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BOCHEŃSKI'S *MINIMA MORALIA*

Abstract

Late in life, Józef Maria Bocheński set out to examine the age-old preoccupation with the question “how to live as well and as long as possible?” A traditional answer has been, “live wisely.” In his *Handbook of Worldly Wisdom* (2020), Bocheński analyzes this answer arguing that, conceptually, living wisely is distinct from obeying moral commandments, prescribing ethical rules, and recognizing authority (e.g., piety, free submission to divine authority). He claims that ethics consists solely in what moral philosophers label as “metaethics” — a theoretical discipline interested in the conceptual status of moral discourse *qua* discourse. However, Bocheński remains silent about a *substantive* ethics — that is, how a life led one way or another subscribes to some guiding value-set. As regards wisdom, therefore, the consequence of this position is that Bocheński’s account is ethically neutral. I argue that such a position entails a tension and dichotomy between, on the one hand, prudential rationality concerned with getting on in the moment — that is, wisdom — and, on the other hand, unconditional moral commandments. For his part, Bocheński does not recommend living according to wisdom’s precepts as he analyses them; his own path through life, he tells us, has been a commitment to Christian values, piety abetted by observance of moral commandments, a perspective that, I submit, is not ethically neutral: on the contrary, it entails thick, substantive value-choice. Bocheński’s avowal suggests a second dichotomy and tension, that between the worldly conduct of life, with moderate acknowledgment of moral principles, and an extra-worldly perspective (the “folly of the Cross”). Bocheński does not attempt to resolve either dichotomy, to seek a possible point of their convergence and integration, for instance by inquiring into moral psychology (i.e., the construction of self, the nature of the will, etc.). I believe that this set of views stems from conclusions Bocheński reached in advance of producing the *Handbook* that bear on, first, how philosophy should be conducted — as logical analysis hostile to grandiloquent speculation and synthesis (“worldviews”); and second, his utter dismissal as nefarious of anthropocentric views. Indeed, Bocheński asserts, without a blush, that almost everything “we” have come to believe about ourselves is superstition writ large. I trace what I consider to be difficulties with Bocheński’s account of wisdom — in relation to his take on morality, (meta-)ethics, and piety — to these idiosyncratic views.

Keywords: wisdom, metaethics, naturalism, anthropocentrism, humanism, autonomy, heteronomy, substantive ethics

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In what follows, I raise questions and express doubts about Józef Maria Bocheński's conception of wisdom and how he relates it to his views on morality and ethics. I focus on his *Handbook of Worldly Wisdom*, first published in Polish, in 1992.¹ I will not consider whether what Bocheński has to say falls in line with views on such matters among the leading protagonists of the Lvov-Warsaw School. In any case, it would not be easy to do so, since neither in the *Handbook* nor, as far as I know, in writings predating the *Handbook*, did Bocheński examine any of the views about ethics, morality, axiology put forward by the stalwarts of the School. It may be that he shared with them no more than the commitment to conduct philosophical inquiry with logico-conceptual tools.²

1.

I start with an overview and state my misgivings about Bocheński's views. In the *Handbook*, Bocheński asserts, among other things, that all there is to ethics comes down to what professional philosophers label as metaethics (although he disparages the use of the term; Bocheński 2020: 134). So understood, ethics amounts to an analytic, theoretical enterprise pursued by philosophers interested in the kinds of terms and arguments — the sentences conveyed in discourses typically regarded as ethical.³ Bocheński is adamant

¹ There are translations in French, German (two editions), Spanish, Italian, and most recently English. It is the last which is quoted and referenced below. See the Bibliography for details. (I am grateful to a reviewer for drawing my attention to the Italian translation.)

² Throughout much of his life, Bocheński espoused Thomist moral doctrine leavened in time with a somewhat schematic adherence to Schelerian material-value ethics. He came to the considerably different views under examination here quite late. (However, I am uncertain whether he maintained his Schelerian sympathies.) It is understandable therefore that during his Thomist phase he paid no attention to views by the leading lights of the Lvov-Warsaw School concerning ethics, morality, axiology, etc. That said, in regard to his views in the *Handbook*, Bocheński might have felt some kinship with Tadeusz Kotarbiński's conception of an independent ethics as well as Tadeusz Czeżowski's empirically oriented ethics. But this is merely speculation.

³ It is not at all evident that Bocheński was well-informed and conversant with metaethics as practiced by (analytic) philosophers at the time he composed the *Handbook*. Nicolaus Lobkowicz (2003) claims that in this respect Bocheński's competence was far from adequate. From the start, Bocheński passes over a conceptual difficulty, viz., talk of metaethics presupposes ethics (at the level of the object-language). To get around that difficulty, Bocheński would have had to claim, in a skeptical vein, that *substantive* ethics has no basis in fact (as did, for example, J. L. Mackie in arguing for his so-called "error theory": ethical and moral statements are all false, there are no ethical-moral states of affairs (values), a position Bocheński did not espouse). Bocheński circumscribed his considerations within an exceedingly narrow space restricted to the "logic of discourse" absent any reference to foundational (i.e., metaphysical, epistemological, and normative) questions in moral phi-

that in the ordinary course of human affairs, no one needs to worry about, least of all behave in accordance with, ethics *so understood*. To the extent that the sentences that make up the domain of ethics are about anything substantive, they pertain to moral discourse, the latter consisting of commandments (including prohibitions) and, it seems, the deliverances of conscience.⁴ It is the (meta-)ethician's business to examine what it means to say, for example, that one is obliged to save a drowning child, which in turn presupposes an analysis of the underlying concept of obligation in its standard discursive settings. Bocheński makes these assertions in the context of distinctions he draws between the "domains" of wisdom and morality, on the one hand, and piety, on the other. He neither raises nor seeks to answer any questions about what if anything these domains share, whether they have a common basis or a point of convergence. Instead, he is content to show that each domain has a specific and independent logical status, such that their respective sentence-types should not be conflated.

