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Mysticism and Practical Rationality Exploring Evelyn Underhill through the Lens of Phronesis

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Abstract: This paper aims to justify that mysticism can be considered rational from the perspective of practical reason. Particularly, we will argue that mysticism embodies the oxymoron inherent in practical wisdom (phronesis), namely, an ordered openness. Our roadmap for substantiating this hypothesis is as follows: we will start by explaining that if the concept of rationality is approached in a scientistic manner, then mysticism cannot be deemed rational. We will employ Kant's approach to rationality to support this assertion (2). Next, we will demonstrate that while the modern scientific approach to rationality is effective for fields of study where the subject matter typically unfolds in a regular or predictable manner, it proves insufficient in dimensions of existence that resist normative descriptions. In this section, following Aristotle and Gadamer, we will contend that theoretical reason should be complemented by practical reason, which is characterized by normative openness (3). Finally, we will argue that mysticism, although not rational from a theoretical viewpoint, is indeed rational from a practical standpoint (4). To avoid inappropriate generalizations when discussing mysticism, the third section will be centered on the work of Evelyn Underhill.

Keywords: mysticism; practical reason; ordered openness; Evelyn Underhill

> "Because mystery is horrible to us, we have agreed for the most part to live in a world of labels; to make of them the current coin of experience, and ignore their merely symbolic character, the infinite gradation of values which they misrepresent. We simply do not attempt to unite with Reality". (Underhill 1914, p. 7)

1. Introduction

The concept of mysticism is often readily dismissed in academic circles and discussions. Those who wield it in an argument are typically not taken seriously, primarily for one of two reasons. On the one hand, it is assumed that any account or reflection based on mystical experiences is associated with an organized religion. Therefore, the discourse or ideas that stem from such an endeavor would be limited by the dogmas or belief system of the religion from which it arises. In that case, the analysis and conclusions are to be considered incompatible with a rational and unbiased (scientific) scrutiny of the subject. Freud, in *The Future of an Illusion*, argues that spiritual information provided by religion is doomed to perish since "in the long run nothing can withstand reason and experience, and the contradiction which religion offers to both is all too palpable. Even purified religious ideas cannot escape this fate, so long as they try to preserve anything of the consolation of religion" (Freud 1961, p. 54). Simply put, any spiritual information that proceeds from religion is not to be trusted, as dogma sets narrow limits within which rational inquiry can unfold.

On the other hand, it is also argued that, in case these types of experiences are not accompanied or sustained by theological or philosophical discourses, the term mysticism is added to an idea or argument for the sole purpose of giving a halo of legitimacy to discourses and lines of thought that lack rigor and, ultimately, a solid foundation. It is once again Freud who warns us of this naive and dangerous positionality by pointing out that there are certain types of people, to whom he refers as *spiritualists*[1], who merely project

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the content of their consciousness (including the unconscious) to worldly phenomena, and then believe that what comes from within themselves is actually *out there*. In his words,

"The proceedings of the spiritualists meet us at this point; they are convinced of the survival of the individual soul and they seek to demonstrate to us beyond doubt the truth of this one religious doctrine. Unfortunately they cannot succeed in refuting the fact that the appearance and utterances of their spirits are merely the products of their **own mental activity**. They have called up the spirits of the greatest men and of the most eminent thinkers, but all the pronouncements and information which they have received from them have been so foolish and so wretchedly meaningless that one can find nothing credible in them but the capacity of the spirits to adapt themselves to the circle of people who have conjured them up" (Freud 1961, pp. 27–28).

In other words, the fact that spiritual experiences tend to coincide with the belief systems of those who encounter them makes us suspect that they are not real phenomena, but mere projections of our naïve human mind.

This situation, at least in part, as Underhill suggests, stems from the fact that the concept of "mysticism" is "one of the most abused words in the English language. It [mysticism] has been used in different and often mutually exclusive senses by religion, poetry, and philosophy: it has been claimed as an excuse for every kind of occultism, for diluted transcendentalism, vapid symbolism, religious or aesthetic sentimentalism, and bad metaphysics" (Underhill 1911, p. x). In other words, it is the inappropriate co-opting of the mystical concept by a variety of movements, lines of thought, or mere emotionally charged descriptions of mundane events, which rightly arouse suspicion towards anything labeled *mystical*.

It is against this background that the present article aims to justify that mysticism, if authentic and not a type of pseudo-spiritualism appropriating this adjective to provide itself with a halo of legitimacy, possesses an inherent rationality. That is, under certain conditions, it would be legitimate to speak of a mystical rationality. Given the vastness of the mystical tradition—if we can indeed classify it as such—and the radical differences in how its representatives present information about the mystical way of life, we have chosen to focus primarily on one exponent of mysticism: Evelyn Underhill. Although we will make occasional references to other mystics and traditions, our main emphasis will be on Underhill's portrayal. We will explore how, according to Underhill, authentic mysticism is far from mere trickery or ingenuity, but rather has its own distinct rationality. Specifically, we will argue that mysticism can be understood as rational from a practical standpoint, in the manner presented by Aristotle and further elaborated by Gadamer. In this context, an analysis of mysticism through the lens of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, can illuminate its meaning, which often remains obscured when approached from a limited and scientistic concept of rationality.

Before we begin, it is necessary to point out that, following Underhill (Underhill 1911, p. 112), there are at least two approaches to the study of mysticism. One involves examining the conditions of possibility for the mystical experience, what Underhill refers to as the *mystic way*. The other approach attempts to decipher the content of the mystical experience itself, that is, to unravel the content of what Underhill calls the *mystic field of perception*. In this paper, we will focus on the *mystic way* and argue that it is this dimension of mysticism that engages with practical reason. A deeper exploration of the mystic field of perception, which would require delving into metaphysics, aesthetics and the effort of trying to conceptually articulate an experience that resists normative description, will be reserved for another occasion (though some remarks on this will be made).

