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ETHICAL ISSUES IN JOHN PASSMORE'S IDEA OF CONSERVATION AND PRESERVATION

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Abstract
Conservationism and Preservationism are two opposing theories in environmental philosophical ethics. The adoption of each of these theories has its moral implication. John Passmore has different views of these two philosophical thoughts. Passmore being anthropocentric in his approach to environmental ethics would naturally incline to conservationism.

Keywords: Conservation, Preservation.

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Introduction

The concepts of conservation and preservation are prominent in Environmental Ethics. To the ordinary man on the street these concepts may be used interchangeably to mean the same thing but this is not tenable in the philosophy of environment. These concepts have drawn environmental ethicists into two major camps and also into different schools of thought.

In environmental philosophy, these concepts mean different things. Passmore in his quest to respond to the alarm orchestrated by the Western Tradition with regard to man's attitude to nature made his stand known on how one should understand and apply these concepts.

Explication of concepts

Conservation

Elimam (2021) defined conservation as the act of conserving or saving our natural resources through careful management. This means we can use the resources but wisely and responsibly. While for Mishra (2021) the term environmental conservation can as well be defined as anything we do to protect our planet and conserve its natural resources. In simpler terms we can express environmental conservation as the management of natural resources, in a planned way, to retain diversity and the balance in nature. It also includes optimum and judicious use of natural resources in such a way that the needs of the present generation are met and at the same time enough resources are available for the future generations to meet their needs. According to Joseph Desjardins (2013), the idea of conservation seeks to protect the natural environment from exploitation and abuse so that humans can receive greater long-term benefits from it.

Preservation.

Contrary to conservation, Joseph Desjardins (2013) opines that preservation seeks to protect the natural environment from any human activity that would disrupt or degrade it. For preservationist, their goal is to preserve the wilderness in its natural, unspoiled state. Ben .A. Minteer and Elizabeth .A. Corley (2007) in their qualitative study of the *Conceptual Foundations of Natural Resource Management* gave some definitions on preservation given by the individuals they interviewed. Some of the analysis of their respondents' discussion of the meaning of preservation also produced three broad and interlocking themes. First, many of those interviewed described preservation as keeping all ''hands off'' of nature (especially, in this context, the national forests). Second, some interviewees explained that they believed preservation was saving nature for no use (or passive use only). Third, many of the respondents disclosed that preservation was an attempt to prevent or arrest environmental change.

Passmore's Conservation and Preservation in Environmental Ethics

Environmental Conservation.

John Passmore began his inquiry into this concept by saying in a general sense what the term conservation means and later he indicated in the sense that he would be using this concept in his philosophical reasoning. Hence he posits that:

> To conserve is to save, and the word 'conservation' is sometimes so used as to include every form of saving, the saving of species from extinction or of wildernesses from land-

> developers as much as the saving of fossil fuels or metals for future use (Passmore 1974, p. 73).

Passmore had a different idea of conservation and how he wished to use the notion in his work. Thus, in accordance with what is coming to be the common practice, however, he tried to use the word *conservation* to cover only the saving of natural resources for later consumption. Where the saving is primarily a saving *from* rather than a saving *for*, the saving of species and wildernesses from damage or destruction, I shall speak, rather, of 'preservation' (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore observed that there are two main schools of thought, the conservationists and the preservationist. However, he is of the view that both can join hands to prevent the destruction of the environment and he went further to make a sharp difference between the two. He emphasized, that on a particular issue, conservationists and preservationists can no doubt join hands, as they did to prevent the destruction of forests on the West Coast of the United States. But their motives are quite different, that is, the conserver of forests has his eye on the fact that posterity too will need timber; the preserver hopes to keep large areas of forest forever untouched by human hands (Passmore, 1974).

Thinking about conservation, Passmore believes that all forms of anti-pollution measures are in a way a kind of conservation. Hence for him, one might describe anti-pollution measures as a form of conservation. For air, water, lakes, rivers, the sea, are all of them economic resources. To pollute them is to use them wastefully; to cause them seriously to deteriorate is to make it impossible for posterity to continue to civilize the world- or perhaps, to continue to survive (Passmore, 1974).

