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The legal and moral status of embryos

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The legal and moral status of embryos and the way in which they are handled are the subjects of a complicated debate. R. Watson (*Nature* 7 March, p.10) seeks to simplify the topic by referring to a clear topological event, fertilization, "at which a unique member of our species is created". One problem with such an oversimplification is that it may be applied to give silly conclusions.

I contend that each member of a pair of identical twins is a unique member of our species, even though both result from one fertilization. I believe that it is (and should be) illegal to murder one, or to use him or her destructively in medical research. I reach the decision that is morally wrong to kill a member of a pair of identical twins by deciding that each is a separate, thinking, feeling person, and not by some simple topological argument about the moment when a genome is created.

Of course one might argue that any mitosis (like that which produces identical twins) is an event "at which a unique potential member of our species is created", since it is probably possible to freeze any human diploid cell, await the development of practical human cloning by nucleus transfer, and make an individual of that cell. The killing of single human cells is neither legally nor normally the equivalent of homicide nor, I contend, should it be. This line of argument, too, is an oversimplification.

Whether the benefits of research on embryos (or of abortions) outweigh the disadvantages of destroying embryos is a complex and difficult question. We should address that complex question without looking for quick and easy definitions of what is a person.