

UNIVERSAL, PARTICULAR AND INDIVIDUAL, PART I

Being human is something we all have in common. We are all also animals and mammals. Most of us are workers. The philosopher's term for these general characteristics, humanity, being an animal, being a worker, etc., is universals. A universal is a general characteristic, but that doesn't mean it applies to everything. It is the kind of characteristic that applies or could apply to several or many things.

The things that have these general characteristics are called individuals. An individual can be a person, a thing, or even process or social class. If we say that "Barack Obama is male," we are saying that one individual, Obama, has a characteristic that he shares with a huge number of other individuals, and this characteristic is a universal, being male.

Besides universal and individual, there is a third category, particular, that fits in between these two. Particular focuses on a single case or a narrow range of cases of some universal. If we talk about a group of workers in a single shop, and learn that some of them are *Red Flag* readers and some are not, then we have several individuals in a particular group or situation that have the characteristic of being *Red Flag* readers, a universal.

Why bother with this terminology?

There are several reasons why communist philosophy uses these terms. As we saw in previous columns, knowledge in the form of laws and generalizations is essential for organizing the

fight for communism, and these laws and generalizations use universals to describe individuals and particular situations. Another reason that especially concerns us here, however, is that wrong ideas about universals are a major area of idealist and pro-capitalist philosophy. To understand what these theories say, we need to separate several ways of talking about universals.

Universals are described by words like "human," "animal," "capitalist," "strike," etc. But the word "human" is not the same as the concept human. "Human" is a word in a particular language. The concept human, a creation of thought, is not the same as any particular word, and can be expressed in any language. Both the word and the concept are also different from the biological, social and historical factors that make something a human being. These factors, characteristics or laws that make up the real universal human are not words or thoughts but aspects of the real world.

Two Capitalist Theories about Universals

Several completely wrong ideas about universals are influential in capitalist philosophy. One view says that there are only words and concepts, but no real universals, at least none we can know about. This theory, called conceptualism, says that we humans form concepts only by a process of leaving out details—excluding the particular. Thus we form the concept horse by leaving out the size, weight, color, health, breed, etc. of individual horses.

The conceptualist says that if there is a real universal that corresponds to this concept we form, we know nothing about it. Conceptualists say we can form the concept of a worker by leaving out the details of any particular job and be left with only with being paid a wage. The real causes and consequences of being a worker, the essence of being a worker, which is the real universal, is unknown and irrelevant. If this were true, there would be no social laws about being a worker, nothing behind the surface that would need to be figured out about work under capitalism.

A similar, more extreme idea is called nominalism, which flatly denies that there are any universals. Nominalism says that the different things we apply one word to have nothing in common except that we use the same word for them. If this were so, there could have been no laws of nature before humans evolved, since there were no languages then.

Conceptualism and nominalism have in common that whenever we say that that some individual has some general characteristic, that characteristic has no counterpart in the real world. Our words and concepts correspond to nothing beyond speaking and thinking, a clear example of an idealist point of view. Unfortunately these are not the only idealist views about universals. In our next column, we will talk about a different idealist viewpoint, and outline the dialectical materialist view of universals.