

ENOUGH BY DESIGN · CHAPTER THREE

Where Abundance Overreaches

Chapter Three of Enough by Design

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Chapter Three of Enough by Design. The whole book, with every chapter, is at business.hautelumiere.life/library/enough-by-design (DOI https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23989348).

A NOTE BEFORE YOU READ

This work is offered for education and leadership development. It is not legal, financial, accounting, investment, medical or psychological advice; take the advice of a qualified professional who knows your circumstances. Companies and events are described from the public record as the author understands it; characterisations are the author's analysis. Examples are illustrative, and no particular outcome is promised to any reader.

ABSTRACT

Chapter 2 set two first principles side by side. John Maynard Keynes, in 1930, told his grandchildren's generation that the economic problem would be "within sight of solution" within a century. Lionel Robbins, in 1932, defined economics as the study of "scarce means". Ammanuel Santa Anna's Ecstatic Economics sides with Keynes, and goes further: in a short companion work he writes that scarcity "is not a boundary condition of reality. It is a blueprint." A claim that strong invites misuse. It can be heard as permission to ignore a real shortage, as a promise that the right attitude produces money, or as a slogan that dresses an old business model in new language. Santa Anna's own book anticipates most of these and refuses them, which is part of why it can be read seriously. But a reader who wants to use the idea at work or at home is better served by meeting the objections at full strength first.

CHAPTER THREE

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A strong claim deserves strong objections

Chapter 2 set two first principles side by side. John Maynard Keynes, in 1930, told his grandchildren's generation that the economic problem would be "within sight of solution" within a century. Lionel Robbins, in 1932, defined economics as the study of "scarce means". Ammanuel Santa Anna's *Ecstatic Economics* sides with Keynes, and goes further: in a short companion work he writes that scarcity "is not a boundary condition of reality. It is a blueprint."[20]

A claim that strong invites misuse. It can be heard as permission to ignore a real shortage, as a promise that the right attitude produces money, or as a slogan that dresses an old business model in new language. Santa Anna's own book anticipates most of these and refuses them, which is part of why it can be read seriously. But a reader who wants to use the idea at work or at home is better served by meeting the objections at full strength first.

This chapter takes five. Each is stated as fairly as its best proponents would state it, set beside the evidence, graded, and followed by a way through: a version of the abundance argument that survives the objection and is more useful for having met it. The aim is not to rescue the idea. It is to find its edges, because an idea used without knowing its edges is an idea that will eventually cut someone.

Santa Anna names the danger himself, in a passage about what he calls consciousness bypass: the insight that consciousness matters "can be distorted into the belief that consciousness is *all* that matters".[21] He does not leave it as a warning. "Consciousness transformation and structural transformation must proceed together," he writes. "Neither can substitute for the other."[21] Every objection below is, in one way or another, a guard against that distortion.

The race that has no finish

The objection. Keynes's forecast depended on most human needs being absolute: needs we feel "whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be". He admitted that the other class, the relative needs, "may indeed be insatiable".[22] If a large and growing share of what rich societies want is relative, then abundance does not end the race. It raises the stakes. Fred Hirsch made the argument at book length in *Social Limits to Growth* in 1976: as material needs are met, more spending goes to positional goods, a house in the best district, a place at the most selective school, whose supply is fixed by their nature because only a few can be first.[23] No amount of production makes more first places.

The evidence and its grade. The argument is logically sound, and the existence of positional goods is not in dispute. What is harder to establish is their share of spending and how that share has changed. Hirsch's book is an argument, not a measurement, and this book does not have a reliable series for the positional share of household budgets to offer in its place.

The way through. The objection does not refute the claim that scarcity is designed. It sharpens it. A positional good is the clearest case there is of designed scarcity: its scarcity is the design. A school is selective because selectivity is what is sold. Seen this way, the objection gives the household and the leader a specific task. Find the lines in the budget whose value is positional, as chapter 2's Two-Column Ledger asked, and decide each one on purpose. Some will be worth keeping. Others will turn out to be the goalpost that, in Santa Anna's notes on financial freedom, "keeps moving".[24] He has a sharp phrase for what that pursuit becomes when it is mistaken for prosperity: "This isn't prosperity consciousness—it's scarcity in disguise."[24]

For a firm, the same move applies to its own offer. A business that competes only on position, being the most exclusive or the most expensive, is in a race with no finish. A business that also competes on absolute needs met well has a floor under it. The companion book on gift and reciprocity reads the same tension from the side of trust.



