Beyond logic there is only nonsense

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Abstract

This paper provides an interpretation of Father Bocheński's saying "Beyond logic there is only nonsense." He considered the battle against superstitions of various kinds as one of the most important intellectual and social duties. The phrase in itself suggests that logic is a weapon in the mentioned battle. Logic is understood broadly, that is, as semantics, formal logic and the methodology of science, and was considered by Bocheński as the main instrument of rational philosophy. Hence, the formula under discussion has an explicit metaphilosophical significance, although Bochenski's understanding of the concept of differs from that of the Vienna Circle.

The phrase "Beyond logic there is only nonsense" (**F**—for brevity) was used many times by Józef M. Bocheński—for the first time in an interview published in *Tygodnik Powszechny* ("Common Weekly") (35/1981), a Catholic weekly journal.[1] He repeated these words 6 years later in his book *100 zabobonów* ("One hundred superstitions") and once again in *Solidarność* ("Solidarity"; an official organ of famous Polish trade union) in 1992 (see also other quotations below). However, whereas in 1981 and 1987 Bocheński was speaking about Thomism, logic and philosophy, in 1992 the same words concerned logic, politics and religion.[2] On the other hand, one can easily observe a deep connection here. Bocheński was a rationalist (or anti-irrationalist, to use Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz's way of speaking) in all respects. He considered the battle against superstitions of various kinds as one of the most important intellectual and social duties. Consequently, he regarded logic as an indispensable weapon against irrationalism. Jan Parys once stated correctly that **F** could well

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[1] The phrase **F** is here understood, undoubtedly in agreement with Bocheński's intentions, as applicable to our cognitive activities. Thus, it does not concern art, literature, music, etc.

[2] The last entry is reprinted in Bocheński (2006, pp. 135–140).

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be considered "the quintessence of Bocheński's philosophy."[3] If a philosopher (or anybody else) does not respect principles of logic), he or she sinks into murky opinions which, sooner or later result in irrationalism, "the common root of all superstitions directed against logic consisting in attributing to people an apparently 'higher' power, which, according to adherents of this faith, successfully replaces reason and is not subject to logical laws. However, formal logic is a description of the most general rules of the properties of objects in general; whoever departs from logic simply mumbles […]. Beyond logic there is only nonsense" (Bocheński, 1987, 61–62). **F** just appears as the key formula in Bocheński's metaphilosophy. However, one should be careful in interpreting **F**, because its proper understanding depends on the meaning of the term "logic." The further parts of the present paper will more closely elaborate these points.

Bocheński's attitude to logic and its role was closely related to his metaphilosophy.[4] He developed his views by studying the works of Bertrand Russell (among others, the *Principia Mathematica*, written together with Alfred North Whitehead), Alonzo Church and Haskell Curry. He also contacted members of the Lvov–Warsaw School, particularly Jan Łukasiewicz, Stanisław Leśniewski, Alfred Tarski, Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz and Tadeusz Kotarbiński–Bocheński considered himself a member of this school.[5] Contacts with logicians convinced him that Thomism can be successfully modernized by employing tools derived from symbolic logic. This task became the main target of so-called Cracow Circle (it can be considered as a part of the Lvov–Warsaw School), a group of Polish Catholic philosophers, including priests (Bocheński, Jan Salamucha) as well as laypersons (Jan Franciszek Drewnowski, Bolesław Sobociński), established in 1936 (Łukasiewicz was also very sympathetic to this group and its program). Bocheński finally ("finally" because he started as a Thomist, but later declared himself an analytic philosopher) accepted the following philosophical views (I list points important for the analysis of **F**): rationalism (the world is an ordered whole); anti-relativism and anti-scepticism in epistemology (truth is a feature of knowledge); knowledge is logically ordered; empirical knowledge is inductive and thereby fallible; anti-positivism; empiricism; anti-irrationalism (views and opinions not based on logic or empirical evidence should be definitely refuted).[6]

Bocheński shared a pluralistic approach to analytic philosophy. He saw no possibility to define this kind of philosophizing by a simple short formula and pointed out that analytic philosophy can be best illustrated by its practitioners and the problems investigated.[7] Ajdukiewicz, John L. Austin, Rudolf Carnap, Roderick Chisholm, Richard R. Martin, Karl Popper, Willard van O. Quine, Nicolas Rescher, Gilbert Ryle, Heinrich Scholz, Peter Strawson, Alfred Tarski and Paul Weingartner were mentioned by Bocheński as typical representatives of the analytic movement. As far as the substantial questions undertaken by analytic philosophers, he proposes

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[3] Addition to Parys (2006, pp. 61–70).

