
The Reith Lectures 2025

with Rutger Bregman

Moral Revolution

2. How to start a moral revolution

ANITA ANAND: Hello, and welcome to the second of this year's Reith Lectures with the Dutch historian and best-selling author Rutger Bregman. Now,

we're in Liverpool, a city known all over the world for its rich cultural heritage, particularly when it comes to music and football, of course.

Today, we are in a wonderful old lecture theatre in the Victoria Gallery Museum. It is really an iconic red brick building in this city. It is part also of the University of Liverpool. And why are we here? Well, we're here because of our lecturers' longstanding interest in the abolitionists, the men and women who fought to end slavery. And, of course, Liverpool was a leading European port for the transatlantic slave trade, and it generated much wealth for this city.

In this, the second of four lectures, Rutger Bregman will reflect on the lessons from history and ask what the abolitionists can teach us now. He's called this lecture *How to Start a Moral Revolution*. Please welcome the BBC's Reith Lecturer for 2025, Rutger Bregman.

(Audience applause)

RUTGER BREGMAN: In the autumn of 1917, the mood on the streets of Petrograd wasn't one of revolutionary zeal. It was exhaustion, cynicism, apathy. After years of war, hunger and hopelessness, most Russians had given up on politics altogether. They hated the Tsar and the royal family, but also the incompetent liberals who replaced them. They hated the corrupt officials, the generals, the landlords, the priests. Everyone was part of the same broken system. So when Lenin and his Bolsheviks arrived at the Winter Palace, many Russians shrugged. "Fine, take it. You won't last six weeks either." But the Bolsheviks did last. Not six weeks. 70 years. The Russian Revolution is a textbook case of how apathy paves the way for tyranny. When the centre collapses, when no one believes in anything anymore, when the old world is so discredited that even madmen look like a better option, that's when history takes a darker turn.

In my first Reith Lecture, I argued that we are living through a similar moment of unravelling. I described how immorality and unseriousness have become the two defining traits of today's elites. I likened America to the spectacular collapse of Rome and Europe to the slow death of Venice. Across the West, trust in democracy is declining. People are tuning out, swiping away, switching off. They don't believe in politicians, in the media, in courts or elections. They have seen too much hypocrisy, too many broken promises. This is a moment of extraordinary opportunity for modern-day Lenins. They can smell their time has come. From religious authoritarians to neo-fascist tech-bros, radical ideologues are waiting in the

wings. Every day, they are gaining power, not because their ideas are so compelling, but because the alternatives feel so discredited. "Let him try," people say, of the next billionaire saviour or would-be strongman. "It can't be worse than this, right?" But it can get worse, much worse.

Here's the good news, though. I promised that I'd structure this series as a classic three-part sermon. Act 1, *Misery*. Act 2, *Redemption*. And Act 3, *Thankfulness.* Now, the poor souls in London had to sit through the first part, which means that you here in Liverpool get to skip the hellfire and head straight to redemption.

The past, after all, is not just a graveyard of disasters. It is also a reservoir of hope. I have always been fascinated by those small groups of stubborn people who change the course of history. Sometimes for the worse, think of the Bolsheviks, but also, gloriously, for the better. Florence Nightingale and the nurses who pioneered evidence-based medicine. Emmeline Pankhurst and the suffragettes who won the vote for women. Norman Borlaug and the inventors whose Green Revolution saved millions from famine. What all these people had in common was a clear vision, a scalable strategy, and the unflagging persistence to pursue their goals. In the immortal words of Margaret Mead, *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

I know that many historians are sceptical of this view. They prefer to focus on the deep, underlying forces of history. Geography, demography, technology. To such scholars, individuals aren't very important. The so-called *Great Theory of history*, they argue, is to our craft what bloodletting is to medical science. The immorality and unseriousness of today's elites are, they think, the mere symptoms of deeper forces.

I'll be the first to admit that there is real power in this analysis. And yet, I have two problems with it. First, it leaves little room for contingency, for the way history can suddenly veer in unexpected directions. And second, it denies our agency. Sure, the 19th-century obsession with great men has rightly been dismissed as naive, elitist, and sexist.

But it's also hard to deny that certain individuals, Lenin, for one, did extraordinary harm. And if that's true, then perhaps the reverse could also be true, that a handful of men and women can bend the arc of history towards justice.

A few years ago, I embarked upon a study of such people, of the great moral pioneers of the past. And before long, I found myself gripped by an unexpected feeling that I can only describe as moral envy. By then, I had spent about a decade of my career in the pundits industry, writing books and articles, giving talks, posting tweets, always hoping that someone else would do the actual work of making this world a better place. And meanwhile, I was on the sidelines, watching, commentating, and the more I read, the more jealous I became. The memoirs of these abolitionists, suffragettes, and humanitarians forced me to ask, what about my own life? What would my legacy be?

As Theodore Roosevelt, the historian and president, once said, *It is not the critic who counts. History isn't changed by those without skin in the game, not by the cynics who explain why things will never work, or by the clever voices pointing out every flaw,* something I've seen especially often among journalists. Change comes from the people who risk embarrassment, who make mistakes, who get knocked down and stand up again. They are the ones who dare to commit themselves to a cause bigger than their own comfort. Sometimes they win. Often, they fail. But as Roosevelt reminded us, even in failure, they achieve more than those who never tried, who played it safe, who preferred irony over courage, and who never knew the taste of victory or the shame of defeat. Roosevelt himself, as a young man, devoured the stories of the heroes of ancient times and decided, “This is the life I want.” He made the conscious choice to live greatly.

