

TOMASZ KĄKOL

SO PLEASANT, SO ADDICTIVE:  
SOME REMARKS ON ALEXANDER PRUSS' WORK *ONE BODY*<sup>1</sup>

I begin somewhat frivolously: since I lost my virginity quite late when compared with contemporary trends (at the age of 33, that is—and with my wife!) and, in addition to that, I broadly share the ethical views that Pruss tries to defend, some people might find me unsuited to critical discussion concerning the book *One Body*. On the other hand, I guess my virginity was probably lost in my heart much earlier, and since intentions, according to Pruss, play the most important role in evaluating action from the ethical point of view, it may well be that my involvement in our symposium will thereby be *not* inappropriate.<sup>2</sup>

*One Body* is a very extensive (over 400 pages) apology for out-of-the-mainstream sexual ethics. The author proves himself to be an excellent theologian, but hereafter I shall focus on his philosophical arguments. Indeed, Pruss himself writes in Chapter 1 that “although the central claims can be accepted on the basis of revelation, they are also independently plausible, and can be studied through philosophical methods” (2).

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<sup>1</sup> It is an exaggeration to dedicate reviews to anybody, but if I were encouraged to do so I would naturally dedicate it to my wife, who is the one I had been looking for most of my life—a cute theologian, lawyer and extremely sexy girl in one.

Alexander PRUSS, *One Body: an Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012). All references to this book henceforth will be by reference to page number in parentheses in the main body of my text.

<sup>2</sup> I put so much emphasis on private matters because one often can hear accusations in similar oral discussions (directed mostly against Catholic priests) like “but what can you know about sex after all.” I will not develop this point but only suggest that, similarly, historians writing about World War II need not be soldiers or participants in any war.

1. Pruss differentiates several versions of “the ethics of love,” as he calls it. He maintains that love can be taken to be the necessary or even the sufficient condition of the moral value of an action, though he will “try to minimize use of this more controversial claim” (7). However, taking into account that love is for him willing the good (for the beloved), appreciation (of the beloved) and striving for the union (with the beloved),<sup>3</sup> and, admittedly, it must be “appropriate love” (for if, e.g., goods willed for the beloved were merely apparent ones, it would make no sense to consider such willing to be a sufficient condition<sup>4</sup>), it is the “weaker” proposition that appears to be less credible: an action can be morally good even if one does not thereby seek any “union” with her neighbor. Perhaps Pruss recognizes this fact since he construes the notion of “union” in such a way that it is sensible to speak of “teammate [loving—T.K.] union between pitcher and catcher” (34) or the (loving) union between academic colleagues “exhibited, say, in cooperating on curriculum development” (32). Moreover, Pruss argues on p. 23 (following Aquinas) that each aspect of love listed above entails the other two. If that is right, then we can easily justify the claim the author takes to be quite strong (42): the duty to love everyone (we have the duty to act rightly to everyone, but to act rightly is equivalent to love; therefore, we should love everyone). Unfortunately, this comes at a price of a nearly tautological claim, for willing the good (appropriately) means acting in such a way that real goods are appreciated and this is exactly what constitutes the rightness of the action, and, moreover, what love consists in.

One more point as far as Ch. 2 is concerned: Pruss rightly observes that “some philosophers think that human beings who lack certain mental capacities, like those between conception and about a year of age, or those suffering from a mentally debilitating disease like Alzheimer’s, are not persons” (39). He settles the issue with a clear-cut remark: “I think, however, that this conclusion is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the position that human beings lacking certain mental capacities are not persons. Love ought to endure under those circumstances, and hence such human beings are persons” (39 f.). For many, this might appear too quick. However, for my part I believe that the celebrated distinction between human animal and person is just beating around the bush: I can imagine my being a soldier, I can even imagine my being an executioner in prison, but I cannot imagine my being a phy-

<sup>3</sup> “Whatever it means,” to quote prince Charles’ statement about his love (?) for Diana.

<sup>4</sup> Where ‘willing’ does not here mean ‘wishing’—it is connected to *action* (154).

sician killing an innocent member of the species I belong to, even if someone assures me that e.g. the woman's life (she is my wife, say) would be in danger should this little human (even supposing that she/he does not feel pain) in her uterus be allowed to live. The same goes for the elderly. Accordingly, trolley-like utilitarian arguments do not convince me at all (Pruss is not convinced, either).

