

WHAT DOES HEGEL PROVE IN HIS *LECTURES ON THE PROOFS OF GOD'S EXISTENCE?*

Andrei G. Zavaliy
American University of Kuwait

Abstract

Even though Hegel rejects Kant's criticism of the classical proofs for God's existence, he is far from joining the followers of St. Anselm. What is needed, he suggests, is the rational account of the transition from the final notion to the infinite Being. The *Lectures* in its central treatment of the Cosmological proof present us with an explanation in rational terms of the fact of religion, i.e., the elevation of the finite spirit to infinite God, rather than with a proof in a narrow logical sense. Hegel is not so much asking the question 'Does God exist?' but rather 'How is the elevation of the finite spirit to God possible?' The Hegelian 'proof,' I argue, consists in a demonstration of the necessity of movement from finiteness to infinity, that is, the demonstration of the necessity of religion itself. Religious faith in this context is not juxtaposed to reason, but appears as a mode of imperfect knowledge, which is superseded by the further development of the rational concept.

It is somewhat surprising to see a major philosopher dealing with the old metaphysical proofs of God's existence years after Kant's first *Critique*, where he rather convincingly demonstrated the inadequacy of all classical attempts to reach certainty with respect to God's existence by means of human understanding. Admittedly, Kant's immediate motivation behind his critical treatment of the proofs was not based on any anti-religious sentiments, or his secular convictions. Kant for the first time attempted to establish the determinate limits of (theoretical) reason's application to the empirical world, and sharply distinguish it from all other modes of our relationship to the world,

such as faith, of which he seemed, as the matter of fact, to be rather sympathetic. Kant's main point was that any attempt to demonstrate God's existence *a priori* by the process of reasoning was doomed to failure. Concepts used in what he calls "transcendental proofs" were inherently inadequate for such an endeavor; the proposed arguments involved circularity and were at best able to create a "dialectical illusion" that the *idea* of necessity is inseparable from Supreme Being. Hence, Kant concludes, "through concepts alone it is quite impossible to advance to the discovery of new objects and supernatural beings; and it is useless to appeal to experience, which in all cases yields only appearances" (A639/B667).

In spite of Kant's authoritative warning, Hegel picks up the topic of the proofs of the existence of God in a series of lectures delivered during the summer semester of 1829 in Berlin towards the end of his life. In a direct opposition to Kant's view, Hegel maintains the unmitigated superiority of *the form* of conceptual speculative reasoning over the claims of faith, and the reducibility of the latter to the former.¹ Not only it is possible to elevate the religious experience to the level of conceptual thinking, according to Hegel, but it is also necessary to do so in order to achieve genuine knowledge of the religious objects. Kant failed to see this, it was argued, due to his narrow and inherently inadequate conception of reason. Instead, Kant put the proofs to the test of what Hegel calls *Understanding* (*Verstand*), which could not bear the various contradictions inherent in these proofs, such as the application of the finite concepts to the infinite being. Hegelian *Reason* (*Vernunft*), on the other hand, thanks to its dialectical nature, is better suited to appropriate the content of religious claims in such a way that it becomes the proper object of speculative thinking.² This was precisely Hegel's primary goal in these *Lectures*—to demonstrate that the claims of faith, such as the claim to the possibility of relationship of finite beings with infinite God, are inherently rational and can be expounded and vindicated in terms of speculative reason.

In what follows, I shall take a look at Hegel's perspective on the possibility of rational justification of religious dogmas, especially that of the existence of God, in the context of his overall system, and make comments on the relation between faith and speculative reason as seen from the *Lectures*. Admittedly, both of these topics are explored

by Hegel at length in several other works, most importantly in *Phenomenology of Mind*, *Encyclopedia*, and *Faith and Knowledge*. Yet the intended scope of this article will restrict the consideration mainly to the series of Hegel's public lectures on this subject. The choice was determined by the conviction of the author that in this posthumously published work Hegel's views on the inherent rationality of religious beliefs get the most clear and concise expression.

