



Is artificial intelligence a threat to meaningful work and living? Technological unemployment and the existential challenges of a transitional era

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Abstract

Is artificial intelligence a threat to meaningful work and living? In both popular and academic press, concerns are often expressed that AI threatens not only people's livelihoods but also the meaning they derive from their work. A common response to these worries stresses that the goods derived from work can be found elsewhere, often in better activities, suggesting that the proliferation of AI-powered automation does not threaten the meaningfulness of people's lives. This argument, however, fails to consider the embeddedness and thickness of meaning in human lives. Even if there are rich non-work sources of meaning, this does not entail that there is not a significant and multi-faceted loss of meaning, one that cannot be compensated for or offset elsewhere. I will argue that thick subjectivist theories of meaning in life and meaningful work—those theories that emphasize that meaning-conferring activities are historically formed—enable us to appreciate how some losses cannot be made up, even if there are in principle ample alternative sources of meaning to be found elsewhere.

Keywords Artificial intelligence · Automation · Future of work · Meaningful work · Meaning in life · Technological unemployment

1 Introduction

A look at recent headlines reveals “automation anxiety” (Susskind 2020, 15) in the face of artificial intelligence's potential to replace human workers. From coders to CEOs (e.g., Dupré 2023; Ito 2023), it seems few roles are exempt from speculation, at least, that AI could soon be filling them.¹ Media sensationalism aside, the debate over whether these new technologies will, on balance, eliminate human jobs or open up new avenues of employment continues (see e.g., Autor 2015; Acemoglu & Restrepo; 2018; Frey 2019; Susskind 2020; Brynjolfsson et al. 2025). Some economists advance a hopeful and tractable picture: “Technological advances are not driving us toward a jobless future. Over the next two decades, industrialized countries will have more job openings than workers to fill them, and robotics and automation will play an increasingly crucial role in closing

these gaps” (Autor et al. 2021, 135). However, not everyone is so optimistic. Daniel Susskind (2020) describes a slow chipping away of jobs, as ever more powerful technologies take up various tasks composing work, leading eventually, even if slowly, to a world where there are more humans than roles for them.

More recently, Suleyman and Bhaskar (2023) argued that irrespective of how the debate over long-term technological unemployment plays out, the medium-term impacts of AI's power to automate cognitive tasks are likely to be troubling: “it's hard to deny the ramifications will be hugely destabilizing for hundreds of millions who will, at the very least, need to re-skill and transition to new types of work” (181).

¹ These worries about automation have been gathering for many years. Several years ago, Frey and Osborne (2017) predicted in a much-cited paper that up to 47% of jobs in the US labor market are at high risk of automation in the coming years. Later, a widely discussed McKinsey report (Manyika and Sneider 2018) estimated 15% of workers worldwide (400 million) could be displaced by automation by 2030 on a middle of the road scenario. They note that it could go as high as 30% (800 million workers). Alongside these more technical papers, popular books like Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee's *The Second Machine Age* (2014) and Martin Ford's *Rise of the Robots* (2015) further brought to the public's attention the new future of work heralded by emerging technologies.

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Even more recently, Dario Amodei, the CEO of AI company Anthropic, warned that AI poses a risk to white-collar jobs, especially at the entry level, with upwards of half of those lower-tier jobs potentially automated within 5 years (Van-deHei and Allen 2025). Indeed, displacing effects by AI on entry-level jobs have already been indicated by a Stanford Digital Economy Lab study (Brynjolfsson et al. 2025).

Yet, these are not the direst predictions. Researchers associated with the AI Futures Project (Kokotajlo et al. 2025) released a harrowing forecast of AI's potential impact on the future of work. They predict that even the work of AI researchers could be significantly usurped by AI models themselves in 2027. By 2029, they conjecture that we may have entered an era of widespread human obsolescence: "Humans realize that they are obsolete. A few niche industries still trade with the robot economy, supplying goods where the humans can still add value" (Kokotajlo et al. 2025, 29). These comments resonate with the work of popular historian Yuval Noah Harari (2015, 370), who speculated a decade ago about the emergence of a "useless class" that has nothing left to do in society. Moreover, for at least one company, the motivating impetus behind the development of AI is nothing less than the extensive automation of human work. Tamay Besiroglu, a founder of the company Mechanize, is quoted in the *New York Times* saying "Our goal is to fully automate work... We want to get to a fully automated economy and make that happen as fast as possible" (Roose 2025).

Even if one does not accept the disturbing conjectures put forward by Harari or the AI 2027 project, artificial intelligence does seem poised to have a huge impact on the future of human work. Economists Tyson and Zysman (2022) argue that AI amounts to "RBTC [routine-biased technological change] on steroids," owing to its increasing ability to automate both routine and non-routine cognitive and manual labor tasks (259). While they do not predict the development and proliferation of AI will result, on balance, in the loss of jobs, given appropriate policy measures, they do worry about a loss of good jobs: "it is likely that there will be *enough jobs* to keep pace with the slow growth of the labor supply in these economies. But we are skeptical that AI along with ongoing automation will support the creation of *enough good jobs*" (256, emphasis in original). Indeed, as several authors have observed, many of the jobs that AI promises to create look to be precarious, piece work (e.g., Gray and Suri 2019; Crawford 2021; Jones 2021; Adams 2025).

Some of the implications of AI concern unsettling consequences to society's balance of wealth and power (e.g., Susskind 2020; Crawford 2021; Acemoglu 2021a; Adams 2025). Notably, Brynjolfsson (2022) foresees the current trajectory of AI development as having worsening effects on society's inequality of wealth and power as building "human-like

AI," which replaces human labor rather than extending it in novel ways, undermines the bargaining position of workers, resulting in a greater concentration of knowledge and power. Yet, these impacts are not, he stresses, a given. Rather, he argues they are the result of policy decisions that favor *automating* human labor over encouraging technological developments and applications that *augment* it. Other scholars agree that the future development and impacts of AI are not pre-determined but depend on the frameworks, incentives, and policies adopted (Pasquale 2020; Acemoglu 2021a; Sidarth et al. 2022).

Whether or not the current round of AI development results in widespread technological unemployment remains to be determined. It may be the case, as Nick Bostrom (2024, 9ff) has explored, that novel desires and needs, ambitious social projects, and/or the unending pursuit of status on-upmanship could keep us working indefinitely. Nevertheless, even if that is the case, the possibility that this round or a future round of AI development may radically upend the current order of work raises questions about the existential consequences of the widespread loss of work. Indeed, a number of thinkers have sounded the alarm that AI-powered automation raises existential worries and may even precipitate a crisis of meaning (e.g., Floridi 2014; Tegmark 2017; Danaher 2017, 2019; Kim and Scheller-Wolf 2019; Coeckelbergh 2020; Mejia 2023; Lederman 2025). In both popular and academic press, concerns are commonly expressed that AI threatens not only people's livelihoods but also the meaning they derive from their work. As Susskind (2020) puts the worry:

the threat of technological unemployment has another face to it. It will deprive people not only of income, but also of significance; it will hollow out not just the labour market, but also the sense of purpose in many people's lives. In a world with less work, we will face a problem that has little to do with economics at all: how to find meaning in life when a major source of it disappears (215).

Technologist and venture capitalist Lee (2018) expresses a related concern:

we have increasingly come to see our work not just as a means of survival but as a source of personal pride, identity, and real-life meaning... It fills our days and provides a sense of routine and a source of human connections. A regular paycheck has become a way not just of rewarding labor but also of signaling to people that one is a valued member of society, a contributor to a common project... The psychological damage of AI-induced unemployment will cut even deeper. People will face the prospect of not just being temporarily out of work but of being permanently excluded from

the functioning of the economy. They will watch as algorithms and robots easily outperform them at tasks and skills they spent their whole lives mastering. It will lead to a crushing feeling of futility, a sense of having become obsolete in one's own skin (173–4).

These comments point to a concern that AI-induced unemployment endangers a major source of meaningful work and meaning in life.