For Passmore, the programme of the conservationists has a moral question to grapple with. Thus, the conservationist programme confronts us with a fundamental moral issue: *ought we to pay any attention to the needs of posterity?* To answer this question affirmatively is to make two assumptions: firstly, that posterity will suffer unless we do so; secondly that if it will suffer, it is our duty so to act as to prevent or mitigate its sufferings. Both assumptions can be, and have been, denied. To accept them does not, of course, do anything to solve the problem of conservation, but to reject them is to deny that there is any such problem, to deny that our society would be a better one (morally better) if it were to halt the rate at which it is at present exhausting its resources. Or it is to deny this, at least, in so far as the arguments in favour of slowing-down are purely such facts as that the lowering of the consumption rate is one way of reducing incidence of pollution and that a high rate of consumption of metals and fossil fuels make it impossible to preserve untouched the wilderness in which they are so often located (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore brought to bear some of the ideas of the economist and nuclear physicists that the assumption that posterity will suffer unless the conservationist approach is not put in place will not hold water since for them inasmuch as there is science and technology to explore there is hope for posterity.

Passmore (1974) citing Norman McRae's writing in the *Economist*, which he states that with the aid of new sensors carried by satellites, which are now available to geologists, vastly increased reserves of fossil fuels and minerals will soon be available for man's use. Talking about fossil fuel in particular, he postulated that we will have an embarrassingly large fuel surplus by the year 2012, (even when so many calculations predict the exhaustion of

petroleum). 'And nuclear fusion should… give to mankind a virtually unlimited source of industrial power, with the oceans serving a boundless reservoir of fuel- even for a world population far larger and many times richer than today's. Passmore then stated that if there is a problem, on this view, it lies only in the disposal of wastes – a pollution rather than a conservation problem (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore went ahead to cite Alvin Weinberg, a nuclear physicist who seemed to have the same idea. Thus, "the problem of resource depletion is phony. With the exception of phosphorus, he tells us, 'the most essential resources are virtually inexhaustible" (Passmore 1974, p.76). Passmore also quoted a physical chemist Eugene Rabinowitch, as saying that "Modern science is showing us ways to create wealth from widely available raw materials – common materials, air, sea water- with the aid of potentially unlimited sources of energy (fusion power, solar energy)" (Passmore 1974, p. 76). Looking at the views of these experts above and if they are correct it is tempting to say according to Passmore, that "there is simply no 'problem of conservation".

Having x-rayed the views of the optimists on the issue that conservation may not be a problem to be considered, Passmore strongly believes that, "the uncertainties, however, remain. We can be confident that some day our society will run out of resources, but we do not know when it will do so or what resources it will continue to demand" (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore furthermore asks the question "should we then set aside the problem of resource depletion as a mere pseudo-problem, on the ground that so distant posterity is no concern of ours? Some philosophers' views on the question that Passmore raised appealed to him and he made reference to a hand full of them in his analysis. Thus he stated that;

> Kant thought it was impossible for us to do so. Human nature, he once wrote, is such that it cannot be indifferent even to the most remote epoch which may eventually affect our species, so long as this epoch can be expected with certainty. And other philosophers have demonstrated a similar concern for their most descendants. That the universe is running down, as the theory entropy was at one time interpreted as demonstrating, is a conclusion William James found intolerable; only a faith in God, he thought could deliver men from the nightmare of entropy. John Stuart Mill was reduced to a state of profound melancholy by the reflection that since there is a limited number of musical combinations, music will some day come to a standstill…Similarly, there are some who felt a sense of relief when astronauts reached the moon; it kept open the possibility, they thought, that men would one day be able to leave a planet made inhospitable by decay to continue the human race on some other shore. But for myself, I more than doubt whether a concern for the ultimate future of the human race forms an essential part of human nature. Kant notwithstanding, a man is not a lususnaturae or a moral monster because his sleep is undisturbed by the prospect that human beings will at some infinitely remote date run out of resources or that, however they behave, they will eventually be destroyed by cosmological convulsions (Passmore 1974, p. 78).

