
The Reith Lectures 2025

with Rutger Bregman

Moral Revolution

4. Fighting for Humanity in the Age of the Machine

ANITA ANAND: Hello, and welcome to the final Reith Lecture of 2025 with the historian and writer Rutger Bregman. Today, we're at Stanford University, at the heart of Silicon Valley. Now this place is pretty close to San Francisco on the west

coast of the United States and we're at the Graduate School of Business where students from over 16 nations develop ideas in entrepreneurship, leadership and technology and just down the road you'll find some of the world's biggest companies including Apple, Meta and Nvidia, a company valued at a staggering five trillion dollars. That makes it the biggest company in history, at least on paper.

Now, some of these tech giants are causing Rutger Bregman considerable worry. In his series of lectures entitled *Moral Revolution,* he has already castigated our political elites for their decadence and unseriousness. He said that history has much to teach us about how small groups can organise and change the world and how individuals can remodel entirely the way we live our lives, sometimes in very radical ways. Now, today, we're going to be hearing about big tech. Is it out of control? Is it threatening the very essence of what it means to be human? He's called this lecture *Fighting for Humanity in the Age of the Machine*. Please welcome the BBC's 2025 Reith lecturer, Rutger Bregman.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]

RUTGER BREGMAN: When I was 15 years old, I thought I had made a monumental philosophical discovery. Late at night, hunched over my old Pentium 4 computer, I wrote my first-ever essay, an earnest attempt to reason my way to the ultimate truth. Its central claim was bold and almost blasphemous. Free will cannot possibly exist. The reasoning seemed airtight, at least to my teenage mind. What we call free choice is nothing more than the outcome of causes we didn't choose. My character? I hadn't chosen that. The family I was born into? Not my choice. My environment, genetics and experiences all handed to me by forces outside of myself.

When the decision appeared before me, it was simply the meeting point of all those factors converging like dominoes falling in sequence. I could say yes or no, but both answers were already determined by everything that had come before. For weeks, I walked around in a daze, convinced I had uncovered a truth that should shake the foundations of human society. I told anyone who would listen, friends at school, family at dinner and my poor teacher during bible study. I could not fathom why they weren't as shaken by my discovery as I was. Because suddenly all the things I had taken for granted, ideas about right and wrong, heaven and hell, the whole meaning of life struck me as arbitrary fictions. It was like standing on the edge of a cliff and realising the ground beneath me had always been an illusion.

Three years later, things got even worse. That's when I learned about the theory of evolution. I devoured everything I could find about Charles Darwin and

the scientists who came after him, and Darwin himself wrote that publishing his theory felt like confessing a murder. I totally understood why. As the son of a pastor, I had always believed there must be a purpose, a goal, an arc to history, that behind all the pain and the chaos that there was a guiding hand, a benevolent force that made life meaningful. But how was I supposed to square that with evolution, with millions of years of endless suffering of life devouring life? For a while, I grasped at straws. I read a pile of books about intelligent design but found them unconvincing. I read up on near-death experiences, but had to admit there was nothing there. I asked friends in church and school how they made sense of what I had learned, but most seemed to prefer not to think about it. And then one morning, I woke up to a stark realisation. I did not believe anymore. And no, that did not feel like liberation. It felt like loss, a sense of falling out of a story.

I began studying history at university, and with it came a new wave of intellectual influences. I attended a lecture series by Herman Philipsen, a prominent Dutch atheist. He was sharp, witty, and relentlessly logical. And at one point, he made an offhand remark about the need for intellectual honesty. "Everyone," Philipsen said, "should have an intellectual hero." And I was intrigued. Who would mine be? Back in my student dorm, I began scouting Wikipedia for a candidate. And after a while, I stumbled upon someone who would become a lifelong guide. Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher who lived from 1872 to 1970. There was so much to love about his story. First of all, he was a towering thinker. Russell brought the exactness of mathematics to the big questions of philosophy. Second, I was in awe of his courage. Russell was not just an academic in the ivory tower; he was a public intellectual who acted on his conscience. He campaigned against the First World War, was imprisoned for his pacifism, and became a leading voice in the fight for nuclear disarmament. Time and again, he refused to go along with the crowd. When he came to America, Russell was even cancelled. A mother from Brooklyn sued to block his appointment at the City College of New York because she feared he would poison the minds of the young with his atheism and permissive views on sex. The New York Supreme Court agreed and pronounced him morally unfit to teach. This was when Albert Einstein made his famous remark that great minds have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds.

