



THE STORY OF ISLAMIC PHILOSOPHY SALMAN H. BASHIER

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I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin at the end of August. And even as I was climbing the stairs to my apartment in one of Wiko’s buildings, I found myself comparing the tense atmosphere that I left behind in Israel and the fifty minutes that we had to spend in the airplane due to a security warning with the atmosphere of peace and tranquility that surrounds Grunewald – the Green Forest.

I was one of those Fellows who chose to come to Wiko to take part in the intensive course in German. My group consisted of a small number of intermediate learners who enjoyed a special sense of humor in addition to eagerness to learn the language.

At the same time, I was writing responses to the reviewers of my project: *The Story of Islamic Philosophy: Ibn Tufayl, Ibn al-'Arabi and Others on the Limit between Naturalism and Traditionalism*. Thus it can be said that I was involved in two intensive courses at the same time, learning German and preparing my project for publication. At the beginning of December I received the good news that the project was approved for publication and I was given five months to complete the work and submit the final copy of the manuscript to my publisher. The work proved to be difficult also because I found it necessary to write a new introduction and conclusions and add a major chapter to the project.

The Story of Islamic Philosophy revolves around a philosophical story by the Andalusian Arabic philosopher Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185). Hayy Ibn Yaqzan (the Live Son of the Wakeful) is the name of the hero of Ibn Tufayl's story, a child who grew up on an isolated island away from society and the human touch. In accounting for his physical and intellectual development, Ibn Tufayl employs his sophisticated philosophical and scientific education to provide a concise account of the general history of the human species. At an early stage in the development of his life, Hayy succeeds in inventing means and tools to cope with the necessities of his physical environment. He imitates animals and follows their movements, but he soon gains mastery over the animal kingdom. Then he turns to pursuing his philosophical speculations and with his unaided reason he climbs the ladder of rationalistic inquiry and advances a great deal in his deliberations concerning the unifying principle in the physical world and then the metaphysical principal that governs its movements. Thanks to his distance from human social distractions and the purity of his natural, intuitive mind, Hayy excels in his logical deliberations and succeeds in drawing the best that can be drawn from his innate logical capacity. Hayy reaches a highly developed rational level. Unlike the rationalists among the philosophers, however, Hayy succeeds in realizing that reason or logical considerations have their limits and that man is more than his reason. This simple recognition that rationalism is, after all, only another phase in the evolution of the human intellectuality opens before Hayy's eyes an additional and extremely important dimension and layer of reality. This is the mystical layer that remains hidden from the awareness of the dogmatic rationalists among theologians and philosophers alike.

At the age of fifty, Hayy encounters human, religious society for the first time. Ibn Tufayl's concise but illuminating account of this peculiar encounter between the solitary one and the religious many is destined to teach us why religion, with its complicated laws and detailed ordinations, is needed for the sake of ordering the affairs of inferior humans who, due to their attachment to and constant occupation with the affairs of their community and

the mundane businesses of their world, must adhere to an inferior (religious) copy of the truth and who lack the capacity reserved for the illuminated ones to think for themselves. At the same time, the illuminated must keep intellectual and, even better, physical distance from humans. Due to his rather violent encounter with the members of the religious community, Hayy chooses to return to his solitary island, this time with another individual whose eyes are opened and who shows serious commitment to follow Hayy's path of illumination. The main lesson that Ibn Tufayl's philosophy teaches us is therefore that illumination is reserved for individuals and that dwelling in the social context not only does not contribute to the illuminative process, but also greatly inhibits and can even terminate it altogether.

The project deals also with another prominent figure among Islamic medieval thinkers and the greatest of Islamic mystics (Sufis), Muhyiddin Ibn al-'Arabi, who was born in 1165 in Andalusia and died in 1240 in Damascus and whose influence on subsequent Islamic thinkers is unmatched.