[4] Cf. Woleński (2003, 2013a, 2013b). On the Cracow Circle, see also Wolak (1995). Bocheński's presents his views (Bocheński, 1988).

[5] He even insisted to be so regarded; I know that from my private conversations with Bocheński.

[6] To avoid possible misunderstandings, Bocheński did not consider his philosophy as incoherent with Catholic faith.

[7] Cf. Bocheński (1993).

four groups of problems falling under the labels "analysis," "language," "logic" and "objectivism." More specifically, analytic thinkers undertake detailed and systematic research (this feature defends philosophy from its identification with ideological worldviews), they investigate language as the device by which to express thought, they respect and apply logical rules, and they are guided by objectivism. Bocheński's specific views mentioned above can be regarded as constituents of the practice of analytic philosophy as he understood it.

The formula **F** can be considered as a piece of analytic philosophy. Clearly, any interpretation of **F** and its metaphilosophical significance depends on how logic is understood. For Bocheński and other members of the Cracow Circle (also for the Lvov–Warsaw School as a whole) the terms "modern logic," "mathematical logic," "formal logic," "logistics" (this label was frequently employed in interwar Poland), "contemporary logic" and "symbolic logic" were considered to have practically the same meaning. Bocheński was inclined to think that there is no logic other than formal logic. On the other hand, he pointed out that many mistaken views or even superstitions appeared concerning what logic is. Here is a list (Bocheński, 1987, 61–62):

1. Contemporary logic should be replaced by something older, for example, scholastic or Cartesian logic;
2. Acceptance of dialectical logic, transcendental logic—this superstition is sometimes strengthened by reference to non-classical logic (Bocheński was not against non-classical logics, but he protested against their overuse);
3. Logic (for instance, transcendental or dialectical) differs from logistics;
4. Pascal's view that the reasons of the heart exceed arguments of reason and free us of the shackles of logic.

Generally speaking, Bocheński strongly opposed the view that logic can be replaced as the fundamental intellectual device or even limited in its applications. Using logic in our intellectual performances is indispensable, if we presume to avoid irrationalism and superstitions generated by this attitude to the world.

Bocheński followed the account of logic popular in the Lvov–Warsaw School (Bocheński, 1981).[8] He distinguished logic sensu stricto (pure logic) and logic sensu *largo* (he did not use these labels). Logic comprises systems of formal logic, classical as well non-classical. Every such system is symbolic, formalistic and objective, that is, deprived of subjective factors. It seems that metalogic is also a part of pure logic. Yet Bocheński did not include philosophy of logic within logic sensu stricto. Now, logic sensu *largo* = pure logic + general applied logic + ?? logical semiotics (logic applied to semiotic) + general methodology (logic applied to methodology; (by the way, Bocheński did not believe in formal inductive logic, although he treated empirical science as based on induction in an intuitive sense) + special developments, e.g., logics of the individual sciences, in particular, mathematics, ethics,

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[8] See also Czernecka-Rej (2017).

rhetoric, etc. There are some questions concerning an informal logic, but I will not enter into this question. This account was strongly related to teaching of logic in interwar Poland. Teaching of logic, even addressed to students of mathematics, included some amount of semiotics and philosophy (methodology) of science. This was motivated by the conviction that mastering intellectual virtues by improving the employment of language and increasing the quality of reasoning constitutes a very important task of logic sensu *largo* and its teaching at all levels. Bocheński believed, as did other members of the Lvov–Warsaw School, that logic as a manifestation of European rationalism will successfully block all manifestations of irrationalism and superstitions, particularly in philosophy.

