Article

The Ecology of Religious Knowledges

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Abstract: Different religious traditions, beliefs, and experiences claim to have epistemic contact with the ultimate source of reality. However, this epistemic claim has encountered one of its most significant obstacles in the initial incompatibility of its multiple accounts. I argue that from the ecology of knowledges, the idea that intentions, body, and physical and social environments are constitutive elements of our experience and knowledge, we can understand both the veridical, as embodied and extended, and pluralistic, as essentially limited, nature of religious experiences and knowledges. I characterize the mystical religious experience as a state of consciousness that (allegedly) allows direct epistemic contact with the supreme reality, articulating its essentially *non-ordinary* nature on the basis of the radical otherness of the sacred realm, namely, its character of being eternal, infinite, and with supreme ontological, ethical, and aesthetic value. According to this proposal, the different religious perspectives are understood as different epistemic approaches dealing with these numinous features in a *gradual continuum* from their most impersonal to their most personal specifications. I conclude that the cognitive relevance of any religious knowledge implies explanations and interventions that, although compatible with, go beyond those of both other religious knowledges and the knowledges of the non-sacred domains.

Keywords: religious plurality; religious objectivity; ecological and embodied knowledges; mystical religious experience

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1. Introduction

Different religious traditions, beliefs, and experiences claim to have epistemic contact with the ultimate and supreme source of reality, on which everything else depends. However, this epistemic claim has encountered, among other important obstacles, a main problem in the multiplicity and, at first sight, incompatibility of its different accounts. Most religious mystics and practitioners refer to the (allegedly existent) ultimate nature of reality from apparently contradictory perspectives: among others, as the ultimate emptiness of *Nirvana*, as the vast impersonal consciousness in which everyone participates, or as the infinitely perfect creator. Even personal or theistic religions, although affirming the omnipresence, omnipotency, omniscience, and all goodness of this supreme being, explain him/her through diverse and potentially conflicting accounts: as a great immaterial mind, a merciful mother/father, an immutable and impassible agent, a king or master who should be worshiped with awe and reverence, the love of his associates by whom he is controlled, and even the paramour of many girls and married women. Furthermore, sometimes this being is considered as three divine persons or as a divine couple.

Most of the philosophical proposals that have tried to resolve the problem coincide in favoring either the veridical contact with the supreme reality or the diversity of the accounts. Some authors argue about the former insofar as they affirm that the diversity only concerns the different linguistic forms which try to describe the same reality that is experienced beyond our concepts (Smart 1999; Smith 1987). In such a case, there can be a mystic experiential contact with that reality, but we cannot validly say whether it is an emptiness, a perfect father, or the highest cupid of the beings. From a Kantian perspective, other authors articulate the phenomenon in terms of a unique reality that is multiply

experienced and conceptualized, but that ends up being a noumenon that is beyond our knowledge (Hick 1989, 2004). Others go beyond this and argue that the diversity not only applies to our concepts and experiences but to their objects (Katz 1978), which implies that different religious traditions do not speak about the same reality or that, if they suppose to do so, they end up being mostly false (Alston 1991; Plantinga 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to propose an integrationist framework that can overcome the dilemma by giving validity to both the *veridical contact* and the *plurality* of approaches to divinity. A picture under which the supreme reality can be experienced and understood, following the mystics' own words, in infinite and inexhaustible ways (Gellman 1997): as a merciful mother/father, as a majestic king, as a supreme cupid, and even as an entity with sacred, transcendental, or numinous impersonal features. Borrowing Santos' (2016, 2018) term of the ecology of knowledges, I call this integrationist framework the ecology of religious knowledges, which is based on the idea of an enactive, embodied, extended (Ryle [1949] 2009; Wittgenstein [1953] 1997; Wittgenstein 1969; Taylor 1985; Varela et al. 1991; Clark and Chalmers 1998; Carter et al. 2018; Gallagher 2020), multiple, and essentially limited (Santos 2016, 2018) account of mind, experience, and knowledge, a perspective that understands the diverse religious traditions as sets of embodied and practical knowledges that try to grasp different features and dimensions of the same ultimate reality, constituting an epistemological ecology of multiple, interactive, and potentially complementary accounts.

It is important to note that the existence of a supreme reality is an ontological assumption of the different religious perspectives that delineates the *conditional* character of the arguments that follow, in the sense that *if* the religious nature of the world is really existent, *then* under the following proposal it must be experienced, known, and understood as articulated below.

