

Hermeneutics and Mysticism: A Philosophical Dialogue with David R. Hawkins

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Received June 8, 2022

Revised July 18, 2022

Accepted July 20, 2022

Key words

Philosophical hermeneutics,
David R. Hawkins, spirituality,
mysticism

The study aims at justifying of the thesis that the inclusion of concepts belonging to the mystical tradition, as portrayed by David R. Hawkins, enriches philosophical hermeneutics. The road map designed for the purpose is as follows: By providing hermeneutical context regarding human understanding a theoretical background is created for an argument that the thematization of human understanding as finite and projective is enriched if concepts of spiritual/mystical traditions are incorporated into it. Consequently, a justification is made that generating a bridge between contemporary hermeneutics and the spiritual world allows to conceptually provide practical tools for the pursuit of happiness.

The perceived world is the result of the projection of human consciousness, and therefore akin to a Rorschach card.

– Hawkins 2009



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1 Introduction

We seem to be in an era in which relativism occupies a privileged place in the epistemological discussion. By this we mean that the idea that each person has their own truth is established, so there seem to be no common ground among different individuals who are part of what we call humanity. Our argument, as it will be shown in the pages that follow, is that this is a consequence of the *hermeneutization* of reality (at least to some extent). That is, of the popularization of the idea that the fact that different people interpret reality from diverse conceptual perspectives has as a corollary that every individual “creates” its own reality according to his or her worldview. In this scenario, the idea that there is an objective reality about which something true or not true (that *conforms* or not to said reality) can be said, has disappeared.

It is in this context that this paper seeks to argue that some individuals classically designated as *mystics* make a philosophically interesting and daring proposal. On the one hand, they recognize that human understanding is projective and hermeneutic (interpretative). On the other, they argue that this does not mean that reality is inherently subjective, that is, subject (and dependent) to the concepts that the agent that understands the world *throws* onto it via projection. Also, the mystics add a dimension to the problem of human understanding that seems have been forgotten in the hermeneutical discussion: The possibility of letting go the conceptual projections that the human mind consciously or unconsciously throws onto what it is being perceived, and therefore of perceiving the world *as it is* (instead of how it *appears* to the human mind). In synthesis, our hypothesis is

that the manner, in which mysticism portrays human understanding, enriches what has already been said about this topic by the hermeneutical tradition. Now, due to the fact that there have been many individuals that have been considered as mystics throughout history, we believe to be prudent to focus our attention in one of them. The candidate, whose we have chosen for this endeavor, is the contemporary American mystic David R. Hawkins.

The roadmap we will follow for justifying what has just been said is the following: We will start by reviewing the way philosophical hermeneutics have thematized human understanding. Afterwards, we will argue that David R. Hawkins portrayed human understanding in a manner that is quite similar to that done by philosophical hermeneutics, but at the same time justify that his line of thought enriches philosophical hermeneutics in at least two manners: the reinsertion of the concept of truth to the philosophical discussion, and the provision of concrete mechanisms for accessing it. Finally, we will draw some conclusions.

2 Finite and Projective: The Case of Human Understanding

In this section, we will provide a conceptual hermeneutical framework for arguing that the incorporation of the spiritual dimension, as well as the concepts and ideas it brings forth, allow us to provide practical tools for an effective and fruitful pursuit of human happiness. We intend to achieve this task through the investigation of the distinction between what something *is* and how it *appears*, along with thematization of human understanding as projective.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant distinguishes between how *something appears* to a human being (Gr. *phaenomena*) and how it *actually is* (Gr. *noumena*). In his words (2009, A 249–250),

for if the senses merely represent something to us as it appears, then this something must also be in itself a thing, and an object of a non-sensible intuition, i.e., of the understanding, i.e., a cognition must be possible in which no sensibility is encountered, and which alone has absolutely objective reality, through which, namely, objects are represented to us as they are, in contrast to the empirical use of our understanding, in which things are only cognized as they appear.

According to Kant, thought, the human mind is like a software that processes the raw data that is supplied by intuition, and therefore that the ideas of the world that are presented to the human mind are not reliable reflections of reality. The human mind, then, plays an active role in the process of understanding, which means that it contributes some elements to what is perceived by the senses. Kant claims (2009, B1) that “*there is no doubt whatever that all our cognition begins with experience... But although our cognition commences with experience, yet it does not on that account all arise from experience.*” Simply put, in every act of understanding we can distinguish between what the world presents to the senses (*sensory data*) and what the human mind contributes to it for a concept to emerge (*pure intuitions* and *categories of understanding*). Kant (2009, A19/B33 – A49/B73) argues, for example, that space and time are not actually *things* that we perceive through our senses, but *a priori* concepts that the human mind attaches to the raw data that is provided by intuition for us to make sense of it. In other words, it is not that reality is permeated by space and time, but rather that our humanness spatializes and temporalizes what it perceives so that our finite mind, which can only know under spatial and temporal contexts, can understand what it is being presented to it.

