

**Near and Middle Eastern Studies
at the
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton:
1935–2018**



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“A GLIMPSE OF THE MYSTERY OF MYSTERIES”: IBN ṬUFAYL ON LEARNING AND SPIRITUALITY WITHOUT PROPHETS AND SCRIPTURES

SEBASTIAN GÜNTHER

In his award-winning novel *Life of Pi*, published in 2001, the French-Canadian writer Yann Martel relates the fantastic adventure of a boy from India who survives a shipwreck and spends 227 days in the Pacific Ocean, sharing a lifeboat with a Bengal tiger. As this tale unfolds, we find that Pi has explored Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam and, due to his sincere “love of God,” recognizes the spiritual and ethical values in each, and eventually embraces all three religions.

The remarkably open-minded approach to religion, in its various forms and appearances, evinced in this twenty-first-century fantasy novel is perhaps reminiscent of the German writer and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), one of the most outstanding figures of the Enlightenment. In his famous dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise*, Lessing comes to the insightful conclusion that the “best of the revealed or positive religions” is that which “least hinders the good effects of natural religion.”¹ The author is noted for expressing, both here and elsewhere in his scholarly oeuvre, the idea that human beings are capable of reaching the apex of awareness through their intellect and intuition alone, regardless of the specifics of any particular religion, be it Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

It may come as a surprise, however, to learn that Lessing, and perhaps Martel as well, were apparently influenced, both literarily and philosophically, by the work of the distinguished 12th century Spanish-Muslim thinker Ibn Ṭufayl. Lessing, whose lifelong study of Arabic philosophy and culture had a profound impact on his theological thought (in particular on his concept of educating humanity), clearly indicated in his treatise *Ueber die Entstehung der geoffenbarten Religion* (*On the Origin of Revealed Religion*, 1763) that his introduction to Ibn Ṭufayl was *Philosophus autodidactus*, the Latin translation of Ibn Ṭufayl’s famous allegorical-philosophical novel *Hayy b. Yaqẓān: Fī asrār al-ḥikma al-mashriqīyya*, or *Living, Son of Wakeful: On the Secrets of Oriental Wisdom*, as the title of the book can be rendered into English.

In the following few pages, we shall take a closer look at Ibn Ṭufayl and his views on education and religion.

1. THE AUTHOR: IBN ṬUFAYL

Little is known about the life of Abū Bakr Ibn Ṭufayl. It has been established that he was born sometime around the year 1116 near the city known today as Guadix, in the northeastern part of Granada, a province ruled at that time by the Muslim Berber dynasty of the Almoravids (1046–1147). Ibn Ṭufayl was of Arab descent. He most likely studied in Seville and Cordoba, two intellectual strongholds on the Iberian Peninsula. It was there, in Islamic Spain, that Ibn Ṭufayl acquired knowledge of

medicine, mathematics, astronomy, physics, and other natural sciences, as well as of poetry. After completing his studies, he settled initially in Granada as a physician.

In those days, the Iberian Peninsula and large parts of the Maghreb were dominated by the Almohad dynasty (1147–1269). Their ruler in Ibn Ṭufayl's time, Caliph Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf (r. 1163–1184), was an enlightened sovereign and very much interested in Greek philosophy. He appointed Ibn Ṭufayl his court physician and advisor in the Moroccan city of Marrakesh, where Ibn Ṭufayl became an influential intellectual. Ibn Ṭufayl died in Morocco in 1185. Thanks to the early translations of his celebrated novel *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* into European languages, Ibn Ṭufayl was renowned in medieval Christian Europe as well.

