

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Rutger Bregman:** This is one of the deepest needs of humans beings. We wanna be part of the group. We want people that we respect to say to us like, Hey, well Don, good job. You are successful. But our definition of success is highly malleable. One of the things I discovered as I studied the British abolitionist movement was that it was all about this cultural shift.

[00:00:23] Elites in particular were redefining for themselves what it meant to be successful, moving away from this conventional shallow definition of success, like making a lot of money, owning a big mansion on Fifth Avenue, and instead they started carrying more about actually doing good, helping others. That became more of a status symbol.

[00:00:41] How can we change our culture of success? is, it possible to culturally engineer this?

[00:00:52] **Nate Hagens:** Today I am joined by Dutch historian and author Rutger Bregman to discuss his recent work in building a movement for moral ambition. Rutger has published four books on history, philosophy, and economics. This includes his most recent book titled Moral Ambition. Stop Wasting Your Talent and Start Making a Difference, which is the subject of today's episode.

[00:01:17] Rutgers spent his early career as an academic historian and went on to become a journalist for over a decade. In 2024, he co-founded the School for Moral Ambition, focused on building a movement I of Idealist to take on the world's biggest problems. By providing various fellowships and educational programs, the global challenges we're currently up against as a species demand

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more than moral idealism in our personal lives, but rather to look at the ways we can have the most impact toward creating better human and planetary futures.

[00:01:52] The idea Rutger presents in this episode, is to ask us to consider the ways in which we could be doing more to support the causes we most care about, and he provides a framework for how to get started on that. If you are enjoying this podcast, I invite you to subscribe to our substack newsletter where you can read more of the system science underpinning our human predicament, where my team and I post special announcements related to The Great Simplification.

[00:02:20] You can find the link to subscribe in the show description. With that, please welcome Rutger Bregman. Welcome to the show. Thanks for having me, mate. Good to see you. You are a historian and author, and one might even call you a philosopher of sorts. your most recent work, including a book that was released this year, has been promoting an idea called Moral Ambition.

[00:02:48] So let's start with that. Can you explain what Moral Ambition is and why you feel that this idea is so important in today's world?

[00:02:56] **Rutger Bregman:** So, have you noticed, Nate, that when people, talk about their idealistic projects, they often say, oh, I just wanna make the world a little bit better. And that just has always annoyed me, like, why a little bit?

[00:03:10] Why do we always say that? Moral ambition is about making the world a wildly better place? It's about combining the idealism of an activist with the ambition of a, an entrepreneur and, It's all about the desire to actually get things done and to scale your impact. the recognition that more is more, and that if the problems of this world are very big, then probably we need to do a lot of work, think big as well.

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[00:03:37] And the solutions need to be big as well. So, that's what World Ambition is.

[00:03:40] **Nate Hagens:** So when you say you were annoyed by just improving the world a little bit, is the calculus in your mind that if you have 10 million people signing up, yes, I want to swing for the fences with moral ambition, that 3% of them will be wildly successful and the rest won't?

[00:04:00] Or is it a series of additive? All 10 million will make some contribution and then the totality will be massive?

[00:04:07] **Rutger Bregman:** I honestly think that both can be true at the same time. So there is something to be learned from the perspective of a venture capitalist who would say like, look, I am investing in a whole portfolio of companies and I know that I'll make most of my money, you know, on just one company that will just be wildly successful.

[00:04:27] I think you could. Argue that something similar happens in the world of doing good. it is true that some movements and even some specific moral pioneers are just wildly successful. It's just pretty hard to predict in advance. And very often these pioneers also need, you know, a much larger support network around them.

[00:04:45] In the book, I talk a lot about the British abolitionist movement now that was founded by a very small group of very entrepreneurial people. The British Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade had 12 founders, of which 10 were entrepreneurs. And when they got started in 1787, the abolitionists.

[00:05:05] Movement was super small in the uk. Maybe there were about 50, maybe a hundred abolitionists in the whole, country. there was no one doing it full time. So they kickstarted a huge movement that eventually drew in hundreds of

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thousands of people. So that's absolutely what you need. So yeah, I would say both can be true at the same time.

[00:05:21] **Nate Hagens:** So building on that, you said that the British abolitionist movement was founded by entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs today we think of them as someone that wants to gain excess profit, monetarily. So you've stated in your work that conventional definitions of success are now harming us and the planet, and that most ideas of success are focused on personal gain rather than a wider boundary societal or environmental ecological benefit.

[00:05:52] So how does moral ambition redefine what the real measures of success for our species might look like?

[00:05:59] **Rutger Bregman:** So I think our current definition of success is really ruining us, and there's so much evidence for this. I agree. It's been a long time in the making. So take a look at the United States where I currently live since the 1960s.

[00:06:12] We have the American Freshmen Survey in which students have been asked every single year since the late sixties about their most important priorities. What they wanna do with their lives, basically. And in the late sixties, more than 90% of students said that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was one of their most important life goals.

[00:06:33] Today, that's just 50%. Now, if you look at something else, making money in the sixties, only 50% said that making money was one of the most important life goals. Today that's around 90%. So it's, basically a total reversal of priorities. And, I think that is one of the root causes. If, you're looking like for an overarching problem, like you're interested in the MedTech crisis, whether that's climate change or animal suffering, or poverty or growing inequality, I would say this is perhaps one of those.

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[00:07:05] Or maybe even the fundamental problem that we face as society.

[00:07:10] **Nate Hagens:** So do you think, can you speculate on the 90% that choose, they wanna make more money. Is that out of greed or is it out of fear that living in today's world, they fear that's a security mechanism. And if we all had basic needs covered somehow that they might want a philosophy of life back the way it was 60 years ago,

[00:07:33] **Rutger Bregman:** I would say it comes out of a desire for status.

[00:07:37] **Nate Hagens:** I agree.

[00:07:38] **Rutger Bregman:** And,

[00:07:38] that's, slightly different. So this is one of the deepest needs of humans beings. Like, we wanna be recognized, we wanna be part of the group, we want people that we respect. To say to us like, Hey, well Don, good job, right? You are successful, but our definition of success is highly malleable and it's, really a cultural artifact that can change and has changed over time.

[00:08:03] One of the things I discovered as I studied the British abolitionist movement, but also the transition from the gilded era to the progressive era in the United States, was that. It was all about this cultural shift. elites in particular were redefining for themselves what it meant to be successful, moving away from this conventional shallow definition of success, like making a lot of money, owning a big mansion on Fifth Avenue, and instead they started caring more about, actually doing good, helping others.

[00:08:35] That became more of a status symbol. And what also is important here is that once you start doing the good work, that changes you as a person, right?

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You often, very often, genuinely start caring about those issues, even if at first you started doing the work because, you know, it just seemed fashionable to do it.

[00:08:52] So, that's just something I've become really obsessed with. Like, how can we change our culture of success? Like, is it possible to culturally engineer this?

[00:09:04] **Nate Hagens:** I have so many questions at this point because what you just said, you know, really springboards in my mind. I'm trying to, develop a framework for philanthropists and in investors, given the landscape of what I call The Great Simplification, which is we've built this civilization and expectations on fossil energy and materials and stable ecosystems, and that's all changing.

[00:09:33] So at the heart of it is, if we change our definition of return, that might also change our definition of success and return right now is just money on money. But what if we widen the boundary of what's included in the return healthy people with community and, ecosystem stability and all those things.

[00:09:55] So what do, you think about that, defining a wider boundary return on capital as, part of the solution?