The paper is divided into three main sections. In Section 2, I articulate the ecology of knowledges and its idea of our mind, knowledge, and experience as constitutively enactive, embodied, and extended. In Section 3, I characterize the nature of the mystical religious experience and its epistemological niche. In Section 4, I explain the consequent religious objectivity and plurality that follows from the ecological approach—an epistemic diversity that implies a range of religious explanations and interventions that, although compatible with, go beyond the scientific and common sense knowledges. The paper concludes with some synthesizing remarks.

2. The Ecology of Knowledges

In his many interesting works, the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos has developed a counter-hegemonic vision of knowledge that has called the “Epistemologies of the South”. One of Santos' primary aims is to fight against epistemicide, that is, the process of extermination that the non-hegemonic, non-European, and non-scientific knowledges have suffered and continue suffering since at least the scientific revolution at the beginning of Modernity. The author starts from the idea that social justice depends on cognitive justice, and that “the struggle for cognitive justice will never succeed if it is based only on the idea of a more equitable distribution of scientific knowledge”. (Santos 2016, p. 189) The reason is that, on the one hand, this distribution is impossible under the global political and economic conditions of the world and, on the other, scientific knowledge has intrinsic limits that border on other types of rigorous, valuable, and necessary knowledges.

In this sense, one of the central theses of Santos is that the cognitive justice on which social justice depends is only possible within the framework of the ecology of knowledges, that is, the epistemological perspective that considers an ecology of multiple knowledges with different methodologies, contributions, verifiable results, and specifiable consequences within particular contexts and for specific needs.

The idea of the ecology of knowledges is that *scientific knowledge*, which has been considered by Western tradition—what Santos calls the “Epistemologies of the North”—as the only kind of real knowledge, only constitutes an epistemic approach that coexists

alongside many other materially, ethically, and politically valuable knowledges which have been established and developed within different cultures and places in the world, but which has been made invisible and even eradicated by the narrow vision of a colonialist approach. In consequence, Santos' proposal is that social justice will only be possible to the extent that the different non-scientific knowledges come to be recognized as equally valid and as epistemologically legitimate tools that *complement* the scientific Western methodology. Now, this seemingly simple turn changes the epistemological picture radically, as the criteria for the recognition of truth, correctness, and usefulness are significantly transformed.

The two fundamental principles of the ecology of knowledges is the idea that all kind of knowledge is (i) incomplete by principle, and (ii) enactive, situated, and embodied. In the first place, Santos affirms that the "principle of incompleteness of all knowledges is the precondition for epistemological dialogues and debates among different knowledges" (Santos 2016, p. 189). According to Santos, all knowledges have internal and external limits:

The internal limits concern restrictions regarding the kinds of intervention in the world they render possible. Such restrictions result from what is not yet known, but may eventually be known, by a given kind of knowledge. The external limits concern what is not and cannot be known by a given kind of knowledge. From the point of view of the ecology of knowledges, the external limits imply acknowledging alternative interventions only rendered possible by other kinds of knowledge. One of the specific features of hegemonic knowledge is that they only recognize internal limits (Santos 2016, p. 189).

Santos' idea is that both types of incompleteness and limitation are essential to all kinds of knowledges, but that the recognition of the external limits makes the difference between a traditional epistemology and one centered on the concept of ecology and diversity.

We can point out that there are reasons indicating the historical, current, and plausibly future existence of a variety of empirical knowledges because we find, on the one hand, a multiplicity of physical sciences that, although deploying a common methodology of intervention and prediction with essential mathematical support, do not seem to be mutually reducible (see, for instance, Leggett 1987; Van Gulick 1993; Cartwright 1997; Hoffmann 2007; Wimsatt 2007; Morales 2018; Dupré 2021); and, on the other hand, a multiplicity of traditional, local, and fundamentally pragmatic knowledges traditionally taught within most ancestral cultures of the world, solving specific problems in satisfactory and rigorous ways in relation, for example, to the preservation of biodiversity, the social and political balance of communities, and the moral, psychological, and spiritual development of individuals.

