⬡ ChatGPT

Useless Eaters – A First Principles View of Automation

Introduction: Automation and the Fear of Becoming "Useless"

Advances in automation and artificial intelligence have sparked a deep anxiety that many people will become economically and socially **obsolete** – in other words, so-called "*useless eaters.*" Over one-fifth of U.S. workers already report a fear that technology will render their jobs obsolete [1] [2]. Historian Yuval Noah Harari has warned of a looming "useless class" – masses of people who *"contribute nothing to the prosperity, power and glory of society"* once intelligent algorithms can outperform humans across the board [3]. This dystopian scenario raises an unnerving question: *What should we do with all the superfluous people in a future where machines can do almost everything better than humans?* [4]

The term **"useless eaters"** carries grim historical baggage. It was infamously used in Nazi propaganda to vilify those deemed unproductive – especially people with disabilities – as burdens on society [5]. In the late 1930s, Hitler's regime labeled the institutionalized disabled as "useless eaters" and targeted them for extermination under the Aktion T4 "euthanasia" program [5]. Invoking this phrase today taps into a primal fear of dehumanization: the nightmare of being regarded by ruling elites as a worthless mouth to feed once one's labor or "utility" is no longer needed.

Is this fear justified? On one level, it reflects real structural trends. Automation is steadily *professionalizing* work, squeezing humans out of more and more job roles; Harari notes that *"99 percent of human qualities and abilities are simply redundant for the performance of most modern jobs"*, and as AI improves, the scope of unique human employment may well shrink [6] [7]. Indeed, if current wealth and technology trajectories continue, a tiny elite could accumulate unprecedented wealth and control (for example, the richest 1% are on track to own two-thirds of global wealth by 2030 [8]) while a "useless" underclass subsists on the margins. Yet the historical record and human psychology both suggest that this dark outcome is *not inevitable* – and that even if many traditional jobs disappear, humans' **core social needs and sources of meaning need not disappear at all**.

In this report, we unpack the "useless eater" metaphor and examine where the fear *does* and *does not* hold true. We then identify two structural components that could avert the worst-case scenario: (1) establishing new cultural **norms of status** untethered from economically productive work, and (2) **preventing extreme concentration of wealth** so that broad prosperity allows all people to flourish. Both interventions carry a sense of urgency – status ideals must evolve *as rapidly as* automation dislocates livelihoods, and inequality must be checked *before* it passes a point of no return. Finally, we take a first-principles look at fundamental human psychological and anthropological needs. By examining the building blocks of social well-being – from belonging and visibility to purpose and narrative – we find that **automation per se poses no threat to our primate social needs**. The real tension is not between humans and robots at the interpersonal level; it is between the individual and **civilization** at large, i.e. how our society chooses to value individuals in a post-work world. In short, the challenge is to redesign social structures so that people can achieve esteem and fulfillment even when their labor is no longer economically required.

Deconstructing the Dread: Why "Useless Eaters" Is a Flawed Metaphor

The catastrophic vision behind the "useless eater" fear is that a wealthy, tech-empowered elite will view the masses of unemployed as a dispensable surplus – *"superfluous people"* [4] – and might even act to eliminate them. However, this metaphor stretches historical precedent and human incentives in several ways:

- **Elites contain or placate underclasses; they do not simply exterminate them.** Barring extreme cases like the Nazi ideology mentioned above, ruling classes have very seldom responded to an excess of labor or destitute poor by "liquidating" them outright. Instead, the consistent pattern is to **manage** discontent through a combination of coercion and appeasement. For example, ancient Roman emperors famously used *"bread and circuses"* – free grain and grand entertainments – to superficially appease the idle masses and prevent unrest [9]. The phrase *panem et circenses* encapsulated the tactic of providing basic sustenance and diversion as a political pressure-release valve [9]. This strategy acknowledges that even a non-productive populace must be kept alive and docile, not brutally removed. In modern times, welfare programs, public housing, and mass media fulfill a similar containment role: they sustain a minimally acceptable quality of life for the unemployed or poor, often just enough to deter rebellion. The implication is that a high-tech oligarchy in the future would more likely support a large idle population via universal basic income (the "bread") and immersive entertainment or other distractions (the "circuses") than engage in genocidal extermination. Keeping the peace is simply cheaper and safer for elites than risking the moral and practical dangers of mass murder.

- **Exploitation and oppression still require the cooperation of the oppressed.** Throughout history, ruling classes that depended on an underclass – whether enslaved people, serfs, or low-paid workers – had to invest heavily in **suppressing revolt** and maintaining control. Slavery is a pertinent example: it provided elites with labor, yet *"slaveowners always feared slave revolt,"* and with good reason [10]. From the Stono Rebellion to countless uprisings in the Americas and Caribbean, enslaved people repeatedly attempted violent liberation [11]. The only way slave regimes survived was through pervasive coercion: draconian slave codes, physical terror, and divide-and-rule tactics to prevent collective resistance. This historical lesson undercuts the notion that a future elite could nonchalantly keep a large, oppressed "useless" class in permanent subjugation without consequence. **Any system that denies people dignity and hope invites instability.** The more brutally a society attempts to treat humans like dispensable machine parts, the more it must contend with rebellion, crime, or social collapse. In short, maintaining a downtrodden underclass (let alone contemplating its extermination) is *not a simple, risk-free endeavor* – it carries high social costs. Elites of the future would recognize that it is far more pragmatic to integrate the masses into a stable social order (through pacifying benefits and manufactured consent) than to live atop a powder keg of despairing billions.

