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WHAT IS THE ARABIC FOR *ZOON POLITIKON*?
ETHICS AND POLITICS IN IBN TUFAYL (D. 581/1185)¹

Abstract

È possibile delineare due filoni interpretativi sul *Hayy b. Yaqzān* (*Il vivente, figlio del destò*) di Ibn Tufayl: secondo l'uno, l'opera è uno sguardo realistico su un solitario in una società corrotta e si ispira agli insegnamenti della *Repubblica* di Platone; secondo l'altro, l'opera ritrae un ideale puro e astratto di vita ascetica e insiste sull'imperativo morale dell'isolamento.

Tuttavia entrambe queste interpretazioni precludono qualsiasi possibilità di felicità per l'uomo o per il filosofo all'interno di una società. In altre parole, tendono a interpretare *Hayy b. Yaqzān* come un tentativo di dimostrare che l'uomo non sia sociale o politico. La perfezione intellettuale e spirituale ricercata attraverso l'isolamento non può, a mio parere, essere separata da uno scopo pratico. L'isolamento del filosofo non viene praticato per distinguersi dalle società imperfette. Al contrario, tale isolamento è intrapreso per condurlo ad una realizzazione più alta e propriamente pratica.

Su questa base, sostengo nell'articolo che l'uomo di Ibn Tufayl sia paragonabile allo ζῷον πολιτικόν aristotelico. Attraverso un confronto tra il *Hayy* di Ibn Tufayl e lo ζῷον πολιτικόν di Aristotele vedremo come Ibn Tufayl si serva dell'*animale sociale/politico* arabo (*hayawān insī* o *madanī*) di al-Fārābī e lo trasponga dal dominio della città a quello dell'individuo. Analizzando alcuni passaggi chiave, è possibile chiarire come il concetto di ζῷον πολιτικόν sia entrato nella filosofia araba e in particolare nella concezione di uomo di Ibn Tufayl attraverso il virtuoso di al-Fārābī e il solitario di Ibn Bājjā.

¹ The use of a simplified transliteration of Arabic words in the present article is an editorial decision, see *supra* the introduction to the volume.

Prevailing academic views on Ibn Tufayl's Hayy b. Yaqzān (Living, the Son of Wakeful) fall into two camps: either the work is a realistic look at an isolated human being amidst a morally bankrupt population and harks back to the teachings of Plato's Republic, or it portrays a pure and abstract ideal of the spiritual life in the footsteps of the natural first man, and insists on the moral imperative of isolation.

The difficulty with both interpretations is that they preclude any possibility of happiness for the human person or the philosopher living in a society. In other words, they tend to interpret Hayy b. Yaqzān as an attempt to demonstrate that the human is not essentially social or political. However, the intellectual and spiritual perfection sought through isolation cannot, in my opinion, be separated from a practical purpose. The isolation of the philosopher is not undergone to distinguish himself from imperfect human societies. On the contrary, such isolation is undertaken in order to lead one to a higher, and properly practical accomplishment.

On this basis, I argue in this paper that Ibn Tufayl's man is comparable to the Aristotelian ζῷον πολιτικόν. Through a comparison of Ibn Tufayl's Hayy and Aristotle's ζῷον πολιτικόν we shall see how Ibn Tufayl reuses the Arabic social/political animal (hayawān insī or madanī) of al-Fārābī and transposes it from the domain of the city to that of the individual. By analysing some key passages, it becomes possible to illustrate how the concept of ζῷον πολιτικόν has entered Arabic philosophy, and particularly in Ibn Tufayl's conception of man through the lenses of al-Fārābī's virtuous and Ibn Bājjā's solitary man.

Introduction

The life of Ibn Tufayl (d. 581/1185) and the story of his *Hayy b. Yaqzān (Living, the Son of Wakeful)* have intrigued scholars of Arabic philosophy for more than half a millennium. Ibn Tufayl lived at the heart of the Almohad regime in the Islamic West and his public office allowed him to patronise the arts and sciences. Yet the strategy for survival of his hero, Hayy, was paradoxically a kind of intellectual withdrawal.

This paper will be divided in four sections. First, I shall briefly point out some aspects of the biography of Ibn Tufayl that are relevant to his work. Then I shall talk about his work *Hayy b. Yaqzān*, in order to show in broad terms what Ibn Tufayl intended to do when he wrote the book, the audience at which it was aimed as well as recreating the backdrop of knowledge that he shared with his original readership, revisiting the pivotal question about *Eastern philosophy*. Third, I shall examine Hayy's choice to leave the island of Absāl and how this relates to the Aristotelian ζῷον πολιτικόν. Fourth, I shall expand my analysis and compare Hayy's attitude towards society with the concept of the social and political animal in Arabic philosophy. I hope to be able to show how the concept of ζῷον πολιτικόν has progressively entered Arabic philosophy, and particularly Ibn Tufayl's conception of man, through the notions of al-Fārābī's *hay-awān insī/madanī* and Ibn Bājjā's *mutawahhid*.

I. Ibn Tufayl's life between politics, medicine, and philosophy

Sources on the life of Abū Bakr Muhammad b. 'Abd al-Malik b. Muhammad b. Tufayl al-Qaysī, known as Abubacer in medieval Christianity, are quite fragmentary. It has been deduced that his education took place during the declining phase of the Almoravid state, which was replaced in 542/1147 by one headed by the Almohads, another Berber dynasty destined for a more shining future than under the Almoravids and one which restored a friendlier environment for philosophy and intellectual endeavour². This political background

² M. Fierro, *The Religious Policy of the Almohads*, in S. Schmidtke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Islamic Theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 679-692. The attitude towards the Ghazālīan texts changed dramatically from the Almoravid to the Almohad dynasty. Two Ghazālīan teachings were particularly subjected to reconsideration: that of *tasawwuf* and rational thinking combined with jurisprudence and, according to Dominique Urvoy, that of individualism. Cf. D. Urvoy, *Averroès. Les ambitions d'un intellectuel musulman*, Flammarion, Paris 1998, p. 48.

explains the importance of al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in Ibn Tufayl's work, as a mark of his commitment to Almohadism³, as well as his dismissive approach to his philosophical predecessors in al-Andalus because they had not proceeded beyond logic and rational investigation. Sarah Stroumsa writes that *stopping at logic was, apparently, a relatively safe way to do philosophy in the unpropitious Almoravid environment*⁴.

