

*E. Lashchyk (CIHA)*

## SKOVORODA'S PHILOSOPHY OF HAPPINESS IN THE CONTEXT OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

The outlines of Skovoroda's philosophy of happiness are rather well known and I have no intention of repeating what many Skovoroda experts have written. My interest in this paper is to explore to what extent Skovoroda's theory of happiness is unique in Western Philosophy. I will argue that Skovoroda's theory introduces aspects that are novel when seen against the background of the giants of Ancient, Medieval, and even Modern Philosophy.

The uniqueness of Skovoroda's theory of happiness is to be found in his account of human nature and in his account of how this nature can be known. Unique features can be found thus, in his ontology, in his epistemology and in how these are related to form a theory of happiness.

The dominant line in epistemology beginning with Plato and Aristotle through St. Thomas Aquinas and Descartes up to modern science was that knowledge is possible only when it is mediated by universal concepts, ideas or as in modern science when something is subsumable under universal laws of nature. Under these conceptions, knowledge of the unique particular is a priori excluded. The individual is known only as an instance of the universal concept or as possessing a universal nature or essence. Both Aristotle and St. Thomas subscribed to the transparency thesis which states that nature is transparent to the human mind and thus can be known. This is a very optimistic view about human cognitive abilities. It is true that a process of abstraction was needed to get at the universal concept or essence but, on their view, it was a fairly perfunctory process of dropping the particular accidents of the individual and getting at the essence of that which is common to all of the individuals in that genus and species. For Aristotle and St. Thomas the essence of human nature lies in rationality and animality.

<sup>1</sup> The claim that Skovoroda developed an original philosophical position or system is not new. Dmytro Cyzevs'kyj for example says that Skovoroda's philosophy "though not original in its details, when looked at as a whole, is an independent creative conception" *Istoriya ukrainskoji literatury* (New York: Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences in the U.S., 1956) p. 315. Taras Zakydalsky also calls Skovoroda's philosophy "an original synthesis". See his "The Theory of Man in the Philosophy of Skovoroda" M.A. thesis, Bryn Mawr College, May, 1965, p11.

*E. Lashchyk* . Skovoroda's Philosophy of Happiness in the Context of Western Philosophy

I can't make up my mind whether in Aristotle and St. Thomas their epistemology drives or determines their ontology or vice versa. I would like to argue that Skovoroda's ontology drives his epistemology, that is, that his account of the nature of man, for example, with his unique "srodnost" forces Skovoroda to give some account of how this unique invisible nature can be known. This is a tough assignment since, as I have suggested above, the emphasis in Western Philosophy has been on an account of knowledge of essences via universal concepts obtained by abstraction. Skovoroda breaks here with the dominant Western tradition and introduces analogies, metaphors, parables and even fables as tools, as symbols, for getting at the hidden nature of things, including the nature of each human being<sup>2</sup>. The use of such metaphoric and symbolic tools may result in a type of faith that God is the source and seed of all natural things including each human being's srodnost'. Such higher type of faith transforms not only the individual but also her world<sup>3</sup>. This is a very modern notion which has recently been stressed by such thinkers as Norwood Hanson, Thomas Kuhn<sup>4</sup> and Paul Feyerabend. Their thesis is that belief in certain paradigm-theories and hypotheses transforms what one sees, that there is no neutral seeing and that all seeing is interpreting. Kuhn went further and claimed that successive paradigm-theories are incommensurable. They are incommensurable because there is a shift in the values that different scientists share; there is a shift in the meaning of terms contained in competing paradigm-theories; scientists committed to different paradigms live in different worlds; and finally they *see* different things when looking at the same things. All of this is the result of commitments or faith in different paradigms. It is easy to see echoes of some of these claims in Skovoroda — the multiple worlds thesis, the different readings of the same words when they are interpreted analogically or metaphorically, particularly in the Bible, the way faith transforms what we see when looking at the same natural objects, the way faith in God or in the material world transforms what we should value.

In all fairness to Plato, it should be pointed out that Socrates and Plato were among the first to use analogies, parables and fables as a way of getting their messages across about the unseen Forms to their listeners or readers. Plato however, developed a method for getting at the true definition of any universal Idea or Form such as justice or virtue by using a method called division. It is here that Skovoroda is more radical in his approach for he seems to avoid reduction to a method in his epistemology and his concept formation and to rely completely on the metaphorical. Skovoroda does follow Plato in the use of the dialogue form and both stayed away from the treatise style of exposition.