One of Santos' most interesting arguments about the necessary external limitations of all type of knowledges is based on the second characteristic of the ecology of knowledges already mentioned, that is, an enactive, embodied, situated, and extended conception of knowledge: the idea that there is neither incorporeal nor passive knowledge, a knowledge that does not presuppose particular needs, intentions, practices, and context, the elements that assign its position, nature, function, and objectivity. Inasmuch as all knowledges irreducibly presuppose an intentional, bodily, and social point of view, there cannot be a knowledge that can account for the totality of the world, as for this account the knowledge of the world itself would have to become an object and, thus, would be examined from another point of view that starts from different purposes, interests, bodily and/or cultural contexts and practices that, in turn, should be examined from a further perspective, and so on, leading us to an infinite regress with an impossible completeness.

We can put it in other words and say that all knowledges presuppose a world-picture (Wittgenstein 1969), a situated pre-comprehension (Heidegger 1962), and a practical background (Taylor 1985) that constitute a subjectivity. Under this idea it follows that any knowledge, either scientific, ancestral, artisanal, spiritual, etc., can only constitute a partial approximation of reality. Therefore, there must be a multiplicity of epistemic niches throughout which we grasp different regions and levels of reality.

We can see that the ecology of knowledges agrees with the enactive, embodied, and extended approaches of the last decades in philosophy which argue that the mind (in its

different cognitive, epistemic, emotional, and experiential aspects) deeply depends on elements that go beyond the agent's brain, such as her body and her interactions with the physical, social, and cultural world, insofar as these factors are *partially constitutive*, that is, *necessary and essential components* for its existence and function. Under this perspective, our mind, knowledge, and experience are located, not only in our head, but beyond it, in the interactions of our brain with processes that occur throughout our body and the environment that surrounds us (Varela et al. 1991; Clark and Chalmers 1998; Carter et al. 2018; Gallagher 2020).

One of the reiterated criticisms of the enactive, embodied, and extended approaches are their seeming confusion regarding the difference between the causal and constitutive connections among mind, body, and world. Authors such as Block (2005) and Adams and Aizawa (2009) argue that the multiplicity of empirical evidence about the dependence between mind, body, and world that these perspectives indicate as the basis of their arguments does not really show more than a causal and, so, contingent connection.

Let us remember that the standard vision—that we can call neurocentrism, the theory that scientists and philosophers assume by default (Vidal and Ortega 2017)—considers the brain as the sufficient physical basis for the appearance (supervenience) of the mental phenomena and capacities supposedly based on empirical evidence. For example, we find cases of people who have pain experiences from the direct stimulation of certain brain areas without having any corresponding bodily damage. We also know that sensations in the so-called phantom limbs are common in people who have been recently amputated. Neurologists are able to produce visual sensations such as the illusion of light flashes through direct neuronal stimulation. We also know the famous case of Phineas Gage, who in an accident suffered severe brain damage that led to noticeable changes in his personality, temperament, and moral behavior. The standard view takes this kind of cases as evidence to affirm that the functional brain is the physical-biological sufficient basis for our mind's existence and dynamics.

However, the neurocentric assertion of the standard theory is not implied by the adduced empirical facts just as we cannot affirm, let us say, that the engine (or any other part) of a car is sufficient for the existence and operation of the car, even when systematic modifications in the former entail systematic modifications in the second. However, beyond this point and in every case, we can show how the body and environment are playing preponderant roles for the mental phenomena in question. I agree with some authors who argue that the standard vision has not in fact depended on cerebral scientific knowledge, as it has originated in the changes of the notions of *person*, *subject*, and *identity* since the beginning of Modernity, when in fact there was no relevant empirical evidence for its claims (Vidal and Ortega 2017). More than an empirical theory, the neurocentric vision can be seen as a research program and a general world-picture with certain dualistic, analytic, and atomistic methodologies and presuppositions deeply incorporated by our culture and identity since that time about ourselves and our relations with our bodies and the world in which we live.

So, my particular proposal and articulation, as a working and empirical hypothesis, is that our mind, knowledge, and experience emerge from the interactions between our brain, body, and physical and social environments and that, therefore, these elements are the constitutive elements from which the former *emerge as their irreducible dynamical organization and structure*. In a nutshell, emergence refers to the idea that some entities of our world (properties, events, substances, and so on) are fundamental, in the sense of being non-reducible to, not completely grounded in, and still ontologically dependent on (because partially constituted by) other things (see, for instance, Morgan 1923; Broad 1925; Papineau 2008; Barnes 2013; Morales 2018, chp. 3). My proposal of the ecological emergence of mind is grounded in the almost universally accepted (at least partially) holistic character of our mind and subjectivity, which necessarily connects every of our mental states with other mental states and with our bodily conditions and reactions, behaviors, intentional actions, and meaningful interactions with our physical and social environments. Among different

