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### **Hryhoriy Skovoroda as a wandering teacher and searcher for happiness**

**Abstract:** This study has been undertaken to present the Ukrainian pedagogue and philosopher Hryhoriy Skovoroda (1722-1794) and his particular way of life as an adult educator. After spending round 20 years of study and research in Kiev at the famous Kiev-Mohyla-Academy and in other cities of Western Europe, he started teaching at different institutions in the Eastern Ukraine. Shortly after that he was forced to quit teaching within an institutional context because his reformatory ideas on the ideal of a man, educational theories and nonconformist theological views were not accepted in traditional circles. Thus he started his wandering life of an adult educator going from one village to another and meeting different people. The present report considers also the didactical particularities of Skovoroda's doctrine. Eager to reach various strata of society, especially the ones excluded from education, Skovoroda formulated his ideas and theories in the form of allegories and parables as well as laconic incisive fables full of exemplified symbols and typical images accessible to common people. The report depicts his life within the scope of his doctrine and his theoretical concepts. Believing in the force of the nature which assigns to each individual a right place in the world and in the society, Skovoroda stood up for „knowing oneself“, for perfection of oneself in the process of permanent self-examinations during the whole life. He often characterizes the life as a theatre where each person is not only an observer but also a performer of his role(s). Skovoroda himself perceives his roles: as a teacher, a musician, a poet, a philosopher and an adult educator. His doctrine was therefore not a theoretical experiment (like in the case of Rousseau, for example), but the quintessence of his own life and experience. The report aims at clearing the question on what score Skovoroda may be considered as an adult educator, what competencies did he possess to be called so.

*“Who thinks about the science, loves it;  
 and who loves it, never stops to learn”*

Hryhoriy Skovoroda is considered to be one of the earliest prominent Ukrainian pedagogues and philosophers. He lived in 1722-1794. He was often called “The Russian Socrates” or the “peasant philosopher”, many legends and myths have been created about his

special manner of life, many investigations have been undertaken to examine his philosophy from different points of view. But his role as an adult educator and his doctrine concerning the lifelong learning haven't been deeply researched.

Skovoroda's philosophy and pedagogy can be interpreted in three different ways, with the emphasis being placed on his epistemology, his doctrine of man, or his life with reference to his philosophy. All these aspects will help us to understand his thoughts concerning the process of learning and teaching. I will begin with some particularities of his life which make him called an adult educator and a wandering teacher.

Skovoroda was born in the Cossack family and that fact allowed him to do his study and to be free to move (unlike the serfs). After having completed the primary school in his own village he entered the Academia Mohyleana in Kiev, where he studied with some interruptions for almost twelve years. In 1745 Skovoroda went to Hungary and Europe with General Vishnevsky. While abroad, Skovoroda had an opportunity to travel widely and to visit other European countries. His biographer Kovalynsky wrote about this time:

"Travelling with this General, Skovoroda had opportunity, with his permission and help, to undertake trips outside of Hungary to Vienna, Offen, Pressburg, and other surrounding places where, exploring on his own, he most of all endeavoured to acquaint himself with people particularly famous at that time for their learning and knowledge"<sup>1</sup>.

Skovoroda benefited considerably from his travel: his horizon broadened, he got acquainted with theological and philosophical teachings of Western Europe. After his return to Ukraine Skovoroda got a position of a teacher of poetry in the Seminary at Pereyaslav near Kiev, but he was very soon dismissed from his post because of the dispute with the bishop who didn't agree with the theory of poetics expounded by Skovoroda and who ordered to teach the traditional presentation of the subject. Skovoroda refused this and went back to Kiev to restart his studies in theology. After two years he got a position of a private teacher in an estate Kovrai near Kiev. There Skovoroda was a tutor in the family of a landowner in Kovrai. From 1759 to 1769, with interruptions, he taught such subjects as poetry, syntax, Greek, and ethics at the Kharkov College. After an

1 Skovoroda (1973), vol. II, S. 441 (English translation: Dan Chopyk: "Fables and Aphorisms", Peter Lang, 1990, S. 33).

attack on his course on ethics, in 1769 he decided to leave teaching within the scope of an institution. He never took it up again and spent the last twenty five years wayfaring. This last period was the time of his great philosophic works. In this period, but particularly earlier, he wrote poetry and letters in Russo-Slavonic and in Latin and did a few translations from Latin.

