makes a lot of financial sense for us.'"[97]

This moral culture "inspires our employees", according to Schulman; "it's their passion that will take us to the Next Chapter."[98] In other words, the passion of PayPal's employees, shaped by the constructed CCS, enables them to collectively drive the company's desired change. This logic (which matches that of change process discussed in Chapter Two) is expressed repeatedly by Schulman. In one interview, he claimed, "If we ever aspire to transform to meet our purpose, we have to have passionate employees who believe in it, believe in our values, and can take us there together."[99] In another, he states that, "the amount of energy and pride this is going to release is going to make a real difference."[100] Across many of his statements, Schulman emphasizes that, "employees are our most important stakeholder at PayPal. It's their passion and energy

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[96] Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 7.
[97] *Ibid.,* 8. Emphasis is my own.
[98] Schulman, "How PayPal is Doing Well by Doing Good."
[99] *Ibid.*
[100] Henry Cordes, "PayPal Wants 'Passionate Employees, So the Company Boosted Pay, Slashed Health Insurance Costs," *Omaha World Herald*, 14 December 2019, https://omaha.com.

that bring us closer to democratizing financial services for everyone around the world."[101] He believes that "managing by mission and values is the most powerful thing we did as a company to be successful… It was the only way to do this turnaround. If you don't have great talent inspired by what you've set out to do, it doesn't matter how good your strategy is."[102] Indeed, words like "inspire", "energy", and "passion" are used frequently when Schulman talks about how employees engage with the company's moral system. By crafting this moral culture that galvanizes employees, the company can develop alongside it, indeed reflecting it, to "provide fast, secure, and inexpensive money management tools to financially underserved consumers and small businesses."[103]

The PayPal leadership's perception and production of the moral culture aligns with the CCS framework developed in previous chapters. But the distinction from that model is the societal nature of the PayPal's purpose and the notion that changing the corporation through the moral system will, in turn, result in societal change—reflecting the logic of Henderson, Fink, Dimiziani, and others. By 2020, the strategy appeared to have paid off from a business perspective: as of the second quarter of 2020, PayPal was processing 3.7 billion payment transactions a quarter, or roughly 40 million transactions per day, in 100 currencies and 200 markets.[104] In the five years since its IPO, the number of active user accounts had grown from 170 million to 346 million as of the second quarter of 2020, the average annual transactions per user had increased from 27.52 to 39.23 and its stock price had quadrupled.[105] In terms of the company's societal impact, as of 2019 PayPal

101 *Ibid.*
102 Michael Porter *et al.*, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," 9.
103 *Ibid.,* 1.
104 *Ibid.*
105 *Ibid.*

reported that it provided over 290,000 small and medium business owners with over $14.5 billion in funding through loans, with 88 percent of borrowers seeing a revenue boost in the first three months of accepting their loans.[106] The company also reports alignment of this activity, along with many other "social innovations" at the heart of the business' operation, with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), listing PayPal's direct, positive contributions to 10 out of the 17 Global Goals.[107]

IV. Conclusion: The Expanding Boundaries of the Corporate Cultural System

At the heart of the Reimagining Capitalism discourse's rhetoric, and indeed of the discrepancy between Friedman and Fink *et al.*, is a divergence of opinion regarding the corporation's premise for coalescing and cooperating. For Friedman, the shared goal of cooperation was maximizing profits for shareholders; for Fink and the contemporary capitalism reformers, the shared goal is producing value sustainably for a broad set of stakeholders, including but not limited to shareholders, and society more broadly**.** The latter relocates societal responsibility within the core strategy of a business, adopting a more moralistic vision of a corporation and its leaders that can change the world and benefit both humanity and the planet through its operation.

106 "PayPal Global Impact Report: Advancing Our Mission to Create a More Inclusive World," PayPal, 2019.
107 *Ibid.*

I have argued that this world-changing vision encapsulated in the Corporate Cultural System reflects the same conceptualization argued for in previous chapters, reaffirming the theoretical frame introduced. By elucidating the ideas identifying and underpinning the moral cultural system, I hope to have further built on the previous chapters' argument that the conception of cultures crafted by the corporation is that of a system of symbols with an inscribed, manufactured worldview and ethos. However, unlike the CCS in the marketplace or workplace contexts, within the context of social responsibility the distinct moral character of the CCS is applied with the explicit ambition of enabling positive societal impact. Indeed, companies attempt to measure, or at least point toward, the positive change they make on the world through their embrace of a moral culture.

Whether the Reimagining Capitalism discourse becomes a passing fad or a new foundation, it establishes the value of the CCS frame for explaining corporate perceptions of and activity around meaning and its management. The moral instance of such a symbolic system points to the flexibility of this frame for understanding a range of corporate activities beyond branding in the marketplace and organizational management in the workplace, as were the focuses of the previous chapters respectively. The Corporate Cultural System framework nimbly enables us to understand how the business community is weaving emerging ideas of the Reimagining Capitalism discourse into their study and practice, combining its moral orientations with familiar culture-crafting corporate practice. In its utility for understanding this world-changing iteration, the frame of the CCS, in its holistic aperture, might usefully accommodate other rubrics of emergent corporate activity.

But the point I want to emphasize is that, in this emergent world-changing iteration, the CCS no longer has demarcations as something to be applied 'outside' the organization for a consumer audience *or* 'inside' the organization for an employee audience. Indeed, the moral CCS is a single cultural system designed to appeal to both. As Mayer puts it, "a broad [social] purpose aims to achieve social impact primarily outside the corporation" but also "motivates employees with the prospect of making a positive contribution to a broader community than just the organization they work for."[108] Application of the CCS within the particular context of corporate social responsibility stretches the boundaries and audiences of the CCS beyond what the brand or organizational management applications may consider individually. The CCS can be constructed to exist both inside and outside the organization, as a composite of myths, actions, rituals, and other symbolic activities that together make up the company's cultural system, intended for both the employee and consumer audiences. In this, ideas about brand, employee culture, and corporate social responsibility blend together, eroding the walls that tend to define their study and practice. Mayer echoes this point, arguing a societally focused purpose "extends the boundaries of the firm and embraces capitals beyond material and financial capital to include human, social, and natural capital."[109]

Perhaps interestingly, much as they did in Chapter Two's examination of corporate cultures within the workplace, Émile Durkheim's theorizations might again offer useful explanation for the particular societal reach of corporate cultures described in this

[108] Mayer and Roche, *Putting Purpose into Practice*, 37.
[109] *Ibid.*

chapter.[110] In posthumously published lectures (*Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (1957)), Durkheim posed a question similar to one that the modern capitalist reformers ask: given the negative social consequences of unfettered markets, which caused a loss of shared purpose or ideals that he termed 'anomie', how is the state to reconcile morality with the market?[111] Durkheim's concern was with a core problem in modernity as he saw it—that economic desires can run rampant among "the manufacturer, the merchant, the workman, the employee, in carrying on his occupation" and that they thus required a "check on egotism" through some kind of regulation of economic life.[112]

Durkheim was convinced that, given the central role of the economy in modern societies, the answer to this problem could be found in "professional ethics" (amongst other civil religions) that could counteract the effects of individualism and support the moral regulation of society.[113] This is because professional ethics, or the morals of "corporate

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[110] Durkheim, as we saw in Chapter Two, has offered useful explanation for much of the business community's thinking about corporate cultures within the workplace, see p.106-11; 135-42.