2. The Sense in Which Mysticism Is Not Rational

In Section 126 of his *Gay Science*, Nietzsche asserts that "mystical explanations are considered deep; the truth is, they are not even shallow" (Nietzsche 2004, p. 121). That is, any narrative to which a mystical dimension is added acquires a halo of legitimacy and vast depth that it does not really deserve. It is most likely that these are, in fact, banal

and superfluous explanations which, due to their shallowness—one that does not even achieve true superficiality—do not really explain anything (presumably, because they resort to pseudo-realities that, given their "pseudoness", do not even touch the surface of the phenomenon they purport to explain). Therefore, these narratives are often *mystified*, hence artificially raising them to a level of significance they inherently lack.

Bearing this in mind—which, regrettably, is often true—makes it challenging to see how mysticism could be considered rational. We will argue, however, that mysticism, if appropriately presented, engages in or possesses practical rationality. We contend that, as with every other domain that is part of practical rationality, mysticism can provide guidelines for the betterment of human action. Although it cannot attain the precision characteristic of mathematics, it nevertheless offers a series of guidelines. As Gadamer explains, while these standards are flexible, they establish the necessary conditions enabling individuals to form a subjective disposition that empowers them to respond appropriately to varied and constantly evolving concrete situations (Gadamer 2013, pp. 323–24). Now, before explaining how mysticism, especially that of Evelyn Underhill, can be seen as aiming at the development of practical wisdom in the individual, we will review how mysticism should not be understood as rational. For this purpose, we will use Kant's concepts of theoretical and practical rationality and see that, if rationality is considered solely in terms of the knowledge that meets these standards, then mysticism is not rational.

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant refers to theoretical rationality, which is concerned with the a priori conditions of possibility for human understanding, by stating that for something to count as knowledge (rather than mere regulative ideas)[2], it is essential that the information provided is systematically organized into an interconnected totality. In his words,

"Under the government of reason our cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody but must constitute a system, in which alone they can support and advance its essential ends. I understand by a system, however, the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea [...]. The unity of the end, to which all parts are related and in the idea of which they are also related to each other, allows the absence of any part to be noticed in our knowledge of the rest, and there can be no contingent addition or undetermined magnitude of perfection that does not have its boundaries determined a priori" (Kant 2009, pp. A 832/833, B 861).

That is, for a body of information to be considered rational and, consequently, science rather than mere opinion, it is necessary that it be hierarchically organized (from genus to species) and that it be autonomous. It must be self-sufficient, not requiring the support of other branches of knowledge. This does not mean, however, that such a system cannot grow or expand. It can do so, but always within the boundaries set by cognition itself. That is, "it can, to be sure, grow internally (*per intus suceptionem*) but not externally (*per appositionem*), like an animal body, whose growth does not add a limb but rather makes each limb stronger and fitter for its end without any alteration of proportion" (Kant 2009, pp. A 833/B 861).

In a theoretical sense, therefore, mysticism would not be considered rational according to Kant's standards. Whereas theoretical knowledge, as depicted by the philosopher from Königsberg, seeks certain and unchanging knowledge, mysticism embraces the opposite premise: it accepts that the world and everything within it are always subject to change and aims to discern the mode(s) of life that can harmonize human existence with this ever-changing world. In other words, mysticism is founded on the notion that the human being is an *existential openness*. This implies, as Plessner aptly states, that "one becomes oneself through the performances of one's own life. The human being is open, not pre-determined or derived from any instance, but constituted in relation to the boundaries of one's world, the possibilities of one's own corporeality, in relation to other people, and one's own actions within the realm of culture in the broadest sense of the word" (Plessner 2019, p. 44). The way to engage with this dual dimension, a constantly changing world and a being (which, in each case, is ourselves) that must repeatedly define itself in the light of this ever-changing backdrop, is not, according to mysticism, by reducing what we understand

as knowledge. Rather, it is through the mastery of both domains: the linear, which is temporal, circumscribed, logical, provable, and objective; and "the nonlinear, which is influential, subjective, experiential, unrestricted, and contextual rather than provable"[3]. As Underhill puts it, "the greatest men, those whose consciousness is stretched to its full extent, are able to grasp, to be aware of, both. They recognize themselves as living in both the discrete, manifested, ever-changing parts and appearances, and also in the Whole Fact. They respond fully to both" (Underhill 1914, p. 39). Framed in Kantian terms, the mystic would not only have knowledge of the phenomenal (which is all that we as human beings are capable of knowing) but also of the noumenal—an unthinkable notion for Kant.

Now, read from the Kantian perspective, mysticism should not be considered rational from the standpoint of practical reason either. This is because, while practical philosophy must assume the existence of things that, if real, would belong to the noumenal realm (sc. human freedom and its exercise), it also seeks universality in its conclusions. In this regard, the philosopher from Königsberg states that "practical laws refer only to the will, without regard to what is attained by its causality, and one may abstract from this latter (as belonging to the world of sense) so as to have them pure" (Kant 1996, p. AA 5:21). In other words, the practical laws are valid a priori, meaning they are prior to and independent of sensory experience (world of senses)[4].

Therefore, the universality that Kantian practical reason aspires to, which is grounded in the fact that pure reason lies at the basis of the practical use of reason (Kant 1996, p. 5:16), is incompatible with the openness, flexibility, and attentiveness to the known (perceptible) and unknown (imperceptible via the senses) of situations and contexts that mysticism advocates (this will be revisited in the following section). For Kant, an explanation of this nature (mysticism) would be merely a paralogism of reason. That is, an attempt to fill "the gaps regarding what one does not know [. . .] making thoughts into things and hypostatizing them" (Kant 2009, p. A 395).

In summary, mysticism would not be considered rational in the modern sense of the term—a notion we have examined through the lens of the philosopher who is the paradigm of the scientization of the humanities in modernity: Immanuel Kant. Rather, it would be situated not within the domain of knowledge, but amidst the tumultuous sea of faith (Kant 2009, pp. A 236/B 295), where ideas proliferate that, though regulative, lack an empirical correlate perceptible to the senses.

