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Kant, Fichte, and the Jews in Poland: A Case Study of a Cliché

Kant, Fichte i Żydzi w Polsce: studium przypadku banału

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Abstract: This paper proposes a new perspective on the entanglement of antisemitism and philosophy by exploring the function and persistence of a cliché in philosophical discourse. It begins with an analysis of Immanuel Kant's remarks on "the Jews in Poland" in a passage often regarded as his most anti-Jewish statement. These remarks are contextualized within the framework of Kant's *Anthropology* and the late 18th-century debates on Jewish emancipation. The paper then turns to contemporary philosophical discussions on Johann Gottlieb Fichte's anti-Jewish polemics in which the trope of "the Jews in Poland" reappears, showing the enduring influence of the cliché.

Keywords: Poland; Judaism; Antisemitism; Anti-Judaism; Kant; Fichte; Philosophy; Haskalah; Stereotypes; Prejudice

Abstrakt: W niniejszym artykule przedstawiono nowe spojrzenie na powiązania między antysemityzmem a filozofią poprzez analizę funkcji i trwałości stereotypu w dyskursie filozoficznym. Rozpoczyna się on od analizy uwag Immanuela Kanta na temat „Żydów w Polsce", zawartych w fragmencie często uznawanym za jego najbardziej antysemickie stwierdzenie. Uwagi te są umieszczone w kontekście *Antropologii* Kanta i debat z końca XVIII wieku na temat emancypacji Żydów. Następnie autor przechodzi do współczesnych dyskusji filozoficznych na temat antysemickiej polemiki Johanna Gottlieba Fichtego, w której ponownie pojawia się trop „Żydów w Polsce", pokazując trwały wpływ tego stereotypu.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska; judaizm; antysemityzm; antyjudaizm; Kant; Fichte; filozofia; haskala; stereotypy; uprzedzenia

Introduction

Philosophical discussions on the anti-Jewish legacy in canonical works often revolve around personal attribution and questions such as: "Was Kant an antisemite?"[1] Such questions risk reducing complex discursive and historical contexts to individual character judgments. They also rely on contested definitions of terms like "antisemite", "antisemitism" or "anti-Judaism", and tend to obscure the broader philosophical and political frameworks from which certain statements emerged. However, it is imperative to recognize that the pervasiveness of anti-Jewish tropes and stereotypes is not merely a product of a bygone era; these tropes and stereotypes persist in the present and have the potential to influence our interpretation of historical texts. Therefore, reducing the issue to the personal attitudes of individual thinkers and rendering conclusive judgments on historical figures offers limited insights. It does not suffice for a self-critical engagement with the anti-Jewish dimensions embedded in philosophical traditions and their ongoing relevance in the present.

This paper proposes a shift in perspective: Rather than focusing on Kant's personal views, I analyze how a specific cliché – namely, "the Jews in Poland" – appears in his work and has been perpetuated through canonization up to present discourse. I distinguish between stereotypes as explicit, concrete attributions (e.g. "Jews are dishonest") and clichés as specific, template-like conceptualizations of people, things, or facts that implicitly convey stereotypical attributions (e.g. "to trade like a Jew"). Clichés are shaped by cultural experiences and rely on a shared background knowledge within a community. They are not expressions of individual beliefs or attitudes but are supra-individual and maintain part of a society's collective knowledge (Schwarz-Friesel and Reinharz 2012, v.7: 109). As such, clichés are dynamic components of cultural expression and appear in domains such as literature, theater, and philosophy.

The cliché of "the Jews in Poland" serves as the focus of this two-part investigation: In the first section, I analyze how and why Immanuel Kant (1724--1804) refers to "the Jews in Poland" in an ostensibly marginal way. I begin by briefly outlining the historical context in which the opposing clichés of "the noble Jew" and "the Polish Jew" emerged (1.1). Then I examine the role "the Jews" play within a philosophical argument Kant develops (1.2), and why he specifies "the Jews in Poland" in parenthesis – even though his claim contradicts the views of several influential contemporaries (1.3). The second part turns to contemporary philosophical discourse on Johann Gottlieb Fichte's (1762-1814) relationship to Judaism to explore how the cliché "the Jews in

[1] The same applies to debates on racism and sexism in philosophy. For analogous thoughts on debates about racism, see Esser 2023.

Poland" is mobilized in modern interpretations. I argue that this reference aims at rationalizing Fichte's anti-Jewish polemics (2.1), even though his own writings provide no evidence to support this claim (2.2). In a brief conclusion, I reflect on the value of analyzing clichés rather than focusing on the personal convictions of individual thinkers.

1. Kant and "the Jews in Poland" as an illustrative example

1.1. Historical context: The "Noble Jew" and the "Polish Jew" as clichés in the later 18th century

When the play *The Jews* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781) premiered in 1766, it ignited a controversial debate: Could a Jew truly embody the moral integrity attributed to Lessing's protagonist?[2] Around the same time, the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) was gaining renown as "Jewish Socrates". Discussions about Jewish emancipation were deeply intertwined with broader Enlightenment concerns about whether non-Christians could be virtuous and under what conditions they might be granted civil rights. Mendelssohn, who inspired the character of Nathan in *Nathan the Wise* (1783), became the prototype of the "noble Jew"– a Jew capable of enlightened thinking and universal love for humanity. This idealized image stood in contrast to lingering caveats and doubts about the moral and civic capacities of Jews among Christian intellectuals.

In a conversation about a performance of William Shakespeare's (1564--1616) *The Merchant of Venice* in 1813, the cliché of the "noble Jew" is juxtaposed with that of the "Polish Jew". In a letter to Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758-1832) expressed his frustration at a theatrical portrayal of the Jewish merchant Shylock that departed from his own idealized conception:

> I have always imagined this Jew as a true merchant who is perfectly right and seeks nothing but his right […]! That is the point of the play's moral! […] To see this Venetian Jew now degraded to a knotty, lousy water Polack [Wasserpolakke] without any merit in him [...] – that can provoke me to anger, indeed I can hardly be satisfied with it (Wilson 2024, 239).[3]

The figure of Shylock remains deeply controversial, often interpreted either as a caricature of Jewish greed or as a humanizing portrayal of Jewish

[2] For this debate, see Hiscott 2017, 448–51.

[3] Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

dignity (e.g. Horn 2022, 193-208). Zelter's letter demonstrates the simultaneous presence of the clichés of the "noble Jew" and the "Polish Jew". Whereas the "noble Jew" is imagined as a Jew who is "perfectly right and seeks nothing but his right", the "Polish Jew" is "knotty and lousy" and has no merit in him.

As I will show in the following paragraph, "the Jews in Poland" was a controversial subject in philosophical and political debates in the late eighteenth century. The notion of an independent Eastern European type of Jews emerged as a byproduct of the modernization processes affecting Jews in Central and Western Europe (Hödl 2008, 260). This notion gradually solidified during the first half of the nineteenth century, although the term "Ostjude" only became widespread in the early twentieth century (Aschheim 1982, 3).

1.2. Argumentative Context: For what sake does Kant talk about "the Jews" in the *Anthropology*?

Kant explicitly refers to "the Jews in Poland" only once, in a footnote in his later work *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (published 1798). Even though Kant's *Anthropology* was for a long time not considered an integral part of his philosophy (Brandt 1999, 7), this passage has since drawn significant attention as a *locus classicus* in the history of antisemitism and is frequently debated in this context (e.g. Poliakov 1983, 203; Rose 1990, 94).

To understand the context of Kant's reference to "the Jews in Poland", I will cite a larger part of the footnote:

> The Palestinians living among us since their exile, or at least the great majority of them, have earned the not unfounded reputation of being cheaters, on account of the spirit of usury [Wuchergeist]. Admittedly it seems strange to think of a nation of cheaters; but it is just as strange to think of a nation of nothing but merchants, the far greater majority of whom are bound by an ancient superstition recognized by the state they live in, seek no civil honor, but rather wish to make up for their loss through the advantage of outwitting the people under whom they find protection, and even one another. It cannot be otherwise with an entire nation of nothing but merchants, as non-productive members of society (for example, **the Jews in Poland**). So their constitution, which is sanctioned by ancient statutes and even by us under whom they live (who have certain holy books in common with them), cannot be repealed without inconsistency, even though they have made the saying ''Buyer beware'' into the highest principle of their morality in dealing with us (AA 07, 205-206).[4]

[4] Author's emphasis, all quotes from Kant's *Anthropology* translated by Robert B. Louden, see Kant 2006. References to the works of Kant and Fichte follow standard citation conventions.

This passage provokes various interpretative questions, which cannot all be addressed here. To comprehend the insertion in parenthesis, "for example, the Jews in Poland", it is necessary to consider the context of the footnote within Kant's book.

Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* is a compilation of various lectures on anthropology that Kant delivered annually from 1772 to 1792 at the Albertus University of Königsberg. These lectures are not part of proper transcendental philosophy. Kant characterizes his *Anthropology* as a "systematically designed and yet popular (through reference to examples which can be found by every reader)" (AA 07, 121). The intention behind this composition was to create a work for a broader audience that "could be read by anyone, even by ladies at their toilette" (AA 25, 857). The subject of religion is not dealt with in detail in the *Anthropology*. The second part of the *Anthropology* contains a section titled "B. The Character of the People", in which Kant described a variety of groups, but neither "Jews" nor "Palestinians".

The quoted passage appears in a footnote to the chapter "On the weaknesses and illnesses of the soul with respect to its cognitive faculty", which concluded the section "B. On mental deficiencies in the cognitive faculty". This section consists of three paragraphs and the footnote discussed here. Moreover, the section contains numerous examples, the purpose of which is to promote the popularity of the *Anthropology*, as has been previously noted. In course of discussing the "weaknesses of the mind in the cognitive faculty", Kant cites an adage that describes someone as "honest but stupid", and subsequently refutes it. According to Kant, this expression "is highly reprehensible [falsch und höchsttadelhaft]" (AA 07, 204) because it assumes that every individual would deceive others if they only possessed the necessary skills to do so, and that those who refrain from deceit merely lack the necessary ability.

The section concludes with a discussion of the case of a successful cheater [Betrüger]. Kant states that even a successful cheater must not be regarded as intelligent, because even a successful cheater is "spat upon" (AA 07, 205), i.e. despised by others, so that "there is really no permanent advantage in that" (AA 07, 205). The price of deception is contempt on the part of others. The point Kant wants to make is: "The cheater is really the fool" (AA 07, 205). Kant's strict position on lying has already been discussed during his lifetime. However, he cannot present the transcendental argument he offers elsewhere[5] to prove that lying is wrong under any circumstances, because this would contradict his intentions to write a popular book. Therefore, he reinforces his point in a popular way – through reference to an example that he deems to be readily

[5] See Kant's Essay *On a Supposed Right to Tell Lies from Benevolent Motives* (1797) and *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), *Doctrine of Virtue*, §9.

comprehensible to his readers. To illustrate that cheaters are despised, Kant refers to a group that is considered to be deceitful and therefore held in contempt: the "Palestinians living among us" – the Jews.

1.3. Why "the Jews in Poland"?

I now turn to the parenthetical insertion "for example, the Jews in Poland". Whom does Kant mean by "the Jews in Poland"? Given the three partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795, it is difficult to determine who he is describing as Jews in Poland. It is also unclear what specific characteristics he attributes to this particular group. Kant first refers to the "Palestinians living among us" as a "nation", then he speaks of "the Jews in Poland", and finally speaks more generally of Judaism as a religion (Brandt 1999, 295). Also, the phrase "at least the great majority of them" leaves room for speculation about the rest. The only clear attribution Kant makes is that "the Jews in Poland" represent "an entire nation of nothing but merchants, as non-productive members of society".

However, this claim was disputed during Kant's time. In his influential essay *On the Civil Improvement of the Jews* (1781) Christian Wilhelm Dohm, a supporter of Jewish Emancipation in Prussia, calls Poland "the country in which the number of Jews has always been the largest, and where they have also been granted considerable freedom of trade" (Dohm 2015, 47).[6] As a result, particularly in the Polish territories, the Jewish population was more likely than in the German territories to be involved in activities other than trade, such as crafts (Dohm 2015, 247) – i.e. in supposedly "productive activities" that were largely inaccessible to them elsewhere. Reinhard Brandt suggests that by referring to Poland, Kant presumably wants to distract from the implication that his blanket statement would otherwise apply to figures such as Moses Mendelssohn, Marcus Herz, and David Friedländer, effectively branding them as cheaters and deceivers, and thus directly contradicting Mendelssohn's literary efforts against anti-Jewish prejudices (Brandt 1999, 295). Mendelssohn (1729-1786), with whom Kant had a warm relationship, explicitly mentions the accusation of an "insurmountable tendency to deception [Betrug]" (Mendelssohn 1983, 6) as a common prejudice against Jews of his time.

Brandts bolsters his interpretation with a marginal note from Kant's estate manuscripts concerning the subject of anthropology "Von den Juden: Carosi" (On the Jews: Carosi) (Refl. 1235, AA 15: 543). Johann Philipp Carosi (1744-

[6] In fact, this freedom of trade was significantly reduced under Prussian, Austrian, and Russian rule after the partitions of Poland (Heyde 2023, 71).

-1801), an Italian geologist and engineer, had published the two-volume travelogue on his journey through Polish provinces (1781, 1784), that interwove descriptions of Polish mining and geology with derogatory descriptions of the Jewish population. After facing criticism, Carosi insisted in his second-volume preface that he had "not attacked all the Jews in the whole world, my complaints apply only to our own" (Carosi 1784: preface, n. pag.) – that is, the Jews in Poland. That Carosi felt compelled to make this statement must be seen in the context of the emancipation and assimilation movements that were underway at the time. While Carosi was willing to admit that his descriptions did not (or no longer) apply to the "Jews in the whole world" (remember the "noble Jew"), he insisted that his description were accurate in the case of the "Jews in Poland".

Kant was an avid reader of travel literature (Lu-Adler 2022). Given his engagement with several Maskilim and his familiarity with their writings, it is striking that Kant's manuscript refers to Carosi – an Italian geologist and engineer – when addressing "the Jews in Poland". To underscore this, I will present two alternative accounts of Polish Jewry that appeared in the 1790s. One such account is Salomon Maimon's (ca. 1751-1800) *Autobiography*. Maimon, who grew up in Poland-Lithuania, was himself highly critical of Jewish tradition and an admirer of Kant's philosophy. Yet, Maimon offers a notably different view of the common accusation of Jewish dishonesty:

> The influence of [the Jewish] teachings in practical life is also unmistakable. The Polish Jews, who have always been allowed to make use of all kinds of means of earning a living and are not restricted to the tiresome haggling [Schacher] and usury of money [Geldwucher] as in other countries, rarely hear the accusation of fraud [Betrug]. They remain faithful to the land in which they live, and feed themselves in an honest way (Maimon 2019, 229).

Maimon attributed this not only to the relative economic freedom enjoyed by Polish Jews, but also to the positive influence of Jewish teachings "in practical life" (ibid.). He was introduced to Kant by Marcus Herz (AA 11, 14), and Kant expressed his appreciation for Maimon's intellectual contributions (AA 11, 48-54). While it cannot be definitively confirmed, certain passages suggest that Kant was at least partially familiar with Maimon's *Autobiography* (see Wälzholz 2016, 114-22).

Another alternative perspective on the Jews in Poland comes from Lazarus Bendavid, a vocal critic of rabbinical Judaism who gained recognition for teaching Kant's philosophy in Vienna from 1791 to 1796 (Schulte 2002, 167). According to Bendavid, in the Austrian-controlled parts of Poland – territories annexed in the first partition of 1772 – Jews and Christians had largely equal

rights. As a result, "[t]he Austro-Polish Jew is happy and content, is a morally good citizen, and his mind and heart make equal strides with his well-being" (Bendavid 1793, 43). Kant explicitly refers to Bendavid and cites the very publication from which this quote is drawn in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) (See Giordanetti's notes in Kant 2005, 151-52). It is therefore reasonable to assume that Kant was familiar with Bendavid's favorable assessment of "the Austro-Polish Jew".

The examples illustrate three key points: First, "the Jews in Poland" were the subject of contentious philosophical and political debates. Second, Kant was demonstrably aware of the range of views on this topic, including more favorable assessments by Bendavid, and probably also by Maimon and Dohm. Third, despite this awareness, he nevertheless chose to invoke "the Jews in Poland" as an example for a nation of merchants and cheaters. In doing so, Kant draws on the image of Jews as dishonest and socially contemptible. His decision to specify "the Jews in Poland" appears calculated: it preserves the rhetorical power of the cliché while implicitly exempting well-known Jewish thinkers with whom he was personally acquainted.

The effectiveness of this example relies on its recognizability; Kant could assume that his readers shared a familiarity with this cultural cliché. The notion that "the Jews in Poland" are merchants and cheaters exemplifies what may be termed a specifying cliché – a cliché that reinforces general stereotypes by identifying a subgroup that ostensibly embodies them in their most extreme form. This rhetorical maneuver also accounts for the ambiguity in Kant's shifting references between "Jews" and "the Jews in Poland". By committing this cliché to writing, Kant inscribes it into the canon of Western philosophy, thereby contributing to its intellectual legitimacy and historical durability.

2. Fichte and "the Jews in Poland" in contemporary literature

We've seen how the cliché of "the Jews in Poland" works in Kant's *Anthropology*. I now turn to an example of how this cliché continues to resonate in contemporary discourse – specifically in contemporary discourse on Johann Gottlieb Fichte's (1762-1814) relation to Jews and Judaism. This relation has been publicly debated since 1794, following the publication of Fichte's *Contribution to the Correction of the Public's Judgments on the French Revolution* (1793). In a multi-page anti-Jewish polemic, Fichte notoriously asserts that while Jews possess human rights, they should not be granted civil rights unless their heads were cut off and replaced with new ones that do not harbor any "Jewish ideas" (see GA I/1, 292-294). For our purposes, it is not necessary to

analyze this passage in detail; suffice it to say that it provoked immediate and widespread condemnation.

Among Fichte's contemporaries, authors such as Friedrich Nicolai (1733--1811), David Friedländer (1750-1834) and Saul Ascher (1767-1822) responded with strong criticism. An anonymous review from May 1794 notes that Fichte's language towards Jews was unprecedented among Kantian philosophers, remarking that Jews were not so much described as "mistreated" (Anonymus 1794, 353-54). Since then, this passage too has become a *locus classicus* in the scholarly literature on the history of antisemitism (Voigts 2001, 285). As a result, many authors have analyzed this passage and tried to make sense of it.

2.1. What are Fichte's "Polish experiences" supposed to be and why are the invoked?

The most comprehensive study on the topic is *Fichtes Idee der Nation und das Judentum* [*Fichte's Idea of the Nation and Judaism*] (2000) by Hans-Joachim Becker. In his detailed commentary on this passage, Becker argues that many of the tropes Fichte uses in this passage can be found in earlier texts by French Enlightenment thinkers (Becker 2000, 38-56). Nevertheless, Becker repeatedly contends that Fichte's rejection of Judaism was also shaped by another, more personal source: his "Polish experiences from the year 1791" (Becker 2000, 32), which according to Becker influenced Fichte's subsequent position towards Judaism. According to Becker, it was during a journey in Poland that Fichte became acquainted with what Becker calls "traditional, orthodox Judaism", which Fichte subsequently came to reject in uncompromising terms (Becker 2000, 37).

By invoking Fichte's "Polish experiences", Becker advances three claims: First, he suggests that Fichte's position towards Judaism was shaped by concrete experiences and direct observations made during his travels. Second, he argues that it was in Poland that Fichte encountered "traditional, orthodox Judaism" – a form of religious life especially in need of enlightenment. Third, he contends that Fichte's derogatory remarks about Jews and Judaism should be interpreted not as irrational hostility but as a critique of "traditional, orthodox Judaism" in the spirit of Enlightenment criticism of religion (e.g. Becker 2000, 65).

2.2. Revisiting Fichte's "Polish experiences"

To evaluate these claims, we turn to the primary sources documenting Fichte's 1791 journey through Poland. Between April and September of that year,

Fichte travelled from Saxony through Polish territories to Königsberg. In his travel diary and letters from this period, he occasionally mentions encounters with Jews. To support the argument that these "Polish experiences" influenced Fichte's later rejection of Judaism, Becker cites two examples. First, Fichte observed that many Jews in Poland did not speak Polish – a fact Becker interprets as evidence that they "in a way" [gewissermaßen] (Becker 2000, 31) formed a separate community. However, Fichte himself does not draw this conclusion in his diary. Second, Fichte notes that he was shaved by a Jewish man in a rural area, prompting the comment that "in Poland the Jew is every craftsman and merchant" (GA II/1, 400).[7] This statement is open to interpretation and may reflect Fichte's surprise at the occupational diversity among Polish Jews. In addition to these two examples, Becker mentions that during Fichte's stay in Warsaw, he passed through the Jewish quarter and expressed complaints about Jewish taverns.

Becker also notes that Fichte expressed frustration not only with Jews, but with many aspects of his journey, including the behavior of Germans in Poland. Indeed, Fichte's diary is replete with complaints: He remarks repeatedly on the poor quality of the beer and criticizes the Germans living in Poland (e.g. GA II/1, 393, 396-397, 408). He also describes Poles in highly condescending and, at times, openly disgusted terms (e.g. GA II/1, 397), and he does not spare Saxonians, about whom he also writes disparagingly (GA II/1, 399-400). In this broader context Fichte's comments about Jews do not appear uniquely hostile.

Moreover, the diary contains no detailed observations on Jewish religious practices. On June 4, Fichte expresses mild annoyance that no Jew would sell him a chicken on Shabbat (GA II/1, 406), and on June 26, he notes that he unintentionally rendered something non-kosher, which he found somewhat irritating (GA II/1, 412). At the same time, he records positive encounters as well. On one occasion, a Jew advised him to take a longer but safer route (GA II/1, 400-401). When passing through a small town near Warsaw, which he describes as "worse than bad" [schlechter als schlecht], Fichte remarks: "Not a single Jew inside, the worse for the town, and foreigners" (GA II/1, 406). Again, this remark is open to interpretation, but it is likely that Fichte suggests that the absence of Jews is a sign of the town's poor condition.

Another claim made by Becker is that Fichte's anti-Jewish polemic should be read as a critique specifically of "traditional, orthodox Judaism", which Fichte allegedly encountered during his journey through Poland. However, this interpretation is historically problematic. In 1791, there was virtually no clearly defined alternative to traditional Judaism, as the movement toward

[7] In Fichte's diary many sentences remain fragmentary and are difficult to understand and translate. The original sentence reads: "In Pohlen ist der Jude jeder Profeßionist, u. Kaufmann".

Jewish enlightenment and assimilation was only just beginning to take shape (Voigts 2001, 290). In fact, the term "orthodox" was not applied to Judaism until 1792, when Saul Ascher introduced it to distinguish reformist, enlightened visions of Judaism from more traditional forms (Schulte 2002, 184). Moreover, Fichte's diary contains no evidence to support the notion that he engaged with or reacted specifically to Jewish religious practices in a way that would substantiate Becker's assertion.

To summarize: neither Fichte's diary nor his letters from the 1791 journey provide any evidence that his encounters with Jews ins Poland adversely affected his later views on Judaism. Hence, there is no basis for the claim that these experiences explain Fichte's anti-Jewish polemic in his *Contribution*. Even Becker concedes that Fichte's remarks about the Jews he encountered in Poland are "relatively reserved" [relativ zurückhaltend] (Becker 2000, 32).

What we see here, once again, is the operation of a *specifying cliché* – but in this case it is not Fichte himself who restricts his remarks on Jews and Judaism to "the Jews in Poland". Rather, it is Becker who imposes this limitation in an attempt to argue that Fichte's anti-Jewish statements should be understood as a rational critique not of Judaism in general, but of Judaism in Poland back in 1791. Just as Kant reaffirms that "the Jews in Poland" actually constitute a nation of merchants and cheaters, Becker wants to say that "the Jews in Poland" form such a deficient community that Fichte's statements about Judaism, when referring to Judaism in Poland, no longer appear as crude polemics, but rather as a legitimate expression of Enlightenment critique of religion. The *specifying cliché* "the Jews in Poland" functions as follows: the general stereotypes about Jews hold true – if applied specifically to the Jews in Poland.

The power of the cliché lies in the fact that it appears not only in canonical philosophical texts but also in the secondary literature surrounding them. This is one of the media that perpetuate such clichés. When these clichés go unexamined, both the canon and its contemporary interpretation contribute to their persistence. For instance, Becker's claim of the importance of Fichte's "Polish experiences" is uncritically adopted in a scholarly book by Hartmut Traub (2020, 561) and thus kept alive in current scholarly discourse.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the cliché of "the Jews in Poland". By analyzing both canonical and contemporary texts, I have aimed to show that engaging with such clichés is not merely an inquiry into a closed historical past. Since these clichés continue to shape contemporary discourse, confronting them remains essential for a self-critical and reflective engagement with the philosoph-

ical tradition. This bridging of past and present was made possible by shifting the focus away from the personal views of individual authors to the operation of clichés – understood as elements of collective social knowledge that are supra-individual in nature.

In the first part of this paper, a passage from Kant served as an example to illustrate how Poland had become a site of imaginary projection for anti-Jewish stereotypes by the late eighteenth century. The cliché of "the Jews in Poland" operates by asserting that anti-Jewish stereotypes are in fact accurate – if applied specifically to Polish Jews. Using Becker's book on Fichte as an example, I have shown that this specifying cliché continues to shape philosophical discourse to this day. Such continuities are often overlooked when the issue is reduced to a personalized binary question: "Was Kant an antisemite: yes or no?".

First, by focusing on the cliché, I have demonstrated the specific function and persistence of the stereotype of "the Jews in Poland". Second, this case study illustrates the methodological value of shifting the analytical focus away from individual thinkers and toward clichés and patterns of thought that operate at a supra-individual level. Third, this case study underscores the necessity of engaging critically with anti-Jewish passages in classical German philosophy. Kant's seemingly marginal insertion "the Jews in Poland" conveys an image that resonates with the cliché of "Eastern Jews" [Ostjuden], a term that came into use around 1900, but whose associated stereotypes remain influential today.

Fourth and finally, by referring to Bendavid, Maimon, Mendelssohn, and Dohm to demonstrate the untenability of Kant's claims about "the Jews in Poland", I have shown that engaging with figures that are not part of the canon can help to challenge and complicate such persistent clichés. Since racism, sexism, and antisemitism are not merely historical problems but remain deeply embedded in contemporary structures, the study of these phenomena in classical German philosophy is not only about the past – it is also a critical inquiry into their persistence and reproduction in the present.

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