Among the major topics that the project treats are the origin of the world, the origin of the human being and human language, and the relationship between religion and philosophy. The work exposes the mythical roots of both philosophical naturalism and religious traditionalism and, by carefully analyzing philosophical, religious and mythical texts that deal with the aforementioned topics, it attempts to offer a new understanding of the limits as well as the possibilities of creating a unified vision of human reflection on persisting intellectual problems. In addition to Ibn Tufayl and Ibn al-'Arabi, the work provides a treatment of an important section of al-Farabi's *Book of Letters*, the Ninth Sort of Avicenna's *Allusions and Intimations* (al-Isharat wa-al-Tanbihat), the third part of Ghazali's *Niche of Lights* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Despite the intense and difficult work, there were several occasions on which I could use a useful distraction from my occupation with the project. The Wiko Tuesday Colloquium provided such a highly demanding and, at the same time, highly enjoyable occasion. In less than one hour, each Fellow was expected to present the project in which he or she was involved, a project whose nature was in the process of unfolding even for himself or herself, and with which the scholar dealt in his or her own innovative way. It was clear to us that such a presentation by careful researchers at such a level of specialization was anything but a simple task. And yet with their unlimited spirit of support and patience, the Fellows made this difficult task most enjoyable indeed.

The Tuesday Colloquium posed a serious challenge to me personally. For most other Fellows, it was enough to mention the name of a modern thinker, say Kant or Spinoza, to have a general idea about the principle tenets of their thought and the social or historical circumstances of their lives. In my case, this privilege was not available. Despite the fact that Ibn al-‘Arabi is considered one of the most prominent Islamic thinkers of all times and certainly the greatest master of Islamic mysticism (Sufism), the majority of our Fellows did not even know his name. I must admit that this was very frustrating not only for the sake of delivering my lecture but also as a negative indicator of the ignorance of the world in general about a whole history of human intellectuality. And yet again our Fellows as well as the several visitors who came to the lecture proved to be most supporting as they heard and received the new discussion with such an enthusiasm and an encouraging spirit that it filled me with a feeling of wonderful satisfaction.

I enjoyed very much Wiko’s Tuesday dinners, especially as the Fellows loosened up after one or two glasses of good wine and a friendly conversation that was not necessarily related to intellectual concerns. The restaurant became louder and louder and from time to time you could hear loud laughter that announced the advent of the spirit of informality. Here you found past Fellows who came to bring memories back to mind gathering together with future Fellows who came to taste what it would soon be like, and then you – the present Fellow – find yourself in the middle and very much responsible for the gathering. Those from the past wish to know from you if it is still the same and those from the future wish to know how will it be. But the only thing that you know in this most wonderful time is the present joy that you would not want to replace with any pleasant memories or noble expectations. The Tuesday dinners were such a joyful time to me, a time that will linger in my memory for the longest time.

By May I had finally completed the work on the manuscript and was ready to send the final copy to my publisher. I still had two book reviews to write but I knew that members of my family were coming for a week visit and decided that it was time to take time out. After several months of continuous, intensive work, now I had the time to relax and see all those interesting places that I had had no real chance to see before in Berlin and the areas surrounding it. My guests loved Berlin. They admired most the order and the traffic quality in the city in addition to all the many attractions that Berlin offers for its visitors. Even after my relatives had left, I found myself simply unable to stop being on the move, and I continued to see more of Berlin. And inside myself I heard a voice saying that it was good that I did not expose myself earlier to the attractions of this beautiful city. Now I am

not talking about the places that even casual visitors to Berlin are recommended to visit right after they leave the airport. I am talking about a different experience in different places, small places whose special quality not even Berliners are aware of.

Time was pressing again, and again I had to befriend my writing desk for a number of weeks to do the book reviews that I was supposed to submit before the farewell party in the middle of July. After the farewell party, Fellows started to leave. Everyday you say bye to another face that you will probably never see again. After a year of knowing these special people it was not easy to depart from them. Even as you try to convince yourself that you might see them again one day, deep inside you know that it will never be the same experience of this communal gathering for a year with such special people. Some philosopher would say here that the experience as a whole is more than the sum of its members, but it is not only the people and the time that you spend with them, but also the place in which you spend the time.

Within the context of my fellowship I participated in EUME (Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe), a multidisciplinary program that deals with important subjects that have to do with the relationship between the Middle East and Europe. The program was rich with intellectual and cultural activities and I made my humble contribution to the program by delivering a lecture in one of its seminars. What I liked most about the program was the golden opportunity that it gave me to meet with scholars from different places in the Arab and Islamic world and to discuss issues of concern with them. I noticed that a number of Wiko Fellows participated in the lectures in EUME's seminars and I think that Wiko should encourage its Fellows to participate even more, since this only adds more depth and significance to the program. Finally, among the Wiko staff I would like to thank especially the library and the computer services. I must say that their service made my work, with all the pressure and the hard work, not only possible but also most enjoyable.