

# Abicht and Śniadecki: about a Turbulent Philosophical Dispute at the Imperial University of Vilnius in 19<sup>th</sup> century

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**Abstract.** The article presents the results of source research conducted on the scholarly and teaching activities of the German philosopher and educator Johann Heinrich Abicht (1762–1816) who in 1804 was employed at the Imperial University of Vilnius. Research in Lithuanian, Polish, Ukrainian, and German archives has revealed many facts about Abicht's scholarly and teaching activities in Vilnius, most of which fall during the period when Jan Śniadecki (1756–1830) was Rector at the Imperial University of Vilnius. In this paper I argue that it was Abicht and his Vilnius-based scholarly and teaching activities that were the direct cause of Śniadecki's publication of the essay *On Metaphysics* in 1814, and indirectly also the trigger for all of Śniadecki's later philosophical writings.

**Keywords:** Abicht, Śniadecki, 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, Polish philosophy, metaphysics

## Abichtas ir Śniadeckis: apie audringą filosofinį disputą Vilniaus imperatoriškajame universitete 19 a.

**Santrauka.** Šis straipsnis pateikia rezultatus šaltinių tyrimo, atlikto nagrinėjant vokiečių filosofo bei švietėjo Johanno Heinricho Abichto (1762–1816) mokslinę bei dėstyimo veiklą. 1804 m. Abichtas buvo priimtas dirbti Vilniaus universitete. Lietuvos, Lenkijos, Ukrainos ir Vokietijos archyvų tyrimas atskleidė nemažai Abichto akademinės bei dėstyimo veiklos Vilniuje faktų, dauguma kurių yra iš laikotarpio, kuomet Jonas Śniadeckis (1756–1830) buvo Vilniaus imperatoriškojo universiteto rektoriumi. Šiame straipsnyje teigiama, kad būtent Abichtas bei jo mokslinė ir dėstyimo veikla Vilniuje buvo tiesioginė priežastis Śniadeckiui 1814 m. publikuoti esė „Apie metafiziką“, taip pat paskatinti visų vėlesniųjų Śniadeckio filosofinių raštų atsiradimą.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** Abichtas, Śniadeckis, 19 a. filosofija, Lenkijos filosofija, metafizika

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## Introduction

Jan Śniadecki (1756–1830), a mathematician and astronomer, one of the leaders of the educational reform in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, from the 1780s continued the programme seeking the modernisation of science initiated by the Commission of National Education, first, at the university in Cracow, and later, in Vilnius (as Rector of the Imperial University of Vilnius between 1807 and 1815). Śniadecki was a proponent of empiricism and the Scottish common sense philosophy, he represented the philosophical minimalism and eclecticism typical of the Polish philosophy of the period, and, above all, supported those ideas of the Enlightenment that could be reconciled with the development of natural and exact sciences. Such a pragmatic approach of Śniadecki to science and university education lent his activities an almost positivist character. Śniadecki went down in the history of the Polish philosophy above all as an opponent of metaphysics, which, he claimed, was “najniebezpieczniejsza dla kraju zaczynającego się porządnie uczyć” [*the most dangerous for a country only beginning to learn properly*] (Śniadecki 2014: 151). Śniadecki’s aversion to metaphysics and speculative philosophy was combined with an obsessive hostility towards the German philosophy, particularly towards Kant and post-Kantian idealist philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Śniadecki presented his philosophical position rather late, in treatises published between 1814 and 1820, in which his criticism was primarily of the German philosophy, notably, the increasingly popular philosophy of Immanuel Kant. These were not original writings, but rather popularisations based on arguments taken from the popular French compendium by Joseph Marie Degérando (1772–1842). The purpose of Śniadecki’s polemics, however, was not strictly philosophical. Rather, they were manifestos written in defence of Enlightenment empiricism, the achievements of science and the Polish language. Still, Śniadecki was unable to halt the growing interest in the German philosophy, which for quite some time had been gaining unrestricted popularity in Warsaw, Lvov, and Cracow. Various authors responded to Śniadecki’s criticism, usually through anonymous polemics appearing in Polish, Russian, and German journals (Krouglov et al. 2016; Kupś et al. 2017). Hence, in the 1810s, Vilnius, by then, the undisputed capital of the Polish and Lithuanian culture and science, also became the centre of a major philosophical dispute. This dispute was initiated by Jan Śniadecki in 1814 with the publication of a short essay entitled *On Metaphysics* (Śniadecki 1814b). Unintentionally, Śniadecki mobilised the hitherto inactive supporters of the German philosophy, defenders of idealism, and supporters of metaphysics, to engage in a discussion with the Rector of the Imperial University of Vilnius.