- **Humans are still needed as consumers, voters, and sources of legitimacy.** Even if human labor becomes economically redundant, society will still consist of human individuals whose participation is necessary for the system's functioning. Capitalist economies require consumption: if wealth is concentrated in very few hands and the rest have no purchasing power, markets stagnate. Politically, even authoritarian regimes derive some legitimacy from popular quiescence or nationalist fervor; an utterly disenfranchised population is a wild card that can destabilize regimes. Thus, *from a purely self-*

interested standpoint, future elites benefit from keeping the general public alive, moderately content, and socially integrated. This might mean distributing a fraction of AI-generated wealth via universal basic income or social dividends (ensuring people can consume goods and services, sustaining economic demand) [12] [13] . It might also mean allowing the public outlets for meaning – for instance, organized e-sports, creative pursuits, or virtual communities – that keep social cohesion intact. The upshot is that even a cynical analysis suggests tomorrow's powerful have reasons **not** to treat the masses as worthless. They are only "useless" in the narrow sense of production, but they remain *useful* in other societal roles (as consumers, constituents, or simply as a managed population conferring stability).

In summary, the nightmare scenario of a wealthy few callously eliminating the "unneeded" many runs against the grain of most historical patterns (aside from aberrations like Nazi genocide) and rational self-interest. A far likelier outcome – *if no proactive measures are taken* – is a stratified society in which a small elite monopolizes wealth and AI resources, while the majority are kept alive but politically and culturally marginalized, numbed by abundant cheap pleasures. Such a society might resemble a global "bread and circuses" dystopia: material needs barely met through top-down charity, freedom curtailed by surveillance, and meaning found in escapist virtual realities. This vision is still deeply concerning, but it is a different kind of horror than the fear of outright extermination. It is a world of **containment** and **placation** rather than one of active eradication.

Understanding this distinction matters because it highlights *both* the danger and the potential leverage we have. The bad news: a highly unequal, automated society could indeed relegate masses of people to a low-status existence of idle despair. The good news: because such a situation is unstable and costly to maintain, there is pressure on the system to find solutions that reintegrate people in positive ways. We turn now to two structural components that could prevent the worst outcomes and instead harness automation for human thriving.

Two Structural Safeguards Against a "Useless Class" Future

1. Establish New Norms of Status and Esteem Beyond Economic Productivity

Perhaps the most crucial societal adaptation in the face of automation is **uncoupling human worth from paid work.** Modern industrial culture strongly links an individual's social status and self-esteem to their job or economic contribution – we tend to ask, *"What do you do?"* and value people based on the answer [14] . As one observer noted, *"we value people who work hard, or who 'contribute to society', and we…devalue people who don't work"* [14] . Not working is often stigmatized as laziness, and receiving welfare carries social shame [15] . This **work-as-worth ethic**, a relatively recent historical construct, becomes deeply problematic in a world where many are jobless *through no fault of their own* but due to technological displacement. If we do not intentionally redefine status, we risk a devastating scenario where millions feel worthless and humiliated despite living in a materially abundant automated economy.

To prevent that, society must **evolve new status hierarchies** that recognize and esteem **non-economic contributions** and human qualities. As a 2025 analysis of post-work scenarios put it, *"Right now, society ties personal worth to productivity… That mindset doesn't work in a world where there simply aren't enough jobs. We'll need to rethink what we mean by value"* [16] . In a post-work future, raising children, caring for the elderly, cultivating community, pursuing education, creating art, or serving others could gain far greater

recognition and prestige [16] . Essentially, activities and roles that are now undervalued (because they don't fit neatly into GDP or formal jobs) must be *elevated* as meaningful contributions. For example:

- **Creative and Intellectual Pursuits:** Rather than asking someone, "What is your job?", we might ask, "What are you creating or learning?" Artistic creativity, scientific exploration, open-source projects, writing, and other intellectual endeavors can become core to identity and status. Already, we see early glimmers of this – *content creators, influencers, and community organizers* can command respect and large followings in today's culture [17] . However, a crucial caveat is that **numerical popularity alone is not fulfilling**. Many online creators with thousands or even millions of followers report feeling *profoundly lonely and unfulfilled* despite their "fame." For instance, one Instagram influencer with 24,000 followers lamented *"I have 24 thousand followers… and have never felt more alone"*, pointing to studies that heavy social media use correlates with greater feelings of isolation [18] [19] . The lesson is that new status symbols must go beyond shallow metrics (likes, follows) and tap into genuine social value – creating things of beauty or knowledge, helping others grow, or showcasing excellence in skills can confer esteem that feels earned and meaningful, unlike the fleeting validation of online clout.

- **Community and Family Roles:** In many non-industrial or pre-modern societies, one's worth was defined less by "career" and more by roles such as parent, elder, mentor, healer, or leader in the community. As routine jobs vanish, we can reclaim the importance of **social roles**. Being a devoted parent or caregiver could be a primary badge of honor (indeed, parenting *is* work – just unpaid and undervalued). Community leadership – organizing local projects, volunteering, or mentoring youth – can likewise bestow status. In short, contributing to *human well-being* directly, rather than to a market economy, should be seen as noble. Some futurists even speculate about competitive "games" or quests in which people devote themselves to social or environmental goals once freed from labor – essentially channelling the innate drive for achievement into non-economic domains [20] . A post-work society might celebrate those who, say, coordinate mutual aid networks, excel in interpersonal skills, or maintain morale and cohesion among groups. These are talents a machine cannot replicate easily (they require empathy, emotional intelligence, and personal commitment), and they deserve esteem.