2. The central Chapter 5 explains what the union distinctive of what romantic (sexual, etc.) love seeks consists in: being one body (or one flesh), as the Bible says. The author offers us a detailed critical review of what kind of union fits this scriptural phrase best (mutual, extremely intense pleasure?; psychological benefits?; etc.), coming to the conclusion that it is only the mutual bodies' striving for reproduction that constitutes the desired union. Well and good, but that cannot be very persuasive unless one demonstrates on purely philosophical grounds that the famous quote from the Bible correctly describes the union that romantic love pursues. One does not know why it is "philosophically plausible" that the union of that kind (biblical "one flesh") "is what erotic love seeks" (113).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, he convincingly argues that "pleasure is valuable when and only when one is taking pleasure in something that is in itself good" (119). However, the modeling of pleasure on paradigmatic perceptual states such as (sensuous) seeing (pleasure is "an affective perception of a good"—p. 123, see also pp. 124 f., 139–141, 329–332, 354), and thus on an intentional state (that is, having a content<sup>6</sup>), is controversial: there is a significant number of philosophers who treat pain, excitement,<sup>7</sup> pleasure, etc., as typical contentless states (pure feelings or qualia). I do not imply that these philosophers are right, only that something stronger than the line of thought presented in *One Body* is needed to refute their view. On the other hand, Pruss correctly points out "that the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake rarely fails to produce misery or at least ennui" (124). Lastly, Ch. 5 contains an analysis of what the essence of or-

<sup>5</sup> M. Iwanicki pointed to me that Pruss' account cannot do justice to the fact that Mary and Joseph were married (as is stated in Mt. 1:20.24), yet—according to both Catholic and Orthodox tradition—they died as virgins. I see no reason to suppose that on the grounds of "One Body" their marriage was not valid. Even assuming that they loved each other romantically, the Annunciation radically changed their plans so their sexual love was never consummated, if this tradition is right.

<sup>6</sup> This notion of intentionality was introduced by F. Brentano in his *Psychology from an empirical standpoint*, trans. Oskar Kraus, Linda L. Macalister, Antos C. Rancurello, Peter Simons (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 59–77 (originally published in 1874).

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere Pruss holds that arousal can be viewed as "a way of perceiving the other's fittedness for sexual union with one" (354).

ganic body involves: the author mentions “coordination [between parts—T.K.] and striving for a common goal” (102), adding that “there may be further biological characteristics needed for union as one body.” This is especially important for the standard bioethical topics concerning early human embryos (at the morula or blastocyst stage), since the popular argument is that at this point we have not yet anything that is a unified organism.<sup>8</sup> The question is whether the conditions given by Pruss are satisfied by such things—not to mention the fact that a negative answer would affect his deeming post-fertilization contraceptives and “spare” embryos resulting from IVF treatment morally wrong due to the fact that humans are killed (291 f., 380).

3. Arguments in Ch. 6 (“Union, commitment and marriage”) are not very persuasive, either. “If the commitment of persons to each other in the union that fulfills romantic love is to mirror, as much as possible, the directedness of body parts to each other and to the whole, it needs to be a «’til death do us part» commitment” (168)—again, it does not seem that the antecedent was supported on non-theological grounds. Nor is the question of indissoluble marriage settled by the remark that “the lover’s primary commitment is to the beloved, rather than to the couple as such, so that it would not make sense to terminate the commitment should the couplehood be damaged” (ibid.). One does not know why “we can now plausibly add a *second* aspect of consummation: the temporal extension of the union through time, in commitment to one another and to the raising of offspring” (169). Some force can be attributed, however, to the very traditional, pragmatic argument against nonmarital intercourse—from the risk of pregnancy (very small, but in the case of most contraceptives nonzero) and the related risk of a child’s being raised in a one-parent family or an orphanage (183–88)—especially under the assumption that abortion is wrong. (Pruss acknowledges that examining the question of abortion is “beyond the scope of this book” [189].) Still, the argument is fairly weak “if the woman is past the age of childbearing,” for example (188). I also find very suggestive the argument from “prospective fidelity to one’s potential future spouse” (191)—and, presumably, as the author notes—“the future spouse of the sexual partner” (192), although I suppose very few will be convinced by it. There is some truth in the rebuttal of the plain sex argument (nonmarital sex need not be