Today, I want to zoom in on a small group of thoughtful, committed people who made the same choice. We remember them as the kick-starters of the greatest movement for human rights that this world has ever seen, the fight against the slave trade and slavery. And interestingly enough, this is a profoundly British story. As we all know, the UK built one of the most brutal slave empires. Here in Liverpool, even small shopkeepers eagerly bought shares in this monstrous trade. Yet Britain also became the driving force in banishing the slave trade from the face of the earth. And I believe that that paradox holds a vital lesson.

Abolition is not just a chapter of history; it is also a reminder of what ambitious idealists can achieve. And in a moment when Britain is losing confidence, slipping into decline and drowning in nostalgia, it is worth remembering that its proudest achievement was not conquest or wealth or empire, it was the courage to abolish one of the darkest institutions in human history.

Let me start with some basic facts about British abolitionism. The most important thing to understand is how weird this movement was, how utterly unlikely. In retrospect, it seemed to have come out of nowhere. No one had ever witnessed anything like it. In the summer of 1787, it spread up and down the country like wildfire. It was all over the newspapers, and in the coffeehouses, there was talk of little else. If you study the histories of all nations, the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville later wrote, *I doubt you would find anything so extraordinary or brilliant.* Its masterminds were 12 men with black hats. On May 22 of that year, they had gathered in a small print shop at 2 George Yard in the heart of London. And there, among the inkwells and piles of paper, they started the first and perhaps most influential human rights campaign ever. The 12th Mission seemed as simple as it did impossible to eradicate the greatest evil of their time. In a country where less than 3% of the population and not a single woman could vote, they launched a movement that would mobilise millions to overthrow one of the oldest economic systems. It was the first great political movement for the rights of others. In all of human experience, observes the great historian Adam Hochschild, there was no precedent for such a campaign.

It's tempting to see the official abolition of legal slavery as the inevitable consequence of progress, that it would have disappeared anyway in a world of cars and computers, just like the stagecoach and the carrier pigeon have faded away from our lives. Yet historians tell us a different story. Dig deeper, and you realise just how unlikely abolition was. A historical accident, one prominent scholar has called it, a contingent event that might just as easily never have occurred. In other European countries, there was hardly an abolitionist movement. The definitive history of abolition in Portugal is tellingly titled *The Sounds of Silence.* In Spain, slavery barely registered as an issue. The French anti-slavery society had only 141 members in the late 18th century and folded after five years. Now, 50 years later, the Dutch equivalent struggled to persuade its members to even show up at meetings. Or, as one British abolitionist wrote about my beautiful home country, *This is a cold and dead place.*

And in the United States, the land of the free? Well, the only party that opposed slavery, the Liberty Party, failed to win a single majority in any district. Even in 1860, the leading anti-slavery newspaper, *The Liberator,* had only 3,000 subscribers. The hard truth is that the word *Abolitionist* was a term of abuse. A campaigner for the future president, Abraham Lincoln, once complained that he was branded impudent, foppish, immature, and worst of all, an abolitionist. It was even worse than being a vegan today.

Small wonder that most European and American abolitionists achieved so little. Spain, Portugal, France, and the Netherlands banned the slave trade only reluctantly and only under British pressure. And that pressure was overwhelming. The Royal Navy launched a massive campaign against the slave trade, which would go down in history as the blockade of Africa. It has been described as the most expensive international moral effort in modern history. 2,000 slave ships were seized, and 200,000 enslaved people freed. Researchers have estimated that direct British efforts brought about the eradication of 80% of the global slave trade. This has led historians to a mind-bending conclusion. Without the success of the British movement, it could have taken significantly longer for slavery to be outlawed, or it might never have happened at all. Had history taken a different turn, legal slavery might still be widespread.

The print shop at 2 George Yard is long gone. I visited the place recently, and on the spot where history was made, I found an ugly office block housing a private equity firm. That's the kind of place where our so-called best and brightest end up today. In my first Reith lecture, I talked about that waste of talent. The biggest problem in the world today isn't climate change, future pandemics, or democratic collapse. It's that far too many brilliant minds are working on everything but those problems.

Yet it doesn't have to be this way. The reason I became so obsessed with British abolitionism is that it offers an example of a different kind of ambition, a moral ambition. Its young leaders were just as ambitious as many Oxford and Cambridge graduates today, but somehow their ambition was channelled in a different direction. To understand how this happened, we have to take a closer look at the founders of the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. Interestingly enough, 10 out of 12 were entrepreneurs. While French abolitionism was led by writers and intellectuals, the British movement was powered by merchants and businessmen. These were people who had built and scaled their own companies, and yes, some had grown quite wealthy in the process. But that's not why we remember them today. We remember them because they used their privilege to change the course of history.