Medicine also played an important role in Ibn Tufayl's work. A physician in Granada, in 549/1154 he became the secretary of 'Abd al-Mu'min (r. 541-558/1146-1163), the governor of the province of Ceuta and Tangier, son of the first Almohad caliph and founder of the Almohad dynasty. In 558/1163 he was called to work as a physician at the court of the second Almohad caliph Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf (r. 558-580/1163-1184), which was part of the Almohad religious elite⁵. In 578/1182, having reached old age, he was replaced in the

³ Ibn Tufayl in the introduction quotes famous Sufis such as al-Hallāj and al-Bistāmī, including the same quotations as found in al-Ghazālī's *Niche of Lights* (*Mishkāt al-anwār*). A.H. al-Ghazālī, *The Niche of Lights*, translated by D. Buchmann, Brigham Young University Press, Provo UT 1998, pp. 17-18. On the Almoravid opposition to al-Ghazālī's thought, see D. Serrano Fuano, *Why Did the Scholars of al-Andalus Distrust al-Ghazālī? Ibn Rushd al-Jadd's Fatwā on Awliyā' Allāh*, in "Der Islam" 83 (2006), pp. 137-156.

⁴ S. Stroumsa, *Andalus and Sefarad: On Philosophy and its History in Islamic Spain*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 2019, p. 126.

⁵ The Almohad religious elite was called *talaba* (lit. *students*), and it was divided into *talabat al-hadar*, who accompanied the caliph during his journeys, and then the other *talaba* which are divided into subcategories according to their religious and political functions. Physicians, philosophers, and theologians belonged to the former. Cf. E. Fricaud, *Les talaba dans la société almohade: le temps d'Averroès*, in "al-Qantara: revista de estudios arabes" 18/2 (1997), pp. 331-387. It is not known whether Ibn Tufayl was also a judge and minister (*wazīr*) of the caliph at the same time: the fact that the thirteenth-century astronomer al-Bitrūjī (the latin Alpetragius, d. 600/1204 circa) calls him *qādī* (*judge*) would seem to confirm this supposition. al-Bitrūjī, *On the Principles of Astronomy. An Edition of the Arabic and Hebrew Versions with Translation, Analysis, and an Arabic-Hebrew-English Glossary*, ed. B.R. Goldstein, Yale University Press, New Haven 1971, vol. 1, pp. 3-4, 61; vol. II, p. 49. Gauthier doubts that he really held this office. L. Gauthier,

position of physician by his friend Averroes (d. 595/1198). This explains the central role of medicine in Ibn Tufayl's work, as we shall see in the following section, as well as the rank of epistemological importance of medicine with respect to natural philosophy over which researchers have long debated but which is a subject that goes beyond the scope of this paper. It will be sufficient to recall here that, according to Richter-Bernburg, Ibn Tufayl saw medicine *as an epistemologically inferior and application-oriented discipline on the one hand, and propaedeutic theoretical basis, considered part of natural philosophy, on the other*⁶.

Before his retirement, Ibn Tufayl invited Averroes to the court of caliph Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf in Marrakesh and encouraged him to write a commentary on Aristotle and other books which were then studied and translated into Hebrew and Latin⁷. He enjoyed, however, the friendship and confidence of the caliph and, after the latter's death (580/1184), the friendship of the successor of the caliph, his son Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb (r. 580-595/1184-1199). Ibn Tufayl died in Marrakesh

Hayy ben Yaqdhān. Roman philosophique d'Ibn Thofaïl, Imprimerie catholique, Beirut 1936², p. 6, fn. 1.

⁶ L. Richter-Bernburg, *Medicina ancillae philosophiae: Ibn Tufayl's Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, in L.I. Conrad (ed.), *The World of Ibn Tufayl. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, Brill, Leiden 1996, p. 92. On this point see also T. Kukkonen, *Heart, Spirit, Form, Substance: Ibn Tufayl's Psychology*, in P. Adamson (ed.), *In the Age of Averroes: Arabic Philosophy in the Sixth/Twelfth Century*, Warburg Institute, London 2011, pp. 198-200; B. Somma, *Models of Desire in Graeco-Arabic Philosophy: From Plotinus to Ibn Tufayl*, Brill, Leiden 2021, pp. 226-227.

⁷ The commitment of the philosophers at court poses a problem that applies not only to Ibn Tufayl, but also to Ibn Bājjā, Averroes, Maimonides and many others, which is that of the sincerity of philosophers with respect to faith. Did they intend to conceal their irreligious convictions under a veil of formal respect for faith and authority? The discussion has its origins in the works of Leo Strauss and in the critique of Oliver Leaman. Cf. L. Strauss, *Persecution and the art of writing*, Free Press, Illinois 1952; O. Leaman, *An Introduction to Classical Islamic Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK 2002², pp. 191-236.

one year later in 581/1185, honoured and esteemed by the caliph himself, who attended his funeral⁸.

Only one philosophical work of Ibn Tufayl survives, the *Hayy b. Yaqzān*⁹. The historian ‘Abd al-Wāhid al-Marrākushī (d. mid-7th/13th century) describes the object of the work as being to *explain the meaning of human existence according to philosophical ideas* and the text itself as *a work in the form of a letter; slim but of tremendous benefit*¹⁰. Therefore, it is through his biography and the only philosophical text of his available to us that we may understand something about his political and ethical thought. The challenge I pose here is to see his thought from the perspective of an ethical and political concept, the ζῶον πολιτικόν¹¹, which would lead to the heart of Ibn Tufayl’s purposes of the book as well as to revealing

⁸ L.I. Conrad, *Introduction*, in L.I. Conrad (ed.), *The World of Ibn Tufayl. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, Brill, Leiden 1996, pp. 6-8; also V.J. Cornell, *Hayy in the Land of Absāl: Ibn Tufayl and Sūfism in the Western Maghrib during the Muwahhid Era*, in L.I. Conrad (ed.), *The World of Ibn Tufayl: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Hayy ibn Yaqzān*, Brill, Leiden 1996, pp. 133-137.

