

Hegel's Ontological Argument: A Reconstruction

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Abstract

This essay takes up a challenge recently posed by Graham Oppy: to clearly express, in premise-conclusion form, Hegel's version of the ontological argument. In addition to employing this format, it seeks to supplement existing treatments by locating a core component of Hegel's argument in a slightly different place than is common. Whereas some prominent recent treatments (Williams, Bubbio, Melechar) focus on Hegel's definition of the Absolute as the Concept, from the third part of his *Science of Logic* (the Doctrine of the Concept), mine focuses on earlier definitions from the first (the Doctrine of Being). As I hope to show, there are even more resources in Hegel's *Logic* for an ontological argument than those emphasized in recent treatments: the concept, the Idea, etc. Already in the first third of the *Logic*, we find a compelling response to a famous Kantian counter-argument to the ontological proof. The counter-argument is summed up in the phrase 'existence [*Sein*] is not a real predicate'. Hence, Hegel's response as I interpret it will take the form of a competing analysis of Being, a *Lehre vom Sein* (Doctrine of Being). What do we learn when we put the ontology back into Hegel's ontological argument? That Being is neither predicate, nor subject, nor copula, but a monist (or 'infinite') category. The larger importance of this exercise to our understanding of Hegel's thought lies in the way it clarifies his profound debt to even non-idealist conceptions of God, such as the one espoused by Spinoza.

The aim of this paper is to give an accessible restatement of Hegel's ontological argument, specifically by putting it in premise-conclusion form. What I offer is my own reconstruction, not a simple restatement of the historical Hegel's argument. I work with materials I insist are very much there in Hegel, but assemble them in a way he did not. I believe the result is a compelling argument which is Hegelian, if not exactly Hegel's own. Before turning to this Hegelian ontological argument, I will begin with some background about the history of the argument.

An ontological argument is a type of argument for the existence of God. It is one which does not rely on any empirical premise. In other words, it is thoroughly a priori. So ontological arguments are distinct from what are known as cosmological or teleological arguments. Those have at least one empirical premise: typically,

something to the effect that created things exist. The existence of their creator is then inferred.

While there are many variants of the ontological argument, they share a common strategy. The strategy is to show that God exists, as it were, by definition. Put differently, God's existence is (according to this line of argument) contained in God's very concept. That God exists, on this view, is an analytic truth. To deny God's existence is to contradict oneself—like denying that a triangle has three sides.

Although the ontological argument found wide acclaim in medieval and modern philosophy, this came to an end with Kant, that 'all-destroyer' of metaphysics. His well-known refutation of the argument is summed up in the phrase 'existence is not a real predicate' (B627). Swiftly and crudely summarized, Kant's meaning is that existence is simply not the type of property that can belong to a thing by definition (though this is not his preferred terminology). Three-sidedness, perhaps—but existence, no. No amount of intellectual reflection on the concept of a thing will be sufficient to prove it exists. If it could, Kant memorably says, then I could improve my financial situation very easily: No sooner would I think of 100 thalers, then I would have them in my pocket.

It is well known that Hegel admired the ontological argument. He lectured on it throughout his career and praised it throughout his writings. Yet there is no work in which Hegel's admiration for the argument is clearer than in his *Logic*. Again and again, he describes different parts of the *Logic* as versions of the ontological argument. Given Hegel's stature, one might think his ontological argument would be renowned. But this is not exactly true, even among Hegelians. Certainly, the camp known as non-metaphysical or Kantian-idealist interpreters of Hegel have very little interest. Yet even those who approach Hegel as a robustly metaphysical thinker, leave the argument to one side.

Especially in recent years, there has been some excellent work on Hegel's ontological argument, even book-length studies devoted to it. Yet the argument remains the province of a few (hyper-)specialists.

Outside of Hegel scholarship, the argument's fate has been even worse, and it is not difficult to tell why. In the first place, the argument raises serious exegetical problems. It is very unclear what Hegel's version of the ontological argument is even supposed to be. Just consider what is said about Hegel in the entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia* on ontological arguments. The author is the philosopher of religion Graham Oppy, an expert on the nature and history of the argument. Oppy discusses the ontological arguments of Anselm, Descartes, and even more recent figures like Kurt Gödel and his followers. But when he arrives at Hegel's version, Oppy tells us Hegel's argument is simply too obscure.

Oppy does not think Hegel scholars have done a particularly good job clarifying the argument.¹ Even the few to have written on it, such as Harrelson, appear to have come up short in Oppy's eyes.² As Oppy writes, "There is no extant

discussion that states clearly the full set of premises of a 'Hegelian' ontological argument' (2019).

This assessment may seem harsh, and is at least a bit overhasty. In the first place, there has been more interesting work on Hegel's ontological argument than Oppy seems to recognize—though he cites some of it.³ In spite of this, I regard Oppy's assessment as broadly correct in the following sense. There is nobody, so far as I know, who restates the argument in premise-conclusion form. Indeed, nobody I know of even attempts to do so. That is why Oppy cannot include it alongside other ontological arguments, which are more easily summarized: Anselm's, Descartes's, even Gödel's.

My aim in this piece is to offer a Hegelian ontological argument in premise-conclusion form, though I concede it is not in any straightforward sense contained in Hegel's text (Oppy's scepticism is, to this extent, justified). My contribution would be better thought of as undertaken in a Hegelian spirit, rather than hewing to the letter. That said, departures from the text can be undertaken more or less responsibly. I will, at a number of stages, attempt to show where I am taking my cues from Hegel (and where I am taking my leave of him).

Oppy has (perhaps inadvertently) hit upon an important truth about Hegel which no defender of the latter's position should deny. It is that Hegel himself did not choose to put his ontological argument, or, indeed, any of his most famous arguments, in premise-conclusion form. Clearly, this was not his favoured method of argument, and he had good reasons for questioning its value.⁴

Worries to the effect that this argument form is inevitably distorting are therefore entirely legitimate. Still, I ask that they be held in abeyance. I am proposing we wait and see what the distortions (if any) might be, rather than allowing them to simply derail the project at this early stage. I will argue the distortions are relatively minor.