While Hegel clearly rejects Kant's devastating criticism of the classical proofs, he is nonetheless far from joining the followers of St. Anselm or Thomas Aquinas. In this sense, Hegel's attitude towards the various attempts to ascertain God's existence by means of the formal logic or argumentation in general is unconventional: neither he embraces the pre-Kantian dogmatism, nor does he want to accept the purely negative results of Kant's treatment. The pre-critical philosophy was static in its formalism, prohibiting any meaningful development of the concept out of itself, confining all the richness of religious experience to "the region of arid Understanding" (Hegel 1962, 156). Trying to infer the existence of infinite being starting from the finite premises it was working in vain, he suggests, and could at best infer a finite God. This apparent failure was not due to the inadequate training in logic of the metaphysicians of the time, but rather due to the irredeemable limitations of the understanding itself. As Inwood points out, "[Hegel] criticizes the customary proofs not because they are invalid, but because they prove the existence of the wrong sort of God, generally a finite God" (1983, 222). Thus Hegel takes up the challenge of showing the possibility to transcend the finiteness of concepts by means of speculative thought.

Kant saw the limitation of finite concepts in dealing with the infinite objects, such as God, soul or the world, but restricted himself to this merely negative result, relegating all the matters of religion to faith and non-intellectual intuition. For Kant, faith stands in an important sense apart from (if not opposite of) reason, and, historically, the ambivalence of their relation to each other in Kantian system created strong tensions among the later generations of philosophers. However partial, Kant's realization was a definite progress, and Hegel generously credits him with raising ourselves "once more to the warm feeling of religion" (Hegel 1962, 156). Yet, for Hegel, religion in general and Christian

religion in particular, *must* have an underlying rational foundation to it, which excludes any possible tension between the claims of reason (properly understood) and those of religious experience. Already in *Logic* Hegel claims: "It is no doubt to be remembered that the result of the independent thought harmonizes with the import of Christian religion: for the Christian religion is a revelation of reason" (1975, 36Z). Thus in his later *Lectures on the Proofs of God's Existence* Hegel seeks to disclose the genuine positive content, i.e., the one exemplifying the necessity of reason, but within the framework of the obsolete metaphysical heritage.

Before we attend to Hegel's interpretation of the concrete proofs, and especially of the cosmological proof, more needs to be said about the relation between faith and reason in Hegel's system of philosophy. Hegel himself suggests this order of exposition, when he devotes the first half of his *Lectures* to the clarification of the essential interdependence of faith and reason, arguing against the wall erected between these two forms of knowledge by Kant and his followers. The apparent opposition between faith and reason is by no means equivalent for Hegel to that between indeterminacy, vagueness on the one hand and certainty on the other. Faith claims to know its transcendental objects with no less degree of certainty than reason claims to know the truths of pure logic. Yet, as Hegel rightly observes, the truth of a proposition does not necessarily follow from the certainty with which it is believed:

It is in the certainty that the nerve of faith lies. And here we encounter a further distinction, we further distinguish truth from certainty. We know very well that much has been known, and is known for certain, which is nevertheless not true. . . . Truth stands eternally over against mere certainty, and neither certainty, nor immediate knowledge, nor faith decides what is true. (Hegel 1962, 178)

As such, reason cannot claim the superiority over religious faith by appeals to the alleged certainty of knowledge which it generates. The dogmatic pronouncements of faith, embraced by the religious subjects, do not lack in certainty, albeit subjective one, any more than, for instance, the axioms of geometry do. The deficiency of faith detached from reason, however, lies elsewhere for Hegel. The failure to realize its deep rational foundation and not allowing thought to explicate the cognitive basis from the immediacy of intuitive knowledge

puts faith in a seeming opposition to rational discourse, adding to the longstanding feelings of hostility between the two. But whether faith is put above reason, or reason above faith in some formal evaluation, or whether both are granted their independent domains, the distinction remains, according to Hegel, “the most painful of all divisions in the depth of the Spirit” (1962, 157), and thus makes any significant relation between the two unintelligible. But once their opposition is recognized as illusory, Hegel may proceed with the rational justification of the religious knowledge, bringing it to the level of absolute necessity (not just subjective certainty):