Nili Kornienko, in the recent article, also emphasizes metaphors as a way of knowing for Skovoroda. The process of coming to know these hidden natures, she suggests, is similar to coming to know strange hidden phenomenon in quantum physics<sup>5</sup> and this coming to know requires some sort of experiment. For example, she says:

"This (way of knowing) can be tried by the use of metaphors, symbols, metamorphosis, and analogies".<sup>6</sup>

Skovoroda's originality lies also, in his account of a vision of man which is

<sup>2</sup> Dmytro Cyzevs'kyj was one of the first to have stressed Skovoroda's use of the symbolic in his philosophy. He says: "The symbolism of Skovoroda

appears in the continual turning away from the idealized, abstract, general to the concrete - to life, to nature, to art and to religious traditions...

It is often difficult to ... unravel the symbolic conundrums that are posed by such a style of reasoning ... But, according to Skovoroda, this is precisely what

is positive about coming to know by means of symbolism. It forces us continually to explain, to interpret, to analyze: in this manner we are forced to come

closer to the essence of a thing..." Fil'osofija H.S.Skovorody (Warszawa: 1934), p.26.

<sup>3</sup> Zakydalsky argues that Skovoroda's account of faith (a type of knowledge) can transform the way the world is or his ontology. He says "These ... passages assign to faith a power to create new being, to transform man's substance from shadow into eternal and perfect being, into God.", p.94.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Kuhn. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>5</sup> To see how models, analogies and metaphorical thinking can function as a heuristic of discovery and creativity in science and even literature see Eugene Lashchyk "Heuristics for Scientific and Literary Creativity: The Role of Models, Analogies, and Metaphors", Rationality, Relativity, and the Human Sciences. Joseph Margolis (ed.) Martinus Nijhoff, 1986, p.151-185.

<sup>6</sup> N.M. Kornijenko "Hryhorij Skovoroda: hipoteza shchastia". Filosofovs'ka i Sociolohicna Dumka, Vol.11, 1992, p.117.

<sup>7</sup> Hryhorij Skovoroda: povne zibraunia tvoriv u dvoch tomach Naukova Dumka, Kyiv, 1973 Vol.1, p.310. All subsequent references to Skovoroda's writings, unless otherwise noted, will be to the 1973, Kyiv edition: volume number in Roman numerals, followed by page numbers in Arabic numerals, inserted in parenthesis following the passage quoted or referred to,

<sup>8</sup> *Filosofia Hryhorija Skovorody* (Kyiv, Naukova Dumka, 1972), p.227 (Ch. 4 was written by I.V.Ivan'o)

<sup>9</sup> *John Duns Scotus* (1265-1308) was one of the very few philosophers who postulated that what differentiates one being from another is a positive unique perfection, a unique "thisness" which he called *haecceitas*, and which can be known.

<sup>10</sup> In Book two of the Republic, there is the following passage "By Zeus, said I, there is nothing surprising in this, for even as you were speaking that, in the first place, each one of us is born somewhat different from the others, one more apt for one task, one for another. Don't you think so? - I do." Plato's Republic trans. G.M.A. Grube, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974), p.40.

<sup>11</sup> *Hryhorij Skovoroda "A Conversation Among Five Travelers Concerning Life's True Happiness"*

contained in the second of his three worlds called the microcosm. Contained in each human being is a unique nature which is imprinted by God and lies deep in the inner heart of each person. Skovoroda's philosophy is thoroughly dualistic and this dualism can be seen as well in his account of the microcosm. There are two hearts in man, the visible outer physical heart is responsible for man's physical drives and desires and the invisible inner heart which is the true man in man. God has imprinted on each inner heart a unique nature with appropriate inclinations and abilities. As I have already said earlier, Skovoroda calls this unique nature with which we were born "srodnost". Here Skovoroda departs radically from the accounts of human nature that we find in Aristotle and St. Thomas. On their accounts man is a rational animal and these properties are common to each human being. Their emphasis is on common characteristics and not on the differences that exist among human beings. There is a troubling passage in Skovoroda's "Dialogue ... On The Ancient World" where Lonhyn, one of the characters says:

"I could tell you also, that if one knows one man, then he knows them all ..." <sup>7</sup>. This is a very Aristotelian position and hence troubling for all those commentators who have claimed that Skovoroda believes in srodnost', that each human being is unique. Ivanio however, provides us with a way of holding on to both thesis. He says "The doctrine of srodnost' is based on an understanding of man as a spiritual-natural being" <sup>8</sup>. It is true that all human beings can be characterized as "spiritual-natural beings" but this is not necessarily an exhaustive account of human nature. Srodnost' can be an additional component of each human being <sup>9</sup>.