Heavily influenced by the ideas set forth by Kant, the contemporary philosopher Martin Heidegger thematizes human understanding as hermeneutic. His argument is somewhat similar to the one of Kant, but he adds another dimension to it: that of meaning. In *Being and Time* Heidegger (2008) claims that when the *Dasein* (that is how he conceptualizes *human being*) approaches reality, he does not do it as a “blank sheet” that is ready to receive that, which is presented to the senses in an “unpolluted” manner. We already possess a series of concepts that allow us to elucidate what is presented to our intuition so that those same concepts set a horizon from which understanding operates. As Wrathall (2013, 181–182) explains, “*to understand is to be in the world in such way that everything is projected upon, that is, makes sense in terms of particular possibilities.*” In other words, with the concepts that we already possess in our mind (and that have been acquired and transmitted by humanity throughout history) we interpret the world and its phenomena. Therefore, understanding the world is at the same time *receptive* (we need something to present itself to our intuition) and *productive* (we give meaning to the world from a set of concepts that we already possess) [1]. Simply put, Heidegger argues that in every act of understanding the agent who apprehends what is presented to his senses does so from a series of previous concepts (*horizon of meaning*). That is, what explains, for example, that a subject interprets a tree as a divine creation that sustains life and must be protected at all costs, while an entrepreneur understands the same tree as an entity from which it is possible to obtain some economic gain. The tree, which is presented to the senses of both subjects, is the same. What differs is the worldview, the series of concepts that form a horizon from which said tree is apprehended. This in turn generates that the world that both subjects of the example perceive, even though based on the perception of the same phenomena, is radically different from one another.

The Kantian and Heideggerian approaches to human understanding revolutionized the perspective from which we philosophically approach to human understanding. They emphasized what the subject contributes to the act of knowledge, and not so much on what reality presents to the senses for human understanding to operate. On the one hand, we see this as something positive. It allows us, humans, to understand that the image of the world that we perceive in our mind is not identical or even remotely similar to the actual reality of the world. It is just an image and not the *real deal*, and as such it can only portray some limited aspects of what it represents. On the other hand, it is an epistemologically

3 Truth of the World vs Images of the World: The Mystical Perspective

dangerous positionality because it can easily lead to affirming that the world is constituted by human subjectivity. That is, we create the world from our horizon of meaning, and therefore that truth is some arbitrary human construction that we then project onto the world. As Heidegger himself comments when reviewing Nietzsche's thought (1993, 3:29–30), the recognition of the projective nature of human understanding leads to asserting,

knowing means to take hold of what shows itself, to guard the sight as the 'view' that something proffers, the 'image' in the... sense of phantasia. In knowing, what is true is held fast; what shows itself, the image, is taken up and into possession; what is true is the in-formed image. Truth is imaging.

By this he means that the concept of *truth* designates the human perception of his own projections onto the world and not something that is independent of human nature. The danger, then, is that of nihilism (Heidegger 1993, 3:25). If there are no legitimate or adequate horizons from which to understand the world, then every interpretation that we project onto it is equally unworthy. If an apple is understood as a divine creation or as an improvised weapon to throw at someone, we do not like it is irrelevant. Nothing really matters in this universe because the world that we perceive isn't even real.

In synthesis, modern and contemporary philosophers, such as Kant and Heidegger, led us to recognize the hermeneutical nature of human understanding. That is, we human beings understand the world from a series of concepts that we inherited from tradition, cultural and familiar context, among other circumstances. We call those series of concepts from which we apprehend the world *horizon of meaning*. This recognition is what allows us to affirm that what is shown to our mind as real and coming from *out there*, is a mixture between what is presented to our senses and what is projected from our horizon of meaning. The main problems that we observe in this thematization of human understanding are that it does not provide a mechanism for determining the legitimacy and truthfulness of different horizons of meaning (and therefore that it leads to nihilism), and that it does not articulate the relation between the hermeneutical nature of understanding and human happiness (which, according to our horizon of meaning, is the main task of philosophy).