The bandwidth that did not always replicate

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The bandwidth that did not always replicate

The objection. Santa Anna's book leans on a body of research associated with Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, whose 2013 book *Scarcity* argued that financial scarcity "taxes cognitive bandwidth", in the book's own summary.[21] The research behind it includes a study published in *Science* the same year by Anandi Mani and colleagues, which found that reminding poorer participants of a large financial demand lowered their scores on cognitive tests, and that sugar-cane farmers in India scored better after harvest,

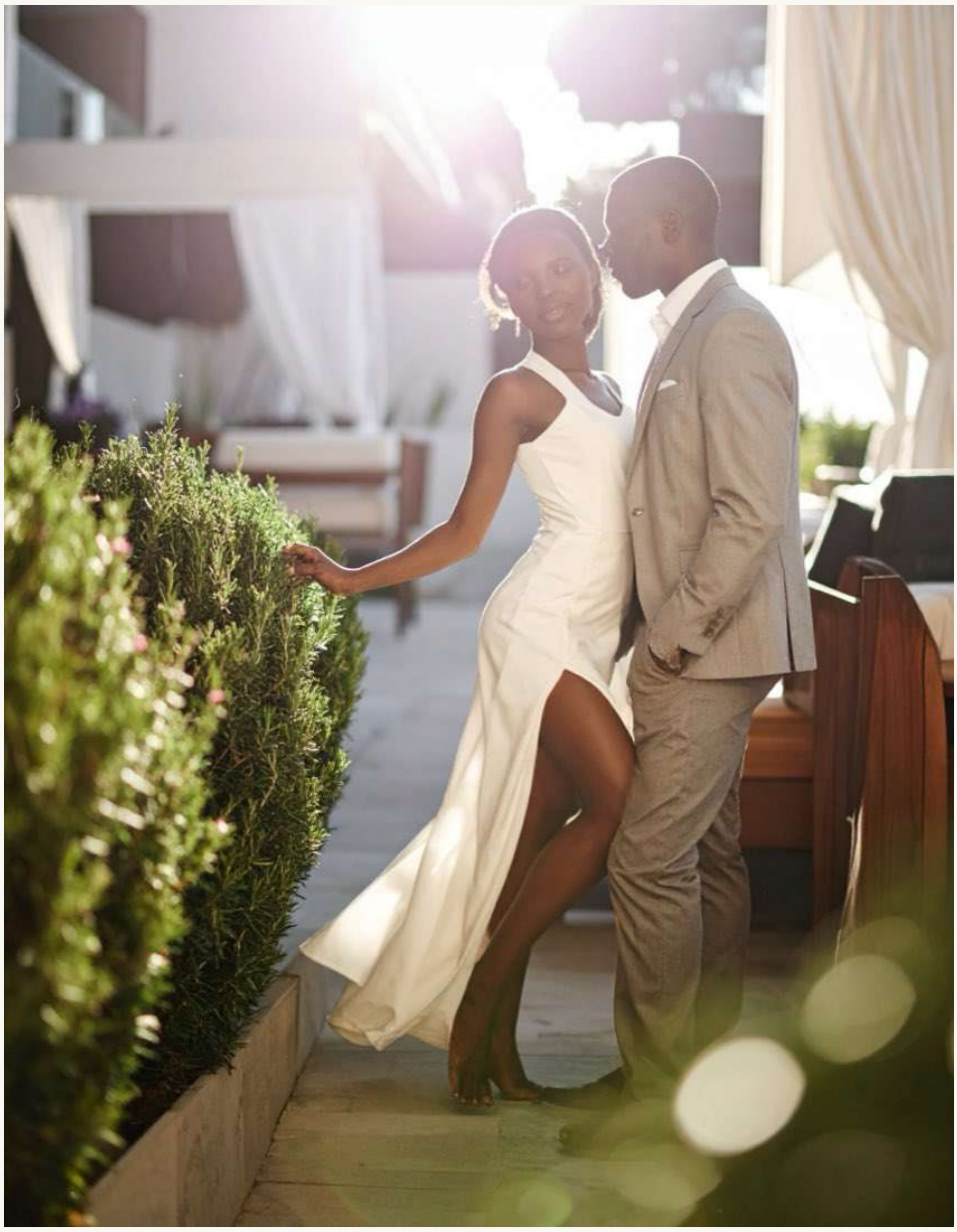
when they had been paid, than before it.[25] If scarcity damages cognition, the argument runs, then scarcity reproduces itself through the mind. But the finding has been challenged, and a reader should know how.

