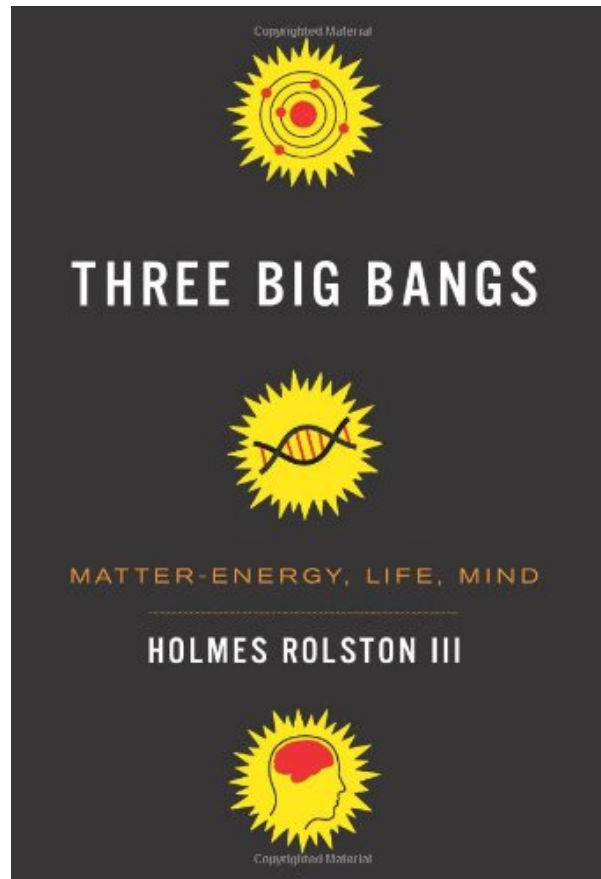
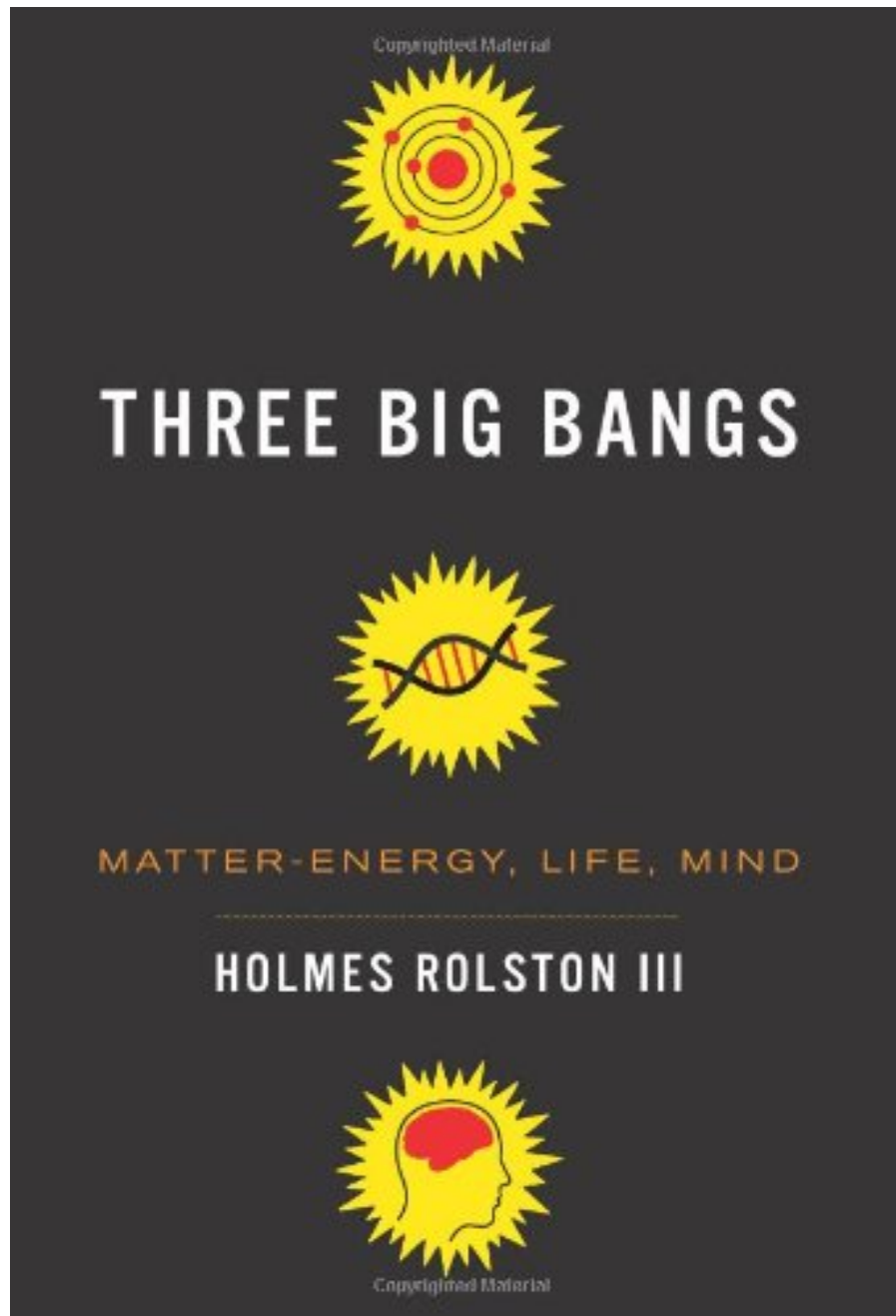


