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IBN ṬUFAYL'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE REVISITED

Introduction

In a paper due to appear as a chapter of a collective book on the theories of knowledge in the Arab thought¹ I tried to translate Ibn Ṭufayl's words on ineffable ideas into a system of concepts as complete as I could manage given the approximative character of the text we are now dealing with, namely his *Risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaḡzān fī asrār al-ḥikma al-mashriqiyya* (*Epistle of Hayy ibn Yaḡzān on the Mysteries of Eastern Wisdom*).²

On that occasion I had to follow the main themes that the Western philosophical tradition has been discussing after Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul*. Now I feel free to try and discuss our man's theory of knowledge without that restriction.

Ibn Ṭufayl within the limits of Aristotle's soul

In my former paper I started with man's soul. I looked into his rational faculty paying attention to the active intellect, but being particularly interested in Ibn Ṭufayl's theory of knowledge at large. Prophethood and eschatology were inevitable chapters as I was dealing with the world of Islam.

Let's have a closer look at the approach to Ibn Ṭufayl's theory of knowledge that I adopted on that occasion.

Ibn Ṭufayl wants to give approximative notions about such high matters as human sight cannot rise to³ and he does so with a great deal of freedom in his exposition and a conscious lack of rigor in his demonstrations.⁴

¹ *De Smet D. and M. Sebti* (eds.). *Noétique et théorie de la connaissance dans la philosophie arabe des IXe–XVIIe siècles*. Collection Textes et Traditions. Paris: Vrin, 2011.

² My investigation rests on the classical edition by Léon Gauthier: *Hayy ben Yaḡdhān: roman philosophique d'Ibn Thofail*. Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1936, cited as LG from now on.

³ LG. P. 114.

⁴ *Ibid.*

Man is a composite being made up of the body (*jism*) and spirit (*rūḥ*). Each body is distinguished from other bodies on account of its form (*ṣūra*), sometimes called spirit (*rūḥ*), soul (*naḥs*) or even nature (*tabī'a*). And that form is an incorruptible feature, whose origin is in God, a feature that is a single thing in its essence but one that appears as a multiplicity by accident.

So the body and the soul are respectively the corruptible and the incorruptible aspects of man. The two of them are closely linked to each other in an unbreakable bond as soon as the body is ready to accept the spirit as if it were the soul's prison and humble servant at once.

Souls have a root faculty (heart's heat)⁵ lying at the bottom of all their other faculties. Those are the body's weight⁶ and the faculties characteristic of the vegetative soul (nutrition and growth),⁷ the animal, or sensitive, soul (feeling, perception and movement)⁸ and the rational soul (which Ibn Ṭufayl fails to mention by this name). The aforementioned faculties are instrumental in man's knowledge of the Necessary Being.⁹

As a matter of fact, the animal soul grasps its objects of knowledge by means of feeling (*iḥsās*) and perception (*idrāk*) but it is only the rational soul that can get to know the Necessary Being.

However, Ibn Ṭufayl never refers to an active intellect at all and does not even draw a sharp distinction between the soul and the intellect. He confines himself to exploring the faculties of the formal aspect of man, which he calls the soul or spirit.

Ibn Ṭufayl develops these ideas, saying there is an exogenous knowledge that comes from sensory input (*hawāss*) and speculative elaboration (*naẓar*), and an endogenous knowledge that comes from the soul's essence by means of contemplation (*mushāhada*) and is each individual's heritage that cannot be expressed in words.¹⁰

Yet the difference between both kinds of knowledge does not lie in the objects to be cognised—quite the opposite, those objects are the same but, in the case of contemplation, with a greater degree of clarity (*ma'a ziyādat wuḍūḥ*)¹¹ and an extreme delight (*'iẓam iltidhādh*).¹²

As for the intelligible structure of the cosmos, there stretches the Neoplatonic medieval world with its hierarchy of celestial spheres and the beings under the sphere of the Moon, between the pole of Necessary Being and that of material beings, with man as the link and compendium of all the worlds.