⁹ We have also a mnemonic medical *urjūza* of 8,000 verses, the longest work in Arabic medical literature, and another poem summoning the Arab tribes to join the Almohads against the Christians in the north. With regards to the first, a copy survives in Al-Qarawīyūn Library in Fez, MS 3158/50 L. A survey of the *urjūza* is in M. Qāsim Muhammad, *Qirā’at fī urjūzat Ibn Tufayl fī l-tibb*, in “Majallat ma’had al-makhtūtāt al-‘arabīyya” 30 (1986), pp. 47-82. With regards to the second, it has been edited in ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Sāhib al-Salāt, *al-Mann bi-l-imāma. Tārīkh bilād al-Maghrib wa-l-Andalus fī ‘ahd al-Muwahhidīn*, ed. ‘Abd al-Hādī al-Tāzī, Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, Beirut 1987³, pp. 411-415. A Spanish translation has been published in E. García Gomez, *Una qasida política inédita de Ibn Tufayl*, in “Revista del Instituto Egipcio de Estudios Islámicos” 1 (1953), pp. 21-28. Other works on metaphysics and natural sciences, including a work on the soul, have not survived.

¹⁰ L.E. Goodman, *Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2009², p. 4.

¹¹ *Politics* 1253a2-5. According to Richard G. Mulgan, ζῶον πολιτικόν means generally *belonging to the πόλις*, which is an exclusively human institution. To translate πολιτικόν as *social* implies a common activity without specifying the type of activity, thus obscuring the fact that Aristotle takes the word with a clear, literal sense, *belonging to the polis*. Cf. R.G. Mulgan, *Aristotle’s Doctrine That Man Is a Political Animal*, in “Hermes” 102 (1974), p. 439.

how it contributes to our understanding of the conception of man in Islamic philosophy. This approach is necessary in order to highlight the element of human sociability in the text, which as we shall see does not appear to be central to Ibn Tufayl's concerns until the final part of the book.

II. *The Hayy b. Yaqzān as a work on ethics and politics*

Hayy b. Yaqzān, literally *Living, the Son of Wakeful*, is a story of the progressive intellectual self-development on an equatorial island of a lonely human, whose name is Hayy. What is the purpose of telling such a story? Ibn Tufayl's declared purpose in the premise is to reveal as well as he can, the secrets of *Eastern philosophy* whose meaning the vast majority of people would not be able to grasp¹². This *Eastern philosophy* is on the one hand strongly influenced by Avicenna, but on the other he explains that his project could not have been pursued with the philosophy of Aristotle, al-Fārābī (d. 339/950 ca.) and the *Book of Healing* (*Kitāb al-Shifā'*) alone¹³. In fact Ibn Tufayl is convinced that his story is an improvement on the philosophical ideas presented in another work of the same title, Avicenna's *Hayy b. Yaqzān*, both on a literary and a philosophical level, although with some profound differences in both the style and purpose of the work¹⁴. Close to the surface, near the subject-problems posed by Ibn Tufayl's premise to *Hayy b. Yaqzān*, there are the problems of the goal of life and man's ultimate happiness – the contemplation of truth¹⁵ – and particularly one question: how to achieve

¹² L. Gauthier, *op. cit.*, pp. 3.4-4.1 (Arabic).

¹³ Ivi, p. 11.13-12.1-2 (Arabic).

¹⁴ The same is true also for another Ishrāqī's work, Suhrawardī's *Qissat al-ghurba al-gharbiyya* (*The Western Exile*), also strongly influenced by Avicenna's *Hayy b. Yaqzān* and al-Ghazālī's *Risālat al-tayr* (*Epistle of the Bird*). Cf. S. Stroumsa, *Avicenna's Philosophical Stories: Aristotle's Poetics Reinterpreted*, in "Arabica" 39 (1992), pp. 187-188.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Fakhry, *The Contemplative Ideal in Islamic Philosophy: Aristotle and Avicenna*, in "Journal of the History of Philosophy" 14/2 (1976), p. 143.

lasting happiness and fulfilment? Or more precisely, how can the theoretical happiness achieved in contemplative life be combined with practical happiness?

The protagonist Hayy grows up on a deserted island and, through sensory experience, abstraction and inference, gradually acquires all the insights of the Aristotelian scientific corpus as a *world-wise auto-didact*¹⁶. Hayy has an innate desire for knowledge that directs him in an independent quest to acquire knowledge that Aristotle posits as a human condition in the famous first sentence of *Metaphysics*: *All men by nature desire to know*¹⁷. This Aristotelian presupposition, as the historian of science Amos Funkenstein (d. 1995) pointed out, expresses in a particularly emphatic way the openness which characterizes Greek science and in which objectivity and provability are necessarily accompanied by accessibility for all. In this case, according to Funkenstein's apt observation, Aristotle enables the actualization of this natural disposition, as in other contexts, with the introduction of *desire* (ὄρεξις)¹⁸.

It is no wonder that Ibn Tufayl's book, like the *Rule of the Solitary* (*Tadbīr al-mutawahhid*) by Ibn Bājjā (d. 533/1139), is concerned with the innate desire to develop knowledge and philosophy independently, therefore not by revelation but by reason¹⁹. The

¹⁶ Hence the title of the first German translation: *the world-wise auto-didact*. Ibn Tufayl, *Der von sich selbst gelehrte Welt-Weise. Das ist, Eine angenehme und sinnreiche Erzählung der wunderbahren Begebenheiten des Hai Ebn Yockdahn. Darinnen vorgestellt wird, Wie derselbe durch das Licht der Natur zur Erkenntniß natürlichen und übernatürlichen Dinge; absonderlich Gottes, der Unsterblichkeit der Seele und des andern Lebens gelangt sey*, ed. J.G. Pritius, Frankfurt a.M./Nuremberg 1726 [https://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb10249500_00007.html]. Last accessed on March 10, 2021.

