Our virtuous ancestors, may God be pleased with them, mentioned an island lying off the coast of India, on the equator,
on which a human being came into existence without mother or father.

**First version: The spontaneous generation of Hayy**

The version which claims that Hayy was born from the earth describes how, beneath the island, deep within the earth, there was a great mass of clay that had been in a state of ferment over the course of many years. Hot vapors mixed with cold and moist vapors fused with dry and produced a homogenous balance of forces. In some parts, the mixture of vapors developed a greater balance and disposition to form humors than in others. The most perfect balance was in the center, where the vapors most fully resembled the humors of man. As the clay churned, bubbles were formed by its extreme viscosity. In the center, a tiny bubble formed that split into two, separated by a fine membrane and each part filled with a gentle, ethereal substance of the most suitable balance. At that point, the spirit that proceeds from the command of the Lord attached itself and so firmly did it bind, it would have been hard for either sense or reason to separate the two. This spirit emanated eternally from God—His are the power and the glory—and could be likened to the sunlight shining constantly on earth.

When the spirit attached itself to the chamber, all faculties became subject to it, made absolutely obedient by the will of God. Alongside this chamber, another bubble formed that divided into three, each part separated from the others by delicate membranes but connected by pathways and filled with an ethereal substance similar to that which filled the first, only more delicate. In these three hollow spaces divided from one, a set of subject faculties was located, charged with the protection and preservation of their hosts and the transmission of any impression, however subtle, to the primary spirit attached to the first chamber.

Beside these two chambers, a third bubble formed, filled with an ethereal substance similar to, but coarser than, the first two. A set of subject faculties was located there and likewise charged with its protection and preservation. These three chambers were the first to be created from the great fermenting mass of clay, in the manner we have outlined.
The formation of the heart, brain, and liver

Each [organ] had need of the others. The first needed the service and utility of the other two, while they needed the first, as the governed need a governor and the led require a leader. To subsequently created organs, however, the latter two stood in the relation of governor to governed, with the second being more suited to this than the third.

When the spirit attached to the first chamber, its temperature rose and it took on a conical, flame-like shape. The coarse substance surrounding it took on a similar shape and became solid tissue, around which a protective membrane formed. This entire organ is known as the heart. Because of the exhaustion of vapors following its temperature rise, the heart could not have long survived without something to supply nutrition and compensate for its continuous action. It also required the ability to sense what it may be in harmony and conflict with, in order to attract and repel accordingly. By virtue of their faculties, whose source is the heart itself, the other two organs supplied these needs—the brain provided feeling and the liver supplied nutrition. In turn, the brain and liver required the heart to supply them with heat and their specific faculties, of which it is the source. As a result, a network of connections and pathways developed, some wider than others, as dictated by necessity. These are the arteries and veins.

The formation of the fetus

This version of the story goes on to describe the process of formation and development of the organs in great detail, in the same way that natural scientists describe the development of the embryo in the womb until, with development complete and all the organs formed, the fetus is ready to descend.

Conclusion of the description of Hayy’s spontaneous generation

To conclude the description, we are again referred to the great mass of fermenting clay and how its condition was such as to furnish everything required for human creation, including the
membranes surrounding the fetus. When development was complete, the membranes split—as in normal labor—and what was left of the clay dried up and cracked. With its source of nutrition gone, the infant became hungry and cried for attention. It was then that the bereaved gazelle came to the rescue.1

**Second version: Hayy Ibn Yaqdhān came from a nearby island**

This is the account of Hayy Ibn Yaqdhān’s origin, according to those who deny the [idea of] spontaneous generation.

They say that facing this island there was a large neighboring island that was rich and prosperous, well-populated with abundant resources, governed by a king among them who was very arrogant and oppressive. This king had a sister of exquisite beauty whom he restrained from marrying, because he could not find her an equivalent match. However, he had a relative called Yaqdhān who married her secretly, according to their rite at that time that legalizes this marriage as permissible. Then from this husband [Yaqdhān] she conceived and gave birth to a son. And then being terrified that her secret should ever become known, she placed the child inside a chest and secured the lid, after she had nursed him enough. At nightfall, she took the baby to the seashore, with her servants and trustworthy friends, and with a heart inflamed equally by extreme love and concern for him, she bade him farewell, saying: “O God, You created this child when he was nothing to be spoken of, and You sustained him in the dark recesses of my womb, until he [was] perfectly formed. In fear of the cruelty of this stubborn and tyrant king, I surrender him to Your subtlety and mercy. O Most merciful (God), be with him always and never leave him.”

Then she cast the chest into the sea. During that very night, the motion of the waves and force of the strong tide carried the chest to the coast of the other island, mentioned above. At that time of year, the tide reaches a height to which it would not return for another year. The water lodged the chest into a pleasant thicket, set with trees and fertile soil, where it was sheltered from the wind and rain and veiled from the sun, whose rays shone obliquely when it rose and when it set. Then the tide ebbed, and the chest was left there, and the rising wind blew a

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heap of sand filling the inlet of that thicket, so water could not reach it. The nails of the chest and its boards were loosened when the waves threw it into the thicket.