3. The Sense in Which Rationality Includes Openness

The somewhat scientistic perspective presented in the previous section leads us to question whether it is correct to consider only that which can produce apodictic knowledge, i.e., that which is necessary and universally valid, as rational. It seems logical that in aspects of human existence that unveil themselves in a consistent or regular manner, the verifiability provided by the scientific method should be the standard by which certainty is gauged—or at least the closest approximation to this standard that can be achieved, as even for modern science, Kantian apodicticity is a challenging goal to attain. However, there are facets of life where such a standard is either unfeasible or may lead to adverse outcomes. For instance, consider the legal sphere: during the COVID-19 pandemic, when special permissions were required to leave one's home, a woman who was raped and fled to report the assault to the police was fined by an officer for lacking the necessary authorization to be out on the street. Through the lens of a stringent scientistic rationality, the officer's action was technically correct—he followed the law to the letter, which stated, "anyone moving without permission should be fined". Yet, any compassionate individual would recognize that fining someone in such distressing circumstances is not only inhumane but also fundamentally irrational[5]. This scenario begs the question of whether rationality can be conceived more broadly than previously discussed, and if mysticism might be considered rational within an expanded definition of the term. In this section, we will review the Aristotelian notion of practical rationality, as well as its reception and development by Hans-

Georg Gadamer, to then justify that an authentic mysticism could indeed be considered rational from this perspective.

While theoretical philosophy concerns itself with things that are not subject to change, Aristotle tells us, practical philosophy deals with what is contingent; that is, with what can or cannot be (Aristotle 1991a, bk. V). In particular, practical philosophy is concerned with the human being as a source of action and aims to improve it (Aristotle 1991b, bk. III–IV). It focuses its study on human action primarily for two reasons. First, because situations that call for human action are never identical. The singularities and richness of the events presented to humans are so varied that one might even dare to say they are infinite. Second, even if situations remain stable (the world unfolds in a typical or regular manner), the interference of freedom on the course of action makes it impossible to predict how the subject will act. The exceptional character of the world and human freedom thus render the human being, as a source of action, the focal point of practical philosophy—a field predominantly concerned with the contingent. Now, if we understand that rationality aims to find criteria that are universal, that is, to arrive at principles that are communicable among individuals of the human species, then the domain of practical reason, the contingency of human action in an ever-changing world, presents a problem. How to provide rules for a dimension of existence where there are no regularities? How to "tame" a world where everything is subject to change?

Aristotle addresses the inherent challenge of navigating through life's uncertainties with the concept of *phronesis*, commonly translated as "prudence" or "practical wisdom". This type of knowledge is distinct; it does not adhere to a strict set of unchanging rules, nor does it offer absolute clarity or uniformity in its application. Instead, it is governed by guidelines that are inherently flexible and adaptable, reflecting the nuanced and variable nature of real-world situations. In the realm of practical philosophy, Aristotle argues,

"we must be content, then, in speaking of such subjects and with such premises to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most part true and with premises of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better. In the same spirit, therefore, should each of our statements be received; for it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits: it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician demonstrative proofs" (Aristotle 1991b, bk. I 1094b12-1094b26).

Therefore, *phronesis* is less about achieving certainty and more about cultivating sound judgment. It ties together the notions of openness, taste, tact, and common sense, suggesting that wise decision making involves a harmonious blend of these elements. This form of wisdom enables individuals to navigate complex moral landscapes with discernment and adaptability, recognizing that life's most pressing decisions often lie in shades of grey rather than black and white.

Legal understanding, in general, and particularly the example we have already seen of the police officer fining the woman who has just escaped from her aggressor and lacks the permit to be out in the streets during the COVID-19 pandemic, once again serves to illustrate what the Stagirite is aiming at. The law, while requiring clear and precise rules that establish a minimum of predictability (we know in advance the legal consequences of our actions), must be open to the exceptional. Gadamer, appropriating Aristotelian wisdom, argues that legal understanding is paradigmatic with respect to the way in which practical reason operates in general. The one who applies the law must not simply know the letter of the statute and subsume the case under its heading, but must mediate the concrete situation that cries out for justice, which is exceptional and singular, with the universality crystallized in the text of the law. That is, applying the law implies a form of dialogue between the concrete case and the letter of the law that, while not free (in which case we would be facing capricious decisionism), responds to rules that our finite human reason cannot fully determine[6]. The seriousness and fragility of the cited case, a woman managing to escape after being a victim of rape, makes it rational from a practical viewpoint not to

apply the fine. This is not, properly speaking, a failure of the statute. It simply happens that, due to its own finite nature, it cannot cover all cases and therefore stipulates regarding what happens in general, that is, most of the time. In that sense, it is not that the law loses its validity by not being applied in exceptional cases. On the contrary, *phronesis* comes to perfect the law, as it comes to fill the void (or *openness*) that the finitude and precariousness of the legal text reveal in the face of exceptional cases.

Therefore, the issue confronted by practical reason centers on its engagement with contingency—the domain of what may or may not be. This engagement encompasses the ever-shifting landscape of the world and the spectrum of human actions within this contingent environment, with an overarching objective to refine and enhance such actions. This engagement, however, poses a notable challenge. If certain actions are discernibly superior to others in the context of contingency, this implies a certain level of non-contingency. There exists a normative framework guiding practical reason in its interaction with contingency, enabling us to evaluate actions as good or bad. This framework suggests the potential to develop mechanisms aimed at steering humanity towards beneficial outcomes in these realms. Although practical reason lacks the universal scope characteristic of theoretical reason, it embodies a form of particular universality. Hans-Georg Gadamer, in his interpretation of Aristotle, elucidates this notion by saying that

"he [Aristotle] describes how various perceptions unite to form the unity of experience when many individual perceptions are retained. What sort of unity is this? Clearly, it is the unity of a universal. But the universality of experience is not yet the universality of science. Rather, according to Aristotle, it occupies a remarkably indeterminate intermediate position between the many individual perceptions and the true universality of the concept" (Gadamer 2013, p. 359).