sources of the holistic character of mind we find the well accepted Ramsey-Lewis method for the—whether a priori and/or a posteriori—functional inter-definition of our mental events, physical conditions, and interaction with the world (see, for example, Block 1980; Lewis 1980; Levine 1993; Kim 2011, chp. 6). Another related source is the idea of the holistic character of our mental ascriptions (see, for instance, Davidson 1967; Dennett 1987). And still another is the already mentioned claim that our mental states necessarily presuppose a world-picture (Wittgenstein 1969), a situated pre-comprehension (Heidegger 1962), and a practical background (Taylor 1985) that enable their specific senses and roles (for a detailed elaboration of the thesis that our minds emerge from brain, body, and physical and social environments according to a non-reducible physicalist perspective, (see Morales 2021, chps. 4 and 6).

Given that our mind, knowledge, and experience emerge from the dynamical interactions between our brain, body, and physical and social environments, one of the fundamental tenets of the ecological perspective is that our practical and experiential knowledges (above all, our bodily sense and bodily experience of the word—see Merleau-Ponty ([1975] 2012) precede and ground our conceptual, theoretical, and linguistically articulated knowledges. Practical and experiential knowledges precede theory in the sense that the goal of all theory is to improve practices and experiences which are given beforehand, and they ground it in the sense that theory itself is a sophisticated practice and experience that makes sense only as an element within a larger structure of intentions, presuppositions, purposes, and established practices.

For the ecological epistemic approach, all linguistically articulated knowledges, whether theoretical (such as the scientific), or mythological, analogical, or poetic (such as those found in the sacred writings of most religions and mystical traditions), imply constitutively knowing how to move in particular contexts or niches, knowing how to derive certain things, how to make them consistent with other things, and how to “put them into practice,” that is, connect them *correctly* with other intentional attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and activities in our interaction with the physical and social environments (Ryle [1949] 2009; Wittgenstein [1953] 1997; Hetherington 2011; Stalnaker 2012; Wiggins 2012).

Another crucial principle of the ecological perspective of knowledge is that our experiences, beliefs, and general mind are *fundamentally objective*. As our activity and interaction with the world are constitutive elements of our (both implicit and explicit) experiences and knowledges, but also of our intentions, desires and, in short, of our subjectivity, we reach the phenomenological discovery that we have always been interacting with the world and the objects that we know, desire, and experience.

On this account we can understand how our beliefs and experiences are veridical by their very nature, and why error only makes sense within a set of massively true beliefs, thoughts, and experiences (Davidson 1986). As our activities and interactions with the physical and social (and purportedly spiritual) world are constitutive of our experience, knowledge, and subjectivity, the correctness and incorrectness of these interactions constitute the criteria for the correctness and incorrectness, truth and falsehood, veracity and illusion of our experiences, beliefs, and knowledge. It is in this way that we can say that the veracity of our perceptions and beliefs that, for example, we are facing a tree with certain characteristics, is determined by the correctness and incorrectness of the interactions (for example, the interventions) that we have and can have with the tree that derive from the possession of such perceptions and beliefs.

3. The Religious Mystical Experience and Its Epistemic Niche

One of the defining characteristics of the mystical or ecstatic experience of religious nature is its noetic character: its pretension to refer to the objective reality in a direct, non-mediated way and, even more, to come into direct contact and know the *ultimate* and *supreme* nature of reality, on which all other things depend. As we have seen, this epistemic claim has encountered significant obstacles. One of the most outstanding problems is the multiplicity of these experiences and their various religious and cultural articulations

which seem to be mutually incompatible, since a large part of them refer to the ultimate ontological nature of reality from apparently contradictory perspectives.

We have seen that the philosophical articulations that attempt to solve this situation end up without a satisfactory account of the epistemic contact that different religious perspectives assert about a single ontologically supreme reality. My proposal is that the ecology of knowledges can account for this phenomenon insofar as it allows us to understand the different religious approaches as different epistemic niches that come into contact with the multiple features and ontological levels of a single supreme and sacred reality.

