Ibn Ṭufayl (3,332 words)

Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Malik b. Muḥammad Ibn Ṭufayl al-Qaysī (d. 581/1185) was a courtier, philosopher, royal physician, and Ṣūfī during the Almohad regime in the Maghrib. A close friend and confidante to the second Almohad caliph, Abū Yaʿqūb Yusuf (r. 558–80/1163–84), Ibn Ṭufayl advocated the pursuit of Greek sciences. Ibn Ṭufayl's only surviving philosophical treatise, the novelistic and evocative Ḥāyy b. Yaqẓān (“Alive, son of Awake”) should be viewed against this background. Through recounting the worldly, intellectual, and religious pursuits of a boy growing up alone on an equatorial island, Ibn Ṭufayl strove to position Neoplatonically infused Aristotelianism as the prism through which God, the universe, and human experience would henceforth be viewed by those Maghrībi intellectuals amenable to a philosophical message. Ḥāyy's enduring popularity has led to different lessons being extracted from its pages. Here, the emphasis is on what Ḥāyy tells us about its author's preoccupations and perspectives.

1. Life and career

Ibn Ṭufayl was born in Wādī Āsh (Guadix), near Granada, perhaps in 510/1116. From the fact that he was called the “Cordoban” and the “Sevillan” we may surmise that he moved through those towns early in his life. In 542/1147 he made his way to Marrakesh, the Almohad capital. In 549/1154 he was appointed secretary to the governor of Ceuta and Tangier (Gauthier).
We do not know when Ibn Ṭufayl became the personal physician to Abū Yaʿqūb. Their paths may have crossed already when the latter served as the governor of Seville. It was at the caliph's side that Ibn Ṭufayl made his mark. While his service as wazīr to Abū Yaʿqūb was ceremonial (Conrad, Andalusian physician, 6–8), there is no mistaking the trust and favour he enjoyed. Stories circulated about the two spending nights in conversation, a narrative that flatters both parties, yet which nonetheless appears veridical.

Thanks to his personal friendship with the caliph, Ibn Ṭufayl became his generation's most prominent representative within the so-called ṭalabat al-ḥaḍar, those “urban scholars” invited to the caliph's court from the intellectual circles whose members were of Arab descent, as opposed to the Maṣmūda Berber ṭalabat al-muwahḥidin (“seekers from among those who profess divine unity”; Conrad, Andalusian physician, 8–12). Jointly, the two classes of ṭalaba discussed, debated, and advised on both worldly and religious matters. Their gatherings provided an arena for different intellectual directions and schools to vie for primacy; with the jostling for the caliph's ear, careers were forged and lost. Ibn Ṭufayl boosted the prominence of philosophy and the Greek sciences through his own work; he also brought promising scholars to his patron's attention, the most renowned of whom was the famed Aristotelian commentator Ibn Rushd (Averroes, d. 595/1198), who by his own account owed his career to Ibn Ṭufayl (al-Marrākushi, 174–5). Another beneficiary was al-Bitrūǧī (d. c.601/1204), the most prominent exponent of the so-called Andalusian revolt against Ptolemaic astronomy. Al-Bitrūǧī credits Ibn Ṭufayl with rendering obsolete the famed Greek astronomer Ptolemy's theory of epicyclical and eccentric celestial motions, those mathematical devices needed to explain the irregular movements of the planets in a geocentric universe. Judging by al-Bitrūǧī's own work (§18), Ibn Rushd's related efforts, and some vague comments made in Ḥayy (79–80), Ibn Ṭufayl's input was more on the level of supplying inspiration and research direction rather than in delivering any developed theory (Sabra).

Beyond promoting Arabic Aristotelianism, Ibn Ṭufayl was involved in cultural production on several fronts. A mnemonic medical poem (urjūza) is the longest extant one of its kind (ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz); a lengthy martial poem praises the caliph's efforts on the northern frontier and enjoins jihād against the Christians (Gómez); and we know that Ibn Ṭufayl recounted in rhyming prose and verse the reception of the authoritative ʿUthmānic codex of the Qurʾān in the Muslim West. There are traces of love poems and religious poetry, possibly intertwined (Lirola Delgado and Garijo Galán). Al-Marrākushi testifies to Ibn Ṭufayl's boasting about his prowess in music, adding further to the profile of a well-rounded courtier.