All that partakes in Spirit is concrete; in this we have before us the Spiritual in its most profound aspect, that of Spirit as the concrete element of faith and thought. The two are not only mixed up in the most manifold way, in immediate passing over from one side to the other, but are so inwardly bound up together that *there is no faith that does not contain within itself reflection, argumentation or, in fact, thought, and on the other hand, no thinking which does not, even if it be only for the moment, contain faith*, for faith in general is the form of any presupposition, of any assumption, come whence it may, which lies firmly at the foundation momentary faith. (Hegel 1962, 160, my emphasis)

The implications of this key passage from the *Lectures* are twofold. First, it is argued here that Kantian separation of the two kinds of objects, those known by reason, and those grasped immediately by faith, is only true to some extent. Upon closer examination the objects of religious faith (at least those of Christian religion) reveal clear rational structure, and thus are fit for being the proper objects of speculative philosophy as well.³ But, secondly and most importantly, since every thought contains an immediate element to it, i.e., the one accepted *as given* by faith (even if unconsciously), the rational proof for some doctrine of religion cannot be universally binding (as, for instance, Descartes’s proofs of self or God’s existence were clearly intended to be), but the recognition of its validity depends in part on the unconditional acceptance of certain presuppositions and assumptions, which, in their turn, can be justified only by the final *result* of reasoning. The first premises of reasoning are supported by the inferred conclusion. The adoption by Hegel of what formally appears to be ‘circular’ reasoning, long vitiated by traditional logic, becomes

the key to escaping the limiting conditions of the understanding and reaching to the transcendental.

Hegel's subsequent discussion of the proofs of the Divine existence cannot be viewed apart from his whole system, as isolated argumentation applicable to many local situations, but should be taken as much as possible in the context of the entirety of Hegel's philosophical enterprise. The transcendental proofs for existence of the Absolute constitute much more than a chapter in Hegel's system—they are at the core of his reasoning. Indeed, as Michael Raposa observes, “one might argue that the ontological proof constitutes the essence of Hegel's philosophical system” (1986, 116). The crucial transition from the first volume of the *Encyclopedia* to the second (from the discussion of logical notion to reality of nature) would certainly require a justification along the lines of the ontological proof.⁴

As it was observed, the underlying rationality of faith and the immediate element in the foundation of any cognitive thinking seem to downplay the importance of the traditional distinction between the two faculties. Still Hegel needs to preserve some sense in which the two can be viewed as different and distinguishable, and, moreover, to safeguard the superiority of philosophy over religion. He finds the major shortcoming of religious belief in the form which it applies to its objects. This becomes evident already in his earlier work *The Christian Religion*:

In faith the true *content* is already found, but it still lacks the *form* of thinking. . . . Philosophy has been criticized for placing itself above religion. But as the matter of fact this is false because philosophy has only this and no other content, although it gives it in the form of thinking; it places itself only above the form of faith, while the *content* is the same in both cases. (Hegel 1979, 292)

The pictorial and symbolic representation involved in religious faith is inferior for Hegel to the form of representation of pure thought. The main difference seems to be in the degree of universality that thinking allows as compared with faith. The pictorial aspect of religious belief limits the scope of its application, since it deals primarily with imagery. The form of thinking, on the other hand, deals with ideas only, and is, in this sense, a higher stage in the development of the Spirit. In virtue of the universality of ideas thinking is able to grasp

the content of religion by detaching it from sensuous images and expressing it through a logical form. Yet, since the content of both is the same (and Hegel no doubt means Christian religion, and perhaps even more specifically, Protestantism), the opposition between the two never arises. The business of philosophy then is to appropriate the true claims of religion by giving it the proper form of thinking. In view of this, we may say that the *Lectures* in its central treatment of the cosmological proof present us with the *description* in rational terms of the undeniable fact of religion, namely the elevation of the finite spirit to infinite God, rather than with a proof in a mathematical or logical sense. This speculation finds support from *Logic* where Hegel writes: “what men call the proofs of God’s existence are, rightly understood, ways of describing and analyzing the native course of the mind, the course of *thought* thinking the *data* of the senses” (Hegel 1975, 50). We can feel here a move away from the restrictions of a rigid epistemic foundationalism of the Cartesian tradition toward the more comprehensive and flexible mode of speculative thinking.

