

# Baroness Warnock

Controversial philosopher who wrote a seminal report on Human Fertilisation and Embryology

**B**ARONESS WARNOCK, the former Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge, who has died aged 94, was a government favourite for all sorts of committee roles and started all manner of official inquiries: into education, animal experiments, teachers, and the management of the Royal Opera House; she was, though, most famously the author of the 1984 Warnock report on Human Fertilisation and Embryology.

The Human Fertilisation and Embryology inquiry, set up by the Conservative government in 1982, had the God-like task of deciding whether human foetuses should be used for laboratory research.

The Warnock Report (which formed the basis for a subsequent Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act) came out with the simple but controversial verdict that experiments on human embryos should be allowed, but only up to 14 days, on the grounds that, as Lady Warnock put it: "up to that point the embryo is just a bundle of cells. After that, differentiation into an individual starts to occur." The report recommended a statutory authority be set up to control research on embryos and license treatments for infertility.

Mary Warnock was an academic philosopher by background and was, at the time of her appointment to the inquiry, senior resident fellow at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. Her husband, Sir Geoffrey Warnock, was also a philosopher and, during the 1980s, Vice Chancellor of Oxford University.

"The very name Warnock," observed one journalist, "stands for rational, discussable, liberal morality that exists solely to mitigate the harm that people may do to each other." Mary Warnock was widely respected in such circles for the sharpness, intellectual rigour, clarity and force she brought to the toughest debate.

She adhered to two basic principles: first, that law and morality can only be determined by their likely consequence, since there are no objective moral principles on which everyone can agree ("consequentialism"). Second, that those who believe in the existence of such principles must be excluded from the decision-making process.

"It really would be entirely unproductive if one had the most fanatical or the most dogmatic persons who really would be wasting the committee's time," she said, "because you'd know they weren't going to change or listen to the arguments." When a liberal Catholic moral philosopher was proposed as a member of the embryology committee she vetoed his appointment, though she later claimed that this was because he was a "creep" and a "horror", not because of his moral views.



Baroness Warnock: she accused governments of 'rancour and envy' in their distrust of intellectuals

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She saw the role of the committee as entirely separate from the moral argument: "We had not, after all, been asked to express

*In my mother's family we were brought up to believe that we were the best; there was simply no doubt about it'*

our individual moral beliefs but to advise ministers on how legislation should be drawn up to regulate and control the new areas of development."

But her critics pointed out that all such advice was bound to arise from moral values, and there were many who felt that in Mary Warnock's case these amounted to little more than the prejudices of a *bien pensant* liberalism that had no sound rational basis.

Although she was a member of the Church of England, she regarded Christianity merely as "a hugely helpful metaphor which I would hate to be without" and did not feel bound by moral absolutes sent down from on high. Indeed, on one occasion she admitted that moral philosophy hardly impinged on her life at all, and attributed moral consciousness to social conditioning.

Colleagues at Oxford, where she spent most of her academic life, recalled her as being good at becoming an instant expert, never inhibited by lack of knowledge, but found that she had a tendency, as one put it, to "start off an argument from her conclusions". Certainly, she never had any pretensions to be an original thinker: her books on philosophy were generally analytical anthologies and she tended to regard philosophy not as an end in itself but as a tool.

Yet journalists who interviewed her often came away with an uneasy picture of immense self-confidence based on less rational foundations than they had been led to expect. They found that she did not respond well to challenges, meeting them with icy resistance, even contempt. Hers, they suggested, was a liberal intelligence which could only win by vigorous assertion of unproved things as "truths".

Thus when people began to question her belief that experiments on embryos should be allowed, she seemed genuinely shocked, and witheringly dismissed her critics as bigots and their arguments as "mere hidebound metaphysics, as in fundamentalist Christianity or Islam".

She brushed aside peers who opposed the legislation implementing her report as a "Catholic mafia, prepared to follow a line that has been handed to them by the Pope or Cardinal Hume or whoever".

When Enoch Powell took her on and tabled a private member's bill banning embryo experiments, she claimed that, if passed, the bill would represent "the triumph of moral fantasy over realism". Powell, she said, was "so much in the dirty tricks department. The moment he called his bill 'The Protection of the Unborn Child Bill', I knew I had no respect for him whatsoever."

This assertiveness became most pronounced in defence of her own profession: "There must be an intellectual

elite who say what ought to be taught and by what methods," she maintained in 1990, attacking the Conservative government's proposals to make higher education more closely related to the needs of the employment market. "It contradicts the notion of universities to put the man on the Clapham omnibus in charge."