The evidence and its grade. Jelte Wicherts and Annemarie Scholten published a comment in *Science* the same year, questioning the analysis of the laboratory experiments; the original authors replied.[26] In 2016, Leandro Carvalho, Stephan Meier and Stephanie Wang studied a large sample of low-income Americans before and after payday, a natural version of the harvest design, and found that people surveyed before payday did not perform worse on the cognitive tasks they measured, though they did differ in some financial choices.[27] The fair summary is that the existence of a cognitive cost of scarcity is contested, that its size, if it exists, is uncertain, and that it likely depends on how scarcity is experienced and measured. This is a live debate, not a settled finding in either direction.

The way through. The book does not need the strong version. Its argument that scarcity is lived in the body rests on a wider base than one research programme, and Santa Anna is careful about what his practices claim. Of the somatic exercises he offers, he writes plainly that "these practices are not magic", and then, in the next sentence, exactly what they will not do:

> *They will not pay your bills, fix systemic inequality, or resolve structural injustice.*[21]

That is the stance the evidence supports. Treat the inner work as necessary for some people and sufficient for none. Where a claim about scarcity and the mind is used to justify a decision about money, a policy or a person, grade the evidence first, and say the grade aloud. A house that will write "one contested study and a replication that did not find the effect" is a house a reader can trust on the claims that are well supported.



The plateau that was not there

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The plateau that was not there

The objection. Much abundance writing relies on the idea that money stops buying well-being past a certain point. If that were true, "enough" would be a fact to be discovered rather than a choice to be made. The best-known support for it was a 2010 paper by Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton, which found, in a large American survey, that income improved people's evaluation of their lives across the range, but that day-to-day emotional well-being stopped rising at around $75,000 a year.[28] The difficulty is that the plateau did not hold up.

The evidence and its grade. In 2021 Matthew Killingsworth, using experience sampling on a large sample, reported that experienced well-being kept rising with income above $75,000, in a paper whose title states the finding.[29] In 2023 Killingsworth, Kahneman and Barbara Mellers published a joint reanalysis, an adversarial collaboration between the two camps. Their abstract is plain: "A reanalysis of Killingsworth's experienced sampling data confirmed the flattening pattern only for the least happy people. Happiness increases steadily with log(income) among happier people, and even accelerates in the happiest group."[30] They suggest that the measures in the 2010 paper had a ceiling, and might be better read as measures of unhappiness than of happiness. The direction is what matters here. For most people in the data there was no point at which more income stopped going with more well-being; the flattening belonged to the least happy, where money eased misery up to a point and then eased it no further.

The way through. This is the objection that most improves the argument, because it removes a crutch the argument should never have leaned on. If "enough" is not a natural plateau, then it is a decision. That is exactly how Santa Anna's notes frame it. The enough line, in his practice, is not discovered in the data. It is set by the person, "based on your actual values and needs", so that there is a finish line at all.[24] The research does not say that money beyond a point is useless. It says nothing about whether the hours it costs are worth it, or whether the relative needs it serves are ones a person would choose on reflection. Those are questions a household answers for itself, and a well-set "enough" line is the instrument for answering them.

Ideas that are getting harder to find

The objection. The strongest case for abundance in a modern economy is ideas. Paul Romer's 1990 model of endogenous growth rests on the observation that an idea is non-rival: once it exists, any number of people can use it without using it up.[31] Santa Anna makes the same point in his own register: an economy can be designed so that its wealth circulates, and knowledge is the clearest thing that does. But in 2020 Nicholas Bloom, Charles Jones, John Van Reenen and Michael Webb published a paper with the blunt title "Are Ideas Getting Harder to Find?", and answered yes. Across several fields, from semiconductors to crop yields to medical research, they found that maintaining the same rate of progress required steadily more researchers, so that research productivity was falling.[32]

The evidence and its grade. The paper is careful and widely cited, and its finding is measured within the cases it studies. What it cannot show is whether the decline is a law of nature, a feature of how research is currently organised and funded, or both. It is a finding about the cost of producing new ideas, not about the cost of sharing ideas that already exist.

The way through. The objection separates two kinds of abundance that are often run together. Copying is abundant: an idea once found can be used without limit, and the marginal cost of a second user is close to nothing. Creating is not: a new idea costs more effort over time, on Bloom and his colleagues' evidence. An abundance argument that confuses the two will promise too much. One that keeps them apart becomes

practical. A firm or a household can ask, of any piece of knowledge it holds, whether its value lies in creating more of it, which is costly and should be funded as such, or in circulating what already exists, which is cheap and is often blocked by design. Chapter 5 works that question through a firm and a household, and chapter 6 follows two firms that chose to circulate what they had made.



