

Colorado State University Libraries
Department of Philosophy
Rolston (Holmes) Collection
Transcription of History - StoryCorps interview, 2011

Item Metadata

Collection: Streaming Media
Creator: Rolston, Holmes, 1932-, interviewee; Yeager, Douglas, interviewer
Title: StoryCorps interview
Date: 2011
File Name: storycorps-interview.mp3
Date Transcribed: Apr 2023
Transcription Platform: Konch

BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION

[00:02 - 00:23] Doug Yeager: I'm Doug Yeager, age 78. And today's date is December the 11th, 2011 in Fort Collins, Colorado. The person I'm interviewing today, Holmes Ralston, is a person I admire and I'm a friend of the family.

[00:27 - 00:53] Holmes Ralston: And I am Holmes Ralston, 79. I'm one up, one year I guess. Again, it's November the 11th. [Background Whisper] I mean, December the 11th. And I'm in Fort Collins, Colorado, talking to a friend of several years.

[00:59 - 02:42] Doug Yeager: I'm Doug Yeager, and I'm here in Fort Collins, Colorado, with Dr. Holmes Ralston III, Professor Emeritus at Colorado State University, Department of Philosophy. He is widely recognized as the father of environmental ethics as a modern academic discipline. Among other honors, Dr. Ralston won the 2003 Templeton Prize awarded by Prince Philip in Buckingham Palace. He gave the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1997-98. Dr. Ralston began his career as a third generation Presbyterian Minister with theology degrees from the Union Theological Seminary and the University of Edinburgh, where he earned a PhD. He also received a BS in physics and mathematics from Davidson College and an MA in the Philosophy of Science from the University of Pittsburgh. He served on the Faculty of Colorado State University from 1968 until his retirement in 2008. He is widely published in the field of environmental ethics, philosophy of science and religion more generally. And he has lectured by invitation on all seven continents. Good

morning, Dr. Ralston. It is a real pleasure to be here with you today. I'd like to start out with a kind of broad question. Many of us find a definite calling in life, but the path to discover it isn't always that clear nor that simple. How did you find your way?

[02:46 - 05:24] Holmes Ralston: Thanks. And I appreciate your interest in interviewing me. So how did I find my way? Well, I think it helps to have good ancestors. I was born Scots Presbyterian in the Valley of Virginia. And those people, they said, like the Scots before them and the old country, those people sort of loved gospel and landscape. They couldn't always figure out which one had priority. So I grew up in a beautiful part of the world, the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. With that kind of background and heritage. Though, there's wandering around those people who love gospel and landscape. They used to also say when they looked back over life, God writes straight with crooked lines. I can see a lot of that in my career, sort of wandering around knowing I loved the natural world, having religious surroundings, but trying to figure out what I was going to do. And there's wandering around. I switched. I majored in, as you said, in math and physics. I went to theological seminary. I went to graduate school in theology, but I went back to school in philosophy of science. I ended up teaching in a philosophy department with a kind of concentration in biological sciences. So if you like, I think it's been a lifetime of crooked lines. And yet there's a certain continuing straight line interest in the conservation, preservation, interpretation of the natural world.

[05:29 - 05:40] Doug Yeager: Do you think of yourself as a pioneer? How does a true pioneer develop a new area of study and how does he get started doing that?

[05:45 - 07:48] Holmes Ralston: Well, as you said, in your introduction I've been called a father of environmental ethics. You're a bit outdated. Most people now calling me the grandfather of environmental ethics, but I'll accept that. Maybe that means I did originate a sort of new field within philosophy. Environmental ethics. If you like, I might not want to call myself a pioneer of so much as an explorer. I've been looking around, thinking about new directions in the interpretation of the natural world. You know, when I was back in Virginia, I went to nearby then East Tennessee State University and learned how to key the plants. The botanist helped me there, and I'd bring in a plant every now and then, and it wouldn't quite fit to key. And the old botanist there said, well, Ralston, you know, the plants have always read the books, right? I think my experience was such that sort of looking around among the plants, among the animals, the wildlife, the natural world. I didn't think the world I was experiencing was the world I was finding in the books about it. And I began to think further, if you like. And I think that led to, if you like, pioneering a new area of study.

