



THE INNER CLIMATE

Global Warming from the Inside Out

THEO HORESH

Author of CONVERGENCE: THE GLOBALIZATION OF MIND

Interviews with

ANDREW REVKIN · FRANCES MOORE LAPPE · PAUL EHRLICH
GEORGE LAKOFF · PETER SENGE · AND MORE

And Interviews with

JULIET SCHOR · MICHAEL SHELLENBERGER · MIKE HULME
KATE PICKETT · PAUL SLOVIC · HOLMES ROLSTON III
JOHN BROOME · ROBERT HENSON

Climate change may alter virtually every major human institution. It will transform who we believe ourselves to be and the way we relate with one another. It may even bring about a reconsideration of the meaning of human existence. But while most serious thinking on climate change is scientific and political, these questions are psychological, sociological, ethical, and spiritual. The failure to explore more deeply the inner climate through which climate change is received is a major part of the story of why there has been so little climate action. And yet, leading thinkers in virtually every branch of the social sciences and humanities are beginning to take on climate change. *The Inner Climate* explores the thoughts of an all-star cast of these often legendary thinkers through dialogue, and in so doing seeks to open up a new series of fronts through which climate change is redressed.



Theo Horesh is freelance journalist and social entrepreneur and the author of CONVERGENCE: THE GLOBALIZATION OF MIND.

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Interview by Theo Horesh

HOLMES ROLSTON III

Holmes Rolston is widely recognized as “the father of environmental ethics” as a modern academic discipline. He is the author of seven books and is the only environmental philosopher to have lectured on all seven continents. He gave the highly prestigious Gifford Lectures, at the University of Edinburgh in 1997-1998, where he had previously received his Ph.D. He is a recipient of the Templeton Prize, past recipients of which have included Mother Teresa, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the Dalai Lama, and Desmond Tutu.

Rolston’s writings on environmental ethics are informed by a penetrating examination of the relevant sciences. They are imbued with a spiritual sense of wonder. He has pioneered thinking on the intrinsic value of nature, arguing that humans value nature not only for the aesthetic, industrial, recreational, and symbolic goods provided. Nature is also a good because the living beings within it have goods of their own, which humans ought to respect. Value is found at multiple levels, not only at the level of the individual but also at the genetic level and at the level of species and ecosystems as well. Most wonderful of all is the richly complex and ever varied human species itself. Yet, this appreciation for humanity need not diminish our appreciation for the “wonderland planet” upon which we live and have our being, the biospheric Earth. All of this is threatened by climate change. Each of us ought to sensitize ourselves to these multiple values of life so that we might better act to preserve this heritage for future generations.

Rolston is a founder of the journal *Environmental Ethics* and serves on the board of several other academic journals. He is a University Distinguished Professor at Colorado State University. He lives in Ft. Collins, Colorado with his wife Jane, whom he married in 1956.

THEO HORESH: *Greenhouse gas emissions are produced through everyday activities, and once released into the atmosphere spread quickly, remain there for the practical foreseeable future, and present significant harm to all life on Earth. We are thus challenged to stretch our moral commitments spatially to include all of humanity, temporally to include all foreseeable future generations, and categorically to include much of life on Earth. Each of these sorts of commitments is relatively new to moral philosophy, and each increases the burden of moral responsibility, considerably in many cases. Hence, Steven Gardner has characterized this as a “perfect moral storm,” in which several moral challenges for which we are ill-prepared confront us simultaneously. And yet you have been thinking through these issues for decades. I am wondering if you can shed some light on how we might approach this perfect moral storm with wisdom and grace.*

HOLMES ROLSTON III: For many centuries humans have had to think about their families, their tribes, their churches, their governments. They have not had to think much about descendants in the distant future or people on the other side of the planet. In that sense, I think, it is new. Yet, many of these same institutions, such as democracy or the church, do invite you to think about people on the other side of the planet or children or grandchildren. Native Americans used to say if we could think for seven generations that would get what we needed. We hope we can think across more than seven generations. Most of us knew a grandparent, maybe a great-grandparent. We know children, grandchildren, maybe great-grandchildren. If you can think in that long of a time-span, then maybe you can confront some of these problems with some wisdom and some grace.

These problems are unusually complex. This will be the first time that humans have had to confront putting the planet in peril - that is new. We have confronted losing a nation. We have confronted losing a culture or a tradition. But we have not confronted putting a planet

in peril. In that sense, we are at a new juncture in the history of the planet. Whether we can confront that with wisdom and grace remains to be seen.

