

DOI: 10.21847/1728-9343.2021.1(2).227385

**IHOR PASKO**

*Center for Humanitarian Education of the National Academy  
of Sciences of Ukraine (Kyiv, Ukraine)  
ORCID 0000-0001-8763-461X*

## **THE REFLECTION ON THE CONCEPT OF UNIVERSALS AND ITS SOCIAL-HISTORICAL VERIFICATION**

In this article, the author reviews the concept of singular and general. The analysis focus on the problem of universals during social-historical transformation. The author illustrates the manifestation of universals as a category during the Antiquity and the Modern era. The author argues that the shift in perception of Natural law, making an individual the central unit of analysis, happened during the Modernity. This shift leads to the creation of the concept of the social contract and the development of the idea that the will of individuals within a given society has to be the state's law.

Therefore, a historical paradox occurred, where private property and laissez-faire economic doctrine simultaneously became the causes for development and a foundation for objection to the conceptional-nominalist paradigm. The consecutive historical development was connected with mass attempts of different social groups to implement individual freedom, anti-etatism, rationalism. This led to shaping the social paradigm of modernity as well as to moderate conservative way of thinking and recognizing the practical falsity of extreme forms realism and nominalism.

This influence of various social groups resulted in the establishment of moderate conservatism in the contemporary social paradigm and the invalidation of radical realism and nominalism. This fact is confirmed by the dominance of liberal-conservative consensus in Modern Europe. Synthesizing the different approaches to the historical experience of formation and evolution of realism and nominalism, it also explores the role and significance theoretical reflection on Universals in the process of social reconstruction.

**Key word:** *universals, conceptual-normative paradigm, social contract theory, laissez-faire doctrine, liberal-conservative order in Europe.*

### **Introduction**

The theoretical background of European philosophical tradition started with determining a correlation between singular and general, and this problem remains relevant for the field of Philosophy nowadays. However, the literature on the history of Philosophy is rather one-sided<sup>1</sup>. Traditionally, the discussion about the definition of Universal is associated with Medieval scholastic disputes on the Christian dogma of Trinity. Nominalists, realists, and conceptualists were portrayed as abstract authors not interested in practical difficulties faced by individuals and society. From our perspective, universals remained a prominent issue for medieval philosophy and attracted new philosophical ideas and explanations in each consecutive historical epoch.

This article aims to broaden the discourse on the nature of universals accounting historical and philosophical reflections of the Antique and Modernity scholars in the context of social and historical changes.

### **Methodological basis**

A significant drawback of the widespread History of Philosophy research methodology on the nature of universals is the perception of this question as a purely philosophical phenomenon one that requires conventional logical and philosophical tools. Most researchers wanted to find a straight forward philosophical solution, which could represent universal objective truth. We think that a dispute on the nature of universals and about the dialectics of singular and general has been connected to the social reality, had a socio-political foundation and orientation. Truth is not gnoseological or logical; it is pretty practical category in the Hegelian sense of objective reality, which in his understanding meant a correlation of reasonable and valid. Therefore, we should come to the solution of this question specifically historically.

Systematic, textual, functional, value-oriented, methodological approaches was incorporated for our theoretical research. I used comparative and hermeneutic approaches as well as the principles of social critical theory and worldview pluralism to compare ideas of different philosophical schools and independent thinkers.

<sup>1</sup>See more: *Istina i blago...*, 2002; Kotarbiński, 1963; Narskiy, 1981; Neretina, Ogurtsov, 2006; Neretina, 1995; 1996.

### Result and Discussion

It would be wrong to assume that the great dispute connected with Universals emerges during Premodern epoch. Sophists were the first to enter the debate. They were the first to oppose the realist understanding of the world, including polis law and customs. In this context we want to remind our reader that the mass conscience of early classic Greece was based on God's natured polis customs as well as Homeric and Hesiodian mythology. This point of view prevailed in the philosophical discourse of that age. Sophists reacted to the dominant paradigm quite distinctively. They have not rejected objective natural law (*physis*) but focused on *nomos*, subjective moral-legislative intentions.

According to the sophistic perspective, human is a moral-political, not a natural being. For that reason, its activity is subjected to *nomos* and not *physis*. Thus, politics, morals, law belong to *nomos*, a sphere of subjective human competencies that do not have an objective ground.

The development of Athenian democracy contributed to the emergence of sophists' perspectives on universals. Athenian democracy developed owing to fast changes in dissolution of the traditional tribe, norms of polis life, and ethnical awareness. The Peloponnesian war was another factor in forming an idea of the absence of unified godly or natural law in the mass conscience. Instead, Athenians concluded that the public exists by its own rules and traditions.