[07:52 - 08:02] Doug Yeager: Well, when you get out front like that, especially out a bit front of your colleagues, how do you go about persuading others to follow?

[08:10 - 10:49] Holmes Ralston: Well, you do what you can, where you can, as you can. As I said, I was interpreting the natural world. And [Clears Throat] I was a philosopher, so I had been taught logic. I had gone back to school to do philosophy of science, I knew that. But I said I was learning how to key the plants and watching the birds and so forth. So I knew natural history. And in a way, people could see, well, this Ralston might be on to something. At least he sees things in the natural world that we don't see when we go out there. And then I began to think about this and said, well, could I offer an experimental class and my department chair said I could. Well, the class filled up immediately, and had 2 or 3 times as many students as want to take it. So, you know, it helps to have a bunch of students who are interested in what you're doing. Your colleagues look around and saying, it's interesting. He must be doing something right. I began to publish and the articles published were reprinted. Well, that wakes people up. What's going on? Here's this fellow got on the periphery of philosophy, but his articles are being reprinted. And then, I guess I could say it helps to have a, sort of personal agenda, interpreting the natural world, which turns out to be a national crisis or a world crisis. So I was interested in nature thinking about nature and joy in nature. And suddenly I found myself surrounded by an environmental crisis. Environment, even on the world agenda. Right? And that persuades others at least, that, well, we better pay a little attention to what's being said here. It looks like this might be important.

[10:52 - 11:07] Doug Yeager: As you started publishing, did you find it difficult to have some of these new ideas accepted into academic publications? And if so, how do you overcome that?

[11:14 - 14:03] Holmes Ralston: Well, yeah. When you are moving in new directions, people tend to say, well, that's a peripheral and it's on the edges, it's way out or it's not mainstream in a certain sense, and you've got to work against that. One of my early articles was called; Is There an Ecological Ethic. And I had had to publish things in peripheral journals. I think they were pretty good. Some of them later got reprinted in mainstream places, but they were peripheral and marginal and I thought, well, I'd send that article, better send it to one of these peripheral sort of journals. They'll probably take it if I send it to the mainstream hardcore philosophy journals, they'll take six months to think it over and reject it. But then I thought, well, you know, why not? Nothing ventured, nothing gained. So I sent it to Ethics, which is the main journal in ethics in philosophical circles. And to my great surprise, they took it. I had structured the article so that the beginning of it sort of looked like analytic philosophy, which was in Vogue then. It was analytic philosophy. But the second half of the article I could begin to say the kind of things I want to say and make my kind of arguments. So it appeared in Ethics, which is a very prestigious journal, has been for a century. And I guess I was overcoming a certain hurdle there. One of my books in Science and Religion, a Field in which I have some interest, particularly biology and religion. It's called Genes, Genesis and God. We might come

back to that in a few minutes, but I sent that off in a preliminary manuscript to about maybe a half dozen publishers, and they all rejected it, right? Readers didn't like it.

[14:04 - 16:42] And then I thought, well, I'll send it to a good press with these others were decent presses, you know. Why not try Oxford University Press? And I did. And the editors liked it and they said, okay, we're going to take it, but we have to clear it with an advisory board. And I thought, well, that'll be sort of automatic. But it wasn't. There was a biologist on the advisory board that didn't like it and he vetoed the book, right. So the book looked like it wasn't going to get published. But then there came the invitation to give the Gifford Lectures. And so I kind of had this manuscript that had been rejected 6 or 8 times. And I thought, well, if I'm given the Gifford Lectures, the well known lecture series, maybe I can revise it some. I had had criticisms from some of these groups that had rejected it, and maybe I can get the darn thing in print after all. And it worked out that way. I did get it printed. Oh, just this year I published an article called Celestial Aesthetics. It had to do with the aesthetic experience of, well, whatever you see when you look up and that's the night sky. But it's clouds in the daytime sky. It's maybe storm clouds, maybe fair weather clouds. Just what is our aesthetic experience when we look up? And I thought I'd done a pretty good job of that, but that got rejected. When I sent it to the mainstream publications, they just kind of thought, well, this is not in the sort of classical stylized format of aesthetics. So there I had to send it and it's got a decent journal theology and science, it appears, in there, you know. So I still struggled to kind of get some of my ideas into print where they don't-- where I seem to be sort of thinking outside the box.