Ibn Ṭufayl relinquished his position as Abū Yaʿqūb's personal physician in 577/1182, purportedly to pursue more metaphysical or divine knowledge (ʿilm ilāhī). The trope on display here, that of a late-life retreat into pious contemplation, is well worn, but Ibn Ṭufayl's place in the acknowledged chains of Ṣūfī masters lends the story credence (Cornell). Ibn
Ṭufayl remained close to the throne, as evidenced by the succeeding caliph, Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb al-Manṣūr (d. 595/1199), presiding over his funeral. This suffices to discredit a report that has Ibn Ṭufayl accused of poisoning Abū Yaʿqūb, who had died months earlier.

2. Ḥayy: aims and structure

Though reports tell of several philosophical works by Ibn Ṭufayl, Ḥayy b. Yaqqūn is all we have to go on. Thankfully, the treatise, despite its compactness, is carefully crafted so as to introduce the reader to a whole range of issues and philosophical puzzles. Moreover, Ḥayy’s narrative inventively plays on the way the philosophical curriculum, along with its various cycles of knowledge, was presented in Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition. Ḥayy’s youthful struggles to prevail over nature illustrate the way in which, according to Aristotle, humanity has need of utilitarian skills and productive arts before theoretical reflection can develop (Kukkonen, Ibn Ṭufayl, 42–8). Ḥayy’s subsequent exploration of nature begins with the things closest to us, which is to say individual living substances such as animals and plants, then guides the reader along Porphyry’s tree—the late antique model for dissecting reality according to the essential commonalities and differences between things—all the way down to the elements and the matter-form distinction that characterises all corporeal being (Kukkonen, Ibn Ṭufayl, 49–64). An investigation of the celestial movements leads beyond the physical universe, to God as First Cause and Maker of the world. Ethics and politics, finally, are worked out on the basis of humanity’s positioning within the great chain of being at the nexus of all realities. Here, a remarkably prescient conservationist set of ecological principles is worked out. Ḥayy learns that everything in the world has its own good to pursue, and he disciplines himself to help, rather than hinder, the flourishing of all living beings within his personal sphere of influence (Kukkonen, Ibn Ṭufayl, 79–93; Kukkonen, No man).

Ibn Ṭufayl announces at Ḥayy’s outset that he means to lift the veil on the secrets of Ibn Sīnā’s (Avicenna, d. 428/1037) al-ḥikma al-mashriqiyya (“oriental wisdom.”) This is a feint. Although the names of Ḥayy’s principal characters—Ḥayy, Asāl, and Salāmān—reflect titles of specific allegories penned by Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Ṭufayl appears not to have possessed any special knowledge regarding Ibn Sīnā’s philosophical corpus of texts (Gutas). Ibn Ṭufayl arrives at the notion of a separate “oriental wisdom” through a tendentious reading of Ibn Sīnā’s preface to al-Shifā’, which may suggest a wholly different body of doctrine to a careless reader but is in actuality a reference to a treatise that treats philosophical topics more curtly and in shorthand form. Ibn Ṭufayl’s citations from the final sequence of Ibn Sīnā’s al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbihāt, meanwhile, are made to serve a brand of rational mysticism that represents al-Ghazālī’s (d. 505/1111) reworking of Ibn Sīnā more than it does Ibn Sīnā himself (Kukkonen, Wisdom). As to Ḥayy’s philosophical teachings, these consist of an eclectic mix of Peripatetic sources—al-Fārābī (d. 339/950), the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, and the school of al-Kindī (d. after 256/870), as well as Ibn Sīnā. We may conclude that Ibn Ṭufayl intended to claim the position of Ibn Sīnā’s
torchbearer in the Muslim West, despite the fact that his knowledge of Ibn Sinā was incomplete and that his understanding of the ultimate contemplative bliss differed from Ibn Sinā’s in important ways.

