

Poet vs. Philosopher

Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Falaquera's significance regarding the antecedents and reception of Maimonides

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Abstract

Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera (ca. 1225 - ca. 1295) in his youth he was a poet and afterwards declared that he was quitting poetry to devote himself to less frivolous pursuits; but this was perhaps only a figure of speech. His poetry is in contemporary taste, without further distinction. As a philosopher he was not original and did not wish to be. He was also a writer of occasional poems, and probably in the fashion of the time, received gifts from wealthy patrons. This occupation, however, he early abjured as little suited to his taste and temperament. In his mature age, Falaquera declared that to pursue poetry is a dangerous profession as it is not engaged in truth but in beauty and rhetorics instead!

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„A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.” (Proverbs 25,11)

Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera was born in northern Spain or Provence ca. 1225, and probably died ca. 1295. The Falaquera family was one of the richest and noblest of Tudela, but it seems that Shem Tov himself was rather poor and retiring; at all events, he was not an important member of the community and intervened in public affairs only once when he supported the philosophers in the anti-Maimonidean dispute. In his youth, he was a poet and afterwards declared that he was quitting poetry to devote himself to less frivolous pursuits, but this was perhaps only a figure of speech. His poetry is in contemporary taste, without further distinction. As a philosopher, he was not original and did not wish to be. His numerous works often consist of excerpts from Arabic treatises, which he translated into Hebrew rather than personal compositions. Thus, he translated

and quoted a number of Neoplatonic texts, including the *Book of the Five Substances* by Pseudo-Empedocles, especially in his two little encyclopedias, *Reshit Hokhmah* (*The Beginning of Knowledge*) and *Sefer ha-Mevakesh*¹ (*The Book of the Seeker*).

Previous research work into this topic in Hungary

As far as I know, it was Lajos Venetianer² who first published extensively about Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Falaquera³ in Hungarian in *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* („Hungarian Jewish Survey“).

Lajos Venetianer, rabbi and historian was born in Kecskemét on May 19th, 1867 and died in Újpest on November 25th, 1922. Between 1881 and 1891, he studied at the rabbinical seminary based in Budapest and meanwhile also at the Breslau Rabbiner-Seminar for an academic year. In 1890 he received his master of arts degree in Budapest and then officiated as rabbi in 1892. He graduated from the university in Cluj Napoca as a secondary school teacher of Hungarian and German literature and language, which he actually taught at the grammar school in Csurgó while he was active there as a pastor. In 1893 he moved to Csurgó, then in 1896 to Lugos, In 1897 he was officiated as the chief rabbi of Újpest. He was deputy chairman of the National Rabbi Association, since 1910 a member of Joseph Franz National Rabbi Training Institute managing board, and a part-time lecturer of theology with the same institute. For the lower-level courses he regularly taught Jewish religion studies, Bible studies and Jewish history, whilst for the upper-level ones, he was a lecturer on the legal and judicial conditions of the Israelite congregation in Hungary and the methodology of religious education after the death of Ignác Goldziher he also taught religion philosophy literature. He was an industrious and fertile cultivator of Jewish studies excelling with his works as a historiographer. Of his oeuvre, special mention should be made of his studies in history with reference and associations of the Jewry in the latter half of

¹ SIRAT, Colette: *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, 1995. p. 234.

² „Hungarian rabbi and writer; born May 19, 1867, at Kecskemet. He studied at the rabbinical seminary, the University of Budapest, and the Jewish Theological Seminary and the University of Breslau, 1888-89 (PhD 1890, Budapest). Receiving his diploma as rabbi from the seminary of Budapest in 1892, he officiated as rabbi at Somogy-Csurgó from that year to 1895, holding at the same time the chair of Hungarian and German literature at the Evangelical Reform Gymnasium of that city. In 1895 he was called to the rabbinate of Lugos and in the following year to that of Újpest near Budapest. Venetianer is the author of: "A Fokozatok Könyve," [The Book of Degrees] on the sources of Shem-Ṭob ibn Falaquera (Szegedin, 1890)." <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14665-venetianer-ludwig> [SINGER, Isidore: VENETIANER, Ludwig]

³ VENETIANER, Lajos: *Semtób Ibn Falakéra, adalékok az arab-zsidó philosophia történetéhez a 13. században*. [Semtób Ibn Falakéra, further data on the history of Arabic-Jewish philosophy in the 13th century] *Magyar Zsidó Szemle* [Hungarian Jewish Review], Budapest, 1890. pp. 74-82, 144-155.

the 19th century. Chief work: *A Magyar zsidóság története* (1922, The History of the Hungarian Jewry).⁴

There is no doubt about the significance of professor Venetianer as a teacher and a scientist. He was a permanent contributor to *Magyar Zsidó Szemle*, and his outstanding publications enhanced the prestige of this periodical.

Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Falaquera (ca. 1225 – ca. 1295) was one of the best-informed and most critical talents of philosophy of his age. In his youth, his ambition was to become a poet, but later on, he declared to quit poetry to devote himself to less bohemian activities, although it was actually only a stylistic statement or twist on his side. His poems reflect contemporary tastes and nothing beyond that. Many of his writings are not his own original creations but actually poetic excerpts from Arabic works, which he translated into Hebrew.

Used in several variations in sources, Falaquera is a nickname originating probably from Beaucaire, a town in France referred to as Bellicadrum in the Middle Ages. Back in those days, town names were often used before the surnames of people of significance. This must have been the case with Shem Tov ben Joseph, as the Hebrew transcription of Belcairo was changed twice amongst the community of Spanish Jews: the initial letter „beth” weakened into „pe”, and moving „yodh” in front by chance resulted in the version „Falaqérá”. It has been confusing ever since that a wide variety of this name has been used internationally in literature: Palquira, Palquera, Palkiera, Palgira, Phalkira, Phalkera, Phalchera, Falaquera, Faláqérá etc.

However, none of the above compromise Shem Tov ben Joseph’s significance. We hardly know any fact about his life.⁵ He was relatively unknown, which may be explained by the facts that he stayed away from public disputes, did not hold any office or rank, and he retired to devote himself exclusively to science. In his youth, he engaged in poetry, which he later regarded as „a child’s game” and just gave it up in order to pursue science instead, the one and only interest which was important for him. After studying the Holy Script and Talmud, at the age of about 30 he was more intensely immersed in philosophy. He was especially engaged in the philosophies of Aristotle, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Averroes, Ibn Gabirol, Judah Halevi and Abraham ibn Ezra. Finally, he evolved into an excellent expert and interpreter of *the Guide* by Maimonides.

⁴ Magyar zsidó lexikon. [Hungarian Jewish Lexicon], Budapest, (ed. ÚJVÁRI, Péter), 1929. p. 945.

⁵ Ibid. p. 77.

Aged appr. 60 (in ca. 1285) he completed his chief work titled *Moré ha-Morét* (The Guide to the Guide),⁶ which was used as a source by every commentator later on thanks to its interpretations of certain passages of *The Guide of the Perplexed*.⁷ There must have been a commentary of the Holy Script and an explanation for the Talmud *aggadah* written by him which apparently have not come down to us. His chief work titled *De'ot ha-Pilosofim*⁸ (*Opinions of the Philosophers*) and another writing on ethics have remained in manuscripts till now. The introduction to *De'ot ha-Pilosofim* is a clear statement of Falaquera's intellectual approach:

„Originating from the Proclaimed *Law* and the wise as well, it is known and accepted everywhere and by everyone that the ultimate and genuine happiness of humans is to know and reach the Creator in thoughts to the extent human intellect has the capacity of. Besides, the genuinely wise also agree that this knowledge is achieved by humans through grasping divine deeds and having an intellectual image of them, because what has already separated from the material can only be the subject of human perception via its actions.”