[16:46 - 17:02] Doug Yeager: Well, there are clearly hazards to working across disciplinary boundaries, but can you think of some advantages that come from that kind of work that you've done over your career?

[17:10 - 21:17] Holmes Ralston: Well, I said already, a lot of people think it's peripheral when you are crossing boundaries. I might think peripheral means at the edges and it's important to be at the edges. Or I might think when you're crossing boundaries, you're discovering new territories, venturing into new territories, and that's important. So there's some positives as well as some negatives to it. Maybe I was able to do this. I was thinking about ethics philosophy, if you like. But I was able to introduce a lot of evidence from science. Now, science and ethics have a tricky relationship, but I knew the natural sciences. Had studied physics and math, kept up some with the physics in school. I had since gotten to be a reasonably good field naturalist. I regularly sat in on biology classes, sometimes psychology classes at university. So I sort of had at hand what some of the biologists were saying, thinking as they were decoding DNA or as they were doing their neuroscience or they were thinking about ecosystems. And I could bring that in and bring those

disciplines into the conversation that philosophers are interested. I found generally that the philosophers then got sort of impressed when you could bring in thoughts from natural sciences or discoveries of the natural scientist. Then the other way around I found that the scientists were-- they knew their science pretty well, but they got to stuttering when they thought about values and they were hungry for somebody who'd help them think about values. The philosophers were impressed by somebody who knew the natural science better than they did. And that worked to my advantage. I really think philosophy in the best sense needs to be philosophy of business or law or environment or medicine or something. Philosophers ought always to be looking over the shoulders of other people and thinking what they're doing is of philosophical interest. I think theologians ought to do that too. They think about theology, but they need to think about theology of medicine or law and so forth. You know, other philosophers, they want to get in the sort of mainstream hardcore philosophy journals. I published an article in the Journal of Forestry, right. Forestry is not philosophy, but in a way I'm as pleased to have done that as to have gotten an article in a mainstream philosophy journal. You know pleased that the philosophers would want to come and and accept an article where I was dealing with values in forests. So there's some very positive things that can be said about working across interdisciplinary lines.

[21:21 - 21:46] Doug Yeager: When you made that career change and moved from theology into philosophy, I noted that you earned a Master's in Philosophy of Science. Why didn't you go on to pursue a Doctorate in Philosophy at that point? Were there some people that you would have liked to work with in that area, in pursuing that degree?

[21:52 - 24:26] Holmes Ralston: Well, I did have a [Clears Throat] I had a PhD from the University of Edinburgh. That's one of the main British schools that impresses people when you say that. But I did go back to school, University of Pittsburgh after ten years. Ten years later, after I had a PhD. [Clears Throat] I went back and got a Master's in Philosophy of Science, which I didn't know very well. And, you know, I kind of set foot on campus at Pittsburgh, where I did this degree in Philosophy of Science. And, you know, I walked in and said, Well, I want to think about philosophy of science. I'd like to do philosophy of biology. And those guys kind of cocked their head one way or another, and they said, oh, wait a minute, you studied physics and math, didn't you? You must mean you want to do work in philosophy of physics. That's what most philosophers of science thought, philosophy of science was all about in those days, philosophy of physics. And I said, Well, I do want to learn philosophy of physics. I think that's important. But no, I think we need to think about philosophy of biology. You've got to get your mind back half a century. There really wasn't any philosophy of biology in those days. So there wasn't anybody around Pittsburgh who knew any philosophy of biology. They didn't even think that was a worthwhile subject matter in those days. Now, since then,

philosophy of biology has developed dramatically in very different ways from philosophy of physics. So I kind of got my background I wanted in philosophy of science, but there wasn't any real way to do a PhD in Philosophy of Biology in those days. We're talking late 1960s.

[24:30 - 24:46] Doug Yeager: You talked about the Gifford Lectures a few minutes ago. When you were selected for that series. What went through your mind and how did you decide then what you were going to do with those lectures?

