Philosophy of Vitality, Mortality, and Immortality in the Theories of Hryhoriy Skovoroda and Confucius

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The research reflects the philosophy of vitality, mortality, and immortality, based on the mystical life and theories of Hryhoriy Skovoroda and Confucius. What connects these two philosophers from different epochs and parts of the world? What makes them always stay interesting for each new generation? And what are their ideas still provoking plenty of interpretations? Dealing with real philosophy, there are always more questions than answers. We can never be sure whether the true ideas of the teachings of the philosophers of such high level were revealed or stayed mysterious secrets for the next generations. But we hope to analyze the tips, given by the great minds, to find out someday the clues to the actual problems for humankind of any century: What is the sense of life? Where can we find happiness? Is it possible to predict death? Are there any possibilities for becoming immortal? This study is focused on investigating the possible answers to all these questions, using modern discoveries of American scientists and the clues left for us in the legacy of the philosophers beyond time and space: Hryhoriy Skovoroda and Confucius.

Keywords: prediction of death, death spiral, libido, mortido, the philosophy of heart and happiness, vitality, mortality, immortality

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Introduction

China is known for its picturesque nature, majestic architecture, and unique culture. But in addition to all this, China is a country with a rich historical past, which is considered to be the birth of philosophy as a science (Orel, 2017). But do we always know the origin and the authorship of each stable expression or aphorism of famous philosophers while hearing or using them in our everyday life? For example, few people know that the famous quote “Do not do to a person what you do not want to be done to yourself” belongs to Confucius, the second largest and most famous philosopher in China after Lao Tzu (Orel, 2017).

However, Ukrainian sages are also known for their contribution to the treasury of world philosophy: for example, Hryhoriy Skovoroda is often called the first mystic philosopher and extremely talented orator, “Ukrainian Socrates,” “the unique thinker-visionary” and “aristocrat of spirit” (Betko, 2018: 161-162). And although Skovoroda did not consider himself to be a philosopher, some modern researchers are convinced that “Skovoroda’s philosophical solitude did not prevent him from entering the ranks of founders of Ukrainian and, in some versions, even Russian philosophy” (Malinov, 2018: 34). Different studies of Skovoroda’s legacy in philological, philosophical, and historical-pedagogical aspects have been investigated for more than 200 years, but his words and ideas still do not lose their relevance. His wisdom undoubtedly lives beyond time, and his mystical figure attracts world researchers’ attention till nowadays, especially from Ukraine, Poland, and Russia. Thus, there are still debates as to which country heritage of Hryhoriy Skovoroda should belong: whether he could be considered Ukrainian, Russian or Ukrainian and Russian writer because: “Skovoroda wrote his works in the Ukrainian “Baroque” language, nowadays hardly understood by modern Ukrainians” (Koval, 2019: 8).


The first study about Hryhoriy Skovoroda was made by his favorite student-follower Mykhailo Kovalinsky “The life of Hryhoriy Skovoroda” (1794-1795). Kovalinsky’s notes were trendy in the Russian Empire, influencing the Ukrainian and Russian intellectuals of that time: Ivan Kotlyarevsky, Gregory Kvita-Osnovyanenko, Ivan Kulzhinsky, Izmail Sreznevsky, Leo Tolstoy, creating a romantic image of a wandering philosopher that gave impetus for research to subsequent generations of scientists (Koval, 2019: 9-10).
The Mystical Life and Death of Hryhoriy Skovoroda

Skovoroda’s acquaintance with Mykhailo Kovalinsky in 1758 was quite mystical. One day Kovalinsky had a strange dream: the names of three young biblical martyrs were shining like gold in the sky, and below, on the ground, stand Mykhailo’s teacher — Skovoroda, and next to him, the boy just felt extraordinary joy and freedom. To whom Mykhailo told about this dream, the priest exclaimed: “Young man, obey this man! He was sent to you by God to be a guiding angel and mentor” (Unguryan, 2001). Kovalinsky never told his teacher about his vision. Still, two months before Hryhoriy’s death, during their last meeting, Skovoroda suddenly remembered how he had been excited by a biblical parable since childhood (which he has carried through his own life): in the parable, three young men, Ananias, Azariah, and Michael, refused to worship the golden calf — they were thrown into the fire for it, but they were not burned and thus embarrassed King Nebuchadnezzar.

