What Is There to Fear in a Post AGI World

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"It's a frightening prospect, but I'm starting to seriously believe that the day I find myself replaced by a robot is never coming," 22-year-old Wintek employee Jie Liu told reporters. … It's sad to think jobs like these may still be here for my children."

The Onion, March 19, 2014

The promise of artificial general intelligence is that it will provide unprecedented productivity gains that could allow all of humanity to achieve a standard of living greater than that experienced by those in the wealthiest nations (Amodei, 2024). The boldest claims promise "radical abundance" (Hassabis, in Roose and Newton, 2025) and "no scarcity" as artificial general intelligence will ensure that "everyone can have whatever goods and services they want" (Musk, 2023). While economists tend to be a bit more skeptical about the potential likelihood of such rapid growth (Acemoglu, 2024), most agree that there is the potential for a new era of rapid economic development that both facilitates higher living standards and creates profound changes in labor markets.

Artificial general intelligence is expected to outperform humans in intellectual tasks, in much the same way that the steam engine (and later internal combustion engines and electric motors) outperformed humans in strength tasks. The erosion of physical strength as a source of status, power, and resources re-shaped more than labor markets and economies—it transformed families, communities, and our very notion of human value. Many people were harmed along the way, but few would argue that humans were not made better off by the creation of super-human artificial strength. And yet, many are less confident that the creation of super-human artificial intelligence will work out as well for humans.

Economic development has allowed people to move away from jobs that were uncomfortable physically, provided little intellectual stimulation, and were rarely motivated directly by a sense of purpose. Such jobs contribute to a meaningful life by providing a community of coworkers, a source of income, and a clear societal role. But work for much of human existence has involved jobs so that people could live, rather than jobs that people lived to do. Technological change has made work better. It has also displaced people. From the earliest forms of technological development these twin tensions have been at play.

The parody newspaper The Onion captured the ridiculousness of the nostalgic longing for the hard, tedious physical work that economic growth and technology has reduced when it described workers in terrible conditions fearing that their jobs would never be eliminated by technology. The goal of progress is to indeed be able to climb the ladder of progress to a job with greater compensation—not just in terms of income, but in terms of non-pecuniary benefits like comfort, meaning, curiosity, and artistic expression. The parody also serves as a reminder that progress has not benefited all workers equally. And

that whenever any human labor is cheaper than its technological replacement, those workers will continue to do work that could be done by a machine.

In the 21st century, human capital—and (mistakenly) even human value—is often synonymous with education and intelligence. As AGIs boasting IQs of 300 or higher become the norm—or in the words of Dario Amodei we have "a country of geniuses in a data center"—the advantages and disadvantages that currently shape human lives will be completely upended just as they were centuries ago (Amodei, 2024). Unlike the previous transformation—which reordered the returns to human skills, reducing the value of the human skills of strength and physical endurance and increasing the returns to human cognitive skills—the fear of artificial general intelligence is not one of reordering skills, but of fully replacing all human skills. What if humans become *completely unnecessary* in the production of goods and services? Or less starkly, the concern is that the labor share of income will ultimately decline, with a growing share of income going to the owners of artificial intelligence and other forms of capital. (Susskind, 2021). This problem—one that is perhaps most centrally a problem of distribution—also raises questions about life satisfaction, purpose, value, community, and the very role of humanity in a society in which machine strength *and* intelligence outstrips that of humans (Brynjolfsson 2022).

This paper focuses on two questions: will the large income gains from artificial intelligence make us happier? How will we find meaning if we are in a world without work?

The answer to these questions ultimately depends on whether society can adapt in a way that ensures a fair and stable distribution of income in the face of rapidly diminishing returns to human capital. In the first part of the paper I turn to the literature on income and life satisfaction and happiness. This literature has shown a clear positive relationship between economic development and national well-being (Saks, Stevenson, Wolfers, 2013). Well-being rises consistently with the log of income. The magnitude of the relationship is similar within and between countries, as seen across time in national time series and panel data series (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008a). Income does make people happier, but it does so at a diminishing rate. Diminishing marginal well-being from income suggests that redistributing income from the rich to the poor will raise average levels of well-being within a society. This utilitarian logic suggests that—conditional on average income—countries with greater income inequality will experience lower levels of average well-being. The findings from this literature suggest that while economic growth can raise societal welfare, how that income is distributed will ultimately determine what the welfare gains are from rapid economic growth.

Even if income gains can lead to large increases in life satisfaction they may not lead to gains in feelings of meaning or purpose in life. In this paper I show that in current data, meaning and other eudemonic measures of well-being are not clearly linked to income. The challenge of finding meaning or purpose in life might be made more difficult if traditional work can no longer serve as the primary source of identity, purpose, and connection for many workers. Unlike life satisfaction that might be lifted by income gains alone, society must seek ways to redefine human meaning, motivation, and community to ensure that meaning can be preserved in the face of the widespread changes that artificial intelligence may bring. In this section of the paper, I explore how meaning may be impacted by the income growth and job displacement that arises from the widespread adoption of agentic artificial general intelligence. The Japanese concept if Ikigai emphasizes one's reason for being—the everyday sources of joy, meaning, and motivation that make life feel worthwhile, independent of career or income. Relationships, community,

and hobbies are crucial for developing a sense of meaning (Gold et al, 2024). Roles such as parent, sibling, child, spouse, head of household, and trusted adviser to others in the community are central to most people's identity. While these roles are sometimes intertwined with market work and the identity of breadwinner, it's useful to recognize that these roles not only can be separated from market work, but their connection to market work has evolved over the course of history.