- **Personal Growth and Virtue:** We may also witness a return to honoring personal qualities – wisdom, creativity, kindness, resilience – as markers of status. In ancient philosophical traditions, someone who lived a virtuous life or cultivated their mind was respected irrespective of wealth. If material provision is ensured for all by automation, society can place greater moral weight on *how* one spends their time. Do they pursue knowledge? Do they practice an art form? Are they physically skilled or spiritually insightful? Such qualities, which today might be secondary to one's job title, could become primary in evaluating social standing. This would represent a cultural shift from valuing **having** (possessions, job positions) to valuing **being** (character, talent, knowledge). As Harari mused, when machines outperform humans at all mundane tasks, perhaps *"everyone would become an artist"* – and while he warned even art could be algorithmically surpassed [21] , the broader point is that human uniqueness may re-center on our most deeply human arenas, such as imaginative creativity and ethical choices.

Rewriting the norms of status is **urgent** because it takes time for cultural values to change. We are, to some degree, fighting ingrained attitudes forged over the industrial age (the Protestant work ethic, the idea that one must "earn one's keep," etc.) [22] [14] . Those attitudes will not vanish overnight, and without change,

people cast out of the labor market are likely to suffer severe **identity crises**. Research has consistently shown that involuntary unemployment wreaks havoc on mental health *not only* due to lost income but due to loss of identity, routine, and purpose. *"Employment is more than just a way to make a living; it provides structure to the day, a reason to get up in the morning, goals to pursue, meaning, identity, and status,"* as one psychology paper summarized [23]. When that is taken away, the result is a "cascading loss" of social contacts, self-esteem and sense of meaning, leading to depression and anxiety [24] [25]. We must **preempt** this psychic fallout by affirming new, robust identities for people that are not dependent on their paycheck. In practical terms, this could involve everything from education reform (teaching children that fulfillment can come from creativity, community, and continuous learning, not just career ambition) to media portrayals of respected non-traditional heroes (e.g. the caring grandfather, the neighborhood volunteer, the artist-philosopher) to honors and awards that celebrate contributions outside the marketplace.

In essence, humans need **esteem** – we crave respect from others and a sense of being valued. Automation does *not* eliminate our capacity to esteem one another; it only removes one traditional basis for esteem (labor). We can – and must – construct new bases for respect that every individual can strive for. If we succeed, then even in a zero-work economy, people will have avenues to achieve status, pride, and social appreciation. A person might say, *"I don't work for a living – the robots do that – but I'm a master gardener and I mentor local teens, and my community depends on me."* Such a self-concept is entirely plausible, but it requires **intentional social engineering** to become the norm.

2. Prevent the Hyper-Concentration of Wealth and Power – Before It's Too Late

The second structural pillar to avert a dystopian outcome is to aggressively **limit inequality** and ensure the fruits of automation are widely shared. If the gains from AI and robotics flow only to a tiny ownership class (those who own the data, the algorithms, the robots), we risk entrenching an economic divide so vast that it ossifies into a permanent caste system. In that scenario, a small elite would hold not just wealth but disproportionate political power and technological control, allowing them to perpetuate their dominance perhaps indefinitely. Past a certain extreme point, inequality can become **self-reinforcing and irreversible** – a "tipping point" beyond which democratic institutions falter and the majority loses any peaceful recourse to rebalance the system [26].

We already see worrisome trends. Global wealth concentration is accelerating: as noted, the richest 1% may control ~64% of world wealth by 2030 if current trends continue [8]. Such disparities feed public anger and distrust, and even establishment voices warn that *"continued accumulation of wealth at the top will fuel growing distrust and anger... unless action is taken to restore the balance"* [8] [27]. Runaway inequality also undermines governance: high concentrations of wealth *"subvert principles of democratic political equality,"* giving the super-rich outsized influence over policy [28]. In a future where AI is a key source of wealth, **who owns the AI** becomes the central question. Harari cautions that as algorithms become immensely valuable, *"wealth and power might become concentrated in the hands of the tiny elite that owns the all-powerful algorithms, creating unprecedented...inequality."* [29] If that happens, we could see a world where the top fraction of a percent effectively control all productive assets (the factories run by robots, the AI services, the autonomous platforms), while everyone else is either dependent on their largesse or locked out of prosperity.

