

considered jointly have no special moral status'. That is to say, an egg and a sperm in separate test-tubes in the same rack have no greater moral status than the egg alone or the sperm alone. But this is irrelevant. For from it we can derive no conclusions about the moral status of the embryo unless we can rely on (A). But (A) is false.

Contrary to what Singer and Kuhse suppose, I am not eager to find elementary fallacies in their work. None the less those fallacies are there and the authors have done nothing to eliminate them.

References

- (1) Scarlett B F. The moral status of embryos. *Journal of medical ethics* 1984; 10: 79–80.
- (2) Singer P, Kuhse H. Response: The moral status of embryos. *Journal of medical ethics* 1984; 10: 80.
- (3) Kuhse H, Singer P. The moral

status of the embryo. In: Waters W, Singer P, eds. *Test tube babies: a guide to moral questions, present techniques and future possibilities*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1982: 61.

B F SCARLETT
*Philosophy Department,
University of Melbourne*

Response to Scarlett

SIR

Scarlett's letter introduces a totally new element into the argument – the idea of degrees of potential. This idea is not even hinted at in his original article. Most of those who want to protect the human embryo are keen to deny that there can be degrees of potential, because this obviously allows us to say that the early embryo is less of a potential person than the later fetus or the infant. The claim that there are degrees of potential in fact concedes just the point we were seeking to make,

namely that there is no absolute distinction between the potential of the human embryo just after fertilisation and the potential of the egg and the sperm when they are separate, but considered jointly.

Once it is conceded that potential is a matter of degree, the issue to focus on is the importance of particular changes in the degree of potential. Since there is no great difficulty in obtaining fertilisation once one has the egg and the sperm in a suitable condition (the success rate for the actual fertilisation *in vitro* of the egg and the sperm is around 90 per cent – the problems occur after the embryo is transferred to the uterus) it seems that fertilisation cannot be a crucial step in the creation of a new person.

PETER SINGER, HELGA KUHSE
*Centre for Human Bioethics,
Monash University,
Clayton, Victoria, Australia*