Skovoroda's position on srodnost' comes close to Plato's views as expressed in the Republic <sup>10</sup>. Plato's position is that humans fall by birth into three categories depending on which part of their soul is dominant. The soul has three parts: the desiring part, the spirited part, and the rational part. If their desiring part is dominant then they ought to be artisans and if they excel in the spirited part then they ought to be soldiers, and philosophers ought to come from those people whose soul excels in reason. Skovoroda goes beyond this three part division and proposes the hypothesis that each human being has a unique nature, a unique set of inclinations, which makes him/her best fit for a particular kind of work.

One gets a deeper understanding of the claim that one is destined by nature for a particular kind of work by looking at some passages in which Skovoroda discusses nature. For example in the dialogue "A Conversation Among Five Travelers Concerning Life's True Happiness" <sup>11</sup> Skovoroda equates God and Nature, so his views are radically different from the Medieval accounts of nature. Yermolai, one of the travelers, says:

*"Why then should He not be called "Nature"? In my own opinion it would be impossible to find a more important and more seemly name for God than this one. Natura is a Latin word; in Russian <sup>12</sup> we call it priroda or yestestvo... It is called Nature because everything that happens on its visible surface and everything that is born out of its secret and unbounded depths, as from the womb of our universal Mother, has a beginning in time. And since this Mother does not have to receive [a seed] from anyone in order to give birth, but gives birth of and by herself, She, or It, is called both Father and beginning or principle [nachalo = arche], since It has neither beginning nor end and is dependent upon neither time nor place. It is represented graphically by a ring or circlet or else by a coiled serpent holding its tail between its teeth" <sup>15</sup>.*

in Russian Philosophy 3 volumes. Eds. James M. Edie, James P. Scanlan, Mary Barbara Zeldin,

and George L. Kline (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965.), p.26-57. George Kline translated this di-

alogue into English.

<sup>12</sup> George Kline translates "po nashemu" as "in

Russian". I think it would be more accurate and less interpretative to translate it "in our language".

For the original see (I: 329).

<sup>13</sup> *Skovoroda, "A conversation..."* pp.32, 33.

This is a very important passage for a multitude of reasons:

1. It supports the view that Skovoroda was a pantheist " because for him in this passage God and nature are one.

2. His reference to God as a She, as a Mother, is also very original for Skovoroda's time for it puts him outside the whole mainstream of theology and philosophy before and, for more than a hundred years after, until the recent attempts by feminists to call God the Mother rather than God the Father.

3. It also puts the claim that each individual has a unique nature in a new light, for if this nature is also part of God than each person has a bit of God in him or her and in coming to know ourselves we come to know more and more not only about nature but also about God.

4. Furthermore since this srodnost', as I have already said, is given by God or Nature and each human being is unique one could almost say that each human being constitutes a separate species. This interpretation is strengthened when we look at Skovoroda's Fables where an analogy is suggested between each human being and different species of animals and their activities e.g., an eagle, a turtle etc. Let us look at Skovoroda's fable "The Eagle and the Turtle".

*An Eagle once sat on the branch of an oak tree overhanging the river while near by a Turtle was delivering the following sermon to her brood:*

*"Blast this flying! Our deceased grandmother (God grant that she be in the heavenly kingdom) has been lost forever, as all history books will show, since she started learning this art of flying from the Eagle. The devil himself could not have thought out a better..."*

*"Listen you fool!" the Eagle interrupted the sermon, Your brainy grand mother did not die from flying, but rather from the attempt to learn what was not in her nature. Flying itself is not any worse than crawling!"*

*Moral: Conceit and greed have enticed many into positions quite unsuited to their abilities. The higher they climb, the worse off they are. Only a few are born to be philosophers, destined to live in Olympic heights"<sup>15</sup>.*