A second obstacle concerns Hegel's choice of idiom: the history of philosophy. Hegel often expresses his ontological argument by invoking those of his predecessors: Anselm, Descartes, Spinoza, Wolff, etc. This is something of an obstacle to providing a clear restatement of Hegel's own version, if only because it dissuades commentators from attempting to isolate it. Many treatments take the form of overviews of the entire history of the argument, concluding with an account of how to situate Hegel in relation to it.⁵ This method can be illuminating, but it is not, I think, the best way to clarify Hegel's unique contribution to the debate. There is a further risk here of depicting Hegel's argument as a kind of *mélange*. This arguably exacerbates the problems Oppy identifies, rather than helping to resolve them. Hence I will leave the question of Hegel's influences mostly to the side. However, I do offer some recompense to those who favour this approach: a stronger case for Hegel's debt to Spinoza.

There is a final serious obstacle to this project, beyond those just noted. Dieter Henrich identifies it in his 1960 book, which remains one of the best and most comprehensive treatments of the history of ontological argument. As Henrich says, Hegel's ontological argument likely encompasses the whole of his system: 'Es ist bekannt [...], daß man sein [Hegels] ganzes System als ontologischen Gottesbeweis verstehen kann' (1960: 193).⁶ At the very least, the argument may encompass the whole of the logic. That would be one way of understanding why allusions to it recur so frequently. Since there is no hope of restating the entire argument of the logic, an accessible restatement of Hegel's ontological argument would seem to be permanently out of reach.

Yet while it is likely impossible to restate Hegel's ontological argument in its entirety, I do think one can do so for an important part of the argument. The part I have in mind is the one where Hegel responds to Kant's aforementioned claim: 'existence is not a real predicate.' As I hope to show, this vitally important part of Hegel's ontological argument is found in an unexpected place—much earlier in the *Logic* than others who have written on the ontological argument in Hegel tend to focus. (In saying this, I do not mean that others simply ignore earlier passages; but I do not think that they give these passages the right significance—namely, locating in it the argument against Kant I find there.) And this specific argument, which they definitely do not consider, is (I think) compelling.

Here is a more specific statement of my thesis: While these scholars have tended to focus on the third book of the *Logic*, the *Begriffslogik*, I will argue that a crucial component of Hegel's ontological argument can be found in its first book, the *Seinslogik*.⁷ In a way, this is unsurprising. Kant's refutation of the argument takes the form of a claim about Being, or *Sein*: '*Sein* ist offenbar kein reales Prädikat' (B627).⁸ So why should Hegel's response not take the form of a competing analysis of *Sein* or Being, a *Lehre vom Sein*, as Hegel calls this part of the book? Approached in this way, the dispute between Hegel and Kant takes on a different appearance. At issue is not just the question of whether God exists or has being, but rather 'the question of being' *tout court*.⁹ To sum up, and putting things a bit glibly, my project is to put the ontology back into Hegel's ontological argument.

Now, I have said I am going to focus on a particular part of Hegel's ontological argument: his response to Kant's 'existence is not a real predicate' idea. But I do not want to simply ignore the rest of Hegel's ontological argument either. I will summarize that too, and, at the close of the paper, put it together with the first part. So, by the end, we will have at least a schematic overview of the entire ontological argument. *But the only part I will defend in detail is the first.*

I. Hegel's ontological argument: the doctrine of being

My first piece of evidence for an interpretation centred on Being comes from Hegel's discussion of his first definition of the Absolute or God: Being [*Sein*].

When being is expressed as a predicate of the absolute, this provides the first definition of the latter: the absolute is being. This is (in the thought) the absolutely first, most abstract, and most impoverished definition. It is the definition of the Eleatics, but at the same time also the familiar one that God is the sum total of all realities [*Inbegriff aller Realitäten*]. The point is that one is supposed to abstract from the limitedness inherent in every reality, so that God is nothing but the real in all reality, the supremely real [*das Allerrealste*]. Insofar as reality already contains a reflection, this idea is expressed more immediately in what Jacobi says about the God of Spinoza, namely that he is the principium of being in all existence.¹⁰ (*EL*: §86, *W*: 8:182)

I begin with some background. At issue here is not the being of 'determinate' entities, i.e. specific or particular entities. We are not concerned with entities distinguished from one another by certain 'determinations', i.e. distinguishing features or properties. Our concern is, rather, the being of something that is indeterminate, something lacking any such determinations. Now, as something indeterminate, the thing we are dealing with lacks any determinations, i.e. features or properties. So, it lacks determination, feature or property that would distinguish it from others. Therefore, it is not one thing among others. It is, instead, the only thing. So, Hegel's initial definition of the Absolute has an undeniably monist cast. This is why he mentions Jacobi, Parmenides and Spinoza in the passage.

What is more, this opening argument is clearly connected with rational theology. In the passage, Hegel refers to *Sein* as the 'Inbegriff aller Realitäten'. As Harrelson has shown, this is the German for *omnitudo realitatis*, which was itself the name for the God of the ontological argument. I would add, in much the same vein, that Hegel uses the term 'Allerrealste'—which, as far as I can tell, was a German word for *ens realissimum*.¹¹ The crucial point is that the God Hegel invokes here is the very same one who figures in the mature Kant's critique of the ontological argument. (This is part of the critique of rational theology from the Transcendental Ideal of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.)

Where I differ from Harrelson is in my interest in deriving from this, and other passages like it, a particular type of rejoinder to Kant's refutation of the ontological argument—at the very least, a concise rejoinder. I therefore begin by explaining just what type of rejoinder I mean. It is as if Hegel is beginning his

logic where Kant's first critique ended. Yet whereas Kant rejects a definition of the Absolute or God as Being, Hegel embraces it.

So, do we already have an ontological argument in the very first pages of the *Logic*? Possibly. The rough idea would be that Being, in Hegel's sense, must be.¹² It is not exactly that Being is a real predicate, the copula, or an absolute subject, the three alternatives considered by Kant (though this last is closest to Hegel's meaning). Rather, we are operating at a pre-predicative standpoint. Being is neither subject nor predicate, nor the link between them, because this would already involve a form of differentiation that we have not earned the right to yet. And Being exists, not because it shares this property with determinate things, nor even because it has it to a higher degree (the idea behind versions of the ontological argument that treat God or Being as the *ens realissimum*). Rather, there would be a more fundamental reason. We simply have not earned the right to speak (or think) of determinate entities yet. We simply do not have the required category: *Dasein*. So God, as Being, exists, as it were, by default.