When the baby became very hungry, he wept and cried for help, and struggled, trying to move. A gazelle whose kid had been carried off by an eagle heard the sound of his voice and, thinking it was the crying of her kid, she followed the sound until she came to the chest. Hearing the cries coming from inside, she searched with her hooves until a top board broke off. Immediately, the gazelle felt a maternal love and affection for him, and she gave him her udder and fed him her own tasty milk. The gazelle nursed him continuously and raised him, looking after him and protecting him from harm.

The Life of Hayy on the Island

[From this point on, the two versions of the story coincide. Both say] that the gazelle that cared for him lived in a fertile land of plenty and her rich, abundant milk provided excellent nourishment. She remained with him [all the time], leaving him only when it was necessary to graze. The baby became so attached to the gazelle that if she stayed away too long he would cry loudly, and she would come rushing back.

Hayy passes two years of age: Observation, sensation, experience, comparison

So the child grew up nourished on the gazelle’s milk until two years had passed; he gradually began to walk and grow teeth. He followed the gazelle everywhere.

Thus the child lived among the deer, imitating their calls with his voice until it was scarcely possible to differentiate them. Similarly, he also imitated all the birdsongs and sounds of other animals accurately.

The wild animals were as used to him as he was to them; so they were not afraid of him nor was he afraid of them. And the images of experiences impressed themselves upon his soul, so after their absence from his observations [the things themselves no longer objects of his immediate sensory experience], he formed a liking for some and a dislike of others.
However, he observed all the animals and noticed that they were covered with fur or hair or feathers. He saw how swiftly they could run, how strong they were, and how they had natural weapons such as horns, antlers, fangs, hooves, and talons for defense against any attack.

Then [in comparison with animals] he looked back at himself and realized he was naked, unarmed, weak in running, and limited in [his ability to] attack. This disturbed him and made him unhappy.

**Hayy reaches the age of seven**

When Hayy was nearly seven years old, his concern focused on these matters and he became distressed by his shortcomings and despaired of any change; he took the broad tree leaves and put them in front and behind himself. Then he fastened them around his waist with a sort of belt made from esparto grass and palm fiber.

From trimmed branches of trees he made sticks; balancing the shafts and sharpening the points. He used them [the sticks] to chase away any animals that threatened him. He could now attack weaker ones [animals] and at least put up a good fight against the stronger. This gave him some sense of self-respect.

Hayy came to realize that his hands gave him many advantages over them [the animals]. By then he was able to cover his nakedness [with leaves] and to make sticks by which to defend himself. So he no longer needed a tail and natural weapons [that animals have].

**The gazelle dies and Hayy searches for the cause of death**

The gazelle who had nursed him and raised him grew old and weak, and he began to [have to] lead her to the fertile meadows and gather ripe fruits to feed her. She became weak and emaciated until at last death caught up with her, and all of her movements and responses ceased. When the boy saw her like that, he became overwhelmed with sadness and his soul seemed to burst in grief.

When Hayy examined her external organs he found no visible damage, yet at the same time, he noticed that her inactivity was total and not confined to any one limb. It then
occurred to him that the problem from which she suffered must be in an organ hidden from sight within the body. That organ must be indispensable to the functioning of the external limbs and when it had become sick, the harm became general. If he could find this organ and remove whatever had affected it, the resulting benefit would spread throughout the body and the bodily functions would resume.

**Hayy cuts open the gazelle’s chest and examines the insides**

So Hayy decided to cut open her breast and examine what was inside. [He cut her open] using sharp pieces of stone and dry splinters of cane similar to knives.

He made an incision between the ribs, and cutting through the flesh, came to the diaphragms; which he found very tough; he assured himself that such a covering must belong to the organ he was looking for, and that once he could get through that, he would find it.

The first part he met with was the lungs, which at first sight he mistook for that which he searched for, and turned them about this way and that way to see if he could find the source of the disease in them. He first happened upon that lobe which lay next to the side which he had opened and when he perceived that it did lean sideways, he was satisfied that it was not the organ he looked for, because he was fully persuaded that that must be in the midst of the body. He proceeded in his search, till at last he found the heart, which he saw closed with a very strong cover, fastened with stout ligaments, and covered by the lungs on that side which he had opened. He said to himself: “If this organ is the same on the other side as it is on this [side] that I have opened, then it is certainly in the middle, and without doubt the same as what I am looking for; especially considering its convenient situation, the beauty and the regularity of its figure, the firmness of the flesh, and besides, it is guarded with such a membrane as I have not observed in any other part.” Then he searched the other side, and found the same membrane on the inside of the ribs, and the lungs in the same posture that he had observed on the side he had opened first. He concluded that this organ was the part he was looking for.

Then when he had laid the heart bare, and perceived that it was solid on every side, he began to examine it, to see if he could
find any apparent hurt in it; but finding none, he squeezed it with his hand, and perceived that it was hollow.