1.1. The Novel

Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* (the title begins with the name of the novel's protagonist) is the highly intriguing account of a boy who grows up on a remote island, alone and without contact to human civilization, and finds God solely through intellectual endeavor and spiritual exercise. As a literary character, Ḥayy embodies a sort of prototype Robinson Crusoe to the extent that he is utterly self-reliant and far removed from other human beings and civilization. However, Ibn Ṭufayl's book is not merely a tale of great adventures on a tropical island, or a *robinsonade* in Islamic guise. Rather, it is the story of someone who persistently strives to acquire knowledge and understanding of the world and of the universe. Without the aid of prophecy and divine revelation, relying instead only on his acute powers of observation, purposeful exploration of nature, and intellection, Ḥayy, at the age of fifty—and through a gradual process of cognition—finds God. Notably, Ḥayy's intellectual abstraction is not rooted in any human language. Ḥayy did not know “how to speak,” as we read in the novel (p. 149).² Rather, he learned a human language only as an adult after he met a visitor from a neighboring atoll.

Let us now turn to the plot of this masterpiece of classical Arabic literature.

1.2. Preface: The Origin of Life

In the preface, Ibn Ṭufayl sets out the academic framework of his novel. He names a number of Muslim scholars whose religious-philosophical views he studied, including al-Fārābī (870–950), Ibn Sīnā (ca. 970–1037), and Ibn Bājja (1095–1138), who were well known also in Europe at that time, as well as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, probably the most influential Muslim theologian and mystic of the day. Although their individual approaches to knowledge and learning differ significantly, these medieval Muslim thinkers—including Ibn Ṭufayl—have two important characteristics in common: first, their fascination with fundamental philosophical concepts of knowledge and the influence exerted on this topic by the writings of Plato and Aristotle; and second, the vital role played by the relationship between philosophy, reason, and religion in their deliberations on the human capacities manifested in the search for and acquisition of knowledge.

Following the largely theoretical preface, Ibn Ṭufayl discloses some fascinating details of the unusual circumstances of Ḥayy's birth. First he relates that Ḥayy lived on a deserted island with a temperate climate near the equator, somewhere in the

Indian Ocean. Then the reader's attention is quickly engrossed as the author offers two different versions of how Ḥayy came into existence.

One story of Ḥayy's origins, claiming that Ḥayy was born on the island with no human involvement, is truly captivating. According to this account, it all began when a bit of clay started to ferment. Heat joined with cold, and moisture with dryness. These natural processes caused bubbles to form in the clay, which in turn created a space for the soul, which "emanates continuously from God—glory be to Him" (p. 107). Out of these compounds of fermenting clay and God-sent soul, Ḥayy, the human being, came into existence in a kind of mystical, spontaneous creation. (Note the parallel to the idea of the first human in the Bible, Adam: another human being formed of clay, who came to life with neither parents nor past.) From the clay, a blood-clot then formed, which became an embryo that grew to be a person—just as described in Qur'ānic accounts of the origin of life (Qur'ān 23:12–14).

The other story, however, tells us that the sister of a tyrannical king gave birth to Ḥayy as the fruit of a forbidden love affair with Yaḳzān, a man from the neighboring kingdom. Fearing the rage of her hard-hearted brother and king, the princess entrusted the fate of the newborn to God and put the suckling babe out to sea in a well-sealed box. The box with the infant eventually washed up on an uninhabited island—a literary motif that obviously alludes to the biblical/qur'ānic story of the baby Moses (Exod. 2:1–10; Qur'ān 20:36–39).

1.3. Main Section: Human Growth and the Thirst for Knowledge

The two different stories of Ḥayy's birth both lead to a single continuation of the tale in the main part of the novel. Here, Ḥayy's life is described as developing in a series of seven phases, each seven years in length.

The **FIRST** phase of Ḥayy's life is his childhood. A doe finds the baby Ḥayy. She suckles him, cares for him, and raises him as her own offspring. Living with the doe and the other animals on the island, Ḥayy becomes acquainted with basic feelings such as affection and warmth as well as unhappiness, shame, and sorrow. He also learns certain skills necessary for survival in the wilderness: for example, how to find his own food and to defend himself. At the age of seven, he finally becomes aware that he is not an animal, or at least that he is quite different from "other animals."