It seems that the student also had a premonition about the death of his beloved teacher because shortly before that, Kovalinsky suddenly became sad, left his family and job in St. Petersburg, bought an estate in some remote place and begged Skovoroda in letters to visit him. The old philosopher came to cheer up his student, and at the farewell, took out of the travel bag his manuscripts and gave them to Mykhailo. It was Kovalinsky who wrote the first biographical book about Skovoroda.

There are many legends about the gift of Skovoroda’s premonition. It is considered that mystically, at the age of 72, he pointed out his death’s exact day. According to the legends, he dug his own grave, went to his room, put on clean clothes, prayed to God, and lay down, with arms folded: “As to the legends, Hryhoriy Skovoroda knew the day of his death and died in peace with himself” (Shtogrin, 2020).

However, some researchers are convinced that this is not a legend. Still, quite logical for the philosopher’s final stage of life — conscious life should end with mindful preparation for death: “If to look at Skovoroda’s correspondence (and I re-read almost all of his letters), you can understand that he was very seriously preparing for death. The transition to another world was also like a philosophy of his last years of life. He had to go to visit his friends and, of course, his best friend — Mykhailo Kovalinsky” (Tomenko & Yashchenko, 2007).

Thus, Mykola Tomenko emphasized that Skovoroda’s life and philosophical intuition was powerful: “He is the man who thought, analyzed, reasoned all his life, but did not just eat, walk or waste. Skovoroda has Gogol’s mystery and Socratic logic of life” (Tomenko & Yashchenko, 2007). So comparing Skovoroda’s incomprehensibility with the mystical figure of Gogol and his lifestyle with the natural one, like Socrates, who always fell asleep at sunset and woke up at sunrise, Tomenko underlines that such a natural cycle was significant in Skovoroda’s life and, therefore, the researcher is sure that Skovoroda’s death is not a legend: “He was preparing for the transition to another life and knew that no one would come up with a better place for his death than himself” (Tomenko & Yashchenko, 2007). That is why Hryhoriy Skovoroda came to the place where he wanted to be buried (the village of Pan-Ivanivka in Kharkiv region, now Skovorodynivka), dug his own grave, and prepared himself for the transition to another world.

There are also opinions that Skovoroda did not want to cause trouble to anyone when he was alive, and he did not want to burden anyone with his death, so he dug his own grave and calmly said goodbye to everyone so as not to upset anyone. According to the legend, once, a 72-year-old philosopher went to the park and began to dig the ground with a patch. “What are you doing, friend Hryhoriy?” asked the landowner, on whose estate the old man was staying. “It’s time, my friend, to end the journey!” replied the sage. He walked around and...
said goodbye to everyone. And a few days before his death, he asked for an inscription over his grave: “The world was catching me, but did not catch” (Unguryan, 2001). Philosophers and researchers worldwide are still debating about possible interpretations of this expression, which has become well-known and inseparable from Hryhoriy Skovoroda’s philosophy of life and death. Maybe it could be observed the symbolic parallel with another famous metaphor of Skovoroda (contained in Silenus Alcibiadis, 1775): “God is as an elusive bird a hermit was in love with” (Perri, 2015: 90).

Is It Possible to Predict Death? The Connection between Skovoroda and Confucius

Death is inevitable — but is it possible to predict it? Some modern scientists believe so. During the experiments with Drosophila flies, held in 2007, 2012, and 2016, American scientists discovered a new and exceptional phase of the life cycle, which is a messenger of the approaching end. This phase is called “the spiral of death” (Barras, 2016). The scientists became convinced that people’s lives can also be a similar stage, which occurs after the main stages: childhood, adulthood, and late-life. According to Lawrence Mueller and Michael Rose, the researchers at the University of California, Irvine (USA), there is evidence that those about to die of natural causes fall into a spiral of death. Although it is generally accepted that equalization of mortality is related to age, Mueller and Rose proved by their experiments with flies that they fell into the death spiral regardless of age. The female-flies showed a sharp decrease in fertility in a few weeks before death, and the male-flies — a similar decline in reproductive potential a few days before death. It is unclear whether libido (willing to live) affects mortido (willing to die) or mortido influences life’s energy instead. According to James Kertsinger, the researcher at the University of Minnesota (USA), both the equalization of mortality and death itself are related to the level of fertility. Perhaps this observation will force biologists to reconsider theories of aging.