I'm sure most of you will be familiar with William Wilberforce, who actually wasn't one of the founders but later got most of the credit for taking down the slave trade. Wilberforce was a curious case. As a student, he had spent his days gambling and drinking. At 20, he thought it might be fun to stand for parliament and use the

inheritance from his grandfather to bribe enough people to vote for him. This was a fairly standard procedure at the time. But at the age of 25, he decided to take a year off from politics to go touring around Europe, which was all the rage among rich kids even back then. And in that fall of 1785, he saw the light. While hiking in the Swiss Alps, Wilberforce made the momentous decision to leave his sinful existence behind and dedicate his life to the Lord. He joined a new movement of Christians, the evangelicals, who were generally despised by the British elites as irritating do-gooders. From that day on, Wilberforce would only bend his mind to lofty matters. And what could be loftier than fighting slavery?

There were those who doubted his motives and said that he cared more about his own soul than about the suffering of the enslaved. But what matters is that Wilberforce did devote his career to fighting the slave trade. Less well-known but more important was another Cambridge graduate named Thomas Clarkson. He was the youngest of the founders of the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. And as a student, Clarkson had participated in an essay contest, which was the main way to make a name for yourself back then, an age without TikTok. Students had to write a dissertation in Latin, addressing a simple question. *Is it permissible to enslave others against their will?* At the time, Clarkson was 25 and studying to become a priest in the Church of England. I had no motive but that which other young men in the university had on such occasions, he later wrote, namely, *the wish of obtaining literary honour.* And sure enough, his essay won first prize. But after the prize ceremony in Cambridge, he couldn't get the subject out of his head. There's this famous moment in his memoirs about when he was on the way back to London and got down off his horse. He was brooding and trying to find some error in his reasoning. But the longer he thought, the more the truth dawned on him. As the village of Wait's Mill came into view, Clarkson sat down by the side of the road, sunk in despair.

"Here the thought occurred to me," he later wrote, "That if the contents of this essay were true, it was time some person should see these calamities to their end."

Suddenly, Clarkson could see himself as the hero who would take down the slave trade. A few weeks later, at a dinner with a few other abolitionists, he rose and solemnly spoke the words, "I am ready to devote myself to the cause."

This may sound a tad performative. And yes, reading Clarkson's memoirs today, you can't help rolling your eyes sometimes. But in the real world, actions outweigh intentions. And what matters is that the ambitious student kept his word. Call it virtue signalling, if you like. But it was real virtue. For the rest of his life, 61

years, Clarkson continued to fight slavery. He travelled 35,000 miles across the United Kingdom on horseback, often at night, and set up hundreds of local committees and recruited thousands of supporters. He even went into the belly of the beast, Liverpool, and he was almost murdered by slave traders here who tried to push him off a pier.

Christopher Leslie Brown, one of the foremost experts on British abolitionism, was once asked who we should see as the most consequential individual in the history of anti-slavery. Brown answered that at the start of his career, he was determined not to give too much attention to these individual heroes. He wanted to focus on the structural causes. But the more time Brown spent in the archives, the more he realised that some individuals had outsized influence. Would the slave trade have been abolished without Wilberforce? Probably. Some historians even think that a savvier politician could have pushed abolition through Parliament faster. But Thomas Clarkson? Could it have happened without him? "Another Clarkson is unimaginable," says his biographer. Clarkson brought the committee together in 1787 at a crucial moment. He devoted his whole life to the struggle. What St Paul was to Christianity, that's what Thomas Clarkson was for abolitionism. The contemporary described him as a moral steam engine and a giant with one idea.

There is one crucial fact about British abolitionism that I haven't mentioned yet. Its timing was everything. Just like Russia in 1917 and just like the world today, Britain was at a crossroads. The late 18th century was also an age of decadence and decline. The political centre was under extraordinary pressure, the same pressure that across the Channel would soon fuel the French Revolution, the Reign of Terror and the beheading of a king. People were sick of their leaders. Parliament reeked of gin, and MPs routinely slurred their speeches. The king's son, the future George IV, was a notorious drunk and gambler and an incredible jerk, even by royal standards. One of his top aides wrote after his death, “A more contemptible, cowardly, selfish, unfeeling dog does not exist.”

This moral rot had spread far beyond the palace and parliament. London had become the sex capital of the world, with as many as one in five women forced into prostitution. Executions were staged as public spectacles while animals were routinely beaten and tortured in the streets.

"The English nation oversteps all others in immorality," a German visitor observed, and the abuses which come to light through addiction and debauchery are unbelievable. In short, virtue was not in vogue. And in exactly that decaying culture, a movement for moral renewal was born.

The abolitionists were a small band of renegades, Quakers and evangelicals, who didn't just take on the slave trade. They set out to spark a wider moral revolution. Wilberforce, for example, wouldn't have described his life's mission as fighting slavery. For him, abolitionism was a part of something bigger, the attempt to make goodness fashionable.

But how do you bring about a cultural revolution like that? Their answer was simple, by practising what you preach, by pledging yourself to a worthy cause. Remember, people don't do good things because they're good people. They become good people by doing good things, even when they initially may act out of vanity. The latter is only human nature. We all crave recognition. Most of us want to be seen and admired. But in our society today, we admire the wrong things and the wrong people. What the British abolitionists taught me is that it is possible to rewrite a nation's honour code, to make a different kind of ambition go viral, to make goodness contagious.