The **SECOND** and **THIRD** phase encompass the time until Ḥayy is twenty-one years old. Ḥayy now realizes that, unlike the animals, he is naked and defenseless. So, he begins covering himself in leaves and feathers and learns to make use of his physical advantages, such as the ability to walk upright. Ḥayy also starts to make conscious use of his mind. Through observation, experimentation, and analogical reasoning, he considerably increases his knowledge of the world in which he lives. He discovers, for example, that he can alter and adapt some of the things he finds in nature. He also learns how to control fire and how to build a protective shelter. Action become now the basis of his life.

When the doe, his beloved "mother," dies, he is filled with pain and grief. In an attempt to find out why she has stopped moving, he decides to cut the doe open: He finds the creature's heart, which, he surmises, is where life is located. He opens

the heart and discovers that one of its chambers is filled with blood, and that the other is empty. He concludes that the vital force of his mother, the doe, must have resided within this now-empty chamber. For Ḥayy, this explains the gazelle's death. He concludes that the dead body is but an empty hull, worth nothing without that "breath" that had previously animated it. Hence, his feelings of love and affection for his mother are no longer fixed on the lifeless body of the doe, but only on the "being which had departed" from the heart (p. 115); that is, the soul, which, Ḥayy concludes, outlives death. Thus, Ḥayy comprehends the finite nature of material existence and the immortality of the soul, which goes on living even after the body dies. Through contemplations of this kind, the pain he has suffered upon the death of the doe becomes bearable, so that he can now bury her. Ḥayy learns what is to be done with a dead body from watching a raven that killed another raven in battle and then covered it up with earth—a literary motif that recalls the archetypal conflict between Abel (Ḥābīl) and Cain (Qābīl), the biblical "hostile brothers," mentioned in Qur'ān 5:31 as "the two sons of Adam."³ According to the Islamic tradition, it was Cain who learned from a raven (which buried its dead mate in the ground) that he must "let go" of his dead brother, Abel, and bury him.

In the FOURTH phase, up to age twenty-eight, Ḥayy becomes acquainted with the laws of causality. He recognizes that every circumstance and every occurrence has a cause and an effect. His observation of the sky, together with the realization that the celestial bodies are in regular motion along fixed courses, leads Ḥayy to philosophical reflection. He deems the heavenly bodies to be made of light. From this, he concludes that they must have been created from an even stronger light and that this source of light may well be the origin of all things. From this point on, Ḥayy begins to differentiate individuals *by type*, material objects *by form*, and effects *by cause*.

In the FIFTH phase of his life, up to the age of thirty-five, Ḥayy develops his epistemological capabilities. He now observes the cosmos and the stars purposefully and devotes his attention to questions about the composition and finite nature of space. His contemplations on the structure of the cosmos and on astronomical questions bring him to fundamental metaphysical queries, which lead him to the insight that the universe must have an omnipotent source – a Creator whom to know and adore becomes a passion for him.

The SIXTH and SEVENTH phase, extending up to age forty-nine, describes Ḥayy's religious awakening, a process that is divided into three steps: The *first step* concerns material things and the task of securing bare survival. The *second step* involves the awareness that there are perceptible forms beyond those in the immediate environment, and that events in this life have connections with another world. The result of this learning process is the conclusion that everything must have been created and animated by a higher, divine force. This leads Ḥayy to develop a kind of contextual or social behavior, which encompasses the veneration of God. The *third step* relates to a meditative approach to—and mystical immersion in—the dispositions of the creator.

Once he has gone through all of these meditative steps, Ḥayy is able to lay aside all worldly activities and dedicate himself wholly to God. The vision of God

comes to him as the highest level of awareness. He now comprehends that this highest stage incorporates knowledge pertaining to the attributes of the creator.

The ultimate stage: The peak of this cycle of development in seven seven-year phases is reached when Ḥayy is fifty years old. The protagonist, Ḥayy b. Yaqzān, “*Living, Son of Wakeful*,” at last, is “drowned in ecstasy,” and witnesses that which “no eye has seen or ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive” (p. 149). In the original Arabic text, this sentence is presented as a quotation from the Prophet Muḥammad, which has been authenticated in several standard collections of prophetic traditions, the *ḥadīth* literature.