⁵ LG. P. 27.

⁶ LG. P. 52.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ LG. P. 50–52.

⁹ LG. P. 77.

¹⁰ LG. P. 9.

¹¹ LG. P. 6.

¹² LG. P. 7–8.

Ibn Ṭufayl describes the celestial bodies as simple, incorruptible and lacking that succession of forms which is typical of everything under the Moon. This latter world is characterised by matter, on whose origins Ibn Tufayl does not say a word. He limits himself to the acceptance of the existence of matter as a reality subordinate to the essence of beings or, in any case, as an aspect of their spiritual reality.

When Ibn Ṭufayl comes to the identification of the contents of reason with those of revelation, he accepts that principle explicitly¹³ but he does not specify any item of this identification at all.

In this frame, the prophet (*nabī*) is the creature that receives the spirit (*rūḥ*) in its fullest range under the Moon.¹⁴ And, as most people find themselves on the level of animals, with no recourse to reason, they can find no other reason to follow apart from the teachings of the prophets (*rusul*)¹⁵ with all their allegories, rites and precepts.¹⁶

Man's purpose, perfection and happiness are in his intuitive vision (*mushāhada*) of God on a permanent basis. But that intellectual and affective perfection cannot be attained without a perfect morality understood as a perfect praxis¹⁷ on which I did not expand.

And, last but not least, I mentioned Ibn Ṭufayl's idea that the choice between unification (*ittiḥād*) and communication (*ittiṣāl*) is not a real one when defining the relationship between the individual soul and the Necessary Being that is the object of *mushāhada*.¹⁸ There is no case for choosing between two alternatives that can only be expressed meaningfully in the case of material essences, as no other kind of essence lies in the realm of plurality, which is where union and communion can take place.

A Second Thought

When reading Ibn Ṭufayl's *Risāla* and my exposition of the theory of knowledge therein I noticed that Ibn Ṭufayl shows a steady relationship between contemplation as the summit of knowledge and praxis as a means of arriving at that knowledge.

If we look at the whole of Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān's story we realise that his attainment of knowledge is accompanied by a specific behaviour, without which his knowledge leaves him. After he realises he is different from all other animals he starts on a program to resemble the celestial bodies, but he also needs to take

¹³ LG. P. 107.

¹⁴ LG. P. 24–25.

¹⁵ LG. P. 111–112.

¹⁶ LG. P. 107–108.

¹⁷ LG. P. 79.

¹⁸ LG. P. 89–90.

into account his material reality and his animal soul if he wants to stay alive in order to obtain that knowledge. So he imposes on himself a whole training course ranging from the food he has to eat to the celestial qualities he has to acquire, including even the whirling of the spheres and the immobility beyond the spheres. Much later, when Absāl gives Ḥayy some of his food to eat, Ḥayy realises he loses his vision of reality.

What do we learn from this side of Ibn Ṭufayl's story? As far as I can see, Ibn Ṭufayl is trying to persuade us that the best of human reason can discover the essence of religious revelation on its own. A lot of attention has been paid to the idea that the knowledge acquired by Ḥayy ibn Yağzān is identical with the real meaning of religious truth as represented by Absāl in Ibn Ṭufayl's *Risāla*. It is evident that human behaviour is taken into account in the story, even if the behavioural aspect of religion is not usually considered in the case of Ibn Ṭufayl, as the Latin translation of the title of his work (*Philosophus Autodidactus*) leads us into thinking of it just in terms of knowledge, not praxis. But Ibn Ṭufayl does not stop at that point, for reason not only discovers that orthopraxis which is the hallmark of true religion, but it also makes clear that no ultimate knowledge can be attained without the right behaviour that Ḥayy discovered along his quest of the truth. This intimate relationship between knowledge and praxis is a basic fundamental in Ibn Ṭufayl's *Risāla* that I failed to come across on the previous occasion and that I think should be taken into account in every future assessment of his thought.