The obvious point is made that just as it is the nature of an eagle to fly high and of the turtle to crawl so each human being has a unique nature. If we pursue the analogy further we arrive at the conclusion that just as eagles and turtles comprise different species so does each human being. This is a surprising and somewhat counter intuitive consequence of Skovoroda's fable but it seems to me to be reinforced when we conjoin it with the claim about srodnost'. Skovoroda's theory of happiness is closely connected with srodnost', the unique nature which is possessed by each individual. In the Fable "The Cuckoo and Thrush" Skovoroda speaks thus about srodnost':

*"The work for which we were born is a source of joy. However, If someone does not get pleasure from his work, he obviously was not born for it, is not its true friend, and loves something else; but as to what it may be, he is uncertain and thus unhappy. Nothing is sweeter than our inborn duty..."<sup>16</sup>*

One needs to add to srodnost' the Socratic maxim "know thyself", which Skovoroda also espoused, to being to get the main components to his theory of happiness. It is rather easy to see how one derives a prudential "ought" from the above doctrines. From what is prudentially good an "ought" can be derived which flows from the desire to do that which is good for oneself but this good is not yet necessarily good for society. A moral "ought" is derivable when one conjoins this with Skovoroda's belief that the pursuit of God given srodnost' will result in a harmonious society conducive to the happiness of all. In the dialogue "A Conversation Among Five Travelers..." the traveler Hryhorij, who usually speaks for Skovoroda speaks thus of happiness:

*"Let us give thanks to our Heavenly Father for having opened our eyes. Now we understand in what our true happiness consists. It lives in the inner*

<sup>14</sup> The above quotation supports a pantheistic position. But Skovoroda's position is more complicated and some commentators like George Kline and Taras Zakydalsky have claimed that it is more accurate to call Skovoroda a pantheist. One philosophical dictionary defines pantheism as the view that "the world exists in God but God is not totally dissolved in nature as in pantheism but is a separate person" (author's translation). V.I. Shynkaruk, gen. ed., *Filosof's'kyj slovnyk*, 2nd ed., (Kyiv: 1986), p.474. Kline defines pantheism as "the doctrine that the world constitutes an aspect or part, but not the whole of God's being." George L. Kline "Skovoroda's Metaphysics" 237 (page proofs of an article to be included in a volume on Skovoroda). For support of such a view see (I: 145)

<sup>15</sup> *Gregory S. Skovoroda Fables and Aphorisms* trans, biography and analysis Dan B. Chopyk (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), p.124.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

*peace of our heart, and peace lives in harmony with God. The greater the harmony the greater one's blessedness"*<sup>17</sup>.

Skovoroda's theory of happiness differs radically from the dominant earlier conceptions. I have already suggested how it is more radical than Plato's for it postulates the uniqueness of each human being. It differs significantly from Aristotle's conception because for Aristotle happiness consists in living a life devoted to the pursuit of sophia which is an intellectual virtue and is usually translated as theoretical or philosophical wisdom. In the following passage Aristotle talks about this virtue which if pursued will result in happiness:

*"If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else, that is, this element which is thought to be our ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element in us; the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative we have already said"*<sup>18</sup>.

The intellectual virtue of Sophia aims at truth. But to attain it one needs to possess two additional excellences which are part of sophia, intuition and science. If a human possesses intuition then he or she is able to arrive at the first principles or axioms in any field. If they possess science<sup>19</sup> then they are able to arrive at deductive consequences of these axioms. Both excellences are needed for those who want to possess sophia and to arrive at truth. Aristotle points out further that it will not be possible to have the intellectual virtue of sophia unless one also has the moral virtues. The human being who possesses moral virtue has practical wisdom which enables her to aim at the mean and thus avoid excesses. Aristotle's point here is that one will not be very good at aiming at the truth if one drinks or fornicates excessively or has other vices. In summary one could say that for Aristotle only those people will be supremely happy who are capable of doing philosophy<sup>20</sup> and who devote their life to the pursuit of sophia and furthermore who possess moral virtue i.e., live a life of moderation. One can find a similar theory of happiness in St. Thomas with the proviso that sophia and hence truth cannot be attained fully in this world and that complete happiness can be attained only in the next world. Only in God and the beatific vision can one attain truth and ipso facto complete happiness.