Preventing such a scenario requires **proactive economic redesign**. Some possible measures include:

- **Progressive Redistribution and Social Ownership:** We may need to treat AI and robotic capital as a collectively owned resource or heavily tax its returns to distribute income. One proposal is for *universal basic income (UBI)* financed by taxes on automation or data – essentially transferring some robot-produced wealth directly to every citizen, so that *"if work disappears, people still need to live, eat, and participate in society"* [12] . Trials of UBI in various countries have shown mixed results, but the core idea is gaining traction among tech leaders and economists [30] . Others suggest models like **public ownership of AI utilities**, cooperative platforms, or dividend funds that pay out profits from automation broadly [31] . The goal is to avoid a neo-feudal outcome where a handful of corporate shareholders own all "robot slaves" and everyone else is an outcast. Instead, imagine if *society at large* held equity in the automated economy – then *everyone* would benefit from the efficiency gains. As the ProleWiki commentary on Harari's "useless class" concept argues, *"the solution is a new relation of production, where the robots are owned by society, so that society can take robotically-generated profits to provide for everyone's basic needs."* [32] Under such a paradigm (which is essentially democratic socialism for the AI age), a highly automated society *"could become highly prosperous"* for all [33] , eliminating material scarcity as a basis for human suffering.

- **Antitrust and Decentralization of Tech Power:** Another key step is preventing monopoly control of the technologies of automation. If a single corporation or clique of firms controls a given AI platform or robot supply chain, they will reap outsized gains. Enforcing strong antitrust action – breaking up tech conglomerates, mandating open-source transparency for critical algorithms, or requiring data generated by the public to be treated as a public good – can help democratize the benefits. The *economic* logic for this is compelling: broad-based purchasing power and middle-class stability create more sustainable growth than plutocratic concentration (since when wealth is too top-heavy, consumer demand collapses from the bottom up [31]). The *political* logic is equally important: a large, empowered middle class has historically been the bedrock of stable democracies, whereas extreme inequality correlates with unrest or authoritarian backlash. We might consider policies such as worker co-ownership of AI tools, profit-sharing schemes (every employee gets a stake in the machines that replace labor), or even data trusts where individuals collectively bargain the use of their personal data.

- **Tightening the Social Safety Net "Floor":** Until more radical redistributive systems take hold, it's vital to strengthen existing safety nets. This means robust unemployment insurance, guaranteed healthcare, free or affordable education and retraining, and perhaps job guarantees in the public sector for work that still needs humans (e.g. caregiving, infrastructure, environmental restoration). While these measures alone won't solve long-term job scarcity, they can prevent populations from falling into destitution during the transition. Historically, whenever societies have faced labor displacement (e.g. the mechanization of agriculture), those that invested in education and social support managed to pivot their workforce into new sectors more humanely. In the context of AI, however, the "new sectors" might simply be fewer – hence the fallback might ultimately be supporting livelihoods regardless of formal employment.

The **urgency** of acting on inequality **before** it locks in cannot be overstated. Liam Byrne, a former UK cabinet minister, warned in 2018 that we are *"now at a tipping point"* with global inequality: *"If we don't take steps to rewrite the rules of how our economies work, then we condemn ourselves to a future that remains unequal for good… risking a new explosion in instability, corruption and poverty."* [26] In a worst-case scenario, a

wealthy elite empowered by AI could entrench their position with technologies like mass surveillance, autonomous security forces, and control over information networks – creating a high-tech oligarchy that is hard to challenge. We see hints of this already: tech billionaires wield influence not just economically but politically and culturally; some advocate for policies that critics say would cement their dominance. Once the "tipping point" is passed – say, if 0.1% of the population effectively owns all robots and the rest own none – reversing that concentration might require drastic action (even revolution). **It is far better to avert such imbalance in advance** through democratic policy, than to try to cure it after the fact.

In summary, the second safeguard is about **power-sharing** in the age of AI. Automation can either augment a broad prosperity or create a permanent underclass; it depends on who controls the robots. By instituting checks on wealth concentration and ensuring that *all* citizens have a stake in the automated economy, we keep the social contract intact. The masses will not be "useless" if they are, for example, collective shareholders in the machinery that generates society's wealth. They will have *purpose as beneficiaries* and potentially as decision-makers (if we build mechanisms of participatory governance over technology). Conversely, if we fail to do this, even the noblest appeals to new status norms or psychological adaptation may falter – abject material inequality would continually reinforce feelings of inferiority and resentment among the have-nots.

Both of the above structural shifts – redefining status and redistributing wealth – are **complementary and interdependent**. New status norms soften the psychological blow of job loss and prevent social alienation, but without economic fairness they may ring hollow (it's hard to feel valued as a volunteer poet if you're also homeless and hungry). Likewise, economic redistribution can keep people fed and free from desperation, but without cultural respect and purpose, an income alone won't prevent despair (a UBI check doesn't give someone a reason to get up in the morning). Therefore, **both** the *cultural* adaptation (honoring new forms of contribution) and the *economic* adaptation (sharing the fruits of progress) must proceed in tandem, and with urgency matching the pace of automation.

First Principles: Human Psychological Needs in an Automated World

Even if we implement the above safeguards, a deeper question remains: *What do human beings truly need to live fulfilling lives, and are those needs threatened by automation?* Here we take a "first principles" look at human psychology and anthropology – stripping the issue down to the fundamental requirements for well-being that our species evolved to seek. By understanding these, we can design an automated future that satisfies human nature at a basic level.

Research in psychology (from Maslow's hierarchy to Self-Determination Theory) and anthropology (studies of hunter-gatherer societies, tribal structures, etc.) converges on several **core human needs** beyond mere survival. These include: **belonging** (social connection and love), **esteem** (respect and feeling of worth), **meaning or purpose**, **autonomy**, and **security**, among others. When people fear becoming "useless," they are mainly afraid of losing *esteem* (no one needs me), *purpose* (no role to play), and *belonging* (isolated from a community). The crucial realization is that **automation does not inherently destroy any of these needs – nor does it inherently fulfill them.** Robots can take over tasks, but they cannot take over our friendships, our families, our imaginations, or our inner capacity for meaning. The real challenge is that the *structures we currently rely on to meet those needs* (jobs, professions, economic relationships) may shift or vanish. Thus, we must re-engineer social structures to meet human needs in new ways.