Finally, there was the sheer richness of Russell's life. Four marriages, founder of a progressive school, survivor of a plane crash, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature, author of more than 60 books, 2,000 articles, and 40,000 letters. Russell lived nearly a century, and just before the end, left behind a sprawling 750-page autobiography as if one life could not contain him. I remember buying a yellowed edition, its pages brittle with age, and on the opening leaf, under the heading, *What*

I Have Lived For, I read the most beautiful words I had ever encountered in English. Russell wrote:

"Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life." *The longing for love*, *the search for knowledge*, and *unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind*. These passions, like great winds, have blown me hither and thither, in a wayward course over a great ocean of anguish, reaching the very verge of despair. "

As I turned the chapter, I was astonished to discover that Russell had faced the same teenage crisis I once did. At 15, he had also begun questioning free will. He had spent long hours in painful meditation as his faith dissolved, recording his doubts in a secret notebook. And reading those pages, I felt as if I had found a kindred spirit across time, another teenager staring into the abyss. He was gripped by the mixture of terror and exhilaration at the thought that the world might be utterly different from what he once believed.

On my Pentium 4, I opened a curious new website called *YouTube*, where I found a BBC interview with Russell from 1959. Asked what advice he would give to future generation, he offered two principles, one intellectual, one moral. His intellectual advice was to see the world as it really is, not how you'd like to see it. And his moral advice was to tolerate our differences. Or, in his words, love is wise, hatred is foolish.

Bertrand Russell didn't just echo my teenage doubts. He offered a model for how to live. His writings radiated a radical humanism that was as honest as it was compassionate. Here was a man who had lost his childhood faith, who had faced the void, and who still lived a life overflowing with purpose. He pursued truth with a rigour that reshaped philosophy. He fought for peace with a stubbornness that landed him in prison. He defended freedom even when it cost him his job. He loved, failed, began again and left behind a body of work that continues to inspire. And in doing so, he revealed a different kind of immortality. Not the denial of death, but the making of a monument out of one's life.

I have to confess that when I was first invited to give these talks, I had never heard of the Reith Lectures; such are the gaps in one's education as a Dutchman. But you can imagine my awe when I learned that none other than Bertrand Russell delivered the first series back in 1948. Of course, I had a massive case of imposter syndrome. Who was I to follow in such footsteps? I found some consolation in the fact that even Russell's debut didn't go over smoothly. Lord Reith himself, the BBC's first Director General, wrote in his diary, "Listen to the first Reith Lecture by

Bertrand Russell. He went far too quickly and has a bad voice. However, I wrote him a civil note." Isn't that British?

Russell spoke shortly after the horrors of the Second World War and the invention of the atomic bomb. For the first time, humanity had gained the power to destroy itself. Russell stood at a hinge of history, asking what humanity had become and what it might yet be. We too are living at such a moment. Wars are breaking out, democracy is faltering, and once again, a revolutionary technology is threatening our very existence.

For the first time in history, we are building machines that may rival or even surpass our intelligence. The stakes could hardly be higher. How can we face this moment without the comfort of religion? Ever since I lost my faith, I've wondered what could take its place. Religions all circle around the same five questions. Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going? How should we live? And what, if anything, is sacred? In all my books, *Utopia for Realists, Humankind, and Moral Ambition*, I have wrestled with those questions. My whole career has been an effort to find in history what others seek in theology.

When I was a teenager, my loss of faith hit me like an earthquake, and I believe our whole culture is now experiencing something similar. Cynicism and apathy are spreading, and people feel betrayed by their elites. The old sources of guidance, faith, community, tradition are fading away, yet nothing equally powerful has taken their place. We are a culture adrift, searching for meaning but mostly finding distraction.

That search for meaning has been the threat throughout these lectures. In the first, I traced our moral decay. I described how liars and cheats climb to the top while honesty and integrity are pushed aside. In the second, I laid out a playbook for redemption, telling the story of the great moral pioneers who came before us. And in the third, I turned their lessons into a programme and a plan for our time. If those three lectures were a sermon delivered at ground level, then this last one looks from above, the God's eye view.

Here, I want to return to those five ancient questions of religion. And where better to ask them than here, at Stanford University, in the heart of Silicon Valley, where our new tech overlords are busy summoning a godlike intelligence?

Let me begin with the first question. Who are we? During my teenage crisis, I thought the answer was grim. Our evolution seemed like a story of endless pain and suffering. But later, in my research, I came to see a different picture, one that is far more hopeful. In my book Humankind, I argue that our real advantage was never

being the strongest or even the smartest animal. Instead, we are the product of what scientists call the survival of the friendliest. For thousands of years, it was those best able to cooperate who passed on their genes.

The second question, then, where did we come from? Well, for hundreds of thousands of years, 95% of our history, we lived as wandering hunter-gatherers. And contrary to the old myth that life was miserable and violent, our societies were remarkably equal, peaceful, and relaxed. Archaeologists have found no serious evidence of warfare before the rise of civilisation. But then we made, as the great scholar Jared Diamond wrote in 1987, the worst mistake in the history of the human race. I remember reading his essay as a student and being in awe of the power of his argument. Farming, Diamond showed, was a disaster. With fields and fences came hierarchy and kings, wars, and slavery. If the long era of foraging had been a story of equality, the age of farming became a story of oppression. Some theologians even suspect that the story of the fall in the Old Testament was an attempt to make sense of that loss, the moment when paradise was ploughed under.