There are different characterizations about the mystical, ecstatic experience, and its relationship with the religious experience, belief, and practices. Mark Webb (2017), for example, argues that the religious experience defines a broader category than that of the mystical experience, because the latter refers to a type of state of consciousness that is achieved through a practice specifically carried out for that purpose. However, following the common usage of the concept of mystical experience in the religious context, we can consider that the experiences of Saint Paul, Arjuna, Moses, and Muhammad, among others, constitute paradigmatic cases of mystical and ecstatic religious experiences that have not been achieved through specific practices. Instead, we can distinguish mystical experiences from the broader category of religious experiences, noting that the latter can refer to any type of experience that is developed within a context of religious and spiritual purposes. For example, the experience of a believer confessing her sins to a priest, of a family baptizing their first child, of a novice Buddhist practicing meditation, or even of an atheist, agnostic, or non-dogmatic impersonalist who reads Baruch Spinoza's *Ethics* in a transcendental way, as in fact has commonly happened.

In general terms, we can understand mystical experience as a state of consciousness that (allegedly) *allows direct and privileged epistemic contact and connection with the supreme ontological reality*, on which the other entities depend. And we can say that it is because this access that the different mystical and religious traditions consider the mystical experience as the ultimate goal to be achieved, whether through rigorous practice, pure gift, divine mercy, "luck," or "accident."

But in addition to (purportedly) having a direct epistemic contact with the supreme reality, the mystical experience is characterized by being an essentially *non-ordinary* state of consciousness, which is not reached through the sensory and perceptual capacities that *we use in our daily lives*. A type of access to reality that in this sense, as some authors have put it, can be termed as trans-empirical, trans-cognitive, or trans-phenomenal (see, for instance, Tripurari 2011; Satyanarayana 2015). Following the same idea, Jerome Gellman characterizes it as "A (purportedly) super sense-perceptual or sub sense-perceptual experience granting acquaintance of realities or states of affairs that are of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection". (Gellman 2019, p. 3)

This characterization is directly related to that which anthropologists and theorists of shamanism have given to the experiences underwent by shamans. In his classic treatment, Eliade ([1951] 1974) defines shamanism itself throughout the interconnection between some practices and a particular kind of experience, that is, as the archaic techniques of ecstasy. The shaman is that individual who, through very diverse techniques (ranging from the consumption of entheogenic plants, fasting, vigil, dancing, singing, reciting mantras, exercising physical postures, and more) achieves an *altered, modified, non-ordinary state of consciousness or experience* that allows her to come into contact with a non-ordinary reality, a reality of "the beyond," the dead, the spirits, the gods, the Absolute.

The mystical experience is that state of non-ordinary experience that allows direct epistemic contact with the supreme reality, with the reality or the world of "the beyond." But as it should be clear from this characterization, the world of "the beyond" clearly refers to the beyond of what people in general and throughout their common states of consciousness and experience can come to grasp; not to an ontological or metaphysical beyond

disconnected from our common reality because, then, it would have no consequences on our world and would be both useless and impossible to evaluate.

Since the alleged reality, or features and levels of reality, that the religious mystical experience epistemically grasps cannot be known through ordinary perceptual and cognitive means, it follows that they cannot be known either through *standard* scientific experimentation, so science, as we know it, cannot be an effective means of accounting for this aspect of reality. If this supreme reality exists, there must be special epistemic niches for its unveiling, precisely the niches that religious traditions claim to constitute.

However, the mystical experience cannot be said to be non-ordinary simply because it is difficult to produce, or because most people cannot experience it (at least systematically and persistently), nor simply because it seeks to grasp the ultimate reality. These are only partial reasons for its non-ordinary quality. The main cause for its peculiarity is the nature of the reality that seeks to perceive and know, a nature so special that it causes the person who experiences it to be radically transformed. This purported reality, or these features and aspects of reality, have a different nature and, in a certain way, are opposed (maybe complementary) to those that we find in both everyday and scientific life and experience. Some of the non-ordinary features that different traditions and scholars claim to find in this reality are:

1. It is eternal, and its time takes an almost paradoxical character (James 1897; Gómez 2020).
2. It can be or seem contradictory in itself (even within the same religious tradition and the same mystical experience) (Stace 1961; Staal 1975).
3. Therefore, it is often considered as ineffable and/or inconceivable and/or unknowable (see, for example, *Tao Te King* I (Laozi 1972); *Kena Upanishad* III (Sharvananda 1920); James (1958); Teresa of Ávila (1961); Rahner (1966); Ricoeur (1978); Bodhi (2005); Rocca (2004)).
4. It is infinite, unlimited, open, progressive.
5. It is beyond the physical, the material, the corporeal.
6. So it is sometimes considered as an internal reality, as when it is affirmed that infinity, the universe, or God are found in our heart or in our consciousness.
7. Sometimes it is considered to be everywhere, internally and externally.
8. Yet, it is considered as the wholly other (e.g., Otto 1958).
9. As we have mentioned, it has an ontological supremacy: everything else derives from and depends on it.
10. Furthermore, (having knowledge and contact with) it is the ultimate goal of human and any other existence which has meaning, intentionality, and teleology.
11. So, it is the meaning of life, reality, and the world as a whole.
12. Thus, it is from where all things derive their meaning and ethical value.
13. Therefore, it has a supreme existential relevance (James 1897; Tillich 1957).
14. Additionally, at the same time, it has a supreme aesthetic relevance and value. As the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* says, “*raso vai saḥ*,” the Absolute is aesthetic rapture, the ultimate aesthetic experience in transcendence (Tripurari 2011, p. 79).

We might summarize the main characteristics of this reality in the claim that it is eternal, infinite, and with supreme ontological, ethical, and aesthetic value. This is why the mystical experience that allows its epistemic contact is seen as a state of enlightenment that places the experimenter in a radical process of vital and human transformation, which carries not only ontological and epistemological, but also existential, ethical, social, and political consequences. Likewise, it is for this very reason that this experience is very difficult and unusually underwent.

Now we can better understand why neither everyday nor scientific experience and knowledge (under the usual senses of the terms) can, by definition, account for a reality with these aspects, since they are devoted to interact with objects and situations which are spatiotemporal finite, with derivative ontological relevance (since they are causal results of other objects and situations), and with secondary ethical and aesthetic value (if they come to have it). As we have said, in case the supreme reality comes to exist, there must be

special epistemic niches to grasp it, special intentions, beliefs, practices, and interactions that in spite of being non-ordinary, as we will explain later, must maintain a necessary connection with both scientific and ordinary epistemic domains and niches.

While religious mystical experience is not ordinary in the articulated senses, it is important to understand its own diversity and multiplicity. Depending on the circumstances, motivations, techniques, practices, and its physical, social, and cultural contexts (to which we will return in the next section), religious mystical experiences have a multiplicity of possibilities: they can be relatively superficial (as when someone has an ephemeral experience of the infinity of the world), unique or repeated, progressive and intermittent (for example, as results of the different practices and techniques that we find in most religious traditions), radical (such as those of Saint Paul and Moses, or of those people who have had near-death experiences and who transform their lives afterwards) and, at best and probably as a result of an intentional process, steady, permanent, and progressively profound.

Mutati mutandis, something similar can be said about the epistemic niches that mystical experiences partially (but necessarily, due to the thesis of the ecology of knowledges and its essentially embodied, emergent, and holistic conception of mind) constitute. In this sense, sacred emotions, beliefs, intentions, and the like, in the same way as mystical experiences, can also be unique, repetitive, gradual, steady, permanent, and progressively profound. Likewise, these sacred intentional states, insofar as are really referring to the numinous or sacred reality, must be intentional states *partially but necessarily constituted* by (because emerge from) the *real physical, bodily, and social interactions* that the subject has with the numinous features of reality and their practical implications through the different domains.

4. Religious Objectivity and Plurality

From the beginning we have wondered about the concept of religious experience and knowledge as a type of epistemic contact with a unique and objective ultimate reality, but a reality that is constituted by multiple features that can be experienced and known from perspectives that have been traditionally understood as being in tension: aspects such as the ultimate emptiness of *Nirvana*, the vast impersonal consciousness in which we all participate, and the infinitely perfect creator.

According to the ecology of knowledges we have proposed that the world is unique and multiple at the same time, that is, a reality that is made up of multiple features at different levels and dimensions; a reality that the different locally and contextually constructed knowledges can reveal in their different practical and experiential approaches. This epistemic conception is based on the fundamentally embodied and agential character of human knowledge and mind, which leads us to an essential incompleteness for all epistemic approaches that enables their dialogue, potential complementarity, and mutual enrichment.

As we have explained, according to this perspective there must be a necessary interaction between the subjects and the knowable reality, insofar as such interaction is constitutive part of their epistemic states. Under this proposal, if religious aspects and levels of reality are really existent and having their defining unlimited character, then there must be a multiplicity of epistemic niches from which they can be known in an essentially practical and experiential way. These different niches will be constituted by the techniques, capacities, interests, purposes, beliefs, presuppositions, world-pictures, and the contexts and cultures of the different subjects. And these elements will dispose the subjects (although they will not determine them, due to their emergent—non-reductive—nature) to have certain types of interactions and, therefore, certain types of experiences and knowledges in which certain features of the ultimate reality are disclosed instead of others.