In this section, we will thematize the projective nature of human understanding from a spiritual perspective and then explain the subjective disposition that is needed to perceive the truth of the world (instead of the projections we *throw* at it). We intend to achieve these tasks through the revision of the ideas set forth by David R. Hawkins.

David R. Hawkins, a contemporary American mystic [2], who considered himself as part of the non-dual metaphysical position termed "Devotional non-duality" (a form of *Advaita Vedānta*) [3], had as a premise an idea quite similar to the one revised in the previous section: The image of the world that we perceive through our mind has nothing to do with the reality of that, which is perceived. His argument goes something as follows: we human beings perceive the world through our senses. That information is then processed by our mind and an (intellectual) image of that, which is being perceived is elaborated and presented to our consciousness. We then, out of naivete, assume that such an image of the world is an accurate depiction of the world as such. That is, we believe that the world is as it is presented to our consciousness. The problem is that this assumption is not correct. It doesn't consider that, in the process of synthesis of what the senses report, the human mind adds some elements of its own to the image of the world it produces. However, we as human beings are usually not aware of this, so we bluntly assume the reality of such image [4]. According to Hawkins (2015, sec. 3956),

because the mind, by virtue of its innate structure, is unable to differentiate perception from essence, or res cogitans (interna) from res extensa (externa), it makes the naïve assumption that it experiences and therefore knows 'reality,' and that other viewpoints must therefore be 'wrong.' This phenomenon constitutes illusion, which is the automatic consequence of the limitation resulting from the mental process.

Differently put, the human mind is innately innocent, and it is therefore incapable, in and of itself, to distinguish between what it is receiving from the world (what is there) and what it contributes by way of projection in every act of understanding.

This assertion, though coming from a spiritual context, is surprisingly hermeneutical. What Hawkins seems to be in-

dicating, as do philosophical hermeneutics, is that human understanding is projective. That is, there are a series of concepts, which we hold in our mind prior to experiencing reality, which we project or *throw* onto what is perceived. These *a priori* concepts, of which we are usually unconscious, form something like a filter from which reality is perceived. As with any other filter, the image that is produced is not a true representation of what is being portrayed, but a distorted version of it (the same as with the filters that can be applied today on the social network Instagram). Hawkins (2007, 830) explains that this phenomenon occurs because “*the mind translates phenomena in 1/10000th of a second; thus, the mind is like the playback monitor of a tape recorder. When that interface of mind between phenomena and experiencing dissolves, the difference is quite dramatic.*” This key piece of information, that there is a fundamental and dramatic difference between what is real and what we perceive as such, provides us with essential information for understanding at least two aspects of human existence: that of communication and the meaning and scope of spiritual endeavor. In what follows we will briefly refer to these issues.

It is not hard to realize that human communication is not an easy task. Games such as telephone, where a message sent by the first player usually gets distorted because the following players understands and communicates something different, clearly show this. The thematization of human understanding as interpretative and projective allow us to comprehend this matter with astounding clarity. In his *Being and Time*, Heidegger (2008, 205) states:

the phenomenon of communication must be understood in a sense which is ontologically broad. ‘Communication’ in which one makes assertions – giving information, for instance – is a special case of that communication, which is grasped in principle existentially. In this more general kind of communication, the Articulation of Being with one another understandingly is constituted. Through it a co-state-of-mind [note: Ger. Mitbefindlichkeit] gets ‘shared’, and so does the understanding of Being-with. Communication is never anything like a conveying of experiences, such as opinions or wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another... In discourse Being-with becomes ‘explicitly’ shared; that is to say, it is already, but it is unshared as something that has not been taken hold of and appropriated.

Though this reference gives way to many issues of major philosophical interest, what it tells us about the matter in question is more or less the following: when we communicate with another human being, we are not operating under

an “output-input logic” where the sender issues certain information employing linguistic references that are known by the recipient, so that the latter receives them in an unpolluted manner. If that were the case, then most moral, political, and even family problems would be solved in the blink of an eye. Human communication, unfortunately, is a much more complex process through which we try to share our way of being-in-the-world with another entity. By this we mean that, as we already explained in section one, every *human being* (Ger. *Dasein*) possesses a series of concepts that allows him to elucidate what is presented to his senses, so that those same concepts set the limits from which said understanding operates. That is, with the concepts that we already possess in our mind (and that have been acquired and transmitted by humanity throughout history) we interpret the world and its phenomena. Communication, then, is an attempt to transmit to another human being the result of the interaction between what is presented to my senses and the horizon of meaning from which I appropriate said world. It is an effort of making *common* a personal and subjective experience with another being that has a different personal and subjective experience (and that is why it is so difficult!).