And yet, history did not end there. After millennia of back-breaking poverty, humanity found a way out, the Industrial Revolution. For the first time, ordinary people could escape subsistence. We invented machines that amplified our powers, produced vast new wealth, and extended our lifespans. Since 1750, we have been living through the Great Acceleration. Energy use, population, and emissions have all followed an exponential curve. We are reshaping the Earth at breakneck speed. And yet, beneath it all, we remain the same old species. We are apes with godlike powers.

Which brings me to the third question. Where are we going? Ask the CEOs of the big tech companies, and they'll tell you that the rise of artificial intelligence is a hundred times bigger than the Industrial Revolution, that this may be the very last invention we'll ever make.

We are currently in a race to create alien minds, systems that we do not understand, and that we may not be able to control. They are not designed so much as summoned into being. And so we must ask, will this be the new, worst mistake in the history of the human race?

Well, the omens are not good. Just look at what the first wave of big tech has already done to us. Literacy and numeracy scores are plummeting. Teenage depression, anxiety, and suicide attempts are rising. Face-to-face socialising is collapsing as we retreat indoors, eyes glued to screens. Solitude is becoming the

hallmark of our age. The bleakest number I've seen is that American teenagers now spend 70% less time hosting or attending parties than in 2003, when I was 15. 70%.

Social media promised connection and community, but what it delivered was isolation and outrage. On Instagram, people spend more than 90% of their time watching videos from people they don't know. And platforms reward those who are loudest, angriest, and most extreme. Or, as a recent study in Nature concluded, those with both high psychopathy and low cognitive ability are the most actively involved in online political engagement. This is not survival of the friendliest. This is survival of the shameless. So, as our very humanity is under attack, the fourth question presses itself upon us. How should we live? Unsurprisingly, I believe we can find the answer in our past.

In my previous lectures, I spoke about two moral revolutions of the 19th century, the fight against slavery and the struggle for women's rights. But I didn't mention the third one yet. Temperance. Many abolitionists and suffragettes were also temperance activists. This movement is largely forgotten nowadays, but it holds vital lessons for us. Back then, alcohol was not a casual indulgence but a social catastrophe. There were no warning labels, no age restrictions, no limits on advertising. Saloons dotted every street corner, wages disappeared into the bottle, and families were torn apart by violence and neglect. The alcohol industry profited from human weakness while devastating entire communities. And that is why people rose against it. The temperance movement was one of the largest democratic movements in history, led by women and workers. They believed that real freedom meant being fully present, to choose connection over compulsion. They saw addiction for what it is, the moment when the power of choice no longer exists. And so they demanded radical measures, higher taxes, stricter licensing, and even total prohibition.

Today, we face a new addiction industry, not of wine and whiskey, but of apps and algorithms. Many of Stanford's brightest minds are building a single great moloch, an attention-hijacking machine that devours our focus, steals our time, and leaves us emptier by the hour. And AI threatens to supercharge it all. But here's my warning to Silicon Valley. I think you're awakening a dragon. Public anger is stirring, and it could grow into a movement as fierce and unstoppable as the temperance crusade a century ago. Poll after poll finds that people across the West think AI will worsen almost everything they care about, from our health and relationships to our jobs and democracies. By a 3:1 margin, people want more regulation. History shows how this movement could be ignited by a small group of citizens and how powerful it could become.

Just as Burton Russell led mass protests against the nuclear arms race, we may soon see mass resistance to the AI arms race. A century ago, temperance activists even managed to push a constitutional amendment through Congress to ban alcohol altogether. Now, those who want to avoid provoking something equally drastic should learn from the past.

And this brings me to the final question. What is sacred? At this hinge of history, what should we defend and expend above all else? Just like Russell, I believe the answer is not to be found in the heavens, but here on earth, in our own human nature. The longing for love is sacred. The search for knowledge is sacred. The unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind is sacred. And so are the small things. Laughter and song, the bonds of friendship, the joy of play, the wonder of art, the beauty of nature, the gift of attention, all of humanity is sacred. That is the revelation that flows from our history. We are not fallen sinners. We are rising apes. The real meaning of the human adventure is not to be found in the heavens, but in the future we can build together.

And I think that this is also where my youthful denial of free will comes full circle. When I was 15, it felt like staring into the void. If nobody is really in control, then what's left of morality? But over time, I've reached the opposite conclusion. If our lives are shaped by history, by forces we never chose, then the whole idea of what people deserve falls apart. Of course, you can see this most plainly in addiction. When someone loses the ability to choose, blaming them does nothing. Saying there is no free will doesn't weaken morality. It makes it stronger. It breaks down the walls of pride and status that separate us and widens our moral circle. I am reminded of the Quakers, the small sect of quiet dissenters that played a leading role in the fight against slavery. They believed in that of God in everyone, an inner light that's shown equally in every human being. To them, slavery was not just cruel. It was a desecration of the sacred.

I believe that the struggle over what is sacred is the defining struggle of our time. Powerful voices on the right insist that what matters most is loyalty to one's tribe, to one's soil, to one's kind. They speak as if love were a scarce resource, something to be hoarded rather than shared. They imagine that tightening the moral circle makes our compassion stronger. But the opposite is true. Real gratitude does not shrink the circle of love. It enlarges it.

