

John Passmore, 1914-2004

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John Passmore died in Canberra, Australia, on July 25, 2004, a few weeks short of his ninetieth birthday. He was one of those enviable philosophers, like Dewey and Russell, who remain intellectually vigorous and productive into old age, and his astonishingly lengthy and prolific career resulted in some 20 books and more than 150 articles over a 70 year period. On the occasion of his eightieth birthday in 1994, he gave a fine public lecture in which he examined the fashionable suggestion that philosophy is coming to an end. Needless to say, Passmore firmly rejected this grim prognosis and defended the value of philosophy as a form of inquiry that opens the mind, calls for imagination, and thrives on controversy and argument. He was present a few years later at the 20th World Congress of Philosophy in Boston in 1998, attending sessions and presenting a paper, and his passion for philosophy remained as strong as ever.

Philosophy takes an interest in all forms of human inquiry, one of these forms being philosophy itself. Such metaphilosophical reflection fascinated Passmore, and he was drawn again and again throughout his career, to an examination of the character, value, methods, and achievements of philosophical inquiry, in both historical and contemporary contexts. He gained an international reputation as a philosopher of the first rank with the publication in 1957 of *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, a book that he described as a history of philosophical controversy. Extraordinarily rich in scholarship, this book set a new standard for work in the history of philosophy. It is history of philosophy by way of a philosophical engagement with philosophical debates evolving over time. Passmore's many writings about philosophers and philosophical movements also include *Philosophical Reasoning*, 1961, *Recent Philosophers*, 1985, and numerous articles and chapters. It is a measure of the high regard in which his work in this area was held that he was entrusted with the article on Philosophy in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* published in 1967. Nearly 40 years on, that essay remains an excellent and insightful overview of philosophy as a form of inquiry, characterized by Passmore as the critical discussion of critical discussion itself. Like all his work, it is of considerable interest to fellow philosophers while remaining generally accessible to the non-specialist reader.

Very likely it was Passmore's keen interest in questions about the activity of philosophy itself, combined with his own wide-ranging interests in the arts, science, and general culture, which led him to a second area of philosophical work in which his contribution is justifiably deemed outstanding. Applied philosophy is such an important and active part of philosophy today that it is easy to forget that it barely existed in the decades preceding the 1970s. A landmark publication in the field was Passmore's 1974 book, *Man's Responsibility For Nature*, widely regarded as the work which signaled the return to applied philosophy in contemporary times. Here he argues that ecological disasters are rooted in ignorance, greed, and shortsightedness, and he sets out, by looking at such problems in all their complexity, to remove the obscurity that blocks the path of inquiry. Passmore remarks about himself that he never learned to specialize, and it was natural that he would explore how philosophy might contribute to the understanding and

resolution of those difficult problems in society that fall outside the scope of the existing sciences. His work in applied philosophy extends to topics such as the treatment of animals, environmentalism, and our responsibility for the future; it also includes consideration of academic freedom, academic ethics, and the limits of government.

These two aspects of Passmore's work -- his concern with questions about the nature of philosophy, and his interest in applied philosophy -- are evident in a third area of particular interest to readers of this journal, namely the philosophy of education. His book in this field, *The Philosophy of Teaching*, did not appear until 1981, but his interest in education was no mere extension of his work in applied philosophy in the 1970s. It may even be that his interest in educational issues led him towards a keener appreciation of the possibilities of applied philosophy. Passmore attended Sydney Teachers College in 1934, where he found the lectures in philosophy of education particularly abysmal, and as early as the 1940s, he had written two pamphlets on education, *Reading and Remembering*, 1942, and *Talking Things Over*, 1945. The first of these is essentially practical guidance for adults on how to read for greater understanding, and how to listen and remember more effectively. It is full of sensible and useful ideas on these subjects and still worth reading, but if we think of the difference between the philosopher and the sage, to introduce a distinction drawn by Passmore himself, this work would have to be categorized as sage advice. The second pamphlet, however, is much more philosophical. Passmore presents an account of the nature and value of discussion understood as the critical examination of opinions which aims at understanding not victory. Although many of the examples are now dated, it clearly illustrates the way in which philosophical analysis is enormously helpful if we are to appreciate the character and significance of an educational idea, and it anticipates the best of the work which was later to appear when Israel Scheffler and R S. Peters forged an analytical approach to philosophy of education in the late 1950s.

