

RESEARCH · SCARCITY AND ABUNDANCE

# Three Rooms

On scarcity, abundance, and the frame that decides which one you live in.

By John F. Long · July 2026

Imagine three rooms.

In the first, nothing is ever enough. The people are friendly, but under the friendliness runs a quiet accounting: who has more, who has less, who is slipping, who is pretending. In the second, the counting has stopped. The people seem, oddly, relieved, grateful for where they stand and untroubled by their neighbors. In the third, enough was never the question. No one is measuring, because everyone is making.

Three atmospheres so different they might be three climates. The obvious guess is that money sorts the rooms, and money is where the difference is loudest, so start there. But money is the surface. Some of the wealthiest people alive would sit most naturally in the poorest-feeling room. What actually sorts the rooms is each person's relationship to the idea of *enough*, and that relationship governs far more than a balance. It governs how a person holds status, attention, credit, love, and time.

## The scoreboard

The first room runs on scarcity, and scarcity is not a quantity. It is what the mind becomes once it decides the pie is fixed. Mullainathan and Shafir (2013) showed that scarcity operates as a tax on attention: it narrows the field of view, produces tunneling, and consumes the bandwidth a person would otherwise spend on judgment and generosity. A mind convinced there is not enough cannot fully attend to anything but the shortfall, whether the short thing is money, recognition, or love.

Once the pie is fixed, every gain by another is a loss to you. Veblen (1899) called this invidious comparison: measuring your standing not by what you have but by the distance to the next person. Hirsch (1976) named the trap that keeps the game unwinnable. Positional goods draw their worth entirely from rank. Being warm is absolute; being warmer than the man beside you is positional, and no amount of heat settles it. The same structure runs on any currency. Being liked is absolute. Being the most liked is a race with no finish line, because it depends on everyone else standing still.

So the room keeps score. And when someone walks in who has visibly stopped keeping score, the room does not admire it. It probes. Schoeck (1966) argued that envy is not wanting what another has; it is being unable to bear that he has it. Girard (1961) went further: we learn what to want by watching what others want, so the one who already has the thing becomes model and obstacle at once, admired and resented in the same breath. The probing is not about the newcomer. It is the sound of a fixed pie defending itself.

## Breathing room

The second room is not defined by having more. It is defined by having stopped counting. The change is structural, not moral. Once a floor of security is felt, the survival alarm switches off, and what Maslow (1962) called deficiency motivation gives way to being motivation. Deficiency asks: is there enough to be safe? Being, once safety is assumed, asks a different question entirely.

That is why gratitude is audible in the second room and absent in the first. Gratitude is not politeness. It is the felt sense that the supply is large enough that one person's fullness drains no one else's. People who are not defending a slice can afford to be glad, and gladness is contagious in a way scorekeeping never is. The word usually reached for is *class*, but class here has nothing to do with manners or lineage. It is breathing room, and a person of modest means can have it while a person of great means dies without ever finding it.

## The makers

The third room has dropped the question of enough altogether, not by ignoring it but by outgrowing it. These are makers, and for makers the currency is not accumulation but circulation. The anthropologists of the gift, Mauss (1925) through Hyde (1983), observed that in a gift economy value is created by movement: a gift kept ceases to be a gift and becomes mere property. Ideas behave the same way. Shared, they compound. Hoarded, they rot.

This is abundance in its constructive form, what Maslow meant by being-values: creation pursued for its own sake by people who have stopped asking whether they are winning. Here status is nearly weightless, because no one's identity is posted to a scoreboard. The only thing compared is the quality of the work. A person can arrive with nothing and say anything, provided the idea is good.

## Preparation is not scarcity

One distinction before going deeper, because two opposite minds wear the same disguise. Some people prepare seriously for disorder. They stock, they build redundancy, they teach others to be resilient. From across the room it looks like hoarding. It is the opposite.