But, of course, the success of any such ontological argument would be extremely short-lived, and it is perhaps for this reason that some have been wary of finding, in the very first definition of the Absolute, an ontological argument.¹³ As everyone knows, Being is Nothing. 'Pure light is pure darkness'. And so on. However, I do not think this scuttles the project of locating, in the Doctrine of Being, a version of the ontological argument, and a response to Kant. Seeing this requires going beyond the *Encyclopaedia*, however, and considering the greater *Logic*.

The Doctrine of Being, as presented there, contains one of the lengthiest discussions of the ontological argument—and a very stark rejoinder to Kant's 'existence is not a real predicate' idea. The discussion does occur under the heading of Being. But the response is framed in terms of a subsequent logical category, though one still belonging to the Doctrine of Being: infinity. Specifically, Hegel frames his main response to Kant in terms of the definition of the Absolute or God as the infinite (*unendlich* or *Unendlichkeit*). However, it would be a serious error to conclude that the focus on Being, in the broad sense, is misplaced. The infinite is a 'sublated', which is to say a refined version of the preceding definition: Being. That is why it is still part of the Doctrine of Being, which we have not left behind yet.¹⁴

I want now to turn to the passage where Hegel claims that God, understood as the Infinite, must exist, and that Kant is wrong to think that the 'existence is not a real predicate' idea rules this out:

Still to be noted is [the immediate connection between, on the one hand, the elevation above the hundred dollars and finite things generally, and, on the other hand,] the ontological proof and the aforementioned Kantian criticism of it. This

criticism, because of its popular example, has won universal plausibility. Who does not know that a hundred actual dollars are different from a hundred merely possible dollars and that they make a difference to my financial situation? [...] However, it is the definition of finite things that in them concept and being are different; that the concept and reality, soul and body, are separable; that they are therefore perishable and mortal. The abstract definition of God, on the contrary, is precisely that his concept and his being are unseparated and inseparable. The true critique of the categories and of reason is just this [*Die wahrhafte Kritik der Kategorien und der Vernunft ist gerade diese*]: to acquaint cognition with this distinction and to prevent it from applying to God the determinations and the relations of the finite. (*SL*: 65–66, *W*: 5:91)

In the passage, Hegel responds to Kant's objection, essentially by restricting its scope. Yes, 'existence is not a real predicate,' but there is a qualifier. This is only true *when the subject concept in the judgment belongs to a certain concept-type*. It is only true when the concept in question is a concept of a finite entity: an entity enclosed within certain limits, boundaries or borders. Finite entities are the ones by which we are surrounded—like tables or chairs or a pile of banknotes worth 100 dollars. And Kant is obviously correct about this much: for such entities, there is no route from merely thinking of their concept to establishing the truth of an existential proposition concerning them.¹⁵

Yet according to Hegel, there is a distinct class of concept to which a different set of rules apply. This is the concept of the infinite, the concept of that which is literally *un-endlich*, without limit, border or boundary. The infinite, Hegel is proposing, can exist by definition. Its concept is necessarily non-empty. Of course, Hegel has not yet told us the reason why this is the case. But that reason, I think, can be expressed in the form of the following argument.

Some who have written about this passage err by reading into it a definition of the Absolute not available at this early stage. Williams, for example, treats it as making a claim about God defined as the Concept: namely, that it is unlike a mere representation in that being is inseparable from it.¹⁶ Bubbio also treats this remark as one concerning the Concept.

However, this definition of God is not available, as we are only in the Doctrine of Being. It is possible Hegel is anticipating later developments, but I will resist this here. In the first place, it flies in the face of Hegel's charity towards non-Absolute idealist definitions of God or the Absolute. Hegel gives these alternatives, e.g. Parmenidean or Spinozist ones, their due. It would be premature to conclude that only the Concept has the positive feature we seek, the one which

makes possible a response to Kant. As I hope to show, this is not the case. What is more, it seems to me that we should not tie the fate of Hegel's response to his case for a definition of the Absolute or God as concept. After all, that case takes up the first two thirds of the *Logic*. Of course, it will ultimately turn out that Hegel's argument is meant to run on a conception of God as the Concept or the Idea. To this extent, these other commentators are right. Here, however, we only have the bare idea of the infinite, a modest successor to pure Being.

I now present an argument, in premise-conclusion form, for Hegel's idea that God, *qua* infinite, necessarily exists:

- I. The infinite *must* exist.
 - P1. Suppose, for reductio, nothing infinite exists.
 - P2. Then either:
 - a) some finite thing(s) would exist ('finitism'); or
 - b) nothing would ('nihilism').
 - P3. *Contra* finitism, there can be nothing finite without the infinite.
 - P4. *Contra* nihilism, it could not be the case that Nothing exists.
 - C1. Therefore, the infinite must exist (P1, P2, P3, P4).

To be clear, I am not claiming that P3 and P4 are found in the passage just cited where Hegel argues that God (the infinite) must exist.¹⁷ Nor, however, would it be correct to allege that these are mere 'presuppositions' in the pejorative sense, i.e. insufficiently well-grounded by the lights of Hegel's method whether because derived from representation [*Vorstellung*] or some other extra-logical source. I agree wholeheartedly with those like Houlgate, who regard Hegel's core aspiration as thinking without presuppositions (2006: Ch. 2).

As I will indicate, however, P3 and P4, though they are not found in this specific passage, can be found in the Doctrine of Being. In Hegelian terms, they belong to the treatment of logical categories like finitude and nothingness [*nichts*]. These are categories not so remote from the one under discussion: infinity. Hegel's own method of argument does not foreground this connection, though it can be discerned from the progression. My own method of argument here requires that I invoke Hegel's rejection of finitism, and of nihilism. What is more this rejection is no simple assertion, but, rather, grounded in argument. The arguments are ones I will reconstruct presently. This would be a key instance in which I assemble Hegel's materials in a slightly different configuration from the one that the strictures of his method demanded.