[00:10:03] **Rutger Bregman:** I love that idea. And, let me, give you two examples. So in my very first book, utopia Free List, I had a whole chapter about the need to move away from GDP Gross Domestic product, product, which is a, pretty old idea, right?

[00:10:18] Economists, I would say ever since, you know, we've had economists have been thinking about what is the, best way to measure wealth and GDP as we have it today is a relatively recent invention, less than a hundred years old. That was actually a tool mainly used for, war planning. Actually, it was super useful during the second World War.

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[00:10:41] but yeah, we somehow stuck with it, for better or for worse. I think GDP can be pretty useful in, in some respects, but it can also really lead astray. Now. Another example comes from my personal life. I'm a member of an organization called Giving What We Can. It's an organization that promotes a simple pledge to, to donate 10% of your income to really effective charities.

[00:11:08] Now, I did that. I think, what is it, a couple of years ago now, it happened because my previous book, humankind had done much better than I had expected. So I suddenly had money, which I never really expected in my life. And I was like, what do I do with this? And I was like, well, I gotta give it away. but how, do I hope myself accountable here?

[00:11:27] How do I make sure that I actually do it? And I really like this idea of making a pledge. Now, what happened after that is, will interest you because what Giving What We Can has is an online portfolio where you keep track of all your donations a little bit like your stock portfolio, right? I'm not sure if you're an investor used to be no longer.

[00:11:47] Well, people like that, right? They like to follow their, I don't know, their crypto or their stocks or whatever can be pretty addictive to update the epi every day, like see how they're doing. But what happened in this period is that I had this like, almost like a psychological shift in my head, like philanthropy in this case, doing good with money.

[00:12:02] I didn't start to see it anymore as money that was just gone after I'd given it. But I started to see it as my own. Philanthropic portfolio. And I suddenly realized, hey, this money isn't gone. It's actually out there in the world generating a return on investment. For me, it's almost like my moral portfolio.

[00:12:20] Right? I can, I, you know, the people can put this on my gravestone. and I just want to make it bigger. So I almost, once I started donating, I became a

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little bit, you could describe it as morally greedy because once you've done research into some of the most awesome organizations, and you give them money, you're like.

[00:12:38] Well, this is awesome, but you know, maybe, we can do more together.

[00:12:41] **Nate Hagens:** Does morality in the sense that you're describing, have a time horizon? Because it seems that you can get immediate returns checking your crypto portfolio, but if you donate 10% or whatever, to, a group of charities, some of the things that we're working on today, we're not gonna see the fruits of them maybe even in our lifetime.

[00:13:05] So what's the relationship between moral ambition and time? I love that point. If there's one

[00:13:12] **Rutger Bregman:** thing that deeply inspires me about some of the greatest movements of the last two centuries, it's their perseverance. So. Again, look at the British society for the abolition of the slave trade, the most successful abolition society in world history, while only one of the original 12 founders was still alive when slavery was finally abolished throughout the British Empire.

[00:13:35] The same is true for the American suffrage movement. So of the 68 women who came together at Seneca Falls in 1848 for the first women's right convention in the us, only one was still alive. 75 years later in 1920 when women finally got the right to vote across the us It's that. Perseverance that, I, it's just so awe inspiring, right?

[00:13:59] The recognition that you're part of something that is much bigger than you, and that you can step into, the footsteps of the moral pioneers who came before you. That it's just time to pass on the torch right. To the next generation at some point. I find that deeply inspiring.

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[00:14:13] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah, I do too. So, so getting back to the British abolitionists, you said they were entrepreneurs.

[00:14:18] So were they doing this, as an altruistic thing on the side, or was this an entrepreneurial movement? So,

[00:14:27] **Rutger Bregman:** there's a fantastic book about this by Christopher Leslie Brown, historian. The book is called Moral Capital, and what he argues is that after the American Revolution, Britain had a little bit of an identity crisis, or actually a pretty big identity crisis.

[00:14:44] They lost, you know, their. Awesome colonies. And they were like, okay, but now what's our place in the world, right? How can we still believe that we are the best country on earth? And he argues that, the abolitionist made use of that in a way. they successfully started promoting abolitionism as part of the British national character.

[00:15:07] They said like, look. This all happened, like everything is going to shit in this country because of our original sin, because of slavery, because of the slave trade. And they also reacted against other, symptoms of immorality. Like there was rampant alcoholism in parliament. For example, you had the Prince of Wales, who even by royal standards was an extraordinary prick.

[00:15:32] so this, the, these early abolitionists, they, launched a countercultural revolt against the immorality of, that day. And they said, look, there's a, there is redemption for us If we become that country, that will abolish the slave trade. And then we'll also spread the gospel of anti-slavery, which is what the UK did in the end, then we can, be the greatest nation on earth once again.

[00:15:57] **Nate Hagens:** So it wasn't, back then, it wasn't for personal gain and power, it was for, improving the nation. Like a wider than yourself goal.

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[00:16:07] **Rutger Bregman:** Yes, It, was really a mix of genuine altruism. Like many of these abolitionists, I would say most deeply cared about the suffering of enslaved people. So that definitely was an important part, but it was also the desire for status and prestige, both for yourself because you could live a life that would be so much more interesting than the life of just a rich, boring entrepreneur right there.

[00:16:31] Throughout history, there have been so many willfully people, right? And we forget most of them. I've met a lot of rich people in my life. Most of them are really boring, but they realized, Hey, wait a minute. there is something else we can do with, our lives. We can actually create. Or make a monument in time of our lives, we can do something worth remembering.

[00:16:52] And it's true, right? We remember these, founders of the British Society for volution of the slave trade, not because they, some of them were wealthy, some of them really were, no, we remember them because they changed the course of history.

[00:17:03] **Nate Hagens:** And that opportunity is completely laying before us in fertile soil.

[00:17:09] I've got a project that I'm calling the 10,000, which is the 10,000 financially richest people in the world. It's not their fault that we're here, their part of the system, but it is their responsibility and they have outsized ability. Unlike people in the past, we have tens of thousands of people that have degrees of freedom that governments don't have.

[00:17:36] And so if, some of those people adopt kind of the philosophy that you are espousing, whoa, what could really change? I, think it's really exciting to imagine.

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[00:17:47] **Rutger Bregman:** Absolutely. And I think that this movement, because I really see it as a movement of people who wanna embrace moral ambition as their personal philosophy, I think it should be grounded for maybe 20% in feelings of guilt and shame.

[00:18:03] I think that can be useful sometimes. Sometimes we deserve a little bit of a kick in the butt. There's a reason why we, humans are pretty much the only animal in the whole animal kingdom with the ability to blush. But I, think it's essential that 80% is grounded in enthusiasm. The desire to just live a much more interesting, meaningful, exciting life.

[00:18:22] Because that's, if I can add one thing, Nate, that's what I experienced. Another emotion that I experienced as I studied these great moral pioneers, I call it moral envy, right? You read about Thomas Clarkson one, the great British abolitionist or, someone like Frederick Douglas or Susan V. Anthony, Elizabeth K.

[00:18:41] Stanton, right? You read their memoirs. You read their biographies and, what it does with me is that I'm like, holy shit, that is a life worth living. Right? That is a life worth remembering. Like if only I could achieve like two or 3% of that, that would be awesome. so yeah, that's what I call moral envy.

[00:19:00] **Nate Hagens:** It gives people status for doing the right thing for society and the planet instead of for growing electronic digital claims on reality. Yeah. And it gets to what you're saying, our tribal past status was really important. even though we were equal in how much food we might have eaten there, there was unequal status.

[00:19:25] so yeah, I, I think it to, to have our status linked to our moral ambition makes sense to me.