Practical wisdom (*phronesis*), therefore, pertains ultimately to the rationality that operates within the realm of the contingent. It faces the intricate task of seeking universality amidst the exceptional cases presented by the facticity of individual experiences.

In synthesis, practical rationality, whose epitome is *phronesis*, is thus characterized by an apparent oxymoron: it is an openness that adheres to rules. There are rules because it is not a matter of acting freely based on mere opinions or arbitrary ideas (it does not seem justifiable that sanctioning the woman in the given example would be considered rational under a legalistic argument). At the same time, however, openness is necessary, for establishing fixed and precise rules for righteous action in a world where necessity is rare and contingency seems to be the norm[7] is something exceeds our finite capacities. In the next section, we will justify that if the practical dimension of rationality as portrayed by Aristotle (and Gadamer), which encompasses an openness that does not devolve into mere romantic emotivism, is considered, then it is feasible to view mysticism in terms of rationality. For this exercise, we will concentrate, as pointed out in the Introduction, on the works of Evelyn Underhill.

4. Mystic Rationality: Making Sense of an [Apparent] Oxymoron

Evelyn Underhill, a 20th century scholar of mysticism, makes an interesting comment in her work "Mysticism". She notes that mystical narratives evidently embody intense emotions—consider, for instance, Meister Eckhart's description of total surrender, where a person's attitude embodies a profound acceptance and trust in the divine to the point that he claims that "if his friend dies «In God's Name!» If he loses an eye «In God's name!»" (Eckhart 2009, p. 97). However, she argues, mysticism is not mere emotivism, in which case the mystic would be a slave or addict to an intense rush of pathological nature. For the spiritual aspirant, emotion is not a reliable guide, yet it can be a tremendous (albeit somewhat arrogant) servant when harnessed by will and reason. In her words, "at bottom, then, we shall find in emotion the power which drives the mental machinery; a power as strong as steam, though as evanescent unless it be put to work" (Underhill 1911, p. 56). That is to say, she argues that mysticism encompasses not only emotion but also reason. In what follows, it will be argued that in mysticism as portrayed by Underhill, we find elements

that would allow us to classify this tradition as rational from a practical standpoint. In particular, we will see that the English scholar recognizes a progressive order that must be followed by those who intend to pursue the mystical path (and in that sense, there would be rules), but at the same time, she emphasizes the various ways in which this order can manifest in concrete life. In other words, Underhill implies that in mysticism we find an ordered openness—an oxymoron that, as we have seen, characterizes practical rationality.

Underhill defines mysticism as "*the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment*" (Underhill 1914, p. 3). To ensure that the concept of union does not remain as what Kant would call paralogistic pseudo-rationalism, Underhill provides a concrete explanation of what this concept aims to convey. Although extensive, it is worth replicating her words:

> "the word «union» represents not so much a rare and unimaginable operation, as something which he is doing, in a vague, imperfect fashion, at every moment of his conscious life; and doing with intensity and thoroughness in all the more valid moments of that life. We know a thing only by uniting with it; by assimilating it; by an interpenetration of it and ourselves. It gives itself to us, just in so far as we give ourselves to it; and it is because our outflow towards things is usually so perfunctory and so languid, that our comprehension of things is so perfunctory and languid too". (Underhill 1914, p. 4)

In other words, the way human understanding relates to the world is through union. That which is *out there* is incorporated into our soul in the form of a concept—an image or ideal representation of reality. We then assimilate this representation and become one with it. Thus, the concept of union with the world does not refer to an experience exclusively attained by a few exceptional individuals throughout history, but rather to the regular operation of human understanding. To understand the world is, in a sense, to unite with it—although not all unions with the world are mystical.

Now, the fact that human understanding typically operates through union does not mean that it always functions optimally. In other words, it is possible that the conceptual image we form of what we perceive in the world might not be an adequate representation of the perceived reality. In fact, Underhill tells us that the norm is for humans to unite not with reality itself, but with a distorted portrayal of it. This occurs mainly for two reasons: first, the symbolic nature of human understanding inevitably means that reason is incapable of fully grasping reality. Put simply, the word is not the thing, meaning the former can never completely encompass the latter. Second, even considering that the human mind is incapable of fully comprehending the reality it perceives, the conceptual image we capture is far from being the most pristine version of it, as we project prejudices—preconceived concepts in our minds priori to the experience—onto what we perceive. The result is that "the coloured scene at which you look so trustfully owes, in fact, much of its character to the activities of cogitation, the seer"[8].

It is at this point that the significance of the *unio mystica* becomes clear, at least in Underhill's thought—though we believe this to be a common characteristic of all authentic mysticisms. It refers, at least in part, to the conditions of possibility for human understanding[9]. That is, one who mystically unites with the world does so without projecting content from their mind onto the world. Those who progress on this spiritual path gradually disarticulate (surrendering) the pre-existing contents of their mind—a priori, prior to experience[10]—thereby expanding the horizon from which reality is grasped, gradually giving rise to "larger and larger existences, more and more complete realities [. . .] learning to know them, to share their very being, through the magic of disinterested love" (Underhill 1914, pp. 138–39). The *mystic way*, as Underhill calls the series of stages of surrender that the spiritual aspirant should follow, is essentially an attempt to provide a framework that the average human being can understand to embark on this epic journey—one that begins, Underhill tells us, with the transition from an unsophisticated Self, which uncritically accepts the mental image as reality itself, to a sophisticated self, aware of its own ignorance regarding the content projected through understanding and skeptical of the images perceived in the

mind (Underhill 1911, p. 6), and ends with what she calls the *mystical life*, a life in which one becomes independent from the slavery of the senses and the mind's projections (or preconceived ideas) and becomes the captain of one's soul (Underhill 1914, pp. 146–47).