It is interesting to note here that the words given in Ibn Ṭufayl’s text as a quotation from the Prophet Muḥammad are identical to a passage in the first epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 2:9). In this letter, Paul imparts the knowledge of God’s mysterious truth and wisdom to the Corinthians. Yet it is—as stated in the Bible—“not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world” (1 Cor. 2:6). As in the biblical sense and in the understanding of the Islamic tradition as well, for Ibn Ṭufayl these are insights into God’s plan that have been hidden from ordinary humans—a plan God had devised long before He created the world and with which He lets humankind share in His glory.

Overwhelmed by this experience of the divine, Ḥayy now chooses to dedicate himself entirely to the contemplation of God, and never again to leave this state of beatitude. He thus arrives at an abstract, mystical understanding of God that is not connected with any particular religion or act of worship.

1.4. Epilogue: The Quest for Truth

Ḥayy now has perfected his cognitive abilities. At the point when the protagonist of the novel has achieved a state of complete felicity, the reader may expect that the story has come to its conclusion. However, Ibn Ṭufayl follows up the tale with an epilogue, in which the author tells us that Ḥayy has come into contact with other people and with civilization. He relates that one day a man named Absāl journeys from a neighboring atoll to Ḥayy’s island. Absāl’s trip came about because he was at odds with his friend Salāmān over a number of fundamental religious questions, and thus sought solitude and peace, in which he hoped to find a more comprehensive understanding of God. Absāl believed that there must be some deeper meaning in religion, something more than he had come to know through the formalized practice of faith on his home island. His friend Salāmān, by contrast, was satisfied with the manifest content and conventions of religion.

When Absāl encounters Ḥayy on his desert island, he teaches Ḥayy human language. This, in turn, enables the two men to communicate verbally and exchange their thoughts on philosophical issues. Ḥayy soon learns that he is in agreement with Absāl on the important questions that have occupied him for such a long time. These concern first and foremost the belief in the existence of an omnipotent creator and in the intellectual capacity of humans to discern the structure of the world and of the universe, along with the ability to understand the place and the destiny of humans within this system. However, whereas Ḥayy has arrived at “pure truth” through a kind of inner reflection combined with an independent assessment of the

properties, dispositions, and forces in the world around him (and of his own actions within that world), Absāl and the people on the neighboring island had come to very similar insights with the help of a prophet and the revelations this prophet had shared with them, including all the instructions, images, and symbols involved in the communication of divine revelation.

Absāl and Ḥayy now travel together to the neighboring island, on which Salāmān has in the meantime become king. When Ḥayy meets Salāmān and the people in his kingdom, Ḥayy tries “to teach this group and explain some of his profound wisdom to them” (p. 163), by untiringly describing the comprehensive awareness of God and of the world that he has achieved. Yet, although the people are pleased by the glad tidings in his message, and in spite of their longing for truth, they are frightened by Ḥayy’s explicit expressions of divine insight. It becomes clear that the majority of the people are not receptive to the complex imagery in Ḥayy’s explanations about religion. Nor are they capable of understanding its deeper meanings. They soon turn away from Ḥayy and dedicate themselves anew to the strictly literal and rather simple understanding of their religious teachings and traditional duties, which their prophet has communicated to them.

Ḥayy is forced to recognize that the people, with very few exceptions, prefer the trivialities of everyday life. They strive for material riches and sensuous pleasures in this life and remain devoted to their conventional notions of God, rather than seeking an understanding of God that is deepened by rational thought. Ḥayy therefore abandons the hope of changing the people and decides to return with Absāl to his deserted island where they can spend the rest of their days in seclusion and in mystical contemplation of God. Hence, the main part of the novel closes with the sentence: “Thus they served God on the island until man’s certain fate overtook them” (p. 165).