It also seems like we are challenged to think with more mathematical precision, into the future, in a way that we have never been challenged to before. We now have cost-benefit analyses telling us what the impact of our actions is going to be five generations into the future, and this seems to make the task of thinking through these issues a lot more complex and challenging.

Yes, but you are talking to a philosopher and not an economist. So, when you begin to challenge me with numbers, I am going to respond, “Yes, but the way you interpret, the spin you put on those numbers, is not built into them.” The spin you put on the numbers is going to come from a larger worldview in which you think more growth is important or in which you might think a diminished population is important. They are largely numbers in dollar signs or they may be numbers of persons. How you interpret them depends on the value system you use when you put those numbers in context. So, I am going to look over the shoulders of these people who are throwing numbers at me across generations, or into the distant future, with a pretty critical eye. You may say, “These are the numbers.” And I may say, “But what are the value choices we have in dealing with these numbers?”

According to an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, there is a medium confidence that approximately 20-30 percent of all species are at risk of extinction if increases in global warming exceed 1.5 to 2.5 degrees Celsius. Say what we will about the precision or the reliability of those numbers, the numbers themselves are unbelievable. How are we to make sense of such numbers and the value of these species that are being lost?

The numbers are alarming, despite what I just said about philosophers wanting to know the framework in which the numbers go. These numbers go in the framework of extinction of species. They go in terms of climate change, and we do know something about what climate change means. So, I agree that these numbers are staggering. They are so staggering that it is hard for many people to make sense of them. We have not faced extinction in that kind of range in human history, nor have we faced climate change in the range of 1.5 to 2.5 degrees Celsius in human history, so these are alarming figures. That forces us to wonder whether humans are up to dealing with this level of complexity.

I judge that we are at some kind of hinge point in history. Given this degree of global warming and extinction of species, it looks to me as though a quick sort of response would be, "It looks like we are going to have to control our appetites; there is something self-destructing about this growth mentality." It has only been a century-and-a-half, more or less, that humans have had enormous powers for growth. For most of human history, human activities were powered by muscle and blood, human labors, also that of horses and oxen, plus a little water-power grinding grain, or wind sailing ships. It really was not until the coming of the steam engine in the mid-1800s, followed at the turn of the century by petroleum and all that came with it, that humans have had hundreds of times the power at their disposal that they once had. The use of that power is producing carbon dioxide, which is nothing anybody wanted. But like it or not, it is a result of what is happening. Now we are able to ask ourselves, "What are our options?" I am not likely to be here when all this washes out. My students are likely to be here 50 years from now - so my concern is partly for the future, but it is partly for the latter years of living people. Can we in some sense face up to what is going on?

In many ways a species is merely an abstraction. And yet we can de-

fine species very clearly and they do matter. So, how do you think about the value of a species that is being lost?

Species are real; lions are real, but the lion-lion-lion-lion-birth-death-rebirth pattern, that has been going on in Africa for at least five million years, maybe ten, is in some sense more real than the individuals. The individuals are found in a dynamic line of continuing life. In that sense, you may want to value species, the ongoing life line, more than individuals.

Many of the animal welfare people, and many other philosophers, who like to say we have to think about individuals and their lives, will get alarmed and may want to bring me up short. Only individuals are real; species are just categories we use to sort them. But I do think that groups count, communities count, nations of which we are members count, and the species lines, which are a key element in the ongoing reproduction of life, count greatly.

Over the millennia of evolution, we do not know how many species there have been. There have been somewhere from 3 to 5 billion, at least. Today on Earth there exist something in the range of at least 5 to 10 million species. By some accounts, because we do not know the insects that well, and we do not know the bacteria and so forth, we may have 100 million species alive today on Earth. That is a staggering figure that we do not want to put at threat. Do we think we humans somehow have the right to extinguish this spectacular genesis of life? We humans are here, we belong here, we are important. But maybe we are important in terms of being trustees of this creative genesis that we inherit. Maybe we are important as caretakers of this planet.

A good planet is hard to find. We have found other planets astronomically, but we do not yet know whether any of them could support life. If we did find one, planets with life are still going to be rare in the

universe. But we find ourselves on a wonderland planet, which has supported life for billions of years, which continues to support it today. Americans treasure their home, mountain majesties above fruited plains. They treasure their national parks, their wilderness areas. They treasure their landscapes. Let's get all this in the picture when we are trying to count whether we want to conserve biodiversity on this wonderland planet.

The wild can be characterized as a realm of predation in which life feeds on life, and in this sense suffering and death is a natural part of the cycle of life in the wild. And yet our human impacts are causing much unnecessary suffering. What sorts of unnecessary suffering are likely to occur due to climate change, and how might we weigh the suffering of non-human life against the well-being of humanity?

