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Utopia's Moorish Inspiration: Thomas More's Reading of Ibn Ṭufayl

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Article abstract

A promising but neglected precedent for Thomas More's *Utopia* is to be found in Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ibn Ḥayy Yaḡẓān*. This twelfth-century Andalusian philosophical novel describing the self-education and enlightenment of a feral child on an island, while certainly a precedent for the European Bildungsroman, also arguably qualifies as a utopian text. It is possible that More had access to Pico de la Mirandola's Latin translation of Ibn Ḥayy Yaḡẓān. This study consists of a review of historical and philological evidence that More may have read *Ibn Ḥayy Yaḡẓān* and a comparative reading of More's and Ṭufayl's two famous works. I argue that there are good reasons to see in *Ibn Ḥayy Yaḡẓān* a source for More's *Utopia* and that in certain respects we can read More's *Utopia* as a response to Ṭufayl's novel.

*Utopia's Moorish Inspiration: Thomas More's Reading of Ibn Ṭufayl**

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A promising but neglected precedent for Thomas More's Utopia is to be found in Ibn Ṭufayl's Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān. This twelfth-century Andalusian philosophical novel describing the self-education and enlightenment of a feral child on an island, while certainly a precedent for the European Bildungsroman, also arguably qualifies as a utopian text. It is possible that More had access to Pico de la Mirandola's Latin translation of Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān. This study consists of a review of historical and philological evidence that More may have read Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān and a comparative reading of More's and Ṭufayl's two famous works. I argue that there are good reasons to see in Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān a source for More's Utopia and that in certain respects we can read More's Utopia as a response to Ṭufayl's novel.

L'Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān d'Ibn Ṭufayl consiste en un précédent incontournable mais négligé à l'Utopie de More. Ce récit philosophique andalou du douzième siècle décrivant l'auto-formation et l'éveil d'un enfant sauvage sur une île peut être considéré comme un texte utopique, bien qu'il soit certainement un précédent pour le Bildungsroman européen. Thomas More pourrait avoir lu l'Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān, puisqu'il a pu avoir accès à la traduction latine qu'en a fait Pic de la Miradolle. Cette étude examine les données historiques et philologiques permettant de poser que More a probablement lu cet ouvrage, et propose une lecture comparée de l'Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān et de l'Utopie de More. On y avance qu'il y a non seulement de bonnes raisons de considérer l'Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān d'Ibn Ṭufayl comme une source de l'Utopie de More, mais qu'il est aussi possible à certains égards de lire l'Utopie comme une réponse à l'Ibn Ḥayy Yaqzān.

Thomas More's *Utopia* is often read as a paradigm of Erasmian humanistic literature, replete as it is with references to Greek and Latin classics and digs at scholastic learning. More, like many of his fellow humanists, forged his identity in opposition to the intellectual culture of what we call medieval

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Europe.¹ But the author of *Utopia* certainly must have been aware of another medieval world, one that was, to be sure, intellectually linked to that of Europe: that is, the medieval culture of Andalusia. If More was beginning to get news of the cultural “others” across the Atlantic,² perhaps he had more than a superficial awareness of what for centuries had been for medieval Europe the great cultural “other,” the Islamic world. The extent of More’s familiarity with the Islamic world is pertinent to understanding his work, particularly since Almohad Andalusia saw the writing of a text that in many senses qualifies as “utopian,” namely, Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqẓān*.³ More’s intellectual environment was such that it is possible that he had read it. Indeed, in More’s *Utopia* there are some traces of a possible influence of this fascinating work. At the risk of hyperbole, I suggest that the capital of More’s *Utopia* might be as much a *madīna* (Arabic for “city”) as it is a *polis* (Greek for “city state”).⁴

1. It turns out that Pico de la Mirandola, who will be important in this study, did not subscribe to the indiscriminate depiction of the schoolmen as “barbarians.” See his famous letter to Ermolao Barbaro, which he published in 1485: Ermolao Barbaro and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Filosofia o eloquenza?* ed. Francesco Bausi (Naples: Liguori Editore, 1998), 36–65. For More’s critique of scholasticism, see Warren W. Wooden, “Anti-Scholastic Satire in Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 8.2 (July 1977): 29–45.

2. Apparently, it was only in 1502 that Vespucci realized that what we now refer to as the Americas was not East Asia. Columbus, who died in 1506, never did accept the claim that the so-called “New World” was not East Asia.

3. The complete title is *Risālat Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān fī asrār al-ḥikmat al-mašriqiyya* (Treatise of the Alive, son of the Awake, on the secrets of oriental wisdom). Ibn Ṭufayl was born in Guadix near Granada, lived in Cordoba, and died in Marrakesh (1105–85). I will in what follows often refer to his most famous work, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, simply as *Ḥayy*. A reliable Arabic text can be found in Ibn Ṭufayl, Abu Bakr, *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān*, ed. and French trans. R. Gauthier, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1936). I cite Lenn Evan Goodman, trans., *Ibn Ṭufayl’s Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān: A Philosophical Tale* (New York: Twayne, 1972), occasionally modified.

4. In what follows, I cite *Utopia* in the translation of Robert Adams with George Logan, *More: Utopia: Latin Text and English Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), text which will be referred to as “Adams and Logan” in what follows. I occasionally make some modifications to the Adams and Logan translations, in many cases inspired by Robert Adams’s earlier translation published in *Sir Thomas More: Utopia*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: Norton, 1992), referred to as “Adams” in the notes. I also provide references to the translation found in the Yale edition of *Utopia* in vol. 4 of *The Complete Works*, ed. Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965).

The name of the capital of More's Utopia, Amaurot, is derived from the Greek word ἀμαυρός, *amauros*, "dark."⁵ This word is thought to be that from which is derived the English word "Moor" (and equivalents in other modern European languages), a word that referred loosely to the Islamic dwellers of Western North Africa and the Islamic peoples living in the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages and early modern period.⁶ At the time of Thomas More's birth in 1478, "Moors"—in this case, the Nasrids, the last Muslim dynasty in Iberia—still governed some small areas of what is now Spain, only to be decisively defeated by Isabel in 1492 at the siege of Granada.⁷ More denies that the name Amaurot has any significance, writing in a letter to Peter Giles, "If the veracity of a historian had not actually required me to do so, I am not so stupid as to have preferred those barbarous and meaningless names of *utopia*, Anyder, Amaurot and Ademus."⁸ But, surely, if More dismisses the name "Utopia" as meaningless, we must take his words with a grain of salt. The import of the city's name is all the greater since, when describing the island of Utopia, Hythloday in fact describes only Amaurot, which on account of the island's homogeneity serves to represent it *pars pro toto*.⁹

5. In a note to his earlier translation of the text, Robert Adams writes, "It is probably only a coincidence that a major medieval heretic, whose teachings were responsible for several communist sects of the Free Spirit among the cloth traders of Flanders, was Amaury of Bène (died 1206 or 1207), whose followers were called 'Amaurians'" (Adams, 32).

6. In fact, although Thomas's family name is probably from Gaelic, it is not impossible that it derives ultimately from the Latin *maurus* which means "dark."

7. The Reconquista was not entirely over. The Treaty of Granada included provisions allowing the Jews and Muslims to live in peace. Forced conversions of Muslims to Christianity in 1499 led to a revolt which was interpreted by the Christian authorities as a violation of the Treaty of Granada. Rebels were granted pardon if they converted to Catholicism, and henceforth these nominally Catholic converts were referred to as Moriscos. The conflict surrounding Islam in a recently Christianized Andalusia was not over by the time of More's death in 1534. In an edict of 1526, Charles I had forbidden heresy and therewith outlawed the use of Arabic and Moorish dress. At a synod of 1565, it was decided to enforce the edict strictly, and measures were taken to extirpate clandestine Islamic practices. This led to the Rebellion of 1568–71 (The war of the Alpujarras). We can only speculate about how much Thomas More knew concerning these events in Southern Spain. Suffice to say that he lived in a time when the Moors' relations to Christian Europe were being contested.