Though the hermeneutical thematization of human understanding and communication does not necessarily imply epistemological relativism (truth and falsehood are relative to an individual or culture) [5], it does bring into light the drama of social life. To adequately relate to another human being means opening myself to another set of concepts and horizons from which the world is appropriated. Unfortunately, this attitude is not the norm. Since there is ignorance concerning the manner in which human understanding operates, what usually happens when people communicate is that two horizons of meaning (manners of relating to the world) collide with one another violently, that is, seeking to establish their own validity through the obliteration of the other. Gadamer (2013, 317), an intellectual disciple of Heidegger, recognizes this problem and affirms that “*understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves... The hermeneutic task consists not in covering up this tension by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out... To bring about this fusion in a regulated way is the task of what we called historically effected consciousness.*” That is, he recognizes that understanding one another inevitably means tension between two different worldviews and claims that the task of hermeneutics is not the elimination of said tension, but the provision of manners through which it can emerge in a regulated manner.

Hawkins, again aligned with existential hermeneutics, recognizes that intermundane phenomena can be appropriated

in radically distinct manners by different individuals. This is, what the contemporary mystic terms as the “problem of paradigm” (Hawkins 2015, 3952):

each person experiences, perceives, and interprets the world and its events in accordance with their own predominant level of consciousness. This is further reinforced by the mind's proclivity to explain via mentalization and interpretation of perceived data. Thus, each level tends to be self-reinforcing by the circuitry of reification. This process results in what is best described as 'paradigm allegiance,' or the presumption that the perceived/experienced world represents 'reality.'

There are different paradigms from which we can understand (or interpret) the entities and events that we perceive through our senses. These paradigms, which Hawkins terms as “Levels of Consciousness” [6], produce different “images of the world”. Because of our innate innocence, our mind believes that the image that is being presented to us is an accurate depiction of “the world as such”. This makes us human beings believe that other depictions of reality are false, and, therefore, wrong (in addition to igniting the adolescent vigilante within us who wants to correct others!). That is why we tend to congregate with people who share our level of consciousness and look down on those who don't, thus reinforcing the validity of the paradigm from which we understand reality.

The beforementioned brings into light even with more clarity the drama of human communication. Conflict arises because communication between people and cultures that perceive the world from different levels of consciousness is sometimes quite difficult. Although the topic of communication in hermeneutics and mysticism justifies life-long devoted research, the reference transcribed below is quite enlightening and clarifies the core issue at hand (Hawkins 2013a, 31–32):

Each level of human consciousness therefore has its own innate 'reality,' and conflict is inevitable between people and cultures that are diametrically opposed to each other. What brings praise in one subgroup would result in ridicule in another. For example, is honesty a virtue, or is it a sign of absurd stupidity and weakness? Are women to be devalued and stoned to death or honored? Throughout history, the same patterns recur not only between individuals but also between classes, countries, cultures, and religions that demonize alternate viewpoints. Thus, there are actually two very different, diametrically opposed and polarized human cultures: those above and those below

consciousness level 200, and each side sees the other as the enemy.

Communication is possible between people who recognize the existence and value of truth (200 is the level of consciousness in which truth starts to emerge). Although the paradigms from people or cultures approach reality may be different, this fundamental commonality allows dialogue and cooperation to emerge. However, communication between individuals that do not assert the existence of truth and those who do is not possible (at least in a fundamental manner) [7].

Now, although there are surprising identities between the hermeneutical and the mystical thematizations of human understanding, Hawkins includes another realm that is to be considered fundamental for spiritual endeavor: that of truth and the proximity or distance of an individual's projections to it [8]. The premise from which the American mystic starts his problematization of the human relation to truth is that, although it is accurate to affirm that human beings have the possibility of knowing the truth, it is also true that we do not have the innate ability to distinguish truth from falsehood [9]. The mistake we make is, again, that we attribute truth to our perception of reality (the image that is presented to my mind) instead of reality itself.

