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Cover

Mašhad, Kitābhāna-i Āsitān-i Quds-i Raḍawī 300, f. 1v
Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *grec* 1853, f. 186v

T. Kukkonen, *Ibn Ṭufayl. Living the Life of Reason*, Oneworld, London 2014 (Makers of the Muslim World), xiv+145 pp.

Ibn Ṭufayl. Living the Life of Reason by Taneli Kukkonen was published in 2014 in the series “Makers of the Muslim World” that, in the aim to present authors who have made a significant political, intellectual, and religious contribution to the Muslim world, combines first-rate scholarship with readability.

Kukkonen devotes his introductory study to the life and thought of the outstanding figure of Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185), the Andalusian philosopher and physician of the Almohad Caliphs. In doing so, he also offers a vivid picture of his word and historical context. Kukkonen focuses on Ibn Ṭufayl’s only extant work, *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, the *Living Son of Wakeful*. This text not only is an outstanding piece in Arabic literature, but also provides a good point of view on important topics of Arabic-Islamic philosophical tradition.¹ Kukkonen is always very accurate in his reconstructions of these different sources, and very sensitive in emphasising Ibn Ṭufayl’s originality.

Despite the fact that Ibn Ṭufayl lived in the West of the Muslim world and that he seemingly had a limited influence on later Arabic-Islamic philosophy, he had a “disproportionate impact on our impression of the Muslim intellectual universe” (p. ix). *Ḥayy* was translated into English through Latin in 1659 and directly from Arabic in 1708, and it was the source of inspiration of European narratives, from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (or better its sequel: *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: With his Vision of the Angelick World*, 1720), to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Émile, ou De l’éducation* (1762), to Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894), to Michel Tournier’s *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage* (1971) and others.

In Chapter I (pp. 1-16) Kukkonen presents the life of Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Ṭufayl in the context of the turbulent intellectual life of the twelfth-century Muslim West, which included the two sides of Gibraltar strait in a single cultural world, where ideas and people moved freely. As court physician, he served the Caliphs Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb (r. 1163-1184) and Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb al-Manṣūr (r. 1184-1199). While the former sponsored philosophy, the latter gradually retreated from the policy of his father to the banishment of Averroes in Lucena in 1195, ten years after Ibn Ṭufayl’s death.

Kukkonen briefly introduces the reader to the ‘Almohad Revolution’ and the religious revivalism inspired by Ibn Tumart, then he presents the few available data concerning Ibn Ṭufayl’s family, childhood, education, and medical training. In the late Almoravid times of Ibn Ṭufayl’s youth, the philosophical library that he had at his disposal included Aristotle’s works accompanied by al-Fārābī’s, treatises by Ibn Bāġġa (d. 1139) and by Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), of which he had only a partial understanding and which were accompanied by al-Ġazālī’s criticisms. In 1154 Ibn Ṭufayl took a secretarial post in the administration of the governor of Ceuta and Tangier; he was eventually appointed personal physician to Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb, the future Almohad Caliph. According to the Moroccan historian of the 13th century al-Marrākuṣī, our principal source of information for the Almohad era, Abū Yūsuf Ya‘qūb felt for him such a strong affection (the Arabic term is *ḥubb*, ‘love’) that for the two decades of their relationship they spent days and nights talking together. The Caliph

¹ “In point of fact, *Ḥayy*, by virtue of synthesizing insights from many disparate intellectual legacies, ends up pointing in multiple directions at once. The work evokes at turns teachings found in Aristotelian philosophy of nature, Galen’s physiology, Ibn Sina’s and al-Ghazali’s metaphysics, Sufi descriptions of contemplative rapture, and Farabian as well as Almohad views of politics and organized religion” (p. 25).

was delighted by his erudite companionship and spent much effort to learn as much as he can; he sponsored the arts and sciences, included those of the Greeks. Kukkonen describes Ibn Ṭufayl's sponsorship of a whole younger generation of scholars, first of all Ibn Rušd, Averroes, and accounts for Ibn Ṭufayl's reaction against Ptolemaic astronomy.

