

# **Hegel's Proof and the Experience of God**

Nathan Schneider  
Department of Religious Studies  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
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The centrality of proof for the existence of God in Hegel's idea of religion cannot be denied.

"The explication of the proofs of God's existence," he goes so far as to say in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, "is the explication of religion itself" (LR 164).<sup>1</sup> Not only does the discussion of proof constitute his critical section on "religious knowledge as elevation to God" in part I of the *Lectures*, but the subject is explored even more fully in a set of lectures on the proofs themselves delivered in 1829. As such the task of proving represents a critical mechanism within the overall project of his philosophy of religion, revealing the harmony between what "is actual religion" and philosophical reason (LR 197).

This is not, however, to talk about the proofs in the usual ways, for instance in their classic scholastic expression or in the conventional forms that have by and large been subjected to more modern criticism.<sup>2</sup> For Hegel, and his is unique in this respect, the three traditional proofs—the cosmological, teleological, and ontological (in that order)—are only moments of a single proof. None is ultimately coherent without the others. Perceiving that the proofs have fallen out of fashion for fear of conflict between faith and reason, Hegel must first of all demonstrate to his listeners that the historical proofs are worth thinking about to begin with. To do so, he attacks the possibility of immediate religious experience, which people claim to have through faith and feeling, insisting on the place of thinking in the "actual" experience of God. This experience, he argues, is explicated by the proof itself, which charts the "elevation to God"

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<sup>1</sup> For Hegel I use two sources: *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (University of California Press, 1988 [1827]) for the *Lectures* themselves, while the lectures on the proofs are found in the third volume of *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. E.B. Speirs (New York: Humanities Press, 1962). In the text I will cite these two parenthetically as LR ("lectures on religion") and LP ("lectures on the proofs"), respectively.

<sup>2</sup> "Modern criticism" goes in a number of directions, beginning with the criticisms of Kant and Hume on the traditional proofs. More recent explorations go all sorts of ways, from Plantinga's *God and Other Minds* to intelligent design theory to J.N. Findlay's rereading of the ontological as a proof *against* God (which Iris Murdoch majestically adopts in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*). The list goes on. I have found surprisingly little recent discussion on Hegel's ingenious treatment of the proofs.

through reasoned thinking, out from naive perception and organic consciousness. The proof, which Hegel synthesizes from the proofs, engages the experience of God in three ways: (1) an explication, suggesting that truly religious experience is both reasonable and accessible to reasonable study;<sup>3</sup> (2) a corrective against religious philosophies that reject or inadequately employ such reason; and (3) an “elevation” for the explicator through explication to the point of being performative religious experience in its own right.

## **Faith and Feeling**

Hegel speaks sarcastically of a sensibility he perceives among his peers, that the proofs are “a barren desert, out of which we have escaped and brought ourselves to a living faith; the region of arid Understanding, out of which we have once more raised ourselves to the warm feeling of religion” (LP 156). This philosophical “pietism,”<sup>4</sup> which he associates with Schleiermacher and Jacobi, takes the ground of faith to be other than thought. “It has come to be irreligious,” he continues, “to place confidence in such reasoned knowledge.” It is for this reason primarily that people have lost interest in the whole idea of proofs for the existence of God, contenting themselves with Kant’s conclusion that a logical proof of this kind is not helpful; instead, the truer foundation of religion lies elsewhere. An imagined nay-sayer stands at the outset of the lectures on the proofs and remains throughout them. For this person, faith and feeling are not only the beginning of religion but its consummation as well. Reason, perhaps, serves religion

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<sup>3</sup> Locating him, in a sense, within the current debates surrounding religious experience by scholars like Wayne Proudfoot and of course Ann Taves.

<sup>4</sup> By pietism and pietist I refer to Hegel’s use of the term as a philosophical movement and not to the earlier religious movement of the same name.

only insofar as it insulates such direct communion against philosophical intrusions. Drawing from Lutheran language, faith, confirmed by feeling, justifies religion.