As far as truth is concerned, what Hawkins postulates can be synthesized as follows: it is effective that the human being unveils or interprets the world from different paradigms (levels of consciousness). He agrees with existential hermeneutics regarding the interference of human subjectivity in understanding. However, he also emphasizes that this does not in any way mean that truth is subjective and depends on the paradigm from which reality is understood. Quite the contrary, Hawkins asserts that the level of truth of what is unveiled (interpreted) by a human being depends largely on the level of consciousness from which this is done. That is to say, he returns to the Thomistic idea of *truth as adequacy* (Aquinas 2017, I, 16, 2) and affirms that there are levels of consciousness that do not provide an accurate depiction of the world (and, in fact, distort it via projection), while others do [10]. Now, it is important to bear in mind that Hawkins proposes different degrees of conformity to truth. That is, the higher the level of consciousness of the subject, the greater the degree of adequacy between his understanding and the world (the degree of participation of his being in absolute truth will increase).

Hawkins's reflection concerning what truth is are also worth mentioning. In *Truth vs Falsehood*, the American mystic ap-

proaches this topic through the description of the experience of truth (Enlightenment) and the role that human mind can play in this event. For Hawkins (2013b, 64),

the Infinite field of the Source of All Existence is a radiant effulgence that shines forth, and its consequences as Creation are forever unified. Creator and Creation are one. It also becomes clear that all such terms as 'existence' or 'nonexistence' are, in and of themselves, merely intellectual constructs and attempts to convey the ultimate Truth, which is only knowable by the oneness of the identity of the merging of self into the Self. The best the mind can do is 'know about', and upon its dissolution, 'knowing' is replaced by the identity of being at one with the Source of Existence itself, the radiance of which is revealed in the exclamation 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo!'

The *whatness* of truth is thus beyond space and time. In that sense, since language is temporally determined, it is not able to describe accurately the reality of truth (that is why it is usually said that it is *ineffable*). What mind through language can describe are the conditions under which a human being can experience said ineffable truth. That is as far as human mind can take us.

It is fundamental to consider that for Hawkins what has been said so far is not abstract material that is of merely theoretical interest but is a key piece of information for understanding the nature of spiritual endeavor: through it, the spiritual aspirant seeks to experientially distinguish between what is real and what is not (and to get as close as possible to the truth). This is a fundamental difference between the philosophical and mystical approaches to human understanding. In the case of philosophical hermeneutics, it is usually argued that we are trapped in the projective and hermeneutical disposition of our finite and precarious human understanding [11]. For Hawkins, however, the recognition of this precarious manner through which we understand reality leads (or at least it should) to taking responsibility for the set of concepts (the level of consciousness) from which we apprehend reality. We become aware that the world is not responsible for our miseries, but that we are miserable because of the concepts that we contribute to the false image of the world of which we are co-creators. In Hawkins's own words (2018, 211), this information leads to being conscious of the fact that

[i]t is we ourselves who create stressful reactions as a consequence of what we are holding within us. The suppressed feelings determine our belief systems and our perception of ourselves and others. These, in turn, literally cre-

ate events and incidents in the world, events that we, then, turn around and blame for our reactions. This is a self-reinforcing system of illusions. This is what the enlightened sages mean when they say, 'We are all living in an illusion.' All that we experience are our own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs projected onto the world, actually causing what we see to happen.

Now, and as we will see in the next section, the manner through which we become responsible for the erroneous ideas, emotions, and concepts we project onto the world is by letting go of them. The way to truth does not require work adding more conceptual layers to human understanding, but merely dismantling the filters that distort our perception of the world. "When the clouds are removed, the sun shines forth" (Hawkins 2018, 187).

In synthesis, though there are surprising similarities between existential hermeneutics and mysticism as portrayed by David R. Hawkins, there is a fundamental difference in their thematization of human understanding as projective and hermeneutical: the latter provides a way out of this innate human ignorance. That is, the mystic does not believe that human beings are condemned to understand the world from a limited paradigm but asserts that we are merely used to it. In that sense, the projective nature of human understanding is not something *natural* that goes hand in hand with being human, but it is a habit that, for that same reason, can be modified. The question is how to achieve this. In the next section, we will see how mysticism provides an answer to this inquiry.

4 Giving Way to Silence: The Path to Truth and Happiness

In this section we will provide a general scheme of the particular way through which the natural tendency of the human mind towards projection and interpretation can be disarticulated. Again, we will use what can be learned from mysticism, specifically from Hawkins, to illustrate this matter.