The novelty in Ibn Ṭufayl’s presentation in Hayy lies in the overall argument that he offers between the lines. By tendering the fruits of Arabic Aristotelianism both as the natural outcome of an uncorrupted process of rational inquiry and the spur to a perfected spiritual practice, Ibn Ṭufayl is able to present several of the major intellectual strands of his time—philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and Śūfism—as compatible with Almohad theological rationalism, which itself had arisen as a challenge to the established practice of dialectically charged theology (kalām). Within this framework, Ibn Ṭufayl positions philosophy as the master discipline on whose terms all others are to be understood and interpreted (Kukkonen, Hayy). Conversely, disciplines that either go unmentioned or are brought up only in oblique or disparaging terms—notably kalām and law—have no rightful place in Hayy’s universe, and presumably enjoy no favour in the universe of Ibn Ṭufayl (Kukkonen, Ibn Ṭufayl, 110–22).

Ibn Ṭufayl’s efforts are helped immeasurably by the attention he lavishes on the particulars of his narrative. Vivid descriptions of Hayy’s interactions with the island’s flora and fauna add up to an immersive reading experience (Urvoy). While claims about Hayy being the first philosophical novel, the first psychological novel, or the first Arabic novel tout court may each be exaggerated, what cannot be gainsaid is the work’s literary allure, which is virtually unique in the field and adds considerably to the book’s intellectual attraction.

3. Distinctive doctrines

Nowhere in Hayy does Ibn Ṭufayl pay heed to formal logic or to logical training. This may simply mirror the narrative. Hayy has to advance without language or the normal collaborative process of human knowledge acquisition as envisioned by al-Fārābī in his Kitāb al-ḥurūf (according to al-Fārābī, the various methods employed in logic developed out of a need to weigh and debate the conflicting claims made by people based on their originally impressionistically formed opinions). But the lacuna also fits a wider conception of philosophy in which empirical investigation and contemplation, conceived along roughly phenomenological lines, trumps argumentative examination and the need to set worldly processes in a syllogistic framework (Germann). This dovetails with Ibn Ṭufayl’s later emphasis on divine reality being accessed through ascetic practice and a shutting off of the world, a point on which he diverges from Ibn Sinā and inches closer to al-Ghazālī (Kukkonen, Wisdom). In the author’s preface, Ibn Ṭufayl explicitly downplays the worth of logic when pursuing the divine (Ibn Ṭufayl, 12).

In psychology, Ibn Ṭufayl draws on classical philosophical sources. The overarching framework is provided by Aristotelian biology, with its analysis of the corporeal living being as an indissoluble unity of functionally and formally organised matter and its aims-based model
of explanation (plant and animal species develop the parts and capacities they do so that they may sustain the mode of life distinctive of each). Many details of human physiology are furnished by the Galenic medical tradition (Richter-Bernburg); Ḥayy is allowed to trace the nervous system up to the brain, for instance (Ibn Ṭūfayl, 52). Against Galen, however, who was the pre-eminent Greek medical authority within the Islamicate world, and in line with the Arabic Aristotelians who opposed Galen on this issue, Ibn Ṭūfayl makes a point of having Ḥayy conduct a thought experiment that establishes the heart, rather than the brain, as the true seat of the soul and locus of the self (Ibn Ṭūfayl, 39–40). Ibn Ṭūfayl additionally develops an understanding of the human rational soul as an immaterial and incorruptible substance (Ibn Ṭūfayl, 92–3). Here, Ibn Sīnā’s influence is readily apparent (Kukkonen, Heart).

Metaphysics, too, is best approached through Ḥayy’s own life story. In one of Ḥayy’s two competing prologues, the boy emerges out of a frothy bubble heated by the sun and impregnated, as it were, by the “spirit that is one of God’s charges” (Q 17:85). The reference to spirit allows Ibn Ṭūfayl both to work in a Qurʾānic reference beloved of the Ṣūfīs and to weigh in on a long-standing debate regarding spontaneous generation (Kruk). What Ḥayy’s birth demonstrates for Ibn Ṭūfayl is the role played by immaterial forces in the coming-to-be of all material entities, not just living ones (Kukkonen, Ibn Ṭūfayl, 70–4). All genesis relies on a continual emanation of substantial forms from the supernal (or “spiritual”) world, forms whose nature is realised in terms of active and passive capacities and powers (Ibn Ṭūfayl, 61, 73–4).