Let us bracket, for now, issues about whether Hegel would accept an argument in this form. I want instead to simply evaluate the argument on its own terms. The argument is pretty clearly valid, a standard argument by elimination. So what we need to do is determine whether it is sound. Premises 1 and 2 look

fine, but premises 3 and 4 are less straightforward. It is unclear why they should be true, for Hegel or otherwise. So I want to devote a little more attention to each.

Regarding 3, we should realize that the no-finitude-without-infinity claim is a core commitment of Hegel's, voiced in many places. But I include a notable instance here:

Therefore, it is merely a lack of consciousness [*nur Bewußtlosigkeit*] not to realize that the designation of something as finite or limited contains the proof of the actual presence of the infinite, the unlimited, that the knowledge of a boundary can exist only insofar as the unbounded exists on this side, in consciousness. (*EL*: §60)

The argument, very roughly, is that if we recognize the bounded or limited, we are thereby committed to recognizing the unbounded or unlimited as its necessary correlate. It is the boundary, border or limit itself which implies something beyond it. And, while one could maintain that the thing beyond is itself finite, this very quickly leads to well-known problems.¹⁸

The main one is an infinite regress. Suppose the thing lying beyond the boundary, border or limit is itself finite. Then it will have a limit, and there will be something lying beyond the latter. And if this is in turn finite, we are quickly off on a regress. This is the form of regress Hegel calls the bad infinite, and it arises in both the qualitative and quantitative domains. So we are led to the idea that the thing lying beyond the boundary, border or limit is the unbounded, unlimited.

Of course, this idea, famously, turns out to be problematic in its own right. But I have gone as far as I need to go with it for the purpose of my argument. The principle, no finite without the infinite, may be revised in response to problems that subsequently arise. What principle of Hegel's thought is not? However, it will be retained.

One obvious question about Hegel's argument for the no-finite-without-the-infinite claim concerns the register in which it should be heard. Does not Hegel run together separate issues, one concerning the concept of the finite, the other concerning the finite itself, and perhaps a third concerning empirical face of the question? Without delving too deeply into Hegel's method, I think it can safely be said that, for him, the logical or conceptual face of the issue and the metaphysical one are identical. As Hegel famously says, 'logic thus coincides with metaphysics' (*Die Logik fällt daher mit der Metaphysik zusammen*) (*EL*: §24). There is no gulf between the way we are constrained to think, and the way things must be. Partly this is vouchsafed by Hegel's Absolute Idealism, which conceives of reality as thinking. Partly, however, it is a consequence of his anti-Kantian methodological view, which is that metaphysical thinking about the nature of reality need not await an investigation of the nature and limits of thought (this would be

like ‘learning to swim before getting wet’) (*EL*: §10). A final source of Hegel’s unwillingness to separate logic from metaphysics is his rejection of Kant’s notion that the forms of intuition have a nature that sets them apart from thought—so that what is from the human standpoint could diverge from what is intelligible.¹⁹ The issue of whether we are operating in a logical, semantic or intentional register, on the one hand, or a metaphysical register, on the other, may be pressing for other philosophers. However it is not so for Hegel.

However, the no-finitude-without-infinity idea also draws support from another principle not often associated with that idea: ‘omnis determinatio est negatio’ (all determination is negation). To see this, we need to realize that the principle is ambiguous as stated, and can be interpreted in two distinct ways. Its first, more common meaning is that each determinate thing or concept is what it is because of its non-identity with some other thing or concept. This is the version of the principle that would become important to the structuralist linguistics of de Saussure and French philosophy of the 1950s and 1960s. And it is this version which Robert Brandom has redeployed in his recent *Spirit of Trust* project (2019).

However, the version I focus on is not this Brandomian-cum-structuralist one. It is rather a more distinctly monist version of the principle. On this interpretation, the ‘all determination is negation’ principle simply entails monism. As Hegel writes: ‘The unity of Spinoza’s substance, or that there is only one substance, is the necessary consequence of this proposition, that determinateness is negation’ (*SL*: 87, *W*: 5:120).

Why, though, should monism follow from the all-determination principle, as Hegel says?²⁰ The analogy Jacobi and others use in the post-Kantian context to illustrate this is drawn from Kant’s conception of space in the transcendental aesthetic of the first critique (A25/B39). There, Kant argues that all determinate spaces are derivative of the one, all-encompassing space. Particular spaces are obtained from the one, infinite space by delimiting it, drawing lines and circumscribing the relevant region. This illustrates the idea that there can be nothing finite (limited, bounded) without something infinite (unlimited, unbounded) underlying it. For Kant, this is only true of space, and for creatures like ourselves with this form of intuition. For Hegel, I want to suggest, it is true in general, and for any thinker—at least at this stage in the argument.

Concerning premise 4: while it is well known that Hegel regards Being as (indistinguishable from) Nothing, it is less often realized that he endorses the converse claim as well. For its own part, Nothing is (indistinguishable from) Being. So it is not even so much as possible that nothing exists.²¹ Kant famously argues, again in his Aesthetic, that human beings could not imagine a world empty of objects. Hegel does him one better, arguing that this is not even thinkable—for any being. Pure nothing is no less unintelligible on its own than pure being.

Hence it is a mistake to leave off discussion of the argument where Being vanishes into Nothing. It is no less true that Nothing has, so to speak, manifested into Being.

Here is a counter-argument.²² Suppose Being, as the infinite, must be—but could there have been Nothing? No, since nothing is indistinguishable from Being. But, since Being is indistinguishable from Nothing, is this not Nothing again? In my view, this does not follow. The outcome of the argument is precisely not a reversion to Nothing. The whole point of deeming Being and Nothing indistinguishable is to block a reversion to one of the indistinguishable terms. The outcome is that we are left with fusion of them in a unity: becoming. From indistinguishability, the possibility of settling on either term in isolation is foreclosed. Still, it is the case that Becoming is sublated Being, and in that sense a form of being.

II. Kantian lines of counter-argument

At most, all of this would show that the argument is successful on its own terms. But we now need to ask: is it convincing, as a response to Kant or otherwise?

One place to start is with the idea that Kant has somehow overlooked the category of the infinite. On the face of it, this is an absurd accusation. To be sure, the infinite in Hegel's sense is not to be found among Kant's twelve categories, the pure concepts of the understanding from the *Analytic*.²³ It can, however, be found among his Ideas of reason from the *Dialectic*, especially the cosmological Ideas. There, Kant does consider the possibility that the world is infinite in its spatial and temporal dimensions.

