

The Freudian psychological life of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan.

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Introduction

The story of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan is a philosophical novel written in the early 12th century by the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Tufayl, Latinized as Abubacer.¹ The story briefly goes as follows. As a baby, Hayy is raised and fed by a deer on a deserted tropical island. Hayy grows older and learns how to walk and how to mimic various sounds of animals. He notices the differences between himself and the other animals on the island, but also realizes he has advantages over these animals. He is able to assemble tools to protect himself from the animals, to gather food or to build a shelter. At the age of 7 Hayy experiences his first loss of a loved one with the death of his mother deer.² At the age of 21, Hayy expands his experiments on nature, including animals, plants and celestial bodies.

The fictional character of the Aristotelian Ibn Tufeyl gradually hypothesizes several metaphysical themes such as the existence of a non-corporeal world, the existence of the tripartite soul and the necessary existence of an Unmoved Mover. From the age of 35, Hayy dedicates his life to knowing this Being, which he regards as the highest form of pleasure that can be attained, through introspection and spiritual rituals such as a Pythagorean diet. He goes even more extreme with his diets and starts to practise an ascetic lifestyle, without moving or eating for days in his cave, “Even when He caused harm or pain to his body, even if He destroyed it completely, he must rejoice in His [God] rule.”³ At the age of 49, Hayy reaches a spiritual state in which he finds the distinction between himself and this Being, being dissolved. Hayy one day encounters another human for the first time in his life named ‘Absal’. They meet and gradually learn to communicate, they conclude that Hayy’s spiritual practices on the deserted island and his hypotheses in the past half-century corresponds with that of Absal’s religion, which is Islam.

¹ This philosophical novel was translated into Dutch by Johannes Bouwmeester and published by Jan Rieuwerts, friends of Baruch Spinoza, in 1672.

² Ibn Tufayl is following heptadic age stages throughout his novel.

³ Ibn Tufayl & Lenn Goodman. (2009). *Ibn Tufayl’s Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A philosophical tale*. University of Chicago Press. p 150.

The main project of the Aristotelian-Sufi Islamic Ibn Tufayl is to prove that one is able to find God through the examination of nature, reasoning, philosophy and introspection. Ibn Tufayl argues that not only God can be found through reasoning without influences of society or an external authority, but that one can even find God through specific spiritual-religious rituals ‘by gaining mastery over the demands of the drives’⁴, in Freudian terms. Despite these far-reaching conclusions, Ibn Tufayl’s philosophical novel is indeed a sterile thought experiment to explore the Freudian psychoanalytical notions of Es, Ich, and Über-Ich in a human, in this case Hayy, isolated from societal, cultural, and religious influences.

In this essay, the psychological life of Hayy will be explored through the Freudian psychoanalytic notions of the Es, Ich and Über-Ich. Within the Es, the clear manifestation of the two forces of Eros and destruction drive in both Hayy’s youth and older age will be analyzed. The development of Hayy’s Ich and the Über-Ich will especially be explored within the light of an absence of influences of culture, society and civilization on a deserted island.

The Deserted Es, Ich and Über-Ich.

The first Freudian psychological apparatus, the Es, is the oldest zone psychological apparatus and is for Hayy the less impacted part of his psyche by the desertedness, since it is the psychological expression of his biology and genetics.⁵ Thus, whether deserted or not, the Es is the Es at birth. The two forces or drives within the Es, the Eros and the destruction drive, although being continuously active throughout Hayy’s life, clearly manifest themselves as a combined force at two moments in both the younger and the older ages of Hayy, which following Freud is very well possible: “in the biological functions, the two basic drives work against one another or combine with one another.”⁶ The first manifestation is when Hayy’s mother deer dies. Hayy decides to cut her body open to examine if a life giving force could be discovered and be restored. However, what follows is further destruction caused by the dissection itself (destruction drive) on the beloved mother deer (Eros):

Certain that the organ where the hurt had settled must be in her breast, he decided to search for and examine it. Perhaps he would be able to get hold of the hurt and remove it. Still he was afraid this very operation might be worse than the original

⁴ Sigmund Freud. (2006). Part One: The Nature of Things Physical. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. p 2.

⁵ *idem*.

⁶ *Ibid*, p 5.

damage. His efforts might do more harm than good. He tried to think whether he had ever seen any animal recover from such a state; and, unable to do so, he lost hope of her getting better unless he did something. But there remained some hope of her recovery if he could find the critical organ and take away the hurt. So he decided to cut open her breast and find out what was inside. [...] Realizing that whatever had lived in that chamber [*heart*, emphasis added] had left while its house was intact, before it had been ruined, Hayy saw that it was hardly likely to return after all the cutting and destruction. The body now seemed something low and worthless compared to the being he was convinced had lived in it for a time and then departed.⁷

