

A *CONTEXTUALIST* APPROACH TO TEACHING ANTISEMITISM IN PHILOSOPHY CLASS

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Abstract

This paper argues for a ‘contextualist’ approach to teaching antisemitism in philosophy class. The traditional ‘systematic’ approach emphasizes recognizing and dismantling antisemitic aspects in canonical philosophical texts. The introduced contextualist approach broadens the perspective, treating philosophy as a continuous debate embedded in cultural realities. It focuses on historical controversies rather than isolated arguments, includes the voice and the perspectives of the oppressed, and so has the potential to broaden traditional philosophical canons. In the second half of the paper, we provide a case study of the contextualist approach, applying it to the ‘Berlin antisemitism controversy’ of 1879/80. We argue that the contextualist approach is particularly valuable when dealing with antisemitism as it teaches students to analyze arguments within the socio-political landscape and to identify antisemitic elements. The students thereby acquire the skills to discern antisemitic argumentation in other contexts as well. We suggest that this approach could be used to teach other debates in the history of philosophy, especially those tackling race, sex, and gender issues.

Keywords: Berlin Antisemitism Controversy, Heinrich von Treitschke, Moritz Lazarus, Hermann Cohen, German Philosophy, Nineteenth Century, Contextualism, Pedagogy, Teaching philosophy

Introduction

Antisemitic violence, harassment, and conspiracy theories are increasing (FRA 2020¹, Mayer 2021, Karakoulaki and Dessì 2021). Consequently, studies have expressed worry

¹ The FRA report summarizes data on antisemitic incidents in the EU countries from 2009 to 2019. It should be noted that results vary somewhat between the different member states (also because of differences in

about the negligence of antisemitism in the educational context (Salzborn 2021, Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland 2020, Eckmann/Kößler 2020). Samuel Salzborn and Alexandra Kurth point out that while there are educational initiatives addressing the problem, they function merely as the “fire brigade” called in emergencies (2021, 10). However, opposing antisemitism should not be mere crisis intervention. We need “better instruments” (Klein 2020) to facilitate fundamental structural change. Antisemitism needs to be approached on a cognitive level and be addressed by a thorough “democratic-political education” (Salzborn/Kurth 2021: 10). Philosophy provides valuable tools to achieve this goal as it teaches essential critical thinking skills (Pfister 2010: 155). This paper works out one pathway to achieve this goal, showing how antisemitism can be discussed in philosophy class. Our aim is threefold:

- i. to introduce a method for recognizing and dealing with antisemitic concepts and arguments contextually,
- ii. to introduce a case study that shows how this method could be applied, and
- iii. to show how this approach equips students with the means to recognize antisemitic lines of argumentation, thereby preparing them to act in a responsible and informed manner regarding antisemitism.²

Recently there has been increasing interest in providing new interpretative perspectives that recognize and dismantle antisemitic aspects in classical philosophical texts of German philosophers (e.g., Farin/Malpas 2016, Faye 2015, Rose 1990, Redner 2002, Mack 2003, Nahme 2020). These accounts tackle antisemitism primarily based on philosophical reconstructions, treating antisemitism as a system or a set of beliefs to be identified. We call this the ‘systematic’ approach to antisemitism. Often the aim is to investigate if and to what extent antisemitic beliefs have a systematic impact on a given philosophical system and/or follow from that system. Furthermore, the focus lies on canonical texts and figures. This methodological approach makes sense if we, for example, seek to find out how Heidegger’s antisemitic beliefs weave into his philosophy as a systematic component (Farin/ Malpas 2016, Faye 2015, Love 2018, Mitchel/ Trawny 2017). The systematic approach might also be used to find out whether and to what extent misogynist or racist ideas impact philosophical systems. Take, for example, the question of whether Aristoteles’ nature essentialism leads to a problematic view of the order of the

data collection), but the report shows that antisemitic violence is on increasing in many countries (including Germany, Austria, France) and remains a concern in the whole EU.

² We do not aim to provide a detailed educational plan that is directly applicable in the classroom. Since the formal conditions of philosophy education differ greatly, we acknowledge that not all topics are suitable for all educational formats. We leave it open to the teacher if and to what extent they want to include the Berlin Antisemitism Controversy. We also do not take a stance on what the targeted age group or grade would be. We follow the lead of other articles published in this journal (see, e. g., von Lüpke 2020) and offer merely a suggestion for teachers of how antisemitism might be integrated if antisemitism is to be discussed in philosophy class.

sexes (cf. von Lüpke 2020, Mercer 2018). Or whether and to what extent Kant's views on race and sex challenge his concept of universality (cf. Kleingeld 2019). In all those cases, the aim is to determine to what extent philosophical theories are affected – or “tainted” – by ideas most of us would reject today. This is a valuable goal, and we do not question its importance. However, insofar as the systematic approach concentrates only on assessing arguments abstracted from the surrounding discourse, it has two weaknesses.

First, it easily dismisses the standpoint of the oppressed. Various contemporary works on “forgotten” female thinkers show that these figures were excluded from the canon because of misogynistic structures rather than merit. Many initiatives within the history of philosophy have recovered these thinkers and started to engage with their philosophical work seriously (cf. Nassar/Gejsdal 2021; Reuter 2019, 2021; O'Neill/Lascano 2019, Berges/Siani 2018). Similar logic applies to antisemitism in the history of philosophy. As Harry Redner points out, one of the main problems in the history of Western philosophy concerns “various efforts made at different times to exclude Jewish thinkers and thought from traditions and lineages of Western philosophies” (2002: 115). Focusing on analyzing the antisemitic aspects in well-known texts merely continues to operate within the same standards that led to the exclusion of Jewish intellectuals from the Western canon in the first place.

Second, we need a method that involves reflecting upon the historical and political context responsible for excluding philosophers who voiced differing opinions and challenged the antisemitic, misogynist, or racist status quo. For this, we must treat philosophy as an argumentative practice in which standards, concepts, and principles are continuously challenged. The systematic approach alone, at least in its most extreme form, cannot account for this. The contextualist approach aims to overcome this problem as it thinks of philosophy as a dynamic practice or a continuous debate. Instead of a static picture of a philosophical system that we try to “decode”, contextualism seeks to understand philosophy in its socio-historical and cultural context, drawing from insights from intellectual and social history. With “context” we mean the historical milieu in a broad sense i.e., the nexus of different cultural and socio-political currents in which a philosopher finds themselves.³ The contextualist approach is based on the epistemological claim that all knowledge claims, including philosophical, are embedded in their social, historical, and philosophical context. While the debates that are analyzed contain claims that purport to be universal, the contextualist approach maintains that the socio-political and historical conditions in which these claims are raised are essential for understanding and interpreting them.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Next, we introduce and qualify the contextualist approach. After that, we offer a case study of the contextualist framework

³ We use the term in quite a broad sense, corresponding to the way many historians use it. It refers to the historical and political reality and is thus a broader conception of ‘context’ than – say – that of ‘semantic-pragmatist contextualism’, where the truth and meaning of a sentence is relativized to the context in which the sentence is uttered.

applied to the ‘Berlin Antisemitism Controversy’ (1879-1881),⁴ demonstrating one possible application of the proposed approach. In the concluding remarks, we summarize five advantages of this approach and point to further possible applications of this method.

2. The Contextualist Approach

Our argument is inspired by the literature on the methodology of the history of philosophy, and we are trying to transpose and utilize those insights for pedagogical purposes. For example, Richard Rorty’s differentiation of “rational reconstructions” and “historical reconstructions” (1984: 49, 53) has informed our distinction between the systematic and contextualist approaches. A rational reconstruction means a past philosopher is, so to say, “re-educated” (ibid.: 51) or translated into contemporary language. In other words, the dead philosopher is treated as a contemporary interlocutor. Historical reconstructions, in contrast, are primarily interested in the original meanings of ideas. The philosophical problems are understood mainly in reference to their historical-cultural environments, and avoiding anachronistic interpretations is essential. Of course, most philosophical-historical studies usually accommodate elements from both approaches and do not explicitly declare themselves in either of these camps. As a rough ideal-typical distinction, it can, however, help to illustrate the contextualist approach.

The systematic vs. contextualist distinction also resonates with debates in the philosophy of didactics. Jonas Pfister follows Douglas P. Lackey in differentiating between two types of text-based philosophy education: the “problem-focused” and the “historical” approach (2010: 166). The former confronts the student with a philosophical problem rather than canonical work or author. Ideas are analyzed regarding their function to *solve* the proposed philosophical problem. The historical approach is mainly concerned with *understanding* philosophical texts by embedding them in their historical nexus. Pfister raises the concern that the focus on understanding would run the danger of hindering students from creating philosophical arguments on their own (ibid.: 168).

The contextualist approach touches the “problem-focused” approach insofar as it focuses on controversies, where the focus lies on a *problem* (and not, for instance, a philosophical system or an individual philosopher). It differs from it as it analyzes with philosophical means socio-political problems that are not reducible to systematic issues and are intermingled with non-philosophical aspects. In this respect, the contextualist approach comes closer to the “historical” method. However, this does not imply a lack of critical engagement. On the contrary, the critical judgment is, as we will show right below, baked into the approach. Recognizing antisemitism and its complex political,

⁴ Heinrich Greatz (1879a, 1779b), Paul Cassel (1879), Harry Breßlau (1880), Ludwig Bamberger (1880), Caro Jescheskel (1879), Karl Fischer (1880), Moritz Lazarus (1880), Seligmann Meyer (1880), Theodor Mommsen (1880a, 1880b, 1880c), Moses Aron Nadir (1879), Heinrich Bernhard Oppenheim (1880) and Heinrich von Treitschke (1879a, 1879b, 1880a, 1880b, 1880c, 1880d, 1880e, 1880f, 1880g) contributed to the controversy, which was mostly carried out in the *Preußische Jahrbücher*.

social, cultural, and historical aspects is a genuinely critical task complementing logical evaluations.

In this sense, Matthew Lipman's pedagogical writings resonate with the contextualist approach. Even though Lipman's "philosophy for children" targets younger children, the basic idea remains valuable for teaching philosophy to all audiences. Lipman (1976) proposes a dialogue-driven method, where philosophically stimulating narratives or stories are used to teach independent philosophical reasoning and rational thinking. We have opted to talk about "context" rather than "narratives," but the case study in the next section will show that the history of philosophy can also function as a philosophically and emotionally stimulating story, but with real-life impact. Another well-known, earlier proposal for a dialogical approach to teaching philosophy was by Leonard Nelson. In his 1929 essay, "The Socratic Method", Nelson advocates teaching *philosophizing* rather than philosophical ideas. He calls for a teacher-student relationship that encourages students to think for themselves (1929/1980). This dialogical ethos is also built into the contextualist approach, as it calls for independent hermeneutic engagement with philosophical texts and ideas. However, in contrast to Lipman and Nelson, contextualism emphasizes the importance of historically informed interpretation of philosophical texts and the adherence to historical facts. It is the socio-political contextualization, rather than storytelling or dialogue, that leads the interpretation and triggers critical – and philosophical – thinking.

The epistemological foundation mentioned above also entails a hermeneutic methodology that triggers critical thinking.⁵ Philosophizing does not fall short in the proposed interpretative approach as the students are forced to go beyond their own experiences by interpreting these texts. The texts provide the material to 'reexperience' a crucial historical debate that was decisive for modern antisemitism. Being able to see the historical and philosophical underpinnings of these tropes equips the students to critically discern and resist antisemitic argumentation they encounter in their own lives.⁶

Apart from the systematic view laid out above, the contextualist view can also be contrasted with the 'traditional' approach to the history of philosophy: the view that the history of philosophy is best studied (and taught) as a series of great systems and canonical thinkers, like a series of "beads on a string" (Norton 1981: 331, Mercer 2020: 71). The contextualist approach views the history of philosophy as diverse and polyphonic. It allows the students to identify philosophical arguments and their complex cultural entanglements.

Three methodological features characterize the contextualist approach. First, the contextualist approach provides a bottom-up learning situation in which students engage with antisemitism as 'hermeneutic experts.' It is sensitive toward the differing

⁵ For the pedagogical virtues of hermeneutics, see Smith 1991 and Sitorou 1993.

⁶ As it is shown in the case study further below, the contextualist approach raises awareness of the various rationales for antisemitism that reoccur in all – also the modern-day – forms of antisemitism. While the violence varies from extreme forms to less extreme, the philosophical take on antisemitism debate teaches the distinctive rationales and their argumentative flaws that are brought forward to justify violent actions.

manifestations of antisemitism. Contextualism expects the students to analyze and interpret the material, and – through this close critical engagement with sources – understand the different facets of antisemitic discourse. In contrast, a top-down approach would proceed from a pre-given definition of the phenomenon.⁷ Avoiding pre-given definitions is especially important when it comes to antisemitism, as vagueness and abstractness are often considered key features in antisemitic “argumentation” (Salzborn/Kurth 2021, Korn 2020, Chernivsky/Lorenz 2020). The bottom-up approach avoids anticipatory judgments and does not take antisemitism to be a “natural kind” that could be defined exhaustively. Rather, a contextualist view considers antisemitism as “a floating signifier” that reappears and takes on new forms in different contexts (Headley 2006).

The most substantive engagement with antisemitism often happens in history class when students learn about the Second World War and the Holocaust. However, teaching the students about antisemitism only through its most blatant and horrifying manifestations is more likely to fail when it comes down to recognizing other forms of antisemitism. The risk is that antisemitism is treated as a historical phenomenon, something “of the past,” and not as a social practice that takes on different forms in different contexts. Antisemitism often disguises itself. Understanding these more subtle but harmful forms of antisemitism – like the infamous “dog-whistling” strategies – requires the students to see antisemitism as a discursive practice with real-life implications.

Second, contextualism requires broadening our understanding of what philosophy is. Systematically speaking, philosophy usually aims for universally true claims. Contextualism argues that to understand philosophical arguments, we also need to consider the time and place in which they evolved. It situates philosophical contributors within a political and social context. Of course, in its weakest form, this claim is somewhat trivial. No historian of philosophy, however systematically minded, would claim that social and historical context has no effect whatsoever. However, contextualism – as we will later see – maintains that context is often *essential* for understanding and evaluating philosophical arguments.

Contextualism – unlike systematic analysis – includes the analysis of false and mistaken beliefs. It takes that those, too, can influence political and philosophical discourses. Given that the contextualist approach seeks to understand a particular nexus of thought, unsound arguments based on logical fallacies are as important for the analysis as the sound and convincing arguments. Consider, for example, Pascal’s wager. A systematic historian of philosophy would evaluate the validity and soundness of the proof

⁷ An example of the top-down approach would be when students are provided with a detached or abstract definition of anti-Semitism without looking closely at cases. Introducing the ‘scapegoat’ anticipates already a critical judgement. Although it is true that antisemites use Jews as a scapegoat for societal problems, presupposing the anticipatory judgement may undermine the critical assessment by students. Of course, there is no way to assess this topic without previously acquired knowledge; however, having this in mind can help stimulating the students’ critical engagement with the texts.

of God's existence. Although contextualists use analytical tools, too, they are also interested in how arguments emerge in a particular historical-political context. This is especially important when dealing with antisemitism, which is based on unsound arguments. It is not enough to identify the philosophical reasons (even though understanding them is essential too). But we also need to understand the nonphilosophical reasons for beliefs (Kusch 1995: 20-21). The motivational factors are crucial for assessing the significance of antisemitic ideas – both within a particular text and when it comes to their socio-cultural effects. The idea that there could be a purely philosophical history of philosophy that is only interested in philosophical reasons for beliefs on the one hand, and a “nonphilosophical” history of philosophy, exclusively interested in nonphilosophical causes for beliefs, is – from a contextualist standpoint – erroneous.

Third, adopting a more historical attitude amounts to studying the past as a complex nexus of ideas rather than as a battleground of abstract and logical philosophical propositions. This might lead to an ethical worry: the efforts focusing too much on *understanding* rather than *criticizing* might downplay the immoral aspects of inhumane and degrading antisemitic beliefs. However, by conceptualizing the past as a nexus of competing ideas and debates, the contextualist questions the very idea of “the” standards of a particular time. Feminist historians of philosophy have highlighted the contributions of female philosophers, who were active participants in philosophical debates. Elise Reimarius, an immediate follower of Kant, criticized for example that the German Idealist's view on political universalism applied, in fact, only to a particular group, namely property-owning males (Maliks 2022).⁸ Given that there have always been women actively resisting the misogynistic status quo, much before modern feminism, one can hardly use the historical contextualization as a valid excuse for someone's misogyny. The contextualist seeks to find those voices that contest those “status quo” beliefs. Jewish philosophers, too, were active participants in debates revolving around antisemitism. By including their voices, the contextualist works against the reduction of moral standards to those of one dominant societal group. The goal is to produce an interpretive framework that offers crucial information for students so that they can identify and discuss the problem in question. By getting acquainted with the historical background information, students gain a more profound sensitivity toward the problem and learn to assess arguments critically from a philosophical and historical perspective.

3. The Berlin Antisemitism Controversy: A Case Study

In this section, we apply the contextualist approach to the “Berlin Antisemitism Controversy” of 1879-1881. This case study is meant to illustrate the possibilities of the contextualist approach and inspire the reader to think about its pedagogical virtues, not as a ready-made lesson plan. We introduce the contextualist framework with which students can ‘reexperience’ antisemitism of the late nineteenth century. We shall show

⁸ For more female philosophers from the nineteenth century that were forgotten, see, for example, the nineteenth century themed *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century Women Philosophers in the German Tradition*, edited by Kristin Gjesdal and Dalia Nassar.

that the contextualist approach focuses on three elements that are particularly important when dealing with antisemitism: motivational reasons, the shift in the meaning of concepts, and the social reality in which the arguments emerged. Considering philosophical claims in light of these nonphilosophical aspects will allow students to detect the specific antisemitic elements of this debate.

One first needs to picture the general atmosphere at the time. From the beginning of the First German Empire in 1807 until 1871, Germany experienced robust economic growth (Nipperdey 2013: 283). The liberals had implemented a law that legalized speculations on the stock market, creating a significant divergence between the speculated and the actual value. The bubble busted in 1873. The Prussian citizens experienced consequently severe economic and societal shortcomings. Heinrich von Treitschke – a national-liberal member of the *Reichstag*, the national historian of Prussia, and a close ally of Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898) – provided an explanation that was met with enthusiasm in some circles. In his polemical piece “Our Prospects” [*Unsere Aussichten*] (1879), he identified a “cultural crisis” that was, in his view, responsible for a reconsideration of the cultural values in Germany. “Economic hardship; the memory of the hopes and sins of the early days [*Gründerzeit*]; the increasing bewildering of the masses that goes hand in hand with the distribution of the secret arts of reading and writing; and the memory of the atrocities of spring 1878—all this has forced thousands to reconsider the values of humanity and enlightenment” (Heinrich von Treitschke 1879/1965). Rather than attributing the societal problems to the economic crisis, he put forward a theory of cultural decline. According to him, it was not the economy but a more general shift in worldview in Germany that led to the rise of socialism and the Jewish emancipation – two movements that allegedly threatened the cultural nation of Prussia.⁹

In 1870, the civil rights movement of Jewish citizens seemed to have come to an end: in northern Germany, they received civil standing in 1869, and the German Empire followed in 1871 (Nipperdey 2013: 401). While Jewish emancipation seemed to have been welcome in the decades before, Treitschke’s essay launched a full-scale controversy about the role of Jews in the German *Kulturnation* (Germany as a cultural-national unity). While the “Jewish Question” had earlier been a fringe issue, it became a topical political and ideological question for the intellectual elite. Ultimately, the question was about who could call themselves “German” (Stoelzer 2009: 183).

Materialism, usually defined as a doctrine claiming that nothing but matter exists, was often seen as a threatening position leading to moral anarchy, as it refrained from the justification of moral ideas. Some feared that it could threaten the religious status quo (see also: Beiser 2014: 53). Treitschke used this ongoing debate and claimed that the alleged lack of morality that especially Jews exhibited was responsible for the materialist mindset in the German intellectual landscape. “The greed of the Jews,” Treitschke states, “bears a big part of the problem of today’s materialism” (ibid.: 9). Without specifying

⁹ Prior to Treitschke’s essay, socialism had fallen into disrepute due to the two assassination attempts on Emperor Wilhelm the First. The “atrocities of spring 1878” refer to these events.

what he means with the “materialist mindset” or justifying this empirical claim, he bases his argumentation on one crucial premise, namely: “The Jews are our misfortune” (1879: 11).

The same vagueness can be found in other references. Treitschke claims that the Jews would understand themselves as the “chosen people”, prior to other religions. Despite the various efforts of theologians and philosophers – including Cohen – who rejected a literal understanding of this doctrine and, instead, suggested a purely *ethical* interpretation of it, Treitschke states that the Jews would enjoy “the safety of Germany” while viewing Christians as their “arch-enemy” (ibid.: 9). Treitschke ties these claims to their allegedly “materialistic” and “greedy character.” In the literature, this is defined as “religious” antisemitism (Harap 1987: 25, Kanitz/Schlagheck 2021).¹⁰ Furthermore, Treitschke claims that Germany would have to deal with the “shadiest, criminal, and vulgar” Jewish tribe crossing the German border from Poland, asserting that Germany had been “flooded” by Jewish immigrants trying to exploit the German system (Treitschke 1965: 7). Even though the Polish Jews crossing the border hardly impacted the population growth in Germany (Nipperdey 2013), this claim is based on an emotionally laden but unfounded picture of Jewish citizens as “socially inferior, pushy, or vulgar”. This is also known as “social” antisemitism (Harap 1987: 25). We also find elements of the “conspiratorial” type of antisemitism (ibid.) when Treitschke states that the Jews would infiltrate the German economy and the press as part of their secret plan to overthrow the western-Germanic “essence” (*Wesen*) (Treitschke 1879: 12). Treitschke concludes that there is only one solution to this alleged cultural mess: The Jews have to “assimilate” to the “morals and thoughts” of the Germans (ibid.: 12).

Reading Treitschke in philosophy class might be considered problematic. Treitschke was a historian and ‘Our Prospects’ is not a philosophical text. It also consists of degrading language that takes up valuable teaching time that could be used for more deserving authors. Yet, reading Treitschke’s text (or parts of it) is instructive to understand the philosophical, political, and ideological questions at issue. Lazarus and Cohen were directly responding to the claims made by Treitschke. Treitschke sets the contextual and argumentative horizon in which the philosophical argumentation took place, and highlights what was at stake for the Jewish philosophers. Moreover, we do not propose to read Treitschke without the philosophers who responded to the text. Only in combination, Treitschke’s remarks are informative as they open the debate that triggered philosophers to think about the problem from a philosophical point of view.

Contextualizing Treitschke’s essay in light of the historical reality operates on two levels. First, it uses traditional analytical methods to analyze the failure of Treitschke’s arguments. The assertions that the “Jews are the misfortune” and that Germany was “flooded by Polish Jews” – allegedly the “shadiest breed” – lack any argumentative underpinning. Second, it uses references to historical and social facts to provoke a discussion regarding the *motivational* aspects underlying these baseless assertions.

¹⁰ Kanitz and Schlagheck focus on “israel-focused antisemitism” and “arabic-islamic antisemitism” (Kanitz/Schlagheck 2021).

Knowing about the economic crisis and the emancipatory tendencies of Jewish citizens puts Treitschke's essay into a different light. It shows that there were more plausible explanations available that were disregarded by Treitschke and remind us of how recent the Jewish emancipation movement had been back then. It is especially the latter part – the factual and historical contextualization – that raises questions about Treitschke's motivational reasons. While analytic-systematic and historical explorations show *that* Treitschke's argumentation fails due to unfounded premises, a lack of empirical data, and argumentative fallacies, the contextualist approach triggers the question of *why* Treitschke was using these specific explanations and why they were popular.

Next, we look at the standpoint of the oppressed. Among the responding Jewish authors was Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903). Together with Heymann Steinthal (1823-1899), he was a leading figure in *Völkerpsychologie* (psychology of “peoples” or “Völker”). In Lazarus' lecture, “What is national?” (1880), he agrees with Treitschke on one occasion, namely that materialism is a problem. Lazarus, however, argues that the materialist worldview would be responsible for the hatred between the races, thereby implicitly calling Treitschke a materialist (1880: 3). According to Lazarus, it is “neither theoretically nor practically” correct to view materialism as a “Jewish testimony” (*ibid.*, 3). Lazarus views materialism as a cultural-essentialist doctrine based on racial ideology (*ibid.*, 22). Any position that is ready to accept a theory of race – including Treitschke's – is, according to Lazarus, materialistic to some extent (*ibid.*).

Lazarus' central thesis is that the concept of “nationality” is based on only one binding factor: “language”, thereby arguing against accounts that take moral or religious norms, geographical borders, race, or ethnicity as the foundational basis (*ibid.*: 7-8). Since every nation consists of several ethnic groups, Lazarus claims that “pure ethnicity” is insufficient to ground a nation (*ibid.*: 9). To overcome the differences, he provides a language-focused definition of nationality, claiming that the shared usage of concepts offers a communicative foundation that allows for overcoming differences and creating a culture in which all members of society – regardless of their religious, ethnic, and cultural heritage – are integrated (*ibid.*: 21-22). Nationality is defined by the *intellectual* ability of its members to strengthen social relations. In colorful words, Lazarus exclaims: “Blood means bloody little to me” (“*Das Blut bedeutet mir blutwenig*”) (*ibid.*: 22).

Lazarus deconstructs several aspects of antisemitism. Against the conspiracist claim that the Jews would plan to overtake Prussian Germany, Lazarus points out the fact that the Jewish community has been and still is a non-neglectable part of the German culture that has fundamentally shaped it. “We have fought for Germany, we have consulted the parliament, we have worked in laboratories, we have healed patients in hospitals, and we have lectured at higher educational institutions [...]. Whether we like it or not, we work as Germans” (Lazarus 1880: 27). Against an exclusive notion of “Germanism” (“*Deutschtum*”), Lazarus argues for the need to refrain from a national identity that leads to a separation of groups (*ibid.*: 37). “Germanism” is instead to be taken as an “ideal of the German nation” that stands above the features dividing a nation (*ibid.*: 37). Once we realize that the ideal of humanity is taken as the foundational character of culture, we

would have to recognize that the variety of traditions and the openness towards each other would offer a foundation to nourish one another (ibid.: 41-42). For such an idealist and humane conception of “Germanism,” the Jewish tradition would offer a helpful tool everyone should use: “self-criticism” (ibid.: 56). Lazarus counteracts Treitschke’s polemics by arguing for an alternative notion of nationality that promotes features that seek to overcome cultural differences.

Again, the contextualist approach allows for a two-layered analysis of Lazarus’ essay. First, a logical analysis of his arguments shows that Lazarus did not violate any argumentative-logical rules. In contrast to Treitschke, Lazarus refrains from empirical claims, focusing on the implications of various conceptions of nationalism and how it ought to be understood. Second, contextualizing Lazarus’ essay within this controversy allows us to focus on the divergence in the meaning of concepts. Lazarus and Treitschke both argue against materialism and for a unified notion of a reason-based nation. However, their understanding of materialism differs fundamentally. While Lazarus takes materialism to be a philosophical position that reduces nation-defining features to empirical features such as religion, race, and ethnicity, Treitschke uses this philosophical debate to discredit one group by disqualifying it from partaking in the “Western-Germanic” idea of a nation. This example illustrates how the same philosophical doctrine was interpreted and operationalized differently within the debate.

Let us now focus on Hermann Cohen’s contribution. Cohen was a Jewish philosopher, former *Völkerpsychologist*, and student of Lazarus. He defended the Kantian notion of humanity as a socio-political ideal that has its roots in Jewish messianism. Three years after his first in-depth study on Kantian ethics, *Kant’s Foundation of Ethics* (1877), Cohen published the essay “A Confession in the Jewish Question” (1880). To everyone’s surprise, Cohen seemed to *defend* Treitschke’s assimilation claim. Cohen argues that Kant’s practical philosophy – which he treats as a treasure of the German Protestant culture – shows crucial similarities with the Jewish foundation of God. For Kant and the Jews, the concept of God is meaningful insofar as it is based on autonomy and rationality (Cohen 1880: 129). However, Cohen seems to presuppose a German and Jewish “essence,” which goes against Lazarus’ anti-essentialism.

“Much to my regret,” Cohen states, “I have to confess that I disagree with Lazarus’ approach that is certainly interesting but leads to a wrong generalization” (Cohen 1880: 133). Although Cohen aligns with his well-respected colleague when it comes to a foundation of a culture that aims to overcome differences, he seems to align with Treitschke when emphasizing the differences between the “German religion” (Christianity) and “Judaism” (ibid.: 133). He even explicitly agrees with Treitschke that, in the long run, only one unified religion could survive in a culture (ibid.: 134). However, in contrast to Treitschke, this means that the Christians and Jews need to critically address and overcome the cultural differences and merge into a “purer form” of culture (ibid.). For Cohen, at least at this stage of his life, assimilation was a necessary and favorable aspect to reach this goal.

The young Cohen did not grasp the chauvinistic elements in Treitschke's arguments, interpreting him in the most charitable way possible. "Treitschke never said that the Jews are not allowed to stay German citizens because they are Semites; he rather said the contrary," Cohen claims (ibid.: 135). Cohen – who seems theoretically and personally like a natural fellow of Lazarus – interprets Lazarus' remark: "The blood means bloody little to me," surprisingly as an "exaggeration" that would inaccurately portray the meaning of Treitschke's view (ibid.). He even accuses Lazarus of going against the German intellectual tradition. As we naturally love our family and our fatherland, Cohen believes it is "natural" to feel more connected to the same race: "We must see that the instinct of race is not simple savagery, but a natural, nationally justified desire" (Cohen 1880: 138). Although Cohen emphasizes that race must never function as a "moral norm," he takes the feeling of belonging to a specific group as a "psychological" mechanism that needs to be considered (ibid.). Against this background, Cohen states: "We all wish we had a Germanic appearance" – a desire he connects with the feeling of belonging and takes to be essential for a nation's identity (ibid.).

However, despite Cohen's appeal to Treitschke, his essay also implies an implicit criticism of him. A "national double feeling" for two nations is, in Cohen's view, an "absurdity" (*Unding*) that only promotes the division of Germany (ibid.: 139). He emphasizes that the empirical perspective on race must never be the source of normativity. Only the Kantian and formal ideal of humanity is sufficient to serve as a justified foundation of cultural normativity. Although Cohen shows great sympathies towards the assimilation of Jews, his argument must be viewed as a more general claim pertaining to anyone – also the Germans – who are part of a nation. "We have to accept that we consciously need to strive for the ideal of national assimilation" (ibid.: 142). This ideal requires an open attitude from *both* sides: "[I]f we want to merge into *one* union, we need to nurture our religious communities and educate ourselves in religious and moral matters" (ibid.: 146). In Cohen's view, in a unified and humane society, where all members are well integrated, religious appropriation and assimilation – also from the Germans – are necessary.

It comes as no surprise that this critical nuance was disregarded by Treitschke and Lazarus. Treitschke thought of Cohen's contribution as an approval of his view. Lazarus saw in Cohen's objection a smarmy approach that played right into the hands of the antisemites. Disappointed by Cohen's views, Lazarus broke ties with his former friend and student. Only later Cohen had come to realize how greatly he had misjudged the situation. Cohen did not recognize that Treitschke's article was not meant as a truth-seeking conversation about the meaning of religious identity and overcoming differences. In fact, this debate marked a crucial turning point in his thinking (Widmer 2021). From that point onwards, Cohen was eager to show how antisemitism was deeply integrated into the philosophical landscape. He even treated Kant as a philosopher whose works were fundamentally shaped by a wrong depiction of the Jewish tradition provided by Christian thinkers (Zank 2000).

By including Cohen, we see how a philosopher misjudges a situation. As a first step, the two-fold analysis differentiates between Cohen's philosophical argumentation and the rhetorical language. Cohen's philosophical argumentation comes closer to Lazarus as he argues for an ideal notion striving to *overcome* empirical differences or a "materialistic" understanding of nationality. His call for "assimilation" targets both sides equally. Yet, the argument uses rhetorical language that is directed against Lazarus. Situating Cohen's essay concerning his later reaction and the reaction of Treitschke allows, in a second step, to contextualize Cohen's argument in the social reality. Even though Cohen held onto a normative-ethical conception of the state, this event taught him that antisemitic argumentation was not to be counteracted with good-faith discussions. The contextualist approach thus makes the reader aware of the socio-historical implications of an argument, allowing her to see a philosopher as a human prone to misjudging and changing their mind.

To sum up, the contextualist approach seeks to include nonphilosophical aspects such as motivational reasons, shifts in meaning, and socio-political implications of an argument. Moreover, it includes the standpoint of the oppressed, thereby painting a more complex picture of how the Jewish identity and the relationship between German nationalism and Jewishness were discussed. What is more, contextualism is meant to trigger students to engage closely and critically with the provided material. A philosophy teacher provides the material, helps with finding the relevant passages and decoding the argumentation, and provides the necessary background information. The students take on the role of 'hermeneutic experts' analyzing and questioning the sincerity of the arguments. Instead of installing a normative framework with certain presuppositions, the students are encouraged to think about epistemic and moral failures based on the texts in context.

The controversy provides three different views on nationality and national identity. In the classroom, those views are analyzed in their socio-historical context, but the arguments resonate with discussions today. The contextualist approach is not necessarily only about understanding history but about engaging critically in complex debates. Historical contextualization does not mean that we are not interested in their contemporary relevance, just that the relevance needs to be found through understanding the arguments properly in context.

4. Concluding Remarks

Without diminishing other approaches to address antisemitism in the history of philosophy, we believe that the demonstrated contextualist and historically sensitive method has advantages. We shall summarize those in this section.

First, the contextualist method concretely teaches how philosophy emerges within a certain nexus of time. The students not only learn to recognize but also analyze the social layers of argumentation. As shown in the case study, students learn to identify different variants of antisemitism based on a very blatant real-world example. They learn to pay attention to potential shifts in meaning, and they experience philosophers as thinking and

feeling beings who sometimes misjudge situations and change their minds. Deconstructing Treitschke's arguments in this context shows that he was not interested in a genuine philosophical dialogue. By making unfounded claims based on old stereotypes, he, in fact, worked out the ideological foundation that gave Chauvinist intellectuals of Prussian Germany a voice. Treitschke successfully pointed away from the shortcomings of Prussian politics and provided a narrative that allowed the leading classes of the society to channel their frustrations to Jews and ideas associated with them: socialism and materialism. The historical contextualization gives insight into the social and political conditions that created an atmosphere where antisemitism flourished.

Second, focusing on a debate rather than individual texts allows for a more nuanced understanding of philosophical concepts' meaning and their political and cultural dimensions. Even though concepts like "materialism" "nationalism" and "assimilation" have a "dictionary definition" i.e., an official meaning, the antisemitism debate shows that in practice the meaning of these concepts varied. It sensitizes students to interpret philosophical language in context-sensitive ways and to recognize when seemingly neutral philosophical concepts are instrumentalized for other ends. Contextualizing the texts brings to the surface that concepts and currents may fundamentally differ in their meaning and that they are sometimes used to denounce other positions.

Third, the contextualist approach offers one way to broaden the canon of philosophy. Concentrating on *topics* and *debates* rather than singular *figures* is an exciting way to include forgotten thinkers in the syllabus. Broadening the canon is especially important in the history of antisemitism and comparable topics, such as misogyny and racism. The history of antisemitism should not be taught only from the side of the antisemites but also prominently include the arguments that resisted it and philosophers who wrote against it. Teaching history of philosophy as a multi-dimensional nexus, including the dissenting voices, shows that problematic, erroneous, and degrading beliefs were constantly challenged. Although the contextualist method refrains from moral judgments, it does not fall short regarding an ethical dimension. On the contrary, by focusing on the voices of the oppressed, students get to know from a bottom-up point of view a vivid picture showing that antisemitism had never been universally accepted.

Fourth, contextualizing and historicizing arguments make it possible to engage critically with a phenomenon without passing down moral judgment on dead philosophers. The contextualist approach is not looking to demarcate the "good guys" from the bad ones in the history of philosophy. However, by including the standards of the oppressed who fought against diminishing practices, it does leave space for affective engagement with the material. It can and should evoke feelings. Mere "rational reconstructions" run the danger of not painting the full picture of sexism, racism, and antisemitism. As Geismann points out correctly, the Berlin antisemitism controversy "cannot be read without pain" (Geismann 1993: 269). Without engagement with the historical reality of the past thinkers, top-down approaches are vulnerable to missing out on creating a learning context in which students can reexperience this pain. Since abstract definitions of antisemitism cannot convey the whole reality of antisemitism, the

contextualist approach allows for a more nuanced picture of what it meant to be Jewish at a time. By recognizing that morally repugnant ideas have social, political, and cultural reasons and causes, the students better understand their actual real-life effects.

Fifth, contextualism supports teaching philosophy in a historically responsible manner. The “beads on a string” approach, i.e., thinking of the history of philosophy as a series of great systems is often not enough. If the history of philosophy is instead taken as a continuous nexus of debates and competing arguments and ideas embedded in the political and historical reality, students learn to recognize the socio-political relevance and consequences of philosophical ideas. In the case of antisemitism: rather than teaching it as an unchanging abstract doctrine, the contextualist approach fosters an understanding of the various facets of antisemitism and focuses on the – often subtle – mechanisms of antisemitism. Including the historical-philosophical dimension sharpens the critical mindset needed to identify antisemitic tendencies when facing other controversies. Learning about the historical context is thus of immediate practical value. It helps students learn from the events and mistakes of the past and helps them make informed decisions in the future, which is in many German-speaking countries an essential goal of a democracy-building education.

The contextualist approach is, of course, not limited to antisemitism. Even though we only concentrated on one case study, we hope to have shown that it has the potential to illuminate debates on race, sex, and gender issues in philosophy class as well.

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