This discussion allows us to begin to understand how mysticism can be considered rational from a practical standpoint. As previously explained, all rationality ultimately refers to universal behavioral norms that are communicable and enforceable among individuals. In the realm of practical existence, however, we face a dilemma: while we recognize that human behavior is rule-governed, the world's incommensurability and the variety of situations we encounter make it impossible to clearly and precisely define these norms. Underhill's mysticism—and we believe this to be true for all genuine mysticism—confronts a similar dilemma. Like practical wisdom (*phronesis*), it proposes a guiding yet inherently incomplete framework. Specifically, Underhill's mysticism operates within the normative dimension of practical rationality, aiming for a clear goal: to achieve an experience of pure perception, free from individual projection onto the world[11]. There are steps or facets, which form what Underhill calls the *mystic way*[12], for individuals to approach this perspective. However, the guidelines and stages of the path—preparation, purgation, attainment, and mystical life[13]—are not definitive. They are fuzzy and adaptable, offering a general outline of the spiritual aspirant's challenges without being exhaustive. Such flexibility even allows for the legitimacy of direct paths—examples include Huang Po's (Huang Po 2007) Zen Buddhism or Ramana Maharshi's (Maharshi 2018) self-enquiry—that while valid in themselves, do not undermine the authority of progressive mystical paths as the ones proposed by Underhill (Underhill 1911), Teresa of Jesus (de Jesús 1902), Climacus (Climacus 1982), or Hawkins (Hawkins 2015) among others. Thus, while mysticism responds to some kind of logic and order (is not an open-ended solipsism where "anything goes"), this order is characterized by its openness; it is flexible and ultimately shaped by the individual's unique journey and the circumstances they encounter. In essence, the mystic, embodying practical wisdom (*phronesis*), recognizes a rational order towards goodness and the possibility of disorder leading to evil, yet acknowledges the limits of fully understanding and articulating this order through concepts.

As in all practical knowledge, an example will serve to clarify what we are trying to convey. Think of teaching, a discipline that is eminently practical. Indeed, being a good teacher requires the use of pedagogical techniques. This includes having a well-structured course curriculum that breaks down content into units, clearly outlines expected learning outcomes for each unit, and a syllabus that effectively organizes the semester, all complemented by accessible materials for students. However, an end-of-semester survey querying students about whether the teacher fulfilled these requirements and whether they consider the teacher to be a good educator or would recommend them to others might yield surprising results. Even if the teacher scores highly on all technical aspects, the response to this overarching question could still be negative—a phenomenon that often perplexes methodologists and curriculum designers. This discrepancy underscores the difference between technical proficiency and perceived teaching effectiveness. Why might this occur? Because teaching, as a form of practical knowledge, is an experience that transcends mere technical discipline. There is an indescribable quality, a *je ne sais quoi*, that distinguishes a truly good teacher. While technical skill is essential, the most effective teachers also possess an ineffable dimension that enlivens their classes—and that is why it is so difficult to find good teachers.

The same occurs along the *mystic way*. Even when there is a spiritual aspirant who strictly follows all the rules and exercises that a particular path demands, they might not reach enlightenment or mystical union. The Zen Buddhism of Huang Po, for example, is aware of this and seeks to correct the idea that enlightenment is a reward obtained after hard and straight spiritual discipline and insists, to the despair of students, that "there is absolutely nothing which can be attained" (Huang Po 2007, p. 125). That is, while spiritual exercises can be beneficial in certain contexts, their effectiveness is limited if they are not recognized as instrumental in achieving a stable foundation—one that should be

independent of mundane practices and deeply connected to the ineffable and extraordinary aspects of human existence[14].

In summary, the exemplary way allows us to see that teaching and the *mystic way* are part of practical rationality. There are rules, as a teacher who talks about whatever he wants in class without any order is a bad teacher, and someone who indulges their whims and subjectivity under the guise of following a spiritual path is not a good spiritual aspirant. But since these rules are oriented towards generating the conditions under which an experience is possible (the *unio mystica*), they are flexible, dependent on context, and, for the same reason, resist being fully described. The pursuit in this context is for the universality of the concrete, a concept inherently dynamic and ever evolving, leading to what can be described as "fuzzy universality", a term that aptly captures the fluid and indeterminate nature of universality as it applies to the concrete.

Finally, although it would warrant a separate study—an interesting, although ambitious, approach to this could result from using Aristotle (Aristotle 1991d), Underhill (Underhill 1976), Jung (Jung 1980a), Tolkien[15] and Campbell (Campbell 2008)—we believe that the fuzzy and ineffable nature of mysticism's practical rationality is one of the reasons why Underhill seeks to express its essence not only academically, but also through literature in her novels *The Grey World* (Underhill 1904), *The Lost Word* (Underhill 1907) and *The Column of Dust* (Underhill 1909). In a way, Underhill, in line with what Aristotle says about Aeschylus and Sophocles, provides life models for emulation[16] (*mimesis*[17]). This approach is chosen precisely due to the limitations of human reason in defining the rules of practical rationality, in which we have argued mysticism participates. Aristotle tells us that, "regarding practical wisdom [*phronesis*], we shall get at the truth by considering who are the persons we credit with it" (Aristotle 1991b, VI, 1140a24-1140b19). Therefore, examples, rather than theoretical explanations, are more effective in capturing and later emulating the essence of practical wisdom. The moral dimension of art, thus, presents archetypes that enable us to grasp these open and adaptable norms of practical reason in a more open and flexible manner.