He began then to think that what he looked for might possibly be contained in that cavity. When he came to open it, he found in it two cavities, one on the right side, the other on the left. The one on the right side was full of clotted blood, that on the left quite empty. He thought to himself that undoubtedly one of those two cavities must be the receptacle he was looking for. The one on the right side had only congealed blood, and it was not in that state before the body died (he had observed that all blood congeals when it flows from the body). Hayy thought, this blood does not differ in the least from any other; and I find it common to all the organs. What I look for cannot be such a matter as this; because I am looking for something peculiar to this place, which I find it could not subsist without not even for the twinkling of an eye. And this is what I looked for at first. As for this blood, how often have I lost a great deal of it in my skirmishes with the wild beasts, and yet it never did me any considerable harm, nor rendered me incapable of performing any activity; therefore what I look for is not in this cavity. Now as for the cavity on the left side, it is altogether empty and I have no reason in the world to think that it was made in vain, because I have found that every organ was appointed for a specific function. How could this ventricle of the heart, which I see is so well-made, serve no purpose at all? I can only think that the thing I am searching for once dwelt here, but has now deserted his habitation and left it empty, and that the absence of that thing has brought about this privation of sense and the cessation of motion of the body.

Now when he perceived that the being that had lived there before had left its house [the body] before it fell to ruin, and forsaken it when as yet it continued whole and entire, he concluded that it was highly probable that it would never return to it again, after its being so cut and mangled.

Once [he understood] this, the whole body seemed to him a very inconsiderable thing, and worth nothing in respect to the being that he believed once inhabited [the body], and now had left it. Therefore he applied himself wholly to the consideration of that being. What was it and how did it subsist? What joined it to this body? Where did it go, and by what passage, when it left the body? What was the cause of its departure; was it forced to leave its mansion, or did it leave the body of its own accord? And if it went away voluntarily, what was it that rendered the body so
disagreeable to it, as to make it forsake it? And while he was perplexed with such a variety of thoughts, he laid aside all concern for the carcass, and banished it from his mind; for now he perceived that his mother, who had nursed him so tenderly and had suckled him, was that thing that had departed; and from it proceeded all her actions, and not from this inactive body; but this body was only an instrument, like the cudgel he had made for himself that he used to fight the wild beasts. So that now, all his regard for the body was removed, and transferred to that by which the body is governed, and by whose power it moves. Nor had he any other desire but to inquire after that.

In the meantime the body of the gazelle began to decay and emit noisome vapors, which increased his aversion to it, so that he did not care to see it. Not long after that he chanced to see two ravens engaged so furiously that one of them struck down the other stark dead; and then began to scrape with his claws till he had dug a pit, in which he buried the carcass of his adversary. The boy observed this and said to himself: “How well has this raven done in burying the body of his companion, although he did ill in killing him. How much greater reason was there for me to have done this for my mother?” Upon this he dug a pit, and laid the body of his mother into it and buried her.

*The nature of life and spirit*

When he discovered fire, Hayy thought that it is similar to that thing that departs from the body, so he started examining animals to verify his idea. He captured a wild animal and cut into it as he had done with the gazelle, until he reached the heart. He noticed that the left chamber was filled with a vapor that looked like mist. He poked his finger inside and found it was almost hot enough to burn him. The animal died on the spot. Hayy was convinced that this warm vapor is the source of life, and when it departs the body, the animal dies. Hayy then involved himself more in anatomy, to explore that vapor; where does it come from? Why does its heat not dissipate?

Likewise, he perceived that this animal spirit was *one*, whose action when it made use of the eye, was *sight*; from the ear, *hearing*; from the nose, *smelling*; from the tongue, *tasting*; and from the skin and flesh, *feeling*. When it employed any limb, its operation was *motion*; and it made use of the liver for *nutrition*
and concoction. And that although there were organs fitted to every one of these uses, none of them could perform their respective offices without having correspondence with that spirit by means of passages called nerves; and that if at any time these passages were broken off or obstructed, the action of the corresponding member would cease. Now these nerves derived this spirit from the cavities of the brain, which has it from the heart (and that contains an abundance of spirit, because it is divided into a great many partitions) and if for some reason any limb is deprived of this spirit, its action ceases and it is like a cast-off tool, not fit for use. And if this spirit departs wholly from the body, or is consumed or dissolved by any means whatsoever, then the whole body is deprived of motion and reduced to that state, which is death.

**Hayy reaches twenty-one years**

Thus far had his observations brought him by the end of the third seventh year of his age, i.e., when he was twenty-one years old. During this time he had made an abundance of pretty contrivances.

He made himself clothes and shoes from the skins of the wild beasts he had dissected. He learned how to make threads. He learned the art of building from observing the swallows nests. He built himself a storehouse and a pantry to lay up the remainder of his provision, and made a door for it from canes bound together, to prevent any of the beasts getting in during his absence.

He made all these discoveries while he was employed in the study of anatomy, and the examination of the properties peculiar to each part, and the differences between them. He did all this before the end of his twenty-first year. By this age Hayy reached a level of insight such that he could affirm that the spirit is more essential than the physical body, and it is the cause of its life and death.

He then moved from anatomy to natural philosophy; by observing nature, plants, and animals, he realized that they go through the process of generation and corruption. He was confused for awhile about the issue of unity and multiplicity regarding members of species.

Thus he continued, considering nothing but the nature of bodies, and by this means he perceived that whereas at first sight,
things had appeared to him innumerable and not to be comprehended; now, he discovered the whole mass and bulk of creatures were in reality only one.