A historical perspective can help in developing an understanding of how the links between work and structure, social identity, and purpose have changed. These relationships have not always had the important link that they often have for highly educated knowledge workers today. Moreover, previous periods of technological transformation have profoundly impacted both sources of meaning and people's roles in society. For instance, the Industrial Revolution redefined work through mechanization, leading to concerns about alienation among workers and the emergence of extrinsic incentives that could undermined intrinsic motivation. In the 20th century, household automation and policy shifts radically altered the societal roles of both women and men. Women, previously excluded from market work, found meaning in relationships and community life even without paid employment, while men experienced an identity crisis as physical labor lost its economic premium. These historical case studies reveal that intrinsic sources of meaning—such as social connections, caregiving, and community participation—have always played a crucial role in human well-being, even as economic roles evolve. As economic roles evolve, societal roles too evolve. In this way, it is useful to consider what keeps people connected to their community, their sense of purpose, and to a meaningful life. For humans to thrive in a post-AGI world, job loss must not also lead to the loss of the many other roles people play in the community.

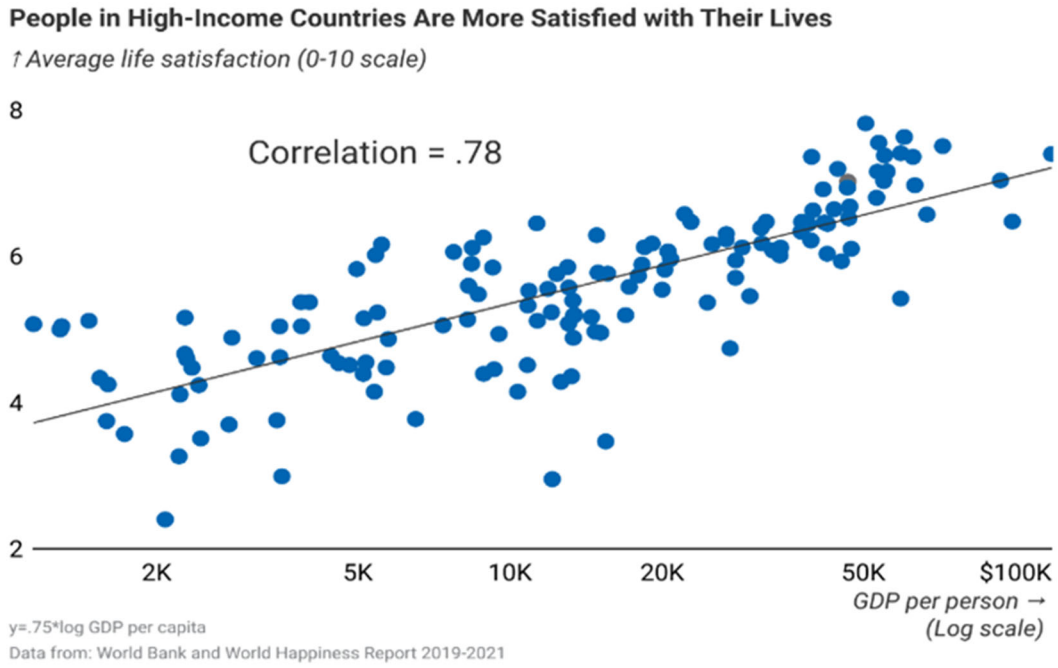
Happiness and Income Growth

In every country, richer people are happier than poorer people, countries that are richer on average are happier than those that are poorer, and over time, as countries get richer they tend to see the average happiness of their citizens grow. Cross-sectional and longitudinal datasets across multiple countries and income groups reveal that higher incomes consistently correlate with greater self-reported happiness and life satisfaction at both the individual and country-level. The robust evidence of a persistent positive relationship between income and subjective well-being is something that I have demonstrated along with coauthors (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008a, Saks, Stevenson, and Wolfers, 2012) and there is a long literature that has come to the conclusion that there is unambiguously a positive relationship between the two (Diener, Lucas, Oishi, 2018). The promise of higher income is a world with high living standards including better health, better nutrition, lower mortality and higher life expectancy. Higher incomes do tend to deliver improvements in these very fundamental aspects of well-being (Preston, 2007; Case, Lubotsky, Paxton, 2002). As incomes growth people are also able to gain greater access to entertainment and physical comfort. From arts and sporting events to smartphones and air conditioning, access grows with income (Davis and Gertler, 2015; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2017) This is partially because higher GDP per capita tends to be correlated with greater access to necessities like clean water, good tasting food, higher quality shelter, better medical care, and greater freedom.