She accepted the notion of a sort of "secular sanctity" to describe the function of the universities; yet when asked whether human life might also be in some senses sacred, she could not see the connection.

"In my mother's family," she observed, "we were brought up to believe we were the best; there was simply no doubt about it and that sort of conviction resists evidence." Though she claimed to have been disabused as an undergraduate at Oxford, what remained was a confidence that she was amply equipped to decide matters that confused lesser mortals.

On one occasion she complained about some graduate students to whom she was supposed to teach existentialism: "I always got fobbed off with these people and they were the very worst" - adding as a footnote that some of them were now working in "redbrick" universities.

She was also highly competitive. The most demeaning manifestation of this trait came when the Warnocks appeared on the BBC television quiz programme *Ask the Family* and lost. Possibly more demeaning still was the fact that Mary Warnock was never able to forget or forgive this "terrible humiliation", even accusing the other family of including an over-age son on their team.

Her confidence in her own powers of reasoning sometimes led her to take positions which many considered as "extreme" as she regarded the views of those who disagreed with her on embryo research. She held, for example, that potential handicap was a full justification for abortion, and deformity a justification for infanticide.

During the notorious Baby Doe case in the early 1990s she supported the refusal of the parents of an American child born with Down syndrome to allow surgery on a life-threatening but treatable malformation of the oesophagus. The child died as a result.

"Baby Doe," said Mary Warnock, "was a handicapped infant. If he had been a handicapped child or an adult," she added mysteriously, "the question would not have arisen." Infants, she believed, should be screened at birth: "As few as 30 years ago ... the doctor and midwife together, often without needing to exchange a word, simply saw to it that the baby did not survive and told the parents it was stillborn."

Given her views, it seemed odd to many people that she found herself forming policy for a radical Conservative



administration led by Margaret Thatcher, and that the government seemed to place quite so much stock in her good sense. Yet it was Mrs Thatcher who as Education Secretary during the 1970s had given her the job of chairing a committee of inquiry into special education. It was Mrs Thatcher, too, who approved the Warnock Report as a basis for legislation.

It was perhaps even more surprising in the light of Mary Warnock's volubly expressed contempt for Mrs Thatcher (whose government gave her a DBE in 1984 and subsequently ennobled her).

Mrs Thatcher, Mary Warnock told one interviewer, "epitomised the worst of the lower middle class". Her neat, well-groomed clothes and hair were "packaged in a way

*If you're demented, you're wasting people's lives – your family's lives – and wasting the resources of the NHS*

that's not exactly vulgar, just low". She felt, she said, "a kind of rage" whenever she thought about Mrs Thatcher's "odious suburban gentility".

Mary Warnock, by contrast, favoured the unkempt Shirley-Williams-type hairstyle, owl-like glasses and loose but tasteful skirts and blouses.

But her social attitudes sometimes combined uneasily with her scientific interests. In the early 1990s she suggested that a statutory body be set up to rule out frivolous applications for genetic testing for selecting the sex of a child. When asked to define a non-frivolous application she replied: "I don't think a

hereditary peerage is a frivolous thing" and suggested that if the 16th Duke of Norfolk, who died in 1975 leaving four daughters, had wanted a son, "he could have fixed it".

Mary Warnock was born Helen Mary Wilson on April 14 1924 in Winchester, the youngest of five children. Her father, Archibald Wilson, was a Winchester housemaster; her mother, Ethel, was the daughter of a prosperous Jewish banker.

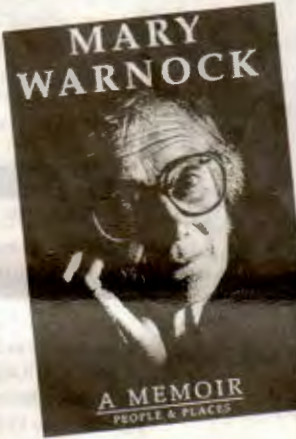
By her own admission a "bossy, conceited and romantic child", young Mary had a happy childhood, though the household was virtually man-free, her father having died before she was born and her elder brother, the late Sir Duncan Wilson (who became Ambassador to Moscow), being 13 years older and not much around.



She was often withering in defence of her views

Over her mother's home-made biscuits they discovered a shared love of committee plotting, and they were married in 1949. That same year she was elected a fellow and tutor in Philosophy at St Hugh's College,

She was educated at St Swithun's, Winchester, and at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, where she studied Philosophy. Her degree was split in two by war work and she was given the choice of going into the ATS or teaching. She chose teaching and taught for a while at Sherborne School for Girls. She met her future husband, Geoffrey Warnock, at Oxford, where he was an undergraduate at New College. She was surprised to find that a man could also be funny; as outgoing chairman of the Jowett Society (for the best undergraduate philosophers), she appointed him her successor.