I am supposing here that to raise and answer the question about a common basis and point of convergence of these "domains" — wisdom, moral principles, and metaethical reflection — is the business of a *substantive* ethics.⁵ In the *Handbook* we are given no such conception. Therefore, because Bocheński distinguishes wisdom from morality and ethics (as he understands it), his account of what wisdom consists of — namely, rules, precepts, recommending how to live as well and long as possible — is ethically minimalist, indeed ethically neutral. That is why Bocheński concludes that the age-old counsels for the good and long-life amount simply to a *technique* for pursuing well-being; they engage a pragmatic rationality centered on the moment, the here and now of daily living, not on some broader perspective about the meaning, the sense of life as a whole.⁶ And since wisdom is not to be conflated with morality,

losophy. His metaethicist attends simply to people's sentences, to their language games, so to speak, and Bocheński does not believe that their analysis reveals the kinds of substantive issues that ethicists claim to discover.

⁴ With regard to these deliverances, Bocheński merely invokes the question of conscience without attempting closer examination. It seems doubtful that his preferred philosophical method, *viz.*, analysis of the logic of a given discourse, is suited to considerations of conscience *qua* moral experience.

⁵ A definition of substantive ethics is hard to come by, as debates among moral philosophers make only too clear. In what follows, I favor a conception that relies on a close connection between moral psychology — motivation, will, self-appropriation — and values, leaving open the question whether and how values are objective or whether they are better regarded as, for instance, cultural, social constructs.

⁶ In fact, Bocheński was not inclined to believe that life as a whole ought to have for each of us some overarching meaning (cf. Bocheński 1990c). Again, however, this attitude

the domain of commandments (including prohibitions), it follows that no one should look to moral commandments to seek the meaning of life. On the contrary — whoever invests energy in the pursuit of the good life and understands that this pursuit consists in following common sense and warding off possible concrete dangers must *not* allow morality to become the principal factor determining their conduct.⁷

In my estimation, by drawing these distinctions Bocheński sets up a problematic dichotomy between, on one side, techniques for getting along in life as well as possible, and, on the other side, the heavy hand of moral imperatives, where each side pulls in the opposite direction: on the one hand, in the pursuit of the good life, moral imperatives can be more of a hindrance than a guide; on the other hand, as imperatives moral commandments brook no exceptions, for which reason it seems that they must be taken into account in the pursuit of the good — the morally good? — life. Had Bocheński restricted his attention to wisdom alone, his views could be brought in line with a hedonistic ethic, because, as he characterizes it, the quality of the good life is attested *subjectively* — that is, by the pleasurable, rewarding experiences it affords.⁸ However, he blocks this avenue of interpretation by invoking moral commandments, the force of which is conveyed by that great spoiler, the voice of conscience dragging the self back to the straight and narrow, thereby constraining the pursuit of the good life.⁹

Does it not appear that, between these poles, an empty space looms, an inert zone, that could conceivably be filled by a dimension missing in Bocheński's

stands in stark contrast to his own commitment to the Christian life.

⁷ To this extent, then, Bocheński can be considered a proponent of an “independent ethics,” however poor in content it turns out to be (unless it is simply conflated with wisdom's precepts for the good life). This is what could provide a basis for comparison between his account of ethics and, say, Kotarbiński's.

⁸ A long and good life is a “life on this earth, free of suffering, abundant, providing pleasures within an agreeable entourage — a life of satisfying activity amidst good relations with others” (Bocheński 2020: 68). Clearly, subjectivity, the quality thereof, is the standard by which to judge whether and how much well-being someone experiences.

⁹ “Confronted by moral commandments, we have the impression of coercion, we feel that we must not act in a way contrary to what the commandment stipulates” (Bocheński 2020: 131). The reference to the “impression of coercion” invokes of course the “voice of conscience,” although Bocheński is more interested in the *self-evident nature* of moral commandments: “Moral commandments are self-evident or are inferred from self-evident moral commandments” (2020: 133) May it be therefore that someone whose conscience is less than attuned to the self-evident character of moral commandments could nevertheless be brought to understand their binding status by pondering their inferential relations (e.g., the inference from “respect for the unconditional value of human life” to “the obligation to save a drowning infant”)?

account — namely, the dimension of *value* in a person's life, what it is that a person counts as important?¹⁰ Is it not reasonable to believe that the values someone holds direct his or her aspirations to flourish and seek meaningful personal fulfillment? If so, could we not also say that precisely the values to which a person is committed generate the impetus, the rationale to conduct oneself wisely, not merely to ensure as much as possible an extended succession of satisfying moments but to secure and further a *meaningful* life in accord with what one holds to be personally important?¹¹ On such a view, would not morality, too, acquire a more positive connotation beyond hard and fast obligations and prohibitions to which Bocheński appears to restrict it, a connotation bearing on mutual concern for well-being, interpersonal respect, solidarity, and responsibility in the community?

