

Baltasar Gracián: Maxims as Existential Wisdom

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (August 2025)



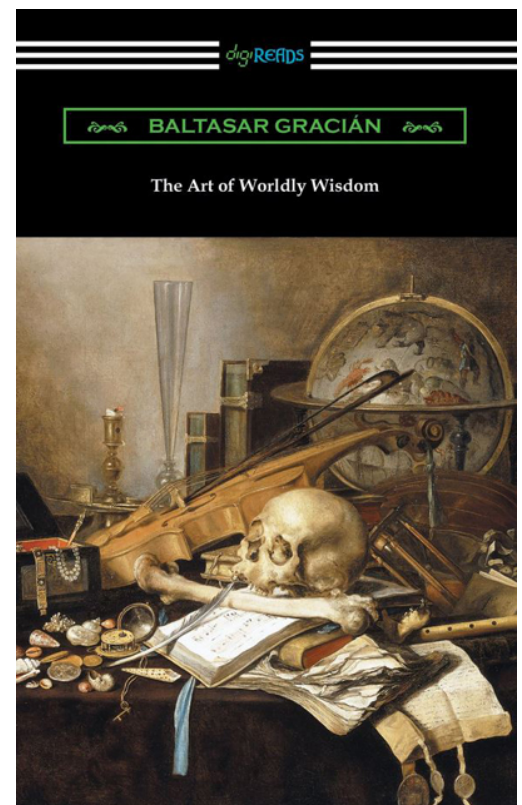
Baltasar Gracián (artist unknown)

All has reached perfection, and becoming a true person is the greatest perfection of all. It takes more to make one sage today than it did to make the seven of

Greece. And you need more resources to deal with a single person these days than with an entire nation in times past. –Baltasar Gracián, The Art of Worldly Wisdom

Maxims are to adults what fables are to children: a sincere way of appropriating conscience and the human condition. Knowledge cannot be separated from conscience and morality. We can say with certainty that philosophical reflection is born from curiosity and existential wonder, which seeking to create cohesion in human existence, enable man to confront human reality while not deforming it.

Intuition for the sublime leads to the realization that the human person must be responsible for deciphering the order of truth, as this manifests itself in human life. This means that ultimately man's quest for knowledge and truth has its beginning and end in existential longing.



Man has a long and fruitful literary tradition of sorting out contradictions. Plato gave us the philosophical dialogue, Montaigne the essay, Cervantes the novel. Of these, maxims are the most amiable and conducive genre to discuss man's moral predicament.

Consider the undeniable truth of Hippocrates' aphorism: "Life is short, opportunity fleeting, experience disappointing, and

judgment difficult.” Maxims capture fundamental aspects of human existence. In part, maxims are successful because people can understand and verify them in their life.

Baltasar Gracián's Maxims

Some of the most profound maxims ever written are by the Spanish Jesuit, Baltasar Gracián y Morales (1601–1658), in *Oráculo manual y el arte de prudencia* (*The Pocket Oracle and Art of Prudence*, 1647). Gracián has had a great influence on other writers who recognize his philosophical work and thought as a profound source of inspiration.

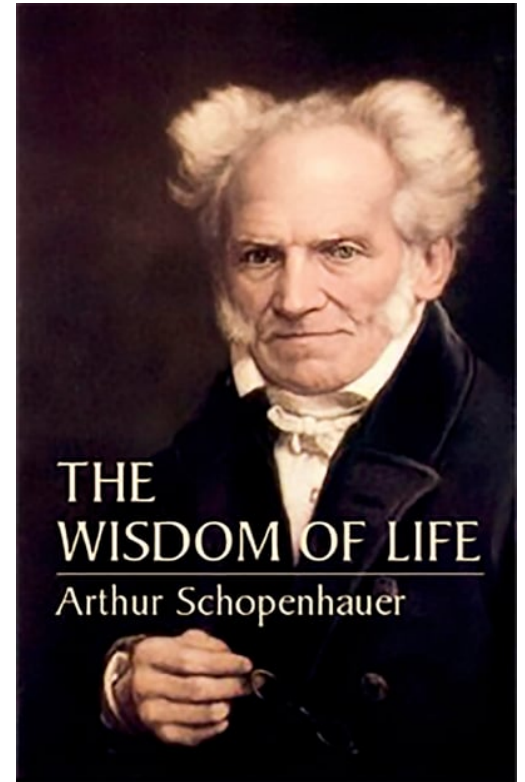
Gracián's maxims are a source of wisdom that discerning readers cannot afford to discard. Thinkers who express their knowledge of the human condition through maxims include Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, La Rochefoucauld and Schopenhauer.

Maxims remind us that the contingencies of human existence must be addressed with moral courage. The legacy of maxims as a philosophical genre lies in their grit and sincerity. While theory arises from a calculated, and in many cases ideological motivation, maxims are born from the practical need to come to terms with human reality.

While the truths that maxims illuminate may appear unsystematic, they remain vital and existential in their ability to penetrate into human reality. Maxims reveal the metaphysical essences that shape the structure of temporal human existence. Thinkers who choose maxims as their preferred genre for expressing knowledge reject abstract thought. The works of writers of maxims enjoy a level of respect for human vitality that theoretical works can never achieve.

Maxims respect Socrates' saying that “morality cannot be separated from knowledge.” Maxims contain a moral heuristic that cannot be denied, though moral relativism and nihilism in

late postmodernity have castrated moral sentiment. The epistemological fragmentation that relativism and nihilism brought about in the twentieth century has destroyed man's capacity to view human reality and truth objectively.



The philosophical value of maxims is that maxims express aspects of human knowledge that have not fallen under the control of institutionalized philosophy: the aberration we recognize today as academic philosophy.

Maxims are moral tools that have little use for theory. A positivist age like ours does not recognize or respect heuristic knowledge as authoritative. This is why wisdom literature, works like *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Aesop's Fables* and *The Triads of Ireland*, do not play the pivotal role they once enjoyed. G.K. Chesterton writes that ours is an age of technicians and not sages. Beginning with the ancient Greeks and rapidly spreading through Roman schools of philosophy, maxims organize and give coherence to human experience.

Experience presents the world to us as fragmented, forcing thought to compensate and unite our experience of reality.

Maxims present us with a mode of knowledge that fill in interstices of reality that common sense readily ignores or does not suspect.

Gracián is arguably the greatest exponent of maxims; his moral stoicism is unique. As a Catholic, he respects that human reality is created by God and that only God, as an intelligent being, knows its makeup. Gracián does not challenge God, rather accepts the idea that God created man with free will. This means that man must respect his condition as a being that participates in God's grace. Grace enables man to practice free will as part of self-knowledge in relation to the supernatural structure of human existence.

Gracián's moral stoicism had a profound influence on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Schopenhauer wrote that "Gracián's books, *The Moral Oracle* and *The Art of Prudence*, are lifelong companions." *The Oracle* is a book composed of 300 maxims and commentaries. Nietzsche refers to Gracián as the most subtle European moralist.

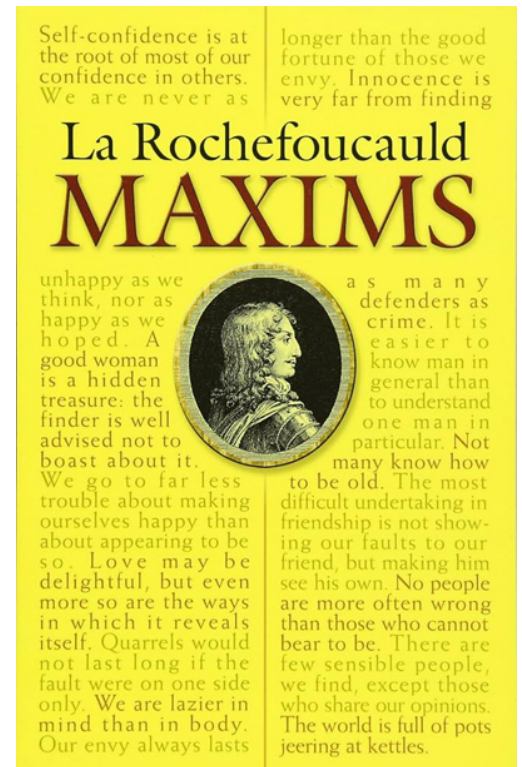
Gracián's thought is anchored in the idea that the best way to avoid error is by practicing prudence, for prudence is a form of self-knowledge. Maxims offer philosophical sincerity. Maxims speak grand truths utilizing a succinct format.

Maxims can be understood by anyone because they represent an accessible form of wisdom. Maxims make their point in an existential manner that eschews pedantry. Writers of maxims recognize that time is the great judge of truth. This is why patience and prudence are staples of maxims.

Gracián was considered a problematic man by many in the Jesuit order. According to Gracián, persons are not complete until they achieve moral perfection. This is one of many paradoxes that Gracián, as a philosopher and Catholic priest, presents readers with. On one occasion, Gracián read a letter during mass that he allegedly received from hell. The letter was not

well received by the heads of the Jesuit order.

Gracián and Francisco de Quevedo are the most important writers of the genre known as *conceptismo*, a genre of Spanish Baroque literature that emphasizes conciseness, complexity and wittiness.



During his lifetime Gracián was described as “biliosus, melancolicus,” “colericus, biliosus,” and “complexio colerica.” Gracián was an individualistic Jesuit; a thinker who had little patience for lengthy texts.

Consider his maxim “How to Attain Perfection.” Some aspects of human perfection, Gracián tells readers, include elevated taste, pure intelligence, a clear will and a mature capacity to judge. These are aspects of personhood that a society of discreet people cannot ignore. .

In a maxim on maturity, Gracián explains that maturity can be easily noticed in some people. The capacity for discernment and ability to judge cannot be taken lightly. Just as weight gives value to gold, so does moral weight give value to man.

A paradoxical aspect of maxims that Gracián entertained is that while this literary/philosophical genre makes us reflect on our moral failings, some people imagine that the truth contained in maxims do not apply to them. Some people have the misguided impression that maxims speak to classes and not

individuals.

Another aspect of maxims is the black-and-white message they reveal. Like the conclusion of a valid argument, the truth value of maxims is not found in the premises or even the conclusion, but in man's capacity for inference. The truths that maxims convey are appropriated through prudent judgment. Consider a maxim by La Rochefoucauld: "Neither the sun nor death can be looked at face to face." .

Maxims confront truth without apologizing to people who find them irritating or brazen. Truth is concrete and decisive; truth does not vacillate. This is one reason why maxims are not ideological. Maxims do not foment social/political schemes. Maxims assume that individuals possess free will and are responsible moral persons.

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Pedro Blas González is Professor of Philosophy in Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included [*Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*](#), [*Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*](#), [*Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy*](#) and [*Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*](#). He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofía" (1951) in [*Philosophy Today*](#) Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998). His most recent book is [*Philosophical Perspective on Cinema*](#).

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