

Hryhorii Skovoroda in the Circle of Philosophers*

Magdalena Andriivna Laszlo-Kutsiuk,

Dr. Sci. (Philology), Professor of Ukrainian Studies, Bucharest University

Hryhorii Skovoroda has long been the subject of differing viewpoints. We believe this disagreement stemmed from a lack of consensus in the specialised literature about the field of knowledge to which his works belong.

Without a doubt, he was a poet. According to the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, Skovoroda was the first outstanding Slavic poet ever. He wrote fables, but they contained such a broad moral that it is difficult to call him a fabulist. Skovoroda's fables and correspondence belong more to the realm of moral philosophy.

Which category do his dialogues and treatises belong to? In terms of their form, they fit into the tradition of Plato's dialogues; still, in terms of content, they fall into what the American philosopher William James called "religious psychology." Leonid Ushkalov, a prominent expert on Skovoroda's legacy, explored his writings in the context of Ukrainian "Baroque theology." Indeed, it was a rather special world. While Western Europe grappled with social and political challenges, Ukrainian scholars, primarily graduates of the Kyiv-Mohyla Collegium (Academy since 1708), were deeply involved in resolving theological issues, the relevance of which was dictated by the need to defend themselves against the invasion of Catholicism from Poland. The Academy's professors also penned treatises on poetics, mostly in Latin; however, these works only replicated dogmatic Western European poetics, featured examples from these poetics, and not a single local one.

With the themes of his writings, Skovoroda could not escape from this circle of spiritual literature. He could only change his approach to certain issues. This difference was determined by his own spiritual structure. The issues raised by Skovoroda were so unique and personal that the Russian philosopher Vladimir Ern, in his monograph *Grigorii Savvich Skovoroda. Zhizn i uchenie* [Hryhorii Savovych Skovoroda. His Life and Teachings], published in 1912, refused to recognise that Skovoroda's works belonged to the field of theology and contended that theology was only a visible covering of his works and that, in fact, he was a purely secular writer.

This impression was also made by a solid imprint in his works of the author's psychic structure. Still, it is all about God and the World, the place of Man in the World and cosmology, seen under the influence of a certain tradition and through a certain temperament. By any means, due to the lack of systematicity, we cannot call Skovoroda a pure philosopher because, as a type of ethical-intuitive extrovert with strong deductive and figurative thinking, he operated mainly in allegories and symbols rather than judgments and deductions. His originality stemmed not from the brilliant stringing of thoughts, as, for example, in B. Spinoza, but from a peculiar approach to the Bible, which he considered a symbolic key to the Cosmos.

Unlike his contemporaries, the French thinkers of the 18th century, Skovoroda did not try to break down the foundations of faith and the Church. On the contrary, he strived to bring all this closer to understanding the individual through unexpected associations that lead to opposing ideas more often than in dogmatic theology. Let's take the serpent as an example. In the Book of Genesis, it is the enemy of God. John Milton interprets the serpent as Satan in his poem *Paradise Lost*, which drew heavily on theological dogmas. While in Skovoroda's Latin-language poem *Pro taiemnu vecheriu abo pro vichnist* [On the Holy Supper or Eternity], the Serpent is an entirely positive character. Realising that the fullness of knowledge is inaccessible to him, the author approaches the Serpent, which is the image of eternity, to reveal this eternity to him. It is no longer a Christian theology but the philosophy of the Gnostics. In the essay *Lot's Wife*, the author places the spirit and matter in sharp juxtaposition and comes to a complete negation of a Christian ritual, where the material world still plays a significant role. This was the logical result of the evolution of

Skovoroda's thinking, starting with *The Narcissus*, in which, contrary to the ancient legend, one cannot love the body but only the spirit. It would seem that all this is a purely theological issue, and Skovoroda's conclusions fit well with the problems of ancient Ukrainian literature.

Nevertheless, the energy of his imaginative thinking places Skovoroda beyond pure theology. However, let us quote Leonid Makhnovets, Skovoroda's biographer:

The Serpent's Flood fulfils Skovoroda's philosophical concept of two "natures" of the world – material and spiritual, or "matter" and "form". Here, Skovoroda considered a "form," an idea, a thought to be the active, driving principle, following the idealist statement of Plato that material nature, the world, is only a "passing shadow of ideas."

For Plato, this concept was associated with his belief in the transmigration of souls. Individuals recall their experiences from the moment they had the opportunity to observe the world of pure ideas directly. The very concept of "form" active in relation to matter belongs to Aristotle.

Along with contrasting the material and the spiritual, which Skovoroda compared to a tree and its shadow, he also distinguished between the "macrocosm" and the "microcosm." These concepts dating back to the ancient philosophers were later adopted by the so-called "philosophy of nature" of the 16th century, particularly by Paracelsus, the famous physician and thinker. Paracelsus likened the world to the human body on a large scale and considered man the small-scale world. The movements of the world within the small personal world correspond to the movements of the world within the big one, accurately copying them. In Skovoroda's work *The Narcissus. A Deliberation on the Topic: "Know Thyself"* we meet the following dialogue:

Druh: I just said that you only see your own tail, but know nothing about your head. So how can you know someone based on only their heel? How can you say that you know thyself? You have only lost thyself. You have no ears, no nostrils, no eyes, none of any of what you are, except for just your shadow.

Luka: Why do you call me a shadow?