¹⁷ Translated by W.D. Ross. *Metaphysics* A.1, 980a21.

¹⁸ A. Funkenstein, *The Disenchantment of Knowledge. The Emergence of the Ideal of Open Knowledge in Ancient Israel and in Classical Greece*, in "Aleph" 3 (2003), pp. 57-59 with note 78.

¹⁹ On the desire for philosophical knowledge in from al-Fārābī to al-Andalus, see D. Wirmer, *Das natürliche Begehren des einsamen Philosophen. Bildung durch Wissenschaft bei Ibn Bājjā und Ibn Tufail. Die Begegnung der Wissenschaft-*

natural desire for knowledge has a key position in the fulfilment of earthly life. The desire for knowledge has both a theoretical and practical value. Two examples explain this point: both al-Fārābī in his *Philosophy of Aristotle (Falsafat Aristūtālīs)*²⁰ as well as in a *hadīth* of the Prophet Muhammad, God is asked to preserve man from knowledge which is of no use²¹. Hayy's path of knowledge likewise provides answers to different practical needs, and is schematized in seven stages of seven years each: heptads or septenaries, with each of these phases having its own features. In each phase the soul has a way of life, knowledge has a method of inquiry and a level of achievement distinct and in some sense higher than the one reached at the end of the previous stage.

However, even before going through the intellectual self-development of Hayy's knowledge, the strangeness of the text is immediately evident, as it starts with not one but two stories about how Hayy reached the island. In the first story, on a nearby island, the sister of a king conceives a child in secret and, fearing scandal, she places him in a chest and sends him floating across the sea. In the second story, the island has such an ideal climate that the earth is capable of spontaneously giving birth to a human. Ibn Tufayl shows off his knowledge of inner medicine and of the human anatomy and he here synthesizes philosophy and medical practice, which is a common feature of Andalusian thought. The presence of two completely different explanations seems intentionally to combine an allegorical explanation for the masses as well as an acceptable explanation for

skulturen im 13. Jahrhundert und die Entdeckung des Konzepts der Bildung durch Wissenschaft, in L. Honnefelder (ed.), *Albertus Magnus und der Ursprung der Universitätsidee: die Begegnung der Wissenskulturen im 13. Jahrhundert und die Entdeckung des Konzepts der Bildung durch Wissenschaft*, Berlin University Press, Berlin 2011, pp. 206-240.

²⁰ M. Mahdi, *Al-Farabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY 1969, p. 77, sect. 3.

²¹ al-Nisā'ī, *hadīth* 5459. I. Goldziher, *Stellung der Alten Islamischen Orthodoxie zu den Antiken Wissenschaften*, Verlag der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, in Kommission bei Georg Reimer, Berlin 1916.

the scientific mind. This example provides us with a methodological key to understanding the text and the seven stages of which it is composed, and that key is the duality that is a central and organizing force throughout the whole narration.

Furthermore, the fact that Hayy has grown up in an ideal climate and surrounded by a favourable environment shows how Ibn Tufayl basically accepted the medical tradition, stemming from Aristotle and Galen, that climatological factors affect the physical constitution and consequently the character of human beings. This environment leads Hayy to shape his social nature, conducting a civilised life even in complete isolation and unaware of the existence of other human beings. His sensibility for the environment is shown to be affected when he decides both to become a vegetarian in order to avoid destroying what God has created and also to protect the environment by preventing plants from having their growth stunted by excessive shade. The fact that he develops an ecological ethics is particularly important since there are not many medieval authors who pay any attention to animal ethics²², and it is even rarer to find care for plant life included, as Ibn Tufayl does in his text. It is worth noting that Hayy is said to reach these ethical conclusions by reflecting on divine providence. The old Platonic injunction to *imitate God insofar as is possible* is thus translated as an ethical reason for protecting the environment²³.

After studying and experiencing the nature that surrounds him, Hayy soon turns his attention away from nature to its Creator and decides to retreat into a cave on the island, achieving an experience of complete unity with God (*tawhīd*, from the same root as *Muwahhid*/

²² The other main example is Abū Bakr al-Rāzī (d. 313/925) in the book entitled *The Philosophical Life (al-Sīra al-falsafīyya)*. Al-Rāzī was a physician like Ibn Tufayl and insisted that we should avoid harming animals. P. Adamson, *Abū Bakr al-Rāzī on Animals*, in "Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie" 94/3 (2016), pp. 249-273.

²³ P. Adamson, *The Ethical Treatment of Animals*, in R.C. Taylor & L.X. López-Farjeat (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, New York, Routledge 2015, pp. 371-382.

Almohad). In terms clearly drawn from the Sufi tradition, Ibn Tufayl speaks of all things disappearing for Hayy with only God remaining. And that would seem to give Ibn Tufayl an appropriate place to end his story. Had he ended the narrative here, his tale would be thoroughly Avicennan and Eastern philosophical (*al-Hikma al-mashriqiyya*)²⁴, at least, based on his understanding of Avicenna²⁵. What Hayy learns on his island is more or less what we could learn by reading Avicenna: Galenic anatomy juxtaposed with an immaterialist theory of soul, and a necessary First Cause which may give rise to an eternal universe, all crowned with the mystical union which Ibn Tufayl sees as the culmination of Avicenna's philosophy. Also deeply Avicennan is the idea that a sufficiently talented person, even on a deserted island, can become a perfect philosopher.