In addition to these pioneering efforts, it is possible perhaps to identify three main contributions Passmore makes to philosophy of education. First, he reminds us not to accept uncritically whatever paradigm of philosophy of education happens to be in the ascendant, and he pushes us towards a critical examination of the nature of philosophy of education, its aims, methods, and achievements. In his two articles published in *Melbourne Studies in Education*, 1965, Passmore concludes that analytical philosophers of education are right to maintain that traditional approaches to the subject often mistakenly suppose that educational conclusions can be deduced from grand pronouncements about the nature of the universe. He refuses, however, to confine philosophy of education to the mundane task of exposing such nonsense, arguing that an answer to a philosophical question such as "What is it to understand?" is bound to affect our approach and emphasis in teaching. With such a question, epistemology and philosophy of education begin to merge and Passmore alludes to the truth, albeit exaggerated, in Dewey's remark about philosophy amounting to the general theory of education.

Second, and connected with the previous point, Passmore is keenly aware, as he reminds his readers in the Preface to *The Philosophy of Teaching*, of the difficulty involved in doing philosophy of education in such a way that it is genuinely philosophical and at the same time relevant to the work of educators. He keeps the ideal alive, however, and shows in his own work that it is worth pursuing and to some extent attainable. In his

memorable work on teaching people to become critical, for example, Passmore distinguishes becoming a critical person from the acquisition of critical thinking skills and habits and argues that a critical person possesses a critical spirit which is an aspect of one's character. This philosophical characterization has immediate and far reaching implications for one's approach to teaching in this area. More generally, Passmore demonstrates throughout his work how philosophical reflection is vital for any teacher trying to chart a defensible way forward in the face of ideological movements and simplistic solutions.

Third, Passmore continually directs our attention as teachers to a range of deeper educational achievements -- flexibility of mind, a critical spirit, being able to absorb fresh ideas, being able to adapt so as to flourish in changing circumstances, and so on -- which, if they are well understood, can serve as guiding principles to direct our overall work as teachers and help us assess the merits of particular educational and pedagogical innovations. Passmore is especially helpful in defusing the supposed conflict between these achievements and other educational goals such as the acquisition of information, rules, and vocational skills. In connection with general intellectual goals, his tireless insistence on the importance of imagination in education, by which he means the capacity to think up and to think through alternatives, has helped to offset an emphasis in recent times on simply developing skills to do more effectively what we are already familiar with.

Passmore's unflinching example of fair-mindedness in the examination of controversial issues meant in practice that he typically sets out as fully and as fairly as possible arguments put forward by others that he himself ultimately does not subscribe to. He remarks, however, in his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Semi-detached Australian*, 1997, that many critics seem unable to comprehend how anyone can describe with sympathetic understanding a view they do not hold. Passmore concedes, for example, that it is not wholly irrational to argue that we are justified, given the uncertainty of the future, in ignoring the claims of distant generations whose needs in an unknown future might be very different from our own. The qualified nature of the concession, however, is significant. Passmore does not claim, as sometimes suggested, that we need complete certainty about the future before ethical obligations arise for us towards posterity. He says quite clearly that uncertainties do not justify negligence, and as long as there is the possibility that human beings will continue to be what they have been in the past, we will not want to act so as to jeopardize their survival.

If Passmore was often misinterpreted -- and he remarked in 1994, in his first ever reply to critics, that he was often left furious by malignant misrepresentation -- he never stooped to the kind of hostile and malicious commentary on philosophical opponents not unknown in philosophy of education. His work is marked throughout his career by a deep commitment to genuine and disinterested inquiry, and in this it can serve as an inspiration for us all.