In like manner he considered other bodies, both animate and inanimate, and found their essence was composed of a corporeal part, with one or more things superadded to it. And thus he attained a notion of the forms of bodies, according to their differences. These were the first things he found belonging to the spiritual world; for these forms are not the objects of sense, but are apprehended by intellectual speculation. Now among other things of this kind that he discovered, it appeared to him that the animal spirit which is lodged in the heart (as we have mentioned before) must necessarily have some attribute superadded to its corporeity, which renders it capable of those wonderful actions, different sensations, and ways of apprehending things, and various sorts of motions; and that this attribute must be its form, which distinguishes it from other bodies, and which the philosophers call the animal soul. And so [it was] in plants, they had within them the same natural heat that was in beasts. He thought it must have something proper to it, which was its form, which the philosophers call the vegetative soul. And there were also inanimate things (all bodies, besides plants and animals, which are in this sublunar world) with something peculiar to them, by the power of which every one of them performs such actions as were proper to it, namely, various sorts of motion and different kinds of sensible qualities; and that thing was the form of every one of them, and this is the same [thing] which the philosophers call nature.

And when by this contemplation it appeared to him plainly that the true essence of that animal spirit on which he had been so intent, was a compound of corporeity and some other attribute superadded to that corporeity, and that it had its corporeity in common with other bodies; but that this other attribute which was superadded was peculiar to itself: immediately he despised and rejected the notion of corporeity, and applied himself wholly to that other superadded attribute (which is the same thing that we call the soul) the nature of which he earnestly desired to know. Therefore, he fixed all his thoughts upon it, and began his contemplation by considering all bodies, not as bodies, but as bodies endowed with forms, from which necessarily flow the properties that distinguish them from one another.
Thus Hayy started to reason that the reality of the animal consists of two things: the concept of corporeity and a concept additional to corporeity and that is called “the soul.” This second concept is what Hayy was eager to know.

However, his sense could not represent to him any body existent in nature that had only this property, and was void of all other forms: for he saw that every one of them had some other notion superadded to it.

Now he knew that everything that was produced anew must have some producer. And from this contemplation, there arose in his mind a sort of impression of the nature of that form, though his notion of it as yet was general and indistinct. Then he paused and examined these forms which he knew before, one by one, and found that they were produced anew, and that they must of necessity be beholden to some efficient cause.

Then he considered the essences of forms, and found that they were nothing but the body’s disposition to produce this or that action. For instance, water, when overheated, is disposed to rise upwards, and that disposition is its form. For there is nothing present in all this, but a body; and some things which are observed to arise from it, which were not in it before (such as qualities and motions) and an efficient cause which produces them. And the fitness of a body for one motion rather than another is its disposition and form.

He concluded the same of all other forms, and it appeared to him that those actions which emanated from them were not in reality owing to them, but to the efficient cause which produced in them those actions that are attributed to them. His notion was exactly the same as the Apostle of God, when he said (may God bless him and grant him peace): “I am his hearing in which he hears, and his seeing by which he sees.”

Now, when he had attained this much, so as to have a general and indistinct notion of this agent, he had a most earnest desire to know it distinctly. And because he had not as yet withdrawn himself from the sensible world, he began to look for this agent among sensible things; though he did not as yet know whether it was one agent or many. Therefore he inquired into all such bodies as he had about him, i.e., those which he had been occupied with all along, and he found that they were all liable to generation and corruption and if there were any which did not suffer a total corruption, they were still liable to a partial one, as water and earth had the parts which, he observed, were
consumed by fire. Likewise among all the rest of the bodies which he was conversant with, he could find none which were not produced anew and therefore dependent upon some agent.

At that point, he laid them all aside, and transferred his thoughts to the consideration of the heavenly bodies. And this is how far he reached in his contemplation; he was twenty-eight years old.

**Hayy reaches twenty-eight years**

Thus at the age of twenty-eight, Hayy was, to some extent, able to transcend sensory perception and reach the beginning of the pure intellectual world. What he was interested in could not be grasped by sensory perception; he started to reason about possibility and necessity; for everything that is possible to be brought about, there must necessarily be something which brings it about. By this way of reasoning, Hayy formed a general, yet vague idea about the efficient cause of the existent things.

With the general idea of an efficient cause, Hayy desired more precise knowledge; he wanted to transcend the natural physical world and its level of sensory perception. Hayy started observing the celestial bodies, and a major question imposed itself.

Does the mass of the cosmos extend to infinity in all directions, or is it finite?

By pure reasoning Hayy came to the conclusion that a body of infinite size is impossible practically, in other words, it is an absurdity. He convinced himself by arguments and proofs, one of which was this:

“Imagine two lines beginning from where it is known to be finite and extending infinitely with and through the mass of the cosmos.

Then imagine a long section cut from one of these lines at its finite end.

Take the remainder and place the end which was cut beside the beginning of the intact line so that the two lines lie in parallel.

Now consider these two lines as they extend into supposed infinity.

Either we find that both lines extend forever into infinity with neither being shorter than the other, in which case the line
from which the section was removed is equal to the line which
remained intact, and that is impossible.

Or we find that the line from which the section was removed
does not extend infinitely with the intact line, but stops short, in
which case it is finite.

If the finite section that was initially removed is then
replaced, the whole, likewise, becomes finite although it is neither
shorter nor longer than the other, intact line, but is, in fact, the
same.

It therefore follows that both lines are finite.
The body on which these lines were supposed is also finite
and, because we can suppose lines like these on any body, all
bodies are finite. The supposition that a body can be infinite is,
therefore, absurd.”