[24:54 - 28:18] Holmes Ralston: Well, it came as a great surprise. I had no idea it was coming. I got I went to University of Edinburgh, got a PhD there back in the 50s, and so they send me mail all the time, wanting money, right. You've had that experience, alumni fund. And so I usually just toss those things in the wastebasket. Well, I got this piece of mail one day and it came in this kind of brown envelope they use in the UK. And I thought, well, a solicitation. I'll toss it in a wastebasket. And so the letter was halfway in the wastebasket and I thought, well, I don't know, that looks a little different. Maybe I better open it up and see what it was. And it was an invitation from the Chancellor of the university to give the Gifford Lectures. And, you know, you could have knocked me out of my chair. I didn't think I was in that league anyway. But nevertheless, I had the invitation. And it turns out a couple of the philosophers at Edinburgh and a couple of the theologians had been reading my material on value in nature and thought I might have something to say about that would be worth the Gifford Lectures. How did I decide what I was going to do? I mentioned already I had this manuscript on called Genes, Genesis and God, trying to connect up those three ideas, and it had been rejected by a bunch of publishers. And I thought, well, okay, I'm going to get that out and dress it up with all my mental powers and see if I can't get that thing published. I was interested in genes, you know, philosophy of biology I said didn't exist. But the radical difference between physics, chemistry, geology or whatever in biology is you've got genes, you've got genetics, you've got information in genes that doesn't exist in physical world. And I was trying to make that point that genes have information and that the information is a key to the creativity in the genes. And you could think of the information as opening up new possibilities space, generating the possibility of value. And I was going to put that all together in these lectures. And I did, and I got it published by Cambridge University Press. So sometimes if you wander around and hang on, you managed to break through a bit.

[28:22 - 28:38] Doug Yeager: Which of your books or articles Dr. Ralston would you think was the most important? And do you think it was judged that way by the academic world? Did they see it the same way that you saw it?

[28:43 - 32:21] Holmes Ralston: Well, probably the book that's most seminal is this Genes, Genesis and God. The Gifford Lectures. It's an effort to show that, well, I kind of sneak around and get my argument in Sideways in a certain sense. It's an effort to show that there's things that genetics can't explain. The biologists were then all in the business of trying to show that everything is genetically based. They had really just sort of begun to decode the genes, figure out genetic coding and they were all gung-ho about this, explaining all the ways we behave and so forth. So I kind of came around to the science and said, wait a minute, can genetics explain how you do what you do when you're a scientist? Can genetics explain the difference between Einstein and Mother Teresa, for example? And they'd have to scratch their head and say, well, no, we need brains to do these kinds of things. But the critiquing of a theory in science, whether it's a good theory or a bad theory, that depends on arguments that aren't genetically based. And then I'd go to ethics and say, well, you know, is ethics genetically based? Are you sort of selfish by genetic nature and that's the end of it? Or if you are altruistic, charitable Mother Teresa, is she simply operating out of her genetics? And people would have say, no, there's more to it than that. And then I would like to say, well, how about being religious? More lately we've heard search for religious gene. I think people might be in certain sense by nature religious, but which religion you adopt, whether you're Presbyterian or Methodist or Buddhist or Hindu, you know, this depends on your cultural heritage. I began to argue that the Darwinian and genetic explanations are incomplete. And I think that's a valuable argument. It takes a while for it to soak in, but it's been accepted. It has to succeed. My articles have been reprinted about 100 times, right. And these are often articles that didn't initially get that much reception. But after a few years they get reprinted and the students read them, and when they begin to teach, they use them. And in that sense, what I think is important has often been recognized eventually, but but it takes a little time.

[32:25 - 32:46] Doug Yeager: You're known for claiming that the natural world has intrinsic value independent of the relationship to or impact on human beings. Most people think that value deals with human desires, goals and choices. What is this value that is independent of humans?