In synthesis, while the inability to formulate clear, precise, universal, and necessary rules that would allow any individual to progress towards mystical life precludes mysticism from being considered rational from a scientific theoretical perspective, recognizing the paradoxical oxymoron of an open and flexible order in the path of spiritual advancement allows us to assert its rationality from a practical standpoint. Additionally, mysticism's confrontation with the unique challenge of practical reason—specifically, the difficulty in conveying practical wisdom (*phronesis*) due to the ambiguity of its rules and the necessity of using exemplary methods (like narratives about the lives of mystics) and art—further reinforces the notion that authentic mysticism is rational from a practical standpoint.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this work was to justify that mysticism, as Evelyn Underhill portrays it, is rational from the perspective of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), as proposed by Aristotle (and further developed by Gadamer). To lend plausibility to our hypothesis, we began by arguing, following Kant, that from a scientistic viewpoint, that is, reducing rationality only to that which can produce universal and necessary knowledge, mysticism cannot be considered rational. The diversity of paths leading to a mystical experience and the inability of language to articulate precise rules—both themes emphasized by Underhill as inherent to mysticism—lead to the dismissal of its rationality.

However, we then saw, this time supported by Aristotle, that if we expand the concept of rationality to include those dimensions of existence that do not unfold in a typical or regular manner—what Aristotle calls practical reason—then mysticism is indeed rational. We observe in it the oxymoron typical of practical knowledge, namely, a rule-guided openness. There are rules, and in that sense, Underhill lays out stages on the *mystic way*. However, it should not be understood that these rules exhaust mysticism or have the ability to always generate the same result (as in the scientific method). In simpler terms, practical reason skillfully navigates the concept that "sometimes yes and sometimes no", without

succumbing to arbitrary subjectivism. This is uncomfortable for the mind seeking clear and stable rules. Mysticism echoes this sentiment. Given that, ultimately, the spiritual paths often categorized as mystical aim to achieve an experience of pure perception, it follows that any method or practice that effectively brings an individual closer to this experience is valid. However, this does not imply an absence of normativity within these paths. Rather, it indicates a recognition that this normativity is open and flexible, uniquely shaped by the individual's specific characteristics and the context they encounter.

In mysticism, therefore, it is coherent to sometimes say yes, for instance, to spiritual practices, retreats, and asceticism, while other times rejecting them. That is, the way in which the rule or principle is articulated depends on the *context*. Here lies the core of practical knowledge. It thematizes the context in which content emerges in a serious and rigorous manner. Gadamer, when speaking about the interpretation of texts, tells us regarding context that: "what is true of the written sources, that every sentence in them can be understood only on the basis of its context, is also true of their content. Its meaning is not fixed. The context of world history—in which appears the true meaning of the individual objects, large or small, of historical research—is itself a whole, in terms of which the meaning of every particular is to be fully understood, and which in turn can be fully understood only in terms of these particulars" (Gadamer 2013, p. 184). That is, the interpretation of texts, which according to Gadamer is paradigmatical of the manner in which practical reason operates, must take into account the context in which the text is to be applied for the meaning of it to fully emerge.

In that sense, mysticism is fundamentally practical–rational, as it acknowledges that context is an untamable beast, whose mode of appearance we cannot foresee, but also cannot ignore (just like death). Clearly, it would be easier to deny the validity of context and stick with what the human mind can explain—adopt the paradigm of science and totalize it, making it the only legitimate instrument to produce true knowledge in all dimensions of existence[18]. But mysticism opts for the more difficult choice: to include context in a serious and rigorous way. In this sense, it is paradigmatically rational because, instead of ignoring this dimension of existence, it takes it as a datum of experience that requires special attention if one wants to understand this world. Furthermore, it must be considered that practical reason in general, and mysticism in particular, possess the virtue of not undermining exact science, as it recognizes that the context in which the hard sciences unfold, namely, one in which existence unfolds in a typical or regular manner, rigid and causal categories are useful. That is, it does not seek to de-scientize the world, but rather to acknowledge and reinforce its validity, but only in the context of linearity[19]. Authentic mysticism, therefore, does not position itself as opposed to science, but merely against scientism—a totalization of the scientific paradigm to all dimensions of existence.

Succinctly put, there are rules that govern practical reason. However, due to the inherent dynamism and incommensurability of practical reality, we cannot fully grasp and formulate them. The same applies to spiritual progress, which mysticism aims to guide us toward. It follows logics that are unique to it but cannot be exhaustively described or prescribed due to the mysterious unfathomability of the human soul. Therefore, we must be content with partial descriptions, based on exemplary pathways or conveyed through myths, parables, or art in general. Yet, this practical normativity, which we argue mysticism partakes in, *is real*, and becoming aware of it is a condition of possibility for a fulfilling human life.

It is also worth mentioning, although this topic exceeds the scope of the current work, that Underhill's reflections on mysticism as an art of union with reality prompt a question about the nature of that which humans unite with through understanding. In other words, it leads to the metaphysical question: what is reality? This question, deserving extensive volumes for its development, finds a fascinating approach in mysticism in general, and particularly in Underhill's reflections. Underhill suggests that the goal of spiritual life is to achieve harmony between the knowing subject and the known world, so that, in the light of this harmony, the essence of reality emerges. This essence, which Underhill seems

to indicate is relational—not a standalone thing existing independently of the subject—is nothing other than Being itself. In this sense, the *mystic way* aims to refine the subject's perceptual disposition, initially prompting them to fix their attention on a mundane object so they can perceive it as participating in Being, and then enabling them to focus on Being as the substrate for all existence (Underhill 1914, p. 115). Underhill states:

"It is in man's moments of contact with this [Being], when he penetrates beyond all images, however lovely, however significant, to that ineffable awareness which the mystics call 'Naked Contemplation'—since it is stripped of all the clothing with which reason and imagination drape and disguise both our devils and our gods that the hunger and thirst of the heart is satisfied, and we receive indeed an assurance of ultimate Reality. This assurance is not the cool conclusion of a successful argument. It is rather the seizing at last of Something which we have ever felt near us and enticing us: the unspeakably simple because completely inclusive solution of all the puzzles of life" (Underhill 1914, pp. 109–10).