Alexander Lavrin, in his fundamental study “1001 Death” (1991) (later this book was renamed as the “Chronicles of Charon. Encyclopedia of Death” and translated into five languages) observe death in various aspects — from strictly scientific to adventural — and among the other questions he also asks: “Is it possible to predict death?”. The author analyzes Confucius as an example of it. There were times in Confucius’ life when he miraculously avoided death. However, he lived to a ripe old age (like Skovoroda, who died about 70 years old) after the death of his wife, son, and beloved student Yan Yuan. Confucius tried to complete his book “Chun-tsyu,” a chronicle that was supposed to reflect the era of enmity over quarrels, which he hoped to leave for the judgment of his descendants, but eventually felt that it was his turn to die: his strength left him and before the disease visions and dreams began to come. His followers prayed for him, but Confucius just compared the passing of life to the river: “Everything fleets — like this current does not stop day or night” (Lavrin, 1993). According to one of Confucius’ students, Tzi Kung, one early morning he heard Confucius walking up to the door, pulling a stick in his hands behind his back, and chanting: “The great mountain must ruin, the strong current must stop, the wise man must fade like a plant” (Lavrin, 1993). The teacher told his student that he had a dream that foretold his death soon, and the only thing Confucius complained about: “There was no wise ruler who wanted to be my student. It’s time for me to die” (Lavrin, 1993). After that, Confucius went to bed and died a week later. It is said that before his death, he did not pray or show fear. The only thing that bothered him was clear from his last words: “Who will take the task to continue my teaching after my death?” (Lavrin, 1993; Xie & Ge, 2013)
The influence of Confucianism on the understanding and perception of the concepts of life and death is felt in modern Chinese culture, allowing its adherents to get rid of the fear of death through its interpretation as an inevitability that one should not fear (Tsai, 2005; Yong, 2011). And suppose Daoism focuses on man’s belief in immortality and the pursuit of longevity in recognizing the naturalness of life and death. In that case, Confucianism emphasizes the social aspects of life, which make death only its continuation (“performing feats,” “creating teachings,” “glorifying moral qualities”) (Tan, 2005). “The difference between the ideas of the two above teachings is that Confucianism — the doctrine of entering the world (society), which emphasizes that there is something more valuable than death in relation to life and death (the sense of life); and Daoism is the doctrine of leaving the world. According to Lao Tzu, people should not be so happy about birth and so sad about death. Everything corresponds to nature” (Mengting, 2020: 89; Sarkissian, 2010).

So, if, according to Epicurus, “the ability to live well and die well is the same science” (Lavrin, 1993), then both Confucius and Hryhorii Skovoroda are vivid examples of this philosophy, which they proved by their own lives and deaths. As Skovoroda wrote in one of his poem “To each city its custom and rights...” (1758):

“I know that death is like a scythe,
She will not even bypass the king.
Indifferent to death, whether a man or a king —
Like a straw, fire will devour everything.
Who will despise her terrible steel?
The one with conscience like a crystal...” (Hryhorii Skovoroda)

Maybe this could be the secret of no death fear but immortality?

The Philosophy of Heart and Skovoroda’s Secret of Immortality

According to Mykola Tomenko, Skovoroda has already defeated death several times: At first, he was reborn in the Soviet version. The most exciting thing was that the Soviet doctrine did not eliminate or ignore him. It simply shifted the emphasis a bit: “This is the law — each generation writes history in a new way, reads it in a new way, and finds its heroes. We also need to re-read Hryhorii Skovoroda, and I think he will be born again in the 21st century, but a little differently — more significant and more important for us” (Tomenko & Yashchenko, 2007).