My original plan was to spend five years on writing a hefty tome about history's great moral pioneers, but after finishing the first part, on the British abolitionists, I shelved the project. The moral envy had become too strong. I no longer wanted to just write about the people in the arena. I wanted to join them. So, in late 2023, I co-founded an organisation called *The School for Moral Ambition.* We like to think of ourselves as the Robin Hoods of talent, taking the best and brightest out of their boring corporate jobs and redirecting them to the great causes of our time. At the heart of our work lies a simple belief that small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.

What we need today is not just bottom-up resistance. We also need a new elite, not of birth, wealth or silly credentials, but of massive positive impact. I'm talking about a skin-in-the-game elite, about people who use what they have, their human, financial and cultural capital, to make a huge difference. Our goal should be to make future historians proud.

This is not about left versus right. It's about seriousness versus laziness, determination versus apathy, good versus evil. If we want to preserve the post-war democratic order, we have to prove that our way works. That we're not just a bunch of whiners and nimbies who never get anything done. We have to show that liberal democracy can deliver and that we're willing to fight for it.

In 1917, most Russians thought the future was already written. They assumed nothing good could come out of politics anymore. That history was a rigged game, where every new set of rulers was as bad as the last. And that cynicism proved fatal. It opened the door to a tyrant who promised salvation and delivered catastrophe. But what 1917 also shows is that in moments of crisis, the world is unusually malleable. That's why moments like this are so dangerous and so full of possibility. The iron of history is softest when the centre is weakest.

And this is where we are today. Our own age of disillusionment could become the prelude to a new authoritarian era. Or it could be remembered as the moment when a new kind of ambition took hold, a moral ambition like the abolitionists once embodied. The same apathy that gave Lenin his opening could just as well have given someone like Clarkson or Wilberforce theirs.

In 1785, a young man on horseback pulled over to the side of the road near the village of Wadesmill and decided to change history. Today could be our Wadesmill moment. Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]

ANITA ANAND: Rutger, thank you so much. A lot to think about. We're going to take questions from the audience, but I just wanted to clarify something in my mind. Because I feel like you have a really complicated relationship with elites. Because those of you who weren't in London you slammed the elites and those with monies in their pockets, quite comprehensively. And you have also said 10 of the 12 who founded the abolitionist movement they had coin in their pocket. They were wealthy. Is the truth not today as it was then? That only those with money have the megaphone. And so you need to make the money to make the difference?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So I deeply believe that we need both. If you look at the success of the abolitionist movement, it was about hundreds of thousands of people boycotting sugar, signing petitions. It was about massive slave revolts in the Caribbean that put so much pressure on the system. But yes, it was also about people like Thomas Clarkson, like William Wilberforce, who were really practising what they preached and who were willing to use their capital, sometimes their financial capital, but also their cultural capital, to take on this horrific system. We absolutely need both.

ANITA ANAND: And the other thing that struck me when you were talking was that these were all men who were moved by their gods. They were spoken to as angels whispering in their ears at night, or the Lord showed them away. It was always inextricably linked with religion, certainly with the abolitionists. We're living in a time when religion is not as important as it was then. Does that hurt your moral revolution?

RUTGER BREGMAN: I would say it's growing in importance. As the son of a pastor, I've always believed that you can leave the church, but we human beings we always have a God-shaped hole in our hearts. People are always looking for answers to the bigger questions in life. So, I think a moral revolution like I'm advocating for does not necessarily have to be religious, but I do think that there is probably a spiritual dimension to it. The recognition that we can be part of something much bigger.

ANITA ANAND: Let's take some questions. Show of hands…there is a question over there…

DANIEL BLISS: Hello, my name is Daniel Bliss. I'm a sixth form student at Tadcaster Grammar School, and as a sixth form student I'm constantly surrounded by my friends and others who are so overwhelmed with anxiety and worry for the future, but also so privileged and so used to a life of doom scrolling on their phones and overwhelmed with like just privilege that they don't have to act, they pass on responsibility for this thing..to make this moral revolution that you speak of. How much faith do you actually have in the younger generations, the new generations, to enact this moral revolution that you're talking about?

RUTGER BREGMAN: If we look at the great moral movements of history, what you realise is that you don't need to convince everyone. You need a small group of very committed individuals who very deliberately try to spread a certain kind of virus. Like abolitionism was a little bit like a virus, you know, it spread up and down the country. It really surprised everyone, and that is really what gives me hope. The fact that a lot of people are — well, to put it bluntly, herd animals, just follow the scripts of their own lives, do what is expected of them, I think that gives an opening for these small groups of people who are like, you know what, let's upend the status quo.

ANITA ANAND: But those who say, you know what, everything is a struggle, rising cost of living…are you not expecting too much of young people who are struggling maybe to get a roof over their heads?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Well, I can assure you that GDP per capita in the year 1800 was quite a bit lower. So, people were poor in the past, and they still managed to do a lot. Clarkson was actually the only full-time organiser. He had a small inheritance from a family member that enabled him to do his work, but at some point, he was utterly broke. And by the way, he also had a total burnout when he was 33 years old. He couldn't walk the stairs anymore; he started sweating profusely whenever he wanted to speak. So, I'm not saying that this is some kind of comfortable, mindful life, you know, there are thousands of self-help books out there that will teach you how to live a relaxed life. That's not what this is.