In what follows, I begin by sketching three different threats AI poses to meaningful work and meaning in life, attaching to different time horizons. This paper will center on the problems of an era experiencing the rapid automation of human work yet still seemingly far off from a mature post-work society. In the following section, I articulate a common response to worries that AI threatens meaningful work. This reply argues that the goods derived from work can be found elsewhere, often in better activities, e.g., play, family, civic organizations, or hobbies (Danaher 2017; Coeckelbergh 2020; Susskind 2020, 2023). I will call these arguments the *Other Sources of Meaning Objection* and the *Better Sources of Meaning Objection*. The remainder of the essay is an extended reply to these arguments. More specifically, I contend these arguments fail to consider the *embeddedness* and *thickness* of meaning in historically formed human lives. Even if we can derive meaning from a wide range of non-work sources of meaning, this does not entail that there is not a significant, multi-faceted loss of meaning when work is displaced or destroyed that cannot be easily compensated for or offset. AI threatens to upend existing sources of meaning rapidly and at scale—what I will call *meaning whacks* and *meaning wipes*. Appreciating how social worlds and personal identities constrain and amplify available sources of meaning enables us to see why the existence of alternative sources of meaning—even, better sources of meaning, in some sense—may neither be accessible nor ameliorate the losses posed by AI's potential dissolution of the world of human work.

2 Three clusters of worries about AI's impact on meaningful work and living

The worry about how AI may endanger meaningful work and living occurs on several different registers, depending on the time horizon considered.² Much of the AI ethics literature

² The problems that I cover in this paper are a subset of the ethical problems that AI poses for work and meaning, more generally. There are, on the one hand, many potential problems that AI poses to the future of work that go beyond questions of meaning, e.g., oppressive deployments or the loss of worker autonomy (e.g., Moradi and Levy 2020; Santoni de Sio 2024). On the other hand, there are also questions of how AI will impact meaningful living that do not concern the future of work, e.g., how AI will transform interpersonal relationships

has focused on the immediate and near-term impacts of AI-powered automation and robotics on meaningful work (e.g., Smids et al. 2020, 2024; Nyholm and R  ther 2023; Banks and Formosa 2023). One important line of inquiry centers on how the automation of tasks within workplaces may give rise to “gaps” in achievement as agents no longer play a crucial role in producing valuable outcomes, thus undermining one important dimension of the meaningfulness of work (Danaher and Nyholm 2021). While the achievement gap theory has had its critics (see Tigard 2021; Scriptor 2025a; Vacek 2025), it has also had its boosters and radicalizers. Knell and R  ther (2024) have further argued that AI technology may not only eat away at the value of the result, so to speak, but also the process, introducing what they call “striving gaps” into the work landscape. Still more recently, R  ther (2025) has further generalized the gap metaphor, suggesting that AI threatens not just the loss of achievement or striving but a wide assortment of “meaningfulness gaps.” When AI automates a task, he argues, we lose not only a chance to achieve but also other sorts of meaning, too.

Another set of concerns about AI's impact on meaningful work and living clusters around the long-term questions about how human beings find meaning in a world that not only lacks work but also increasingly lacks any necessary activity. In an interview with the then Prime Minister of the United Kingdom Rishi Sunak, entrepreneur and tycoon Elon Musk described the future heralded by artificial intelligence:

Well, I think we are seeing the most disruptive force in history here... we will have for the first time something that is smarter than the smartest human... There will come a point where no job is needed... One of the challenges in the future will be how do we find meaning in life if you have a magic genie that can do everything you want (Sunak 2024, 15:28).

Setting aside the not insignificant question of whether it is appropriate to think of AI as a “magic genie,” Musk's comments raise the issue of the long-term future of humans living with AI. In the far future, there is a cluster of worries surrounding whether AI may upend human life as we know it, as AI takes over far more activities than just work. Notably, two books stand out for bringing these concerns into focus. John Danaher's *Automation and Utopia* (2019)

Footnote 2 (continued)

(Nyholm and R  ther 2023; Saeidi 2025; Placani 2026), how promoting “sustainable AI” is meaning-conferring (R  ther 2024), how relying on AI can amount to a surrender of humanity's existential task of self-creation (Vallor 2024), or how AI will lead to widespread deskilling (Vallor 2015; Baillie 2024; Krook 2025). Finally, I will set aside questions of justice-related issues arising from technological unemployment (Wong 2025), including its effect on the distribution of meaningful work with future generations (Swanepoel 2023).

and Nick Bostrom's *Deep Utopia* (2024) each draw our attention to the possible downsides to utopia. They address in different yet related ways what confronts human beings when there is no more need for not only work but also for many other activities that previously served as sources of meaning for human life. In this radically new condition, can we human beings still lead meaningful lives? Both Danaher and Bostrom consider the possibility that AI will eventually take away more than just work but also ultimately non-work sources of meaning. Related concerns have been echoed in a growing literature (see also Dietz 2023; O'Brien 2025; Placani 2026).

In this paper, I focus on a third cluster of issues raised by AI for meaningful work and living—namely, the medium-term impacts of AI, and, more specifically, the threat of technological unemployment. While this set of concerns takes up most of the oxygen in the popular press on the topic of AI and the future of work, in academic philosophical literature on the subject, it has received less attention, most of which has been divided between short-term, micro-level analysis and long-term speculation (with notable exceptions of Kim and Scheller-Wolf 2019; Mejia 2023; Lederman 2025). One recent article, however, frames the medium-term problems nicely:

This transitional period...could be the most hazardous epoch in recent human history. It has the potential to trigger social upheaval and revolutions, if the challenges of mass unemployment and population displacement are not effectively addressed...Even if emerging technology holds the promise to liberate us from the drudgery of work, we are not necessarily prepared to know what can or should be done with all this new 'free time.' *Because work has been so central to the social formation and the individual's sense of self-worth and identity, being without work may not be seen as an opportunity but as a deficiency and a problem* (Gordon and Gunkel 2025, 1898–1899, emphasis added).

This comment captures a significant cluster of issues relating to the time between the onset of technological unemployment and a mature post-work society. This transitional phase raises specific difficulties as work still plays an important role in the lives of many, yet may increasingly dwindle away without adequate alternative sources of meaning being available. The problems of this era will be especially salient for those who have been displaced from their work, struggling to find their footing in a new world.³

³ Given my concerns about how AI technologies may result in layoffs and technological unemployment, for the purposes of this paper, I will understand 'work' simply as paid employment, a move similar to others in the literature (Danaher 2017, 2019; Kim and Scheller-Wolf 2019). For a subtler treatment of the meaning of work, see Ciulla

In what follows, I will specifically focus on the threat of AI-induced technological unemployment and its implications for people caught in a society where their previous roles and sources of income have disappeared yet where a significant portion of the population remains employed. Even if the concerns addressed here are ultimately eclipsed in a different society to come, they remain important issues to address for the coming future.

3 Other sources of meaning, better sources of meaning

Worries about the impact of AI-powered automation on our attempts to lead meaningful lives encounter a common rejoinder: we need not worry about technological unemployment, because there are plenty of sources of meaning available other than work understood as paid employment.⁴ For example, Mark Coeckelbergh (2020) writes:

The worry about job destruction assumes that work is the only value and the only source of income and meaning. But if jobs are the only thing of value, then we should probably create more mental illnesses, smoke more, and get more obese, since these problems tend to create jobs. We don't want that. Clearly, we think that other values are more important than job creation itself...keeping in mind the skepticism about what AI can do...and the very fact that so many of our activities are not 'work' but are very meaningful, we will probably still have plenty left to do (139–141).

Assuming significant control and direction over how AI technologies are integrated into society, Coeckelbergh suggests that we should not worry about technological unemployment resulting from the use of AI technologies, because those affected can find meaning in other sources, whether these are new forms of work or non-work sources. On the

Footnote 3 (continued)

(2000, 22ff) and, more broadly, the meaning of social labor, see Honneth (2024). For a long historical view on the changing meaning and character of work, see Lucassen (2021).

