

Rebecca Goldstein,

Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel

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REVIEW

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To the extent that Goldstein’s book is an intellectual biography of Gödel, it will inevitably be compared with John Dawson’s (1997) *Logical Dilemmas*. In any such comparison, Goldstein’s work will fare far the worse. It is, for example, short on biographical detail. It is short, also, on exposition of Gödel’s most important mathematical results. Moreover, it is weak on exposition of Gödel’s work. There are plenty of other accounts of Gödel’s mathematical work to turn to, however. The treatment that Goldstein renders is roughly on a technical par with Nagel and Newman’s (1958) *Gödel’s Proof*, as mathematically sophisticated as a philosopher is prepared to venture whose training in mathematics and logic does not precede beyond a standard course in “Symbolic Logic” covering propositional calculus, first-order functional calculus with identity, just enough set theory to learn the Russell Paradox, and just enough “metamathematics” to receive an outline of Gödel incompleteness and a discussion of its philosophical import for arithmetic theories.

Goldstein, trained at Princeton, but in philosophy (albeit engaged to a limited extent in philosophy of mathematics) rather than in mathematics, and author primarily of fiction, is at a disadvantage in navigating the details of Gödel’s proof of his incompleteness results. To the extent, however, that Goldstein’s real aim in this study is to integrate Gödel’s biography and character with the philosophical aspects and *raison d’être* of his mathematical work, the loss of detail has minimal impact on the message that she is seeking to relate.

The dual core of the discussion center around Gödel’s attendance at, but lack of participation in, the meetings of the Wiener Kreis; and his reticence in publishing. The latter episodes focus on Gödel at Princeton and his shared intellectual “exile” there with Einstein.