ANITA ANAND: Okay, actually, can we go back to that young man, because I mean, that's not a great advert for the life you'd like him to lead. Are people, do you think, of your generation willing to make the sacrifices that Rutger is asking of them?

DANIEL BLISS: I'm unsure. As studying psychology at Sixth Form, I've seen things about like the diffusion of responsibility and how the more people are aware of a problem but not really willing to enact it, they will just say, "Someone else will do this." And in a world where, like you said, it's so difficult to get a house, to get a good, solid job, people are more focused on just, I think, making their way through life or appealing to social media or to society, rather than worrying about their society's future.

ANITA ANAND: So, does that make you depressed? Do you not have very much faith in your generation?

DANIEL BLISS: Not really, no.

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, I'd love to push back on that because I have a tremendous amount of faith, actually, in young people. We've recently interviewed a lot of students, both in Britain and the United States, asking them about their ideals. And you see this, actually, in the application essays they write when they go to university. It's about all the global problems they aspire to solve. There is genuine idealism of a lot of young people that we can work with.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. There is a question over there, the gentleman over there, and then we're going to take one from the back. Great.

DAVID: Hi, I'm David. I'm a professor of AI. And I've got a question about those committed individuals you mentioned earlier before. You actually mentioned the people, the particular group of people I'm thinking about at the moment, who have got skin in the game, basically tech bros. Now, what makes tech bros fundamentally different from the other people who were insulted back then, abolitionists? Tech bros are an insult now; abolitionists were an insult then. What's the fundamental difference between the two, really? And basically, what makes one group of people bad and the other group of people good?

ANITA ANAND: Thank you.

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, the fundamental difference is the moral compass, I'd say. I am fascinated by people like Peter Thiel, for example, a well-known Silicon Valley venture capitalist, who wrote, in my view, a quite brilliant book called *Zero to One*, in which he asked this simple question of like, "Hey, what's the opposite of a cult?" You know, this small group of thoughtful, committed citizens that wants to make a big difference. He says, "Well, it's a consultancy firm." Like, you don't believe in anything, you just hop from project to project. And a lot of people in Silicon Valley indeed understand this power of very committed groups who are like, let's change the course of history. Now, what I find deeply worrisome is that many of them have given up on democracy or are actively trying to destroy it. So, in that sense, I think there are the great enemies of freedom and democracy today. But in terms of if you just look at the social physics, they understand historical change very well. And they are the modern-day Lenins that I talked about at the beginning of this lecture.

ANITA ANAND: Do you agree with that assessment, Professor of AI?

DAVID: Not particularly, no, really.

ANITA ANAND: Show us your workings.

DAVID: I think...we've got a group of elites basically judging other elites, really. So, I think we've got a hierarchy of elites going on, really, because who determines what's good and bad between each of those elites? Abolitionists was once

a dirty term, just like tech bros are a dirty term now. Now, is that because we've got a set of elites that basically determine that tech bros are bad now? Are they all bad?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, look, I would like to push back on that moral relativism. I do think there is such a thing as good and bad. I think the abolitionists have shown us that, that indeed, slavery was one of the most horrible things that humans did to one another. And the fact that we managed to abolish it, outlaw it, it's illegal everywhere. I think that was in one of our greatest human triumphs. And what you then see afterwards is that abolitionism was the mother of all movements. So the suffrage movement grew out of that. The temperance movement grew out of that. The civil rights movement grew out of that. I think we can join this great family of humanitarians and activists who have pushed to expand the moral circle and recognise that each and every one of us has human rights, has human dignity. And when I see some of those tech bros attacking the global institutions, democracy itself, what I see are groups who've given up on those ideas of human rights, of the inherent worth of each and every one of us. So, I do consider that bad.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. Let's go to the back.

TAYO ALUKO: Thank you. My name is Tayo Aluko. I am actually Nigerian. I've lived in Liverpool for many years. Of all the abolitionists you've mentioned, there wasn't a single black man or woman. Your institute of very clever, brainy people; does that include people of African descent?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Absolutely. So, one of the great British abolitionists was Olaudah Equiano. I'm sure you're familiar with him. He was really one of the great bestselling authors of this movement. He described his experience of growing up in Africa, being enslaved, being transported across the Atlantic, and then just describing this extraordinary life story. He travelled across the seven seas. He worked for his own freedom and then arrived in London and became a very good friend, actually, of Clarkson and joined that band of abolitionists. So, he was incredibly important. And as I mentioned just now, it was also actually the slave revolts that were really, really important, most famously on Jamaica and on Haiti, of course, that put a lot of pressure on the whole system.

What I do think we have to keep in mind, though, is that people who are enslaved always resist that condition, always. So, one out of 10 voyages across the Atlantic saw a slave revolt. But this system was so horrific, so cruel, so totalitarian, that for centuries, those who suffered from it could not overthrow it. And that's the

reason why it did take also a group of fairly privileged people to join that fight. And I think that's the reason why, in the end, they were able to overthrow it.

ANITA ANAND: Yes, the young woman over there.

