



HAYY IBN YAQZĀN:
EXAMINING THE INTERRELATION BETWEEN REASON &
REVELATION

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Abstract

Ibn Tufayl's philosophical novel, *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, is said to have had massive impact on philosophical inquiries. It has been translated into Hebrew, Latin, English, German, French, and Spanish. The novel follows Hayy's—a human born on an uninhabited island—developmental journey of independent rationalization as he learns self-preservation and the philosophy of life without the aid of any external guidance or revelation. According to one account, Hayy was born from a forbidden love affair between a ruthless king's sister and a man called Yaqzān. After his birth, Hayy was cast to the sea on a raft which arrived on an uninhabited island. According to another, Hayy was born on the island with no human involvement. In both accounts, he was discovered and nurtured by a doe, and was left to thrive solely on his innate qualities, logic and nature, from childhood to adulthood. In the end, Hayy, without the aid of prophecy and divine revelation, only through applying his faculties of observation, exploration, and intellect, finds the truth, that is, God. In recent times, the story is considered a pioneering work in autodidacticism as Hayy learns about the truths of the universe through the process of self-learning. Hayy utilizes multiple methods to learn about the world in various stages, and the text contains a blend of mystic and Platonic traditions. However, the fundamental question is whether *Hayy ibn Yaqzān* is a product of mere rational philosophy or part of a mystical discourse? While the story does conclude that reason and revelation lead to identical truths, the process of the acquisition of this knowledge through reason remains somewhat unclear. Is the process thoroughly rational and autodidactic? Or is there a hint of intuition there? This paper attempts to discuss answers to these questions by examining two significant themes in Ibn Tufayl's novel, educational philosophy and religious philosophy.

Keywords: *autodidacticism, reason, philosophy, revelation, spirituality*



Introduction

Ibn Tufayl—a Muslim philosopher and theologian—wrote *Hayy ibn Yaqzān* in the 12th century. It is written in the form of a letter and follows the developmental journey of Hayy, a human born on an uninhabited island. Ibn Tufayl was eager to reconcile religion with philosophy and gave much weight to divine revelation both at literal and philosophical levels (Goodman, 2009). As a result, the text contains multiple references to the Quran and religious scriptures (Haq, 2016). *Hayy Ibn Yaqzān* has traversed languages and geographies and has profoundly impacted the fields of literature, philosophy, and science. There are multiple literary parallels between *Hayy ibn Yaqzān* and various English literature classics such as *The Jungle Book*, *Robinson Crusoe*, Shakespeare’s poem *The Seven Ages of Man* and even the Italian narrative poem, Dante’s *The Divine Comedy* (Haq, 2016). Given the extensive influence of *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, it would be interesting to explore the extent of its impact and the consequences of this impact.

Hayy ibn Yaqzān is a story of human development on an uninhabited island, the journey of an individual human soul. Hayy’s development, as outlined by Ibn Tufayl, takes place in seven stages. These stages are a symbolic representation of the continuous growth in human beings. The seven phases of Hayy’s life are (1) childhood—intuition, (2) age of practical reason—action-oriented life, (3) the age of wonder—delving into metaphysics, (4) age of reason, (5) wisdom, (6) maturity, and (7) self-awareness. Hayy applies logical deductions using self-evident premises and inductive generalizations that are inferred from systematic observations to learn about the world around him (Haq, 2016). For each stage, Hayy uses a mix of these methods, where each has its process of inquiry and character (Goodman, 2009). The climax of Hayy’s journey is a representation of the highest level of awareness a human can experience—the recognition of God and His attributes. Hayy’s learning does not end with him figuring out how the world works but rather it continues with him discovering what it means to be human, i.e., having self-awareness. It is noteworthy that Hayy reaches this point not through institutions and instructions but by learning on his own (Goodman, 2009).