Thus, he concluded that the cosmos is finite.

He then observed the spherical shape of it, and its orbital
motion. Hayy questioned, is the universe as a whole something
that was originated in time and came into being from non-being,
or it was something that was never preceded by non-being, but
has always existed? Is the universe eternal? Or was it created?

He was not certain about the answer, and could not reach a
definite conclusion one way or the other. Contradictions arose
when he assumed a belief in the origination of the universe. He
raised more questions about creation:

If the universe was originated, it must have an originator.
Why has this originator brought the universe into being now and
not at some time in the past? How could it have been brought
into being as a result of some external force acting upon the
originator, if there was nothing else in existence? And if it was
brought into being by some spontaneous change occurring in the
originator, what could have caused the change?

Hayy spent several years on this issue, his mind full of
contradictory and opposing arguments. He switched to another
approach to evaluate these arguments, and considered the
implications of each one of them.

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3 Ibid., p. 35.
If the universe came into being after non-being, then it necessarily followed that it could not have come into being by itself but must have been brought into being by an agent.

It is impossible for this agent to be just another body, otherwise it would be originated, and if this second originator was also a body, there would have to be a third originator, then a fourth and so on, ad infinitum, which is absurd.

Therefore, the universe must have a non-corporeal agent.

If this agent is non-corporeal, then it cannot be perceived by the senses. It will also be impossible to perceive it with the imagination, because imagination is based on sense data that are no longer present.

This agent (as non-corporeal) must be free from the principal attribute of corporeity and all other corporeal attributes. This agent of the universe must have perfect knowledge.

Now suppose that the universe is eternal, it follows that its motion must be pre-eternal and infinite in respect to beginning, for every motion must have a mover, and this moving force must be the first cause. Hayy concluded from both arguments the necessity of the existence of the first cause, nothing could exist without Him. He is the cause of everything. “The whole universe, then, and everything within—the earth, sky, planets, and stars, and everything between and above and beneath them—is His work and His creation and consequent to Him in essence, although not subsequent in respect of time.”

Although both eternally coexist, the universe is consequent to God; imagine yourself holding a pen in your hand then moving your hand, the object will move in keeping with the movement of your hand. Its motion will be consequent, in essence, to the motion of your hand but not subsequent to it in time, since the two motions began together.

The universe is the creator’s effect and creation, out of time. His command is such that if He wants a thing to be, all that He need say is “Be! and it is.”

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4 Ibid., p. 38.
**Hayy reaches thirty-five years**

Hayy reached the age of thirty-five and became more involved in recognizing the power of the creator. He started meditating on how He gave each animal species its creation and its guidance. Without His guidance, no animal could use the limbs He gave them as He intended, and they would instead be burdened. He realized then that the creator is the most generous and compassionate.

Hayy reflected differently on the beauty and goodness of things as they emanated from the existence and the work of the creator, may He be praised! Hayy came to understand that the creator’s essence is greater, more perfect, more complete, more beautiful, more lovely, and more lasting than anything; it is far beyond compare.

With this level of understanding his heart became so attached to the agent that he thought of nothing but Him. As a result Hayy lost interest in studying things. He became more interested in understanding how to know Him more and perceive Him further with his [various] faculties. Of course, sense and imagination were not suitable since they deal with corporeal things, while reason had the equivalent strength of logical arguments, as had become apparent in his consideration of the issue of eternity.

**Identification with the necessary existent**

Hayy knew that he had become aware of this being with his self and that the knowledge he had of Him was firm and fast. It therefore appeared that the self was something non-corporeal. He also concluded that the perfection of his self and its happiness lay exclusively in bearing actual and constant witness to the necessarily existent being. He then began to find out how to bear this actual and constant witness in such a way that he would not turn aside or be distracted. Continuous meditation was the key; Hayy observed the planets and stars and their orderly and harmonious movements. What kind of activities did he need to perform to be closer to the necessary existent, should he identify with the dumb animals or with the celestial bodies, or identify with the necessary existent being?
The first [identification] was necessary inasmuch as he had an oppressive body, with individual limbs and organs, distinct functions and various instincts. The second was necessary because he possessed the animal spirit, located in the heart as the principal part of the body and source of its faculties. The third was necessary by virtue of his being who he is, i.e. the self which knows of the necessarily existent being.5

Hayy realized that the third kind of identification was his goal, but it could not be achieved without self-discipline and practicing both the first and the second.

Thus he started a kind of sufi program of diet and exercise, eating the most readily available food and spending more time on meditation. He developed a great sense of compassion and commitment toward plants and animals, and desired to relieve them from any danger. He kept himself clean at all times, washing as often as possible. He perfumed himself as he could with plant fragrances and aromatic oils and kept his clothes clean and scented, until he quite sparkled with cleanliness, fragrance, smart grooming, and good looks.

He also started certain exercises of various kinds of orbital movement (imitating the motion of the celestial bodies); he walked around the island’s coastline, turned circles on the shore, and sometimes Hayy spun around on the spot until he dropped down in a faint.6

Hayy went to the third identification and started concentrating his thoughts upon the necessarily existent being and detached himself from sensory experience.