[111] Émile Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957). For the backstory of this collection, including a Turkish doctoral student, Durkheim's daughter, and Marcel Mauss, see Smith, *Durkheim and After* (Polity Press, 2020), 63. The ideas captured in these lectures follow some threads from his earlier works. Among other things, the lectures build on the idea of 'anomie' that Durkheim developed in the *The Division of Labor* (1893), which he saw as an abnormal form of the division of labor where there was too little regulation to encourage cooperation between different social functions (on 'anomie', see Chapter Two, p.109). The seeds of similar ideas can also be found in the preface Durkheim wrote for the Second Edition of *The Division of Labor* from 1902 (See Durkheim, *The Division of Labor,* trans. George Simpson (Free Press, 1947), 1-30). For further commentary, see Frank Hearn, "Durkheim's Political Sociology: Corporatism, State Autonomy, and Democracy," *Social Research* 52, no. 1 (1985): 151-78; Jurgen Mackert, "Reorganization and Stabilization: Social Mechanisms in Émile Durkheim's *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, A Contribution to the Explanation of Social Processes," *Journal of Classical Sociology* 4, no. 3 (2004): 311-36.

[112] *Ibid.,* 12.

[113] In addition to professional ethics and the system of industrial relations (or corporatism), Durkheim theorizes the morals of the family and civic morals as crucial in modern societies (Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*, *passim*). Although the significance of the family

bodies" and other "professional associations", could foster the reorganization of the anomic state of the economy in modern society by defining the binding rules it lacked: professional ethics help define the "obligations of the employee towards the employer and vice versa; or of business men one towards the other, so as to lessen or regulate the competition they set up and to prevent it from turning into a conflict sometimes – as to-day – almost as cruel as actual warfare."[114] Thus, occupational groups possess a "moral power capable of containing individual egos, of maintaining a spirited sentiment of common solidarity in the consciousness of all workers, of preventing the law of the strongest from being brutally applied to industrial and commercial relations."[115]

We might see this formulation of 'professional ethics' as eliding with the idea of 'moral cultures' that, I have argued, is central to the Reimagining Capitalism discourse. Like Fink's argument that each company must develop its own purpose and values, Durkheim assumes that professional ethics would be diverse and the product of respective professional groups.[116] Likewise, much as Fink claims those more consciously advanced companies who take up what we call moral cultures will gain sustainable, strategic advantage, Durkheim posited that professional ethics would similarly signal a group "more advanced in their operation" and the "greater the stability and the better the

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seemed to be on the decline, he still considered the morals of the family as important in the private sphere. With respect to the public sphere, Durkheim claimed that civic morals, along with professional ethics, were the specific morals necessary for the regulation of democracy.

[114] *Ibid.,* 30. Though corporate bodies at the time were "only a collection of individuals who have on lasting ties to one another", he thought they "must become…well-defined and organized associations" (p.13).

[115] In the 1902 second preface of Durkheim, *The Division of Labor,* 10. Cf. Smith offers a strong summary, that professional groups create "a positive and collective morality based on an awareness of a shared mission, a defined contribution to society, and a set of common interests" (Smith, *Durkheim and After,* 63).

[116] Durkheim, *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals,* 8.

organization of the professional groups themselves."[117] Moral cultures, perhaps, can be viewed as the modern manifestation of Durkheim's theorized professional ethics, since both imagine corporate cultures expanding into society, regulating run-away economic life, and raising its moral standards. Companies guided by a moral, social purpose, as Jacqueline Novogratz puts it, "point us in the right direction of morally rejuvenating our society and economies."[118]

Whether or not we accept the moral Corporate Cultural System as approximating something like Durkheim's professional ethics, this chapter's elevation of the moral example of the CCS nonetheless shows an expansion of the business community's use of and perhaps ambitions for the tool. The distinct societal focus of the CCS appears to center a more holistic corporate enterprise concerned with managing meaning, rather than seeing the CCS as a specialized tool that might be used within the workplace or the marketplace, respectively. The following concluding chapter takes this observation as its start point and discusses its implications.

[117] *Ibid.*

[118] Montgomery, "Jaqueline Novogratz." Italic emphasis is my own. Cf. Novogratz, "Conclusion," in Montgomery, *Perspectives on Impact*, 2019.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the Corporate Management of 'Meaning' and Pointing Toward its Future Directions

I. Summary of Conclusions and Contribution

This thesis brought the fields of Business Studies and Religious Studies into dialogue to explore 'meaning' and its management. What do business academics and professionals consider corporate 'meaning' to be? How do they understand the work to construct it? And what ends do they believe it can support? In pursuing these questions, theories of religion served the purpose of helping explain ideas at the center of business discourse.

Beyond validating the merit of this approach, I hope that this thesis has shed some light on the contemporary corporate practice of manufacturing and managing 'meaning.' My primary argument is that the Corporate Cultural System (CCS) construct provides a lens for understanding the meaning-concerned activity of the twenty-first century

corporation, and that the work of manufacturing its worldview, ethos, and symbolic system is part of modern business practice.

Three core chapters demonstrated that this same conceptual frame is evident across various business contexts, even as priorities, audiences, and boundaries of application differed widely. Chapter One explored corporate meaning-making within the marketplace context. Ideas from Religious Studies—from Malainowski's magical inducements to Jung's archetypes and Tillich's cultural icons—have long helped explain the relationship between brands, meaning, and consumers. When observing contemporary discourse and practice, a new theorization from Religious Studies appears to offer explanatory power: through examples of the Budweiser, PlayStation, and Dove brands, I argued that the business community perceives the commercial brand as a system of symbols that promotes a particular worldview and inscribes certain patterns of behavior. This formulation resembles anthropologist Clifford Geertz's theory of religion as a 'cultural system', with the distinction being that the *Corporate Cultural System*, introduced here for the first time, is professionally crafted. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the preferences for Geertz's anthropology over alternatives and suggests it might offer a convenient avoidance of issues surrounding the authoritative status of symbols and culture.

