

## Guest Editorial: Mary Warnock— An Appreciation

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**Helen Mary Warnock, Baroness Warnock, CH, DBE, FBA, FMedSci. 4 April 1924 – 20 March 2019.**

Mary Warnock was a phenomenon! She was perhaps the foremost of a truly brilliant, and dauntingly formidable, group of women philosophers who emerged in Oxford in the post war generation, a group which also included Elizabeth Anscombe, Iris Murdoch, and Philippa Foot. Perhaps not foremost as a pure philosopher (she was notoriously and unnecessarily modest about her philosophical writings), but she was certainly unparalleled in her global influence on science, human welfare, and indeed, public affairs. She was in turn an academic holding many research and teaching appointments in Oxford, the head of Oxford High School for Girls, and chair of an influential United Kingdom inquiry into the teaching of children with special learning needs; she sat on a Royal Commission on environmental pollution, and was a member of the Independent Broadcasting Authority from 1972 to 1983 and Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge from 1984 to 1991.

She was ‘godmother’ to an important dimension of contemporary bioethics, setting an example of real and impactful influence on public affairs. This journal has also benefited from Mary’s wise counsel, as she was instrumental in shaping the journal and served on the first advisory board.

I first met Mary in 1972, while I was a doctoral student in Oxford. Neither Mary, nor I, could be thought of as Marxists, but we shared a commitment, rare in those days, to Karl Marx’s famous aphorism that the purpose of philosophy must not merely be to understand the world but to change it! We also came to share advocacy for the legalization of euthanasia and medically assisted dying. I cannot claim that I knew Mary well, but I knew and admired her work, we met frequently at conferences and events, and indeed have produced public critiques of one another’s work, she of my book *Wonderwoman and Superman*, and I of her report on *Human Fertilization and Embryology*.

One, rather trivial, event sums up for me the force of Mary’s personality. Some years ago we were both attending an International Conference in Brasilia, and on a free afternoon Mary, myself, and a number of other delegates were debating what to do. Someone proposed visiting an interesting but notoriously dangerous part of town. There was much debate about the extent of the risks of going there until Mary said simply “Well I’m going!” We immediately knew that under the protection of such a formidable Englishwoman we would all be safe.

Last year I had the honor to chair the selection committee for the Dan David Prize in Bioethics for 2018, a committee on which the editor of this journal also served. This gave me a recent opportunity to review the corpus of Mary Warnock’s work and contribution. It was no surprise to me when the selection committee unanimously agreed that the prize should be awarded to Mary Warnock (shared with Jonathan Glover and Ezekiel Emanuel).

Mary Warnock has produced a stunning series of more than 13 monographs of the first quality over 55 years, from *Ethics since 1900* (1960), through *Women Philosophers* (1986), *Dishonest to God* (2010), and *Critical Reflections on Ownership* (2015). But her seminal and unparalleled achievement was *The Warnock Report on Human Fertilisation and Embryology 1984*, which she chaired and guided through to legislation and adoption. This established a framework for a national consensus (in the UK) on embryo research, proposed the so-called “14 day rule” for a permissible window of ethical embryo experimentation and heralded an Act of Parliament and the setting up of a permanent licensing and review body: The Human Fertilization and Embryology Authority (The HFEA). The 14-day rule has so far been adopted (or at least followed) in most research intensive nations, and has been critical in the flourishing of embryology globally and in the birth of many millions of healthy children worldwide through the various methods of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART). Persuasive (though not necessarily decisive) arguments for the 14-day rule were an important contribution of Mary’s to the success of her proposals, and thanks to Mary, this limit is widely invoked and used to this day.

It was not only the force of Mary Warnock’s rational advocacy, but her heroic consensus building, both in parliament in the U.K., in society and globally, that has permanently changed both the face of science and the agenda of bioethics. The work of Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards established the scientific principles and the first reliable and safe method of achieving assisted reproduction globally, but it was Mary Warnock who enabled the fruits of this ground-breaking science to benefit countless women and establish millions of families. I cannot think of another philosopher whose work can directly claim to have achieved so much good, to have enabled so much first class science to proceed and come to fruition, and to have resulted in the successful birth of considerably more than 5 million babies worldwide since 1990. Mary Warnock’s lasting legacy will be the success of a demonstrably robust and trusted regulatory and licensing system for both Assisted Reproduction and Embryo Research, and the lives and futures of those millions of healthy children and their families.



Wax anatomical model of a human head, possibly German, 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Location: Science Museum, London, Great Britain. Photo Credit: SSPL/Science Museum/ Art Resource, New York. Reproduced by Permission.