The following is a version of the conservative's so-called "slippery slope" argument against abortion: "Infanticide is clearly seriously wrong. But there is no morally relevant difference between the neonate and the fetus just before it emerges from the womb. And so, too, for any stage of the developing fetus and the immediately preceding stage, until we slide all the way back to the newly fertilized egg (the zygote)."

A standard liberal response to this argument is that its advocate cannot prevent it from taking us all the way back to the sperm-egg pair, which will unite to form the zygote (the gamete pair), and, hence, that it proves more than some conservatives desire, namely, the extreme conservative conclusion that artificial contraception is seriously wrong. John T. Noonan is a moderate conservative, i.e., a conservative with respect to abortion but not artificial contraception. Noonan in effect tries to meet the envisaged liberal response in two ways: (1) The zygote has the genetic code of the future human being which it will become if it is not destroyed, while the gamete pair does not. And this stops the slide back to the latter: because of its DNA, there is a morally relevant difference between killing the zygote and preventing conception by the use of contraceptives. (2) There is a high probability that the zygote, if not destroyed, will become a full-fledged human person; but the likelihood of any given sperm and any given ovum becoming a zygote is enormously small.

However, these replies are not impressive. The trouble with (1) is that DNA molecules per se make no moral claim on us. Otherwise, it would be wrong to brush one's teeth or wash one's face, thereby killing some DNA-inhabited cells. The DNA molecules which are contained in the zygote are, of course, different from those which are contained in
one’s teeth and face, since the former, but not the latter, will, in the
normal course of events, become a human person. But this is true as
well of the gamete pair. (2) is even less impressive. Suppose that (as
frequently happens) a woman has predictable fertile periods and her
husband a normal, or above normal, sperm count. Then, though they
cannot know specifically which of the multitude of sperms involved in
an ejaculation will fertilize a given ovum, they can be quite certain that
some one of them will. Uncertainty about a given sperm does not entail
uncertainty about all of the sperms which are involved in the ejacula-
tion. Hence, such uncertainty cannot be relevant to the question
whether artificial contraception is warranted. (Similarly, if I know that
there are people in the hotel room next to mine and that at least one of
them will be killed if I throw dynamite into the room, the fact that I
don’t know which one will be killed has no bearing on the question
whether I am justified in throwing dynamite into the room.)

II

Some philosophers² have maintained in effect that the slippery slope
arguer is mistaken in taking it for granted that infanticide is morally
inadmissible. As against that presupposition, they have argued that the
point at which it becomes wrong to kill the developing organism is
when (a) it has a concept of itself as a continuing entity and (b) it
desires continued life, conditions not satisfied by neonates.

An obvious objection to this thesis (call it “T”) is that it entails that it
is morally admissible to kill human adults, who, at a given time, t, do
not desire to live because (a) they are, e.g., sound asleep or severely
depressed, even though (b) they will desire continued life if they stay
alive beyond t. The advocate of T, if he wishes to remain pro-abortion
and pro-infanticide, cannot rebut this objection by claiming that, if
condition (b) is satisfied, then killing the sleeping or depressed person
is not justified. For most human fetuses and neonates will develop into
a person who desires continued life, if she is not killed before then. One
move that the pro-abortion and pro-infanticide advocate of T might
make vis-à-vis the envisaged objection is to claim that it is the following
disjunctive condition which is necessary for a human adult’s right to life
at time t: either she desires continued life at t or she has, before t,
desired continued life.