

## JOHN PASSMORE ON THE IDEA OF MULTIPLICATION AND POLLUTION: A CRITICAL REVIEW.

**Eke, Nathaniel**

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

**Prof. T. V. Ogan**

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria.

**Okere, Zephrianus Chiagoziem**

Department of Educational Foundations, School of General Education, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education Owerri, Imo State.

### Abstract

*Alarmed by the environmental degradation in the 70's, John Passmore was quick to identify what he calls ecological problems which was caused by the Western Traditions that sees man as a despot to nature instead of a steward to nature. Pollution and multiplication (population growth) were among the ecological problems he identified in his quest to give a solution to the environmental degradation. While some environmental philosophers and environmentalists were of the view that population growth contributes to environmental pollution, Passmore argues differently by tracing the environmental pollution to post modernism.*

**Keywords:** Multiplication (Over population), Pollution.

## Introduction

Environmental degradation has been a source of worry and concern to the modern man. There are many factors that contribute to this palpable phenomenon in our world today. The unguarded and unethical actions of man contributed to environmental degradation and disaster. Pollution is part of the causes of environmental degradation. Its effects have caused damages to man and his environment with its attendant ethical implication. While some philosophical schools of thought argue that population growth is part of the causes of pollution others would have contrary opinion. Hence this work aims at bringing to lime light the philosophical arguments and ideas of John Passmore on the issue at hand.

John Passmore was among the environmental ethicists who were alarmed by Western Tradition of man's despotic attitude to the environment that contributed to environmental degradation. Some have attributed environmental pollution to population growth. While others argue that population growth has no negative effect on population. John Passmore in his work *Man's Responsibility for Nature* delved into the area of population growth. He, however, used the concept of "multiplication" in place of "population". Despite the fact that John Passmore believed that environmental degradation has human stamp on it, which made him to call for a new mentality and a new ethics as a way of assuaging the environmental menace and degradation. He strongly believed that the idea of multiplication may not necessarily contribute to population.

This work is meant to assess his position on population growth and pollution. His position is quite different from the common postulation that population growth forms a major cause of environmental pollution.

We shall look at the concepts as used in this work. We shall then analyze the position of Passmore on what he calls multiplication by which he argues that population growth is not the major cause of pollution.

## Explication of Concepts

### Multiplication (Over population)

According to Petersen (1972), Over-population refers to a population which exceeds its sustainable size within a particular environment or habitat. Over-population results from an increased birth rate, decreased death rate, the immigration to a new ecological niche with fewer predators, or the sudden decline in available resources. Therefore, overpopulation describes a situation in which a population in a given ecosystem limits the resources available for survival. George Morris (1988), equally defined overpopulation as the state of the population when there are more people than can live on earth in comfort, happiness, and health and still leave the world a fit place for future generations.

### Pollution

According to the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (6th ed.), the term *pollution* refers primarily to fouling of air, water, and land by wastes. In recent years it has come to signify a wider range of disruptions to environmental quality. Thus litter, billboards, and auto junkyards are said to constitute visual pollution; noise excessive enough to cause psychological or physical

damage is considered noise pollution; and waste heat that alters local climate or affects fish populations in rivers is designated thermal pollution.

Ezedike (2020) citing Srivastava, defined pollution thus;

As an undesirable change in the physical, chemical or biological characteristics of our air, water or land that may or will harmfully affect the life or create a potential health hazard and threaten the survival or activities of humans or other living organisms (Ezedike 2020, p.211).

He went further to buttress the fact that man plays a major role in causing this phenomenon. For him therefore, pollution is the introduction of noise, or harmful chemicals by humans to the environment, directly or indirectly, which produces such deleterious effects as damage to the quality of the environment and potential threat to the communities of life.

This definition offered by Ezedike helps us to see more clearly what we could call the moral implication of pollution in human existence since man as a unique being in the universe is acting unethically towards the environment which causes pollution.

### **Passmore on Pollution**

Before Passmore delved into the notion of pollution as a an ecological problem he observed abinitio the aim of his investigation thus he stated;

I have set out to consider whether Western civilization can, in principle, solve its ecological problems within the framework of its central traditions. A logically prior question, however, has to be asked: what constitutes ‘the solution of an ecological problem’? In this context, ‘ecological’ is used in a loose way, now current; a problem is ‘ecological’ if it arises as a practical consequence of man’s dealing with nature. So pollution, the depletion of natural resources, the extinction of species and the destruction of wilderness, the increase in human numbers- which I shall consider each in turn in the chapters which follow- all count as ‘ecological problems’. But in what sense do they present ‘problems’ and what would it be like to ‘solve’ them?(Passmore 1974, p. 43).

