

Post-scarcity is not post-problems

[Toby Russell](#), March 2009

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 does not make it unfeasible. Indeed, this 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, pretty much since farming began. This small article is my attempt to make a post-scarcity world seem more pragmatic and humdrum, less "nirvana-like," less utopian, and therefore more worthy of serious study. For a more detailed analysis, read [this article](#).

I want to remind people here too, that this is not some idle, cerebral pursuit of a better 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.

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](#). It 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? Put simply, it means no more material/financial worries for anyone. 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? No. 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. As a loner, as an introspective person who enjoys such solo pursuits as reading and writing, I can easily imagine filling my time with rewarding endeavours. And yet I know not all are like me in this regard, and nor should they be. It will be an enormous challenge to have 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 each of us full maturity, which few in scarcity-based systems reach (myself included in my humble opinion).

Post-scarcity economics would of course require a total and deliberate redesign of all aspects of society – of our cities, our energy supply, our transport system, education, law, defence, etc., so that it is unhelpful trying to imagine such a world looking like the present, just without money. It would in fact be very different, as would we. Those areas of work not immediately automatable would need to be done by humans still, and while the financial reward of pay would be missing, the "spiritual" reward of contributing to a healthy society, of doing work that is both necessary and beneficial, would be substantial. Indeed, that so few of us can imagine being satisfied by the pleasure of working to make the world an ever better place, tells us how far from civilised we are.

For such a world to work, each human on the planet would have to be purposefully raised from childhood to become a mature, free-thinking adult. A post-scarcity world demands a recognition that *we* are responsible for our actions, that we understand how profoundly interdependent we are, that it is up to *us* to maintain our societies and the ecosystem in a sustainable way. It would therefore be unthinkable to indulge in a bout of "blame-game point-scoring", then simply sit back and wait for the "authorities" to step in and clear up the mess. Post-scarcity may well be a "free ride" monetarily speaking, but not in any other way. We would *all* stand at its centre, *jointly* responsible for its smooth functioning.

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. Humans are neither “good” nor “bad.”

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.