Towards the end, the story makes a declaration that reason and revelation lead to identical truths. What Hayy discovers, through innate capabilities and reason, about ethics, cosmology, and God, is precisely what Asal—a human from another island—has learned under the guidance of a religious teacher. It suggests that what religion teaches one through stories of prophets can be acquired from the practice of philosophy based on reason. However, this point has been a topic of much contestation, for if philosophy teaches one through reason what revelation

does, is there even a need for revelation? Moreover, Ibn Tufayl does not elaborate on how Hayy came to the same conclusion as Asal, making the issue of reason and revelation a subject of debate. Here it is integral to understand that Ibn Tufayl's own beliefs were founded upon the Islamic philosophical doctrine according to which reason and revelation lead to the same conclusion. Goodman (2006) expands on this point, "The answer is that Hayy is not alone and his nature and the realization of that nature is a gift of God, and the story is grounded in radical monotheism which believes that God's presence pervades the universe," (p. 11). But where does this belief stem from? The belief is not grounded in pure reason, and the mystical facet of this claim will be explored by delving into educational and religious philosophies in Islam and its connection to Hayy's journey.

Educational Philosophy & Hayy ibn Yaqzān

The novel puts forth multiple questions regarding education, personal development, and human fulfillment and what they entail. For example, what does education mean? What is personal development? Is personal development different from education? How does human growth typically happen? Hayy's character is a reflection of mankind as his growth and development recapitulates the evolutionary history of humans (Goodman, 2009). Hayy goes from intuition to practical reason and then slowly transitions into the age of wonder, followed by reason, wisdom, maturity, and self-awareness. Each stage of this transition sees God in different ways. In the age of wonder for example, Hayy sees God in the workings of the world, and in the age of reason, God is proven to be the designer of the universe, the perfect cause of himself and creator of everything that exists (Goodman, 2009). Wisdom is achieved when Hayy begins to delve deeper. Wisdom seeks an active relationship; between knowledge and love, it identifies God not by knowledge but instead by love. According to Ibn Tufayl, Hayy's recognition of God by love is an indication of the last two phases of maturity and self-fulfillment which the novel marks as the pinnacle of man's development.

Comparing Hayy's experiences to the modern-day education system would be futile for his education is not to reproduce good social behaviors or cultural capital. Hayy's education lies somewhat outside of the present-day conception of human society. His education makes the current education system seem like an institution that only reproduces certain ideals. Moreover, Ibn Tufayl's

characterization of Hayy is integral to note. Ibn Tufayl assumes in Hayy natural capacities of boldness, curiosity, and goodness (Goodman, 2006). These qualities cannot be assumed to exist in all children by birth, at least not to the same degree as Ibn Tufayl presupposed them in Hayy's character. Therefore, it may be Hayy's *fitra* which allows him to achieve the level of self-awareness and spirituality inconceivable today.

Additionally, Ibn Tufayl's personal beliefs and conviction influenced his writing and the conclusion of the story: the notion that Hayy is never truly alone. The existence of God and the belief that his presence pervades all existence is the focal point of Ibn Tufayl's argument. This argument can further be understood by applying the Neoplatonic understanding of God's relationship to the world. The Neoplatonic understanding assumes that all that exists is an emanation of the divine, and all beings in one way or another reflect God, i.e., man is a reflection of God (Goodman, 2009). Upon further investigation of the ideas mentioned above, one recognizes that God does not merely form the *fitra* of a person but also continues to direct and energize the capacities of its beings, i.e., if God did not teach animals how to use their limbs, they would not be able to (Goodman, 2009). According to Ghazali, we see things happening in a flow and relate them to habit and concomitance, but in actuality, it's God's will, and God can stop this process upon his will (Dallal, 2010; Marmura, 2000). As a result, one can say that reason alone is not enough, for if God were not to energize Hayy's soul and allow it to perfect and activate his intellect, he would never reach the conclusions that he did. This does not mean that reason alone cannot provide one with knowledge, it can, but at one point there is an integration of reason and revelation which leads us to the Ultimate Truth: the recognition of God and his attributes through love.