As we have already explained, both the hermeneutical tradition and some individuals who have been classically designated as mystics argue that there is a veil between the knowing subject and the world which is known. This produces that the image of the world that is perceived by the human mind is not a reliable portrait of reality. The main difference is that, while in philosophical hermeneutics the emphasis is put on the projections that the individual *throws* at what is being perceived (that is, the subject occupies the throne in the epistemological context), in the case of the

mystics the main concern is the true reality of the world and how we can have access to it. Simply put, the goal of the mystic is not merely to thematize the conditions of the possibility of human knowledge (as is the case of the hermeneutic), but to use said thematization to disarticulate the projections of the human mind and thus perceive the truth of the world.

A common element in the thought of the mystics is that they affirm that to perceive the world as it really is it is necessary for the human mind to be quiet (de Jesús 1902). That is, the human mind mustn't project anything to the world. Therefore, the individual must have a subjective disposition characterized by a silent openness. The distinction, Alan Watts (2011, 24) makes between belief and faith, will allow us to clarify the meaning of this statement:

Belief, as I use the word here, is the insistence that the truth is what one would 'lie' or wish it to be. The believer will open his mind to the truth on condition that it fits in with his preconceived ideas and wishes. Faith, on the other hand, is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go. In this sense of the word, faith is the essential virtue of science, and likewise of any religion that is not self-deception.

What Watts is saying is simply a more refined version of the same argument. A belief is merely the projection of a preconceived idea to the world that does not necessarily contain information concerning the world. Faith, on the other hand, is characterized by an openness to otherness without prejudice (previous judgments or concepts). It is a subjective disposition that does not seek to dominate reality through conceptualization, but rather to acquire knowledge of the world by letting it unfold according to its own logic and listening to what it has to say. Therefore, it is an existential positionality that is humble and conscious of human limitations. Silence, then, is the existential condition that allows us to see the world as it is instead of a mere image of it.

The first question that arises naturally in light of what has just been said is the following: Why is it desirable to see the world as it really is? It certainly seems easier to remain in the illusory world of human projections. Hawkins (2007, 32) is clear on this matter. It's a sharper and more accurate perception of reality results in a more gratifying and happier life:

The process is an unfolding of discovery resulting in greater happiness and diminution of fear, guilt, and other nega-

tive emotions. The motive is inner development, evolution, and fulfillment of potential, which is independent of the external world. Life becomes progressive rather than just repetitive. All experience is of equal value and innately pleasurable so that life stops being an endless sequence of alternating pleasure and displeasure. With inner progress, context expands, resulting in greater awareness of significance and meaning, and therefore, gratification of potential.

The path to happiness is thus precisely one in which the human being stops worrying about changing the world and realizes that what he must adjust is his perception of the world.

At this point, the philosophical perspective from which we are approaching the topic of happiness comes to light. Hermeneutics, though an autonomous philosophical perspective, approaches the manner through which reality emerges in epistemological and ontological manner. In that sense, the issue of happiness, which is classically dealt with by ethics, seems to be a little far-off topic. For Hawkins, however, epistemology and ontology are suitable candidates (among many others) for setting the stage for the realization of truth (which entails happiness). In Hawkins view (2013b, 64),

[t]he Reality of the source of existence is outside time and space, which, in itself, is a limiting intellectual concept. All 'starts' and 'stops' or 'beginnings' and 'endings' impute the condition of temporality. By whatever name it is called, the Infinite Source of All Existence is inclusive of existence but not subject to it. It is not subject to limitation as implied by the concepts of beginning or ending. While these same conclusions can be reached through the study of epistemology and then ontology, the actual subjective experience and knowingness of the reality of foreverness is reported equally by sages as well as by people who have had near-death experiences.

What Hawkins argues, then, is that epistemology and ontology are the best philosophical gateways for happiness and a fulfilling life to emerge. This because if one understands how human mind works and the errors that it is prone to, then it is easier to remove the blocks that hinder the perception of the world's inherent beauty and perfection. Philosophical endeavor, then, can set the stage for an experiential awareness of truth.

