

Existentialism in Christianity and Islam :A Case Study on Ibn Ṭufayl vs. Kierkegaard

Nadia Maftouni*

Associate Professor, Department of philosophy, Faculty of Theology, University of
Tehran, IRAN.

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Abstract

Ibn Ṭufayl and Kierkegaard share existentialist elements around nature. Ibn Ṭufayl believes in nature as the best teacher of philosophy and philosophical reasoning. For Kierkegaard, being human means being dependent on and embedded in nature. This makes Kierkegaard a highly relevant interlocutor for contemporary Eco philosophy and ecocriticism. Ibn Ṭufayl's opinion on the subject is discernible in his novel called *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzan*. Pursuing the truth of life, Ḥayy, the main personage of Ibn Ṭufayl's novel, finds his way through four travels of mind. Nature is the context of his travels, so determined to protect nature, Ḥayy takes considerable care of fauna and flora as he steps into the highest levels in his ascent. In the first travel, Ḥayy begins from nature from which is created and in which is raised by a roe mother. In the second travel, he figures out all of natural affairs insofar as becoming a leading scientist. In the third travel resulted in the former travel, Ḥayy becomes successful in philosophical analysis. In the fourth travel, Ḥayy goes forward with philosophical analysis and reaches mystical level. The mystical experiences go on so that through all natural beings and events Ḥayy conveys to God. In this last pace, Ḥayy returns to nature and becomes a nature protectionist. At the end of story, Ḥayy faces a religious stranger showed up from another island. Ḥayy finds his beliefs thoroughly in accordance with his own opinions.

Keywords: Existentialism, Kierkegaard, Ibn Ṭufayl, Nature.

*. **Corresponding Author:** nadia.maftouni@ut.ac.ir

Introduction

In this introduction first I'll deliver a brief bio of Ibn Ṭufayl, following the short bio of Kierkegaard. Then I will be able to clear the point of current paper, a comparison between two distinguished figures of theology and philosophy in two traditions of Christianity and Islam.

Abū Bakr Muḥammad bin 'Abd al-Malik bin Muḥammad Ibn Ṭufayl (1105-1185) and Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855), as I will prove, share some existentialist elements related to nature. Belonging to the Western Muslim world, Ibn Ṭufayl is a well-known Andalusian Arab polymath: a philosopher, theologian, physician, astronomer, and politician. Born close to Granada under the Almohad caliphate, Ibn Ṭufayl was an older contemporary of a surely better-known philosopher, Averroes (Ibn Rushd). After the retirement in 1182, Averroes became Ibn Ṭufayl's successor. Ibn Ṭufayl died several years later in Morocco in 1185.

Writing critical texts on religion, ethics, psychology, and the philosophy of religion, Søren Aabye Kierkegaard is a prominent Danish theologian, philosopher, poet, and religious author regarded as the first existentialist philosopher. Despite the fact that these two philosophers belong to two different realms of history, philosophy, and theology, one may well find common notions in their theories. In this research, I'll focus just on the importance they have put on nature, however, they might have, and have many more different ideas and theories.

Ibn Ṭufayl believes in nature as the best teacher of philosophy and philosophical reasoning, while for Søren Kierkegaard, being human means being dependent on and embedded in nature. This makes Kierkegaard a highly relevant interlocutor for contemporary Eco philosophy and ecocriticism.

The idea of four travels of mind is traceable in the novel of Ibn Ṭufayl of Andalus although it is attributed to the later philosophers especially to Sadra Shirazi (1571–1635). A politician, novelist, philosopher, and physician, Ibn Ṭufayl (c. 1105 Spain–1185 Morocco) is an influential Spanish polymath who has informed a wide range of later thinkers. (Conrad, 1996; Goodman, 2009)

While only one of his works has survived intact, the impact of this one piece is visible on major works of science and fiction. "Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzan," i.e. alive the son of awake, is regarded as the first recorded writing in history that is intentionally cast as a philosophical novel, expressing Ṭufayl's opinions through storytelling.

Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzan rendered in 1671 into Latin under the title *Philosophus Autodidactus*. (Ockley, 1929) Among other English and Arabic editions, (Ibn Ṭufayl, 1929; 1993; 1996) we will refer to a more

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recently published Arabic-English version. (Maftouni, 2017)

The main character of ibn Ṭufayl's novel, Ḥayy has truth and happiness as his primary objective, striving to attain these elusive concepts throughout the story. While deprived of contact with other human beings and their writings, Ḥayy goes on to discover the ultimate truth and genuine happiness solely in interaction with nature. Isolated in an island surrounded by the sea and disconnected from any mainland, Ḥayy imagined that there was nowhere in the world but that island.

It naturally seems that this island symbolizes the world in which humanity needs happiness. In this island, Ḥayy gets happiness figuring out that true happiness and pleasure is quite simply to view God. At long last, Ḥayy understands that the content of religion is nothing but the very lessons of nature.