In the second manifestation, the Eros is combined with a destruction drive that, is not pointed towards an external object, but this time is internalized towards Hayy itself. When Hayy becomes older, he concludes through examination of nature and reasoning that a creator must exist. He goes even more extreme by making an ascetic life his own; in order to know and love God, he must discover the image of God within himself through complete abstinence of the material world. Days pass for Hayy in his cave, without having any food or without moving, “Even when He caused harm or pain to his body, even if He destroyed it completely, he must rejoice in His [God] rule.”⁸ The destruction drive in Hayy essentially longs for the death, at least the death of his material body, such that his soul can (re-)unite with God (Eros):

So Hayy undertook to expel all this from himself, for none of these things was conducive to the ecstasy he now sought. He would stay in his cave, sitting on the stone floor, head bent, eyes shut, oblivious to all objects of the senses and urges of the body, his thoughts and all his devotion focused on the Being Whose Existence is Necessity, alone and without rival. When any alien thought sprang to his imagination, Hayy would resist it with all his might and drive it out of his mind. He disciplined himself and practiced endurance until sometimes days could pass without his moving or eating. And sometimes, in the midst of his struggles, all thoughts and memories would vanish, except self-consciousness. Even when immersed in the beatific experience of the Necessarily Existent Truth, his own subjecthood would not disappear.⁹

⁷ Ibn Tufayl & Lenn Goodman. (2009). *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A philosophical tale*. University of Chicago Press. p 125.

⁸ *Ibid.* p 150

⁹ *Ibid.* p 156

The second psychological apparatus of Hayy, the Ich, is heavily influenced by the desertedness on the island since the external world influences a part of the Es to develop as the Ich and since in turn, the Ich mediates between the external world and the Es.¹⁰ The function of the Ich is two-folded, towards the external world:

getting to know the stimuli there, by storing information about them (in the memory), by avoiding excessively strong stimuli (through flight), by dealing with moderate stimuli (through adaptation), and finally by learning to change to the external world in an expedient way to its own advantage (through activity).¹¹

And towards the internal world:

with respect to the Es, by gaining mastery over the demands of the drives, by deciding whether they should be allowed gratification, by postponing this gratification until the time and circumstances are favourable in the external world, or by suppressing their excitations altogether.¹²

Hayy grows up in a totally different external world as our children of a cultural, societal, civilizational modern world grow up. Hayy encounters dangers from the moment he came to the island as a baby, with no human parents and with constant threats from wild animals. Our children grow up in a safe world, they barely experience excessively strong (dangerous) stimuli and the need to change the external world to its own advantage is barely needed since food and safety are automatically provided by parents. The Ich, thus needs to use its functions less, and therefore becomes less trained. In other words, the Ich of the civilized child is less developed than the Ich of Hayy. While at the same time, from a Freudian perspective, it may for Hayy be easier to stay healthy and non-neurotic, since he is isolated from civilization, or at a smaller scale, a family, that does not put demands on his Ich:

Nor ought we to forget, therefore, the influence of civilization when it comes to the factors conditioning neurosis. We recognize that it is easy for the barbarian to be healthy, whereas it is a difficult task for the civilized human. We may find the

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud. (2006). Part One: The Nature of Things Physical. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. p 17

¹¹ Ibid, p 2

¹² Ibid, pp 2-3.

yearning for a strong, uninhibited *Ich* perfectly comprehensible; but, as our current age shows us, it is in the most profound sense inimical to civilization. And, since the demands of civilization are represented by the upbringing in the family, we must also bear in mind this biological characteristic of the human species, the extended period of childhood dependency, when we are considering the aetiology of neurosis.¹³

The earlier psychoanalytic position discussed not only supports Ibn Tufayl's notion that Hayy would be able to ascetically master his own demands to such degrees, it underlines that *only* Hayy's *Ich* would be able to master the demands of the *Es* to such extreme degrees. If the *Ich* has to battle on two fronts as Freud states,¹⁴ it first has to undergo an extreme training in the external world during childhood on an abandoned island, in order to win the second battle with the *Es* in the internal world at later ages in which "He [Hayy] disciplined himself and practised endurance until sometimes days could pass without his moving or eating."¹⁵

The desertedness also has a major impact on the third psychical Freudian authority, which is the *Über-Ich*. Despite the absence of human parental influences with absence of "the familial, racial and national traditions that they hand down, along with the demands of the particular social milieu they represent." and "the later parental substitutes and other people who carry on having an influence, such as educators, public role models and respected social ideals",¹⁶ Hayy still would develop an *Über-Ich* from a Freudian psychoanalytic notion, since there was a long period of seven years of childhood dependency on the mother deer:

We can suppose that an *Über-Ich* is always present when there has been a prolonged period of childhood dependency, as with humans.¹⁷

His *Über-Ich* however, would correspond to a less complex, animal psychology and animal morality¹⁸. In addition, although Freud states that the influencers should be 'people', it is not clear why such a necessity should exist. In Hayy's case, he consciously or unconsciously was

¹³ Sigmund Freud. (2006). Part Two: The Practical Task. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. p 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 54.

¹⁵ Ibn Tufayl & Lenn Goodman. (2009). *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A philosophical tale*. University of Chicago Press. p 156.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud. (2006). Part One: The Nature of Things Physical. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. p 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p 4.

