

int.1 Historical Background

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In this section, we will briefly discuss historical developments that will help put the incompleteness theorems in context. In particular, we will give a very sketchy overview of the history of mathematical logic; and then say a few words about the history of the foundations of mathematics.

The phrase “mathematical logic” is ambiguous. One can interpret the word “mathematical” as describing the subject matter, as in, “the logic of mathematics,” denoting the principles of mathematical reasoning; or as describing the methods, as in “the mathematics of logic,” denoting a mathematical study of the principles of reasoning. The account that follows involves mathematical logic in both senses, often at the same time.

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The study of logic began, essentially, with Aristotle, who lived approximately 384–322 BCE. His *Categories*, *Prior analytics*, and *Posterior analytics* include systematic studies of the principles of scientific reasoning, including a thorough and systematic study of the syllogism.

Aristotle’s logic dominated scholastic philosophy through the middle ages; indeed, as late as eighteenth century Kant maintained that Aristotle’s logic was perfect and in no need of revision. But the theory of the syllogism is far too limited to model anything but the most superficial aspects of mathematical reasoning. A century earlier, Leibniz, a contemporary of Newton’s, imagined a complete “calculus” for logical reasoning, and made some rudimentary steps towards designing such a calculus, essentially describing a version of propositional logic.

The nineteenth century was a watershed for logic. In 1854 George Boole wrote *The Laws of Thought*, with a thorough algebraic study of propositional logic that is not far from modern presentations. In 1879 Gottlob Frege published his *Begriffsschrift* (Concept writing) which extends propositional logic with quantifiers and relations, and thus includes first-order logic. In fact, Frege’s logical systems included higher-order logic as well, and more. In his *Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, Frege set out to show that all of arithmetic could be derived in his *Begriffsschrift* from purely logical assumption. Unfortunately, these assumptions turned out to be inconsistent, as Russell showed in 1902. But setting aside the inconsistent axiom, Frege more or less invented modern logic singlehandedly, a startling achievement. Quantificational logic was also developed independently by algebraically-minded thinkers after Boole, including Peirce and Schröder.

Let us now turn to developments in the foundations of mathematics. Of course, since logic plays an important role in mathematics, there is a good deal of interaction with the developments just described. For example, Frege developed his logic with the explicit purpose of showing that all of mathematics could be based solely on his logical framework; in particular, he wished to show that mathematics consists of a priori *analytic* truths instead of, as Kant had maintained, a priori *synthetic* ones.

Many take the birth of mathematics proper to have occurred with the Greeks. Euclid’s *Elements*, written around 300 B.C., is already a mature repre-

sentative of Greek mathematics, with its emphasis on rigor and precision. The definitions and proofs in Euclid's *Elements* survive more or less in tact in high school geometry textbooks today (to the extent that geometry is still taught in high schools). This model of mathematical reasoning has been held to be a paradigm for rigorous argumentation not only in mathematics but in branches of philosophy as well. (Spinoza even presented moral and religious arguments in the Euclidean style, which is strange to see!)

Calculus was invented by Newton and Leibniz in the seventeenth century. (A fierce priority dispute raged for centuries, but most scholars today hold that the two developments were for the most part independent.) Calculus involves reasoning about, for example, infinite sums of infinitely small quantities; these features fueled criticism by Bishop Berkeley, who argued that belief in God was no less rational than the mathematics of his time. The methods of calculus were widely used in the eighteenth century, for example by Leonhard Euler, who used calculations involving infinite sums with dramatic results.

In the nineteenth century, mathematicians tried to address Berkeley's criticisms by putting calculus on a firmer foundation. Efforts by Cauchy, Weierstrass, Bolzano, and others led to our contemporary definitions of limits, continuity, differentiation, and integration in terms of "epsilon and delta," in other words, devoid of any reference to infinitesimals. Later in the century, mathematicians tried to push further, and explain all aspects of calculus, including the real numbers themselves, in terms of the natural numbers. (Kronecker: "God created the whole numbers, all else is the work of man.") In 1872, Dedekind wrote "Continuity and the irrational numbers," where he showed how to "construct" the real numbers as sets of rational numbers (which, as you know, can be viewed as pairs of natural numbers); in 1888 he wrote "Was sind und was sollen die Zahlen" (roughly, "What are the natural numbers, and what should they be?") which aimed to explain the natural numbers in purely "logical" terms. In 1887 Kronecker wrote "Über den Zahlbegriff" ("On the concept of number") where he spoke of representing all mathematical object in terms of the integers; in 1889 Giuseppe Peano gave formal, symbolic axioms for the natural numbers.

The end of the nineteenth century also brought a new boldness in dealing with the infinite. Before then, infinitary objects and structures (like the set of natural numbers) were treated gingerly; "infinitely many" was understood as "as many as you want," and "approaches in the limit" was understood as "gets as close as you want." But Georg Cantor showed that it was possible to take the infinite at face value. Work by Cantor, Dedekind, and others help to introduce the general set-theoretic understanding of mathematics that is now widely accepted.