How did he accomplish this? Hayy did four things; he closed his eyes, blocked his ears, made a great effort not to let his imagination distract him, and fourth, he did his best to think only of the necessarily existent being alone and associated with nothing. In order to confuse the senses and imagination, Hayy started the procedure of spinning around faster and faster, until his sensory perceptions gradually disappeared, his imagination and other faculties weakened and the working of his self intensified as a result.

5 Ibid., p. 46.

6 Today a sufi sect called the Malawiyya, or dervishes, practice such spiritual exercises by spinning while they are in the process of remembrance of God (dhikr).
What are the attributes of the necessarily existent being he asked himself, in order to meditate and identify himself with these attributes. Some of these attributes are positive, such as knowledge, power, and wisdom, and some are negative, like freedom from corporeity. Hayy succeeded in purifying himself, and with his pure heart he witnessed the truth, everything disappeared from his mind. His own self, too, disappeared. Everything faded away and vanished in the wind. Only the one reality, the eternally existent being, remained. He asked, “To whom belongs dominion now? To God, the One, the Almighty.” He drowned in that state and witnessed what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart of man has ever felt. How can this be described? It is impossible. Language is very restrictive. Hayy continued with this experience until he reached the age of fifty, when he returned to the physical world after his journey. When he rejoined the world of the senses afterwards, he was able to engage and disengage himself at will. He stayed there constantly, until he met Āsāl.

Āsāl and Salāmān

One of the two versions of Hayy Ibn Yaqdhan’s origin mentions the existence of a neighboring island and to that island a true faith based upon the teachings of one of the ancient prophets (may God bless them), had come. Two sons of that island, young men of goodwill and honor by the names of Āsāl and Salāmān, encountered this faith and embraced it wholeheartedly. Together they committed themselves to following its teachings and upholding its duties and rituals.

Āsāl was interested in esoteric interpretation and spiritual meaning, while his friend Salāmān was concerned with literal meaning and had little time for interpretation, contemplation, and independent judgment. Nevertheless, each applied himself to doing good works, examining his conscience and controlling desire. Certain passages of scripture encouraged retreat from the world and solitary meditation, indicating that therein lay salvation and success, while others advocated social engagement and commitment. His contemplative nature, desire for understanding, and eagerness for insight into deeper meaning, led Āsāl to advocate the pursuit of solitude and he drew support from verses recommending this. The solitary life, he believed, was
the path to achieve his aim. Salāmān, averse to contemplation and personal choice, urged commitment to society and similarly referred to appropriate passages of scripture for support. Commitment, he believed, was what kept the whisperings of negative thoughts at bay and protected against the temptations of demons.

Their difference of opinion led the two to part company. Āsāl knew of the neighboring island (the one where Hayy Ibn Yaqdāhān was living), its resources, abundance, and temperate climate, and he knew that solitude was there for whoever sought it. He decided to withdraw from society and spend the rest of his life there; he collected what money he had, spent some to hire a boat, and divided the rest among the poor. He bade farewell to his friend Salāmān and set off across the sea. The ship’s crew ferried him to the island, set him ashore and sailed away.

Āsāl stayed on the island to worship and glorify God and contemplate His names and sublime attributes. There was nothing to disturb his mind or cloud his meditation. As need arose, he picked fruit or hunted to satisfy his hunger and, for a time, remained in perfect happiness and communion with his Lord. Daily, he witnessed His goodness, benevolence, and grace towards him in easing his quest and sustenance. This gladdened his heart and confirmed his certainty.

Hayy Ibn Yaqdāhān, meanwhile, was totally absorbed at the stations of sublimity. He only left his cave once a week to search for the food he needed. Consequently, Āsāl did not come across him at first and, although he wandered the length and breadth of the island, he saw no sign of anyone. This increased his sense of communion and joy, since it was the pursuit of solitude that had led him to renounce society. One day, however, it happened that Āsāl was in the area when Hayy emerged to look for food and they caught sight of one another.

Certain that here was a solitary ascetic, come to the island to withdraw from society as he had himself had done, Āsāl was afraid to intrude and make Hayy’s acquaintance lest he disturb his state of mind and frustrate the fulfillment of his aim. For his part, Hayy had no idea who or what Āsāl was, never having set eyes on any animal like him before. He was wearing a kind of loose black tunic made of hair and wool that Hayy thought was his skin. He stood staring at him for a long time, astonished.

Afraid of disturbing him, Āsāl retreated. Natural inquisitiveness, however, made Hayy follow but, seeing how
anxious the other was to avoid him, he kept his distance, and kept himself out of sight. Believing that Hayy had left the area, Āsāl began to pray, recite scripture, invoke God’s names and prostrate himself in humility in order to calm his mind. Unnoticed to Āsāl, however, Hayy had crept up close enough to see and hear him in his devotions. He listened to the lovely, rhythmical sound of his voice intoning scripture and watched him humble himself in prayer, something which he had never known any other animal do. He studied his shape and appearance and realized they were the same as his own; and it was obvious that the tunic he wore was not his natural skin but something made, like his [clothing]. He appreciated that Āsāl’s prayer, humility, and devotion was something good, and became convinced he was an essence that is conscious of the truth. He wanted to find out what he was doing and the reason for his prayer and devotion. He drew closer until, suddenly, Āsāl became aware of his presence and fled. Hayy gave chase and, with his natural strength and cunning, caught up with Āsāl and pinned him firmly to the ground.