The objective existence of infinite God cannot be deductively grounded, as once supposed, but this is not necessary either for acquiring adequate knowledge of the Absolute. For Hegel, we should remember, “to prove simply means to become conscious of the connection and consequently the necessity of things” (1962, 188). The connection he has in mind here is the dialectical connection between ideas of contingency and necessity, finitude and infinity, and the *necessary transition* from one to another. Religious consciousness grasps this process of mutual transition with little effort; indeed, it participates in this transition itself as one (finite) element of the relation, and what then remains for speculative thinking is “the explication of the separate moments of this process of the spirit, and their explication in the form of thought” (1962, 231). Knowledge thus acquired would not differ in content from the truths of religion accepted on faith, but would supersede it with a more perfect form, since mediated knowledge for Hegel is always higher than the immediate one. This doctrine fully applies, *mutatis mutandis*, not only to the proponents of religion proper, but to the position of *intuitivists* in philosophy as well. Since faith for Hegel usually signifies an immediate mode of knowledge, rather than the mystical union with God or the tool of eternal salvation, the views

of Jacobi and Schelling, as well as of the romantics of his age, are the indirect targets of his critical discussion here.

Once again we should stress at this point that in the *Lectures* Hegel does not claim to begin from a position of epistemic neutrality with respect to knowledge of God's existence, whose actuality is to be established (or repudiated, as the case might be) as the *result* of some proof, i.e., he is not so much asking the question 'Does God (objectively) exist?' His main concern rather lies with the question 'How is the elevation of the finite spirit to God possible?' where this elevation is taken to be obviously present in history. We may agree with Peter Hodgson (1984) when he argues at some length that it is not primarily God whose necessary existence Hegel wants to demonstrate, but rather the necessary existence of religion itself. God's existence is taken in some sense for granted; but the necessity of human elevation to God through religion still needs to be shown.

In the *Lectures*, Hegel identifies the two *types* of possible proofs, or, rather, the two possible directions of thought: from Being to Notion and from Notion to Being. The first type would include both cosmological and teleological proofs, since they start from one or another feature of the phenomenal world and proceed from this basis to the idea of God. The inquiry then goes "from Being to the thought of God, that is, from determinate Being to true Being as representing the Being of God" (Hegel 1962, 221). The ontological proof, on the other hand, follows the path of thought from the idea of God to his Being, and consequently to Being (existence) of his creation: "from the thought of God, from truth in itself, to the Being of this truth" (1962, 221).

Even though Hegel assigns much importance to the ontological argument in several places, and in fact, as it is often claimed, this argument can be seen as constituting the inner core of his whole system, he does not treat it at any considerable length in the primary text of the *Lectures* (i.e., the oral presentation). The lengthy discussion added at the end of the tenth Lecture which deals directly with Kant's criticism of the ontological proof is but a fragment found among Hegel's papers and later inserted in the posthumous edition of the *Lectures* by a German editor. The short fragment under the name *Amplification of the Ontological Proof*, usually published at the end of the main corpus of all sixteen lectures, is a thematically related excerpt from

the lectures on Philosophy of Religion delivered at a later period in 1831. But the text of the *Lectures* proper is conspicuous for its visible bias toward the cosmological proof of God's existence at the expense of all other traditional arguments. Whereas the discussion in the first nine lectures revolves around the general matters of religion and the distinction between the methods employed by faith (immediate knowledge) and that of speculative philosophy when it aspires to reach transcendence, the rest of the text almost exclusively, with the exception of the concluding chapter, devotes itself to the detailed investigation of the cosmological argument. Hegel's concluding remarks at the very end of the course only confirm the initial impression: "Amongst the proofs of the existence of God, the cosmological occupies the first place. Only in it is the affirmative, absolute Being, the Infinite, defined not merely as infinite in general but, in contrast to the characteristic of contingency, as absolutely necessary" (Hegel 1962, 347).