1.5. The Author’s Conclusion: Seeking an Understanding of the Divine

At the end of the novel, Ibn Ṭufayl addresses his reader directly. He explicitly notes—like the Apostle Paul in the Bible, in 1 Cor.—that his story belongs to “a hidden branch of study” (p. 165), which will be grasped only by those who have a real understanding of God. With his book, the author says, he has for the first time lifted the “veil” (p. 165) that has hidden this knowledge. The reason he did so, Ibn Ṭufayl writes, is that wrong opinions and corruption had gained the upper hand in society, so that many weak people were rejecting the authority of the Prophet and were instead following “the ways of fools” (p. 165). Therefore, he concludes, it was necessary to “afford them a fleeting glimpse of the mystery of mysteries to draw them to true understanding and turn them away from this other, false way” (pp. 165–166). Nonetheless, Ibn Ṭufayl also remarks that he hopes his treatise will “excite desire” in his readers to take themselves on an intellectual journey through which they, too, can strive towards the “secret” and achieve “knowledge of Him” (p. 166). This fascinating concluding passage reads as follows:

And this—may God give you spirit to strengthen you—is the story of Ḥayy b. Yaqzān, Absāl and Salāmān. It takes up a line of discourse not found in books or heard in the usual sort of speeches. It belongs to a hidden branch of study, re-

ceived only by those who are aware of God and unknown to those who know Him not. In treating of this openly, I have broken the precedent of our righteous ancestors, who were sparing to the point of [stinginess] in speaking of it. What made it easy for me to strip off the veil of secrecy and divulge this mystery was the great number of corrupt ideas that have sprouted up and are being openly spread by the self-styled philosophers of today, so widely that they have covered the land and caused universal damage. Fearing that the weak-minded, who throw over the authority of prophets to ape the ways of fools, might mistake these notions for the esoteric doctrines which must be kept secret from those unfit to know them, and thus be all the more enticed to embrace them, I decided to afford them a fleeting *glimpse of the mystery of mysteries* to draw them to true understanding and turn them away from this other, false way. Nonetheless, I have not left the secrets set down in these few pages entirely without a veil—a sheer one, easily pierced by those fit to do so, but capable of growing so thick to those unworthy of passing beyond that they will never breach it.⁴

Thus, Ibn Ṭufayl makes it very clear that, for him, “truth is something that exists outside of the purview of the text” and that the text “functions as a type of indirect communication.” In fact, the role of the text is not to confine Truth, but to “open it up to the reader’s gaze,” as A. W. Hughes once noted.⁵

2. MODELS FOR AND RESPONSES TO IBN ṬUFAYL’S NOVEL

2.1. Predecessors and Contemporaries

The idea of an autodidactic, rational way of religious learning eventually leading to belief in and vision of God, communicated in the literary form of a philosophical-allegorical novel, was not entirely new in the history of Arabic literature and Islamic thought at the time. Among Ibn Ṭufayl’s predecessors and intellectual mentors from the eleventh century, the most important was the aforementioned Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), a physician, philosopher, and polymath who wrote a trilogy of mystical tales or recitals in Arabic in which he “recaptures his spiritual autobiography in the form of symbols.”⁶ This trilogy consists of the short but highly original epistle [*Risālat*] *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* (Recital of Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān), the *Risālat al-Ṭayr* (Recital of the bird), and the treatise *Salāmān wa-Absāl* (Salāmān and Absāl). It is the first text of Ibn Sīnā’s trilogy in particular, *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* (comprising ten pages in print), that inspired Ibn Ṭufayl to write a book of his own on this topic—for which he adopted the title from his predecessor’s work.

In Ibn Sīnā’s novel, the soul on its search for knowledge encounters at some point a sage named Ḥayy. The sage teaches the soul, which originally belonged to the immaterial world, how to protect itself from the dangers of the material world. In using rationality and logic, the soul eventually overcomes the darkness of this world and finds its way to “the light,” that is, the source of all life and existence. Although the contents and plots of Ibn Sīnā’s and Ibn Ṭufayl’s narratives differ significantly, the two accounts have, in addition to the title, two major characteristics in common. First, they both have a very poetic way of expressing the human desire to

acquire knowledge and to learn, and second, they both stress the active, autodidactic aspect of learning and human growth.

