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Rolston III, Holmes (1932–)

Leading environmental philosopher, ethicist, and theologian, Holmes Rolston III is widely recognized as the “father of environmental ethics” for his central role in developing environmental ethics as a modern academic discipline. Throughout his distinguished career, he has helped make explicit the ethics of nature that have been implicit in philosophical and sacred writings since ancient times. Born in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia on 19 November 1932, Rolston’s multidisciplinary educational career included a childhood spent in contact with nature, an undergraduate degree in physics (Davidson College, 1953), a divinity degree (Union Theological Seminary, 1956), a Ph.D. in theology (University of Edinburgh, 1958), and later a masters in philosophy of science (University of Pittsburgh, 1968). He wrote the acclaimed books *Philosophy Gone Wild* (1986), *Environmental Ethics* (1988), *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (1987), *Conserving Natural Value* (1994), and *Genes, Genesis and God: Values and their Origins in Natural and Human History* (Gifford Lectures, University of Edinburgh, 1997–1998) (1999). He edited *Biology, Ethics, and the Origins of Life* (1994), and in 1979, helped found the now-refereed professional journal *Environmental Ethics*. Additional works include 80 chapters in other books and over 100 articles, a number of which have been used in college courses and have been translated into at least a dozen languages. A founding member of the International Society for Environmental Ethics (1990) and delegate to the

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992), Rolston has lectured on all seven continents, consulted with dozens of conservation groups, received numerous awards including the 2003 Templeton Prize for Progress Toward Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities, and currently serves as University Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Colorado State University, his professorial post since 1976.

For four centuries following the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution in Europe, Western philosophy promoted an almost exclusively anthropocentric focus, perceiving nature as mechanistic and only having value in relation to human uses and preferences. In the early 1970s, Rolston acknowledged that nature had instrumental or use-values for medicine, agriculture, and industry. He went further, though, recognizing that nature had other values – aesthetic, ecological, educational, historical, recreational, scientific, economic, and religious – as well as intrinsic value. Fundamentally, he argued, organisms (including plants, animals, and humans), species, ecosystems, and the Earth have intrinsic value just for the fact that they have evolved and survived for millions and billions of years. Each level also has systemic value (value associated with processes and capacity to produce) that is interwoven with instrumental and intrinsic values. Rolston posits that for all of these reasons and more, humans have ethical obligations to the environment.

An ordained Presbyterian pastor like his father and grandfather, Rolston frequently draws on the Bible, emphasizing in writing and in lectures its implied guidance on environmental ethics. He likes to think of the “swarms of living creatures” brought forth from land and sea (Gen. 1:20, 24) as early references to biodiversity and notes that when God reviewed the display of life he found it “very good.” According to Rolston, the story of Noah’s ark illustrates that God wills for species to continue (Gen. 6:19) and the rainbow is God’s sign re-establishing “the covenant . . . between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations” (Gen. 9:12–13). In addition to the ecological, intrinsic, aesthetic, instrumental, and religious values implied in Genesis and Matthew 6, Rolston highlights biblical passages that speak to economic and other values, as well as human responsibilities.

Rolston promotes the idea that ethics are for people, but not only about people. To whom much is given, much is required, and humans have a rich and ancient inheritance, the Earth and biosphere, to steward. Rolston says that perhaps we make our deepest error “forever putting ourselves first, never putting ourselves in place in the fundamental biosphere community in which we reside” (2000: 83). Through his writings and lectures, he attempts to instill a more profound sense of civic and environmental

responsibility, calling upon people to live up to their duties as *Homo sapiens*, the so-called wise species.

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Further Reading

- Rolston III, Holmes. "Intrinsic Values in Nature." In II Congresso Brasileiro de Unidades de Conservação, Anais, vol. 1. Conferências e Palestras, organizadores Miguel Serebiuk Milano e Verônica Theulen (Proceedings of the Second Brazilian Congress on Conservation Areas), 5–9 November 2000, Campo Grande, Brazil, 76–84.
- Rolston III, Holmes. *Genes, Genesis and God: Values and their Origins in Natural and Human History*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Rolston III, Holmes, ed. *Biology, Ethics, and the Origins of Life*. Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1995.
- Rolston III, Holmes. *Conserving Natural Value*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- Rolston III, Holmes. "Creation: God and Endangered Species." In Ke Chung Kim and Robert D. Weaver, eds. *Biodiversity and Landscape*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 47–60.
- Rolston III, Holmes. *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.
- Rolston III, Holmes. *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987.
- Rolston III, Holmes. *Philosophy Gone Wild*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1986.
- Rolston III, Holmes and Andrew Light, eds. *Environmental Ethics: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003.
- See also: Environmental Ethics.