

Extract from  
*Opinions of the Philosophers,*  
“Definition of the Terms”<sup>1</sup>

Shem Tob ibn Falaquera  
(ca. 1225-1295)<sup>2</sup>

It appeared necessary to me to recall from the outset some of the terms the reader might use, although many of them are known to those well-versed in these sciences, and will become familiar to anyone who studies the contents of the present treatise. I will then explain other terms, taking them into consideration in the appropriate place. I affirm that it is well known that language originates from consensus. This means that the human beings agree (*haskîmû*) on it, even though it is rooted in natural things. For it is quite possible that a given language at its beginnings lacks of all the terms that would be required to name all the things, since it did not yet occur to those who agreed on language that they would have to speak about such things. Therefore, several learned men coming after them, when they had to speak about things whose names were lacking in that language, found themselves obliged to assign new names on their own, in order to signify such things. And if it was possible to draw such names from the words established in the language out of agreement, they drew them from these latter. Thus, for example, from “man” (*enôsh*), we say “humanity” (*enôshût*), for “humanity” did not exist in our language as a common noun derived from “man”. Nor was there in the Arabic language “humanity” (*insāniyya*); rather, some learned men drew it from “man” (*insān*) to denote this meaning. The same is true for “earth-ness” (*artzût*), “air-ness” (*awîrût*), “water-ness” (*mêmût*) and “fire-ness” (*eshût*). When it proved impossible for them to do this, they invented names on their own, or also they borrowed them from other languages. Therefore also among us one can observe several learned men, peace be on them, who made use in many passages of Greek and Aramaic words, because in the holy tongue (*scil.* Hebrew) there were no names

<sup>1</sup> Falaquera’s *Opinions of the Philosophers (De’ot ha-Filosofim)* is divided into two books: Book I contains seven parts, and Book II three. For the structure and contents cf. Jospe (1988: 53-61); detailed analysis in Harvey (2000: 238-247).

<sup>2</sup> Little is known about Falaquera’s life. Jospe (1988) draws from his writings as much biographical information as possible.

to denote such things. And the same happens in all languages: this is one of the reasons for commonality between languages. Also Arabic, rich as it is, makes use of many words from Greek and other languages. Furthermore, there are lots of words that sound strange to us because we seldom use them: they are indeed Hebrew words, but it is only the topic we are dealing with that compels us to make use of them, and there are no other words to ascertain it. Thus, the learned men became accustomed to use words in their works that are simple and easy to understand, preferring the understanding of the subject-matter over the refinement of the expression.

“Universal and Particular (*kelalî we-phrathî*)”. Beings are subdivided into individual beings and universal beings, also called “general items”, whose existence is only mental. The “particulars” or “individuals” are the things perceived by the five senses, like “Ruben and Simeon”, “this horse”, “this tree”, and other things like these, or also such as “this whiteness”. “Individual” is the name assigned to the particular which is subordinated to the species. When using this expression in this work of mine, I mostly refer to this meaning. For example, we speak of “individual substance”, that is “this man” and “this stone”, and of “individual accident”, that is “this darkness” and “this whiteness”. The fact that these particulars are called “individuals” – for example, “Ruben and Simeon”, “this horse”, “this tree” and other things like these – does not imply that each individual is identical with another, because “this man” is not “that man”; this only points to the fact that they are similar in some respects, like Ruben and Simeon are similar in their corporeality, and a man and a horse are similar because both are animals. Thus, the features that make beings similar to one another are called “universals”, and “general items”. It could happen that Ruben and Simeon are similar to each other in height and whiteness. The height and the whiteness where the similarity is found are the general items present in them; but *this* height is not the same as *that* one, and *this* whiteness is not the same as *that* whiteness. To the first kind belong the universal substances, while to the second belong the universal accidents.

*Translated from Hebrew (ed. Zonta 1992: 25-26) by Elisa Coda*