Therefore, it is the harmony between the subject and reality that allows the individual to become aware of the essence of the latter (reality), which is none other than Being itself. This experience, the goal of all authentic mysticism, is simultaneously alien and familiar. It is alien because it resists conceptual articulation, a challenge to the human mind. Yet, it is familiar because Being is perceived not as something distinct from ourselves, but as participating in and giving rise and reason to our own existence. It is akin to returning home after a long journey: the destination (home) differs from the path, but it is a known place that reveals itself as being intrinsically part of one's own existential constitution. The mystical experience is, therefore, like a return to the house of being (Heidegger 1993, p. 263).

This reinforces the idea that while philosophical reflection on mysticism is valuable and enriching, ultimately, union with reality is an experience of Being. Being, as partaking in all that exists, allows the individual to perceive (or perhaps "intuit" might be a better term) a complete and total harmony between the subject and the universe. In summary, although the philosophical exploration of mysticism extends beyond the limits of this work, it is clear that the ultimate goal of mysticism, as seen through the lens of practical reason, is to facilitate a profound and authentic experience of Being. This experience transcends mere subjective spiritualism, grounding the mystical journey in a universal (yet particular) and harmonious connection with all of existence.

Before we conclude, there are two themes we consider important to mention. First, we insist that from the standpoint of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy, mysticism would not be considered rational. However, we see a possibility—albeit one that requires further investigation—of perceiving a certain degree of rationality in mysticism when approached from the perspective of Kant's third critique. A deeper exploration of Kantian thought, particularly regarding the *reflective* use of the faculty of judgment[20], suggests that mysticism might possess a form of rationality. This is not a rationality that leads to knowledge in the strictest sense, but rather one that postulates a universal rule or concept towards which reason is oriented (*as if* it were real[21]), yet never fully attains as knowledge.

Secondly, this work primarily focused on what Underhill describes as the *mystic way*—the progressive path that the spiritual aspirant follows to purge or purify their perception and way of being in the world (Underhill 1911, pp. 112–13). However, we did not thoroughly address *the mystic field of perception* (the mystical experience per se), which refers to

"The revelation under which the contemplative becomes aware of the Absolute. This includes a consideration of the so-called doctrines of mysticism: the attempts of the articulate mystic to sketch for us the world he has glimpsed, in language only adequate for the world in which the rest of us dwell. Here, arises the challenging question of symbolism and symbolic theology, a point where many promising expositions of mysticism have foundered" (Underhill 1911, pp. 112–13)

While this subject deserves a lifetime of dedicated study, it is important for this work to acknowledge that Underhill notes that as one progresses further on the *mystic way* towards a perception purged of distortions, rational categories become less effective in explaining what is perceived. Therefore, to truly grasp the mystical field of perception, an

even greater level of openness is necessary. This entails openness not only to the reality that emerges once pure perception is attained but also to the method of communicating this experience. Here, the emphasis transitions from conveying specific content to transmitting the context from which the content emerges. This is why, at this point in mysticism, there is an abundance of stories, myths, poems, and artistic representations. This is because, as Gadamer aptly articulates, aesthetics is not merely a matter of personal preference; rather, it serves as a profound method for unveiling the truths embedded within context (Gadamer 2013, pp. 33–34)—thus holding value for practical rationality. Recognizing the limitations of language (and, therefore, of philosophy) in fully capturing this mystic experience, we find that sometimes art and poetry speak more profoundly than prose. In this spirit, we conclude with a poem inspired by Meister Eckhart, which recites:

> "Enough with words, now.
> This is more than enough.
> Shhhhh.
> Enough. Go." (Sweeney and Burrows 2017, p. 205)

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Notes

1 Hawkins argues that when the suffix 'ism' is added to a concept, it refers to a closure of reality in light of a narrow and inflexible paradigm in which the adherent is convinced that the description that the 'ism' provides of reality is a faithful correlate of the truth of said reality. Regarding this topic, he comments that "each person perceives, experiences, and interprets the world and its events in accord with their own predominant level of consciousness. This is further reinforced by the mind's proclivity to explanation via mentalization and rationalized 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 one's own personal perceived/experienced world represents 'reality'" (Hawkins 2013, p. 59). Jung, on the other hand, points out that this is something common in philosophy. In his words, "I cannot let myself presuppose that my peculiar temperament, my own attitude to intellectual problems, is universally valid. Apparently this is an assumption in which only the philosopher may indulge, who always takes it for granted that his own disposition and attitude are universal, and will not recognize the fact, if he can avoid it, that his «persona equation» conditions his philosophy" (Jung 1980b, 75–76).

2 Kant says that the territory of knowledge is a small island, while that of ideas is a vast and misty ocean. In his words, "This land, however, is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end" (Kant 2009, pp. A 235/236, B 294/295).

3 (Hawkins 2013, p. 96) In this context, Hawkins comments that the best spiritual path does not involve either science or spiritual laxity, but both. In his words, "It would therefore seem that the most beneficial combination would be that of love and faith, plus reason, in which logic and reason are instituted in the service of love for self and others as well as Divinity (as per St. Thomas Aquinas). The hallmark of this combination is seen as compassion, which takes into consideration mankind's naïveté, limitation, and Achilles' heel of blind ignorance of even the nature of its very own mind" (Hawkins 2013, p. 96).

4 Kant explains what he means by "law" in the following passage: "Practical *principles* are propositions that contain a general determination of the will, having under it several practical rules. They are subjective, or *maxims*, when condition is regarded by the subject as holding only for his will; but they are objective, or practical *laws*, when the condition is cognized as objective, that is, as holding for the will of every rational being" (Kant 1996, p. AA 5:19).

