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Post-Labor Economics: Classical Economic and Moral-Philosophical Perspectives

Part I: Classical Economic Readings of PLE

Adam Smith (1723–1790) – Division of Labor and Invisible Hand in a Post-Labor World

Adam Smith, famed for *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), championed the productivity gains of division of labor and mechanization. He observed that machinery "abridged and facilitated" work – a miller with a windmill could grind more grain with ease than many men with hand mills. Smith credited the division of labor with spurring invention of labor-saving machines, as specialized workers naturally sought "the easiest methods" to accomplish their tasks. In a post-labor economy (PLE) – one where technology performs most work – Smith would likely applaud the enormous growth in output. The "invisible hand" of self-interest would still operate, but capital and innovation (not labor) become the primary engines of wealth. Smith saw mechanization as generally beneficial; by "facilitating and abridging" labor, machines freed humans for other pursuits. However, he also warned that excessive specialization can dull workers' intellect and virtue (as noted in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*). In a PLE, that risk magnifies: if humans no longer labor out of necessity, society must ensure education and moral development to prevent what Smith called the "torpor" of the mind in repetitive tasks. Overall, Smith's framework implies that **greater productivity from automation can vastly increase societal wealth**, but only if the gains are widely distributed. His support for free markets might extend to support for entrepreneurial innovation in AI and robotics. Yet his emphasis on moral sentiments suggests Smith would urge that **post-labor abundance be guided by an "impartial spectator" ethic** – ensuring the wealth benefits all and that individuals find purpose beyond mere consumption. The challenge, in Smith's view, would be maintaining social cohesion and individual virtue once the disciplining mechanism of necessary labor fades. Historically, Smith noted how **technological progress tends to raise living standards**, and one can imagine him observing that PLE could fulfill the promise of the "wealth of nations" on an unprecedented scale – as long as markets, guided by proper institutions, channel the productivity for common prosperity.

David Ricardo (1772–1823) – Technological Unemployment and Rentier Dynamics

Ricardo famously grappled with machinery's impact on labor. Initially he believed (like Smith) that mechanization would not harm workers overall, assuming new industries and demand would employ them. But in the third edition of *Principles of Political Economy* he added Chapter 31, "On Machinery," where he reversed course: **the substitution of machines for labor "is often very injurious to the interests of the class of labourers"**. Ricardo illustrated how labor-saving machines can reduce the *gross output* that generates wages, even if *net output* (profits) rises. In a post-labor economy, this Ricardian insight is prescient. If automation allows output to soar while requiring minimal labor, then without intervention workers may receive almost none of the income. Ricardo would predict an extreme version of what he described: rising net income to owners of machines (capitalists) even as the labor share plummets, potentially rendering many workers "redundant". His theory of rent also becomes relevant. In PLE, the owners of robots and AI algorithms may earn **economic rent**, much as landlords did in his era. Ricardo

might analogize that **machine owners capture the surplus** once paid as wages, unless policies (like taxes or ownership broadening) redistribute it. Notably, he allowed that over time, capital accumulation could create new jobs and re-employ displaced workers, but this optimistic scenario assumes continuous emergence of new labor-intensive industries – an assumption strained by advanced AI. **Ricardo's stark warning** was that without deliberate action, the same cause that increases national wealth and profits "may at the same time render the population redundant, and deteriorate the condition of the labourer". Thus, a Ricardian critique of PLE would demand mechanisms to ensure that the productivity gains from automation flow to the displaced workers – whether through a social dividend, capital endowments, or other means. He might endorse policies to prevent a permanent "redundant" class of laborers, such as widespread shares in the automated economy or public capital funds, to replicate what wages used to provide. In essence, Ricardo's analysis highlights **the conflict between profits and wages under automation**, foreseeing that **without corrective measures, PLE could concentrate income among rentier-capitalists at the expense of labor**, a dynamic he would find socially untenable.

Karl Marx (1818–1883) – Automation, Surplus Value, and the Realm of Freedom

Marx would view post-labor economics through the lens of his critique of capitalism's tendency to automate production in pursuit of surplus value. In his *Grundrisse* notebooks, Marx famously imagined a future in which automation becomes so advanced that **"labor time ceases and must cease to be the measure of wealth"**, undermining the basis of the capitalist system. Marx saw that capital's drive to increase productivity via the "application of science" to machinery would eventually reduce the need for labor; at that point, **exchange-value (based on labor time) would no longer measure use-value**, and the capitalist law of value would collapse. This is essentially the scenario of PLE: abundance achieved by the "general intellect" (accumulated science/technology) rather than direct human toil. In Marx's vision, this could "blow the foundations of capitalism skywards" [1]. Freed from the necessity of toil, humanity could enter the *realm of freedom* – **"the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific, etc. development of individuals in the time set free"**. Marx would applaud the *potential* of PLE to realize his communist ideal: material abundance permitting distribution "from each according to ability, to each according to need." However, he would fiercely critique a capitalist implementation of PLE where capital owners alone control the automated means of production. Under capitalism, automation simply increases *relative surplus value* (profits) while workers are cast into a "reserve army of the unemployed." Marx warned that **the same automation that could liberate workers will, under capitalism, immiserate them** – until social relations are revolutionized. He noted that capitalism's crises stem from overproduction and underconsumption; PLE might amplify those, as jobless masses cannot buy the abundant goods. His concept of *surplus value* extraction also shifts: if human labor is scarcely needed, surplus is extracted from machine output – but then who owns the machines? Marx would likely predict intensifying class conflict between a shrinking class of owners and the dispossessed majority. Ultimately, Marx would see PLE as **a historical turning point**: either society socializes the productive power of automation (fulfilling a communist society where free time is devoted to higher pursuits), or the concentration of wealth leads to acute crisis and class struggle. Notably, Marx wrote, "As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the great well-spring of wealth… **the surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth**… [then] production based on exchange-value breaks down". In sum, Marx would hail the *technological possibility* of post-labor abundance as the material basis for human emancipation – but only if accompanied by a radical reordering of economic relations to **eliminate exploitation and ensure the fruits of automation are shared by all**.

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) – Stationary State, Distribution, and the Art of Living

J.S. Mill provides a nuanced perspective, envisioning that a reduction of labor could enable greater human flourishing if managed wisely. In his *Principles of Political Economy*, Mill anticipated a "stationary state" of capital and population that need not imply human stagnation. He famously wrote that **a stationary economy with moderate wealth could be preferable to endless growth, if it meant no one was poor and people had time for "mental culture and moral and social progress"**. Mill **"was not charmed with the ideal of life"** which treats ceaseless economic struggle ("trampling, crushing, elbowing" in the rat race) as the highest good. A post-labor world realises much of Mill's hopeful vision: it "implies no stationary state of human improvement" – on the contrary, with basic needs met by machines, humanity can focus on **"improving the Art of Living"**. Mill would emphasize **distribution and education** in such a society. He believed that even if aggregate growth slows, **just distribution of wealth and shortening of work hours** are desirable. Mill endorsed worker cooperatives and education reform; in PLE, he might support mechanisms like universal basic income or common ownership of automation to ensure equitable distribution of the fruits of production. Technological unemployment would not alarm Mill as much as moral underdevelopment. He cautioned that idle luxury can degrade character – hence the need to channel free time into self-improvement, culture, and community. Mill's utilitarian ethos sought the greatest happiness: if automation liberates people from toil, happiness depends on **using that freedom well**. He would likely advocate for a **"leisure ethic"**: social norms and institutions encouraging people to pursue higher pleasures (intellectual, artistic, interpersonal) once freed from drudgery. Mill's vision of progress valued **qualitative** improvement over endless quantitative consumption. As he mused, *"Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."* A PLE society could afford everyone the education and leisure to pursue Socratic self-cultivation. Importantly, Mill distinguished between the *function* of work (providing necessities) and the *ultimate goal* of economic activity, which for him was a richer life. In PLE, the function is fulfilled by machines; society can finally pivot to the ultimate goal: improved quality of life for all. Overall, Mill would likely applaud PLE's potential to achieve what he considered a **"very considerable improvement on our present condition"** – a condition in which people **"no longer desire to be richer, nor fear becoming poorer," focusing instead on "betterment of the art of living"**. But he would stress active efforts in education, civic engagement, and social reform to convert freed time into genuine progress rather than vapid amusements.

Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950) – Creative Destruction and the Entrepreneurial Role

Schumpeter, who coined "creative destruction," would interpret post-labor economics as the culmination of capitalism's incessant revolutionizing of production. In Schumpeter's view, capitalism evolves through waves of innovation that destroy old industries and create new ones, raising productivity and living standards in the long run. A PLE scenario – mass automation of work – is essentially **the ultimate wave of creative destruction**. Schumpeter acknowledged that this process is messy: **"lost jobs, ruined companies, and vanishing industries are inherent parts of the growth system"**, and some individuals may be worse off *perhaps forever*. He would likely say that the **"perennial gale" of creative destruction** has now reached labor itself: entire job categories wiped out by AI and robots. Yet true to form, Schumpeter would look for the *"good that comes from the turmoil."* Over time, he argued, societies allowing creative destruction become far wealthier and their citizens enjoy new and better products, shorter workweeks, and higher living standards. Indeed, he noted historically technological progress led to **shorter work hours and better jobs** on average. In a best-case PLE, machines assume drudgery and humans benefit from abundance and leisure – a kind of victory of innovation. However, Schumpeter also issued a paradoxical warning: **a society cannot reap the rewards of creative destruction without accepting that some will suffer**. In the

context of PLE, this means mass technological unemployment and inequality might reach destabilizing levels. He believed attempts to *"soften the harsher aspects"* of creative destruction via heavy protection or prevention of change would only lead to stagnation. Thus, Schumpeter would argue for embracing innovation but also for *managing* the transition. He might envision entrepreneurs and new industries arising to employ human creativity in novel ways – for example, an explosion of creative arts, experiences, personalized services that humans **uniquely** provide even when routine work is automated. His concept of the **entrepreneur's role** in constantly finding new combinations could extend to post-labor society, where entrepreneurship shifts to social and creative realms. Schumpeter also predicted that capitalism might "degenerate" as it becomes more efficient – potentially evolving into some form of administered society or *"laborless"* socialism. In *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, he speculated that the entrepreneurial vigor could wane as capitalism succeeds, leading to a form of corporatism or public control. A post-labor economy might, in his eyes, be one outcome of capitalism's success, but it could usher in a new socio-economic system. Ultimately, Schumpeter would see PLE as **a dramatic but logical next stage of creative destruction** – one that promises immense gains (unprecedented productivity and wealth) but demands adaptive responses to handle the "destruction" side: permanent job loss for many and the psychological impact of rapid change. He'd likely advise bold experimentation (perhaps new economic institutions or social policies) to ensure **the "creative" dominates the "destructive,"** preserving the dynamism of progress while mitigating that *"some individuals might be worse off, not just in the short term, but perhaps forever"*.

John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946) – Technological Unemployment and Economic Possibilities

Keynes anticipated the core of post-labor economics in his essay *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren* (1930). Writing amid the Great Depression, Keynes envisioned that within a century (by 2030) technological progress could so boost productivity that **the "economic problem" of subsistence would be solved and people would work as little as 15 hours per week** – devoting the rest of time to non-economic purposes. He coined the term *"technological unemployment"* to describe the short-term dislocation as **"our discovery of means of economising the use of labour outruns the pace at which we can find new uses for labour"** [2]. Crucially, Keynes saw this as a *temporary* phase on the way to abundance, not a permanent curse [3]. In a PLE framework, Keynes's prediction has essentially come true in qualitative terms: productivity has soared, and the constraint is no longer production but distribution and maintaining demand. Keynes would urge proactive policy to manage aggregate demand when traditional jobs vanish. He was a proponent of public investment and fiscal policy; in a world with fewer workers, stimulating consumption might require direct income supplements (e.g. a basic income or public employment in socially useful but non-market tasks). He might advocate for **shorter work weeks** and job-sharing – trends he explicitly endorsed as technology improved [2]. Indeed, in 1930 he mused that humanity would need to **"revalue its ends"**: instead of striving for profit and work, people would need to learn to enjoy leisure and find purpose in a life where work is no longer center-stage. Keynes warned this mental adjustment could be difficult: "to those who only know the struggle for life, **there will be a fearful spiritual slackening**" when that struggle eases (he referred to the "nervous breakdown" of the unemployed in his time). However, he believed our innate "purposiveness" would find new outlets – in art, science, love, and so on. On distribution, Keynes was more egalitarian than classical liberals: he favored redistributive taxation and social insurance. Confronted with PLE's extreme inequality potential, Keynes would likely support robust taxation of robot-produced wealth and **"collective solutions"** (perhaps sovereign wealth funds, expanded Social Security, etc.) to ensure mass purchasing power and social stability. He might also counsel patience: just as after past industrial revolutions, new "uses for labour" eventually emerged (think of industries like IT

or healthcare today), Keynes might speculate on new roles for humans – possibly in personal services, creative industries, or caring professions that automation cannot fully satisfy. Still, in line with his *General Theory*, if private investment lags behind savings in an automated economy (a scenario of secular stagnation), Keynes would press for government as the spender of last resort to maintain full employment (broadly defined). That employment might be in **education, arts, environmental conservation** – jobs providing social value even if not strictly needed for production. In summary, Keynes offers a hopeful but pragmatically grounded vision: **technological progress should enable unparalleled abundance and leisure** ("economic bliss" as he called it), but achieving that potential demands active fiscal and social policy to navigate the transition. As he optimistically put it, *"man will be faced with his real, permanent problem – how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science… will have won"*. The task for a Keynesian in PLE is to ensure aggregate demand and social cohesion are preserved while humanity learns "to live wisely and agreeably and well" in a society of plenty.

Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992) – Spontaneous Order, Liberty, and Caution Against Planning

Hayek, a staunch free-market advocate, would approach post-labor economics with a mixture of intrigue and warning. On one hand, a society where machines provide abundance could, in principle, liberate individuals from drudgery – which aligns with Hayek's liberal emphasis on individual freedom. But Hayek would be deeply concerned *how* this new order is achieved. He believed no central planner could ever possess the dispersed knowledge that individuals and markets do. His theory of **spontaneous order** holds that complex social outcomes (like price equilibria or economic coordination) emerge "as the result of human action, but not of human design," and that only the **"unabashedly free market" generates accurate signals for coordination**. Hayek would therefore oppose any technocratic attempt to centrally plan a post-labor economy. He'd caution that even if labor is less needed, *market price signals* must still guide resource allocation – including the allocation of machine-produced goods. If, for example, a government simply guaranteed incomes or controlled robot production, Hayek would fear distortions, shortages, or authoritarian control. **"Tyranny results from government's attempts to plan the workings of daily life,"** he wrote, arguing that letting authority dictate economic outcomes undermines freedom. He might well apply this to PLE: if the state tries to assign incomes or jobs to people "liberated" from work, it could become a despotic "Leviathan" treating people as means to its vision (a concern echoing Kant's caution never to treat persons merely as means). Instead, Hayek would likely favor a **market-based transition**: perhaps something like a negative income tax (which Milton Friedman advocated) combined with minimal regulation on innovation, so entrepreneurs can discover new roles for human creativity. He did acknowledge a basic safety net is permissible, so he might accept some form of universal income as long as it's run in a market-friendly way (e.g. cash transfers rather than detailed welfare programs). The key for Hayek is that **individuals must be free to choose their pursuits even in a post-labor world**, and that the rule of law protects private property in the means of production (including robots/AI). He'd also highlight the danger of *elite "experts"* misusing the narrative of PLE to justify expansive planning. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* warned that well-intentioned economic planning leads to loss of freedom. He might point to the Soviet experience and say: even if machines make production easier, concentrating their control in the state (or a few tech monopolies) would be perilous. Instead, disperse ownership and decision-making. Interestingly, Hayek did envision in later works that society might eventually afford a generous safety net once wealth is sufficient – PLE could be that moment. But he'd insist it be structured to preserve incentives and competition (perhaps through something like Friedman's voucher or NIT systems). **In summary, Hayek would celebrate the productivity of a post-labor economy but vehemently argue that only the spontaneous order of a free society can effectively and humanely handle such a transition**. He would

say: *trust the evolved institutions of markets and private property, buttressed by the rule of law, to adapt,* rather than handing the reins to central planners. Maintaining liberty, in Hayek's view, is paramount – even amidst robots. Any attempt to "steer" society too much in response to automation he'd likely label as the fatal conceit of planners who cannot possibly know all the dispersed, tacit human preferences that give life meaning.