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[00:19:32] **Rutger Bregman:** Yeah. One thing to add though is that if we expect a lot of popularity in the here and out. Well, then we might be disappointed. Yeah. Take something like the suffering of animals today. I think that is arguably one of the greatest moral atrocities of today.

[00:19:49] I think if the story of the future will look back on us and see how we torture tens of billions of animals every year, and we've developed these horrific torture chambers for them, like cult factory farms, I think they'll be horrified. So if you advocate against that, I think that's very morally ambitious.

[00:20:09] It may not make you very popular today. Right. So when you think about status. I think it's very important to make a conscious decision for yourself. Like, who are the important people to you? Like, whose respect do you want? And that could, even be the historians of the future, right? It could even be people who aren't alive today.

[00:20:29] **Nate Hagens:** Well, you could merge it and maybe you have, I, don't know. with the concept of, extrinsically, motivated or internally, motivated and do you even need the external validation that Rutger Bregman did this wonderful thing, look at how swell of a human being he is, or does your own knowledge that you did the thing suffice?

[00:20:56] **Rutger Bregman:** So I've written about that as well in one of my previous books, humankind, you know, some of that pioneering work. I think it's really interesting that distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. I guess writing this new book, Moral Ambition has. Change my mind a little bit there. I think that the two forms of motivation are inextricably intertwined often, and that sometimes a project can start because you're mostly motivated by extrinsic motivation.

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[00:21:25] But then as you start doing the work, you become more intrinsically motivated. Let me tell you the story of Thomas Clarkson. You know, I already mentioned him, the. Greatest, probably most important, British abolitionist. When he was 25, he participated in an essay contest at the University of Cambridge. Back then, he was just, a pretty vain young man who wanted to make a name for himself and this was the way to do that back in the day.

[00:21:50] So, just by, by chance he had to answer that, the question that year, is it okay, is it moral to own and sell other human beings? He had never really thought about that, but he just wanted to win first prize. So he did the research and yes, he won first prize. He went to Cambridge, to the beautiful Senate house, attended the ceremony.

[00:22:09] it was all nice and well then went back to London where he lived. And then there's this famous moment in his memoirs that he keeps thinking about what he had just written. And he's like, well, if this is really true, then shouldn't someone do something about it? And you read that and one. Part of you thinks, well, this is a pretty vain young man who can suddenly see himself as this world historical hero taking down slavery.

[00:22:34] But then you realize, well, the guy actually did it. He did. Spent 61 years of his life, he traveled 35,000 miles across the United Kingdom to spread his propaganda everywhere. He had a total burnout when he was 33, and as he did the work, he became more and more intrinsically motivated. He started doing it for what we would call the right reasons, and in the end, he was buried in an unmarked grave.

[00:22:53] So I've become more interested in working with the full spectrum of human psychology. It's great that there are some saints out there. I love them if people do it for pure altruism. I just think that most of us are mixed backs and that we need to work with whatever we have.

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[00:23:08] **Nate Hagens:** Well said. I agree with that.

[00:23:10] So you have, aligned with your new book started something called The School of Moral Ambition. Can you tell us a little bit about that and, maybe briefly define, the seven principles? It's, based on,

[00:23:25] **Rutger Bregman:** so the thing with books is that very often we've write them for ourselves, right? you're thinking about, Hey, someone should write this book.

[00:23:33] And at some point you realize, well, maybe I should do it. And this new book, moral Ambition, is actually a little bit of a self-help book. So the first person I wrote it for was me. Like I needed. To change my life, I was honestly quite fed up with myself. I had spent about a decade in what I always like to call the awareness business.

[00:23:53] So did a lot of podcasts, wrote a lot of articles, wrote books, stand, stood on many stages in many countries, preaching, you know, my messages and hoping that some other people will do the actual work of making this world a better place. And I started to come to the realization that perhaps this awareness that I was generating might be overrated.

[00:24:17] I think we very clearly see that we'll take something like, our own behavior and, Climate change. Right. I, always thought it's funny that in, the Netherlands, they recently did a study that the people who feel most guilty for flying, you know, which is very bad for the environment, often fly the most.

[00:24:39] so here there's a pretty big gap between awareness, knowing that something is not very good and action, and we see that time and time again. Right. I experienced this in my own life as you know, I became semi-famous because I said some nasty things about billionaires when I attended Davos in 2019

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saying, Hey, you need to pay your taxes instead of go on about your BS philanthropy.

[00:25:01] I remember that. So yeah, you go viral, but then nothing much happened after that. So the School for Moral Ambition is basically the next step in my career. What we're trying to do, and actually what we're doing is we're building a movement of people who have that same nagging feeling that they wanna do more, that they want to move beyond awareness, that perhaps they even want to quit their current job and take on one of the most pressing issues we face as a species.

[00:25:26] We now have seven, 17,000 members across more than a hundred countries. We've launched fellowships that really pay people to quit their job. everything I earn with this book is going into the movement. It's honestly been the most exciting and exhausting thing I've ever done in my life.

[00:25:43] **Nate Hagens:** So what are the, seven principles, underpinning the School of Moral Ambition?

[00:25:49] **Rutger Bregman:** Yes. Yeah. So we created a whole list indeed, of, things that, we think really defined what moral ambition is. So the first one is. Pretty simple. so that's action. as I said, we think awareness is overrated and we think it's really important that, or ideas actually translate into meaningful impact.

[00:26:12] So we gotta do something. This is also a little bit of a message to my friends on the left. you know, I've been guilty of that as well. We're really good at coming up with systemic analysis about everything that's wrong with capitalism and the patriarchy and, the meta crisis, and whatever, right?

[00:26:31] but it's also actually important to move beyond that and just start doing some good work. the second principle is impact. So we think it's super important

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to prioritize, to think like an entrepreneur. We use a framework called the SSS framework, so that means we focus on the most sizable, the most solvable, and the most sorely neglected issues.

[00:26:55] So I could take. give you an example. Take something like, climate change. Obviously very sizable problem, threatening billions of people. very solvable. I think we've got amazing solutions that we need to scale up. and lots of good ideas is, it's sorely neglected. I would say The good news is that it's less and less neglected.

[00:27:13] More and more people are working on it. but there are still a lot of aspects within climate change that are very neglected. So that's why we at the School for Moral Ambition, focus on food that's 20% of emissions. And compared to clean electricity, for example, very few people are working on it and the investments are pretty tiny, compared to other things.

[00:27:33] **Nate Hagens:** I assume based on your earlier comments that you are vegetarian or, vegan,

[00:27:39] **Rutger Bregman:** yeah. Yeah. Pretty much vegan. Yeah.

[00:27:40] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. Okay.

[00:27:41] **Rutger Bregman:** Yeah, and look, that's not because I think that's gonna be my great contribution to this world. I do think though, that it's, you know, on a certain level important to practice what you preach.

[00:27:52] Yeah. And for me it's a little bit weird to eat animals that I think have really lived horrendous lives, but I'm not the kind of vegan who's like. You know, checking every product for, oh, is there a little bit of milk powder in there? Because I consider that a waste of my time. I'm also not the kind of vegan, you

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know, who's dunking another, you know, meat eaters all day, unless they're my good friends.

[00:28:14] I only dunk on my friends if they still eat meat, but not on others. It's often more effective to shame our friends because they take it seriously. Okay. Action impacts. Yeah. and

[00:28:25] **Nate Hagens:** what comes next?

[00:28:26] **Rutger Bregman:** that's, radical compassion. So, it's all about expanding the moral circle. this is what the abolitionists did, right?