Āsāl stared at this man dressed in furs, whose hair had grown so long that most of it reached the ground. He realized that Hayy’s speed and physical strength were much greater than his own and tried to appease and placate him in a language that Hayy could not understand—he knew only that it betrayed all the signs of fear. Hayy tried to calm Āsāl with sounds he had learned from the animals and by patting his head. He stroked his cheeks and smiled at him until, eventually, Āsāl regained composure and realized that Hayy meant him no harm.

Āsāl’s devotion to scriptural interpretation had led him to learn many languages fluently and he began to ask Hayy questions in every language he knew, in an effort to make himself understood but to no avail. Hayy was puzzled by what he heard but had no idea what it meant, except that it seemed to be friendly. Each thought the other very strange.

When he discovered that Hayy could not speak, Āsāl stopped worrying about his faith and resolved to teach him language and instruct him in religious knowledge and practice. Thus would his reward from God be greater. Slowly at first, Āsāl taught him to speak by pointing at an object and pronouncing its name, repeating it and then having Hayy say the word while pointing at the thing. In this way, he gradually built up his vocabulary until, within a relatively short time, he could speak.
Āsāl asked Hayy about himself and how he had come to the island. Hayy replied that he knew nothing about his origin and parents, apart from the gazelle who had raised him. He described everything he could about himself and how he had advanced in knowledge and understanding until finally reaching the level of union. He described the truths and the essences, transcendent of the material world, which are conscious of the divine essence. He described the divine essence, with His attributes of goodness and as much as he could of the rapture of those who had united and the torment of those excluded, and what he had witnessed when he attained union.

As he listened, Āsāl had no doubt that everything in scripture about God, His angels, revelation, the prophets, the last day, and heaven and hell was an allegory of the things which Hayy Ibn Yaqdān had actually witnessed. The perception of his heart was opened, the fire of his mind was lit, and he grasped the conformity between rational understanding and received wisdom. The different paths of scriptural interpretation were reconciled and all the difficulties he had encountered with scripture were resolved. What had before been ambiguous and obscure now became clear and he became a man of understanding. He looked at Hayy Ibn Yaqdān with reverence and respect realizing that he was one of those close to God who have no fear, neither do they grieve. He undertook to serve and follow him and be guided by him over any apparent contradictions in the teachings of his faith.

Āsāl told Hayy all about himself and, in answer to his questions, described conditions on his island, the level of knowledge, how the people had lived before the arrival of religion and the way that they lived now. He told him how scripture described the divine world, heaven, hell, resurrection, judgment, and the true path. Hayy understood it all and saw nothing to contradict what he witnessed at the sublime station. He realized that whoever had so described and communicated it, had done so truthfully and was sincere in his claim to be a messenger of God’s word. So he declared his belief and testified to the message.

Hayy asked what scripture said about religious duties and the practices of worship. Āsāl told him about prayer, taxation, the pilgrimage, fasting, and other similar, external aspects of the faith. Hayy accepted and undertook to perform these, in line with his belief in the prophet’s authenticity. There were, however, two points which surprised him and the wisdom of which eluded him.
First of all, why did this apostle use allegory in most of his descriptions of the divine world and avoid direct disclosure? He had similar misgivings about punishment and reward in the hereafter.

Secondly, why did he circumscribe religious obligations and the duties of worship yet make the acquisition of wealth and excessive consumption permissible? The result is that people occupy themselves in futile ways and turn their backs on truth. He, of course, thought that no one need eat anything unless it was to keep body and soul together and the concept of money had no meaning for him. He found the regulations of religious law about money, such as the various aspects of taxation, buying and selling, interest and fines all very strange and long-winded.

“If people really understood,” he said, “they would avoid these futile things, dispense with them entirely and devote themselves to the truth. No one needs to be so obsessed with money and property that it has to be begged for, that hands be cut off for stealing or that lives be lost in robbery.”

But he had made the mistake of assuming that people are thoughtful, perceptive, and resolute. He had no idea of their lack of knowledge, inadequacy, lack of judgment, and weak character.

Āsāl and Hayy go to Āsāl’s island

Hayy developed a deep compassion for humanity and desire to be the cause of mankind’s salvation. He became determined to go and explain the truth, in order to enlighten them. He discussed this with Āsāl and wondered if he could see any way of reaching his island. Āsāl told him about the people’s lack of character and how they had turned from God’s will without realizing. However, as Hayy remained attached to his idea, Āsāl offered encouragement, cherishing the hope that, through him, God might guide an aspiring group of friends who were closer to salvation than the rest. The two decided that, if they remained on the shore day and night, perhaps God would provide them with a way of making the crossing.

By the grace of God, a ship that had been blown off course by the wind and waves was driven within sight of the shore. As it sailed close to land, the crew saw the two men standing on the shore and altered course. They agreed to Āsāl’s request to take
Hayy and himself aboard and a fair wind carried the ship to the island in no time at all.

The two disembarked and made their way into the city, where Āsāl’s friends flocked to meet him. He introduced them to Hayy Ibn Yaqdhān, whom they greeted enthusiastically and treated with much respect and deference. Āsāl advised Hayy that this was the group closest to understanding and wisdom among the entire population and that, if he was unable to teach them, he would have even less success in instructing the masses. The island was now governed by Āsāl’s old friend, Salāmān, who believed in engagement with society and had argued in favor of outlawing asceticism.