Designed scarcity, designed by whom

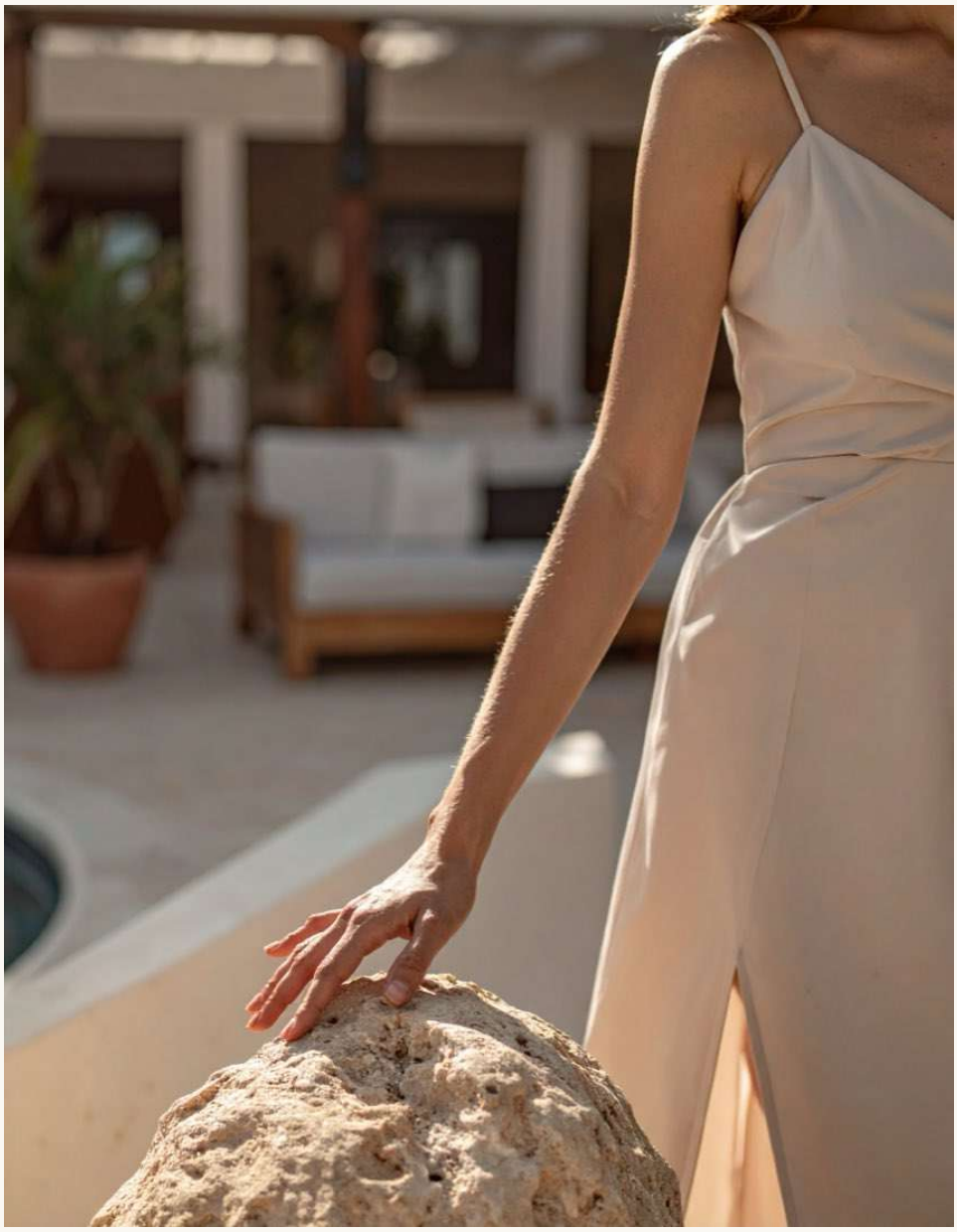
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Designed scarcity, designed by whom

The objection. If scarcity can be designed, it can be designed for profit. The modern economy is full of deliberately constructed shortages: software licences that limit copying, platforms that capture a network and charge for access to it, intellectual property terms that extend for decades. Jonathan Haskel and Stian Westlake, in *Capitalism without Capital* (2018), argue that the rise of intangible investment comes with exactly these features: intangibles scale, spill over and combine, and the firms best placed to capture their returns pull away from the rest, with consequences for inequality and competition.[33] "Scarcity is a design choice" can be the slogan of the extractor as easily as of the steward.

The evidence and its grade. Haskel and Westlake's account is a synthesis of a large literature on intangibles rather than a single test, and the links they draw to inequality are argued rather than proven causally. The broad pattern, that intangible investment has grown in importance and that its returns are unevenly captured, is well documented.