8. Adams and Logan, 269; Surtz and Hexter, 4:251.

9. "If you know one of their cities, you know them all, for they're exactly alike, except where geography itself makes a difference. So I will describe one of them, and no matter which. But what one rather than Amaurot the most worthy of all?—since its eminence is acknowledged by the other cities which send

There are other hints that *Utopia* might have some “Moorish” pedigree. Thomas More suggests that the language of the Utopians is close to Persian. Persian is, of course, an Indo-European language fundamentally very different from Arabic, which is a Semitic language. Persian is, however, written in Arabic script, and in our (and already in More’s) day very heavily Arabicized, in so far as it absorbed a great deal of its vocabulary from Arabic (including the largest part of its philosophical lexicon). Given the state of knowledge of linguistics and in particular of Middle Eastern languages in early sixteenth-century England, it is doubtful that More would have had a clear understanding of the differences between a Semitic and Indo-European language.¹⁰ More would have had good reasons to think that Arabic and Persian were very close. Of the Utopians, Raphael Hythloday recounts,

I have a feeling they picked up Greek more easily because it was somewhat related to their own tongue. Though their language resembles Persian in most respects, I suspect their people derives from the Greeks because, in the names of cities and in official titles, their language retains quite a few traces of Greek.¹¹

Perhaps More refers to “traces of Greek” in the Utopian idiom simply to justify his own playful use of Greek in assigning names in his imaginary republic, but Arabic certainly borrowed many terms—including toponyms and titles—from Greek. Is there any chance that More is, in fact, alluding to Arabic?¹²

It is More’s attachment to Pico de la Mirandola as an intellectual and spiritual protagonist of Renaissance humanism that represents the firmest ground for any attempt to see an influence of Arabic thought in *Utopia*. More’s love for Pico de la Mirandola was such that the British humanist translated from Latin into English a short biography of his Italian hero (it is essentially

representatives to the annual meeting there; besides which, I know it best because I lived there for five full years” (Adams and Logan, 114–15; Surtz and Hexter, 4:116–17).

10. However, keen interest in Hebrew on the part of humanists and reformers meant that advances were being made quickly. Already in 1538, Guillaume Postel published a comparative study of Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic.

11. Adams and Logan, 181, modified; Surtz and Hexter, 4:180–81.

12. Interesting is the fact that Hythloday brings Greek learning to the Utopians. To a large extent, Greek learning had passed to medieval Europe through Andalusia. Is this a playful reversal?

a hagiography and is accompanied in More's translation by a few other short works by Pico, several letters, spiritual exercises in the form of "rules," and poems).¹³ Pico represented for More a paragon of openness, daring, and spiritual dedication, even asceticism, a figure who was able to reconcile with Christianity the elements of Ancient Greek thought which had essentially been banished from European Christendom. Ultimately, Pico was able to revalue the human. But Pico de la Mirandola was not only a "Renaissance thinker" in the strict sense, since his aim was not simply to revive learning of the classical Greek and Roman worlds. Rather, he was impassioned also by ideas and texts from other cultural sources, including sources that had been looked upon with suspicion and even enmity by his European predecessors, most importantly sources in Jewish and Islamic learning. More translates a passage of Pico's biography that mentions Pico's cross-cultural studies thus:

[Pico] set out of the secret mysteries of the Hebrews, Chaldees, & Arabies: and many things drawn out of the old obscure philosophy of Pythagoras, Trimegistus, and Orpheus, & many other things strange: and to all folk (except right few special excellent men) before that day: not unknown only: but also unheard of.¹⁴

13. Thomas More, *Life of Pico*, in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Volume 1. English Poems. Life of Pico. The Last Things*, ed. A. Edwards, K. Rodgers, and C. Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 51–123. The text in the *Complete Works of St. Thomas More* is a critical edition of the original text with the spelling conventions of early sixteenth-century English. In what follows, I will cite this work using the modernized spelling found in *The Life of Pico Della Mirandola By his Nephew Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola Translated by Thomas More Edited with introduction and notes by J. M. Rigg With an introductory essay by Walter Pater Published by the Ex-classics Project* (2011) available at <http://www.exclassics.com>. I will refer to this as Rigg. See Stanford E. Lehmborg, "Sir Thomas More's Life of Pico della Mirandola," *Studies in the Renaissance* 3 (1956), 61–74, for an account of the additions and omissions which More made in his translation of the biography. See also Gabriela Schmidt, "Textual Encounters in an Age of Transition: Thomas More's Translations between 'Medieval' and 'Humanist' Literary Culture," *Moreana* 48.185–86 (2011): 149–71.

14. Rigg, 35; Surtz and Hexter, 1:56–57. Compare another passage from the biography: "O very happy mind which none adversity might oppress, which no prosperity might enhance: not the cunning of all philosophy was able to make him proud, not the knowledge of the Hebrew, Chaldee & Arabic language beside Greek and Latin could make him vainglorious" (Rigg, 39; Surtz and Hexter, 1:65). In addition to the passages where Arabic is mentioned in Pico's biography (see note 9 above) see also the letter of Pico to Andrew Corneus which More translated. Pico here mentions studying Arabic. More translates, "And because ye shall not think that my travail & diligence in study is any thing remitted or slacked: I give you

Pico's eclecticism led him to all kinds of texts beyond those of the Greek and Roman classical authors which so inspired the humanists. Among those texts that preoccupied Pico was Ṭufayl's philosophical tale *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, a text that he in fact translated from Arabic into Latin.¹⁵ Of crucial importance in the context of the present study is the fact that Pico's translation of Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* does not seem to have circulated very widely. Despite Pico's pioneering work, the extraordinary success that *Ḥayy* was to enjoy following the translations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is preceded by a relative silence.¹⁶ One can only imagine how the European intellectual world would have evolved if it could have followed Pico's path of cross-cultural appreciation, if, for example, Pico's translation of Ṭufayl had won as much purchase as Ficino's translations of Plato and Plotinus. Yet it is entirely possible that More got his hands on it and read it. Perhaps it even played some role in the genesis of More's *Utopia*. It is this possibility that I would like to explore in this paper.

I have no more than, as it were, circumstantial evidence suggesting that there are traces in More's *Utopia* of a reading of Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy*. Perhaps some clear historical evidence might emerge in the future. Accordingly, my purpose in what follows is modest. I will read the two texts together and interpret them in light of one another and in light of the possibility that More *might*

knowledge that after great fervent labour with much watch and infatigable travail I have learned both the Hebrew language and the Chaldee, and now have I set hand to overcome the great difficulty of the Araby tongue. These my dear friend be things which to appertain to a noble prince I have ever thought and yet think" (Rigg, 50; Surtz and Hexter, 1:88).

15. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān*, Biblioteca Universitaria di Genova. Cod. A, IX, ms 29, 79v–116r. This manuscript does not seem to be in Pico's hand. See Avner Ben-Zaken, *Reading Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān: A Cross-Cultural History of Autodidacticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011): 71–73. We will not enter into the fascinating question of Pico's reading of Ṭufayl, but there can be no doubt that it played some important role in the vision articulated in *On the Dignity of Man*.

16. The Latin translation by Edward Pockocke, published in 1671, was titled *Philosophus autodidactus, sive, Apistola Abi Jaafar ebn Tophail de Hai ebn Yokdhan in quâ ostenditure quomodo ex inferiorum contemplatione ad superiorum notitiam ration humana ascender possit*. An English translation based on Pockocke's Latin was published by George Keith in 1674. Simon Ockley published an English translation from the Arabic in 1708 titled *The improvement of human reason, exhibited in the life of Hai ebn Yokdhan*. These translations are thought to have influenced the likes of John Locke and Daniel Defoe. See Samar Attar, *The Vital Roots of European Enlightenment: Ibn Ṭufayl's Influence on Modern Western Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010).

have read *Ḥayy*. Ṭufayl's philosophical tale has—appropriately, I think—been read as a “utopian” text.¹⁷ Furthermore, it has been suggested—once again, quite appropriately—that “Ibn Ṭufayl offered a subtle reformation from within a certain regime, in much the same way and in similar circumstances as the Erasmists five centuries later.”¹⁸ Perhaps Ṭufayl's “subtle reformation” was a source for at least one Erasmist five centuries later.