Up to this point, there had been a belief among historians of philosophy that Śniadecki’s

<sup>1</sup> In the correspondence of Duke Adam Czartoryski, we find a characterization of the brothers Jan and Jędrzej Śniadecki. Czartoryski writes of the Śniadeckis that they are “contemptuous of all that is not connected with the sciences” and obsessively oppose the employment of foreigners at the university: “In addition to the battle between the sciences and literature, we also see here a contempt for foreigners and a conviction of their uselessness, which, combined with the self-important conviction that we have in the country many people superior in every field of science, is harmful.” Letter from Adam Kazimierz Czartoryski to Adam Jerzy Czartoryski from Sieniawa, dated 5 September 1807, ms. PCL: Ew 1046, p. 425 (Beauvois 2012: 68–69).

anti-Kantianism was provoked by a specific Polish Kantianism, represented mainly by Józef Kalasanty Szaniawski (1764–1843). This hardly constitutes a plausible explanation. Szaniawski's main dissertations date between 1802 and 1808, while Śniadecki's first polemical essay was published in 1814. The chronology itself suggests that the immediate reason for Śniadecki's philosophical activity must have been different. Today we can say with certainty that this reason is known, and that it is the Vilnius-based scholarly and teaching activity of Johann Heinrich Abicht (1762–1816), a professor of logic and metaphysics employed in Vilnius in 1804.

In this paper I do not discuss the content of Śniadecki's philosophical writings. They have been studied repeatedly and competently elaborated on by historians of philosophy. The arguments Śniadecki used in his polemics have been exhaustively analysed, and their source identified, thus reliably demonstrating the secondary nature of Śniadecki's philosophical work (Woroniecki 1904; Viliūnas 2002). The subject of this article, however, concerns the events that immediately preceded the publication of the essay *On Metaphysics* and mobilised Śniadecki to undertake a polemic directed against the German philosophy. After all, if we take a look at all of Śniadecki's academic activity, it appears that his publications on philosophy will remain suspended in a vacuum until an unambiguous reason is indicated that prompted him to write the essay *On Metaphysics*.

However, before I proceed to the main topic, I will first sketch the historical situation in which Abicht's employment in Vilnius took place. Then I will present the most important facts of Abicht's teaching activity at Vilnius University and the most significant episodes of Abicht's conflict with Rector Śniadecki. The contemporary established facts of Abicht's scientific biography can now finally be placed in the context, well-researched and thoroughly described by historians, of the history of science and education in the territories of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Johann Heinrich Abicht at the Imperial University of Vilnius. Selected facts**

When, in 1803, Tsar Alexander I approved the new legal grounds of the University of Vilnius (Baliński 1862; Bieliński 1899–1900; Truchim 1960; Kaminska 2012; Beauvois 2012), thus launching a process of extensive educational reforms in Russia, the University of Cracow was in decline. In 1803, the Austrian authorities undertook the process of merging the universities of Cracow and Lvov, restored the Faculty of Philosophy, and exchanged the Polish academic staff for German professors. An imperial decree, issued on 6 August 1805, finalised this process and led to the final provincialisation and Germanization of Cracow University (Mrozowska 1965: 71, 89, 91).<sup>2</sup>

Even if the earlier experience of Cracow's and Vilnius's cooperation with foreign scholars had been positive, the new political situation resulting from the Third Partition

<sup>2</sup> The specificity of the Faculty of Philosophy was that lectures were delivered predominantly in German (Mrozowska 1965: 100).

of Poland produced a groundswell of resentment towards foreigners employed at Polish universities, particularly towards Germans. When Jan Śniadecki moved from Cracow to Vilnius in 1807 to take up the post of Rector of the University there, he had ample grounds for showing his dissatisfaction with the personnel policy of his predecessor, Rector Hieronim Stroynowski (1752–1815), who willingly recruited foreigners.

From the perspective of Rector Stroynowski and Curator Czartoryski, the hiring in Vilnius of Johann Heinrich Abicht, a German philosopher and teacher from Erlangen, a proponent of Kant's philosophy, was no precedent. On the contrary, Vilnius University already had a long tradition of employing prominent foreigners.<sup>3</sup> It was therefore no different from usual when, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, official invitations were extended to European universities, and informal private contacts were initiated to find the very best professors for university chairs.<sup>4</sup>

Abicht was chosen from a large group of competing candidates.<sup>5</sup> Besides Abicht, applicants for the chair of logic and metaphysics included: Christoph Gottfried Bardili (1761–1808) from Stuttgart, Andrzej Markiewicz (1762–1815) from Cracow, Giovannelli (?), Johann Baptist Schad (1758–1834) from Jena, and Duncan Forbes (?) from Edinburgh. Meanwhile, the applicants to the chair of moral philosophy were Johann Christian Wilhelm Wunder (?) from Erlangen, David Theodor August Suabedissen (1773–1835) from Marburg, and Thomas Campbell (1763–1854) from Glasgow. This list should be further complemented by some names that appeared later: Lancellin<sup>6</sup> Kirsten (?) and Georg Heinrich Henrici (1770–1851).<sup>7</sup> It also seems that, among the candidates for the chair of philosophy, Albert Christian Meinecke (1757–1807) was also considered. He was a classical philologist, Rector of the gymnasium in Osterode, who was recommended by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, then professor in Berlin and from 1804 in Erlangen.<sup>8</sup>