In subsequent lines, I will analyze Ḥayy's endeavor in his four travels so as to show the role of nature in the happiness of humanity. For Søren Kierkegaard, being human means being dependent on and embedded in nature. This makes Søren Kierkegaard a highly relevant interlocutor for contemporary Eco philosophy as well as ecocriticism, as revealed by Knausgard's novel *Morgenstjernen* (Mjaaland, 2021). Mjaaland analyzes Kierkegaard's discourse *The Lily in the Field* and *the Bird of the Air* against the backdrop of contemporary critiques of the Romantic notion of nature as presented by Eco philosopher and literary scholar Timothy Morton.

1. The First Travel: Beginning from Nature

It is evident that Ḥayy is a child of nature in two meanings according to two versions of the story narrated by Ṭufayl. Based on the first version, Ḥayy was created in an island where human beings came into the world without parents. He then was raised by a roe (Maftouni, 2017: 25). As per the second version, he was born into a human mother and father who were living in a great island-other than the island of our story-the governor of which had a rather beautiful sister prevented from marriage. At last, she married privately a near relative called Yaqzan and gave birth to a son called Ḥayy. Then "being afraid that it should be discovered ... she put him into a little ark." (ibid: 36) All courtesy of the tide, Ḥayy was carried ashore on the island of our story, *Lone Island*. Again the roe in a quest for her lost fawn, hearing a cry, believed it was her fawn and came up to the ark. In this second narrative, likewise, Ḥayy was raised by a roe.

Whichever version is the case, Ḥayy is born in an island without any other inhabitant, opening his eyes to a roe-mother. His first travel, i.e., the first period of his subjective movement, consists of three parts:

Initially, Hayy learns all natural beings and becomes a great physicist. Further, He learns from nature his acts. Then he generates empirical sciences like anatomy, autopsy, and vivisection.

The time is not exactly determined, though it is after the age of two and before seven when he starts to think about nature and learn whatever objects around him:

By this time, he began to have the ideas of a great many things fixed in his mind, so as to have a desire to some, and an aversion to others, even when they were absent. In the meanwhile, he considered all the several sorts of animals, and saw that they were all clothed either with hair, wool, or feathers; he considered their great swiftness and strength, and that they were all armed with weapons defensive, as horns, teeth, hoofs, spurs, and nails (ibid: 55-56).

Next, Hayy learns from nature the way of life. He ponders over his points of strength and weakness vis-à-vis nature. As a weak spot in nature, Hayy observes that certain animals have some birth defects or weaknesses. "Then he considered such animals as had any defect or natural imperfection, but amongst them all he could find none like himself." (ibid: 57)

As some points of strength in nature he observes:

whenever there happened any controversy about gathering of fruits, he always came off by the worst, for they could both keep their own, and take away his, and he could neither beat them off nor run away from them ... He observed besides that his fellow-fawns, though their foreheads were smooth at first, yet afterwards had horns bud out, and though they were feeble at first, yet afterwards grew very vigorous and swift ... Besides, he observed that their genital organs were more concealed than his own were (ibid: 57-58).

Hayy considers all these topics, and he cannot understand the reason of these differences. Moreover, he involved a great grief because of these matters. "When he had perplexed himself very much with the thoughts of them, and was now near seven years old, he despaired utterly of having those things grow upon him, the want of which made him so uneasy." (ibid: 59)

So, Hayy learns from nature to cope with the situation and remedy his weaknesses. For instance, he "got him some broad leaves of trees, of which he made two coverings, one to wear behind, and the other before." (ibid: 59) In the meantime he was growing up passing his seventh year (ibid: 61).

In this time strikes some important event, that is, the death of his roe-mother, which induces a remarkable growth in his scientific motives. "She grew lean and weak, and continued a while in a languishing.

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condition, till at last she died, and then all her motions and actions ceased.” (ibid: 63) Because of finding the problem of the roe, Ḥayy pursues anatomy and autopsy.

So Ḥayy becomes one of the greatest scientists. “He arrived to the highest degree of knowledge in this kind which the most learned naturalists ever attained to.” (ibid: 89) “He made all these discoveries whilst he was employed in the study of anatomy, and the searching out of the properties peculiar to each part, and the difference between them; and all this before the end of that time I speak of, i.e., of the age of 21 years.” (ibid: 97)

2. The Second Travel: From Nature to Philosophical Reasoning

The second travel or second part of Ḥayy’s movement is that he begins to think in broad fashion—that is, philosophical reasoning. The origins of philosophical reasoning could be seen before his age of 21, when he studies some kinds of animals. For example, he concludes that each animal has a soul, requiring the unity of the animal soul: “This animal spirit was one, whose action when it made use of the eye was sight; when of the ear, hearing; when of the nose, smelling; when of the tongue, tasting; and when of the skin and flesh, feeling. When it employed any limb, then its operation was motion.” (ibid: 91)

This reasoning happens when Ḥayy is 21 years old. And after the age of 21, Ḥayy goes on with philosophical reasoning in a serious way; as Tufayl points it out: “Then he embarked on the other methods.”

