



DIVINE OMNIBENEVOLENCE: 1. Introduction; 2. Argument for Divine Omnibenevolence; 3.

Defence of Premises (I): Divine Omnibenevolence; 4. Potential Challenges and Possible

Responses; 5. Argument against Divine Omnibenevolence from Divine Malevolence; 6.

Defence of Premises (II): Divine Malevolence; 7. Confronting Divine Malevolence: Rejections,

Replies and Rejoinders; 8. Conclusions and Practical Observations.

In this short paper, I outline some biblical arguments for divine omnibenevolence and its primary challenger, namely, the argument against divine omnibenevolence from divine malevolence. Premises are stated, explained and discussed, and practical observations made.

1. Introduction.

Divine omnibenevolence, or the all-loving nature of God, postulates God as a morally perfect and entirely good being who sincerely loves and is therefore genuinely concerned for the life of every creature he has created, especially with reference to human and angelic persons, whom God created in his own image. In short, divine omnibenevolence is the view that God loves all persons. In the context of Christian soteriology, divine omnibenevolence speaks to God's universal saving love and desire for all fallen and sinful human creatures in need of redemption. (This is the relevant sense in which I shall be employing the term 'person' henceforth throughout this paper.) Belief in the doctrine of divine omnibenevolence implies particularly significant theological facts about God and his purposes in the world. It also carries certain practical consequences for the Christian life. The truth or falsity of divine omnibenevolence is therefore quite significant.

To the classical Judaeo-Christian theist, the truth of the doctrine of divine omnibenevolence seems obvious. Yahweh expresses sincere, actual emotions at human sin and wickedness. Yahweh also humbles himself in such a way as to enter into human flesh in order to guide by example and to suffer and die alongside his creation for the sake of the creatures in order that they may enter into a unique and loving saving relationship with him

unto eternal life by faith in him. Despite these obvious facts, there are detractors of the classic doctrine of divine omnibenevolence. Therefore, we need an argument in defence of the doctrine of divine omnibenevolence to be formulated coherently in order for divine omnibenevolence to remain tenable. This I will do. With this goal in mind, then, let us turn to the argument for divine omnibenevolence.

2. Argument for Divine Omnibenevolence.

Briefly stated, the argument for divine omnibenevolence is as follows:

- (1) Whatever God the Father does, the Son of God also does. (Jn. 5:19)
- (2) The Son of God loves his enemies. (Matt. 22:37-40; cf. 1 Cor. 11:1ff)
- (3) Therefore, God the Father loves his enemies. [(1), (2)]**
- (4) All sinners are God the Father's enemies. (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21)
- (5) Therefore, God the Father loves all sinners. [(3), (4)]**
- (6) All persons are sinners. (Rom. 3:23)
- (7) Therefore, God the Father loves all persons. [(5), (6)]**

This argument is intuitively valid—its conclusion (7) clearly follows from its premises (1) through (6). This is also a *deductive argument*—if the premises are true then the conclusion (7) follows necessarily and inescapably according to the orthodox canons of logic and inference. Note the argument's structural strengths, also. On this particular argument, *two conclusions* (3) and (5) also function as *premises* supporting further premises unto the conclusion (7). These premises (3) and (5) are themselves (being conclusions in their own right) are in turn supported by premises (1) and (2), and premises (3) and (4), respectively, forming the argument in such a way that the truth of (1) and (2) implies (3), the truth of (3) and (4) implies (5), and the truth of (5) and (6) implies (7). Therefore, in order to be able to

avoid the conclusion (7), one must first deny at least one of the premises either: (1), (2), (4) or (6). Let us then say a quick word in their defence.

3. Defence of Premises (I): Divine Omnibenevolence.

Premise (1) makes the claim that both the Father and the Son share a will that is perfectly united in such a way that the Son only does or wills something if and only if the Father does also (cf. John 5:19). This is not to say the Father and the Son share the same functional role in the economy of salvation. So the Father neither became incarnate nor died and rose again for our sins. But this is not relevant. What is relevant is the divine *agreement* of the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit in everything. If we were not to grant this essential unity between the Father and the Son in all things, we would risk postulating disagreement in the very Godhead itself. That would be unacceptable.