Ibn Ṭūfayl posits that because divine munificence is everywhere perfect and uniform, any divergence in outcomes must be due to the vagaries of matter. Put differently, the form in which the divine bounty is received ties in with the suitability or fittedness (ʾīḍād, istiʾḍād) of the receptacle. One notable entailment is that, metaphysically speaking, the human becomes the paradigmatic living creature, rather than plants forming the base line and then animals and humans adding successive capacities to this foundation. Working in an Islamic reference, Ibn Ṭūfayl proclaims that God created Adam according to His form, while other life forms fall away from this model in degrees (Ibn Ṭūfayl, 59). Notwithstanding this important point about hierarchy and order, Ibn Ṭūfayl subscribes to the signature Andalusian doctrine of a multiplicity of substantial forms, according to which an animal, for instance, possesses at once the forms of animal, living organism, and body (66–8, 100–101). This allows him to entertain the possibility of all other forms characterising corporeal human existence falling away at death—animal, body, and so forth—leaving only the distinctively human and immaterial reasoning soul to remain as the immortal human essence.

Ibn Ṭūfayl professes agnosticism when it comes to the disputed issue of the world’s eternity (80–8), although his remarks on the world’s continuous existential dependence on a First Cause lend support to an eternalist reading (133–4). In presenting the case for the opposition, according to which a beginningless universe constitutes a breach of the Aristotelian principle that an actual infinite can neither come into being nor be traversed, Ibn Ṭūfayl makes a rare
concession to the kalām tradition, which ultimately owes its arguments to the creationist late Greek commentator on Aristotle, John Philoponus (d. 574 C.E.). Ibn Ṭufayl's conception of revealed religion, meanwhile, owes most to al-Fārābī. Any sound religion consists of a set of affective similes that translate philosophical propositions into a form that can be grasped by the multitude and that provide them with adequate practical guidance. The pessimism of Ḥayy's coda, in which Ḥayy unsuccessfully tries to teach philosophy to others, signals that for Ibn Ṭufayl the majority of humanity must be content with such simulacra (Ibn Ṭufayl, 150–5).

Ḥayy's theorisation and subsequent vision concerning the afterlife (Ibn Ṭufayl, 95–8, 129–32) indicate that human souls after death are condemned to suffering, acquire various levels of salvation or bliss, or simply are consigned to a state of nothingness or something very like it, all according to the level to which their thoughts are directed towards God or turned away from Him. This blending of Śūfi motifs with Ibn Sīnā’s teachings probably represents the “oriental wisdom” that Ibn Ṭufayl wanted to pass on to a select readership.

4. Influence

Ibn Ṭufayl's influence on Islamic thought proved limited, although the theologian and medical author Ibn al-Nafis (d. 687/1288) wrote an imaginative riposte to Ḥayy about a century after Ibn Ṭufayl's death, in which he underlined the necessity of revelation in the eyes of even the perfectly rational, self-taught individual (his own protagonist, stranded just as Ḥayy was). In Europe, knowledge of Ibn Ṭufayl and his masterwork passed through Hebrew circles on to Renaissance scholarship and then early-modern England and beyond (Ben-Zaken). Ḥayy became fabulously popular following the publication of an Arabic and Latin edition by two famed English orientalists—Edward Pococke, father and son—and then a profusion of translations and imitations (Daiber, Russell). For about two centuries, “Abubecer” or “Ebn Tophail” was the only Arabic philosopher whom Europeans could read in the vernacular. Claims about Ibn Ṭufayl influencing Daniel Defoe or John Locke are often tainted with anachronisms and wishful thinking (Baroud; Kukkonen, Ibn Ṭufayl, 131–4). It is, nonetheless, through the European valorisation of Ibn Ṭufayl as the first empiricist, Muslim rationalist, and the like that modern Muslims have come to a renewed appreciation of his work.

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Cite this page
Kukkonen, Taneli, “Ibn Ṭufayl”, in: *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*, Edited by: Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson. Consulted online on 18 December 2018 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_32274>
First published online: 2017
First print edition: 9789004356627, 2017, 2018-1