Passmore believes that to solve an ecological problem means to reduce the rate of incidence of a particular problem to a satisfactory level as to mitigate its severity. For instance to solve the problem of pollution is to make sure that pollution is reduced so as not to cause harm to the society. We shall therefore look at his idea of pollution as an ecological problem.

Passmore defined pollution in a way similar to how dirt is defined. Thus he posited that the classical definition of dirt is “matter in the wrong place”. That is Pollution can be said to be simply the process of putting matter in such a place in quantities that are too large. Or, more broadly, matter and physical processes – allowing, for our present purposes, that everyday distinction – since radiation and noise now commonly count as pollutants. In the right place, and in the right quantity, the substance of the process may not only be harmless but even beneficial; phosphate fertilisers are beneficial in a potato field but not in a lake of river, salt is harmless in the seas but not in irrigated fields (Passmore 1974).

For Passmore, there are three points that could make a matter wrong where it is kept and that would make it to be considered as pollution. First, it might be wrong aesthetically. Secondly, it might be wrong because it would be dangerous to human life. And thirdly, it might be wrong because it would become a threat to wild life and plants.

He believes that to solve this problem there is need to reduce quantity of matter in the wrong place Therefore, solving the problem of pollution, means reducing the flow of substances or processes into places which are wrong. To undertake this task successfully, one must first know what substances are in the wrong place only as a result of scientific and technological developments. We can solve our ecological problems only with the help of more science and more technology. But in the situation in which we now find ourselves, that is obviously the case. The scientist and the technologists first drew our attention to the ecological problems which confront us, and without their aid we cannot hope to solve them, even if they, in turn, cannot solve them by their own efforts (Passmore 1974).

John Passmore's analyses show that good scientific investigation needs to be put in place if pollution as an ecological problem can be solved. He opines thus,

More scientific investigation, then, is certainly needed. But, as we have already suggested, this investigation will sometimes have to assume a rather novel form. Any scientific contribution to the solution of ecological problems depends upon the discovery of relationships between physical processes which are ordinarily investigated by quite separate sciences. To appreciate the effects of nuclear fall-out, for example, it is necessary to investigate, first, the type of chemical substance a nuclear explosion releases; secondly, the mode of its distribution by atmospheric forces; thirdly, the manner in which it is taken up by the human body, including the body's genetic mechanisms. It is not the business of any one University department, to put the point crudely, to look at this whole complex of relationships, and what is not the business of any one department tends to get ignored. Everybody who writes about ecological problems is, in respect to certain of the topics he is discussing, an amateur. So far as the Western tradition discourages communication between specialties, it presents an obstacle to the adequate examination of ecological problems. Inter-disciplinary investigations are in this area not a luxury, but a necessity (Passmore 1974, p.48).

Having said this, Passmore knew the implication of using technology to prevent or eradicate pollution since any invention of new devices would amount to more pollution especially in the areas of manufacturing. He calls for prudence in the activities of man. For him, different areas of disciplines should be invoked while analyzing the whole situation of reduction of pollution. For Passmore, to give up taking any risks would be to give up acting. It is commonly believed that every action costs something and risks something. What can properly be demanded is not that men should cease to act in ways which involve ecological risks because there are not such ways, as matters now stand. Rather, we should take more account of ecological costs and benefits of our actions. And this means, once again, that they will have to make fuller use of rational Western-Type methods, cost-benefit analyses or decision-procedures (Passmore 1974).

Passmore however summarizes his anti-pollution measures by stating that to sum up a successful attack on pollution involves the solution of a great variety of problems, not only scientific and technological but moral, political, economic and administrative. Hence for him, we ought not to pretend to know the solution to a pollution problem until we know how to reduce the incidence of that form of pollution by the use of a method the costs of which are not greater than the resulting benefits, which is politically feasible, and which can be effectively administered without intolerable disadvantages, economic and social. Passmore further posits that the total agreement that a proposed solution is satisfactory is not to be expected; there will be disagreements about the costs and benefits and about political feasibility. The immediate moral problems are not, in the case of pollution overwhelming at least so far as we have yet explored them. Because there is a general agreement that nobody ought to be allowed to poison his neighbor (Passmore 1974).

Notwithstanding the analyses already made by Passmore he strongly believes that the problem of pollution is one that is not easy to tackle as may be thought. Hence he asserts that:

It would be quite foolish to be complacent about pollution, to suppose that its world-wide incidence is at all an easy problem to solve. If I spoke of it as the easiest of ecological problems to solve, this was not to suggest that it is easy. But it has in some measure been successfully tackled, and there is no reason to suppose that all that can be done has now been done. There is certainly nothing in the moral, the political or metaphysical tradition of the West to inhibit appropriate action (Passmore 1974, p. 72).