Premise (2) is based on the Evangelical Christian teaching that, as our chosen Prophet, Priest and King, Jesus Christ perfectly fulfilled the Law on our behalf so that his active obedience might be imputed to us by grace when we believe. Christ keeps all of the commandments of the Law perfectly. The second greatest commandment of the Law: “Love [*agapeseis*] your neighbour as yourself.” This is itself derived from the first and greatest commandment in the Law: “Love [*agapeseis*] the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength.” The Parable of the Good Samaritan also seems to illustrate that this kind of neighbourly love should extend to all people. For the Jews of Jesus’ day hated their semi-Pagan neighbours, the Samaritans. Yet Jesus intentionally utilised the image of a Samaritan helping a Jew as an example of neighbourly love in order to rebuke Jewish prejudice and to foster godly humanitarian care among them. Finally, 1 Cor. 11:1ff illustrates that the highest ethic is love. In this way, Paul the Apostle imitated Christ as an example for us to follow. If one were to consider Paul’s love, concern and care for all

people—both believing and unbelieving—one could see an expression of Christ’s heart also.

Premise (4) is a basic teaching about the sinfulness of fallen people and their hostility towards God and his Law. All human beings are born in sin into a world of sinful influences, which spread their seeds across the heart from very early life, developing sinful habits within us human creatures. These seedlings then grow and blossom into outright rebellion against God and his Law from within. Now, fallen and sinful creatures cannot submit to God’s Law, nor can they do so. Sinners openly reject God’s Law and revelation of himself, preferring instead to suit their own desires. Poignant to this discussion is Romans 7:7-25. There, the unbeliever is undergoing the conviction of the Law upon his conscience. He finds he wants to do God’s Law, but his fallen nature prevents him from doing so. He is an enemy to God deep in his heart. Romans 5:10 and Col. 1:21 state this more succinctly. We are enemies of God in our minds because of our evil behaviour.

Premise (6) is the premise that all sinful human persons—save Jesus Christ himself—are guilty of sin and worthy of death and hell and are therefore in need of salvation (Romans 3:23). This is a plain and undeniable truth of the Bible.

Since premises (1), (2), (4) and (6) each therefore seems most eminently more plausible than not, the conclusion (7) follows necessarily and inescapably according to the orthodox canons of logic and inference. What initial objections, then, might the detractor of omnibenevolence offer for the defender of the doctrine of divine omnibenevolence?

4. Potential Challenges and Possible Responses.

Premise (1) may be disputed by the detractor of divine omnibenevolence by pointing out that there are times in the scriptures where Christ’s will does not seem entirely to fall in line with the Father’s will. Christ’s will wavered in Gethsemane before the supreme will of the Father, namely, the trial of the cross (cf. e.g. Luke 22:39-46). So premise (1) is not

necessarily true. However, this objection seems to confuse the fact that, whereas the person of Christ may have been tempted to withdraw given his merely human nature. Nevertheless, Christ was always without sin. Christ's actually carrying out of his self-giving sacrifice proves the fact that his will and the will of the Father are perfectly united in love (cf. Hebrews 4:14-16). As Christ himself (Luke 22:42): "Not my will but yours be done." Christ's obedient submission to the will of the Father completely to become a sanctified sacrifice on our behalf is the ultimate expression of his boldness and willingness to die for us.

Premise (2) might be open to scrutiny by the detractor of divine omnibenevolence on the basis of the ambiguity about as to what extension of enemies we are to love might be. Are Christians expected to love *all* enemies or only *all kinds of* enemies? Furthermore, it seems ambiguous as respects the way in which believers are expected to love our enemies. For if Christians are to love *all* our enemies, what are we to make for example of the Psalmist's hatred for his enemies (cf. Psalm 139:21)? Surely, then, the set of enemies who we are to love must be a restricted set, since to hate a person implies you do not love that person (more on that below). An immediate response could be to say that it is not at all obvious that we should need to restrict the set of persons in the extension of our enemies who to love. If one had three enemies in the world, it would seem arbitrary to pick two out of three enemies to love, and the other not to love. Rather, the teaching seems plain. If you know any who person fits the description of an enemy, imitate Christ, and treat that person with compassion. This implies that for whoever is an enemy of Christians, Christians should love that enemy. This is a universally quantified statement. The detractor of divine omnibenevolence may not be completely satisfied with this response, but it is a perfectly legitimate defence, especially in light of the immediate context.

Lastly, since premises (4) and (6) seem relatively uncontroversial, the detractor of divine omnibenevolence should agree with both of these basic truths, and therefore no further

comment is needed.

5. Argument against Divine Omnibenevolence from Divine Malevolence.

So it seems that any argument the detractor of divine omnibenevolence might employ against the premises of the argument in favour of divine omnibenevolence will be less plausible than the premises of the original argument themselves. However, perhaps the detractor of divine omnibenevolence can employ one last tactic. It is a running joke in philosophy that one man's *modus ponens* is another man's *modus tollens*. That is to say: necessarily, if *P* implies *Q*, and *P*, then *Q*, but, also necessarily, if *P* implies *Q*, but not-*Q*, then not-*P*. Perhaps the detractor of divine omnibenevolence could formulate an argument along these lines, then. Perhaps he could craft an argument *from divine malevolence*, the doctrine that God does *not* love and is therefore *not* concerned for the lives of at least some of the creatures he has created, even with reference to human and angelic persons whom God has created in his own image, against divine omnibenevolence. In short, God does *not* love all persons, as divine omnibenevolence claims he does. Divine malevolence is the negation of divine omnibenevolence.