So I think Hegel's criticism needs to be revised. He should not say that Kant overlooks the concept of the infinite. However, it would be open to him to say that Kant's concepts of the infinite are insufficient from a Hegelian perspective. In Kant, these concepts of the infinite, or Ideas, are of two fundamental kinds: the 'unconditioned condition', on the one hand, and 'the whole series of conditions' on the other. Now, of course, Hegel thinks that some infinities are genuine and others are not. The latter he calls 'schlechte Unendlichkeiten'—not so much bad infinities, as the usual English translation has it, but, rather, fake infinities, those which are not really genuine. And Hegel thinks Kant's belong to the latter variety. Neither is *genuinely* a concept of the infinite, or unlimited.

We can see that this is so in both cases.²⁴ The unconditioned condition meets its limit, boundary, or border in the other members of the series conditions. The whole series meets its limit, boundary, or border in the new member which, Hegel insists, can always be added. Simply stated, the idea is that you can always add one to infinity—and then you do not have infinity anymore. So, while it is unfair for Hegel to claim that Kant does not consider the concept of

the infinite, it would, I think, be legitimate to claim that he does not do so with sufficient care.

From Hegel's perspective, it is not surprising that Kant would have omitted an important category. As is well known, Hegel thought Kant's table of categories was incomplete, chiefly because it was based on an inadequate, eighteenth-century logic. What is more, Hegel claimed that his logic had outdone the critical philosophy in this regard, providing a comprehensive system of all the categories of rational thought.

What interests me here is less the criticism itself than its bearing on the controversy over the ontological argument. Here we need to recall something Hegel says in the lengthy passage just considered, namely, that the true critique of reason (*die wahrhafte Kritik*) would uphold, not denigrate, the ontological argument. What this shows is that Hegel is not simply rejecting the critical philosophy in favour of rational theology. He is claiming that a superior version of the critical philosophy would be a form of theology. And when we remember Hegel's criticism of Kant's table of categories, we can see why. It is because Kant mishandles the categories that he omits a crucial theological one. And it is because he omits it that he denigrates, rather than upholds, the ontological argument.

However, Kant has another fairly obvious response to Hegel's argument. For Kant, no concept of the understanding can, all on its own, acquire an object. For this, the contributions of a separate cognitive faculty are required: the intuitions of sensibility. As is well known, Kant thinks that 'concepts without intuitions are empty' (A51/B75).

Still, it seems to me that Hegel has a response to this Kantian line of counter-argument as well. The response is that it would be question-begging for Kant to invoke this conception of knowledge at the outset of his critique of metaphysics. To do so would be to prejudge the case. If knowledge requires sensible intuition, then of course metaphysics fails. It would be wrong to assume that the critique of metaphysics is this straightforward. The logical positivists may have been content to simply dismiss metaphysics for its unverifiability. However, this is most certainly not Kant's critique of metaphysics. Nor could it be. After all, Kant's Transcendental Dialectic takes up 5/6 of the first critique. Karl Ameriks has warned against imputing to Kant short arguments for idealism (2000: Ch.3). I would add that we should not impute to Kant short arguments against metaphysics either.

What is more, there is evidence Kant has no truck with such 'short arguments'. He appears not to require that his metaphysical opponents assume the 'thoughts without content' idea. In his dialectic, Kant is prepared to allow, at least provisionally, arguments for existential truths that are free of any appeal to sensible intuition. The arguments made by his metaphysical opponents for the theses and antitheses of each antinomy are of this kind. Each is an argument for a

claim of the form 'there is [*es gibt*]' ...there is a beginning of the world in time, an outermost limit of it in space (e.g. A426/B454). None, however, invokes sensible intuition. Yet if Kant is willing to entertain such arguments there, he must do so in the Ideal as well. There too, a priori arguments for existential claims are not out of bounds.

This concludes my interpretation and defence of what is just a small part of Hegel's ontological argument. It is the part relevant to his response to Kant. We have put the argument in premise-conclusion form, and therefore made an attempt to meet Oppy's challenge. Whether Hegel would be satisfied is another matter I want to take up later. However, it is important to see that we still have not reconstructed Hegel's ontological argument in its entirety. This is more than I can do in a paper of this length. Still, in the space I have left, I want to at least sketch the remainder of the argument, as I understand it.

III. From substance to subject: completing Hegel's ontological argument

It is crucial to note here that what we have so far is not sufficient *even by Hegel's lights*. After all, it is not simply Hegel's ambition to prove that something infinite exists. Spinoza may have been content with something infinite, but impersonal: substance.²⁵ But Hegel is not. Hegel famously objects to Spinoza's God on the grounds that it lacks personhood. Yet it would be wrong to conclude from this that Spinoza's substance is not in any way included in the conception of God Hegel does ultimately embrace. This aspiration to incorporate Spinozism is reflected in Hegel's well-known slogan, 'the true must be grasped, not only [*nicht nur*] as substance but also as subject' (*W*: 3:22).

How can Hegel build on his argument for the claim 'something infinite must exist' so that he is not just left with Spinozism? The answer, I think, is that we need a further argument for the claim 'anything truly infinite is subjectivity.' The two arguments, taken together, yield an ontological proof acceptable by Hegel's lights, and it is not difficult to see why. If a) something infinite must exist, and b) the only thing that is truly infinite is self-determining subjectivity, then c) self-determining subjectivity must exist.²⁶

Clearly, the *Logic* does not end with the definition of the Absolute or God as infinity. Like all such definitions, this one is subject to a process of conceptual refinement that yields a superior one. Through immanent critique, the original definition is shown to undermine or contradict itself. Then, through determinate negation, we generate a superior, successor category. This we do by resolving the contradiction inherent within the preceding. The process will then repeat.

There is an obvious place in which we move from a Spinozist conception of the Absolute as Substance to Hegel's own of it as subject: the transition from

Essence to the Concept. In addition to being obscure in and of itself, this argument presupposes a whole wealth of other material: roughly, all of the logical transitions in the Doctrine of Essence preceding it. Even if we could sort out Hegel's tortured analyses of the relationship between active and passive substance, and how their reciprocal interaction yields something more like the Concept—there would be too much presupposed. It would seem then that a problem for the project as a whole has re-emerged in this final phase. I mean the problem of localizing Hegel's ontological argument.

