

bio.1 Kurt Gödel

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Kurt Gödel (GER-dle) was born on April 28, 1906 in Brünn in the Austro-Hungarian empire (now Brno in the Czech Republic). Due to his inquisitive and bright nature, young Kurt was often called “Der kleine Herr Warum” (Little Mr. Why) by his family. He excelled in academics from primary school onward, where he got less than the highest grade only in mathematics. Gödel was often absent from school due to poor health and was exempt from physical education. He was diagnosed with rheumatic fever during his childhood. Throughout his life, he believed this permanently affected his heart despite medical assessment saying otherwise.



Figure 1: Kurt Gödel

Gödel began studying at the University of Vienna in 1924 and completed his doctoral studies in 1929. He first intended to study physics, but his interests soon moved to mathematics and especially logic, in part due to the influence of the philosopher Rudolf Carnap. His dissertation, written under the supervision of Hans Hahn, proved the completeness theorem of first-order predicate logic with identity (Gödel, 1929). Only a year later, he obtained his most famous results—the first and second incompleteness theorems (published in Gödel 1931). During his time in Vienna, Gödel was heavily involved with the Vienna Circle, a group of scientifically-minded philosophers that included Carnap, whose work was especially influenced by Gödel’s results.

In 1938, Gödel married Adele Nimbusky. His parents were not pleased: not only was she six years older than him and already divorced, but she worked as a dancer in a nightclub. Social pressures did not affect Gödel, however, and they remained happily married until his death.

After Nazi Germany annexed Austria in 1938, Gödel and Adele emigrated to the United States, where he took up a position at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. Despite his introversion and eccentric nature, Gödel’s time at Princeton was collaborative and fruitful. He published essays in set theory, philosophy and physics. Notably, he struck up a particularly strong friendship with his colleague at the IAS, Albert Einstein.

In his later years, Gödel’s mental health deteriorated. His wife’s hospitalization in 1977 meant she was no longer able to cook his meals for him. Having suffered from mental health issues throughout his life, he succumbed to paranoia. Deathly afraid of being poisoned, Gödel refused to eat. He died of starvation on January 14, 1978, in Princeton.

Further Reading For a complete biography of Gödel’s life is available, see [John Dawson \(1997\)](#). For further biographical pieces, as well as essays about Gödel’s contributions to logic and philosophy, see [Wang \(1990\)](#), [Baaz et al. \(2011\)](#), [Takeuti et al. \(2003\)](#), and [Sigmund et al. \(2007\)](#).

Gödel’s PhD thesis is available in the original German ([Gödel, 1929](#)). The original text of the incompleteness theorems is ([Gödel, 1931](#)). All of Gödel’s published and unpublished writings, as well as a selection of correspondence, are available in English in his *Collected Papers* [Feferman et al. \(1986, 1990\)](#).

For a detailed treatment of Gödel’s incompleteness theorems, see [Smith \(2013\)](#). For an informal, philosophical discussion of Gödel’s theorems, see Mark Linsenmayer’s podcast ([Linsenmayer, 2014](#)).

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