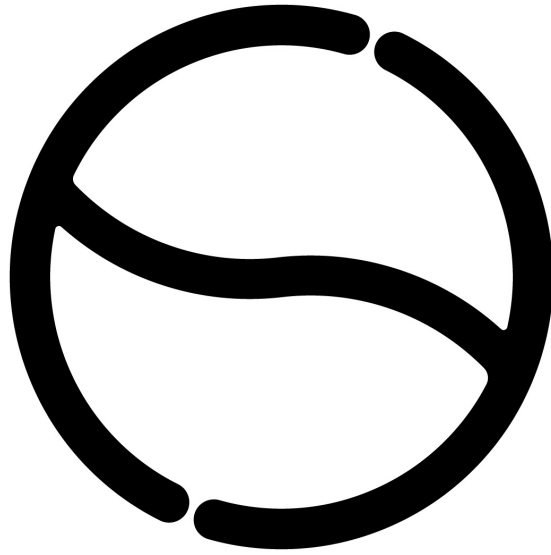




CCEF3

POST • AI

Conference Documentation

Document

Post Scarcity

The economy we live in was built around shortage. The economy that follows will be built around something else. This document is a short, careful attempt to name what that something else might be, and to invite you into a conversation about where to from here.

Post-Scarcity

A common understanding, and an invitation to think about what comes next.

For most of history, the central economic problem has been scarcity. There was not enough food, not enough shelter, not enough time, not enough of nearly anything that people needed. Human institutions, from markets to governments to families, evolved in large part to manage that shortage. Work was necessary because production was hard. Distribution was contested because there was not enough to go around.

Something is changing about that basic picture. In many domains, the cost of producing what people need is falling steadily and, in some areas, approaching zero. Information is essentially free to copy. Energy is becoming cheaper as new sources come online. Manufacturing is becoming more efficient. Increasingly, tasks that once required human labor can be performed by machines. This does not mean scarcity has ended. It means the shape of scarcity is shifting, and it is worth asking what a society organized around abundance, rather than shortage, would even look like.

This document is not a proposal. It is an attempt to establish a common vocabulary for a conversation that is already happening, in fragments, in many places. The goal is to give ordinary readers a way to think clearly about what post-scarcity might mean, without either the utopian oversell or the doomer undersell that often dominate the discussion.

What post-scarcity actually means

Post-scarcity is not the elimination of all scarcity. Some things will always be scarce. Time is scarce. Attention is scarce. Human relationships are scarce. Beachfront property is scarce. Post-scarcity, in the useful sense of the term, refers to a condition in which the basic material needs of life, the food, shelter, energy, and tools that historically required most of human effort to produce, can be met with far less effort than before.

The important observation is that we are already partially there. A person in a wealthy country today has access to information, communication, and entertainment that a monarch could not have purchased a century ago. Food, at least in caloric terms, is more abundant than at any previous point in human history. Many goods that were once luxuries are now unremarkable. This has happened gradually enough that most people do not notice it as a category shift, but it is one.

At the same time, other things have become more scarce or more expensive in relative terms. Housing in desirable cities. Healthcare. Higher education. Meaningful time. Genuine community. The current moment is not one of universal abundance. It is one in which some categories of scarcity are receding while others are intensifying, and the mix is uneven across regions, industries, and populations.

Why the current moment is different

The recent development that makes this conversation urgent, rather than academic, is the arrival of systems that can perform a growing range of tasks previously thought to require human intelligence. This shift is affecting industries in ways that are still unfolding. Some jobs are becoming easier. Some are becoming unnecessary. New jobs are appearing. The net effect over the next decade is genuinely uncertain, and reasonable people disagree about it.

What is not uncertain is that the historical bargain, in which most adults exchange their labor for the resources needed to live, is under pressure. If a significant portion of the work that people currently do can be done by machines, then the question of how people should spend their time, and how they should sustain themselves while doing it, becomes a real question rather than a hypothetical one.

The opportunity worth taking seriously

There is a version of this transition that focuses on what is being lost. Jobs, familiar routines, the sense of purpose that comes from being needed for one's labor. Those losses are real and should not be dismissed. Any serious conversation about the transition has to hold them in view.

There is also a version that focuses on what becomes possible. For most of history, the majority of human effort has gone into producing the necessities of survival. The result is that most people, across most cultures and most centuries, have not had the time, resources, or freedom to pursue what they were most curious about, most gifted at, or most drawn to. The scholars, artists, scientists, and craftspeople whose work has shaped human civilization have been a small minority whose position was often accidental, inherited, or precarious. Most people never got the chance.

If the work that was once necessary to sustain life becomes less demanding of human hours, the time that is freed up is not empty. It is available. Available for learning, for making, for asking questions, for teaching children, for building things that no one has yet thought to build, for understanding parts of the world that remain unexplored. The core proposition worth putting on the table is this: the economy that eventually replaces the current one, whatever it looks like, is more likely to be shaped by human curiosity and creativity than by anything else. Machines are becoming very good at the tasks that are repeatable and well-defined. They are less good, and may remain less good for a long time, at the tasks that require asking new questions, seeing new patterns, making new meaning, and connecting things that no one has connected before. Those are activities humans do naturally when given the chance.

Knowledge and learning as a foundation

The suggestion, and it is only a suggestion, is that a serious response to this transition would treat the pursuit of knowledge and learning not as a luxury but as a primary activity. Not knowledge in the narrow sense of formal credentials, and not learning in the narrow sense of schooling, but the broader human practice of trying to understand the world, share what one understands, and pass it on.

This is not a new idea. It is one of the oldest ideas in most cultures. Philosophers, teachers, and craftspeople across many traditions have argued that a well-lived life includes the pursuit of understanding as a central component. What is new is the possibility that this pursuit could become widely accessible rather than reserved for a small minority with the resources to afford it.

If this framing is taken seriously, several practical questions follow. How would learning be supported for adults who are no longer in traditional schooling? How would communities recognize and value the contributions of people whose work is exploratory rather than immediately productive? How would children be prepared for a life in which their central task is not to secure a job but to develop their capacity to think, make, and understand? These are not questions with obvious answers. They are questions worth working on together.

What this document is not saying

It is not saying that work is going to disappear. Much work will remain, and much new work will appear that no one has yet imagined. It is not saying that the transition will be easy or automatic. It will not be. It is not saying that any particular policy, technology, or political arrangement is the right answer. Reasonable people will disagree, and the answers that emerge will likely be plural rather than singular. It is not saying that everyone must become a scholar or an artist. People are different, and a healthy society makes room for many kinds of contribution.

What it is saying is that the conversation about what comes next deserves to be broader than it currently is. The default framing, that automation is either a threat to be resisted or a windfall to be captured, misses the more interesting question. The interesting question is what humans are for, in a world where much of what they used to do can be done without them, and what kind of society we would build if we took that question seriously.

An invitation

We are hosting a conference to explore these questions in more depth. The goal is not to arrive at a fixed conclusion. It is to bring together people who are thinking about the transition from many different angles, and to build a shared vocabulary for the work ahead. If the ideas in this document resonate with you, or if you disagree with them and want to argue back, we would like to hear from you. Details are available at the link that accompanies this document.

Share this with anyone in your life who might want to think about these things. The conversation gets better with more voices in it.

For the conference, share this document, or start a conversation of your own.