The same CCS rubric appeared to be at play *within* the organization itself. As Chapter Two argued, the business community conceptualizes employee culture as a Geertzian cultural system, crafted to reflect a strategically selected worldview (or 'purpose') and ethos (or 'core values') for the organization. Through the examples of Nike, Airbnb, and Hyatt, among others, I showed how this formulation of the workplace CCS is

constructed either to 'energize' employees and support social integration or to 'mobilize' them and ignite a strategic revolution within the organization. In these various applications of the CCS, the business community appears to draw on the ideas of social theorists Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, respectively, pointing to an elevated interest in the social meaning that the CCS produces within the workplace context.

If Chapter One introduced the core CCS construct through the marketplace arena and Chapter Two introduced how the CCS can support organizational stabilization or transformation priorities in the workplace one, Chapter Three points toward another escalation of this core frame. It takes as its preoccupation the arena of corporate social responsibility, in which we see a world-changing scope of ambition for the CCS. Here, the corporate worldview and ethos take on a moral character as companies construct almost salvific orienting beliefs—from PayPal's desire to promote economic opportunity to Nestlé's social purpose of shaping a better and healthier world. In this pursuit of societal impact, the adoption of a moral CCS begins to blur the distinction between the 'outside' and 'inside' contexts of the corporation that Chapters One and Two respectively explored.

Across the discrete contexts of each chapter, I hope to have shown that the Corporate Cultural System construct captures the internal formulations held by the business community about corporate meaning, its manufacturing, and its management. In addition to enabling the identification of this theoretical construct for the first time, throughout this thesis ideas from Religious Studies allowed us to parse a more dimensional and critical understanding of the myths, meanings, motivations, and morals crafted within corporate contexts.

As we turn to concluding thoughts, the CCS this thesis revealed does beg the question I set aside at the outset. As the series of quotations placed before the introductory chapter ask, might we see the corporation as, or at least as assuming some of the roles of, religion within modern society? Brands, for example, "tell us stories about our place in culture" and "transcend their economic function", and organizations are "symbolic forms like religion and folklore; they are displays of the meaning of life."[1] Throughout this thesis we have also seen bodies of work looking at the similarities between new age movements and cults, the "spiritual" nature of the organizations, the search for the "soul" of business, and the enlightened "consciousness"—or even "salvation"—companies might bring to a ruthless marketplace and suffering society. I personally agree with the idea that companies, for better or worse, might be considered religions in modern society. Given that the CCS, as I have argued, resembles Geertz's theorization of religion as a cultural system, there is a clear theoretical pathway for such an argument.

This is just one of a few implications suggested by this thesis' primary insight of the CCS construct. The remainder of this concluding chapter offers an epilogue exploring two other possible lines of enquiry forward: the first points toward an emerging theory of the corporate firm centered around 'meaning'; and the second explores the possible relevance of the Corporate Cultural System framework within other fields of activity beyond the corporation.

[1] See p.xii.

II. Implications: The Elevation of 'Meaning' Within Business Thinking and Practice

i. Toward a 'Meaning Theory' of the Firm: The Case of Ben & Jerry's

Throughout this thesis, I have shown that ideas of 'meaning' have long been part of business thinking. However, the study of these ideas has traditionally taken place in niche Business Studies sub-fields (most prominently in the Consumer Culture Theory, corporate culture, and corporate social responsibility literatures that this thesis has overviewed). I hope that this thesis's identification of a coherent conceptualization of the CCS across traditionally discrete corporate contexts makes clear the elevated role of 'meaning' and its management in modern business practice. Indeed, what the CCS construct points to is a holistic management model, increasingly adopted by the business community, that puts 'meaning' at the center.

If we accept this convergence of corporate activity concerned with managing meaning, it points to a breaking down of traditional business categories: with the adoption of a meaning management lens, notions of (outward-facing) brand began to blend with concepts of (inward-facing) organizational culture, which in turn began to blend with conceptualizations of corporate social responsibility.[2] Though this blending feature was suggested in the IKEA, Nestlé, and PayPal examples explored in Chapter Three, it becomes abundantly clear in the example of Ben & Jerry's, the ice cream business owned

[2] I discuss how the CCS construct begins to blur activity inside and outside the firm in the concluding section of Chapter Three. This argument builds on that observation.

by Unilever.[3] Rob Michalak, former Head of Social Mission at Ben & Jerry's, tells the ice cream brand's origin story in this way:

> "These rather unconventional old friends were proud of what they were building and from the start they wanted their success to be linked to that of their partners, farmers, employees, and customers. With this vision as a cornerstone, they continued to build their company based on values, courage, commitment, transparency, faith, humility, and a good dose of humor."[4]

In the story are what I hope are now familiar tropes of the 'Reimagining Capitalism' discourse: of "rather unconventional" founders that started their company based on a vision that, through its business practice, Ben & Jerry's might create prosperity for its stakeholders.[5] The company was "founded on and dedicated to a sustainable corporate concept of Linked Prosperity… an idea as simple as it is radical: as a company prospers, all those touched by the company must also prosper—including employees, suppliers, customers, communities, and everyone else within our value chain" (Figure 11).[6] This concept makes up Ben & Jerry's moral worldview in the frame offered by this thesis, and as we might expect, the company also formally documented what it calls its 'Progressive Values', describing them as integrated into "day-to-day business activities" and enabling

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[3] On the history and context of Ben & Jerry's and its purchase by Unilever in 2000, see N. Ellis and L. Fairchild, "Case Study: Ben & Jerry's (2000)," *Journal of Financial Education* 29 (2003), 87-102.

[4] Nina Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose: Leading Voices on Building Brands and Businesses for the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2019), 172. This case study draws largely on chapter 8, offered by Rob Michalak.

[5] Cf. "Imagine saving the world through chocolate brownies and ice cream. Hyperbole? Well, maybe. But even if we're not saving the world, the humble brownie is a great example of what is at the center of Ben & Jerry's purpose-driven business model, which, when done well, can create a lot of good" (*Ibid.*, 173-4).

