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Comments on *A New Environmental Ethics: The Next Millennium for Life on Earth*

MARION HOURDEQUIN
Colorado College

As a subfield of philosophy, environmental ethics has been marginalized, labeled as a branch of "applied ethics" offering nothing profoundly new or deep. Environmental philosophers, from the perspective of the discipline more generally, are often thought to be mired in messy contingency, too burdened by empirical details to identify fundamental truths about the world. On the other hand, when environmental philosophers speak to a broad audience about intrinsic value or non-anthropocentrism, they are frequently seen as utopian and disconnected from real-world problems. Environmental philosophy thus seems caught in the middle: too applied to conform to the taste of traditional theoretical philosophers and too abstract to connect with policy and practical environmental issues.

Wanting to make a difference, many environmental philosophers have in recent decades turned away from theoretical questions of intrinsic value and associated critiques of anthropocentrism to more pragmatic approaches to particular environmental issues and questions. Pragmatists like Bryan Norton (1991) offer the "convergence hypothesis," where anthropocentrists and non-anthropocentrists come to agree in the policy arena: disagreements at the level of theory need not obstruct consensus at the level of action. The sort of convergence Norton describes, however, is not merely the natural result of various disparate ethical perspectives coming together in the political realm. Rather, convergence requires compromise: it can happen only if some are willing to give up or at least temporarily relinquish their commitment to certain values they hold. Environmental philosophers who want to be taken seriously in the realm of climate ethics, for example, tend to focus on injustice: not injustice to other species, but to humans who will be unfairly harmed as a result of past, current, and future practices of burning fossil fuels and emitting excessive greenhouse gases. Yet for a non-anthropocentrist, global climate change puts at stake not only justice among human beings, but the fate of species, ecosystems, and evolutionary processes on earth more broadly. Similarly, those who believe that planetary-scale geoengineering is fundamentally hubristic and overreaching can only converge with non-anthropocentrists by working to hammer out a "just" governance regime for a kind of planetary management that violates some of their deepest convictions.

In *A New Environmental Ethics* (2012), Holmes Rolston, III shows that environmental ethics must be at once theoretical and practical, ambitious in the breadth and depth of its critique of traditional ways of thinking yet grounded and connected to practical questions about animal welfare, wilderness protection, ecological restoration, and climate change. Unlike Norton, Rolston resists convergence and the compromise that accompanies it. There *is* a substantial difference between anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism, he argues, championing the

latter. Rolston unapologetically defends the value of non-human animals, as well as plants and other non-sentient life forms, species, ecosystems, and the earth as a whole. He is frank about his method and about the predicament of environmental philosophy more generally: in the effort to generate a paradigm shift – as is needed – one cannot proceed from pre-existing assumptions. We ought not, therefore, expect a straightforward, logical argument for the "environmental turn" (Rolston 2012, 25). He notes, "Often in the real world argument is not so much like the links of a chain as like the legs of a table, where support comes from multiple considerations," which themselves are the product of "interpretive seeing," value-laden observations and interactions with the natural world. Rolston goes on to explain:

> In evaluating natural and world history, and our part in it, one must join earlier and later significances in ways more qualitative than quantitative, more dramatic than linear. One needs a sense of scenic scope. (Rolston 2012, 26)

Rolston attempts to facilitate this sense of scenic scope by laying out in detail, and with rich use of cases and examples, the relevant considerations. Drawing on ecology and environmental science, law, policy, and economics, Rolston shows us the possibility of valuing nature much more broadly and thoroughly than we do today. This is a worldly environmental ethics, very much grounded in observations of nature and its workings along with an astute critique of where our own beliefs and institutions fail to acknowledge sources of value outside of ourselves. The book does not purport to offer an argument from first principles, and, true to its word, it instead *narrates* the world so as to reveal to us the possibility of a coherent alternative to our entrenched and narrow modes of valuing and the anthropocentric institutions that instantiate and further reinforce them.