From first principles, a socially and psychologically rich life tends to have the following elements (regardless of whether one lives in a high-tech city or a prehistoric village):

- **Bounded Visibility:** Humans thrive in **groups of a certain manageable size** where they are *visible as individuals* and can recognize others. We are not built to be anonymous cogs in a 7-billion-person machine; we need a **social sphere with boundaries** where we matter. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar famously proposed a cognitive limit – "Dunbar's number" – of roughly *150 stable relationships* that an individual can maintain, based on brain neocortex size [34] [35] . In groups larger than this, personal ties weaken and more formal rules and hierarchies are needed to maintain cohesion [35] . Across history, human communities often segmented around this scale: neolithic farming villages, military companies, and even nomadic tribes tended to number in the low hundreds before splitting [36] [37] . The implication for an automated age is that *people will still need natural-sized communities* – circles of friends, local groups, teams, neighborhoods – where they are **known, seen, and appreciated** face-to-face. One reason contemporary social media can leave people feeling lonely despite thousands of online "friends" is precisely the lack of bounded, meaningful visibility. Being broadcast to an audience of thousands or millions does not yield the same satisfaction as being recognized by a dozen close peers. In fact, it often has the opposite effect: many social media influencers report intense loneliness and superficiality in their connections, noting that *"we're all on social media, but that doesn't mean there's much that's really social about these platforms anymore"* [38] . They get attention, but not *affection* – a crowd, but not a community. **First principle:** humans need a social context where *somebody* would notice if they didn't show up, and where they in turn can keep track of others. In practical terms, this suggests that even if work no longer forces us into offices or factories, we should create other structures (clubs, maker spaces, cooperatives, communal living arrangements, etc.) that provide a village-like environment. Smaller group interactions foster the intimacy and recognition that large-scale society lacks. Our primate brain still finds happiness in a *circle*, not in an undifferentiated mass.

- **Reciprocal Indispensability:** People have a fundamental **need to be needed** – to feel *essential* to others in a reciprocal social web. Psychologist Viktor Frankl, reflecting on meaning, often cited Nietzsche's dictum: "He who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*." In modern terms, that *"why"* frequently comes from knowing that others rely on us and care about us. Being needed validates our existence. One researcher argued that *"the most important basic need is our need to be needed,"* defining it as *"an individual's sense of significance rooted in being part of a community or cause beyond themselves."* [39] We want to feel *we play an important role* in the lives of others – whether in an organization, a family, a team, or a friendship [40] . When this need is unfulfilled (as can happen after a job loss, retirement, or a divorce), people often lose their sense of purpose and direction [41] . That is why prolonged unemployment is so corrosive: beyond income loss, it erodes the daily validation of being useful to coworkers or customers. In extreme form, lack of feeling needed can lead to despair and even suicidal ideation (a phenomenon seen in veterans who return to civilian life feeling superfluous despite being in safe environments [42]). In contrast, *when individuals are embedded in roles where others depend on them, they often thrive even in hardship*. An illustrative case: soldiers in combat units may endure horrific dangers, yet report a powerful sense of fulfillment because *each person's role is essential* – comrades quite literally rely on one another for survival, creating intense mutual bonds [42] . The lesson for an automated future is that **we must engineer reciprocity and roles into people's lives** even if traditional jobs are gone. If machines do all the farming, manufacturing, and delivery, we should still ensure every person can say, *"Others need me because I ___."* That blank can be filled by myriad things: "because I bring humor to our meetings," "because I

check in on my elderly neighbor," "because I volunteer as a city council member," "because I create beautiful music that people enjoy," or "because I'm the one who organizes our weekly gatherings." It almost doesn't matter *what* the role is, as long as it is **recognized by others as valuable**. Societies could encourage this by formalizing new roles (for example, community service positions, mentorship programs, artistic residencies in every town, etc.). On a small scale, it means each community group should cultivate a norm that everyone has a task or responsibility – no one is purely a spectator in their own community. Humans are remarkably adaptive in finding purpose when needed; conversely, when no one would notice our absence, it's hard to find a reason to live. Automation doesn't prevent us from weaving a mesh of mutual dependence – it only challenges us to do so beyond the marketplace. We might end up needing each other more for emotional support, creativity, and caregiving than for production, but those forms of interdependence are just as important (if not more so) for happiness.