¹⁸ Ibn Tufayl would disagree, since he asserts that an external authority (consequently morals) can arise from within by exploration of nature and with the use of reason.

influenced by what he observed on the island and in animals. Hayy compares himself to other animals and realizes that no one looks like him; while he is completely naked, other animals have fur or tails concealing their genital area.

No maimed or deformed animal he could find was at all like himself. All other animals, he observed, had covered outlets for their bodily wastes— the solid by a tail, the liquid by fur or the like. And the fact that the private parts of an animal were better concealed than his own disturbed him greatly and made him very unhappy. When he was nearly seven and had finally lost hope of making up the deficiencies which so disturbed him he took some broad leaves from a tree and put them on, front and back. Then out of plaits of palms and grass he made something like a belt about his middle and fastened his leaves to it.¹⁹

Hayy also observes practices and traditions in other animals that he would mimic, thereby developing an animal morality based on his observations of other animals which would shape his Über-Ich:

They [two ravens] fought until one struck the other dead, whereupon it scratched a hole in the earth and buried the dead one. Hayy said to himself, “it surely was good of this bird to bury the other, although it was wrong to kill him. I ought to do the same for my mother”.²⁰

Later, when Hayy becomes older, he encounters another human being named Absal for the first time of his life. Hayy first learns human language and later shares his ideas on God and the Truth he reached using his examination of nature, reason and asceto-spiritual practices. Absal and Hayy come to the conclusion 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 Hayy Ibn Yaqzan had seen for himself”.²¹ The Über-Ich of Hayy, who developed out of an animal Über-Ich, without influences of culture, society, civilization and religion, “corresponded to the religious practices he [*Absal*, emphasis added] had learned in his society.”²² The story of Hayy ends after Hay and Absal travel to the civilized world, where Hayy shares his ideas on and his experiences with God only to be disappointed by

¹⁹ Ibn Tufayl & Lenn Goodman. (2009). *Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan: A philosophical tale*. University of Chicago Press. p 119

²⁰ *Ibid*, p 115.

²¹ *Ibid*, p 164

²² *Idem*.

realizing that those civilized were only culturally religious people with a numb, superficial, undertrained Über-Ich, “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.”²³ Hayy eventually returns to the deserted island to practice an ascetic life together with his friend Absal in order to experience the presence of God and live by his moral rules.

Ibn Tufayl overestimates the Über-Ich developed on an deserted Island, by arguing that the Über-Ich has the potential capacity to develop and reach the same moral laws as an Über-Ich with cultural, societal, civilizational and religious influences. To be more precise, Ibn Tufayl even argues that an Über-Ich without the influences of civilization has the potential to develop a more pure Über-Ich, or in other words, that civilization and traditions may stagnate the development of a strong Über-Ich. As mentioned earlier, this is in principle a non-Freudian understanding of the Über-Ich, since “the Über-Ich essentially represents the influence of what is taken over from other people”²⁴ or in Hayy’s case ‘animals’ as substitute for people, at most. Ibn Tufeyl’s intention essentially is to prove that a deserted human being should be able to reach to the conclusion that a creator must exist, through examination of nature using human reason. However, Ibn Tufeyl goes much further by concluding that a deserted human being, without influences of culture, society, civilization or religion, does not only have the capacity to find a creator, but also is should be able to discover certain divine moral laws (e.g. fasting, living an ascetic life) through introspection alone, which exactly is the non-Freudian assumption:

The claims of philosophers and believers that man's moral sense isn't instilled into him by his parents or acquired by him as a member of the community but is infused into him from a higher authority are probably based on an inkling of the Oedipal fact.²⁵

Conclusion

In this essay, the psychical life of the deserted Hayy was explored using Freudian psychoanalytical notions of the Es, the Ich, and the Über-Ich. First, the two forces of Eros and the destruction drive within the Es of Hayy were analyzed. The first manifestation appears with the dissection, and thus the destruction, of his beloved mother deer’s body after her

²³ Ibid, p 170.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud. (2006). Part One: The Nature of Things Physical. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. p 4.

²⁵ Sigmund Freud. (2006). Part Two: The Practical Task. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*. p 60.

death. The second manifestation appears during Hayy's asceto-spiritual experience with God at older age, which pushed Hayy to the edge of the destruction of his own physical body in an attempt to mentally and spiritually reach his beloved God. As with the Ich of Hayy, it is well-developed, because it needs to carry out its function in the external world often during his childhood on a dangerous and deserted island and because of the lack of demands of culture, society, civilization and religion. Consequently, it becomes possible for his Ich to gain mastery over the demands of the internal world and the forces of the Es later in his life. Despite the desertedness and the lack of societal influences, Hayy does develop an animal-level Über-Ich, which originates from his prolonged period of childhood dependency on his mother deer and from his observations of the outward appearances, behaviours and traditions of other animals on the island. Based on a Freudian analysis, it can be concluded that Ibn Tufeyl is over-estimating Hayy's psychical apparatus with the dynamics of the Es, Ich and Über-Ich to not only attain awareness about the existence of a creator, but also to discover divine moral laws through examination of nature and introspection on a deserted island alone, without cultural, societal, civilizational and religious influences.

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