It is not difficult to see that Skovoroda developed a theory of happiness which departs radically from both Aristotle's and St. Thomas' theories of happiness. In the first place Aristotle's view fails Skovoroda's litmus paper test for an adequate theory of happiness. An adequate theory must make happiness accessible to all human beings. Since Aristotle's theory of happiness is elitist because it is attainable only by those human beings who excel in rationality, it ought to be rejected. In the following passage one can see how Skovoroda utilizes this criterion:

**Hryhorij.** *Here is thy candle: our most merciful Father has opened the path to happiness to all men. With this touchstone thou canst test the purity of gold and silver.*

**Athanasios.** *But what if one is unskilled in such testing?*

**Hryhorij.** *Here is the way to test: Can all men be artists and architects?*

**Athanasios.** *Of course not. That would be absurd.*

**Hryhorij.** *Hence happiness does not lie in those callings. Thou seest that this path is not open to everyone...*

**Hryhorij.** *Can all men be prosperous and of high station, stalwart and comely? Can everyone live in France? ... By no means! Thus it is plain that true happiness lies neither in high rank nor bodily gifts ..."*<sup>21</sup>

The doctrine that true happiness is accessible to all can be found already in

<sup>17</sup> Skovoroda, "A Conversation ...", p.46.

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle Nichomachean Ethics, 1177a, p. 11-17.

<sup>19</sup> "Science" in Aristotle means deductive reasoning and corresponds with what we now call deductive logic. It differs radically from our modern conception of science which relies more heavily on inductive reasoning.

<sup>20</sup> According to Aristotle there is a whole class of people whose rational part of the soul is weak. Because of this they are incapable of doing philosophy and ought to be slaves by nature. Women are also given a second rate status by Aristotle.

<sup>21</sup> Skovoroda "A Conversation..." p.37.

Epicures and it is likely that Skovoroda received this piece of the doctrine of happiness from him. This suggestion becomes even more plausible because Skovoroda also utilizes the following Epicurean maxim which can be found in the dialogue "A conversation Among Five Travelers..."

**"Yermolai.** / recall the wise saying of a certain sage: I give thanks to blessed nature for making what is necessary easy to obtain, and what is hard to obtain unnecessary and of little use"<sup>22</sup>.

A version of the view that happiness lies in having an inner peace of one's soul can also be found in Epicures. In conclusion it can be said that Skovoroda's theory comes closest to the Epicurean theory.

Jaremy Bentham's Utilitarian theory of happiness which defines pleasure as the satisfaction of desire, and defines happiness as the accumulation of more pleasure than pain in one's lifetime also seems to satisfy Skovoroda's requirement that happiness must be accessible to all. Skovoroda however, is very critical of those who think that happiness lies in the satisfaction of desire and the presumed resulting feeling of pleasure. He seems to subscribe to the Dewean maxim that not everything desired is desirable and vice versa and thus rejects the hedonistic and utilitarian views on happiness. Take for example the following passage in Skovoroda:

**"Hryhorij.** *To think that such foolish wishes should reach the ears of God. Thou, with thine enterprises, are like the tree which desires at one and the same time to be an oak, a maple, a linden ... The baby in arms often reaches for a sharp knife or a flame, but Nature our most merciful mother, knows better than we do what is good for us ... Millions of unhappy children complain day and night, content with nothing. If you place one thing in their hands, they cry for something else...*" ^

It is clear that the satisfaction of desire does not make people necessarily happy. Just as getting a knife does not necessarily make a baby happy but can result in a painful cut and so with the satisfaction of some other desires.

In conclusion it can be said that Skovoroda's theory of happiness in its totality is a very bold and modern view. It puts happiness in the hands of the individual person independent of God's grace, wealth, or social position in society. It is true that one is not completely free to create his/her nature and become what one wishes, as in Sartre. There is the God given or Nature given unique nature to contend with but I do not view this as a weakness but a strength of Skovoroda's theory. I have always felt that Sartre's view was unrealistic because it does not recognize that there are built in limitations in our genes which makes us more suitable for some professions rather than others<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.45. Kline in the footnote on the same page correctly traces this saying to Epicures, To Menocephus, 130, p.9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Skovoroda "A Conversation...", p.28.

<sup>24</sup> I would like to thank George Kline and Andrij Chucky for helpful suggestions on an earlier version of the paper.