There are two approaches open to people: prophecies and science. Falaquera⁹ reaches far back to the *Neoplatonic* tradition in his introduction to *the Guide*, but also relies on Avicenna when declaring that a prophet gets to know everything directly through and by the grace of the Eternal One, which in turn means that his knowledge is perfect and whole even without his studying it; there is no need for him to advance and move upward step by step; his knowledge is not different

⁶ „In the third appendix to *Moreh ha-moreh* (Guide to the Guide), Falaquera critiques Ibn Tibbon's (and occasionally Al-Harizi's) Arabic translations. In *Moreh ha-moreh*, Falaquera has taken pains to translate Maimonides precisely so that the author's intention is not lost. The Guide includes many words that hint at a deeper meaning, he notes, and only one who is schooled in philosophy and science will understand this complexity. If these words are not translated properly, explains Falaquera, their deeper meaning will be lost.”

ROBERTS-ZAUDERER, Dianna Lynn: *Metaphor and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Thought* Moses Ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi, Moses Maimonides, and Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera. Palgraven Mecomillan, Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019. p. 175. (eBook) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29422-9>

⁷ VENETIANER, Lajos: *Semtób Ibn Falakéra, adalékok az arab-zsidó philosophia történetéhez a 13. században*. [Semtób Ibn Falakéra, further data on the history of Arabic-Jewish philosophy in the 13th century], Magyar Zsidó Szemle, [Hungarian Jewish Review] Budapest, 1890. p. 79.

⁸ In his comprehensive encyclopaedia titled „*De'ot ha-Philosophim* he introduced and presented the sciences of physics and metaphysics. Although the two surviving manuscripts show Ibn Tibbon as author, Zunz (Parma, de Rossi, 1640), and (Schr, 3 (1876), 277ff.) Steinschneider has proven with certainty Falaquera's authorship.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* CD-ROM, FALAQUERA [Moshe Nahum Zobel]

⁹ „In the dispute against Maimonides he was defending Maimoni, who even wrote a public letter to defend the Guide for the Perplexed. Just like Maimoni, he believed that developing the intellect leads to salvation. In 1280 he wrote a Guide to the Guide, a highly valuable commentary in which he presents Maimonides' philosophical views.” *Ibid*.

from that of a philosopher; however, in contrast with the latter he does not acquire it via demonstration and evidence, but through his intuition. A philosopher may be more or less a scientist or a philosopher; whilst a prophet is entirely and exclusively a prophet with a knowledge which is complete. There is yet another aspect which distinguishes a prophet from a philosopher: he enjoys and bears divine providence.

An anticipatory attitude, the rejection of making statements, his firm attachment to juxtapositioning things. All this is highly characteristic of Falaquera, but it is also highly questionable to what extent he was an original thinker.¹⁰ He refrains from searching for any kind of original solutions, does not propose anything new as if everything was fine as it is, and as if he viewed the philosophical tradition as a solid and coherent system. There is only one exception associated with creation itself. This is the occasion when Falaquera takes sides firmly as he thinks this is the most important issue of all for a believer. In his letter defending Maimonides, he explains two reasons why he believes Maimonides wrote *the Guide*. Firstly, to highlight that philosophical reasonings are not right when it comes to the creation of the world; secondly, to fight anthropomorphism. According to Falaquera, Maimonides believed that the world came into being as created, and he explains its various stages accordingly. The explanation of miracles by Maimonides is based on creation, whilst creation itself is the foundation for the acceptance of divine revelation. Falaquera rejects proving the existence of the Eternal One by the primary mover (The Guide to the Guide pp. 74–78.), in his work, there is a remarkably precise historical study on the evidence of the existence of the Eternal One, because this proof presupposes the eternity of the world itself. Maimonides, as Falaquera declares, presented two different methods of proving the existence of the Eternal God:

– via eternal motion, and

¹⁰ „Falaquera was not an original thinker of the first order. But the breadth and depth of his knowledge of Judaism, philosophy and science qualify him as an important figure in the development of Jewish philosophy. Unlike Maimonides, who explicitly wrote for an elite intelligentsia, Falaquera wrote most of his works with the explicit aim of raising the cultural level of the Jewish people. It is therefore perhaps precisely such a personality as Falaquera who can best indicate the extent to which philosophy succeeded in finding a home in Judaism. The pioneering philosophical efforts of the earlier luminaries attained an enduring impact on the course of Jewish history and the religious life of the Jewish people, it may be maintained, through the consolidation of those efforts at the hands of Jewish philosophers like Falaquera. Their contribution is onless important for the fact that their light was often a reflected one.” JOSPE, Raphael: *Torah and Sophia, The Life and Thought of Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera*. Hebrew Union College Press Cincinnati, 1988. p. 1.

– contingency (the Eternal One being a self-evident being), whilst the existence of creation as a whole is only possible, and depends on the Eternal One.

The first method of demonstration is conflicting with faith; Maimonides himself declared later on that only the proof via the contingency of the world is of genuinely philosophical relevance. For the Guide to the Guide (p. 77.) Falaquera regarded both the textual interpretations and philological methods applied by Maimonides.¹¹ Falaquera treated the issues scientifically and emphasised the aspects that can bridge the gaps. In his works, his ambition was to prove the agreement between scientific achievements and traditional beliefs.¹² Similarly to Maimonides, Falaquera also states that a prophet is to be perfect both rationally and morally.¹³

Falaquera wrote his works in order to educate via philosophical teaching material any Jew lacking a certain background of philosophy and knowledge of the Arabic language. This may have been a topic also present in *the Guide* by Maimonides and is rooted in the rabbinical tradition, according to which certain philosophical teachings are not to be taught to several people simultaneously.¹⁴

¹¹ „The exegetic sections, which he regarded as the heart and marrow of the book when he wrote the introduction, should accordingly be the place to start in the search for intentional inconsistencies. A learned medieval commentator assumed as much insofar as the fifth category, the exigencies of exposition and pedagogy, is concerned. He speculated that Maimonides' reference to inconsistencies belonging to that category had in view the "explanation of terms that he undertook at the beginning [of the Guide], the treatment of those terms being imprecise in comparison to what Maimonides explained later." Shem Tob FALAQUERA: *Moreh ha-Moreh*. Pressburg 1837, p. 10. In: A. DAVIDSON, *Herbert: The Man and His Works*. Oxford University Press, 2005. p. 390.

¹² VENETIANER, Lajos: *Semtób Ibn Falakéra, adalékok az arab-zsidó philosophia történetéhez a 13. században*. [Semtób Ibn Falakéra, further data on the history of Arabic-Jewish philosophy in the 13th century], *Magyar Zsidó Szemle*, [Hungarian Jewish Review] Budapest, 1890. p. 80.

¹³ „Like Maimonides, Falaquera maintains that the prophet must be perfect rationally and ethically, ethical perfection being prior in time. Also like Maimonides, Falaquera interprets the statement in the Talmud that prophecy applies only to a person who is wise, strong, and rich, to mean that these include all the rational and ethical virtues." JOSPE, Raphael: *Torah and Sophia: The Life and Thought of Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera*. Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1988. p. 112.

¹⁴ „ShemTov Falaquera describes his works *Reshit Chokhmah*, *Sefer ha-Ma'alot*, and *De'ot ha-Pilosofim* as intended to guide a certain Jew with no background in philosophy or knowledge of Arabic through the philosophical curriculum. This may have been a *topos*, exemplified in Maimonides' *Guide* and rooted in the rabbinic tradition, that certain philosophical doctrines are not to be taught to more than one at a time. But it suggests the absence of established schools to which those who wanted systematic training in philosophy could turn. All of this indicates a pattern of philosophical study described by Colette Sirat: there was "no organised teaching of the sciences, no school, but only a transmission from master to pupil." SAPERSTEIN, Marc: *The social and cultural context: thirteenth to fifteenth centuries*. In: *History of Jewish Philosophy*. Edited by Daniel H. FRANK, and Oliver LEAMAN, London and New York, 1977, Routledge, pp. 303-304.