⁴ Kim and Scheller-Wolf (2019, 324) address this problem in terms of what they call the "glamorization" and "romanticiz[ation]" of leisure sources of meaning, a view that they find intimated in Arneson (1990). They rightly criticize how such appeals to non-work sources of meaning can function "as a rationalization to dismiss the [existential] impact of lack of employment opportunities" (324). However, this framing misleadingly suggests that the problem is, at bottom, one of *misrepresentation* of how rich these rival non-work sources of meaning, in fact, are. However, this does not, in my view, get to the root of the problem. Even if we have an accurate view of other sources of meaning, this may not account for those limitations arising from our historically formed identities and projects.

topic of how technological unemployment may impact sources of esteem, Cordasco and Véliz (2025) adopt a similar strategy. While acknowledging the loss in the domain of work, they point to involvement in civic affairs and games as alternative potential bases for pride and self-worth. Max Tegmark (2017) also argues that meaning, purpose, and self-esteem, among other goods, “can be provided outside of the workplace, for example through sports, hobbies and learning, and with families, friends, teams, clubs, community groups, schools, religious and humanist organizations, political movements, and other institutions” (129).

This line of reasoning has still other prominent defenders. Notably, Danaher (2017) presents a version of this argument:

there is nothing intrinsic to work as I define it in this paper (performance of a skill for economic reward) that makes it the only forum for achieving those goods. People can, and do, achieve excellence, social contribution, community and status in leisure activities, voluntary activities and hobbies. They tend not to because they are forced to spend their time in economically productive forms of work. If technology can take over the economically productive activities, then the instrumental and intrinsic virtues of these non-work contexts can flourish (52; see also Danaher 2019, 84–5).

In fact, Danaher (2017, 47ff; Danaher 2019, 53ff) goes on to defend the thesis that, on balance, work is generally bad along several axes of analysis, and automation stands to be a real boon for humanity as it would liberate us to do more meaningful things with our time: “there are a variety of contingent and intrinsic harms associated with work, and... there are reasons to think there are better ways in which we could spend our time” (Danaher 2017, 16).⁵

For clarity, let us re-state the following set of objections to be considered.

Other Sources of Meaning Objection: The widespread loss of work (understood as paid employment) does not entail a significant existential threat to leading meaningful lives, because there are other sources of meaning available in non-work contexts.

This argument can also be amplified in the following way, as we find in the work of Danaher (2019, 54ff), who sees paid employment as “structurally bad” for various reasons, e.g., engrained hierarchies, limited autonomy, and so on, stemming from its contemporary social context. Thus, we can state his argument as follows:

Better Sources of Meaning Objection: The widespread loss of work (understood as paid employment) does not entail a significant existential threat to leading meaningful lives, because there are other *and better* sources of meaning available in non-work contexts that avoid the bad-making features of work.

Thus, these arguments present the case for why the widespread loss of work posed by AI and automation may not be bad for meaning, even if it is bad in other respects. Indeed, if Danaher is right, the meaningfulness of people’s lives may be improved, as they can shift away from “structurally bad” activities and spend their time on more worthwhile pursuits.

A similar line of argument can be found in the work of Daniel Susskind (2020, 2023), who suggests that the predominant cultural focus on finding meaning in and through our paid employment may deflect us from more fulfilling non-work sources of meaning. He writes:

For most of us, work is the new opium. Like a drug, it provides people with a pleasurable burst of purpose. But at the same time, it intoxicates and disorients, distracting us from looking for meaning elsewhere. This makes it difficult to imagine how we could live our lives any differently. Work is so entrenched in our psyches, we have become so dependent on it, that there is often an instinctive resistance to contemplating a world with less of it, and an inability to articulate anything substantial when we actually do (2020, 225).

Susskind continues by speculating that the importance of work depends on the relative amount of time spent on it: “Work is a source of meaning for some people at the moment not because work itself is special, but because our jobs are where we spend the majority of our lives” (2020, 232). Susskind (2023) postulates that if people lived in a society that was not structured by work, they would grow up to have very different priorities and find meaning in different aspects and facets of life that are currently overlooked or underappreciated. The close link between work and meaning “has been identified in a setting where work sits at the center of most adults’ lives, and where the social order is built around that centrality of work—but in a world where most adults do not work, that fact would no longer hold” (2023, 6). He goes on to speculate that “It may be that humankind is forced to find meaning in whatever activities they spent most of their time doing and now that is work—but in the future, unable to work, people may find that meaning in other activities instead” (2023, 6).

Ultimately, Susskind (2020, 2023) maintains that there is a contingent relationship between meaning and work. It can be a source of meaning, but it need not be:

the relationship between work and meaning is highly contingent – it depends upon individual preferences,

⁵ Nevertheless, Danaher (2017, 55ff; 2019, 101ff) worries that AI could “sever” us from whole swaths of meaning in, above all, moral and cognitive domains. For responses to Danaher’s long-term views, see Chan (2020); Scriptor (2022); Cea et al. (2023); Knell and Rüter (2024); O’Brien (2025); Pugnaletto (2025); and Placani (2026).

the moment in time, the geographical place, and the nature of the available work. Put differently, some but not all people care about having meaningful work, some but not all work is meaningful, and the balance between the two can look very different in different places and at different moments in history (2023, 7).

Call Susskind's position the *contingency of work and meaning thesis*.

Contingency of Work and Meaning: The significance of work for leading meaningful lives is contingent upon psychological and social factors, including but not limited to the amount of time spent working and the position of work in a given society.

Based on the contingency of the relationship between work and meaning, Susskind (2023) challenges the view that work and meaning have a tight connection and questions the prejudice that “non-work activities are a poor alternative source of meaning” (11), offering a clear statement of the *Other Sources* argument: “many people do in fact find meaning outside of the formal labor market, not only in hobbies and recreational activities, but also in the great variety of work that is goes unpaid” (11). Susskind (2023, 11) argues that the contingency thesis may be difficult to acknowledge given the interference stemming from the role work plays in contemporary society. Nevertheless, he thinks that as work begins to slip away from the majority of people, we will need to reassess its existential significance.⁶ Yet, we might worry the transition may be bumpy. As a prominent economist has responded to Susskind (2021), “it would be imprudent to presume that a large fraction of the current (or perhaps even the next) generation will be able to adapt seamlessly to a workless future without losing social meaning” (Acemoglu 2021b).

The *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* arguments purport to offer consolation in this transitional era. But do they succeed? In what follows, I will grant Susskind's contingency thesis. It is certainly conceivable that people might lead meaningful lives outside of the contemporary world of human work.⁷ But we might wonder whether this is really plausible as a widespread substitute, especially in the proximate future.⁸ I will argue that the contingent connection

⁶ The various historical meanings of work have been nicely chronicled by Ciulla (2000).

⁷ Other writers who worry about the transitional era also concede as much (see Kim and Scheller-Wolf 2019; Mejia 2023).

⁸ As John Tasioulas (2022) writes, “Can we accept the idea that the large-scale elimination of job opportunities can be compensated for by the benefits that automation makes available? The answer partly depends on whether the participatory self-fulfillment of work can, any time soon and for the vast majority of those rendered jobless, be feasibly replaced by other activities, such as art, friendship, play or religion” (238).

between work and meaning cuts the other way, too, i.e., it provides grounds for undermining the *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* objections, at least in the transitional age before the emergence of a mature post-work society.⁹

4 Context-side reply: embedding work in the contemporary world

The *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* objections, I argue, fail for two kinds of complementary reasons, one arising from the side of the contemporary social context and the other arising from a deeper consideration of human agency. In brief, these objections ignore how meaning is both *embedded* and *thick*.¹⁰ By *embedding*, I refer to the contextual constraints on an agent's ability live meaningfully. Sources of meaning—in this case, paid employment—need to be located against the broader horizon of social circumstances that shape, constrain, and amplify their existential significance.¹¹ The *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* arguments consider sources of meaning abstracted from the social contexts in which agents seek to lead meaningful lives or suppose conditions quite different from our contemporary social world. Whether an activity is significant for the meaningfulness of a life depends not only on its inherent features but also how it is situated in a broader landscape of options. The *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* objections neglect a number of complications that make the loss of work especially damaging under the current social circumstances. On the context side, there have been some noteworthy interventions in the debate on technological unemployment and meaningful work (Kim and Scheller-Wolf 2019; Mejia 2023). The following argument about embeddedness builds on their views, yet it also aims to expose an underlying

⁹ The argument cannot simply be that meaning is lost as a matter of fact (Placani 2026, 8), but rather we need reasons why other sources cannot compensate for or offset this loss. Notions of embeddedness and thickness offer an account of this.

