



# Reading Hayy Ibn-Yaqzan: A Cross-Cultural History of Autodidacticism

By Avner Ben-Zaken

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**Reading Hayy Ibn-Yaqzan: A Cross-Cultural History of Autodidacticism** By Avner Ben-Zaken

Commonly translated as "The Self-Taught Philosopher" or "The Improvement of Human Reason," Ibn-Tufayl's story *Hayy Ibn-Yaqzan* inspired debates about autodidacticism in a range of historical fields from classical Islamic philosophy through Renaissance humanism and the European Enlightenment. Avner Ben-Zaken's account of how the text traveled demonstrates the intricate ways in which autodidacticism was contested in and adapted to diverse cultural settings.

In tracing the circulation of the *Hayy Ibn-Yaqzan*, Ben-Zaken highlights its key place in four far-removed historical moments. He explains how autodidacticism intertwined with struggles over mysticism in twelfth-century Marrakesh, controversies about pedagogy in fourteenth-century Barcelona, quarrels concerning astrology in Renaissance Florence, and debates pertaining to experimentalism in seventeenth-century Oxford. In each site and period, Ben-Zaken recaptures the cultural context that stirred scholars to relate to *Hayy Ibn-Yaqzan* and demonstrates how the text moved among cultures, leaving in its wake translations, interpretations, and controversies as various as the societies themselves. Pleas for autodidacticism, Ben-Zaken shows, not only echoed within close philosophical discussions; they surfaced in struggles for control between individuals and establishments.

Presented as self-contained histories, these four moments together form a historical collage of autodidacticism across cultures from the late Medieval era to early modern times. The first book-length intellectual history of autodidacticism, this novel, thought-provoking work will interest a wide range of historians, including scholars of the history of science, philosophy, literature, Europe, and the Middle East.

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### Editorial Review

Review

A fascinating work of multi-cultural scholarship tracing the fortunes of a 12th century Arabic text in four eras of Western history.

(Bernard Bailyn, Harvard University)

This highly interesting volume can be described in three ways. First it is a historical analysis of the concept of autodidacticism. Second, it is the history of a particular book. Finally, the book is self-described as an exercise in interdisciplinarity... 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.

(M. V. Dougherty *Renaissance Quarterly*)

Ben-Zaken sketches this backdrop to Hayy beautifully.

(Lydia Wilson *Times Literary Supplement*)

This engaging book is slight in size yet ambitious in scope and innovative in methodology... overall, this is a splendid and daring book!

(Peter Heath *International Journal of Middle East Studies*)

This book will inspire future scholars along three different paths. First, it encourages fuller development of the reception-history of Hayy Ibn-Yaqzan; second, it opens up new directions in the study of the wider themes of autodidacticism and experimental learning in the early modern world; and, finally, it illustrates a new, increasingly popular methodology in the practice of intellectual history that moves beyond the constraints of period, national literature, religious orientation, and even scholarly discipline to produce a thick description of the movement of ideas across time. This is an extraordinary accomplishment for a relatively slim monograph.

(Suzanne Conklin Akbari *American Historical Review*)

This is an impressive interdisciplinary achievement.

(Nicolai Sinai *Journal of Islamic Studies*)

A fascinating and deftly told story of the development of autodidacticism... This study opens an illuminating

window to cross-cultural exchanges.

(Su Fang Ng *Sixteenth Century Journal*)

*Reading Hayy Ibn-Yaqzan* is a mesmerizing study that will enchant anyone interested in interdisciplinary cross-cultural explorations that transform the way we look at the past and the present.

(Justin Grosslight *The Arts Fuse*)

This whirlwind tour through five centuries does an immense amount of work in presenting of both the text itself and four contexts of reception. Ben-Zaken's patient 'de-layering' of each generation's use of the text uncovers new readings of all-contexts – the original work and of its repeated translations.

(Lydia Wilson *British Journal for the History of Science*)

About the Author

**Avner Ben-Zaken** is the chair of the humanities program at Ono College, Israel. He specializes in the cross-cultural history of science and is the author of *Cross-Cultural Scientific Exchanges in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1560–1660*, also published by Johns Hopkins.

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