Shem Tov ben Joseph was not only the very first but also the most significant interpreter of Maimonides with his comprehensive background and well-preparedness, and fantastic ability to perceive the essence. Despite his steady ambition, he was unable to advance to the level to further enhance the achievements of contemporary philosophies. A characteristic component of his works is his explanation and comments with a critical approach, but his intellectuality would not go beyond the limits of the genre of commentary¹⁵. His insight enabled him to spot even the minor „flaws“ (ambiguity) of Maimonides or the misinterpretations in Ibn Tibbon's translations¹⁶, but his excessively critical attitude changed into sarcasm or taunt, which would not allow him to take his own independent path in science walk. Shem Tov ben Joseph (besides Ibn Tibbon) is almost the very first commentator of *the Guide*. He interpreted more than a quarter of the text: the most important parts, that is. Although he was familiar with Maimonides' warning that others should not interpret his works by any means, he felt entitled to it as he was aware of a large number of misinterpretations.¹⁷ He primarily criticised certain parts of Ibn Tibbon's translation, and he actually re-translated the chapters concerned. According to his own view, he could not let Maimonides' teachings suffer and be compromised. It is typical of his explanations that he tends to refer to himself, and he was aware of the fact that he interprets *the Guide* in an innovative way.

The very first printed edition of *Moreh ha-Moreh* (The Guide to the Guide): Pressburg, 1837. As far as I know, it has not had an official new edition ever since, but in 2008 in Jerusalem, I got the answer in an Orthodox bookshop that sometimes there are customers in the ultra-orthodox district who would need some dozens of copies of reprint editions. For those not lucky enough to get one, I recommend international auctions or downloading the online digital version used by me.

Back in the age when Falaquera lived, the majority of Jews had already forgotten to speak Arabic, but they could read works by scientists of the previous periods in Hebrew translations. Although he was considered an epigone by some people, his translations as well as his own original works have had formative significance

¹⁵ „Most of my words in this book are the knowledge of excellent philosophers and professionals. I have not contributed to them with any kind of novelty...“ – he wrote in his introduction. www.plato.stanford.edu Stanford Enc. Phil., Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera

¹⁶ “In his philosophical work, Falaquera created a scientific terminology which distinguishes itself from Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew terms in many respects.” Encyclopaedia Judaica CD-ROM, FALAQUERA [Moshe Nahum Zobel]

¹⁷ www.plato.stanford.edu Stanford Enc. Phil. [Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera]

till now for those wishing to learn more about Maimonides and medieval Jewish philosophical thinking.¹⁸

Outstanding scientists preceding Falaquera

When assessing the significance of Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera's philosophy of religion, I suppose it is important to at least briefly present his immediate intellectual predecessors as well as his successors with reference to medieval Jewish scientific thinking. Just like Falaquera, they were the ones primarily excelling with the interpretation of *the Guide* by Maimonides.

Samuel ben Judah ibn Tibbon¹⁹

He translated *The Guide of the Perplexed* and *The resurrection of the dead* by Maimonides, as well as the introductions (the philosophical parts) from *Commentary on the Mishna*, and in 1213 he compiled a glossary of the terms of *the Guide* which he found difficult to interpret. He completed this latter work on board a ship on returning from *Alexandria* near Karthagenos, one and a half days' walking distance from Tunis. His translations and glossary form the foundations of the „traditional“ Maimonides exegesis. His correspondence with the Master,²⁰ and the respect and love with which he responded to this contributed to Samuel's advance into an „official“ interpreter of texts as well as head of this school to whom everyone referred to on a regular basis. What we regard as his own works are his comments on the ambiguous or more challenging parts of Maimonides' oeuvre.

¹⁸ „The labels “epigone” and “unoriginal” ignore Falaquera's own stated purpose for translating and collecting scientific and philosophic works. The Jews of northern Spain, France and Germany in his day were generally not conversant in either written or spoken Arabic. Falaquera views himself as a disseminator of Aristotelian knowledge and takes it upon himself to provide an encyclopedic survey of Arabic Aristotelian philosophy in Hebrew, which he does in the three-volume *De'ot ha-filosofim*. He also distills Maimonides' philosophical ideas in the single-volume text *Moreh ha-moreh*.” ROBERTS-ZAUDERER, Dianna Lynn: *Metaphor and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Thought*. Palgrave Macmillan, Switzerland, 2019. p. 166.

¹⁹ „Samuel was perhaps born at Lunel, where he lived; but he also lived in Arles, Marseilles, Toledo, Barcelona and, it seems, spent a short time in Alexandria. The year of his birth is not known, but he is known to have died ca. 1232. As a youth, he rather disappointed his father, who found that he did not take enough interest in his studies and wrote a particularly vivid and lively moral testament for his edification.” SIRAT, Colette: *A history of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, 1995. p. 217.

²⁰ „In his letter to Ibn Tibbon, the translator of Maimonides (A. Marx.: *JQR*, 25 [1934-35], 374-81) he advises to study Aristotle with Greek commentaries, as well as his contemporary, Averroes.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica CD-ROM, MAIMONIDES, Influences on Maimonides* [Arthur Hyman]

According to Samuel ibn Tibbon, the world was undoubtedly created *ex nihilo* in time, and the only reason why Moses did not state this explicitly is that the primary objective of the *Torah* is to be useful for the wider public: actually, it is a political law and not the illuminating source of the wise. Indeed, truths are hidden in a certain way in the *Torah*, but Moses intentionally revealed certain concepts for the ignorant that corresponded with their meanings at that certain moment in history but were far from the genuine truth.

Another issue, with which Samuel ibn Tibbon was preoccupied, is *Ma'amar Yikkawu ha-Mayim* (*Let the waters be gathered*), in which he discusses the concept of providence extensively. He had been investigating it since translating Book III of *the Guide*. Chapters 17 and 18 actually provide a definition of providence which Ibn Tibbon entirely agreed with, but Chapter 51 apparently contradicted these two chapters. Briefly, he was not actually engaged in the issue itself but in the contradiction found in Maimonides' text. He also appears to have written to him for this very reason in 1199 (although the date is somewhat uncertain). The letter must have arrived after Maimonides' death, as we have no information about his reply.

Samuel ibn Tibbon thus drew the conclusion that Maimonides wrote Chapter 51 of Book III of the *Guide* to meet the needs of the public and prevent questioning the truth of providence.

Ibn Tibbon's work (*Lexicon or Glossary of Unusual Words to be found in the 'Guide'*).²¹ had enormous significance for the historical influence of *the Guide*. Jewish posterity studied *The Guide of the Perplexed* in the Hebrew-language translation by Ibn Tibbon, and his glossary of the unknown words was regarded as the authoritative interpretation and the very first comment of *the Guide*. Owing to his prestige, Ibn Tibbon was considered an „official” interpreter of Maimonides' thoughts already in his lifetime. It is not by chance that from the second edition on (Venice, 1551) each Hebrew-language edition included the *explanation of unusual words* as an appendix. Samuel ibn Tibbon wrote this work of his in 1213, nine years after completing the Hebrew translation of the *Guide*. The author set these objectives. On the one hand, he wanted to explain the meaning of Hebrew philosophical terms. Thanks to his translation, Ibn Tibbon had a key role in shaping the Hebrew terminology of philosophy, on the other hand, he provided explanations of concepts indispensable for the studies of philosophy, including

²¹ MAIMONIDÉSZ: *A tévelygők útmutatója*. [Maimonides: *Guide for the Perplexed*], Budapest, Logos Kiadó, 1997. (1st complete edition, ed. BABITS, Antal, transl. KLEIN, Mór), *Explanation of unusual words in the Master's work*. (translated: SCHMELOWSZKY, Ágoston and VISI, Tamás) pp. 1061-1116.

those not found *the Guide*. Considering all this, we inevitably conclude that Ibn Tibbon was the first „official“ commentator of *The Guide of the Perplexed* as well as the most significant one ever since.

Reception and the earliest reflections

Maimonides' oeuvre had immediate impact. In the East he was criticised for the „anti-religiousness“ of his philosophy, not so much for his employment of philosophy, especially his attitude to the afterlife; his most fervent opponent in this dispute was Samuel ben Ali to whom Maimonides himself replied in his essay on *The resurrection of the dead*.

The Guide of the Perplexed had been less influential amongst Jewish philosophers living in Moslim environment compared to those with a Christian context. At least this is the impression the famous Joseph makes, for whom *the Guide* itself was written: undoubtedly, it is Joseph ben Judah of Ceuta who died ca. 1226. Maimonides kept corresponding with him till his death and was highly fond of him.