He never stopped writing and reading, and he kept giving his philosophical essays and dialogues to friends as gifts. His works were copied and sent all around the country but not a single page of his writings was published during his lifetime. The essence of Skovoroda's spiritual life can be described in a few words: he spent his life on the road in search of truth and wisdom. "*Everyone born in this world is a wayfarer — some are blind, and others are enlightened,*" he wrote. "*I gave so much time to learning before I began teaching others.*"<sup>2</sup> Kovalynsky who wrote a biography of Skovoroda, using Skovoroda's own descriptions of his attitudes, succeeded to reproduce what kind of a person Skovoroda was:

"His destiny began preparing him for what awaited him in his later life steeling his heart against injustice that he was subjected to all his life long. While he was without a home to live in, without money to buy food, without clothes to keep him warm he was never without hope. His spirit kept him safely away from temptations and earthly desires, and making him a stranger, a wanderer and wayfarer, it gave him the heart of a Citizen of the World who, possessing no family, no estate, no roof above his head, yet possessed the ability to enjoy Nature, the natural things, to share the joys of the simple and carefree — the joys that come from the simple mind and carefree spirit engaged in the search of eternal treasures."<sup>3</sup>

The central issue of Skovoroda's philosophy was Man, his existence in this world, his happiness and exploration of the ways that may lead him to happiness. Skovoroda found himself in trying to teach all those whom he met during his wanderings "the true things." He did not establish a philosophical school, there were no pupils who would carry on making popular his ideas and teaching. Skovoroda became a holy figure in the folklore — a wanderer, a sage, an itinerant musician with a flute and a walking stick, moving from place to place teaching the postulates of wisdom. Skovoroda appears in many folk legends, anecdotes, jokes and fables.

2 Skovoroda 1973, vol. I, S. 276.

3 Skovoroda 1973, vol. II, S. 440.

They say that Skovoroda was a philosopher who practised what he preached. So, to understand his life one should take a look at his principal philosophical ideas. That's why I will dwell in few words on some points of his philosophy.

### Structure of the world

The basic principle of Skovoroda's philosophy is the understanding of the structure of the world. Skovoroda recognizes the existence of three worlds:

"There are three worlds. The first is the universal and inhabited world where every creature dwells. It consists of countless little worlds.... The other two are partial and little worlds. The first microcosm or little world is man. The second is the symbolic world, that is, the Bible."<sup>4</sup>

All three worlds have a parallel structure, a dualism of appearance and reality, external facade and internal nucleus, inessential and essential. Thus, by studying one of the worlds, we at same time understand the other worlds.

So, all these three worlds consist of two natures: one visible, the other invisible. The invisible is called God. This invisible nature or God inheres and sustains all creation. This nature is eternal omnipresent. Skovoroda's discussion of the ontological structure of things is based on the theory of Plato:

"All three worlds consist of two natures in one, named matter and form. In Plato these forms are named idea, that is, presentations, appearances, images. These forms are the original worlds, the underived secret threads penetrating and sustaining matter or shadows. In the great and small worlds the material appearance indicates a form or an eternal image hidden under it."<sup>5</sup>

### Epistemology

The recognition of the world and the only true access to knowledge begins by Skovoroda in self-knowledge. In view of the fact that man is a microcosm that reflects all the structures of the macrocosm and that of God one can reason that the world can only be known through

4 Григорій Сковорода: Твори в двох томах. Київ 1961. (Gregory Skovoroda: Works in Two Volumes, ed. O. I. Biletskyi, D. Kh. Ostrianyn, and P. M. Popov. Kiev: Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR, 1961), vol. I, S. 536. (English translation: Taras Zakydalsky: The Theory of Man in the Philosophy of Skovoroda. Bryn Mawr College, 1965, p. 38).

