

The Joy of Useless Pursuits: Why Ancient Wisdom Will Outlast AI

Souvik Sarkar
sounix000@gmail.com



The irony of the fact that this image is generated by an AI, although the prompt is by the author!

There's something deeply revealing about watching a mathematician's eyes light up when they discuss AI. While lawyers panic and consultants scramble to prove their continued relevance, the pure theorist leans forward with genuine excitement: *Finally, a research assistant that never gets tired of my questions!*

This split reaction tells us everything we need to know about who will thrive when artificial minds reshape our world. The answer isn't what Silicon Valley prophets would have us believe.

The beautiful futility of pure thought

Imagine walking through the corridors of *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris, where young minds wrestle with mathematical abstractions that have no immediate use, no clear path to profit, no obvious benefit to humanity's material condition. These students are doing something our productivity-obsessed age considers almost scandalous: they're thinking for the pure joy of it.

When AI arrives to handle the world's practical problems, these "impractical" souls will simply continue their work, now aided by silicon minds that can crunch numbers while leaving the deeper mysteries intact. They were never competing with machines because they were never doing mechanical work. They were always doing something fundamentally different: **experiencing wonder.**

The crisis that's coming—and it is coming—will not be economic in the traditional sense. It will be existential. What happens to a species that has spent centuries defining human worth through economic utility when that utility vanishes overnight?

The terrible honesty of obsolescence

Every profession tells itself a story about its irreplaceable value. Lawyers speak of nuanced judgment, consultants of strategic insight, and managers of human leadership. But AI is offering us a terrible honesty: much of what we've called skilled work was always pattern recognition dressed up in professional clothing.

The panic spreading through corner offices and conference rooms isn't really about unemployment. It's about identity collapse. These people built their sense of self around being better than others at economically valuable tasks. AI isn't just taking their jobs; it's revealing that their jobs were already mechanical—the mechanism just happened to be running inside their skulls instead of on silicon chips.

Meanwhile, in small rooms around the world, people who society has always considered slightly mad continue their work undisturbed. The number theorist exploring prime distributions, the poet playing with language, the philosopher questioning the nature of consciousness—they greet our artificial future with curiosity rather than dread because they never confused their value with their productivity.

The fraud of subsidized serenity

We often point to Scandinavian happiness as a model for post-work society, but this misses something crucial. Although home to serious philosophy, literature, and math, Nordic contentment is built on oil wealth and resource extraction. Similarly, Swiss philosophical tranquility rests on centuries of banking profits. These societies haven't transcended economics—they've simply been wealthy enough to afford the illusion of transcendence.

When AI disrupts the economic foundations that fund their social safety nets, when oil becomes worthless and algorithms handle financial services, these carefully constructed paradises may crumble faster than anyone expects. Their happiness was always contingent, always dependent on the very economic systems they appeared to have moved beyond.

True resilience lies elsewhere—in those places where intellectual fire has burned bright even in material darkness.

The underground rivers of wisdom

There's a reason mathematics flourished in ancient India despite economic hardship, why poetry survived centuries of Persian upheaval, why Jewish scholarship thrived in ghettos across Europe. These traditions understood something we've forgotten: that the pursuit of truth and beauty needs no external justification.

Walk into the *Chennai Mathematical Institute*, where brilliant minds work with minimal resources but maximum passion. Visit the institutes of Eastern Europe, where scholars produced world-changing insights while their governments collapsed around them. These are laboratories of a different kind of human development—one that doesn't depend on venture capital or government subsidies, but on something deeper and more durable.

The people in these traditions don't pursue knowledge because it might lead to patents or profits. They pursue it because the alternative—a life without wonder—is unimaginable.

The great returning

What's about to happen may not be progress in the way we usually understand it, but rather a great returning. The civilizations poised to thrive in the AI age are not those rising now through industrial might, but those that were once great because they understood what makes humans human.

Ancient Athens didn't fund philosophy because it generated economic growth. The Islamic Golden Age didn't support mathematics because it improved trade efficiency. Vedic India didn't develop complex philosophical systems to boost agricultural output. These civilizations invested in human intellectual and spiritual development because they recognized it as intrinsically valuable.

The industrial age convinced us to forget this wisdom. We learned to develop human potential instrumentally—education to create workers, research to generate competitive advantage, and even happiness policies to boost productivity. But when AI eliminates the economic rationale for human development, these instrumental approaches lose their foundation.

Societies that never lost sight of why human consciousness matters—beyond its economic utility—will find themselves not scrambling to create meaning, but simply continuing to pursue what they always valued.

The physics of wonder

Here's what AI optimists and pessimists both miss: Artificial Intelligence isn't humanity's replacement, but its liberation. Not from work—that's the shallow reading—but from the illusion that our value lies in our usefulness.

Picture an AI tutor working with a child to rediscover the quadratic formula. There's no rush, no economic pressure, no competition with other students. The AI provides just enough guidance to keep the child in that magical space between confusion and insight. When understanding finally dawns, the joy on that child's face is purely human—the delight of a conscious mind encountering truth for the first time.

This is what we're moving toward: a world where learning becomes play, where research becomes art, where the ancient human love of pattern and beauty can flourish without apologizing for its uselessness.

The civilizations ready for this transition are not those with the most advanced technology, but those that have maintained their appreciation for what the Greeks called *theoria*—the contemplation of truth for its own sake.

The deepest economics

There's a beautiful irony waiting to unfold. The countries that prioritize happiness, health, and intellectual contribution for their own sake—rather than as inputs to economic output—may find themselves not just spiritually richer, but materially more resilient as well.

These three elements form the true foundation of any economy: flourishing consciousness, vital bodies, creative minds. We've spent centuries treating them as byproducts of economic activity, when in fact they are its source.

When the age of artificial intelligence fully arrives, the societies that remember this truth will discover something remarkable: they were preparing for the future all along, not by racing toward it, but by preserving what was always most valuable about being human.

The future belongs not to those who can compete with machines, but to those who remember why consciousness itself is worth celebrating. In our rush toward artificial minds, the deepest

victory may belong to those who never forgot the irreplaceable miracle of the natural ones we already possess.

As humans, the return to useless pursuits might be our only true superpower.