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HOMOSEXUAL SEX AND THE ONE-FLESH UNION

In *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics*, Alexander Pruss presents a clear, rigorous, thoughtful, and wide-ranging discussion of sexual morality from a Christian (primarily Catholic) perspective. In this review I cannot possibly do justice to every topic that Pruss discusses. I focus here on Pruss's analysis of the one-body (or one-flesh) union described in Gen. 2:24 and the role that analysis plays in Pruss's arguments for the immorality of homosexual sex. I will resist those arguments by sketching an alternative to Pruss's way of understanding the one-body union.

Pruss's Christian approach to sexual morality is grounded in what ought to ground a Christian approach to any moral issue: love. Pruss claims that we are morally obligated to love everyone *appropriately*, where loving someone appropriately requires loving "the beloved *as the beloved is*" (19). Pruss explains: "Thus, loving my daughter as if she were God would be an inappropriate love, since I would not be loving her as the creature of God that she is" (19). Love, of course, is not always reciprocated, but in reciprocal love the lovers aim at what Aquinas calls "real union"—"the particular form of togetherness to which one is called by the nature of a given form of love" (32). Pruss's focus in *One Body* is on one of these specific forms of love: romantic love. He says that the real union that is distinctive of romantic love is a sexual union—a "this-worldly, fleshly union" (33). Pruss looks to scripture to understand the nature of this sort of union, identifying biblical passages that he suggests point toward the view that when two people engage in morally appropriate sexual activity they

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constitute a “union as one body” (90). To make sense of this one-body union, Pruss proposes that when such a union occurs, the two bodies of the individuals involved constitute a whole in virtue of their joint striving for a common goal. This common goal must be “a goal of the whole *as a whole*” (101) and in order for the union to be a good union “the goal striven for will have to be valuable” (102). Pruss considers three possibilities as to what the goal of this common striving might be, ultimately concluding that it is reproduction:

[I]t is the bodies’ mutual *striving* for reproduction that is involved in union. Whether reproduction results or not, the bodies’ mutual striving unites them, just as when a mammal’s optic nerve is damaged, its eyes still unsuccessfully strive together with the brain to obtain information about the environment, and hence are functionally united with the brain (136).

Thus, according to Pruss, in appropriate sexual activity the bodies of the two persons involved unite as one body to strive for reproduction and that this is the one-flesh union spoken of in Gen. 2:24: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Pruss argues that romantic love is defined by a tendency toward this sexual one-flesh union—though he is careful to point out that it does not follow that such sexual union is the most important aspect of romantic love (160).

Pruss also draws on his account of sexual activity to develop an analysis of sexual pleasure, claiming that sexual pleasure is pleasure that “is taken specifically in the one-flesh union” (329). This does not imply that sexual pleasure can occur only if the one-flesh union actually takes place. Pruss holds that sexual pleasure, like perceptual experiences, can be veridical or non-veridical. Sexual pleasure can occur in the absence of the one-flesh union; however, such pleasure is non-veridical “just as one’s vision is not veridical when one sees a pink elephant and either there is no elephant or there is only a blue elephant there” (329).

Pruss draws on these ideas to develop two arguments for the immorality of homosexual sex. According to the first of these, “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” (367). Pruss explains what is morally objectionable about creating such an illusion as follows:

Pleasure is an apparent perception of ... a good. ... A nonveridical pleasure in something that is not good ... pulls us in the direction of either loving something we should not love or loving something in a way we should not love it. ... The

temptation to love incorrectly is indeed a temptation to evil ... And to deliberately place oneself in the way of temptation, to induce the deceitful pleasure that constitutes the temptation, is itself wrong (331-2).

I take it that this first argument can be formulated as follows:

THE FALSE PLEASURE ARGUMENT (FPA). 1. The object of sexual pleasure is the one-flesh union. 2. Sexual pleasure in the absence of the one-flesh union is false pleasure. 3. By deliberately experiencing false pleasure, one deliberately places oneself in the way of temptation. 4. It is morally wrong deliberately to place oneself in the way of temptation. 5. So, it is morally wrong deliberately to experience sexual pleasure in the absence of the one-flesh union (from 2-4). 6. The one-flesh union cannot occur in homosexual sex. 7. Therefore, it is morally wrong to experience sexual pleasure in homosexual sex (from 5 and 6).