Milton Friedman (1912–2006) – Free Markets, Negative Income Tax, and Capital Distribution

Friedman, a leading monetarist and free-market economist, would approach PLE emphasizing choice and simplicity in policy. He famously proposed a **negative income tax (NIT)** as a means to support those with little market income by providing cash transfers while maintaining work incentives. In a post-labor scenario, Friedman's NIT idea becomes especially salient: if automation drastically reduces jobs, a guaranteed basic income via NIT could ensure everyone has a floor standard of living. Friedman would prefer this market-friendly approach to a complex web of welfare programs. He argued that giving people cash is more efficient and respects their freedom – they can spend according to their needs, rather than being directed by paternalistic programs. So one can easily imagine Friedman promoting a **universal basic income (or NIT)** funded by the enormous productivity of AI and robots, instead of, say, elaborate government job guarantees. He'd likely insist that any such income guarantee have a phase-out (so as not to discourage work entirely) – yet if there simply isn't enough traditional work, Friedman might acknowledge that the old incentive arguments carry less weight. He might also join Hayek in advocating minimal regulation on innovation: let the tech sector innovate freely to drive costs down so that even the poorest can access abundant goods (echoing his stance that free trade and competition benefit consumers with lower prices). On the issue of inequality, Friedman believed in equality of opportunity rather than outcome, but he also recognized the efficiency of broad-based prosperity. In a society where capital ownership is the main source of income (because labor isn't needed), Friedman might support mechanisms to widen capital ownership – albeit through voluntary market means (e.g. employee stock ownership, widespread index fund investing, etc.) rather than coercive redistribution. Notably, Friedman did endorse ideas like school vouchers and health savings accounts – indicating a willingness to reinvent institutions to expand access. For PLE, he might similarly propose **"capital vouchers"** or a one-time endowment to citizens to partake in the returns of automated industry. Friedman's overarching philosophy was that economic freedom underpins other freedoms. He'd likely celebrate that PLE *could* liberate people from menial jobs, giving them freedom to choose careers, education, or leisure as they desire. But he would be wary of government stepping in to "manage" how people use that freedom. He once said, *"The society that puts equality before freedom will get neither. The society that puts freedom before equality will get a high degree of both."* In PLE context, that means he'd resist heavy-handed redistribution beyond a basic floor. Instead, trust in entrepreneurship and personal initiative: many people might still *choose* to work or create (art, research, startups) even if not forced by necessity. Friedman would predict new forms of "work" will arise – perhaps not menial labor, but creative and interpersonal endeavors that the market will reward (consider how the internet gave rise to entirely new professions). Government's role, in his view, should be limited to maintaining stable monetary conditions (to avoid inflation in a world of possibly accelerating output), enforcing contracts, and providing the minimal safety net. **Thus, Friedman would likely endorse a simple and direct redistribution (basic income) to address joblessness, but otherwise champion the power of free markets and technological entrepreneurs to fill the post-labor world with opportunities and innovations we cannot yet imagine.** His optimism in markets would extend to PLE: if we free individuals from constraints, they will find productive and fulfilling ways to use their talents, even if 40-hour factory jobs are history.

Joan Robinson (1903–1983) – Labor Exploitation, Monopsony, and the Value of Work

Joan Robinson, a prominent Keynesian and post-Keynesian economist, would cast a critical eye on PLE, focused on power imbalances and the fate of workers. She quipped pointedly that **"the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all."** In other words, unemployment and being deemed economically redundant is a worse plight than even exploitative low-wage work. This insight rings loudly in a post-labor scenario: if most humans are "not needed" for production, their bargaining power drops to nil. Robinson studied imperfect competition and monopsonies (situations where employers have power to set wages). In a PLE, capital owners (the owners of AI/robots) form an extreme monopsony or even monopoly – workers have essentially no alternative employer if machines are more efficient at every task. Robinson would likely predict a collapse of the wage share and chronically insufficient aggregate demand as workers lose incomes. She might extend her analysis of *disguised unemployment* (labor that is only employed at low productivity because better options lack) – in PLE, a vast portion of the workforce may become openly or disguised unemployed, potentially kept busy in precarious gigs or public make-work. **From Robinson's perspective, radical policy is needed**: perhaps government as employer of last resort (financing socially useful work that the market won't pay for) or strong labor institutions that claim a share of productivity. She, being sympathetic to aspects of Marxism, would likely call for **social ownership stakes** for workers in the automated means of production. If capital is the source of all output, then to avoid a dystopia Robinson would argue workers must become *collective capitalists* – e.g. through public ownership, cooperatives, or heavy redistribution. Joan Robinson also emphasized economic *purpose*. She once asked, *"what's the point of economic growth if it doesn't benefit the common person?"* In a world of automated production, she'd ask similarly: *What is the economy for?* If it's not providing meaningful employment, it must deliver welfare and meaning in other ways. She might advocate for redefining work – valuing forms of labor like care work, education, community service that are still done by humans and which our current system undervalues. Under a capitalist PLE, without intervention, she'd warn of a dual economy: a tiny elite of tech owners and a mass of effectively idle poor, perhaps kept docile with meager universal dole. This ties to her criticism of the neoclassical theory of marginal productivity – in PLE, the marginal product of most labor could be near zero (machines do it all), so standard theory would say pay them zero. Robinson would say this exposes the moral failure of treating distribution as purely a market outcome. Society must instead *choose* distribution ethically. In her later work, Robinson also valued human creativity and welfare beyond GDP. She might see an opportunity in PLE to shorten work hours and improve work conditions drastically (much like Keynes did), but only if policies force the issue – left to itself, capitalism might not shorten the working week but simply eliminate some jobs while overworking those still deemed "useful". In summary, Joan Robinson's take on PLE would be a stark warning: **"If you think exploitation is bad, wait until you see mass redundancy."** She'd press for structural changes ensuring that **the wealth of the machine age is shared** and that humans aren't reduced to what she feared most – an underclass with "nothing to sell but their sweat" but now even that sweat has no buyer. Her plea would be to use the post-labor opportunity to elevate everyone's economic security and to redefine work to include any activity that contributes to society, not just what the market labels productive. Only through such deliberate measures could the *misery of not being exploited at all* be averted in the age of intelligent machines.

Thomas Piketty (1971–) – Inequality, Capital, and R>G in a Post-Labor Era

Piketty, renowned for his analysis of capital accumulation and inequality, would likely view post-labor economics as a magnified version of the trends he documented in *Capital in the 21st Century*. Piketty's fundamental insight: when the return on capital (r) exceeds the growth rate of the economy (g), wealth