This brings us to twentieth century developments in logic and foundations. In 1902 Russell discovered the paradox in Frege's logical system. In 1904 Zermelo proved Cantor's well-ordering principle, using the so-called "axiom of choice"; the legitimacy of this axiom prompted a good deal of debate. Between 1910 and 1913 the three volumes of Russell and Whitehead's *Principia Mathematica* appeared, extending the Fregean program of establishing mathematics

on logical grounds. Unfortunately, Russell and Whitehead were forced to adopt two principles that seemed hard to justify as purely logical: an axiom of infinity and an axiom of “reducibility.” In the 1900’s Poincaré criticized the use of “impredicative definitions” in mathematics, and in the 1910’s Brouwer began proposing to refound all of mathematics in an “intuitionistic” basis, which avoided the use of the law of the excluded middle ($\varphi \vee \neg\varphi$).

Strange days indeed! The program of reducing all of mathematics to logic is now referred to as “logicism,” and is commonly viewed as having failed, due to the difficulties mentioned above. The program of developing mathematics in terms of intuitionistic mental constructions is called “intuitionism,” and is viewed as posing overly severe restrictions on everyday mathematics. Around the turn of the century, David Hilbert, one of the most influential mathematicians of all time, was a strong supporter of the new, abstract methods introduced by Cantor and Dedekind: “no one will drive us from the paradise that Cantor has created for us.” At the same time, he was sensitive to foundational criticisms of these new methods (oddly enough, now called “classical”). He proposed a way of having one’s cake and eating it too:

1. Represent classical methods with formal axioms and rules; represent mathematical questions as **formulas** in an axiomatic system.
2. Use safe, “finitary” methods to prove that these formal deductive systems are consistent.

Hilbert’s work went a long way toward accomplishing the first goal. In 1899, he had done this for geometry in his celebrated book *Foundations of geometry*. In subsequent years, he and a number of his students and collaborators worked on other areas of mathematics to do what Hilbert had done for geometry. Hilbert himself gave axiom systems for arithmetic and analysis. Zermelo gave an axiomatization of set theory, which was expanded on by Fraenkel, Skolem, von Neumann, and others. By the mid-1920s, there were two approaches that laid claim to the title of an axiomatization of “all” of mathematics, the *Principia mathematica* of Russell and Whitehead, and what came to be known as Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory.

In 1921, Hilbert set out on a research project to establish the goal of proving these systems to be consistent. He was aided in this project by several of his students, in particular Bernays, Ackermann, and later Gentzen. The basic idea for accomplishing this goal was to cast the question of the possibility of a derivation of an inconsistency in mathematics as a combinatorial problem about possible sequences of symbols, namely possible sequences of sentences which meet the criterion of being a correct derivation of, say, $\varphi \wedge \neg\varphi$ from the axioms of an axiom system for arithmetic, analysis, or set theory. A proof of the impossibility of such a sequence of symbols would—since it is itself a mathematical proof—be formalizable in these axiomatic systems. In other words, there would be some sentence Con which states that, say, arithmetic is consistent. Moreover, this sentence should be provable in the systems in question, especially if its proof requires only very restricted, “finitary” means.

The second aim, that the axiom systems developed would settle every mathematical question, can be made precise in two ways. In one way, we can formulate it as follows: For any sentence φ in the language of an axiom system for mathematics, either φ or $\neg\varphi$ is provable from the axioms. If this were true, then there would be no sentences which can neither be proved nor refuted on the basis of the axioms, no questions which the axioms do not settle. An axiom system with this property is called *complete*. Of course, for any given sentence it might still be a difficult task to determine which of the two alternatives holds. But in principle there should be a method to do so. In fact, for the axiom and derivation systems considered by Hilbert, completeness would imply that such a method exists—although Hilbert did not realize this. The second way to interpret the question would be this stronger requirement: that there be a mechanical, computational method which would determine, for a given sentence φ , whether it is derivable from the axioms or not.

In 1931, Gödel proved the two “incompleteness theorems,” which showed that this program could not succeed. There is no axiom system for mathematics which is complete, specifically, the sentence that expresses the consistency of the axioms is a sentence which can neither be proved nor refuted.

This struck a lethal blow to Hilbert’s original program. However, as is so often the case in mathematics, it also opened up exciting new avenues for research. If there is no one, all-encompassing formal system of mathematics, it makes sense to develop more circumscribed systems and investigate what can be proved in them. It also makes sense to develop less restricted methods of proof for establishing the consistency of these systems, and to find ways to measure how hard it is to prove their consistency. Since Gödel showed that (almost) every formal system has questions it cannot settle, it makes sense to look for “interesting” questions a given formal system cannot settle, and to figure out how strong a formal system has to be to settle them. To the present day, logicians have been pursuing these questions in a new mathematical discipline, the theory of proofs.

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Bibliography