Joseph of Ceuta was often mistaken for his contemporary, Joseph ben Judah ibn Akin, as the short work which has come down to us titled *Ma'amar bimehuyav ha-metsiut ve'eykhot sidur ha-devarim mimenu vehidush ha'olam* (*A Treatise as to* (1) *Necessary Existence* (2) *The Procedure of Things from the Necessary Existence* and (3) *The Creation of the World*), bears the name Ibn Akin, and was published in his Hebrew translation, and then also published in English. We do not know whether these three treatises were written before or after Joseph of Ceuta and Maimonides met. The latter is not referred to by the author and the opinions attributed to the philosopher are actually those of Avicenna.

Toledo witnessed the spread of the whole movement that saw in the word and the letters of the alphabet an esoteric science superior to philosophy and comprising everything. This philosophy relies on traditional texts, especially on *Sefer Yezirah* (*The book of Creation*), but also on other *aggadic* and *midrashic* additions proving letter combinations hallmarked by Judah ha-Cohen and Abraham Abulafia, among many others, reveals a *Neoplatonic* orientation – when it comes to the world perceptible via ration at least –, and mysticism also drew plenty of inspiration from it.

Joseph ben Judah ibn Akinin

Joseph ben Judah ibn Akinin²² was by and large Maimonides' contemporary and they got acquainted with each other during his stay in Africa. Three of his works are at least partly philosophical: his Hebrew-language book titled *Sefer ha-Musar* (*Book of the Morality*) on morals, which is a commentary akin and close to *Pirkei Avot* (*The fathers' sayings*) and *Tibb-al-nufus* (*The Hygiene of Healthy Souls and the Therapy of Ailing Souls*), a psychological work of which only the chapter on parenting and education has been published so far. According to Akinin, studies of sciences, logics and mathematics should be postponed till the age of thirty to solidify in-depth traditional education and to avoid endangering the firmness of religion by philosophical doubts –, and finally *Jnkishtif al-asriir waluhur ai-anwar* (*The Divulgence of Mysteries and the Appearance of Lights*), which is a commentary on the *Song of Songs*.

The man in love in the *Song of Songs* is the last intellect: the *Active Intellect*, whose lover is the human soul, which is obliged by the *Active Intellect* to acquire what is conceivable by the intellect and leave behind everything belonging to the material. The structure of the commentary does not make it easy for us to reveal a sort of systematic thinking; otherwise, Akinin does not seem to have done more than accept contemporary Arabic *Aristotelianism*. He explains the individual verses according to three various exegeses that are layered on one another without inconsistencies:

1. The literal exegesis primarily offers grammatical explanations based on works of such authors as Saadiah, Judah ibn Balaam etc., and the Spanish *grammarians*.
2. The rabbinic one makes a selection of midhrasic texts and reveals the historical and eschatological meaning of the discourse between Israel's community and the Eternal One.
3. The allegorical interpretation is a scientific (logical, psychological and philosophical) explication for which the author takes full responsibility. He declares that he is the first to provide a philosophical explanation for the entire *Song of Songs*, and thus is also launching a long-established tradition, but as

²² „Joseph ben Judah Ibn Akinin was more or less a contemporary of Maimonides, whom he met during the latter's sojourn in North Africa. Born at Barcelona in about 1150, he lived in Fez, concealing his Judaism, until about 1220. His numerous treatises deal chiefly with the *Mishnah* and the Talmud. Three of these works are philosophical, at least in part. (1) *Sefer ha-Musar* (*Book of the Morality*), written in Hebrew, is a commentary on the *Pirkei Avot*, and is close to Maimonides' commentary." SIRAT, Colette: *A history of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, 1995. p. 207.

opposed to his followers, such as Moses ibn Tibbon, Caspi and Gersonides, he also mentions *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Nevertheless, according to him, and also in Maimonides' and his commentators' views, the *Song of Songs* and the *Active Intellect* actually describe the human soul aspiring to join and the love of the *Active Intellect* for the smart spirit.

One can ask whether this allegorical interpretation, which the author regards as the best one, may result in the believers' discarding the literal explication.

It is a kind of risk Maimonides was also afraid of, and he warns us against it in *Mishneh Torah*, declaring that „the one revealing the face of the *Torah*, and not interpreting the commandments word by word, is a heretic“.

Abraham ben Moses Maimonides

Abraham ben Moses Maimonides²³ (1186–1237) had to defend his father against his eastern opponents attacking *the halakhic words*, just like against the *Provincals* who fought against philosophy. He certainly follows his father's opinions and firmly believes in divine incorporeality, and he based his defence of Maimonides in his *Milhamot Adonai (The Wars of the Lord)* on this theory. He was not a philosopher himself and had a tendency to accept a sort of religious mysticism approximating *asceticism* and *Sufism*.

Efodi (Isaac ben Moses Levi)

Efodi, a.k.a. Isaac ben Moses Levi lived in the late 14th and early 15th century. Originating from Catalonia, he stayed in Hispania during the persecutions in 1391. He did not write comprehensive philosophical works, his thoughts and teachings are found scattered all over his various writings²⁴: His commentary to Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed* rather literal; more often than not he was working on the rejection of interpretations which seem to depict Maimonides as

²³ „Abraham ben Moses Maimonides (I 1186-1237) was forced to defend his father against his oriental opponents, who attacked the halakhic works, as well as against the Provincals, who opposed the philosophy. It is certain that on many points, he followed his father's views, and, especially, he firmly believed in the incorporeality of God, basing his defence of Maimonides on this fundamental thesis in his *Milhamot Adonai (The Wars of the Lord)*. He himself was not a philosopher and quite clearly tended towards a religious and ascetic mysticism very like Sufism.“ Ibid. p. 209.

²⁴ „Efodi's work is encyclopedic, comprising medicine, grammar, philosophy, arithmetic, astronomy and astrology, and various controversies. His polemical works show his profound knowledge of Christian culture; in *Kelimat ha-Goyim (Opprobrium of the Gentiles)*, most probably dedicated to Hasdai Crescas and composed in 1397, Efodi points out the errors in the translation of Jewish texts into the New Testament and in the Church Fathers; he also made use of the arguments of internal Christian criticism.“ Ibid. p. 353.

a philosopher apparently despising the *Torah*, and he also quite expertly recognizes the dangers involved in certain statements phrased by Maimonides.

Although mysticism has not been proven, one must admit – says Efodi –, that the *Torah* and the prophets are far more in harmony with these teachings than with those of the philosophers, and if we can trust what is told about the mystics – that with miracles they could „change“ (in the spiritual sense) the very nature of created entities –, that would confirm their truth-claims even more. However, they are far from reaching an agreement, which means that the risk of fallacy is greater than elsewhere.

Efodi's final conclusion is that one must return to the study of the *Torah*, because this is the only safe road to ultimate happiness. And if it is true that the *Torah* is entirely made up of god names, then the study of the Scripture is like prayers, as it spreads and shares the efficiency of the names of the Eternal One. The various books of the Holy Script more or less also have such powers in case they are studied in the Hebrew language.

His commentary on *The Guide of the Perplexed* is an integral part of the edition translated by Ibn Tibbon even today.

David ben Joseph Kimhi

Philosophically, David Kimhi²⁵ is more versatile and interesting than he may appear at first, as he requested Abraham ibn Hasdai to translate Isaac Israeli's *Book of the Elements*. Besides, his philosophy faithfully follows Maimonides and in many respects Ibn Ezra, even though he sometimes quotes the Jewish *Neoplatonists* and Aristotle. David Kimhi was not an original philosopher and his contribution to this science is meagre, but he played a key role in disputes on philosophical studies that prevailed throughout the 13th century.