Having set out in the introduction the principal historical arguments for the possibility that More read Ṭufayl, I employ in the remainder of this study a comparative methodology. I do believe that the comparative section of this study provides some further support for the claim that More may have in fact read *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*; however, as a philosopher, I am most interested in what a reading of these texts can reveal to us about philosophical problems and possibilities of responding to them. Ultimately, I suggest that despite the paucity of historical evidence, it is legitimate to read More's *Utopia* at one level as a response to problems formulated in *Ḥayy*. More's *Utopia* has been read as an optimistic text. I propose that More's *Utopia* formulates in some sense a utopian response to what More might have perceived as a kind of dystopian view of society embedded in the hermetic ideal that he found in Ṭufayl's work.

A summary of Ibn Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*

Before proceeding to the comparative part of this study, a short summary of Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* is in order.¹⁹ The main body of the work consists of the story of a feral child growing up on an island without any human companionship. It is a sort of philosophical *Bildungsroman*, one in which the path of learning roughly follows that of a Neoplatonic philosophic curriculum but without any texts provided to the student, hence the fact that the work became known in Europe initially as *Philosophus Autodidactus*.²⁰ Ṭufayl

17. Marco Lauri, “Utopias in the Islamic Middle Ages: Ibn Ṭufayl and Ibn al-Naf'is,” *Utopian Studies* 24.1 (2013): 23–40.

18. Emilio González-Ferrín, “The Disobedient Philosopher: Subtle Humanistic Insurgence in Ibn Ṭufayl,” in *Disobedient Practices: Textual Multiplicity in Medieval and Golden Age Spain*, ed. Anne Roberts and Belén Bistué (Newark: Juan de La Cuesta, 2015), 19.

19. For a concise introduction to this work, see Kukkonen Taneli, *Ibn Ṭufayl: Living the Life of Reason* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2014).

20. See note 16.

provides two possible accounts of the arrival of the baby on the island: the child might be the product of the spontaneous creativity of nature, or the fruit of a union on a neighbouring island. The eponymous protagonist of the tale whose name literally translates as “Live, son of Awake,” is initially raised by a deer (or gazelle; the word *ghazal* in Arabic, a fact which has been thought to indicate the importance of Al-Ghazali in the formation of the work).²¹ After the death of the deer, Ḥayy, then aged seven, attempts to understand the secrets of life and eventually dissects the deer only to find that the principle of life is not a material thing. The need to fend for himself in the face of what seem to be much better equipped creatures leads Ḥayy to develop rudimentary technology and eventually a certain sense of human superiority. At succeeding intervals of seven years, Ḥayy makes further discoveries, ascending from the immediate material world of nature to knowledge of the heavens and eventually knowledge of an immaterial first mover. His knowledge of God does not stop at this Aristotelian being, but rather proceeds beyond the rational to an experiential, mystical knowledge of God.

Ḥayy’s isolation ends when he is aged forty-nine. A solitary renunciant arrives on his quiet island. Following a comic depiction of the interactions between Ḥayy and Absāl, as the new arrival is named, the ability to communicate is established and eventually a philosophic friendship emerges between the two. Ḥayy and Absāl discover that their points of view largely coincide: Ḥayy’s education in nature led him to a vision that aligns quite neatly with that of Absāl’s revealed, prophetic religion. Only it is Ḥayy who has achieved the highest levels of wisdom, and who initiates Absāl into the most elevated mysteries. Absāl convinces Ḥayy to visit his own island of origin and share his wisdom with his compatriots. Here we are introduced to Salāmān, Absāl’s friend, and the governor of the island. In the end, things do not go particularly well. Ḥayy ends up disappointed by the slavishly legalistic approach to religion. Unable to reconcile their vision of spirituality with that which reigns in the city, Ḥayy and Absāl eventually retreat back to Ḥayy’s island of origin in order to pursue the life of contemplation and mystical ecstasy. It is this short, last section of *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, in which Ṭufayl describes Ḥayy’s visit to society, that will be most important to us in this study.

21. González-Ferrín, 21.

The work is framed as a letter to a friend in which the main story is prefaced by a short theological discussion situating the work in relation to the thought of Ibn Sīna (Avicenna), Ibn Bajja (Avempace), Al-Ghazali, and others. Al-Farabi's notion of religion as an imagistic version of philosophic truth is very obviously at work in *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*. Ṭufayl claims to walk in the tracks of an Ibn Sīna much more mystically inclined than the one we know in extant works (Ṭufayl even borrows the title of Ibn Sīna's work on "Eastern" philosophy). Ṭufayl gently criticizes Ibn Bajja, one of his immediate predecessors among Andalusian philosophers, for his failure to go beyond reason. With some reservations, Ṭufayl praises Al-Ghazali, the great critic of philosophy, who was anathema under the Almoravids but much appreciated under the Almohads in Ṭufayl's day.²²

Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān's relation to utopian literature is not clear.²³ The island where Ḥayy grows up is certainly a "no place" in so far as it is entirely imagined, and a "good place" in so far as it is a world where a feral child can fully realize the highest levels of human development. Moreover, it is a place where animals and humans live in harmony.²⁴ Yet, the topos, "place," that we commonly associate with utopian literature is usually a social place, a "republic." It is not obvious that we have any real society on Ḥayy's island. Ḥayy's island is perhaps

22. The Almoravides began to dominate Andalusia in 1090, while the Almohad reign in Andalusia begins with the occupation of Seville in 1147. See Pierre Guichard, *Al-Andalus 711–1492: Une histoire de l'Espagne musulmane* (Paris: Fayard/Plurriel, 2010).

23. Lauri writes, "The book thus qualifies as an unaccomplished, or 'ambiguous,' utopia. It shows many of the typical features we see in utopian discourse, except that it falls short of complete success" (24). The typical features Lauri has in mind are the place that is reached only by a voyage or the imagination and that contrasts with the real world known to exist. Lauri continues, "The Ḥayy shows most of the features typical of utopia. 'Classical' utopias, such as the ones of early modern western literature, typically include a journey (either real or metaphorical, for example, a dream) from the 'known' world to a previously unknown place, very often an island or an otherwise remote space, whose boundaries and gates are normally apparent. Past this boundary, the traveler is put in a situation where the well-ordained, harmonious society of Elsewhere can be contrasted with the 'real' world (both the traveler's and the author's, which often coincide), a contrast that, in most cases, pitilessly uncovers the inadequacy of the author's reality, which is, in many cases, shared by the main character. The ideal model is thus dynamically put in relation to reality" (24).

24. Éric Marion, in *Lumières arabes et Lumières modernes. Au miroir de l'utopie insulaire d'Ibn Ṭufayl* (Paris: Éditions Kimé, 2016), has in fact argued that we find in *Ḥayy* an authentic environmental ethic (58–82).

a society in so far as we can see the relation between human and animal as “society.”²⁵ Or again, we might see it as a social place once Absāl joins Ḥayy on the island and a friendship between them emerges. Perhaps we have in the relationship between Ḥayy and Absāl the *seeds* of a utopia, if a utopia that will look more like a Sufi brotherhood than a political state. But again, perhaps a utopia need not be a social organization like a republic.²⁶ To be sure, however, the island where Salāmān reigns is something of a dystopia. It is a place where fundamental spiritual truths are available only in watered-down form. It is a place where human life is under the sway of a kind of lie, if in some sense “noble” since it serves to protect the masses from their own base desires which would otherwise dominate them. Salāmān’s society is, furthermore, a place of intolerance; Ḥayy is essentially forced to leave it at the end of the philosophical tale.