concentrates in the hands of capital owners. In a PLE world, **r>>g could become the norm**, because capital (AI, robots, intellectual property) might generate enormous output with minimal labor, while overall growth may not keep up. Labor's share of income, already observed by Piketty to be falling, could approach zero as machines take over. He would predict an unprecedented surge in the capital share of income – **perhaps close to 100% of output accruing to owners of robots and algorithms**, if institutions don't change. Piketty has already warned that absent shocks or policy, wealth inequality tends to reach extreme levels. With PLE, this "patrimonial capitalism" could be complete: a new aristocracy of robot proprietors. He might update his famous formula to: β, the capital-to-income ratio, would skyrocket as capital accumulates and labor income dwindles. The extreme scenario of PLE was hinted in his discussion: *"If Piketty's feared scenario comes to pass, in which machines replace labor and population growth slows, the world would experience unbounded growth… the economy could grow while people contribute no new innovations"* – essentially **a hyper-productive economy with potentially negligible human employment**. Piketty would see this as socially and politically unsustainable without major intervention. He has advocated progressive wealth taxes and inheritance taxes to prevent oligarchic dominance. In PLE, such tools might need to be even more aggressive: perhaps **annual taxes on robots or on the imputed output of AI** to fund social dividends. Piketty might also call for **universal capital endowments** (a concept he has floated, giving each young adult a lump sum of capital) so that everyone owns a piece of the robotic means of production. His recent work also emphasizes participatory governance and worker voice – in PLE that could translate to giving citizens or workers collective stakes in AI platforms (for example, data trusts or public ownership of certain AI utilities). Additionally, Piketty, being attuned to historical political economy, would note the risk of *political backlash*. Extreme inequality in a PLE could fuel populism or unrest that makes the Gilded Age's struggles look mild. Therefore, he'd likely stress *democratic control* over the transition: ensuring that the gains of automation are broadly shared as either public services or basic incomes. In essence, Piketty would argue that **post-labor abundance must not become post-democracy oligarchy**. Just as he documented how the 19th century's unequal capital ownership led to social upheavals (world wars, etc.), he would warn that a 21st century PLE without redistribution could lead to crisis – whether democratic revolt or dystopian stratification. His prescription would combine heavy taxation on excessive capital gains, **redistribution of wealth in forms that build assets for the many**, and investment in education and training so people can still find meaningful roles (even if not strictly needed for survival, humans will seek meaning – perhaps in new professions like caretaking, creative arts, research which society can choose to reward). Piketty often invokes the need for *"participatory socialism"* or new forms of shared ownership. A PLE world might vindicate that vision: if not only the returns to capital must be shared, but even decision-making about production (since machines may produce plenty but **society** must decide how to use that plenty – e.g. more leisure, environmental restoration, etc.). In summary, Piketty's analysis suggests that without deliberate policy, **post-labor economics would massively exacerbate the trend of r > g, entrenching a new rentier class**. To counter this, he would advocate robust tax and transfer schemes and innovative ownership models so that *"the earth itself belongs to us all"* (as Rousseau put it) even if labor no longer does. In short, *either* we have Piketty's nightmare of inequality or we implement Piketty-style solutions to democratize the benefits of our robotic inheritance.

Part II: Moral-Philosophical Readings of PLE

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) – Autonomy, Dignity, and the Moral Use of Freedom

Kant's deontological ethics, centered on autonomy and respect for persons, provides a rigorous lens for a post-labor society. Kant held that each person must be treated as an **end in themselves, never merely as a means**. In a PLE world, this imperative gains new dimensions. If human labor is no longer economically

necessary, there is a risk people could be seen as *superfluous means* – useless except as consumers or objects of welfare. Kant would condemn any social arrangement that devalues persons' intrinsic worth or strips their agency. **Autonomy** was for Kant the hallmark of moral personhood: the capacity to give oneself the moral law. Work under necessity sometimes compromised autonomy (one might labor out of need, not free choice). Paradoxically, a post-labor economy can *enhance* autonomy – freeing individuals from coercive economic necessity to pursue their own purposes. This would delight Kant, but only if individuals indeed *use* their freedom in line with moral law and reason. He might warn of the temptation to sink into mere indulgence (what he'd deem heteronomy, being ruled by desires). Kant envisioned humanity's vocation as progressing toward a moral society (the *kingdom of ends*). PLE could be an opportunity to focus on moral and intellectual development now that survival is guaranteed. He wrote that **"the true vocation of human reason is not to secure happiness, but to produce a good will"**. With labor's yoke lifted, society must invest in education in virtue, ensuring people find worthy pursuits. Themes like **purpose and duty** become acute: absent economic duties, how will people find a sense of duty? Kant might point to duty to self and others – cultivation of one's talents, aiding others, contributing to community – as new forms of non-compulsory "work" that maintain dignity. Kant's political philosophy (in *Perpetual Peace* and *Idea for a Universal History*) also valued a society of freedom under just laws. He believed nature used **"unsocial sociability"** – our competitive tendencies – to drive progress toward a cosmopolitan order. In a post-labor context, he might see a double-edged sword: on one hand, **the antagonism that spurred economic progress might dwindle** (since competition for subsistence is gone), potentially slowing mankind's development. On the other hand, if guided by reason, humanity could turn energies to higher pursuits (science, culture, governance) – a more direct route to moral progress. Kant would strongly emphasize **justice** in distribution. While not an egalitarian in a modern sense, his principle of right demands that social arrangements be such that they could be willed by all rational beings. A PLE constitution or social contract would need to pass the test of universality: could every person consent to the way resources and freedoms are allocated when labor is unnecessary? If, for example, a few controlled all the AI and everyone else was on meager welfare, that fails to respect persons' equal dignity. Kant might propose a system where each citizen's freedom is secured by rights to basic provision (perhaps aligning with a Rawlsian or rights-based basic income as precondition of autonomy). Finally, Kant's concept of **duty to others** implies that with great power (technology) comes greater duty to use it for moral ends. In PLE, that could mean duties of the talented or wealthy (who control AI) to ensure it benefits humanity (a **"cosmopolitan stewardship"**, caring for the world and future generations – a notion consistent with Kant's cosmopolitan ethics). Kant's stringent moral law would counsel each individual in PLE not to lapse into mere pleasure-seeking, but to act from duty – for instance, using one's free time to help others, pursue truth, and perfect oneself. In essence, Kant would welcome a society that liberates people from being treated as means (laborers) so they can fully be ends (moral agents). But he would stress that this **freedom carries the obligation to use one's autonomy wisely**, respecting the moral law. A post-labor kingdom of ends should be one where all have the material freedom to act morally, and choose to do so, never degrading themselves or others into purposeless idleness or exploitative relationships. **Human dignity** in PLE demands that we see each person not as a redundant unit, but as an irreplaceable legislator of values – a being called to set ends for themselves beyond economic necessity.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) – Leisure, Virtue, and the Fulfillment of Human Telos

Aristotle provides an uncannily direct reflection on a post-labor ideal. In his *Politics*, he mused that **if tools could work on their own, like "the statues of Daedalus" moving automatically, then masters would have no need of slaves**. This essentially describes advanced automation. Aristotle saw manual labor as necessary but not ennobling; the highest human life, in his view, requires **scholē** – leisure for contemplation

and virtue. He famously asserted that **"happiness depends on leisure; for we work to have leisure, and wage war to live in peace."** In a post-labor economy, Aristotle's hierarchy of ends can be fulfilled: material needs met, people free to pursue *eudaimonia* (flourishing). However, Aristotle would be cautious. Leisure (scholē) in his sense is not mere inactivity or amusement; it's time spent in **virtuous activities** – philosophy, aesthetics, cultivating friendships, practicing civic duty. He might fear that freed from work, many could indulge in trivial pleasures (what he might call **"wretched contentment"**, akin to Nietzsche's Last Man's plight). Thus, an Aristotelian take on PLE would strongly emphasize **education and habituation in virtue**. Aristotle believed character is formed by habits: a society transitioning to abundant leisure must train citizens from youth to use free time well – otherwise they risk vice or akrasia (weakness of will). Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* teaches that true happiness is an *activity of soul in accordance with virtue*. So in PLE, the "economy" of life shifts from production of goods to **cultivation of character and intellect**. Aristotle, who valued the **"contemplative life"** highest, might see a golden age of philosophy and science emerging – if people are properly guided to value those pursuits. He'd likely advise structuring society (laws and culture) to encourage participation in self-governance, arts, and sciences during newfound leisure. Additionally, Aristotle's concept of the **polis** (city-state) as existing "for the sake of the good life" resonates with PLE's potential. Freed from survival labor, citizens can engage more in politics and community (which Aristotle saw as natural for humans as "political animals"). However, he also worried that extreme inequality corrodes the polis. If PLE initially brings inequality (few own robots), Aristotle would urge a balance – perhaps echoing his preference for a **broad middle class** to stabilize society. On **purpose (telos)**, Aristotle would ask: what is the telos of human life when not bound by toil? His answer: rational activity in accordance with virtue. PLE grants the external conditions for this (leisure, resources), but achieving it requires internal virtue. So public institutions might need to foster **"leisure ethics"** – norms that esteem pursuing excellence (arete) in arts, sports, thought, rather than just mindless consumption. Aristotle also discussed **"magnanimity"** (megalopsychia) – greatness of soul – which in part means using great wealth or power for noble ends. In a society of abundance, cultivating leaders and citizens who use their capacities for honorable projects (say, grand cultural or scientific projects – perhaps *"cosmological stewardship,"* like planetary protection or exploration) would be an Aristotelian mandate. Lastly, Aristotle recognized that not everyone will choose the highest life; some prefer the life of pleasure, others of honor. A PLE society must accommodate plural conceptions of the good – but ideally, steer people gently toward higher pleasures (some commentators see in Aristotle the root of a **"leisure science"** of well-being). **In summary, Aristotle would greet PLE as the materialization of a long-standing dream: the elimination of forced menial labor (which in his time was done by slaves) allowing citizens to pursue virtue and excellence.** Yet he'd insist this dream doesn't automatically fulfill itself: it takes deliberate cultural and ethical effort to ensure abundant leisure leads to **eudaimonia** and not mere indolence. Cultivating virtues like temperance (to not abuse pleasure), courage (to undertake challenges even when not compelled by need), justice (to contribute to common good), and phronesis (practical wisdom in using one's freedom) would be Aristotle's roadmap to making post-labor life truly **the good life**.