Bearing in mind the diversity and multiplicity of the mystical experiences, both throughout and within each religious tradition (and even for the same individual, as we have indicated), we can analyze the role that the social and cultural context may be playing in every case. For example, on some occasions the social and cultural context encourages and seeks the development of mystical techniques and capacities from an early age of many

or some of the individuals. This is the case of notably religious and mystical communities (from Buddhist and Christian to shamanic ones). In these cases, the communities predispose and equip individuals with certain techniques, through certain physical, intellectual, and spiritual practices, under the guidance of those more advanced in this knowledge, and with the help of sacred scriptures and/or inherited mythologies that outline and nurture the kind of experiential and practical knowledge that the supposed interaction with the divine implies.

In special cases such as those of Saint Paul, Moses, and Siddhartha, the social contexts play an important but different role: they establish a background that is criticized and overcome, but only on which the type of experience and knowledge that these individuals reach can make sense and where a (purported) direct interaction with the divine is shown as a more salient factor. From the ecology of knowledges and assuming the existence of the sacred world, we can say that in mostly secular, agnostic, or atheistic cultural contexts, as is the case in contemporary Europe, mystical experiences and knowledges will tend to be more diffuse and less common, although not null, as there will always be personal or contextual interests and incentives that may motivate their search and development.

On the basis of the different niches and the various possibilities for the appearance and development of mystical religious knowledges, the senses of eternity, infinity, and maximal ontological, ethical, and aesthetic value take on very particular specifications. We can speak about a *continuous* movement in the specification of these aspects that *gradually* flows from an *impersonal* border towards a *theistic* or *personal* pole and that can return in a back and forth motion. Impersonal experiences of the sacred, such as the absolute union with God in Christian mysticism, the melting of consciousness in the Hindu Brahman, and the annihilation of identity in the Buddhist void or *Nirvana* are experiences of a type of absolute “eradication” of the multiplicity and difference of the world (or, in an opposite but complementary way, experiences of “eradication” of the unity and permanence of any entity, where multiplicity and becoming are understood as the only thing “permanent” and real); experiences arising within epistemic niches that emphasize the common characteristics of the finite elements of the world and their interconnection with the infinite whole, rather than the features that differentiate these elements within (and with) the whole, giving an ontological, ethical, and aesthetic priority to the former over the latter.

Meanwhile, at the other pole (of the gradual transition from impersonalism) we find the personal or theistic experiences of the divine, characterized by different types of interactions with the different personal forms and traits of the absolute or God, as in the cases of Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Vishnavism or devotional Vedanta. In these cases, throughout an interaction with its intentional object, the (purported) religious experiences and knowledges discover in the supreme person(s) the ultimate source of existence, ethics, and aesthetics and, accordingly, configure their ultimate goal in the progressive development of *divine love* as a type of deeper mystical experience and as their ultimate stage of wisdom, goodness, and beauty.

We can see that under the ecological approach we can understand both the veridical, cognitive, and objective (as embodied and extended) character, as well as the pluralistic and diverse (as necessarily limited) nature of the religious experience and knowledge. Under his proposal, Gellman argues about a similar picture that resorts to the key concept of divine infinitude or God’s “inexhaustible fullness” in order to harmonize the different and apparently contradictory, incompatible, or conflicting religious traditions and experiences. He affirms:

In at least some mystical experiences of God, a subject experiences what is presented as proceeding from an intimation of infinite plenitude. Given this feature, a claim to experience a personal ultimate, for example, can be squared with an experience of an impersonal ultimate: one “object,” identified as God or Nirguna Brahman, can be experienced in its personal attributes or in its impersonal attributes, from out of its inexhaustible plenitude. (Gellman 2019, pp. 22–23, see also Gellman 1997, chp. 4)

Although agreeing with Gellman, we have argued that this infinity or inexhaustible plenitude of God allowing the compatibility of apparently contradictory approaches must be complemented with a certain conception of the subject, since compatibility and integration of *perspectives* can only have a place under an account of knowledge and experience that articulates their necessary embodiment and partiality.

So the ecology of knowledges is a pluralistic and integrationist account of the different religious experiences, knowledges, and traditions. However, it also has to give an account of the connections of religious knowledges with other types of knowledges, in particular, with scientific and common sense experience and knowledge.