A consequence of this kind of thinking, one which Hegel is eager to do away with, is the perpetual threat of conflict between faith and reason, since each is held in opposition to the other. This critical concern is presented at the outset of both sets of lectures. The perception of such conflict only gives rise to doubt in the soul of man, “depriving him of all peace” (LP 157). At the root of this, Hegel contends, is the pietist insistence on access to the divine that is both unmediated and inaccessible to reason. This position, meant to protect faith from the incursion and confusion of reason, has in truth only endangered it. It fails to recognize that “the content of philosophy, its need and interest, is wholly in common with that of religion” (LR 78). Positioning the two as entirely separate prevents both from reaching the consummation which they mutually seek.

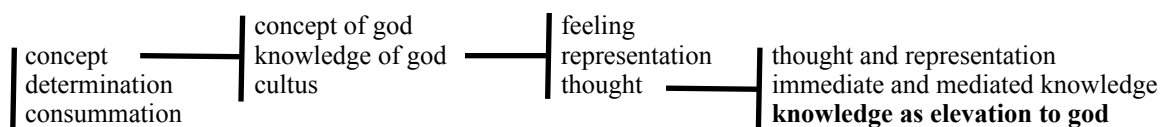
Drawing in his own way from a Lutheran sensibility, for Hegel also “religion must be felt, must exist in feeling, otherwise it is not religion” (LP 180). Furthermore it is only through faith that the final unifying reconciliation of subject and Spirit becomes possible in his religious system (LR 474). Faith is at the root of the proof too, positing the concept of God upon which it rests. The centrality of these is what distinguishes religion from the sciences, so that “the heart is the seed, root, and source of this content,” though, he continues, “that is not saying very much” (LR 141). What Hegel contends against the pietist, rather, is that neither faith nor feeling has very much meaning at all apart from knowledge. To talk of feeling alone, in his terms, is “indeterminateness”—of course to talk of *a feeling*, for feeling to be meaningful, is to have a representation and knowledge of its referent (LR 139-140). Likewise with faith, “which only

exists through the medium of an object” represented in thinking. Otherwise, “we have empty identity, a faith in or knowledge of nothing” (LP 177). Such a faith is surely untenable. Therefore the pietist deceives himself by withholding due credit to knowledge, settling instead for a naive faith that is unaware of its own nature. The failure of faith and feeling that claims immediacy becomes especially apparent in the experience of the community which, without shared knowledge, degenerates into alienated individuals who each seek inward self-emptying without end (LP 184-5). In the ethical community however, faith, Spirit, and reason manifest their convergence and develop themselves “even onto worldliness” (LR 482). By explicating the process of religious thinking outright, the formal proof demonstrates and serves as a demonstration that religious knowing, like all knowledge, is necessarily mediate.

Neither the lectures on the proofs nor on religion generally deal directly with the kinds of mystical experience that others, like William James for instance, have taken to be at the core of what religion is. But against someone like James, who took theology and religious philosophy to be mere epi-phenomena, Hegel is clear enough. A mysticism grounded in direct encounter, known through the feeling of the senses, is an incomplete religiosity, and one liable to run contrary to reason and to the reasonable, ethical community. Feelings of the heart have a place, but it is precisely that: a place within a greater process. Neither feelings nor faith can be salvific without the religious content of thinking, and those who deny the privilege of this content practice a naive religiosity. Since such religious experiences depend on the intelligible content of thought, furthermore, their logic must be fundamentally explicable.

## The Nature of Proof

In Hegel's exposition, the method and meaning of the proof are as significant its content.<sup>5</sup> At least half of the lectures on the proof are not about one step or another within the proof itself, but are rather a commentary on these more contextual matters. Meanwhile it is both useful and necessary to locate the proof in the further context of its original appearance as an element of



The **proof** in the context of Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*

Hegel's philosophy of religion. There, it represents the last moment of "thought," the last moment of "knowledge of god," before the synthesis of the "concept" of religion. As such it is importantly transformative; through the proof, the moment of thinking reaches a climax before becoming manifest in the activity of the cultus. Located as it is in the discussion of the "concept," this mechanism should be found in any determinate (or consummate) religion. The proof, therefore, maps the direct antecedent of all truly religious activity. Because of this it is a species of activity itself, distinguished from other kinds of thought, "the witness of the thinking Spirit ... not merely potentially, but actually" (LP 201).