Scarcity is defensive: there is not enough, so I must protect what is mine. Preparation is constructive: the system is fragile, so I will build resilience and teach others to build it. Taleb (2012) drew the line with antifragility, where redundancy is not waste but the very thing that lets a system gain from shocks. The Stoics drew it first with *premeditatio malorum*, the deliberate rehearsal of misfortune, practiced by Seneca not to feed fear but to disarm it. The scarce mind clutches against loss and stays afraid. The prepared mind designs against loss and grows calm. One clutches. One engineers. Identical at a distance, opposite up close.

## The flywheel

One correction before the real question, because the room metaphor hides a mechanism. The rooms are not locations. They are loops.

Watch the causality run in a circle. Scarcity narrows attention, narrowed attention sees only shortfall, shortfall confirms the pie is fixed, and the counting tightens. Making runs the same circle in reverse: making produces surplus, surplus removes the need to count, and the freed attention goes back into making. The makers are not making because they found the good room. The room is good because they are making. Each room manufactures the very condition that sustains it.

Which means no one is in a room at all. Everyone is spinning one, and carries it through every door. This is why fortune so rarely moves a person between rooms: rooms are not entered, they are generated, and a windfall handed to a counting mind becomes one more thing to count. Where the first spin comes from is the old tangle, temperament, upbringing, lineage, the whole fabric of a person, and no one chooses their starting rotation. But a flywheel, once seen, can be leaned on. The direction is inherited. The direction is not fixed.

## The variable underneath

Now the real question, the one the rooms only pose. Why do some people move through all of this untouched, while others are pulled toward it like filings to a magnet, needing the room's approval, wounded by its slights, forever proving themselves?

It is not the size of anyone's supply; the first room proves that plenty and scarcity coexist easily. It is the location of the frame. Rogers (1961) described the mature person as one who carries an internal locus of evaluation, an inner instrument for judging worth, rather than renting the crowd's. Rotter (1966) formalized a cousin of the idea as locus of control. A person whose frame is stored inside decides in advance what a thing means, so the room cannot redefine it. A slight glances off a value the person set for himself. There is nothing for it to grip.

The magnet people lack the instrument, not through weakness but through lack of necessity. If the standard scoreboard fit you from the start, you never had a reason to build a private one. The default sufficed, and the default made the crowd your mirror. But those who could not run on the default, for whatever reason the world handed them, had to build an internal reference frame early, simply to know their own worth at all. That forced construction is the muscle that later reads as immunity. The people the scoreboard never fit are so often the ones who can pass it untouched because the exclusion built the instrument.

And the immunity is not numbness. To pass untouched is not to feel nothing. It is to feel the friction and metabolize it rather than absorb it. The sensor still fires. What changes is the routing: around the self instead of into it.

One more mark of the fully unhooked, and it is the rarer one. They are magnetized in *neither* direction. Not pulled down by the anxious room, and not pulled up toward the highest-status figure in any room. Status stops being the axis at all. An exchange is worth having or it is not, and the standing of the person offering it does not move the needle. Immunity to the slight is uncommon. Immunity to the slight and the pull together is the surest sign the frame has moved all the way inside.

## A shirt, for instance

The frame is abstract, so take a case. Picture a sober man, no drink, no smoke, coffee and nothing else, who owns a tie-dye shirt and wears it wherever he likes. He wears it because the colors are alive, because someone made it by hand, because no two are the same. That is the entire reason.

A shirt like that is never allowed to be a shirt. One kind of stranger lights up and claims him for the psychedelic tribe: hey, brother. Another kind, in rooms of quiet accounting, audits him for seriousness and finds the shirt disqualifying. Two rooms, opposite verdicts, same error. Each read the surface through its own dictionary and arrived at confidence. Neither learned one true thing about the man.

The shirt, it turns out, is a Rorschach. It says nothing about the wearer and everything about the reader. The stranger who sorts by costume reveals it. The stranger who sorts by conformity reveals it. And the rare one who asks why he actually wears it, then waits

for the answer, reveals a mind that can hold a contradiction open long enough to check it. The shirt sorts the room while the man stands still.