You are quite correct that there is suffering in wild nature. There is predation. Animals suffer when the weather gets dry and they cannot get water. They suffer when it gets cold and they cannot find food and stay warm. The deer are not predators, but they can suffer in their natural world. So, I agree that suffering and death is part of the cycle of life, and I do not think we can or ought to eliminate it.

We can exploit nature, but what is going to be our attitude toward that? Do we care nothing about whether what we are doing to the natural world increases animal suffering? Do we care nothing for the pains of the livestock that are butchered to be on our tables to eat? We ought to be able to think about the limits of exploitation, whether our exploitation is stepping up the pain in life.

I do not want to think about how to get more and more control of all the non-human things that are out there so that we can exploit them better. I do not want to think about my life, generally, as maximizing the capacity to control others. I want to think about harmony, I

want to think about community. In that ongoing life on Earth, there is going to be suffering enough. But it does not become humans to be indifferent to the additional suffering they may be causing by exploiting the Earth.

There has been a lot of talk lately about entering a new phase of life on Earth, which has been dubbed the Anthropocene. Can you talk a bit about this concept of the Anthropocene and the extent to which humanity is fundamentally altering the conditions for all life on Earth?

The Anthropocene is a dangerous term. We will have to wonder what we mean by it. The people who celebrate the Anthropocene are backing geo-engineering or re-engineering the planet pretty quickly. They say that nature is over, nature is gone, now humans are in the driver's seat. Mark Lynas says, to paraphrase, "We are the God species, nature no longer runs the Earth, we do. "What we must push for, according to the Royal Society of London, the world's oldest scientific society, is *sustainable intensification* of reaping the benefits of exploiting the Earth. This idea that humans are going to manage the planet ever more intensively for their own benefit is, I think, dangerous.

The idea that humans will ever more cleverly engineer the planet for the next 15 thousand years strikes me as being inordinately speculative and extremely unlikely. I will take my chances with a planet that has been working more-or-less like it has been working for the last 15 thousand years. I want us to get in harmony with that and not get anxious about rebuilding the planet so that we can exploit it better or so that we can fix our problems for the next 15 thousand years. We are going to have to think more carefully about the human presence on Earth. But I want that to be thinking about harmony and community. I do not think humans want to look forward to a denatured life on a denatured planet. Basically, we want to keep life natural. Of course, we are going to farm and so forth. But we are going to require ecosys-

tem services - the air we breathe the water we drink, the soil we use, the ocean currents flowing. We need to think about these fundamental life support systems continuing and not being managed by arrogant human engineers.

You are somewhat unique amongst environmental philosophers in that you have placed a strong emphasis on both the value of non-human life, including species and ecosystems, and the wonder of human complexity and the genetic accomplishment of the human being. What is the significance of humanity relative to all other life, and how can we cherish what is most sacred in humanity in such a way that we gain an even greater appreciation for the value of all other life?

That is a complex question. The last book I wrote is called, *Three Big Bangs*. Everybody knows the first big bang, the beginning of the universe some 13 or 14 billion years ago. What I call the second big bang is the explosion of life on Earth. Earth started out, once upon a time, with zero species of living things. We have already said in this conversation that we have had billions over time. We have got millions today, in terms of both increase of diversity and increase of complexity. I think the explosion of life on Earth is one of the miracles of the universe. I would be delighted if we find life elsewhere, but it is going to be rare. The third big bang is mind, right between our ears. Of course animals have minds. Elephants have minds, in some sense bigger minds than we do. But they are not more complex. Mice have minds; many creatures have brains, at least. And human brains share a lot with them.

Much of our human mind/brain is held in common with others. But there are unique capacities in the human mind that radically transcend anything known in any other species. Humans are the only species who can know they are on a planet. Humans are the only species who can form cumulative transmissible cultures; animals

have only quite simple cultures. Humans can learn the Pythagorean Theorem, that was taught by Pythagoras thousands of years ago, and has been taught and retaught over centuries. We humans today can have high-technology development, but this is built on what has been transmitted from mind-to-mind-to-mind over many centuries. So, this whole conversation that we are now having about human responsibility, about human uniqueness, is just not the kind of thing we can ever imagine our dogs or chimpanzees having.

In that sense, humans are radically different. That radical difference, since we alone can know we are on a planet, we alone can know evolutionary history with its creative genesis, surely means that we ought to cherish this wonderland planet on which we live. Anything else will stunt our humanity. Now I said a minute ago, we do not want a denatured life on a denatured planet. You might want to say, "I want more civilized life." Let me put it this way: if humans do not become trustees of this planet, as we can and ought to do, it is going to stunt our humanity. If that is a self-interest, then count it as that. But you do not want to live a stunted life, do you? Then wake up to human responsibility on this wonderland planet.

