

Abundance and Meaning

The Crisis Automation Cannot Solve

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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 emerges 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, and narrative coherence—and that removing labor without replacing its meaning-generating role produces existential instability, not automatic liberation. It further shows that abundance is never neutral: ownership of productive capacity determines whose lives retain meaning and agency under post-scarcity conditions.

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 epistemic authority over 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.

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

When labor is removed, these functions do not automatically transfer elsewhere. The person who loses work does not merely lose income—they lose a structure that organized identity, time, status, narrative, and belonging simultaneously.

The abundance narrative assumes that material provision replaces what labor provided. But labor provided *meaning infrastructure*, not merely survival resources. 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. It is an argument that abundance without meaning reconstitution produces a specific kind of instability: the crisis of legitimacy.

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. Scarcity suppressed them. Abundance makes them unavoidable.

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. Aristocracies that detached from productive labor developed elaborate systems of status, honor, and distinction to maintain legitimacy without economic function. Religious orders that renounced material production developed contemplative practices and service roles that grounded meaning beyond productivity.

What these precedents share: meaning reconstitution was *actively constructed*, not passively inherited. The transition from productive to non-productive identity required institutional, cultural, and psychological infrastructure. Contemplative traditions—Buddhist, Stoic, monastic—developed sophisticated practices for grounding identity, structuring time, and generating meaning independent of economic productivity. These traditions represent millennia of accumulated insight into precisely the problem abundance will force upon everyone.

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. Byung-Chul Han’s analysis of burnout society suggests we already see early manifestations: achievement-driven exhaustion that persists even when external demands ease, because the demand has been internalized and purpose has not been reconstituted.

IV. Ownership as Epistemic Authority

Abundance Is Never Neutral

A critical insight: 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

Ownership of productive capacity shapes—though does not fully determine—what counts as value.

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

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.

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* meaning questions by removing the scarcity that previously deferred them.

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.

References

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Durkheim, É. (1897). *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. (Concept of anomie as crisis of legitimacy following collapse of traditional structures.)

Frankl, V. E. (1946). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press.

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Illich, I. (1973). *Tools for Conviviality*. Harper & Row.

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://brunoton.github.io/return-to-consciousness/>

[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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