5 Skovoroda (1961), vol. I, p. 539 (English translation: Zakydalsky (1965), p. 43).

self-knowledge. "*He who is blind at home is blind also on visits*"<sup>6</sup>. We cannot understand the nature of the world without first discovering the nature of ourselves.

But it is impossible to recognize anything without seeing God in it. Even if you know all scientific materialistic laws of the world, "*even if you had measured all the Copernican worlds, but had not discovered the plan that sustains their whole external appearance [i.e., God's ideas] nothing would come of it.*"<sup>7</sup> All truths that do not contain a clear reference to God are only partial and of a lower order. To believe in the sciences as possessing the absolute truth is to be in error.

The sciences in themselves, however, are not false if they do not make the claim to absolute knowledge – in fact Skovoroda doesn't criticize the sciences in general, but he wants the knowledge of God to take the upper place of all the other knowledge.

"We have measured the sea, land, air and heavens and have disturbed the belly of the earth to reach its metals, traced the planets, searched the mountains, rivers, cities on the moon, discovered countless worlds, built incomprehensible machines, filled abysses, blocked and redirected the flow of rivers. Daily we raise new questions and create wild inventions.... Good heavens, what is there we don't know how or can't do! And yet, to our misfortune, something great seems to be lacking in all this: we only know that something is lacking, but what it is we have no idea."<sup>8</sup>

In this feeling of dissatisfaction lies the first hint that we must search elsewhere for the truth.

What is the basic reason for this insufficiency of the sciences? Why cannot the sciences, or rather our faith in the material world as opposed to our faith in God, possibly make man happy? We can understand that by examining the inner structure of the man. The inner heart, or how Skovoroda calls it – "the true man" is eternal by its nature and the very image of God. Only the divine knowledge refers to the deep structure of the man and nourishes his inner core.

One last point must be made about Skovoroda's notion of knowledge and that is that true knowledge always has practical consequences. It affects the quality of man's existence, his attitude to life and to his work, his relation to himself and to others. Knowledge is inseparable from practical action. Knowledge in this sense is truly the whole life of man.

6 Ibid., vol. I, p. 364.

7 Ibid., vol. I, p. 41.

8 Ibid., vol. I, p. 222. (English translation: Zakydalsky (1965), p. 88).

### Self-fulfilment

God gives each man an individual nature, which determines his vocation in life. This vocation can be discovered by self-knowledge. Skovoroda expresses the fundamental points of this theory in this way:

"Nature and inclination are the innate divine will and God's secret law that governs all creatures ... God's kingdom and truth are within his creatures. He does not wrong anyone in distributing inclinations. One man is meant for one job, another for another ... and though it may be a base calling, it is not dishonorable and will prove absorbing and useful, if the man directs himself according to God's will."<sup>9</sup>

Each man is gifted with different talents and inclinations or interests. They lead him to a particular personal vocation. As vocations are unequal, men must also be unequal in natural ability.

But all men, whatever their vocation, can be equally happy in case they follow this vocation – so to say their own nature. This is Skovoroda's doctrine of "unequal equality." First we must be grateful to God for making us what we are. Then we must pursue our vocation actively. Work according to Skovoroda is the primary source of self-fulfilment and happiness.

Unnatural work (work that doesn't correspond to natural abilities) is objectionable to Skovoroda. It destroys one's own nature and perishes God's intentions. Such work is a sin. People who take up unnatural work don't follow their vocation but are eager to receive some other rewards. Though they may achieve these rewards, their work must be a "deathly torture" to them, and furthermore must poison their whole lives:

"Then [the soul] is not satisfied with anything, loathes both its position and society. Its neighbours seem vile, its amusements unsavoury, its discussions vain, ... its whole family hateful, its nights boring, its days vexing ... it degrades its country and customs, defames nature, grumbles against God and is angry with itself ... it cannot live and does not wish to die. The personal vocation has not only immense significance for the individual, but for society as a whole. It is God's way of founding and structuring society"<sup>10</sup>.