¹⁰ Notions of thickness and embedding point us toward the interplay of meaning, self and world. The interplay of self and world can be found some notable accounts of grief (Ratcliffe 2022) and resonance (Rosa 2019), stemming, respectively, from traditions of phenomenology and critical theory, as well as, in a different way, the capabilities approach (Nussbaum 2011, 20ff).

¹¹ While the historical and social situatedness of sources of meaning has not received much sustained attention within analytic discussions of meaning in life, a few authors have acknowledged how our attempts to lead meaningful lives can be frustrated by social situations, e.g., being in prison camps (Metz 2013, 66) or living under a totalitarian regime (Adams 2010, 81). Notably, see also May's (2017, 12ff) discussion of the relationship between projects and social practices. The social situatedness of meaning is discussed further in Williams and Sripeter (forthcoming).

theoretical weakness that I will attempt to rectify in the following section.

Responding to what they see as the “glamorization” of non-work sources of meaning, a variant of the *Other Sources* argument, Kim and Scheller-Wolf (2019, 324ff) have stressed that the loss of work is especially damaging in contemporary society for practical reasons. Specifically, they argue that paid employment provides critical “platforms” (324) needed to have significant influence in society, and without access to this, unemployed persons are likely to suffer in respect to opportunities for meaningful activity. They elaborate:

in modern society, if one systematically lacks opportunities to be part of a well-coordinated productive means of a cooperation-enhancing hierarchical and technological infrastructure, one systematically lacks much of the real opportunity to contribute to the economic process and to the good of society and its constituents in a consistently competitive, innovative, and workable manner (325).

As a consequence, they anticipate that in an era of technological unemployment, “many unemployed people will realistically *lose* a large portion, and in fact an entire class, of meaning-creating opportunities” (327), and that this loss also has psychological “spillover effects” outside of work, undermining meaning in leisure and private life (327–8).¹²

There are more than just practical reasons to fear the widespread loss of work. Drawing on Jonathan Lear’s (2006) theory of cultural collapse, Santiago Mejia (2023) argues, paid work has a special normative status in contemporary Western societies:

Widespread automation... would pose a significant cultural challenge given that work operates as a central organizing *telos* around which our contemporary lives gravitate. A world with few work opportunities would be a world devoid of a core structuring ideal around which our society has organized itself and, as such, has the potential to strain our ability to make sense of what it means to find life meaningful (2023, 848).

As Mejia (2023) summarizes the various ways in which work matters for a life:

work is pervasive in our culture. It touches everyone and everything, defining the rhythms of our days and weeks and providing a center of gravity around which our lives are structured. Work constitutes a pervasive way in which individuals in contemporary societies provide for themselves and contribute to the common good. As such, work constitutes a central dimension of human excellence, and it offers a space to cultivate skills and virtues necessary for individuals in Western societies to flourish. Because of this, a significant part of our own identities and sense of worth comes from our success and efforts at our activities associated with compensated work (853).

Mejia (2023) contends that technological unemployment would amount to “a *cultural* crisis of intelligibility” (848). At the same time, he claims that this would have devastating implications for individuals, because “a person’s ability to find meaning in her life in general, and her work in particular, is frequently anchored and dependent on a set of specific shared institutions and cultural aspirations” (849).

Still other contemporary discussions underscore the centrality of work in modern life. Notably, Joanne B. Ciulla (2000) has described how historically work has come to play central to modern identities, acting like a double-edged sword that both offers fulfillment as well as exposing workers to vulnerabilities:

We have gone beyond the work ethic, which endowed work with moral value, and now dangerously depend on our jobs to be the primary source of our identity, the mainspring of individual self-esteem and happiness. Furthermore, work sometimes substitutes for the fulfillment we used to derive from family, friends, religion, and community. The substitution is risky because the economy is unpredictable and employers are sometimes feckless. Work can also ruin lives. When companies ‘downsize’ they leave some with too much work and others with none. Both groups face a less certain future. Overwork and unemployment place enormous strains upon individuals and families (xi–xii).

In the contemporary context, work does, in fact, play an outsized role for many, a tendency that has been called in “workism” (Thompson 2023; Hammerton 2025), even if it need not in principle be the only source of meaning in human life. Consider, for instance, how paid work (especially of certain sorts) is a sign of winning in a society with *meritocratic* ideals, aptly explored by Markovitz (2019) and Sandel (2020). This explains why the loss of work may be devastating, even if there are other sources of meaning available to a person. Under current circumstances, job losers may come to perceive themselves as losers as such. As economists Case and Deaton (2020) describe in their account

¹² Kim and Scheller-Wolf ground their claims in Susan Wolf’s (2010, 2015) influential hybrid theory of meaning in life, which holds *in nuce* that “meaning in life arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness, and one is able to do something about it or with it” (2010, 26). Specifically, Kim and Scheller-Wolf (2019) focus on how organizational forms provided by paid employment facilitate making a social “contribution” under current circumstances in modern developed societies. They contend that technological unemployment would deprive people of the social supports for achieving such objective goods, yet they leave the subjective-side underexplored, a topic that I will analyze further in the following section.

of the rise of “deaths of despair” in the United States, paid employment is entangled in broader ways of life that give meaning to people’s lives. As they put it:

Jobs are not just the source of money; they are the basis for the rituals, customs, and routines of working-class life. Destroy work and, in the end, working-class life cannot survive. It is *the loss of meaning*, of dignity, of pride, and of self-respect that comes with the loss of marriage and of community that brings on despair, not just or even primarily the loss of money (8, emphasis added).

While they do not tie their analysis to AI specifically, Case and Deaton’s (2020) study brings into focus the role that having work can play in a person’s life and the devastating effects when it is taken away. Moreover, they note that impacts of the loss of employment are magnified as other traditional sources of meaning, e.g., participation in religious communities, workers’ unions, and family life have increasingly declined. In this context, the loss of work is, quite literally, deadly.¹³

These effects are not unique to the American capitalism. As German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2023) argues, the loss of employment in contemporary society is often accompanied by a change in self-interpretation, devastating the displaced worker’s self-image:

The permanent loss of salaried work deprives subjects of their legitimate place in the social order; if they are dependent on the aims of the welfare state, they are allowed to die a sort of social death. For, in the social formation of modernity, gainful employment has become, in a sense, the source of resonance or the umbilical cord of life. In their work, subjects experience themselves in a self-actualizing way, as part of the social whole; they make a palpable contribution to the success of life and help to maintain its order. In return, they receive strength and nourishment in the form of income; the world sustains and nourishes them in a cycle of resonance. If subjects lose their jobs, however, the dominant cultural self-interpretation... forces them to see themselves as ‘freeloaders’ (122).

The loss of work thus gives rise to a loss of meaning and, more specifically, as Rosa has argued, this can be tied to a damaging reinterpretation of self, as previously employed workers find themselves out of place in society. On this point, Mejia (2023) offers further support observing that “a stable job is often seen as a badge of honor that testifies that

you are a respectable member of society who spends your time pursuing socially valuable activities” (852). But, as Arneson (1990, 1132) reminds us, some low status jobs may, in fact, be “badges of failure,” underscoring both the contingency and hierarchy of meaningful work. Nothing in my argument intends to suggest that all work in contemporary society is meaningful. Plenty of jobs suffer from a sense of pointlessness, captured brilliantly by David Graeber’s (2018) concept of “bullshit jobs.” And even those that purport to be quite meaningful can drive us to burnout (Malesic 2022).

While the negative effects of the loss of work may not, as Nick Bostrom (2024, 105ff) argues, apply to a world where no one has work and no one has worked (in the sense of paid employment) for a long time, in the more immediate future where this work-centered, meritocratic background still exists, we can expect the loss to be existentially damaging. Taking on board the contingent significance of work for leading a meaningful life, emphasized by Susskind (2020, 2023), we can now see that the *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* arguments operate in a social vacuum. It may in fact be true that there are many more potential sources of meaning in life than that provided by work. Indeed, paid employment might even have, as Danaher (2017, 2019) has argued, serious downsides. Nevertheless, in our current social world, the loss of work may be especially devastating. Were we to shift from a world organized around work to a truly “post-work imaginary” (Weeks 2011; see also Siegel 2023), if this is possible (cf. Deranty 2022), then the situation would be different. But this is not our current situation. Thus, if we consider the current embedding of work in the contemporary world—at least for some, if not many—there are reasons why the loss of work would count as a significant loss of meaning for them, even if there are, abstractly considered, other and even better sources of meaning out there.

