

On Vermeersch's God (and that of Christians)

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

In *De Standaard der letteren* of Thursday, November 10, 2016, Lieven Boeve, theologian and director general of Catholic Education in Flanders, reacted to E. Vermeersch's latest book, "About God." He did it from the believing point of view of a Christian. We gladly endorse what he writes. May we in turn also delve into this book, this time however from a logical angle. Here we go.

I don't really remember why I bought it, but when I left the book fair in Antwerp, I had Etienne Vermeersch's book "About God", the third edition already in one month, in my pocket. Maybe I wanted to immerse myself in his world of thought. It is always good to consider the arguments of someone with a different vision, I consoled myself.

Back home I looked at the book and immediately read on the inside cover: "Christians believe that God is omnipotent and charitable. Yet there is suffering and evil in the world. So the God of Christianity is neither omnipotent nor infinitely good". Surely the latter is a far-reaching conclusion, and this from two relatively simple premises. I want to be able to do that too. So let's try it out, and this with a similar reasoning: "Many people believe that a lamp gives light and warmth. Yet there is darkness and coldness. So a lamp gives neither light nor heat."

My reasoning, while analogous in structure, makes no sense at all. Why is mine clearly wrong, and would Vermeersch's be valid? Or could it be that his is not free from any superficiality either? Could it even be a fallacy?

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

(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 omnipotent and infinitely good and wise, there will be no suffering and evil in the world.

(d) Well, there is no doubt evil in this world.

So God cannot exist.

So much for Vermeersch.

To clarify, we ourselves have added the term "only" in both prepositions above. In this way that which has been concealed, but was implicitly understood, is now also explicitly expressed. History teaches us that the Greek Epicurus (-341 /-271) was the first who reasoned in this way. He founded Epicureanism, a kind of philosophy of pleasure. At first glance, his reasoning seems conclusive. If the three prepositional phrases are valid, then the one postpositional phrase follows from them. But is it indeed conclusive? That God can only act in this way is hereby assumed, but not at all proven. Perhaps God, in his goodness, omnipotence and wisdom, has profound reasons for acting differently, e.g. because he wants to respect man's autonomy. Perhaps He can prevent evil, but does not want to do so automatically, precisely because He respects the freedom of the creature.

Indeed, the reasoning above assumes that God only creates non-free beings, beings who are not capable of making an independent decision. In such a creation people have no free will, no sense of norm, cannot reason independently and therefore have no inner growth. They are then merely robots and automatons. With such a creation, the whole responsibility for evil indeed lies with God, not with the creature.

However, God does not create automatons, but rather people with a free will. At the same time He gives them a norm or rule of conduct, in the Bible the Ten Commandments, and the possibility of deviating from that norm. The person who disregards the rule of conduct is tolerated for the time being out of respect for his freedom. But in the case of transgressive behavior, sooner or later he or she will be confronted with what the Bible calls "the judgment of God. Biblically expressed: What one sows, one will reap. For believers, these rules of conduct have something absolute and thus transcend the worldly frame of reference with its all too variable character. History and current events indeed teach us that there are places and times, and even many, in which norms sometimes dare to change and in which 'evil' is not always rejected with the same severity by society. Or do we compare, for example, the way in which people looked at religion half a century ago with the rather negative mentality of today. Apparently times too have their fashion.

In order to fathom a disappointing fact like the existence of evil logically, one must ultimately - note: ultimately - situate it in the totality of reality. All too often our human limitations do not find sufficient reason for this. Then the fact seems absurd, because it shows no clear reason but nevertheless causes a terrible pain. The term "justice" insofar as it lives in man, is precisely the absolute requirement here to find a sensible explanation. But for this, the cause of evil, cause which is itself an evil, is usually situated too much in the mysterious depths of earthly existence. Indeed, so much tragic remains that cannot be made intelligible, or only with great difficulty. The fact that we do not gain sufficient insight into this, however, does not prevent there being an objective, sensible structure at work in evil and suffering. Expressed in religious terms, God has his reasons which our even faithful reason cannot grasp just like that.

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. Thus, for the atheist, the sufficient reason for evil certainly does not lie in God. It lies in the finite, free world and the deviations it contains. The latter is also the Christian view.

