

Avner Ben-Zaken. *Reading Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān: A Cross-Cultural History of Autodidacticism.*

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. xiii + 192 pp. index. illus. map. bibl. \$60. ISBN: 978-0-8018-9739-9.

This highly interesting volume can be described in three ways. First, it is a historical analysis of the concept of autodidacticism, described by the author as a “fundamental concept of modernity” (xi). Second, it is the history of a particular book, *Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān*, the literary work composed by the medieval Islamic philosopher Ibn-Tufayl. Ben-Zaken traces the book’s history in lively detail, narrating how it was received in quite diverse late medieval and early modern cultures as it was translated from Arabic to Hebrew, Hebrew to Latin, and then from Arabic to Latin and Latin to English, over the course of five centuries. Finally, the book is self-described as an exercise in interdisciplinarity, for it claims to represent “a historiographic proposal for a more unified cultural history, interdisciplinarily fusing seemingly mutually exclusive fields” (xii). Ben-Zaken provides examples of how perspectives from the history of science, cultural contexts, and intellectual history can assist the interpreter of a philosophical text. The method of this historiographic proposal is described as “historical sampling,” whereby the appropriation of a text in various cultural contexts is displayed and compared. In all three of the abovementioned ways, the present reviewer judges the book to be a success. Moreover, it is written in such a lively style with rich detail that it is engrossing from start to finish.

The volume examines a quartet of “historical moments” or “disparate cultural nexuses” of the reception of *Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān*, a book that the author understands to have been composed by Ibn-Tufayl as an argument for the view that human reason can attain scientific knowledge about nature and mystical insights about God, independently of social conventions and religious traditions. Ben-Zaken begins with the authorship of the book in the twelfth century, showing how Ibn-Tufayl sought to appropriate features of Sufi practice while still defending the necessity of philosophical practice. The narrative then turns to fourteenth-century

Barcelona, where Moses Narbonni commented on Ibn-Tufayl's book to defend the teaching of philosophy to adolescents. The story picks up again in fifteenth-century Florence, where *Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān* was encountered by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and then the account turns to the seventeenth century, where Ibn-Tufayl's work was used to validate the empiricism and experimentalism of English thinkers such as Boyle and Locke.

The lengthiest section of the volume, the one likely to be of greatest interest to readers of this journal, is the chapter on the crises of late fifteenth-century Florence. The author highlights a brief reference to *Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān* in Pico's *Disputationes*, the massive anti-astrological work, arguing that this reference underscores autodidacticism as a key piece of evidence in Pico's opposition to astrological determinism. He bolsters this view with additional evidence: Pico had *Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān* translated into Latin in 1493. Ben-Zaken situates Pico's astrological polemics within a cultural struggle in Florence over homosexuality after the death of Lorenzo de' Medici. On this account, Pico opposed the astrological view that sexual disposition was determined by planetary positions. The reader learns that there is "some evidence" and there are "a few clues" that Pico "himself engaged in homosexual relations and sodomizing of adolescents," and that "the murders of Poliziano and Pico were sexually motivated" (84, 93).

I have a few chronological quibbles. At the end of the volume the author notes that *Ḥayy Ibn-Yaqzān* "has been echoed by" Pico's most famous work, the *Oratio* of 1486 (172). This claim is surprising, as the author earlier presented a chronology where Pico "came to know the work only after his arrival in Florence in 1488" (73) and that "Pico knew of Ibn-Tufayl's autodidactic philosophy at least as early as 1489" (75). Additionally, it is imprecise to say that Pico "in 1491 published" the *De ente et uno*, as it was only posthumously published, first in 1496 (86). These quibbles are minor and do not detract from a highly interesting volume.

M. V. DOUGHERTY

Ohio Dominican University