Throughout the book, Rolston engages and rejects many fashionable ways of thinking about the environment. Critiques of wilderness, the idea of restoration as "faking nature," adaptive management, and environmental pragmatism all come in for critique. For example, in response to the idea of "adaptive management," an ecologically informed and experimental approach to ecosystem management, Rolston offers the following observation:

> No one wishes to oppose intelligent management. Everyone wants to be 'adaptive' [...] But ought humans to place themselves at the center, claiming management of the whole in their human self-interest? […] Perhaps what is as much to be managed is the human earth-eating, managerial mentality that has caused the environmental crisis in the first place. (Rolston 2012, 45)

"Enlightened" and politically-correct environmentalism earn no special exemption from Rolston's critical gaze. Adaptive management may be better than what preceded it, but that doesn't ensure its adequacy. Similarly, Rolston resists the contemporary move to collapse nature and culture, and on that basis to question the coherence of the wilderness idea and ideal. While

acknowledging that many North American landscapes were historically shaped by human beings and, in that sense, were not pristine prior to European colonization, he insists that we acknowledge differences of degree between the kinds of manipulations that characterized Native American use of the land and those typical of contemporary civilization. On this basis, we can distinguish wild lands from those dominated by human beings. Relatedly, Rolston finds confused the conceptual critique of wilderness, which appeals to the idea that wilderness is merely a social construct erected by Westerners in the grip of a romantic idealization. As he notes,

> [I]t cannot count against 'wilderness' having a successful reference that some earlier peoples did not have the word. Yes, 'wilderness' is, in one sense, a twentieth-century construct, as also is 'the Krebs cycle,' and 'DNA,' and the 'Permian/Cretaceous extinction' [...] Nevertheless, these constructs of the mind enable us to detect what is not in the human mind. (Rolston 2012, 177)

On this view, there really are some parts of the natural world that are wild, and some that are significantly less so, and this distinction matters. Not all the world needs to be wild, but wild nature is of distinct value, and something that should be protected and preserved.

David Schmidtz (on the book's back cover) describes *A New Environmental Ethics* as "old and new" at the same time – and the description is apt. This book is up-to-date with current examples and engagement with contemporary interlocutors, yet it also reflects a point of view that Rolston has been developing over many decades. It is thoughtful and considerate of other perspectives, but also direct and uncompromising. Rolston is not just laying out possibilities for the reader to consider; he is making an argument, and neither the popularity nor the power of his opponents deters him. Even the White House Christmas tree comes in for criticism, as "teaching the wrong thing about trees" (Rolston 2012, 101). Rather than chop down a large tree "in the prime of its life," Rolston suggests that the President designate a standing live tree as the national Christmas tree each year (Rolston 2012, 101). Such trees could be marked with plaques, and people could go to visit these national trees, still standing, years later.

This last example provides just one illustration of Rolston's engagement with environmental ethics at many levels. He is concerned with theoretical questions of what has value, but also with the ways in which our practices reflect various value presuppositions. Rolston is an engaged and attentive social critic. For example, he distinguishes between environmental economics and ecological economics, both of which attempt to ameliorate the inability of classical economics to account adequately for the environment, and he identifies *ecological* economics as the approach worth pursuing. Environmental economics is simply "classical economics applied to natural systems" (Rolston 2012, 168). Ecological economics, in contrast, seriously challenges the basic presuppositions of classical economics, such as commitments to profit maximization and endless growth.

Rolston's book as a whole covers an expansive territory, but the argument is set up to move the reader sequentially from familiar realms of value (humans and sentient animals) to the less

familiar (plants, species, ecosystems, and the earth). At each stage, Rolston shows us that we need to recognize that value takes diverse forms – there is no single characteristic, whether rationality, sentience, or being alive, that all valuable things share in common. In the case of plants and other non-sentient beings, we find value in their teleological organization; they are entities that "defend value" (Rolston 2012, 100). In species, we find "dynamic life forms preserved in historical lines that persist genetically over millions of years" (Rolston 2012, 129). To kill a species is to "[shut] down the generative process, a kind of superkilling. [T]o superkill a particular species is to shut down a story of many millennia, and leave no future possibilities" (Rolston 2012, 135).

It is in this latter half of the book, where Rolston clearly strikes out on his own, defending the value of species, ecosystems, and the earth, that the arguments are most interesting. The argument as a whole recapitulates ideas Rolston has been defending for many years, but the development of these arguments and the treatment of particular issues and examples in the context of the overall argument is often provocative and new. I want to discuss just two examples to illustrate the many-stranded nature of the book as a whole: the discussion of ecological restoration and the theme of character and virtue that runs throughout.