This impressive list is not complete. To it we should also add the names of people who were also considered, even if they did not officially declare their candidature. Such potential candidates included Johann Heinrich Tieftrunk (1760–1837) from Halle<sup>9</sup>, who was considered as Abicht's competitor. Tieftrunk, however, did not receive sufficient assurance from Vilnius, and ultimately did not take the risk of a change of employment.<sup>10</sup> At a later stage, the candidature of Joseph Marie Degérando (1772–1842) was also under

<sup>3</sup> During the entire history of Vilnius University, from its foundation in 1578 until its closure in 1831, it is possible to count 35 names of German scholars alone who occupied university chairs (Mirovič 1933). This number illustrates that the dispute between 'Germans' and 'Poles' within the professorial body during the rectorate of Jan Śniadecki was more of an episode that did not reflect the reality of the university in its long history.

<sup>4</sup> There was a dispute at the university about the manner in which the selection of professors should be undertaken. Not only was there a serious lobby opposing the involvement of foreigners, but questioning open competitions in general as an inefficient form of recruitment (Beauvois 2012: 81, 85).

<sup>5</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 277. A higher number of candidates was recorded only for the university clinic.

<sup>6</sup> PCL: ms. 6395, vol. 2, p. 695. Lacellin was a candidate to the chair of moral philosophy.

<sup>7</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 277, c. 4-5; ms. F 2 KC 232, p. 114; ms. F 2 KC 208, c. 11, 15.

<sup>8</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 208, c. 14; cf. PCL: ms. 6395, vol. 2, p. 329: letter from H. Stroynowski to A. J. Czartoryski of 20 March 1804. *Nota bene* Fichte briefly gave lectures as Abicht's successor in Erlangen.

<sup>9</sup> PCL: ms. 6395, vol. 2, p. 329.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 329: letter from H. Stroynowski to A. J. Czartoryski of 20 March 1804.

consideration as a professor of moral philosophy.<sup>11</sup> This plan too, however, had to be abandoned when it became apparent that Degérando had already taken a job as secretary to the minister of Maine de Biran.<sup>12</sup>

In the end, Abicht was chosen based on his achievements, the dissertation submitted, and the recommendations of Nicolas Fuss (1755–1826), a Swiss mathematician and member of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. On strictly objective criteria, Abicht's academic output was impressive. During his fourteen years in Erlangen, Abicht was involved in the scientific life of Germany and was active in organizing (as an editor of philosophical journals) and teaching (as head of the educational and the logic-practical seminar). During this period, Abicht managed to publish dozens of philosophical treatises in theoretical philosophy and ethics, one of which in 1796 won the competition of the Berlin Academy of Sciences (Klemme 1998; Klemme 2005; Klemme 2016). It is beyond doubt that Abicht's scholarly competence and teaching experience set him apart from the candidates and meant that few could compete with him.

Abicht arrived in Vilnius on 10 September 1804.<sup>13</sup> He presented a detailed plan for a philosophy course officially on 15 October, during a meeting of the council of the Faculty of Moral and Political Sciences. The note with which the information about this event was provided is a foreshadowing of the principal problems connected with the later teaching work of this German professor in Vilnius. For from the very beginning, Abicht presented an ambitious programme for a course in philosophy, a sort of manifesto for academic and educational activity. In the proposed curriculum, he intended to go beyond the stereotypical lectures on logic and metaphysics and wished to extend his lectures with additional philosophical subjects.<sup>14</sup> Already the earliest surviving letter from Abicht to the IUW Senate contains a declaration of his willingness to give lectures in teaching and anthropology as well as other branches of philosophy.<sup>15</sup> The letter was accompanied with Abicht's account of his most important publications (nineteen titles) and a list of the seven courses he taught at Erlangen (logic, metaphysics with criticism of reason, anthropology, moral philosophy, law of nature, psychological theory of nature, and educational science). Abicht also mentioned that in Erlangen he headed the logic-practice institute and the educational seminar.<sup>16</sup> All of Abicht's subsequent efforts to expand the philosophical lectures he gave in Vilnius can be seen as an effort to continue the teaching he had previously conducted in Germany. The university authorities opposed these plans, interpreting Abicht's motivation merely as an attempt to gain more income. This does not reflect the whole picture. Abicht indeed had unique competences and experience to offer the new university, if only the authorities had been sufficiently

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 695.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 695–696: letter from H. Stroynowski to A. J. Czartoryski of 9 April 1805.

<sup>13</sup> LVIA, 721 I 382, c. 6.

<sup>14</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 208, c. 20.