9 Ibid., vol. I, p. 343 (English translation: Zakydalsky (1965), p. 111).

10 Ibid., vol. I, p. 323 (English translation: Zakydalsky (1965), p. 113).

### Happiness

In contrast to most Christian philosophers Skovoroda does not consider man's life as a preparation for the eternal life. All men are created by God to be happy. "*Absolutely everything was born for a good end and the good end is happiness.*" From the fact that happiness is the necessary end of life, one can draw the following conclusions: happiness is universal and available to every man and happiness is somehow easy to attain. Happiness cannot be located in goods that aren't accessible to everyone, such as noble birth, nationality, abilities and talents, health and comeliness, or wealth. If God wants all creatures to be happy, he has made the road to true happiness easy to follow. "*O depth of blessed Wisdom that makes the necessary easy and the difficult unnecessary*"<sup>11</sup>.

Gratitude, which is the basis of happiness, is not merely a resignation: it is a joyful acceptance of his own nature.

### Doctrine of Man

For Skovoroda man is essentially a creature with the capacity to think and to know the truth. This capacity distinguishes him from other creatures and makes him a self-directing, autonomous image of God. The image of man that Skovoroda proclaimed is that of a self-dependent inimitable person who has found himself, who is able to rule himself and who is connected with God. Behind it one can recognize the classical philosophical image of the mature person – autonomous, enlightened and reflecting. Skovoroda acknowledges the right of self governance and the possibility of development of the unique abilities for every person.

The pedagogical theory of Skovoroda is based on the assumption that the source for the right life style and for truth is hidden in the inner of the person. The key which one needs to answer the important questions of life can be found in the contiguity between the divine core of a person and his own individual nature.

"[O]f all ceremonies in whatever lands and times, of all knots, of all secret images in seals and signs, man is the center or end. Here everything ends.... Whatever it may be: a deed, action or word – everything is an empty nothingness if it has not become an event in man himself."<sup>12</sup>

The world, like a ceremony or a sign, exists not for itself but to

11 Ibid., vol. I, p. 177.

12 Ibid., vol. I, p. 115 (English translation: Zakydalsky (1965), p. 32).

signify, to point out something else to man.

"Everything that is designated there in the world must by necessity come to fulfillment in man himself.... This is why Paul, mentioning the sun, moon and stars ties all of them to the resurrection, that is, to man.<sup>13</sup>"

### Teaching and Wandering

His whole life was devoted to learning how to live well and to teaching this art to others. Skovoroda didn't accept the institutional methods of teaching of his time, that is why he left his work as a teacher in both colleges. He carried the reformist ideas concerning education and the only free space to put these ideas into action was the life of a wandering philosopher and teacher. He educated children on the estates where he lived and entertained with his conversations beloved people therein. But it was not the knowledge of the worldly things that he was teaching. It was an education for the heart. He often ridicules the intellectuals who are so dedicated to their sciences that they forget that these are merely tools for happy living and not ends in themselves:

"Mathematics, medicine, physics, mechanics, music with their ungovernable sisters; the more we taste of their richness, the more does our heart burn with hunger and thirst, while our dull dumbness does not even suspect that they are all handmaids serving a mistress and the tail in relation to the head without which the whole body is ineffective.<sup>14</sup>"

Skovoroda poses the question how one should learn. The answer is that the only way to acquire deep knowledge is to learn slowly and thorough going. "Learning means constant practise, formed into habit, for practice is a daughter of nature". One must be very careful to choose the science to concentrate oneself to, because this choice determines the whole life. One can never complete training in that or other area, it is a task for the whole life. If a person has recognized his vocation, his mission, he is on the right path to the wisdom: "The ideal wisdom doesn't consist of knowing everything. Who could it ever? [...] But if you know everything that you need, this is the complete wisdom"<sup>15</sup>.