The ecological approach is based on a non-reductive, emergentist, embodied, and extended conception of mind and agency that has a conception of reality as constituted by multiple features, levels, and domains, wherein the function and scope of the different physical and special (among them, social and human) sciences must be understood as limited, collaborative, and complementary (see, for instance, Leggett 1987; Van Gulick 1993; Cartwright 1997; Hoffmann 2007; Wimsatt 2007; Morales 2018; Dupré 2021). I think that this emergentist and layered picture of reality and its epistemological consequences should be extended to the different religious perspectives as different approaches that deal with the upward and downward structure of the multiple (and inexhaustible) levels of the numinous reality, from its/her/his most impersonal aspects (throughout the described gradual continuum) to its/her/his most personal traits (for the interaction and integration of impersonal and personal traits of divinity in Asian religions see, for instance, Tripurari 2011; Satyanarayana 2015; Holdrege 2015; Holdrege and Pechilis 2017).

According to this picture, the function and scope of the different religious traditions should be also understood as essentially limited, collaborative, and integrative in their attempt to know the different numinous layers that naturally extend the ontologically structural organization going from microphysics to the human and social reality. Now, since it is precisely in the realm of human agency and psychology that the convergence of physical, animal, and human, as well as spiritual and (plausibly) divine spheres is most clearly and directly shown, it is natural to think that an empirical evaluation of any religious claim should begin with their psychological, ethical, and social (and, therefore, behavioral, and neurophysiological) implications.

In this sense, and following the non-reductive, pluralistic and integrationist character of the different epistemic approaches to reality that follows from the ecological perspective, the empirical evaluation of any religious claim should conform with at least the following requirements, in such way that: (i) it should propose human dynamics and consequences necessarily consistent with what the different (as other religious, common sense, and scientific) knowledges know about them; (ii) it should sustain their own “predictions” and interventions, which cannot be reducible to those given by other (as other religious, common sense, and scientific) knowledges; and (iii) it can be used by the other different knowledges to expand their range of action, explanation, and intervention.

A more detailed articulation of the evaluation and the necessary interaction between religious and other types of knowledges are outside the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, here we have pointed out some directions in which we can work on, discuss, and improve, in order to deepen our understanding of religious experiences, knowledges, and traditions.

5. Conclusions

We have seen that the different religious traditions, beliefs, and experiences claim to have epistemic contact with the ultimate and supreme source of reality. However, this epistemic claim has encountered one of its most significant obstacles in the initial incompatibility of its multiple accounts. The ecology of knowledges is the epistemic approach that argues about an essentially enactive, embodied, and extended conception of the subject, taking intentions, body, and physical and social environments as constitutive elements of our knowledge and experience. So, we have seen that under this conception we can understand both the veridical, cognitive, and objective (as embodied and extended)

character, as well as the pluralistic and diverse (as essentially limited) nature of the religious experiences and knowledges. However, what kind of knowledge is a religious knowledge? Furthermore, how is it connected with other kinds of knowledges?

Different traditions and authors characterize the religious mystical experience as a state of consciousness that (allegedly) allows direct epistemic contact with the supreme reality. We have found that it is a kind of conscious state or experience that is essentially *non-ordinary*, as the features of the reality that it seeks to grasp are essentially non-ordinary, and so special that they require a radical subjective transformation in order to contact them—features such as eternity, infinitude, and supreme ontological, ethical, and aesthetic value. According to this conception of the numinous realm, we concluded that neither everyday nor scientific experience and knowledge are appropriate to explain it, since they are devoted to interact with objects and situations which are spatiotemporal finite, with derivative ontological relevance, and secondary ethical and aesthetic value.

Finally, we talked about *impersonal and personal poles* on a *gradual continuum* of the specification of the sacred traits, in such a way that religious perspectives can be seen as different epistemic approaches dealing with the (inexhaustible) features of the numinous reality, from its/her/his most impersonal to its/her/his most personal aspects; a reality that can be seen as naturally connecting and extending the ontological structure that goes from microphysics to the human and social reality. On the basis of this picture, the ecological approach argued that central part of the empirical evaluation of religious experiences and knowledges must imply a range of explanation, action, and intervention on human agency and psychology that, although compatible with, goes beyond that proposed by the knowledges of the non-sacred domains, from which our human experiences, knowledges, and interactions with the divinity emerge.

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