While Mejia’s (2023) argument brings to light the role that work plays in our cultural self-understanding, his account unfortunately suffers from weak theoretical underpinnings in his account of meaning. Mejia appeals to Lear’s (2006) account of cultural collapse as its broader theoretical reference point. However, Lear’s theory is not framed as a theory of meaning in life and does not address the debates on this topic. Nevertheless, Mejia’s (2023) argument attempts to draw out implications for the meaningfulness of individual lives, despite being primarily couched in terms of “intelligibility” at a cultural level. But what exactly is the link? More needs to be said to provide an underlying account as to why and how a broader cultural crisis brought about by technological unemployment undermines the meaningfulness of individual lives, yet his account is lacking an explicit theory of meaning in life.

One apparent solution available to the above problem would be to appeal to intelligibility theories of meaning (Repp 2018; Thomas 2019), which take the issue of

¹³ Indeed, the damaging effects of unemployment have long been covered by academic and popular sources (e.g., Jahoda et al. 1971; Eberstadt 2022; Thompson 2023).

meaningfulness in life to most fundamentally concern understanding and explanation. Yet, this view runs into problems, aptly pointed out by Iddo Landau (2021b), who argues that a life having value is more fundamental than intelligibility and mere intelligibility does not guarantee meaning. We might adapt Landau's argument (213ff) to the issue of technological unemployment as follows: a displaced worker—say, an economist or sociologist—may fully well understand how technological unemployment works and why they are reeling from being displaced as society undergoes rapid shifts, but this does not soften the personal blow to life's loss of value. Appealing merely to an intelligibility theory of meaning may not help us appreciate where the loss of meaning occurs. If Landau is correct, loss in meaning is not primarily a loss in intelligibility, as is suggested on Mejia's account. Nonetheless, we still lack an account linking the cultural upheaval discussed by Mejia to the question of the meaningfulness of an individual life as it impinges on her identity and aspirations. It may be that intelligibility plays an important foundational role for other types of meaning (see Seachris 2019; Kauppinen 2022). But we still need an account of these other sorts of meaning. In the following section, I turn to theories organized around notions of projects and identities that may bring this into focus. It is my contention that we cannot properly understand the implications of embeddedness without also considering the thickness of meaning. These are, in the end, complementary aspects of meaning in life.

5 Agent-side reply: meaning and thick subjectivism

Considerations of context, however, are only part of the rejoinder to the *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* arguments. Indeed, the considerations of context, as I have argued above, require a richer underlying theory of meaning. I hope to make good on that promise in the following section. The transitional era can be expected to be existentially damaging not only because of context-side reasons but also agent-side reasons, irrespective of the existence of non-work sources of meaning.¹⁴ Importantly, the *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* objections fail to consider the *thickness* of the agents who would be grappling with the

¹⁴ Context-side and agent-side arguments are not independent but have a dialectical relationship. On this point, I agree with Mejia (2023), who observes, “The fact that we are cultural animals involves a co-constituting dialectic between individuals and their culture that is both empirical and normative. Cultures shape (and *are meant* to shape) how individuals understand the world and their place in it. Individuals, in turn, sustain (and *are meant* to sustain) the cultural institutions and social arrangements that allow them to understand the world and their place in it” (854). Cf. Jaeggi (2014) and May (2017) for respective accounts of how projects relate to the social world.

effects of AI-induced technological unemployment.¹⁵ Theories of meaningful work and meaning in life are *thick* in my use of the term insofar as they hold that meaning is conferred by relations that are built up over time in the course of an agent's life history. By contrast, on *thin* theories what is meaning-conferring has no reference to historical buildup or formation. More specifically, thin subjectivist theories focus merely on attitudes without reference to an agent's extended history.¹⁶ A closer consideration of links between projects, identity, and meaning in life provide further grounds to think that there is a unique loss of meaning when jobs are automated away that cannot be simply dismissed on the grounds that alternative sources of meaning exist, even those supposedly better sources. *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* arguments neglect the thickness of our historically formed relations to sources of meaning. Thus, even if there may be other sources of meaning out there, they may not be good sources of meaning for *me* as a concrete agent with a specific life history. Put another way, other, better sources may indeed exist out there in the world, but they may be *inaccessible* to me.¹⁷

5.1 Thick subjectivism about meaningful work

Let us begin by considering what is meant by “meaningful work,” a topic that has drawn much attention in social philosophy (e.g., Schwartz 1982; Bowie 1998; Yeoman 2014; Veltman 2016; Michaelson 2021; Parmer 2024). An important stream of this literature on meaningful work draws inspiration from hybrid theories that include both subjective elements and objective elements, expressed most influentially in Wolf's (2010, 2015) “Fitting Fulfillment” theory of meaning, which understands meaning as requiring both subjective fulfillment and objectively valuable activity. Notably, Veltman's (2016, 111ff) theory of

¹⁵ Thick/thin distinctions have become common in contemporary analytical philosophy; cf. the use of ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ selves as discussed in Kaufman (1999) and Fischer (2009, 66ff).

¹⁶ In his treatment of subjectivism, Danaher (2017, 52) considers what he calls “simple subjectivist theories” and defines them as maintaining the following: “a life is meaningful to the extent that the individual living it experiences certain subjective states, typically conscious well-being and desire satisfaction.” Such accounts are “thin” in my sense and fail to capture the complexity of meaning on the agent side.

¹⁷ This is one shortcoming with Kim and Scheller-Wolf's (2019) response to what they frame as a problem of “romanticizing” non-work sources of meaning. The problem cannot be simply that these sources of meaning are seen with rose-colored glasses. Non-work sources of meaning might be genuinely good sources of meaning with no distortion or “glamorization” but remain inadequate for *me* as a particular, historically formed agent. The problem lies not in a deficiency of the other sources themselves but with the fact that an agent's life has been built around something else.

meaningful work is explicitly modeled on Wolf's hybrid theory.

These hybrid theories of meaningful work have tended to also be pluralistic insofar as what makes work meaningful is not identified with one thing but rather a cluster of various goods. Specifically, Veltman (2016, 115ff) holds that what makes work meaningful is the combination of engagement or passion on the worker's part with one of four dimensions of objective goods: (i) offering agents' purposes to pursue, (ii) enabling them to develop skills, (iii) providing conditions for the cultivation and exercise of virtues, and (iv) helping them integrate their lives with their communities and broader life histories. Likewise, Gheaus and Herzog (2016) argue that besides money, workers gain from their work four different kinds of goods: "(i) attaining various types of excellence; (ii) making a social contribution; (iii) experiencing community; and (iv) gaining social recognition" (71). Such pluralistic theories of meaningful work thus bring to light a wide range of goods offered by work (see also Ciulla 2000, 225–6).

This wave of theorizing about meaningful work, however, is not without its discontents. Notably, Jens Jørund Tyssedal (2023) has argued that such pluralistic theories of meaningful work—Veltman's in particular—do not capture what is meant by "meaningful work," but rather confuse it with a wide range of goods achieved "at work." Related concerns about the wishy-washy characterization of "meaningful work" have led Willem van der Deijl (2024) to try to distinguish two separate lines of influence—well-being and meaning—that are expressed in contemporary theories of meaningful work. These recent criticisms, thus, try to pare down and refine the capacious pluralistic theories of meaningful work that have been so influential, even if not precise.

While these criticisms rightly point to a certain slipperiness in talking about "meaningful work" as a cluster of various goods achieved in and through work, my main concern is what is marginalized in these accounts. To capture what is specifically *lost* in technological unemployment, we need to be able to appreciate an agent's relation to *existing* work rather than simply qualities of possible work. Fortunately, such resources can be found in the recent literature. Notably, Samuel A. Mortimer (2023) has argued that work is meaningful in virtue of a worker's personal *commitments* to the work:

what makes work meaningful is neither some objective feature of work, nor the worker's experience of it as meaningful, nor even some combination of the two, but instead the worker's commitments—an act of the will. When our commitments lead us to pursue certain work, it makes the work meaningful. It follows that individuals do not need to seek out

especially ethical or enjoyable jobs in the search for meaningful work. Meaningful work is something made, not found (844).