Now many environmentalists would favor a world with as few as 500-million humans, and you often hear the number of a billion thrown around. But these low numbers sometimes seem to stem from a sort of misanthropy. Some environmentalists appear to hate the human experience and are not really sure what to make of the human capacity for reason. But I get the impression that you might like to see more of us around, that you value something in the achievements of human civilization.

Humans belong on the planet; humans are a marvelous species. A planet without humans would be much poorer than it is. But that does not mean the more the better. We have got seven billion now. Does

that mean we shrink from seven to one billion? I don't think so – I am not wise enough to say. Might that mean shrinking from seven to five billion? Maybe. I will just have to see when we move in that direction whether it looks like life is getting richer, better, more meaningful. I will not be around, because I am a senior citizen. But somebody will be around to wonder if this de-growth, downsizing, right-sizing, is leaving us better off. And I predict that they will find life better with a less crowded Earth.

Insofar as environmental ethics touches on the value and the interconnectedness of all life, it seems shot through with religious implications. Could you talk a little bit about the spiritual and religious implications of the rise of environmental ethics and environment philosophy in general?

You can be an environmentalist without being religious. I myself am a religious person. I think there is a fuller, richer picture than just to find yourself, surprisingly, on a wonderland Earth and wanting to save it. And what is the dimension of depth? Just go down deep enough, just think about the larger, bigger picture. We do find ourselves on a planet in which there has been a creative genesis over the millennia of natural history. And you just may say, “Well, that is a given.” But others might want to say, “It is not just a given, it is a gift in some sense.” There is something about these forces of creativity that have produced a marvelous Earth, and we need to think deeply about sources and origins.

The Hebrew tradition thought of the land of Israel as being a promised land. They saw the land as a gift. That can be used in mistaken ways, as a claim of privilege for a select people. But I would prefer to think that humans all over the Earth, who have lived on six of the seven continents and learned to love their landscapes, could think of all of the landscapes as being in some sense a gift, something over

which we are trustees. The Hebrews had the idea that Israel was the Promised Land; it was going to flow with milk and honey. A critic might say, "That is just going to give the Israelites more milk and honey; that just sounds like they want to exploit this Promised Land. But you need to pay attention to the wider context of living in the Promised Land. The Hebrew prophets said, "the land flows with milk and honey *if and only if* justice flows down like waters.'" That is a line from the prophet Amos. Living well on the landscape involves living with a sense of fairness and justice. The Hebrews gave that conviction to the Christian faith. The Muslim tradition inherited and developed similar ideas.

The idea we need is a sense of humans respecting what they have been given and sharing it for a larger community of life in which there is fairness and justice. By the time you reach such thoughts, if you are not religious, you are getting pretty close. You might say the Promised Land is just where this idea got started in Ancient Israel. Still, the idea continues forcefully. We live on a planet with promise, a marvelous wonderland planet, and the people who are most likely to think with depth about that, and to see it over long time frames, to think about sacrifices they might make to continue life on this planet, are likely to be religious or something pretty close to it. They will at least call themselves spiritual.

You have been contemplating these issues for several decades. Any wise advice for younger people trying to sort through the meaning of the changes we are now experiencing on Earth?

You do ask tough questions. Sometimes I answer that kind of question like this: my great, great-grandfather owned slaves, and we have cast off slavery, and that is a marvelous thing, at least in the United States. In my own lifetime, when I grew up in the U.S. South, black people rode at the back of buses, and they ate in separate places and

restaurants; they were segregated. In my own lifetime, we have largely, if not entirely, cast off that ancient segregation.

What I am building up to is the idea that students today must not think that no big changes are possible. I am just giving you examples of two enormous changes in human history that have occurred in the last couple of lifetimes. If you had told me when I was a young man that we would have a black President of the United States, I would have said you were out of your mind. And now I celebrate the fact - whatever you think of Obama's policies - that we have at least been able to elect a black person as President of the nation. We have had black people in many high places. These are radical changes. I grew up in the U.S. South. My ancestors raised tobacco. If you told me when I was a young man that on my Colorado State University campus you would not be permitted to smoke a cigarette, or that on an airplane or a train you could not smoke a cigarette, I would have said you are out of your mind. But we have had radical changes in whether we accept smoking and whether we accept blacks and whether we accept women's rights. So, do not tell me that big changes are not possible. Do not underestimate our capacity for producing major changes in the way we live and think in our own lifetime.