The protagonists of Ibn Sīnā's third work in the trilogy, *Salāmān and Absāl*, also appear prominently in Ibn Ṭufayl's novel. However, unlike Ibn Sīnā, who made abstract, mystical figures the main characters in his *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān*, Ibn Ṭufayl placed the development and cognitive process of a human being in the foreground of his work. Indeed, Ibn Ṭufayl's protagonist is a human individual whose character traits and thirst for knowledge the readers of this novel can readily identify with.

Apart from Ibn Ṭufayl, the plot and characters of Ibn Sīnā's *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* constituted the basis for a philosophical poem written in Hebrew. This poem, entitled *Ḥay ben Meqīṣ*, was composed by Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), a distinguished Spanish-Jewish litterateur, philosophical theologian, and natural scientist, who greatly admired the Arabic-Islamic culture and thought that he encountered in al-Andalus, where he grew up.

Interestingly, there is yet another famous Muslim philosopher and mystic, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī (1153–1191), known as the "Master of Illumination," who was inspired by Ibn Sīnā's trilogy. Al-Suhrawardī's work is entitled *Qisṣat al-ghurba al-gharbiyya* (Tale of occidental exile), known also as *Risāla fī Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* (Treatise on Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān). Al-Suhrawardī composed this work on the theme of an allegorical journey because, as he noted at the beginning of the treatise,

I was struck by the fact that, although it [i.e., Ibn Sīnā's *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān*] contained [many] marvels of spiritual words and profound allusions, it was devoid of intimations to indicate the greatest stage, which is the "great calamity" [Qur'ān 79:34] that is stored away in divine books, deposited in the philosophers' symbols and hidden in the tale of *Salāmān and Absāl* put together by the author of *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān*; that is, the mystery upon which the stages of the adherence to Sufism and the apocalypics are based.⁷

Notably, in al-Suhrawardī's tale, the lands of the Occident represent the Realm of Matter (and darkness), while the East stands for the Sublime World (and light).

2.2. Reception among Muslim Writers

One of the major Arab recipients of Ibn Ṭufayl's work was Ibn Rushd (Latinized as Averroes, 1126–1198), the well-known Spanish Arab philosopher, legal scholar, and medical doctor of the twelfth century and proponent of a rational approach to faith and religion. Ibn Rushd wrote a commentary on Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān*. Apart from Ibn Rushd in the western part of the Islamic empire, in the east it was the great Persian poet and mystic Nūr al-Dīn Jāmī (1441–1492) who revived, in his mystical poem *Salāmān and Absāl*, the ideas and the literary motif of *Salāmān and Absāl* already employed by Ibn Ṭufayl and his predecessor Ibn Sīnā. Jāmī developed the motif further while emphasizing the role of human beings in the world and the mystery of faith as such.

The final, and no less fascinating, instance of reception is *al-Risāla al-kāmiliyya fī l-sīra al-nabawiyya* (The treatise of Kāmīl on the Prophet's biography) by 'Alā' al-Dīn Ibn al-Nafīs (1213–1288), a brilliant physician and philosopher in Damascus and

Cairo during the time of the Mamluks (1250–1517). Ibn al-Nafīs wrote this book in direct response to Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān*, as is clear from the fact that Ibn al-Nafīs took both the core idea of a coming-of-age story and the main plot of Ibn Ṭufayl's novel as a model. As in Ibn Ṭufayl's work, Ibn al-Nafīs's protagonist, Kāmil (whose name means "the complete" or "the perfect") is a boy who was spontaneously generated and grows up on a deserted island. Similar to Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy*, Ibn al-Nafīs's Kāmil learns all by himself and eventually finds the Truth and God merely by observation and self-education, with no human teacher or contact to the outside world. Only at a more advanced age, when other humans accidentally arrive on his island, does Kāmil encounter civilization. In contrast to Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophical-mystical account, however, Ibn al-Nafīs's narrative is socio-theologically motivated.