But just where did Bocheński really stand? I find it telling that already in his preface to the *Handbook*, Bocheński informs the reader that his interest in wisdom is theoretical, scientific; he is out to discover just what (the domain of) wisdom comprises (and does not).¹² He immediately adds that, despite this interest, far from attempting to live as the sages have advised, his way through life has been to submit to and follow the truths of Christian revelation. Whether or not by saying so Bocheński was hedging his bets as to how his readers would respond to his text, his avowal brings into focus the dimension of value that I have just said is missing in his account of the domains of wisdom and morality. After all, committing sincerely to the Christian life is an axiologically rich, thick life choice on which a person stakes her authentic being and aspirations. The key word here is choice, the choice to live in a certain way according to values that provide the person with structure and direction. One standard way moral philosophers have conceived the nature

¹⁰ Christine Korsgaard writes: "It is the most striking fact about human life that we have values. We think of ways that things could be better, more perfect, and so of course different, than they are; and of ways that we ourselves could be better, more perfect, and so of course different than we are. . . . Where do we get these ideas that outstrip the world we experience and seem to call it into question, to render judgment on it, to say that it does not measure up, that it is not what it ought to be?" (Korsgaard 1996: 1). The perspective given expression in these lines is absent in Bocheński's ruminations.

¹¹ He writes: "A given man's life has meaning [Polish '*sens*'] when and only then when there exists a goal toward which that man is striving *in the moment* or else when he is making *the most of the moment*" (Bocheński 1990c: 13, italics added).

¹² One commentator points out correctly that Bocheński himself states that he intended his *Handbook* to provoke his readers, to bring them to reflect on what it means — and does not mean — to pursue the good life. Bocheński does not recommend leading a life according to his analysis of wisdom. However, the commentator goes on to conclude that the *Handbook* is a kind of philosophical "joke," a conclusion to which I take exception (Andrzejuk 2020).

and importance of ethical choice is to invoke rational autonomy, self-determination, cultivating an enlightened will with respect to values and life choices. Bocheński, however, as if wanting to avoid what he may have judged to be an overly subjectivist perspective, grounds the choice to live the Christian life in piety and reverence — that is, fear of the Lord. He tells us that he cleaves to the Abrahamic injunction “not my will be done, Lord, but Thy will.” It appears, then, that along with the dichotomy between worldly wisdom and morality’s commandments, there is a second tension, this time between worldly pursuits and, shall I say, extra-worldly transcendence. Where the former dichotomy neglects a substantive ethic grounded in value choices, the latter compensates as it were for that neglect by invoking the authority of divine providence, subordinating personal choice to the will of another — that is, advocating heteronomy in place of autonomy.

Why did Bocheński eschew substantive ethics? Why was he seemingly indifferent to a view of the human condition — let me call it self-integration — that could have prompted the search for a resolution of the two dichotomies: between “mere” wisdom and moral commandments, on the one hand, and between worldly concerns and (transcendent) piety, on the other? The answer, I submit, is found in conclusions at which Bocheński had arrived in advance of producing the *Handbook*. These bear, first, on his conception of what philosophy is and is not, and second, on how *not* to conceive the human condition, and why so many philosophers (and not only they) have, in his opinion, erred massively in their pronouncements about Man. It remains a matter of speculation whether, had he not arrived at these conclusions, he may have made room for a substantive ethics and, on that basis, a different conception of the good life. In the following sections, I examine the views predating the *Handbook* and indicate how they are consistent with the account of wisdom therein.

2.

Over the course of some two decades prior to his death in 1995, Bocheński engaged in a philosophical house-cleaning, an intellectual detox, revising or scrapping earlier convictions. For one thing, he increasingly defended a minimalist outlook on the possibilities of philosophy and, on the other, he turned a critical eye to what he came to consider as grossly mistaken ideas about the human condition professed by purveyors of “worldviews” and “ideologies” bereft of any scientific support.

As for philosophy, its tasks and limits, Bocheński came to brand himself a “naturalist,” frequently invoking Aristotle’s authority in this regard.¹³ The philosophical naturalist, Bocheński holds, cleaves to the authority of experience and the “scientific” method governed by strict rational procedures. Centrally important is the role assigned to logic (again invoking Aristotle), both as the method of philosophical analysis and the most general theory (ontology) of the structure of the world.¹⁴ While Bocheński had consistently stressed the importance of logic, in his last period he elevated logical analysis to the status not only of a salient but indeed the sole yardstick with which to assess (“scientific”) philosophical pronouncements overall. The rise of logic — that is, the development of mathematical, “formal” logic early in the 20th century — marked, he held, a splendid resurgence of rationality out of a “dark age” in European culture. This conviction prompted the phrase he repeated often: “beyond logic, there is only absurdity.”¹⁵ Close to the end of his life, he proudly characterized himself as belonging among the “hardest of hard analytic philosophers,” including among others the logical wing of the Lvov-Warsaw school.¹⁶

One upshot of this insistence is that philosophy done right abhors doctrines that transgress standards of “scientific” rationality — namely, synthetic “worldviews” and “ideologies.” Scientific philosophy abjures speculative syntheses and concentrates instead on articulating the “logical structure” of domains of discourse; it focuses on sentence-kinds and examines how, in their respective domains, they hang together conceptually, logically. That is

¹³ Cf. Bocheński’s *Selbstdarstellung* (1975) as well as chapter 13, “Filozofia,” of his *Wspomnienia* (1993). In addition, his conversations with Jan Parys (Bocheński 1990b) shed considerable light on his “evolution.”

¹⁴ Perhaps Bocheński’s clearest and most direct statement of the dual aspects of logic as method and ontology is “Logic and Ontology” (1974a).