[00:28:36] they started expanding the moral circle. They said, look, when we talk about human rights, for example, it's not only about white people, it's also about black people. it's what the suffragettes did when they said, look, we shouldn't just fight for the rights of male citizens, because that's what it initially was with the French Revolution.

[00:28:51] For example, you know, the Declaration of Rights for male citizens. Well, Obviously women have the same rights or deserve the same rights as well. And we think we can take this a step further. I mean, that's why we already just talked about animals. I don't think animals are the same, obviously as humans.

[00:29:10] So they wouldn't deserve the exact same rights. I wouldn't give them the right to vote or anything like that. but I do think they deserve our moral consideration. And today we just treat them like, I don't know, like plastic, just like resources. Like, like totally agree. As if they're things. Yeah, I think it's important to recognize that a lot of moral progress in the last two centuries has simply been a result of pushing that moral circle.

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[00:29:35] It could even, you know, lead us to some conclusions in the. In the far future. That may sound very weird today, right? But I think we have to be open-minded here. like not that long ago, it would've sounded utterly bizarre to think about the rights of a horse. now we're doing more and more research into the sentient of creatures that, you know, are not super charismatic.

[00:30:00] And the book I talk about, the Shrimp Welfare Project, for example, which is an NNGO that you guessed it, advocates for shrimp, which is, you know, the, in terms of the numbers, it's like the most factory farmed animal in, in, in the world. Like way more even than chicken. We slaughter like hundreds of billions of shrimp every year.

[00:30:21] And then I think we gotta be open to the evidence and there's more and more scientific evidence coming in that actually these shrimp are. Super sensitive and cognitive cognitively, quite advanced creatures that are probably suffering immensely, in these systems that we could pretty easy, easily improve.

[00:30:39] So that's something that's would also be a part of moral Circle expansion is that you're open to those arguments.

[00:30:45] **Nate Hagens:** So that's part of radical compassion. Yeah. Yeah. and keep going. What, are the other principles?

[00:30:52] **Rutger Bregman:** Okay, the next one is open-mindedness. and again, I'm also saying this to myself, if you really wanna change the world, I think it's absolutely essential that you strive to see the world as it really is and not how you want to see it.

[00:31:08] you gotta be epistemically humble, as they say. the, world is just very weird. It's complicated, and very often the right things happen for the wrong reasons. So, I'll, I can give you one example. This abolitionist, Thomas Clarkson at

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some point realized, that, if you would. Just keep hammering the point that slavery is just deeply immoral, and that therefore it ought to be abolished.

[00:31:32] That was just not, you know, the winning argument in Westminster, in the late 18th century. So he started doing, a lot of research and discovered that about 20% of white sailors also died during these slave voyages on these ships, which was actually a higher percentage even than the enslaved people because the sailors, they weren't property, they weren't capital investments, but they were just, you know, employees.

[00:31:59] And the great thing about a debt sailor is that you don't have to pay him anymore. Once he realized that, he thought, oh, wow. But this is a super powerful argument in Westminster. If politicians realize that our boys are dying on these ships, then they will become much more receptive to our arguments that we ought to abolish the slave trade.

[00:32:18] So this is an, this is the kind of. Thing that you're more open to if you're, if you are more open-minded, right? It sounds very weird at first. but if you in the end really care about making the actual impact, then you, will just use whatever tool you have. What's next? the next one is, connected to my previous book, I would say.

[00:32:39] So I wrote a book called Humankind, which is about fundamental human decency. I've, I make the argument that we humans have evolved actually to work together and are the product of something called survival of the friendliness. So the fifth principle is really connected to this. We, call it just kindness.

[00:32:57] like I think as we try to do good in the world, there is a temptation to start using other people as means to an end instead of goals in and of themselves. And I think that is both for pragmatic reasons and for fundamental

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reasons, not the right way to go. Like pragmatically, I think it may work for some time, but at some point you'll blow up your movement because that's just not.

[00:33:20] How people wanna be treated. and fundamentally it's just not the way how, I wanna live my life. It's just not how I wanna treat people. so, I think that's super important to, to believe in the good in people. the next one is also a little bit con connected to that's enthusiasm. I think we already talked about it.

[00:33:39] Like, I think moral ambition shouldn't suck up everything. That's obviously one of the risks of being ambitious, is it that it just takes over your life. I already mentioned that Clarkson had a total burnout when he was 33. So yeah, we wanna try and prevent that, obviously. and for me, life is about much more than just, morality, right?

[00:34:03] I'm the father of two kids. I'm a husband, I've got wonderful friends and I wanna be a good dad. I wanna be a good husband, I wanna be a good friend, and I don't want all that to compete with, with my moral ambition. So, Yeah, it's all obviously always a struggle, struggle to balance all those things.

[00:34:23] But for me it's an explicit goal, again, both for pragmatic and for fundamental reasons to live, a, fool and a rich and a well-rounded life. And then the last one, perseverance. We already talked about that. yeah, we're determined not to give up. because yeah, just real change.

[00:34:41] **Nate Hagens:** It just takes so much time.

[00:34:42] So from when you imagined this book and you researched it, and you wrote it, and now you're out speaking about it, I know you were on the John Stewart Show and other places. Has this changed you, and your enthusiasm and perseverance and, all the things, you personally, it's been absolutely, totally

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[00:35:02] **Rutger Bregman:** transforming.

[00:35:02] Yes. yes. So there's one chapter in the book, moral Ambition, which is about resistance heroes, during the Second World War. As a young boy, I was always fascinated by that. Question, like why did some people have the courage to join the resistance? And I guess sub subconsciously, I always assumed that they must have been different in a kind of psychological way.

[00:35:25] Maybe there was something like the psychology of the resistance hero, but for this book, I really dug into the research and discovered that's actually not true. So researchers looked at a lot of variables. They looked at, well, are they perhaps more progressive or conservative? Are they rich or poor or young or old, or men or women?

[00:35:47] And turns out, no, actually it's a cross section of the population. People who had the courage to help persecuted Jews to find a hiding place and really risk their own lives in the process. then I thought, well, maybe it's their environment, right? Maybe they had certain. A certain upbringing, right?

[00:36:04] Was it something their parents did or was it, that they just had the opportunity, maybe they had, an attic or something like that, or, a second house or, anything, but still that, wasn't the right explanation after a lot of time, a group of researchers in the nineties published a paper called The Importance of Being Asked.

[00:36:26] So in 96% of all cases, people said Yes, if someone asked them to join the resistance. And for me that was such an epiphany, because that means that it's not really that you are, a good person and therefore you do good things. It's the other way around. You do good things and that makes you a good person.

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[00:36:49] And very often you start doing good things because someone asks you, right? Because you're infected by this idea of moral ambition. There's a positive feedback going on. yes. and I guess it's true for entrepreneurship as well. I always saw myself as a writer, as someone who's like a one man army, someone who lives in the world of books and, memoirs and articles, and just collects ideas.

[00:37:12] And then I spend quite a few years writing a book. And then for a year or so, I come out of my cave to talk about the book, and then I go back into the cave. I never thought of myself as someone who could actually start something, build something. I was like, no, that's, other people who do that.

[00:37:28] That's like entrepreneurial people who do that. I am not entrepreneurial. But then I had some people around me, you know, and this was in my early midlife crisis a few years ago after I had published my previous book, humankind, who basically said, well, why don't you do this? So I basically have people around me, one person in particular who asked me that question, like, okay, but why not, you know, use your next book to kickstart a movement.

