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NATURAL THEOLOGY IN AN ECOLOGICAL MODE

Mark Wynn

The paper considers the possibility of an alliance between natural theologians and environmental ethicists in so far as both uphold the goodness of the natural world. Specifically, it examines whether the work of Holmes Rolston III can contribute towards the natural theologian's treatment of two issues: the nature and extent of the world's goodness, and the reasons why we may fail to register its goodness fully. The paper argues that the holism and non-anthropocentrism of Rolston's work throw new light on the values in nature, and on the multiple achievements which are presupposed in any informed appreciation of its goodness.

Introduction

In the world of business and public policy, we have become familiar with the idea that any major undertaking should be accompanied by an "environmental impact statement." In recent years, theologians have conformed to this trend, by seeking to show that Christian commitment is an undertaking which has (or ought to have) beneficial implications for our relations to the natural world.¹ Of course, they have been spurred on in this endeavour by the suggestion that there is some sort of strain between Christian commitment and ecological sensitivity, and more particularly by the charge that the Christian world-view (coupled perhaps with the Greek metaphysic in which it has been cast) is in some significant measure responsible for our current ecological predicament, whether on account of its tendency to think of matter and spirit antithetically, or for some other reason.² The issues I address in this paper will have some relevance to this larger topic, concerning the consonance or otherwise of Christian belief and a properly informed environmental ethic. But I shall be considering more specifically the question of whether the perception of the non-human world which emerges in the writings of ecologists and environmental ethicists throws any light on a number of well-worn issues in natural theology. More specifically still, I shall be asking whether the writings of one particular environmental ethicist, Holmes Rolston III, can contribute towards the natural theologian's treatment of two issues: the nature and extent of the world's goodness, and the character of the impediments which may obstruct our discernment of its goodness. Rolston's work is significant here both in its



own right and in so far as it is representative of a wider body of opinion. Its ability to play this representative role in turn reflects the seminal nature of his writings, and their enduring influence in the field of environmental ethics.

The theological resonances of Rolston's work in environmental ethics are surely not coincidental. He has a doctorate in Theology and Religious Studies from the University of Edinburgh and is ordained in the Presbyterian church (U.S.A). However, his theological interests are rarely explicit in his writing on environmental ethics.³ And where he has made connections between his theological concerns and his ethics, he has not, so far as I am aware, sought to bring out the particular connections which form the topic of this paper.

I ought to begin with a brief point of terminological clarification. Ecology is of course a science, concerned with the description of the complex structure of ecosystems; and accordingly, we might suppose that ecologists as such make no explicit value claims.⁴ On the other hand, environmental ethicists plainly do make such claims about the nature of our relations to the natural world, and in so doing they customarily draw extensively on the writings of ecologists. In considering the possibility of an ecologically informed natural theology, I am as much interested in the possibility of an environmental ethically informed natural theology. In other words, I am interested in the evaluative significance assigned to the findings of ecologists by environmental ethicists in general, and by Rolston in particular. So for the purposes of this discussion, I shall not draw a sharp distinction between the two disciplines: by ecology will be meant ecology as interpreted by Rolston and his colleagues in the context of constructing an environmental ethic. The blurring of this distinction would meet with Rolston's approval, I think. He grants that the environmental ethicist does not merely reiterate the work of ecologists, but also notes the difficulty of distinguishing between the ecological "facts" and the environmental ethical "values." For instance he comments that:

What is ethically puzzling, and exciting, in the marriage and mutual transformation of ecological description and evaluation is that here an "ought" is not so much *derived* from an "is" as discovered simultaneously with it. As we progress from descriptions of fauna and flora, of cycles and pyramids, of stability and dynamism, on to intricacy, planetary opulence and interdependence, to unity and harmony with oppositions in counterpoint and synthesis, arriving at length at beauty and goodness, it is difficult to say where the natural facts leave off and where natural values appear. For some observers at least, the sharp is/ought dichotomy is gone; the values seem to be there as soon as the facts are fully in, and both alike are properties of the system.⁵