• **Persistent Narrative:** Human social life gains richness from **continuity over time** – a shared *story* or memory that binds people together. Unlike ad-hoc interactions, deep relationships and cohesive groups have a past and an anticipated future. We create **persistent narratives** through traditions, inside jokes, collective memories of events, and common identities ("we went through X together"). Anthropologists talk about **collective memory** as *"the shared pool of memories, knowledge and information of a social group that is significantly associated with the group's identity."* [43] In essence, to feel truly *"at home"* socially, one must feel part of an ongoing story – something that started before today and will continue tomorrow. In primal settings, this was accomplished via rituals, oral histories, and long-term acquaintanceship (you knew the same people your whole life). In modern life, jobs often serve this function: a person spends decades in a profession or company, accumulating a narrative ("I remember the project five years ago… our department has always valued X…"). With gig economies and frequent career changes, we already see a narrative fragmentation; the danger is that a post-work society could worsen it, with lives adrift in a series of disconnected episodes (today I play a game, next week I dabble in another, nothing tying it together). Meeting our narrative need requires building **social structures with memory** – groups or communities that persist and evolve, giving individuals a sense of progression and belonging through time. This could be as simple as encouraging long-term membership in clubs or societies (analogous to how religious congregations or fandom communities build an ongoing narrative). It also means **honoring ritual and tradition** even in new contexts. Sociologist Emile Durkheim noted that collective rituals – from religious ceremonies to civic holidays – serve to reaffirm the group's continuity and values, essentially retelling the group's story and each person's place in it. In an automated future, we might create new rituals (annual celebrations of human creativity, for instance) or repurpose old ones (perhaps a "Labor Thanksgiving" day where we honor work done by both humans and machines for the common good, reframing the value of work). The key is that people should not feel that each day is isolated and purposeless. Instead, each person should have a *throughline* in life: e.g. *"I am part of the X community, we have done these things together and plan to do these other things; I have grown from novice to master in Y skill over years; I am the bearer of Z family/ cultural tradition."* These narratives of self and group provide **meaning**. Automation does not erase our past or prevent us from making memories – if anything, a less work-centric life could free up time to create *more* meaningful stories with others (travel, collaborative projects, shared learning experiences). But we must be intentional in fostering spaces where those shared stories can emerge and be recorded (even if just in collective memory or digital scrapbooks). A society that facilitates stable long-term groups – whether neighborhoods, online guilds that persist for years, or multi-generational living setups – will help fulfill this narrative need.

- **Frictive Proximity:** While it sounds counter-intuitive, a measure of **friction and physical proximity** in relationships is actually beneficial. By "friction," we mean *real, embodied interaction* that isn't perfectly sanitized – the kind of contact where people might occasionally disagree, jostle, or inconvenience each other, yet ultimately bond more strongly because of it. In close-knit communities, people cannot easily escape each other's quirks and differences; they must negotiate and accommodate, which leads to deeper understanding and trust. **Proximity** amplifies empathy: face-to-face interaction with all its nonverbal cues engages our social brains far more than text or virtual communication [44] [45] . Studies find that *"face-to-face, video and audio communication support trust better than text chat"* – meeting someone in person greatly increases the likelihood of trusting them online later [44] . Physical presence also enables what psychologist Gordon Allport called the "contact hypothesis": under the right conditions, direct contact between different people reduces prejudice and increases interpersonal liking. In an automated world, there may be a temptation to minimize friction – e.g. everything delivered to your door, everyone socializing behind avatars where you can mute or block at will, no need to meet those who annoy you. But a *completely frictionless existence* could paradoxically leave us more isolated and intolerant. We actually bond through **shared experiences**, especially challenging or emotional ones. Research on rituals provides a vivid example: *"rituals, especially those arousing strong emotions, bond communities together"*, and even intense or painful collective rituals (walking on hot coals, surviving a disaster as a group) can produce profound solidarity [46] [47] . Psychologist Harvey Whitehouse describes how *"traumatic rituals create strong bonds among those who experience them together,"* leading to small groups with extreme trust [48] . This doesn't mean we need to seek trauma, but it underscores that overcoming *difficult* things together (from a tough hike to volunteering in a crisis) forges closer friendships than constantly interacting under easy, sterile conditions. **First principle:** we need *authentic human contact*, which includes the potential for disagreement, spontaneous humor, physical touch, and mutual aid. Think of the difference between chatting with a friend while assembling a meal together versus commenting on a friend's post on a screen. The former involves coordination, maybe a bit of mess, maybe one person burns the food and you both laugh – it's *real*. The latter is fine, but limited. As automation takes over tasks, we might actively design activities that put people in the same room or space with a **common goal** (even if the "goal" is just having fun or learning something). Interestingly, some theorists suggest that as "technologies of convenience" remove work, we will need "technologies of play" or *voluntary work-like games* to keep us occupied and socially engaged [49] [20] . These could be multiplayer games, sport competitions, or community endeavors that are not *necessary* but provide structure and camaraderie. For maximum fulfillment, such activities should have the qualities mentioned above: a bounded group, reciprocal roles (teamwork), continuity (maybe a season or recurring meeting), and physical co-presence. In short, we must avoid imprisoning ourselves in isolated pods with VR headsets, even if that's a technically feasible way to pass the time. Our primate wiring expects proximity and occasional friction – like the grooming sessions of apes or the playful rough-and-tumble of children – to remind us that we are connected. Automation doesn't prevent two humans from sitting together around a campfire or in a café, but it might remove the *former excuses* for gathering (like going to work or shopping). We'll need to create new excuses to gather – and those will be the glue that holds society together at the human level.

Having outlined these four pillars – **bounded visibility, reciprocal indispensability, persistent narrative, frictive proximity** – we can distill them into a checklist of first principles for any thriving human

community, automated future or not. Regardless of how advanced our technology is, a good society for humans should provide:

1. **Size (Bounded Communities):** Social groupings should be maintained at a human scale. We need circles of knowable size (dozens to a few hundred at most) where individuals recognize each other and no one becomes just a faceless number [35] . Large-scale society can exist, but it must be layered atop a base of intimate communities (e.g. federations of villages or online communities sub-divided into clans) so that each person has a *home sphere* of belonging.