However, this picture of logic and its role does not suffice for an interpretation of **F.** In fact, to say that, if an agent does not preserve principles of logic, he or she falls into nonsense is not enough, because it is too vague. First of all, Bocheński expressed **F** by the phrase *Poza logiką jest tylko nonsens*, that is, in Polish. So, the word *nonsense* (*nonsense* in English) is crucial. According to the *Dictionary of the Polish Language*, "nonsense" means "the lack of sense." *Absurd*, another relevant word, has two meanings: (1) what lacks sense (nonsense); (2) contradictory (internally inconsistent).[9] Positively speaking, point (1) is related to having meaning as the antonym of lacking meaning. Thus, having sense can be identified with meaningfulness and being nonsense with meaninglessness. Let me try to apply to the issue in question certain ideas of logical empiricism. The conception of nonsense developed in this movement is perhaps the most famous in the entire history of philosophy. Its simplified version is captured by.

(*) a sentence *A* is meaningful if and only if it is tautological or empirically verifiable.[10]

Hence, if *A* is either not empirically verifiable or non-tautological, it is nonsense (meaningless). At first, logical empiricists considered (*) formula as dictated by logic itself, that is, as proper logical grammar (syntax), but later added a semantic justification. In both cases, (*) was conceived as something implied by the internal logic of language. The criticism of (*), for example, advanced in Poland by Roman Ingarden, pointed out that this principle is neither empirical nor tautological, and thereby must be qualified as a piece of nonsense (Ingarden, 1936).

Bocheński rejected the interpretation of (*) as a tautology or an empirically testable statement—he was neither a logical empiricist nor a scientist.[11] For instance, he considered at least some metaphysical questions (for instance, the problem of God's existence or the issue of free will) as legitimate and to some extent considered

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[9] In English, (linguistic) nonsense = having no meaning; absurd = wildly unreasonable, illogical. Thus, the meaning of "absurd" is not the same in Polish and English. I follow the former, Bocheński's native language.

[10] "Tautological" means in this context "logically true or logically false," but I do not enter into this difficult problem. Logical empiricists believed that we have a mechanical procedure to test that *A* is tautological. As we know, even first-order logic is not decidable. Under the semantic approach, logically true = true in all models, and logically false = false in all models.

[11] It seems that Bocheński shared Ingarden's criticism of (*).

himself a Platonic philosopher, that is, one who accepts abstract objects. Even if we say that Bocheński would agree with Carnap that (*) concerns scientific rationality, they differed as far as the issue of the scope of nonsense is concerned. To repeat, Bocheński, like other members of the Lvov–Warsaw School, regarded logic as an indispensable tool of philosophy (as well as any other human activity). If we restrict logic to a collection of formal systems, that is, to pure logic, **F** can be understood as the claim that formulas which do not satisfy constraints imposed by logical calculi are nonsensical. However, that does not fit Bocheński's intentions. He considered logical methods rather broadly, that is, as belonging to logic sensu *largo*, consisting of semantics (semiotics), formal logic, and methodology of science. Hence, **F** is to be understood as a principle requiring logical maturity in the case of any intellectual activity, be it scientific, philosophical (if one intends to distinguish science and philosophy) or common sensical, consisting in using language correctly according to its syntactic, semantic and pragmatic rules, as well as deriving conclusions from given premises by sound (proceeding from truths to truths) inference rules or justifying statements by reliable methods. For Bocheński, obeying logic was also a moral duty. Although he never quoted Łukasiewicz's dictum "Logic is the morals of thought and speech," he certainly shared it, quoting in the version in which "morals" is replaced by "ethics."

Explaining the sense of **F** to Parys, Bocheński said:

> For me, beyond logic there is only contradiction. Any talk that fails to preserve logical laws is contradictory. Philosophy cannot be reduced to logic, but one cannot go beyond it. Hence, my criterion of meaningfulness differs from that of the Vienna Circle. (Bocheński, 1988, 74)

The second sentence of the last quotation confirms Bocheński's view that philosophy is meaningful, provided it obeys rules of logic. However, the rest of the quoted explanation leads to various interpretative problems. Although we can eventually say that contradictions are absurd (in the sense that nobody accepts them), the equation: absurd = nonsense is not acceptable. As it follows from identifying contradictions with logical falsehoods, they are logical in this sense that they are analysable by logic (compare Husserl's distinction of *Unsinn* and *Wiedersinn*). Thus, the formula "Beyond logic there is only absurdity" better fits **F** than (*) in its interpretation proposed by the logical empiricists, provided contradictions are absurd, that is, they do not satisfy the criteria of (rational) acceptability.