The question that will arise from these arguments is if human beings will some day run out of resource does it make sense then to preserve the environment for posterity? The reasonable thing to do would be to think of the population in existence now than to think of posterity which is far removed from us. This idea was a source of worry to John Passmore as well. Should we, then, move to the opposite extreme and leave the future to look after itself, concentrating all our efforts on making, the best we can today? Then it would not matter whether the scientists are right or wrong in predicting an early exhaustion of resources. For the future would be none of our business. This according to Matthew (6:34), is what Jesus taught: 'Take therefore no thought for tomorrow; for tomorrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' Nor is it by any means a preposterous attitude. We are confronted, in the present, by evils of every kind: in some of the developing countries by precisely the starvation, the illiteracy, the abysmal housing, the filth and disease which we fear for posterity; in many of our own cities by urban decay, impoverished schools, rising tides of crime and violence. It might well seem odd that the conservationist- and this is an argument not uncommonly directed against him- is so confident that he knows how to save posterity when he cannot even save his own contemporaries. Over a large part of the globe, too, the 'needs of posterity' are already being used to justify not only tyranny but conspicuous failure to meet the needs of the present. One can easily be led to the conclusion that it would be better to let tomorrow look after itself and to concentrate, as more than sufficient, upon the evils of our own time (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore examined so many arguments for and against the conservationist view that the resources should be conserved for posterity. Hence, he concluded that whether we approach the problem of obligations to posterity by way of Bentham and Sidgwich, Rawls or Golding, we are led to something like the same conclusion: our obligation are to immediate posterity, we ought to try to improve the world so that we shall be able to hand it over to our immediate successors in a better condition, and that is all. And this, of course, is a very familiar principle: it represents accurately enough what, over the last two centuries, men have seen as their duty to posterity as a whole, as distinct from objects of their special affection. This would still imply that we are called upon not to waste those resources our successors will certainly need. But it means that we ought not to act, out of concern for posterity's survival, in ways, which likely to destroy the civilized ideals we hope posterity will share with us. We should try so to act that our successors will not only be wholly without electricity, but we need not, should not, close down our civilization merely in the hope that a remote posterity will have some hope of surviving (Passmore, 1974).

On the concept of environmental conservation, Passmore, believes that the State has an important role to play in control of human activities that might have adverse effect to the society and our planet. At the administrative level, pollution and conservation run parallel. The choice, once more, lies between such devices as prohibition, taxation and subsidization: men can be prohibited from using particular resources, taxed heavily if they use them, subsidized if they use substitutes. Any estimate of the advantages and disadvantages of these methods must, as in the case of pollution controls, take into account their general political consequences as well as their administrative effectiveness (Passmore, 1974).

Environmental Preservation.

Passmore, in his intellectual inquiry into the ecological problems also looked at the notion of preservation. He gave his own definition of preservation and delineated the limit of his inquiry about the notion under study. Thus, by 'preservation', Passmore means that attempt to maintain in their present condition such areas of the earth's surface as do not yet bear the

obvious marks of man's handiwork and to protect from the risk of extinction those species of living beings which man has not yet destroyed. The word is often used rather more widely, as when we speak of 'preserving' buildings or villages, stretches of urbanized landscape like Tuscany, cities like Venice. At this present purpose, however, Passmore excluded from consideration the preservation of artifacts; the case for preserving them overlaps, but does not coincide, with the case for preserving what human beings have not created (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore's desire to limit the scope of his inquiry on preservation was generated from his thoughts that there is consensus on the need to preserve things like the artifacts but there is no consensus that the natural things like the wilderness and other untamed natural resources should not be destroyed. Therefore he opined that as we have seen, it is generally agreed that works of art ought not to be destroyed; there is no such agreement that is wrong to destroy wildernesses and undomesticated species. Should there be? This is the first issue we have to consider. We have to ask ourselves whether it constitutes a genuine problem that at ever increasing rate men are converting wildernesses into tamed landscape, into farms, towns, suburbs, tourist resorts and destroying the plants and animals which once shared the earth with him. Does it really matter that the moa no longer stalks the New Zealand plain? Does it really matter that tourist resorts have been set up in the remotest corners of New Caledonia? In his 'Song of the Redwood Tree' Walt Whitman asserts that the redwood tree must 'abdicate' his forest-kingship so that man can 'build a grander future'. What, if anything, is wrong with this attitude? (Passmore, 1974).

No doubt, Passmore's quest is to make a critical survey of the ethical implication of the actions of man with regard to these resources from the point of view of preservation. He is of the view that this question has two ways to look at it. First, whether these resources are instrumental or they have intrinsic value in themselves.

The preservation of the wilderness, swamps and other species has so many advantages from the economic point of view (providing food and lodging for valuable fish) and also from the scientific point of view (providing opportunities for scientific research work). Passmore observed there are some authors who actually inclined to preservation and also for their use in carrying out some activities. For Aldo Leopold who is a preservationist, "public wilderness areas are, first of all, a means of perpetuating, in sport form, the more virile and primitive skills in pioneering travel and subsistence". He also quoted G. P. Marsh who had preservationist orientation and yet opined that there should be room for recreation in the preserved environment, it is desirable that some large and easily accessible region of American soil should remain, as far as possible, in its primitive condition, at once a museum for the instruction of the student, a garden for the recreation of the lover of nature, and an asylum where indigenous tree… plant…beast, may dwell and perpetuate their kind (Passmore, 1974). If this position of Marsh is to be desired, it is also seen as having a preservation for the main purpose of instrumentality to man.