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<sup>5</sup> Mark C. Taylor, "Itinerarium Mentis in Deum: Hegel's Proofs of God's Existence," *Journal of Religion* 57.3 (July 1977) offers a strong presentation on the content and movements of the proof itself, while giving comparatively little attention to the first half of the lectures on the proof or how the proof fits into Hegel's broader philosophy of religion.

Religious proof, it is clear, should not be taken in the sense that scientific proofs are. As Kant showed, this kind of approach is what leaves the original proofs lacking. Rightly understood, rather, the proofs are not mathematical demonstrations once and for all for the existence of a particular being, but “an inner experience” demonstrated in the person who enacts them habitually. “Here the ‘many times’ of the repetition,” as a person experiences the thought-process of the proof again and again over time, “and the ‘at all times’ which really represents the result, are united together in what is ‘once’ ” (LP 214). As a repeated enactment, during which “the individual’s trust and the intensity of his belief in God are strengthened,” it resembles more the kind of performative proof that miracles offer, a testimony to be apprehended, rather than a stroke of pure logic. Unlike mathematical proof, which is only “an aid to knowledge,” this kind actually constitutes religious knowledge, describes it, and confirms it.

The religious experience described in the proof need not be at its core a formal exercise. Rather, the its philosophical formulation is secondary, the correct though not necessary description of “this process,” this elemental religious thinking, “which takes place in every human spirit. If one thinks on God, one’s spirit contains the very moments that are expressed in this procedure” (LR 105-106). In this respect Hegel distances it from the method of geometry, which builds demonstration upon proven demonstration. Religiosity, stemming from feeling and faith, is not to be treated in this way. God’s existence need not be proven before being felt and talked about, but rather in order to comprehend what that feeling and talking actually represents, what makes them meaningful, and what lies implicit within them. Fundamentally, “to prove simply means to become conscious of a connection” (LP 188), or “to show coherence” (LR 166).

What the proof proves, then, is not so much the existence of God but the coherence of the concept and the logic of the encounter.

The knowledge of the proof, furthermore, has its own consequences, which begin to elucidate the task of the philosopher of religion. Philosophy has first of all to comprehend religious knowledge in the language of reason. Once seen reasonably, apart from errors and misrepresentations, “actual” religion (that which coheres reasonably) can be separated, “purified,” from the rest, “from other contingent elements, and from the contingency that attaches to thought itself” (LP 201-202). Such a distinction becomes self-evident in the course of proving, as does the privilege of reason. “By explaining [religion] in terms of thought,” Hegel explains, we “give thought the satisfaction of realizing that the absolute right possessed by it has a right to satisfaction totally different from that belonging to feeling and sense-perception or ordinary conception.” This passage circles back with definite clarity to the question of naive religious experience as it has been discussed above. The proof is a tool by which the philosopher can begin to locate the truth of religion, distinguishing the actual from the empty and the reasonable from the unreasonable. Hegel arranges his taxonomy in such a way that categorizes and contains sensual experience, dismissing it as a salvific medium by itself. He is also able to dismiss, furthermore, those who rest authority on direct (immediate) experience with the divine through faith and feeling, especially in such a way that refuses the scrutiny or substantiation of reason. “It is thinking,” therefore, “that enjoys the truth and purifies the subjective consciousness” (LR 79). This offers a clear retort to the pietist interlocutor, while also ensuring grounds on which to insist that “religion and philosophy” (faith and reason) “coincide in one.”

The philosopher, however, is more than a detached critic. The proof itself is an “elevation,” not only for the doer who knows not what he does, but for the philosopher as well who, moment by moment and logical step by logical step, does by knowing explicitly. Just as to perform the proof is implicitly to know its content, to know the proof explicitly is also to perform it, only all the more self-consciously. The privilege Hegel gives to thought generally suggests that a philosopher with the proof in mind has access to a higher echelon of “elevation.” This implication will be explored further in the concluding section.