[6] *Ibid.*, 174-5. He continues: Linked Prosperity provides a "clear, orienting vision for the impact we want to achieve as a business. It is, has been, and will continue to be our purpose…as we continue to grow our business, we will continue to grow our social impact."

employees to "hold ourselves accountable" to the company's Linked Prosperity worldview (Figure 12).[7]

In line with the Corporate Cultural System frame, Ben & Jerry's crafted worldview and ethos are made manifest in a system of symbols. Examples include the company's livable wage policy; their executive team's values-based boardroom decision-making process; their appointment of an independent Board of Directors to protect the company's 'integrity'; their ongoing support for family dairy farms and sustainable agricultural practices; their annual "Free Cone Day" that brings together customers (called "fans") with local charities; their continued action to address the unjust consequences of climate change throughout their value chain; their use of their brand platform to help to re-shape public discourse around the issues of equity, race, and class; and the stories of how their eclectic ice cream flavors were created and named.[8] These symbols, myths, and rituals constitute the crafted Ben & Jerry's cultural system.

[7] *Ibid.*, 175. The politics of economic and environmental justice at the heart of both the Linked Prosperity worldview and the Progressive Values ethos reveal a moralistic attitude. They acknowledge that capitalism, as practiced, doesn't create opportunities equally, nor does its pursuit of productivity recognize negative environmental consequences. As an agriculturally based business participating in both the global economy and in the industrial food system, the company believes it needs to "take responsibility for our part in creating solutions to the issues of growing social inequality and climate change that these systems worsen."

[8] *Ibid.* The company also became a Benefit Corporation (B Corp) to "[reaffirm] our commitment to Linked Prosperity" and "join the movement… [of] a new type of corporation that could use the power of business to solve social and environmental problems" (p.174).

FIGURE 11. BEN & JERRY'S 'STATEMENT OF MISSION.'
(Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose* (Routledge 2019), 172).



FIGURE 12. BEN & JERRY'S 'PROGRESSIVE VALUES.'
(Montgomery, *Perspectives on Purpose* (Routledge, 2019), 173).

The observation I hope to make is that this CCS is confined to neither the marketplace nor the workplace arena. As such, I would suggest that Ben & Jerry's creation of meaning is best understood as a holistic management mode. The company's CEO, Matthew McCarthy, captures this idea:

> "Of course I have to worry about revenue, but my primary job as CEO—and I tell all our leaders this is their primary job too—is to fight for, defend, and spread the worldview we hold at Ben & Jerry's. What we stand for guides how we make decisions and partnerships, why employees come to work for us, and why people love our brand and buy our products. If revenue slips, we can fix that. But if we're not intentionally living up to our beliefs, not intentionally and consistently creating the meaning and impact in the world we want to, that's hard to ever come back from. This is bigger than just brand or culture or whatever. It's the *soul of our business* and if we lose that, we lose everything. As CEO I see my role as ensuring that soul is brought to life over and over again, in everything we do."[9]

McCarthy's description of the "soul" of the Ben & Jerry's business as something "bigger than brand or [corporate] culture" echoes language seen throughout this thesis; Howard Schultz needed to save the "soul" of Starbucks and Harvard Businness School professor Ranjay Gulati argues "soul" is the secret of today's most high performing companies.[10] Like McCarthy, these advocates describe the soul of businness as a holistic "management ethos", one which I hope to have given new dimension to through the CCS frame,[11]

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[9] Matthew McCarthy, "Deconstructing Impact: Lessons from Ben & Jerry's," Stanford University, Class Lecture, delivered 16 November 2021. Italic emphasis is my own.

[10] See p.76, 185. E. Bell, S. Taylor, and C. Driscoll, "Varieties of Organizational Soul: The Ethics of Belief in Organizations," *Organization* 19, no. 4 (2012): 425-39.

[11] Ranjay Gulati, *Deep Purpose: The Heart and Soul of High-Performance Companies* (Harvard University Press, 2022), 3-5. Though Gulati insists soul is important, he never defines it beyond the "intangible and ephemeral beliefs at the heart of a business" (p.6). I hope the CCS might offer a theoretical construct that gives precision to what, exactly, the soul is and the various ways in which it is managed today.

The observed blending of the marketplace and workplace contexts—and the elevated role of meaning-making as a management practice—poses implications for a larger body of work within contemporary Business Studies known as 'theories of the firm.'[12] This body of work acknowledges that the basic tenet of the corporate entity remains consistent: that is, that it generates consumer satisfaction in return for income that gets distributed to its owners, employees, suppliers, and public goods recipients. Where theories of the firm differ are in what they consider to be the purpose of the firm, its primary principles of operation, and its design to institutionalize those premises.[13] As these particular conceptualizations of the firm change, so too do the boundaries of its activities within a business environment.

With the identification of the CCS as a management approach focused on meaning, I suggest we might be glimpsing a new conceptualization of the relationship between the corporate entity and its business environment. We might consider the 'Meaning Theory' of the firm as one emerging presently from the business community itself. This theorization seems to posit the corporation as a network of communities to be managed over time primarily through the production of symbolic systems. That is, groups of employees, consumers, and stakeholders can find identification, orientation, energy, and belonging from the cultural texts a company offers; and it is through this meaning-

[12] Demetri Kantarelis, *Theories of The Firm* (Inderscience Publishers, 2017), 5. Kantarelis overviews the theories of the firm since the field's inception, including The Neoclassical Theory, The Decision-Maker Theory, The Strategic Firm Theory, The Transactions Cost Theory, The Principal-Agent Theory, and The Evolutionary Theory.

[13] *Ibid.* The Neoclassical Theory of the firm, for example, makes central to management a microeconomic concept of a predictable marketplace and characterizes firms by decisions made to maximize profits; by contrast, the Evolutionary Theory of the firm makes central the survival of the firm as part of evolutionary process, characterizing firms by their routines, or their regular and predictable patterns.

making potential that productive engagement, coordination, and even reform might be achieved by the corporation. In this theory, leadership and top managers understand their symbolic power and see it as a powerful management mode: as PayPal's Daniel Schulman remarked, "This idea of managing by mission and values is the most powerful thing we did as a company to be successful."[14] Leadership and the organization itself act symbolically, institutionalizing rituals, histories, and other myths through public actions and messages that affirm the company's codified core beliefs (worldview) and values (ethics).

ii. New Directions for Stakeholder Management and Sensemaking Theories

Even if an emerging Meaning Theory of the corporate firm is an overstated implication of the CCS construct, the identification of this frame itself builds on several foundational bodies of work within Business Studies. The first is one that reflects upon the relationship between stakeholders and corporate institutions. A memo of the Stanford Research Institute in 1963, which referred to "those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist", first introduced consideration of stakeholder management (SM).[15] These groups, typically theorized as strategic resources to the firm, include shareholders, employees, consumers, suppliers, local communities, and even society and the planet. Most succinctly, stakeholders are anyone or anything touched by

[14] Michael Porter, Mark Kramer, and Annelena Lobb, "PayPal: The Next Chapter," HBS no. 9-721-378 (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing, 2020), 9.
[15] M. Pedrini and L. Ferri, "Stakeholder Management: A Systematic Literature Review," *Corporate Governance* 19, no. 1 (2019): 44-59.

the business at any point along its value chain.[16] The focus of the field has evolved over time, but today it primarily studies methods through which the firm can build and organize relationships with the different stakeholders to improve its ability to respond to their expectations and improve the business' overall performance.[17] Most methods focus on firm decision-making, the juridical relationship, or the value-creation process.[18] Adding to this list of methods, I have shown how managers also appear to craft the CCS to engage a range of stakeholders, whether consumers, employees, or society. In other words, we might introduce 'offering the potential for meaning' as an explicit, currently practiced, and indeed conceptually primary way in which companies believe they draw various stakeholder groups into relationship with them. Managing stakeholders through meaning adds a new dimension to this conversation.