The people who built the great moral movements of the past, the abolitionists, the suffragettes, the civil rights leaders, were not less devoted to their families and countries. They were more so. The British abolitionists who ended the slave trade

made their country greater. The American civil rights campaigners who took down segregation brought the nation closer to its creed. They were the true patriots. And that was also the spirit in which I was raised. My parents taught me that compassion does not stop at the border of family or nation. Over time, I discovered that beneath the differences of language and ritual, we share the same convictions. To be honest, I have long since lost interest in debates about belief versus unbelief. I have also lost a certainty of my youthful atheism. Yes, theism still seems rather unlikely to me, but what once felt like clarity has given way to a deeper kind of agnosticism. Not indifference, but awe at how much we do not, cannot, and perhaps don't even have to now.

What matters, I think, is not what people believe, but what they do. A tree is known by its fruit. And again, I'm reminded of the abolitionists. This movement was a fusion of Christian compassion with the Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality. It was the pulpit and the pamphlet, the inner light and the natural right. Together, they toppled one of humanity's oldest and cruellest institutions.

What I've tried to do in these lectures is to use history as a compass, to show how decadence can end in renewal, how moral revolutions happen, and how the future depends on what we hold sacred. The whole series has been a meditation on determinism and freedom, necessity and contingency, history and agency. And this is the heart of my secular religion. Two ways of seeing the world. When we look at others, we should see the causes behind their actions, the history, the luck, the wounds they never chose, and respond with understanding rather than blame. But when we look in the mirror, we should recognise our freedom to act.

As Kierkegaard said: "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."

So let us throw ourselves fully into the task. We know it will not be easy. The future holds no guarantees, no certainty that our species will endure or that our story will end well. But that has always been the human condition. What we do know is this. Again and again, small groups of committed citizens have bent the arc of history towards justice. And whatever the outcome, there is beauty into trying, beauty in every act of courage, in every spark of truth, in every rich and well-rounded life. We cannot build monuments in stone that last forever, but we can build monuments in time. Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]

ANITA ANAND: Rutger, thank you very much again for another very thought-provoking lecture. You mentioned Jared Diamond, the author of the phenomenally successful *Guns, Germs and Steel*, talking about how farming was the worst mistake that humanity had made. Are you saying to this room of quite a few tech students that, actually, big tech is, in your opinion, the worst mistake that humanity has ever made?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Well, it very well could be. And the example of farming really makes you think. Like, here was an enormous transition in the history of the human race. And we often regard it as progress, right? When we look at civilisation or when we think about civilisation, about the great cathedrals, the pyramids that were built, we think that must have been great for people. Well, actually, the people who had to build these pyramids, they were all slaves and they were exploited relentlessly. So, yes, technology can have massive, massive downsides.

ANITA ANAND: But the fact that you may blow raspberries at it doesn't mean you're going to stop it.

RUTGER BREGMAN: Look, there are two types of historians. There are the big history historians like Jared Diamond who are inclined to say that there are these big structural forces in history, in the past, that basically determine the human story. That there is some variation here and there, but that the direction of history is kind of settled. And there's something to be said for that. If you look at the history of innovation, like it's very striking that you see the same patterns again and again. The other view that I like to subscribe to is that there are still a place for contingency, that there are still a place for small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens to make a difference.

ANITA ANAND: I'm going to open this up to the very bright young things who are here in the Stanford audience. Put your hands up very clearly so I can see you. Let’s take a question from over there..

KENZIE POSSEE: Hi, I'm Kenzie Possee. I'm a journalism master's student here at Stanford. It feels very easy to criticise the CEOs of tech companies, but I'm curious what you would say to the average user of AI who is using it to take the friction out of their very difficult life. They're working a hard job. They're making a long commute. They're going about their day, and maybe that's kind of their reprieve at the end of the day, or it's taking the friction out of their everyday life that is very difficult. How would you get them on board on your side of preventing the abyss?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So I think that's understandable and obviously I see the many benefits of AI and I use it a lot in my own life as well. I think that many of us though, have this this uncomfortable feeling that this sense that something is really not going in the right direction. And very often maybe particularly so in this country, we have a shallow conception of what it means to be a free human being, a free citizen we say, "It's just about choice," right; you can just do whatever you want. That's the kind of thing that someone like Sam Altman would say, like, "Yes, we have now, I don't know AI porn, but adults should make their own decisions. If we have AI companions that people, if you are above the age of 18, make your own decisions."

In my view, that is a very shallow conception of freedom. Real freedom, if you go back to the ancient Greeks, the old ideals of what it means to be a citizen is about how do we collectively shape society. What kind of world do we want to build together? And then it may might very well be that we say like hey, we recognise the enormous benefits of AI, but we are also very worried about some of the applications. We want to slow down, we want to really focus on what's working for us and say no to the things that we really, really don't like.

ANITA ANAND: Yes, sir.