Now, it is easy to understand the reasonableness of the premise on which it is built but putting it into practice seems extremely difficult. Nonetheless, it is imperative to bring this

abstract knowledge into the world because, as Aristotle explains, it is not enough to intellectually discern the path that leads us to happiness; it is necessary for the human being to act on that knowledge [12], to walk the path that reason allowed us to see. If this is not done, then reason becomes the main block to happiness. The world is filled with subjects who have studied what the great thinkers have said about happiness throughout history. What does not abound are happy people. Huang Po (2007, 56), a mystic from the Zen tradition, puts this idea beautifully into words when saying that

merely acquiring a lot of knowledge makes you like a child who gives himself indigestion by gobbling too much curds. Those who study the Way according to the Three Vehicles are all like this. All you can call them is people who suffer from indigestion. When so-called knowledge and deductions are not digested, they become poisons, for they belong only to the plane of samsāra. In the Absolute, there is nothing at all of this kind. So it is said: 'In the armoury of my sovereign, there is no Sword of Thusness.' All the concepts you have formed in the past must be discarded and replaced by void. Where dualism ceases, there is the Void of the Womb of Tathāgata.

Reason is very useful since it allows us to set the stage in which the world unfolds as such to human beings (and not as a mere distorted image), however, it is not capable of taking us all the way. That is why, as Huang Po says, there is a point at which the books must be put aside, and the practical journey must be undertaken on foot.

How, then, can we achieve this inner silence (absence of projections from the mind)? How can we *receive* the world as it is and not how our mind interprets it? What the mystics tell us about this matter is nothing new but rather reinforces what practically all spiritual and/or religious traditions point out: Spiritual practices (meditation, contemplation, prayer, among many others) are essential for overcoming the finitude and precariousness of human understanding.

Spiritual life and the practices associated with it, then, are a manner through which the subjective disposition of the mystic, that of *silent openness*, comes to life. This is because serious spiritual practices, whichever they may be, tend to aim toward shifting the attention of the practitioner away from the world, and into the “I” that perceives the world. This introspection is usually accompanied by a subsequent critical analysis in which the spiritual aspirant seeks to distinguish what is real from what is not. This shift from a perspective directed towards what is *out there*, to one centered on the “I” or “Self” that perceives the inner and outer world allows us to gradually (but inevitably) dismantle the projections we throw onto the world. In Hawkins’s words (2020, 1:54:00), through the constant repetition of spiritual practices, “*there is letting go wanting to change anything as it is, because you see the only thing you want to change is your perception of it all and your judgmentalism about it.*” That is, these types of habits don’t “add” new knowledge for a better understanding of the world, but rather seem to be of purgatorial nature. Through them, the practitioner goes through a process of purification, which demands letting go of erroneous concepts from which we interpret (and therefore distort) reality. This disarticulation of the horizons of meaning from which we apprehend what is presented to our senses triggers the appearance of the world as it is. The condition of possibility of the emergence of the world as such (and not as a mere image), then, is the letting go of the *a priori* concepts from which our intellect interprets what is perceived as real. In the words of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart (2009, 33), “*the very best and noblest attainment in this life is to be silent and let God work and speak within. When the powers have been completely withdrawn from all their works and images, then the Word is spoken.*”

In sum, a manner through which we can cleanse our perception of the world is through spiritual practices. Intellectual knowledge, though extremely useful for clearing the path and showing us the way towards human happiness, is not a tool powerful enough for taking us all the way. Spiritual practices, on the other hand, are useful devices for learning how to let go of erroneous concepts of the world. This makes them very suitable for allowing us to perceive reality as such, because once the obstacles are removed (the *a priori* concepts from which we project meaning to the world), the truth of reality shines forth.

5 Some Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to justify that the mystical way of portraying human understanding enriches what has already been said about this topic by the hermeneutical tradition. To provide plausibility to our hypothesis, we started by briefly reviewing what philosophical hermeneutics have said about the way human understanding operates. In this context, we argued that this philosophical lineage portrays human understanding as hermeneutic (or interpretative) and projective (we *throw*, or project said interpretations to what is presented to our senses). We also noted that said thematization of human understanding presents some problems that are not minor. The two main difficulties we observed were: philosophical hermeneutics does not provide a mechanism for determining the legitimacy and truthfulness of different horizons of meaning (and therefore leads to nihilism), and that it does not articulate the relation between the hermeneutical nature of understanding and human happiness.