2.3. Translations and Reception in Europe

Ibn Ṭufayl's novel was a source of great fascination for Jewish and Christian scholars in Europe. Recent studies in comparative literature have noted that polymaths such as Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200–1280), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Voltaire (1694–1778), Rousseau (1712–1778), and Diderot (1713–1784) may have known and appreciated Ibn Ṭufayl's work,⁸ in addition to Lessing, with whom we began our inquiry into *the mystery of mysteries* that caused so much interest and contemplation among medieval Muslim thinkers.

Yet the long history of the reception of Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* does not stop there. The book was also translated into Hebrew very early on and was published in 1349 with a commentary by Moses ben Joshua of Narbonne (late thirteenth century–1370). The first Latin translation was completed in 1671, followed one year later by a Dutch translation, as well as two English translations shortly thereafter. The first two German translations were published in 1726 and 1783, respectively, followed by further renderings into Spanish, Russian, and other languages. The English writer Daniel Defoe (ca. 1660–1731) very probably was inspired by Ibn Ṭufayl's earlier novel and its hero, a kind of Robinson prototype, when he wrote his famous adventure book, *Robinson Crusoe*.⁹ Interestingly, based on his tropical island tale, Defoe is considered the originator of the genre of the novel in England.¹⁰ Another renowned novel with familiar elements from Ibn Ṭufayl's story is *The Jungle Book* (1894), written by the Indian-born English writer Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936), that tells the story of a foundling child, Mowgli, who grows up in an Indian jungle without human contact. Finally, brief reference also must be made to the probable link between Ibn Ṭufayl's book and the novel *Tarẓān*, written in 1912 by the American author Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875–1959).

3. CONCLUSION

In his extraordinary *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age story, *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān*, Ibn Ṭufayl makes impressive use of the power and rich imagery of the Arabic language. He develops a magnificent narrative that is exceptional both for its linguistic mastery and for its skillful use of the literary and religious heritage of the Arabs—and indeed of the peoples and cultures of the Mediterranean in general. With remarkable eloquence and literary sophistication, Ibn Ṭufayl demonstrates in his book the par-

ticularly close interaction of religion and literature in Islam during its classical period from the ninth to the fifteenth century. In addition, there are several more conclusions to be drawn concerning the following points:

First, in general terms, Ibn Ṭufayl's philosophical-allegorical work evokes compelling linguistic images concerning the relationships between humans and their environment, on the one hand, and humans and their creator, on the other. In more particular terms, this novel offers unique insights into the cognitive abilities of human beings at the generally highly charged interface between faith and reason.

Second, one major objective of Ibn Ṭufayl's narrative is the depiction of an intellect-oriented pathway to knowledge. This rational approach to learning is presented in the novel as equivalent and alternative to a purely empirical and tradition-centered process. For Ibn Ṭufayl, as for many classical Muslim thinkers, the human mind is God-given, as the Qur'ān explicitly states. Moreover, the human being is not only equipped for and capable of making active use of such learning aids and methods as deduction, rational reasoning, analysis, inquiry, and experimentation to achieve perfection, but in the Qur'ānic sense virtually obligated to do so. Interestingly enough, Ibn Ṭufayl advocates this rational approach in the pursuit of both secular and religious learning. In doing so, he lends credence to the idea that, in Islam, an intelligent person has not only the ability but also the religious duty to make comprehensive and purposeful use of his or her intellectual potential to strive toward a deeper understanding of God and, at the same time, to attain human perfection—and thus happiness. It is particularly noteworthy that, in Ibn Ṭufayl's view, these major goals can be achieved without prophets, and without revealed scripture or an established religion in the conventional sense. For Ibn Ṭufayl, human life and faith in God do not build on human-made dogmas, rituals, or the formalisms of any particular faith. Rather, Ibn Ṭufayl's idea of human life and existence centers on the individual's abilities and desire to grow and prosper as much as it does on the individual's relationship with the creator. Ḥayy finds his way to God without being, or becoming, a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim.