My attempt to relate the environmental ethical (cum ecological) perspective and the issues in natural theology I have distinguished will focus upon two features of this perspective in particular. First of all, I shall

draw upon the tendency of ecological thought to represent the world in holistic terms - that is, its tendency to understand things in nature by reference to their place within a complex web of such things. And secondly, I shall be interested in the non-anthropocentric scheme of values which is characteristic of the writings of many environmental ethicists, Rolston included. These two doctrines are of course related. If we think holistically about the place of human beings in nature, then immediately we are likely to suppose that their well-being is tied to the well-being of other creatures and to the normal functioning of various non-biological processes. On such a view, we are likely to suppose that human interests and the interests of the wider "biotic community" have a tendency to coincide, so that an enlightened anthropocentrism comes to involve a concern also for the flourishing of non-human life forms and the integrity of the ecosystem more generally. Rolston takes this theme a step further, arguing that things in nature have an intrinsic value, and are not to be valued simply on account of their usefulness in promoting human well being. However if our holism is radical enough, there may not be much difference between these two perspectives (those of "deep" and "shallow" ecology) in terms of their implications for human conduct. But I shall return to Rolston's understanding of natural value shortly. At this juncture I wish simply to draw attention to the fact that I shall appeal to the holism and non-anthropocentrism of Rolston's thought in making a case for the possibility of some sort of fruitful conversation between environmentalists and natural theologians.

1. Valuing the world

The natural theologian who believes that the reasonableness of theistic belief can be established by reference to generally agreed facts concerning the world of sense experience need not appeal to the goodness of the world in making her case. For instance, she might suppose that the existence (and goodness) of God can be established by reference to some form of the cosmological argument, which depends only upon the observation of change or upon the recognition that material things are contingent in some sense or other. However, the attempt to ground theistic belief in some form of the argument from design presupposes, I suggest, that the world is fundamentally good, and can be shown to be so. Commentators on the argument from design sometimes distinguish between "teleological" and "eutaxiological" versions of the argument. Only the first of these kinds of argument is said to depend on the identification of purpose in the world; the second rests simply on the observation of order, and the thought that such order is unlikely to have arisen by chance.⁶ But even where some feature of the world is said to indicate design independently of our having any precise sense of what purpose it might serve, it seems the feature must evidently contribute towards or constitute some sort of good. Otherwise it would presumably have no tendency to establish the existence of a (beneficent) designer. So the design argument depends in general upon the claim that the world is good. Moreover, other ventures in natural theology, while they may not

seek to ground theistic claims in the goodness of the world, also depend upon the claim that the world is good, to the extent that they need to rebut the "problem of evil." So the belief that fundamentally the world is good is central to the project of natural theology, whether that belief provides the premise in an argument for the existence of God, or a way of turning aside an alleged defeater of theistic belief.

It might seem easy enough to connect this basic commitment of natural theology, to the goodness of the world, and the concerns expressed in the ecological perspective. After all, this perspective is conventionally taken to include the demand that human interference in the natural world should be restricted; and in turn that may seem to imply that nature is good when left to run its own course, and even that "wild nature" as such cannot be improved upon (not at any rate by us). I shall argue that the writings of Rolston and others provide a way of articulating this basic insight. I begin by noting a number of interpretations of the natural world, some of which draw their inspiration directly from the natural sciences, which pose a challenge to the natural theologian by putting in question her belief in the goodness of the world. I shall then seek to read Rolston's work as an ecologically informed rebuttal of this challenge to natural theology.

David Hume is the most celebrated philosophical critic of the design argument, and not surprisingly his objections to the argument reflect a negative assessment of the basic tendencies of the natural world. Thus in the person of Philo, he remarks that when we consider the world of living things, we discover that:

The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind nature, impregnated with a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children.

And he infers that:

the original Source of all things [or nature itself we might add]... has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy.⁷

In brief, Hume's complaint is that nature is indifferent to the well being of her creatures. This sort of negative evaluation of the natural world is echoed in the writings of other philosophers. John Stuart Mill observes that nature presents an "odious scene of violence."⁸ And William James also finds fault with nature considered as a whole, drawing a conclusion about how we should behave in relation to the natural world which is strikingly contrary to the sort of conclusion typically favoured by environmental ethicists:

Visible nature is all plasticity and indifference, - a moral multiverse ... and not a moral universe. To such a harlot we owe no allegiance; with her as a whole we can establish no moral communion; and we

are free in our dealing with her several parts to obey or to destroy, and to follow no law but that of prudence in coming to terms with such of her particular features as will help us to our private ends.⁹