[00:37:55] And I was like, well, because I'm not an entrepreneur, I'm a writer. I don't do that stuff. And then they said, well, why not? You can try, you can just get started. And that's basically how it works. So it, this whole book is one attempt, one big attempt to ask a lot of people that question, to basically remove those blockades in their head, right?

[00:38:17] We, have these preconceptions of ourselves that we say, oh, we aren't that kind of person. We are not morally ambitious. We're not altruistic, we're not. Get rid of all that. that's just not how it works. Like Martin Luther King, when he was 26, he wasn't like, I'm the civil rights hero. Not at all. When he was interviewed later, he said, look, I, if, someone would've asked me back then, I would've run.

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[00:38:40] A thousand miles away from that person, it just sort of happened. It got outta hand. Right. And, I just, someone asked me the question, can you do this? And one thing led to the other,

[00:38:49] **Nate Hagens:** it really resonates with me. And it's inspiring to know that lots of those people are listening to this show right now.

[00:38:58] and maybe just need a reframing on, on, on what to do because the challenges do seem daunting. let me ask you this. Moral ambition feels connected with a phrase that I used to tell my students, which is to maximize your impact as opposed to minimize your consumption. And specifically, this is playing off the environmental movements call to minimize our ecological footprints, but if we all lived our lives at the smallest footprint possible, we wouldn't have any impact on the larger system driving, all these crises.

[00:39:33] So, so do the concepts of moral. And ambition carry similar tension here.

[00:39:40] **Rutger Bregman:** I absolutely love that point. So indeed, there's a whole obsession in the modern environmental movement with your own footprint. the idea that you have to indeed minimize your own consumption, minimize the amount of damage that you do, on a daily basis.

[00:40:00] And then we obviously have all those modern commandments like, don't eat meat, don't fly. Don't have kids, don't use plastic straws, drive an electric car, E exactly all that stuff, and buy a tiny house. Have your own vegetable, garden. And then in the best possible scenario, if you do everything right, then you have limited your damage to almost zero.

[00:40:23] You've got a footprint of almost zero, and you might as well not have existed. So then death becomes the highest ideal. Look again, you know, I drive in

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an elec in an electric car. I'm pretty much vegan. I have kids, which I encourage everyone to do by the way. but I don't think, as I said that is my greatest contribution to the world or anything like that.

[00:40:48] For me, that's just part of like, I don't know, good citizenship. It's your part of your human hygiene. Yeah. It's like the moral minimum, but we're not gonna save this world with a moral minimum. We gotta look for our moral maximum. We've got so many movements right now, and I love quite a few of them quite a bit, right?

[00:41:07] But so many of them are thinking about the moral minimum. Think about something like the B Corps movement, for example, right? saying like, okay, you can get this label from us if you, know, do this whole laundry list of things. And then at some point you've passed the bar and you're in the club.

[00:41:24] There's something to be said about it. Don't, get me wrong, it, it's, it can be a pretty powerful approach, but are we really gonna fix the world's greatest problems in that way? in that sense, I am inspired by maybe almost like the more Silicon Valley entrepreneurial approach. There's no. You know, young co-founder in Silicon Valley or at Y Combinator for example, who says, you know, it's just this amount of money that I wanna make.

[00:41:49] If I have made a million, then I'm done, then it's enough. Or, you know, I just wanna, you know, have a little bit of impact. No, they're like, the sky is the limit. And I think that's exactly the approach we need in the fight against the next pandemic, against climate breakdown, against extreme poverty. Like more is more, if you help one person, that's great.

[00:42:08] If you help two people, that's twice as much. And this is called mathematics. So that's, build a thing bigger.

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[00:42:15] **Nate Hagens:** What's the role of, Collaboration and, networking here. Some might argue that, while it'd be good to have our best and brightest acting super ambitiously towards these issues, it might also bring out competing initiatives to be the best at, At solving something, seeking status, like you said earlier, ultimately making them less effective than if they were a little more humble and worked together. So how do you respond to that?

[00:42:45] **Rutger Bregman:** I guess it really depends on the problem we're trying to tackle. I think competition can be a powerful tool, especially competition among teams can be, a form of innovation, right?

[00:42:57] So take something like, like animal rights that we talked about. I think it wouldn't be healthy to have like one big animal rights organization that does all the work, you know, and, that tries to come up with the best strategy. It's probably better to have multiple organizations trying different things and some will just fail.

[00:43:14] Those will need the open-mindedness and the epistemic humility to say, okay, this doesn't work. I think that's super important. Part of moral ambition is also the bravery to say like, Hey, I tried this and I didn't work. Like we should have an annual awards gala. You know, for those people who, had the bravest, failures.

[00:43:35] As I said, it really depends on the problem we're trying to solve. if, we're talking about. Lobbying work. For example, with the School for Moral Ambition, we've been recruiting strategy consultants, people with a legal background, and we've been sending them to Brussels to lobby for alternative proteins.

[00:43:53] Well, that's a super collaborative skillset. You then need, if you go in there and start shouting, everyone needs to go vegan. I'm not sure you'll, achieve a lot, but I am, super pragmatic about these issues. Like it just depends on the

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kind of problem we're trying to tackle because for some things we can be much more confrontational.

[00:44:14] **Nate Hagens:** So I know in the past you've talked a lot about poverty and, inequality as, important issues. And by definition of how our current world works and is structured, there are gonna be people and jobs, that won't be able to work at the highest levels of their calling, just because they, just don't have the resources to do that.

[00:44:37] So how do you define who should and who gets to work towards their greatest moral ambitions, and what would you, say to others who, fall outside of that, category? It's.

[00:44:49] **Rutger Bregman:** Absolutely essential for me to keep emphasizing that moral ambition is for everyone. This goes back to my point about the Dutch resistance heroes.

[00:44:57] You know, it was a cross section of the population. Rich, poor, young, old men, women, introvert, extrovert. there's really no personality type here is, that's super important to remember. So in my book, I have stories of quite privileged people. Thomas Clarkson received a pretty sizable inheritance from an uncle that enabled him to become a full-time abolitionist.

[00:45:20] But I also talk about people like. Rosa Parks, you know, who was a seamstress and one of the greatest activists, strategists of the 20th century. People don't realize that she wasn't like a, humble seamstress or anything, but she was a seasoned activist and it was all planned. Many more women had been arrested before her in the bus.

[00:45:40] They were just waiting for the right moment. And when Rosa was arrested, they were like, okay, Rosa, you know, she's a brilliant activist. She's

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gonna be the spokesperson for this, whole movement. So, that's super important for me. Le you know, the great social revolutionary. He was an electrician, Nelson Mandela.

[00:45:57] He worked as a security guard of mine. So it's not like you need the McKinsey, job title or whatever. If I sometimes talk about those people, it's because I'm quite angry at them. Take a university like Harvard, I was there recently to speak about moral ambition. This is a place where thousands of students apply every year, and they write beautiful application essays about the global.

[00:46:25] Problems they aspire to solve. You know, the tax avoidance of the billionaires factory farming, the next pandemic they want to take it on. But then as the years go by, probably around junior year, something has happened, and they get sucked up by what a good friend of mine who studied at Oxford always calls the Bermuda Triangle of Talent, which is consultancy, corporate law and finance.

[00:46:48] It's this gaping black hole that sucks up so many of our best and brightest. Now, I don't wanna say that moral ambition is only for these people. J just as I said, I, sometimes talk a bit more about them because I'm angry. and I think that especially they, with all that privilege, should be much more

[00:47:08] **Nate Hagens:** morally ambitious.

[00:47:09] Given that, how linked is ambition to the idea of status and then what do you think it would take to change how we measure status in our culture?