Since Skovoroda believed that every man was born endowed

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., vol. I, p. 222 (English translation: Zakydalsky (1965), p. 27).

<sup>15</sup> Skovoroda (1973), vol. I, p. 132.

with the talent to a certain occupation, he built his educational theory on that fact: "The teacher is just a servant of nature who is the only and true teacher". "You teacher can teach a falcon to fly quickly, but you cannot teach a turtle to fly [...] You do not need to teach an apple tree to bear apples; the nature has taught it already. You need only to protect it from the pigs by putting a fence around it; prune it (in the springtime), spray it in the proper time, ameliorate it, etc. Don't interfere with nature, but if you can, smooth the path for unhampered development and keep it clear...<sup>16</sup>"

After the education by a teacher one should move on the road of self education. The person can never stop recognizing himself and his internal divine plan. Skovoroda argued for lifelong learning and wrote in one of his letters to his student Kovalynsky never to stop learning, because "*the best fellow in old age is the wisdom or the science because everything will leave the person in the old age besides the science*"<sup>17</sup>.

In fact the teaching that true knowledge must precede good living is central to Skovoroda's philosophy. Skovoroda lived in the estates of his friends and benefactors moving from one to another, but he always kept his proper manner of life. He lived in moderation and shared his views among their friends in disputes in some groups or circles. Some of this conversations Skovoroda wrote down so his philosophical works were produced. He dedicated all of them to his friends. Some people convicted his way of life, but Skovoroda gave explanation in one of his letter describing his choice and his occupation:

"Recently somebody asked about me, 'Tell me, what is he doing there in seclusion?' If I were there on account of my bodily ailment, or if I attended the apiary, or was tailoring, or occupied with hunting, then Skovoroda would seem to them as having a job. But without this they think me idle and, nor without cause, are wondering. [...] But is this the only task for a man: to sell, to buy, to get married, to achieve, to make war, to push and to shove, to tailor, to construct, to hunt?... But aren't there limits to our heart? Well, there is the reason of our troubles: we, having sunk our heart into the acquisition of worldly things and into the sea of bodily conveniences, have no time to look inside ourselves, to purify and to cure the mistress of our body, our soul. We forgot our own selves... 'Not by bread alone lives man'.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., vol. II, S. 104. (English translation: Chopyk (1990), S. 161).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., vol. II, S. 220.

Concerning this last one, the bread of angels, cares Skovoroda day and night..."<sup>18</sup>

Skovoroda believed that education, mental development can change the society. He was often accused to be passive in matters of social questions of his time: he has never given his opinion concerning the question of the serfdom, concerning the strong oppression of the Ukraine by Russia, etc. But he supported the evolution that came from the spirits of the people, who succeed to recognize themselves and to arrange their lives corresponding to their divine nature: *"In an ideal society everyone realizes his or her natural abilities in an appropriate (in-born) work and obtains enjoyment from a truly civilized way of life. Society can achieve this type of life through general education"*.

Skovoroda insisted that the education is necessary for all the strata of the society. He himself abandoned his work in the colleges limited only for the lads of the well-going families and started to move through the country to reach every man and to show him the most important and the most simple thing – the way to be happy. Skovoroda also disapproved of the wish of one of his students to become a tutor of German language in a rich family. *"Such a profession may be dangerous for your young age"*, wrote Skovoroda in one of the letters to him, *"you can be quickly influenced by amoral things of the rich people"*<sup>19</sup>.

### Methods

Skovoroda's teachings have a purely practical significance. He does not dwell on the principal philosophical questions. He examines them only as a basis to solve the practical question of action.

To a considerable degree his philosophy is a philosophy of images. His concepts almost always were connected with a metaphor. For him the imagination is one of the stimulating elements that activate the process of thinking.