FRED MONDRAGON: Hi, Rutger. My name is Fred Mondragon, and I'm an AI specialist at Google. My question is, a lot of futurists actually believe that there could be a future of abundance with technology. You could have billions of robots, very intelligent robots built with AI capabilities that can take care of people's problems in their elderly years with healthcare, that can help manufacture products here in the United States, so we can be competitive with any country and really make things available to people that are very difficult. So, I guess my question is, do you believe that that's also a possibility? There could be an age of abundance? And the other thing is, if we were going to control, put controls or regulations over AI and things like that, who would actually govern that?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So the first Reith lecturer, Bertrand Russell, once said that “the ability to spend your leisure time wisely is going to be like the last product of civilisation." Like that's the last question we will have to be able to figure out in this era of automation and robots. What's interesting is that from a historical perspective, this has been predicted many, many times. So some of you will be familiar with the essay that John Maynard Keynes wrote almost a century ago now. In which he predicted a 15-hour work week by 2030. If you look at the '50s and the

'60s, sociologists and anthropologists were really worrying about, "Hey, the work week is shrinking and shrinking and shrinking, what are we going to do with that time?" And what has happened is, to be honest, not very hopeful.

Robert Putnam already wrote this in his book, *Bowling Alone*, that, from the six hours of additional leisure that Americans got from, say the '60s to the '90s, six hours went to watching more TV. Now, what I worry is that what's going to happen is that as the robots automate more and more jobs and unemployment is going to go up and up and up, that gap will be filled by this massive addiction industry of AI, and addiction will be everywhere. And that's not really what Bertrand Russell hoped for, and it's also not what I hope for.

ANITA ANAND: Do you know, I spy with my little eye a former Reith lecturer in the audience who might have something to say about this. Stuart Russell, professor of computer science at Berkeley in California, is with us. And your entire lecture series was warning us about the potential tipping points of artificial intelligence. Now, our friend from Google is saying, “Look, the age of abundance is also a possibility.” We've had, what, three years since your lecture? Are we closer to the abundance or the abyss now, Stuart Russell?

STUART RUSSELL: Thanks, well, I think we're much closer to the abyss. We even have some of the CEOs saying we already know how to make AGI, but we have no idea how to control it at all.

ANITA ANAND: And just explain AGI to those who aren't attending Stanford, basically. What do you mean by AGI?

STUART RUSSELL: AGI, artificial general intelligence, meaning AI systems that essentially exceed human capabilities in every dimension. So, I have a question for Rutger to do with the value of humanity, which you began your lecture with. So, there's a faction here in Silicon Valley and elsewhere that not only thinks it's pretty likely that AI systems will take control of the earth, but they think that that's a good thing. They approve of that, and they think it's time that the human race left the stage. Do you have something to say to those people?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Well, this is exactly why I called the lecture *Fighting for Our Humanity*. I think it's not some kind of conspiracy theory when I say that there are some very powerful tech CEOs in Silicon Valley who just don't seem to care all that much about humanity and its long-term survival. I mean Peter Thiel was recently asked this question in a conversation with Ross Douthat for the

New York Times, and Ross Douthat asked, "Hey, what do you think? Should humanity survive?" And it took him five, six, seven seconds to say, "Yes, I guess so." It was astonishing to watch that.

And I think there is really this extraordinary hubris, this idea that we are in this moment when we transcend to a different kind of race or some kind of Übermensch we'll have to take over. So, yes, this is why I said, we've got to ask right now, what do we hold sacred? And my secular religion is that humanity is sacred.

ANITA ANAND: Can I go back to our questioner, Stuart Russell, on this? Why not actually just allow AI to be the moral compass? We keep hearing it again and again, and you've said it many times in your lecture that humanity has lost its moral compass.

If you put the prompt in, be nice, don't destroy us, look after people, why not let AI handle morality or questions of morality?

STUART RUSSELL: Well, if we had any idea how it worked and we had any idea how to actually get it to do what we want to provide good moral advice… but what we find instead is that it advises people on how to commit suicide, encourages them to do so. It would rather start a nuclear war than be switched off itself. And so, there's no sign at all that the direction of the technology is converging fast enough that the capabilities are not going to lead to an enormous problem.

And the CEOs say this, right? They are telling us. Dario Amodei says there's a 10 to 25% chance of human extinction if he succeeds in the project on which he's spending hundreds of billions of dollars. How much more clear does he need to be, right? So, he is willing to play Russian roulette with the entire human race.

Have we given him permission to do that, to come into our houses and put a gun against the head of our children and pull the trigger and see what happens?

No, we have not given that permission. And this is the uprising that Rutger is predicting.

ANITA ANAND: He's not here to defend himself, but there are people working surely in AI who might want to comment on this. There's one hand that's gone up, and I know Rutger, you want to come back on this as well. Are you working in AI, the person over there..