If we read on, however, we see that Ibn Tufayl makes room for politics in the last heptad of his tale where he refers to the island presupposed by the first story, which had Hayy being conceived normally and put out to sea by his mother, thus reconnecting the plot of the whole story to one of its two beginnings. Hillel Fradkin suggests that this link highlights Hayy's political nature as a *social being*²⁶.

²⁴ The existence of an "Eastern philosophy" is a widely debated historiographical *topos*. This approach goes beyond Ibn Bājja's metaphysics. It is a reasoned approach to the mystic experience, which unites the gnostic-esoteric teaching with the rationalistic-philosophical one. On the other hand, Baffioni claims that *the writing of the Andalusian philosopher has nothing to share with the Avicennian one* [the *Shifā'*] (*lo scritto del filosofo andaluso non ha nulla da condividere con quello avicenniano*). Cf. C. Baffioni, *I grandi pensatori dell'Islam*, Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 1996, p. 129.

²⁵ The key to the problem is to understand correctly what Ibn Tufayl meant by "Eastern philosophy". On this point, I agree with Gutas: it is the designation of a kind of philosophy, rather than the Avicennan work "Eastern philosophy" or an Eastern philosophy opposed to the Western. It is important to underline that, as Gutas says, Ibn Tufayl reads Avicenna as a mystic, misleading the interpretation of many historians in an esoteric sense (Nasr, Massignon, Corbin and Jambet). Cf. D. Gutas, *Ibn Tufayl on Ibn Sīnā's Eastern Philosophy*, in "Oriens" 34 (1994), pp. 222-241.

²⁶ H. Fradkin, *The Political Thought of Ibn Tufayl*, in C.E. Butterworth (ed.),

In the second island there is a religion which remains unnamed, but, as in al-Fārābī's depiction of the *virtuous city*, it seems obvious that the unidentified, generic religion is meant to represent Islam²⁷. The island's society provokes two virtuous men to opposite reactions. One, named Salāmān, follows the scriptures of that society literally and tries to usher his fellow citizens towards a more faithful religious life. The other, Absāl, is given to a more figurative understanding of the scripture, but he despairs of communicating the hidden truths he has discovered to his benighted countrymen. He leaves his island and, seeking isolation, comes to Hayy's island.

The two encounter each other, and once Absāl has encountered Hayy and taught him to use language, the two realize that they share the same beliefs. Hayy becomes a follower of Absāl's faith, showing that philosophy and mysticism do not require religion, but do not rule it out either. Absāl, meanwhile, accepts Hayy as a profound teacher. The two agree to return to Absāl's island in an attempt to disseminate the truths they have come to understand, but they find that even the most enlightened inhabitants are unable to accept their teaching. Hayy realizes that the members of this society need the guidance of the religious texts, whereas self-taught philosophers like Hayy himself and Absāl do not require them. The limited understanding of the people living on the second island reconnects the reader with the more simplistic explanation of Hayy's birth, which

The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MS 1992, pp. 250-256.

²⁷ Obviously, this apparent absence of religious arguments in the treatment of philosophical problems, as well as of Qur'ān and the Sunna, places Ibn Tufayl among the rationalists, and not the traditionalists-theologians. This distinction is drawn in B. Abrahamov, *Islamic Theology: Traditionalism and Rationalism*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1998, pp. 19-26. Although the section of the *Hayy b. Yaqzān* that focuses on the problem of the existence of God weakens his position, I still think that Hayy is still a rationalist, because in his gnoseological path, reason prevails over revelation.

is aimed at people whom Adamson describes as needing *to be given truths allegorically, in the manner that is typical of religion*²⁸.

The happy ending, such as it is, has Hayy advising Salāmān and his people simply to adhere to their religious beliefs and practices and sailing off with Absāl to resume a life of seclusion on the other island. As Ibn Bājja might say, there the two of them will practice the *Rule of the Solitary*.

What interests me the most for the scope of this paper is the last part of the story, especially considering the general position taken in modern scholarship on Andalusian medieval philosophy. Al-Fārābī, inspired by Plato's ideal of the philosopher-king, argued that philosophers should participate in the government of the city, in contrast to which Andalusian philosophers generally thought of the pursuit of wisdom as a more solitary undertaking. Indeed, what matters is that the inhabited island is dominated by politics and religion, in contrast to the first island, the uninhabited one, where the arguments of intellectual mysticism prevail. The identity of the self-taught philosopher is in fact not complete without the element of social and political involvement.

III. *Hayy as an anti-social animal*

Hayy leaves his own island, and some scholars have seen a parallel here to the philosopher inside the Platonic cave who wants to leave his prison, which leads us to Conrad's interpretation that *the social aspects of the possession of Truth can never be given up*²⁹. Hayy goes to the second island because he believes that he can share

²⁸ P. Adamson, *A False Start? The Two Beginnings of Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzān*. Forthcoming article. Online: [https://www.academia.edu/33050134/Ibn_Tufayl_Beginnings_pdf]. Last accessed on June 1, 2021.

²⁹ L.I. Conrad, *Through the Thin Veil: On the Question of Communication and the Socialization of Knowledge in Hayy Ibn Yaqzān*, in L.I. Conrad (ed.), *The World of Ibn Tufayl*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1996, p. 266.

the truth and that everyone endowed with reason will be able to grasp it. When Hayy lands on the inhabited island, he does not meet its whole population, but only an elite. He is introduced to a group of men who are *nearest to intelligence and understanding (tilka al-tā'ifa hum aqrab ilā al-fahm wa-l-dhakā)*³⁰. Then he is told that if he cannot educate this group, it will be impossible for him to educate the common people, the *masses (jumhūr)*³¹, and so he starts to teach; but then he also investigates the subdivision of human society into classes (*tabaqāt al-nās*)³². This subdivision is not accidental and recalls Ibn Bājjā's *Epistle of the Conjunction of Intellect with Man (Risālat ittisāl al-'aql bi-l-insān)*³³. He recognizes three species of man: the masses, deep in the cave³⁴; those outside the cave, or the speculative people, who are the elite³⁵; and finally the philosophers³⁶. These classes are not based on their incomes or jobs, but on their levels of intellectual achievement³⁷. This shows how the influence of Neoplatonism ran deep in al-Andalus, although the extent of its acceptance is still a moot point³⁸.