¹⁵ Jan Woleński (2021) prefers “nonsense” to “absurdity.” As he notes, Bocheński stated this several times over the years. The exclamation as it stands is of course unacceptable, itself a piece of nonsense. Bocheński the *provocateur*? Perhaps. What about, say, artistic inspiration and creation, or that elusive something called love and devotion? Nonsense? Anecdotally, Bocheński once inquired of the present author whether he could explain, to Bocheński’s satisfaction, the point of the “noise” emanating from the radio on his desk, that “noise” being the second movement of Beethoven’s 7th symphony. There is also the question of the status of religious faith — to which Bocheński did devote attention — as well as the piety he underscores in the *Handbook*. Below, I note Bocheński’s conviction that most everything Man has said and believes about his status in the world is “superstition” writ large.

¹⁶ I was present, in Fribourg, at the solemn ceremony, in 1994, in Bocheński’s honor — his appointment to the Polish Academy of Science — during which, hardly able to stand and speak, he proudly affirmed that commitment.

all that philosophy should be.¹⁷ For these reasons, Bocheński directed his ire at much of modern European philosophy: “modern” purveyors of what they considered to be “philosophy” had either ignored or misconstrued logic, which is why, in his eyes, what they had to say came to so little, being so much idle speculation or, as he was often wont to say, “empty babble” (Polish: *belkot*). Toward the end of his life, there was an added degree of vehemence in his dismissal of virtually all modern philosophy.¹⁸

An example of the kind of synthetic, speculative views that Bocheński came to renounce is Thomism. He had after all espoused the spirit, and much of the letter, of Thomism.¹⁹ However, in several publications and public statements throughout the 80s, and then again in the early 90s in the wake of the collapse of the Communist regimes, we learn that he has come to count Thomism among the “isms” that trade in speculative worldviews, thereby violating philosophy’s scientific — that is, logico-analytic — calling (Bocheński 1988, 1990a, 1991). Ultimately, he was able to countenance only two features of Thomist “method”: its role as an “auxiliary” discipline — the “handmaiden”

¹⁷ Examples of such analysis in Bocheński’s canon include the logic of religion, of authority, responsibility, the business enterprise, as well as, despite important reservations he came to hold about Thomism, the logical reconstruction of passages from Aquinas’ *Summa* concerning the divine essence.

¹⁸ There were exceptions: Leibniz was one, another was Hegel, for whom Bocheński nurtured a grudging respect. (Incidentally, Marx did not figure as a philosopher at all; Bocheński pegged him as a sociologist.) As a historian of philosophy, Bocheński considered his main achievement — overall — to be his painstaking reconstruction of the history of logic (Bocheński 1956). In addition, he researched ancient logic (Theophrastus) and aspects of medieval logic (the Thomistic conception of analogy and relations). He did produce an overview of the doctrines prevalent in 20th-century European philosophy prior to World War Two (largely because he had been appointed to the chair of modern and contemporary philosophy in Fribourg). We do not find among his writings a history of modern philosophy — that is, from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century. It is worth mentioning, I believe, that Bocheński seems not to have had an interest in, or acquaintance with, the history of ideas, also known as intellectual history (in the vein, say, of Arthur Lovejoy). He thought of the history of philosophy — that is, the history of the most abstract kind of knowledge, along lines that recall, on the one hand, Husserl’s early vindication of philosophy as an a priori science of pure validity and, on the other hand, Karl Popper’s vision of an objective realm of products of thought, the so-called “third world.” The kind of socio-cultural contextualism and hermeneutics intellectual historians typically subscribe to was certainly alien to Bocheński’s vision of philosophy and its history. It should be recalled that as a young man he had come under the influence of a prominent Polish sociologist of knowledge and philosopher of culture, Florian Znaniecki, and influence he apparently shed early on.

¹⁹ I refer the reader to Jan Woleński’s several publications devoted to Bocheński’s Thomism. A very recent study is (Zembrzuski 2021).

(*ancilla*) of theology (which Bocheński regarded as a “science”) — and “destructive” energy — Bocheński’s expression — consisting in demolishing falsehoods, intellectual superstitions (Bocheński 1988: 188f.). All the rest is *Weltanschauung*, speculative synthesis, not analysis, and, as such, deserves to be scrapped. In 1991, he wrote:

a philosopher should not be an “-ist” of any sort, no more than the physicist who never calls himself an Einstein-ist or Galileo-ist. And that is because, while physics is science, all the -isms, Kantianism, Thomism, Marxism, etc., are not. (Bocheński 1991: 302)

Clearly, this assertion involves an oblique self-reference that pretty much puts paid to Bocheński’s youthful philosophical ideals.²⁰

In closing this section, we can ask whether and how Bocheński’s mature conception of philosophy impacted his considerations of ethics, broadly speaking, including wisdom. Korneliusz Policki comes to the following conclusion with which I concur:

The Fribourg philosopher asked himself the following question: what are the characteristic statements for the domains of morality, ethics, and wisdom? He began with the analysis of the concepts and linguistic structures of these domains, as is the wont of a good analytical philosopher. Bocheński was not interested in human attitudes to moral values but in the sets of commandments or sentences characteristic of morality, ethics, and wisdom. Equally, the metaphysical aspect did not fall into the domain of interests of the Fribourg philosopher. His conception of ethics was independent of any world-view or metaphysics whatsoever. (Policki 2005: 51)

At the very least, this statement sustains the assessment that Bocheński’s account of wisdom is ethically neutral; because it is “independent” in the sense stated, it is at best axiologically minimalist. This is borne out by Bocheński’s criticisms of typical, widespread beliefs about the nature and standing of Man in the world, to which I now turn.