OLIVIA: So, hello, my name is Oliwia, and I'm currently a third-year student at the University of Liverpool, studying history and politics so this lecture has been very interesting. My question is, the idealistic view of individuals changing the tide is good in theory but in practice, it seems that revolutionary movements and people who are interested in those revolutionary movements are losing that interest. Revolutionary causes are often fleeting trends, followed more for appearance than conviction. Look at, for example, the action that was once for climate change, or the once yellow-ribboned support for Ukraine. One of the reasons for the fleeting support is that our interest in collectivist action is diminished. So how do you expect to mobilise the masses to support your cause?

RUTGER BREGMAN: It's absolutely a problem that a lot of online activism today is quite fleeting. It's easy to send out a tweet and have thousands of people in the streets, but what we've seen a lot in the last 10 to 15 years is that many of these movements also collapse. What I've learned from the abolitionists and also the suffragettes who fought for the women's right to vote is the need for perseverance. So, of the 12 founders of the British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade, only one was still alive, Thomas Clarkson, when slavery was finally abolished across the British Empire. Of the sixty-eight women who came together at Seneca Falls, the first great women's right convention in the United States, only one was still alive when women finally got the right to vote across the United States, and she was sick on the day of the election. So it is really that kind of perseverance that we need here.

ANITA ANAND: Okay.

DIANA JEATER: I'm Diana Jeater. I'm the professor of African history here at the University of Liverpool and I'm also a Quaker so this is partly my story. But I was thinking about what you just said, which I thought was an extremely interesting comment, that the resistance that we saw from people of African descent doesn't count as morality because it's motivated by desperation. And if we go down that route, we end up kind of saying that morality is something that only the privileged can have. And I don't think that is where you want to go. I hope that's not where you want to go. But I do think there's a problem in the way that you've presented that position. And I wondered if you could say a bit more about that.

RUTGER BREGMAN: Yes. So, I really don't think that. I did want to say that it was really special to have this first movement for the rights of others. It's the first time in history, at least to my knowledge, that hundreds of thousands of people started advocating for the rights of people they had probably never seen. I think that's special. And I think we need much more of that today, especially us who live in rich countries that are increasingly closing off the borders, that are cutting development aid.

Yeah, I think it's important that most injustice, the worst form of suffering, are often not about us. I am, for example, someone who cares deeply about animal suffering. I think that's one of the greatest moral atrocities of our time. 80 billion animals are slaughtered and being tortured in the most horrific conditions. They can't vote. They're not represented. And I think we need a massive movement for the rights of those who are now forgotten. But that's absolutely not to say that those who fought with everything they had against this horrific system for many, many centuries, I mean, obviously, obviously, they were on the right side of history.

DIANA JEATER: But were they moral?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Obviously, yes.

ANITA ANAND: So the lady asked, were they moral? And your answer is?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Yes, obviously.

ANITA ANAND: Obviously. Thank you.

ALEX: Hi, I'm Alex, project coordinator and local fundraiser. I think passion plays such a key part in everything that we do. But I would like to know, do you think that Thomas Clarkson would have been as successful if he hadn't have had the passion for what he wanted to do because he could have had the same beliefs, the same resources but if he didn't have that passion for it as a driving force, would he have got anywhere? And it kind of links in with the younger generations of, it's not that they've not got the means to make change, because we've all got that in us. Do we just need to reignite our passion for wanting to change things for the good?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, I'm sure you're familiar with the story of Gandalf and Frodo, right? One day, Gandalf knocks on Frodo's door and says, "Look, there's a terrible situation down south in the country, evil wizard has arisen, wants to kill us

all. We got to fix this. And apparently, you know, this ring, if you throw that ring into this fiery mountain, then he dies. So, can you do that? One inconvenient fact: it's far away from here, and it's actually next door to where the evil wizard lives, but can you do that?"

Now, if you analyse that story very closely, what you will notice is that Gandalf did not say to Frodo, "Hey, Frodo, what's your passion?" It's not what he said. He said, "Hey, this is the biggest mission in the world right now, throw the ring into the mountain." That's how I like to think about doing good. We got to find our own Gandalf, really think about what are some of the most pressing issues. And I think in that sense, it's similar to Clarkson. He had never thought about the slave trade and the evils of slavery. It was just that he had his own Gandalf moment.

ANITA: Question from the back..

CHRISTINA: Thank you. My name is Christina and I've had 50 years' experience in practical application of child health law. I am concerned about the fact that we're talking about this entirely Eurocentrically, as we've abolished slavery when we know as long as there are sex and drugs and greed, slavery is out there. What do we do from here to actually stop that from happening?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, you're absolutely right. This is still one of the greatest challenges we face, and it's enormous. I've seen different estimates, 40, 50 million people who still live in conditions of slavery, and a lot of us don't realise that. And sometimes it's hard for us to wrap our heads around that this was a normal part of the economy almost everywhere. Pretty much every civilisation throughout history, didn't really believe in fundamental human dignity and fundamental human freedom. That is the exception, and we got to keep fighting for it. You've got to keep preserving it.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you.

SIOBHAN MULROONEY: I'm Siobhan Mulrooney. I record a podcast,the Formby podcast. My question is that wouldn't — so for the youth today that you were talking about, I would say that you've got some great young people coming through with some amazing voices, and some amazing messages. They're a very kind generation coming through. And I would have thought that Greta Thunberg she would have been an amazing person, who would be one of the people that you would be talking about today, who has a passion and lives her passion.