Figure 1 shows a tight correlation between life satisfaction as measured by a ten-point scale using data from the Gallup World Poll and the log of GDP per capita as measured by the World Bank. The data reflect life satisfaction data gathered between 2019 and 2021 and GDP per capita in 2020. Despite being a

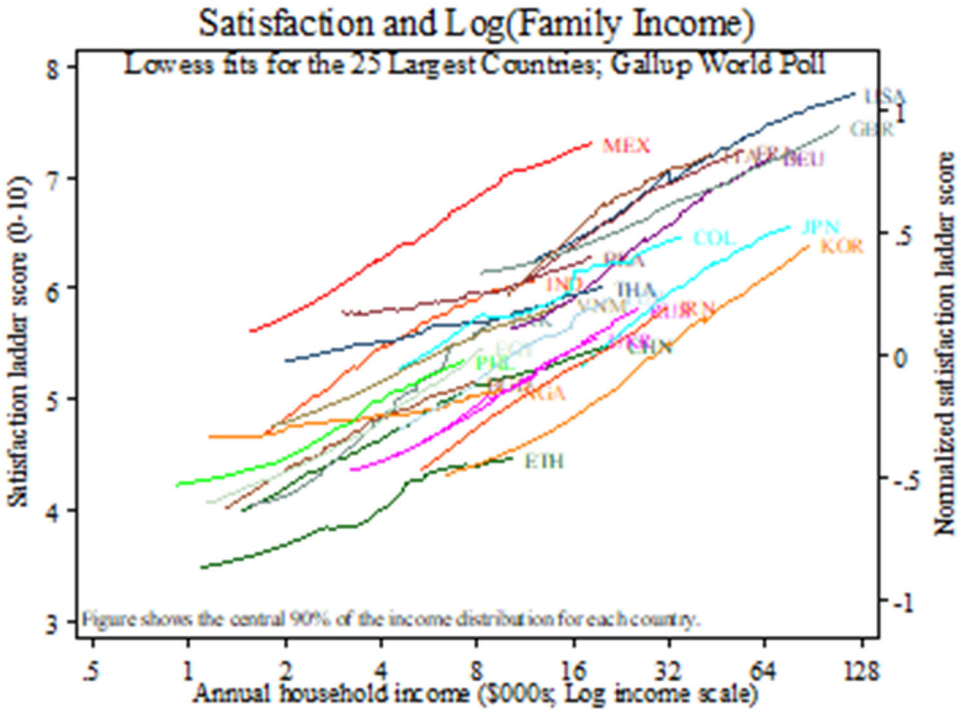
time period that includes a global pandemic the result is similar to that found in previous studies: higher incomes are associated with greater well-being with a correlation of roughly 80 percent. The relationship between income and well-being is linear in the log of income, and thus each additional dollar delivers less life satisfaction. A dollar of income is associated with incrementally smaller gains in happiness the more income one has.

Figure 1



There is no clear point of satiation beyond which income completely ceases to increase subjective well-being. Figure 2 shows you the relationship between subjective well-being and the log of income for the 25 largest counties in the world. For each of these countries well-being rising with income in a similar way—note that the slopes of each of the lines is similar. Roughly the same percentage gain in income across all of these countries leads to a similar gain in well-being for households.