Chapter II (pp. 17-32) is devoted to Ḥayy Ibn Yaḳzān and discusses its *divisio textus* (pp. ix-xi; Kukkonen follows Gauthier's edition, 1936). Then Kukkonen discusses Ibn Ṭufayl's aim in writing this work and its intended selected audience. Ibn Ṭufayl claims that the occasion for the composition of his work was a friend's request to explain the secrets of Ibn Sīnā's *Eastern Philosophy* (*al-Ḥikma al-mašriqiyya*), which proposes a path to ecstasy through contemplation. This ecstasy is the taste (*ḍawq*) of the divine and the intimacy with God (*wilaya*) in Sufi terminology. The three characters of the story, Ḥayy, Asāl and Salāmān, bear the same names of those of two separate allegorical tales by Ibn Sīnā. As is well known, Ḥayy either arrives on the island floating in a basket like the baby Moses, or is spontaneously generated by the warmth of the sun, the depths of the earth and other cosmic forces. He is adopted by a doe, which, as a surrogate mother, teaches him to walk, graze and fend for himself. The death of the doe is the occasion for Ḥayy to study nature from the earthly beings to the heavens: he arrives at considering the whole universe as created by something outside it, the Prime Mover and Necessary Being. At this point Ḥayy "devises an elaborate program of self-purification reminiscent of Sufi practices" (p. 20) till the contemplative bliss of the divine. Unexpectedly a man, named Asāl, reaches Ḥayy's island from a nation where an unspecified revealed religion is practised. Ḥayy learns how to communicate in a human tongue and understands how to share with Asāl his idea of the divine. He decides to go to Asāl's island ruled by Salāmān, to perfect the revealed religion of Asāl's community. His mission fails: Ḥayy's exhortations fall into nothingness, the community remains fixed at the literal level of the revealed religion, because otherwise they risk losing their faith. Ḥayy and Asāl return to the desert island to live their austere spirituality.

According to Ibn Ṭufayl's preface, by following Ḥayy's cognitive ascent till the ecstatic vision of the divine the reader will elevate his/her thinking to the same goal. Kukkonen proposes to consider this statement as Ḥayy's goal, at variance with the interpretations advanced by Hourani and Gauthier. According to Hourani, the purpose of the tale is to affirm the "human rational capacity for achieving a comprehensive vision of reality" (p. 24); Gauthier's opinion is that the topic under discussion is the relationship between philosophy and revealed religion. Kukkonen focuses also on the two possible designs of Ḥayy's ascent. One is according to the Aristotelian principle that our knowledge starts from what is most evident to us: thus Ḥayy begins from natural philosophy (cosmology, generation and corruption, biology), then he moves to the intermediate sciences which lie between the material and the immaterial (psychology and mathematics), then again to metaphysics and theology, and finally to ethics and politics: only logic is missing. Another pattern is represented by a sort of movement from the outside experience to the inside one of Ḥayy's cognitive ascent (pp. 21-3).

Chapter III is devoted to Ḥayy's island and the life in it (pp. 33-48). Kukkonen observes that it has never been discussed in itself, only as the stage for Ḥayy's life and growing. Ibn Ṭufayl places it near the Equator, refuting the most authoritative philosophical and medical authorities – Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, and Ibn Sīnā – who considered that zone inimical to human life. Ibn Ṭufayl's interest in climate is related to the problem of Ḥayy's birth or arrival. As we have just seen, either he is spontaneously generated, or he arrives on a floating basket: now, according to the first hypothesis the climate of the equatorial zone allows an ideal mixture of the four primary qualities – hot, cold, dry and moist – from which life can emerge. This represents "an exception to how information is parcelled out in Ḥayy. Ibn Ṭufayl generally takes care not to introduce anything more complex into his scheme than what the reader can absorb thanks to sharing in Ḥayy's earlier experiences" (p. 40).