David Hume (1711–1776) – Utility, Habit, and the Conditions of Justice and Purpose

Hume, an empiricist and philosopher of human nature, would examine post-labor society by asking: how does it align with our psychological dispositions and the "circumstances of justice"? Hume famously argued that **justice (especially property rights) is necessary only under certain conditions** – namely moderate scarcity. If goods were superabundant, or conversely extremely scarce, the notion of justice and property would become irrelevant or suspended. *"Why make a partition of goods where everyone has more than enough?"* he wrote; **in conditions of extreme abundance, "justice…would be an idle ceremonial"**. A post-labor economy might approach such abundance for many goods (energy, information, basic necessities).

Hume would predict a transformation in norms: if AI yields plenty, society might relax some property conventions – for example, free public provision of basics (like how air or knowledge can be freely used without ownership). He observed that even in his time, water and air were left in common because they were abundant. In PLE, many more things could fall in that category (perhaps housing, healthcare, education could be guaranteed rather than allocated by market). However, Hume would also note that **human nature isn't transformed overnight by abundance**. We still have pride, ambition, and the need for meaning. Hume emphasized habit and custom: people find meaning and virtue through useful activities and social appreciation. If employment (a key source of routine and purpose for many) vanishes, Hume might foresee malaise unless new customs arise. In his essays, Hume wrote that **industry and action are essential to happiness** – he considered idleness a source of misery despite our initial inclination to it. He admired commerce and improvement for instilling *"habits of industry, frugality, and invention."* In a PLE world, ensuring people have *meaningful pursuits* (even if not economically required) would be crucial. Hume's notion of *"ease and freedom from want"* being conducive to the arts and civility suggests optimism: when not harried by poverty, people may cultivate finer tastes and social virtues. But he'd caution that too much ease can breed *enervation*. Hume's sentimentalist ethics also highlight **sympathy**: human happiness is strongly tied to social bonds. A risk in PLE is people become isolated consumers of entertainment (with no workplace, etc.). Hume would urge fostering community engagement – perhaps through voluntary associations, clubs (he was part of intellectual clubs himself), and public festivals. As a skeptic of utopias, Hume would be quick to point out potential *"evolutionary mismatch"* issues: we evolved to strive for survival, and now that survival is given, some might flounder. He'd likely encourage channeling competitive instincts into **"harmless" competitions** – e.g. sports, academic rivalries, artistic contests – to satisfy our *unsocial sociability* in productive ways (here he resonates with the idea of **"distributed agonism"**: spreading competition across many domains so it remains creative, not destructive). On politics, Hume acknowledged that extreme inequality or dependence corrodes liberty and social cohesion. If PLE initially produces wealth concentration, Hume's pragmatic side would support reforms if needed to maintain stability (he wasn't dogmatic about property – he saw its justification in its social utility). Should the rich become too rich and the poor too idle and discontent, the *public utility*, which for Hume is the foundation of justice, might dictate progressive policies. Summarily, Hume would approach PLE with cautious pragmatism: *If* it increases the general welfare (more comfort, learning, sociality), then it's good. But human nature being what it is – a mix of reason and passionate habit – we must proactively shape this new condition. **He'd likely champion the creation of new social norms and institutions that give people structure, pride, and virtue in an economy that no longer *needs* their labor**. For instance, civic projects or intellectual endeavors could become the new "work" to occupy our energies. And echoing his insight that **extreme abundance could render justice obsolete**, he might foresee a world where rigid property rights relax in favor of a generous commons – provided it truly serves public happiness. In essence, Hume's philosophy reminds us that *context matters*: post-labor economics will alter the context of our lives, and our moral sentiments and institutions must adapt in tandem to preserve social utility and human contentment.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) – Inequality, Amour-Propre, and the Search for Meaningful Community

Rousseau, the great critic of inequality and advocate of the "natural man," would have a complex reaction to a post-labor economy. On one hand, PLE promises a kind of return to a state where survival is secure and one's time is one's own – reminiscent of Rousseau's idealized portrait of the independent savage who is free because his needs are simple. **"The fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody,"** he wrote, lamenting that the first enclosure of land began the era of inequality and servitude. If automation could effectively *de-enclose* productivity – making it possible to provide plenty for all – Rousseau might

celebrate that as a chance to **undo artificial inequalities**. He hated the dependence inherent in modern economic relations (the servant dependent on the master, the tenant on the landlord). PLE could, if structured for egalitarianism, free people from dependence on others for livelihood, fulfilling Rousseau's desire for **personal autonomy within a cooperative community**. However, Rousseau also recognized the deep psychological change civilization wrought: **amour-propre** – the inflamed self-love that drives status competition, vanity, and ceaseless comparison. A society without labor doesn't automatically cure that. In fact, it might intensify certain forms of status competition *because* people no longer compete for basic economic success. They might compete even more in social hierarchies of fame, looks, or online clout. Rousseau would warn that **"everyone wants to be seen, to be preferred to others"** – a tendency that could become pathological in idle, media-saturated masses. He would likely advise that a PLE society emphasize education fostering **amour-de-soi** (healthy self-regard) over amour-propre. That might mean encouraging modesty, communal activities, and discouraging extreme displays of luxury or achievement that make others feel lesser. Rousseau's *Social Contract* envisioned a community bound by a **General Will** – a collectively determined common good that each individual, as citizen, consents to. In a post-labor world, the challenge and opportunity is to redefine civic duty and participation. Freed from daily toil, people could engage more in governance and community decision-making. Rousseau would delight in the prospect of citizens gathering in assemblies (or deliberative forums) to decide how to manage their common wealth of automation. He might propose something radical: since no one *needs* to work, civic service (like participating in councils, militia, juries, public works) could become the new "work" that gives life structure and virtue. **"Idle hands"** worried Rousseau only if they led to vice; if instead those hands can play music, make art, exercise in nature (he was big on outdoor education), or debate in the agora, then leisure can breed virtue. He'd likely support simplistic living with high thinking – using leisure to reconnect with nature and community. Yet, he'd also caution about **Hobbesian dangers**: in *Discourse on Inequality* he notes how with leisure, people invented arts and comparisons that led to jealousy and vice. So PLE must manage that by cultivating **simple pleasures and equality**. Possibly, Rousseau would favor strong limits on economic inequality even more in PLE – if machines produce everything, allow everyone access rather than let a few hoard. He might even propose communal ownership of major automated industries, aligning with his idea that sovereignty (and by extension major resources) should lie with the people. Another theme: **purpose.** Rousseau believed natural man had unity of self and purpose (survive, live freely). Modern man, by contrast, is fragmented, alienated, not sure what to live for beyond chasing social approval. PLE could exacerbate that void: what do we live for when not for survival or duty? Here Rousseau's concept of **"civil religion"** or civic spirit might enter. He suggested societies need shared values or quasi-spiritual civic rituals to unite them. In a post-labor era, forging a common sense of purpose – perhaps stewardship of the environment (a *"cosmological stewardship"* ethos, as in caring for the planet and beyond) or the pursuit of knowledge – could serve as a new civil religion. Distributed agonism (spreading competitive energies widely) also resonates: Rousseau loved physical contests (like his recommendation that children learn through physical competition but without excessive emphasis on winning). One could imagine him supporting many small-scale competitions (sports, games, contests of virtue) to channel amour-propre in healthy ways, **"distributed"** such that no single hierarchy dominates. Summing up, Rousseau would see post-labor economics as a chance to **recover lost human freedom and equality**, but only if we consciously reshape society's values. Without reorienting toward simple, communal, virtuous living, he'd fear we become *"fake happy"* last men (to borrow Nietzsche's term) or fall under new tyrannies (perhaps the soft despotism of bread and circuses). He might pen a new *Social Contract* for PLE, starting: *"Man is born free from labor, yet everywhere finds himself in chains of gold and silicon. How to break these chains and return to freedom?"* His answer would revolve around **equality, civic engagement, and a revival of communal life** as the cure for the aimlessness that could otherwise engulf a labor-free humanity.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) – Security, Competition, and the Leviathan of Welfare