While one might think that environmental philosophers would embrace ecological restoration as an exemplar of a healthy and caring relationship between humans and the land, the relationship between the two fields has been complex. Aldo Leopold, who holds a place of high esteem among environmental ethicists, was of course not only the author of "The Land Ethic," but also a pioneering figure in ecological restoration. His work in this field, however, has been little discussed and written about by environmental philosophers. Because the possibility of restoration depends on the existence of ecological damage, some have worried that restoration has an insidious side. Perhaps the most well-known and widely cited essay on restoration by an environmental philosopher is Robert Elliot's "Faking Nature" (1982), which views restoration with suspicion. This essay, later expanded into a book, argues that restoration fakes nature by passing off human-created nature as authentic or real. Restoration obscures the disruption of natural processes that occurred at a site, failing to reveal the way in which a disturbed site's genealogy diverges from that of an undisturbed landscape. Elliot highlights the free play of natural processes as a source of natural value, and argues that restored sites lack that value: they are inevitably diminished in relation to their undisturbed counterparts. What's more, restored sites are deceptive, because they trick us into thinking they are natural, when in fact they are not. One of Elliot's central worries is that restoration will be used as an excuse for degradation: if we mistakenly believe that restored sites are just as good as natural landscapes prior to disturbance, we may be less wary of mining, logging, and other activities, which in fact destroy natural value, even if followed by restoration.

Rolston, while sharing the concern that we not use restoration as an excuse to engage in ecologically destructive behavior, contests the claim that restored nature is inevitably inauthentic and unnatural. "The naturalness returns," argues Rolston (Rolston 2012, 184). If we put the pieces back, nature will eventually take over, and a site can be transformed from an artifact into a

place where natural processes reign. For Rolston, the term "restoration" is misleading insofar as it suggests that we are putting things back or resetting the clock – restoration is "forward looking," it is about "rehabilitation for the future" (Rolston 2012, 185). So while he acknowledges that a disturbed site has experienced a disruption or discontinuity that cannot be undone, Rolston wants us to recognize that there are other aspects of natural value that can return: a restored site can again be natural and wild, in the sense that natural processes can return as can significant freedom from human control.

This discussion raises the question of how we should consider other forms of restoration, particularly those that do not fully restore naturalness or wildness. Rolston does recognize that there are kinds and degrees of restoration (Rolston 2012, 183) and that sometimes we will restore to make restitution for past damage, and other times for pragmatic reasons, to benefit people. This seems consistent with a contextual approach to restoration (Hourdequin and Havlick 2011) and with the recognition of cultural values associated with particular landscapes and the possibility of restoration that integrates the cultural and the natural. This approach allows that "historical fidelity" – understood narrowly as loyalty to pre-disturbance ecological conditions – is not the only relevant value in restoration. While historical fidelity understood in this way may be an appropriate and central guiding value in certain places such as large natural areas, elsewhere other social and cultural values legitimately come into play.

The field of ecological restoration has developed significant divisions over the role of history, with some insisting that restoration should always strive to replicate the structure, composition, and function of pre-disturbance reference ecosystems, and others arguing for "forward-looking restoration" (Choi 2004, 2007) that takes little account of the past, instead focusing on developing new ecosystems that will function effectively under changing conditions and that respond to human needs and values. Traditionalists worry that this latter vision will fail to value what came before and collapse into a hubristic and promethean remaking of the natural world. This worry is legitimate, but one can acknowledge diverse possibilities and roles for restoration without accepting a vision of restoration as a mere servant of narrow human interests. Rolston, in recognizing the dynamism and diversity of nature and value, seems to allow space for many forms of restoration – some restorations might be large scale and guided by the goals of bringing back naturalness and wildness; others might be smaller and serve primarily to heal our relationship with the natural world by encouraging us to engage positively rather than negatively with nature (cf. Jordan 2003; Light 2002); still other restorations might serve as exemplars of how the human and the natural can productively blend in spaces that people regularly use and inhabit. Agroecology projects, ranchland restoration, and the development of urban natural areas might be instances of these latter kinds of restoration.