The first of them is that mothers care for their babies as the doe does with Ḥayy. He observes plant and animal life for a long period, from the age of seven to that of thirty-one. After the doe's death, "the most spectacular instance of Ḥayy's explorations (...) is his early dissection of the doe's chest. This act alone lends a wealth of information about the heart's cavities and functions and is later supplemented by a vivisection" (p. 45). At the end of this first period, Ḥayy becomes as experienced in anatomy and bodily functions as the "greatest physicians" (Gauthier, p. 50). Ḥayy improves his knowledge from the experience of what occurs repeatedly to the technological mastery, then to that kind of knowledge which requires inquiry into causes, and eventually to wonderment for the essential properties of things.

A narrative shift marks the difference in Ḥayy's new view of the whole world, which is no longer limited to the island he inhabits. Chapter IV is dedicated to the scientific study of nature which Ḥayy begins when he is twenty-one years old (pp. 49-64). According to Kukkonen, Ibn Ṭufayl uses a "telescopic style of writing" (p. 51): Ḥayy proceeds in his analysis from common, concrete experiences to more abstract considerations, then he goes back with a new consciousness to observe animal life before moving again to a cosmic level. The result is that Ḥayy returns to certain topics over and over again, succeeding in throwing new light on his ordinary experience. Kukkonen suggests that in this way Ibn Ṭufayl aims at legitimising the Aristotelian physics and metaphysics as the right tool to conceptualise the universe in all its parts.² Ḥayy classifies the natural bodies according to their functions, motions and activities. Kukkonen rightly stresses Ibn Ṭufayl's use of the term 'nature' in its philosophical meaning, and suggests that this probably depends on the fact that in the theological circles of Ibn Ṭufayl's age speaking of 'natures' with autonomous powers was understood as a challenge to God's omnipotence.

Soul, the topic of Chapter V (pp. 65-78), is one of the main concerns in Ḥayy's research. Kukkonen carefully indicates the differences between Ibn Ṭufayl's psychology and Aristotle's. Spirit (*ruh*) is associated with the vital heat: Ḥayy searches for the doe's vital heat after its death, but he is unable to bring it back; he even practices vivisections, looking for spirit.³ Kukkonen states that Ibn Ṭufayl seems "to want to say that it is the spirit that is essentially alive and ensouled so that once the spirit dissipates, life terminates" (p. 69). Now, this 'spirit' is the vehicle of soul. Soul, a spiritual form, interacts with the body through an intermediary, a more refined type of matter which is reminiscent of the *pneuma* of the medical and Stoic traditions. Kukkonen indicates some possible ways in which this doctrine reached Ibn Ṭufayl (pp. 69-70). But not a single living compound comes into being without the emanation of a divine power which is the true principle of life and which is compared by Ḥayy to the sun. The divine activity is described, in a Platonic vein, as life and light. Ibn Ṭufayl emphasises the dispersal of powers in the outflow of emanation and the suffusion on all reality at all times. Kukkonen then analyses how the divine Spirit gets divided across the many distinct forms of life.⁴ All species form a great chain of being along a continuum of capacity and actualisation. In some beings matter limits the reception of the divine Spirit, but it acts as the sun, which extends its light

² "In dwelling on philosophical model for explicating physical reality, Ibn Ṭufayl leaves the reader in no doubt as to its superiority in producing not only a better physics, but ultimately a more accurate and pious theology as well. Above all, this means explicating reality in terms of matter and form as well as potentiality and actuality" (p. 53).

³ Kukkonen cites with approval Gauthier, p. 45: "from this thing issue all these actions, not from the lifeless body. The whole body is merely a tool for the spirit, as it were, similar to the stick with which Ḥayy kept the wild beasts at bay".

⁴ "Each form represents a set of characteristic actions, with such capabilities stacked one on top of another so that, for instance, animals do everything that plants do (feeding, growing, reproducing) while simultaneously being capable of more (sensing and moving)" (p. 75).

and warmth equally in every direction. The human being in this context is the best living being, as attested by the name *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, the *Living Son of Wakeful*. And philosophy is the way of life which leads Ḥayy to spiritual perfection: philosophy “shades into desire to become godlike” (p. 83).