I have also shown how the CCS is crafted to support both organizational solidarity (*e.g.* the Airbnb case) and change (*e.g.* the Hyatt case) projects. A pure business strategy theorist might draw parallels between the conceptualization of 'meaning-making' and an

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16 On stakeholders as strategic resources, see, for example, S. Harrison and M. Qureshi, "Choice of Stakeholder Groups and Members in Multicriteria Decision Models," *Natural Resources Forum* 24 (2000): 11-9.

17 For SM as it relates to performance, see Pasi Heikkurinen and Karl Bonnedahl, "Corporate Responsibility for Sustainable Development: A Review and Conceptual Comparison of Market- and Stakeholder-Oriented Strategies," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 43 (2013): 191–8; Stelvia Matos and Bruno Silvestre, "Managing Stakeholder Relations When Developing Sustainable Business Models: The Case of the Brazilian Energy Sector," *Journal of Cleaner Production, Sustainable Innovation and Business Models* 45 (2013): 61–73.

18 On the influence that companies and stakeholders could exert on each other, see *e.g.,* G. Savage *et al.*, "Strategies for Assessing and Managing Organizational Stakeholders," *Academy of Management Perspectives* 5 no. 2 (1991): 61-75. On the juridical relationship, see *e.g.,* T. Donaldson and L. Preston, "The Stakeholder Theory of the Corporation: Concepts, Evidence and Implications," *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 1 (1995): 65-91. On the role in the value-creation process, see *e.g.,* M. Clarkson, "A Stakeholder Framework for Analysing and Evaluating Corporate Social Performance," *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 1 (1995): 92-117.

already established process on 'sensemaking.'[19] Like Chapter Two's exploration of meaning within the organizational context, the literature on sensemaking also focuses on corporate adaptation, organizing teams, and the design of internal structures to survive shocks and change. Sensemaking is particularly concerned with the process of how the micro-level, individual actor makes sense of their environment, in reaction to its change. Drawing on practitioners' own conceptualizations, the perspective on meaning-making I offer presents a focus on the collective over the individual, on proactive management intervention rather than reactive employee interpretation, and on a process that exists one higher level of abstraction from sensemaking; meaning-making is more concerned with structure defining, reorganizing reality, the creation of truth, and offering existential comfort. In short, while both sensemaking and meaning-making engage how change happens within corporations, the former describes how players adapt to changing conditions and the latter, I suggest, describes more fundamental changes to the 'rules of the game.'

iii. Studying the Legitimacy and Spread of Management Ideas

I believe we are witnessing just the beginning of this phenomenon, of the business' formal efforts to manage through meaning. With the exception of the Dove example from 2004, all of the cases elaborated upon across chapters reflect corporate activity from

[19] For an overview of sensemaking, see Karl Weick, Kathleen Sutcliffe, and David Obstfeld, "Organizing and the Process of Sensemaking," *Organization Science* 16, no. 4 (2005): 409-21. For sensemaking and the change context, see Mats Alvesson and Stefan Sveningsson, *Changing Organizational Culture: Cultural Change Work in Progress* (Routledge, 2015), 28-30.

after 2012, with the bulk from after 2015. Moreover, once a business adopts a meaning-conscious practice, it appears to continue along this pathway; for example, Dove, as I have shown, continued to conceptualize and produce a CCS through 2021. To be sure, there are still many companies that do not subscribe to this construct, but the cases this thesis explored might be seen as early adopters of this emerging management model.

As derived from this thesis and the cases it examined, we might identify four adoption archetypes, or pathways by which companies might come to utilizing the CCS to achieve business needs. A first one we might call the 'progressive employee brand' pathway.[20] These firms are often in the technology industry and compete for top talent coming out of top schools. PayPal, Airbnb, and PlayStation fall in this category. The technical talent they require tends to hold liberal ideas and want to join companies located on the progressive coasts of the United States (with San Francisco and New York being their epicenters). These 'progressive' companies adopt the CCS because their prospective employees want to work for a firm that is mission-driven and can help them with their own processes of self-actualization.

We might call a second archetype the 'stand out from the crowd' entry point. Firms in this category have witnessed intense growth and crowding in their marketplaces; they must defend their ground, or market share, all while facing the constant threat of disintermediation. Hyatt, Budweiser, and Starbucks fit this category, and each uses the CCS as a tool to advance their businesses and differentiate themselves in a quickly

[20] On the employer brand, see *e.g.,* Helen Rosethorn, *The Employer Brand: Keeping Faith with the Ideal* (Gower Publishing Ltd., 2009); Barrow, Simon, and Mosley, *The Employer Brand: Bringing the Best of Brand Management to People at Work* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011).

growing and changing marketplace. These companies' use of the CCS to differentiate within the marketplace resembles what Douglas Holt calls 'myth marketplaces', or an arena of competition based on what you stand for rather than what you sell.[21]

A third archetype we might call the 'doing it differently' pathway to adopting the CCS. These companies are led by cult-like founders (Steve Jobs and Apple, Ingvar Kamprad and IKEA, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield and Ben & Jerry's) and the ideologies of these larger-than-life leaders created the bedrock upon which the CCS might be crafted, often since the inception of the company.

A fourth and final archetype, however, is perhaps most indicative of why and how we might witness the normalizing spread of the CCS across industry, and perhaps even something like a Meaning Theory of the firm. We might call this archetype the 'legitimacy seeking' entry point. In Chapter Three, I discussed how Nestlé, Danone, and Unilever (parent corporation of both Dove and Ben & Jerry's) have all crafted moral cultural systems that reflect aspects of the Reimagining Capitalism discourse. These companies represent some of the largest Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) companies in the world, and, though I did not detail them in this thesis, others in this group of biggest CGP firms like PepsiCo, Proctor & Gamble, and General Mills also appear, at a cursory glance, to adopt a moral worldview and ethos in line with the CCS model.