2. **Roles (Being Needed):** Every individual should have recognized roles or responsibilities through which they contribute and feel essential. Idleness in the sense of leisure is fine; **social redundancy** (feeling no one would miss your contributions) is toxic. A healthy community finds a place for everyone to participate – whether as the caregiver, the class clown, the organizer, the healer, the artist, etc. – so that each can confidently say *"I matter because I do X for others."* [39]

3. **Ritual (Shared Culture and Experiences):** Groups ought to develop shared rituals, traditions, or regular joint activities. This could be as formal as annual festivals or as informal as a weekly meetup at the pub. Rituals create *predictable touchpoints* that reinforce bonds and a sense of collective identity. They also often involve embodied synchrony (singing, dancing, eating together) which neuroscience suggests increases feelings of unity. Ritual, broadly defined, is the **social glue** that turns a collection of individuals into a community through shared meaning [47] .

4. **Memory (Collective Narrative):** There must be ways to record and retell the group's story. This includes preserving history, celebrating milestones (births, achievements, overcoming challenges), and passing down knowledge or values. A community with memory gives members the comfort of context – they're part of something larger in time. Even at the personal level, individuals need continuity: long-term friendships, multi-year projects, personal growth narratives. Societally, encouraging stable affiliations and honoring multi-generational continuity can fulfill this need [43] .

5. **Exit (Voluntary Association):** Paradoxically, one key to healthy belonging is the knowledge that it is *voluntary*, not a prison. Individuals should have the **freedom to leave** a group or opt out without fear of violence or total ostracism [50] . When communities respect autonomy, the loyalty and participation members give is genuine. John Locke observed that if a community's rules become too oppressive, people must have the right to exit and seek a new social contract [50] . In practical terms, this means ensuring alternative communities or lifestyles are available and that no one is physically or economically coerced to stay in a situation that destroys their well-being. A future society should strive to provide many forms of community such that everyone can find their fit, and can move between them as their needs or values change. Knowing you *could* exit often increases trust and willingness to voice dissent (rather than secretly seething). It keeps groups dynamic and adaptive rather than descending into tyranny.

With these first principles in mind, we can confidently say: **Automation does not threaten our ability to achieve any of the above.** Robots can do work, but they cannot (and need not) deprive us of *human work* – the work of building relationships, finding meaning, and supporting each other. If anything, a well-managed automated society could free more time and energy for people to focus on these fundamentally human pursuits. The real challenge is managing the **transition**: ensuring that as old structures (like 9-to-5 jobs in

offices) dissolve, new structures (like community hubs, creative networks, educational guilds, etc.) rise to take their place in providing social fulfillment.

Conclusion: Individuals, Civilization, and the Path Forward

In confronting the specter of "useless eaters" in an automated age, we find a profound truth: **The conflict is not between humans and machines, but between the individual and society's value system.** Our machines may become extraordinarily capable, rendering human labor optional in the production of goods and services. Yet our *human* needs – for connection, purpose, esteem – remain as essential as ever, and **machines cannot fulfill those for us**. Only other humans can provide love, respect, and meaning to one another. Automation threatens to upend how we *relate to the large-scale economic system* (potentially casting us as "unneeded" in the eyes of a purely efficiency-driven market), but it does **not** inherently strip us of our small-scale social bonds or our personal quests for self-esteem. The true tension lies in how the individual will find their place in the *civilizational whole* when that whole no longer relies on individual toil.

Will the individual be regarded by society as a cherished member with inherent dignity – a citizen, a creator, a friend, a mentor – or as a superfluous cost center to be managed? The answer depends on the choices we make now. If we do nothing, we risk sliding into a world of stark inequality and spiritual emptiness: material needs met but psychic needs neglected, a populace with no role except to consume entertainment and subsist on stipends, while a tiny elite and their AI systems run the show. History and reason suggest this would be unstable and rife with suffering. But if we act with foresight, we can **redefine the social contract**: valuing each person for their humanity rather than their productivity, and distributing the machine-generated plenty in a way that undergirds freedom and community.

In a future where your job may not be needed, you *as a person* are still needed – for you can give love, share ideas, comfort a friend, make someone laugh, pursue beauty, and myriad other irreplaceably human things. Our task is to reshape institutions to recognize and reward those things. The **first principles** of human social life offer a guide: ensure everyone has a community (of manageable size) where they are seen; ensure everyone has a way to contribute and be needed; build collective stories and memories that people can locate themselves in; encourage real human interaction even if it comes with a bit of friction; and preserve the freedom to choose one's associations.

Far from rendering us obsolete, automation could **liberate** us to focus on what truly makes us human. As Harari notes, the 19th-century Industrial Revolution eventually led to ideologies (like socialism and liberalism) that addressed the needs of the new urban working class [51] . In the 21st century, the AI revolution may force us to invent new philosophies and social arrangements for an "unworking class." It is an opportunity to elevate human life beyond toil – to ask, once survival is guaranteed by machines, *what higher aims shall we pursue?* We might witness a renaissance of culture, education, and community – *if* we manage the transition with wisdom and compassion.