Druh: Because you have lost the truth of your essence, and of your entire body you preserve the heel or tail, bypassing what you exactly are and so you have lost what is primary (Volume I, p. 156).

And further:

Luka: So be it. In the entirety of what is under heaven I see nothing else than the visible, or as you say it, the bodily or fleshly.

Druh: Then this makes you an unbelieving pagan and an idolater.

Luka: How can I be an idolater if I believe in one God?

Druh: How can you believe if you see nothing except for the visible? True belief disdains visible emptiness but depends on that which is the head, which is strength and fortitude and this will never perish. (Ibid.)

Thus, Skovoroda adapts the concepts of ancient idealistic philosophy to those of Christian theology and uses illustrative material developed in the European Baroque period. The fact that Skovoroda was not limited to the teachings of antiquity but was also familiar with Early Modern Philosophy is evident from his connections with monadology. Unlike the materialist philosophers of the 18th century, Skovoroda viewed a man not as an empty mechanism; for him, humanity was a complex of independent monads, each driven by spiritual power. The above quote leaves no doubt about this. Ever since Oleksandra Yefymenko, a professor from Kharkiv, unreasonably tried to bring Skovoroda closer to B. Spinoza at the end of the 19th century, although their ideas or approaches had nothing in common, there have been several repeated attempts to draw comparisons between the two (e.g., by Anastasiia Nizhenets). The analogy is appropriate precisely with G. W. Leibniz (1646-1716). However, Skovoroda never mentioned Leibniz; he may have known his works through other philosophers, for example, Christian Wolff, but the similarity of the concept of a man as a microcosm is too obvious. Skovoroda's good friend, the founder of Kharkiv University,

Vasyl Karazin, asserted this similarity: “Beneath a forelock and in a Ukrainian peasant jacket, we had our own Pythagoras, Origen, and Leibniz.”

In addition to macro- and microcosm, Skovoroda distinguished the third world, the world of symbols. It is represented by the Bible and consists of two natures, the inner and the outer, just like the two other worlds. The outer nature of the Bible is its superficial part, a literal understanding of Biblical narratives, while the inner nature is the universal truth concealed in it. Skovoroda adopted the symbolic interpretation of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament, from his favourite Jewish thinker, Philo of Alexandria. To some extent, but not as widely as in Philo, this symbolic interpretation can be found in another author from Alexandria, Clement, who was a Christian. His name appears on Skovoroda’s list of favourite authors, compiled by his student Mykhailo Kovalynskyi. Another Christian author who appeared on this list (vol. 2, p. 293) is Maximus the Confessor – one of the most well-known representatives of the symbolic or analogical reading of the Bible. Maximus the Confessor (580-662), a Christian Neoplatonic philosopher, believed that nature was created by God, who revealed himself in the Bible.

Previous studies on the subject have primarily focused on drawing similarities with the authors who were unknown to Skovoroda. Dmytro Chyzhevskyi has thoroughly analysed the parallels with German mystics Jacob Böhme and Angelus Silesius. However, to the author’s best knowledge, studies comparing Skovoroda and the prominent 17th-century thinker Blaise Pascal, with whom Skovoroda had much in common in terms of mental structure and problematics, are still lacking. Pascal was also a religious thinker who, like Skovoroda, became disillusioned with the exact sciences (Skovoroda repeatedly rejected interest in the “Copernican spheres” and called to look into the caves of the heart). Let’s quote translated Pascal’s characteristics from S. Averintsev’s dictionary *Sophia-Logos*:

Pascal’s place in the history of philosophy is determined by the fact that he was the first thinker to depart from the mechanical philosophy of rationalism of the 17th century and question the limits of “scientific thinking,” emphasising the “reason of the heart” that reason itself cannot understand, thus anticipating the subsequent irrational trend in philosophy... Drawing the main ideas of Christianity from the traditional synthesis with cosmology and metaphysics of the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic type, Pascal refuses to build an artificially harmonised theological image of the world.

Pascal consistently refers to the impermanence of human nature, particularly its sadness. Let us mention the “boredom” as the central motif of Skovoroda’s poems. Pascal and later Skovoroda had a dialectical way of thinking as opposed to the geometrical methods found in Spinoza’s philosophy. Similar to Pascal, Skovoroda could not find satisfaction in the world and avoided people. But being, like Skovoroda, a type of “Hamlet,” Pascal did not find satisfaction in solitude either.

Skovoroda contended that the “truth has no beginning.” Therefore, he did not believe that something newer was necessarily better and instead relied on ancient authors. Pascal wrote:

We always recognise the greatness of antiquity. Yet it is true that if it has been discovered recently, we must give preference to the opposite opinion of ancient thinkers. Because the truth is always older than antiquity. Although not recognised, the truth existed even when wrong opinions were formed. We would completely misunderstand the essence of truth if we thought it began to exist only when people discovered it.

Finally, Pascal and Skovoroda shared the same understanding of the role of self-esteem and tradition in career choice; they believed that work should be “congenial” and correspond to the nature of a particular person. They evaluated people by their inner values rather than social status. The above parallels show that both thinkers can be defined as representatives of moral philosophy because the “human heart” was more important to them than all the problems of cosmology.

* Laszlo-Kutsiuk, M. (2003). *Hryhorii Skovoroda u koli filosofiv* [Hryhorii Skovoroda in the Circle of Philosophers]. Nash Holos, pp. 113-114. Pereiaslavski Skovorodynivski studii. Issue 9, 2022.