## **The Nature of the Proof**

The original, classic proofs, like pietist religiosity, are naive expressions for Hegel. They are fundamentally incomplete and lacking self-awareness, while nevertheless containing a kernel of truth. It is their historicity that justifies their importance: “For the very reason that they were authoritative for more than a thousand years,” and for all that time appealing to the naive religious understanding of people, “they deserve to be considered more closely” (LR 105). The ontological proof, the account of the Prime Mover, expresses the intuition of God’s necessary existence. The teleological proof is that of intelligence and meaning, while the ontological is that of divine perfection. In that order, Hegel takes each in its specificity as an intuitive moment of the cohesive whole, which in turn transcends the limitations of the three alone.

As he finds them, none of the proofs are valid. Philosophers before Hegel had already shown this. Nevertheless, by his account, it is only the “distortion” of the proofs that has actually been refuted and not their essence. “On the contrary,” he announces, “our task is to restore the proofs of God’s existence to a position of honor by stripping away that distortion” (LR 165).

This distortion comes as a result of the limitations of *analytic understanding* and can be overcome through the use of *dialectical reason*.<sup>6</sup> In the cosmological proof, for instance, the first mode of thought would attempt to prove the existence of the infinite (God) from the contingent (creation). The unintended consequence of this, however, is that the infinite is construed as dependent on the contingent. Analytic understanding is forced to make this kind of move, since it can only prove one abstract identity from an already known abstract identity. Dialectical reason, alternatively, can posit the concrete identity of opposites in and through each other: “the Being of the finite is not its own Being, but is, on the contrary, the Being of its Other, namely, the Infinite” (LP 260). This approach reveals the truth of the cosmological proof that had previously been hidden behind the distortion of the analytic method.

Each in turn, Hegel makes similar moves with the teleological and ontological proofs. In terms of analytic understanding, the teleological proof results in a God that is conditioned, once again, requiring finite creation to accomplish its designs. Hegel’s dialectical reformulation describes the infinite, not as an outside agent, but as an organic whole that subsumes the organic inner processes of finite creation within it, guided by the larger totality. Infinite processes can be inferred from finite processes without making the first contingent on the second, but rather subsuming it. He defends the ontological proof from Kant, who pointed out that a concept of the understanding cannot think God into existence by its own accord (famously, “existence is not a predicate”). Through dialectical thinking, however, Hegel argues to the contrary that *true* concept and being can only exist in relation to each other; the conceptual proof of God therefore reveals God’s existence in being. Above all, dialectical reason reveals the coherence of the three original

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<sup>6</sup> For this distinction and the following discussion I draw heavily on the article by Taylor cited above.

proofs as elements of a unified whole. The cosmological and teleological proofs supply the identity of God as creator and sustainer, while the ontological carries the concept into being. By assuring the correlation between pure thought and pure being that the first two presuppose, the ontological proof furthermore brings the sequence around in full circle. What naive understanding tried and failed to do with the existence of God, imitating the constructive proofs of geometry, becomes possible only through dialectics, which recognizes reality as essentially relationality.

The priority of relation in Hegel's thinking is pervasive, and helps to explain the priority he gives to thinking in religious experience. Since reality is made up of relations, it is out of relations that the concrete identities of things are composed. The significance of religion is understood in these terms. God is "the loftiest object that can occupy human beings" (LR 75) exactly because God is the infinite sum of all relations in the universe. We find another example of this priority in the order of living organisms, which Hegel explores in his explication of the teleological proof. Life itself is a relative condition, one determined exclusively by relation, by contingency. Those things that are most fully contingent, built of relations, are the things that are most alive. "Animals," for instance, "are inorganic as contrasted with men, and plants are inorganic when contrasted with animals" (LP 339). Things that are not alive are those that are comparatively immediate and independent, appearing complete in themselves. Living things, as they eek out their own self-preservation, are constantly dependent on food, resources, and each other. The culmination of this sequence of dependence is human thought, which seeks completion in the knowledge of God: "God reveals Himself, it is said, in Nature; but God cannot reveal Himself to Nature, to the stone, to the plant, to the animal, because God is Spirit; He can

reveal Himself to Man only, who thinks and is Spirit” (LP 195). Feeling, rooted in the animal nature of people, is a more independent condition, an immediate event in itself that can only direct itself to God, to the totality of relations, through the mediation of thinking.

