

Holmes Rolston III

1.

Study environmental ethics to figure out who you are, where you are, and what you ought to do. "The unexamined life is not worth living" (*Apology*, line 38). The classic search has been to figure out what it means to be human. Socrates, however, was sometimes wrong. I found that out in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia.

Socrates loved Athens. We live in towns; humans are "political animals" (Greek: *polis*, town; Aristotle, *Politics*[^] line 1253a). Cultures shape our humanity. That's a main reason you are in college. But Socrates avoided nature, thinking it profitless. "You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and trees won't teach me anything, and the people in the city do" (*Phaedrus*, line 230d). I was born in the country, looking at Jump Mountain from my crib; that shaped my childhood worldview.

Out the other window was Bethesda Church, where my father was pastor. The Scots Presbyterians in the Valley loved gospel and landscape. Sundays and schooldays, I was tutored in that culture; otherwise I roamed the hills, fished in Hays Creek, swam in the Maury River.

"Life in an unexamined world is not worth living either." I discovered that when I stumbled, alone, on a whorled pogonia (*Isotria verticillata*) in a secluded glade to exclaim, "Amazing grace!" I needed the gospel words for my awesome landscape. With this more inclusive maxim, I claim to be wiser than Socrates. You will be too. Humans, the only species capable of enjoying culture, are also the only species capable of enjoying the splendid panorama of life.

Become a three-dimensional person. The totally urban (urbane!) life is one-dimensional. One needs experience of the urban, and the rural, and the wild. Otherwise you will be underprivileged. In my Virginia youth I had no electricity, got water from an outdoor cistern, hoed the garden, killed the chicken for Sunday dinner, and knew where the first Trailing Arbutus bloomed in February. My father was educated at the University of Edinburgh in theology, philosophy, mathematics. He taught me gospel, Plato, and Euclid. I was overprivileged.

2.

In environmental ethics you will learn what you most need to know about nature: how to value it. Later in my education, I had found my teachers underprivileged. I had to fight philosophy. Philosophers of science insisted that nonhuman nature was value-free, nothing but a resource for the satisfaction of human desires, abetted by the skills of science. Value was entirely in the eye of the beholder, assigned by the preference of the valuer.

I had to fight theology. In the late 1950s, interest in a theology of nature was disreputable. I was told to seek learning in linear history, not cyclic nature, the distinctive Judeo-Christian redemption history. The Creation stories were problematic myths, a primitive visionary ideal, but the truth was fallen nature, from which by God we are redeemed historically in the biblical covenants.

In the moments when I could escape the philosophers and the theologians, there were the mosses, so luxuriantly developed in the Southern Appalachians, but nobody else seemed much to care about them. There they were, doing nobody any good, yet flourishing on their own, not listening at all to the philosophers and the theologians.

Indeed, there the whole natural world was right "in my face" in the Shenandoah Valley – forests and soil, sunshine and rain, rivers and hills, the cycling seasons, wildflowers and wildlife – all these timeless natural givens that support everything else, all prior to these arrogant humans. That world is not value-free; to the contrary, it is the genesis of value, about as near to ultimacy as we can come.

My college teachers said I was wrong. Almost the first lesson in logic is the naturalistic fallacy; there is no implication from descriptive premises to value or to ethical conclusions. But in the wilderness, hearing a thrush singing to defend its territory, maybe even singing because it enjoyed it, seeing a fox pounce on a squirrel, spooking the deer who fled fearing that I was a hunter, searching for signs of spring after winter, I knew they had to be wrong.

There was life abundant in the midst of its perpetual perishing. These creatures valued life, each in their own way. Something of the meaning of life

does lie in its naturalness. "Man is the measure of things," said Protagoras, another ancient philosopher (recalled in Plato, *Theaetetus*, line 152). Yes, humans are the only evaluators who can deliberate about what they ought to do to conserve nature. When humans do this, they must set up the scales; and humans are the "measurers of things," we prefer to say. But do we conclude that all we measure is what people have at stake on their landscapes? Cannot other species display values of which we ought to take some measure?

When you go home and say that you are taking a class in environmental ethics, mom and dad may be doubtful. "Isn't that an ethic for the chipmunks and daisies? Shouldn't you study something more serious? College costs a lot of money!" But, if you study hard, you will have an answer: "I have been searching for a land ethic" (Aldo Leopold). Tell them that an education these days requires becoming environmentally literate, just as much as it does becoming computer literate.

3.

Environmental ethics is vital because the survival of life on Earth depends on it. The main concerns on the world agenda for the new millennium are: war and peace, escalating populations, escalating consumption, degrading environments. They are all interrelated. For the first time in the history of the planet, one species jeopardizes the welfare of the community of life on Earth, as with global warming and extinction of species. Ecology is about living at home (Greek: *oikos*, "house"). Figure out this home planet.

I've been lucky that my own personal agenda has, during my lifetime, become the most inclusive concern of all: figuring out the human place on the planet. Living locally led me to think globally. You should be so lucky.

You don't want to live a denatured life. Humans neither can nor ought to denature their planet. Be a, good citizen, and more. Be a resident on your landscape. Study environmental ethics to get put in your place.