

Text 31. On the God of Vermeersch (and that of the Christians)

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31.1. Vermeersch: “God cannot exist.”

Prof. Dr. Etienne Vermeersch (1934/2019) was a Belgian philosopher, teacher, and vice-rector at Ghent University.

In *De Standaard der letteren* of Thursday, November 10, 2016, Lieven Boeve responds, theologian and Director-General of Catholic Education in Flanders, on the latest book by E. Vermeersch, “Over God”. He did so from the faithful perspective of a Christian. We gladly agree with what he writes. May we, in turn, delve into this book for a moment, Now, however, from a logical angle. Here we go then.

I don't remember exactly why I bought it, but when I left the book fair in Antwerp , I had the book “Over God” by Etienne Vermeersch—it was already in its third printing within a month —in my bookbag. Perhaps I wanted to immerse myself in his way of thinking for once . It is always good to consider the arguments of someone with a different perspective , I told myself.

When I got home, I looked at the book and immediately read on the inside of the cover: Christians believe that God is almighty and charitable. Yet there is suffering and evil in the world. “The God of Christianity is therefore neither omnipotent nor infinitely good.” The latter is certainly a far-reaching conclusion, and that based on two relatively simple premises. I want to be able to do that too . So, let's try it out, using similar reasoning: “Many people believe that a lamp gives light and heat. Yet there is darkness and cold. Therefore, a lamp gives neither light nor heat.”

My reasoning is constructed analogously, but it makes absolutely no sense. Why is mine clearly wrong, while Vermeersch's would be valid? Or could it be that his, too, cannot be acquitted of any superficiality? Could it even be a fallacy ?

On page 35 of his book, he elaborates on this, and does so with reasoning that, as I read, has been known in the Western tradition for centuries:

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

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

(c) If the god of Christianity is almighty and infinitely good and wise, there will be no suffering and evil in the world.

(d) Well, there is undoubtedly evil in this world.

Therefore, God cannot exist.

So much for Vermeersch.

31.2. The term 'single'

added the term 'only' to both preceding clauses above . In this way, that which was concealed, but implicitly understood, is now also explicitly stated. History teaches us that the Greek Epicurus (-341 /-271) was the first to reason in this way. He founded Epicureanism, a kind of philosophy of pleasure. At first glance, his reasoning seems conclusive. If the three preceding clauses are valid, then that one concluding clause follows from them . But is it indeed conclusive? That God can only act in this way is assumed here , but by no means proven. Perhaps God, in His goodness, omnipotence, and wisdom , does have sound reasons to act differently after all, for example because He wishes to respect human autonomy. Perhaps He can prevent evil, but does not wish to do so without further ado , precisely because He respects the freedom of the creature.

The reasoning above indeed posits that God creates only unfree beings, beings incapable of independent decision-making. In such a creation, humans have no free will, no sense of norms, cannot reason independently, and therefore experience no inner growth. They are then merely robots and automatons. In such a creation, the entire responsibility for evil indeed lies with God, not with the creature.

God, however, does not create automatons, but rather people with free will. At the same time, He gives them a norm or rule of conduct—in the Bible, these are the Ten Commandments—and the possibility to deviate from that norm.

The person who disregards the rule of conduct becomes, for the time being, tolerated out of respect for his freedom. But in the event of transgressive behavior, he or she will sooner or later be confronted with what the Bible calls: “the judgment of God”. Expressed Biblically: What one sows, one shall reap. For believers, these rules of conduct have an absolute quality and thereby transcend the worldly frame of reference with its all too changeable character. History and current events indeed teach us that there are places and There are times, and indeed quite a few, in which norms tend to change and 'evil' is not always condemned with the same strictness by society. Or consider, for instance, the attitude towards religion half a century ago with the rather negative mentality of today. Times, too, apparently have their fashion.

To logically fathom a disappointing fact like the existence of evil, one must ultimately—mind you: ultimately—situate it within the totality of reality. All too often, our human limitations find no sufficient reason for this. Then the fact seems absurd, for it exhibits no clear cause yet nevertheless causes terrible pain. The term 'justice,' insofar as it lives within man, is precisely the absolute requirement for finding a sensible explanation here. But for that, the cause of evil, a cause that is itself an evil, is usually situated too much in the mysterious depths of earthly existence. Indeed, so much remains tragic that cannot be made comprehensible, or only with extreme difficulty. However, the fact that we do not gain sufficient insight into this does not prevent an objectively sensible structure from being at work in evil and suffering. Expressed in religious terms: God has his reasons, which even our believing reason cannot easily grasp.

31.3. An 'argumentum ad hominem'

Let us return to Vermeersch's reasoning. It is also an 'argumentum ad 'Hominem', an argument that can be used against whoever claims it. If God indeed does not exist, then He cannot be the cause of evil. If evil does exist, then it cannot possibly come from a non-existent god. Therefore, the sufficient lies for the atheist. The reason for evil certainly does not lie in God. Rather, it lies in the finite, free world and the deviations present within it. The latter is precisely the Christian view on this matter.