Ṭufayl’s *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* has been read as an argument that philosophical reason and mysticism are better able reach the truth than the theology of revealed religion.²⁷ From this point of view, *Ḥayy* is about the relation between reason and revelation. But the work clearly deals with the question of the relation of the contemplative life to the active life, which is a major theme of More’s *Utopia*. *Ḥayy*, of course, gives primacy to the life of contemplation.²⁸

25. See Taneli Kukkonen, “No Man Is an Island: Nature and Neo-Platonic Ethics in *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46.2 (2008): 187–204.

26. Daniel Ogden, “Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) as Possible Ecotopias,” *Spaces of Utopia: An Electronic Journal* 5 (Summer 2007): 8–22, <http://ler.letras.up.pt>.

27. It evoked a response. Lauri comments, “the Syrian physician Ibn al-Naf is (d. 1288) wrote a broadly similar tale, the *Risālat Kāmiliyya*, about a feral child called Kāmil, which means ‘Perfect’ or ‘Complete,’ spontaneously generated on a desert island. Compared with Ibn Ṭufayl’s *Ḥayy*, however, Ibn al-Naf is’s work has different, if not opposed, ideological undertones, as the title of the book, referring to the life of the Prophet, suggests. Kāmil’s intellectual progress ends in rationally deducing orthodox religious truths rather than philosophical or mystical ones; organized society plays a much more positive role” (25).

28. It is worth noting at this point that Ṭufayl’s name has been found on the membership list of a Sufi brotherhood. It seems that his interest in mysticism was not only theoretical or literary. Lauri provides a useful history of interpretations of *Ḥayy*: “The early modern translators, and more recently George Hourani, understood the *Ḥayy* as being about reaching the truth through untrained reason aided only by sense experience. In this view, the climax of the narrative is the moment where *Ḥayy* reaches the unio mystica as a culmination of his progress toward science, by himself and without having any knowledge

Another approach to *Ḥayy* is to see it in relation to Quranic exegesis. From this point of view the work is not about a dichotomy concerning reason and revelation but rather is concerned with the nature of reason's application to revelation. The meaning of the Quran has been understood in terms of the outer *zahir* meaning, the literal meaning, and the inner or esoteric meaning, *batin*. *Ḥayy* would represent a kind of esoteric interpretation of the Quran while Salāmān's island is governed with fidelity to the exoteric, literal meaning of the text. If More read *Ḥayy*, then he may have been interested in the themes behind all of these readings.

A comparison of *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān* and *Utopia*

1) Ḥayy and Hythloday

The figures of Ḥayy and Hythloday have a certain resemblance in physical appearance and serve similar functions in the articulation of what we could call the "utopian visions" of their respective works. Both Ḥayy and Hythloday have an "uncivilized" exterior. Here is More's description of Raphael Hythloday:

One day after I had heard mass at Nôtre Dame, the most beautiful and most popular church in Antwerp, I was about to return to my quarters when I happened to see him [Peter Giles] talking with a stranger, a man of quite advanced years with a sunburned face, a long beard, and a cloak hanging loosely from his shoulders; from his face and dress, I took him to be a ship's captain.²⁹

of language whatsoever. The 'social,' shorter final part is seen as a less important sequel to this climax. A different view is well established among western scholars, according to an approach harking as far back as Ernest Renan where Muslim philosophy is conceived as being primarily concerned with a conflict between Reason and Revelation, which translates into Law in the social sphere. Leo Strauss and his school have supported a conception of this kind, though in a different form. This outlook already characterizes the interpretation of the *Ḥayy* by its first modern editor, Leon Gauthier, who followed Renan's ideas. These perspectives have some merit, but they only catch the epiphenomenon of a deeper contrast between the individual and society, a contrast that Ibn Ṭufayl had not, in the end, the means or the will to resolve" (Lauri, 30–31).

29. Adams and Logan, 43, modified; Surtz and Hexter, 4:49.

Ḥayy's appearance changes as he develops, but his mature appearance (which is rather more ragged than Hythloday's) is most clearly brought to light when seen by the eyes of another human being. Here is Ṭufayl's account of Absāl's first clear view of the strange island dweller who will soon become his friend:

When he got a good look at his captor [Ḥayy], clothed in hides still bristling with fur, his hair so overgrown that it hung down over a good part of his body, when he saw how fast he could run and how fiercely he could grapple, Absāl was terrified and began to beg for mercy.³⁰

Both Ḥayy and Hythloday are figures who, like the Greek cynics, do not respect the norms of society (or at least those of a particular society). Their rough appearances represent this rejection of certain sets of conventions. It is true that Hythloday is, or at least was for a certain period, in some sense an adopted member of the Utopian society, and he certainly does serve as its spokesperson. But he is also an outspoken critic of his own society of origin.

Ḥayy's philosophy—if his independently discovered system of knowledge of life qualifies as a "philosophy"—is *de facto* one of living life in accordance with nature, precisely the creed of the Greek cynics or 'dog-philosophers' who reject conventional law. Thanks to their standpoints situated outside of a society, both Ḥayy and Hythloday are capable of formulating a critique of it. Ḥayy's social critique is formulated from a point of view constructed entirely outside of human society. Hythloday's critique, in contrast, is formulated from the point of view of a wanderer figure that simultaneously belongs to multiple societies and none at all.

As noted above, the name Ḥayy ibn Yaḳzān literally means "Live, son of Awake." The significance of this name may have to do with the fact that he is fully realized both at the basic level of soul (the life principle) and at the spiritual-intellectual level. It turns out that Ḥayy is also one of the Islamic ninety-nine beautiful names of God and is commonly associated with the notion of eternal life. Hythloday, a product of More's hellenophilic imagination, signifies something like "Peddler of Nonsense." Raphael literally means "God's Healer" and is, of course, one of the Archangels. The names Ḥayy and Hythloday suggest that these two figures are in some sense close to God.

30. Goodman, 159; Gauthier, 141.

2) *Tradition, reason, and learning*

Early modern European readings of *Ḥayy* make much of the process by which Ḥayy acquires knowledge. He has no teachers, no books, no tradition, but by his curiosity and experiences, by his natural abilities, his body, his senses, and his reason, he rises to the very highest levels of knowledge. *Ḥayy* has been identified as a source of inspiration for early modern European empiricism (particularly that of John Locke). Ṭufayl's emphasis on empirical observation of the natural world, including the body, represented somewhat less of an innovation in the Islamic world than in Christian Europe; since in the medieval Islamic world it was common for philosophers to work as physicians, they were much more closely connected to Greek precedents in medicine than were their Latin counterparts.

In his own studies, however, Ḥayy proceeds entirely beyond the senses. The underlying metaphysical structure is thoroughly Neoplatonic. Ḥayy's development traces the return of the soul to the divine (this "return" is usually referred to as *anabasis* in Greek) through the hierarchically-organized sensible and intelligible universes, both manifestations of divine goodness. Many early modern empiricists, in the intellectual formation of whom translations of *Ḥayy* played a role, probably would have seen in the step over and beyond the sensible world a grievous violation of empirical methodology. Ṭufayl writes of Absāl's conversion to Ḥayy's way of seeing the world:

Hearing Ḥayy's description of the beings which are divorced from the sense-world and conscious of the Truth—glory be to him—his description of the Truth Himself, by all his lovely attributes, and his description, as best he could, of the joys of those who reach Him, and the agonies of those veiled from him, Absāl had no doubt that all the traditions of his religion about God, His angels, bibles and prophets, Judgement Day, Heaven and Hell were symbolic representations of these things that Ḥayy Ibn Yāqẓān had seen for himself. The eyes of his heart were unclosed. His mind caught fire. Reason and tradition were at one within him. All his old religious puzzlings were solved; all the obscurities clear. Now he had "a heart to understand."³¹

31. Goodman, 160; Gauthier, 144.

At the highest level of knowledge and understanding, we have reference to the “heart” as the most important “organ” of cognition. In so far as the heart is a central organ of knowing, Tufayl’s conception of rationality is rather distant from those with which we tend to work in our day.