Why have the largest players in this category all adopted a meaning crafting and managing premise of the corporation? One might argue they needed to adopt a moral perspective

[21] For an overview of myth marketplaces and Douglas Holt's work, see Chapter One, p.46, 69.

since the size and scale of their operations made them among the world's most extractive and destructive companies; in other words, they are the first targets to clean up their act to get ahead of bad public relations. Another argument might be that, again given their scale and global reach, these firms need the worldview and ethos that the CCS provides as the glue to coordinate employees across the globe. Management scholars might also point to a body of work on the legitimacy of the firm within Institutional Theory to explain this kind of category-wide spread of the CCS. This body of literature sees the company as an 'open system' with porous boundaries that mean many of the dynamics in the organizational environment stem not from technological or material imperatives, but rather from cultural norms, symbols, beliefs, and rituals.[22] A chief aspect of legitimacy is mimicry: once one company acts in a certain way, others it competes with must imitate.[23] This is because the first actor has shifted standards of what is 'legitimate', and the new activity becomes a point of parity for other companies. Translated to our context, once one company adopts a moral perspective, doing so becomes expected of others in its category; or, once a firm adopts a meaning management model, the others will follow suit.

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[22] Mark Suchman, "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches," *The Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (1995): 571. Suchman overviews three types of institutional legitimacy: pragmatic legitimacy (legitimacy stems from being responsive to larger interests), moral legitimacy (legitimacy is 'sociotropic', usually reflecting beliefs about whether the activity promotes societal welfare as defined by the audience's socially constructed value system), and consequential legitimacy (legitimacy is derived from what a company accomplishes). See also W. Scott, "The Adolescence of Institutional Theory," *Administrative Science Quarterly* (1987): 493-511. For legitimacy as an argument for 'Reimagining Capitalism', see Ioannis Ioannou and George Serafeim, "Yes, Sustainability Can be a Strategy," *Harvard Business Review* (2019) https://hbr-org.cdn.ampproject.org/ c/s/hbr.org/amp/ 2019/02/yes-sustainability-can-be-a-strategy.

[23] See *e.g.*, Kyungmook Lee and Johannes Pennings, "Mimicry and the Market: Adoption of a New Organizational Form," *Academy of Management Journal* 45, no. 1 (2002): 144–62.

In the CPG marketplace, we might see a category of legitimacy referred to in the literature as moral legitimacy, where a firm's institutional legitimacy is derived from its reflection of beliefs about promoting societal welfare, as defined by the audience's socially constructed value system.[24] Compared with other forms of legitimacy, moral legitimacy tends to be "embedded into institution", with "beliefs" articulated through "symbolic displays."[25] The CPG companies, I would suggest, take on a form of moral legitimacy through the techniques and procedures of the CCS. Once one of the companies adopts the CCS as a legitimate technique, the others mimic.[26] This 'legitimacy seeking' fourth archetype, in my opinion, is the one that will continue to normalize the management of meaning as common business practice beyond the set of companies who adopt the CCS today.

Accelerated by the growing Reimagining Capitalism discourse that foregrounds a higher meaning for business' operation in society, I suspect we will continue to see this management-through-meaning take over the private sector, with companies adopting the practice through any one of the archetypal onramps described above. As they do,

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[24] Suchman, "Managing Legitimacy," 578-80. Suchman also notes that moral legitimacy roughly parallels Weber's discussion of legitimate authority in *Economy and Society* (trans. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Bedminster Press, 1968)).

[25] *Ibid.,* 579.

[26] The mimicry of managing meaning might be seen in the phenomenon colloquially called 'purpose washing' or 'woke washing.' See *e.g.*, Anne Nielsen and Christa Thomsen, "Reviewing Corporate Social Responsibility Communication: A Legitimacy Perspective," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (2018); Jessica Vredenburg *et al.*, "Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?," *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 39, no. 4 (2020): 444-60.

practitioners will continue to hone the CCS instrument, guided by learnings from more cases of its use, and indeed with academics and consultancies contributing to its take-up.

III. Implications: The CCS Beyond the Corporation

i. Constructing Cultures for Non-Business Organizations

In addition to growing prominence in the private sector, another future direction to note is the seeping of the CCS idea into new spaces. While this thesis has looked only at the corporation, it is clear that the CCS may apply to other major institutions, including not-for-profit organizations, NGOs, and governments. Indeed, many other institutional forms appear to adopt a similar rubric of meaning management.[27] The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, codifies a worldview for the organization ("Our mission is to create a world where every person has the opportunity to live a healthy, productive life") and its activity is "guided by five core values" (including Collaboration, Rigor, and Innovation).[28] With consultants crossing over between private and social sector clients, we might hypothesize that they bring their models from one organization to the other. The design firm IDEO, for example, is a hired advisor for the executives of PlayStation,

[27] Cf. "Many nonprofits are ideological organizations, and their passion…is their rationale for existence. A clear mandate or calling creates allegiance ad trust among employees, clients, and donors" (Debra Minkoff, Walter Powell, and Göran Sonnevi, "Nonprofit Mission: Constancy, Responsiveness, or Deflection?," in *The Nonprofit Sector* (Yale University Press, 2006), 591-611; R. Sheehan, *Mission Impact: Breakthrough Strategies for Nonprofits* (Wiley, 2010); Paul Temporal, *Branding for the Public Sector: Creating, Building and Managing Brands People Will Value* (Wiley, 2014).

[28] "Culture and Values," Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, accessed 2 November 2021, https://www. gatesfoundation.org /about/careers/culture-and-values.

Unilever, and The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, among many, many others.[29] These consultants might be imagined as missionaries of sorts—spreading ideas of the meaning managing organization as an efficient one, regardless of sector, with the CCS as its primary instrument.

There is also indication that the CCS model is spreading beyond organizations. The new city of Telosa, for example, is a project by billionaire Marc Lore to create a futuristic city from scratch in America "that sets a global standard for urban living, expands human potential, and becomes a blueprint for future generations."[30] The project's 'why', according to its website, is that "while the current economic system is a growth engine, it has led to increasing inequality" and so Telosa's mission is "to create a more equitable and sustainable future." It calls this worldview "Equitism", or the belief in "an economic system in which citizens have a stake in the city's land—as the city does better, the residents do better."[31] The three codified values of "Open", "Fair", and "Inclusive" are held by its community of developers, prospective citizens, and entrepreneurs.[32] This purpose and values will be "brought to life" in every choice and feature of the city. Again, we see the CCS conceptual framework at work.