Some Jews accused *The Guide of the Perplexed* of heresy, and Franciscan monks even burnt the copy of this book at their disposal in public. David Kimhi, who

²⁵ „David ben Joseph Kimhi (1160?-1235?) is the very type of the average Provençal philosopher. He was also a remarkable exegete. David's father, Joseph Kimhi, was a celebrated grammarian, exegete, translator and polemicist, who emigrated to Narbonne from Spain during the Almohad persecutions. His son wrote, apart from works on grammar, a biblical commentary (on Genesis, the Prophetic Books, Psalms, Chronicles), the renown of which almost equals that of the commentaries of Rashi and Abraham Ibn Ezra. Very clear and readable, his exegesis tends to give a philosophical explanation of the text, without however neglecting homiletic explanations, which are quite distinct from the literal sense. Only two of his commentaries are philosophical, a commentary on the Story of Creation (Genesis) and another on the Story of the Chariot (the first chapter of Ezekiel), and both are more or less an amplification of passages of the *Guide of the Perplexed*." Ibid. p. 222.

was down with an illness at the time in Avila, was desperate and accused Slomo ben Abrahamo of reporting *the Guide*, but it is highly unlikely that he was the one. This is the beginning of a sad story: that of the inquisition and the mass destruction of Hebrew books.

We should also mention here a minor non-fiction work titled *Ruah ha-Hen (Spirit of grace)*. Many have attributed it to Samuel ibn Tibbon or Jacob Anatoli. However, their authorship is unlikely, and the unknown author must have belonged to the philosophers of Provence or Italy. This work probably dates from ca. 1240. It was widely read and copied, as a total of 80 copies exist, all in manuscripts, with the latest one dating from 1824.

In the introduction, the author says as follows: „...a few useful words to understand *The Guide of the Perplexed*. I had a lot of difficulties with them, and found some of them as uttered by writers, the others in written books.” This reveals that the author used statements from speech as well as written texts.

Not all of the written sources have been identified. The author drew inspiration from Maimonides, Averroes, Avicenna and most certainly also from Neoplatonic texts.

This little book is significant for the history of ideas because it reflects the level of ordinary people: there is no doubt this was the minimum of scientific knowledge that everyone had to acquire in order to „be on a level” and avoid being despised as clueless, and able to read *The Guide of the Perplexed*. Even today, this is one of the best introductions to medieval Jewish philosophy. We should not forget about a unique circumstance, namely the fact that Kimhi – influenced by Maimonides – also wrote two esoteric works to the Book of Ezekiel.²⁶

The intellectual horizon of contemporaries and successors Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia

One of the earliest medieval mysticists, who passionately devoted his life to philosophical studies and *the Guide* by Maimonides.²⁷

²⁶ „Kimhi used Maimoni’s *Guide* as an example. It was preceded by his writing of two esoteric studies to Ezeiel’s first chapter.” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* CD-ROM, KIMHI, DAVID [Frank Talmage] – We should not view it as a coincidence as the two books actually closely correlate even according to Maimoni himself as well!

²⁷ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com> ABULAFIA

For Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia²⁸ (1240–1291) *The Guide of the Perplexed* and *Sefer Yezirah* (*The book of Creation*) were texts of primary importance. Judah ha-Cohen and Judah ben Nissim interpreted the world and the Eternal One according to the Neoplatonic scheme, in which *Intellect* is the first emanation. Abraham Abulafia argued that *Active Intellect* is the last separated *Intellect* both, according to *Aristotelians* and Maimonides, but categorically stated that the „letter-science“ should not be used for any other purpose than contemplation and reaching prophecy.

His works are numerous, and include more than 30 titles; the majority of which remained in manuscript, and they show a degree of development reflecting the author's gradual progress in philosophy, prophetism and then messianism.

He always respected and appreciated Maimonides and often referred to his writings, although he was dissatisfied with philosophy and other fields of knowledge in general. At the age of thirty-one, he started studying *Sefer Yezirah* (*The book of Creation*) as well as its commentaries. Explanations and interpretations by Eleazar of Worms largely influenced him, which in turn intensified his mystic tendencies. He also researched several symbols, such as the numeric values of letters and the symbols of vowel signs, as well as the practice of combinations and permutations and the meanings of the tetragrammaton. He was the first to discover a link between the Christian „trinity“ and the *kabbalah*, which others could see as a faint light of hope. Later on in *Sicily* appeared as a prophet and „Messiah“...²⁹

Isaac ben Abraham ibn Latif

Latif was a great admirer of the *Aristotelian* Maimonides, and yet was occupied with the criticism of his Aristotelian philosophy whilst being deeply influenced

²⁸ „Quite different was the fate of the work of Abraham Abulafia, Judah ben Nissim's contemporary. For Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia, the two basic texts were the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Sefer Yezirah*. Judah ha-Cohen and Judah ben Nissim conceived the world and God according to the Neoplatonic schema, where the Intellect is the first emanation. For Abraham Abulafia, the Active Intellect is the last of the separate Intelligences, as in the Aristotelians and Maimonides. Judah ha-Cohen's principal research was directed towards the appreciation of the various sciences and their claim, real or imaginary, to understand the world and God. Judah ben Nissim, whose ontological schema agrees more or less with that of Judah ha-Cohen, was more particularly interested in the utilisation, theoretical and practical, of the science of the letters. Abraham Abulafia declared categorically that this 'science of the letters' should not be used for ends other than accession to contemplation and prophecy.“ SIRAT, Colette: *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages*. Cambridge University Press, 1995. p. 262.

²⁹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/ABULAFIA>

by Maimonides' philosophy. His methods and style, as well as his language and view on providence were especially influential on his mindset.³⁰

Isaac ibn Latif³¹ wrote in Hebrew, but had an admirably in-depth knowledge of Arabian philosophy. Although he does not rely on translations by others, he was familiar with two Hebrew-language translations of *The Guide of the Perplexed*. He quotes his sources, which were partly Greek and/or Arabic translations, but also used many sources of Neoplatonic Jewish philosophers, especially Slomo ibn Gabirol, whom he does not refer to by name, but quotes as a poet only. The reason for this may be because he believed his teachings were one of the „secrets“ that should not be revealed to the public.

Ibn Latif, who regarded himself as Maimonides' follower, reveals secrets of a Neoplatonic world perceivable only with intellect amongst the proliferation of symbols.

Latif worked out a unique system: that of mystic philosophy, which was actually a new school of thinking. He merged mysticism with the Neoplatonic philosophy, and he even united this with Ibn Gabirol's views, but also integrated the esoteric doctrine of *sephira* in his system.

Ibn Latif's works were greatly appreciated by later masters cited them frequently: such as Josep Albo, Samuel Motot, Cemah Duran, Moses Botarel, Isaac Arama and Isaac Abrabanel. In the modern times we can trace Latif's influence in writings by Nachman Krochmal.³²

Jacob ben Abba Mari Anatoli and His Pupil

Anatoli was a famous doctor, preacher and translator in the 13th century. In his philosophical *exegesis* he frequently used allegorical interpretations. He faithfully followed Maimonides' teachings and worked in this spirit. The collection of his teachings was published titled *Malmad ha-talmidim (Incentive to the pupils)*. (Lyck,

³⁰ Encyclopaedia Judaica CD-ROM, LATIF, ISAAC BEN ABRAHAM IBN [Sara O Heller-Wilensky]

³¹ „Isaac ben Abraham Ibn Latif seems to have lived at Toledo, between 1210 and 1280. In 1238 he finished the first and most important of his works; a shorter version, not bearing his name, composed ca. 1230, has been attributed to various authors, including Solomon Ibn Gabirol. This work, Sha'ar ha-Shamayim (The Gate of Heaven) is soon to be published; the introduction has already appeared. Several other works by Ibn Latif exist in print. These are a commentary on Ecclesiastes; Ginzei ha-Melekh (The treasures of the King); Zurat ha-'Olam (The Form of the World); Zeror ha-Mor (Bouquet of Myrrh), dedicated to the celebrated Talmudist Todros ha-Levi Abulafia; Rav Pe'alim, a collection of aphorisms; and philosophical response. A commentary on Job and another on the Sefer Yecirah seem to have been lost.“ SIRAT, Colette: A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages. Cambridge University Press, 1995. pp. 255-256.