THREE BIG BANGS: MATTER-ENERGY, LIFE, MIND BY HOLMES ROLSTON III



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An important contribution not only to the field of science and religion but also to the wider world of intellectual culture. This readable work gives evidence not only of Rolston's breadth of learning in the various sciences, ranging from cosmology and biology to neuroscience, but also of his expertise in the philosophy of science and theology, qualities very few scientific thinkers can claim to possess.

(John F. Haught, Georgetown University, author of Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life)

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mind. The key idea is that the universe is ripe with information, and information is what is both reaped and released in the rarity of life and the uniqueness of humanity. This book is not only a scientifically updated guide for the perplexed. It is masterly written, and involves the reader in an open inquiry about the meaning in science as well as beyond science.

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(Choice)

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By dividing the creation of matter, energy, life, and mind into three big bangs, Holmes Rolston III brings into focus a history of the universe that respects both scientific discovery and the potential presence of an underlying intelligence. Matter-energy appears, initially in simpler forms but with a remarkable capacity for generating heavier elements. The size and expansion rate of the universe, the nature of electromagnetism, gravity, and nuclear forces enable the the explosion of life on Earth. DNA discovers, stores, and transfers information generating billions of species. Cognitive capacities escalate, and with neural sentience this results in human genius.

A massive singularity, the human mind gives birth to language and culture, increasing the brain's complexity and promoting the spread of ideas. Ideas generate ideals, which lead life to take on spirit. The nature of matter-energy, genes, and their genesis therefore encourages humans to wonder where they are, who they are, and what they should do.

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Wonder in All the Wrong Places

By Michael H. Shenkman

I too appreciate Rolston's notion of three "Big Bangs," as cited by another reviewer. I also appreciate Rolston's sense of wonder at it all. I think at bottom, this is the only appropriate response to the marvel presented by these three truly fabulous events (I choose those words advisedly).

I mark the book down, to three stars (to "I liked it," but no more) because of Rolston's evasion of some seminal principles in physics, biology and information theory that would have more properly specified the wonder, and leave less of a temptation to truck with creationists or design ideologues. Rolston does not do this, but he gives credence to their rantings, and that is no service at all.

