



Holmes Rolston.

Rolston, Holmes (1932-)

American environmental and religious philosopher

Rolston has devoted his distinguished career to plausibly and meaningfully interpreting the natural world from a philosophical perspective and is regarded as one of the world's leading scholars on the philosophical, scientific, and religious conceptions of **nature**. His early work on values in nature, as well as his role as a founder of the influential academic journal *Environmental Ethics*, was critical not only in establishing but also in shaping and defining the modern field of environmental philosophy.

In his 1988 book *Environmental Ethics: Values in and Duties to the Natural World*, Rolston presented a philosophically sophisticated and defensible case for a value-centered ecological ethic, one which derives ethical conclusions from descriptive premises. Rolston clearly states that **intrinsic values** objectively exist at the **species**, **biotic community**, and individual levels in nature and that these values impose on humans certain direct obligations to nonhuman entities, such as species and **ecosystems**. These obligations are separate from and sometimes in conflict with those based on the instrumental value of nature, which may motivate humans to protect the **environment** for their own benefit.

Rolston is one of the most prolific writers and sought-after speakers in the field today. His work is unusually accessible to a wide audience, and he has pioneered the application of ethical theory to actual environmental problems by consulting with two dozen **conservation** and policy groups, including the United States Congress and a Presidential Commission.

Rolston came to prominence in this field in a round-about way. Born in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, he studied physics as an undergraduate at Davidson College before entering theological seminary. After completing his Ph.D. in theology and religious studies at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, Rolston spent nearly a decade as a Presbyterian pastor in rural southwest Virginia. During this time, Rolston's love for and curiosity about nature and **wilderness** grew unabated. He fed his love of these things by learning the natural history of his surroundings in splendid detail and by becoming an activist on local environmental issues. In his search for a philosophy of nature to complement his biology, Rolston entered the philosophy program at the University of Pittsburgh, where he received a master's degree in philosophy of science in 1968. He then embarked on an academic career at Colorado State University, where he currently holds the prestigious position of University Distinguished Professor.

The major theoretical innovations of Rolston's work include the reconceptualization of ethical extensionism to accommodate intrinsic value at all levels of nature, a task for which the ordinary methods and vocabulary of traditional ethics proved inadequate. The result is a biologically-based account of natural values which is hierarchical but nonanthropocentric. He has thus established himself as the foremost proponent and defender of intrinsic natural value theory.

Rolston is often identified as the father of **environmental ethics** as a modern academic discipline. As such, he occupies a singular place of importance in modern philosophy. Rolston continues to integrate the practical and theoretical dimensions of his work, as he examines life to discover its meaning and expands the circle of moral significance to include all natural entities, processes, and systems. In addition to *Environmental Ethics*, Rolston has written several other critically acclaimed books, including *Philosophy Gone Wild*, *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey*, and *Conserving Natural Value*, and has contributed to dozen other books and professional and popular periodicals. Rolston is also an avid backpacker, accomplished field naturalist, and respected bryologist. *See also* Ecology; Environmental attitudes/values; Environmental education

[Ann S. Causey]

FURTHER READING:

Rolston, Holmes. *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

_____. *Philosophy Gone Wild: Environmental Ethics*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989.

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William P. Cunningham, Terence Ball, Terence H. Cooper, Eville Gorham, Malcolm T. Hepworth, and Alfred A. Marcus, eds., *Environmental Encyclopedia* (Detroit, MI: Research Inc., 1994)

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