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Barry SMITH and Berit BROGAARD, “Sixteen days,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 28, 1 (2003): 45–78 (accessible at <http://ontology.buffalo.edu/smith/articles/16Days.pdf>).

wrong when romantic love and/or marriage is simply denied by the couple)—for “through the sexual activity, sexual desire is being fostered” (196), the desire for more than just plain sex.<sup>9</sup> Of course, there is a minority of which this is not true, yet who knows before intercourse whether she belongs to this group? The author is probably right when he argues that the position he calls “the more liberal version of the permissive view” (concerning nonmarital intercourse) allows for some cases of free-from-serious-reasons (such as poverty) paid sex (204) and that “if sex is so widely permissible, it does not appear likely that it also has the kind of deep meaning we ascribe to it” (205). The issue of premarital sex is summarized by another pragmatic argument: “premarital sex is often strongly tempting, and times of sexual temptation are not times of the highest degree of rationality” (210)—that is why we should just adhere to the simple rule of ‘no way’, instead of constructing complicated rules with several exceptions! However, readers will not be convinced by the alleged analogy between the physical world and the moral one, the first one being such that mathematically simpler laws are preferred to complex ones (206, 208 f.). Again, the pragmatic proposal near the end of Ch. 6 seems to have some persuasive force: “A view on which divorce is valid—really dissolves a marriage—but immoral would be one where immoral behavior is rewarded and where the temptation to divorce is significantly increased” (256). A final note on the chapter under discussion: on a hylomorphic view regarding the mind-body problem, the statement according to which “the soul *is* the life of the body” (198; see also 199) is an obvious category mistake—the life of the body is a process, whereas the soul is a thing enduring in time.

4. The aforementioned lack of a nonscriptural argument for a one-body union as the primary aim of romantic love is fatal for many more specific issues discussed in the book like (positive) contraception. Thus, in Ch. 7 (“Contraception and natural family planning”) we are told that in the case of an “intercourse with a condom whose tip was cut off (...) we clearly have a full sexual union as one flesh” (266), whereas by engagement into a typical condomic intercourse or coitus interruptus “one is intentionally acting against union, and hence against that which romantic love seeks” (267). The same can be said about another of Pruss’ arguments: “to oppose one’s body while the body strives for love’s consummating union, is to go back on that love” (272)—the philosopher who wants only “natural arguments” if possible would

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<sup>9</sup> This theme is popular in movies, indeed.

add that one should first establish that the union constituted by mutual bodily striving for reproduction is the consummation of romantic love. Consequently, contrary to what the author suggests, the arguments are far from convincing.<sup>10</sup> Besides, at least two points in Ch. 7 needs correction: First, it does not seem true that “the direction of moral progress tends to be from the less restrictive to the more restrictive” (308; think about rules concerning women’s casual clothes, say<sup>11</sup>). Second, Pruss suggests, if I understand him correctly, that hormonally positively contraceptive intercourse (in marriage) meets the one-body union condition (326). I would rather say that if the intention is what counts, it is the opposite that is more consonant with his theory: such an intercourse only mimics the full biblical one-flesh union, since mutual bodily striving for reproduction is clearly (at least intentionally) blocked when e.g. the woman is on the pill. Surprisingly, what is more convincing is the very pragmatic (once again) remark closing the chapter: “The initiation of processes that are biologically aimed at the production of images and likenesses of God [or Kantian ends in themselves, if someone prefers a more secular account—T.K.] is surely not something to be taken lightly. But contraception is felt to remove the connection, allowing sex to be taken more lightly” (327).

5. Ch. 8 (“Sexual pleasure and noncoital sexual activity”) contains intriguing observations. First, leaving aside his controversial account of pleasure as a kind of perception, Pruss acknowledges the fact that there is something problematic (to say the least) in activating (in many sophisticated ways, oral sex being probably the most known example) orgasmic pleasure which is the evolutionarily selected reward mechanism motivating members of the species *Homo sapiens* to reproduce. If someone finds the analogy with R. Nozick’s experience machine or “satisfaction pill” unsatisfactory, one could vividly imagine aliens who reproduce by shaking hands with a member of the opposite sex. Evolution on the planet they inhabit facilitated the

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<sup>10</sup> “The arguments *are* strong” (305). Then he continues: “Basically, the argument is that one-flesh and one-body union is achieved through sexual intercourse, and sexual intercourse is, biologically, a mutual striving for reproduction (...). If a one-flesh and one-body union essentially involves the biological, which is clear given that we are talking of *flesh* and *body*, then acting against that which constitutes the union is surely either acting against the union or is a personal disclaiming of the union. Neither option is compatible with romantic love.” Again, provided that romantic love seeks this kind of union. Compare another example: “where the semen is being directed seems to be the crucial difference between one-body unitive intercourse and mutual masturbation or oral sex” (323).