Rolston's willingness to acknowledge various forms of restoration reflects a more general acknowledgement of the complexity of our relationship with nature and the values we find there. We face, inevitably, difficult choices as we navigate relationships with other living beings, and with entities at higher levels of organization: species, ecosystems, and the planet. The poignancy of these relationships is underscored throughout the book, as Rolston guides our thinking through

decisions in which multiple values are at stake. For example, he raises numerous questions about whether and when we ought to intervene to alleviate pain in the natural world. Should we rescue a grizzly bear and her cubs stranded on an island in the middle of Yellowstone Lake (Rolston 2012, 134–135)? Should we rescue starving bighorn sheep (Rolston 2012, 71)? Drowning bison (Rolston 2012, 71)? These are not easy questions. Pain is often a bad thing that we should seek to reduce, but again, we need to consider context. Pain and suffering are part of the natural world and attempting to eliminate them entirely would not only be Sisyphean but unwise, on Rolston's view. Though predation involves pain, predation is essential to ecological systems. There is a tragic element to life, but we can see also how tragedy is entwined with larger processes and cycles which themselves have significant value (Rolston 2012, 74).

The emphasis on context, complexity, and the diversity of values pervades Rolston's work, and the recognition of this complexity seems to call for the cultivation of particular traits of character in us, traits that enable us to grapple with complexity and motivate us to respond in appropriate ways. Rolston is clear that he is not a virtue ethicist if what virtue ethics entails is the rejection of rules as important guides for behavior. Rules, argues Rolston "channel caring and discipline virtuous intentions," and are crucial in moving people along the path toward virtue and in regulating individual and institutional behavior in the public realm (Rolston 2012, 136). Despite these caveats, Rolston does offer us a picture of the kind of people we must be if we are to embrace an Earth ethics. Like Aldo Leopold, he encourages us not only to be "good citizens" in the traditional sense, but ecological citizens (Rolston 2012, 221). We must learn how to reside on Earth and to do so with "respect, reverence, and care" (Rolston 2012, 222). We need hope (Rolston 2012, 216) and solidarity on a global scale (Rolston 2012, 222). We need to know our home place – not just the highways and shopping malls, but the plants, the animals, the geology, the climate, and the interconnections among these things and their relation to us. "Three-dimensional persons" are those that appreciate the urban, the rural, and the wild: they understand how human civilization is nested within broader ecological contexts. As Gary Snyder explains in "The Place, the Region, and the Commons," living in place involves having a sense of home centered around the hearth – or in the town or city where one resides – but extending outward from there to farms and ranches to "woodlot, forest, desert or mountain" (Snyder 1990, 28). On this view, the concerns that occupy Rolston in *A New Environmental Ethics* are not only about values or character; they are existential:

> But how could we *be* were it not for this planet that provided our very shape? Two conditions – gravity and a livable temperature range between freezing and boiling – have given us fluids and flesh. The trees we climb and the ground we walk on have given us five fingers and toes […] The land gave us a stride, and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind. We should be thankful for that, and take nature's stricter lessons with some grace. (Snyder 1990, 29)

Or as Rolston puts it, "Earth is not something we outgrow or rebuild and manage to our liking, it is the ground of our being" (Rolston 2012, 222).

In *A New Environmental Ethics*, Rolston gives us a map to guide us in revaluing nature and reconfiguring our relationship with the natural world. In many places, it is a sketch map, awaiting new ways of thinking, new values, and new institutions to populate and fill it out in a way that enables rather than truncates life on Earth. More will need to be said to convince us that we should abandon our self-centeredness and follow Rolston's lead. Our cynicism is so deep that when social scientists tell us that money doesn't buy happiness once we've met our basic needs (Kesebir and Diener, 2008), but that relationships, community engagement, and meaningful work do, we are skeptical. Isn't this just what the 1% wants us to think? Is this not a ploy to keep us in our place? To truly compel change, others will need to take the map as a guide and begin to fill out, on the ground, the landscape envisioned there.

There are times when one might also wish that Rolston offered more in the way of traditional arguments for his position, the comforting deductions from premises to conclusions that philosophers so deeply prize. Instead we find Rolston prodding us to see the world differently, gently insisting that in effect, our value schemes have got it all (or almost all) wrong. How presumptuous, one might respond: Where are the arguments? But then we are provoked to ask, with respect to our anthropocentrism, our conviction that the world is here for us to manage according to our will, our commitment to infinite growth: Where are the arguments, and can they withstand critical scrutiny?

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