Hayy reaches a conclusion which leads him to understand the human condition (*ahwāl al-nās*): most men are no better than unreasoning animals (*akthāru-hum bi-manzilat al-hayawān*) although the words of the prophets and the religious traditions have already provided them with everything necessary to help them. The subdivision of man is guided toward truth-based paths for which a certain

³⁰ L. Gauthier, *op. cit.*, p. 149.8 (Arabic).

³¹ Ivi, p. 149.9 (Arabic).

³² Ivi, p. 151.2-3 (Arabic).

³³ M. Asin Palacios, *Tratado de Avempace sobre la unión del intelecto con el hombre*, in "Al-Andalus" 7/1 (1942), pp. 15-18, 20-21 (Arabic), 33-38, 43-45 (Spanish).

³⁴ C. Genequand, *Ibn Bājjā (Avempace). La conduite de l'isolé et deux autres épîtres*, Vrin, Paris 2010, p. 198.5-7.

³⁵ Ivi, pp. 199.21-200.1-2.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 200.3-5.

³⁷ A similar classification is found in Plotinus' *Letter on Divine Science* (229-234), where we also find three classes based on their ability to attain true knowledge.

³⁸ S. Stroumsa, *Andalus and Sefarad ... cit.*, pp. 57-60.

amount of esoteric knowledge suffices, but not too much because people would not be able to handle more³⁹.

Furthermore, every man is created for a purpose (*fa-li-kull 'amal rijāl wa kull maysir li-mā khalaqa*), which entails the acceptance and assimilation of individual personality⁴⁰. However, the infusion of a purpose into the soul of man carries no imputation of passivity or impotence, rather of autonomy and self-rule. And what determines human choice and the invocation of human values? Education, proper upbringing, and human development, which are the moral *sine qua non* for the individual who becomes self-sufficient and chooses for himself.

In light of such awareness, Hayy makes distinctions between gregarious and solitary animals. A similar distinction is made between the two islands of the story as soon as Absāl and Hayy reach the second island: here Hayy recognizes the same duality among men, that of solitude and life in a community, precisely when Salāmān is said to believe in living within a society and to hold isolation unlawful (*kāna ra's tilka al-jazīra wa kabīru-hā Salāmān wa huwa sāhib Absāl alladhī kāna yarā mulāzamat al-jamā'a wa yaqūlu bi-tahrīm al-'uzla*)⁴¹. Then he makes a further distinction between the elites and the masses.

The term *al-'uzla*, *isolation*, is quoted in another passage of the text, which describes other moments before Hayy meets with Absāl. Here I quote Goodman's translation:

*In the Law were certain statements proposing a life of isolation and solitude ('an al-'uzla wa al-infirād) and suggesting that by these means salvation and spiritual triumph could be won. Other statements however favoured life in a community and involvement in the society (al-mu'āshira wa mulāzamat al-jamā'a).*⁴²

³⁹ L. Gauthier, *op. cit.*, p. 153.5-6 (Arabic).

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 153.8 (Arabic).

⁴¹ Ivi, pp. 149.9-150.2 (Arabic).

⁴² L.E. Goodman, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

In this case, Hayy does not say that isolation is better than community life, not even before leaving Salāmān's island. Rather he recognizes the normality that *animals* can be gregarious or solitary, and that there is a difference between living in a community and being involved in society.

Then Hayy settles down to teach the elite, and Ibn Tufayl tells us:

*The moment he rose the slightest bit above the literal or began to portray things against which they were prejudiced, they recoiled in horror from his ideas and closed their minds.*⁴³

In the end, Hayy saw “every faction delighted with its own” (*Qur'ān* 23:55; 30:31)⁴⁴ and realized that their appetites and passions made them incapable of following in his footsteps, let alone knowing and being aware of the divine essence. Reluctantly, he reaches the conclusion that symbols and restrictive laws, rather than the unvarnished truth and the discipline of self-perfection, are the best that the masses can achieve. The symbols can be mistaken for the truth itself and the minimal restrictions of a civil and criminal code are readily taken as the substance of righteousness and the fulfilment of God's will. But such confusions are a necessary evil. For without the religious truths to compensate for the moral and intellectual inadequacies of humanity and the weaknesses of human culture, even worse confusions of spirit and depravities would occur. So Hayy decides to return to the isolated island, not alone but with Absāl, which leads Goodman to conclude that *man is not an animal* and that *if [Ibn Tufayl's] thought experiment can prove anything, it can prove that man is not essentially social*⁴⁵.

Having failed in his inconsiderate attempt of reforming the neighbouring island, Hayy withdraws into solitary meditation. Rosenthal summed up the concept of his failure and withdrawal in

⁴³ Ivi, p. 163.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵ L. Gauthier, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

the formula of *individualistic deviation*, which basically terms his withdrawal from the unjust city as a sort of *hijra*⁴⁶. According to Rosenthal, this course of action by Hayy rebuffs the Platonic notion that the philosopher has a civic duty towards the city and its citizens. The philosopher, aware of the impossibility of attaining the highest perfection in an imperfect environment, advocates his own withdrawal in order to come closer to intellectual perfection. Even more negative is the mid-14th century commentary of *Hayy b. Yaqzān* by Moshe Narboni (also Moses of Narbonne), who added a translation of Ibn Bājjā's *The Rule of the Solitary* as a supplementary comment to the commentary itself. Narboni regards Ibn Tufayl as a thinker who went beyond Ibn Bājja in completely removing the philosopher from society, while Ibn Bājja describes philosophers as *strangers* (*gerim*, a Hebrew term that has specific overtones, i.e. the stranger to whom one must show hospitality), who live physically within society but are spiritually apart⁴⁷. Most recently Taneli Kukkonen reached a melodramatic conclusion: Hayy's end *casts a sick pall* and is *a downfall, a great tragedy* and *a real failure*⁴⁸.