Scientists as well as philosophers have lent their voice to the view that nature is indifferent to life, and if viewed as a work of contrivance, then badly contrived. Thus Darwin wrote that the process of natural selection was "clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel."¹⁰ And Stephen Jay Gould has commented that: "Odd arrangements and funny solutions are the proofs of evolution - paths that a sensible God would never tread"; citing an example, he notes that: "Orchids were not made by an ideal engineer; they were jury-rigged from a limited set of available components."¹¹ Similarly Francis Crick remarks that biology has no "elegance," in view of the haphazard nature of evolutionary change.¹²

Of course, it is sometimes supposed that nature is not properly the subject of any kind of evaluative assessment except in so far as it impinges upon the lives of human beings. And sometimes the problem of "natural evil" as discussed by philosophers of religion takes this form. But in these quotations, it seems that exception is being taken to the natural world in virtue of its own inherent character, independently of its bearing upon human well-being. (This is true even of the quotation from Hume, since he seems to be concerned with life in general, and not merely with human life.) Thus the natural world is said variously to be "blind," "odious," "a harlot" to whom we owe no allegiance, "clumsy" and "cruel," "odd" and "funny," and inelegant. I take it that these value judgements if understood as characterisations of the fundamental bent of the natural world are incompatible with, or at least place under serious strain, a natural theological understanding of the world's significance. Certainly they are incompatible with the argument from design, which rests upon a conviction that the world is manifestly good; but such a bleak assessment of the non-human world also seems to pose a challenge to theistic belief more generally, including those forms of belief which do not depend upon a claim to discern the workings of providence in any detail.¹³

Now the writings of environmental ethicists are also standardly opposed to this sort of assessment of the natural world. For instance, Rolston cites with evident approval the following case. In the winter of 1981-82, the bighorn sheep of the Yellowstone National Park caught conjunctivitis. The park officials, Rolston notes, judged that "the disease was natural and should be left to run its course," despite knowing that many of the herd would die if not treated.¹⁴ The decision not to intervene here was not based, it seems, upon an inability to treat the sheep effectively, but on the sense that in the long run, the natural order would hit upon some optimal outcome by the working out of its own processes. A host of philosophically charged issues arise at this point, among them the importance of sentience as a criterion of value, and the relationship between our dealings with the natural world and our dealings with one another in the realm of "culture." But here I note simply that Rolston's judgement, and the judgement of the park officials, seems to reflect a

much more affirmative understanding of the behaviour of the natural world, even in cases of disease and suffering, than the views I recorded just now. This suggests that we should take seriously the possibility of some kind of affinity between ecology, understood in a broad, Rolstonian sense, and natural theology. I want now to explore this possibility in rather more detail.

2. Towards an ecological natural theology

Rolston's writings contain a wealth of material which is relevant to this general topic. Indeed, just about everything he says has some bearing upon it. So I shall have to be highly selective in this report on the implications of his views for the possibility of an ecologically informed natural theology. In general terms, Rolston's case for a positive valuation of the natural world has two foci: first of all, he requests a broadening of our perspective so that natural phenomena are considered in their ecosystemic context; secondly, and relatedly, he invites us to develop new value concepts for the purpose of understanding the richness of the natural world. These two themes take us back to the holism and non-anthropocentrism of his perspective. His desire to understand natural phenomena in a broader context flows from a holistic conception of their significance; and the desire to frame new categories of value is related to his sense that our existing categories are rooted in specifically human forms of value, or at any rate in the values which we associate with sentience.

Turning first of all to the question of holism, Rolston argues that the Darwinian paradigm is not so much mistaken as partial. Once we extend our focus away from the individual creature, beset by problems of predation and competition, towards its setting within an ecosystem, we will find that new forms of "order," "harmony," and "stability" come into view. "In post-Darwinian nature," Rolston remarks, "we looked for these values in vain, while in ecological description we now find them; yet the earlier data are not denied, only redescribed or set in a larger ecological context."¹⁵ There are many examples of this general approach in Rolston's work. Here are a few. For instance, from a purely local perspective, it may seem wasteful that most species produce a surplus of young. But viewed in ecosystemic context, this surplus appears, according to Rolston, as a necessary condition of mutational advance: granted that no species can expand in numbers indefinitely, there must be a surplus of young if there is to be selection across mutants; and in turn, it is only if there is selection in relation to mutants that a species will be able to track effectively changes in its environment, and to contribute towards the evolution of more complex life forms.¹⁶ Moreover, Rolston suggests, the surplus is not wasted for a further reason, because it sustains the lives of other creatures. What is waste in the rabbit life stream is a resource in the coyote life stream; and in general, Rolston suggests, "wherever there is available free energy and biomass, a life form typically evolves to exploit those resources." Thus "Nature's exuberance," he writes, "is also nature's economy."¹⁷ These observations surely go some way towards tempering Hume's judgement that the "great vivifying

principle" of nature is indifferent to the needs of creatures; on the contrary, it appears that there is a systematic connection between nature's abundance and her ability to sustain existing life forms, and to evolve new life forms which are capable of flourishing in their environments.