The main evasion is that of a main tenet of self-organization: that diversification and increasing complexity proceed to the maximum allowed by (1) available, suitable energy and (2) the openness of the milieu for further elaboration. This proposed "fourth law of thermodynamics," (See Kauffman, *Investigations*, p. 151) demonstrates how once set in motion, processes such as autocatalysis and symbiosis (both mentioned, but not elaborated upon by Rolston) explode geometrically with explorations of the "adjacent possible," where unprecedented eventuations can take place. The three big bangs are all within this "possibility space" at these rates of variation.

The second notion given short shrift comes from physics: that of symmetry breaking. In this idea, accommodated variations of a state accumulate and interact until a point is reached at which a breach or a bifurcation occurs. After this event, new and novel courses of development ensue, developments that are not "predicted," but are within a realm of "possibility," to the extent that they take up position in the "adjacent possible," and then proceed along their proliferating and elaborating paths according to Kauffman's fourth law of thermodynamics.

By skipping over doing the hard work of explaining these seminal ideas, Rolston keeps the findings of the science (that he countenances) within in reach of the nut cases.

I assure the reader that the two notions I have cited and that he evades do nothing to dispel the wonder of what has ensued (see Kauffman's *"Reinvention of the Sacred"*) (also, Rolston mentions Kauffman, but does not cite the specific conditions at which Kauffman cites his sense of wonder: i.e., that we live in a universe that embraces, encompasses and elaborates on symmetry breaks and increasing complexity). I assure the reader that by studying the implication of these notions the reader will only arrive at a source of wonder that remains firmly within the confines of the elaboration of the human ability to cognize, organize and live within larger, more complex, more force/energy/potency-based regimes of occurrence -- all of which can be explored whenever our facultative capabilities have been raised to the level needed to grasp them. With the notions of Kauffman's fourth law and symmetry breaking we come away with a source of wonder that we can live in and act upon and so can feel our engagement IN the great epic of the universe, and not be a residue of some other great force's design. We will be no less humble by realizing this, but we will be fully ALIVE -- and that, I think is the point (not that we are some special, chosen being designated by a great master to perform some task).

Thankfully Rolston does not give in to creationist credos, but he does succumb to the notion that something is at work, and that something's name begins with a capital letter.

I would not use this book in a course on current, critical thinking for that reason, although I would cite Rolston as the "author" of the cool name he gives to the cosmically epochal symmetry breaks science has noted and proposed.

I would, however, base a course on the works of Stuart Kauffman. Begin with "The Reinvention of the Sacred" and then proceed to "Investigations." Waldrop's "Complexity" provides excellent background to this path-making mode of thought.

It is too bad Rolston backs away from this salient and ensconces himself in the comforts of agnostic ideology.

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Metaphysics of Optimism

By R. Walter

Thinking of life as beginning with a bang, especially placing it in comparison to "the" big bang, is simply misleading in my opinion. Evolution occurred by a series of accidental starts, setbacks, and stops over nearly unimaginably long periods of time. Because time is required to filter out the deleterious mutations, instantaneous evolution is not possible.

The development of mind, while occurring on a timescale more compressed than evolution, has suffered as many setbacks and accumulated as much 'junk' as DNA. That we are even moving 'forward' when threatened by overpopulation and warming seems optimistic. Unlearning our mistakes takes a toll in too many intellectual endeavors and is getting worse.

I would recommend any would be reader to consider Nick Lane's 'Life Ascending' instead.

3 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Balanced and up-to-date reading

By Vesa Annala

This is the second book I have read by Holmes Rolston. The first one was "Genes, Genesis and God". "Three Big Bangs" is good reading for everyone who are seeking a balanced and learned treatment of the origin of universe, life and mind. Rolston takes up the question of information as one of the big question we are facing today. What is the source of information? "The biological sense of information is proactive, agentive. What makes the critical difference is not the matter, not the energy, necessary though they are, what makes the critical difference is the information breakthrough with resulting capacity for agency, for doing something," he writes (p. 43-44). The materialistic dogma (philosophical naturalism) ala Carl Sagan that "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be" is getting it's deathblow.

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