This sequence of ever-increasing relatedness that Hegel finds in nature parallels the sequence of the proof, from naive experience to its manifest fulfillment. It begins with the initial cosmological insight that finite creation is contingent and “does not support itself” (LP 226). The subject recognizes the infinity of God as posited in the very finiteness of creation, which both subsumes the finitude in itself and is its dialectical antithesis. In the teleological moment, the same insight probes further into the progress of creation. Through the intelligibility of Spirit’s expression in finite relations, grasped by thinking minds among them, the intelligence of the infinite reveals itself also. The purposes of determinate organisms work themselves out within, and as constituent parts of, the larger working out of the absolute organism, the ultimate relation. In the ontological moment, finally, the absolute concept in the finite mind meets, and even instantiates, the absolute being of the infinite. Through pure thought (and only through it), the finite reconciles itself to the infinite, to pure being. By the conclusion of the sequence, the thinking subject becomes subsumed in the web of total relatedness: “The process of elevation to God is in itself the abolition of the one-sidedness of subjectivity in general, and, above all, of knowledge” (LP 226).

For Hegel the explication of the proof is the explication of all religious experience. Any elevation from finite human beings to a God that is the infinite God always and only occurs by this sequence.

## The Religion of Rational Cognition

In the final paragraphs of the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel summarizes the dialectical sequence of modernity through religion and Enlightenment. The first moment is that of “immediate religion,” which is that of the pietist. This represents “the vanity of the understanding, which is displeased by the fact that philosophy still exhibits the truth in religion and demonstrates that reason resides within it” (LR 489). What follows, then, he terms “the Enlightenment of the understanding.” This moment, in which Hegel seems to locate Kant, abandons faith in the name of philosophy, only to lose sight of the contingency implicit in thinking that the religious Absolute Idea reveals. The third moment, “the rational cognition of religion,” deploys dialectical reason rather than the analytic understanding that limits the first two moments, and in it reason and piety converge in philosophy. “It is this last,” concludes Hegel, “that I have sought to exhibit in these lectures.”

If philosophy, then, is the convergence of religion and reason, the work of the philosopher cannot help but assume religious meaning. We might be tempted to see Hegel’s philosophizing as a universal *replacement* for religion, but he seems to rule this possibility out. While “religion is for everyone,” as “the manner or mode by which all human beings become conscious of truth for themselves,” philosophy “is not for everyone,” but only for those who choose to and are able to do it (LR 106). Nevertheless, for those who do philosophize, who do embark to grasp “the rational cognition of religion,” he ensures the work’s religious value as religiosity. In the concluding paragraphs of the exposition of the cultus in the lectures on religion, Hegel assures that the ethical community in which religion finds its fulfillment must be “bound up” with “consciousness of the true, of the divine, of God” (LR 194). In this, alongside the ethical,

“philosophy too is a continual cultus.” As philosopher of religion in a world of competing pietists and radical rationalists, Hegel prefigures in his own work a kind of philosophical priesthood in the world to come. With the religiosity of representation transformed into the religiosity of ethical human freedom, this philosopher maintains in rational form the “elevation” that makes human freedom possible through reconciliation in the infinite.

In the century and a half since Hegel, seen from the particular lens of academic religious studies, the world to come has turned out somewhat differently than he imagined. Religiosities of feeling founded in claims of immediate knowledge of the divine are probably no less common, and meanwhile our praxis has emerged that studies religion while claiming to be nonreligious. His influence, or at least agreement with him, is pervasive among many scholars today, who conclude that reason can explain religion and religious experience better than religion itself can. Through the explication of texts, ritual performances, sociological data, and psychological phenomena, their work rests on the assumption that such explication makes the vital logic of religious experience meaningfully accessible to the outsider (or insider) researcher. All, this, furthermore, while maintaining a posture of secularity; even as we grasp the logics of religious experience and “other people’s myths,” we can still keep ourselves at arm’s length from religiosity itself. What is still mere religion, then, is only that which belongs to naive, pre-rational representation, which comprehends not what it does.

Hegel makes no such presumption. His treatment of the proof for the existence of God demonstrates the way in which for him, to think about religion is necessarily to think religiously. To explicate the elevation to God is to experience it, and at a higher level.