[29] "Work: A Selection of Case Studies," IDEO, accessed 22 January 2022, https://www.ideo.com/work.
[30] "About Our City," Telosa, accessed 2 November 2021, https://cityoftelosa.com/.
[31] "Equitism," *Telosa*, accessed 2 November 2021, https://cityoftelosa.com/about/#equitism.
[32] *Ibid.*

ii. Constructing a Worldview and Ethos for Societal Transformation: The Case of Dubai

Perhaps also due to the influence of consultants as well as the perceived ability of the CCS to transform society, the CCS appears to have gained traction with governments. Specifically, its formulation appears to offer a valuable tool within the processes of economic development. Looking cursorily at the Arab Gulf region, for example, the public-facing, government-created development plans I surveyed for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as well as for the emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai follow some version of the worldview and ethos rubric this thesis overviews.[33] In each case, this rubric captures the essence of an articulated national culture, which is cast as able to mobilize citizens as the engine of desired societal transformation.

Of this set of Gulf examples, Dubai provides a particularly stirring picture of how these governments appear to craft something akin to the CCS to support ambitions of societal change. Over just three generations and within the past half century, the emirate of Dubai has transformed from a trade and fishing village to a city of the future known for its ultramodern architecture, lively night scene, and luxury tourism experience. The cityscape is filled with cranes and construction work—on new business towers, museums and heritage sites, malls, city centers, and housing projects, among other things. Dubai is a

[33] "Vision 2030," Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2016); "UAE and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Excellence and Implementation," UAE National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals (2017); "The Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030," Government of Abu Dhabi (2017); "Dubai Plan 2021," Government of Dubai, accessed 13 August 2021, https://www.dubaiplan2021.ae/dubai-plan-2021/. Though all are economic development visions, they all name building national culture that people identify with and act on to support the stated character of development's ends as critical.

self-declared city in progress, but it is also criticized as a country without culture; it is sometimes seen as "soulless", as the Las Vegas of the Middle East, and a "cultural vacuum built on sand."[34] If not culturally vacant, it is seen as selling superficial and sanitized visions of 'Arabness'—desert, dates, camels, etc.[35] This lack of discernable, authentic culture is in part credited to the fact that Dubai is an emirate divided; it has a large population of ex-patriates who live and work together, a smaller population of Emirati nationals who mostly work in government and do not mix with foreigners generally speaking, and then a large population of migrant workers.[36]

As part of Dubai's economic development work, in 2015 the government published a document called the 'Dubai Plan 2021', laying out its multi-year agenda "to achieve the happiness of all our people, be it citizens, residents, or visitors."[37] Like the brand books and corporate culture documents from previous chapters, the Dubai Plan 2021 explicitly codifies what we might see as a worldview and ethos for the emirate: Dubai strives to be a "city of happy, creative, [and] empowered people," and its "people, at the bedrock of our society…have been inculcated with core values of *personal responsibility, creativity, and tolerance*." [38] The plan makes clear that this distinctive culture is shared by *all* residents of

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[34] On "soulless," see Richard Evans, "Sprawling, Soulless Dubai is an Architectural Flop," *Financial Times Europe* (29 May 2006) 11. For the comparison to "Las Vegas" and "cultural vacuum", see Andrew Maratz, "Dubai, the World's Las Vegas," *The Atlantic*, 18 April, 2017, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/ photo-booth/dubai-the-worlds-vegas.

[35] Rana Al Mutawa, "Monolithic Representations and Orientalist Credence in the UAE," *Gulf Affairs* (2016): 22-6.

[36] Miriam Cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (University of California Press, 2014).

[37] "Dubai Plan 2021," Government of Dubai.

[38] *Ibid.* These same values for the emirate and its people are laid out in HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, *My Vision Challenges in the Race for Excellence* (Motivate, 2012).

Dubai, signaling that this worldview and ethos have been crafted in an attempt to unite a divided population under one shared sense of 'culture.'

More than that, these core values reflect the "characteristics that Dubai's people need to have to deliver on the city's aspirations in all areas."[39]

> "These values focus on moving Dubai to a sustainable economic model driven by innovation, and productivity in capital and labor, and supported by the most business friendly environment. In addition, the theme highlights the importance of a diversified set of value-add economic activities that would enhance Dubai's economic resilience and allow it to absorb internal and external shocks."[40]

Like the CCS in corporate reform contexts, here, the ethics of a people are being crafted in a way to guide particular social outcomes. In this case, Dubai wants to diversify its economy and is betting on creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship as its method. The link between Dubai's crafted culture and these social and economic outcomes are plain: "[As residents], we are an integral part of this city, and our contribution to its development is crucial. We can use our *experience*, *thinking*, *talents*, and *creativity* to build a better Dubai for all, each in their own way."[41]

Indeed, "the people of Dubai are the main focus of Dubai Plan 2021" and "it is from this perspective that the plan addresses the *traits* and *characteristics* that must be reinforced

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[39] *Ibid.*

[40] "Dubai Plan: Society," *Government of Dubai*, accessed 13 August 2021, https://www.dubai plan2021.ae/ the-society/

[41] *Ibid.* There are numerous examples drawing out this same logic of values-led social change. Another compelling one from the Dubai Plan includes: "Those who call Dubai home *think*, *innovate*, and *create* constantly… Dubai 2021 outlines a world in which I live prosperously with all the tools I need to be *creative* and *productive*." Italic emphasis is my own.

and developed among the people of Dubai to ensure *they are capable of driving the city forward* into its future."[42] People, according to these statements, are "empowered" and "hold power." The role of government is explicitly "to *empower* people, not *hold power* over them. Government, in short, should nurture an environment in which people create and enjoy their own happiness."[43] Like Weber's theory of social change that emphasized the power of people's ideas to influence development, societal transformation in Dubai is cast as something led by people who, acting on their values, usher in a prosperous future. As the plan says, the "strategy is straightforward: national development based on core values, and focused on a future in which everyone achieves happiness."[44] This strategy follows an almost identical formulation to the CCS in the multiple transformation contexts I have discussed, particularly in Chapters Two and Three.[45]

There is much more to the Dubai case, like how the regime is sponsoring new museums to craft new histories of how those living in Dubai have always been innovators, or how multiple Western brand and design agencies over the last decade have been hired by the government to help them craft and disseminate this worldview and ethos (including IDEO, Wolff Olins, and others behind the various cases in this thesis).[46] But since a

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[42] *Ibid.* Italic emphasis is my own.