<sup>15</sup> PCL: ms. 5450, p. 3: letter from J. H. Abicht to University Senate of 21 October 1803.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

receptive to his proposals to expand the philosophy course and introduce new teaching methods, especially in the training of future teachers.<sup>17</sup>

The stance of the university authorities towards Abicht's proposals for additional philosophical lectures is quite well reflected in one of Rector Stroynowski's letters to Duke Czartoryski. In this letter, Stroynowski not only reveals the backstage of the internal organization of the university's work, but also gives the first characterization of Abicht and the first assessment of the style of his work.<sup>18</sup> The Rector, among other things, reports that Abicht has submitted a number of disparate projects (even contradictory to each other), and that they all aim to increase the number of classes allocated to a full course in philosophy (Stroynowski doubts whether 10 years would be sufficient for Abicht to complete such an extensive course). Stroynowski speculates that Abicht's behaviour might be the result of his 'metaphysical addictions', but allows for the idea that it might simply be motivated by a desire for additional income. In the end, it was decided that Abicht could not be entrusted with an additional course in moral philosophy (as he was originally scheduled to do), and that he should first prove his teaching skills by lecturing only on speculative philosophy. It was also expected that Abicht would conform to the university's accepted way of teaching science "decently and clearly" and complete the lecture during a two-year course.

The prospect of obtaining permission to teach a course in moral philosophy, which Abicht had sought from the beginning of his employment in Vilnius, came unexpectedly and by chance, as a result of a coincidence. In the autumn of 1807, the then new Rector Jan Śniadecki reported to Curator Czartoryski about scandals caused by the professor of Latin language and literature, the Italian scholar Paul Tarenghi (1767?–1830?).<sup>19</sup> Śniadecki dismissed Tarenghi from teaching and began efforts to expel him from the University and from Vilnius. As a result of this decision, a substitution had to be provided immediately for the lectures taken away from Tarenghi. To this end, Śniadecki introduced the possibility of combining two related chairs into one. He thus resolved the problem of vacancies and, simultaneously, assured the professors an additional source of income.<sup>20</sup>

Most likely prompted by this change, in 1808 Abicht, too, began his efforts to obtain a second chair of philosophy. At the beginning of 1809 he again sent a description of the proposed course in moral philosophy to Duke Czartoryski.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, he informed the Duke that he had already given the Latin copy to Rector Śniadecki at the end of August the previous year, and that it was only a month later that, under pressure, the Rector

<sup>17</sup> For Jan Śniadecki, and especially for Hugo Kołłątaj, *Ustawy, czyli ogólne postanowienia Imperatorskiego Wileńskiego Uniwersytetu i Szkół jego wydziału* [Statutes, or General Provisions of the Imperial University of Vilnius and the Schools of its Faculty] of 1803 introduced too much philosophy into the university (Kołłątaj 1844: 159-163), which had previously been nearly eliminated by the reforms of the National Education Commission

<sup>18</sup> PCL: ms. 6395, vol. 2, pp. 738–740, 753–755: letter from H. Stroynowski to A. J. Czartoryski of 24 May 1805.

<sup>19</sup> J. Śniadecki to A. J. Czartoryski, letter of 15 September 1807, ms. BCz 6396, pp. 151–152.

<sup>20</sup> J. Śniadecki to A. J. Czartoryski, letter of 18/30 September 1807, ms. BCz 6396, p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> PCL: ms. 5450, pp. 31-33; letter of J. H. Abicht to A. J. Czartoryski of 15 February 1809. The attachments mentioned in the letter have not been preserved.

presented it to the University Senate, which, in turn, submitted it to the Faculty of Moral and Political Sciences for evaluation.<sup>22</sup> In said request, sent to the Senate, presumably at the beginning of October 1808, Abicht asked to be permitted to give lectures on moral philosophy, teaching, aesthetics, and general grammar.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Abicht made it clear that he had already written on the matter to Duke Czartoryski, who instructed him to prepare a plan for teaching the courses in question.<sup>24</sup> The surviving draft of the plan then submitted by Abicht is dated August 1808.<sup>25</sup>

The evaluation procedure for the plan submitted in 1808 to teach two philosophy courses commenced nearly six months later, in the spring of 1809.<sup>26</sup> The Faculty of Moral and Political Sciences issued its opinion as early as 20 April 1809.<sup>27</sup> The opinion was highly critical. Abicht replied to it extensively and firmly on 15 June 1809, upholding everything he had included in the original programme; at the same time, he demanded that his comments, together with the critical opinion of the faculty, be included in the record and communicated in full to Duke Czartoryski.<sup>28</sup> It took another year for Abicht to receive final approval, as the acceptance of the Minister of Public Enlightenment was necessary.<sup>29</sup> Finally, on 13 September 1810, during a session of the faculty council, Abicht read out his plan to teach practical philosophy.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, from the academic year 1810/1811, Abicht's lecture programme changed. According to the *Praelectiones*, each year Abicht began his course with the first part of psychology, which he taught six times a week. After – as he put it – “laying the foundation for the rest of philosophy,” he proceeded to lecture on each discipline. Three times it was criticism of reason, also called the second part of psychology (in 1810/1811, 1812/1813 and 1814/1815), which always preceded the lecture on metaphysics. Also three times Abicht lectured on mental anthropology (in 1810/1811, 1812/1813, 1814/1815), twice on logic (in 1813/1814, 1815/1816), presumably always combined with logical exercises. In this period, ethics was taught by Abicht most often (in 1810/1811, 1811/1812, 1813/1814 and 1815/1816). The history of philosophy, on the other hand, was taught by Abicht only once (in 1814/1815), and was based on a textbook by Friedrich Gedike.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>22</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 208, c. 79 and 99.