Since this final stage of the argument is supplemental to my main project, namely, answering Kant's 'existence is not a real predicate' claim, I will be somewhat less faithful to the text. I restrict myself to a very modest task. I want to present a compressed version of the argument which, while not identical to Hegel's own in the texts, does incorporate at least one of the key moves: the refinement of the notion of the infinite (from the bad infinite into the good). I take it this is one, but not the only, place in which we make a move from substance to subject. The basic principle I will follow is that, as soon as he has rejected the bad infinite in favour of the good (or true), Hegel has, in effect, already made a kind of transition from substance to subject.

- II. The only thing *truly* infinite is self-determining subjectivity.
 - P5. Suppose, for reductio, the infinite is simply the non-finite.
 - P6. Then it is either beyond all any particular limit, though still itself limited; or beyond all limits.
 - P7. The former is infinite quantity, which is self-contradictory (cf. Leibniz).
 - P8. The latter is the indeterminate, which cannot be.
 - P9. The infinite and the finite, though distinct, must also be inseparable (= the *true* infinite). (P5, P6, P7, P8)
 - P10. Self-determining subjectivity *best* meets this standard (= the *true* infinite). (P9)²⁷
 - C2. The only thing truly infinite is self-determining subjectivity. (P9, P10)
 - C3. Self-determining subjectivity necessarily exists. (C1, C2)²⁸

Notice that this argument only works when it is taken in conjunction with the earlier one. The mere fact that self-determining subjectivity best meets the standard we have set up does not by itself entail that that self-determination exists.²⁹ It is only because we have first shown that the infinite must exist (C1) that we are in a position to draw the conclusion (C3) that self-determining subjectivity exists. We do so via the further conclusion that the *true* infinite is self-determining subjectivity. So we show that the infinite exists, refine our notion of infinity into self-determining subjectivity, and then draw the relevant conclusion.

While P10 will be my main focus, I will now briefly comment on the others. P5 is based simply on the definition of the infinite. P6 lists what are naturally assumed to be the only two ways something could be beyond limit. P7 is more controversial. It identifies the condition of being beyond any particular limit, but not beyond any limit as such, with infinite quantity. And it further proceeds to insist, as a long tradition has, that the notion of infinite quantity is a contradiction in terms. P8, though less transparent, re-treads old ground. To be beyond all limits is to lack a determinate feature or property that would distinguish oneself from others. But this is to be the indeterminate, which, we know from Hegel's critique of Being and Nothing, cannot be.

I want to dwell on P10. What does it even mean to unify the infinite and the finite, while (somehow) holding them distinct as per their definitions? Is this not a contradiction? And why should we think this is best achieved by the self-determining subject?

While it would be possible to illustrate this with self-determining subjectivity, in its logical guise (the Concept or the Idea), I want instead to consider it as it figures in the *Realphilosophie*. So my focus is not the Concept but, rather, what Hegel tells us is an instance of it: 'the free will'.³⁰

The key to resolve the apparent contradiction—between identifying and distinguishing the infinite and the finite—lies in treating them as distinct phases of a process. As Hegel explains in the opening paragraphs of his *Philosophy of Right*, the free will has three defining 'moments', essentially the same three as the Concept (PR: 5–7, W: 47–57). The first is a 'moment' of 'pure indeterminacy' or 'unrestricted infinity' ('Das Element der reinen Unbestimmtheit [...] die schrankenlose Unendlichkeit') (PR: 5A, W: 7:49). At this stage, my will is infinite in that it transcends all limitation. In particular, it cannot be limited by any particular end. It can step back, reflect, and decline to act on any end suggested to it by its desires, social surroundings, etc. The will is indeterminate in the sense that it is not yet determined by any particular end. It is, in this qualified sense, free. However, this form of freedom is limited. After all, it is not possible to remain at this stage. There can be no deliberation which does not eventually issue in decision and action.³¹

Hence, the second moment is that of determinacy (*Bestimmtheit*) or finitude ('das absolute Moment der Endlichkeit') (PR: 6, W: 7:52). At this stage, my will is finite in the sense that it is limited by a particular end. It is determined in the sense that what it will do or effect is dictated by that end. Clearly, this is a form of unfreedom, determinism or determination, as Hegel would call it.

Fortunately, there is a third moment that is the unity of the two (PR: 7, W: 7:54). This is the unity of the infinite and finite, the indeterminate and the determinate. Here, the experience of transcending all limits, and of having to limit oneself, coalesce. The alternative to the freedom of indeterminacy and the determinism is self-determination. I am bound by no end but the one I myself choose.

I conclude by addressing a possible misgiving about the argument. It is a worry about Hegel's project first voiced by his left-Hegelian followers, Feuerbach among them. The worry is that Hegel has offered us a mystified depiction of humanity, but not of God. In my view, however, this is to miss the point entirely. In much the way that Spinoza rejects the opposition between the natural and the divine, Hegel rejects the opposition between the human and the divine. The idea that ordinary phenomena of human life have an irreducibly theological valence is one of the most characteristic of Hegel's thought. It should not be dismissed out of hand so easily.

In fact, we can see this from the preceding argument. The divine without the human would be the first moment, the infinite-without-the-finite; it is for this reason that Hegel compares it to the Brahma of the Hindus or Buddhist nirvana. *Pace* Feuerbach, the idea here is not that the 'first moment' of volition is where human beings acquire their (false) idea of Brahma or Nirvana. Nor is it that they misunderstand this 'first moment', treating something human all too human as having theological significance. In his theory of alienation, Feuerbach gives us a mechanism by which this would occur: the imaginative projection by human beings of some of the best features of themselves onto a fictional, supernatural world. But Hegel's idea, I think, is that this debunking story cannot be entirely right. The 'first moment' *is* Brahma or Nirvana, and that it is of cosmic significance: 'In this way man becomes Brahma; there is no longer any distinction between finite man and Brahma [*Auf diese Weise wird der Mensch zu Brahman: es ist kein Unterschied des endlichen Menschen und des Brahman mehr*]' (PR: 5A, W: 7:52) It is real, it is infinite, and it is something the cosmos contains—not outside me but within me, but what of it?

