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## Universals

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In [metaphysics](#), a **universal** is a type, a property, or a relation. The term derives from the Latin word *universalia* and is often considered to be a mind-independent entity that transcends the vicissitudes of time and so can be applied throughout the universe. It is most often contrasted with "individual," "particular," or sometimes "concrete" and is used to explain how individuals share similar qualities, relations, or resemblances with one another. For example, while "Fido" refers to an individual or particular dog, the term "dog" as a universal represents any and all individual dogs. Likewise, a brown dog and a brown bear share the quality of brownness. But in being universals, the terms "dog" or "brown" refer to all dogs or brown things throughout history regardless of particular time and place and regardless of the different words which are used in different languages. For instance, the English word "dog" and the French word "*chien*" refer to the same universal idea.

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## Problem of Universals

Throughout the history of philosophy, and particularly in ancient and medieval philosophy, the problem of universals has been a major one. Briefly, the problem of universals centers upon the nature or “[ontological](#) status” of universals as ideas and in what sense they refer to a reality or have a reality all their own. For where and how do these universals exist? Does the universal idea exist only in our minds or do they have some actual existence outside of our minds? If they exist only in our minds, how does the idea of a dog in our mind correspond with actual, living dogs? Or how does the idea of a dog in your mind relate to the idea of a dog in my mind? If they exist outside of our minds, where do they exist? Do they exist in actual things, such

as real dogs or trees? Or do they exist in some other intellectual realm which we all can participate in through our minds? Or do they exist ultimately in the mind of God? Finally, perhaps these universals are merely ideas or concepts which we form in our minds and which only approximate real things. If so, this would mean that we never really know the “things-in-themselves” but only build up certain ideas based on our perceptions? Moreover, this would suggest that there are no “universals” in the absolute or timeless sense, but only historical concepts or ideas which are constantly changing or in a state of “becoming.”

## **Interpretations of Universals**

### **Plato**

Plato viewed Universals as Ideas or Forms that exists outside of us in some higher, intellectual realm. While real things or particulars here on earth are subject to change, the universal Ideas always remains the same and are eternal. The Ideas, then, have a higher ontological status and so a greater reality. For this reason, the many particulars merely participate in the one universal Idea. For example, the many particular dogs all participate in and so derive their reality from the one Idea or Form of dog or perhaps “dogness.” Moreover, the Ideas in themselves are perfect, while the particulars are imperfect. Eventually particular dogs die and so pass away, whereas the Idea of Dog remains unchanging and eternal. Human beings as intellectual beings are able to participate in this higher intellectual realm and so can come to know or share in these Ideas. The problem which Plato never explained, however, is

just where these Ideas really exist or what the precise nature of this higher, intellectual realm might be.

## Aristotle

Aristotle had a similar idea of universals but reversed the relation. He agreed that the many particular or real things are predicated to the one common idea of those things. Fido, Rover, and Trot can all be called “dogs.” But for Aristotle the common idea (of dog) is abstracted out of the real particular things (Fido, Rover, and Trot). For where, asked Aristotle, would this idea of a dog exist except in our minds? He rejected Plato’s notion of separate Ideas existing in some higher realm. Nonetheless, Aristotle did think the essences, which are abstracted out of real things, do exist, in some sense, in the real things themselves. That is, as a philosophical realist Aristotle held that real things have certain natures which our minds are able to grasp. It is through the universal ideas, then, that we grasp these essences or natures.

## Scholasticism

This problem of the nature of universals persisted throughout the medieval period. The earlier neo-Platonists (such as Plotinus) had followed Plato in viewing universals as holding a separate existence. They argued, though, that this separate intellectual realm (or “intellectual hypostasis”) was an intermediate realm which existed between the ultimate Good or One and the physical, temporal universe. Later St. Augustine followed a similar model but theologized it by calling the ultimate Good “God.” The intellectual realm was then the mind of God. But this led to questions of how humans with their finite

understanding can know these Universals as an infinite God would know them. Moreover, in knowing them would they know God himself (that is, in His essence)? In any case, most medieval realists, prior to the Aristotelian renewal in the thirteenth century, held to the notion that universals were some kind of real “secondary substances” as opposed to the primary substances of particular things. What kind of existence they had, however, was not adequately explained.

In the thirteenth century St. [Thomas Aquinas](#) tried to synthesize some of these earlier views through a theory which was influenced by the Arabic philosopher [Avicenna](#). Aquinas held that universals had real existence only in God as creative ideas, which were “actualized” into existence, such as real trees, dogs, and humans. These universals as essences can in turn be experienced by us in the actual particulars of real trees, dogs, and humans that we perceive in everyday life. Finally, insofar as we abstract these natures from the particulars and so know them, the universals exist in our mind as mental entities or ideas through which we know these real things.

Later medieval thinkers (such as [William Ockham](#) had a more [nominalist](#) view of universals. This meant that universals did not have any ontological reality but were merely names which represented classes of things. While Aquinas held to the more Aristotelian realism that universals corresponded to ontological facts, for Ockham universals as terms were signs which merely pointed or referred to real things.

## [Modern Philosophy](#)

The anti-realist posture characterizes most of modern philosophy. Although there are large number of different views in general they can be characterized as either “conceptualists” or “nominalists.” Both camps deny the real existence of universals. Conceptualists explain the similarity or resemblances between individuals in terms of concepts or ideas as they exist in our minds. Nominalists, on the other hand, think that reality in itself is unknowable and so often rely on various theories of language and predication to explain the formation of our ideas. The notion of universal has also been taken up in modern idealism, for example, in the philosophy of [Hegel](#). Here there is a dialectical relation between an abstract universal and a concrete particular which is ultimately subsumed with the higher Idea of a concrete universal. This notion of a concrete universal was in turn taken up by British [neo-Hegelian idealism](#).

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# External links

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## General Philosophy Sources

- [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)
- [Philosophy Sources on Internet EpistemeLinks](#)
- [Guide to Philosophy on the Internet](#)

- [Paideia Project Online](#)
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