Chapter VI (pp. 79-91) deals with Ibn Ṭufayl’s position on the vexed question of creation versus the eternity of the world. In the last resort, “The consequences of the two beliefs are one and the same” (Gauthier, p. 82) because, as Kukkonen aptly summarises, Ibn Ṭufayl seems to maintain that “an incorporeal agent must be postulated to account for the physical world being what it is, no matter what one thinks about its age. The hypothesis that the world came to be, once upon a time, immediately connotes an Agent (*fā’il*) both powerful and all knowing”; on the other hand, an eternal world perpetually in motion implies an infinite force, “which in turn cannot be housed in a finite body but must instead issue from an incorporeal source” (pp. 82-3). When Ḥayy realises this, he is “no longer troubled by doubts regarding the eternity or coming-to-be of the world. Either way, he was satisfied of the existence of an incorporeal Agent, one that neither was in contact with bodies nor separated from them, neither entering them nor external to them” (Gauthier, p. 86).

Kukkonen discusses the implications of God’s incorporeality in Ibn Ṭufayl’s theology: God, in Ḥayy’s views, is the incorporeal Maker, Mover, and Agent: the “pure existent” whose existence is necessary in and by itself. Ḥayy is 35 years old when he reaches this conviction and becomes fully aware of the existence of two worlds, the visible and the intelligible, which he is confident he can reach. Man is “a creature capable of contemplating the Necessary Existent” (p. 86). Ḥayy thinks he bears a resemblance to the three kinds of beings: animals, the heavenly spheres, and the Necessary Existent. Every man belongs to three levels of reality: the transitory and material, the perpetual and ethereal, and the eternal and immaterial. Being such a microcosmos, he has to perform three duties: first, the body that man shares with other animals must have what sustains the vital spirit, namely a regular diet and an austere lifestyle on the model of the Sufi masters; second, man’s actions should imitate that of the heavenly spheres (*tašabbuh*) in a providential care with a compassionate program of helping all living creatures in need; finally, man must try to imitate the heavens’ contemplation of the Necessary Existent, which requires a complete renunciation of the physical world.

Ibn Ṭufayl thinks that knowledge of the Divine is different from every other knowledge and is accompanied by a special joy. In Chapter VII (pp. 95-110) Kukkonen inquires whether Ḥayy’s “level of arrival” (Gauthier, p. 144) corresponds to *ittiṣāl*, contact or conjunction, or *ittiḥād*, mystical union. Ibn Ṭufayl on this topic agrees with Ibn Sīnā, al-Ġazālī, and Ibn Bāḡḡa, not without echoing Sufi doctrines. According to Kukkonen, what he proposes is “a form of God-consciousness that is not mere knowledge about God (*ilm*) – a creedal statement or a philosophical proof, say – but a knowledge of God, i.e. understanding (*ma’rifā*) in the sense of a genuine acquaintance with the object. To know God in this sense is akin to knowing someone personally: in some ways, it hews closer to raw sense-perception than to rational belief formation, which is why the Sufis had likened such an act of understanding to tasting (*dhawq*). But this is also what makes it so difficult, even impossible, to convey the essence of what happens. Translating the experience into another modality will only serve to render one’s testimony false” (p. 99). Knowing God is qualitatively different, but not in contradiction with what has been established by reason. Ibn Ṭufayl discusses what can be affirmed and what must be denied of God: body, and multiplicity. Kukkonen observes that in his account of the incorporeality of God versus corporeality Ibn Ṭufayl recalls the arguments of *kalām* and Almohadism more than the philosophical doctrines.⁵ Concerning the positive attributes, Ibn

⁵ “The latter, after all, had allowed for other immaterial beings, such as the heavenly movers and immaterial souls” (p. 101).

Ṭufayl mentions knowledge, power, and wisdom.⁶ God is infinite, “the ultimate in perfection and beyond perfection” (Gauthier, p. 144), an echo from the pseudo-Theology of Aristotle.⁷ God is dissimilar from anything in the world, but he is known by human beings; hence, in some respect he must be similar to them. Kukkonen observes that these two inferences are presented in quick succession, but they seem to point in opposite directions. Ibn Ṭufayl’s solution is that the human beings does not belong to the lower world. The ethical consequence of this idea is that the Divine that sparks in the human beings must be privileged above everything; the metaphysical implication is that a reality that is capable of intuiting the Necessary Existent must be incorporeal and indivisible. The “imperishable nature of the true human self” (p. 103) is thus established; the epistemological implication is that a model of cognition different from abstraction is needed.