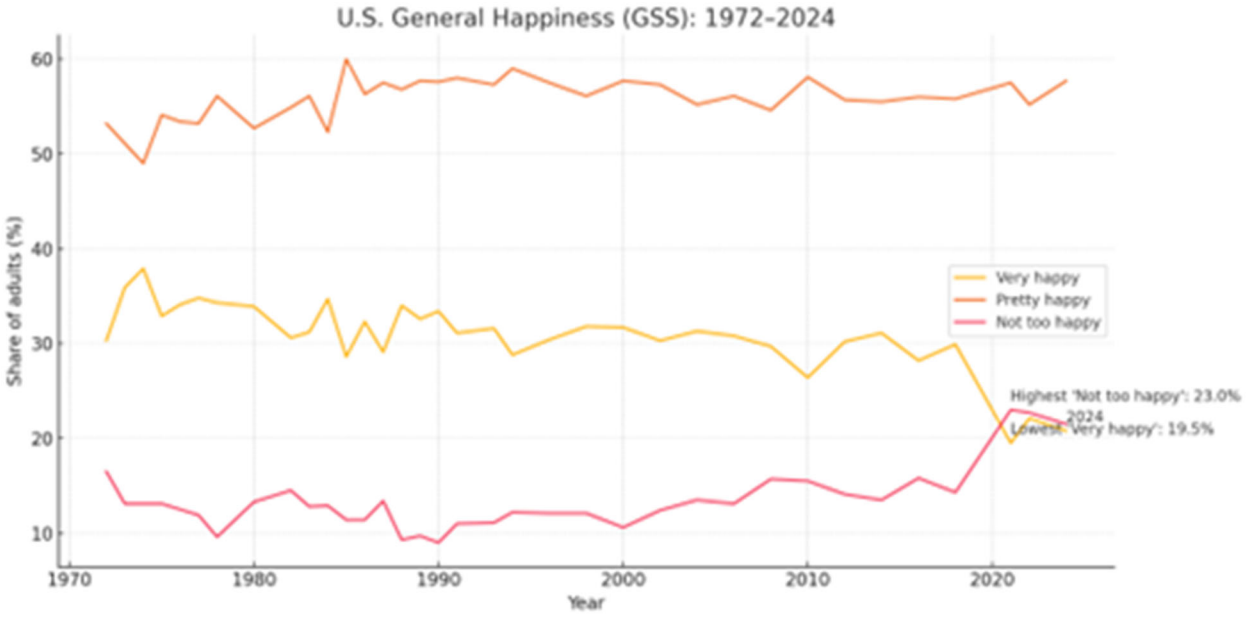
Figure 2



Stevenson and Wolfers (2013) found that previous assertions that economic growth stops leading to gains in life satisfaction after a certain level of development fails to withstand rigorous empirical scrutiny. For example, splitting the sample in half and estimating the relationship separately for low income and higher income countries reveals a somewhat stronger relationship between the log of income and life satisfaction. However, it should be noted that because these estimates are in logs, a dollar still buys more happiness in low-income countries than in high income countries. In short, higher incomes continue to play a crucial role in improving population-level happiness, even in affluent societies.

However, these findings do not imply that there will never be a point of satiation. Nor do they imply that income growth must deliver higher well-being. The finding is that income growth, holding all else equal, leads to greater subjective well-being. But many other factors matter for life-satisfaction and if higher incomes come paired with social isolation and loneliness, for example, then the negative effects of loneliness could more than counter any well-being gains from higher income. In the United States, subjective well-being has historically risen with income, but stagnated in the late 20th century even as incomes rose, partially because women, whose social roles were changing rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s, experienced declines in well-being (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2009). However, declines in well-being among men and women have occurred in the United States in the 21st century. Figure 3 shows that since the early 1990s the share of Americans reporting that they are “not too happy” has grown, while the share that report being “very happy” has fallen.

Figure 3



This failure is may be partially due to the fact that the income gains have gone disproportionately to the top of the income distribution. Not because people dislike inequality per se, but because diminishing marginal well-being from income suggests that redistributing income from the rich to the poor will raise average levels of well-being within a society. Because each dollar that goes to the top end of the income distribution contributes less to well-being than a dollar that goes to someone with less income, income growth that occurs in an imbalanced way should lead to lower growth in well-being in a nation overall. In the United States declines in racism have led to an increase in happiness among Black Americans, eroding two-thirds of the happiness gap between Black and White Americans, while widening income gaps by education have led to widening happiness gaps by education (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008b).

Beyond income, declines in American's well-being are correlated with declines in their social connections and the increase in loneliness in the United States. For example, American Time Use Survey data show that the average amount of time spent with friends has fallen from 60 minutes per day in 2003 to 20 minutes per day in 2020. While Covid accelerated the trend, most of the decline had already happened before the pandemic started. Church attendance is down, participation in social clubs is down, membership in labor unions is down. Few people trust other people, even those in their community, and even fewer report attachment to their community (U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory, 2023). The end result is that one in three Americans report being lonely and a quarter say that they do not have anyone that provides them with social or emotional support (CDC, 2024). These trends accelerated over the past 5 years and match the sharp rise in the share of Americans reporting that they are not too happy seen in Figure 3.

Income Growth is Less Well-Connected to Meaning and Purpose: Ikigai

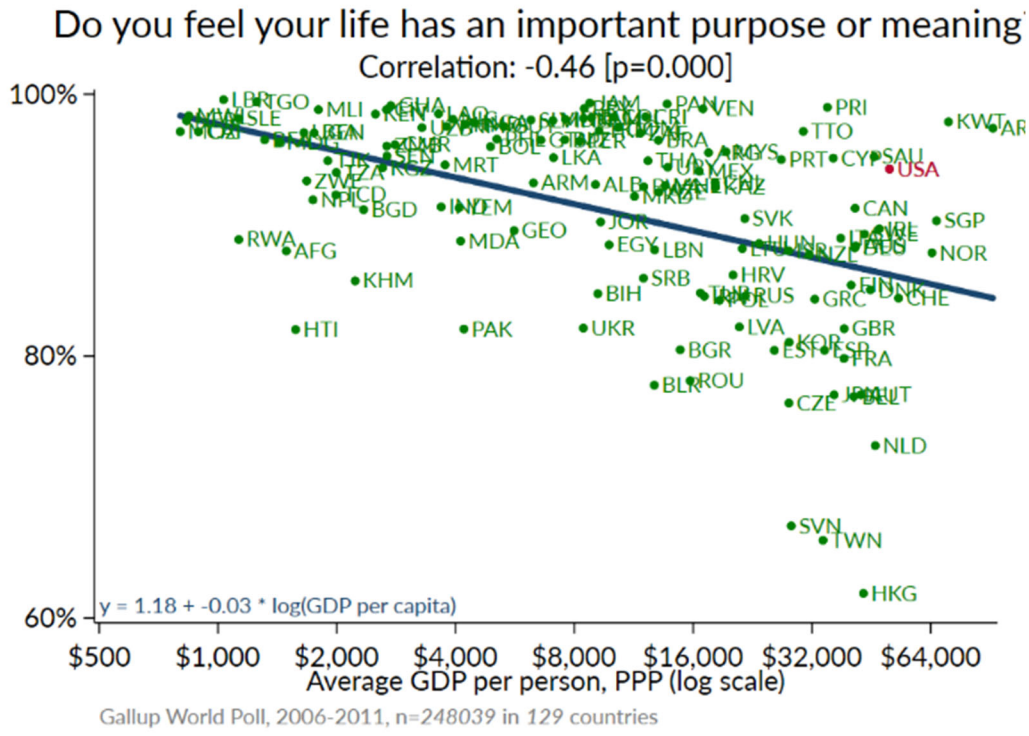
Life satisfaction and happiness are holistic measures of well-being that are connected to the concept of well-being that psychologists refer to as hedonism—that well-being consists of pleasure or happiness. It is

