

The Relevance of Skovoroda's Ethical Principles Skovoroda's Discussion of Real Happiness

Christoph Lumer

University of Siena, Italy

E-Mail: lumer@unisi.it

Homepage: <http://www.lumer.info/>

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Greeting address at the conference to celebrate the 300th birthday of Hryhorii Skovoroda

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To the 300th anniversary of his birth
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0. Greeting and preliminary remarks

Good morning to everybody. Many thanks to Professor Ivan Karpenko for his kind introduction! Many thanks to Professor Iryna Karpenko and the organisers for inviting me to this conference! I am delighted to be able to speak to you on this memorable occasion, the celebration of the 300th birthday of Hryhorii Skovoroda!

A few weeks ago, I organised a roundtable in Berlin for the German Society for Analytic Philosophy to initiate further scientific cooperation between Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian philosophers. Professor Iryna Karpenko was one of the Ukrainian participants. And she reported, among other things, on the bombing of the museum dedicated to Skovoroda's memory by the Russian invading forces. About the background she said that this is an attack on one of the most important symbols of Ukrainian philosophical thought. Russian aggressors bombed the small but very beloved by Ukrainians Museum of Skovoroda. This museum is located far from the city of Kharkov in a small village. Obviously, that this blow was not accidental. The attack was aimed at destroying Ukrainian cultural identity. German newspapers (*Süddeutsche Zeitung* 20.5.2022) also wrote about this bombing and classified it exactly the same way, as an attack on Ukrainian cultural identity.

Bombs can destroy material objects but not ideas. Therefore, it is all the more important to preserve the cultural contents attached to these objects in our hearts, to spread them and to keep them alive in our minds. The present congress, which we are at the beginning of, is an important contribution to this. Cultural memory and living tradition are more difficult to destroy than their

material symbols. This does not mean that the material symbols are not very important or that the destruction of even cultural memory and a living tradition is not possible. But the latter becomes all the more difficult the more widespread these thoughts and traditions are. A small note from me on this: not many of Skovoroda's writings have been translated into English, or they are difficult to access. It would be important to translate more of them into English and make them more accessible. English is the lingua franca in the Western world. Disseminating Skovoroda's works in this world as well, with hundreds of millions of possible readers, makes the destruction of his thoughts that much more difficult. Internationally, many texts do not count if they are not translated into English and easily accessible.

I understand my small presentation as a sign of my solidarity with the fight of the Ukrainians for your freedom, for democracy, for a legal system that protects your fundamental rights, for your own culture, economic and intellectual development. I admire the determination and bravery of the Ukrainians in the battle for these goals, which has turned what at first seemed to be a hopeless endeavour into quite a successful one so far. Continue the very good work!

1. The Content of Skovoroda's "Conversation Among Five Travellers Concerning Life's True Happiness"

After this introduction, let me come to my actual topic: "The Relevance of Skovoroda's Ethical Principles", which Professor Iryna Karpenko asked me to treat. I must say at the outset that I am a systematic analytical ethicist, not a historian of philosophy. I can therefore say nothing about the contemporaneous references of Skovoroda's thought, his discussions with other contemporaneous philosophical authorities. For another, I must say in advance that I had only *one* ethical text by Skovoroda that I could read: "A Conversation Among Five Travellers Concerning Life's True Happiness", which Professor Karpenko kindly made available to me. So here I will say something about this conversation in the style of systematic analytic philosophers, that is, who seek to reconstruct the argument and critically evaluate it epistemically. Some consider such analyses impious. This is certainly not the case. Rather, the writings from the history of philosophy are discussed like those of contemporaries and are thus taken particularly seriously.

Skovoroda's "Conversation Among Five Travellers Concerning Life's True Happiness" is, as the title of this dialogue suggests, about what real happiness is. This is an old topic in philosophy and belongs to ethics in a broad sense. For the different answers to this question subsequently lead to completely different lifestyles with which the respective kind of happiness is to be achieved. Skovoroda draws on this tradition, especially the relevant discussions of happiness in Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics", but also on ideas from other authors and traditions such as Socrates, the Stoics and above all Christian thought. Skovoroda knows all these traditions quite well, and tries to develop his own theory within this intellectual framework, namely a very strict Christian conception of happiness.

The conversation is in the style of the Socratic dialogues. Five people take part in it, representing different theories on the title question, what true happiness is.