I should like to focus on the aspect of isolation and draw a comparison between the *Hayy b. Yaqzān* and other texts, where the solitary dimension of the philosopher is equally investigated. These works are mentioned by Ibn Tufayl at the beginning of his own text and in my opinion, they help the reader to understand better Hayy's choice to leave the inhabited island.

⁴⁶ E.J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam. An Introductory Outline*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge MS 1962, pp. 158-174.

⁴⁷ E.J. Rosenthal, *Political Ideas in Moshe Narboni's Commentary on Ibn Tufayl's Hayy b. Yaqzan*, in G. Nahon and Ch. Touati (eds.), *Hommage a Georges Vajda. Études d'histoire et de pensée juives*, Peeters, Louvain 1980, pp. 227-234.

⁴⁸ T. Kukkonen, *Ibn Tufayl. Living the Life of Reason*, Oneworld, London 2014, pp. 23, 119, 123-124.

IV. *The social/political animal in perfect and imperfect cities: a matter of choice*

The perspective of the isolated philosopher questions the relationship between the philosopher and the society at the core, and therefore rewrites the idea that man is a ζῷον πολιτικόν. Aristotle described isolation for the sake of contemplation of higher truths in book ten of *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) and often recommended isolation as the best possible life for a human being. As Nadja Germann explains, the theoretical way of life in book ten of the *NE* is that which grants the purest and most lasting pleasure, while in *Hayy b. Yaqzān* this can be attained only through cognition, humanity's final aim⁴⁹.

All scholars have noted that the behaviour of Hayy recalls the isolation of the *solitary man* in *Rule of the Solitary* by Ibn Bājjā. Ibn Bājjā was also a close reader of Plato's *Republic*, of Aristotle's *NE* and of al-Fārābī's syntheses of the metaphysics of Neoplatonism with an Islamicized version of Platonic politics and Aristotelian ethics. Ibn Bājjā knew that man is a social, indeed, a civil being by nature, and that happiness is life led in accordance with virtues. Ibn Bājjā also knew that virtues are socially and civilly instilled and that the mediation of imagination is crucial in the implementation of the social policies by which moral virtues are inculcated and intellectual virtues fostered. Finding references to Aristotle's *Politics* in Ibn Bājjā and Ibn Tufayl's works is more problematic, especially taking into consideration the longstanding debate about the historical plausibility of their transmission into Arabic. Nevertheless, *Hayy b. Yaqzān* and *Rule of the Solitary* have in common with the *Politics* at least the basic classification of how men are related to societies: in isolation, (Ibn Bājjā uses the metaphor of the weed, while Ibn Tufayl uses the allegory of the first island), or as part of them.

⁴⁹ N. Germann, *Philosophizing without Philosophy? On the Concept of Philosophy in Ibn Tufayl's «Hayy ibn Yaqzān»*, in "Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales" 75/2 (2008), pp. 285-289.

Both Hayy's and Ibn Bājja's *solitary* man's move away from society to live essentially as a hermit dedicated to theoretical contemplation and in order to cultivate his perfection and approach to God autonomously. Yet there are significant differences. The society in which the solitary man of Ibn Bājja lives is imperfect. Here the solitary man is a *weed* (*nabta*) and a stranger. Ibn Bājja addresses himself to two major concerns. On the one hand, he endorses Aristotle's teaching that theoretical activity makes man similar to the divine. On the other hand, he interprets this assimilation along Neoplatonic lines as a full identification with God. In this vein, he views philosophical endeavour as a nearly mystic ascent and, concomitant to this, a withdrawal from the external world. Philosophers should deal with the things that are above, and not with earthly matters. In this respect, Ibn Bājja upheld a definite view of the relationship between politics and philosophy. His position anticipated the ideal of philosophical solitude in Ibn Tufayl. At the same time, he adopted an intuition of al-Fārābī who, in contrast, advocated the engagement of philosophers in the life of the city, and he did this by discriminating between the ends and the means of social life. The former bears on the intellectual progress of the individual, the latter on the external circumstances that prepare it and sustain it. Philosophers seek the former but disregard the latter, especially when these have been perverted by a corrupt regime.

To return to the title, *rule/regimen* (*tadbīr*) can be applicable to many things: the management of the city, household affairs, and the individual. A solitary man (*al-mutawahhid*) like the philosopher will focus on the last of these. His intellectual life is the supreme good to which the good of society itself is subordinated. This is one of the reasons why Steven Harvey does not consider the *Rule of the Solitary as a theoretical treatise on political science*⁵⁰. Basically, the solitary man is not interested in the perfect city, but in his own true

⁵⁰ S. Harvey, *The place of the philosopher in the city*, in M. Mahdi & C.E. Butterworth (ed.), *The Political Aspects of Islamic Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Muhsin S. Mahdi*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MS 1992, pp. 206-208.

happiness. Somehow the *Rule of the Solitary* rewrites the idea that man is a ζῷον πολιτικόν. It accepts it, but it also believes that it is possible to deny a politicization. In other words, spiritual perfection and the happiness can have the upper hand over participation in political and social life.

According to Joaquín Lomba Fuentes:

*For Avempace, it is clear that sociability belongs to the same natural essence of man, while loneliness is a good only accidental and motivated by circumstances. Indeed, the ideal would be for the wise man, the fully achieved intellectual man, to develop within a human and real society.*⁵¹

Aristotle suggests this kind of taxonomy in his *Historia animalium*, where he argues that both gregarious and solitary animals divide into political and dispersed (σποραδικά) individuals, an aspect that Ibn Bājjā does not dwell on in his *Liber animalium* where he generically defines all men as *madanī*, a broader *social and political* level⁵².