ANITA ANAND: Okay, so more of a comment, but fine. It does lead, actually, neatly to a question that's been itching at me. Who are today's abolitionists, would you say? Who are the ones that maybe our great-grandchildren will look back on and say, "They were amazing?"

RUTGER BREGMAN: What really struck me as I studied the abolitionists of two centuries ago is that so many of them also deeply cared about animal rights. And I think there's just an undeniable logic at play here. Many of the abolitionists later became suffragettes because they also saw it as logical to expand this moral circle in that way. And I think we're now at a point in our history when we can go further. And I already said that I think that that is one of the great moral atrocities of our time.

ANITA ANAND: But name names. I think everyone wants to know the people that the books will be written about in future generations. You're here now, you're a historian. Give us a heads up. What are the shelves going to be filled with?

RUTGER BREGMAN: The most specific names. So look, they're often not names who are super well known. In my book, *Moral Ambition*, I profile people like Leah Garcés, who's one of the greatest animal rights activists, who I see as the Thomas Clarkson of today, because she is someone who deeply, deeply cares about the suffering of farmed animals, but also is smart and wise enough to understand that she's got to cooperate with farmers, who a lot of vegans see as the enemies. But she's like, no, we got to build coalitions against these evil, terrible corporations that are exploiting both the animals and the farmers. So that's one example. I've got a whole list of examples that you —

ANITA ANAND: Just give me one more. Give me one more.

RUTGER BREGMAN: Someone who has founded an organisation called *The Against Malaria Foundation* in Britain, actually. His name is Rob Mather. I think the Against Malaria Foundation is the — well, what's the best soccer club these days? Is it Manchester, something?

ANITA ANAND: What are you — Oh, my —

ANITA ANAND: What are you saying in Liverpool?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Very painful. Sorry.

ANITA ANAND: I'm so sorry. He's Dutch...!

RUTGER BREGMAN: Okay. So he founded the Liverpool basically, of the charity world. Really had a massive effect on hundreds of thousands of lives. And what I really like about his life story is that he's really shown how contagious doing good is. What I've learned from him is that you can just ask a lot of people to get going.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you.

GERALD: Hello. I'm Gerald. I'm a university dean. My question to you is, I want to go back to your consultancy firm analogy. So, whether the idea or the person coming in is good or bad or otherwise is kind of irrelevant, the key features of what you said so far is someone needs a personal idea and they need to persevere, they're the two things I have taken from what you said so far. But in the consultancy firm analogy, what other precedents, what other key lists of other things beyond individual or personal idea and perseverance that will get it done? There must be a list of key features that history's taught us. What are they?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So not really, actually, We were talking about what makes someone a really good person, what makes them do the right thing? There are some people who I like to call the do-gooders. Maybe Greta Thunberg is an example of that. She just feels that deep injustice, and she just is unable not to do anything about it. Most of us are not like that. Most of us, you know, the normies we're herd animals, right? We need to see others, other people doing the right thing, and we want to be inspired. And sometimes we are initially motivated by feelings of well, maybe vanity, and that's what I find so interesting about the Clarkson and the Wilberforce story is that they weren't these typical do-gooders who were like, let's do the right thing.

ANITA ANAND: But what I take from that gentleman's question is, what is the secret sauce here? How do you make the goodness that you talk about contagious?

RUTGER BREGMAN: You got to make it sexy. You got to make it prestigious. So again, this is something that we've discovered and talking to a lot of students is that they were like, "Look when I was younger, I wanted to fight tax

avoidance. I wanted to tackle climate change," but it doesn't really come across as the coolest most prestigious thing I can do.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. Now, if the lights are very bright, but you look like a young person, are you a young person?

TOM: I go to University of Liverpool.

ANITA ANAND: Well, say your name first.

TOM: Tom, I go to University of Liverpool, do history. I'm in my second year. My question was that, so you were talking, what you said about the abolitionists and Wilberforce, you were saying that he often came up with criticism because people are saying he's doing it for his own good rather than for slavery and that kind of resonated with me is in when I look at the pressure groups the world today, they get a lot of criticism, but some would say ridiculed especially I think from my generation and I was just wondering if Wilberforce were in the now and day like..do you think in the age of social media, he would be as criticised as some other types of pressure groups?

ANITA ANAND: What a fabulous question. Yeah, would any of those great men have survived X scrutiny or TikTok scrutiny?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Whoever survives that. Look, their talents and skill sets were obviously really applied to the age in which they lived. What I think is so interesting about Wilberforce is that he was obviously — I mean, he was a pain in the ass. He was very full of himself. He was — I really wouldn't have liked him probably, and it's also deeply unfair that he got most of the credit, like his sons absolute a-holes. Sorry, that has to be — sorry. Sorry, the BBC. I do that all the time.

ANITA ANAND: Do you want to try and say it with a sort of a more BBC word?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Yeah. His sons…very problematic figures. They edited his biography, and they took out Thomas Clarkson's role completely. I think about a decade, 15 years ago, there was a Hollywood film about Wilberforce, and Thomas Clarkson was portrayed as a drunkard who couldn't even understand a phrase in Latin, even though he wrote —

ANITA ANAND: He didn't drink.