Hobbes, with his bleak view of human nature in the state of nature, would approach a post-labor world first by asking: does it mitigate or inflame the causes of conflict? Hobbes identified **"three principal causes of quarrel: competition, diffidence (fear), and glory."** In the state of nature, people invade for gain, for safety, or for reputation. Does PLE remove these causes? Potentially, *competition for gain* over basic goods might diminish if abundance is real – when resources are ample and provided, one need not fight over bread. Hobbes noted if resources were infinite, there'd be no need for justice or war. However, other elements remain. **Diffidence**: even in a lush world, people might fear each other – perhaps fear of crime, or in modern form, cyber threats, AI misuses, etc. And **glory**: humans might still seek domination or prestige ("a word, a smile" can offend and spark conflict). In fact, if people no longer channel aggression into economic competition, they might channel it more into status and ideology (Hobbes would see the seeds of conflict in prideful human psychology). Thus, Hobbes would likely insist on the continued necessity of a strong **Leviathan** – a sovereign power to keep peace. If anything, a government might take on an expanded role: not only protecting lives but also providing for livelihoods (since in Hobbes's time, labor secured one's needs, but now the state might need to allocate machine-produced wealth). Hobbes's ideal sovereign had absolute authority to ensure security. In PLE, the social contract might involve trading some freedoms for guaranteed sustenance and order. Picture a scenario where government provides a universal basic income (that's the "Leviathan of welfare") and in return expects citizens to obey laws and perhaps even lifestyle regulations (to avoid societal decay). Hobbes might support relatively authoritarian measures to prevent the "disorder of idle multitudes." He described life without sovereign rule as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," but ironically, *with* PLE life could be communal, rich, safe, even long – yet a sovereign is still needed because human nature hasn't angelified. People might still form factions and compete (for example, political power or cultural dominance). Hobbes would worry about new forms of conflict: maybe the masses, freed from the distraction of work, engage in more intense political or religious disputes (Hobbes, writing after civil war, feared divisive ideologies). To him, keeping a lid on sectarian strife would be as important as ever – possibly more, since an idle population might become *devil's workshops* for fanaticism or power struggles. **Status competition** ("glory") might also intensify in strange ways – think of social media flame wars or striving for fame. Hobbes would shrug: *same humans, new toys.* His solution remains: strong laws, maybe regulating harmful content or public conduct, akin to a Leviathan moderating the new arenas of contest. On a more positive note, Hobbes did acknowledge that under a strong sovereign, arts and knowledge flourish ("commodious living" arises). So if PLE has a Leviathan ensuring distribution and security, people could focus on culture and science rather than survival – aligning with his claim that only under peace and order do "industry, culture of the earth, navigation… and knowledge" prosper. Hobbes might thus accept a paternalistic state that organizes the economy (ensures everyone is fed by the robots) and strictly prevents violent competition. **Freedom, in Hobbes's eyes, is limited** – freedom is the silence of the law. In PLE, people might have *more* laws concerning distribution (taxes, etc.) but also *fewer* constraints of necessity. Perhaps he'd see that as a net benefit: as long as physical safety and basic needs are guaranteed (core of his contract), people are freer in a civil sense to do as they please (within law). Ultimately, Hobbes would counsel *realism*: PLE doesn't make humans all benevolent. He would likely predict **new forms of war** – not over bread, but maybe over honor, ideology, or sheer mischief. And he'd stick to his remedy of an overarching authority to check those impulses. If the Leviathan in Hobbes's time was the mortal god that kept subjects in awe, the Leviathan in PLE might also need to manage the potentially **demoralizing effects of purposelessness**. A Leviathan might enforce, say, mandatory education or civic service to occupy people usefully (Hobbes wouldn't trust people to spontaneously behave well in unlimited leisure). In a sense, Hobbes might endorse what later thinkers called **"authoritarian paternalism"** in PLE – albeit for the ultimate end of preventing the war of all against all. In summary, Hobbes's take: *Technology may remove the fight for survival, but not the fight springing from human passions.* Only fear of a common

power keeps those passions in check. So even in a post-labor Eden of material plenty, the Hobbesian serpent (competition, diffidence, glory) must be constrained by the iron arm of Leviathan.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) – The Last Man, Overman, and the Transvaluation of Work

Nietzsche provides one of the most visceral critiques relevant to a post-labor scenario: his concept of the **"Last Man."** In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he sketches the Last Men as those who live in **comfortable mediocrity** without ambition or great passion. *"'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink"*. This eerily anticipates a society where material comfort (from automation) is maximized and struggle minimized. Nietzsche would be profoundly wary that PLE could produce a civilization of Last Men: risk-averse, pleasure-seeking, and devoid of higher aspirations. The Last Man, Nietzsche says, **"lives longest"**, *content with little pleasures, wanting no great challenges*. That sounds like a welfare state utopia turned spiritual dystopia – humans reduced to contented cows, as it were. He would thunder against this flattening of the human spirit. Nietzsche's philosophy calls for the creation of new values and the overcoming of man (the **Übermensch or Overman**). In a world where traditional work is gone, the challenge is: *what new values, what new striving will humanity embrace?* If none, then nihilism (the sense of meaningless) or Last Man complacency sets in. Nietzsche actually saw nihilism as the great crisis of modernity – the death of God and, with it, the collapse of old purposes. PLE might accelerate this: remove the daily purpose of work and many might find themselves directionless, confronting the emptiness of "why live at all?" He would urge a **"transvaluation of values"** – a radical rethinking of how we assign meaning, independent of the old notion that one's worth = one's work or utility. Freed from drudgery, humans have the *opportunity* to become **creators**, to exercise will to power in artistic, intellectual, or adventurous realms. Nietzsche would hope for **"Overmen"**: individuals (or a culture) that turns this free time into an arena for self-overcoming, creative excellence, and perhaps *cosmic* projects (he spoke metaphorically of giving birth to a "dancing star" from one's internal chaos). In Nietzsche's terms, PLE must avoid making people **"mere stomachs"** (echoing his critique of societies that worship comfort). Instead, conditions should be such that existential tension and creative pressure remain. He might actually advocate *manufacturing* some difficulty if it's lacking – for example, encouraging strenuous physical training, extreme sports, or intellectual contests to ensure people still experience struggle and growth. This ties in with the idea of **"distributed agonism"**: since economic competition is largely moot, we create many fields of symbolic competition (games, sports, art, scholarship, even simulated wars in virtual reality?) to channel the will to power in non-lethal ways. Nietzsche would also critique any egalitarian impulse that drags everyone down to equal comfort. He valued excellence and hierarchy (of ability if not of rights). So he might favor that PLE allows exceptional individuals to undertake grand projects – perhaps multi-generational art like building awe-inspiring architectures, exploring space (a form of **"cosmological stewardship,"** taking humanity's will to power beyond Earth). These would be the new arenas for greatness. Meanwhile, he'd lambast the notion that simply ensuring everyone's basic needs met is the *end* of society. That, to him, is baseline, not apex. The tragedy would be if humanity, having solved hunger and toil, *decided to do nothing higher*. Nietzsche's concept of **sublimation** is relevant: he thought creative and spiritual pursuits sublimate raw drives (sex, aggression) into culture. With PLE, ample energy from unspent labor must be sublimated or else it could turn destructive (perhaps senseless violence born of boredom or decadent self-indulgence). He'd encourage sublimation into philosophy, art, dance, or self-experimentation. For example, individuals might treat life as a work of art – forging their own disciplines, lifestyles, even personas (think of Nietzsche's own self-fashioning as an solitary prophet of the future). **Postnihilism** is actually a term that fits a Nietzschean resolution: after the collapse of external meanings (work, religion), one creates meaning through one's own will and creativity. Nietzsche would challenge post-labor humanity: *"Now that you have comfort, for what will you* will*? Can you will the overman?*