easy to see how the high incomes generated by transformative artificial intelligence could lead to higher incomes and greater access to pleasure if the income gains are widely shared. However, many people are concerned about the potential loss of meaning and purpose in a world where all of one's needs are met by machines. The well-being concept that is more relevant to this concern is that of eudaimonism which focuses on the actualization of human potentials.

Eudaimonism measures such as being proud of something you did, being interested, or believing that your life has purpose or meaning show a much less clear relationship between well-being and income across countries.

Figure 4 uses Gallup World Poll data that asked "Do you feel your life has an important purpose or meaning?" in 132 nations. Although life satisfaction was substantially higher in wealthy nations than in poor nations, meaning in life was higher in poor nations than in wealthy nations. In part, meaning in life was higher in poor nations because people in those nations were more religious (Oishi and Diener, 2013). Oishi and Diener found that the negative relationship between income and meaning disappears once they account for religiosity. They argue that "meaning can be attained even under objectively dire living conditions, and religiosity plays an important role in this search" (p 422).

Figure 4



Taking a look at other eudemonic measures like feeling "proud of something you did yesterday" or feeling "bored" or reporting that you did "something interesting" there is little relationship with average GDP per person. In many ways, the criteria that is necessary for a young child to build a strong self-

esteem and a good relationship with learning—getting to feel proud and interested and engaged—has little connection to our incomes.

A useful way to think about meaning that does not reduce to money or consumption is the Japanese notion of ikigai—literally, “that which makes life worth living.” Ikigai is an everyday term in Japan used to describe what one most essentially lives for; crucially, it need not be one’s job and often spans family roles, community ties, hobbies, faith, or craft. In Japan specifically, survey work by Kumano found that shiawase (feeling happy) aligns with hedonia, while ikigai aligns with eudaimonia—future-oriented striving, accomplishment, and fulfillment.

In 2024, Japanese government began collecting data that attempts to directly measure eudaimonia including Ikigai or meaning and purpose in life asking “The following question asks to what extent you feel a sense of “Ikigai”—that is, purpose or meaning in life—on a scale from 0 to 10. Zero means you feel no “Ikigai” at all, and 10 means you feel “Ikigai” to the fullest.” They found that while Ikigai is correlated with life satisfaction, it captures elements of well-being not included in life satisfaction. They found a stronger relationship between life satisfaction and income than that found between ikigai and income. Unlike the cross-national data, the relationship is positive—higher income people tend to report more Ikigai—but it is a much weaker positive relationship than is seen with life satisfaction. Much more important for ikigai is participation in volunteer activities and community engagement. Respondents in the low-"Ikigai" group were much more likely to be non-participants or to have low participation while respondents in the high-“Ikigai” group participated more frequently. The Japanese data also showed a clearer relationship between life satisfaction and financial and material well-being, while Ikigai was more closely linked to relational dimensions of well-being.

Thus, rather than concluding that income is bad for meaning and purpose, a more natural conclusion is that income alone does very little to boost meaning and purpose. Because if the quest for income crowds out activities like volunteering, spending time building social connections, attending church then it may lead to a decline in meaning and purpose. Among modern knowledge workers, some of that decline is made up for by seeking meaning and purpose at work. What is clear is that the lack of a relationship makes it clear though that the higher income allowed by AGI can not be counted on to insulate us from reductions in meaning or pride or increases in worry.