Perhaps one could frame an argument for divine malevolence as follows:

(8) For any X and any Y, if X hates Y then X does not love Y. [=def. 'love', 'hatred']

(9) If God is omnibenevolent, then God loves all persons. [=def. 'omnibenevolence' at (7)]

(10) There *do* exist some persons whom God hates. (Psa. 5:5, 11:5; Prov. 6:16-19; Mal. 1:2c-3 cf. Rom. 9:13)

(11) Therefore, God is not omnibenevolent. [(8), (9), (10)]

(12) If God is not omnibenevolent, then God is malevolent. [=def. 'malevolence']

(13) Therefore, God is malevolent. [(11), (12)]

Thus the detractor of omnibenevolence has formulated a coherent, independent, valid argument against divine omnibenevolence. He has thus become not only a detractor of omnibenevolence, but an *advocate* for divine malevolence. The defender of divine omnibenevolence must therefore not only uphold the plausibility of the premises of her own argument, but she must also provide defeaters for the premises of the argument against omnibenevolence from divine malevolence. In this case, the premises occupy positions (8), (9), (10) and (12) of the argument. Premise (11) is itself also a *conclusion* established logically by the preceding premises (8), (9) and (10), and (11) itself also functions alongside premise (12) in order to establish divine malevolence at conclusion (13). How exactly might a defender of divine malevolence conceptualise his premises most persuasively and what then might the defender of divine omnibenevolence say in reply?

6. Defence of Premises (II): Divine Malevolence.

Premise (8) takes the very concepts of ‘love’ and ‘hatred’ and postulates them as being implicitly opposed. This is intuitively true given the ordinary every-day sense in which we seem to use and understand these terms. Love commonly implies affection or connection to a certain thing. Love bears the resemblance of favour or beneficial disposition towards that thing, perhaps even the special choosing of a person (“I love *you*”) and the pursuit of unity and lasting friendship with that person. Hatred, on the other hand, implies the revulsion of a particular thing. He who hates his neighbour is usually ill-disposed towards that individual. Rather than seek union and friendship with her, he will despise her and seek to avoid her. Revulsion, loathing and exclusion are appropriate indications of deep hatred. Thus, the very concepts of love and hatred seem to be mutually opposed.

Premise (9), we take it, is simply the definition of omnibenevolence. This definition is conceded for the sake of argument.

Premise (10) simply points out the obvious fact that there actually exist a multitude of Bible verses from which to indicate that God not only hates certain persons (namely, human sinners), but also that God's hatred for them is contrasted with his love for others, which seems to support the intuitive mutual opposition of these two concepts of 'love' and 'hatred' (Psa. 5:5, 11:5; Prov. 6:16-19; Mal. 1:2c-3 cf. Rom. 9:13). Furthermore, each one of these references seems to take place with respect to God's eternal purpose and plan. This may indicate that not only is God malevolent, but *eternally* malevolent. So we seem to have good *prima facie* scriptural evidence for the doctrine of divine malevolence.

Premise (12) says that divine malevolence (the doctrine that God does *not* love some persons) really just is the negation of divine omnibenevolence (the doctrine that God loves all persons). It simply follows intuitively that if there are some persons whom God has created which are nevertheless not loved by him, then God does not love all persons, but rather God loves only a restricted set of persons. And that is just how we defined divine malevolence.

With premises (8), (9), (10) and (12) in place, the conclusion (13) will follow logically and necessarily—God is a malevolent being. If the defender of omnibenevolence is to rescue her classic doctrine of the all-loving nature of God, she must rebut at least one of the premises.

7. Confronting Divine Malevolence: Rejections, Replies and Rejoinders.

But which of the premises might the defender of divine omnibenevolence reject? She will have to concede premise (9); that is simply her view, and she assumes it. Similarly, she will recognise that (12) simply follows logically and intuitively. It is clear, then, that any good refutation of the argument against divine omnibenevolence from divine malevolence that the defender of divine omnibenevolence has to offer lies in the rejection of premises either (8) or (10) or both.