Some English renderings lack this critical phrase (ibid: 17). This new methods are pertaining to his ways of thinking including two levels in the first of which Ḥayy begins to put natural beings into some categories and generalize them. The second level is that he goes on with generalization, venturing in the mystical realm. He goes on with generalization all the way to what could be considered mystical territories.

The first level of generalization may well be seen in following lines: He then proceeded further to examine the nature of [all] bodies in this world of generation and corruption, viz. the different kinds of animals, plants, minerals, and the several sorts of stones, and earth, water, vapor, ice, snow, hail, smoke, flame, and glowing heat; in which he observed many qualities and different actions, and that their motions agreed in some respects, and differed in others (ibid: 98).

By this way of thinking, Ḥayy figured out that “a whole species was one and the same thing, and that the multiplicity of individuals in the same species is like the multiplicity of parts in the same person, which indeed is not a real multiplicity.” (ibid: 103)

The second level: This way of reasoning leads Ḥayy to the spiritual world, however, he just touches on it. So, it might be called a quasi-mystical experience. “And thus, he attained a notion of the forms of bodies, according to their differences. These were the first things he found out, belonging to the spiritual world; for these forms are not the objects of sense, but are apprehended by intellectual speculation.” (ibid: 115)

Looking more deeply at the mind-blowing topics, Ḥayy is affected and then has a retreat from intellectual world to the sensible world until the next stage that he will be absorbed in the spiritual beings:

When his contemplation had proceeded thus far, and he was got to some distance from sensible objects, and was now just upon the confines of the intellectual world, he was diffident, and inclined rather to the sensible world, which he was more used to. Therefore he retreated a little and left the consideration of abstracted body (since he found that his senses could by no means reach it, neither could he comprehend it) and applied himself to the consideration of the most simple sensible bodies he could find (ibid, 130-131).

3. The Third Travel: Mystical Thinking

Between his age of 21 and 28, Ḥayy’s knowledge grows up to the mystical experiences. He, for example, thinks on proving some agent would be called God: “Now he knew that everything that was produced anew must have some producer. And from this contemplation, there arose in his mind a sort of impression of the maker of that form, though his notion of him as yet was general and indistinct.” (ibid: 133)

Form the age of 28 to 35, His state is so that he is conveyed from every natural thing to intelligible affairs, focusing on the God features. When intelligible knowledge totally sheds light on his mind, in light of this knowledge Ḥayy again begins to study nature believing all actions of all beings owe to God: “and it appeared to him that those actions which emanated from them were not in reality owing to them, but to the efficient cause which produced in them those actions which are attributed to them.” (ibid: 134)

Now, when he had attained thus far, so as to have a general and indistinct notion of this agent, he had a most earnest desire to know it distinctly. And because he had not as yet withdrawn himself from the sensible world, he began to look for this agent among sensible things; nor did he as yet know whether it was one agent or many. Therefore he enquired strictly into all such bodies as he had about him, viz. those which he had been employed about all along, and he found that they were all liable to generation and corruption. And if there were any which did

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not suffer a total corruption, yet they were liable to a partial one, as water and earth, the parts of which, he observed, were consumed by fire. Likewise, among all the rest of the bodies which he was conversant with, he could find none which were not produced anew and therefore dependent upon some agent (ibid: 136-137).

In this point, Ḥayy puts them all aside, and passes his thoughts just on the heavenly bodies and now he is about the end of the age of 28. Then the whole world appears to Ḥayy as one individual going so far as to see all things other than God non-existent.

In like manner he enquired into all the attributes of imperfection, and perceived that the maker of the world was free from them all. And how was it possible for him to be otherwise, since the notion of imperfection is nothing but mere non-existence, or what depends upon it? And how can he any way partake of non-existence, who is the pure existence, necessarily by his essence; who gives being to everything that exists, and besides whom there is no existence; but He is the being, He the perfection, He the plenitude, He the beauty, He the glory, He the power, He the knowledge? He is He, and besides Him all things are subject to perishing (ibid: 162-163).