When in book 1 of *Utopia* Peter Giles responds with incredulity to Hythloday’s claim that “If you had seen them, you would frankly confess that you had never seen a well-governed people anywhere but there,” Hythloday emphasizes the fact that Utopians did not come up with their superior government on account of tradition or natural ability. Rather, it is essentially only their “zeal to learn” that distinguishes them from other peoples. More writes,

“Come now,” said Peter Giles, “you will have a hard time persuading me one can find in that new world a better-governed people than in the world we know. Our minds are not inferior to theirs, and our governments, I believe, are older. Long experience has helped us develop many conveniences of life, to say nothing of chance discoveries that human ingenuity could never have hit upon.”

“As for the relative ages of the governments,” Raphael replied, “you might judge more accurately if you had read the histories of that part of the world. If we believe these records, they had cities there before there were even people here. What ingenuity has discovered or chance hit upon could have turned up just as well there as here. For the rest, I really think that even if we surpass them in natural intelligence, *they leave us far behind in their diligence and zeal to learn. ... This readiness to learn is, I think, the really important reason for their being better governed and living more happily than we do*, though we are not inferior to them in brains or resources.”³²

More seems to wish to emphasize that the insights of the Utopians are available to the natural reason of all human beings who are truly zealous in learning. Good government and happiness are in this picture directly conditioned by education. But education is a result of “readiness” or “zeal” to learn, which

32. Adams and Logan, 104–07, my emphasis; Surtz and Hexter, 1:106–09. This passage essentially concludes book 1.

functions like a virtue, an ethical disposition, which is cultivated as an ideal and as an element in culture, rather than imposed by law or other institutions. It is significant that More's view of education emphasizes leisure rather than structured schooling (although in *Utopia* we do find formal teaching institutions in the form of readings and lectures). The utopian system reserves time for learning in the form of leisure, whereby, like its classical precedents (in Aristotle in particular), this leisure is to be devoted to self-cultivation and will ultimately benefit the society as a whole. The point that human goodness develops naturally given the appropriate conditions is essentially humanistic.

Both Tufayl and More assert that humans are naturally capable of greater insights than we are usually given credit for—if only, freed from the limits imposed on the use of our natural capacities, we practise “zeal to learn.” Hayy does not simply exhibit zealous learning. His case is even more extreme: he is a paragon of individual perfectibility through study. Like *Utopia*, *Hayy* spurns idleness: Tufayl has *Hayy* criticize the manner in which the society he encounters seems to promote idleness (“leaving men idle to busy themselves with inane pastimes and neglect the Truth”³³). In *Utopia*, zeal for learning and the leisure to pursue it facilitate the perfection of society. Leisure as time excepted from the normal demands of life, however, seems to be a concept that only makes sense in the context of a society in which social demands tend to dominate life.³⁴ In *Hayy* we do not have a notion of leisure, because time devoted to the satisfaction of necessities of life is the exception rather than the norm.

3) *Property and the political*

Probably the most radical theme elaborated in More's *Utopia*, and the one most commented upon, is developed in its arguments concerning the community of property. Plato's *Republic* is an explicitly cited source for this position, and, of course, there are precedents in Christian, particularly monastic, thought, with which More was intimately familiar. Furthermore, *Utopia* was written at a time when the English “commons,” which was essentially public property, were being “enclosed,” or in our parlance, “privatized.” In More's time and place, the

33. Goodman, 161–62; Gauthier, 146–47.

34. In fact, part of the difference between Hayy's model and that of any city seems to revolve around the difference between hunting and gathering and agriculture.

common use of land was topical. All of these sources are sufficient to explain More's emphatic discussion of communism in *Utopia*.

However, there is a striking discussion of property in *Hayy* which might also have inspired More. This is a passage wherein is depicted Ḥayy's incomprehension with regard to certain aspects of the revealed religion he encountered. Ḥayy is, first of all, perplexed concerning the use that the prophet of this religion makes of symbols to portray the divine, thus encouraging humans to conceive of immaterial truths as corporeal and failing to accurately illustrate divine transcendence. Secondly, Ḥayy finds the ethical guidelines that the prophet puts forward wanting in so far as they do not derive directly from the inner character of the individual who seeks truth, they permit violation of Ḥayy's ascetic ethical ideal and, Ḥayy implies, they distract from human destiny. Ḥayy is particularly critical of the approach to wealth. We read,

why did he confine himself to these particular rituals and duties and *allow the amassing of wealth* and overindulgence in eating, leaving men idle to busy themselves with inane pastimes and neglect the Truth. Ḥayy's own idea was that no one should eat the least bit more than would keep him on the brink of survival. *Property (mâl) had no meaning for him, and when he saw all the provisions of the Law (shar') to do with money, such as the regulations regarding the collection and distribution of welfare or those regulating sales and interest, with all their statutory and discretionary penalties, he was dumbfounded. All this was superfluous.* If people understood things as they really are, Ḥayy said, they would forget these inanities and seek the Truth. They would not need all these laws. *No one would have any property of his own to be demanded as charity or for which human beings might struggle and risk amputation.* What made him think so was his naïve belief that all men had outstanding character, brilliant minds and noble souls. He had no idea how stupid, inadequate, thoughtless, and weak willed they are, "like cattle gone astray, only worse."³⁵

Ḥayy is perplexed by the fact that this revealed religion allows the amassing of property and has provisions governing taxes and charity. Moreover, we find a very significant parallel with More in the fact that Ḥayy links private property

35. Goodman, 161–62, modified, my emphasis; Gauthier, 146–47.

with crime and punishment. When he writes of the “risk [of] amputation,” he is clearly referring to Sharia punishment for theft. Like More, Ṭufayl suggests that property necessarily leads to “criminalization.”³⁶

Incidentally, the theme of property seems to have been an issue for Pico, too. We read in More's translation of the Italian humanist's biography,

There was nothing more odious nor more intolerable to him than as (Horace saith) the proud palaces of stately lords: wedding and worldly business he fled almost alike: notwithstanding when he was asked once in sport whether of those two burdens seemed lighter & which he would choose if he should of necessity be driven to that one and at his election: which he sticked thereat a while but at the last he shook his head and a little smiling he answered that he had lever take him to marriage, as that thing in which was less servitude & not so much jeopardy. Liberty above all things he loved, to which both his own natural affection & the study of philosophy inclined him: & for that was he always wandering & flyting & would never take himself to any certain dwelling.³⁷

Ṭufayl's (and Pico's) rejection of private property seems to be motivated primarily by the desire to remove obstructions for spiritual development. More's argument with private property is largely “this worldly,” aiming at psychological tranquility and political harmony. In *Ḥayy*, religious and political law coincide but serve only to govern what we could call “unperfected” souls, the souls of those who have not followed the curriculum of Ḥayy. In *Utopia*, where the religious and political are clearly distinct, and law operates at the level of the political, the community of property serves to eliminate the fear of want and need, and ultimately crime and punishment.

4) Religion: critique and freedom

While the critique of religion is central in Ṭufayl's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, it is somewhat less obvious in More's *Utopia*. However, it has been argued that More's *Utopia* elaborates the first modern argument for religious freedom and should be seen as a serious precedent for better known works such as John Locke's *Letter on*

36. See the long discussion in book 1 of *Utopia* (Adams and Logan, 54–81; Surtz and Hexter, 4:60–87).

37. Rigg, 41; Surtz and Hexter, 1:69.

Toleration (1689).³⁸ (Incidentally, the availability of translations of *Hayy* make it such that it could well have served as a source for *both* More and Locke in their thought on religious freedom.) What is interesting about both Ṭufayl and More (as well as Locke, as it turns out) is that their approaches to religion are characterized by attempts to valorize religion while limiting its possibly pernicious effects. In other words, both thinkers see religion as basically good, but also potentially dangerous.