²⁰ A question can be raised about how Bocheński distinguished “legitimate” domains of discourse from what he took to be babble, be it in the public sphere, in the pronouncements of certain philosophers, and by pseudo-scientists (e.g., astrologists). It might be thought that, to answer the question, philosophers turn to ontological, epistemological, and conceptual research with an eye to what is happening in the empirical and formal sciences. However, epistemology was absent from Bocheński’s canon, and all the ontology he seemed to care about amounted to formal ontology, which for him is logic as the most general theory of relations. In that case, it seems that for Bocheński all we have to go on to determine that discourse X, but not discourse Y, is scientifically legitimate is empirical success and formal analysis (e.g., the branches of mathematics). If these observations are on the right track, Bocheński appears to have had much in common with logical positivism.

3.

Bocheński trained his sights on what he considered to be two main scandals prevalent in much of modern (and some 20th-century) philosophy and rampant in the popular culture: “anthropocentrism” and “humanism.” The former he characterized as the erroneous belief that the human condition constitutes the point of departure and core of philosophy, and that it exceeds the powers of science to explain this condition (Bocheński 1987: 15); “humanism” is described as the misguided conviction that Man has a special, elevated status over and above the rest of nature. In Bocheński’s eyes, those who peddle this kind of “nonsense” are engaging in nothing less than idolatry (1987: 45). Having vilified “modern” philosophers for their neglect of logic in favor of speculative syntheses, he was now equally, indeed perhaps more, scathing regarding those who proclaimed the uniqueness, the otherness of the human condition.²¹

The *Short Philosophical Dictionary of 100 Superstitions* that Bocheński cobbled together in 1987 (in Polish; German edition 2017) has the unrelenting purpose of ferreting out and combatting a variety of false beliefs throughout society and culture under the sway of those two central superstitions.²² In seeking to demolish them, Bocheński was not playing the reductionist card; he was no physicalist, least of all an eliminativist concerning the human condition.²³ He only wanted to say that, far from being unique and special, humans and animals share much in common: for instance, as we do, some animals sing (?); as we do, many build colonies and co-exist socially (?); we and they often cower in fear hearing sounds portending danger (?); and man is not the sole species to fear death (?); and the list goes on.²⁴ In short, although

²¹ Existentialists, for instance, came in for some especially sharp words from Bocheński, but also in part, as well, for those among them with “nihilist” views of the human condition — e.g., Sartre, who assured us that we are so many idle passions. For his part, Bocheński was certain that we do find meaning in life, although it is not pie-in-the-sky meaning beloved by the anthropocentric humanists, but down-to-earth, everyday meaning, in the moment.

²² Bocheński includes among “superstitions” as false beliefs what others would prefer to call “myths” with a positive connotation — providing answers of sorts to the search for wider, inclusive meaning in life (e.g., love of “my neighbor” generalized to universal, therefore, anonymous altruism). Bocheński, the rationalist, does not appear to recognize what Leszek Kołakowski characterized as the “presence of myth” that, were it absent, would severely impoverish the cultural imagination (Kołakowski 1989).

²³ He frequently described himself as a “cosmocentric” thinker — man is not a being apart, outside nature — and as a “categorical pluralist” — along Aristotle’s lines: being is said in many ways, etc. Cf. Bocheński’s “self-presentation” (1975), and the more stringent conclusions he expressed in his conversations with Parys (Bocheński 1988/1990b).

²⁴ The question marks are meant (only) to draw attention to possible doubts about Bocheński’s (perhaps facile) juxtaposition of Man and animal as well as insect (ants, bees)

Man does have specific properties (e.g., the power of rational speech), Man is not a being apart, beyond nature, the only view a consistent naturalist can espouse, even at the risk, as Bocheński acknowledged, of alienating admirers of his former incarnations.²⁵

The following assertion by him provides an especially clear example of how far he was prepared to go in denigrating anthropocentrism and humanism, including criticism of his own former incarnations:

in my opinion, for a philosopher it would be best if there were no people at all. Man is such a complex creation that he throws up enormous difficulties. . . . I came to the conviction that everything that man usually says about himself is not only a superstition but superstition with a capital "S." I didn't always think this way. Once I was a superstitious humanist. One of my friends suffered deeply witnessing the gradual development of my views toward a decided naturalism. (Bocheński 1990b: 229, my translation).

We can imagine, I think, that the friend in question wondered how a man of the cloth invested in Christian truths could nevertheless settle on what to this friend possibly appeared as crass materialism. After all, it is one thing to turn a scientific, logical eye to anthropocentric and humanist excesses, but is it not quite another to proclaim that almost *everything* we believe about ourselves is superstition writ large? We can easily imagine that Bocheński's friend wondered what in that case Bocheński made of the nature and status of moral values, of the human person and the ground of her dignity, of the sources of normativity, as well as, in the case of the believer, how and why commitment to revealed truths grounded in faith is at all legitimate? With some important exceptions — the *Handbook* being the most evident — much of what Bocheński had to say about such matters belongs to the period prior to his intellectual detox and is flavored by the Thomism he espoused to a certain degree. Once he had shed his former "superstitious" views, however, he allowed himself to say little more about such questions than the following example illustrates. To wit, he was prepared to admit that there are grounds for upholding "religious humanism." A religious humanist believes that God has elevated man to a special status, but Bocheński warns that, although this person is within her rights so to believe and speak, she may not call on reason, experience, or science to justify what she says. None of these can warrant such talk (Bocheński 1987: 46). Nor can philosophy manage such a feat, since

species. Do Man, the higher animal species, and insects share the same kinds of *intentionality* thanks to which singing, social co-existence, fear, etc. signal *meaningful* rather than instinctive engagement with the environment?