Others have opined that the preservation should be meant for life of solitude and contemplation of nature. The idea of the preservation for the main purpose of aesthetics was not left out of consideration. However, all these arguments for Passmore do not suffice to give moral background to preservation. And this is one of the reasons why arguments he posited would not be considered adequate by the more uncompromising preservationists (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore, recognized the importance of a new ethics towards nature as explored in the aforementioned arguments which incline to nature's instrumentality to man alone. Thus, it is at this point, for him that the cry grows loudest for a new morality, a new religion, which would transform man's attitude to nature, which would lead him to believe that it is intrinsically wrong to destroy species, cut down a tree, and clear wilderness (Passmore, 1974). Paul Taylor (1986) an environmental ethicist would disagree with Passmore, because for him, environmental ethics is not a subdivision of human ethics. It is an independent ethics within which wild communities of life deserve moral concern and consideration because they have a kind of value that belongs to them inherently. Taylor argued that humans should behave towards nonhuman organisms by four guided rules: nonmaleficence, non-interference, fidelity and restitutive justice.

Passmore opined that this kind of new morality is not going to be something conjured up or an ordinary hypothesis but rather a gradual change of attitude. Hence, he postulates;

> A morality, a religion, is not, as I have already argued, the sort of thing one can simply conjure up. It can only grow out of existing attitudes of mind, as an extension or development of them, just because, unlike a speculative hypothesis, it is pointless unless it actually governs man's conduct. But it may be true that in fact men's attitudes are already changing, that the 'new morality' would be a natural outcome of a change that is already in process, which can now be hastened by exhortation or argument (Passmore 1974, p. 111).

For Passmore, some of these 'new ethics' are already being practiced, this is because recently men now commonly recognize that they ought not unnecessarily to inflict pain on animals. This means that they recognize at least one point at which their relationships with nature are governed by moral principles. This has not always been so (Passmore, 1974).

Passmore was poised to discover the moral background for the call for preservation of Nature and we can see a 'seed' in the Old Testament Scripture, in Genesis (7:15) Jahweh is represented as telling Noah to take with him into the Ark two and two of all flesh, wherein is the breath of life- not only the 'clean', it will be observed, but even the 'unclean'. And this shows God's concern, so it has been argued, for the preservation of animal species."

For Passmore, there are more arguments in support of preservation like an argument from the point of view of diversity according to Thomas Aquinas even though highly criticized but it had its origin in the Old Testament argument taken from the Genesis account with regard to God's command to Noah. However, another good argument that might support the concept of Preservation would be the principle of never to destroy life. There is one other very broad principle which, were it acceptable, would certainly permit the conclusion that species ought never to be destroyed. For this asserts that men ought, in general, to reverence life. And this principle may be interpreted as forbidding the destruction not only of species but of any individual animal (Passmore, 1974).

As a way of concluding his inquiry on the idea of preservation, Passmore, after presenting many arguments for and against discovered there are many factors to be considered for taking a preservationist direction and these areas he analyzed must be borne in mind: "But this would be at a very great cost to civilization. For his part, Passmore agrees, in the long run, with the Stoics: if men were ever to decide that they ought to treat plants, animals, landscapes

precisely as if they were persons, if they were to think of them as forming with man a moral community in a strict sense, that would make it impossible to civilize the world – or, one might add, to act at all or even to continue living" (Passmore, 1974).

Conclusion

In John Passmore's ethical reflection on the environment, he argues that the conservationist and the preservationist should work jointly to prevent the environment from future damage. Passmore did acknowledge that his mission was like that of John Locke, "to be employed as an under-labourer in clearing ground a little and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge". This is the method applied by John Locke in his work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* he acknowledged at the beginning of his work that he was going to separate the opinion from knowledge. "It is therefore worthwhile to search out the bounds between opinion and knowledge; and examine by what measures, in things whereof we have no certain knowledge, we ought to regulate our assent and moderate our persuasion" (Locke, 1974).

Bearing in mind Passmore's anthropocentric approach to environmental ethics it is glaring that he would incline more to conservationist theory. Passmore's final analysis on the issue of preservation is the fact that it does not create room for civilization. For him, preservation does not promote civilization.

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