Third, with this book Ibn Ṭufayl unequivocally criticizes the Muslim society of his time. He rejects an understanding of Islam that reduces faith to religious doctrines and formalized activities of worship. In this respect, Ibn Ṭufayl clearly disagrees with certain influential conservative religious scholars and proponents of traditional Islam. One scholar he criticizes in this regard is Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111), the highly authoritative theologian and mystic of the twelfth century. Al-Ghazālī had argued against Aristotelian philosophy, declaring it irreconcilable with orthodox Islamic faith and portraying it as a threat to Muslim piety. Also, al-Ghazālī is known to have seen mysticism as the only righteous way to salvation and to the happiness which, in his view, is fully attainable only in the next world. By contrast, Ibn Ṭufayl proclaims—in an almost humanistic manner—the possibility of an individualized and direct relationship between humans and God, one that is free of denominational regimentation and that, at the same time, enables humans to experience happiness in this life.

Fourth, in his tale, Ibn Ṭufayl develops a synthesis of rational and mystical principles. He underpins this alternative approach to human existence with numerous theological and literary references to creation myths and to biblical and Qur'ānic par-

ables and metaphors. Particularly interesting in this context is the fact that Ibn Ṭufayl's brilliant narrative *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* is a novel of education that has no educator in the conventional sense of the word. Thus, Ibn Ṭufayl emphasizes the power and sovereignty of the human intellect. At the same time, he stresses—as did other classical Muslim scholars both before and after him—that for him, God alone is the principal and supreme teacher and educator of humankind. It is, therefore, in no way surprising that Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy b. Yaqẓān* is today considered a masterpiece of the classical intellectual heritage of Islam and, indeed, of world literature.

¹ Quoted in Otto F. Best, “Noch einmal: Vernunft und Offenbarung; Überlegungen zu Lessings ‘Berührung’ mit der Tradition des mystischen Rationalismus,” *Lessing Yearbook* 12 (1980), pp. 123–156, here: pp. 135–137.

² Page numbers in the main text of the article refer to Lenn Evan Goodman (trans.), *Ibn Ṭufayl's Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān: A Philosophical Tale*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972, pp. 165–166. The original Arabic text is included, for example, in Léon Gauthier (trans.), *Ibn Ṭufayl: Risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān, Roman philosophique d'Ibn Ṭufayl*, Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1936 [repr. in *Publications of the Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Sciences*, ed. Fuat Sezgin, Frankfurt am Main: Institute for the History of Arabic-Islamic Science, 1999].

³ See also Sebastian Günther, “Hostile Brothers in Transformation: An Archetypal Conflict Figuring in Classical and Modern Arabic Literature,” *Myths, Historical Archetypes and Symbolic Figures in Arabic Literature: Towards a New Hermeneutic Approach*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth et al., Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1999, pp. 309–336.

⁴ Goodman's translation.

⁵ Aaron W. Hughes, *The Texture of the Divine: Imagination in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 60.

⁶ Henri Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Willard R. Trask, New York: Pantheon Books, 1960, p. xi.

⁷ Trans. W. M. Thackston, *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Shihabuddin Yahya Subrawardi*, London: Octagon, 1982, pp. 100–108, esp. p. 100 (slightly adjusted).

⁸ Samar Attar, *The Vital Roots of European Enlightenment: Ibn Ṭufayl's Influence on Modern Western Thought*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007, p. xii.

⁹ The view of Ibn Ṭufayl's influence on Defoe, widely held in European literary circles, was recently called into question by Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “*Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* as Male Utopia,” *The World of Ibn Ṭufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān*, ed. Lawrence I. Conrad, Leiden: Brill, 1996, pp. 52–68, esp. pp. 53–54.

¹⁰ Max Novak, “Defoe as an Innovator of Fictional Form,” *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. John Richetti, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 41–71, esp. p. 41.