Ḥayy's encounter with revealed religion is double. At first he encounters revealed religion when Absāl arrives as a visitor on Ḥayy's island. Thus, Ḥayy discovers the good aspects of the revealed religion of Absāl's society in Absāl's enlightened account. This revealed religion seems to have bred in Absāl a disposition which is not unlike Ḥayy's, and Ḥayy understands that many of the religious doctrines Absāl explains to him are symbolic versions of the philosophical and spiritual truths he himself has discovered. Later, Ḥayy encounters this same religion in a second step, that is, as it is manifested in society. This encounter, however, ends in disappointment.

Not only does Ḥayy's encounter with religion take place in two steps, but readers of the tale also see it from two perspectives, Absāl's and Ḥayy's. First, we read how Absāl finds truth in Ḥayy's descriptions of his naturally attained knowledge of

the beings which are divorced from the sense-world and conscious of the Truth—glory be to him—his description of the Truth himself, by all His lovely Attributes, and his description, as best he could, of the joys of those who reach Him and the agonies of those veiled from Him.³⁹

Ḥayy, for his part, finds in Absāl's account of his revealed religion a confirmation of his own experience and adopts some of Absāl's religious practices—"prayer, poor tax, fasting, and pilgrimage."⁴⁰ Yet, revealed religion does not seem to provide Ḥayy with any new knowledge or insight:

38. Sanford Kessler, "Religious Freedom in Thomas More's *Utopia*," *The Review of Politics* 64.2 (Spring 2002): 207–29.

39. See the passage cited for note 32, above. Goodman, 160; Gauthier, 144.

40. Goodman, 161; Gauthier, 145.

Hayy understood all this and found none of it in contradiction with what he had seen for himself from his supernal vantage point. He recognized that whoever had offered this description had given a faithful picture and spoken truly. This man must have been a “messenger sent by his Lord.” Hayy believed in this messenger and the truth of what he said. He bore witness to his mission as apostle of God.⁴¹

But he also is perplexed by some elements of the law.⁴² And after having visited the other island, he is left with a rather negative view of religion. We read, “*The sole benefit most people could derive from religion was for this world, in that it helped them lead decent lives without others encroaching on what belonged to them.*”⁴³ Ultimately, the critique of religion in *Hayy* is formulated in the depiction of a sort of dystopia. Religion is a world view and set of laws appropriate to those who fail to advance in spiritual development and who therefore are at risk of entering into conflict with one another and even with themselves.

More approaches the question of religion from a very different perspective. The Reformation looms behind all of his considerations concerning religion and its role in human development. Where questions concerning religious pluralism do not seem to be of any interest to Tufayl in *Hayy*, they are of central importance for More. This is why in *Utopia* the critique of religion is directly related to arguments for religious tolerance and religious freedom. The religious context of the Renaissance and the Reformation in Europe explains why More puts forward a model of religious freedom that includes conditions and limitations designed precisely to realize religious tolerance and freedom. Much of the picture of religion in *Utopia* is captured in Hythloday's account of the founding of *Utopia*. It reads as follows,

Utopus had heard that before his arrival the natives were continually squabbling over religious matters, and he had observed that it was easy to conquer the whole country because the different sects were too busy fighting one another to oppose him. And so at the very beginning, after he had gained the victory, he prescribed by law that everyone may cultivate

41. Goodman, 161; Gauthier, 145.

42. Cited above in section 3 (on property).

43. Goodman, 164, my emphasis; Gauthier, 152.

the religion of his choice and strenuously proselytise for it too, provided he does so quietly, modestly, rationally and without insulting others. If persuasion fails, no one may resort to abuse or violence; and anyone who fights wantonly about religion is punished by exile and slavery. [...] H]e was quite sure that it was arrogant folly for anyone to force conformity with his own beliefs on everyone else by threats and violence. He easily foresaw that if one religion is really true and the rest are false, the truth will sooner or later emerge and prevail by its own natural strength, if men will only consider the matter reasonably and moderately. [...] So he left the matter open, allowing each person to choose what he would believe. The only exception was a solemn and strict law against anyone who should sink so far below the dignity of human nature as to think that the soul perishes with the body, or that the universe is ruled by blind chance, not divine providence.⁴⁴

Although Utopians are obliged to believe in the immortality of the soul, the ethical system governing the ideal island focuses on matters pertaining to this world. Human happiness is its goal. The eudaimonic ethic behind the organization of Utopia includes a rather positive account of the role of pleasure in human life. This contrasts with Ḥayy's ascetic tendencies. We know that in his personal life More himself was both fun-loving and inclined towards asceticism, but in *Utopia* he shows little interest in asceticism.

Perhaps the emphasis on human happiness in *Utopia* is based on an implicit separation between church and state. Ṭufayl does not seem to entertain the possibility that the laws of religion and the laws of a state should have different ends. If a tenet of modern western political thought is the idea that the state should not be in the business of taking care of souls, Ḥayy in contrast seems to think that religion is actually the only way that the majority of souls, weak as they are, can be saved. In the model of the society represented by that which Salāmān governs, the political and the religious must coincide completely; the *raison d'être* of the state is precisely to prevent spiritual decline.

Some of the differences between Ṭufayl's and More's approaches to religion may be understood as stemming from different notions of law in Christian and Islamic traditions. Hythloday says that the Utopians have few laws and entertains the possibility that laws can be made by humans. In *Ḥayy* it seems, in accordance with Islamic tradition, that laws in a primary sense are divine laws.

44. Adams and Logan, 222–25; Surtz and Hexter, 4:218–21.

The place for human creativity in relation to law lies in the ability to interpret it. Ṭufayl's rational spirituality does seem to have much in common with Erasmian Catholicism, which had embraced reform, emphasized independent learning, but respected tradition. More himself suggests a rather relativistic approach to religion when he writes of Utopus (in the passage cited immediately above), "In such matters he was not at all quick to dogmatise, because he was uncertain whether God likes divers and manifold forms of worship and hence inspire different people with different views."

Ultimately, we can see More as responding to Ṭufayl's dystopian vision of religion. More, as it were, proposes a third way where Ṭufayl gives his readers a dichotomy. Indeed, Ṭufayl lived in a place where there was a degree of religious freedom that in many respects and at many times was more significant in extent than in Europe. It is striking that Ṭufayl, who worked at the Almohad court, would be at liberty to publish such a serious critique of religion. So we must recall that the dystopia of Salāmān's island is not a depiction of any existing society.⁴⁵ If in formulating his views on religion in *Utopia* More was influenced by Ṭufayl, then one of the most significant modern arguments for religious freedom in Europe would be directly indebted to Andalusian thought.⁴⁶ More did not live to see the massive destruction of human life in the religious wars of the latter part of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries in Europe, but he himself was, it seems, guilty of religious intolerance against Protestants, particularly during his chancellorship (1529–32). This is hard to reconcile with the more enlightened approach of Utopus.