Technology not only changes our incomes, but it will likely change both the nature of work and our relationship to work. At the start of the 21st century, work provides structure, social identity, and purpose for many people in addition to an income. Jobs offer a bundle of attributes. When work is necessary to survive, the most important attribute is the income it offers. When workers have more marketable skills they can command a higher compensation package. Because non-pecuniary benefits including aspects like enjoying work or finding meaning in work are typically normal goods, this translates to a positive relationship between skills and meaning or purpose at work (Weston SJ, Hill PL, Cardador 2021). At the opposite end of the skills distribution, research finds that lower income workers experience an increase in meaning and purpose at retirement (Yemiscigil A, Powdthavee N, Whillans 2021).

The Early Industrial Revolution: A Half Century of Harm

The early Industrial Revolution saw rapid technological advancements that led to significant economic growth, increased productivity, and rising profits for industrialists, yet the typical person felt few of the benefits for many decades. Between 1760 and 1840—a period known as the Engels pause— output per head increased while labor's share fell and real wages for workers were stagnant or barely rising (Allen, 2009). That two-phase path—early gains accruing to capital and only later diffusing to labor—is central to understanding why productivity gains may not lead immediately to improvements in the well-being of the typical person and serves as a stark warning about the risks of a new period of rapid technological change.

Rapid urbanization also brought disease exposure, crowding, and pollution—the classic nineteenth-century "urban penalty." In England and Wales, life expectancy and infant mortality broadly stagnated until the 1870s, while industrial cities bore exceptionally high mortality, with coal smoke and poor sanitation key culprits (Davenport, 2020). These public-health headwinds also contributed to stagnating well-being despite the economy's new productive capacity.

Across a wide range of measures, the technological advancement that is the roots of the high living standards currently enjoyed in Britain (and in the United States among other industrialized countries) took generations to yield benefits for the common person. The median person born as this new technology was taking off ended their working life before it had generated gains for them or people like them. This timing mismatch between productivity and the well-being of the typical person could play out similarly early in an AI transition. Today's leading AI models are quintessentially *intangible* and scale at near-zero marginal cost, a recipe for "superstar" effects in which a few firms capture outsized shares of value before diffusion raises typical wages. Early on, then, GDP and profits can rise while broad-based wage growth and job quality lag—blunting life satisfaction even as the economy "advances."

The cultural and community impact of the industrial revolution began long before the income gains materialized. This period of stagnant wages contributed to widespread skepticism about industrial progress among ordinary people. Workers saw new machines and factories as sources of hardship rather than prosperity, fueling cultural anxieties. Literature vividly captured the human costs of rapid industrialization. Authors such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell depicted grim factory conditions, poverty, and inequality, bringing awareness and sympathy to the plight of industrial workers. And of course, the period coined the Engels pause by economic historian Robert Allen spawned Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx who penned the Communist Manifesto just as productivity gains were beginning to benefit workers. The mass politics of the time—the Luddites and Chartists among them—were as much about status loss, identity, and control as they were about pay packets, a reminder that well-being depends heavily on rank, dignity, and agency.

The tensions during this period triggered governmental reactions and policy shifts. British authorities increasingly intervened in labor relations, resulting in early attempts at factory reforms such as the Factory Act of 1833, which prohibited factory work under age nine, limited daily hours for older children, and mandated basic schooling during the workday. Later acts strengthened these protections. These were not yet redistributive policies; they were guardrails that made the new production regime compatible with family life and human development—precisely the sort of institutional response that begins to turn

technological progress into felt improvements in daily life. Public pressure during this era also laid the groundwork for broader welfare initiatives and more significant regulatory interventions in labor and public health later in the 19th century. Finally, this period exacerbated class divisions and social unrest intensified, leading to organized labor movements and political activism demanding better wages and working conditions. These activities ultimately transformed societal views on inequality, labor rights, and the state's role in economic affairs. That institutional hinge is the bridge to well-being during a period of technological change.

By the start of the 20th century, the United States managed the transition away from agriculture by sending young people to school, with higher enrollments in education than those seen in comparable economies (Goldin and Katz, 2008). With fewer workers needed on farms, there was less work to be done and thus parents could allow their children to work less and ensure that young people had opportunities to develop skills needed for higher incomes in less physically demanding occupations. It is worth noting that this investment in education required broadly shared income gains—productivity gains in the 20th century reduced work, with much of the loss of work focused on childhood and retirement—partly because the income gains were widespread. The high-school movement was therefore a well-being policy as much as a wage policy: it created a protected adolescence, new pathways to status, and a buffer against the dislocation of sectoral change.

Modern economies brought more people into work that they lived to do. Economic growth brought the pursuit of more intellectual and meaningful jobs, and particularly for the generation of Americans coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s, jobs could provide a sense of identity. The expansion of leisure across the 20th century amplified these gains; in the U.S., for example, time-use evidence suggests leisure rose markedly from the mid-1960s through the early 2000s, while long-run working hours trended down across rich countries over the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Crucially, the quality and synchronization of time—weekends, evenings, and school calendars—mattered for well-being, not just the number of hours (Aguiar and Hurst, 2007).