[43] "Dubai Plan: Government," Government of Dubai, accessed 13 August 2021, https://www.dubaiplan2021. ae/the-goverment/. Italic emphasis is my own. Cf., also in this source, "The role of government is to create an environment in which people can achieve their dreams and ambitions, not create an environment that government can control."

[44] "Dubai Plan 2021," Government of Dubai.

[45] For perspectives on 'nation branding' and 'invention of culture' efforts in Dubai, see Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai, the City as Corporation* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Pamela Erskine-Loftus *et al., Representing the Nation: Heritage, Museums, National Narratives, and Identity in the Arab Gulf States* (Routledge, 2016).

[46] IDEO and the Government of Dubai maintain a joint venture called Palmwood that describes itself as a "design-led movement… developing creative capabilities in the people of the UAE"; it is an initiative designed to "foster generosity, curiosity, and creativity" in the emirate and

conclusion should serve to close a can of worms rather than open one, for now, the value of this case is to point to an emergent direction of the CCS's application outside the corporate and organizational realm.

IV. Parting Thoughts, and a Word of Caution

The cases throughout this thesis, and surely the Dubai example in particular, throw into high relief a somewhat sinister feeling about the Corporate Cultural System construct. I have done my best to take an impartial view, describing simply the 'what', 'how', and 'why' behind the business community's internal formulations of meaning within the corporate context. This view has allowed for the elevation of the framework itself from the language and activity of mostly well-meaning or values-agnostic people. But if this construct continues to be a staple of business practice—and if it continues to spread across the private sector and beyond as I suspect it will—I hope this thesis also sounds some alarm bells about this kind of social power and calls for discussion.

The CCS might appear non-threatening when it is simply a conceptualization of brand for Budweiser or a corporate culture for Nike, but as the Dubai example may show, culture may be deliberately crafted using something like this model as a form of coercive instrumentality. Whether corporate managers or authoritarian regimes, the CCS enables

beyond, reflecting the stated values of the emirate in its various documents. Branding agency Wolff Olins supported the creation of the Dubai Expo 2020 brand cultural system, including the logo and the story behind it also emphasizing these same values: see Expo 2020 Dubai, "Expo 2020: Our Logo," YouTube, 27 March 2016, https://youtube.com/NbMLYuhWa1w.

cover to not appear coercive. It is a construct that, through its language and internal models, nominally give people agency in interpreting significance from these crafted cultural systems and in choosing whether to act according to the approved style. The observations and questions asked in the conclusion of Chapter One become relevant again here. The CCS construct has aligned itself with a Geertzian theorization of culture that is often critiqued for not dealing well with issues of power and the authoritative status of symbols.[47]

It is here that I think Business Studies and the business community at large might again find relevance in the theoretical tools that Religious Studies has to offer. The field has a wealth of ideas and debate around issues of power, inclusion, and morality that the still-nascent CCS would benefit much from. To start, adopting the ideas of Antonio Gramsci (*e.g.* cultural hegemony and domination) or of Karl Marx (*e.g.* power struggles between elites and labor) might offer a different picture of meaning-focused corporate activity than the one painted by this thesis.[48] Further to the issue of power and the construction of cultural systems, scholars of religion have explored for decades the relationship between religion and authority, touching on themes of language, domination, coercion,

[47] See Chapter One, p. 90-2 and Chapter Two, p.115 note 48.

[48] Those who have applied the lens of Gramsci to corporate social responsibility, for example, have arrived at a very different analysis of the 'Reimagining Capitalism' mainstream discourse I discussed in Chapter Three, see *e.g.*, Arno Kourula and Guillaume Delalieux, "The Micro-Level Foundations and Dynamics of Political Corporate Social Responsibility: Hegemony and Passive Revolution Through Civil Society," *Journal of Business Ethics* 135, no. 4 (2016): 769-85. The same can be said of analysis through a Marxist lens, see *e.g.*, William Shaw, "Marxism, Business Ethics, and Corporate Social Responsibility," *Journal of Business Ethics* 84, no. 4 (2009): 565-76; Shalon van Tine, "The Problem of Woke Capitalism," in *Liberalism and Socialism*, ed. M. McManus (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 217-32.

and social change.[49] In a similar vein, studies on the patterns of relationships between empires and religion might offer fruitful analogy. As multi-national corporations (including ones discussed in this thesis like Facebook, Unilever, Airbnb, Starbucks, etc.) are increasingly discussed as something like the 'empires' of the twenty-first century, ideas like the constitution of imperial power, the cultural products of empire, resistance, and colonialism might throw useful critiques and questions about the corporation's analogous activity into the mix.[50]

In addition to *how* meaning is constructed, Religious Studies might help further examine *who* is doing this construction, and with what internal or external motives. Since my analysis is built on the corporate business community's own language and perceptions, it reflects the beliefs held by the elites doing the work of constructing. I welcome further questioning of why this community frames their activity this way. On a more personal and anecdotal note, having spoken or worked with over a hundred corporate executives and hundreds more senior managers, many possess a palpable, almost anxious lust for 'impact.' And yet, when pressed, many cannot articulate what they mean by impact in scope or scale, or how their corporate activity is a net positive for the world in concrete terms. To put it more plainly, and perhaps more cynically, I observe a substantial level of self-delusion on the part of the business community. Some seem to seek self-actualization

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[49] See *e.g.*, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Nile Green and Mary Searle-Chatterjee, *Religion, Language, and Power* (Routledge, 2008); Gerrit Brand, "Culture, Power and Religion," *NTT Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion* 65, no. 2 (2011): 117-36; Rachel Blum *et al.*, *Religion and Regimes: Support, Separation, and Opposition* (Lexington Books, 2013); Titus Hjelm, "Religion, Discourse and Power: A Contribution Towards a Critical Sociology of Religion," *Critical Sociology* 40, no. 6 (2014): 855-72.

[50] See *e.g.,* Richard Horsley, "Religion and Other Products of Empire," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 1 (2003): 13–44.

through their work, while others are concerned with their legacy ("I'm doing the right thing for my children!" is a common refrain). Others see a ripe avenue for self-promotion, casting themselves as the 'thought leader' of this rising trend or publishing feel-good clickbait about benevolent business. Others still, including some academics, seem to subscribe wholeheartedly to what I would go so far as to call the ideology of business as the savior of the world. Even if calling it an ideology feels too flippant, studying the psychology and anthropology of the very collective business community fueling the wider discourse that I have traced of meaning and management would be fascinating.

My parting thought, then, is that I hope students of religion, and of business, can probe beyond the ideological wrapping of the Corporate Cultural System, and explore the thornier contours shaping its limits, and the manifold ends to which it might be applied.

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