### **Passmore on Multiplication.**

On the idea of multiplication, which is also understood as population, Passmore began by criticizing the sarcastic expression of some ecologists who say “people are pollution”. He cited authors like P.R. Ehrlich who compared population bomb of human beings to cancer cells. Notwithstanding such criticism by Passmore, he also underscored the effects of human population on the environment. He observed that the negative effects of human existence to the environment cannot be over emphasized. Passmore observed that the origins of ecological destructiveness are so varied, therefore the reduction in the rate of population may not necessarily reduce the experience of pollution of the environment. Passmore argues that post modernism is the cause of pollution more than the human population. He therefore posited thus;

The precise importance of population growth as a source of ecological destruction is highly debatable. Barry Commoner has argued that the switch to synthetic, rather than population growth as such is largely responsible for the sharp post-war increase in pollution; Ehrlich remains convinced that population growth is the chief villain. We can safely go only this far: within a given system of production and consumption, with established techniques and social habits, an increase in population will intensify man’s ecological problem. It will be harder for him to find ways of disposing of his wastes, to cut down the rate of which he is depleting natural resources, to preserve areas of wilderness and the species which inhabit them. This is to even although a decline in the rate of population growth will not necessarily improve the situation in any of these aspects; it may be out-weighted by the

effects of increasing affluence or new technological innovation (Passmore 1974, p.128).

The aforementioned position of Passmore indicates that for him the new invention that new technologies have generated will go further to cause more harm and damage the ecosystem than the reduction in population.

After weighing the arguments of some experts who connect over population with lack of education or technological progress and that of those experts who counter such arguments Passmore was of the opinion that, a decline in the rate of population growth would not necessarily ease the problems of developing countries. But a high rate of growth accumulates these problems, makes them more difficult to solve, even if in principle it does not rule out their solution (Passmore 1974).

He further argued that decline in population rate whether in developing countries or in developed countries is not a magic cleanser. It is not a guarantee that there would be cleaner environment, cleaner schools and other public places. We can see in this argument of Passmore a preparatory ground for the enunciation of his new ethics as a way of eradicating the environmental problems and challenges.

Notwithstanding his position that reduction in the rate of population growth does not guarantee the eradication of environmental problem he is of the opinion that population simply cannot continue to increase at its present rate, that if it were to do so it would issue in a population which would be by any conceivable standards overcrowded, in which men would have neither room nor resources. The ultimate choice, as we said, lies between permitting population growth to be controlled by famine and disease or attempting deliberately to control it fully conscious of the fact that in that process we shall make serious mistakes in our estimates of future members and future needs, mistakes which by their very nature cannot be corrected overnight. And conscious too, that any reduction in rates of population growth has costs as well as benefits. He indicated that the quest for population reduction has some challengers or actors that one has to confront with first. He mentioned those challenges as “Ignorance, Prudishness, Religion, Ideology, Social Habits, Female servitude and moral sempls”. On the challenge of ignorance Passmore distinguished two types;

First, there is technological ignorance. Technologist, have yet to invent methods of birth control which are at once cheap, easy to use, reliable and devoid of side effects. No device at present in use combines these qualities to a degree sufficient to ensure the success of birth-control campaigns, especially in developing countries. The defects of any such device are sufficient to lend apparent justification to exaggeration by rumor-mongers, with results that are often disastrous (Passmore 1974, p.140).

Bearing in mind the period in which Passmore wrote his work and also this present time we can say the opinion of Passmore on technological ignorance may have been overtaken.

However, John Passmore opined to a second ignorance which he called *Individual Ignorance*. Like in the first type of ignorance, this second one is almost obsolete because

the awareness on the use of contraceptive has reached to a point where some religious bodies and more conservative groups have criticized its use and the orientation of people towards the patronage of things like that. However, there could be percentage of people who are still ignorant of the modern contraceptive devices. The view of Passmore may be insightful at the time he wrote his book in the early seventies, but I doubt if such position might be relevant now as it was then.

Prudishness is another factor considered by Passmore as a challenge. He said the Japanese government was able to use the media to create awareness on population control or reduction by spreading the use of contraceptives but societies that are more conservative would be slow in permitting such. He therefore stated that;

The success of Japanese campaign to lower the birthrate depended in large part on its capacity to use such media on television to offer explicit information about contraceptive methods. Such a degree of frankness is in mainly western societies not permissible even if some women's papers have now broken the prudishness-barrier. Those moralists who firmly believe for some reason totally obscure to me, that it is morally wrong accurately to describe the sexual act, even to those who are known to engage in such acts, they have the power to limit the effectiveness of contraceptive training. Their influence, for the moment at least, appears to be diminishing. But it would be foolish to ignore it; prudishness is still a potent force in the West as it also is in some Eastern societies. It might well revive, and prove to be an even more important obstacle to the communication of contraceptive information (Passmore 1974, p.141).

Does the opinion on the prudishness as held by Passmore still remain relevant in our present time? I doubt, at least to some extent in the larger society.