Skovoroda expresses his thought in form of abstract concepts. He usually formulates a thought in philosophical concepts as briefly as possible and then repeats it and develops it by means of various symbols. This style has as a consequence the ambiguity of a thought. That may be considered as pedagogical challenges for the reader or listener to participate in the creative process, to bring, to

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., vol. II, p. 398 (English translation: Chopyk (1990), S. 54).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., vol. II, p. 349.

bear on his interpretation, his own experience and his imaginative powers. But this style has also disadvantages, one can never be categorically sure what Skovoroda means.

Skovoroda offers a special type of philosophy, a philosophy that is not based only intellectually, but also spiritually. He speaks in a very personal way to the reader. He considers every man as an individual human being concerned with his ultimate fate, frightened by the inevitability of death, hoping for happiness and fulfilment in life, and worried about trifling everyday problems. Skovoroda speaks as a wise friend who has solved for himself the great and the small riddles of life and has tested his solutions in practice. His wisdom is based on his own experience and may be described best as a personal faith. The problems he deals with in his works stimulate the reader's own thought rather than they dispense easy solutions. His aim is Socratic – to kindle in us a desire and thirst for the truth by turning our attention upon ourselves.

Skovoroda's philosophical dialogues also have a great aesthetic value. Skovoroda's style is colorful, picturesque and vivid. The rhythms of speech are natural, relaxed, leisurely, yet lively. Witty comparisons, puns and aphorisms produce humour and playfulness of the conversations. Sometimes an entire anecdote or story is inserted to illustrate a point.

"Philosophy, or love of wisdom directs all its efforts to the end of giving life to our spirit, nobility to our heart, light to our thoughts, which are the head of everything. When the spirit in man is gay, the thoughts quiet, the heart peaceful, then everything is bright, happy, and blessed. This is philosophy"<sup>20</sup>.

### His life and his doctrine

Skovoroda's philosophy corresponds to his own search for meaning and purpose to his existence and for guidance in actions. His philosophical enterprise was not purely speculative, and was not carried out in a quiet study isolated from life. It was closely connected with the practical questions of everyday life.

He repeated several times that he would change his profession if he wasn't sure that it is correct. But he remained all his life of the conviction that his calling is to propagate the truth and to teach the other about self-awareness. Due to his manner of life he obtained the inner peace and considered himself as a happy man. He had all he

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., vol. II, p. 443.

needed, as he said: "*the life, the wealth, the sun, avocation, occasions to speak and to be silent*"<sup>21</sup>.

His whole life was a way to reach freedom. He underlined the importance of the free choice of the profession and the manner of life for others, and he himself lived accordingly. He chose the freedom by refusing the conventional career in the convent and in the colleges, also by his own new interpretations of the Bible as well as by proclaiming his new educational methods. His life may be also considered as a self-made learning biography. He conceived the education in distance from all sorts of external dependence and he voiced it in his letter: "*O Freedom! O science!*"

Among the educated and ruling class he reached only those few who were his personal friends. They read his philosophical manuscripts and made copies of them by hand. Thus, Skovoroda's philosophical works reached a very limited though selected audience. In the masses Skovoroda found a greater audience. Though common people admired him greatly, they certainly could not appreciate his philosophical thought. They loved him for the exemplary life he led, for his protests against abuses by the higher classes, and also for the songs and fables that he composed. Some of these literary works were incorporated into the folklore and were preserved by oral tradition through the 19th century. In the 1860s G. P. Danilevskii wrote that "*It is a rare corner of the country that does not remember Skovoroda with emotion to the present day.*"<sup>22</sup> Skovoroda's thoughts about education play an important role in the society of modern democratic Ukraine. After the collapse of the Soviet Union with his antidemocratic propagandistic ideas concerning education the question of new models and traditions has arisen. Skovoroda's doctrine was one of the most orientation to build a new educational system.

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<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 345.

<sup>22</sup> *Ukrainskaya starina: materialy dlya istorii ukrainskoi literatury* (Ukraine's Past: Materials for the History of Ukrainian Literature) (Kharkiv: Zelenskii and Lyubarskii Press, 1866), p. 2.

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