

Abundance and Meaning

The Crisis Automation Cannot Solve

Project: [Return to Consciousness](#)

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Authorship Note: Co-authored with AI as a disciplined thinking instrument—not a replacement for judgment. Prioritizes epistemic integrity and truth-seeking as a moral responsibility.

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Abstract

This essay examines a structural problem that economic abundance cannot solve: the crisis of meaning that intensifies when labor ceases to organize human identity. As AI and automation promise unprecedented productivity, public discourse frames this as a transition toward “universal abundance” or “universal high income.” This framing obscures the deeper question: if scarcity collapses faster than meaning is reconstituted, what kind of crisis follows? The essay argues that labor has historically structured not only income but identity, status, temporality, belonging, and narrative coherence—and that removing labor without replacing its meaning-generating role does not create the meaning crisis but *democratizes* it, making universal a problem that scarcity had distributed unevenly. It further shows that abundance is never neutral: ownership of productive capacity determines whose lives retain meaning and agency under post-scarcity conditions.

Keywords: automation · post-work · meaning crisis · labor and identity · post-scarcity · AI economics · existential legitimacy · ownership of production

Scope and Dependency

This essay presupposes and builds upon:

- [Return to Consciousness](#), which establishes that consciousness and meaning cannot be treated as derivative without cost
- [Epistemic Authority: What Ontology Leaves Unresolved](#), which diagnoses how inherited frameworks constrain what counts as legitimate knowledge and value
- [Asymmetric Methodological Restraint](#), which exposes how apparent neutrality encodes asymmetric power

What this essay does:

- Treats claims about AI-driven abundance as structural provocations, not predictions

- Reframes “universal high income” as insufficient response to a coherence and meaning problem
- Shows how automation shifts crises from economic scarcity to existential legitimacy
- Connects ownership of automation to the structural power to curate what counts as value

What this essay does not do:

- Advocate specific policies (UBI, regulation, taxation)
- Forecast timelines or make predictions
- Present abundance as either salvation or doom
- Center personalities as authorities

Its role is not to solve the problem but to make its structure visible.

I. The Promise and Its Omission

The Abundance Narrative

A new narrative is emerging in public discourse: AI and robotics will drive unprecedented economic abundance, potentially detaching productivity from human labor altogether. Variations of this claim appear across the political spectrum:

- “Universal high income” replacing universal basic income
- Post-scarcity economics becoming technologically feasible
- Human labor becoming optional rather than necessary

The narrative carries implicit optimism: if machines produce enough, material deprivation ends. The problem of scarcity—which has organized human societies since their origin—finally dissolves.

What the Narrative Omits

The abundance narrative treats meaning as downstream of material conditions. Solve scarcity, and meaning will either persist unchanged or become a secondary “lifestyle” concern.

This treats meaning as if it were metaphysically neutral—as if removing material constraints automatically liberates human flourishing without changing what flourishing means or who gets to define it.

The omission is not incidental. What appears as neutral technological progress encodes unexamined assumptions about value, identity, and legitimacy.

This concern is not new. A substantial post-work literature has engaged it: Gorz’s *Farewell to the Working Class* (1980), Graeber’s *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), Weeks’s *The Problem with Work* (2011), and Srnicek and Williams’s *Inventing the Future* (2015) all examine the pathologies of labor and the possibilities beyond it. This essay does not claim to discover the problem. Its contribution is a specific framing: treating meaning as *infrastructure* with identifiable structural components (identity, temporality, status, narrative, belonging), and connecting the ownership of automated production to the structural power to curate what counts as value—a dimension the post-work literature has generally treated as an economic or political question rather than one about the conditions under which meaning is formed.

II. Labor as Meaning Infrastructure

Beyond Income

Labor has never been merely a mechanism for income distribution. It has served as infrastructure for:

Identity formation. “What do you do?” is not a request for economic data. It asks who you are, what you contribute, where you belong in the social order. Labor organizes selfhood.

Temporal structure. Work divides days, weeks, years. It creates rhythms that anchor biological and psychological life. Retirement often triggers existential crisis not because income stops, but because time loses structure.

Status and recognition. Social standing derives significantly from productive contribution—or its appearance. The professional is distinguished from the idle, the employed from the unemployed, the maker from the consumer.

Narrative coherence. Life stories are organized around work: career arcs, achievements, transitions, retirements. “Building something” provides narrative direction that consumption alone cannot.

Belonging. Workplaces constitute communities. Colleagues become social networks. Shared labor creates solidarity, even when resented.