²⁵ The views referenced here are scattered throughout Bocheński's conversations with Parys, published in 1988 as *Między logiką a wiarą* and *Entre la logique et la foi* (1990b). See also the entry "Humanizm" in (Bocheński 1987).

it does not appeal to cognitive means other than reason (logic), ordinary experience, and the scientific method.²⁶ Toward the end of his life, Bocheński returned to what he had called, in his *Logic of Religion* (1965a), the “religious hypothesis” (an expression borrowed from William James), affirming that acceptance on faith of religious truths — in Bocheński’s case the propositions that make up the core of Catholic beliefs, the *Credo* — is, despite not being scientifically grounded, not irrational.²⁷

By my lights, by recognizing, *malgré tout*, the rights of the religious humanist, Bocheński acknowledged, however implicitly, that there is more to the story about the human condition than mundane experience, natural science and its cognates, and logic alone account for, according to the terms, that is, accepted by the “naturalist” philosopher. I sense a pre-echo here of the theoretical situation Bocheński advanced in the *Handbook*: on one side, the dichotomy and tension between worldly wisdom and moral commandments, on the other, the dichotomy and tension between self-governance and the pious man’s submission to the authority of divine providence. Is it not natural to ask whether and how these seemingly disparate spheres in the human condition somehow coalesce and integrate? But Bocheński has warned us that, so far at least, attempts to satisfy such curiosity have amounted to so much superstition with a capital “S.”

Bocheński enjoins us to ponder that we are mere passing specks in the cosmos who would do well to exercise extreme caution in the face of such ringing statements as the “unexamined life is not worth living” *in case that means* that humans enjoy some extra-ordinary status and calling in the world that it is their business to discover and cultivate. No philosophy worth its salt, if it takes its calling seriously, can show anything of the kind. Such are the attitudes that, taken together, underpin the position put forward in the *Handbook*.

4.

In the first two parts of the *Handbook*, Bocheński sets forth, at the outset, the general principle of wisdom — “Act in such a way as to live long and well” — and then, by a kind of process of inference, precepts bearing on, first, how to conduct one’s own life and, second, how to conduct relations with others.²⁸

²⁶ How Bocheński looked upon the rational — i.e., scientific, including philosophical — method, can be discovered in, among others, *The Methods of Contemporary Thought* (1965b), published originally in German (1954).

²⁷ The reference is to Bocheński’s hitherto unpublished *Was ich glaube*.

²⁸ In the first part, entitled “The Fundamental Principles,” addressed to each and every-one taken individually, Bocheński puts forward a first axiomatic precept — “Act so as to live long and well” — followed by seven ancillary precepts, including, for example, pru-

In addition, Bocheński appended a third, theoretical part to remedy what he believes is the prevailing ignorance of the concept of wisdom. In effect, however, the third part is an outlier; Bocheński could have omitted it, remaining content to set out wisdom's precepts as he understood them, in which case the title would have entirely matched the contents.²⁹

Picking up at present the issues raised in the first part of this paper, in the third section of the *Handbook* Bocheński contrasts the "logic" of worldly wisdom with the "logic" of morality, on the one hand, and the "logic" of ethics, on the other. These, in turn, are contrasted with the code of the pious believer. True to form, in his analyses of the respective "logics," Bocheński leaves aside psychological, sociological, as well as metaphysical matters.

Starting with wisdom, the statements in its domain — namely, precepts — appear to have the logical form of commandments: for instance, "Do not argue with a policeman" appears to be isomorphic with "Do not steal," as the Decalogue commands.³⁰ But Bocheński is of the view that wisdom's precepts are by and large empirical sentences only dressed up grammatically as commandments:³¹ it is a plain fact that arguments with a policeman often incur unpleasant consequences that do nothing to enhance the good life. But consider: could not theft prohibited in the Decalogue potentially incur even greater unpleasant consequences — empirically considered — than picking an argument with a representative of the law? Is Bocheński simply assuming that the God-given nature of the *commandment* sets it apart logically from a *mere precept* of worldly wisdom, for which reason empirical import is largely

dence. In turn, the latter are specified and form families of precepts (e.g., the fundamental principle of prudence acquires no less than eleven specifications such as "Don't worry about what you cannot influence"). The second part concerns relations with others and consists likewise of eight principles of which the fundamental one reads: "Consider your relations with others as extremely important for your life," the remaining seven being negative (e.g., be circumspect) and positive (e.g., be benevolent) derivatives of the first. However, my concern here is with the third, "theoretical" part.

²⁹ Indeed, a collection of Bocheński's thoughts on various ethical matters published in 1995 — *Etyka* — included a reprint of the *Handbook*, where the last, theoretical part in the original edition is a separate chapter.

³⁰ When considering the nature of moral commandments, Bocheński appears to have treated the Decalogue of the Old Testament as paradigmatic. Clearly, however, the absolutely binding and categorial status of the Ten Commandments reposes on God's self-grounding authority.