The Necessary Existent is endowed with self-awareness: the knower, the known, and the act of knowing are one and the same. When man has cognition of the divine, he is absorbed into this divine self-consciousness. This is the philosophical explanation of the Sufi doctrine of ‘annihilation’.⁸

As is well known, Ḥayy’s arrival at the ultimate vision of the divine is not the end of Ibn Ṭufayl’s romance. In Chapter VIII, “Religion” (pp. 111-26), Kukkonen analyses Ḥayy’s journey to Asāl’s island and describes “how Ibn Ṭufayl portrays human community and civilization almost exclusively in terms of organized religion” (p. 111). Ibn Ṭufayl thinks that the reader can learn something from Ḥayy’s dealings with such communities. The religion is not specified, but he states that it was established by one of the ancient prophets; all its beliefs – God, angels, the Holy Book, the messenger, the last day, the paradise and hellfire – and all its practices – prayer, pilgrimage, law – are those of Islam. This religion represents the truth through symbols and images derived from sense-perception, which are persuasive. As in *al-Fārābī*, this is the second best option to reach the truth, while the first is philosophy. These beliefs are beneficial for the society and the single man. Asāl and Salāmān perform really seriously what is prescribed in their religion: Salāmān prefers the plain meaning (*zāhir*) of Scripture and he is described as the guarantor of an ordered human society; Asāl looks for the spiritual meaning, which is hidden (*bāṭin*), and it is for this reason that he had chosen voluntary seclusion from his community, thus arriving at Ḥayy’s island, where he found in Ḥayy’s contemplative practice the tools for the allegorical interpretation of Scripture (*ta’wīl*). Asāl’s impact on Ḥayy is much less strong. “Ḥayy already knows what the truth is, with unassailable certitude and conviction, so that the only remaining question is whether he can also bring himself to accept the claims made in religion” (p. 117). The answer is affirmative. The claims of religion are symbolic representations of the truth, but their limit consists in the fact that “in Ḥayy’s eyes (...) the goal of all of the ordinances of religion on Asāl’s island aim merely at managing a fundamentally venal and unruly population, not on genuinely improving their character, let alone steering them in the direction of a genuine love of God and the transcendent” (p. 120). Thus, Ibn Ṭufayl seems to criticise the public face of Islam. Ḥayy realizes that “most people’s hearts are hardened to the point where only a strict adherence to the letter of the law will keep society from devolving into a war of all against all” (p. 121), but he cannot change this state of affairs. Ḥayy’s failure consists in that he is only

⁶ “Whatever perfection is ascribed to God cannot be thought of as defining God in the sense of encompassing Him and thereby delimiting His mode of being” (p. 102).

⁷ “The former feature explains how creatures aspire to know Him (every kind of perfection is ascribable to Him, only infinitely more so), while the latter points to the way in which God’s essence stands independent of any rationally defined form of excellence and thus escapes our understanding altogether” (p. 102).

⁸ “Thus when one has a clear perception of the Necessary Existent, the rest of the cosmic sequence will take on the appearance of an equally necessary and inevitable outflow” (p. 106).

a philosopher, not a prophet who is able to communicate the truth he knows in a form palatable for the masses. There is no place for Ḥayy in Asāl's community: "he is too high-minded to engage with the rest of humanity in the ruthlessly pragmatic terms the circumstances would require" (p. 124).

In the last chapter Kukkonen briefly explores the fortune of Ibn Ṭufayl's Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān (pp. 127-36) from the Muslim West to the Hebrew circle of Moses Narboni (d. 1349), to the Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, to the two 17th century English orientalists Pococke father and son, to Daniel Defoe. The book ends with a selected bibliography (pp. 137-42) and a general index (pp. 143-5). Kukkonen's study deserves to be read not only as an introductory work, but also as a research essay: it has the great merit of presenting a sort of running commentary to Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān, which inspires the desire to read again and again this philosophical tale.

Cecilia Martini Bonadeo