This reasoning occurs when Ḥayy is about the end of the age of 35 (ibid: 157). Such observation of the supreme agent, or simply say God, is so deeply established in Ḥayy's heart that departed from considering anything else: "... And his heart was altogether withdrawn from thinking upon this inferior world, which contains the objects of sense, and wholly taken up with the contemplation of the upper, intellectual world." (ibid: 164)

In the meanwhile, Ḥayy begins thinking about himself as a thinker who is able to find the supreme agent, and infers that it should be an incorporeal being free from all material properties. Having thus learned that his essence was not that corporeal mass which he perceived with his senses and was clothed with his skin, he began to entertain mean thoughts of his body, and set himself to contemplate that noble essence, by which he had reached the knowledge of that superexcellent and necessarily existent being.

And whilst he was thus exercised, he used to wish that it would please God to deliver him altogether from this body of his, which detained him from that state; that he might have nothing to do but to give himself up wholly and perpetually to his delight, and be freed from all that torment with which he was afflicted as often as he was forced to avert his mind from that state by attending on the necessities of the body.

Ḥayy proceeds in this manner till passing his age of 50. (Ibid, 260)

4. The Fourth Travel: Returning to Nature

The fourth travel is the highest mystical level. of Ḥayy's spiritual movement. He figures out that real happiness and real pleasure is to view God. The following shows his mystical position in the fourth stage: "When he had abstracted himself from his own and all other essences, and beheld nothing existing but only that one, permanent being." (ibid:229)

But he also finds out that nature and all natural beings could very well function as the way of real happiness, real pleasure, as well as salvation. So, he finds out that he must take account of his body and the material part of life. Just in this stage he becomes a nature protectionist. "When he saw what he saw, and then afterwards returned to the beholding of other things." Thereby Ḥayy returns to the sensible world protecting nature. For example, he is used to removing all impeding or harmful things from animals and plants, if possible.

If he saw any plant which was deprived of the benefit of the sun by the interposition of any other body, or that its growth was hindered by its being twisted with any other plant, he would remove that which hindered it if possible, yet so as not to hurt either; or if it was in danger of dying for want of moisture, he took what care he could to water it constantly (ibid: 211).

Observing any weak creature pursued by any ferocious animal, or caught up in a trap, or hurt "with thorns, or that had gotten anything hurtful into its eyes or ears, or was hungry or thirsty, he took all possible care to relieve it. And when he saw any watercourse stopped by any stone, or anything brought down by the stream, so that any plant or animal was hindered of it, he took care to remove it." (ibid: 212)

5. Existentialist View of Kierkegaard on Nature as A Teacher

Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–1855) was a prolific writer whose work is difficult to categorize, spanning philosophy, theology, religion, psychology, etc. (Lippitt and Evans 2023) So we must scrutinize his writings to find and categorize his opinions, for example, about nature as a teacher; some applying this point over the all of the continental philosophers.

In spite of these difficulties, while many of the most eminent analytic philosophers have not worked about aesthetics at all, matters stand very differently in continental philosophy and art and aesthetics has been given an important place by every important continental philosopher. So it brings them to the front and center of our focus, when working on art and aesthetics issues. Pointing out Kierkegaard and his literature, you'll find out his opinion about nature and its role in human life.

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Kierkegaard sees the lily and the bird as teachers. In his short text, *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air* (1849), Kierkegaard sets out from an aesthetic reflection on nature, or more precisely: how to look at nature and how to write about nature. In discovering the difference of speech, the first step in this exercise follows “From the lily and the bird as teachers, let us learn Silence, or learn to be silent.” (SKS 11, 16/ WA, 10. Emphasis and line break in original)

Conclusion

Searching a global language in the era of Islamic Golden Age, Ibn Ṭufayl devised a way of happiness for humanity regardless of religion, albeit consistent with it.

Nature plays a distinctive role in human happiness. Depicting his views in the novel of Ḥayy, Ibn Ṭufayl explains following functions for nature: Happiness begins from nature, from which is created Ḥayy and in which is raised by a roe-mother. His second step is learning all natural objects until becoming a leading scientist, specifically in anatomy, autopsy, and vivisection.

The third stage is to learn philosophical reasoning based on the previous pace. Keeping philosophical reasoning, Ḥayy arrives at mystical experiences so that through all natural beings conveys to God. In this step, he returns to nature and becomes a nature protectionist.

Kierkegaard’s short text, *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air*, sets out from an aesthetic reflection on nature, or more precisely, how to look at nature and how to write about nature. Kierkegaard also sees nature as teachers. In *The Lily in the Field and the Bird of the Air*, Kierkegaard recites:

“Father in heaven, what we in company with people, especially in a crowd of people, come to know with difficulty, and what we, if we have come to know it somewhere else, so easily forget in company with people, especially in a crowd of people-what it is to be a human being and what religiously is the requirement for being a human being-would that we might learn it or, if it is forgotten, that we might learn it again from the lily and the bird; would that we might learn it, if not all at once, then at least some of it, and little by little; would that from the lily and the bird we might this time learn silence, obedience, joy!”

So to put it in a nutshell, from the lily and the bird as teachers, let us learn to be silent!

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