5 For more information on this paradigmatic case, see https://www.elmostrador.cl/braga/2020/07/10/mujer-iba-a-denunciar-una-violacion-cuando-fue-detenida-por-carabineros-por-no-respetar-el-toque-de-queda/ (accessed on 6 December 2023).

6 (Gadamer 2013, pp. 338–39) In his words, "The work of interpretation is to concretize the law in each specific case89—i.e., it is a work of application. The creative supplementing of the law that is involved is a task reserved to the judge, but he is subject to the law in the same way as is every other member of the community. It is part of the idea of a rule of law that the judge's judgment

does not proceed from an arbitrary and unpredictable decision, but from the just weighing up of the whole. Anyone who has immersed himself in the particular situation is capable of undertaking this just weighing-up. This is why in a state governed by law, there is legal certainty—i.e., it is in principle possible to know what the exact situation is. Every lawyer and every counsel is able, in principle, to give correct advice—i.e., he can accurately predict the judge's decision on the basis of the existing laws. Applying the law is not simply a matter of knowing the law. If one has to give a legal judgment on a particular case, of course it is necessary to know the law and all the elements that have determined it. But the only belonging under the law necessary here is that the legal order is recognized as valid for everyone and that no one is exempt from it. Hence, it is always possible to grasp the existing legal order as such—i.e., to assimilate dogmatically any past supplement to the law. Consequently there is an essential connection between legal hermeneutics and legal dogmatics, and in it hermeneutics has the more important place. For the idea of a perfect legal dogmatics, which would make every judgment a mere act of subsumption, is untenable" (Gadamer 2013, pp. 338–39).

7 In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle says that "There are few facts of the necessary type that can form the basis of rhetorical deductions. Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity" (Aristotle 1991d, I, 2, 1357a23-1357b23).

8 The complete phrase reads: "The plain man's universe is full of race-horses which are really running dogs: of conventional waves, first seen in pictures and then imagined upon the sea: of psychological situations taken from books and applied to human life: of racial peculiarities generalized from insufficient data, and then "discovered" in actuality: of theological diagrams and scientific "laws", flung upon the background of eternity as the magic lantern's image is reflected on the screen. The coloured scene at which you look so trustfully owes, in fact, much of its character to the activities of cogitation, the seer" (Underhill 1914, pp. 16–17).

9 This means that **mysticism has a transcendental dimension**, using Kantian terminology, since it "is occupied not so much with objects but rather with our mode of knowing objects, insofar as this is to be possible a priori". (Kant 2009, pp. A 11, B 5).

10 A least according to Kant, who chooses to designate that which the subject contribute in the act of knowledge a a priori "because we do not derive it immediately from experience" (Kant 2009, p. B 2).

11 However, this does not mean that a perception free of prejudice is divorced *from* the world. That is, someone who attains enlightenment or mystical union does not rise above the facticity of concrete existence. On the contrary, pure perception is a window towards Being (be it called I, God, Transcendence, Void, or whatever one prefers) that operates *within the world*. In other words, it is a pure-*practical* perception. The metaphysical reflections at the end of this work shed some light on this matter.

12 In her words, "a discussion of mysticism as a whole will therefore include two branches. First the life process of the mystic: the remaking of his personality; the method by which his peculiar consciousness of the Absolute is attained, and faculties which have been evolved to meet the requirements of the phenomenal, are enabled to do work on the transcendental plane. This is the **«Mystic Way»** in which the self passes through the states or stages of development which were codified by the Neo-Platonists, and after them by the mediaeval mystics, as Purgation, Illumination, and Ecstasy. Secondly, the content of the mystical field of perception, the revelation under which the contemplative becomes aware of the Absolute. This will include a consideration of the so-called doctrines of mysticism: the attempts of the articulate mystic to sketch for us the world into which he has looked, in language which is only adequate to the world in which the rest of us dwell. Here, the difficult question of symbolism, and of symbolic theology comes in: a point upon which many promising expositions of the mystics have been wrecked" (Underhill 1911, pp. 112–13).

13 For a more extensive analysis, see (Underhill 1914).

14 For a deeper analysis on this subject, see (Pérez Lasserre 2022).

15 Tolkien humorously comments that "Not long ago—incredibly though it may seem—I heard a clerk of Oxford declare that he «welcomed» the proximity of mass-production robot factories, and the roar of self-obstructive mechanical traffic, because it brought his university into «contact with real life». [. . .] The expression «real life» in this context in this context seems to fall short of academic standards. The notion that motor-cars are more «alive» than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more «real» than, say, horses is pathetically absurd. How real, how startlingly alive is a factory chimney compared with an elm tree: poor obsolete thing, insubstantial dream of an escapist!" (Tolkien 1997, p. 149).

16 In his *Poetics*, Aristotle says that "epic poetry and tragedy, as also comedy, dithyrambic poetry, and most fluteplaying and lyre-playing, are all, viewed as a whole, modes of imitation" (Aristotle 1991c, pp. 1447a14–18).

17 (Aristotle 1991c, pp. 920a8–10).

18 Hawkins comments that being that the case, there is not only belief in science, but faith. In his words, "faith in science becomes 'scientism', with associated faith and blind enthusiasm" (Hawkins 2013, p. 82).

19 In Hawkins's words, "The linear is definable, limited, conceptual, purportedly 'objective', and locatable in time and space. In contrast, the nonlinear is nonlocal, diffuse, beyond dimensions, and is influential, subjective, and experiential. Realization and comprehension of the nonlinear spiritual realities are the province of the mystic. The spiritual realm is one of context, whereas that of the linear is content. The spiritual field is all-inclusive yet beyond delineation in terms of merely time or space" (Hawkins 2013, p. 62).

20 In his third critique, Kant distinguishes between the determining and reflective uses of the power of judgment.

[21] This aspect of Kantian philosophy is fundamental for Kant's intellectual successors. Vaihinger, for instance, constructs his entire philosophy from the Kantian 'as if' of the third critique (see Vaihinger 1935).

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