<sup>23</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 385, c. 20: letter of J. H. Abicht to the senate of IUW from before 15 October 1808 (letter service date). It is most likely the aforementioned request to proceed with the matter.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* The earlier correspondence referred to by Abicht is unknown. To date, no letter addressed to Abicht has been found.

<sup>25</sup> VLNU: ms. F 1 6158, c. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 208, c. 79 and 99. The minutes of the session of 15 November 1809 give the date of Abicht's submission of *Philosophiae propriae sic dictae brevissima delineatio*: „20 April.”

<sup>27</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 385, c. 5–7, 16–18: The opinion of the Faculty of Moral and Political Sciences on Abicht's letter entitled *Philosophiae propriae sic dictae brevissima delineatio*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, c. 9–15: *Observationes in censuram „Delineationis philosophiae proprie sic dictae” ab ordine Philosophorum doctrinam moralium et politicarum institutam*.

<sup>29</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 177. The official approval is dated as of 12 August 1810. Cf. PCL: ms. 5450: letter of J. H. Abicht to A. J. Czartoryski of 25 September 1810.

<sup>30</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 208, c. 124. The plan read out at the time was most likely the manuscript: *Expositio Cursus Ethices secundarii*, dated 13 September 1810, BCz., ms. 5450, pp. 51–54.

<sup>31</sup> VLNU: ms. F 1 6153.

The effect of the implementation of the principle of combining chairs must have been surprising for Śniadecki. In the spring of 1810, contrary to the facts, the Rector notified Duke Czartoryski that there was no vacancy in the Faculty of Moral and Political Sciences, although the chair of moral philosophy, which Abicht had applied for at the time, was still to be filled. Perhaps this was because it was commonly believed that a lecture in moral philosophy should be made by a professor of natural law. This view had been explicitly expressed earlier by Kołłątaj (Kołłątaj 1844: 163) and was most likely shared by Śniadecki as well. For Rector Śniadecki, Abicht's ambitions and his desire to lecture in moral philosophy were confirmation that Abicht represented a pernicious kind of exaggerated erudition, which he regarded almost as a national vice of the Germans. Abicht's application for the privilege of teaching new philosophy courses became another opportunity for Śniadecki to express his contempt for the German philosophy, which, in his view, "dishonoured human reason."<sup>32</sup>

Śniadecki was looking for a way to suppress the expansion of the German philosophy at the university and, personally, the growing influence of Abicht and his lectures. Śniadecki provides an extensive explanation of his position on this issue in further correspondence to Prince Czartoryski. The following is an excerpt from the letter:

You very rightly consider, Your Highness, in your letter of 20 April written to me, that just as human reason is one, its certain beginnings are always and everywhere the same; just as Philosophy, too, should be one and the same everywhere, founded on these beginnings. But, unfortunately, as in the body of man, so in his mental faculties, various diseases having crept in, most often originating in preconception, in a false view of things, and in the exaggeration of pure principles, which, having already infected the Greeks, gave rise to various Sects of Philosophers under the name of Pyrrhonists, Sceptics, Idealists, Materialists, Empiricists, Dogmatists, etc. etc. Of our own time, the German School, seeking what it liked to call the principles of pure reason in the two elements of *time* and *place*, fell into the now forgotten oddities of the ancient Greeks and embroiled science with a nomenclature and language peculiar to it, which is a true *eclipse* of the mental powers of man. This mystical yarn, misunderstood by its own creators, has infected German writers, and has deranged the young minds of that nation to the great detriment of science; it has even spread to Vilnius, twisting the minds of some young people to such an extent that it is almost impossible to guide them to proper thinking in the sciences.<sup>33</sup>

The quoted letter is an important testimony revealing Śniadecki's motivations behind his decision to undertake a public critique of the German philosophy. The letter of 1810 contains almost all of the most scornful epithets that some years later Śniadecki used in his publications criticizing metaphysics and his contemporary German philosophy: the resurrection of the old sectarianism of the ancient philosophers, incomprehensible language and terminology, the eclipse of mental powers, mysticism, etc.

<sup>32</sup> PCL: ms. 6396, p. 671: letter of J. Śniadecki to A. J. Czartoryski of 3 April 1810.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 715: letter of J. Śniadecki to A. J. Czartoryski of 8 May 1810.



## The Consequences of the Dispute between Johann Heinrich Abicht and Jan Śniadecki

The explanations thus far formulated of the reasons that prompted Śniadecki to publicly criticize the German philosophy were based on speculation rather than facts. The few conjectures made by historians of philosophy, although accurate, had to remain nothing more than that owing to the lack of availability of documents that could shed light on the well-known facts and tie the hitherto scattered threads into a plausible explanation (Kinach-Brzozowska 1981: 128; Kupś 2014: 134). Today, we can answer briefly: the immediate reason for Śniadecki's writing and publication of his essay *On Metaphysics* was the Vilnius scholarly and educational activity of Johann Heinrich Abicht.

The historian of philosophy, Stefan Kaczmarek (1911–1997) was the first to link the publication of Śniadecki's essay *On Metaphysics* with Abicht. However, he did not directly see Abicht's lectures at the IUV as the reason for Śniadecki's paper, but only included Abicht among the polemicists who responded to Śniadecki's criticisms (Kaczmarek 1961: 108). Kaczmarek admitted that he based his hypotheses on the memoirs of Karol Kaczkowski (1797–1867). However, Kaczkowski's original account is different from Kaczmarek's. In Kaczkowski, there is not a single word about Abicht, while there is extensive mentioning of Gottfried Ernest Groddeck's (1762–1825) conflict with Śniadecki. In Kaczkowski's accounts, Śniadecki is portrayed as a despot focused exclusively on the development of the natural sciences (Kaczkowski 1876: 123–124). Kaczkowski also confirms Śniadecki's well-known impulsiveness of character by recounting the stormy course of one of the meetings, during which Śniadecki did not hesitate to utter publicly the accusation that one of the professors was sending denunciatory letters to the Ministry (*ibidem*: 124–125). Although no names were mentioned, still, provoked, Groddeck vehemently denied these slanders (*ibidem*: 125). The conclusion that Kaczmarek drew from Kaczkowski's relation was as follows – “The inability to fight openly against the Rector meant that the German group sometimes resorted to insinuation and denunciation, in which Abicht excelled” (Kaczmarek 1961: 108) – which, however, must be regarded as baseless slander, and Abicht should be cleared until other sources confirm the accusation levelled.

In fact, the source of Kaczmarek's speculations about Abicht's involvement in university conflicts is not Karol Kaczkowski, but rather Józef Bieliński (1848–1926). It is Bieliński who, in his monograph on the history of Vilnius University, is the only one to provide information about the existence of Abicht's polemical work, his response to Rector Śniadecki's attack on the German philosophy. Kaczmarek therefore created a compilation in which the facts given by Bieliński concerning Abicht's polemic with Śniadecki were integrated into Kaczkowski's account of Groddeck's personal disputes with Śniadecki.

Let us take a look at Bieliński's original account, as it contains important facts that subsequent researchers have overlooked:

Of his [i.e. Abicht's – T.K.] numerous manuscripts, one in German, devoted to a defence of German philosophy, directed against the accusations made by Jan Śniadecki, is noteworthy. This work, written down on 11 sheets, is important to us not because of its exposition, as there

are many defenders similar to Abicht, and perhaps even better than him, but because of the fact that, at that time, around 1810, a struggle was taking place, first quietly and then openly, between two parties at the University, one domestic and the other foreign, specifically, German. Unable to speak openly against it, the Germans resorted to dirty insinuations and denunciations. Abicht's work was translated into French by the same Georges Lery who competed for the chair of history with Lelewel, a teacher of the Czetwertyńskis in Grodno, and although this work was not published in print, it circulated in copies, hence its dissemination. In the literary field, Abicht made a positive mark with his activity. (Bieliński 1900: 108–109)

Unfortunately, today we know of no manuscript by Abicht that would correspond with the description given by Bieliński. The translator of Abicht's dissertation was not 'Lery' (as Bieliński wrongly noted), but Georges Lévy (Beauvois 2012: 244), who applied for the post of professor of general history, which was finally awarded in 1815 to Joachim Lelewel. *Nota bene*, the fact that Abicht made sure that his essay was translated into French testifies to his good knowledge of the then Vilnius elite, whose representatives certainly communicated much better using French than academic Latin or little-known German.

However, neither Bieliński nor Kaczmarek provided any arguments supporting the hypothesis that “[a]fter Śniadecki published his treatise *On Metaphysics*, Abicht was the first in Vilnius to speak against the rector” (Kaczmarek 1961: 108), and that he did so with this French manuscript. Today, however, we can cite such arguments, and we can say a little more about Abicht's still-undiscovered polemical treatise.

If Kaczmarek's conjecture that Abicht was provoked into a polemic with Śniadecki by the publication of the essay *On Metaphysics* is correct, we should be able to find some allusions referring to the Vilnius professor of logic and metaphysics in Śniadecki's text itself. Indeed, there is at least one such allusion, which certainly refers to Abicht.

Śniadecki's essay *On Metaphysics* is not only a critique of the erroneous metaphysics, but is also a characterization of what Śniadecki regards as scientific metaphysics. In order to develop this scientific metaphysics competently, Śniadecki argues, one has to be a scholar oneself, who knows a particular discipline of natural knowledge from his own scientific practice. For this reason, Śniadecki questions the usefulness of such a teacher of metaphysics who, having no knowledge of natural and mathematical sciences, becomes an arbiter in the matters of science:

Hence it is easy to understand how those alleged philosophers, who, not having thoroughly learned any [science – T.K.], make laws for human reason in all [sciences – T.K.]: those universal pedagogues, who instruct how to teach what they themselves do not know, the blind teaching the art of seeing. It is impossible for anyone who is well acquainted with science of any kind, and used to thinking within it, to read without amusement, and often without indignation, the nonsense and absurdity of so many of those law-makers, doctors, manufacturers of plans and projects, and, finally, those literary merchants who sell as science the products of unreason and insolence, and with it infect and seduce the young, eager for knowledge. (Śniadecki 2014: 155–156)

This allegation most definitely relates to Abicht. Firstly, in the official correspondence of the University of Vilnius and the curatorial office of Prince Adam Czartoryski, several

different projects of Abicht have been preserved, mainly concerning plans to expand the delivery of courses, the manner of conferring degrees, the organization of an educational seminar, etc. At the same time, no Vilnius professor could match him in this field, and it is clear from the correspondence that not all of Abicht's projects have survived to our times. Secondly, Abicht had no training in natural sciences or mathematics, and these issues are absent from his publications and lectures. His second speciality was education, in which he considered himself a professional and which he wanted to teach at the IUW according to the German standards he knew best and which he considered modern. Thus, when in 1814 Śniadecki wrote about "universal pedagogues" and "manufacturers of plans and projects," he could only have had Abicht in mind.

We know for a fact that Śniadecki's essay *On Metaphysics* was provoked by Abicht and his scholarly and teaching activities, but are we sure that Abicht's unknown, lost treatise, which only Bieliński wrote about, was a retort to Śniadecki's criticism? Can we be assured that Abicht's manuscript, which circulated in Vilnius in French language copies, was the first response to Śniadecki's essay *On Metaphysics*? The doubts are justified because Abicht did not speak Polish and probably never learned the original content of Śniadecki's essay *On Metaphysics*. We must assume, therefore, that the content of Śniadecki's essay, was either accurately presented to Abicht, or that he obtained a translation into a language he knew (such as when he was involved in drafting the university's rules and regulations and benefited from the "benevolence of another person"<sup>34</sup>). The answer is found in correspondence that describes the further fate of Abicht's manuscript of the dissertation.

We know that Abicht decided to publish this text and took the necessary steps in the matter, sending the manuscript to Dorpat (now Tartu in Estonia) in order to obtain the approval of the censor and the right to print with a publisher in Riga. In a letter to his friend Johann Karl Simon Morgenstern (1770–1852), a philosopher and classical philologist working in Dorpat, he explicitly writes about this: "... You receive from me a manuscript to be printed in Riga, which needs the imprimatur of your academy. It concerns malicious accusations against philosophy in general, and German philosophy in particular, made by a man whom the Poles used to regard as a great sage and their spokesman on matters of national culture (*Nationalkultur*), thus, it combats malicious and extremely harmful national prejudices and advances certain claims to scientific merit. You would be doing me, most honourable friend, a great favour if you could assist me shortly in preparing this manuscript for an imprimatur, since, on account of the French translation, it has remained in private hands for too long. It is understood that for my colleagues here, the censorship of this [writing] may appear to be something unseemly."<sup>35</sup>

From the contents of the letter, it is evident that Abicht's polemical treatise was a response to Śniadecki's criticism ("a man whom the Poles used to regard as a great sage and their spokesman in matters of national culture"). Unfortunately, only a month later, on

<sup>34</sup> VUB RS: ms. F 2 KC 10, p. 165: *Bemerkungen über neuen Entwurf der Statuten für die Wilnaer Akademie*.

<sup>35</sup> TUL: ms. F 3 Mrg CCCXLII, c. 7, I. 1: letter from J. H. Abicht to J. K. S. Morgenstern of 13 March 1816.

28 April 1816, Abicht died, and the edition of the manuscript became obsolete. Groddeck, in a letter dated 7 May 1816, notified Morgenstern of Abicht's sudden death (Groddeck 2015: 292), and, at the same time, conveyed to him that, according to the executor of Adolf Abicht's will (the adult son of his deceased friend), his father's unpublished manuscripts were to remain in Dorpat until they were collected by a trusted person (*ibidem*).

Almost two years later, the matter of Abicht's legacy was once again the subject of correspondence. In a letter dated 7 March 1818, Morgenstern wrote to Groddeck that he had followed the instructions given to him and returned the manuscript (*ibidem*: 295). Morgenstern's correspondence preserves a short letter in which Adolf Abicht attests to the return of the manuscript to Vilnius, while casually imparting some important information about the contents of the manuscript.<sup>36</sup> Firstly, the letter implies that the text in question is in two language versions, a German original and a French translation. Hence, at least two copies of the manuscript of Abicht's treatise existed at the time. Secondly, the letter gives the title, or at least the opening phrase of the main text (or both at the same time): "Aber was ist denn endlich Metaphysik? Kann sie einem Lande schädlich sein, u. s. w." Consequently, all we know from Abicht's lost essay is the beginning of the first sentence, which reads: "And what, after all, is metaphysics? Can it be detrimental to the country...", but the abruptly broken off sentence can easily be completed: "...only beginning to learn properly?," because there is no doubt that this is a quotation from the first paragraph of Śniadecki's essay *On Metaphysics* (Śniadecki 2014: 151).<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

Little was known concerning what and with what success Abicht was teaching in Vilnius during the twelve years of his work, from 1804 until his death in 1816.<sup>38</sup> Opinions about him were formed almost exclusively on the basis of the works he published in Germany and the activity he pursued in Erlangen. At the same time, in the works of Polish and Lithuanian historians of philosophy one can find, admittedly few, but highly flattering opinions on Abicht. "[O]ne of the most prominent German Kantists" (Harasek 1916: 42), Stefan Harasek writes about Abicht, "an excellent connoisseur of Kant, who took

<sup>36</sup> TUL: ms. F 3 Mrg CCCXLII, c. 7: letter from Adolf Abicht to J. K. S. Morgenstern of 20 May 1818.

<sup>37</sup> Śniadecki begins his essay *On Metaphysics* with a quotation from his other dissertation, dedicated to the accomplishments of Hugo Kołłątaj (Śniadecki: 1814a: 115–116).

<sup>38</sup> If we were to compare with the Imperial University of Vilnius, during the same period, the University of Cracow (first managed by the Austrians and then reactivated under the Napoleonic legislation of the Duchy of Warsaw), we would find that Abicht was the longest lecturing scholar in philosophy in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the territory of the former Polish Republic. Michał Waclaw Voigt (1765–1830) lectured on philosophy first in Cracow (1804–1810) and then in Lviv (1811) for a total of 6 years, while Feliks Jaroński (1777–1827) lectured in Cracow for 7 years (1809–1816) (Jaworski 1997). Let us note that M.W. Voigt, at the same time, in Cracow represents an analogous case. Like Abicht, Voigt was also a 'Kantian', a German philosopher who was lecturing in Latin. Yet he deserved the attention of researchers. The case of Abicht in Vilnius, Voigt in Cracow and, in the longer term, also Johann Baptist Schad (1758–1834) in Kharkiv, provides a 'Germanocentric' perspective for the study of the expansion of the German academic philosophy in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, perhaps Abicht should first and foremost be considered in this context, rather than – as has hitherto been the case – from a local perspective.

such an active part in the contemporary German scientific movement, contributed to acquainting Polish minds with both Kant and later idealist metaphysics” (*ibidem*: 73–74). The contemporary Lithuanian historian of philosophy, Stepas Tunaitis, more precisely characterizes the merits of Abicht, who

with his teaching as well as creative activity, contributed as a modern thinker, who directed philosophical ideas from the stagnant and incapable of renewal Enlightenment traditions onto the path set by I. Kant. Having come to Lithuania from Germany (...) he transferred here a kind of programme of philosophical renewal: huge layers of problems which, shaped both in Kant’s philosophy and in his school, determined the development not only of Kantianism itself, but also of the ideological search of post-Kantian philosophy. (Tunaitis 2006: 27)

Unfortunately, owing to the lack of access to sources, little has been written about Abicht by historians of philosophy. Even contemporary monographs on Vilnius philosophy tend to omit Abicht. In turn, the evaluation of Abicht’s work is determined not by his achievements, but by some very critical opinions about him that were expressed by the most influential people of the Polish academia of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup>

Research undertaken in recent years in Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Polish, and German archives and libraries has revealed a vast number of Johann Heinrich Abicht’s surviving manuscripts (lecture notes, drafts, and letters). Today, thanks to the knowledge of documents unavailable to historians of philosophy for over 200 years, we are able to reconstruct Abicht’s philosophy of the Vilnius period. Although Abicht did not publish much in Vilnius, he still played a very prominent role in the history of the Polish-Lithuanian science at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the period when Jan Śniadecki was Rector of the Imperial University of Vilnius. Abicht’s lectures provoked Śniadecki to publicly criticize the German philosophy. Vilnius became the arena of a philosophical dispute in which the late-Enlightenment ideas of moderate empiricism and common sense philosophy, represented by Śniadecki, clashed with the psychologism and speculative post-Kantian idealism represented by Abicht. The personal dispute described here brings us to the realisation that Abicht was an important actor in the Polish-Lithuanian science of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and played a significant and inspiring role in it. The essays that made Śniadecki’s name in the history of philosophy were not just a reminiscence of Śniadecki’s general worldview position: the essays had their own addressee – the first of whom was Abicht himself.

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<sup>39</sup> The most influential men of the Polish academia of the time, Hugo Kołłątaj and Jan Śniadecki, had the most negative opinion of Abicht’s lectures: “Żal bierze słyszeć, czego tam uczy metafizyk niemiecki” [*It is pitiful to hear what the German metaphysician teaches there*] (Bieliński 1900: 109), wrote Kołłątaj in a letter to Jan Śniadecki on 20 July 1805. Kołłątaj had reservations not only about Abicht’s lectures. He was critical of the general principles of the organization of Vilnius University with its overly developed philosophy, in particular with a separate chair of metaphysics and logic. He presented his comments to Tadeusz Czacki in private correspondence, but there is ample evidence that they were widely known and shared by many other Polish scholars (Kołłątaj 1844: 159–163).

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