The reason for this manifest preference lies outside any considerations of the relative convincing power of the cosmological proof or its alleged logical merits. As we have observed earlier, the value of an argument of this sort for Hegel lies not in its capacity to convince the religious skeptic, but in the accuracy of its description of the actual process of the elevation of finite human spirit to the realm of the Divine. While the ontological proof takes as its starting point the notion of God, concludes about his Being and *recedes* from it eventually to the finitude of human existence, thus making *infinity* as its initial standpoint and *finitude* as its implied result,⁵ the cosmological proof more closely follows the actual course of the religious experience, which always begins with the apprehension of the finitude of the world and only afterwards proceeds from that fact to the notion of the infinite Being. Martin De Nys in his helpful discussion on this subject puts it nicely when he says that cosmological argument "presents a speculative account of the religious claim from the standpoint from which that claim is made. Religion claims a relationship between the finite and the divine infinite from the standpoint of the finite subject" (De Nys 1978, 349–50). In view of this goal Hegel is right when he assigns the "first place" to the cosmological proof, i.e., gives preference to the path of reasoning which reflects the "native" way of religious consciousness.

It is still not clear, however, why Hegel disregards in his *Lectures* other possible proofs of the same *type*, e.g., the teleological argument. Even though the text does not give us any explicit explanation of this choice, we may suggest that Hegel considers the cosmological proof as a paradigmatic case of the elevation of finite spirit to God and on this basis ignores other traditional ways of concluding about God's existence from the being of the finite world or finite consciousness as simply superfluous for his purpose. Whether the spirit rises from the phenomenal world to the absolute *ground*, *causa prima*, or the absolute *telos* of its being, the stages of consciousness seem to remain essentially the same in all cases.

Throughout the *Lectures* Hegel consistently demarcates his views from the three other positions: Kantians, Dogmatists and the Intuitivists. Kantian criticism of the proofs was misleading because it was based on the dogma of the radical separation between the two realms of Being. This essential dualism, the doctrine of radical separation between the realm of contingent and the realm of necessary, finite and infinite, phenomenal and noumenal was superseded in Hegelian speculative metaphysics. Likewise, Hegel argues that the traditional pre-critical way of argumentation is equally unsatisfying albeit for another reason. By inferring some necessary essence as the ground of the contingent world, the proof says nothing about the nature of this essence: "Even if the absolute necessity is hypostatized as Essence, still this Essence is indeterminate, and is not a subject or anything living, and still less is it Spirit" (Hegel 1962, 281). The danger of this indeterminacy lies in the identification of God, the absolutely necessary Being, with the necessity of nature and its laws, i.e., taking a pantheistic route. Only God as the subject thinking himself would be worthy of a name for Hegel.

Neither does he want to embrace, as we have noted earlier, the position of Jacobi and other intuitivists, who criticized the formal approach to the proofs of God's existence on the very similar grounds but then rejected the rational justification altogether in favor of the immediate knowledge. To differentiate Hegel's view on the proofs of God's existence from these three schools is only to do justice to the overall strategy of his system, since for Hegel these three "attitudes of thought to objectivity" are the main targets of polemical argumentation

on many other philosophical subjects too. The beginning chapters of the *Encyclopedia* provide the best example of this tendency.

In the first *Critique* Kant observes that the cosmological proof, even if valid, is only able to infer the *idea* of the necessary being, but nothing in the proof itself points to the possibility of actuality (existence) of this idea. As it stands, it requires the further proof that the idea of the necessary being has its actual embodiment in some existing subject, and thus, Kant writes, “the so called cosmological proof really owes any cogency which it may have to the ontological proof from mere concepts” (A607/B635). Once again, however, this criticism presupposes the rigid separation between the ideal notion and reality in some limited material sense. For Hegel, only that which lives up to its notion is truly real (*wirklich*). The notion (*Begriff*) which lacks reality (*wirklichkeit*) is a contradiction in terms. The famous Hegelian maxim “What is rational is also real” fully applies here to the case of God—the most reasonable and, therefore, the most real notion of all. The distinction Hegel draws elsewhere between existence (*Dasein*) and reality needs not to be pursued at this point, but it is satisfactory enough for him to stress that the reality and rationality of the notion of God consists in its utter *importance* for the contingent world and for the history of the Spirit; the notion is real because it *matters*. What other ‘higher’ reality could the notion of the absolutely necessary Being possibly have?