Ibn Tufayl has used the Islamic doctrine to formulate his story, which emphasizes the idea that there is God's hand in everything that exists. According to the Islamic interpretation, man has free will and man's fulfilment is attributed to God; God implants the drive that brings man to fulfillment and the realization of this drive makes a man fulfilled (Goodman, 2009). Essentially, within the Islamic doctrine, even a human's exposure to their environment is understood as being purposive and controlled by God, meaning that a person's surroundings play a vital role in educating a man and activating his *fitra*, as is evident from Hayy's story. For Ibn Tufayl, education is a process of molding a person and the molder here is God himself. So, while at the surface level it does seem that Hayy is guided by reason, one can see that there is a power beyond reason too, which is what

activated Hayy's intellect and led him to the Ultimate Truth.

Religious Philosophy and Hayy ibn Yaqzān

To understand the relevance and application of philosophy of religion in *Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, one needs to acquaint themselves with both the differences and the coinciding aspects of theology and religion. For this, it is necessary to understand that humans' approaches to seek God differ, but they are all motivated by the same drive towards a certain higher truth, and accepting this fact is an intellectual practice of toleration. For someone looking further, this statement might not be sufficient, and he might seek deeper unifying truths and realities that surpass worldly cultural and religious divisions (Goodman, 2009). According to Goodman (2009), there can be two approaches to seek such truths and answers that reveal the relationship between human beings and the greater Being—theology and religion. Theology revolves around the notion of and questions relating to God, his existence, his morality, powers, and characteristics. Philosophy of religion, however, deals with the religion itself and addresses questions like, "What is a religion and why is it there?", "For whom does it prevail?" Theology does overlap with the philosophy of religion as the former deals with man's relation to God, while the latter deals with God's relation to man (Goodman, 2009).

It is essential to note that no human after seeking the Ultimate Truth can enter a realm of ecstatic experience and surrender himself to God without generating a philosophical perspective (religious philosophy) of his own (Goodman, 2009). Here, Goodman (2009) describes the ecstatic experience as something which, "no eye has seen or ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart [i.e., mind] of man to conceive" (p. 149). So, in order to understand Ibn Tufayl's philosophical standpoint of religion (which he explains through Hayy's experiences), it is important to first distinguish among three types of religion: rational religion, mass religion and mystical religion (Goodman, 2009).

Rational Religion

According to Goodman (2009), "The philosopher who holds a theory of rational religion considers religion to be the activity of the human mind imaginatively seeking to articulate a conception of the divine without idolatry" (p. 42).

Essentially, reason and intellect are the fundamental elements of rational religion, and a rationalist finds himself as a sentient, conscious being who hunts for the Ultimate Truth (Goodman, 2009). The rationalist perceives theology as the struggle to derive a concept which describes a holy being (Goodman, 2009). Therefore, according to rationalist religion, every individual on Earth is invited with his intellect to take part in the rational search of God, irrespective of their background. Rationalists consider contemplation as a rational, religious activity. For a complete rationalist, man is above all other rational creatures and contemplation is the process of assimilation of self into God (Goodman, 2009).

Mass Religion

The proponents of mass religion defy the fundamental argument of rational religion by arguing that rational religionists claim to know too much about the eternal mystery through the use of reason alone. Niebuhr (1946) critiques the rationalist religionists by arguing that reason merely cannot teach one about God's powers and His attributes, His knowledge, and His control. He explains the need of faith alongside reason by saying that there is a light that shines in the darkness and reason is not solely responsible for it. Faith can pierce through the darkness and apprehend it (Goodman, 2009). Niebuhr (1946), thus concludes that faith in revelation is essential to mass religion. However, as his statement presupposes that reason's purpose in religion is to replace revelation as a source of religious knowledge, it has led to debates regarding reason versus revelation.

Mystic Religion

Mystics not only cast-off the truths of reason and the duties of obedience but rather they become lovers of paradox and rebellion. This reminds one of Hallaj's words, "I am the Truth, I am the Truth" (Payami, 2017). In mysticism, both reason and revelation are considered irrelevant, and the mystic feels no difficulty in knowing God as He is manifest (Goodman, 2009). In other words, "a rationalist knows God as a study, a believer serves Him as a master; but for a mystic, God is a friend, a lover" (Goodman, 2009, p.50). For whom does such version of religion exist? Goodman (2009) answers this question by arguing that in mystical religion, the ecstatic union of God and man, lover and beloved, blots out the rest of the world. Only the lover remains with a singular awareness of his Beloved. And in this awareness, it is through intuition that his own identity

is absorbed.