Now, the human without the divine is the 'second moment', the finite without the infinite. This is human life as it is seen from a secular point of view. It is here that we encounter individual agents, distinguished from one another by their specific ends. And to conclude that only this is an accurate picture of human life would be misleading. But Hegel's point is that only the 'third moment' is true, and that the divine and the human, the infinite and the finite, the indeterminate and the determinate, are inseparable.

IV. Premise-conclusion form vs. the dialectic

The main outstanding issue is the form of argument I use, but which Hegel does not. How to justify the discrepancy?

While Hegel says many derisive things about standard philosophical arguments, it is difficult to specify what he thinks their main flaw is. A natural place to begin would be Hegel's critique of the syllogism, but this soon proves

unpromising. While I will return to this criticism, I want to approach it from a different angle: Hegel's critique of judgments of subject-predicate form.³² The two topics of syllogism and judgment are related, since a syllogistic argument just is a number of judgments linked to one another in a certain way. Hegel's complaint about judgments of subject-predicate form is much easier to understand. It is that they require uncritically accepting the subject-concept as legitimate. Whereas he would advocate that we critically scrutinize the subject-concept.

To see what Hegel has in mind, consider this critique of judgments of subject-predicate form as it figures in his assault on pre-critical metaphysicians. Pre-critical metaphysicians assume a certain subject: God, the soul, the world. They then ask whether various things can or cannot be predicated on this subject in a judgment: does God exist or not? Is the soul immortal or mortal? The world finite or infinite? The problem with this approach, Hegel tells us, is that the answer is usually predetermined by the conception of the subject from which we began. But how are we to know what the right concept of God, the soul, the world is? Here, pre-critical metaphysics has no answer. It took over the contents of these concepts from religion, ordinary usage, and so on.

Hegel's dialectical theory of the categories is meant to allow us to give a principled answer to why we invest certain concepts with the content that we do. The answer will be: we have deduced this concept, understood in this way, meaning it is indispensable to our thinking. Deduced from what? From Being, the most fundamental concept that there is. And deduced how? In a first step, we show that Being, and every subsequent concept, contradict themselves (immanent critique). And in a second, we show that the contradiction can only be resolved by a successor concept (determinate negation).

Once we understand Hegel's critique of judgment, and his dialectical alternative, the critique of syllogistic reasoning comes into focus. While it is customary to think of syllogisms as combining two or more judgments (all human beings are mortal, Socrates is a human being, etc.), Hegel prefers to speak of them in a different way. On his alternative view, syllogisms are connections between terms: human being, Socrates, mortal. What this means is that a syllogism just extends the two-place relationship in a judgment one step further. Indeed, one could think of it as a kind of impossible three-part judgment: human beings, like Socrates, are mortal. The crucial point here is that syllogistic reasoning does not eliminate the dogmatism about our concepts inherent in judgment. Rather, it preserves it.

The upshot of all of this is that Hegel's objection to traditional forms of argument and syllogistic reasoning is that they beg the question about the content of our concepts. Despite being an argument in premise-conclusion form, I do not think the version of the ontological argument I have attributed to Hegel does this. Rather, I think what it does is recast, in different terms, Hegel's own, non-

question begging deduction of the categories. So, for example, P4 in the initial argument is just Hegel's immanent critique of Nothing. And P3 a component of his immanent critique of the finite. There is, I submit, a fairly direct route back from each step in the argument to what Hegel considers arguments of the only valid type: immanent critiques or determinate negations of individual categories.

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Notes

¹ Hegel says that “the ontological argument” succeeds. However, he does not make it clear what he takes the premises of “the ontological argument” to be; and nor does he make it clear what it would be for “the ontological argument” to succeed. Some scholars have claimed that the entire Hegelian corpus constitutes an ontological argument’ (Oppy 2019).

² Oppy cites Harrelson (2008), and has reviewed his work elsewhere (Oppy 2010). So he has not simply overlooked it.

³ In addition to Harrelson, he cites Bubbio and Redding (2014). Oppy does not consider the recent books, in English, by Bubbio (2017) and Williams (2017), for example—and, in German, the earlier work of Henrich (1960) and the more recent book by Melichar (2020).

⁴ I therefore somewhat agree with Inwood when he says that ‘The proof is no longer a proof in anything like the traditional sense’ (2018: 121). I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the Inwood piece, which I did not know of at the time of this writing. Inwood’s reconstruction is perhaps the closest to mine in the literature. Inwood too emphasizes Hegel’s attempt to answer Kant’s objection by conceiving God as infinite. I note some further parallels between Inwood’s account and my own below. The main difference between my account and Inwood’s is that, rather than insist on the need to supplement Hegel’s ontological argument with a cosmological one, I show that its deficiencies can be addressed by considering earlier developments in the Doctrine of Being (2018: 126). Another is that Inwood, like the other commentators I discuss, invokes the difference between ‘the concept’ and ordinary concepts, whereas I hold that this would be question-begging at this early stage of the logic (2018: 125). However, the most important difference between my piece and Inwood’s is that I persist in trying to put the argument in premise-conclusion form, something which Inwood (perhaps wisely) does not attempt to do.

⁵ This is perhaps *most* true of Harrelson (2008), but also to varying extents of Bubbio (2017) and Williams (2017). However, despite dissenting from Harrelson’s approach, I consider my account a further development of his in one crucial respect: we both maintain that Hegel runs a

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(compelling) ontological argument on definitions of the Absolute from the Doctrine of Being. See Harrelson (2008: 212).

⁶ “It is known...that one can understand the whole of his [Hegel's] system as an ontological argument.”

⁷ Williams (2017) is typical in this regard, as is the more recent book in German by Melichar (2020). Bubbio (2017: esp. 91–105) too emphasizes the role of the Concept. As we will later see, it is not that commentators like these ignore the earlier material but that they do not attribute to it the right significance. To be clear, it is not my aim to minimize the importance of this later and better-known argument, in which we transition from Subjective to Objective Concept, but I do want to supplement it by considering a crucial portion of Hegel's ontological argument from earlier. For a related reason, I will be less focused on Hegel's lectures on the ontological argument and philosophy of religion, though I do occasionally refer to them in passing. These lectures focus on the Concept and Spirit, rather than Being, the Infinite, etc. In one instance, I take issue with another commentator's attempt to combine evidence from these two sources, on the grounds that it distorts the *Logic's* (Being-based) argument. See infra n. 10.