Passmore moreso mentioned religion as part of the challenges that population reduction has to grapple with. For him both Roman Catholic and Protestant orthodoxy agreed on one fundamental point. He therefore stated that the primary purpose of marriage in the words of the Roman Catholic Code of Canon Law is the procreation and education of children. This was linked with their attitude to sexual intercourse. That sexual act is dirty in itself and needs to be justified by being attached to an external purpose which is procreation. For him, this is a view one finds running through the Roman Catholic Church (Passmore, 1974).

Looking at this submission, the Christian religion stands against any kind of sexual relationship that does not gear towards marriage and consequentially promoting procreation. If the views of Passmore are correct, therefore reduction in population would be discouraged among the adherents of Christian religion. However, it is proper to distinguish between the Christian point of view on the issue of the use of Contraceptives and the birth-control. The Christian religion from the moral point advocates for total abstinence as a way of birth control as against the use of contraceptives which promotes immorality even among legally married couples.

Ideology is another factor considered as a challenge in population control by Passmore. For instance Marxism and nationalism has this myth that population, power and security are indissolubly linked.

Social Habit is another factor to be considered in the population reduction. However, Passmore sees religion and ideology in playing a major role in the determination of social habits. “Religion and ideology can reinforce social Habits; they can, for example, encourage or discourage marriage, they permit or forbid Polygamy (Passmore, 1974 p.151).”

Passmore went further to consider marriage as one of those social habits that can determine the population rate he uses Ireland as a case study.

Marriage is the most important social habit. The sharp decline in the Irish population in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries- it halved between 1841 and 1931- was only partly a consequence of emigration; Celibacy played an important part in it. The average number of children born to married women remained high, but the marriage rate was and remained low. This is a classical example of the Roman Catholic pattern with its alternatives of complete celibacy or a large family. But although the willingness to remain celibate was no doubt encouraged by the exceptionally puritanical character of Irish Catholicism, it primarily derived from Ireland’s economic situation. The Irish example is an unusually interesting one; it illustrates just how profoundly a combination of economic decline and rising manicheanism could affect the demographer’s projections (Passmore 1974, pp. 151-152).

The celibacy practice at a point in the western culture also declined because of capitalism and the social outcasts that associated with one remaining celibate. Another kind of social factor emerged within this period is that “it is wrong to have more children than one can support, but one can have as many children as one can afford. If too large a family on this criterion, was condemned as a ‘feckless’, too small a family was no less condemned as ‘selfish’” (Passmore 1974, p. 154).

Other factors like the economic situation of a given society also affect this reduction in population. Passmore indicated the role of women as another factor that affects or influences the idea of population-growth. Hence he stated that the Church, kitchen, children, as a description of the role of women is not an invention of Hitler’s but a typical Christian slogan. So formally was this attitude to women embedded in western thought that even the enlightenment did not, in general, seriously question it. Kept in her ‘rightful’ place by Rousseau, severally criticized by Diderot as an inferior sex who constantly sought to dominate over men, it was in Condorcet that she found a friend and a protector, one of the first to advocate full political rights for women. But not until more than a century later were these rights recognized in law. And the view that child-bearing is a woman’s spiritual vocation, her route to salvation, still finds a place in papal pronouncements (Passmore, 1974).

For me this pejorative idea of describing women from the point of view of ‘Church, kitchen and children role’ should be jettisoned in the present time when women have excelled in different areas of human endeavor: academics, politics and science.



Another factor mentioned by Passmore as a part of obstacle to population control is moral objection. He is of the opinion that these moral objections- often, but not necessarily, linked with religious beliefs. These morally objectionable methods could be related to issues like infanticide, abortion, contraception, sterilization periodic abstinence, total continence and legislative enactments.

### **Conclusion**

In his environmental ethical reflections John Passmore passionately argued that the Western Traditions contributed to the environmental degradation due to what he perceived as the despotic approach of man to nature. It is quite interesting to observe in his work that contrary to the ideas of authors like P. R. Ehrlich that population growth is the chief villain of pollution, Passmore argues that increasing affluence or technological innovation could weigh more on pollution than population growth. To abate this ugly trend Passmore advocates for new ethics which must be interdisciplinary.

### **References**

- Columbia Encyclopedia 6th Edition, (2000) Editor: Lagasse P. et al, Columbia University Press
- Ezedike, E. U., (2020). *Environmental Ethics And Sustainability. An Introduction to Environmental Philosophy*. Port Harcourt: University of Port Harcourt Press.
- Morris, G. (1988) *What is overpopulation?*  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12281798>
- Passmore, J. (1974) *Man's Responsibility for Nature*. New York: Scribners.
- Petersen B. (1972). *Reproductive efficiency and overpopulation*. *Population*. Review.  
<https://biologydictionary.net/overpopulation/>