
ROLSTON, HOLMES, III

(November 19, 1932-)

Environmental Philosopher, Theologian, Founder of *Environmental Ethics*

Holmes Rolston III is widely recognized as the father of environmental ethics as a modern academic discipline. He has devoted his career to the development of a philosophical interpretation of the natural world and is regarded as one of the world's leading scholars on the philosophical, scientific, and religious conceptions of nature. His body of work and his role as a founder of the influential academic journal *Environmental Ethics* have been instrumental in establishing, shaping, and defining the modern discipline of environmental philosophy.

Holmes Rolston III was born in Staunton, Virginia, on November 19, 1932, to Holmes and Mary Winifred (Long) Rolston. He grew up in the Shenandoah Valley, where his father was a rural pastor. Their house had no electricity, and water came from a cistern pump outside and another cistern on a hill behind the house from which water flowed by gravity to the kitchen inside. Rolston's mother had been raised on a farm in Alabama, which Rolston would visit for a month each summer and where he explored the woods and swamps. From a very early age he was deeply immersed in nature.

Rolston studied physics as an undergraduate at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina, because physics seemed to him to be the science that would best help him understand nature. During his studies, Rolston became interested in biology after taking an entomology class at Davidson; he began to recognize that physics alone could not explain nature the way he had hoped. While

physics sought to address order and universal laws of nature, biology explored the more alluring wild nature. Upon completing his undergraduate degree in 1953, Rolston turned to theology and decided to attend Union Theological Seminary. Once he completed his seminary studies in 1956, Rolston pursued theology and religious studies at the University of Edinburgh, completing his Ph.D. in 1958.

Rolston spent the next ten years as a Presbyterian pastor in rural southwest Virginia. Taking two days off each week, Rolston would spend one hiking the southern Appalachian Mountains and the other sitting in on biology classes at nearby East Tennessee State University. After botany and zoology came geology, mineralogy and paleontology. During this time, Rolston learned the ecology of the mountain woods and discovered that trees and country places had as much to teach him as the scholars.

While he was developing a passion for the wonders of nature, Rolston became alarmed by how quickly the natural world was being lost to development. The sense of wonder he felt for nature turned to horror as he discovered his favorite forests scarred by clear-cuts, mountains stripped for coal, soils eroded away, and wildlife populations decimated. Rolston worked to preserve Mount Rogers, in southwest Virginia, and Roan Mountain, in northeast Tennessee, and to maintain and relocate the Appalachian Trail so that it passed mainly through undeveloped areas.

In his search for a philosophy of nature to complement his biology, Rolston

received his *first* formal training in philosophy when he entered the philosophy program at the University of Pittsburgh. Struggling for respect in a program that considered the philosophy of nature disreputable, Rolston received a master's degree in the philosophy of science in 1968 and accepted a post at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, where he has remained, and currently holds the prestigious position of University Distinguished Professor.

In 1975, Rolston's essay, "Is There an Ecological Ethic?," published in *Ethics*, provocatively probed questions and issues regarding the potential of nature to have an intrinsic value. While debates on this issue had existed since ALDO LEOPOLD'S *Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949, Rolston's essay initiated renewed interest in the debate, which ultimately led to the creation of the refereed journal, *Environmental Ethics*, in 1979. Rolston was a founder of that journal and still serves as the associate editor.

Rolston's 1988 book, *Environmental Ethics: Values in and Duties to the Natural World*, is generally recognized as the best available work in its field. Rolston presents a strong argument for a value-centered ecological ethic. He claims that intrinsic values objectively exist at the species, biotic community, and individual levels in nature and that these values impose on humans certain obligations to species and their ecosystems. This intrinsic value of nature is separate from its instrumental value, the latter motivating humans to conserve the environment for their own benefit. Sometimes the two kinds of values complement each other; sometimes they conflict.

Rolston is a prolific writer, having written six books acclaimed in critical notice in professional journals and the national press, chapters in 50 books, and over 100 articles. His work is published and read the world over and has been translated into several languages. He has also served on the Board of Governors of the Society for Conservation Biology. During the 1997-1998 academic year, Rolston delivered the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, which resulted in his book, *Genes, Genesis, and God: Values and Their Origins in Natural and Human History*. Because of his prominent status in environmental philosophy, Rolston is often sought after by conservation and policy groups. He has served as a consultant for more than two dozen such groups, including the U.S. Congress and a presidential commission. He is also a member of the Working Group on Ethics of the World Conservation Union.

In early 2000, Rolston visited Antarctica and while there became the only environmental philosopher to have lectured on all seven continents. Avocationally, he is a backpacker, an accomplished field naturalist, and a respected bryologist.

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