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

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Respecting Life: A Human Obligation


The richness of the field of environmental ethics is, for the most part, fully showcased in Holmes Rolston III’s new book, A New Environmental Ethics: The Next Millennium for Life on Earth. The book should be a landmark publication for the discipline, from one of its greatest founders and practitioners, but it falls short. Many chapters are inspiring, however, especially those in which his deep knowledge of science is coupled with his outright religious appreciation of all of Earth’s life and history.

A New Environmental Ethics returns to the major topics that Rolston, as a college professor and true teacher, has discussed through the years. The tone of the whole book is that of an extended lecture. Each chapter reveals his unusually poetic prose and his wide-ranging knowledge of most of the developments in the field of environmental ethics, a discipline in which he first taught in 1973 and one that has blossomed ever since. Rolston mentions many of the books, collections, and anthologies but misses one of the best—the late Louis P. Pojman’s anthology (Pojman and Pojman 2012), which allowed philosophers to speak in their own voice, rather than offering canned versions of their thoughts.

Among the strengths of the book is Rolston’s outstanding, in-depth treatment of organisms, species, natural systems, wilderness, and nature’s intrinsic value. Equally outstanding is his encyclopedic (although, at times, selective) knowledge of the field of environmental ethics as he tackles broader and more far-reaching issues.

The problematic aspects of his work become apparent in his discussion of various aspects of the wild and the various positions that environmental ethicists have held on theoretical issues. A key issue of Rolston’s is that of intrinsic value, a topic that has engaged environmental philosophers for decades. He comments that “we will be arguing that wilderness is set aside both for people and on account of intrinsic values there and that the two are complementary” (p. 50). This is where Rolston excels. In chapter 4, “Organisms: Respect for Life,” he takes on other philosophers in defense of intrinsic value: “An organism is thus where Rolston excels. In chapter 4, “Organisms: Respect for Life,” he takes on other philosophers in defense of intrinsic value: “An organism is thus

It may be wrong to seek insight within the themes that are peripheral to Rolston’s real strength, which is the unique way he approaches both the

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...consequences, and many accounts have been given of the reasons to preserve species diversity. Most of these accounts are either focused on trying to demonstrate the intrinsic value of species—a value that all species have, independent of our own human perspective—or, more recently, on demonstrating the utilitarian value of biodiversity—in particular, with respect to the ecosystem services that species provide or support. The Value of Species travels along another line of argument, a line that has been rather neglected so far.

Author Edward L. McCord’s main argument for protecting all species on this planet—without regard to their usefulness for us—is that saving species is a question of realizing (in both senses of this word) what it means to be a human being. This is basically an anthropological argument for conservation, albeit one rooted in a long philosophical tradition reaching back to Aristotle. McCord, director of the University Honors College at the University of Pittsburgh, seems to be an ideal person to convey such an argument, having been educated in anthropology, philosophy, and law and teaching interdisciplinary courses in environmental science, inter alia, at Yellowstone National Park.

McCord’s personal experiences, his own history as a naturalist (from childhood onward), and his love for nature were the main motivation for writing The Value of Species. He openly admits that he is not just a neutral analyst of philosophical and scientific views on species conservation; he writes as an advocate for the very matter. This explains why the book is not written in a difficult scientific or philosophical language but in a very readable style that can be understood by a broad audience interested in the issue of biological conservation.

Nevertheless, McCord conveys important philosophical distinctions that are often neglected in conservation discourses. One of these distinctions is that protecting species is (mostly) something different from protecting individuals of a species. Whereas...