Oxford, where she remained for 17 years. During the 1950s the Warnocks formed half of a quartet of philosophical experts who broadcast regularly on the BBC Third Programme. They also had five children, all of them born, conveniently, during university vacations.

Given their mother's busy schedule, the children were brought up under a regime of fierce domestic discipline and a robust attitude to health. "They were hardly ever allowed to be ill," Mary Warnock recalled. "They'd crawl to school on their hands and knees." In the main she discharged her maternal duties by assiduous cultivation of the children's intellects; she would always read aloud to them over their evening meal.

In 1966 she left St Hugh's to take up the post of headmistress of Oxford High School, where she had for a time sent her own daughters. There, she came to take a jaundiced view of parents who "believe absolutely in the superiority of their own children even in the face of all the evidence", while admitting that in her time she had been guilty of exactly the same offence. She also learnt to play the French horn, in order to swell the brass section of the school orchestra.

She left in 1972 to take up a research fellowship at Lady Margaret Hall, and four years later she returned to St Hugh's as senior resident Fellow.

It was at Oxford High School that she began to "go public" as she put it. From the early 1970s her name was on the Civil Service List, the official directory of the great and the good who are eligible for public appointments. From local education committees she moved on to regional planning groups, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, the Social Science Research Council, and on to a succession of Government inquiries.

She chaired the committee into special education which recommended in 1978 that the term "handicapped" should be replaced by "having special educational needs" and that training courses should be devised to help teachers identify children falling into this category. Later she chaired the Advisory Committee on Animal Experiments.

She also served as a member of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, and on committees of inquiry into validation of public sector higher education, teaching quality and bioethics. In 1984 she resigned as a member of the UK delegation to Unesco because she was "fed up with the waste of time and money".

From 1985, when she was made a life peer and appointed Mistress of Girton, Mary Warnock took on the cause of universities as a crusade. In 1989, in a polemical essay in the Counterblasts series, she accused the government of "rancour and envy" in its distrust of intellectuals.

What politicians found most intolerable about universities, she observed, was "the fact that high intellectual standards inevitably lead to intellectual freedom. The dislike felt by Government for the academic does not stem from philistinism, as is often supposed, but from dogmatism."

To schools and schoolteachers, however, she showed less reverence. In 1985 she hit out at teachers who "only have themselves to blame for the low esteem in which they are held by parents and pupils". In *A Common Policy for Education* (1988), she suggested that GCSEs and A-levels should be scrapped and replaced with a system of individualised tests for children to take when they are ready for them.

She urged teachers to create their own professional body responsible for maintaining standards and urged reforms to teacher training. But in a radio interview in 1990 she objected to the greater public involvement in education introduced by the Conservatives on the grounds that it would draw in "middle-class parents".

She retired as Mistress of Girton College in 1991 and the next year chaired

an Arts Council committee of inquiry into the finances of the Royal Opera House. The report attacked Opera House management under Sir Jeremy Isaacs for creating a crisis and argued that it should immediately shelve its £250 million development plans. The Royal Opera House, she concluded, was run

"with incredible amateurism and all the precision of a school choir".

She was a passionate advocate of euthanasia, and in 2008 caused controversy when she suggested that dementia sufferers might consider ending their own lives to avoid being a burden. "If you're demented, you're wasting people's lives - your family's lives - and you're wasting the resources of the National Health Service," she said.

Mary Warnock published several books on philosophy, including *Ethics Since 1900* (1960), *Jean-Paul Sartre* (1963), *Existentialist Ethics* (1966), *Memory* (1987), *The Uses of Philosophy* (1992), *Imagination and Time* (1994), *Women Philosophers* (1996), *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics* (1998) and (with Elisabeth Macdonald) *Easeful Death: is there a case for assisted suicide?* (2008).

She also wrote a memoir, several books on education and a regular column for the *Times Educational Supplement*. She was for many years a trenchant reviewer of books for *The Sunday Telegraph*.

Mary Warnock was appointed DBE in 1984 and created a life peer in 1985. She was made a Companion of Honour in 2017.

Her husband died in 1995, and she is survived by two sons and two daughters. Another daughter predeceased her.

**Baroness Warnock, born April 14 1924, died March 20 2019**