The Meaning Vacuum

Labor has never provided these functions uniformly. For those in repetitive, degrading, or coerced work—Marx’s alienated labor—work has always been closer to survival than to vocation, and the meaning-infrastructure argument applies most directly to professional, creative, and skilled labor. Yet even alienated labor supplies a residual structure: it organizes time, confers the social standing of “employed,” and provides the survival necessity that absorbs existential questions into practical ones. Under scarcity, meaning questions are unevenly distributed. Those in meaningful work have them answered; those in alienated work have them suppressed by material urgency. Abundance lifts the suppression for everyone simultaneously, making universal a crisis that scarcity had kept uneven.

When labor is removed, whatever meaning-generating functions it provided—robust or residual—do not automatically transfer elsewhere. The abundance narrative assumes that material provision replaces what labor provided. But labor provided *meaning infrastructure*, not merely survival resources. Marie Jahoda’s research on unemployment demonstrated precisely this: job loss damages psychological well-being through the loss of time structure, social contact, collective purpose, status, and enforced activity—functions that parallel the meaning infrastructure identified here—and these effects persist independently of financial hardship. A person with sufficient income and no meaningful activity faces a different crisis than a person with insufficient income. The first crisis is existential; the second is material. Material solutions do not resolve existential problems. As Viktor Frankl observed, meaning is not a luxury that follows material security—it is a primary human need that, when unmet, produces its own pathology regardless of material circumstances.

This is not an argument against abundance, nor a claim that no meaning infrastructure exists outside paid labor. Caregiving, civic participation, religious life, and community work already ground meaning for many. The question is whether these structures will expand sufficiently to

replace what labor provided at scale—and the abundance narrative simply assumes they will, without examining the conditions under which they might or might not.

III. The Crisis of Legitimacy

From Scarcity to Legitimacy

Under conditions of scarcity, the meaning question is partially deferred. Survival demands labor; labor provides meaning infrastructure; meaning questions are absorbed into practical necessities.

As scarcity dissolves, meaning questions re-emerge with full force:

- **Why should I exist?** (when my productive contribution is unnecessary)
- **What makes me valuable?** (when machines outperform me)
- **Who am I?** (when work no longer defines identity)
- **What should I do with my time?** (when necessity no longer structures it)

These questions were always present—existential philosophy, religious seeking, and nihilism have all flourished under material deprivation. Scarcity did not prevent meaning crises; it distributed them unevenly and masked them behind survival imperatives. Abundance universalizes and intensifies them by removing the material urgency that deferred the question for many.

Legitimacy as the New Scarcity

The crisis that follows is not material but *legitimizing*. Under abundance, the scarce resource is not goods but *grounds for existence*.

This inversion has historical precedent, though none that translates straightforwardly. Aristocracies that detached from productive labor developed elaborate systems of status, honor, and distinction to maintain legitimacy without economic function—but these systems depended on rigid hierarchy and the explicit exclusion of most people from the category of persons whose meaning mattered. Religious orders that renounced material production developed contemplative practices and service roles that grounded meaning beyond productivity—but they operated within totalizing cosmological frameworks that secular post-abundance societies cannot simply adopt.

What these precedents share is not a transferable template but a structural lesson: meaning reconstitution was *actively constructed*, not passively inherited. The transition from productive to non-productive identity required institutional, cultural, and psychological infrastructure—and in each case, the infrastructure relied on conditions (shared metaphysics, enforced hierarchy) that post-abundance modernity lacks.

Contemplative traditions—Buddhist, Stoic, monastic—operated within the same kind of totalizing frameworks: shared cosmology, institutional support, often withdrawal from ordinary life. As *systems*, they are no more directly transferable than aristocratic honor codes. But they developed something the aristocratic and monastic precedents did not: specific *practices*—attention training, ethical discipline, structured inquiry into the nature of experience—that have demonstrably survived extraction from their original institutional contexts and function across cultures and cosmologies. Their relevance to post-abundance meaning is not as models to adopt but as evidence that the structural problem has been recognized across traditions, and that some of

the practices developed to address it are less dependent on their conditions of origin than the systems that housed them.

The abundance narrative assumes this infrastructure will emerge spontaneously. History suggests otherwise. Without deliberate reconstitution, the meaning vacuum produces:

- Status anxiety disconnected from material need
- Identity fragmentation without clear resolution
- Temporal chaos as structure collapses
- Narrative incoherence as life stories lose direction
- Social isolation as workplace communities dissolve

These are symptoms of *delegitimization*—the experience that one’s existence lacks adequate grounds. The evidence is not speculative. Case and Deaton’s research on “deaths of despair”—rising mortality from suicide, overdose, and alcoholism among working-age Americans without college degrees—documents a population experiencing meaning collapse under conditions of relative material adequacy, driven not primarily by poverty but by the erosion of stable employment and the social infrastructure it sustained. Byung-Chul Han’s analysis of burnout society identifies a complementary pattern at the other end of the spectrum: achievement-driven exhaustion that persists even when external demands ease, because the demand has been internalized and purpose has not been reconstituted. Together, these suggest that meaning infrastructure is already failing across economic strata—abundance universalizes a process already underway.