[00:47:20] **Rutger Bregman:** So I would say it is quite linked. I think. Always, I'm not entirely sure, but at least very often the desire, the ambition is grounded in a desire for some form of status, and it's super important that status.

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[00:47:38] It can be all kinds of things. Sure. It could be like just money getting richer. Like if you ask academics status is about being the smartest or having the most publications. Right. That's for what status is for them. in a world of animal rights activists, it's like, I don't know, being the most caring for animals.

[00:47:58] it's, super malleable. What, status actually is.

[00:48:02] **Nate Hagens:** So the Harvard Juniors, when they encounter the Bermuda Triangle, they are ambitious, but what's lacking is, the moral part of the term. Yeah. Because they get sucked into what I call the economic super organism of, money, energy, resource impact in our, current culture that rewards and respects digits in the bank more than it does some of the things that you're talking about, for, now.

[00:48:29] Yes. Yes.

[00:48:31] **Rutger Bregman:** And I think that's what we gotta change. It's incredibly hard. It's like, The task of a generation, but the fact that it's been done before in history gives me hope. can you unpack that? We can talk more about the move from the Gilded Age to the progressive era when elites like Theodore Roosevelt, for example, in the US the president, the Harvard graduate, Launched or became a part of, a movement that was all about redefining what it means to be successful. He set things like, and I'm paraphrasing to complain about a problem and not do anything about it. It's called whining. And he said that it's not the critic who counts, but it's the man or the woman in the arena who actually does the work, who has skin in the game, who takes the risks, who fails, but then stands up again, et cetera, et cetera.

[00:49:21] So that was very much a reaction against the shallow definition, the conventional definition of success. That was indeed all about money that was predominant during the Gilded Age.

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[00:49:31] **Nate Hagens:** So were there any, examples in the past societies you studied, that had status values that were aligned with the betterment of the commons?

[00:49:42] **Rutger Bregman:** Yeah,

[00:49:42] So that's what fascinates me so much. Like the Gilded Age was an incredibly immoral age. Huge amounts of corruption, incredible amount of equality. Obviously these rubber barrens just like the. Jeff Bezels and Elon Musk and Mark Zuckerberg. Today, you have people like Andrew Carnegie and Rockefeller, you know, super wealthy men who were just, abusing their millions of workers, to make as much money as possible.

[00:50:12] but then what came after the Gilded Age was the progressive era. Like for the first time we had an income tax in the us the eight hour work week was implemented. some of these big monopolies like standard oil were broken up. So. I guess that's what I hope we can achieve in the next couple of decades because we're clearly living through a second guilded age.

[00:50:34] Right. The, level of corruption, especially in this country, has just reached levels that are just, well, very often you just don't know whether you need to laugh for whether you need to cry,

[00:50:44] **Nate Hagens:** but we're becoming aware of it. It's not hidden anymore. And maybe, and let me ask you this, have you noticed that since it's so out in the open, there's more of a yearning for a moral ambition?

[00:50:59] because of what people are experiencing. Have you, what do you think about that? I totally agree.

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[00:51:04] **Rutger Bregman:** It's just because the shit has so clearly hit the fan that the whole notion of like, oh, we're doing good by doing well, our idealism is a little bit like a hobby. We do it on the side. I mean, that was possible 10 years ago.

[00:51:21] That was possible in the era of Ted Talks. You know, when you could just say, oh, you know, we're gonna bring the community together. We will have awesome solutions. No one's ever gonna have to make any kind of sacrifice. You can be filthy rich and do good at the same time. And, that's gonna be wonderful for everyone.

[00:51:41] Yay. I mean, it's 2025 now. We have some of the best experts on fascism leaving the country saying that the lesson of 1933, that it was better to leave too early than too late. I mean, that is the grim reality that we're in right now. Currently in, in LA like thousands of people are in hiding, like literally in hiding for ICE because there are these insane rates going on.

[00:52:06] Ridership on the subway dropped by 15%. That's how many people are currently in hiding. I mean, I can go on and on, but I mean, I, assume anyone listening to this podcast is aware of everything that's going out on outside. So the whole notion that we can fix this world by doing a little bit better or by you know, doing good, by doing well, it just sounds utterly ridiculous.

[00:52:30] Right. If we have no, if we're not prepared to make some sacrifices, to have some skin in the game to actually make our own lives more challenging, then, I mean, then, you're just not serious.

[00:52:44] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. I, see this, see it the same way. so Rutger, along the lines of, moral ambition, I've heard you, in other interviews discuss the idea that we should not just be working against something, but rather we should be striving towards something else.

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[00:53:02] Can you unpack that idea and how it has, shaped, your work?

[00:53:08] **Rutger Bregman:** Yeah, it's a longstanding critique I've had of the modern left is that it seems to be mainly focused on what We don't want the

[00:53:17] **Nate Hagens:** postmodern critique.

[00:53:19] **Rutger Bregman:** Yeah. I mean, we're against austerity. We've, been against the establishment against growth against the elite.

[00:53:28] but you also need to be for something. I always like to point out that Martin Luther King never said, I have a nightmare. Right. He had a dream. he, had something worth fighting for. Lemme give you two examples. So. The fight against climate change, for example. I think we're not gonna win that fight if we only ground it in, visions of doom.

[00:53:49] Right? If you don't do that, your life is gonna get so much worse. It's gonna become hellish. And if you do it, it's gonna be Yeah. Just, about as it is today. Well, that's not super motivating to me, right? I, wanna hear a story about how we can make this world a wildly better place. the same is true for how we talk about technology.

[00:54:09] If you look at the culture today, we've become so pessimistic about the potential of technology, right? Everything has become Black mirror. It did, like, what's the last science fiction movie or the last series on Netflix that is like very utopian or hopeful about the potential of technology to lift up humanity and make this world a much better place?

[00:54:32] we used to have that, and I think we need to get back to that because, there's always been this extraordinarily morally ambitious potential of technology.

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In the book, I talk about how women's rights, and technology are in inextricably intertwined, right? And, the feminists, and the suffragettes, they, knew this right?

[00:54:52] Susan B. Anthony, knew that inventions like the dishwasher, or the washing machine, or the bicycle, which is so important as well, were crucial. or I've written about the invention of the birth control pill, which liberated women in the most massive way. And that was financed by a suffragette called Catherine McCorick, who had inherited a lot of money from her husband.

[00:55:16] And she said, you know what I want? I want this pill to exist. I'm gonna find the scientist who does it. And, she did it, you know, she find found a renegade scientist who had just been kicked outta Harvard, called George Pinkus. And, He did the work, spent the years on it and then developed something called innoVi.

[00:55:34] And that was so revolutionary that today we call it the pill, right? So, I'm not saying like we need to go to this, Pollyannish like super optimistic vision of technology that is dominant in Silicon Valley, but I do think we can tell a more possible story around how we can shape the future of technology because if it's all doom and gloom, I don't know.

[00:55:56] I, I, don't, think we're gonna. We're gonna win this battle.

[00:55:59] **Nate Hagens:** I agree with that. But the, technology and the framing also has to be tethered to our reality. It can't be false, po false enthusiasm Based on things that, aren't feasible. but I agree with you. So, so getting back to the School for Moral Ambition, which you founded, around this philosophy, what are your programs and your fellowship look like?

[00:56:25] And is this like a full-time thing for you? Or, how is, that un unfolding?

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[00:56:30] **Rutger Bregman:** Absolutely. It's full-time. It's more than full-time. so currently we have two main programs. The first program. It's called our Moral Ambition Circles. So these are groups of five to eight people who wanna explore what moral ambition could mean for them.