GERALD WALUKA: My name is Gerald Waluka. I'm actually an alumni of this institution. I'm a recovering entrepreneur now, having lived the dream of Silicon Valley, starting a company, actually starting a couple and selling them.. It took tens of engineers years to build an AI that can win at AlphaGo, and that's it. Then there's a whole lot of engineers solving AGI problems, They can't build an AI that solves puzzles. I was just at a conference this weekend where puzzle writers laughed at AI. So why do you believe that AI or AGI that comes from computers is going to rule? I think it's going to fail, and we're living in another bubble.

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, I think that might very well be true. But when I look at the technology as it exists today, I am astounded, absolutely astounded by how powerful it is, by what we already have right now, and then the tools are getting better.

Now, if you think about another general-purpose technology that absolutely revolutionised the world - electricity, that was invented in the 19th century. It took many, many years. Some economists say like it took 30 years for it to be properly adopted in factories. And it took quite some time before you started to see it in the productivity statistics. I think that might very well be true for AI as well. Even if AI progress would stop today, I think it would already be an absolutely revolutionary technology.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. Let's take a question from the back.

JEM: Yes. Hello. I'm a research assistant here. Unfortunately, not a tech Lord. Although if anyone here would like to change that, maybe a billion-dollar check, I would appreciate it. Now I think I'm going to try and give a very unashamed defence. I think *they* would give. I don't think I agree with this. But they would just call you a Luddite. They would say, well, if we'd listen to those Luddites all those days back, we'd actually destroyed the machines, gone back to agriculture civilisation, we wouldn't be enjoying the fruits of industrial civilisation that we are enjoying right now. They would call you a Luddite, and they would say, "Let the great men of industry take us forward into the future. Give us abundance. Don't panic." This is what they—

RUTGER BREGMAN: I love that point.

ANITA ANAND: Does our future tech overlord have a name?

JEM: My name is Jem.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. Okay.

RUTGER BREGMAN: I think the Luddites were actually right. So, it's really interesting if you study this history and the points that were made by the Luddites. This is the early 19th century, and they were saying, “Look, we have spent many, many years and decades honing our craft, right, and this is our livelihood, this is how we make money, and now these machines come along and they take away our jobs.” And yes, they say, "Just re-train." But what will happen that we re-train and then we have another job, and then machine will take that job as well.

It's not true that they benefited so much from the rise of the machines. Economic historians will tell you that it took until the late 19th century for the benefits of the Industrial Revolution really to trickle down to ordinary citizens. So, I think the Luddites had a really good point, and I think they were very useful and positive force in the debate, and I would love to see a lot more neo-Luddites in the debate today.

ANITA ANAND: Ok, the woman over there.

ALEXIS: Hi, my name's Alexis. I work at Stanford also in AI. I actually, [speaks in Dutch] and my husband's Dutch. And I worked at Twitter 10 years ago and was there for the time of the joy and the hope of the Arab Spring and all the connections that were there. And now I do a lot of work in AI as well.

And I do want to ask about the concept of tools. And are these tools perhaps not the enemy itself, but a reflection of our humanity? And so is that showing that the morality that we have lost perhaps in ourselves? And so the people that we allow to be running these tools, what does that say about us, and so instead of just blaming AI to me or Twitter to me, is it possible that we can try to become more human-centred?

ANITA ANAND: Thank you very much.

ALEXIS: That’s my question.

ANITA ANAND: Rutger.

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, the first thing I would say is that we are continuously fed this story of technological inevitability, that this is going to happen no matter what, that if we don't do it, then some other lab will do it or the Chinese

will do it. And I think that that story is one of the most dangerous stories out there, that we really got to try and fight that.

When we think about what do these tools say about us, I think this is just the kind of tool where we really need to ask ourselves the question, do we even want to have it? If we cannot control it, then I think we should remember that we always have the power and the ability to say no. There are examples of that in our history. Take something like human cloning. Countries came together and said, "we don't think that's great. We're not going to do that." I think we really should stop seeing technology as some kind of force of nature, some kind of God that just, I don't know, is ruling us all but to remember that in the end, we are in the driving seat and that the imperative right now is to just say no.

ANITA ANAND: But you gave an example of the temperance movement. Now we're in America. America had prohibition. Prohibition brought mafia families, high crime rates, huge violence, and then alcohol was legal again. So, is the genie not out of the bottle and actually it's going to happen.

RUTGER BREGMAN: So that's why I called it my warning to Silicon Valley. People are really, really angry. If I look at the polls right now, I feel that there's a huge momentum, a huge potential for a massive, broad bipartisan movement. We've seen it just getting started with the movement against phones in schools, how angry parents are about how their children are getting addicted. I think if Silicon Valley goes on like this, that movement could become way broader, bigger, more powerful.

Temperance, it took them quite some years to really get started. But once they got going, they were unstoppable. And yes, they went way too far. Prohibition was not a great idea. But the fact that they've become so powerful that they could push a constitutional amendment through Congress, that says a lot about how angry people were at these addiction industries.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. We have a very illustrious hand that's been up in the air. The gentleman over there, do say who you are.

GUIDO IMBENS: I'm Guido Imbens, I'm a professor here at the Graduate School of Business.