Or will you sink into the void?" His hope would be that a few (the "experimenters," "free spirits") will use the freedom to *go beyond* – in knowledge, in self-mastery, even in biological or technological enhancement (Nietzsche's notion of overcoming could extend to transhuman-like ideas of enhancing human capacities, though that's speculative). He'd likely disparage those who choose passive contentment – *"No shepherd and one herd! Everyone wants the same, everyone is the same"* he mockingly says of the Last Men. In PLE he fears a monoculture of consumerism. The remedy is cultivating strong individuals and cultural practices that celebrate risk, challenge, and difference. In summation, Nietzsche would see **post-labor economics as a test**: it removes external constraints and excuses, leaving human beings face-to-face with themselves. **Will we become creators or just consumers?** Nietzsche's verdict: *Woe to the society of Last Men; but glory to the society that can give birth to Overmen.* The post-labor world must actively choose the latter path by rejecting complacency and embracing a self-transcending quest for new values, meaning, and greatness.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) – Sublimation, Discontent, and the Need for Work and Love

Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, would bring a clinical and pessimistic eye to post-labor society's psychological implications. Freud said human well-being rests on two pillars: **"love and work."** Work, to Freud, was a vital outlet for our libido (broad life energy) through the process of *sublimation* – diverting primal drives into socially acceptable activities. He observed that **"professional activity is a source of special satisfaction if it is freely chosen – by means of sublimation it makes possible the use of instinctual impulses"**, and it gives one a place in the community. So what happens if traditional work vanishes? Freud might worry that without work, many people lose a key way to channel their psychic energy constructively. The aggressive and sexual drives that went into ambition, competition, building things – where will they go? Possibly into neurotic symptoms or destructive behavior, if not rechanneled. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud already noted work is not loved for its own sake by most ("men do not strive after it as they do after other satisfactions… the majority only work under the stress of necessity"), yet it's indispensable for structure and mental health. **An idle population, freed from necessity, may face a surge in what Freud called "the ordinary unhappiness."** With nothing *external* to blame for discontent (no "I hate my job" – because no job), people might confront inner conflicts more. We might actually see more anxiety and depression, a point modern commentators raise when purpose is lacking. Freud would likely predict an increase in escapist behaviors (what he called *"mild narcosis"* – immersion in art, fantasy, intoxicants). The digital entertainments of a PLE could serve as a kind of mass narcotic to cope with boredom. But like all narcotics, he'd say, it only temporarily masks misery. Another Freudian concern: **regression to unproductive pleasures.** If society allows immediate gratification (because machines supply needs, perhaps even simulate pleasures), people may retreat to more infantile states of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, governed by what Freud called the *pleasure principle* rather than the *reality principle*. Civilization advanced by forcing us to renounce and sublimate instincts (via work and social norms). If that pressure is off, some might "regress" – e.g. spend days in virtual reality harems or echo chambers of rage. Freud also spoke of the **"death drive"** – an instinct toward inertia or self-destruction. In PLE, absent life's traditional challenges, that drive could manifest as nihilistic or risky behaviors just to feel something. Yet, Freud was not entirely negative. He also considered the possibility of **"art and creativity"** as substitute satisfactions when direct instinctual outlets (like raw sexual conquest or aggression) are blocked. In a positive interpretation, PLE provides more room for art, culture, and love – the *other* pillar. People might invest more in relationships, communities, and artistic pursuits. Freud wrote that making love and building family (in the broad sense of love, Eros) is central to happiness. Freed from toil, perhaps individuals could put more libido into family bonds, friendships, volunteerism – thus strengthening the social fabric (Freud did say civilization tries to bind people with "libidinal ties" like identification and love). He would approve if PLE-enabled leisure allowed more focus on **"the program of life's purpose: the programme of the**

pleasure principle”, though he doubted its full attainability. But he’d caution that love too is double-edged: we’re never more vulnerable than when we love (losing a loved object causes immense suffering). So putting all hope in personal relationships can also bring pain. In essence, Freud might foresee **new forms of discontent** replacing the old work-stress: existential angst, lack of direction, interpersonal melodramas on a larger scale. Psychoanalytically, we might see more people seeking therapy or meaning (which today we already see in many who feel alienated despite material comfort). Freud’s counsel might be: ensure **sublimation channels** in PLE. Encourage art, scientific inquiry, hobbies – anything that “displaces libido” from potentially harmful outlets into creative ones. Also, maintain some form of *“work”* – perhaps not needed economically, but as routine and sense of contribution (Freud observed routine can guard against neurosis by providing stable expectations). This aligns with modern proposals for community service or creative endeavors as pseudo-work in PLE. In summary, Freud would likely predict that **post-labor society will still be unhappy in its own ways** – “**discontents”** will persist, just not in the form of exploitation or hunger. We will trade external struggles for internal ones. To mitigate that, he’d stress the vital importance of **love (broadly, human connection)** and **meaningful activities** (sublimation) to provide psychic balance. Without deliberate cultivation of those, PLE could become a velvet-lined coffin for the human spirit – comfortable but stifling, leading to widespread neurosis or apathy. Freud’s key message: *Man cannot live by bread (and Netflix) alone.* The psyche demands something to strive for, and if denied, it will produce its own problems. So PLE planners must account for human psychological needs – designing a society that keeps people **engaged, connected, and finding outlets for their enduring instincts** even when labor is optional.

Charles Darwin (1809–1882) – Evolutionary Mismatch, Purpose, and the Drive for Struggle

Though Darwin was not a moral philosopher per se, his evolutionary perspective casts light on post-labor society as an environment radically different from the one that shaped our species. Darwinian evolution honed humans through **struggle and natural selection**. An environment where survival is assured, and we need not strive for food or mates (due to technology or norms), could create what evolutionary theorists call a **“mismatch”** between our instincts and our reality. Darwin might note analogies: animals in too-comfortable zoos sometimes become listless or unhealthy. Likewise, humans evolved in conditions of moderate scarcity and constant challenges; take those away and our bodies and minds may not thrive automatically. Modern issues like obesity, diabetes, or anxiety can be seen as mismatches (our craving for sugar/fat is maladaptive in abundance; our fight-or-flight stress system misfires in sedentary lifestyle). **Post-labor life could amplify such mismatches** – even more sedentary behavior, more artificial stimuli (e.g. endless on-screen novelty tickling our reward circuits), less physical and mental exercise. Darwin, were he speculating, might foresee health selection pressures: perhaps only those who self-discipline to exercise and engage will remain robust, whereas others may suffer reduced fitness (even if survival isn’t at stake, quality of life is). On the social side, Darwin emphasized competition not just for survival but for mating (sexual selection). *Status competition* (what Rousseau called amour-propre, Hobbes glory) has evolutionary roots: higher status individuals historically got more mates or resources. In PLE, overt competition for resources might drop, but **status competition could remain as intense** – perhaps shifting to domains like popularity or creative achievement. Evolutionary psychology suggests people will find new ways to differentiate and compete (think of how on social media, even if everyone is materially fine, they compete for likes and attention). Darwin might say: the instinct to compete and compare won’t vanish just because the stakes are “only” psychological. We may even see an increase in **“signal” competition** – showcasing virtue, uniqueness, etc., to stand out in a world where economic success is less differentiating. This aligns with the concept of distributed agonism and Nietzsche’s point: competition will migrate to other fields.