Labor-replacing technological change in the home: The Loss of "Jobs" for Women

If the factory reordered men's work in the nineteenth century before sharing its gains, the twentieth-century home was its quiet analogue. A wave of labor-saving technologies—washing machines, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, microwaves, canned and vacuum-sealed foods—transformed the production function of the household. As with earlier general-purpose technologies, however, the first changes were social and psychological rather than purely economic. That is the bridge to the AI era: the work may go first, the meaning follows much more slowly unless institutions and norms evolve.

For generations, women faced steep formal and informal barriers to living fully independent lives: limits on market work and business ownership, on opening bank accounts, on voting, and on basic legal autonomy in marriage. Choices about schooling, fertility, and employment were often made within sharply constrained option sets. And yet, within those constraints, women created meaning and dignity through dense networks of relationships—with children, family, neighbors, congregations—and through the craft and care of home production. Even when women were primarily homemakers, constrained by laws and social norms, women worked. They worked to provide home-produced goods and services, to barter goods and services in their community, and they took the paid work they had access to, even when

it was done as secondary to, or as a supplement to, the family income. The point is not to romanticize inequality; it is to recognize that well-being was built from belonging, purpose, and competence as much as from wages.

It is worth noting that even when women did not work, they often continued to strive for a better life for their family through educating their children, through their husband's earned income, and through their savvy use of household resources to make the most out of home production. The ability to strive for a better life is not limited to the confines of paid work. Indeed many have argued that one challenge for well-being in modern society is that parents are struggling to understand how to help their children strive for a better life.

Prior to the invention of washing machines, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, microwaves, vacuum-sealing of manufactured foods, among many other labor saving technologies, women worked dawn to dusk hand-washing and repairing clothes they had often made by hand, they beat rugs on lines outside, they used their hands-on knowledge of chemistry to bake and cook using raw ingredients, and they even discovered and shared home health remedies—particularly for unintended pregnancies. Then came the home technologies that eliminated millions of hours of backbreaking manual labor.On paper, time use should have fallen sharply. In practice, the first phase of adoption **intensified** standards rather than freeing time. With new appliances and processed inputs, expectations rose: cleaner houses, whiter whites, more elaborate meals, tighter tidiness norms. Phase one looked less like liberation and more like doing the same job "better," against higher benchmarks set by technology and culture. The result was a peculiar mismatch: less necessity for toil, but **more** pressure to toil perfectly. Women spent countless hours dusting, vacuuming, and preparing elaborate meals. In 1965, mothers spent 32 hours a week on housework—more than mothers and fathers combined spend today (Parker and Wang, 2013).

The problem was that this technological revolution had the capacity to wipe out the jobs of millions of women as expert homemakers. While women for the most part embraced the new technologies, there was a period of difficult adjustment. The technological revolution in the home and the changes it wrought provides a useful window into how labor replacing technology impacts our preferences, our communities, and our expectations.

As true necessity declined, many women experienced a meaning gap: the sense that relentless activity was no longer anchored to a compelling purpose. Betty Friedan named it in 1963—the "problem that has no name." Importantly, she did not blame the washer or the vacuum. The solution was not to throw out the vacuum cleaner and go back to beating rugs! It was to expand the possibilities for a woman's identity and fulfillment. While domestic roles, motherhood, and marriage played a role, women could—indeed must—play other roles. She argued that women should allow the new technologies to free them from the burden of constant household work and then rebuild identity around richer sources of purpose—education, civic life, creative and intellectual pursuits, and, for many, paid work (Friedan, 1963). The result was that women's labor force participation surged from under a third of women to 60% of women by the end of the 20th century.

While many urged equality for women in market work, others looked for more revolutionary solutions to the meaning crisis for women. Germaine Greer warned against simply trading one narrow metric of worth (perfect housekeeping) for another (career status), quipping "I didn't fight to get women out from behind

vacuum cleaners to get them onto the board of Hoover"(Greer, 1999). Greer was much more concerned with purpose and equality and changing unequal societal structures that confined people to narrow roles in society. She criticized feminism for seeking equality with men that would allow women's self-and societal-worth be determined by paid work. Greer and others pressed a deeper question that resonates in an AI age: Can a society that equates human value with productivity—whether domestic or market—ever deliver true spiritual meaning and purpose in life? True liberation, they argued, requires rethinking the entire framework of how society values people's lives and contributions and how people seek and find meaning and fulfillment.

These arguments are not necessarily (although they can be) critiques of how capitalism allocates resources in a society. One could argue that capitalism is the best system for maximizing income and lifting the most people out of poverty. But is capitalism necessary or even useful if artificial general intelligence can replace of all human labor and generate untold riches for the world?

AI is poised to do in offices, studios, and shops what appliances did in kitchens and laundries: compress the time and expertise needed for many tasks, then raise expectations for polish and speed. If the household revolution is our guide, the first phase of AI will likely intensify work—more deliverables, faster cycles, higher benchmarks—before it reliably frees time. That is precisely when well-being can stall: autonomy can shrink, status ladders can wobble, and social connection can thin out as tasks become more solitary and asynchronous.