[32:51 - 35:01] Holmes Ralston: Yeah, most people think that values are. Deal with humans desires that that value has to be chosen and maintained and thought about it and so forth. And that's true of certain kinds of values. It's quite true of psychological, the defended values in human life. But I was beginning to see I recall my visits into the natural world, hiking, backpacking, camping, often out for a week or so. Alone that these plants and animals that surrounded me had a good of their own. No, they weren't moral agents. They didn't deliberately think about and reflect on their choices, but they had lives that they were defending. The biologist all the time talk about survival value. They use that term value freely. Thorns help roses to survive, even though roses are plants and don't think about

anything, right. Everything that I would see in the woods seems to have a sort of good of its own, a life that its defending. And I began to call this intrinsic value in nature that's independent of humans. I'd walk into a site and there the squirrels were getting nuts, right? And I walked away from the site and the squirrels were still getting the nuts. Seemed like to me the squirrels had a good of their own and valued the nuts. And I began to argue that and have become reasonably well known for celebrating this intrinsic value in nature.

[35:04 - 35:19] Doug Yeager: You're also known for your efforts to join science and religion, particularly in thinking about how to interpret natural history and the evolution of life. Do you think of yourself as a pioneer there too?

[35:25 - 37:28] Holmes Ralston: Well, pioneer again, an explorer. Darwin was wiser than we often think. If you look around in Darwin, you may find some of these ideas that we have rediscovered. I think now we set the individual survival of the fittest in a larger ecological context. Survival of the fittest really means the survival of those best able to leave survivors in the next generation. It's survival of the senders of life onto the next generation. And I have brought out that dimension philosophically. Interdependence, community. Generally, the idea that Darwinian explanation, though correct, is incomplete and there I might think of myself as something of a pioneer. Again, genetics, the genes contain information. Darwin didn't know anything about genes really, or about the cybernetic nature of those processes. But we've now come to see the importance of that. And there I'm not alone, but I think of myself as one of the persons thinking on the edges on the periphery, if you like new directions in interpreting the junction of science and religion. Because now we find that life has this logic, life has this creative capacity for Genesis, and we can get to be theological about that.

[37:31 - 37:42] Doug Yeager: We got 3 or 4 more minutes. You published a book last year called The Three Big Bangs. All of us have heard of the original Big Bang, but what are the other two?

[37:45 - 38:56] Holmes Ralston: Original Big Bang is matter and energy. The explosion of once upon a time at the start up of the universe. The other two, to my mind, are life, the explosion of life on the planet. You might not think that to be thought of as an explosion. evolution can be pretty slow if you like. But still, we've had marvelously on earth life beginning, we hardly know how, but certainly beginning quite simple. Exploding across natural history into maybe 4 or 5 billion species, maybe 10 million, maybe 100 million life on earth. I think that's a kind of an explosion. The third explosion is mind, right? It's right in your head. The explosion of mental powers in humans. I think is dramatic, spectacular, and in many respects different from anything of which any other species on earth is capable.

[38:00 - 39:14] Doug Yeager: Finally, let me ask you about the Templeton Prize. This is a very big prize, both in money and in prestige. What did it mean to you and your discipline to earn this award?

[39:20 - 41:15] Holmes Ralston: In a way, I've won sort of two biggest prizes in my field. The Templeton Prize, which is worth about a million and a half dollars in prize money and is a prestigious event, and I was invited to give the Gifford Lectures, which about which I have spoken. So it's kind of nice to win at the sort of two biggest prizes in your field. And where have I done it? I've done it at CSU. Now, CSU is a very-- Colorado State University, a very fine institution. But back east, when they look west, they just kind of think there's a cow college out west, right? And here's a guy who's been out at this cow college in the west getting these big awards and they wake up about that. So it gives you a certain kind of recognition. I used the Templeton money to endow a chair at Davidson College, my alma mater, North Carolina, in science and religion. And I think that'll help to educate young minds for centuries ahead. And partly as a result of my reputation here, others are giving. It's not in place yet, but it will be in a few years, an Endowed Chair in Environmental Ethics here at Colorado State University. So in that sense, winning these prizes, giving these lectures, has, I think, helped to establish my discipline in some ways for the foreseeable future.

[41:17 - 41:34] Doug Yeager: Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate the opportunity to sit here and talk with you today. And you have a very interesting story to tell and a lot of value I think that we all need to contemplate. So thanks again.

END TRANSCRIPTION