[00:56:47] anyone is invited to join us. As I said, we have 17,000 members now. all the material is available for free and, it takes a couple of months. you go through the whole program and as a group you answer questions like, what are some of the most important pressing issues we face as a species?

[00:57:05] What are my personal superpowers? What's the match between those two? How can I take a first step? can I invite others in? Right? Remember the power of asking other people, how can I leverage my network and how can we hold each other accountable? And at the end of the program, people are even invited to make a promise because as, we talked about at the beginning of this conversation, I think promising, pledging, you know, promising to yourself to say like, this is the kind of person I wanna become, can also be very powerful.

[00:57:34] So that's, the program we have for everyone.

[00:57:36] **Nate Hagens:** And are those strangers or people that find each other in their own communities? It could be both. So we have quite a few

[00:57:43] **Rutger Bregman:** people who, you know, just, create their own group. they do it with friends or with colleagues, but we have a whole platform, an online platform, moralambition.org that helps, to find other people.

[00:57:57] So we basically match people. So that's been really cool to see how quickly this has been growing and how it's been resonating. What we've also been doing is we've launched our moral ambition fellowships and, they're, I'll be honest, they're very hard to get into. So we are really looking for the most talented people

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we can find, and we pay them to quit their job, to take on one of the causes that our researchers have selected, and currently we work on three issues.

[00:58:30] One in Europe, is to fight against big tobacco, which was actually a big surprise for me. But that's an important aspect of the school for more ambition. It's not me as a co-founder who gets to decide what we work on. We think it's super important to work with prioritization researchers who do extensive research into that question.

[00:58:49] What are some of the most sizable, solvable, and sorely neglected issues that we face? And it turns out that. Smoking tobacco is, well, pretty much the most evil legal industry out there, responsible for the deaths of 8 million people annually, which is more than a hundred times as much as the amount of people that die from natural disasters each year.

[00:59:09] and it's, you know, deliberately been engineered to be as addictive as possible. And most people start when they're still kids. So anyway, when you start learning more about this, you, quickly become quite radicalized, like you go from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. so that's one cause.

[00:59:24] The other two causes are the fight for tax fairness, and implementing a global billionaires tax, which is probably also gonna be the work of a generation, or two generations, maybe two generations from now. There won't be any billionaires, but keep going. Well, there you go. And then the, third one is, well we already talked about that extensively.

[00:59:45] the food system reform, we think that's just so incredible, incredibly important. So,

[00:59:50] **Nate Hagens:** if you're successful, and I hope you are, You might soon have a hundred issues.

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[00:59:57] **Rutger Bregman:** Well, I think we wanna limit the amount of Carls areas we work on. So we are thinking like maybe we'll expand to eight or nine or maybe 10 at some point.

[01:00:06] Yeah, That, that will take some time. But yeah, I do really believe in the power of prioritizing. It's one of those things that I've learned from a movement called Effective Altruism, that has received some bad press recently and probably for good reasons. one of the most famous effective altruist was Sandbank Mare, who's now in prison.

[01:00:25] You know, he was the guy behind FTX. But there's some really cool people in that movement as well. And one of the things that they emphasize is that, for example, when you spend money philanthropically, it's not just about how much you give, it's also very much about. What causes you give it to. And some organizations like the best organizations, they're not like two or three times as effective, as average, but more a hundred or like a thousand times even, or maybe even 10,000 times.

[01:00:53] So again, there's this power law, again, we gotta think like a venture capitalist here. so, that's why if you wanna be morally ambitious, it's incredibly important to think long and hard about what you're actually gonna work on. That's gonna be the most determining aspects of how much impact you're gonna make.

[01:01:13] It's not how hard you work, it's not how smart you are. It's not how much money you, you, spend. No, it's, really about what are you actually working on. And if you're really laser focused on the most sizable, solvable, neglected issues, you can make so much more impact

[01:01:28] **Nate Hagens:** that rings true. to me. So does moral ambition mean this work takes over your entire life?

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[01:01:34] You said you're a husband and, a father. How do you find balance between these great goals for the betterment of society and the future and finding time for other priorities in your own life?

[01:01:46] **Rutger Bregman:** Yeah, that's a good question. That's a question that my wife has also been asking me recently.

[01:01:50] Perhaps, you know, a good coach, Nate?

[01:01:52] **Nate Hagens:** I do actually. be because you're now intrinsically motivated, but I imagine you're also intrinsically motivated by your family.

[01:02:01] **Rutger Bregman:** Yeah. Look, as I said, for me, life is about many things. Like I'm a pluralist. I don't wanna have one metric that starts to dominate everything.

[01:02:11] Like, I don't know the amount of life saved or the amount of good you do in the world. For me, morality is an important part of a rich and well-rounded life. But it doesn't take over everything. Absolutely not. Yeah, like, there's so much beauty to appreciate books, to be read series, to be binge watch, beers to be drank, right?

[01:02:33] There's, so much more to life. Yeah. So, that is for me, absolutely non-negotiable. But if I look at a lot of people in the modern workforce, what I see is that, well, the latest evidence is that around 25% of people think that their own job is socially meaningless. And I think the combination of doing work that you don't care about and then also working too hard, I mean, that's like a recipe for burnout, isn't it?

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[01:03:02] so moral ambition already solves one part of that problem is that yes, we're gonna still gonna work hard, but we're gonna work hard on things we actually care about.

[01:03:10] **Nate Hagens:** So if viewers of this show, and listeners on Spotify and the, podcast platforms are persuaded by the idea that you present here of Moral Ambition, what, sort of ways could they get started implementing this philosophy in their own life beyond obviously joining your, fellowship program?

[01:03:31] **Rutger Bregman:** I think it's so essential to make this a collective journey. It's so much easier if you do it with others. there's a beautiful quote from Margaret Mead that I come back to again and again in the book. Never doubt that small groups of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. In fact, it's the only thing that ever has.

[01:03:49] So find your own small group of thoughtful, committed citizens. They will be your battery. They will give you the perseverance you need. They will, you know, help you stand up back, back again when you've fallen down. And they will make the whole journey so much more joyful and meaningful. I'm a.

[01:04:08] Former journalists. So, journalists often like to say, you know, we need to get out of our bubble. but actually doing this has, made me more interested in actually finding and building safe spaces for do-gooders. Sometimes actually we need our own bubble for practical and emotional support. So, obviously we've tried to build a platform, we're building that movement ourselves, but there are, many other cool movements out there.

[01:04:34] but this is my most important piece of advice. Don't do it alone. do it with a group of people and preferably meet them physically. Right? I think that's also super important, like human beings have evolved for face-to-face interaction

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and the virtual world can be pretty useful, but if you want to make this a long lasting, effective thing.

[01:04:52] Do it in real life.

[01:04:53] **Nate Hagens:** So expanding that, to the closing questions I ask all my guests, do you have any broader personal advice to listeners at this time of global upheaval and anxiety, what some people call the poly crisis? Do you have any general advice?

[01:05:09] **Rutger Bregman:** Okay. Two pieces of advice. one is general advice for everyone, like the fact that a lot of things seem to be going to hell right now.

[01:05:19] It's not your fault. You don't need to be worried about everything all the time. You're not helping anyone with that. And this is the problem with our mother information ecosystems is like we're doom scrolling all day. And we think that maybe that makes us a good citizen, like we're informed or anything like that, but it's not helping anyone and it's only making us more depressed.