Researchers of the life and teachings of Hryhorii Skovoroda agree that this philosopher manages to remain close and modern for new generations, despite the change of several epochs: “In each new generation there are people who have Skovoroda “for their own,” love him as a friend and respect him as a teacher” (Shtogrin, 2020). Perhaps this phenomenon can be explained by Skovoroda’s desire to find answers to the questions that will never lose relevance, remaining exciting for each generation: “What is the sense of life?”, “What is happiness? Where to find it? And how to keep it?”, to which Hryhorii Skovoroda answers in his poems:

“On ships and chariots, we strive for a good life.
But what you want is with you:
It is, my friend, inside you” (Hryhorii Skovoroda)
So, for Skovoroda, the path to happiness is inseparable from knowing our essence and realizing that each of us is a part of something higher and all-encompassing, so we should live doing good deeds to be in harmony with ourselves and the Universe — and only through self-knowledge, according to Skovoroda, a person can learn the essence of all things: “This is what it means to be happy — to know yourself, that is your nature, to take on your destiny and to live accordingly to your own part of the all-encompassing idea” (Shtogrin, 2020). Skovoroda considered self-knowledge to be a part of the “natural” cycle of things that binds the universal with the individual fire. The philosopher identified God with nature — he clarified in The Dialogue Among Five Travelers (1772) that the best way to call God is to call him “nature”: “He Himself is the principle, and is all in all” (Perri, 2015: 93). Thus, people as a part of nature may find God inside themselves. “To be happy is to know oneself, to find oneself” (Malinov, 2018: 44), which means to find out the core, the essence of one’s own nature and life, to discover it to oneself. That is why Hryhoriy Skovoroda was convinced that we shouldn’t look for happiness somewhere: “It is not somewhere, because it is everywhere” (Malinov, 2018: 43), because “it is always with us — like a fish is in the water,” and happiness is like the sunshine: “just let it enter your soul...” (Unguryan, 2001). As to Hryhoriy Skovoroda: “Happiness is in heart. Heart is in love, love is in the eternal law” (Malinov, 2018: 43). So, easiness is another quality of happiness. It mustn’t be a burden for people. But the search for happiness is impossible without self-knowledge — that was the firm belief of Skovoroda.

The philosophy of the heart occupies a leading place in the system of the philosophy of Hryhoriy Skovoroda. His statements evidence this fact in many of his works that the heart itself is the main organ of a man: “The head of everything in a person is the human heart. It is the most real person in a person, and everything else is just the environment... The heart is the root of life and the home of fire and love” (Tomenko & Yashchenko, 2007). Thus, only through the heart and soul in the broadest sense, Skovoroda tries to comprehend the world and everything that happens in it. So the heart for him is the center of a man as a part of the Universe, like a bridge between how a person lives and how he perceives this life: “That is, everything passes through the heart, through feelings, through emotions. This is how a person perceives the world, and it does not need to be done another way. It is not necessary to make the stomach or brain the basis of human existence. The mind is not the basis of existence, because it is too pragmatic and rationalizes man” (Tomenko & Yashchenko, 2007).

It is natural for Skovoroda not to focus on any human defects in his fables, but to cultivate moral values, so he emphasizes the values, needed for high-spirited, moral, honest men, which he believes should be the basis of human thinking and being. And modern researchers point out that although it should not be assumed that in Europe before Hryhoriy Skovoroda, no one professed cardiocentrism or the philosophy of the heart, but “the fact that Skovoroda painted it in his own unique way proves that he is one of those who introduced such a doctrine in European philosophy” (Tomenko & Yashchenko, 2007).

Conclusions

The village (Pan-Ivanivka, now Skovorodynivka, Kharkiv region), where the famous philosopher is buried, claims that his spirit has protected these lands for more than two hundred years. At the resting place of Skovoroda, as he asked, there is no cross, only a massive stone with an inscription, “The world was catching me, but did not catch.”

“Life is a constant and continuous search for truth”: that was a life philosophy of Hryhoriy Skovoroda, and he demonstrated it by his own example. The multifaceted figure of
Skovoroda, who was considered by Ivan Franko a completely new phenomenon due to the breadth of his views and the depth of his thoughts, of course, will be attracting the attention of researchers again and again. And his mystical life and death will excite people of different generations, too. The same we may tell about Confucius. Their secrets will stay thrilling for ages, as well as their theories, will provoke more and more interpretations.

World researchers and philosophers still have been analyzing the life and creative paths of both Hryhoriy Skovoroda and Confucius, discovering new sides of these unusual personalities and their viewpoints in the context of new realities and eternal values. And questions of vitality, mortality, and immortality are just as troubling for people of each era, so further researches in this direction cannot lose its relevance in the future.

References


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