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The Politics of Religion — A Secularist Attempt

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Mary Warnock, formally known as Baroness Warnock of Weeke, is one of the most influential figures in the field of biomedical ethics and ethical philosophy. She emerged in the international limelight in 1984 when she headed the committee that brought the so-called “Warnock Report” that legalized IVF procedures in Great Britain.

In recent years, Baroness Warnock has become a major proponent of a secularized vision of ethics — ranging across the field of ethical concerns. The limitation of her secularized approach is that it so often comes down to little more than what *she* believes is ethical and right.

In the current issue of *The New Statesman*, a prominent intellectual journal in Great Britain, she argues again that political policies must be free from religious influence. The background is a new controversy there over the potential creation of human-animal hybrid embryos.

As Baroness Warnock writes:

A few years ago, Lord Justice Bingham observed that judges increasingly had to pronounce moral judgements in court. It no longer makes sense to say, “This is not a court of morals.” Of course it never did make much sense; murder was always morally as well as legally foul. The criminal law reflected more or less shared moral beliefs; if it ceased to do so, it would become unenforceable.

However, the comfortable assumption of coincidence between moral beliefs and the criminal law is no longer justifiable. Though much of the law remains squarely in accord with what society believes to be right, we are more conscious than ever before of sometimes irreconcilable differences. As private individuals, we may be content to advocate a practice of tolerance, a kind of moral relativism, but in public life, in legislation and the enforcement of law, there is no room for relativism. Society survives only if it is subject to the rule of law, and the law must be unequivocal, and must be seen to apply to everyone alike.

Put into plain language, Warnock believes that society is now so divided over basic moral questions that no moral consensus now exists. Thus, the law must choose sides and “must be unequivocal.” In other words, one side wins a total policy victory.

She continues:

If we consider the passage of a new law, the problem becomes obvious. For example, with the Embryology Bill, to be debated in the House of Commons in May, there is profound moral disagreement between those who would permit the creation, for research, of admixed human embryos (the nucleus of a human cell, encased in the emptied outer coating of the egg of another animal) and those who regard this as a moral outrage. How can this moral dispute be settled?

To her credit, Baroness Warnock sees the irreconcilable nature of the differences between the two understandings of the human embryo. The law will either protect the life and dignity of human embryos or it will allow them to be used in experimentation and destroyed. We are talking about embryonic human beings here — or about morally insignificant collections of human cells. Where you come down on this question is essentially a matter of your worldview.

Baroness Warnock wants to make certain that religious and theological objections are not allowed to impede what she sees as scientific and medical advances. The actual shape of her argument, however, demonstrates the inherent limitations of a truly secularized worldview.

In the first place, Warnock just assumes that her rendering of a secularized ethic is free of worldview implications. Religious people have prejudices — she seems to think that secular folk do not. Secularism is just normal, theological concerns are eccentric.

More:

Society is not a religious organisation like a church. Laws must as far as possible be made in the interests, far wider than matters of faith, of all members of society, whether or not they hold any religious views. As legislators, MPs and governments must consider the consequences of the measures before them, how they will probably affect society and whether they will do more good than harm. It is the role of legislators to be consequentialists. They must not ask, "What does my religion teach about this measure?" but "Will society benefit from it in the empirical world?"

This is a very important statement, for in it Warnock argues for a “consequentialist” model of ethical reasoning — an approach that limits the moral question to the expected consequences of an act. As she sees the current issue, the medical treatments that might come from this form of embryo simply outweigh any other consideration (and this includes concern about the moral status of the human embryo itself).

Her consequentialist approach allows her to ignore the question of the embryo and moral concern about human experimentation and the destruction of human life. The limitation of her approach becomes very apparent when the human subject is no longer an embryo but a human being beyond gestation. International laws and protocols governing human medical experimentation are not consequentialist arguments. Instead, they are based on arguments about the inherent dignity of every single human life. Baroness Warnock can avoid this question with regard to the embryo only by employing a mode of ethical theory she could not apply to other human beings. In other words, she simply *decided* that the embryo is not a consideration in itself.

Furthermore, she says that the crucial issue is answered by this question: “Will society benefit from it in the empirical world?” While Baroness Warnock clearly believes that a potential benefit of the embryo research “in the empirical world” might well include medical treatments, she completely ignores the fact that the consequences of a devaluation of human life and human dignity — also “in the empirical world” — would be devastating.

We can thank Baroness Warnock of Weeke for reminding us all that *everyone* operates out of a basic worldview and that all worldviews involve ideological and philosophical assumptions — including the secularist worldview. There is no neutrality.