Turning to another example, pain may appear to be a further instance of nature's disregard for her offspring. Again, on Rolston's view, this impression changes when we enlarge our focus. Thus while it is true that in a particular instance, a creature may suffer and derive no benefit from its suffering, in general the evolutionary process will pare away any capacity for pain that does not confer some sort of benefit on average to the many members of the species. Moreover, on Rolston's view, pain, like the surplus of young, proves to be related to the tendency of the evolutionary process to evolve more sophisticated life forms. Thus he writes that:

In natural history - whatever might be true in other imaginable worlds - the pathway to psychosomatic consciousness, the only kind of experience we know, is through flesh that can feel its way through the world.¹⁸

Again, these remarks must count against, even if they do not dispel altogether, the thought that nature is "cruel." On this view the pain creatures undergo plays a systemic role, in preserving the species, and in permitting the emergence of new and higher life forms.

So far I have considered the bearing of Rolston's work on the charge that nature is wasteful and cruel, and in these respects indifferent to the flourishing of life. The other charge which figured prominently in our earlier discussion was that nature is "blind," and therefore develops haphazardly, if at all. Of course, this thought is connected with the discovery that genetic mutations are random. Here again, Rolston accepts these claims as a description of individual things, but reaches a different evaluative conclusion, by setting these localised truths within a broader context. In particular, he proposes that mutational randomness favours non-randomly the development of better adapted life forms. Thus he writes that:

We do not here wish to cast out the randomness (or the conflict); we want to recast it in a bigger picture. Randomness is not valueless noise in the system. Rather, embedded within systemic principles of order, it is a value generator, a value transformer.¹⁹

Moreover, the random searching out of new adaptational possibilities is selectively focussed. As Rolston observes: "Only those variations are tested and selected that are more or less functional. The organism typically only probes the nearby space for possible directions of development."²⁰ This suggests not so much a chaotic lurching from one possibility to another, as a systematic examination of the various potentialities of the natural order. Far from being unreliable as a problem solving method, mutational variation has even been taken as a model for vari-

ous computer based problem solving strategies.²¹ Of course, this leaves the objection of Gould and others that the whole process is rather ad hoc. But on this point Rolston counters that the historical character of evolutionary development is itself valuable: indeed "it is more valuable," he writes, "to have history plus value as storied achievement than to have 'elegant' optimal value solutions without history, autonomy, or adventure."²²

Evidently, there is a mass of material here which is broadly relevant to the question of the goodness of the natural world, and relevant in particular to the thought that it is not fundamentally wasteful, cruel or (in any pejorative sense) blind. Rolston's approach to these topics is naturally viewed as a generalisation of the familiar procedure of theodicians, in so far as he seeks to situate evils or disvalues within integral wholes which are overall good. But of course, his system is also non-anthropocentric; on this view, the process of soul-making is not limited to the transformation of human beings, but extends to the natural world in general. Thus pain and death, when understood ecosystemically, prove to be a condition not merely of renewed human life, but of the flourishing of new life forms. At times, the Hickian overtones of this approach are unmistakable. For instance in his discussion of the pasqueflower, Rolston writes that "the floral diversification of our temperate climates is very much a product of winters alternating with summers. This pasqueflower springs forth in its particular form of early beauty [the time of its flowering is recorded in its name] as much because of winter as to spite it; it buds and blossoms because it is blasted."²³ And unusually, he permits himself to note the obvious theological resonances of this fact (implied of course in the flower's name). "The way of Nature," he comments, "is, in this deep and earthen sense, the Way of the Cross."²⁴

By showing how we might generalise the soul-making theme, Rolston's work also throws at least some light on what has proved to be a celebrated test case for theodicy in recent discussion. William Rowe suggests that the agonising death of a fawn following a forest fire (caused by a lightning strike) is apparently pointless.²⁵ Rolston offers this ecosystemic understanding of fire:

Consider how our attitudes toward fire have changed since being informed by ecology. Fire sanitizes and thins a forest, releasing nutrients from the humus back into the soil. It resets succession, opens up edging, initially destroys but subsequently benefits wildlife. It regenerates shade intolerant trees.

