Mary Warnock (1924–2019) [1]

By: LaTourelle, Jonathon J. Keywords: Warnock Report [2]

Baroness Mary Warnock of Weeke, a philosopher and crossbench member and Life Peer of the United Kingdom's House of Lords, participated in several national UK committees of inquiry that dealt with ethical and policy issues from animal experimentation, pollution, genetics, and euthanasia to educational policies for children with special needs. One of these was the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilization and Embryology, of which Warnock was the chair. The 1985 Warnock Report issued subsequent to this inquiry led to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act of 1990, passed in the British House of Commons, and to the creation of the UK Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in 1991. Warnock has published a number of books on topics including existentialism, imagination, reproductive rights [3] and research ethics, euthanasia, the place of religion in politics, as well as several memoirs.

Warnock was born Helen Mary Wilson on 14 April 1924 in Winchester, England, to Ethel Mary Schuster and Archie Wilson. Warnock's father was, by the time of her birth, already dead seven months. Archie Wilson had been housemaster and teacher of Modern Languages at Winchester College in Winchester. In late 1923 he caught diphtheria during a school-wide outbreak and died, leaving behind five children and a newly pregnant wife. Warnock's eldest brother Malcolm Wilson had what would later be diagnosed as a severe case of autism and lived most of his life in various medical and mental-health institutions. After Malcolm came Jean, Duncan, Grizel, Stephana, and finally Helen Mary. The Wilson family also had a nanny, Emily Coleman, who stayed with them from 1920 until she died in Mary's sister's house in 1976, at the age of ninety-four.

In 1937, Warnock attended St. Swithin's Anglican boarding school in Winchester. Warnock's said in her 2000 Memoir that St. Swithin's school was run by religious fanatics of whom all the schoolgirls were in awe. She reported that the school was closed because of what she describes as a panicky headmistress who was anxious about war and concerned over the school's vulnerability to attack. It was because of this that Warnock left St. Swithin's in December 1940 to finish her last year before university at Prior's Field, a small school in Godalming, UK.

In 1942 Warnock went to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford University in Oxford, UK, where she spent the next five terms reading for Classical Honour Moderations and Greats, in which she received top marks. In the summer of 1948, she received a Gilchrist scholarship, which allowed her to extend her studies at Oxford another year, reading for the newly created Bachelor of Philosophy degree.

In the summer of 1949 Helen Mary Wilson married the philosopher Geoffrey James Warnock. Shortly after their marriage, Warnock was elected to a lectureship at St. Hugh's College in Oxford and her husband received a fellowship at Magdalen College, also in Oxford. She held her position as a fellow and tutor in philosophy until 1966. Geoffrey and Mary's first two children, Kitty and Felix, were born at their home in Summertown, North Oxford, UK. The Warnocks had three more children: two more girls and a boy. At the same time as they were starting a family, Warnock studied with the philosophers John Langshaw (J.L.) Austin and Philippa Foot, as well as many other Oxford philosophers of the time.

In 1966 Warnock applied and won the headship of Oxford High School in Oxford, UK. Over the next decade Warnock was involved in a variety of public works including holding a position as a member of the Independent Broadcasting Authority, from 1972 through 1983, and membership in the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, headquartered in London, UK, from 1979 to 1984.

In 1974 Warnock was solicited by Margaret Thatcher, then the UK Secretary of State for Education, to chair a committee of inquiry into the education of mentally and physically disabled children in the UK. Warnock wrote in her A Memoir that for her, the central question to be addressed by this inquiry was the function and value of public education in society. In her memoir, Warnock argued that society is socially and economically stratified into the uneducated and the educated. Accordingly, she said, education is a matter of social justice not just of social practice.

Warnock was committed to the view that no child was ineducable and that justice in a modern society demanded universal education from which no one ought to be automatically excluded. These principles are expressed in paragraph 1.4 of the final 1978 report issued by the Committee of Enquiry into the Education of Handicapped Children and Young People. The authors of this report argued that the purpose of education is first for the betterment of the individual being educated and second for the betterment of the society that they will join after education is complete. For Warnock, addressing the needs of physically and cognitively disabled people was a special case of this general goal. The report issued by the committee argued that this view meant special needs children should be, as far as possible, integrated into the main stream of public education.

On the foundation that every child had fair access to education, Warnock and her committee pushed for the integration of special schools for the disabled with local educational authorities. The 1981 Education Act was largely the product of the Warnock Report on Special Educational Needs of 1978. Prior to the reforms of the Education Act of 1981, special education facilities in the UK had primarily been dedicated to special healthcare centers, with little or no education analogous to what other British children experienced. Warnock has said that she came to bitterly regret some of the provisions of the report, and has called for major revisions to be made. She has been especially vocal in her criticism of current policies' vulnerability to, and unwitting encouragement of, abusive over-reporting by administrators of children with special needs.

By 1982 Warnock was teaching at various Oxford colleges and chaired the UK Home Office's committee on the use of animals in ...
Sources

Baroness Mary Warnock of Weeke, a philosopher and crossbench member and Life Peer of the United Kingdom's House of Lords, participated in several national British committees of inquiry that dealt with ethical and policy issues surrounding animal experimentation, pollution, genetics, and euthanasia to educational policies for children with special needs. One of these was the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilization and Embryology, of which Warnock was the chair. The 1985 Warnock Report issued subsequent to this inquiry led to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act of 1990, passed in the British House of Commons, and to the creation of the UK Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority in 1991. Warnock has published a number of books on topics including existentialism, imagination, reproductive rights and research ethics, euthanasia, the place of religion in politics, as well as several memoirs.