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Persisting Substance and Human Dignity: When is a Human a Person?

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Background

Syllogism:

“First premise: It is wrong to kill an innocent human being. Second premise: A human fetus is an innocent human being. Conclusion: Therefore, it is wrong to kill a human fetus.”¹

Interpretations

Most people believe that the debate over the point of development that a human attains value is in the second premise. One side believes that some time during gestation the fetus becomes a person. The other side believes the humans become persons at the beginning of life at conception.

Singer argues that the first premise should be challenged instead. He believes that fetuses and young infants only have value if a person gives them value. He believes that infants only achieve intrinsic value when they become self-conscious, which happens months after birth.

Human vs. Person

The first premise, also known as the sanctity of life, is widely accepted. Singer challenges this acceptance. Singer says that the term “human” in the syllogism is ambiguous and therefore allows the syllogism to work. “Human” may either refer to a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, or being a person. Singer claims, if “human” refers to a “person” (a rational or self-conscious being) then the first premise is true, but the second one is false since fetuses are not rational or self-conscious. If “human” refers to a member of the *Homo sapiens*, the second premise is true, but the first premise is false since abortion would be no different than killing a member of another species.

Human: *Homo sapiens*

Person: Human being with intrinsic value

Philosophy

Kant on Human Dignity

Immanuel Kant believed that human beings have an intrinsic value. This value is different from other species because humans are rational agents; humans are free and able to make their own decisions, to make their own goals, and to direct their behavior by reason.

Categorical Imperative: “Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only.”²

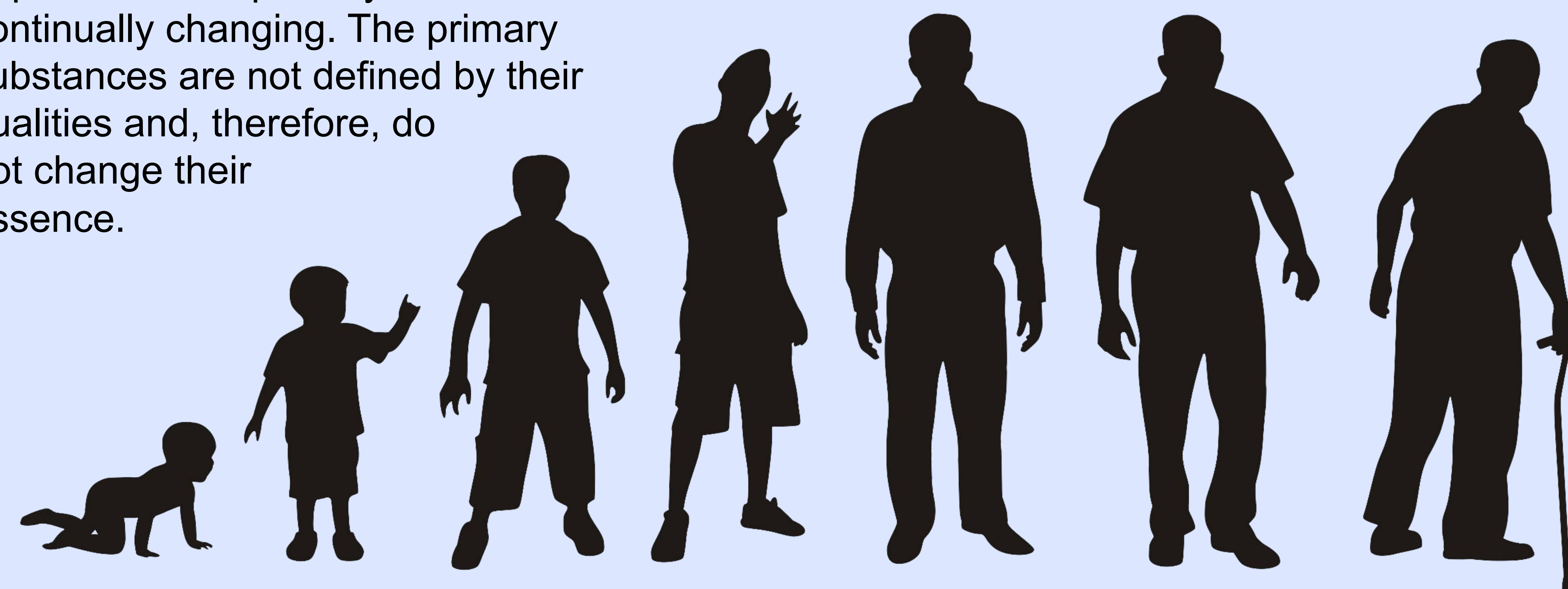
This principle that Kant wrote asserts that one must not use another person for their own purpose. This Categorical Imperative also implies that one should promote other people’s welfare, respect their rights, and not harm them.

Aristotle on Substance

Types of substances:

1. Primary substance: substance, in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word, is that which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject.
2. Secondary substance: or qualities, describe primary substances.

The secondary substances are in constant change, which means that the physical appearances of primary substances are continually changing. The primary substances are not defined by their qualities and, therefore, do not change their essence.



Thesis

Peter Singer believes that humans only have value when they obtain self-consciousness, however, humans have intrinsic value because they belong to a rational kind that individually has the same persisting substance from the beginning of life at conception until death.

Analysis

Singer believes that humans are only persons when they become self-conscious. He believes that these non-person humans do not have intrinsic value.

Kant, however, believed that all humans are intrinsically valuable because humans are a unique rational kind. Humankind is unique from all other species, because we are rational beings. Without rational beings, Kant claims, there would be no moral law, because moral law is a rational law. Therefore, rational beings become the embodiment of moral law and also have ultimate value.

Aristotle believed that each human is a primary substance. This essence is what truly constitutes the human and remains the same throughout his entire life.

Conclusions

At conception, a new person, wholly present, is created. As this embryo matures to eventually become an adult, the person has had the same substance throughout his entire development. A person is fully present in each moment of time. A person can not be partly present, he exists as a whole, even if he is immature and undergoing development. A human is always a person from conception until death.



References

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²Rachels, J. (1986). Kantian Theory: The Idea of Human Dignity. In *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (pp. 114-17, 122-23). New York: Random House.

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