Mortimer's (2023) theory does not directly address the problems posed by AI and automation. However, it does help us to explain, in part, what can be so devastating about the loss of employment. It is not just the loss of certain goods found in a job that could be found again elsewhere. Even if a displaced worker can find objectively meaningful work in a new field, the previous commitments that characterized their pursuit may have been shattered. Yet, Mortimer's account also needs to be amended. On his view, he presents the sorts of commitments that define meaningful work as "an act of the will." But a displaced worker may not be able to simply "will" themselves to find meaning in a new job. Minimally, Mortimer's account would need to take on board something like Harry Frankfurt's (2004, 46ff) idea that our wills can be internally constrained by themselves with what he calls "volitional necessities." What we will is not always up to us. Moreover, these commitments typically emerge over the course of an agent's extended involvement in the work. Recognition of this limitation to willing would further lend credibility to appreciating what is at stake when an occupation is suddenly gobbled up by technological automation.

The commitment theory of meaningful work helps us explain why the loss of meaning is personal—it is not just the loss of certain objectively meaningful conditions that would affect all workers the same way. It points us to a *thick subjectivist* account of meaningful work. Thick subjectivism recognizes the substance of a self that is formed under historical circumstances, including both an individual's life history as well as social circumstances and captures enduring features of a subject that gives meaning to their relationship to the world. Even if the objective meaning-conferring features of work can be found elsewhere, e.g., opportunities for achievement, recognition, skill development, and so on, this does not necessarily compensate for the loss experienced by the displaced, because they would not necessarily have a commitment to these new sources of meaning. Again, there may in principle be perfectly good alternative sources of meaning. Some people may be able to transition to these with relative ease. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mitigate the blow to those suffering dashed commitments.

5.2 Thick subjectivism about meaning in life

The thickness of meaning runs deeper still. In addition to Mortimer's (2023) commitment-based theory of meaningful work, we can find further support in two strands of recent theorizing about meaning in life. These can, I argue, help us to articulate what is at stake with technological

unemployment and why the *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* objections fall flat.

Within the contemporary discourse on meaning in life in analytic philosophy, naturalistic theories of meaning in life are commonly divided into three prominent camps: subjectivist, hybrid, and objectivist theories.¹⁸ An important strand of contemporary subjectivist theorizing about meaning in life centers on the role of a person's identity. Several thinkers have tried to articulate theories of meaning in life drawing on our identities.¹⁹ Consider two examples. First, Kirsten Egerstrom (2018) defends the view that “a part of a person's life is meaningful when that part is fundamental to who she is and is endorsed by her” (199). This view is echoed by another prominent theory. Drawing on Christine Korsgaard's (1996) concept of “practical identity” understood as “a description under which you value yourself, a description under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking” (101), Michael Cholbi (2021a), too, defends an identity theory of meaning in life. In his words, “a person's life is meaningful to the extent that her practical identity is one whose future pursuit or implementation she welcomes to a sufficient degree that expending her future on its pursuit or implementation is justifiable to her” (Cholbi 2021a, 244–5). Such identity theories of meaning in life are thick forms of subjectivism in my sense, because the meaning-conferring aspect is built up historically over the agent's life. What lends a human life meaning is not simply an attitude that might be flipped on an off, like a switch. Rather, even though the meaning-conferring element is located in the subject's relation to life, this is something that emerges over time, bearing its own history as an agent comes to possess an identity.

Another strand of discussion that highlights how the thick, historically formed aspects of our agency are central to meaning in life stems from the work of Bernard Williams (1981, 11ff) and his concept of “ground projects.” Williams introduces “ground projects” in tandem with another concept called “categorical desires” (1973, 85ff; Williams 1981, 11ff). These desires, unlike mundane desires, have a special existential significance owing to the fact that they might be offered as reasons to keep living in the scenario that an agent rationally calculates whether or not to commit

suicide. Our “ground projects” are the undertakings that flow from these existentially rooting desires. As Williams (1981) puts it, “A man may have, for a lot of his life or even just for some part of it, a *ground* project or set of projects which are closely related to his existence and which to a significant degree give a meaning to his life” (12). Williams's theory of ground projects has proven influential within analytic theories of meaning in life, as several other authors on the subject have made the notion of “project” central to their own theories (see Kaupinnen 2012; Wallace 2013; May 2017; Svensson 2017). Monika Betzler (2013, 101ff) has further emphasized, rightly in my view, that projects involve a certain relationship to time that enables agents to connect their lives diachronically, giving rise to their sense of identity. Indeed, Svensson's (2017) theory specifically links categorical desires with practical identity. Thus, the ground projects approach to meaning in life provides, as it were, a backdoor route to identity; our ground projects count as temporally extended undertakings that generate our meaning-conferring identities. Yet, the link may go the other way, too. As Wong (2008, 134) argues, identities also involve certain related projects.

Both identity and ground project theories of meaning are thick forms of subjectivism in my sense insofar as they take the historically formed moral agent's identity to be the locus of meaning.²⁰ Those activities that imbue life with meaning are developed over time and woven into our sense of self. I will set aside questions regarding the comparative advantages and disadvantages of practical identity versus ground project theories, focusing on what they share. Moreover, there is nothing that rules out adding an objective component to make these *thick hybrid* theories. We might thus hold that our ground projects and practical identities give rise to meaning in life, but not any and all possess sufficient value to do so. Such a move is made, for instance, by Wallace (2013, 190ff). Wolf (2015, 109), too, sometimes describes her hybrid theory using “projects” talk, which we might then read as having a thick subjectivist element, even if she does not emphasize it. Crucially, both thick subjectivist and thick

¹⁸ Typically, subjectivist theories are those that see an agent's subjective attitude as meaning conferring, e.g., desire (Taylor 1970) or care/love (Frankfurt 2004). Objectivist theories focus on attitude-independent features like the consequences of our actions (Smuts 2013; Bramble 2015) and hybrid theories typically combine features of both (notably, Wolf 2010, 2015). Some also adopt more nuanced combinations like Thaddeus Metz's (2013) “fundamentality” theory, which sees the subjective attitude as meaning-conferring, albeit not necessary for meaning.

¹⁹ For other identity theories of meaning, see also Wong (2008) and Calhoun (2015, 2018).

²⁰ Iddo Landau (2021a) distinguishes subjectivist and objectivist theories from internalist and externalist theories. The former concerns the meta-ethical distinction between relativist and non-relativist judgments of meaning, and the latter concerns whether meaning-conferring elements are internal to an agent's life or the agent's external impacts on the world. While a ‘thin subjectivist’ theory might hold that a life is meaningful if an agent judges it to be so, making it a kind of relativist theory, ‘thick subjectivism’ about meaning in life, as I use it, would be a species of what Landau calls ‘internalism’ insofar as it emphasizes as meaning-conferring states internal to an agent's life yet developing historically over time, e.g., identities or projects. Cf. Chastain's (2021) attachment theory of meaning, which would count as a thick theory insofar as those attachments are formed historically over time.

hybrid theories highlight how meaning in life is derived from historically developed concerns and undertakings that would play no independently meaning-conferring role on objectivist consequentialist theories (Smuts 2013; Bramble 2015). In the wake of technological unemployment, after workers find themselves obsolete in their old roles, perhaps novel non-work sources of meaning could offer them the same or better opportunities to contribute to the positive advancement of the world in new positions. Focusing merely on objective consequences does not bring into focus what is lost here, and this is one reason why thick subjectivist and hybrid theories better express what is at stake in the face of AI-powered automation.²¹

While thick subjectivist theories emphasize how our projects and identities are built up over time, nothing rules out in principle the possibility of sudden transformation or epiphanies (Cottingham 2013; Johansson and Svensson 2022; Chappell 2022). Emphasis on the historical formation of meaning in life also does not preclude the possibility that agents may develop new practical identities or ground projects (see Landau 2017, 221; May 2017, 22ff; Cholbi 2021b, 188; Baillie 2024, 349) or that agents may even find meaning in the collapse of these existing identities or projects (see Scliper 2025b; Morioka 2021, 2023a, b). But it does emphasize that the loss of a major source of our existing projects and identities counts as a substantial blow to leading a meaningful life, all else being equal, and the transition to new projects and identities may be difficult and time-consuming. In some cases, it may never be successfully completed.²²

Thick frameworks can thus help us appreciate what is at stake in the loss of identity or ground projects in the wake of AI. Take the following example. A recent *New York Times*

piece describes the “career meltdown” of Gen Xers in media and creative industries facing displacement in the face of growing use of GenAI technologies, among other causes:

Aside from lost income, there is the emotional toll — feelings of grief and loss — experienced by those whose careers are short-circuited. Some may say that the Gen X-ers in publishing, music, advertising and entertainment were lucky to have such jobs at all, that they stayed too long at the party. But it’s hard to leave a vocation that provided fulfillment and a sense of identity. And it isn’t easy to reinvent yourself in your 50s, especially in industries that put a premium on youth culture (Kurutz 2025).