Sophist's position in the dispute was undoubtedly nominalist. They pointed out that a society with a positive law that was not objectively compulsory was nothing more than a codified will of the ruler. From a social perspective, that was an objection to the foundation of tyranny and authoritarianism. In an attempt to get rid of moral relativism extremes, Protagor specified that overcoming the *status quo* is possible through social actors' mobilization. This thought was a core of sophists' humanitarian sense of their moral and legal enlightenment activities. However, the democracy in this interpretation loses its objective foundation since it has a set of only subjective virtues and similarly to tyranny can be imposed externally.

We should presume that sophists' nomothetic nominalism was a necessary philosophical and rational verbalization of democracy's objectively historical imperatives—the problem of correlation of singular and general embodiment in conflict of aristocratic and democratic political systems. The triumph of Antique democracy was the most important argument in favor of nominalism. Thus, Sophistic philosophy was the first attempt in history to provide a theoretical explanation of democracy.

The crisis of democracy had finally caused a crisis of ethic and normative (legal) sophistic nominalism. The political and social evolution of ancient world led to the discrediting the primacy of individual's participation in state governance and law-making. It can be argued that Protagoras's claim that "human is a measure of all things" was not approbated by history.

Athenian polis became a model for democratic public authority. However, ancient Greeks did not manage to found neither a mechanism of political conflict regulation between different groups and individuals, nor a consensus mechanism desperately needed in a free society. Without this mechanism, democracy was degrading into an ochlocracy with totalitarian features. A subjective nom-

inalist philosophy of sophists has identified this vulnerability of Athenian democracy.

For this reason, a practical truth for history was a comeback to aristocratic and authoritarian political regimes and to the realist formula defining its essence. Socrates provided the best and most whole definition of realism with his thesis on objectivity and primacy of kindness and justice in general regarding individuals and their actions. Plato has later created a sophisticated philosophical system on this theory.

Even though the dispute on the nature of universals in either philosophical stream continued for two thousand years, its outcome, according my view, was seemingly determined. Competing sides broke spears, shredded arrows, and put labels one each other. The flames of irony and arrogance of scientific arguments incinerated folios and humiliated disputers.

However, the course of history did not take these polemics into account and entrenched God, the state, and the church as underlying realities. The primacy of man as imperative of history occasionally attracted the minds of some theoreticians, but the mass conscience could not understand or accept this idea. For that reason, moderate realists Aristotle and Thomas of Aquinas were the most authoritative thinkers of Premodern era.

The situation changed radically with the economic relations in the Modern period. Civil society as a sphere of personal autonomy and entrepreneurship emerged gradually within old feudalistic structures. This sphere challenged the totalitarian state, slowly separating and reforming the regime into an authoritarian. This process occurred in England and theoretically corresponded to liberalism. Thus, the social practice of the Modernity starts not with democratization but with liberalization, from the individual's private sphere free of state control. This state of affairs objectively required recognition of liberalism's cornerstone principle, "laissez-faire," as well as a pivot of new social philosophy. A further explanation of the natural law, which makes an individual a central unit of analysis, was an invention of the New Epoch. The individual is viewed as a primary reality in society and state. Thus, the rights of an individual were more important than the rights of the collective: individuality and autonomy of the person are primary and implicit, while social connections and affinity are secondary and conditional. In accordance with this vision, all legal and moral norms are conditional and artificial; therefore, they cannot have the factor of social progress and precondition for welfare.

A logical ending for the liberalism doctrine was a social contract concept. The question about the truthfulness of this concept was not a question of science but a question of social practice and a need in a specific conceptual reflection of a controversial Medieval realism. In this case, the focus is on rethinking the ideas of Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

In the context of the first theoretical approximation, it seemed that the concept God-state-individuum trinity as a practical implementation has failed. The mind inversion has now recognized that only an individual was entitled to the actual status of being. In the XVII century nominalist-conceptualist ideas of T. Hobbes and J. Locke were perceived as consequences of scientific revolution. By the XVIII century, the deference of scientific, philosophical, social, cultural, and political notions of this kind was not impressive but evident.

In this context it is interesting questioning: why would a new European society refusing one set of mental stereotypes and adopt another? Individualist ontology and its moral and law foundation principles seem not only imperfect but rather questionable. If a rule has no objective and absolute prerequisites: natural, godly, or righteous, how can we be sure that this law is not evil or fraud? History has chosen liberal conceptualism as truthful because its ideas, which attracted a mass conscience, formed the market and virtues wealth, technical, scientific, moral, and spiritual progress.

