

Dear professor Raja Chatila, dear colleague Ernst Hirsch Ballin, dear other colleagues, students and participants from societal organizations,

As the President of the Executive Board of Tilburg University, I am very happy to welcome you on behalf of our University. In exactly one week from now, we will be celebrating our 92nd anniversary. Therefore, we are still a very young university, even younger than this beautiful cinema, which, by the way, has showed many science fiction movies in all those years, some of which have come true and others not or not yet.

As you may know, the university started as a higher education institution on economics and trade, adding law, sociology, psychology, theology, and other humanities. From the start, the university has known a very strong societal commitment, reflected in our motto "Understanding Society."

You might think that a university so deeply specialized in the social sciences and humanities does not have much experience and expertise regarding the technological developments we are discussing today: robots, artificial intelligence, chatbots, and other intelligent and autonomous "machines." However, the reverse is true.

First, our university was initially established to support the training and education of young, future leaders of the core industry in this region: the textile industry. In the 1970s and 80s this industry almost disappeared through a process of offshoring to low-wage countries and automation. In other words, we know how it feels to lose our machines and jobs. Fortunately, the region successfully reinvented itself and has been flourishing since.

Second, 55 years ago, the brilliant mathematician and the first and only Dutch world champion chess player Max Euwe gave his inaugural lecture at our university, titled "Can computers think," Euwe was professor of automation/computer science at our university and the head of the Computer Center, consisting of very large and, according to today's standards, very slow mainframe computers.

For Euwe, chess represented the ways in which humans—or at least chess grandmasters—differ, and will continue to differ, from computers. He considered hunches, inspiration, and intuition typical for how we as humans think and operate: something that computers would never be able to imitate. Thus, Euwe was convinced that the computer would never be able to beat an outstanding chess player, as opposed to checkers, which he considered a different game.

At Euwe's retirement in Tilburg in 1971, he reluctantly admitted that it was getting more and more difficult for him to beat a chess computer. He did not live long enough, maybe for the better, to see that, 25 years later, on February 10, 1996, IBM's Deep Blue computer beat world champion chess player Garry Kasparov.

Third, based on our knowledge of statistics, mathematics, methodology and cognition we have been enriching our profile very fast over the past decade with data science, artificial intelligence and robot applications. You can find this out yourself during the eight workshops that will be held after the plenary part of this seminar. These workshops are organized in a typical Tilburg way, together with our partners from society and aiming at impact, innovation, and improvement. We are now further accelerating this development.

Fourth, last but certainly not least, our university is well positioned and well equipped to contribute to the many challenges and missions the new technologies are sparking. These technologies can be either blessings or devils in device. In the traditional view on the social sciences and humanities in relation to technology, these disciplines are believed to have had a limited, secondary role with a large emphasis on issues like facilitating the acceptance and user-friendliness of technology or merely legal issues like privacy protection.

Seen from a more contemporary viewpoint, the social sciences and humanities take a more fundamental and primary position, seeing technology development as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. The key issue is about values: how can we align autonomous and self-learning technology with values, our human values. What do we want the machines to do and not do? We are very lucky to have excellent knowledge about values, as among other things represented in our European Values Studies Center.

Before I hand over to professor Wilthagen, who will further introduce our keynote speakers and today's theme, it's my pleasure to give two presents to professor Chatila, thanking him for his time and effort to come to Tilburg. First, I would like to give you the official, golden tie of the university, and we hope that you will wear it and perhaps introduce a new trend in France, golden ties, besides the yellow vests. Second, I have a copy for you of the Atlas of European Values. It was produced by our research team in collaboration with partners from their European network. I wish you an inspiring and informative afternoon in Tilburg.

*Professor Koen Becking, President Tilburg University
Seminar Man-Machine & Values, November 14, 2019*