ANITA ANAND: And also, a Nobel Laureate. And I'll say it, you're not going to say it, I'll say it.

RUTGER BREGMAN: Very humble man.

ANITA ANAND: A round of applause, we have a Nobel Laureate among us.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]

RUTGER BREGMAN: Now I'm even more intimidated than any time.

GUIDO IMBENS: Like Rutger, I'm from the Netherlands originally. I really enjoyed your lecture. And obviously, your work has been very much influenced by your European roots. And it's very clear that Europe and the US approach tech very differently. What do you see about the differences between Europe and the US and the way they're going to be regulating tech? Do you have more hope for the way Europe is going to go about that? And kind of related to that, having been here a couple of days now, you've probably, you've seen kind of how the students here are actually very much interested in having an impact. It's part of the motto here of the GSB. Does it give you more hope for the way things are moving here relative to Europe?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, on my first lecture, I spoke about the decadence and the immorality and the unseriousness of a lot of elites here in the US. Now I'm sad to say that in Europe, they also tend to be kind of irrelevant. So, I've spent some time attending conferences here in Silicon Valley, and I've heard a lot of our tech overlords and tech bros talking about Europe with, how do you say that, disdain, like you guys don't matter at all. And it's kind of true. It breaks my heart, but it's kind of true. Like a couple of years ago, Europe proudly announced its AI Act to the world, but we don't really have any notable AI companies to speak of. So, we've become really good at regulating industries we don't have.

That's a bit sad. So sometimes I feel that like while in the US, morality has maybe become outlawed, in Europe, it's ambition, but we need both. We need moral ambition. We need people who really have the desire to make this world a wildly better place and use their privilege to do that. So that's where we can learn a thing or two. We Dutchies, we can learn that from the Americans.

ANITA ANAND: Yes..

ANAT ADMATI: My name is Anat Admati, and I teach here at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, GCB. And I wanted to go to a little bit the politics and

the people in power because you kind of alluded to empathy or compassion being outlawed, and it's true that people in power here seem to be cruel people. So, do you think that the empathetic people will rise up, and can they rise up? For example, addiction to sports betting is allowed by our Supreme Court, and companies are taking advantage of that. Can we fight?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Well, I won't sugarcoat it. I think the baddies are indeed currently in office. And I think if we want to preserve our democracy, our humanity is just an absolute imperative that the forces of democracy win, not just in the US, but across the world. And what I think we need in order to do that is to have a really pragmatic mindset to build broad coalitions of people who see how serious the situation is. So this is no time for infighting. This is really a time for all the forces, everyone who believes in what for me is just the basics of civilisation as we agreed upon after the Second World War, for the Declaration of human rights to democracy, to you name it, we all need to band together now and preserve what we have.

ANITA ANAND: Can I just do a follow-up on that? You've said a number of times that you are a social democrat, you're an old-fashioned social democrat, but you seem profoundly irritated by some of the choices made by democracies. I mean you're saying that the wrong people are in charge, but those are the people that people have voted for, aren't they?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, you would call this a democracy, okay? Where do I begin?

ANITA ANAND: Well, it's the system that we've got, and it's what won. So just address it.

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, I think that democracy as it exists today in the US is obviously utterly broken. I mean just enormous power of money.. billionaires dictating the elections, the fact that Someone like Elon Musk can give hundreds of millions of dollars to a campaign and then be so influential in that way. We've come to accept things that should be utterly unacceptable. So no, I don't think that it is fairly democratic.

When you look at like simple things like polls, for example, it's not the case that the vast majority of people think it's a really good idea that just a few Tech CEOs have the enormous power to decide how this tech race is going to end. When you tell them about the situation, the vast majority of people are horrified by what is happening.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you

ELISHA BAREH: My name is Elisha Bareh. I'm a sophomore here studying economics. I'm the president of the Turning Point chapter here at Stanford and a part of the America Club. So, you often call for no big systemic change for these real-world problems, but as a conservative, we see that as the system gets larger, the citizen gets smaller. So why should we believe in moral ambition if that means giving more power to these institutions and governments that have frankly failed many citizens?

RUTGER BREGMAN: So I always like to say that I'm an old-fashioned European Social Democrat. So that means you believe in a mixed economy. You believe in the power of civil society. You believe in the power of markets. You believe in the power of government as well and there always needs to be the right balance. I think that in America, as we see it today, the balance has really shifted way too far towards the power of markets and money. But you can also go too far in the other direction, and that might be really the wrong decision. So, I think we always ought to be looking for the right balance here.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. There's a woman in the front row.

ALEXIS OFFERMAN: Hello, my name's Alexis Offerman. I'm an MBA student at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. There does seem to be growing interest in shielding children and even ourselves from AI and social media. But avoiding these tools entirely risks losing fluency. So I'm wondering what you think of that trade-off, and how do we draw the line between protection and preparation?