Vermeersch concludes: "Although the argument (note: of Epicurus) is very old, no one has ever presented a conclusive counter argument." We ourselves, however, come to a very different conclusion and find the arguments that have been presented here against his reasoning - in our opinion they are not new, he himself could have mentioned them - to be conclusive.

In addition to the assertion that God does not exist, Vermeersch repeatedly talks about the supremacy of scientific research. Only that which exists scientifically has the right to exist. Everything outside that is of no consequence to him and his like-minded fellow thinkers. Yet many of our certainties of existence are not of a scientific nature. For example, a child can grow up in the conviction that his parents like him and that they love each other, without this being able to be tested in a hard scientific way, or as Vermeersch puts it, with "strictly controlled observations".

Something gets scientific recognition if it meets the criteria, the assumptions of science. For example, science must be amenable to investigation by the community. This research should preferably be repeatable. A fact acquires scientific status if other researchers in identical circumstances come to identical findings. These strict criteria mean that what has scientific recognition is sound and well-founded. But this also makes it clear that its field does not encompass all of reality. It then limits itself to that part of all that exists which corresponds to its presuppositions.

If science nevertheless claims to encompass the whole of reality, but in doing so 'only' - again we meet that exclusive little word 'only' - gives a right to exist to what corresponds to its axiomatics, then it must first prove that with its finite presuppositions it indeed encompasses the whole of reality. In other words, she must be able to show that her scientific model is the only one that includes all reality. But how to prove such a thing? How to prove in a scientific way that science possesses the only valid form of knowing? Such proof requires a point of view that goes beyond the vision of science, otherwise one ends up in a circular argument, a reasoning that concludes what had already been stated. And as long as science does not show that with its method it encompasses the whole of reality, it cannot make comprehensive statements about it either.

A methodical form of science agrees that its domain does not cover the whole of reality, but that it limits itself to a part of it, namely that which corresponds to its presuppositions. An ideological form of science believes that it covers the whole field of everything that exists. It seems abundantly clear to us that Vermeersch wrongly identifies science with this latter form. Whoever imposes material demands on reality in advance will indeed find nothing that transcends this materiality. That which is immaterial, religious or paranormal then completely escapes him or her.

And let's go into the latter as well, the paranormal. Not only does religion rest on an ancient tradition, but also - and this may surprise even some overly materialistic believers - on paranormal experiences. Anyone who reads the Bible for even a moment will notice that God lets himself be known to some through dreams, visions, inspirations and appearances. These are much more than mere subjective imaginations or hallucinations. We refer, for example, to the many prophets whose pronouncements are different from the "cognitive dissonance" cited by Vermeersch, where the latter contradicts the prediction with the consequence. The predictions of the prophets in the Bible were confirmed by subsequent events. With regard to the paranormal, for example, we also refer to the mystical experiences of some people in the course of history. A single supernatural experience of someone can be so impressive and profound that it changes his or her life definitively and thoroughly. Surely this does not seem so dissonant to us.

Because many do not have any religious experience themselves, they generalize that there is simply no such thing. Strictly logical, this is a syllogism in which the prepositional phrase was concealed. Written out is this reasoning, "Anything I don't experience myself, doesn't exist. Well, I myself have no religious experience, so religious experiences do not exist." But the statement, "Everything I do not experience myself does not exist," as a preposition is an unproven generalization. Therefore, that whole reasoning is only a hypothesis, not a conclusive proof.

Even though God, as already mentioned, has his reasons which we do not easily grasp, this in no way means that religion would eliminate reasoning. As a form of knowledge, religion is

of course amenable to a logical approach. A healthy and healing religion is miles away from an irrational behavior or jump as is too often assumed. If one experiences or believes that the sacred - the core of religions - is the background of all existence, then a number of deductions follow from this and one arrives at a believing world and life view. 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 some reflections on 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 in the process all the paranormal and the supernatural, then one is not criticizing religion as such, but rather an all too superficial caricature of it. But then one does a gross injustice to its reality. In biblical language then, as we read in Matt. 5:13, the salt of religion becomes powerless. One no longer believes in its supernatural power but one neglects or denies it.

With all this we have hardly gone beyond a few introductory remarks concerning religion. The theme remains, even for those who have studied it seriously, quite complicated and is also, indeed especially, situated in the unconscious and subconscious depths of our soul. We have tried to go into all this further in the book "The 'homo religiosus', religion as an experience of power".