

Summary of Text 31: On Vermeersch's God (and the God of Christians)

The philosopher Etienne Vermeersch (1934–2019) argues in his book *Over God (On God)* that God does not exist. He bases this claim on a fallacious argument that goes back to the Greek thinker Epicurus (341–271 BC) and has been known in the Western tradition for centuries.

The argument runs as follows:

(a) A God who is infinitely good will want to create only a world in which there is no evil or suffering.

(b) A God who is infinitely powerful and wise can create only a world in which there is no evil or suffering.

(c) If the God of Christianity is omnipotent, infinitely good and wise, there should be no evil or suffering in the world.

(d) Yet there is undoubtedly evil in this world.

Therefore, God cannot exist. So much for Vermeersch's argument.

For the sake of clarity, the author has added the word “only” to the first two premises. This makes explicit what was originally assumed implicitly. However, the claim that God can act only in this way is taken for granted rather than demonstrated.

The argument assumes that God could create only beings without free will. Yet God may have sound reasons, given his goodness, omnipotence and wisdom, for acting differently, for example because he wishes to respect human autonomy. According to this view, God creates not automatons but human beings endowed with free will. At the same time, he gives them rules of conduct, such as the Ten Commandments in the Bible, while allowing them the possibility of disregarding these rules. Those who fail to follow them are initially tolerated out of respect for their freedom. However, when serious boundaries are crossed, they may sooner or later face what the Bible calls “the judgment of God”.

To understand the existence of evil logically, it must ultimately—and this is important—be considered within the totality of reality. Because of the limitations of human understanding, we often fail to find an adequate explanation. Much tragic suffering remains difficult or almost impossible to comprehend. However, our limited understanding does not mean that there is no objective and meaningful relationship between evil and suffering. In terms of faith, God has reasons that even our believing minds cannot readily comprehend.

Vermeersch's argument can also be regarded as an *argumentum ad hominem*: an argument that can be turned against the position of the person making it. If God does not exist, he cannot be the cause of evil. Evil therefore cannot originate from a God who does not exist. For an atheist, the explanation of evil must consequently lie not in God but in the finite world of free beings and the deviations that occur within it. According to the author, this is precisely the Christian view as well.

Alongside his claim that God does not exist, Vermeersch emphasizes the authority of scientific research. In his view, only what can be scientifically demonstrated deserves to be recognized as existing.

Christianity distinguishes three levels within reality: nature, the realm beyond nature, and the supernatural realm.

Nature consists primarily of the material world that everyone can perceive. The realm beyond nature encompasses phenomena that can supposedly be perceived paranormally, such as subtle-material beings and subtle-material forces. The supernatural realm is reserved for the biblical God, the inhabitants of heaven and the workings of a dynamically understood Christianity.

When Vermeersch regards science as the highest source of knowledge, he confines his argument to the natural realm and denies the existence of the realms beyond nature and the supernatural. The author therefore argues that Vermeersch deprives himself of any authority to make definitive claims about whether or not God exists.

Anyone who denies religion any form of logical reasoning, forces it into an ideological-scientific framework, and excludes the paranormal and the supernatural from the outset is not criticizing religion itself, but rather a superficial caricature of it.