⁸ References to Kant are of the standard A/B variety. These citations refer to Kant (1998).

⁹ However, it does align me with a group of interpreters like Houlgate (2006) and Martin (2012), whose reading of the Doctrine of Being (as ontology) is somewhat controversial.

¹⁰ Abbreviations used:

EL = *Encyclopedia Logic*, ed. and trans. D. Dahlstrom and K. Brinkmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

PR = *Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. A. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

SL = *The Science of Logic*, ed. and trans. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

VPR = *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion. 3 vols*, ed. W. Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1984).

W = *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1986).

¹¹ Strikingly, Hegel uses both German terms in rapid succession in a section of his 1831 lectures on the philosophy of religion (*VPR*: 3:272).

¹² Redding and Bubbio (2014: 478).

¹³ “The Doctrine of Being, it would seem, is not the appropriate place in which to look for a thought determination adequate to God” (*ibid.*).

¹⁴ Of course, this is arguably true of all subsequent logical categories, but the connection between Being and the infinite is tighter than this. Both are, I think, monist categories, in a broad sense. Being is ‘indeterminate’ and therefore the only thing for this reason. Similarly, the infinite is ‘unlimited’, unbounded and therefore the only thing.

¹⁵ Inwood (2018) also notes Hegel's reliance on a conception of God as infinite to rebut Kant's 'not a real predicate' counter-argument. However, the idea that the infinite is sublated Being is crucial to my reconstruction in a way it is not to Inwood's.

¹⁶ It is telling that Williams must import quotes from elsewhere (the lectures on the philosophy of religion) to support his reading of this passage from the *Logic* as informed by an understanding of God as the Concept (2017: 108).

¹⁷ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

¹⁸ An anonymous reviewer asks whether this is not a 'presupposition', in the pejorative sense. I deny this. The claim 'no finitude without infinity' is explicitly argued for by Hegel in the passage cited, and not just flatly asserted. What is more, I reconstruct this argument. The argument takes us from a premise citing the definition of finitude, as boundedness, to a conclusion that something (infinite) must lie beyond the boundary. Along the way, we consider but reject the alternative hypothesis that something bounded (finite) could do so for independent reason: the possibility of infinite regress. By contrast, a presupposition is something either flatly asserted, or argued for on insufficiently rigorous grounds: for example, appeal to *Vorstellung*, custom, tradition, authority, revelation, etc. Yet there is no such appeal here. Crucially, the argument operates with the logically deduced concepts of finitude and infinity, and not the ones in common circulation—or, alternatively, with sensible intuitions.

¹⁹ This point has been stressed especially by Pippin in his recent book *Hegel's Realm of Shadows* (2018).

²⁰ The version of the 'omnis determinatio' argument I emphasize here is the one Stern (2016) calls 'Spinozist' and, at least initially, distinguishes from Hegel's own. However, Stern ultimately ends up arguing that the doctrine which Hegel seems to put forward in his own voice is usually Spinoza's own in disguise: 'the context of Hegel's reference to the 'determination is negation' principle suggests that he was using it in a way similar to Spinoza—which then of course dispels the mystery that he should refer to Spinoza at just this point, notwithstanding his *different* take on the principle when it is used elsewhere' (2016: 38). Stern's interpretation is thus completely consistent with mine on this point.

²¹ Cf. Houlgate (2006: 79–83).

²² I, once more, thank an anonymous reviewer for the counter-argument.

²³ In the table of forms of judgment, there are infinite judgments e.g. 'the soul is non-mortal' (B106). However, these seem to have very little to do with infinity as a definition of God or the Absolute. 'Allheit' (totality) under the head of quantity is not much better as a candidate. It is a plurality considered as a unity, and therefore applies as much to relative totalities as absolute ones.

²⁴ Cf. Franks (2005: Ch. 2).

²⁵ Inwood (2018) also notes, and proposes his own solution to, this problem. I once again thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to Inwood's piece.

²⁶ Although expressed in terms of 'substance' and 'subject,' Inwood (2018: 130) lays out something resembling this two-pronged strategy. However, he presents a different account of the need for a subject in terms of what has come to be known (perhaps erroneously) as Hegel's

'acosmism' objection to Spinoza: only a subject, rather than a Substance, can generate determinate (finite) modes.

²⁷ 'Best' meets because other definitions of the Absolute or God may meet it as well, just not as well. For example, life is a true infinite, but not the highest true infinite.

²⁸ An anonymous reviewer objects that this argument is invalid, since 'necessarily' appears in C3 but not in C2. However, 'necessarily' does appear in C1 from which C3 is partially derived. This second argument is not self-standing, but meant to function in concert with the first. They are each part of a single, longer argument.

²⁹ As an anonymous reviewer asks: why should the best exist? The answer is that this notion of the best is a refined version of the earlier notion of the infinite; and this notion, the earlier argument shows, must find a foothold in the world. Once again, the arguments are meant to function in tandem.

³⁰ It is understandable to be sceptical that the ontological proof could be relevant to the *Philosophy of Right*. However, Hegel himself draws a connection between the discovery of the proof in modern philosophy, on one hand, and the realization of freedom in modern society, on the other: 'But the distinctive form of the Idea and of the transition here in question is the immediate transition of the pure self determination of the will (i.e. of the simple concept itself) into this [specific entity], into natural existence, without the mediation of a particular content (such as the end of an action). – In the so-called ontological proof of the existence of God, it is this same transformation of the absolute concept into being which has given the Idea its profundity in the modern age' (PR: §280).

³¹ An anonymous reviewer draws my attention to a related discussion in Houlgate (2021: vol. 1 246), which had not come out when this paper was first submitted for review. There, Houlgate puts forward romantic love and modern citizenship as instances of the true infinite, which they undoubtedly are. However, I think there is reason to include even more rudimentary forms of the free will under this heading as well.

³² I will focus, in particular, on Hegel's complaint that, in pre-critical metaphysics, 'There was no investigation as to [...] whether the form of judgment is capable of being the form of truth' (EL: §28).

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