And he concludes that "the temporary upset is integral to the larger systemic health."²⁶ Of course, this is hardly a decisive refutation of Rowe's case. We may want to ask: granted that fires can benefit a forest, why should deer have to be exposed to fire? Or again and more fundamentally: granted that various benefits for the wider ecosystem follow on from the particular incident Rowe describes, is there not a possible world in which deer are exposed to fire but do not suffer, and even survive? This question of whether the values and disvalues which Rolston under-

stands holistically are bound together by relations of logical necessity, or only by relations of contingent, natural necessity, is too large an issue to be pursued here. But I venture the view that we cannot confidently say that the connections in question are not broadly speaking logical. After all, recent developments in cosmology have drawn our attention to the delicate relationship between the large-scale character of the universe and the possibility of its giving rise to life. And this discovery should make us wary of supposing that we can coherently envisage a material world in which sentient things behave in a broadly regular way, in accordance with their natures, but in which deer (or their counterparts) are not burned, or do not suffer when burned.²⁷

So far I have been talking about the holistic dimension of Rolston's approach to the value of the natural world. The second general strategy which Rolston commends, as a means to understanding the value of nature properly, is a re-thinking of our value concepts. Of course, this further strategy is related to the first. It is because we are not used to thinking ecosystemically that our existing value concepts lead us to understate the goodness of the world in various respects, and in particular to overlook the goodness which attaches to ecosystemic wholes.²⁸ I shall give just one example of the stretching of our value concepts that is needed, on Rolston's account.

Rolston notes the common view that the natural world is in general beautiful, in a pictorial sense. (The tradition of landscape painting is one obvious manifestation of this sort of response to nature.) But he goes on to note that this claim can be challenged, since any given landscape will be full of dying and disfigured things. Surely it is difficult to uphold the claim that nature is in general beautiful once these further features are brought into view? Characteristically, Rolston's reply to this challenge invokes the ecosystemic perspective. Decay and predation, and pain, are all ecosystemic preconditions of various forms of flourishing. Thus "ugliness, though present at times in particulars, is not the last word. Realists with a 'depth' past a 'flat' vision can 'see' the time line as well as the ugly space immediately present; they know that regenerative forces are already present, that over time nature will bring beauty out of this ugliness, and that this tendency is already present and aesthetically stimulating now."²⁹ Thus our pictorial sense of beauty is only partially adequate to the beauty of nature; seeing this beauty requires an enlarged, ecosystemic aesthetic sensibility. Clearly, this sort of understanding of the value of nature, one which does not gloss over the suffering and ugliness of the world, but sets it in an ecosystemic context, is not merely Panglossian. As Rolston notes, the world is not a "jolly" place, and if it is beautiful, its beauty is of a "somber" kind.³⁰

Rolston's suggestion that our value concepts are sometimes inadequate for the purpose of mapping the value of nature carries a further implication which has some relevance for our discussion. What if we should find that in some respect we simply cannot value the world? Rolston's approach implies that this failure may reflect not so much an inadequacy in nature as an inadequacy in our concepts. (There are echoes here of course of Wykstra's reply to Rowe's problem in relation

to the suffering fawn; analogously, we may say that our failure to see any value in the fawn's suffering is unsurprising, even supposing there is such value, given our history of needing to reform our concepts when trying to understand the value of nature.)³¹ In view of his own experience of uncovering new forms of value through the closer study of nature, Rolston finds himself reluctant to admit that his failure to find the world valuable in a given respect clearly indicates a failure in nature. Thus he reflects on the limitations of the ecosystemic method - thus far - in these terms:

We shall surely not vindicate the natural sequence in every detail as being productive of ecosystemic health, and therefore we cannot simplify our ethic to an unreflective acceptance of what naturally is the case. We do not live in Eden, yet the trend is there, as ecological advance increasingly finds in the natural given stability, beauty, and integrity, and we are henceforth as willing to open our concepts to reformation by the world as to prejudge the natural order.³²

The implication of Rolston's position here is perhaps rather that we do not clearly live in Eden - but might do so, for all we can tell.