RUTGER BREGMAN: It's honestly something I'm struggling with all the time. On the one hand, as a writer, you want to reach an audience, and it's just inevitable to use social media. And I see the benefits. On the other hand, I'm the kind of person who uses parental controls, and whenever I want to install a new app, I have to go to my wife, she puts in the code. And that has been necessary to control my own phone addiction. So, I like to think I'm an adult, and if we need these kind of things for adults, what does that say about the power of the technology? I think we're now at a point where, yeah, you need regulation. You really need the government to step in. And again, I think there's a lot of public support for that.

ANITA ANAND: So, what do you think, though? Would you ban mobile phones for children under 18?

RUTGER BREGMAN: But that's like the bare minimum we could do. I think we could move in—

ANITA ANAND: But you would be for that. You would be for that.

RUTGER BREGMAN: Yeah, absolutely. And we could move in with — there's one proposal, for example, for dopamine taxes. That would be similar to alcohol taxes. Why do we just massively tax the ad revenue of Big Tech?

ANITA ANAND: Ok but if it's bad for kids under 18, then would you go further and ban it for people older than 18?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Well, I would regulate the algorithm. Like, now the algorithm is designed for survival of the shameless. The nature study that I quoted is that people who are high on psychopathy and in low cognitive ability they dominate the platforms. That's not inevitable. It's been designed this way, deliberately so to make as much money as possible. This is not rocket science at all, but that is what this industry has devolved into.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you.

EMILY SCHAFFER: Hi, so my name is Emily Schaffer, and I'm a doctor in training. I think it's important that we also look at all the good that AI and digital technology is doing for our health. And for example, I have worked on a digital health app that will give access to rural areas so that they also won't be left out of the Healthcare system that we have, and I've also seen how in AI can help with MR scans, so that it can detect better and then radiologists to find cancers. And so I wanted to ask, how do we differentiate between the AI that is doing good for our populations, in contrast to the AI that isn't? And also, how do we ensure that we utilise that?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Well, first, thank you for what you're doing. This is what I call moral ambition really using what you have in this case your talent, to make the world a much better place and when I look at universities like Stanford, what saddens me is that I do see a lot of students being sucked up by this Bermuda Triangle of talent so many people ending up in boring consultancy firms or law firms or a big tech companies where they're not really working on the biggest issues that we face as a species and I think it's really a responsibility and also a privilege to use your privilege on these great challenges. Now, how do we distinguish bad from

wrong? I don't think it's that difficult, is it? Addicting people on a massive scale, making them really unhappy and driving teenagers to suicide: that's bad. Curing cancer, that's good.

ANITA ANAND: Thank you. There's a gentleman on the right, lets go there.

JOSH: Thank you. My name is Josh. I'm from University of Amsterdam. Your father was a pastor, and I'm pretty sure that he would have ended any so many had with some kind of positive note, a little bit of hope. And I want to actually challenge you, is there something positive? There's also been so many revolutions that you mentioned that have also bought very many positive things. Is there anything that you see that is a good thing?

RUTGER BREGMAN: Yes. So, I like to think that this has been a hopeful lecture series indeed about the power of small groups of people to rally around an ideal to fight for human rights, to fight for human dignity, and I believe that there is an enormously hopeful utopian world out there for us. I think the path towards it is very narrow and that the journey is very treacherous. But I think there is a real case to be made that maybe sometime in the future historians will look back on us and think, gosh, these people were like, I don't know, like the Middle Agers. And in a way, we could be so poor compared to what could lie ahead for us in the future.

I am really that utopian. We talked about what automation could bring us. I always love to go back to those visions that someone like Kane's head or Isaac Asimov, the science fiction writers and they would describe these beautiful utopias where people would finally get to find out what actually makes life worth living.

ANITA ANAND: I'm going to take one more question over here..

PETER: My name is Peter and I'm a lecturer here at the GSB and family business and I am both petrified and enamoured by AI and I want to have a very brief question that will be built around a circle around humanity because my wife and I have done 200,000 miles around the world on a sailboat and we've been to probably 50 or 60 countries and our takeaway is that people all over the world are kind and nice and wonderful. And so my question brief, your comment, if I understood it correctly, is that the agriculture somehow destroyed the world. Are you saying that AI will, well, it could, but agriculture, I don't think did…

RUTGER BREGMAN: So, I wrote a book called *Humankind* in which I make the case that people deep down are fundamentally decent. Now, I've had a hard time defending that thesis, because a lot of bad things happen in history. But what makes me hopeful is that we've got our own human nature to work with. We can build institutions; we can build schools. We can design cities; we can construct nations that once again go back to that fundamental truth, which is that most people deep down are decent.

ANITA ANAND: On that hopeful note. We have to end it there. Rutger, thank you so much for your lectures. You've given us so much to think about. All of these lectures are going to be available on BBC Sounds. Do check out the Reith website, it has an enormous archive going all the way back to the first Reith lecture by Bertrand Russell, Rutger's hero, and that was, let me tell you, broadcast on Boxing Day in 1946. But for now, a big thanks to our hosts, our audience here at Stanford University and of course, our Reith lecturer, Rutger Bregman.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUSE]