Alive and Awake in Allah

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Although a great number of literary works contain elements that are certainly philosophical, few philosophers have chosen narrative as the means of expressing their ideas. Notable exceptions do exist, such as Plato's dialogues, Rousseau's *Emile*, and more recently, Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World*. Yet, since philosophers tend to value prose and straightforward argumentation over the perceived 'non-rational' approach typically found in literature and religious stories, philosophers typically shy away from all narrative formats. In fact, I suspect that a large percentage of philosophers would agree with the editors of an undergraduate writing guide that philosophy is "the natural development of religious thought that moves from a narrative phase appropriate to a popular uneducated audience to a reasoned one appropriate for the more sophisticated elite."[1]

The Islamic story *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* is a remarkable exception to this rather pejorative view of the use of narrative in philosophical writing. This philosophical fable was written by Abu Bukar Ibn Tufayl, a 12th Century Muslim born in a little town 50 miles east of Granada in the Iberian Peninsula. As a young man Tufayl studied philosophy under Ibn Bajja (Avempace), as well as medicine, law and religion. Demonstrating great talent, he became an influential leader in the Granada court, and rose to the position of personal physician to Sultan Abu Ya'qub Yusuf. Islamic historians note that Ibn Tufayl was universally admired for his intellect and for the encouragement he gave to numerous scholars who came to Granada. One such philosopher was Ibn Rushd (Averroes) who with Ibn Tufayl's recommendation was commissioned by the Sultan to write his famous commentary on Aristotle's works that later had profound influence upon Aquinas and others in the Christian West. Near the end of his life, Ibn Tufayl's resolved to dedicate himself to the study of metaphysics with the goal of reconciling religion and philosophy. Although historians note that he wrote many texts, only one survived – the curious little novelette *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*.[2]

[1] Anthony Graybosch et al., *The Philosophy Student Writer's Manual*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1998) 12.

[2] All quotations of the text are from: Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Gee Tee Bee Press, 1991).

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Tufayl's story is essentially a thought experiment about a mythical man named Hayy Ibn Yaqzan, which translates as 'Alive, son of Awake,' who spent the first 50 years of his life on an island in the Indian Ocean without any human contact. In spite of his isolation, or maybe because of it, Hayy slowly learns through careful observation, serious reflection, and the rigorous employment of reason first about himself, then animals, the material world, the movement and nature of the Heavens, and then the existence of God. Eventually, with great effort, Hayy obtains the mystical union with Ultimate Reality – the Being Who exists without cause – through a total annihilation of his own self-hood. Soon after his mystical vision the story shifts, for Hayy encounters Absāl, a Muslim who came to the island seeking solitude. The two men fascinate each other. Hayy is enthralled by Absāl's description of Islam and the message of the Prophet, which Hay recognizes is in full accord with what he has learned through his philosophical study. Likewise, Absāl is spellbound by Hayy's description of his mystical visions, which he understands to be fully in line with revelation. Absāl quickly becomes Hayy's student and the pupil convinces the teacher to return with him to his home, so his Muslim countrymen can also benefit from Hayy's spiritual insights. Although Hayy is received with great affection and many initially sought his wisdom, the people of Absāl's island quickly ignore his message for they are incapable of rising above the literal meaning of things. Hayy's profound wisdom is unable to break their attraction to their passions, and they resoundingly reject Hayy's teaching as incomprehensible and his demanding method of self-discipline and meditation as impractical. Rather than condemn the unenlightened Muslims, Hayy and Absāl return to the isolated island where they live out their days contemplating Allah.

At the end of the fable, Ibn Tufayl remarks that the story of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan "takes up a line of discourse not found in books or heard in the usual sort of speeches" (165). I fully agree with this self-assessment, for Tufayl explains that he not only attempts to reach "pinnacles higher than the eye can see," but that the very topic of his investigation "belongs to a hidden branch of study" lost to those not already aware of God. Tufayl actually ends his novel with a plea for indulgence from his fellow philosophers for "my loose exposition and lack of rigor in demonstration" (166). He confidently writes in the manner he does, however, because he recognized that a new approach was required to make clear the "mystery of mysteries" to his intended audience – those "self-styled philosophers of today" who the reader recognizes to be remarkably similar to the weak-minded who live on Absāl's island (165). Tufayl argues that a new manner of philosophy is needed if he is to achieve his stated goal: to draw all people "to true understanding and turn them away from . . . [the] false way" by approaching his readers "in words so as to excite desire and inspire

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a passion" (166). This new style of writing philosophy is, of course, narrative.

It is more than appropriate that the philosophical content of *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* is presented in story form, for it allows Tufayl the means to achieve his stated goal with his audience, that is, to inspire in them a desire to discover the truth. Narration is so successful in generating this kind of change because readers are more often swayed by identification with a character than they typically are by philosophical arguments, even when rigorously presented. I think this is so because the reader is never simply a detached outside observer to the events of the well-told story; rather the author invites the reader to participate in the story. For example, in Tufayl's narrative the reader 'spends' over 50 years with Hayy, and we see what Hayy sees, feel what he feels, and think what he thinks. As a result we come to experience with Hayy the great appetite of his wonder, the joy of his discoveries, the challenge he faces to temper his physical desires, the results gained by re-directing his intellectual vision, the terrifying stillness he embraces as a hermit, and the pity he feels when his message is rejected by the people of Absāl's island.

This intimate experience with another – even with a fictional character in a story – changes us, and good authors successfully utilize this identification so as to make us value what their characters value. For example, can anyone come to know Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and not desire justice? Is it possible to become acquainted with Don Quixote and remain thoroughly practical? In this regard I think Aristotle is absolutely right when he says that we take on the characteristics and values of those we identify with.[3] That is, friendship changes us into being more like our friends, for we ultimately come to desire what they desire.[4] Tufayl obviously accepts this principle of change through identification, for he explains that Absāl "wanted to serve as [Hayy's] disciple, follow his example and accept his direction" because he greatly admired Hayy as a man of God (160).

Certainly Tufayl hopes that we, like Absāl and not like those on Absāl's island, identify with Hayy and accept the values that direct him toward the truth. That is, Tufayl trusts that we will make these important connections and that they will change us, for he writes in the preface of the novel: "I want only to bring you along the paths I have just crossed, so that it may bear you where it did me and you may undergo the same experience and see with the eyes of your soul all that I have seen. Then you will not need to confine yourself

[3] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII.

[4] For a contemporary and true illustration of how one person's passions can influence the desires of others, see *Teacher: The One Who Made the Difference* by Mark Edmundson (Random House, 2002).

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within the limits of my knowledge" (103). Following Ibn Sina and the Sufi tradition, Tufayl rejects the traditional means of expression common to philosophy, noting that the most profound ideas about God and the human self cannot be reached "by theorizing, syllogistic deductions, postulating premises and drawing inferences, but solely by intuition" (97). Tufayl likens those who "merely think" without adding on the higher faculty of intuition to a blind man who correctly knows the colors of many objects, but does not actually know the colors (98). These sightless individuals fail to reach the higher level of being that Tufayl interestingly calls 'the level of love.' Therefore, Tufayl's use of narrative allows him to supersede what he calls "the rationalists' method" more common to philosophy with intimacy; although Tufayl freely admits that what is obtained by pure reason is both true and valid, he also believes that those who employ intimacy "enjoy a clearer view and a far greater delight" (98).

Tufayl's use of narrative is all the more necessary because of the subject of the book. Tufayl clearly acknowledges that he cannot describe a mystical union with God in literal terms (98), for doing so is like wanting to do the impossible, like tasting colors (149). That is, when one tries to put a transcendent experience into words the essence of the experience is necessarily distorted. Therefore, since language utterly fails to provide a one-for-one correspondence with what Hayy experienced, Tufayl urges the reader to listen "with the ears of your heart" if they desire to understand (149). In this way a novel has a decided advantage over a standard philosophical essay, for it allows the mystic the opportunity to present "a discursive, intellectualized introduction to this experience" even if one is forced to "speak of it publicly only in riddles" (99). Thus, even though Tufayl resorts to stating understandably cryptic phrases to explain Hayy's special vision[5] that may be anathema to 'strict philosophy,' these phrases are more than appropriate for this philosophical fable because they point to the reality of the mystical experience in the only way it can be understood – figuratively.

The choice of narration has other advantages for Tufayl as well. First and foremost, Tufayl's decision to tell a story frees him from the all-to-common complaint leveled against those in his discipline that he is simply another example of an arrogant philosopher who claims to know the truth that the masses are incapable of understanding. Even though I am a philosopher and attracted to sound reasoning, I readily admit that I initially resist almost every argument offered to

[5] For example, Tufayl resorts to explaining Hayy's mystical union in very vague terms, such as that Hayy 'died' to himself, saw "nothing in all existence but the everlasting ONE," and discovered that "his true self was the truth" (150).

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me because I perceive that the argument is attempting to tell me what I must do or think. Although Tufayl is in fact presenting me with an argument for what I must do if I want to understand the truth about the universe, I am not instantly adverse to his argument because it is presented in a story. That is, I suspect that I 'generously' give Tufayl the opportunity to preach his message to me because I don't perceive his story to be a formal instruction. After all, I tell myself that Tufayl's message is 'just a story' about a rather unusual man who had a rather unusual experience. I will listen, therefore, as long as I identify with one of the story's characters; if I lose interest with the story, I can always stop reading. Such freedom to take the book up and put it down is not always given when reading philosophy, for philosophers demand your time and attention when they call their ideas lofty, important, and only ignored by fools. Narrative forms, including poetry, plays, art and music, do not demand the same from you – and hence, unlike 'strict' philosophy, philosophical stories are not quickly rejected because they are not perceived as forcing themselves upon you.

Second, the reaction to Tufayl's criticism of how many of his contemporary Muslims live their faith is softened by the use of narrative. The story does blame the majority of believers as being "stupid, inadequate, thoughtless, and weak" and "no better than unreasoning animals" (162, 164), yet we are not as likely to blame Tufayl as being overly critical because this judgment comes after we have already adopted Hayy's unique perspective. That is, Hayy's criticism is not seen as coming 'out of nowhere' but is probably seen by most as the natural judgment of a holy man; thanks to our identification with Hayy, like Hayy we feel nothing but pity for those who reject his teaching. We do not blame Hayy for judging others because we understand where the judge, that is Hayy, is coming from. Thanks to Tufayl's ability as a writer, we may not even suspect that we too are being condemned by Hayy, for at the end of the novel we certainly identify with Hayy and not the unreflective crowd. I suspect that Tufayl's ability to reorient the reader to condemn the unreflective expression of religion without rejecting the condemnation itself may be one of the reasons why the book has been so successful throughout the years.

And finally, Tufayl's ideas are well received because it is an interesting story. My students in my Islamic Philosophy course almost universally express their affection for the work. I must admit that after several weeks of reading traditional Islamic philosophy texts they are certainly primed for something different. However, even though the narrative occasionally falls into a dull listing of successive thoughts – like the worst entries in a diary – my students report that they are intrigued by Hayy's life and they genuinely want to know what

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happens to him next.[6] The great utility of this identification is lost to some philosophers, who often make little or no effort to make their writing compelling or interesting. Tufayl makes no such mistake, for Hayy is an interesting character living a rather extraordinary life.

In conclusion, *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan* is a successful work of philosophy because its ideas are expressed in narrative form. Ibn Tufayl could not have expressed his viewpoint in a more traditional philosophical account because such an account would not make the issue personal for his readers. This intimate connection made between the reader and its main character is not unique to this Tufayl's story. Other novels and fables have done this even more successfully and with greater influence. However, what may be rather unusual about Tufayl's story is that we are not only allowed but encouraged to participate in the intellectual journey of a mystic from his first confused thoughts to his great awakening. Through our identification with Hayy we touch the most sublime insights possible for the human mind and we are drawn to desire the fully experience for ourselves. Although we could be simply told what we must do to obtain ultimate wisdom in a fashion more typical to more traditional philosophy fashion, Tufayl knew that such an essay would not successively motivate the reader to change. Only the intimate connection between the reader and Hayy successfully motivates the reader to desire what Hayy wants – union with God.

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[6] I suspect that the identification with Hayy is so strong that some students lose themselves in the story. That is, I believe that they are not simply interested in the story because they are curious to discover what will happen to Hayy. Instead, I think the story so captures them within it that they want to know what will happen to themselves.

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