So far I have been arguing that Rolston's holism and his ecosystemic (non-anthropocentric) conception of value provide a useful framework for re-thinking certain familiar issues to do with the goodness of the world. This framework is particularly relevant to discussion of a generalised form of the problem of evil, one which finds the natural world deficient in the ways we have noted. So far as I can see, it does not lend itself directly to an argument from design; for instance, it does not, without further elaboration, establish the improbability of this state of affairs independently of contrivance or knowing guidance of some sort. It offers rather a basis for the view that the natural world is consonant with a theistic scheme, rather than requiring to be explained in those terms.³³ Nonetheless, this discussion remains particularly relevant to a natural theology grounded in the argument from design in so far as that argument rests on the claim that the world is manifestly good, and not merely on the claim that it is not manifestly bad.

I turn now to the second of the general themes I identified at the beginning of this discussion, namely the issue of why we should fail to discern in full the value of the world, if we do. I have already noted one approach to this question which is suggested by Rolston's work, namely the thought that our value concepts fail to register certain systemic features of the world's goodness. But there is a further line of reflection in Rolston's writings which can usefully be brought to bear on this issue.

3. Failing to see the value of the world

To understand the value of nature, it is necessary then to be ecologically informed. But in Rolston's view, it is necessary moreover to have extensive first-hand experience of nature. So as with other spheres of evaluative judgement, it seems that making appropriate value judge-

ments in relation to nature depends not just, nor even primarily, upon having a relevant body of theory, but upon close familiarity with a range of particular cases. Hence Rolston can write that: "The recommendation that one ought to value these events [in nature] follows from a discovery of their goodness in place, which is not so much by argument as by adventure that experiences their origins, structures, and environmental locations."³⁴ So here is a further reason why some of us fail to appreciate fully the value of nature: we may be lacking not only in the requisite ecological theory, but in relevant experience.

Moreover, Rolston is clear that such experiences have a profound importance in determining our sense of ourselves and the significance of human life. In fact, on Rolston's account, this particular sphere of evaluative experience is not really optional, for purposes of developing fully as a human being. Thus he notes that our experiences of nature are recreational in the deepest sense:

Something about a herd of elk grazing beneath the vista of wind and sky, or an eroded sandstone mesa silhouetted against the evening horizon, re-creates us.³⁵

The ability of nature to play this re-creating role is rooted in our evolutionary past. As Rolston notes: "Given evolutionary theory, genetics, biochemistry, and more lately, sociobiology, it is difficult to think that our emotions have not been shaped to fit us for the natural environment."³⁶ Accordingly, there are occasions when our felt affinity with certain scenes or situations in nature seems to amount to a biological reflex.³⁷ However, it is also clear that on Rolston's view, this re-creation of the self through its exposure to the natural world is a quasi-moral achievement. Thus it needs to be worked at, and requires the kind of self-emptying that we associate with moral insight. I want now to elaborate a little on how experience of nature can play this role.

In a memorable passage, Iris Murdoch writes of how observing a scene from nature can liberate a person from egocentric concerns:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.³⁸

This is the sort of experience that Rolston seems to have in mind when he supposes that experiences of nature can contribute towards a morally significant redefinition of the self's concerns. On Rolston's view too, this sort of self-transcendence requires a sensitivity to the worth of things in themselves, quite apart from their ability to further the projects of the egocentric self.³⁹ Thus he writes that:

Wild nature is a place of encounter where we go not to act on it, but to contemplate it, drawing ourselves into its order of being, not drawing it into our order of being.⁴⁰

It is perhaps significant that Rolston talks here of “drawing ourselves” into an appreciation of the intrinsic worth of nature, implying that this sort of appreciation may well require effort and a training of our powers of attention. (By contrast, the particular example I have cited from Murdoch suggests a spontaneous response.) At this juncture, Rolston characteristically asks for an ecosystemic reworking of another of our value concepts, this time that of the self. Thus he writes that in such experiences of nature, “the ‘self’ has been so extended as to be ecosystemically redefined.” Hence: “The human welfare which we find in the enriched ecosystem is no longer recognizable as that of anthropocentrism.”⁴¹

So on Rolston’s view a proper appreciation of the value of nature depends upon some familiarity with relevant ecological theory, and upon a willingness to immerse ourselves in experience of nature, and lastly and most challengingly upon the willingness to allow our sense of self to be stretched by coming to recognise the inherent value of natural things. Accordingly, the failure to appreciate the value of nature may arise from a failure in any of these respects. But in this connection, I want to stress the importance of the final condition of proper evaluative insight: the ability to escape to some extent from the egocentric perspective. The implication of Rolston’s view here is that it is unsurprising that often enough we do not fully grasp the value of the natural world, because doing so would require something akin to a moral conversion. Indeed, this conversion is if anything more radical than the conversion which is (directly) relevant in our relations with other human beings, in so far as the natural world often presents itself as a threat to our well-being. Thus he writes that:

That we should struggle against storm and winter is not here denied, nor that we may need to oppose wolves and thistles, rattlesnakes and the malaria mosquito. But we add that we can respect the alien not only in its autonomous otherness, but even in its stimulus, provocation, and opposition.⁴²

As Murdoch’s example indicates, the capacity for this sort of self-transcendence while it is directly relevant to our relations with the natural world, also carries indirectly implications for our relations to one another, by helping us to relativise the egocentric perspective.

Conclusions

I have tried to show how the holism and non-anthropocentrism of Rolston’s environmental ethics throw into new relief certain issues which are of foundational importance for natural theology. Notably, they offer a new vantage point upon the goodness of the natural world,

and upon the question of why we may sometimes struggle to recognise the full extent of its goodness. I do not suggest that invoking Rolston's account clearly settles these questions in favour of the natural theological perspective. It does not. But it supplies a range of data and conceptual resources which are of fundamental relevance to these matters.

Clearly, a more detailed incorporation of Rolston's approach within a natural theology would need to address a range of issues which I have only touched upon, if I have mentioned them at all. Some philosophical critics will press the question of whether Rolston's value system is excessively consequentialist, in trading off the well-being of (current) individuals against those of species, and those of species against those of ecosystems. At any rate, we will certainly want some assurance that his evaluational holism in the natural sphere will not spill over into a kind of totalitarianism in the domain of interpersonal relations.⁴³ On the other side, more radical environmentalists will maintain that Rolston has conceded too much to the anthropocentric viewpoint, by allowing that "the highest value attained in the system is lofty individuality with its subjectivity, present in vertebrates, mammals, primates, and preeminently in persons."⁴⁴ His view is also open to theological critique of course. Some will find that his thoroughgoing affirmation of the natural world is inconsistent with Christian teaching, because it does not take seriously enough the doctrine of the Fall, or does not leave open the possibility that the natural world will be subject to radical improvement at the eschaton.⁴⁵ In my own view, Rolston's approach is not overthrown by any of these considerations, though it may need fine-tuning in the light of such concerns. At the least, it offers a way of broadening traditional philosophical discussions of the problem of evil, in a way which takes account of disvalues which are independent of any hurt done to human beings, and draws attention to the multiple achievements - conceptual, experiential, and (broadly speaking) moral - which are presupposed in any informed response to these issues.⁴⁶

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NOTES

1. By the "natural world" I mean this planet excluding human beings and their artefacts. Of course, there is not much in our world that is "natural" in the sense of being in no way affected by human beings; in my usage, the natural world will include things which are affected by human beings, without merely being human artefacts.

2. Stephen Clark notes some of the difficulties in this association of Christian belief and environmental depredation: "Global Religion," in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment*, ed. by Robin Attfield and Andrew Belsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 113-118.

3. The point is noted by Francisco Benzoni in "Rolston's Theological Ethic," *Environmental Ethics* 18 (1996), p. 339.

4. However evaluative notions quickly arise here; after all, the point of developing an ecological understanding is to be clear about the conditions

of flourishing of ecosystems. See also the quotation from Rolston which follows.