Both *Ḥayy* and *Utopia* depict and discuss proselytism. In *Ḥayy*, there is a moment at which it seems we will witness a mutual conversion of Ḥayy and Absāl where each one's approach to the spiritual life complements the other's. But when at Absāl's prompting Ḥayy attempts to bring his approach to spirituality to Absāl's island, it is rather flatly rejected. In contrast, More's Hythloday is successful in his efforts to persuade his Utopian hosts to adopt his pragmatic version of Christianity. There are in Utopia rules governing proselytism, rules

45. It is possible that Ṭufayl's critique of legalism in *Ḥayy* was intended to be a critique of Almoravid rule.

46. Kessler argues that "More was the first Western thinker to publish a comprehensive defense of religious freedom" (208). According to Kessler "Most scholars fail to appreciate the significance of religious freedom [in More's *Utopia*] because it stands in the shadow of communism, the other great founding principle of More's republic" (209).

such as to guarantee religious exchange while limiting any form of fanaticism (a Christian convert was, Hythloday tells us, sentenced to exile for having violated these rules and creating public disorder).⁴⁷ Yet Hythloday seems to approach religion with the idea that we also have much to learn from the monotheistic Utopian Mithra religion. There is an implicit religious universalism behind his relatively long account of the Utopian religion. Utopian Mithraism is, it seems, a religion essentially devoid of revelation. We find in this utopian Mithraism interesting parallels to religion in *Hayy*, particularly when Hythloday explains of the Utopians that, “They think that the careful contemplation of nature, and the sense of reverence arising from it, are acts of worship to God.”⁴⁸

In *Hayy* it is ultimately only in friendship that religious exchange can take place. Proselytism seems to be a hopeless mode of communicating religious truth. In *Utopia* we have what could be referred to (despite the work’s explicit rejection of capitalism) as a “market of ideas.” In Tufayl’s tale the relationship between ideas, spiritualities, and world views is starker. The figure of Hayy is a kind of anti-prophet in so far as his insight is acquired exclusively by way of natural reason. Yet his spirituality ends up being focused on the “other-worldly.” As we have seen above, in Tufayl’s work the prophetism of revealed religion, its images and laws, turns out to be of relevance primarily to “this-worldly” affairs.

5) *The contemplative life vs. the active life*

One of the most prominent themes in More’s *Utopia* concerns the relative value of the contemplative vs. the active life. This is a classical theme if there ever was one, prominent as it is already in the works of Plato and Aristotle and of critical importance in Stoic thought. We have already at the very beginning of the first book of *Utopia* a first glimpse of this theme: “‘My dear Raphael,’ he [Peter Giles] said, ‘I’m surprised that you don’t enter some king’s service; for I don’t know a single prince who wouldn’t be very glad to have you.’”⁴⁹ Raphael, however, equates service to a monarch with slavery. Raphael even cites Plato, saying, “unless kings became philosophical themselves, the advice of philosophers would never influence them, deeply immersed as they are and infected with

47. Adams and Logan, 220–23; Surtz and Hexter, 4:218–19.

48. Adams and Logan, 228–29, modified; Surtz and Hexter, 4:224–25.

49. Adams and Logan, 50–51; Surtz and Hexter, 4:54–55.

false values from boyhood on.”⁵⁰ We know that More, who once considered entering the monastic life, was quite preoccupied with this problem. But if More was a deeply religious man and was interested in spirituality, Hythloday seems to reject the active—that is, the political—life, not in order to retreat to a monastery or a cave for quiet contemplation, but rather in order to guarantee his freedom as a kind of wandering cynic philosopher.⁵¹ One might justifiably ask whether More was a mystic, like Tufayl clearly was.⁵² In any case, there is no significant reference to mysticism in *Utopia*. With its extensive provisions for leisure (and its separation of church and state) the utopian state seems in some sense designed to overcome the division between the active and the contemplative lives. What is striking in *Utopia* is the little space there is to be alone. There are no caves for meditation on the island of *Utopia*.

In *Hayy*, by contrast, it seems that the highest levels of human development can be accessed only by living in isolation. Taken as a whole, the story of Hayy's auto-didactic progress implies that he is capable of ascending in spiritual development thanks to the fact that he is alone, the unfolding of his natural

50. Adams and Logan, 82–83; Surtz and Hexter, 4:86–87.

51. Kessler, 224, provides a concise account of how the religion that Hythloday transmitted to the Utopians is different from traditional Catholicism: “Utopian Christianity was quite unlike traditional Catholicism, however, because Hythlodæus himself brought this faith to the island and shaped it according to his own predilections. Hythlodæus was ‘unreservedly’ a philosopher and, as such, a very dubious Catholic (51.2). He rejected authority, avoided institutional ties, and criticized the medieval Church for distorting Christ’s teaching. In fact, his religious independence was so great that he took no Christian literature or Bible with him on what was to be his final departure from Europe (see 107.20–21; 181.33ff.) This independence combined with Utopia’s isolation enabled Hythlodæus to present Christianity to the Utopians as he wished. His version of the faith, like that of Erasmus, stressed the sacraments and the character, teaching, and miracles of Christ rather than the complex doctrinal requirements of the Church (217.36–39; 219.1). Hythlodæus also made much of the disciples’ common way of life in deference to the prejudices of his audience (219.1–8). While in book one of *Utopia* he railed against those who would ‘accommodate [Christ’s] teaching to men’s morals as if it were a rule of soft lead,’ he made Utopian Christianity wholly compatible with Utopia’s common faith and with her legal and ethical codes (101.33–34). Indeed, he invoked Christ’s authority in support of Utopian laws which he recommended for worldwide adoption (243.25–32).”

52. G. K. Chesterton said of More, “He was a mystic and a martyr,” in Chesterton’s “A Turning Point in History,” in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. Germain Marc’hadour and Richard Standish Sylvester (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977), 501. Marie-Claire Phélippeau, however, concludes that More was not really a mystic in any standard sense; see Phélippeau, “Thomas More, the Mystic?,” *Moreana* 52.199–200 (2017): 135–54.

abilities unimpeded by the mores imposed by society. Upon encountering revealed religion, Ḥayy discerns the tension between the solitary and the communal lives. We read,

In the Law were certain statements proposing a life of solitude and isolation and suggesting that by these means salvation and spiritual triumph could be won. Other statements, however, favored the life in a community and involvement in society. Absāl devoted himself to the quest for solitude, preferring the words of the Law in its favor because he was naturally a thoughtful man, fond of contemplation and of probing for the deeper meanings of things; and he did find the most propitious time for seeking what he hoped for to be when he was alone. But Salāmān preferred being among people and gave greater weight to the sayings of the Law in favor of society, since he was by nature chary of too much independent thinking or doing. In staying with the group he saw some means of fending off demonic promptings, dispelling distracting thoughts, and in general guarding against the goadings of the devil. Their differences on this point became the cause of their parting.⁵³

Salāmān agrees with Utopus in his insistence on the importance of participation in society. However, in contrast to *Utopia* there is in Ḥayy no mention of rules enforcing participation in public life (the common meals, etc.). Yet, one would not be surprised if Salāmān should have approved of such rules, since he is introduced to readers as follows: “The ruler of the island and its most eminent man at this time was Salāmān, Absāl’s friend who believed in living within society and held it unlawful to withdraw.”⁵⁴ As we have seen, after his tour of the neighbouring island, Ḥayy’s views of society become adverse. On the basis of his experience there, he concludes that most people do not rise even to the level of reason, not to speak of the highest levels of spiritual awareness which are to be found beyond reason. We read,

Ḥayy now understood the human condition. He saw that most men are no better than unreasoning animals, and realized that all wisdom and

53. Goodman, 156–57; Gauthier, 137–38.

54. Goodman, 163; Gauthier, 150.

guidance, all that could possibly help them was contained already in the words of the prophets and the religious traditions. None of this could be different. There was nothing to be added. There is a man for every task and everyone belongs to the life for which he was created. "This was God's way with those who came before, and never will you find a change in the ways of God."⁵⁵

Incidentally, Pico, who as we have seen perhaps served as intermediary between More and Tufayl, is also fully engaged with the question of the relation between the contemplative and the active life. He articulates a vigorous defense of philosophy in his letter to Andrew Corneus, a letter which More had translated and appended to Pico's bibliography. In this letter Pico makes a stand for the philosophical life, writing, "And I desire you not so to embrace Martha that thee should utterly forsake Mary. Love them & use them both, as well study as worldly occupation."⁵⁶

6) *Crisis*

The final aspect of *Hayy* and *Utopia* that I will address has to do not with elements internal to the texts, but rather with such as pertain to the respective environments in which they were written. Both More and Tufayl lived in times of crisis. Both Tufayl and More were statesmen of sorts. And both were deeply religious. Tufayl lived at a time when the Almoravids had been upset and replaced by the Almohads. The political reversal coincided with a theological and philosophical reversal. The Almoravids had completely rejected Al-Ghazali, that unrelenting critic of "the philosophers" (particularly Avicenna), banning his works. Things were turned around completely under the Almohads for whom Al-Ghazali was a key figure of ideological orientation. And under the Almohads, Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who was in some sense a protégé of Tufayl and champion of philosophy against the charges of Ghazali, would see his books burned. The crisis of twelfth-century Andalusia was not only a struggle between the Almoravids and the Almohads; Christian powers also figured in the political troubles. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, Arab-Islamic power in Andalusia had been critically undermined, never to recover entirely.