³² Encyclopaedia Judaica CD-ROM, LATIF, ISAAC BEN ABRAHAM IBN [Sara O Heller-Wilensky]

1866.) His activities largely promoted the philosophical development of contemporary Jewry in Italy.³³

During his stay in Naples, Jacob Anatoli³⁴ introduced Maimonides' tradition in the 13th century. His pupil, Moses ben Solomon of Salerno (who died in 1279) wrote a Commentary to accompany *The Guide of the Perplexed*, which has remained in manuscript format ever since. His commentary on the first two parts of *the Guide* is an interesting example of the cooperation between Jewish and Christian philosophers. Moses ben Solomon of Salerno does not only permanently refer to the Latin translation of *the Guide* but also provides the vulgar Latin equivalents of many Hebrew concepts. As their contexts are different, these terms do not always make perfect matches.

We have hardly known anything about contemporary Italian philosophers recently. Research, however, which is carried out by G. Sermoneta and his pupils nowadays in Jerusalem, has already yielded great results and we can now outline the typical characteristics of Italian Jewish thinking.

It was Samuel ibn Tibbon's son-in-law, Jacob Anatoli and Zerahiah ben Gracian who took Maimonides' exegesis to Italy, which was also enriched then by the influence of Juda ha-Kohen. Italian philosophy differs from the other trends because it accentuates the significance of Latin *scholastic* texts often quoted and referred to in Hebrew translation, whilst *scholastics* had a less spectacular influence on the Provençal movement. Some scientists attribute the essay titled *Ruah Hen (Human Intellect)* to Anatoli, which serves as an introduction to *the Guide* by Maimonides.³⁵

³³ Encyclopaedia Judaica CD-ROM, ANATOLI, JACOB BEN ABBA MARI BEN SAMSON [Umberto Cassuto]

³⁴ „Anatoli, Samuel Ibn Tibbon's son-in-law and pupil, continued his work of translation and exegesis of the traditional texts. Under his father-in-law's direction, Anatoli studied mathematics and began to make scientific translations from Arabic into Hebrew of works on logic and astronomy. In 123 [he became a physician at the court of Emperor Frederick II. of Hohenstaufen at Naples. There he met the famous Christian scholar Michael ScoU, who was translating Arabic works into Latin, and it is possible that Anatoli collaborated in these translations. His only original work is the Malmad ha-talmidim (Incentive to the pupils), a series of philosophical sermons arranged according to the pericope for each week of the year! However, almost everyone of these sermons begins with a verse from Proverbs, and the sermon is rather a commentary on this verse than the exegesis of the pericope. In this sense, Anatoli continued the exegetic study of the Solomonic literature that Samuel Ibn Tibbon had begun and Moses Ibn Tibbon had concluded with a commentary on the Song of Songs.” SIRAT, Colette: A history of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages. Cambridge University Press, 1995. p. 226.

³⁵ *Encyclopaedia Judaica* CD-ROM, ANATOLI, JACOB BEN ABBA MARI BEN SAMSON [Umberto Cassuto]

Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera's significance for religion philosophy

Once again, about Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera's significance for religion philosophy, we can conclude that the intellectual chaos today as well as the lack of encyclopaedic knowledge which was characteristic of Maimonides' age³⁶ make it difficult for us to understand works written by polyhistor scientists. It is partly due to the fact that Shem Tov ben Joseph's work is not researched as extensively as it should be today. Exceptions are those who have comprehensive knowledge and also the capacity to go on their own intellectual way. Such an exception was Solomon Munk, who compiled the critical edition and standardizing French translation of the original Judeo-Arabic version of *the Guide* in the mid-19th century and in his explanatory notes provided guiding principles relevant even today including references to Shem Tov ben Joseph's commentary, based on which he even emended the text on several occasions. In his wake, the excellent Hungarian translator of *the Guide*, Klein Mór also made a meticulous comparison of the original text with Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translation and some corrections of the text by Shem Tov.³⁷

Although Falaquera's most important work, the *Moreh ha-Moreh* (*Guide to the Guide*) had and could never have been integrated as the focus of Jewish thinking, it can provide guidelines for those who have in-depth knowledge of *the Guide*³⁸ even today as a commentary of significance.³⁹ As a philosopher he paid special attention to the appropriacy of terminology, and carefully selected the

³⁶ BABITS, Antal: Határolt – határtalanság, Maimonidész istenkeresései. [Maimonides: Limited – Unlimitedness, Maimonides' God Searches], Budapest, 2015. Logos Kiadó, [Logos publisher] pp. 157-172.

³⁷ „Schem Tob used the burnt bird expression to mean fake ideas that perishes when truth is searched for. (Comm. for More end of 5,8).” MAIMONIDES: A tévelygők útmutatója. [Guide of the Perplexed], Budapest, (1st complete edition, ed. BABITS, Antal, transl. KLEIN, Mór), Logos Kiadó, 1997. p. 72.

³⁸ BABITS, Antal: Maimonidész vallásbölcseleti módszere. [Maimonides' methodology of religion philosophy"], In: Babits Antal: Végtelen ösvények, zsidó bölcselet vagy/és misztika. [Endless paths, Jewish philosophy and/or mysticism], Budapest, (ed.. UHRMAN, Iván), Gabbiano Print, 2011. pp. 57-89.

³⁹ „Maimon in the Guide clearly explained on several occasions that teaching it should be limited to references. Knowing this, his „silence” concerning Ibn Tibbon can thus be interpreted as an „approval”. It is also proven by the fact that this translation is studied in the religious Jewish communities, along with the commentaries that have evolved into a sort of classic by now. It is not by chance that the majority of interpreters of the generations after Maimoni's death who had direct contact with the spirituality represented by Maimoni also relied on this translation,” For more details: Babits Antal: Hermeneutikai csapdák a Maimoni-recepcióban, „epigonok”, „epikajres-zek” és episztemológusok vélekedései az Útmutatóról. [Traps of Hermeneutics in Maimoni's reception, opinions of „epigones”, „epicaires” and epistemologists on the Guide], In: A The heart has two parts. A collection of essays in honour of Prof. Dr. József Schweitzer on his 90th. birthday. (ed. Koltai Kornélia), Budapest, 2012. MTA Judaisztikai Kutatócsoport – L'Harmattan Kiadó, pp. 265–282.

philosophical phrases he used.⁴⁰ Falaquera presented philosophy and science in a creative way. He was one of the first Hebrew authors to write philosophical dialogues, a scientific-philosophical encyclopaedia as well as a commentary to *the Guide*.⁴¹

In his commentary, he appears as a critical thinker, speaking in his own name and only accepting views and opinions even from the greatest philosophers that he regarded as firm ones also from a philosophical aspect. He was more familiar with Arabic philosophical works than any scientists from among his contemporaries and he translated many of them into Hebrew. Although originality was not his ambition, he proved to be highly creative in philosophy and science and was one of the earliest authors publishing in Hebrew in the genre of dialogue. It was typical of his writings that he wanted the sources he quoted to speak for themselves.

Ibn Falaquera opens the *Moreh ha-Moreh (Guide to the Guide)* with a brief poem in praise of the *Guide* and Maimonides. The text is multi-layered, replete with biblical borrowings and linguistic puns that would be difficult if not impossible to reproduce in translation. He may also have practised medicine. For the physicians of his day, he does not appear to have great esteem.

Here is a typical example from Falaquera's poems:

*Quoth Fate unto the Fool
A doctor be; Who, killing folks off, netteth income large;
So hast thou yantage o'er Death's Angel;
He Must take the lives of people free of charge!*

⁴⁰ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/falaquera/#FalEnc>

⁴¹ „Falaquera did not seek originality, yet was quite creative in his presentation of philosophy and science. He was, for example, one of the first Hebrew authors to write a philosophic dialogue, an encyclopedia of science and philosophy, a commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, and poetic philosophic tales. His method of seamlessly blending various philosophic texts together to form a coherent whole is perhaps unique to him. But the fact is that his most important works are comprised of Hebrew versions of the writings of others. We have seen that his personal views on theological-philosophical matters may be discerned from his *Moreh ha-Moreh*, particularly when he speaks in his own name. Yet even in his earlier works, he often asserted his personal views, but he usually let his sources do the talking. When proper care is taken in the study of these works not to jump to conclusions regarding his views on the basis of his translations, it is possible to uncover his own theology. The role played by his occasional critical comments in his commentary is played by the selection, blending, and abridgement of sources in the earlier works.” In: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Summer 2009 Edition, Falaquera as a philosopher <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/falaquera/>

He was also a writer of occasional poems, and probably in the fashion of the time, received gifts from wealthy patrons. This occupation, however, he early abjured as little suited to his taste and temperament. Eking out thus an uncertain livelihood, he did not complain of his lot, forgetting hardship in his devotion to learning.