<sup>11</sup> I do not mean that moral progress correlates in that matter with the degree of nakedness, but only note that adopting extremely harsh rules (say, allowing women only brown capes with the holes for eyes) does not thereby guarantee any moral progress.

process of reproduction in such a way that those creatures feel extremely intense pleasure during climax. Thus, some of them shake hands with themselves (her left hand with her right hand), causing similar pleasure; others, who do not want to reproduce, lie in bed head to foot, catch his or her partner's feet and shake them rhythmically, thereby inducing something very similar to our orgasm. That is why it is very natural to think of sexual pleasure as "a natural drug" (it is a metaphor since strictly speaking this phrase is a contradiction in terms),<sup>12</sup> although the risk of addiction is not as high as in the case of, say, amphetamine. Second, masturbation can indeed sometimes be seen as "a kind of infidelity" (343). What I claim to be controversial is the unqualified contention that "any activity that acts out of or in support of one's own attraction to another or another's attraction to oneself, when that other is not one's romantic partner, is a form of infidelity to the romantic partner" (357). Think of a married rock star that uses extraordinary makeup, with her body pierced and tattooed, and wears clothes that more sensitive males deem sexy. Should her husband be jealous of her due to her fans? There are less suggestive examples but the point is that for many "morally upright" jobs such as weathergirl<sup>13</sup> or sales representative it is almost impossible *not* to induce sexual arousal in others. Of course, one could argue that if we are to take into consideration every pervert, then we should look like mummies or perhaps stay home.<sup>14</sup> Or we may use the principle of double effect.<sup>15</sup> Still, the difficulty remains if "modesty is important both in order to avoid even unintentionally arousing others and in order to signify the privacy of the act" (348). Father Ksawery Knotz, probably the most prominent expert in sexual ethics among Polish Catholic priests,<sup>16</sup> would be skeptical about Pruss' remarks on "representations" (p. 341)<sup>17</sup>: although they were issued in the context of pornography, they seem to entail that any "improvement" in sexual attractiveness is morally suspect. Father Knotz in his sermons frequently encourages married people to make their intercourse more

<sup>12</sup> A friend of my wife once wished me and my wife "three divine drugs: sex, sun and sweets." Numerous pop stars' songs explore this metaphor, too.

<sup>13</sup> At least in Poland in private TV stations.

<sup>14</sup> Due to Ancient Egypt-oriented necrophiliacs.

<sup>15</sup> In a private correspondence A. Pruss agreed that in this context the aforementioned principle should be invoked.

<sup>16</sup> See his homepage <http://www.szansaspotkania.pl/index.php/pl/>

<sup>17</sup> "However, because sexual love, like all love, is centered on reality, it is plausible that any arousal should be *by the spouse as he or she really is* rather than at the *representation*, or the spouse as he or she is not."

“crazy” in some positive sense of the term: I remember him telling funny stories about the couples he knows, such as a husband who has sex dressed as Superman, since his wife had always wanted to be rescued by Superman, or about a couple where the husband has sex dressed as a wolf and his wife dressed as Little Red Riding Hood, and the like. Is the arousal in these cases “by the spouse as he or she really is?” Arguably not. But is there *always* something morally wrong with such intercourse?<sup>18</sup>