Premise (8) is clearly the fundamental underlying assumption of the entire argument against divine omnibenevolence from divine malevolence. Love and hatred are conceptualised in such a way as to set each against the other in a dualism of mutually exclusive emotions. The proponent of divine malevolence seems to think that that whenever I *love* someone, I cannot *truly* say that I *hate* them in any sense; and similarly when I *hate* that same person at a different time, I cannot *truly* be said to *love* them in any sense. But why should the defender of divine omnibenevolence accept this strong conceptual assumption? Whereas it *is* true that quite often both love and hatred *do* mutually exclude each other absolutely, the same is not true that in every case. People can have *mixed feelings* about each other. Siblings can desire to forgive, but pride can cause them to act hatefully towards each other. Or two people who love each other might merely act hatefully towards each other because they are both sheepish. But they still love each other. Perhaps the proponent of divine malevolence could say in response that these so-called “mixed feelings” are simply irrational contradictions grounded in human imperfection and finitude, and it would be irreverent to attribute that kind of confusion to God. But it is not at all clear how conflicting desires towards individuals is necessarily a bad thing *per se*. Indeed, this reply of the proponent of divine malevolence seems to place divine love and divine hatred on a higher plane than human experience such that we could neither attain to nor comprehend them. But how, then, can the proponent of divine malevolence appeal to “intuitive” and “ordinary every-day sense” use of terms and concepts like ‘love’ and ‘hatred’ and their consequent mutual opposition in the original argument? It seems as if the proponent of divine malevolence would be conceded the point if he were willing to make the move to deny our ordinary phenomenological grasp of these two concepts.

Premise (10) seems to constitute a purely biblical exegetical question about the meanings of biblical terms in their original languages. Perhaps the defender of divine

omnibenevolence could therefore reply that the biblical concepts being employed and/or alluded to by the biblical authors in Psa. 5:5, 11:5; Prov. 6:16-19; Mal. 1:2c-3 cf. Rom. 9:13 and elsewhere about God do not correspond to the kind of *fallen* human hatred we often feel in about of irrationality or anger against others. Rather, we should try to understand these concepts as a pure and holy response by God to sin *within* human persons. It is possible that the strength of the biblical language is used in these instances to express the divine wrath against sin as it destroys the creation and creatures loved by God. Furthermore, it is perfectly possible that a kind of literary metonymy was intended by the biblical authors. On this view, the expression of a divine hatred of the sinners themselves, wholly apart from *negating* God's love for them, precisely just is an *expression* of God's abounding love for them. If this is right, then the proponent of divine malevolence has actually done the defender of divine omnibenevolence a favour by pointing out such passages, which reveal another side of God's *holy* love for his creatures. The proponent of divine malevolence ought to be quick to reply that we simply cannot be sure that some form of literary metonymy was intended by the biblical authors, but of course that does nothing to harm the case of the defender of omnibenevolence. She may be quite happy, in this context, to stand alongside the proponent of divine malevolence in epistemic neutral, having shown the premise to be unjustified.

8. Conclusions and Practical Observations.

In conclusion, then, we have seen two arguments: one argument for the truth of divine omnibenevolence (the view that God loves all persons), and one argument against divine omnibenevolence from divine malevolence (the view that God does *not* love all persons). Premises in an argument *for* divine omnibenevolence seem to revolve around the example of the person of Jesus and the facts concerning the nature and extension of love in the Christian life. Premises in an argument *against* divine omnibenevolence from divine malevolence

emerge from a discussion of the mutually opposed conceptual nature of love and hatred, and biblical data about God's hatred of certain persons.

The doctrine of omnibenevolence and its antithesis of divine malevolence both seem to have particular implications for certain Christian doctrines about God and Christian living. How Christians conceive of the nature and character of God will shape how Christians relate to both God and man in worship, evangelisation and discipleship. And the truth or falsity of either divine omnibenevolence or divine malevolence should influence the way Christians think about Christian doctrines. For example, the historically divisive doctrine of predestination has been discussed by Christians under certain assumptions about the love of God. But a well-articulated doctrine of the love of God along with other necessary divine attributes should be concomitant with how Christians understand the doctrine of predestination and other doctrines such as clear teachings about the doctrine of hell and the doctrine of sin, and other more obscure doctrines such as the doctrine of infant salvation. It is not immediately clear how a doctrine of divine omnibenevolence or divine malevolence might influence one's interpretation of such doctrines as these. But surely there are implications. All Christians therefore must be careful to identify what their philosophical conceptual beliefs about terms and concepts are, and how their beliefs about those terms and concepts might be influencing their received interpretation of any particular doctrine. And, of course, each Christian must then weigh the consequences of his or her philosophical conceptualisations by the judgement of the Word of God exegetically to see if they actually consistently hold with the theological data expressed therein (1 Cor. 1:20; Col. 2:8).