

UNIVERSAL, PARTICULAR AND INDIVIDUAL, PART II

Conceptualism

In the last issue we introduced the concept of a “universal,” something which is responsible for the common features of individual things or processes. Examples of universals include human, atom, worker, female, etc. We also discussed some wrong views about universals, like nominalism. Nominalism says that particular things or events have nothing in common except that we use the same words to describe them.

Nominalist Thinking

Nominalism is a fairly common mistaken way of thinking. Suppose someone works several jobs and is treated badly by the boss in each one. A nominalist thinker would say that it is a coincidence that these three different individual bosses are vicious, and not look for the common explanation. That explanation is that most bosses treat most workers badly most of the time because they are enforcing capitalist exploitation of workers’ labor. A nominalist mistake is also made by people who see that the U. S. government is fighting two wars to control oil and gas (and just finished fighting in a third one) but don’t see that there is such a thing as imperialist war.

According to nominalist philosophers, the world is just an unstructured bundle of individuals, and words (“signifiers”) only refer to other words, not to something in the world. Only theories that discuss very narrow topics (“micro-narratives”) can be constructed, they say, and Marxism, which describes the whole world of social relations, is impossible.

Nominalism’s cousin is “conceptualism.” Conceptualism says that there is nothing outside thought that corresponds to concepts. This makes it impossible to explain why we work out particular ways of describing what individuals have in common and reject others. Good concepts are ones that describe accurately and also help explain. If we defined “human” as “a two-legged animal with soft earlobes and no feathers,” it would pick out human beings accurately, but is still a crazy concept. It doesn’t describe the things that actually make us human like the ability to work, plan, cooperate, and fight oppression, etc.

Using bogus racist concepts, like defining “intelligence” as what IQ tests measure, gives wrong results but makes them look scientific. Conceptualists excuse this scam by claiming that scientific concepts are merely “hypothetical constructs” which don’t have to correspond to anything real. But corresponding with reality is just what knowledge must do to guide practical activity.

Platonism

Nominalism and conceptualism leave no room for universals, but Platonism makes an opposite mistake. Derived from the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, Platonism imagines that there is a separate ideal realm of universals, which most people can barely perceive. Each universal is supposed to be a perfect example, and things in the real world are considered to be just defective im-

itations of them.

Platonists treat universals as if they had a kind of spiritual power. After World War I, the French government built a huge building on the battlefield at Verdun to hold the bones of 150,000 soldiers who died there in a single battle. Stained glass windows on the building portray this imperialist slaughter as a battle of Justice and Humanity (the French side) against Ignorance and Brutality (the German side). But rival capitalist powers fought this war, not universals!

Platonism is common in religion, too. The Bible describes God as “the Word” that “became flesh and lived among us” as Jesus. “The Word” (“logos”) here means “explanation” or “reason,” so God is being described as a universal.

Marx and Engels gave an example of how Platonism holds people back from struggling for communism. A Platonist sees the real humanity as something perfect, but the humanity he actually finds is “a crowd of run down, overworked, sick, hungry, poor people.” The Platonist tries to ignore this and focuses on his idealized higher reality, and “thus falls directly back into idealism, while the communist materialist sees the necessity and at the same time the conditions for re-designing both production and social structure” (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*).

In the next issue, we will summarize the dialectical materialist view of universals, which rejects the idealism of nominalism, conceptualism, and Platonism.