ETHICAL AND SACRED RESPECT FOR NATURE
Rolston's ecological ethics in science, philosophy and theology

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Holmes Rolston III is an American philosopher who trained as a physicist and mathematician and who has spent his academic life in the philosophy department of Colorado State University. The son of a Presbyterian minister, he himself is also a pastor in the Presbyterian Church, despite deciding to dedicate his life to academia. Although retired, he still remains intellectually active. Among the many prizes and accolades he has won throughout his career, the Templeton Prize in 2003 was the one which, without doubt, most served to popularise his name and work.

Rolston the man

Holmes Rolston graduated in physics and mathematics from Davidson College, Charlotte, N.C., before studying theology at the Union Seminary in Virginia. Later, in 1958, he earned a PhD in theology from Edinburgh University, Scotland, and finally, several years later, earned a second doctorate in philosophy of science from Pittsburgh University. He was then invited to work at the philosophy department of Colorado State University, where he was appointed a full professor in 1976. His contributions were not always highly valued by the scientific community, and indeed, some of his key manuscripts were initially rejected by important publishing houses. However, full recognition arrived when he was invited to give the Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh in 1997-1998.

When examining Rolston's intellectual contribution to science, we should remember that he is known as 'the father of environmental ethics'. Rolston himself has observed that 'it turned out that the direction in which I wanted to go, and in which I went for two decades, ended up being the direction in which the world started to move'. His work coincided with the rise of environmental issues, and in this field he ended up becoming one of the most important authors of American philosophy.

For Rolston, the ethical discovery of nature is 'philosophical', but it is a philosophy that accepts science and which is based on the intrinsic values of nature itself. Nevertheless, as a theologian, Rolston has also described the 'theological logic' that enables us to recognise not only the ethic value, but also the sacred value of nature. Rolston's work then, merges, quite independently, the logic of philosophy, which accepts and applies ethical rules to science and technology, and the logic of theology, which projects onto nature the perspective of faith which accepts philosophy and science, but which views nature with a kind of sacred respect which steers human behaviour towards new ethical-ecological dimensions.

His work and the science-religion debate

Rolston gained a certain level of recognition for the first time in 1975, when he published his paper *Is there an Ecological Ethic?* The paper explored some of the ideas that Rolston has striven to combat for years, namely the existence of a value-free nature, with no intrinsic value in itself, since all ethical valuation depends always on a connection with humans. Rolston, on the other hand, believes that natural ethics does not always depend on mankind.

Nature itself possesses ethical values that any ethical being (i.e. man) should respect for themselves, regardless of their repercussions on human life. Soil, plants, animals, species and ecosystems hold, for Rolston, a value in themselves, regardless of and separate from human issues. This value constitutes ethical principles that impose themselves on human conduct.

Some of his most important works include *Philosophy Gone Wild* (1986), *Environmental Ethics* (1988) and *Conserving Natural Value* (1994). In other works he explores the ethical-theological view of the natural world, with this being his own individual contribution to the science-religion debate, understood on the basis of the convergence of philosophy and theology in ecological ethics. Here,

we will be looking at *Science and Religion: A Critical Survey* (1987) and *Genes, Genesis and God* (1999), in connection with the Gifford Lectures of 1997-1998.

Rolston intuitively explains his approach to the debate on science and religion. Other approaches, he says, have either based themselves on religion and tried to reach out to science, or have based themselves on science and have tried to reach out to religion. However, they have always tried to make peace between the warring parties. Rolston, on the other hand, aims to prompt both science and religion to make their peace with nature, and to come together in nature itself.

Science has always seen nature as a medium, something neutral with no intrinsic ethical value; for its part, monotheist theology has always seen nature as something 'fallen' owing to human 'sin'. For Rolston, if both science and religion were to change their view of nature, they could also lessen the secular gap that separates them, thus reaching a convergence between the philosophical ethics of reason and the sacred ethics of theology.