Religious Philosophy within Hayy ibn Yaqzān

We must see how Ibn-Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzān* was written and how it relates to the categories of religion described above. The terms used to describe the birth of Hayy are very scientific and rational, but when one reads the description of the beatific vision of cosmic proportions that Hayy experiences, it feels very spiritual and mystical. According to Tufayl, Hayy achieves the utmost fullness of knowledge and ineffable felicity in mystical union with his Lord (Goodman, 2009). It is important to remember that Tufayl warned his readers not to take his words literally since the experiences that he described cannot be processed through rational thought. In a subtle manner, he also admits that the transcendental experience, where Hayy seeks the Ultimate Truth, cannot be caged into words. Thus, it can be inferred from the manner in which he describes the beatific vision of Hayy as the climax of his journey, that Ibn Tufayl may be a mystic (Goodman, 2009).

However, many questions arise regarding the mysticism within Tufayl's work. Firstly, mysticism encompasses sacrifice and paradox at the very essential level. A conventional mystic loves God enough to submit himself to Him. But does Tufayl write about this sacrifice? Does Hayy give God the ultimate sacrifice—the sacrifice of reason? According to the definition of mysticism we explored, a pure mystic would have crushed promptings of reason long ago in this journey. But Hayy never felt any element of beatific experience that contradicted the truth acquired through his use of reason. (Goodman, 2009). In the light of this argument, it is essential to understand that for Tufayl, the role of reason is very significant. According to him, reason is not an inferior way of comprehending God; it is the very first way to start thinking about Him. Hence, for him, reason paves the way for intuition (Goodman, 2009). Thus, we can find some characteristics of mystical religion in Hayy's case. But ultimately, he is not a mystic who defies the role of reason. Instead, he considers and utilizes reason as another device to understand God and his relation to Him.

Reason and Intuition

The symbiotic relationship between reason and intuition in *Hayy ibn Yaqzān* can

be identified through the idea of contemplation. For Hayy, the primary source of knowledge about the Ultimate Truth was through contemplation (Goodman, 2009). He imitated animals, stars, the heavenly bodies and even God through the act of contemplation. However, no source can answer whether he contemplated God by the aid of reason or intuition. Thus, no line can be drawn between whether his vision was a product of sole reason or intuition. It appears that reason and intuition act as two sides of the same coin. Lenn Goodman (2009) summarizes Tufayl's religion beautifully:

The religion of Ibn Tufayl is a hybrid, a synthesis of mystical and rational religion. God is known first and most safely by reason, ultimately and most intensely by intuition, but calmly and constantly by a philosophical mind that seems to find no phenomenological distinction between the two. (p. 55)

The diversity of instruments in obtaining knowledge can be observed in Tufayl's writing at various occasions. Sometimes, he makes logical deductions from self-evident premises. Other times, he makes inductive generalizations, where we see Hayy contemplating like Plato and the Sufis. Thus, this literary piece depicts the importance of both reason and revelation in one's journey to understand the Ultimate Truth, and asserts the significance of one accompanying the other. Thus, the religion of Hayy cannot be classified solely into any single category of religion, be it mass, rational or mystical religion. It is a rather complex one as it encompasses the characteristics of both rational and mystical religion, which support each other in a way that no clear distinction can be made between the two.

Conclusion

Ibn Tufayl, within Hayy ibn Yaqzān, utilizes multiple instruments to portray how knowledge is obtained. Knowledge which leads Hayy to the ultimate truth. Hayy uses both reason and contemplation to understand the workings of the universe, himself, and ultimately, God. This conclusion by Ibn Tufayl settles the debate of reason versus revelation by iterating that they go hand in hand and that both have significance in the process of reaching towards the Ultimate Truth. Therefore, Ibn Tufayl's work cannot be entitled as truly a product of rational thought or mysticism—it is a combination of both.

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