Vermeersch concludes: “Although the argument (note: of Epicurus) is very old, no one has ever presented a conclusive counter-argument”. We ourselves, however, arrive at a very different conclusion and find the arguments cited here against his reasoning – they are Oh, not new, he could have mentioned them himself already – but conclusive.

In addition to the claim that God does not exist, Vermeersch repeatedly talks about the supremacy of scientific research. Only that which exists scientifically, has a right to exist in this regard. Anything falling outside of that is of no consequence to him and his like-minded peers. Yet quite a few of our existential certainties are not of a scientific nature. For example, a child can grow up in the conviction that his parents love him and that they love each other, without this being able to be tested in a rigorous scientific manner, or as Vermeersch puts it, with “strictly controlled observations.”

Something receives scientific recognition if it meets the criteria, the presuppositions of science. Thus, in order to be amenable to investigation by the community. This research is preferably repeatable. A given acquires scientific status if other researchers, under identical circumstances, arrive at identical findings emerge. These strict criteria ensure that whatever receives scientific recognition is sound and firmly founded. However, this also makes it clear that its field does not encompass the entirety of reality. It limits itself, therefore, to that part of all that exists which corresponds to its presuppositions.

31.4. Science: Methodical or ideological?

If science nevertheless claims to encompass the whole of reality, but in doing so If 'only'—again we encounter that exclusive little word 'only'—gives legitimacy to what corresponds to her axiomatics, then she must first prove that, with her finite presuppositions, she indeed also encompasses the whole of reality. In other words, she must be able to demonstrate that her scientific model is the only one that includes all reality. But how to prove such a thing? How to demonstrate in a scientific manner that science possesses the only valid form of knowledge? Such a proof requires a viewpoint that transcends the vision of science; otherwise, one ends up in circular reasoning, a line of reasoning that concludes which was actually already established . And as long as science does not demonstrate that she with her Since the method encompasses the entire reality, it can likewise not make comprehensive statements about it.

A methodical form of science affirms that its domain does not concern the totality of reality, but limits itself to a part of it, namely that which corresponds to its presuppositions. An ideological form of science believes that it covers the entire realm of everything that exists. It seems abundantly clear to us that Vermeersch science wrongly identifies with this latter form. Whoever imposes material demands on reality in advance indeed finds nothing that transcends the material. That which is immaterial, religious, or paranormal then

completely eludes him or her.

31.5 Paranormal experiences

And let us also briefly touch upon this last point, the paranormal. Religion not only rests on an ancient tradition, but equally—and this may surprise even some overly materialistic believers—on paranormal experiences. Anyone who reads the Bible, even briefly, will notice that God reveals Himself to some through dreams, visions, inspirations, and appearances. These are much more than merely subjective imaginings or hallucinations. Let us refer, for example, to the many prophets whose pronouncements differ from the “cognitive dissonance” cited by Vermeersch, where in the latter case the prediction contradicts the outcome. The predictions of the prophets in the Bible were indeed confirmed by later events. With regard to the paranormal, let us also refer, for example, to the mystical experiences of some throughout history. A single supernatural experience of someone can be so impressive and profound that it changes his or her life permanently and changes thoroughly. That doesn't seem so dissonant to us after all.

Because many do not possess any religious experience themselves, they generalize that such a thing simply does not exist. Strictly logically, this is a syllogism in which the introductory clause was omitted. Written out, this reasoning becomes: “Anything that I myself do not experience does not exist.” “Well, I have no religious experience myself, so religious experiences do not exist.” But the statement: “everything that I do not experience myself does not exist”, is, as a proposition, an unproven generalization. That entire reasoning is therefore merely a hypothesis, not conclusive proof.

Although God, as already mentioned, has his reasons that we do not easily grasp, this by no means implies that religion eliminates reasoning. As a form of knowledge, religion is naturally susceptible to a logical approach. A healthy and healing religion stands miles away from irrational behavior or an irrational leap, as is all too often assumed. If one experiences or believes that the sacred—the core of religions—constitutes the background of all existence, then a number of deductions follow from this, leading to a worldview and philosophy of life based on faith. This can lead to various forms of worship. Religions then become much less a matter of blind faith and much more a matter of evidence.

We have taken the liberty of writing down a few reservations regarding Vermeersch's book. Let us summarize this text somewhat with the following conclusion. If one denies religion every form of logical reasoning, forces it into

an ideological-scientific straitjacket, and excludes all that is paranormal and supernatural, then one is not criticizing religion itself, but rather an all too superficial caricature of it. But then one does its reality a gross disservice. In Biblical language, then, as we see in Matt. reading 5:13, the salt of religion powerless. People no longer believe in its supernatural power, but one neglects or denies it.

With all this, we have barely progressed beyond a number of introductory remarks regarding religion. The theme remains, even for those who delve deeply into it, quite complex and is situated also—indeed, above all—in the unconscious and subconscious depths of our soul. We have attempted to elaborate on all this in the book “De 'homo religiosus ', religie als erlevenbare krachtwerving”.

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