55. Goodman, 164; Gauthier, 153.

56. Rigg, 49ff.; Surtz and Hexter, 1:86.

More's *Utopia* is a response to crisis emerging in the European world, the emergence of capitalism and colonialism, and, of course, the Reformation. More seems to have an uncanny awareness of the immanent destruction of societies different from our own, a destruction driven largely by greed. (Recall the colonial destruction of the Aztec Empire in 1521 and the Inca Empire in 1533). Of course, one of the problems of Renaissance thinkers was reconciling classical learning with its emphasis on human reason with the spirituality of Christian (particularly Catholic) religion. The relation between faith and reason was of course of crucial importance for Pico.

I suggest that both *Ḥayy* and *Utopia* are fictional and imaginative ways of dealing with crisis. If we recognize this, we can understand how aspects of these two works have similar functions. In fact, I suggest that one of the characteristics of the utopian literature, as a genre, consists in the fact that it responds to crisis. The nature of the crises faced by Ṭufayl and More were political, philosophical, religious, and personal. The nature of these crises was such as to stimulate the imagination of our thinkers. The alienation which at the psychological level constitutes an existential response to cataclysmic political circumstances runs parallel to the alienation in the imaginative process—the making “other” (*alius*)—which is constitutive of the utopian genre. I suggest that More, if he did read *Ḥayy*, recognized a philosophical crisis reflected in the text and learned from the philosophical approach to this crisis that he found in Ṭufayl's work: the utopian approach. This approach involves following through with the psychological alienation—through a process of imaginative alienation, or what we might call “insular thinking.” In this model, the waters that separate land represent buffers that make critical thinking possible.

Ṭufayl talks very explicitly about his work as, on the one hand, representing the divulgation of secrets, but on the other as covered by a “thin veil.” It is the special circumstances, the circumstances of crisis, which make it necessary to bring to language—written language—truths that normally would circulate in more obscure ways. If crisis provokes this *prise de parole* in Andalusia, we might suggest that the new genres of More's day were also an effect of crisis.

Conclusion

Given Thomas More's historical and intellectual contexts, the nature of the parallels between *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* and *Utopia* demonstrate that it is plausible

that More read Ṭufayl's work and drew upon it in his thought. If this is the case, we shall have to revise our understanding of More as a Renaissance humanist. We can understand More as a "Picoist" among Renaissance thinkers in so far as his humanism reaches—albeit rather modestly in comparison with Pico's—beyond a revival of Greco-Roman intellectual traditions.

It has been argued that More's *Utopia* is a serious work of political theory based squarely in the tradition of Renaissance humanism and, elsewhere, that it represents the first substantial argument for religious freedom in early modern European thought.⁵⁷ Given these evaluations of More's work and its role in European thought, it will be of crucial significance if his contributions to these areas are nourished by a non-European source, by an Islamic thinker, and by a text that does not belong in any strict sense to the "western canon." Early modern European political thought and thought concerning religious freedom are often taken to be constitutive of our contemporary "Western" world view. If *Utopia* is, indeed, a pivotal work in Western political and religious thought, and if More was influenced by Ṭufayl in *Utopia*, in particular in his conceptions of the political and the religious, then important elements of our modern approach to politics and religion can be, at least in part, traced back to twelfth-century Andalusia.

If at one level we can understand More as being influenced by and appropriating elements from Ṭufayl, we can also understand him as responding to Ṭufayl. This is true even if we do not have sufficient historical evidence to prove that More was influenced by Ṭufayl. Where Ḥayy is a long account of the natural perfectibility of the individual human, *Utopia* provides some kind of account of the perfectibility of human society. In the few pages that recount Ḥayy's visit to, disappointment with, and departure from Salāmān's island, Ṭufayl gives us something of a dystopia. Ḥayy's island is anarchic; it is something of an anti-republic. Ṭufayl seems to suggest that communal life of a certain sort—governed by laws that constrain those who have not risen to a certain level of understanding of reality—is not a communal life at all. In *Utopia*, More in some sense presents an alternative to Ṭufayl's anarchic anti-republic.

Both Ṭufayl and More inherit a Platonic model of the soul that divides the soul into higher and lower parts. This model is clearly at work in Ṭufayl,

57. This is the main argument of George M. Logan, *The Meaning of More's "Utopia"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

where the superior part of the soul uses the lower capacities of the material soul to ascend ever higher. Ḥayy's version of asceticism, where the desires of the lower soul must be held in check in order to pursue spiritual development, has repercussions on his view of sociability. In the end, he seems to think that a true bond between humans can occur only where humans rise to this highest level of soul. That is, the spiritual friendship between Ḥayy and Absāl is conditional upon their having overcome the baser desires of the lower soul and sharing a spiritual vision. For Ḥayy, the religious and political laws that govern Salāmān's island are only necessary in a context where people operate at the level of base desire. Ṭufayl's model seems to be more aristocratic, since Ḥayy despairs at the idea that most people will not rise to a level of spiritual development at which they could dispense with the externally imposed law that regulates lower desires. If we can portray the model in *Ḥayy* in terms of virtue, we might say that for Ṭufayl, intellectual (spiritual) virtue trumps moral (social) virtue. In a certain sense, the picture of politics in Ḥayy is Hobbesian. At the level of the lower soul, *homo homini lupus est!*

The picture of human nature in *Utopia* is more optimistic, and, in consequence, it can easily accommodate political egalitarianism. The virtues that are cultivated on the island of Utopia are relational and social, including, significantly, the virtue of tolerance. The model of soul behind the structure of laws and rules implies that the lower desires of the soul only become dangerous for interpersonal relations when social circumstances permit negative emotions—in Platonic psychology generally associated with the “lower soul”—to emerge. According to More, it is above all fear that disrupts society and *causes* greed. These dangerous negative emotions can, however, by the community of property (and an appropriate socialization), be eliminated. More articulates a preemptive criticism of Hobbes's conception of individuals as fundamentally in competition with one another.

In *Ḥayy*, in contrast, virtue is conceived primarily in terms of one's relation to the cosmos (including nature) and the divine, rather than to other people. The topos, “place,” which Ḥayy inhabits is not a city but a spiritual cosmos. According to the story we read in *Ḥayy*, it is through education—self-education in relation to the natural world—that one can find one's place in the physical and spiritual cosmos. Such an education is only possible in the absence of laws and complex social relations. According to the account we read in *Utopia*, one finds one's place in a social reality that accommodates human

intellectual needs by leisure and intellectual nourishment and that proscribes the economic relationship at the source of emotional turmoil: private property. Ṭufayl and More both put a general Platonic psychological model to work, but in different ways, in order to address crises, political and religious, that cut to the core of human reality. This Platonic model allows these thinkers to project and explore spaces inner and outer, social and cosmic, that are good (*eu*) and elusive, even non-existent (*ou*). That More might have reached to Ṭufayl's book in a search for ways to deal with the crises that faced him, his country, Europe, and the world suggests that our problems will best be faced by the combined philosophical resources of our world cultures.