

Wonderland Earth in the Anthropocene Epoch

Talk by Holmes Rolston III

October 23, 2020

Online event at 12-1 pm ET

On October 23rd, the Yale Center on Environmental Communications, the Yale Program of Religion and Ecology, and the Yale Program on Environmental Humanities invited the father of environmental ethics, Holmes Rolston III, for a discussion on values. During a lecture, Q&A and follow up chat, the speaker and 25 participants dove into the baseline ethics that underpin actions in the environmental sphere. Discussions included how artificial nature can be, whether there is a “right size” to the economy, and the ethics of geo-engineering. The fundamental conversation topic was how to conserve nature while still keeping it “natural.” [Watch the recording of the event.](#)

3 Takeaways from a conversation with Holmes Rolston III, the father of Environmental Ethics

1. End of Nature

- a. As Soulé once pointed out, the term “nature” may disappear from our vocabulary. As we stare into the face of climate change and environmental degradation, a common solution comes up: changing earth to fit humanity. Managing the climate so that we can both have our economic cake and eat it too. Yet Professor Rolston warned against the end of nature. Not only is geoengineering poorly understood and fraught with possibly disastrous side effects, but it raises ethical questions about what it means to live in a designer earth. Can we still claim there is any “nature” on Earth completely managed by man?

2. Anthropocene Arrogance

- a. Hubris was our original sin and it has followed us closely. As we look to the future of environmental management, we are constantly reminded by certain groups that the environment should be managed solely for the benefit of people. But what of those without economic value, biodiversity for instance? Those

groups may try to take the moral high ground, saying it is most ethical to run the economy and the environment in a way that does the most good for the most people. Yet that is the system that has led to the extinction of countless species, many of whom have been around much longer than we have. Is it moral to put one species so far above all the rest? Further, there is a very realistic ambiguity as to whether a human-oriented economy that ignores the environment actually does the most “good” for humans. As Rolston puts it, development is addictive, and we slowly get more used to a degraded environment.

3. Right-Sizing

- a. In an attempt to preserve authentic nature, and in an attempt to create a truly sustainable future, we must be forced to ask ourselves how large we want things to be, what is the “right size?” Should forests take up a certain percentage of land, should agriculture? Should the human population be prescribed, should cities attempt to end their limitless growth? Should humanity find its right size as a uniplanetary species? The actual, numerical answers are not the point, Rolston challenges us to ask whether an unmanaged system in which things grow to the size that market forces and human desires dictate is correct. Alternatively, should we attempt to figure out the “right size” of things, using reasoning to pre-determine limits to growth to ensure sustainability.