The loss we are dealing with is not simply that these workers find themselves out of work, but more specifically, it is the work that they trained for, internalized, and have made, at least in many cases, central to their sense of who they are. For such people, with reference to the concepts discussed above, work counts as a ground project or is important to their practical identity. Nor are creatives outliers or exceptional cases. Ivana Bartoletti (2020) writes, “For many people, labour is the single most important thing they rely on for a sense of identity, and AI is threatening not only jobs but also the very essence of labour, which has for centuries dominated the political landscape” (85). Relatedly, Roessler (2012, 82ff) argues that work plays an important shaping role on practical identities. We find similar concerns noted in Gordon and Gunkel’s (2025, 1899) description of the transitional phase of adopting AI-powered automating technologies and its consequences for the “sense of self-worth and identity” of workers. As Harvey Lederman (2025) puts it, “For us, ‘workists’ that so many of us have become, technological displacement wouldn’t just be the loss of our jobs. It would be the loss of a central way we have of making sense of our lives” (7). Even if there is overall progress through automation, Lederman suggests that we still may grieve what is lost in the wake of the success of ChatGPT or other AIs: “A future without work could be much better than ours, overall. But, living in that world, or watching as our old ways passed away, we might still reasonably grieve the loss of the work that once was part of who we were” (6).

Future generations who have never known work may have nothing to lament, as Lederman (2025, 7–8) notes, but those of us whose practical identities and ground projects have been formed by the existent order, we may grieve. Thick subjectivist theories offer us a framework that enables us to articulate why blows to our historically formed identities and projects count as meaning-detracting. Consider, for example, Cholbi’s theory of grief (2021a, 2021b), which appeals to practical identity to make sense of what is lost (cf. Ratcliffe

²¹ Nevertheless, while my focus is on the subjective element, there are also implications for, at least some, objectivist theories. Notably, on Kauppinen’s “narrative shape” theory of meaningfulness, which is initially presented as a hybrid theory (2012) and then later an objectivist theory (2013), the progression of our projects over-time crucially influences the meaningfulness of an agent’s life. If a project around which a life is built fails due to technological unemployment and the agent never recovers, this could have implications for the “narrative shape” of such a life. Instead of showing historical growth and development, it would display stalling or even decline. Thanks to two anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to clarify the implications for objectivist theories of meaning.

²² At this point, a conservative theory of value (Cohen 2011; McPherson 2019) might be enlisted to defend the value of existing projects and identities. My argument, however, does not turn on the priority for conserving existing value as such, avoiding Danaher’s (2019, 172) critique that sometimes we have to sacrifice one value for another. Rather, my emphasis on the thickness of meaning is that meaningful projects and identities are built up over time, and in the event of their destruction, there is no guarantee of a replacement or recovery given the constraints of context and agency, even if there are alternative sources of meaning in principle out there.

2022). Although Cholbi's account focuses on the loss of persons, his analysis is adaptable to the loss of careers, too.²³ Grief is, above all, for Cholbi (2021b, 30ff) characterized by a "practical identity investment," the loss of which calls for us to rethink who we are and where we are going. As Cholbi (2021a) puts it, "Because grief is a response to the disruption in our practical identities that results from the deaths of others, grief alerts us to this threat to meaningfulness in our lives" (245). Moreover, Cholbi (2021b, 85) notes that grief mediates between our practical identities and the social contexts in which we are situated, providing knowledge about ourselves and the significance of our various relations. From a phenomenological perspective, Ratcliffe (2022, 8–15, 24ff) also argues that grief reveals the interplay of practical identity, projects, and social world. The grief of losing work, following these theories, would bring to light its significance to one's identity and overall place in one's life, even if previously unacknowledged or overlooked.

I want to suggest that ground project and identity theories of meaning help reveal what is at stake in the loss of meaning posed by AI-powered displacement or destruction of jobs. Insofar as a worker strongly identifies with their job, its loss may be devastating to the meaningfulness of a displaced worker's life, even if there are still other possible sources of meaning available outside of work. The commitment theory of meaningful work as well as ground project and practical identity theories of meaning in life are all examples of *thick subjectivism about meaning in life*, which foreground substantially developed identities, projects, and commitments that tether agents to the world.

Suppose, for example, that trucker jobs were replaced, more or less suddenly, by self-driving long-haul trucks. Thick subjectivist theories help capture the loss suffered by at least some of the workers who identify with the culture of trucking (see Levy 2023; see also Susskind 2020, 98–111). On this scenario, the patterns of life of these displaced workers are upended and replaced. For those workers who identify as truckers, embracing life on the road as personally defining, the loss is a significant loss of identity. An entire set of identities, with whom many people strongly identify, is eliminated. Here, we find an instance of what Kim and Scheller-Wolf (2019) find worrying about technological unemployment: "many unemployed people will realistically *lose* a large portion, and in fact an entire class,

of meaning-creating opportunities" (327).²⁴ While they are focused on the loss of possibilities for social contribution, the loss also occurs at the level of ground projects and practical identities. Individuals who ground their sense of self and the meaning of their lives find themselves in a new social world that has no place for them—at least for who they were. This worry about AI's impact on work has been noted by some AI leaders, who see AI's automating power as having the potential to eliminate whole sectors of jobs. Notably, Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, has remarked, "Some areas, again, I think [are] just like totally, totally gone" (Gedeon 2025).

But the worry here cannot be appreciated without also considering the speed of the changes. As Lederman (2025, 7) puts it, "It's one thing for a person to adjust over a full life, to the washing machine, the dishwasher, the air-conditioner, one by one. It's another, in five years, to experience the progress of a century." What is stunning about the prospects raised by AI is the speed at which they could potentially devour whole fields. It is the combination of the speed and the scale that leads Mejia (2023) to posit that technological unemployment may precipitate "a cultural crisis of intelligibility" (859). The potential speed of automation, Belic (2024) has argued, also compromises attempts to adapt to changing circumstances. To better bring into focus the threat from AI-induced technological unemployment, we can thus add to the existing repertoire of "meaningfulness gaps" (Rüther 2025), the following concepts:

Meaning Whack: the sudden loss of a source of meaning in a life.

Meaning Wipe: the wholesale loss of a kind of source of meaning in a life, e.g., skill, role, or activity.

The technological unemployment precipitated by AI-powered automation thus has the potential to simultaneously give rise to meaning whacks and meaning wipes, suddenly eliminating a whole field of meaning-conferring activities, jobs, or roles.²⁵ Moreover, the exposure of certain skills to automation may extend further than an initially automated role or job, as the MIT Iceberg Index has sought to measure (Chopra et al. 2025). Concepts of meaning whacks and meaning wipes are significant for thick subjectivist theories,

²³ Given Cholbi's (2018) views on work as an unfortunate "adaptive preference," however, he may be unsympathetic to the use to which I'm putting his theory of grief. Yet, he does recognize the existential costs to displaced workers in the proximate future and recommends policymakers take this into consideration in ameliorating the transition to a post-work society (14), a point with which I'm in agreement.

²⁴ There is a parallel problem for long-term losses of meaning, which may extend beyond the loss of particular skills and roles to more fundamental spheres of meaning. Notably, Danaher (2017, 2019) and

Footnote 24 (continued)

O'Brien (2025, 762) consider long-term scenarios where AI automates "entire domains of meaning and value" besides those found in paid employment, e.g., cognitive, moral, and creative goods.