The explanation in the last paragraph is pragmatic and suggests that we should respect logic, because it generates the rules of acceptability. In particular, we should not accept logical contradictions—they are beyond logic in this sense. However, if logic is understood as *logica* sensu *largo*, this reading of **F** is too restrictive, because it does not cover semantics (semiotic) and methodological procedures used in empirical science. The idea that it is impossible to leave logic suggests still another interpretation, supported by Bocheński's remark "Any talk that does not preserve logical laws is contradictory." Interpret "any talk" as referring to the collection of all possible utterances having cognitive ambitions. Call this collection the territory (denote it by the letter **T**) in which logic sensu *largo* acts. Consequently, **F** means that beyond **T** there is only nonsense. Since the word "beyond" has spatial connotation, we can

speak about limits of logic. Ludwig Wittgenstein used the metaphor of limits in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1922):

> 5.6 *The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world.
> 5.6.1 Logic fills the world: the limits of the world are also its limits.
> We cannot therefore say in logic: This and this there is in the world, that there is not.For that would apparently presuppose that we exclude certain possibilities, and this cannot be the case since otherwise, logic must go outside the limits of the world: that is, if it could consider these limits from the other side also.

I do not pretend to offer an interpretation of these passages, particularly whether 5.6 implies solipsism or not.[12] I guess that Bocheński would not agree with 5.6, because **T** is not the world but the collection of sentences about it. We can adopt 5.61 in the version "Logic acts on **T**: the limits of **T** are also its limits." Furthermore, logic itself (even sensu *largo*) cannot exclude any possibility from **T** because any sentence conforming logical rules is meaningful. The last part of 5.61 seems to exclude metalogical statements, but the proposed interpretation of **F** does not entail this consequence, because **T** is extendible, for instance, by constructing new metalanguages. Even if looking at **F** through "Wittgensteinian" glasses can be regarded as metaphorical to some (great?) extent, it illuminates the issue, at least to some extent.[13]

Let me return to Bocheński's view on the relation between logic and philosophy. Discussing the relation of logic to (analytic) philosophy, he distinguished four roles: logic recommends (a) the acceptance of rationalism; (b) rejecting irrationalism; (c) accepting that the principles of logic govern our speech; and, (d) the view that formal logic is significant for philosophy. Converting (d) into the equation "formal logic = philosophy" implies the most radical version of **F**. It means that, if a philosophical statement is not reducible to pure logic, it is a piece of nonsense. Perhaps it was accepted by early Wittgenstein and the early Carnap ("perhaps" because I do not propose an answer), but it was based on a very dubious understanding of logic, certainly rejected by Bocheński. If we admit, as he did, that logic sensu *largo* generates the standard of rationalism, **F** implies "every piece of irrationalism is a piece of nonsense"—this version was approved by Ajdukiewicz and the majority of the members of the Lvov–Warsaw School. This view is comparable to "the principles of logics are the limits of **T**," perhaps with the addition "if our statements are to be recognized as intelligible." I guess that Bocheński opted for a combination of rationalism and the last formula. Yet there is a problem about the limits (in a more literal sense) of logic sensu *largo*—it is a perennial and controversial question. In particular, criteria of semiotic and methodological consistency are (have been and will be) always problematic. And so it should be so, because in philosophy *res ad*

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[12] Cf., for example Friedlander (2001).

[13] I do not claim that Bocheński would fully agree with the interpretation outlined in this paragraph. It is only a proposal concerning a reading of formula **F**.

principia venit, but fundamental metaphilosophical principles are always outside logic although still dependent on choices determined by various circumstances. Clearly, a certain amount of rhetoric is also involved in **F** and similar formulas—Bocheński's case makes this function of the formula in question obvious.[14]

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