

Hayy ibn Yaqzan, by Ibn Tufayl

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In Review



Hayy ibn Yaqzan

by Ibn Tufayl

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The 12th-century Muslim mystic Ibn Tufayl relates the story of a spontaneously generated child raised by a gazelle on a desert island, and the process by which he attains union with God through the naturally acquired art of mystic contemplation.

At the heart of the story is a literal autopsy of a heart: when the gazelle who raised him dies, young Hayy seeks the source of her immense love for him by studying in detail the heart she described as the source of her love. This inquest launches Hayy on a journey of knowledge that leads to God.

Because this philosopher's tale is not widely known, students lack any received wisdom about it. They love the determined yet supremely gentle Hayy, and they are prompted to rethink distinctions between practice and dogma, and between the active and the speculative life. The sobering ending describes Hayy's failed attempt to bring contemplation to civil society. Tufayl suggests that the fault resides not with the mystic but with those who simply cannot be ordered toward such attainment.

Tufayl shows more than he tells. While this indexes his conviction that only a few will fully understand, there's no doubt that many grasp a great deal. Such canonical authors as Daniel Defoe and Voltaire knew *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* and may have borrowed from it.