

Alexander R. Pruss, *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. 464 pages. \$40, paperback.

In this masterful new work, Alexander Pruss, professor of philosophy at Baylor University, articulates and defends a comprehensive Christian sexual ethic – one that is rooted in both scripture and tradition, but is also supported by premises that are intended to be “independently plausible” (2). I will focus on the independently plausible version here.

The central argument of *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* is built on the claim, outlined in chapter two, that any act that is contrary or opposed to love is always morally wrong. According to Pruss, there are three essential components of any form of love: good will, appreciation, and union. In a loving relationship, one both wills the good of the beloved and seeks union with the beloved. The kind of good that is to be willed and the kind of union that is to be sought is determined by a successful appreciation of the relevant features of oneself and the beloved. What distinguishes the various forms of love is not the presence or absence of any these components, since every form of love will include all three, but rather, each form of love is characterized by the kind of “real union” that “consummates” it (33). Given this “ethics of love” (19), it follows that any act that is contrary or opposed to the good of the beloved, an accurate appreciation of the beloved, or, most importantly, one’s real union with the beloved is always morally wrong.

In chapter four, after demonstrating that we do typically take sex to have at least some intrinsic moral significance, Pruss contends that the best way to account for this is by recognizing that sexual activity falls under the jurisdiction of an ethics of love. If there is such a thing as romantic love, and romantic love is a distinct form of love, then there will be some distinct kind of real union that consummates it. What seems to set romantic love apart is its relation to sex (though, of course, romantic love seeks more than just sex). Plausibly, then, romantic love is consummated by sexual union. As a result, any act that is contrary or opposed to sexual union is contrary to romantic love, and is thus morally wrong.

But what is the real union that can be achieved in sexual intercourse? In chapter five, Pruss argues that the kind of real union that can be achieved in such acts is achieved through a biological union – one in which the participants are coordinating the activities of their bodies for the sake of some common goal. According to Pruss, this common goal that can unite the bodily activities of the participants must be reproduction, and so the real, one-body union that can be achieved in sexual intercourse is constituted by the joint physical striving of the participants’ sexual organs for reproduction. Importantly, for this sort of union to be achieved the participants need not necessarily succeed in reproducing, nor is it necessary that the participants consciously intend that reproduction result. Sexual union, then, is constituted by this joint striving for reproduction. And since sexual union is the kind of real union that consummates romantic love, any act that is contrary or opposed to the joint striving for reproduction is contrary or opposed to romantic love, and is thus morally wrong.

Although Pruss takes the sort of biological union detailed in chapter five to be a necessary feature of the consummation of romantic love, he also acknowledges that it isn’t the only feature. In chapter six, he emphasizes the fact that romantic love seeks not simply a union of organisms but a union of persons. Sexual union, and the romantic love that it consummates, is meant to be a

comprehensive union, both biological and personal, and so any act that is contrary or opposed to either the biological or personal aspects of the union is contrary or opposed to romantic love. Such actions are, according to an ethics of love, always morally wrong.

This much is the basic argument of the book. In the chapters that follow, much of the discussion revolves around the application of this argument to particular issues in sexual ethics. Later on in chapter six, Pruss explains that premarital or extramarital sexual activity is contrary to the comprehensive commitment of wills necessary for personal union and for any kind of enduring biological union. In chapter seven, Pruss argues that the use of contraception in sexual intercourse is an act that is contrary or opposed to both the joint striving for reproduction and the personal union that is meant to be achieved through that union. And in chapters eight and nine he argues that noncoital sexual activity (any sexual act that does not include the coordinated activity of both male and female reproductive organs) gives the participants only the illusion of real union. Inasmuch as at least one of the participants takes this illusion as a true representation of reality, to that extent he or she succumbs to either self-deception or self-disintegration – neither of which are conducive to comprehensive union with the beloved. Voluntary acts of this kind, then, are contrary or opposed to the sort of union that consummates romantic love.

The most impressive thing about *One Body* is Pruss's ability to sustain his main argument for the entirety of the work (all four-hundred and some pages), through further complications, responses to objections, and an array of complex and important issues. There are, scattered throughout, several minor arguments that offer secondary support for some of his particular ethical conclusions. But, in my opinion, the greatest contribution that *One Body* makes to the field of Christian sexual ethics is the systematic approach that it provides for those who want to investigate these issues further. Pruss shows us that a traditionally-minded Christian sexual ethic need not be cold and impersonal, or contrived and ad hoc. It can, and should be, systematic and precise. But it should also remain founded on an ethics of love.

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