Instead the society in which Hayy finds himself preaching on the second island is the best society possible: it is, in fact, a society ruled by the principles of prophecy and religious traditions – a Muslim society, even if not explicitly stated as such. The fact that Hayy leaves this society does not mean that the city itself is imperfect, as the society of the second island is the perfect opposite of the imperfect society described in *Rule of the Solitary*. Neither does it mean that, since it is a perfect society, none of its inhabitants need any guidance. It only indicates that most men have neither the inclination nor the capacity to achieve spiritual perfection. Therefore the problem is different, because the ζῷον πολιτικόν is not seen as the saviour of an

⁵¹ J. Lomba Fuentes, *Pensamiento de Avempace*, in A. Martínez Lorca, *Ensayos sobre la filosofía en al-Andalus*, Anthropos, Barcelona 1990, p. 348.

⁵² HA 1.1, 488a1-10. Ibn Bājjā, *Kitāb al-Hayawān li-Abi Bakr Ibn Bājjā ‘alā ḍaw’ makhtūtai Uksfūrd wa-Barlīn*, ed. Ğ. al-‘Ammārātī, Dār al-Baidā’, Beirut 2002, p. 188.10.

imperfect society and both can live happily without each other. But this poses one crucial question: if the society is already perfect, what is the role of the philosopher?

By virtue of his scientific-cognitive and mystic achievements, the solitary man in an imperfect society leads that imperfect society towards overcoming its imperfection. But when society is perfect, as in *Hayy b. Yaqzān*, the solitary man detaches himself from it, somehow denies it and considers it useless. He no longer needs society. In short, the ζῷον is no longer πολιτικόν. The mystic contemplative does not renounce society in order to change society, as it is already perfect. Society is simply seen as a sort of paradise, and the only function remaining for the philosopher is to achieve perfect union with the divine.

Hayy leaves the second island and renounces society in order to return to the first island, the Platonic cave, in order to devote himself completely to solitary contemplation. Just as philosophy may be experienced in this distorted and diminished way, so, conversely, it may happen that a most evolved member of the communal organism remains unacknowledged – and may even be ostracized. He might be a prince, who could wisely lead others in the ways of happiness, and yet it might be that no use is made of him. The city bears its own *arche*, its own ruling principle in its political and social structures, supported by the dictates of prophets, sacred texts and religious mediators. The *fact that he [the philosopher] is of no use to others*, notes al-Fārābī, *is not his fault but the fault of those who either do not listen or do not think that they should listen to him*⁵³. Here at once we see displayed the impotence of *logos*, which can always remain unheard and cannot simply impose itself on circumstances, as well as the fragility of the philosopher, always vulnerable to misrecognition, suspicion, hostility, and ultimately overwhelmed by the charge of futility. In other words, the social and political structures

⁵³ M. Mahdi, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

of the city based on religion impede a successful communication between its inhabitants and the philosopher.

This theme is recurrent in Plato's *Republic*, primarily in book six⁵⁴, but also in book nine⁵⁵. We might also consider the ambiguous ending of Aristotle's *NE*, which, in the figure of the wise one, shakily brings together communal belonging and self-sufficiency, political engagement and the self-transcendence of the human (indeed, the most accomplished human being is identified with the beyond-human, that is, with the divinity of νοῦς). These problems are also amplified in the *Politics*, where the excellent social and political animal is shown to be at the limit, that is on the margins of political association. In other words, the excellent social and political animal tends towards perfection and reaches a level of self-sufficiency making him resemble God⁵⁶. It seems like the best of social and political animals try to overcome themselves. Such a being may neither be expelled from the city nor subjected to rule. This being has two choices: to stay and rule, like al-Fārābī's philosopher king, or to go, like Hayy.

Conclusion

So what is the Arabic for ζῷον πολιτικόν? If the message of *Hayy b. Yaqzān* is that there is no one exclusive truth and no one exclusive way of finding the truth, then it is possible to argue that there is no definite Arabic version of ζῷον πολιτικόν and that there is no one single exclusive way of discovering what man's identity is all about. Nevertheless, the discovery of the social and political identity of

⁵⁴ See the discussion leading to the image of the city as a ship [487b-489c] and that of the philosopher seeking refuge from adverse circumstances, like someone in a storm [496d-e].

⁵⁵ It ends with Socrates' invitation to care for the city that may not be anywhere on this earth, but inside oneself and reflecting the sky above [592a-b].

⁵⁶ *Politics* 1253a25-29; 1284b26-34.

man is the final of the several phases of self-taught knowledge in the *Hayy b. Yaqzān*. A similar phase can be found in al-Fārābī and synthesized in the definition of man as *hayawān insī* or *madanī*, which is a close Arabic correspondent to ζῷον πολιτικόν.

Hayy is not shaped by family, society, history, language, or religion. Yet his intellectual achievements make him a cosmopolitan personality and a rational free thinker who can function anywhere on this earth and in any community. He has been shaped by how he has made good use of his desire for knowledge, which helped him see diversity and unity, strangeness, and familiarity in a dialectical way. Consequently, his identity has not clashed with other identities. Theoretically, he believes that since everyone is endowed with reason, there is no need for prophets, sacred texts, religious mediators, or conventional religions. However, this thesis is modified when Hayy encounters different personalities on the inhabited island. Only then does he realize that other people may live in isolation or in communities; that they can be divided into categories according to their own intellectual achievements; that they tend to rely heavily on religious authorities; and that not all of them allow their own reason to transcend materiality.

However it is the courageous, tolerant, and rational view of society and the optimistic engagement in the challenge of improving the society that can be considered Hayy's recognition of his identity as a *hayawān insī* or *madanī*. This is made clear by his being able to choose his own destiny in the end, to stay on or leave Salāmān's island, and in his choice to return to his island no longer as a *solitary* inhabitant but with Absāl: it means that a deeper meditation and union with God is compatible with human coexistence and sociability. He chooses to leave Salāmān's island because the society there is already perfect with the guidance of religion. Hayy does not need Salāmān's people and nor do they need the guidance of the philosopher, but both styles of life remain compatible. And in the end, even though Hayy returns to the first island, he does not completely neglect the social nature of man.

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