Hayy began to teach and spread the secrets of his wisdom but had progressed only a little beyond the surface forms of things by describing what others had already given them to understand, before they started to shut themselves off and shrink from what he had to say. In their hearts they resented him, even if they behaved towards him with courtesy out of consideration for a stranger and proper respect for their old friend Āsāl. Day and night, in public and in private, Hayy tried to win them over and convince them but this only increased their disdain and aversion. They wanted what was good and genuinely desired the truth but, because of their weakness of character, they were not prepared to accept what he said or follow his example by searching for the truth in the way that he had. In fact, they only wanted to learn of the truth by conventional methods. His hopes were dashed by their reluctance and he despaired of their reformation.

Hayy then considered the different classes of society and found each group satisfied with what it had. They had taken their desires for idols and their god was their passions. Desperate to amass the dross of this world, they were diverted by what they could accumulate, until they reached the grave. No counsel would avail, nor good advice prevail and discussion only served to entrench them. They had no path to wisdom and no share in it. They were soaked through with ignorance. What dominated their hearts was the profit they could make. God had laid a veil across their hearts, their ears, and eyes, and a terrible torment awaits them. All of them, with few exceptions, adhered only to the worldly aspect of their faith. They had thrown away and sold for a trivial price the good they did, thinking it worthless and slight. Business and commerce had distracted them from the word of
God and they did not fear the day when hearts and minds will be turned inwards.

As he realized this, it became perfectly clear that speaking to them publicly was impossible. Any of his attempts to impose a higher task on them was bound to fail.

When he understood the condition of mankind, and that the greatest part of them were like brute beasts, he knew that all wisdom, direction, and good success consisted in what the messengers of God had spoken, and in the divine law delivered; and that there was no other way besides this, and that there could be nothing added to it; and that there were men appointed to every work, and that everyone was best capable of doing that to which he was appointed by nature; that this was God’s way of dealing with those who had gone before, and there will be no change in this.

Upon returning to Salāmān and his friends, he made excuses for what he had said to them, and desired to be forgiven, and told them that he had come to share their opinion, and had adopted their rule of conduct. He exhorted them to stick firmly to their resolution of keeping within the bounds of law and performing the external rites; that they should not dive into things that did not concern them, but that in obscure matters they should give credit and yield their assent readily; that they should abstain from novel opinions, and from their appetites; they should follow the examples of their pious ancestors, and forsake novelties; and that they should avoid neglecting religious performances, a habit seen in the vulgar sort of men, and also avoid the love of the world.

Both he and his friend Āsāl knew that these tractable, but defective sort of men had no other way of salvation; and that if they should be raised above this to the realm of speculation, it would be worse with them; they would not be able to attain the degree of the blessed, but would waver and fall headlong; and ultimately come to a bad end. But on the contrary, if they continued as they were till death overtook them, they should find safety, and stand on the right hand: but as for those that left them, they should also take their place, and be the nearest to God. So they took their leave and left them, and sought to return to their island; and God helped them to make a convenient passing. Hayy Ibn Yaqdhān endeavored to attain his lofty station by the same means he had sought at first, till he recovered it; and
Āsāl followed his steps, till he reached almost the same place; thus they continued serving God on this island till they died.

Ibn Tufail’s Concluding Remarks

This is what (God assist you and us by his spirit) we have received of the history of Hayy Ibn Yaqdhān, Āsāl and Salāmān; and this is a choice of words as are not found in any other book, nor heard in common discourse. It is a piece of hidden knowledge which none can receive but those who have the knowledge of God, nor can any be ignorant of it but those who have not [any knowledge of God]. We have taken a method contrary to that of our pious ancestors, who were reserved in this matter, and sparse of speech. The reason which persuaded us to divulge this secret, and remove the veil, was the corrupt notions that some pretenders to philosophy in our age have broached and scattered; [these notions have become] diffused through several countries, and the mischief which arises from them has become epidemical. We feared therefore for those who are weak, who reject the authority of the prophets (of blessed memory) and choose what is delivered them by fools, that they might imagine those corrupt notions to be the secret which should be hidden from the unworthy, and then the more eagerly might incline toward them. We have thought it good to give them a glimpse of the secret of secrets, that we might draw them into the way of truth, and avert them from this other.

Nevertheless, we have not so delivered the secrets that are comprehended in these few leaves [pages], as to leave them without a thin veil or cover over them, which will be easily rent by those who are worthy of it, but will be so thick to the one that is unworthy to pass beyond it, that he shall not be able to get through it. I desire for those of my brethren who shall see this discourse, to excuse me for being so careless in my exposition and so free in my demonstration; I would not have done so, had I not been elevated to such heights as transcend the reach of human sight, and wished to express the matter in easy terms, that I might dispose men and raise a desire in them to enter into the right way. I beg of God mercy and forgiveness, and pray that He would please lead us to the well of the pure knowledge of Himself, for He is gracious and liberal of His favors. Peace be to
you my brother, whom it is my duty to assist, and the mercy and blessing of God be upon you.

The End of the Story of *Hayy Ibn Yaqdhan*