²⁵ Neither the category of a meaning whack nor meaning wipe is exclusive to technological unemployment. Certain social roles may be eliminated for other reasons, including those of a political or social variety, e.g., prohibition, and such losses may occur quite suddenly. Cf. Keohane's (2023) exploration of the effects of retirement, which might be sudden yet foreseeable.

because they underscore how technological change can come into conflict with the established projects and identities that root our lives. The speed of the change—the whack—makes adaptation difficult. And scale of the loss—the wipe—makes it difficult to find a suitable replacement. It might be objected that humanity has faced technological change before.²⁶ But AI’s potential for rapid and widespread automation (Nowotny 2011, xii; Tyson and Zysman 2022; Suleyman and Bhaskar 2023) gives us reason to worry that the existential implications may be more severe and broad sweeping than in previous waves of technological change. Indeed, some have suggested that we slow down the development and adoption of AI technologies (Mejia 2023, 860–1; O’Brien 2025, 766–8), a proposal to which I’m sympathetic. Categories of meaning whacks and wipes give us language for capturing the potentially disorienting consequences of our AI future.

The concepts of meaning whacks and wipes also help us see what is common in two types of technological unemployment: (a) situations where jobs cease to exist, because technology has made workers redundant or obsolete as in *structural unemployment*, and (b) situations of *frictional unemployment*, where technologies have eliminated some jobs while facilitating the creation of new jobs (Keynes 1963; Susskind 2020, 2022). While much of the debate in economics focuses on whether automation will result in structural technological unemployment or whether losses will be offset by gains elsewhere, i.e., whether new technologies will ‘replace’ or ‘complement’ workers (e.g., Frey 2019; Susskind 2020), the existential impacts can be significant, irrespective of who is right about the trajectory of long-term techno-economic forces. Displaced blue-collar workers out of work in, say, Kentucky or Henan may find no solace that new technologies have created jobs in Silicon Valley or Shenzhen, as they are unable to move into those positions for reasons of lacking relevant skills, being in the wrong place, or having incompatible self-conceptions (Susskind 2020, 98–111; Susskind 2022). As Suleyman and Bhaskar (2023, 180) put it, “If your sense of self is wedded to a particular kind of work, it’s little consolation if you feel your new job demeans your dignity.” We can thus appreciate the loss to the meaning of lives on two different scenarios:

Displacement of Work (frictional unemployment): the social uptake of AI-powered automation leads to the elimination of a certain class of meaning-conferring jobs and identities, while giving rise to new classes of jobs and identities that may or may not be accessible to the displaced.

Destruction of Work (structural unemployment): the social uptake of AI-powered automation leads to the net loss of a certain class of meaning-conferring jobs and identities that are not replaced in the social order, leading a swelling class of persons that struggle to find an ever-shrinking set of employment-related social positions and identities.

In light of the foregoing analysis, we can appreciate why the *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* arguments fail to assuage medium-term fears about AI-powered automation precipitating widespread existential crises and social tumult. These arguments occur in a psycho-social-historical vacuum, neglecting how the actual sources of meaning in an agent’s life are built-up over time. The mere existence of other sources of meaning does not entail that a historically formed agent with strong attachments to particular sources of meaning can easily draw meaning from those other potential sources.²⁷ I will call this the accessibility problem.

Accessibility Problem: the existence of non-work sources of meaning does not mean that those sources of meaning are *accessible* to historically formed agents, i.e., potential sources of meaning cannot be converted into actual meaning in an individual’s life.

Historically shaped agents with particular ground projects and identities cannot simply switch to other sources of meaning, even if they are available in an agent’s social world. Our thickness also generates resistance. Susskind’s (2020, 2022) arguments about frictional unemployment from the mismatch of skills and identities provide an instructive parallel for thinking about the thickness of meaning. These barriers to entry apply not simply to new sources of work but, more generally, to new sources of meaning in general, including non-work sources of meaning. Non-work sources may themselves may require skills and self-conceptions that prevent an agent from simply shifting to these as available sources of meaning. Our historically developed practical identities and projects not only open us up to certain sources of meaning, but they may also close us off to others. A displaced designer may find it hard to find meaning in a new activity and lack the training to, say, find adequate consolation in performing music or some sporting endeavor, even if these are potential sources of meaning. Minimally, such a shift may require both time and effort. The loss of meaning

²⁶ Thanks to Lin Ying-Tung and an anonymous reviewer for raising this question.

²⁷ The theme of the accessibility of meaning is explored further in Williams and Scripter (forthcoming). More generally, on accessibility in connection to grief and meaning cf. Ratcliffe (2019); Matey (2023); Golub (2025) and on accessibility in connection to values and aspiration cf. Callard (2018). For an alternative interpretation of accessibility in connection with the phenomenon of alienation, see Jaeggi (2014).

inflicted by meaning wipes and whacks is not simply to an existing self whose sustaining context and activities have disappeared. The historically formed self in a new, foreign environment may be ill-suited to tap into these alternative sources of meaning. The existential adaptations, so to speak, that allowed them to take meaning in some activities may actually impede their transition to other sources as they find themselves unequipped for and uninterested in otherwise perfectly meaning-rich endeavors.

What follows from this analysis of the thickness of meaning? To start, it has implications for how we might address the loss of work. Briefly, let me mention just one downstream issue. When the topic of AI-induced technological employment comes up, it is commonly mentioned in conjunction universal basic income (UBI) as a potential remedy (e.g., Tegmark 2017, 126ff; Coeckelbergh 2020, 140). Indeed, Aaron James (2020) has offered a moral case for universal basic income (UBI) as a precautionary measure for mitigating potential crises in the wake of future technological unemployment. Even if UBI is beneficial, work still may have its own significance (Forget 2020). Thus, it may be no surprise that appeals to UBI as a solution for technological unemployment have also been met with suspicion that it serves as “a painkiller” (Lee 2018, 210) or “hush money, or a bribe, perhaps even an attempt to monopolize a source of life’s meaning and deny it to others” (Susskind 2020, 220). UBI may turn out to be inadequate as solution to crises of meaning in the wake of technological unemployment (Kim and Scheller-Wolf 2019). While I suspect UBI may be necessary, the foregoing argument about the thickness of meaningful pursuits helps us to appreciate the limits of UBI as a palliative for the social disruption caused by AI-powered technological employment. Acknowledging how the loss of sources of meaning in historically formed lives may not be easily replaceable by other sources of meaning helps us to appreciate what remains lost—for some, at least—even if UBI helps to mitigate the economic losses.

6 Conclusion

The prospect of AI-powered automation has prompted repeated warnings that the future of human work may be upended in the coming years. Given the role that work has played in providing meaning in human life, do these changes threaten meaningful human work, and more generally, living? This essay has focused specifically on the threat of technological unemployment in both its structural and frictional modes, leaving aside short-term questions of AI integration into the workplace and long-term speculation about what human life looks like when no one needs to work. More specifically, I have taken up the argument, often repeated, that we need not worry about the loss of work as a source

of meaning, because there are plenty of other non-work-related sources, including those some that are better than work-based sources of meaning. The arguments, which I have called the *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* objections, fail to do justice to the *embeddedness* and *thickness* of our projects and identities, concepts which work in tandem to articulate the constraints—external and internal—on an agent’s ability to live meaningfully. Whether technological unemployment renders human lives less meaningful is doubly contingent upon both the social world in which AI technologies displace and/or destroy paid human employment as well as the individual identities of the people inhabiting that social world. This contingency gives us grounds to doubt the *Other Sources* and *Better Sources* arguments. Concepts of *meaning whacks* and *meaning wipes* help bring into focus how technological unemployment may come into conflict with historically formed meaning-conferring projects and identities, expressing reasons why our AI future has the potential to be disorienting as losses in meaning-conferring activities may happen suddenly and at scale. While some especially adaptable agents may be able to weather a sudden sea change of meaning with ease, this double contingency provides strong grounds for thinking that *some* human lives will almost certainly be negatively impacted on an existential level, as central sources of meaning in *their* lives disappear. Abstract considerations about other potential sources of meaning should not underestimate or minimize this loss.

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Declarations

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