RUTGER BREGMAN: He didn't drink, and he wrote the original essay in Latin. So that's really unfair. But look in history, often the right things happen for the wrong reasons.

ANDREW FINLAYSON: Hi, Andrew Finlayson. I work for a consultancy firm. Thanks everybody. But I'm also writing a book on a moral compass and the network we need around us to be moral. So, I suppose, what enabling people or personalities do you think we need around us to make sure we've got the impact of morality?

RUTGER BREGMAN: These are things that are highly, highly contagious. Obviously, for Thomas Clarkson, it didn't come out of nowhere. It was someone who assigned that essay to him. So, there was, what is it? A vice chancellor at the University of Cambridge who had already been inspired by the works of people like Granville Sharp or Anthony Benezet, one of the most important American abolitionists. They were most often Quakers. And that is often my advice for people who want to make this world a wildly better place. The first thing to do is to fight your own cult, your own cult of highly committed people who are like, "Yes, this is what we want to do." So that actually have the confidence and have the courage to go out there and withstand the ridicule because it's bad. I mean, the supporter of Abraham Lincoln was indeed called imprudent, foppish and an abolitionist. Today, for animal rights activists, for example, can be pretty hard as well. So, then you really need that support network.

CAMILLA MANKABADY: Hello, my name is Camilla Mankabady, and I work for the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority as the Director of Strategic Communications and Corporate Affairs. So, you talk about a utopia, you talk about mobilising people. What is it you want? What does a good society look like to you?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, going back to this simple point that I'm an old-fashioned social democrat, I believe in the inherent dignity of each and every one of us. I believe that we can make this world so, so much better, that we can spread the wealth, and we could get much richer together. That there's enormous waste of talent going on, not only among elites who get stuck in these BS jobs, but there are also so many lost Einsteins who never get the opportunities that they deserve. So that's the kind of society I envision.

ANITA ANAND: Which country does it best right now at the moment, do you think?

RUTGER BREGMAN: I lived for a year in New York recently, then came back to the Netherlands, and I was like, well, some things are a bit more decently organised in my own country. But then at the same time, what you see is that many of those nice examples of Norway and Sweden, et cetera, they're very small societies and they close up their borders. They're basically turning into gated communities for millions of people. And that is one of the things I find most depressing about the era we're living in.

ANITA ANAND: Okay. Thank you.

JEANNIE DAVIS: My name's Jeannie Davis, and I'm coming out of a midlife crisis. And I wanted to ask you, to what extent is evil needed to catalyse good?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Ha! Well, in every good story, you need it, right? What really struck me when I was studying some of the studies of the people I just mentioned, like a Thomas Clarkson, is they almost remind you of, well, "The Hero's Journey," you know, the book by Joseph Campbell, maybe. That was such a big inspiration for George Lucas when he created Star Wars. And it's this classic arc, when a hero starts his journey and then has a setback, usually they lost both their parents as well. And there is something there that you can find the meaning, the great meaning of life, in taking on a challenge that is much bigger than you are.

I always like to say that if you can solve your problems or achieve your goals during your lifetime, then you're probably not thinking big enough. And indeed, when we, at my organisation, at *The School for Moral Ambition*, talk to young people, that is often where they do find a lot of meaning. I'm saying like, don't be depressed, that the problems are so big, this is actually exciting, and we can do something that's actually interesting instead of creating a boring PowerPoint at McKinsey.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. Can I just say that we've suddenly developed, if you're hearing howling, we are in the middle, of all of a sudden apocalyptic weather. So, this is a howling wind is blowing outside, and you might be able to hear it on our microphones.

DETECTIVE: Hi. I'm a Detective Chief Superintendent from Merseyside Police. And I joined the police service to do good. What do you see as the role of institutions like policing in supporting more revolution in society?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, I've been talking a lot indeed about moral ambition. I haven't been talking a lot about essential jobs. So, what I really want to emphasise is that I'm not saying like everyone should be morally ambitious. We also need those people who support society itself. If they would go on strike, if people like you go on strike, then everything collapses. That's true for the teachers, for the nurses, for the plumbers, for the police officers, for the firefighters, the essential jobs, as we call them during the pandemic. It's just that on the other hand, we have, well, maybe, what is it? About 30, 40% of people who went to "really nice universities, " who have nice resumes, beautiful LinkedIn profiles. But still, at the end of the day, if you ask them like, "Okay, what happens if you go on strike?" The answer is often, "Well, not much actually." Those are the people that I'm calling out.

ANITA ANAND: Can I ask you, do you see young, dewy eyed things coming into the force with the same moral ambition that you had when you joined?

DETECTIVE: Absolutely. I say that without hesitation. I think 99% of the officers and staff that I work with are there because they're motivated by helping people and supporting people, and making a difference.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. We're out of time, sadly. We have so many more questions. I know. And I'm sorry if we didn't get to you. Thank you very much for those of you who did ask questions. For the third in the series, we're going to be in Edinburgh, where Rutger is going to talk about how to make utopia a reality. So, all that's left for me is to say thank you very, very much to our audience here in Liverpool. And thank you very much to our Reith lecturer, Rutger Bregman.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]