1. *Athanasius* is a *materialistic hedonist*: happiness for him is the joy of the heart; all seek this happiness by striving for in a broad sense material sources of happiness: friends, high social positions, wealth, material goods, sensual pleasures, etc.
2. *Gregory* is a *Christian eudaemonist*: true happiness is the peace of the soul, which we attain by following the word of the Bible, making His will our own (26); true happiness is harmony with God. In addition to Christian thought, Gregory draws a little on the Stoic concept of ataraxia and frugality and asceticism for the idea of peace of mind.
3. *James* does not clearly stand for a position of its own; he mainly seconds Gregory's position, e.g. by pointing it out once again or by making points against the representatives of the other theories. I will not discuss James any further.
4. *Ermolai* (from 7) is a *satisfactionist*: according to him, the best thing in life is to be satisfied with all things (10). Ermolai, however, also does not play a major role.
5. Finally, *Longinus* (from 16) is a *radical*, one could also say *evangelical Christian eudaemonist*: according to him, happiness is – as already with Gregory – inner peace and tranquillity of the soul (21). According to him, we have two natures, a material and a spiritual one, or a bodily and a divine one (41); earthly goods are necessary, but unimportant (40); a frugal satisfaction of physical needs is enough. Science is also unimportant; the only thing we need for happiness is the Bible. And he backs all this up with a flood of biblical quotations.

The relationship between the positions of Gregory and Longinus is difficult to determine. They do not contradict each other, but rather seem to complement each other, so that in the end they could stand for two somewhat different expressions of one and the same theory, with Longinus then representing this somewhat evangelical expression from which Gregory is free.

Skovoroda seems to identify with the position of Gregorius, but, as just mentioned, also to advocate much of what Longinus said. This is essentially clear from the content: Gregorius' position is never successfully attacked in the conversation. An additional indication is the fact that Gregorius bears the same name as Grigory Skovoroda.

How does the discussion between the five interlocutors develop? Athanasius, the materialistic hedonist, opens with a statement of his position: 1. For him, happiness is the joy of the heart. This is thus an affective conception of well-being, which also includes sensual pleasures in particular. 2. The way to this happiness is the accumulation of material sources of happiness in the broadest sense. Gregory then tries to refute Athanasius with arguments. One important argument, for example, is that Gregory's happiness is not attainable because it wants too many contradictory things at once. Athanasius keeps asking questions back in the discussion, but does not put forward any significant new arguments against the critics. Gregory hides his position, he only criticises in the first part of the dialogue without revealing his position.

Then Ermolai, the satisfactionist, enters the scene and presents his position: The best thing in life is to be satisfied with everything. Gregorius engages in a sharp argumentative debate with Ermolai, criticising him among other things with a good old argument, namely that many people do not become happy, even unhappy, by achieving what they had wished for. Ermolai no longer plays a significant role in the conversation.

The whole discussion takes a turn with the appearance of Longinus, the radical Christian eudaemonist – after the first third of the text. He sets out his position in endless expositions: So happiness is inner peace (21) and tranquillity of soul (21) and this consists in unity with God. We have a material and a spiritual nature (41), the material is necessary (40), but unimportant, so that a frugal satisfaction is sufficient (40). The Bible is the most necessary thing for this happiness. (20) In doing so, he refers more and more to the Bible; there are countless biblical quotations. Slowly, Gregorius is also lured out of his reserve and provides positive additions to Longinus' position, as if this position would finally say what he had not said before: If one makes God's will one's own, everything happens according to one's own will, so that one becomes satisfied with everything. (26) Happiness lies in inner peace and this in harmony with God. (27) The relationship between the two remains somewhat unclear. It could be, as already said, that they are meant to complement each other. These expositions are theological, but not philosophical.

The third to last contribution to the conversation, which was preceded by Longinus' long speeches, comes from Athanasius, who complains: "You have so clogged your speech with scraps of Scripture that no one can understand it." (44) Longinus apologises saying he is so in love with the Bible – and continues with his litany. (44-45) Gregory has the last word: If Athanasius did not like the scraps from the Bible, they could continue the discussion in the evening in another way. (45)

2. Critical discussion of the text

So much for my summary of the text. I can now begin the critical discussion.

Skovoroda is quite well versed in the main classical philosophical positions on happiness; he is thus up to date. What is unfortunately missing is a discussion of another classical position that would have been even stronger than Athanasius' materialistic hedonism, namely an Epicurean hedonism that is essentially concerned with spiritual pleasures. (Skovoroda apparently did not know the hedonistic paradox discovered a generation before him by Bishop Joseph Butler, that those who selfishly pursue happiness are more likely to miss it than those who altruistically care for others. Today's social psychological research confirming the hedonistic paradox or noting the limited importance of high income for happiness could further strengthen Epicurean hedonism; but these are of course much later developments.) And Skovoroda goes beyond the known arguments with some of his arguments, so he is innovative, especially with his critique of materialistic hedonism as outlined.

