

## Post-scarcity is not post-problems

[Toby Russell](#), March 2009

*“Free will is doing gladly that which one must do.” Carl Gustav Jung*

Upon hearing a post-scarcity world described, most people find it silly and fantastical, or a charming yet unrealistic dream. The idea that an abundance could be produced for all the world's people, that there would thereafter be no war, no poverty, no corruption etc., is hard to envisage, but our understandable difficulty picturing such a world makes it neither unfeasible nor unrealistic. Indeed, our difficulty is not a reflection of the unerring accuracy of our predictive abilities, but arises naturally from a history of economic systems shaped, until now, by conditions of scarcity. This small article is my attempt to make a post-scarcity world seem a little more pragmatic and prosaic, less “nirvana-like,” less utopian, and therefore more worthy of serious study. For my more detailed analysis, read [this article](#).

I want to remind people here too, that this is not some idle, cerebral pursuit of a perfect world, something to while away the hours on a rainy Sunday. There are [serious reasons](#) to consider a radical alternative to the current crop of economic models, and there are serious people discussing them.

Money is, among other things, a [force for division and corruption](#). Because being rich is better than being poor, [money motivates many to behave corruptly](#), and lies at the root of all socio-economic models currently operative on our planet. Combine this tendency to corrupt with humanity's enormous powers of consumption and production, add in the legal structure of the corporation requiring that ever increasing profits be the number one priority, factor in a teetering ecosystem, and you have a huge and many faceted motive to take radical change seriously. So it is not just that a post-scarcity world would be better than a scarcity-based world, but that we must start looking at how to implement such a model as a matter of urgency. We are [consuming ourselves to death](#), while manufacturing and inventing with an eye only to profit. We ignore the branch we all sit on – the environment – at our peril, and put, to our collective detriment, matters such as human dignity and respect on a distant back-burner.

So what does post-scarcity mean for ordinary folk like you and me? Put very simply, it means no more material/financial worries. It would be as if everyone had enough money not to worry about it any more. Would this mean an end to all problems, all challenges, all worries? Of course not. Ask those who have won the lottery, question them on the new set of problems they have had to deal with. Having no money worries does not in any way guarantee happiness. It simply means one type of problem has been removed. That its successful removal from society would necessitate a prior, well-planned, ground-up redesign of everything, would of course mean other (profound) changes too, but my basic point remains. We would still be humans, would still have to get along, learn, do, sustain, and otherwise grow old, and die, as happily as we are able. That will always be an almighty challenge.

Furthermore, if we look a little deeper into the way things are today, we can see we don't actually HAVE to do the boring job that brings in the money we need. We are actually “free” to live our lives completely differently; to go off and live in “nature,” or live on the streets, or go into crime, leave our families, commit suicide, and so on. The reasons we tend to carry on with what we've got, however mundane and uninspiring, do not exist solely because of money, but consist of a complex of societal influences, as well as our own likes and fears and history. All these things combine to make us do things we might not otherwise do. We each sustain the system that is our life by various means, and for various reasons, only one of which might be suffering a job we don't like. My point here is that no matter what – and even in a post-scarcity society – there will always be things that must be done, compromises to make, opportunities that must be forgone, as inescapable parts of keeping things going in the manner of our choosing. And there will always be forces, internal and external, to “make” us do them. Consequently, the disappearance of money and financial concerns would not mean motivation disappears from human experience, nor that life would be one endless party, nor that we would no longer be able “to get things done.”

As an introspective person who enjoys such solo pursuits as reading and writing, a post-scarcity world appeals to me, perhaps because I can easily imagine filling my time pursuing my twin hobbies. And yet I know not all are like me in this regard, and nor should they be. It will be an enormous challenge to fill one's own time with activities and hobbies, goals and objectives we set for ourselves because we want to, not because we are told to. True freedom is actually a daunting prospect, when you think about it. A post-scarcity economy will not be “heaven on earth,” and should not be imagined as such. It will necessarily demand of us all full maturity, which few in scarcity-based systems reach (myself included in my humble opinion).

Post-scarcity economics of course requires, as mentioned above, the total and deliberate redesign of all aspects of society – our cities, our energy sources, our transport systems, education, law, defence, etc. It is misleading trying to imagine post-scarcity looking like the present, just minus money. Indeed, today's world could not function without money. Total redesign is essential to the idea's successful execution.

Each human on the planet would have to be raised from childhood to become a mature, free-thinking adult, as opposed to the unthinking and obedient consumers our education tends to produce today. A post-scarcity world demands of us generally a recognition that we are responsible for our actions, and that we understand how profoundly interdependent we are. It will be up to us all to maintain our societies, and the ecosystem that supports us, in a sustainable way.

Ethical evolution is an important part of human history that will never end, just as technological progress knows no end. Currently, we face a set of coinciding circumstances unprecedented in human history, a challenge which requires of us a readiness to consider solutions which seem outlandish and unworkable at first. In contemplating a world of abundance for all, we are obliged to remember that such a world is not about the self-serving accumulation of possessions and status, but about co-operation and sustainability. Just as the cells of the human body co-operate in conditions of nutrient-abundance, but compete with, and steal from, one another in conditions of nutrient-scarcity, so humans would exhibit co-operative behaviours in conditions of abundance, as surely as they go to war in conditions of scarcity. For example, in a theatre we get along, laugh, clap and enjoy ourselves as the play proceeds. Should a fire break out we become very different creatures indeed, trampling each other to death to escape the danger.

Behaviours that seem so natural and “inborn” to us, such as lording it over others, seeking power over others, Schadenfreude, and so on, are more accurately seen as the inevitable consequences of conditions of scarcity. Scarcity leads to competition, where obviously the victors benefit, which rewards aggressive and hoarding behaviours, this over millennia shaping our belief systems, our social and economic systems, our politics and philosophy, profoundly. Of course aggression and competitiveness are natural – as is greed – in that they exist in us as potentials, but their chance of being expressed, and the manner in which they are expressed, are determined by environmental factors.

Imagine two puppies taken from the same litter, one raised by wolves, the other by a loving human family. How differently would these dogs end up? They might start out physically and genetically identical, but their personalities would be as different as chalk and cheese. So it would be with identical human twins, the wolf-boy being after seven years in the wild utterly different from his twin raised by loving human parents. So too with apple-seeds from the same apple, one planted in barren, the other in fertile soil, one grown with minimal water, nutrients and sunshine, the other with exactly the right amounts. The seeds would be genetically identical, but the fruit produced very different in taste and sweetness, though of course still apples. Environmental conditions are not everything – puppies can't grow into cats, apple-seeds can never become orange trees – but they are extremely significant. Significant enough, in fact, to make a post-scarcity world both feasible and desirable. We just have to take it seriously, then work towards it. It certainly won't be easy, but will be well worth the effort.