Nevertheless, the liberal practice has a fetus of self-doubt at its core. Private property, economic freedom, and competition seemingly liberate an individual from the state and make dependence conditional and surreal. Such a state is no longer an *Universum* or arbitrator in the social life of the individuals. On the contrary, the will of social individuals has to be the law of the state. This political ideal is common to the classical liberalism era and for the post-Soviet society. Its implementation, in reality, could have been a practical solution to the historical dispute on the essence of universals, but there are quite a few people that argue the opposite.

Many argue that the implementation of this political ideal has occurred in many civilized countries; therefore, Ukraine has to incorporate it in its state-building process. Indeed, representative democracy, the political mechanism of liberalism and constitutional state, grants society an opportunity to solve many economic and social problems without significant restraints on individual's rights and freedoms. Even though liberalism has faced several obstacles in the course of history, it was definitely influenced by the conceptualist social paradigm of the Modernity. Super powers searched for effective civil society control methods leaning on the social contract and individual liberty.

Analyzing the English political system, Montesquieu the theoretically grounded the separation of powers principle. He concluded that the society could control only differentiated government when its branches can have checks on each other. The creation of a political system that provides for the rights and freedoms of individuals limits the role of the government can be seen as moderate nominalism and conceptualism. The western mentality and a part of the occidentally oriented public of the post-communist world accepted this thesis by appropriating the "Rights of the individuals are above the rights of nations and states" slogan. The reality, however, is more complex than that.

The state or the people do not govern the rule of the law society. What does the legislation mean for this society? One can observe that jurisdiction norms determine certain spheres of livelihood, but it is unclear how these legislative norms are produced. Do legislators create these norms with kind intentions and in good will? Many parliamentarians would argue that the quality of law depends on the good or evil intentions of the policymakers. However, the misfortunes that the civilized world has encountered in its political history refuted these naïve assumptions. The rule of law emerges in societies with an economic system of private property, "laissez-faire," and the market. This system does not allow state to enlarge control or central regulation, allowing the market to reach homeostasis through self-regulation.

A particular historical paradox takes place. Private property and laissez-faire were factors of conceptual-

nominalist paradigm formation, but their derivative, the market, was an agent of its abrogation. The development of the homeostatic market system made practical truthfulness of conceptualism and positivist-liberal methodology doubtful. The Renaissance of realist worldview, the primacy of general recognition, and acknowledgment of objective being as a law became necessary and inevitable. From this perspective, the essence of legislative norms becomes understandable. It can be 'truthful', 'legislative', and must functioning on objective imperatives of the market. A mission of political system is the shaping of these imperatives.

Only the state capable of verbalizing these laws and functioning by them can be called constitutional. In this case, the state becomes a political and jurisdictional representative of the market, a self-regulation tool, and an instrument in hands of those incapable of using it. Thus, the historical process with its attraction to market and objective law governance did not fit in nominalist laissez-faire type of economy which logically lead to anti-etatism, and finally to anarchy, an interpretation of every law as evil abolishing liberty. Therefore, conservatism with its moderate realistic aspirations became an antithesis to liberalism.

The 'new wave' theoreticians that did not accept the natural law idea had an interesting reaction to this phenomenon. For example, Adam Smith thought that the market was not contrary to liberal principles of social organization; an individual's freedom of expression corresponds to actions of the objective forces similar to Niels Bor's principle of complimentary, where opposites reinforce instead of annihilating each other. Hegel, on the contrary, believed that they were incompatible and resolved the antinomy by prioritizing state and market and recognizing realism as a concept of absolute Truth. Thus, Hegel's philosophy of law had a significant impact on the social conception of conservatism.

Conservatism can be considered a concept most closely resembling reality. This ideology defines history as a product of people's actions and not their conscious projects and programs. In his analysis of the French Revolution, Tocqueville has warned about overvaluing the mind in the course of history (*Tocqueville, 21008:153*).

Tocquevillian criticism remains relevant today when social constructs are based on unjustified claims of mind to a comprehensive understanding of social processes. English conservative Burke noted that the "human mind is limited. Prejudice is a prepared reaction in extraordinary circumstances, motivating a man to be wise and fair, helping him to overcome doubt and skepticism" (*Burke, 1955: 99*).