6. The arguments in Ch. 9 (“Same-sex attraction”) suffer from the “one body” flaw I pointed to earlier.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the author takes up the interesting issue of sexual reassignment surgery. On the one hand, we can reasonably hold that “a surgically created artificial «vagina» in a biological male is no more a vagina than the ear canal is” (369). But on the other hand, Pruss knows the syndrome leading many patients to have (one of) their limb(s) amputated—and he has qualms about such medical treatment even provided that psychotherapy is ineffective in those cases (107).<sup>20</sup> But assuming that such medical treatment is justified, the preferred operation should be one involving transplant of the whole reproductive system. The difficulty is that one does not know who is to be a donor: victims of accidents? Or maybe the best solution would be some kind of mutual transplant involving a gay and a lesbian—observe that in this way homosexuals can create heterosexual relationship. Matters are complicated, but I think this possibility is worth exploring.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> In a private exchange of views M. Iwanicki disagreed with me, whereas Pruss’ position was closer to mine, which is that there is no general rule as to the moral exclusion of such intercourses—they should be evaluated by a case-by-case study. However, for Pruss, for example, “the wolf and Little Red Riding Hood case seems really problematic, verging on pedophilia and bestiality” (private correspondence). I simply have no such intuition. Similarly, I do not think that “dressing up as a prostitute to please one’s spouse seems incompatible with marital dignity” (private correspondence).

<sup>19</sup> “But on our analysis of erotic love as partly defined by a tendency to sexual union, and of sexual union as partly defined by a biological union of reproductive type as a single organism, the idea of erotic love for persons of the same sex is conceptually problematic” (361). “I have argued in the previous chapter that it is wrong to intentionally induce orgasm outside of the context of penile-vaginal intercourse, because to do so would be to create an illusion of a sexual union in the absence of such union. In the same-sex case, it would create an illusion of a deep union in the absence of the *possibility* of such union, an illusion that would rest on a misunderstanding of the realities involved” (367). “It is impossible to unite sexually with someone not of the opposite sex” (369).

<sup>20</sup> Pruss confirmed this in a private correspondence.

<sup>21</sup> Personally I propose the following argument against homosexual sex, which I think Pruss would endorse: *If* homosexual sex is not morally wrong, then homosexual marriage is not, either; and *if* homosexual marriage is not morally wrong, then having children by them (by adoption, for instance) is not such, either. But if we cannot agree with this consequent, it follows that homosexual

7. Finally, I have nothing to add regarding the last two chapters (“Reproduction and technology” and “Celibacy”).

All in all, the book is worth reading but more work should be done to make it attractive, especially for nonbelievers. I should emphasize that pragmatic arguments are the strongest (philosophical) part of the work under discussion but taking into account the fact that many would say that proper ethical arguments should be something more than simply pragmatic ones, there is a danger that ultimately the strength of “One Body” is illusory.

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#### TAK PRZYJEMNY, TAK UZALEŻNIAJĄCY: KILKA UWAG O PRACY ALEXANDRA PRUSSA *ONE BODY*

##### Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule o charakterze recenzyjnym analizuję szczegółowo książkę Alexandra Prussa *One Body*, wskazując na miejsca, w których się z nim zgadzam, oraz podkreślając kilka niedociągnięć w jego argumentach. Ogólny tok myślowy, który jest eksploracją biblijnej metafory „bycia jednym ciałem”, jest dla mnie w ostateczności zadowalający z teologicznego, ale nie z filozoficznego punktu widzenia.

#### SO PLEASANT, SO ADDICTIVE: SOME REMARKS ON ALEXANDER PRUSS' WORK *ONE BODY*

##### Summary

In this article in a form of a review I analyze at length A. Pruss' book *One Body*, pointing at where I agree with him and stressing several flaws in his arguments. The general line of thought,

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sex is morally wrong. (The question of the law is a separate one, of course. Notice, also, that this is not a slippery slope argument or vagueness paradox.) If someone sees nothing problematic with the sentence about children, consider the alternative: Everybody agrees that this reasoning holds when we replace ‘homosexual’ with ‘heterosexual’, and that bisexual orientation is closer to heterosexual one than homosexual is. Now replace ‘homosexual’ with ‘bisexual’ in the above argument. I suspect only a minority would see nothing wrong with a “family” consisting of e.g. two bisexual males, one heterosexual female (therefore forming a triadic marriage) and their two children.

which is exploring the biblical metaphor of “being one body,” is ultimately sufficient for me from the theological, but not the philosophical point of view.

**Słowa kluczowe:** seks, etyka seksualna, miłość, małżeństwo, antykoncepcja, seks bez penetracji.

**Key words:** sex, sexual ethics, love, marriage, contraception, noncoital sex.

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