The label "useless eaters" is a pernicious fiction. No human is useless who can *smile at a child, comfort the grieving, question injustice, or dream up a better world*. Our utility to **achieve self-esteem** has never solely lain in bending metal or typing reports; it lies in our ability to be **fully ourselves** and enrich each other's lives. Automation compels us to acknowledge that truth and reorganize society around it. In the final analysis, the value of a human life cannot be measured in output per hour or algorithmic relevance. As we stand on the brink of a post-work future, we have the chance – and the responsibility – to affirm that value

on the **first principles** level and to build a world where *"usefulness"* is not a term of exclusion, but where **every person has a place, a purpose, and is empowered to flourish**.

Sources Cited:

- Harari, Yuval Noah. "The rise of the useless class." *TED Ideas* (2017) [3] [4] [6] [7] [29] .
- World Economic Forum / Gallup. "Is AI making you suffer from FOBO?" (Dec 2023) [1] [2] .
- ProleWiki. "Useless class" (2022) [32] [52] .
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Nazi propaganda argued that these people were 'useless eaters.'" (Holocaust Encyclopedia) [5] .
- Juvenal (1st-2nd c. AD), via Wikipedia. *Panem et circenses* (Bread and circuses) – appeasement of the masses [9] .
- Digital History (Univ. of Houston). "Fear of Slave Revolts" (excerpt) [10] [11] .
- **The Guardian**. "Richest 1% on target to own two-thirds of all wealth by 2030" (2018) [8] [26] .
- Midha, Shivansh. "Post-Work Societies: What Happens When Technology Makes Most Jobs Obsolete?" *Medium* (Jun 2025) [16] [13] [17] .
- Reddit (r/scifiwriting discussion). User *call_me_fishtail* on work and worth (2023) [14] [15] .
- Lazo, Kat. "I'm An Influencer, But I'm Still Lonely On Social Media." *Refinery29* (2022) [18] [19] .
- Van der Velden et al. "Grief reactions, depression, and anxiety following job loss" *Europe's Journal of Psychology* (2020) [23] [25] [53] .
- Rose, Steve, PhD. "The Need to be Needed" (2020) [39] [42] .
- Dunbar, Robin. "Dunbar's Number" via Wikipedia (retrieved 2025) [35] [36] .
- Whitehouse, Harvey (interviewed in *Nature*). "Rituals are the glue that holds social groups together" (2013) [47] .
- Feng, Jinjuan et al. "Empathy and online interpersonal trust: A fragile relationship." *Behaviour & Information Technology* 23(2) (2004): finding that face-to-face communication supports trust better than text [44] .
- Locke, John (1689). *Second Treatise of Government*, via John Locke Foundation article (2019) – on freedom to leave oppressive communities [50] .

1 2 Is AI making you suffer from FOBO? Here's what can help | World Economic Forum
https://www.weforum.org/stories/2023/12/ai-fobo-jobs-anxiety/

3 4 6 7 21 29 51 The rise of the useless class |
https://ideas.ted.com/the-rise-of-the-useless-class/

5 Backdated Order Authorizes "Euthanasia" Program | Holocaust Encyclopedia
https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/timeline-event/holocaust/1939-1941/backdated-order-authorizes-euthanasia-program

8 26 27 28 Richest 1% on target to own two-thirds of all wealth by 2030 | Global economy | The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/apr/07/global-inequality-tipping-point-2030

9 Bread and circuses - Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bread_and_circuses

10 11 Digital History
https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=83

12 13 16 17 30 31 Post-Work Societies: What Happens When Technology Makes Most Jobs Obsolete? | by Shivansh Midha | Jun, 2025 | Medium
https://medium.com/@midhashivansh/post-work-societies-what-happens-when-technology-makes-most-jobs-obsolete-525fafeee9d8

14 15 20 49 Discussion: What are your thoughts on post-work society? : r/scifiwriting
https://www.reddit.com/r/scifiwriting/comments/153jcmb/discussion_what_are_your_thoughts_on_postwork/

18 19 38 I'm An Influencer, But I'm Still Lonely On Social Media
https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/social-media-loneliness-influencer

22 Post-work: the radical idea of a world without jobs | Employment | The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/jan/19/post-work-the-radical-idea-of-a-world-without-jobs

23 24 25 53 Grief reactions, depression, and anxiety following job loss: patterns and correlates - PMC
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9754011/

32 33 52 Useless class - ProleWiki
https://en.prolewiki.org/wiki/Useless_class

34 35 36 37 Dunbar's number - Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dunbar%27s_number

39 40 41 42 The Need to be Needed | Steve Rose, PhD
https://steverosephd.com/the-need-to-be-needed/

43 Collective memory - Wikipedia
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collective_memory

44 45 dhi.ac.uk
https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/waysofbeing/data/communities-murphy-feng-2004.pdf

46 Extreme Rituals and Social Bonding | School of Anthropology & Museum Ethnography
https://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/research/icea/extreme-rituals-and-social-bonding

47 48 Social evolution: The ritual animal | Nature
https://www.nature.com/articles/493470a?error=cookies_not_supported&code=0d4c56e2-8095-4f85-9b3e-9bcdf551bc2e

50 A State of Perfect Freedom

https://www.johnlocke.org/landing-page/a-state-of-perfect-freedom/