Note carefully what the shirt is not. Worn to avoid the questions, it would be conformity. Worn to provoke them, it would be performance, which is conformity's twin; both take their orders from the room. A uniform is issued by the group. A signal is emitted by the self. He would wear it on a desert island.

## The scoreboard grows back

Here the framework must turn on its own maker, because the most seductive failure is hiding in everything above.

The person who escapes the first room can rebuild it in a minute by changing the currency. Stop ranking by money and start ranking by awareness: who is evolved, who is asleep, who sees it, who never will. The vocabulary improves. The structure is identical. Being at peace is absolute; being more evolved than the anxious room is positional, Hirsch's trap in finer clothes, a race that depends on everyone else staying asleep. Contempt for the scorekeepers is still scorekeeping. It is the same game played from what feels like the winner's chair, and from the inside it feels exactly like clarity.

A second seduction stands beside it: diagnosing from across the room. At that distance, compulsion and joy look identical. So do envy and mere dullness. The observer who reads envy into every slight and a cage into every stranger's labor is choosing the reading that ranks the observer highest, and an analysis that flatters the analyst is precisely the one to trust least. Sometimes a slight is a fixed pie defending itself. Sometimes it is a dull man making conversation. Knowing that you cannot always tell the difference is part of the frame being inside. Certainty about other people's interiors is a sign it has crept back out. Even the man in the shirt is not exempt: the moment he starts enjoying the misreadings, scoring each stranger for the sort he just performed, he has rebuilt the scoreboard in brighter colors.

So the honest version of this essay cannot be written from outside the phenomenon. The scoreboard grows back, in everyone, on whatever axis they happen to be winning. The work is not to escape it once. The work is to notice each regrowth and put it down again, and there is no room from which this stops being necessary.

## The test

None of this can be bought. Advantage of any kind, money included, buys permission only: it can quiet the survival alarm and open a door. It guarantees nothing, because a person can carry the anxious room through the door and reassemble the scoreboard on the far side. Whoever spends decades accumulating and still keeps score acquired the supply and never the frame, and no quantity of the first purchases the second.

So the divide is not between those who have and those who do not. It is between those whose worth is stored inside and those who left it out in the crowd. The one group spends life defending a slice. The other spends it choosing which room to stand in, and leaving when the ideas run out.

Watch the confusion at any airport gate. First class boards first, and the cabin fills with people who paid for the privilege of maximum time in the tube. The prize was never comfort; a free traveler would want the opposite, last in, first out, the least confinement money can buy. The prize was walking past the line. Rank was purchased and mistaken for freedom, when the two are not even the same species: rank is a position in the room, freedom is the ease of leaving it.

Underneath it all sits a simple test. Freedom is not the absence of effort; the busiest maker may outwork everyone in the anxious room. Freedom is the ability to stop. The scorekeeper cannot stop counting. The compulsive builder cannot stop building, because stillness is where the unexamined bargain would finally speak. The free can set the work down, feel the old gravity, notice it no longer holds, and pick the work back up because they chose it.

And a final test, sharper still. The settled person does not need the first room to be beneath anything. When the rooms stop needing ranks, the frame is inside. When *evolved* still needs *unevolved* to mean something, it is the old game in better colors.

That is the whole of it. Three rooms, one variable, and it was never the money. It was whether you could put the scoreboard down, and keep putting it down, every time it grows back.

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The body of work is structured as a quartet of citizenship surveys (time, ground, voice, currency), with [The Periscope](#) as the catalyst essay, [The Map](#) as the compressed survey, [The Absent Presence](#) as the meta-frame, and two applied notes: [Acting in the Cracks](#) (prescription) and [The Obvious Child](#) (demonstration). A Verification strand applies the same discipline at the scale of a name and a life: [The Aptanagram Method](#) and [Closing Loops](#). The full reading order is at [/the-index](#).

Reader correspondence is welcomed; see [On Correspondence](#).