The way through. The objection does not undo the claim. It names who is holding the pencil. Santa Anna's own policy writing is clear about the direction he means: "Overflow is cultivated; scarcity is manufactured."[34] The question for a leader is therefore not whether to design scarcity or abundance, since every firm does some of each, but where each is designed and whom it serves. A licence that protects the people who made a thing so they can keep making it is a different design from one that locks a customer in after the value has been delivered. Ostrom's work on the commons, read at length in the companion book on the commons, is the most patient study available of rules that keep a shared resource abundant for those inside it without making it a toll road for those outside. The house's instrument for seeing who holds which position is *Alpha Stakeholder Map*.



What survives

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What survives

Put the five objections together and the abundance argument is narrower and stronger than its slogans. It does not say material shortage is an illusion; Santa Anna says outright that people in deprivation "need material resources, not consciousness shifts".[35] It does not say a changed mind produces money, or that money stops mattering at a threshold. It does not say ideas are free to make.

What it does say survives all five. A large share of the scarcity a well-off household or a well-capitalised firm lives inside is positional, designed or habitual rather than material. Positional scarcity is real and can

be chosen about. Designed scarcity can be redesigned, by someone, for someone. Habitual scarcity, the bracing at a bank balance that is "objectively fine", is a pattern in a body, and Santa Anna's whole book is about meeting it there, without pretending that doing so pays the rent.

Chapter 4 reads that surviving claim through Amartya Sen and the house's living-systems lens, and *Ecstatic Economics* remains the fuller statement of it.

Grading a claim in practice

The tool at the end of this chapter turns the five objections into a sheet a leader can fill in. It helps to see one worked before using it. What follows is a composite, drawn from no single firm, and labelled as such.

A mid-sized professional-services firm hears from its operations director that "our knowledge is abundant; we just hoard it." The claim sounds like this book. Graded, it splits in two. The firm's methods, templates and past proposals are copies waiting to circulate: a designed scarcity, held in place by folder permissions and by a bonus scheme that rewards partners for what they alone can do. That half grades well, and the fix is a rule, not a mood. The other half of the claim, that the firm has plenty of senior judgement to go round, is material. There are four partners who can price a complex engagement, and no reorganisation adds a fifth this year. Treated as abundant, that half would ask four people to carry more for the same pay, under the language of generosity. The bypass test catches it.

The worked case shows why the grader asks who designed a limit before it asks whether the limit is real. Most claims arrive mixed, and the useful work is separating the parts. Santa Anna's own phrase for the stance is "pragmatically idealistic":[36] clear about what is wanted, and plain about what the figures will and will not bear. In his book the warning is sharper still: individual change "without structural change is spiritual bypassing in economic clothes. Both are needed. Neither alone is sufficient."[37]

The test of an idea is not whether it can be stated beautifully. It is whether it still stands after the people who disagree with it have finished speaking, and this one is still standing, a little thinner, with its weight on the right foot.

The Tool: The Abundance Claim Grader

Use this on any claim that something is "abundant", "artificially scarce" or "a mindset problem", whether it appears in a strategy paper, a vendor's pitch, a policy proposal or your own planning. One claim per sheet. Fifteen minutes.

The claim, in one sentence:

1 · What kind of scarcity is it about? Tick one.

- [ ] Material: a physical or contractual limit that would exist under any rules.
- [ ] Positional: the good's value lies in being scarcer than others'.
- [ ] Designed: a rule, licence, price or process creates the limit.
- [ ] Habitual: the limit has outlived its cause; it is still felt, though the figures show sufficiency.

If it is material, stop. The claim is not an abundance claim and should be met with resources.

2 · Who designed the limit, and who benefits from it? Name both. If you cannot, the claim is not ready to act on.

3 · What is the evidence, and what grade is it?

GRADE	MEANING
A	Several independent studies, including at least one large or natural experiment, in the same direction
B	One good study, or several small ones, not yet challenged
C	Contested: studies in both directions, or a well-known failure to replicate
D	An argument or a case, without measurement

Write the grade and one sentence on what the evidence cannot show.

4 · Copying or creating? If the claim concerns knowledge, skill or information: is the value in circulating what exists (usually cheap) or in producing what does not yet exist (usually costly)? Write which.

5 · The bypass test. Does acting on the claim require anyone to accept less material support because their attitude is expected to change? If yes, rewrite the claim until the answer is no.

6 · The decision. In one sentence: what will you do differently because of this claim, by when, and how will you know in three months whether it was right?

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