5. *Philosophy Gone Wild* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), p. 20.
6. I have taken these terms from J.D. Barrow and F.J Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), p. 29. A similar distinction can be found in T. McPherson, *The Argument from Design* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 8.
7. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. by Henry Aiken (New York: Hafner Press, 1948), p. 79. The second passage is quoted in Rolston, "Disvalues in Nature," in *The Ethics of the Environment*, ed. by A. Brennan (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1995), p. 104.
8. "Nature," in *Collected Works* (University of Toronto Press, 1963-77), vol. 10, p. 398. The text is quoted by Rolston in "Disvalues in Nature," p. 87. Similarly he remarks that: "In sober truth, nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another, are nature's everyday performances": "Nature," p. 385. The passage is quoted in *Philosophy Gone Wild*, p. 39.
9. "Is Life Worth Living?," in *The Will to Believe* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896), pp. 43-44. Rolston cites the passage in *Philosophy Gone Wild*, p. 30.
10. See his letter to Joseph Dalton Hooker, quoted in Rolston, "Disvalues in Nature," p. 87. As Rolston notes, Darwin's assessment of the process is not always so bleak.
11. *The Panda's Thumb* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), pp. 20-21. The passage is cited in Rolston, *Science and Religion. A Critical Survey* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), p. 128.
12. *What Mad Pursuit: A Personal View of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), p. 6, cited in Rolston, "Disvalues in Nature," p. 96.
13. It is significant that even Demea takes issue with Philo's judgement here (and not only Cleanthes, whose theism is grounded in the design argument): *ibid.*, p. 80. Of course, it has been supposed that even the evidential form of the problem of evil lacks any cogency because it rests upon an implausible assessment of our ability to discern the divine purposes in creation. See Stephen Wykstra, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'," in *The Problem of Evil*, ed. by M. M. Adams and R. M. Adams (Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 138-160. I do not have space to pursue this interesting thesis here.
14. See Rolston's *Environmental Ethics: Duties to and Values in the Natural World* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), p. 53. In fact, some 300 sheep, 60 % of the herd, died as a result.
15. *Philosophy Gone Wild*, p. 20.
16. *Science and Religion*, p. 136.
17. "Disvalues in Nature," p. 106.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
19. *Environmental Ethics*, p. 207.
20. "Disvalues in Nature," p. 99.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 96.
23. *Philosophy Gone Wild*, p. 261.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 261. See also Rolston's "Does Nature Need to be Redeemed?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 29 (no.2, 1994), especially pp. 218-221. I am grateful to Professor R.J. Berry for drawing my attention to this reference.

25. "The Problem of Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism," in *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 129-130.

26. *Environmental Ethics*, p. 242.

27. The same sort of point is made in Alan Olding, *Modern Biology and Natural Theology* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 156-158, and 162-164, and in Peter Van Inwagen, *God, Knowledge and Mystery. Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 79-81.

28. Rolston distinguishes between intrinsic, instrumental and systemic value. The first is not confined to sentient life forms; for instance, it extends also to plants. The value of the system is not reducible to that of its products; its creativity has an inherent value. Rolston proposes that: "The objective, systemic process is an overriding value, not because it is indifferent to individuals but because the process is both prior to and productive of individuality": *Environmental Ethics*, p. 191.

29. *Environmental Ethics*, pp. 240-241.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

31. See Wykstra's essay cited above.

32. *Philosophy Gone Wild*, p. 26.

33. In fact, there are other themes in Rolston's work which point in the direction of a design argument, for instance his discussion of the tendency of the evolutionary process to generate higher forms of life; but that is to raise a further topic. See *Science and Religion*, pp. 115-124.

34. *Philosophy Gone Wild*, p. 133.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 249.

37. The biophilia hypothesis provides a striking example of how this general thesis might be developed. See *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, ed. by Stephen Kellert and Edward Wilson (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1993). I discuss the hypothesis in "Beauty, Providence and the Biophilia Hypothesis," *Heythrop Journal* 38 (1997), pp. 283-299.

38. *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 84.

39. Compare Murdoch's comment that: "we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones and trees": *ibid.*, p. 85.

40. *Philosophy Gone Wild*, p. 43.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 24. Rolston also has interesting things to say about how the solitariness of encounters with nature is a precondition of genuine community: *ibid.*, p. 228.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 88. He goes on to compare this sort of respect to love of enemies in the human sphere.

43. Rolston does offer this sort of assurance. See his distinction between nature and culture in *Environmental Ethics*, pp. 181-182.

44. *Ibid.* p. 191. See Arne Naess's reference to ethicists who refuse "to acknowledge that some life forms have greater or less intrinsic value than others": "The Deep Ecological Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects," in *The Ethics of the Environment*, p. 166. It is clear from this paper that Naess envisages a more radical restructuring of human relations to the natural world than does Rolston.

45. Compare Stephen Clark's remark that sacramental theism "declares, almost above all, that although 'Nature' is to be respected, it is not now exactly as it should be": *op. cit.*, p. 127. In fact, I think Rolston does hold that "wild nature" is open to improvement; he just doubts whether we are capable, in many cases, of contributing to its improvement. Rolston identifies a

limited role for “management” of wilderness in *Conserving Natural Value* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 187.

46. I would like to thank Professor Rolston for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and for finding time to talk to me about his work during a busy visit to Edinburgh. I am also grateful to members of the King’s College, London, philosophy of religion seminar for their comments on the paper.