To summarize, Hegel’s primary insights in the *Lectures on the Proofs of God’s Existence* are in full accord with his whole system of speculative philosophy. Although in his earlier, more systematic works Hegel prefers to use the term ‘Absolute,’ his treatment of God in this series of later lectures in many ways corresponds to the description of Absolute, its nature, relations and attributes as seen from the *Encyclopedia* and other major writings. In fact, many points in the *Lectures* are taken directly or with only minor modifications from his other works, most notably from the first volume of the *Encyclopedia*. In this sense, the *Lectures* do not present us with the original philosophical views, but rather show the possibilities of application of the general and already developed system to the particular questions of religion. Perhaps the biggest merit of this work, however, is its clear and informal style of expression, which often elucidates the more obscure parallel passages of the earlier writings.

Notes

1. The sense in which the claims of faith are 'reducible' to the form of speculative thought will be made clear later on. It suffices to say at this point that this 'reduction' does not imply elimination of faith altogether, but preserves it as a necessary, albeit imperfect, mode of knowledge.
2. The comprehensive explanation of the distinction between (Kantian) Understanding (*Verstand*) and Hegel's Speculative Reason would require a much deeper immersion into Hegelian system than the format of this article allows. One way to characterize the difference is in terms of *stability* vs. *motion*. The goal of Understanding is to reach 'fixed' knowledge starting from the hard and fast notions and presuppositions; the kind of knowledge that shies away from contradictions of dialectical thought. The distinctive feature of reason (*Vernunft*), on the other hand, is its capacity to recognize the dialectical nature of reality and to appropriate the "opposing characteristics" of the world at a higher level of synthesis without ever reaching the final stop. Findlay (1964) provides an excellent summary of the relationship between reason and understanding in Hegel's thought.
3. As Kaufmann (1972) rightly observes Hegel's attitude toward Christianity has not always been equally optimistic. The earlier writings on religion reveal a much more skeptical Hegel, with much less favorable estimation of the Christian faith by comparison with "the faith of the Greeks."
4. Indeed, Hegel does seem to regard something like the ontological proof as *evidently* true in his *Logic* when he writes: "Certainly it would be strange if the notion, the very inmost of mind, if even the 'Ego,' or above all the concrete totality we call God, were not rich enough to include so poor a category as being, the very poorest and the most abstract of all" (*Logic*, 1975, 51).
5. The most vivid example of this movement can be found in Descartes's *Meditations* (1997) when he first uses a form of ontological proof to show God's actuality ("*ens realissimum*") and later uses this result to ground the existence of the 'outer' (finite) world through the consideration of God's character (the well-known "God is not a deceiver" argument).

Works Cited

- De Nys, Martyn J. 1978. "The Cosmological Argument and Hegel's Doctrine of God." *The New Scholasticism* 52: 234–48.
- Descartes, Rene. 1997. *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, trans. L. Laflueur. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Findlay, J. N. 1964. *Hegel: A Re-Examination*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Hegel, G. W. F. 1962. "Lectures on the Proofs of the Existence of God." In *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, trans. and ed. E. B. Speirs and J. B. Sanderson, vol. 3. New York: The Humanities Press.
- . 1975. *Logic*, trans. W. Wallace. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

———. 1979. *The Christian Religion: Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Part 3*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson. Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion.

Hodgson, Peter C. 1984. "Hegel's Approach to Religion: The Dialectic of Speculation and Phenomenology." *Journal of Religion* 64: 158–72.

Inwood, M. J. 1983. *Hegel*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Kant, Immanuel. 1929. *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Kaufmann, Walter. 1972. "The Young Hegel and Religion." In *Hegel: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Alasdair C. MacIntyre. New York: Anchor Books.

Raposa, Michael L. 1986. "Faith and Certainty." *The Thomist* 24: 56–69.