A naturalised religion: the divine epic of life

Rolston believes that religion should 'naturalise itself' in that it should return to the 'sacred' experience of nature. For Rolston, all religious experience is a numinous experience of nature. This experience may explain the prehistoric origin of religion, and is therefore the form that religious experience has gradually taken in our genes (and which is in keeping with current empirical results on the existence of what is today known as the 'mystic brain').

'One must also get religion naturalised, not so much in the sense of explaining it (away) naturalistically, as of explaining the numinous encounter with manifest nature. Biology does generate religion: the phenomenon of life evokes a religious response whether or not a functional human society is at issue…'. 'Nature is the first mystery to be encountered, and society comes later, much later, after one learns evolutionary history' (*Genes, Genesis and God*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 294).

As human beings with mind, we are here and therefore need a unified recounting of the history of the Earth that has brought us to where we are today.

A prolific Earth

The first numinous experience of an ethical and sacred Earth is its fertility. The idea of a surprising, fertile Earth that produces life. Fertility, Rolston says, is exactly what is evoked by religious faith. The Earth's prolific fertility, fruitfulness or generative capacity is what most needs to be explained in the spectacular unfolding of life in which we ourselves are immersed. We should remember, Rolston reminds us, that Nature's root idea is that of 'giving birth' (p. 226).

We need to explain the unfolding, the generative processes. We need to find out how possibilities are updated, how spaces and deep sources of creativity become possible. In this genesis, more regularly comes out of less. Sometimes, it even comes out of nothing; or in other words, out of somewhere where nothing similar ever existed before. 'Information' is superimposed onto matter and energy, as the key to the vital regeneration of life. It is a pregnant Earth. We know the meaning of 'pregnant' in child-bearing women; it is the period during which life information is transferred via DNA from one generation to another. However, we need to rethink where and how this information arises on Earth. Virtually all biologists are religious, in the deepest sense of the term, even if it is a religion without revelation. We discern something sublime, in the sense that it inspires awe, because there *is* something sublime (in the etymological sense of the term), something which takes us to the limits of our understanding, and mysteriously even beyond (p. 297).

Nature, sin, suffering

In this prolific process of the Earth in which more seems to emerge from less, nature proceeds unbendingly: it is the logic of the selfish gene in which progress towards life is built over death. If this progress which tramples on the past is seen as a 'sin', then nature becomes prolific on the basis

of sin. Making headway by cutting off others, aborting possibilities, in the midst of death, burdens the dynamics of life with the weight of transgression or sin. This dramatic quality of moving forward 'sinfully' (in the widest sense of the term) on the basis of negation, is one of the unmistakable traits of the natural world.

However, in beings endowed with sensibility, this move forward also occurs in the midst of suffering. History, Rolston says, is the history of the evolution of suffering. Genes do not suffer; organisms with genes do not need to suffer, but those with neurons do. Life is unquestionably prolific, and is therefore as undeniably pathetic (from the Greek *pathos*) as if its logic were exactly that of pathos. Fertility is closely linked to struggle (p. 303).

Suffering, Rolston believes, is a torturous fact, but the first thing we learn is that suffering is the downside of sentience, the sentient experience, consciousness, pleasure, intention, all excitation of subjectivity that is so strangely generated from pure objectivity. Rocks, he says, do not suffer, but the substratum of the rocks has organised itself into animals whose experience produces pain and pleasure, and into men whose existence includes anxiety and affliction (p. 303).

Not only because of this dramatic quality of moving forward in 'sin' through negation, but also because of its progress through the affliction of suffering, nature is prolific and creates life along a dramatic road that Rolston describes as 'cruciform', alluding to both the cross, the essence of Christianity, and to the core of the experience of other religious traditions, such as Buddhism.