³¹ One could ask, how is it that this isomorphism came about, what does it convey about "our" ethical life, broadly speaking? However, a question like this goes beyond the logico-conceptual analysis to which Bocheński cleaved exclusively, and enters into sociological, cultural, psychological considerations. By not inquiring into such issues, does Bocheński per chance impoverish his analysis?

irrelevant in assessing the force of the commandment? Be that as it may, given the empirical character of wisdom's rules, to live according to them is never mandatory, Bocheński advises, but is a matter of choice abetted by common sense and cogent reasoning. When we fail to respect wisdom's precepts, we are not morally blameworthy but careless, unreflective, downright foolish; we should have known better. Blame is incurred only when we violate moral commandments, which brings us to the logic of morality.

Morality, Bocheński holds, is the domain of unconditional, categorically binding commandments. Moral commandments are not hypotheticals, they are imperatives, typically prohibitions — “do not do X” (“Do not commit adultery”). Because its statements are categorical, morality is not amenable to scientific (empirical) treatment (as are the disguised empirical sentences of wisdom's domain). True, certain moral commandments do fall within wisdom's purview — for instance, the commandment “Do not kill” is clearly important to the sage. But consider here again: the commandment not to kill, like the commandments not to commit adultery and not to steal, could well be ascribed the status of “mere” precepts due to the unfortunate empirical consequences that follow from a failure to abide by them.³² Do we succeed in getting around this kind of objection by invoking the God-given nature of the Decalogue — that is, the assumption of an absolute authoritative normative source? This is a substantive issue, of course, one that Bocheński leaves dangling, noting only that the sage counsels moderation in the degree to which moral commandments are to be heeded. It pays no dividends to pass over agreeable occasions — *carpe diem* — by first testing in each instance for moral fitness: would the Pope, the Taliban, the religious fundamentalist approve? Often, a pragmatic approach suffices to chart the right, including the harmless, course, and we do learn as we go along (at least some do).

As for piety, it resembles morality in one respect and differs from it in another. Piety, fear of the Lord, involves submission to God's commandments which are of course unconditional; in this it resembles morality. However, the believer submits freely, as the Son submitted to the will of the Father. By contrast, Bocheński tells us, submission to moral commandments carries a sense of constraint attested by pangs of conscience, the weight of guilt: when morality is violated, reparation is an obligation. Notice how this contrast between morality and piety goes well beyond attention to logical form alone: where piety is concerned, Bocheński invokes, although without closer com-

³² From the perspective of criminal law, the injunction not to kill is hardly a “mere precept.” Still, worldly wisdom and the law have at least this much in common that they refrain from reinforcing the force of the injunction by appealing to divine law and sanction. Additionally, would an atheist affirm that there are no grounds for abhorring killing?

mentary, psychological as well as substantive ethical concepts, such as submission, love, guilt, contrition, responsibility. I note as well that, whereas in the case of wisdom and morality, we believe we know in what their respective discourses consist (viz., precepts grounded in experience and commandments, respectively), the case of piety is less clear. The pious man prays — what is the logical status of prayer?

So, finally, to ethics. I stated the crux of the matter at the beginning of this discussion: for Bocheński, there is no substantive ethics to speak of. For him, “ethics” is just metaethics, it raises and seeks answers to questions such as: “what do we mean when speaking of moral commandments?,” “what do we mean when we speak of the ‘good life,’ ‘happiness,’ etc.?” Ethics is therefore conceptual analysis disclosing the logical structure of the domains of worldly wisdom and morality. Typical statements in these domains may be of great interest to the philosopher, but Bocheński insists that “no one needs ethics to live well. It is entirely possible to live a good and moral life without the slightest idea of what ethics is for” (Bocheński 2020: 136).³³

I think we can agree with Bocheński that the proverbial man in the street can safely ignore ethics *as Bocheński understands it*. But is it plausible, psychologically, culturally, indeed philosophically, to restrict ethics to such a narrow understanding? In his earlier incarnations, Bocheński advocated in succession several substantive ethical positions: initially Kantian ethics; then Thomist natural law; he produced a military ethic in the vein of virtue ethics inspired by Christian principles; he subscribed to Scheler’s intuitionist material-value axiology of ideal value-essences, and we should not forget the general Christian ethical tenor of his ministry.³⁴ Clearly, these several theoretical orientations, although of little interest to the untutored, comprise quite different, contrasting metaethical positions.³⁵ Bocheński’s focus solely on the logical structure of the ethical domain consigns to silence a host of questions that these positions grapple with. For instance, determining that morality consists of commandments logically distinct from the empirical status of wis-

³³ Why does Bocheński speak here about the “good *and* moral life?” Given my argument about his dichotomous accounts of wisdom and morality, between, that is, the precepts to respect for the sake of a pleasurable (“good”) life and the unconditional commandments of morality, how is the “and” to be factored in?

³⁴ The two volumes of Bocheński’s sermons attest to this. Early in life, he was even a nationalist, which he later condemned as a dangerous superstition (Bocheński 1987: 72).