The second risk is a meaning gap for knowledge workers akin to the mid-century housewife's dilemma: the old markers of competence and identity (craft, effort, scarcity of skill) may no longer signal value once AI can produce acceptable work at speed. Without a broader revaluation, people can feel superfluous even as aggregate income rises. Work is connected to meaning, perhaps even more so for today's knowledge workers than anyone else currently or throughout history. But it is plausible that if we rethink the entire framework there could there be more meaning, more dignity, and a richer life.

Just as domestic technology produced a season of dislocation for women before new roles and status scripts emerged, the changing nature of paid work has already produced a meaning crisis for many men. For many men, the erosion of the sole-breadwinner model, the shift away from physically demanding jobs, and the entry of women into roles from which they had long been excluded disrupted a narrow—yet powerful—identity built around provider status. This example of faltering meaning and connection as work changed faster than our social scripts has disrupted families, communities, and men's well-being. The solution is not to turn back to a poorer past. The problem is not a simple shortage of jobs or income. It is that our framework for recognizing contribution, belonging, and responsibility has not kept pace with how work has changed.

For generations, men's social standing and family role were anchored in physical labor and steady earnings. As returns shifted toward cognitive, social, and credentialed skills, many whose training and comparative advantage lay in manual or place-based work struggled to translate status into the new economy. Too often, job loss or unstable employment cascaded into withdrawal from other roles—partner, parent, neighbor, volunteer—producing not just economic strain but a loss of purpose. This is a cultural and institutional failure at least as much as an economic one.

The lesson for AI is straightforward. If automation compresses the time and expertise required for tasks that have been central to many men's sense of mastery—troubleshooting, craft, "fixing things," providing—then we risk widening this meaning gap even if average incomes rise. The danger is a repeat of the household story's first phase: technology raises expectations and devalues yesterday's markers of competence before society supplies new, esteemed roles to grow into. What's needed now—before AI accelerates the transition—is a broader repertoire of recognized, rewarded roles for men (and, by extension, for everyone) that decouple dignity from any single labor-market script:

Conclusion

What, then, is there to fear in a post-AGI world? Not, primarily, the absence of output. If history is any guide, transformative technologies will deliver extraordinary productive capacity. The two credible fears are older and more human: first, that the material gains arrive in a pattern that leaves many people behind for a long time; and second, that even when incomes rise, the institutions and norms that grant people purpose, status, and community fail to keep pace. The lesson from the Engels pause, from the household revolution of the twentieth century, and from the recent decoupling between income growth and American well-being is that technologies do not automatically translate productivity into lived flourishing. They do so only when societies retool distribution and redesign meaning.

On happiness, the evidence is remarkably consistent: higher incomes are associated with higher life satisfaction, within and between countries and over time, with diminishing marginal returns. That empirical regularity yields a simple policy corollary for the AGI era: if the surplus is broadly shared, average well-being can rise a lot; if it concentrates, aggregate gains will convert only weakly into happiness. The early industrial experience, contemporary superstar dynamics, and the widening of income gaps by education in the United States all caution that "wait and see" is a choice—for slower diffusion, wider gaps, and flatter well-being.

On meaning, the evidence is different. Eudaimonic measures—purpose, pride, interest—do not rise mechanically with income and sometimes run higher where incomes are lower, largely mediated by social connection and religiosity. This does not imply that income is bad for meaning; it implies that income is insufficient. As with mid-century housework, new capabilities can initially intensify standards and erode yesterday's markers of competence before freeing time or deepening purpose. Knowledge work is primed for this pattern: if AGI compresses time and lowers the scarcity premium on many cognitive tasks, yesterday's sources of identity and esteem can evaporate faster than new scripts appear. Unless we deliberately widen and honor the nonmarket roles through which people experience dignity—parent, caregiver, neighbor, mentor, citizen, creator—the meaning gap will grow even in abundance.

These principles also suggest a cultural project. If men's (and many women's) identities have been tightly braided to a single market script—provider, credentialed expert, indispensable problem-solver—the AGI era invites a broader canon. The roles to elevate are not exotic; they are the ones already doing the quiet work of well-being: caregiver, parent, partner, neighbor, mentor, teacher, coach, volunteer, artist, organizer, steward of place, and friend. When those roles are recognized, resourced, and synchronized with others' time, they become sturdy sources of pride and purpose, not consolation prizes.

None of this requires rejecting growth or romanticizing drudgery. The Onion's joke—that the tragedy is having to keep a bad job forever—lands because the true goal of progress is not to preserve tasks but to expand lives. The danger in the AGI transition is the inverse: that we achieve astonishing output while preserving scarcity where it most harms well-being—scarcity of security, of status, of time together, and of recognized purpose. The promise is that we can do better: a society in which superhuman intelligence lifts living standards, while human meaning is rebuilt on roles that machines cannot want.

In short, the fear to take seriously is not that AGI will make us obsolete; it is that we will fail to redesign our institutions and norms quickly enough to convert abundance into flourishing. If we focus only on productivity, we will get productivity. If we also design for connection, dignity, and fair shares, we can have the thing people actually want when they say they want growth: a life that feels worth living, together.

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