Nature and supernature

Man forms part of nature through his experience of existing in a prolific nature. This fertility is so great that it seems to give the false impression that, in its advance, 'nature' becomes 'supernature', as if it were 'beyond itself', or as if more had emerged from less. Rolston defends an emergence in which the natural dynamics produce new ways of being (which lead to the human 'spirit'); but this process towards 'more' is always based on previous stages, and at the end of the day, on matter-energy. The future (more, supernatural) is possible because it already existed in the past-present (less, natural).

According to Rolston, believing in God is, for many, like putting the supernatural beyond the natural. But no theory can establish a complementary link between God and nature while an unresolved dualism exists between the natural and the supernatural (*Science and Religion. A Critical Survey*, p. 298). Everything is in everything. In this sense, the dignity of the spirit already exists in the nature of matter-energy. Thus, the ethical discourse for respecting human dignity and autonomy is, at this level, the same ethical discourse for respecting the dignity and autonomy of natural processes.

However, at the end of the day, Rolston also offers a religious interpretation of the process which constitutes an even more powerful foundation for ecological ethics. God is the ultimate supernatural conclusion, but at the same time, the origin of the whole process, the foundation existing in nature. All this has an unmistakable Teilhardian flavour based on the concepts of alpha and omega. Indeed, Teilhard is continually present in Rolston's work.

God is, at a certain level and order of magnitude, beyond the states of quantum superimposition, beyond the ambital ether of space-time and beyond the anthropic order. God is the supernature from which nature is 'frozen'. In this sense, God as a fundament comes before what comes after —matter, life, mind, spirit— and becomes gradually manifest (by being omnipresent) in the superb evolutionary sequence in which more and more supernature emerges in nature.

According to Rolston, the universe and the Earth are both God in the form of history. The form of an explanation of this kind would be more fitting for nature than the best scientific explanations based on mere laws. It could reach the level of our senses which goes beyond pure cause. It could reach the sense of the Presence of God, of the Divine You existing in the mundane That (p. 305).

Rolston then, believes that the coherent image of God from the perspective of science is that of a 'panentheist' God, compatible with orthodox Christianity, which constitutes the non-local background of the universe and produces nature through creation. Thus, 'spiritual' (supernatural) divine ontology would emerge through the evolutionary process right up to the appearance of man.

The presence of the God of nature in Christ

Rolston believes that in Christian theism, Jesus is the living parabola of God. Unlike those who say that suffering is always too painful to be divine, Christianity presupposes a free life dedicated to love, leading towards a mysterious end, although it detects in suffering the endless power of God. Through the cross, Christians enter into communion with this normative power in redemptive suffering. They join with Christ, who thus dramatically shows that he commands divine energy in always emerging levels.

What in principle seems an annoying anomaly which contradicts the claim that God is omnipresent, i.e. the scandalous history of a peasant abandoned by God and crucified, thus becomes key evidence of the presence of God. The Creator, Rolston believes, is always present, perfecting his creation through suffering.

Jesus on the cross is a painful God. The hypothesis of God offers the only viable explanation for the emergence of Jesus in the world. God is both Author and Actor in this exciting story. Jesus loves with perfection in perfect freedom. And he dies as a testimony to the power of love through suffering (pp. 326-327).

Rolston's ecological 'theologia crucis'

Through ecology, Rolston strives to understand *theologia crucis*, or the logic of God on the cross, i.e. what God is trying to tell us through Christ. His perspective belongs to the Christian tradition: the evangelical logion 'take up your cross and follow me' is a succinct summing up of Rolston's theology of the cross. Evolution is cruciform and being a Christian means accepting the cross of suffering and letting oneself be moved by the impulse towards the supernatural, that in turn leads to God.

It is, without doubt, an aspect of the message of the cross that is unmistakably Christian. Nevertheless, the message of the cross also has other important aspects that Rolston does not consider. The cross shows that God does not impose his presence on the universe, but rather gives man his freedom, a freedom that is evident in a world in which life, and even ecological ethics, may be understood without God.

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