Darwin also noted that cooperation is a strong human strategy (groups that cooperated often out-survived others). PLE could remove one impetus for cooperation (banding together to do labor), so we'd need new cooperative enterprises (maybe communal art projects, citizen science, etc.) to satisfy that group instinct. Darwin's concept of **adaptation** implies that if PLE is stable long enough, society (and maybe eventually our genes) would adapt to it. We might, for instance, culturally adapt by developing stronger norms for exercise, continuous learning, and artificial challenges (like e-sports or adventure tourism) to keep us "fit" in an abstract sense – an echo of "those who do will be healthier and happier (and maybe have more attractive mates), so that behavior spreads." Over many generations, perhaps even genetic selection could favor traits suited for a low-necessity environment (maybe less aggression, or conversely, those with intrinsic motivation and creativity do better in PLE and thus have more offspring). Darwin would be fascinated: PLE begins a new chapter in human evolution – cultural evolution for sure, possibly biological if it persists. He might also consider **"cosmological stewardship"** in evolutionary terms: humans freed from Earthly labor could turn to exploring and colonizing new environments (space) – thus continuing the evolutionary expansion of our species. Such cosmic ventures would reintroduce real struggle (space is harsh) – which ironically could be good for our species' long-term vitality (those who venture forth face natural selection again, perhaps preventing stagnation). Darwin, reflecting on domestication of animals, might draw a parallel: humans in PLE risk becoming like domesticated pets – well-fed but less resilient and inventive than their wild ancestors. Domestication often leads to loss of certain skills and sometimes health robustness. To avoid self-domestication pitfalls, Darwin might encourage that we maintain some "wild" challenges and diversity of lifestyles. Evolutionary **diversity** is key to resilience; if PLE pushes a one-size-fits-all life of ease, we might lose resilience to unforeseen challenges (like novel diseases, or environmental changes). Thus, from Darwin's perspective, **post-labor society should cultivate variation and allow a range of lifestyles** – some may engage in intense physical or intellectual quests, others in artistic or caregiving roles, etc. This diversity is insurance for humanity's adaptive future. Lastly, Darwin, who personally found solace and meaning in scientific discovery and nature, would likely advocate that in PLE, many more people can pursue science, study nature, and contribute to knowledge – essentially harnessing our natural curiosity (an evolved trait) for collective progress. That resonates with moral themes: giving people purposeful engagement (scientific or explorative) taps into an instinct (curiosity) and prevents ennui. In sum, Darwin would remind us that **we ignore our evolutionary makeup at our peril**. PLE must address the mismatch: we still need exercise, challenge, social bonds, and meaning because that's how our minds and bodies evolved. A wisely structured post-labor society would emulate some of the conditions of the "environment of evolutionary adaptedness" in healthy ways – e.g., sports mimicking hunts, communities mimicking tribal bonds, problem-solving mimicking survival puzzles – to keep us fulfilled. **If we manage those adaptations, humans could flourish in the novel niche of abundance; if not, evolutionary pressures (like disease or declining mental health) may impose corrections.** Darwin's view thus injects a pragmatic, quasi-biological morality: the good society is one that fits our nature – and our nature was forged in work, struggle, and cooperation. Post-labor or not, any blueprint for human life must accommodate those enduring legacies.

John Rawls (1921–2002) – Justice as Fairness in a Post-Work Society

Rawls, with his theory of justice, would approach a post-labor economy by extending his principles – **equal basic liberties, fair equality of opportunity, and the difference principle** – to this transformed context. Under a *"veil of ignorance"* (not knowing one's place in PLE), what principles would rational citizens choose? Likely they'd still choose Rawls's two principles. The twist is how to interpret "opportunity" and "difference" when jobs are few. **Equal basic liberties**: Rawls would insist PLE not compromise fundamental freedoms (speech, thought, association). If a large state role in distribution arises, it must be constrained by these

liberties (avoiding, say, an overbearing technocracy that violates rights for efficiency). The **fair value of political liberty** becomes salient: Rawls stressed that large disparities of wealth undermine political equality. PLE potentially creates massive wealth for capital owners – to preserve democracy, Rawls would likely require wide distribution of ownership or heavy taxation to keep wealth from translating into dominating political power. He championed *property-owning democracy* precisely to "prevent a small class from controlling the economy and indirectly, political life". In PLE, property-owning democracy might entail each citizen owning shares of the automated economy (perhaps a universal capital endowment at adulthood, or a social wealth fund paying dividends). The **difference principle** (that inequalities are justified only if they benefit the least advantaged) would guide distribution of the fruits of automation. If robots make an enormous pie, any unequal slice is allowed only if it raises the floor for everyone. Rawls might support, for example, a generous social dividend or UBI financed by returns on capital, ensuring the least well-off (those with no robot ownership or low ability to seize new opportunities) have a high standard of life – indeed maybe a rising floor as tech progresses. Rawls would likely *not* accept a scenario where an elite thrives and the masses, while still fed, are relatively disempowered and excluded from decision-making. Such an outcome fails "justice as fairness" because even if basic needs are met, citizens must be respected as equals. This ties to **self-respect**, which Rawls considered a primary good. In a society where labor isn't needed, how do people gain self-respect? Rawls might argue the social bases of self-respect must be maintained – communities, meaningful roles (perhaps in voluntary associations or civic service). Public recognition of each person's contribution (even if not "economic") is crucial. The principles don't directly dictate that, but a concern for self-respect could influence institutions (like perhaps giving people titles or offices for community work, to replace job titles). **Opportunity**: Rawls's second principle demands fair equality of opportunity to offices and positions. If "positions of responsibility" now include things like creative or scientific roles (since jobs no longer mainly in factories but say, as leaders of projects, artists, scholars), society should ensure even the least advantaged can attempt those. That means heavy investment in education and training from a young age, talent cultivation, etc., so that not only the children of the tech elite get to be, say, chief robot designers or cultural influencers. Rawls would update schooling for PLE, focusing on empowering everyone to pursue their conception of the good in non-labor domains. Perhaps ensuring access to resources for art, travel, lifelong learning – all as part of social minimum guaranteed. Rawls's **"difference principle"** might also justify incentivizing some innovation – e.g., allowing talented inventors or entrepreneurs to be richer *only if* their innovations benefit all including the poor. In PLE context, that likely holds: new technologies should be shared or taxed to uplift everyone. One could imagine a Rawlsian PLE constitution requiring that AI advancements (a social product) be used to *maximally* improve the position of the worst-off – maybe by focusing them on healthcare, environment, etc., not just luxury goods for the rich. Rawls was also concerned about **stigmatizing inequalities**. In PLE, if some people work (out of passion or necessity) and others don't, there's risk of a social divide – "workers" vs "idle." A Rawlsian approach might emphasize not attaching moral worth to employment status. Possibly institutions like guaranteed civic roles could avoid a stigma of "jobless" by giving everyone a socially valued role if they want one (like juror, local council member, etc.). Rawls's notion of reciprocity suggests people should feel they're contributors to the social cooperation scheme, not just passive recipients. PLE should be structured so that even those who don't work in a traditional sense are contributing (maybe raising family, volunteering) and recognized for it. In sum, Rawls would design PLE institutions such that **the gains of automation are fairly shared** (difference principle), **political and civic equality are preserved** (no plutocracy of robot owners), and **each person has genuine opportunity to pursue meaningful life plans** (through education, cultural access, and removal of class barriers). Rawls might support something like a *"Robot Dividend"* as a right of citizenship – aligning with property-owning democracy's aim that citizens "have a real stake in the productive capital of society". The exact policy aside, the guiding idea is his: **justice as fairness** demands that a post-labor society be one free of domination, envy, and arbitrary inequalities – a society of free and equal persons cooperating *as equals* in determining their shared life, even if the

cooperation is no longer about producing output but about distributing leisure and pursuing common goods. If anything, Rawls might see PLE as an opportunity to **fully realize justice**: when the wealth is ample, the moral imperative to share it such that even the worst-off flourish is harder to deny. Under the veil of ignorance, no one would gamble on a society where they might end up a marginal, disrespected dole-dependent. They'd choose one where even if they are not a captain of industry (since industry has no captains or too many), they still live a life of dignity and have a say in public affairs. That is Rawls's vision adapted: a well-ordered society of **freely cooperative citizens**, which PLE can support *if and only if* its immense material benefits are harnessed for **the common good under fair terms for all**.

Maximizing human well-being in a post-labor economy requires weaving together these economic, moral, and anthropological insights. The classical economists remind us to distribute the new abundance broadly and keep incentives aligned with innovation and equity. The moral philosophers urge us to provide purpose, justice, and virtue when the old structure of labor falls away. Together, they imply a future where material needs are met, but our higher needs – for autonomy, achievement, belonging, and meaning – must be actively cultivated through wise institutional design. In a post-labor world, humanity faces a mirror: freed from necessity, we see ourselves clearly. It will take the combined wisdom of Smith's pragmatism, Marx's vision of shared prosperity, Kant's moral rigor, Aristotle's virtue ethics, Nietzsche's call to create meaning, and all the rest, to ensure that the "leisure society" is not a vacuous one, but rather a launchpad for the next stage of human flourishing.

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