Then, in the second and third sections of the paper, we justified, with the help of David R. Hawkins, that the mystical thematization of human understanding as hermeneutic and projective allow us to overcome the nihilistic perspective to which existential hermeneutic had led philosophical inquiry. Therefore, mysticism can be seen as a “way out” of the nihilistic and relativistic view of the world in which we are immersed in current times. The analysis made allows us to assert, with relative certainty, that the mystical tradition enriches what philosophical hermeneutics has said about the way in which human understanding operates in the following manner:

- a) After recognizing the hermeneutical and projective character of human understanding, the mystics argue that this fact is not an obstacle to affirming that there is an objective reality (absolute truth).
- b) Human understanding, though finite and precarious, can access truth.
- c) It is imperative that we take responsibility for the erroneous paradigm from which we understand the world. If this is done, then the truth of reality will be revealed, and we will have a happier and more peaceful life.
- d) Reason can set the stage for this to happen, but it is finite and, therefore, cannot lead us all the way.
- e) A manner through which we can see reality as it is, and not as it is portrayed (and distorted by human mind) is through spiritual practices. They allow us to *let go* of the content that our mind projects to what it perceives; that is, to undergo a process of gradual “cleanse” of the *a priori* concepts from which we interpret the world.

Finally, we can only make explicit something that should already be obvious at this point: the intellectual and philosophical nature of the work here presented makes its scope extremely limited. As Joseph Campbell well explains (2008, 254), “*symbols are only the ‘vehicles’ of communication; they must not be mistaken for the final term, the ‘tenor,’ of their reference. No matter how attractive or impressive they may seem, they remain but convenient means, accommodated to understanding.*” In that sense, in the best of cases this work can illuminate to the reader the fact that he or she should stop studying spiritual texts and start (or deepen) a spiritual practice.

Gloria in Excelsis Deo! [13]

Notes

- [1] This, however, does not exclude the possibility of attaining new knowledge (Crowell 2013).
- [2] By *mystic* we mean an individual that has experiential knowledge of God (Vauchez 2012, 259–260).
- [3] Concerning his “lineage”, Hawkins (2007) argues that his ideas belong to none – his devotion is to truth and God. However, for convenience he suggests his body of work to be called *Devotional non-duality*.
- [4] For a more detailed account of hermeneutics and relativism see Wachterhauser 2002.
- [5] This is, according to our knowledge on the matter, one of the core ideas behind Hawkins’s work.
- [6] The *Map of Consciousness* is the instrument in which Hawkins specifies the different *Levels of Consciousness*. This map is available in all his published books.
- [7] As Grace (2020, 24), an intellectual and spiritual disciple of Hawkins, explains “[e]ach energy field represents a view of life that makes sense to those at that level of consciousness. Endless arguments go on between people at different levels (even in the same family or workplace) because the world they are seeing is literally a different world. If one is wearing red-colored glasses, everything will appear red, no matter how strong the case is presented by those wearing green-colored glasses. Is the world green or red? The world you see depends on the lens you are looking through. A person stuck in Grief, for example, sees nothing but the past; they talk about ‘what used to be.’ A lot of frustration is eased when one realizes that people aren’t ‘bad’; they are simply seeing life the way they see it because of the lens they have. That lens is their level of consciousness.” We see that the argument is, again, the same: we project meaning onto what we perceive through our senses and then attribute reality to what we have projected by believing that it comes from *out there*.
- [8] It must be considered that authors like Heidegger and Gadamer do inquire deeply and thoroughly about the matter of truth. We believe, however, that their approach lacks the clarity and simplicity that Hawkins provides to the subject.
- [9] This is another core idea behind Hawkins’s thought. The fact that one of his greatest books is called *Truth vs Falsehood* (2013b) seems to indicate that this is so.
- [10] In his *Map of Consciousness*, Hawkins designates logarithmic numbers for each level of consciousness. Those, who are below 200 (shame to pride), do not participate in truth. There is a progressive and ascending adaptation of the mind to the entity between calibration levels 200 (courage) and 1000 (Enlightenment).
- [11] In Heidegger’s words (2008, 213), “[t]his everyday way in which things have been interpreted is one into which Dasein has grown in the first instance, with never a possibility of extrication. In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed. In no case is a Dasein, untouched and unseduced by this way in which things have been interpreted, set before the open country of a ‘world-in-itself’ so that it just beholds what it encounters.” Differently put, the interpretative and projective character of human understanding is an ontologically determined aspect of our being. Hawkins, on the other hand, argues that there is a *way out* of this existential conundrum through the responsible appropriation of the projections that we throw into the world.
- [12] Aristotle coins the term *praxis* to refer to the human action based on intellection (Vigo 2007, 110).
- [13] Hawkins begins and ends each his work (and almost all his lectures) with this exclamation. As an act of devotion to his teachings and respect for the teacher, we have made the decision to follow his example.

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Acknowledgement

The study was supported by Vicerrectoría de Investigación y Doctorados de la Universidad San Sebastián – Project VRID_FAPPE22/03.