The first third of the talks is argumentative. And the arguments are to a large extent very good. However, the positions of Gregory's opponents and their arguments are never made particularly strong, so that, seen from the outside, a number of open questions remains. Skovoroda adopts from Aristotle a definition of the 'highest good' that confuses the (i) *intrinsically good*, that is, that which is good for its own sake, not for the sake of its consequences, with (ii) the *quantitatively greatest good*. However, what is intrinsically good, according to hedonism e.g. even a small pleasure, does not necessarily have to be very important. This confusion then allows

Gregorius a quick refutation of Athanasius' materialistic hedonism: One cannot have everything, all valuable material goods at once; this is a contradictory desire. However, this new and initially good (e.g. going beyond Immanuel Kant, a contemporary of Skovoroda) argument can be quickly debunked by a variation on materialist hedonism: One need not aim at the greatest material goods everywhere, but can also aim at the greatest attainable sum of intrinsic goods, hedonistically that is, the greatest sum of pleasures – as Jeremy Bentham proposed a generation after Skovoroda and is standard in today's successors of this theory. At one point, Gregory in his critique of Athanasius makes it too simple: Because not everyone can be in the highest positions at the same time, happiness cannot consist in socially high rank (13). But this is a strawman fallacy, for Athanasius did not claim that happiness *consisted* in high rank etc., but that this was a *source* of happiness, whereas happiness for him was the joy of the heart.

Gregorius' argument against Ermolai's satisfactionism, i.e. the argument that people can wish for the wrong thing and thus unwittingly wish for their own unhappiness, is also good and powerful. Against this argument, new variants of satisfactionism have only been developed in the 20th century, for example by Richard Brandt, which escape this objection.

From the first appearance of Longinus, the evangelical Christian eudaemonist, that is, in the last two-thirds of the conversation, the nature of the conversation changes radically. There is no more argument; Longinus and Gregory only state their positions, but no longer justify them. Their contributions to the conversation become insufferable and tediously long. Longinus in particular only preaches. From a philosophical point of view, the discourse slides into the theological. In this way, so much remains open that would have required clarification and considerable justification. For example, what is our heavenly nature? Does our normal psyche with its small and large joys and sufferings belong to it? If so, what can inner peace of mind be other than our normal basic psychological contentment, which, however, can have quite different sources than the spiritual ones? One would then have ended up with a spiritual, Epicurean hedonism. If not, then what does our heavenly nature consist of? Why does the heavenly nature count for so much more than the earthly one – if our psychic nature is first aiming at hedonic and desire gratification? What is there at all to say that we should follow God's word? That he can force us? That he tells us what is good for us? In the latter case, how do we know that it is good for us? What exactly is God's word in the first place, how do we know it? There are so many speculations about it. Etc. Because all these questions remain unanswered, this part is rather unsatisfactory from a systematic analytical-philosophical point of view. It sinks into theology, moreover, tedious theology.

From this perspective, a ray of hope comes in the third to last contribution to the conversation, the short, taunting remark of the hedonist Athanasius: "You have so clogged your speech with scraps of Scripture that no one can understand it". (44) It is a monitum to return to a secular argument. However, here too one does not know at first: a) Does Skovoroda want to distance himself here from the endless litanies of the evangelical with a short jibe? b) Or is this brief interjection once again an implicit slap at Athanasios himself, who shows with this remark that he still has not grasped what has long been clear to everyone else. The fact that Gregorius

suggests continuing the conversation by other means could be an indication for the first interpretation (a).

The contrast between the shorter first, philosophical part and the second, twice as long, theological part is striking in terms of style (first lively back and forth, then long monologues), subject orientation (philosophy vs. theology), scientific-philosophical content (argumentation vs. sermon). It is the most remarkable aspect of this conversation. Skovoroda has shown in the first part that he knows how to argue well. What made him abandon the argumentative beginning in favour of a dogmatic sermon? Did he consider the position of frugal Christian eudaemonism to be correct from the outset and was not prepared to give it up, without then being able to support it argumentatively? Is there any other writing of his in which the evening conversation suggested by Gregory, which was now to be philosophical, is elaborated? As I said, I am not a historian of philosophy and must therefore leave these questions open here.

Thank you for your attention! I wish you a fruitful discussion of Skovoroda's thoughts! Above all, I wish you a very soon end to the war!

Bibliographical note:

The version of Skovoroda's text used, to which also refer the bracketed page numbers in the above text, is:

Skovoroda, Hryhorii: A Conversation Among Five Travellers Concerning Life's True Happiness.

In: Journal of Ukrainian Studies 30.1 (Summer 2005): 1-45. (Internet: <http://sites.utoronto.ca/elul/English/218/Skovoroda-travellers.pdf>)