On October 7, 2019, Stanford’s MLA Program was pleased to host Rob Reich, Professor of Political Science and, by courtesy, Professor of Philosophy and of Education at Stanford University, for a discussion of his book *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better*.

Rob Reich is the director of the Center for Ethics in Society and co-director of the Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society, both at Stanford University. His current work focuses on ethics, public policy, and technology, and he serves as associate director of the Institute on Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence at Stanford. Rob is the recipient of multiple teaching awards, including the Walter J. Gores award, Stanford’s highest honor for teaching. His other recent books include *Education, Justice, and Democracy*.

*Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better* investigates the ethical and political dimensions of philanthropy and considers how giving might better support democratic values and promote justice. Is philanthropy, by its very nature, a threat to today’s democracy? Though we may laud wealthy individuals who give away their money for society’s benefit, *Just Giving* shows how such generosity not only isn’t the unassailable good we think it to be but might also undermine democratic values and set back aspirations of justice. Big philanthropy is often an exercise of power, the conversion of private assets into public influence. Philanthropy, when properly structured, can play a crucial role in supporting a strong liberal democracy. The book is available for purchase from Princeton University Press.

Below is a summary of the evening’s lecture from the perspective of MLA student Tony Lo:

“Professor Reich’s lecture addressed American philanthropy, where he brought in examples as diverse as the suggested charitable giving of the wealthy Bay Area suburban school districts to the largess of the Gates and Zuckerberg foundations. He gave background on American charitable giving in his illustrative historical examples of Rockefeller and Carnegie’s giving. Most eye-opening to me was the information he shared on where Americans are giving their money. Religious entities, schools, and medical affiliates are
by far the largest benefactors of charitable giving. Only a small fraction of philanthropy goes to services aimed at directly helping the poor.

Professor Reich next highlighted flaws in American philanthropy. Of note, the tax code is what economists call “upside-down” in that charitable giving uncharitably benefits the wealthy. Moreover, the laws that constitute a charity, the 501( c )3 organization, is exceedingly lax. He ended his talk proposing changes such as enhanced transparency, a market-based framework in charitable giving, and more philanthropy targeted to exploratory endeavors.

I truly enjoyed Professor Reich’s talk. It provided cogent commentary on the state of American charity giving, both on the local and national level. It highlighted the role played by the public and private sector charitable giving. Most of all, however, it sparked a greater personal awareness of the strengths and flaws in our current system of philanthropic giving. It was definitely an evening well spent!”

Tony Lo, 1st year student, MLA Program.