[01:05:40] So it's totally okay if you limit your news consumption, if you plug out and if you just choose your cause area or maybe two cause areas like the issues that you really care about. And yes, you inform yourself about that specific cause and you try to make progress, right? You actually try and contribute, but really do not see us as your responsibility to feel bad all the time.

[01:06:05] the second advice is, for younger people, in the audience, what we've experienced. We've recently been interviewing a lot of Harvard students actually, because we're. Exploring the idea of starting a fellowship there as well. And we've, really been shocked by the levels of anxiety and how scared young people can be to make choices, right?

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[01:06:30] This is actually one of the pictures of McKinsey. It's why so many people go and work for McKinsey. It's because McKinsey says, look, he can become a consultant, you know, jump from project to project, not really commit to anything and preserve your optionality, right? You can postpone becoming a real adult.

[01:06:46] go and work for us. And I think the essential lesson here is that your twenties is not for postponing, your twenties is for committing. It's, just for. Going, you know, jumping full into a project and maybe it will totally fail, but you will learn so much. so don't postpone those decisions when you have something that you can work on, whether it's, you know, starting a company or starting a family or a job that you really care about or a move to a different city.

[01:07:13] Just go and do it. don't stress about preserving your optionality. Just live your life

[01:07:19] **Nate Hagens:** or change the framing in your mind from financial optionality to optionality of your humanity. Yeah, that goes without saying. Yeah. Yeah, So, what do you care most about in the world? Rutger.

[01:07:36] **Rutger Bregman:** Whew. Well, I'm pretty old fashioned, I guess, or, predictable in that way.

[01:07:40] Like our son was born seven months ago and, you know, when I'm with my family, I'll admit that, you know, if I'd have to choose, I'd burn the whole wall probably. but as I said, I'm a pluralist, so I find that question pretty hard. Yeah. Like I care about multiple things.

[01:07:59] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah. that's obvious.

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[01:08:01] But I do ask that of all my guests. So yeah. If you could wave a magic wand and there was no personal recourse to your decision, what is one thing you would do to improve the future? Well, that's

[01:08:12] **Rutger Bregman:** a hard question, Nate. That's a really hard one. So, the reason I find this so hard is. If it's like one thing, then I immediately think of all the second and third order effects.

[01:08:25] **Nate Hagens:** You could, Oh yeah.

[01:08:25] **Rutger Bregman:** Right.

[01:08:26] **Nate Hagens:** Yeah.

[01:08:28] **Rutger Bregman:** and it's, one of the things I've learned writing this book, moral Ambition, it's that it's so easy to think you're doing good, but then actually it could backfire in all sorts of ways. Like, again, the world is just very, weird and a lot of well-intentioned people do a lot of harm.

[01:08:46] but look, if there's the cause that I care about the most, as we talked about, I think it's, the way we treat animals. I think the historians of the future will judge very harshly for it. And sometimes I think that, you know, I studied, I spent a lot of time studying the British abolitionist movement, and what really struck me was the contingency of that movement.

[01:09:09] So this is what historians argue, that it could easily have gone another way. If a few people would've fallen off their horse in the late 18th century, then slavery might well have gone on, you know, deep into the 19th century, maybe deep into the 20th century. It might still be with us today. That's hard to believe.

[01:09:25] But, you know, for a long time it was seen as entirely normal. so as I read that, I started to think, well, maybe there was someone in the sixties in the

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seventies who just fell, I don't know, of a kitchen chair or something like that. And if that person. Would still be alive today, then maybe we, wouldn't have that factory farming.

[01:09:46] Right. Maybe that was also very contingent and we just made a massive catastrophic moral mistake as a civilization. So maybe that's the thing I would change. Right? I would, go back in time and resurrect that person.

[01:09:59] **Nate Hagens:** It does feel that many areas in societies today are pregnant with the potential like that, of not falling off the horse on so many different Yeah.

[01:10:09] Issues, which is why I find your work, IM important. because instead of just casting dispersions that there's doom and gloom. Okay, let's swing for the fences on, action and, be enthusiastic about it. And we might change mid, mid-flight. but I, really resonate with a lot that you've said here.

[01:10:35] Thank you, mate. So, If you were to come back on this show a year from now, is there one topic relevant to our collective future that you're nerdy about or super interested in, that you would be willing to take a deep dive on? Maybe nothing to do with moral ambition, just something that you, Rutger, Bregman are, fascinated by.

[01:10:59] **Rutger Bregman:** Two things come to mind. One is masculinity. something I'm really interested in. How so? Well, maybe just becoming a father. Like our daughter was born four years ago and our son seven months ago. And when our daughter was born, I bought all these books about how awesome girls are and we received a lot of those books as well.

[01:11:25] Like Girls are Smart, girls are Powerful Girls Rule the World. And I loved all those books. And then our son was born, it was like, I wanna have the same

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books for our little boy, but those. Those books didn't really exist. Right? And we all know toxic masculinity, right? We know about Andrew Tate on the right, you know, just a Total Loser if you ask me.

[01:11:47] And then we have Lu Luigi Mangione on the left who murdered his way to relevant. But what are the positive male role models? Like, what are the stories I can tell to my son? and I think that progressives have just, lost it a little bit. They've just conceded all the ground to conservatives. They've just said like, well, masculinity is pretty much always bad.

[01:12:08] There was recently a poll, by Pew that just, found that most or the majority of Democrats think that, yeah, masculine behavior is by definition bad. And then we're surprised that there. That they turn to very toxic people like Andrew Tate. So anyway, exploring what it, what a positive, a heroic version of masculinity could mean.

[01:12:30] If I would've time, I'd write that book, but it's probably not gonna happen.

[01:12:33] **Nate Hagens:** Well, that's what I was gonna say is you need to find a, an executive director for School of Moral Ambition and quick write that book and then come back. What was the second, topic?

[01:12:44] **Rutger Bregman:** Yeah, the other one is ai. really, so I think it's, by far the most important thing that's happening in the world.

[01:12:51] Yeah. And I think we need a much broader social democratic movement against ai, basically. so now it's dominated by wonks, it's dominated by people with technical expertise. AI safety was, a cause that was dominated by people who believed in alignment, right? If we just do enough research, then we can create a version of AI that is safe and good for humanity.

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[01:13:18] And I've come more and more. To the view that what we really need here is a moratorium, something similar as with human cloning, I think that this is an incredibly dangerous technology that we have no clue what the fuck we're doing to put it bluntly, and that just, people need to rise up and say, okay, enough is enough.

[01:13:36] Like we, we don't actually want this. so let's use our power. Let's use our voice. let's stop this train. Like, there's no need to race towards this technology. We can, take it much slower and we, should involve the public, make it a democratic process. So that's something, I've been thinking about quite a bit.

[01:13:58] **Nate Hagens:** I don't think you probably watch my podcast a lot, but what you just said is, been echoed by seven or eight guests in the last year, so we're on the same page there. This has been wonderful. Thank you so much for your work in the world. Do you have any closing comments for people watching or listening who understand and agree with what you've laid out here today?

[01:14:19] **Rutger Bregman:** Well, The only thing I can say is everyone's very welcome in our community moral ambition.org. look forward to see you there. Thanks so much, Rutger. Thanks Nate. This is wonderful.

[01:14:31] **Nate Hagens:** If you enjoyed or learned from this episode of The Great Simplification, please follow us on your favorite podcast platform.

[01:14:38] You can also visit The Great Simplification dot com for references and show notes from today's conversation. And to connect with fellow listeners of this podcast, check out our Discord channel. This show is hosted by me, Nate Hagens, edited by No Troublemakers Media, and produced by Misty Leslie Balu, Brady Hayan, and Lizzie Sir.