³⁵ To take an example, the very title of what is arguably Scheler’s main treatise in moral philosophy highlights how fraught metaethical controversy can be: *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik*. The ‘und’ is to be understood, of course, as ‘versus’: Scheler intended to contrast diametrically opposed standpoints on the nature and sources of values (normativity).

dom's precepts helps not at all to answer such questions as "do moral values exist?" "how do we come in contact with, experience, and grasp moral values?" and so forth. (It would have been interesting to discover what Bocheński would have made of, for example, J. L. Mackie's error-theory concerning the status of moral values.³⁶) Bocheński's assertion that no one needs ethics to get along in life simply begs the question about the importance of getting things right about what is and is not good and why a reasonably articulated substantive ethics may be essential in that regard. Recall: for him, the good life is not, say, the Aristotelian life of virtue in the *polis* abetted by reasonable prudence, but self-preservation in ever-changing, potentially hazardous circumstances for the sake of pleasurable life in good company; and morality is of no assistance, he tells us, in charting a course through these circumstances or adding to wellbeing, since it consists solely of categorially binding commandments and prohibitions utterly indifferent to circumstances. I reiterate the difficulty with Bocheński's standpoint stated earlier: in the *Handbook*, we have on one side wisdom's prudential rationality, on the other the weight of moral commandments with nothing to link these dimensions. I drew attention to Bocheński's substantively ethical avowal that his has been the life of the devout Christian heeding God's Word. He did not consider whether his choice or another encompassing life choice might serve to link worldly wisdom and morality as he understood them to the transcendent dimension to which the pious man aspires. Instead, Bocheński discounts this possibility with a kind of Kierkegaardian "either-or." Quoting Saint Paul from *Corinthians* 1, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?," Bocheński avows "I am a Christian, I profess therefore evangelical foolishness and have no intention of recommending worldly wisdom" (Bocheński 2020: 57-58).

5.

The upshot, and conclusion, is that Bocheński's wisdom, for all its practical, rational acumen, is bereft of a substantive ethical dimension. In my view, this gives rise to a significant difficulty. As Bocheński presents them, wisdom's precepts turn out to be compatible with an *indeterminate* variety of life choices restricted only by the cardinal rule, "respect and protect your life" (a form of the fundamental principle: "act so as to live long and well"). He does not consider that commitment to something transcending prudential self-preservation — that is, commitment to a dimension of value — could well

³⁶ Lobkowicz (2003) contends that Bocheński, though wont to talk of values (à la Scheler), was largely ignorant of the metaethics current in his day and therefore poorly prepared to take part in the debates. For his part, Lobkowicz argued that Scheler-like talk of values is enmired in pseudo-problems.

provide *the whole point* to respecting and protecting one's life in the first place, thereby assisting in *closing redundancies* across a spectrum of possible ways to be and behave. Think of thieves' honor, for example, which is entirely compatible with prudentially watching one's back, steering clear of arguments with a policeman, and being loyal to one's partners in crime. A "good" thief is a calculating, prudent thief, but is it "good" to lead a life of crime? On Bocheński's account, wisdom provides no ground for motivation to adopt certain values and aspire to become a certain, rather than another, kind of person.³⁷

What about values, then? In the *Handbook*, all that Bocheński has in mind when considering value is given to us by nature for free, so to speak — that is, holding dearly to life — however much and often we flout its charms. Beyond that, there is no mention of an axiologically diversified hierarchy of values, the kind Bocheński had earlier admired in Scheler's material-value ethics. Nor does the term "virtue" occur in the *Handbook*: although Bocheński does reference Aristotle, he displays no interest in Aristotle's virtue ethics centered on *phronesis*, prudence, for the sake of building and perfecting character. Would not a sage of Aristotelian persuasion object to certain life choices, not merely as deleterious to self-preservation, but as beneath a person's dignity, not something anyone should be wholehearted about? Absent, too, is consideration of the moral psychology of caring for what we hold as important that provides the will with a direction and impetus — in the manner, say, of Harry Frankfurt (1988, 2004).

Finally, although Bocheński does insist on autonomy, self-governance, he is not thereby siding with Kant to advocate rational legislation of the will. He means no more than that we should not come under the sway of others, least of all opinion-makers to whom the benighted masses are all too subject. On this question of the will, there is a pattern in Bocheński's thinking over the years. Policki has noted that, in his Thomist period, Bocheński espoused *theonomy* — that is, theological heteronomy: submission to God's will — "not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42, Policki 2005: 151). In the *Handbook*, this position remains intact under the banner of piety — reverential fear of the Lord. Moreover, it is not difficult to believe that Bocheński drew sustenance from the life-structure the Dominican order afforded him founded on obedience to institutional — that is, deontic — authority, present as well in the relation between a military officer and those under his command that

³⁷ This may be overstated: Bocheński is insufficiently precise in explaining how moral commandments figure among wisdom's precepts and how their presence in our worldly deliberations and deeds may impact our sense of the good life. But this is the consequence of his narrow focus on the "logic" of distinct discourses.

Bocheński very much admired. The sage minds authority, for its own sake as well as for the advantages it procures in pursuing the good life. To be self-governing hardly excludes recognition of and submission to authority, both epistemic and deontic,³⁸ indeed it seems to require it if foolishness is to be avoided. But does cleaving to authority, be it worldly or transcendent, obviate the question, not to say the worry, about whether *my* life is on the right track, whether it is getting better or worse, and what I should do to improve things?

To end, I remain puzzled why Bocheński was so adamant in his refusal to countenance more than metaethics in his sense, why he resisted going beyond the “logics” of wisdom, morality, ethics (in his sense), and piety. In his hands, they remain discrete domains of discourse absent a substantive ethical — that is, axiological — foundation. Was it because he really did believe that almost everything we have heretofore said about ourselves is superstition, for which reason we — at least the philosophers among us — should make sure, when assaying the human condition, that we do not venture beyond the rigid, narrow confines of logic? It appears that is the case given, as I showed, the strictures he imposed on philosophical practice, his abhorrence of worldviews, and his condemnation of anthropocentrism and humanism.

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³⁸ Bocheński (1974b/1988) produced a logico-conceptual analysis of epistemic and deontic authority.

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