We should be in error if we inferred from Falaquera's indifference to wealth and power and his absorption in study and contemplation that he was one of the dreary ascetics, so numerous at that time in the church, with whom mortification of the flesh was a merit. From such fantastic doctrines, he was saved by the teachings of Judaism, to which asceticism has been repugnant, and by the Aristotelian ethics, which warned its disciples to avoid all extremes.⁴²

At his mature age, Falaquera declared that pursuing poetry is a dangerous profession as it is not engaged in truth but in beauty and rhetoric instead!

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⁴² MALTER, Henry: *Shem Tob ben Joseph Palquera, A Thinker and Poet of the Thirteenth Century*. In: THE JEWISH QUARTERLY, 1910. pp. 159-160.

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Epistemological foundations of economics: the philosophical problem of ranking

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Abstract

In our article, we examine the philosophical challenges of ranking that are economically significant from multiple angles. With our findings, we want to demonstrate that ranking in the actual world is a far more sophisticated, partially context-dependent behaviour enacted via specialised decision-making systems. In some ranking scenarios, the exact preference relation may vary depending on whatever basic set of phenomena we are discussing. On this basis, we can limit the scope of economic modelling to exclude, for instance, aesthetic value judgments. In the study, we would like to demonstrate the importance of the philosophical substantiation of economic phenomena.

Keywords: economic philosophy, ranking, modelling

Introduction

Nowadays, the economy – as the dominant subsystem of society – participates in the significant transforming of the whole society, hence we may say that this subsystem seeks to reshape and orient the entire system. From a philosophical point of view, the question arises: what is the role of the economy from the metaphysical, ontological, aspect of existence, including the human person with self-reflective capabilities? From this perspective, what does value creation mean, and how does it relate to the real good? How does this value relate to society, its structure, and the structure of existence? In the economic philosophy program of the Doctoral School of Philosophy of the University of Pécs, we conduct research related to the above issues.

In our planned series of studies, we would like to flash certain slices of the topic for interested readers. We hope that the raised topic provokes wider interest and generates a productive professional dialogue.

In our first, introductory study, we examine the philosophical issues of ranking. The importance of this field is indicated by the fact that, hitting almost any introductory book on economics, sooner or later we will come across the concepts of preference ordering, and utility, in a short ranking. Nonetheless, the conditions for this possibility are not decisively addressed by economically oriented works, since strictly speaking, this is not covered by economics studies – at least at the introductory level. However, for the explanatory power of theoretical models to increase, the former question cannot be avoided. It is necessary to explore the basic epistemic fringe conditions that are necessary for ranking.

We note that, from a psychological point of view, several works have been produced that seek to capture the basic motifs and characteristics of the bearing of economic actors (see, for example, Simon, 1955, 1991; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, 1974). And this means that the need has arisen to revise the anthropological concept of economics. However, this has not led to a complete paradigm shift, since in many sub-areas, the traditional image of man and the few epistemic boundary conditions formulated in connection with it still prevail. Although attempts are made to weave the phenomenon of learning or limited rationality into theoretical economic models, all this runs into certain reasonable limits due to the strongly formalised construction of the models (beyond a point, the model becomes overly complicated, the possible computational need associated with it will increase).

Within the management science that studies the business sphere and the life of organisations, the importance of narratives has been discussed for years now (see Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Consequently, the significance of philosophical, or more precisely, interdisciplinary grounding, is not a novelty these days. However, all this has not necessarily been realised either by the academic side or by corporate executives.

We would like to narrow this hiatus somewhat with the help of this study. As mentioned earlier, we do this by epistemological examination of the phenomenon of ranking. Our work is by no means exhaustive, but we hope to contribute to the development of a productive discourse that can have an impact on the disciplines involved.

Our study is divided into three units in terms of content. We deal with the interrelatedness of

1. ranking and context;
2. prioritization and decision;
3. ranking and truth.

In the first-mentioned unit of content, we examine the contextual definition of ranking or evaluation, in the second the relationship of ranking to the decision, and in the third, the truthfulness of statements related to ranking.

Ranking and context

In order to talk about ranking at all in any scenario (possible world), it is necessary to assume phenomenon-level heterogeneity, as well as succession for the formation of ranking. Without the latter, the system of alternatives is unintelligible and cannot even be established. If these are given, the next step is to assume that the set of objects for which I want to rank can be sorted according to some set of criteria. Érdi (2020) formulates this as the need for something that ensures comparability. This set of criteria allows two different objects to have something in common that can form the basis of the ordering (e.g., in the case of a gymnastics row, such an aspect is the height).

At this point, we would like to emphasise that in order to be able to order the elements of the set of objects in question, it is not necessary to quantify them, in other words, to assign some kind of numerical value to them (colloquially speaking, translate them into the "language" of numbers). However, because of order, it is certainly possible to assign values to them (for example, nonnegative natural numbers, see Likert scale) in a way that, with the "usual" ordering relation, exactly the same sort "pattern" will appear as the result of prioritisation on the elements of the set of objects. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that any "acceptable" interpretations can be associated with the assigned values, but rather that they have a kind of technical function in terms of sequencing.

Note that we can imagine cases where the relationship between these values makes a lot of sense (which is why, for example, weight ratios in decision theory are very important respectively). So instead of talking about entities that can be quantified or have only qualitative characteristics, we follow the former division and talk about quantifying an object that can be interpreted locally or remain unintelligible. Local interpretability refers to the fact that a number of boundary conditions can shape the content of the interpretation, which is, therefore not

independent of the situation or context that designates the relevant boundary conditions, so it may not be possible to speak of temporal permanence.

The mentioned quantification can also be called evaluation, so it is worth thinking about ranking as the ordering of evaluated or value-carrying sorting objects. Here the question immediately arises: what is the relationship between evaluation and ranking? Are they simultaneous phenomena, or does one necessarily precede the other? Based on what we've seen so far, it seems that ranking is an epistemological problem, although later it turns out that metaphysical dimensions can also be opened.

The question arises, how is the value generated, that is, how is the valuation carried out, can all objects be valued at all, and if so, how unambiguous is this? What about incommensurable objects (see Érdi, 2020: 17)? In this context, it is important to see that value formation is essentially a social construct. At this point, we note that we do not intend to take any dualistic approach, and we would also like to avoid the contraverse approaches of both supervenience and ontological individualism. In connection with the above, we would like to draw attention to the factors of ethologist Vilmos Csányi that shed light on the formation and dynamics of communities, which are as follows (Csányi, 2007/2006):

1. joint actions,
2. common constructions,
3. common beliefs,
4. and loyalty as a result of the former.

Taking into account the above factors, we mean by social construction a combination of community construction and beliefs. Consequently, we are not assuming an ontological individualistic position since, for example, the construct includes the object created, not only the social meaning attributed to it (i.e., but it is also not a phenomenon constituted exclusively by individuals). The problem, however, is that communal constructs and beliefs are not well defined, i.e. their boundaries are blurred, and certainly their semantic field is not disjointed. Beliefs can also be seen as a kind of construct, and the former are also elements of the identity-forming narrative that is the result of the constructional activity of the community at all times. Henceforth, constructs, beliefs, and loyalty make a fundamental contribution to the phenomenal character that is an integral part of the evaluation.

Continuing our train of thought, for example, at an auction, the (monetary) value of a given work of art is created through bidding, which has nothing to do with the inherent (aesthetic) value attributed to the work. In this example, monetary value is the end result of a process (unintelligible quantification), while aesthetic value is the result of subjective "interaction" with a work of art. Thus, a number of cases can be thought of where the ranking established by aesthetic interpretation is radically different from the ranking resulting from monetary valuation, which is merely the result of numerical ordering. Consequently, it can be stated that the unanimity of the assessment is far from being ensured.

