

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

# The death of a genius? What James Watson taught us about ethics, ambition, and the moral limits of science

MICHELE VENOSA<sup>1,2</sup>, ANDREA VESPASIANI<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Orthopaedic Department – Casa di cura Villa Betania – Rome, Italy; <sup>2</sup>Department of Mini-Invasive and Computer-Assisting Orthopaedic Surgery, San Salvatore Hospital, L'Aquila, Italy; <sup>3</sup>Department of Life, Health and Environmental Sciences, University of L'Aquila, L'Aquila, Italy.

## To the editor,

The passing of James D. Watson (1928-2025) marks not only the end of an era in science but also a moment of collective introspection for the global research community. Watson's name is inseparable from one of the most transformative discoveries of the twentieth century: the elucidation of the double helix structure of DNA in 1953 (1). That breakthrough – reached with Francis Crick and informed by the X-ray diffraction data of Rosalind Franklin and Maurice Wilkins – reshaped biology and medicine, thus laying the foundations for molecular genetics, genomics, and biotechnology. Yet, running alongside the brilliance of that discovery is another parallel narrative of ethical tension – a narrative that exposes the enduring fragility of moral judgment in the pursuit of scientific glory. Watson's intellectual audacity and his relentless drive to “crack the code of life” exemplified an ambition that propels science forward. His contribution helped in redefining what it means to understand living systems, shifting biology from descriptive observation into molecular explanation. At the same time, however, the circumstances of that discovery have become emblematic

of the ethical dilemmas that trouble modern research. The use of Franklin's data without her explicit consent, followed by her delayed recognition, has become the cautionary example of how competition, hierarchy, and gender bias can distort the collaborative ethos upon which science depends. Equally enlightening is the worldview that Watson himself expressed through his writings and interviews: a view of science as a contest of intellects, not as a collective moral undertaking. The “Double Helix”, his memoir, is simultaneously a vivid historical testament and a manifesto of scientific cynicism (2). It testifies to a culture in which curiosity and ambition were regularly decoupled from empathy, and where personal success was valued above ethical reflection. Watson's later public comments on issues of race, gender, and intelligence – utterances utterly devoid of scientific substance and condemned by colleagues for their prejudice – only deepened this moral confusion. The consequent isolation from the scientific community underscores dramatically the thought that intellectual achievement cannot excuse ethical failure. The “death of a genius,” then, is not only biological but symbolic: it means the end of an era in which scientific brilliance could exist comfortably apart from moral



Received: 12 October 2025 | Accepted: 19 November 2025

**Correspondence:** Michele Venosa, MD / Orthopaedic Department – Casa di cura Villa Betania - Rome, Italy Via Pio IV, 42, 00165, Rome, Italy / E-mail: michelevenosa@hotmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0002-9256-1758

scrutiny. Today's science operates upon a radically different landscape, defined by vast data sharing, interdisciplinary collaboration, and public accountability. Yet the temptations that shaped Watson's career remain. The pursuit of recognition, the pressure of competition, and the allure of rapid discovery continue to test the integrity of researchers in every field, from artificial intelligence to gene editing and synthetic biology. The central lesson of Watson's legacy, however, is that ethics is not an external constraint on discovery but its defining dimension. Scientific progress uncoupled from ethical reflection risks eroding public trust and undermining the very foundation of knowledge. The moral responsibility of science does not end with the publication of results; it begins with how those results are achieved and for whose benefit they are applied. As we face the moral frontiers of research in the twenty-first century, the story of James Watson offers us both inspiration and warning. It reminds us that scientific genius, untempered by humility and ethical awareness, can easily slide into hubris. True innovation requires not only insight into the natural world but also a commitment to the values that sustain our common humanity. The enduring challenge, therefore, lies not in producing more knowledge, but in seeing

that knowledge serves the human good. It is only when ethics is incorporated as an explicit structural feature of scientific practice, and not merely as a retrospective one, that the power entailed by discovery will be matched by the responsibility for its use. The death of a genius must not become the death of conscience in science.

**Conflict of interest:** The authors declare that they have no commercial associations (e.g. consultancies, stock ownership, equity interest, patent/licensing arrangement etc.) that might pose a conflict of interest in connection with the submitted article.

**Declaration on the use of AI:** None

## References

1. Watson JD, Crick FH. Molecular structure of nucleic acids; a structure for deoxyribose nucleic acid. *Nature*. 1953;171(4356):737-8. doi: 10.1038/171737a0.
2. Watson JD. *The double helix: a personal account of the discovery of the structure of DNA*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; 1981.

---

**Copyright:** the Author(s), 2026. Licensee Mattioli 1885, Fidenza, Italy. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial License (CC BY-NC-4.0).

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in this article are solely those of the author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of their affiliated organizations, the publisher, the editors or the reviewers. The publisher and the editors disclaim any responsibility for injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products mentioned in the content. Any product that may be evaluated in this article, or claim made by its manufacturer, is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.