Three hundred years of European history provided evidence that society is a complex organism and that radical changes to it produce unexpected results. This position represents moderated realism, perspective, and position in history. Adam Mikhnik noted that "logic of restoration is ultimately better than the logic of Jacobin and Bolshevik cleansings, vengeance, and guillotine executions. Steady restoration is gray and similar to nausea, but progressive revolution is as red as blood is" (*Mikhnik, 1995:66*).

### Conclusion

Humanity is capable of perceiving history to the extent that its ability to reach its full potential. History is a part of

human self-realization, but it does not answer the central philosophical questions. In the essay, the reader could ascertain that, despite stereotypes, the discourse on the essence of universals is not chronologically limited to the Middle Ages. Its roots can be traced to Antiquity and found in new streams of European philosophy. The "pure" nominalism and realism obtain distinct features in each era depending on the societal and historical transformations. Is it possible to get an absolute answer to a truthful essence of general terms? Currently, we can conclude the practical untruthfulness of realism's and nominalism's radical streams. The dominance of liberal-conservative consensus in Europe is the confirmation of this fact.

#### REFERENCES

- Berdyayev, N.A. (1990). *Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma*. Moscow: Nauka. (In Russian)
- Burke, E. (1955). *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. New York, 1955.
- Istina i blago: universalnoye i singulyarnoye (2002). Moscow: Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences (In Russian).
- Kotarbiński, T. (1963). *Spor ob universalnykh v sredniye veka* (translate from Polish). In: *Izbrannye proizvedeniya*. Moscow. (In Russian).
- Mikhnik, A. (1995). *Oksamytova revolyutsiya (Velvet Revolution)*. Suchasnist. Literatura, nauka, mystetstvo, suspilnezhyttya. 4: P.61-66 (In Ukrainian).
- Narskiy, I.S. (1981). *Problema universalii i diskussiyana XVI V semirnomo filosofskom kongresse*. In.: *Filosofiya i mirovozzrencheskiye problemy sovremennoy nauki*. Moscow: 269-298. (In Russian).
- Neretina, S.S. (1995). *Veruyushchiy razum. K istorii srednevekovoy filosofii*. Arkhangelsk. (In Russian).
- Neretina, S.S. (1996). *Slovo i tekst v srednevekovoy kulture. Kontseptualizm Petra Abelyara*. Moscow. (In Russian).
- Neretina, S.S., Ogurtsov, A.P. (2006). *Puti k universaliiyam*. Moscow: Izdatelstvo RKHGA. (In Russian).
- Solovyov, V.S. (1992). *Dazhe yesli Boga net, chelovek ne Bog*. In: *Marksizm: Pro i contra*. (In Russian)
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. (2008). *Staryy poriadok i revolyutsiya* (translate from French). St.Petersburg: Aletyya. (In Russian)

**Ігор Пасько,**

*Центр гуманітарної освіти НАН України (м. Київ, Україна)*

*ORCID 0000-0001-8763-461X*

### СПІР ПРО УНІВЕРСАЛІЇ ТА ЙОГО СОЦІАЛЬНО-ІСТОРИЧНА ВЕРИФІКАЦІЯ

У статті автор розмірковує про природу універсалій з точки зору співвідношення одиничного і загального у контексті суспільно-історичних трансформацій. Показано, яким чином питання про існування чи неіснування універсалій презентувалося в античному дискурсі та дискурсі Нового часу. Саме Новий час, як доводить автор, містить поворотний момент в тлумаченні поняття природного права, в якому за основу береться автономний індивід. І це призводить до формування концепції суспільного договору, а також до розвитку ідеї про те, що воля суспільних індивідів мусить бути законом буття держави. Констатується існування певного історичного парадоксу, у якому чинниками становлення концептуально-номіналістичної парадигми мислення і одночасно чинниками її заперечення стали приватна власність і економічна доктрина *laissez faire*. Подальший розвиток історичного процесу і масштабні спроби окремих соціальних груп затвердити в ньому антиетатизм, анархізм, витлумачувати закони як зло і порушення індивідуальної свободи, призвели до затвердження в сучасній суспільній парадигмі поміркованого консервативного способу мислення і визнання практичної неістинності крайніх форм як реалізму, так і номіналізму. Підтвердженням цього факту є домінування в сучасній Європі ліберально-консервативного консенсусу.

*Ключові слова: універсалії, концептуально-номіналістична парадигма мислення, теорія суспільного договору, принцип laissez faire, ліберально-консервативний устрій Європи.*

© Ihor Pasko

Надійшла до редакції: 24.02.2021

Прийнята до друку: 02.04.2021