In line with the above, a further explanation is that value formation in one case or another is context-dependent, which may have different strengths. There may be situations where you can't appreciate a thing. In this case, there is usually a lack of any relevant information "background base", and presumably, no social reference is given. Another aspect of the assessment may be functionality. I address value to an entity in so far as it is functionally useful to me in a given situation. Finally, it also seems plausible that the values of objects are in constant dynamic interaction with each other, which obviously affects the ranking itself.

From the above train of thought, the conclusion arises that value formation is really nothing more than the assignment of a dynamically changing "orientation point" to elements of a particular set of objects. And since it is an "orientation point", it is necessarily related to the other elements of the set. In addition, the value of a thing is added to the meaning of what it influences, nuances. Consider that in colloquial speech, it is more than once the case that a question about the meaning of a particular object is answered with an assessment: "What is this interestingly shaped thing in your room?"; "Just a worthless junk." In the latter case, for the respondent, in the given situation, the meaning of the object being asked is almost exhausted by the value judgment that appears in the answer.

In the context of evaluation, the question of whether it is necessary to assume some kind of absolute, "platonic type" of (meta-) value – as a reference, an unchanging standard – in order for ranking to be carried out cannot be ignored? Another question is whether value actually corresponds to "something" that embodies the "value" concerning the value bearer, or is it a purely social and subjective construct? In other words, is the value bearer merely a semantic phenomenon that provides a particular interpretation of an object?

To try to answer the first question, it is necessary to clarify the concept of metavalue. If by metavalue I simply mean a point of reference formed by experience as a result of my dynamic existence in the world, then the answer is

affirmative. However, we take a rather skeptical position if we approach the reality denoted by the concept in question as an objectified ideal being (edios), permanently present. For our part, we consider the reference back to the previously mentioned invaluable objects to be a plausible argument, since if there were any metavalue that would allow the evaluation of an arbitrary object regardless of my own epistemic situation, then they could not be invaluable as well as incommensurable objects.

In connection with what we have seen so far, we will write down two analytic lines of thought that condense some pivotal findings into them:

- (P1) Local ranking requires an assessment in a specific context.
- (P2) For evaluation, it is necessary to have heterogeneity at the level of phenomena in a given context.
- (K) If no epistemic difference between objects can be established in a given context, then evaluation cannot be performed in that context, i.e. no local ranking is possible.
- (P1)' The individual $i(w)$ performs the evaluation $e(w, f_i(w))$ dependent on the condition $f_i(w)$ in a given context $c_i(w)$ in a possible world w .
- (P2)' The individual $i(w)$ performs the evaluation $e(w, f_i(w))$ in a given context $C_i(w)$ in a possible world w if $C_i(w)$ context is not substantially different from $c_i(w)$ in an epistemic sense.
- (K)' If an individual $i(w)$ cannot perform the assessment in $C_i(w)$, then $C_i(w)$ and $c_i(w)$ are epistemically significantly different (epistemically incomparable).

In this line of thought, if we consider $f_i(w)$ as part of each context, then $e(w, f_i(w))$ can be written $e(w, C_i(w))$. And (P2)' can be paraphrased:

- (P2)'' The individual $i(w)$ performs the evaluation of $e(w, C_i(w))$ in a given context $C_i(w)$ in a possible world w if $C_i(w)$ context is not substantially different from $c_i(w)$ in an epistemic sense.

Please note that it does not seem to be possible to reverse the direction of implication within (P2)' or (P2)''. This is because a situation cannot be ruled out in which, despite the epistemic incompatibility between the different contexts, the assessment is feasible in both cases.

Ranking and decision

When it comes to ranking, of course, we are always faced with a decision situation. Approaching the phenomenon in a naïve and superficial way, we discover circularity in the fact that the establishment of a ranking is preceded by a decision, but at the same time ranking is necessary for a decision to be made. However, if we look at this more closely, we need to realise that our perceived individual narrative, which plays a role in how we understand it, how much it matters, what content we fill our concepts with, what kind of normative character they acquire, or even what emotional implications they have, are embedded in a broader narrative. Without the latter, the former is meaningless and even impossible. We encounter the broader (frame) narrative in question in the course of our socialisation, and this in turn, fundamentally determines the individual mental model that underlies our decisions. We mobilise this model at every moment, often without actually knowing it. In view of this, the following statement, quoting Nietzsche, is of substantial importance:

"Thus he [Nietzsche] maintains that there can be no 'absolute knowledge', and that there are no 'facts'; and that, rather than either, there are only 'interpretations' – or (even more pugnaciously) only 'beliefs.'" (Schacht, 1984: 79)

In order to make the description above, which seems a bit alien to life, more picturesque, we will engage in a short thought experiment. If we imagine, for example, that Katie heard from her parents the importance of conscious nutrition from childhood, and then this was further reinforced by her environment in her later life stages (i.e. the secondary, tertiary steps of her socialisation) (say, through a number of positive emotional feedbacks), then healthy eating will be central to the narrative that is the point of reference for Katie and directs her thoughts and actions. Then, if Katie has to decide whether to buy, say, vegetables, fruits, or high-carb foods containing a number of artificial compounds when shopping, her narrative is that she chooses the former, preferring them. Moreover, her mental model – aside from the possible circumstances – even plays a role in her decision to choose a multinational grocery store or the corner vegetable shop.

Ranking and truth

The preference ordering that appears during ranking can manifest itself in statements such as: "I prefer B over A", "I like D better than C" or simply "E is better than F". The former, in a formalised way, appears like this: $A < B$, $C < D$, as well as $E < F$. It is clear that in each statement the relation " $<$ " corresponds to a different sequence of signs. In the first case, it is in the place of "I prefer", in the

second it is in the place of "I like it better than", while in the third it is in the place of "better than". Consequently, the preference relation depends on what objects you bring into a relationship. For example, it makes sense to say that "Toyota is better value for money than Renault", but that "blue is better value for money than yellow" no longer makes any sense.

After so many introductions, let's raise the question of whether every statement linked to a preference ordering (more precisely, the proposition "behind" the statement) can be a truth bearer? Obviously, it can't be. Whereas, while on the basis of certain community-accepted criteria, the statement "Toyota is better value for money than Renault" can be determined to correlate with reality, the truthfulness of the statement "Rodin's thinker is more beautiful than Leonardo's Mona Lisa" is by no means so clear – at least if we think in terms of collective standards. For the former, there are procedures and protocols in the communal narrative by which this statement can be called "true" or "false," but with regard to the latter, "beauty" is not a quality that is inherent in the works of art in question – at least not in an objectified sense – so we cannot point to any method that would allow for a clear resolution.

In view of what has been said so far, the following quote from Quine should be considered:

"It is obvious that truth in general depends on both language and extralinguistic fact. [...] Hence the temptation to suppose in general that the truth of a statement is somehow analysable into a linguistic component and a factual component. [...]

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs [...] is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. [...] A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements." (Quine, 1951: 34, 39)

Summary

In our study, we analysed the economically relevant philosophical problems of ranking from several perspectives. In each of the areas presented here, questions arise that provide grounds for further investigation, which are partly interpreted as a given and partly not raised by economic theories; *ab ovo* they imply as a given, a self-evident, natural phenomenon.

With our analyses, we wanted to point out that ranking in real life is a much more complex, partly context-dependent act that is expressed through specific decision-making mechanisms. In some ranking situations, the specific preference relation

may differ depending on which basic set of phenomena we are talking about, and with regard to certain types of rankings, there are not necessarily socially prescribed standards that make a statement unquestionably a truthbearer in a collective sense. The latter statement identifies the range of phenomena that may be considered in a way that makes any sense at all from the point of view of economic modelling that is relevant in practical terms. Based on this, we can delimit the scope of economic modelling, excluding value judgments in the field of aesthetics, for example.

We hope that in the study, we managed to demonstrate the importance of the philosophical substantiation of economic phenomena. As indicated at the beginning of the article, our discussion is far from complete. We are confident that our thoughts, formulated with the need for interdisciplinarity, can be a kind of far-fetched point in both domestic economic and philosophical thought and can bring about further discursiveness in this topic.

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