IV. Ownership and the Curation of Meaning

Abundance Is Never Neutral

Abundance does not dissolve power structures. It relocates them.

If robots, energy, and compute are owned by a small number of actors, then:

- Abundance does not eliminate hierarchy; it shifts its basis
- Power moves from labor markets to ownership structures
- Those who own productive capacity determine the terms of abundance
- Those who do not own remain dependent, however well-provisioned

The person receiving “universal high income” from owners of automated production is not economically equivalent to the person who owns that production. The first is provisioned; the second is sovereign. The difference is not material but *relational*—a matter of who depends on whom.

Ownership and the Conditions of Meaning

This relational asymmetry extends beyond material dependence into the conditions under which meaning is formed. Those who own productive capacity hold structural power to shape the environment in which value judgments are made—not by declaring what a good life is, but by determining what the environment rewards, makes visible, and treats as default.

If all material goods are produced by automated systems owned by a concentrated few, then those owners influence:

- What goods are produced (and therefore what consumption is possible)
- What activities are rewarded (and therefore what behavior is incentivized)

- Which forms of contribution receive material recognition

The mechanism is concrete. Consider platform-mediated abundance: if automated content, education, and entertainment are produced and curated by a small number of platform owners, those owners shape attention through algorithmic design—determining what activities are visible, what contributions are rewarded with audience, and what forms of life appear desirable. The person creating art, tending a garden, or practicing contemplation does not *need* the platform’s material resources. But they exist in a cultural environment where the platform defines what counts as achievement, what attracts recognition, and what registers as a life well-lived. The ownership of production becomes the curation of meaning—not through coercion but through the structural power to set defaults.

This is what Gramsci analyzed as cultural hegemony: not the imposition of beliefs by force, but the capacity to make a particular set of values appear natural, inevitable, and uncontested. Under conditions of abundance, ownership of automated production becomes the material basis for this hegemony—shaping not what people are *told* to value, but what the environment makes it easy or difficult to value.

This is structural influence, not total control. Cultural, religious, and counter-cultural practices routinely assert meaning against dominant production regimes. Meaning-making remains contested terrain. Robust democratic institutions, commons-based production, and decentralized cultural fields can limit concentration’s reach.

But the contest is asymmetric. Those who control production control the material conditions under which alternative meanings must survive. “Abundance for all” may mean abundance of what owners choose to produce—and those who define value differently must do so against the grain of material incentives, not with their support.

V. What Reconstitution Would Require

The Structural Need

If labor’s meaning-generating role is not automatically replaced, then post-abundance societies require deliberate construction of:

Identity structures that do not depend on productive contribution. What grounds selfhood when “what you do” no longer defines who you are?

Temporal structures that organize life without work schedules. What creates rhythm when necessity no longer imposes it?

Status structures that confer recognition without economic function. What distinguishes a meaningful life from a merely provisioned one?

Narrative structures that provide life direction without career arcs. What gives life a story when “building something” is no longer the organizing theme?

Belonging structures that create community without workplace. What binds people when shared labor no longer does?

The Diagnostic, Not Prescriptive, Stance

This essay does not prescribe what those structures should be. That would exceed its scope and risk the policy advocacy it explicitly avoids.

What the essay diagnoses:

- The abundance narrative systematically omits the meaning question.
- Material provision does not replace meaning infrastructure.
- Ownership concentration under abundance creates new asymmetries, not automatic liberation.
- The transition will produce existential instability unless reconstitution is deliberate.

VI. Conclusion

Material provision *intensifies* and *universalizes* meaning questions by removing the scarcity that previously masked them behind survival imperatives.

If scarcity collapses faster than meaning is reconstituted, the result is not utopia but crisis—not material crisis, but crisis of legitimacy, identity, and coherence.

This is not an argument against abundance. It is an argument that abundance is an *existential inflection point*, not an economic endpoint. What follows depends on whether meaning-generating infrastructure is deliberately reconstituted or passively assumed to emerge.

Meaning is not derivative of material conditions. It requires active grounding. The question is not whether abundance will arrive, but whether humans will have grounds for existence when it does.

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For the abundance narrative being analyzed, see public statements by technology leaders regarding AI-driven economic transformation and “universal high income” proposals.

Related Essays in This Project

Available at: <https://returntoconsciousness.org/>

[Return to Consciousness \(rtc\)](#) — The core framework

[Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality \(mmn\)](#) — Why the abundance narrative’s implicit assumptions matter

[Epistemic Authority \(eaa\)](#) — The epistemic constraints this essay presupposes

[AI as Ego-less Intelligence \(ela\)](#) — Companion essay on AI and cognition

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