According to Pruss, FPA does not identify the most serious problem with homosexual sex. He explains what he takes to be a more serious problem in these lines:

[T]he feeling of sexual pleasure and union is both a kind of completion of the union of erotic love, and something that calls out for erotic love by presenting the other person as erotically lovable. When these feelings are manifested toward someone with whom such union is impossible ... one is affectively misconstruing the other person's nature—treating the other as in a relevant way able to be united with one, when the other is not (368).

This passage suggests the following argument:

THE MISCONSTRUED NATURE ARGUMENT (MNA). 1. The object of sexual pleasure is the one-flesh union. 2. The one-flesh union is impossible in homosexual sex. 3. So, homosexual sexual pleasure affectively misconstrues the other's nature (from 1 and 2). 4. It is morally wrong to make oneself or another affectively misconstrue another's nature. 5. Therefore, it is morally wrong to make oneself or another experience homosexual sexual pleasure (from 3 and 4).

According to the FPA, homosexual sex is immoral because it engenders a temptation to love inappropriately, whereas according to the MNA homosexual sex is immoral because its participants affectively misconstrue each other's nature, treating each other as the sort of person with which one could unite as one flesh when in fact such union is impossible.

I take it that the conclusions of both of these arguments are false and that what we learn by reflecting on these arguments is that each of them has at

least one false premise. In what follows I explore a way of rejecting the shared first premise of both arguments.

As I noted above, Pruss's approach to sexual morality is grounded in certain biblical passages that appear to connect sexual activity with becoming one flesh or one body. The most important of these is Genesis 2:24. Pruss notes that in the book of Matthew, Jesus is described as quoting the Genesis passage and then remarking: "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mt. 19:4-6). Pruss says that his method is to take such passages seriously and to argue "that the best way to understand the union as one flesh and one body is as a union constituted by cooperative reproductive striving" (155). However, he acknowledges that "the texts do not say that there is a mutual striving and certainly do not say that it is for reproduction" (155). Accordingly, I will sketch a way of taking such passages seriously that does not commit one to accepting the initial premise of FPA and MNA.

To begin, note the following weakness in Pruss's interpretation of these passages. On Pruss's account, the bodily union spoken of in these passages is constituted by cooperative reproductive striving. It follows that the existence of the one-flesh union coincides with the presence of such striving. In short, Pruss's account seems to imply that man and woman are joined as one flesh when and only when they are engaged in sexual activity. But that doesn't fit particularly well with Jesus's remarks in the book of Matthew quoted above. Pruss takes Jesus's remarks to constitute a moral condemnation of divorce. The problem is that on Pruss's account divorce would not normally destroy the one-body union (though it might prevent future such unions between the two people getting divorced), which is by its nature temporary in any case. On Pruss's account, Jesus's directive not to put asunder what God has joined together is most naturally construed as a command not to separate husband and wife while they are actually having sex! Both the Genesis passage and Jesus's comments about that passage suggest that the one-flesh union is a more enduring union that is associated with marriage rather than a sporadic union that exists only during sexual activity.¹

Although Pruss never explicitly addresses this precise worry, *One Body* contains a strategy for addressing it. Noting that sexual union is "an event

¹ For another critique of the view that the one flesh union mentioned in Gen. 2:24 is only physical, see SALZMAN AND LAWLER 2008, 164–5.

that lasts for a limited amount of time,” Pruss proposes that by way of a “*commitment* to a lasting relationship, a couple can extend the biologically momentary nature of the union of intercourse” (164). Pruss identifies such commitment as a second component of the consummation of romantic love (169). Thus, romantic love is fully consummated only when cooperative reproductive striving occurs in the context of a “commitment to one another and to the raising of offspring” (169). This, then, is the fullest version of the one-flesh union.

However, there seems to be tension between this proposal that the one-flesh union can be temporally extended beyond actual sexual union and Pruss’s earlier claim that coordinated striving for a common purpose is required for a union of the relevant sort to exist. In connection with that earlier claim, Pruss writes:

[I]t appears to be a necessary condition of something’s being a body part that it have service to the body as a purpose. ... We should go a step further. Not only must the part have such service as a purpose, but it must actually be striving ... to promote this purpose. ... One might point to the lungs of a dead person and say that they should be supplying oxygen to the rest of the body. But if they are not *striving* to do that, then they are no longer a part of the body (99).

When a committed couple is not actually having sexual intercourse, their bodies are not actually striving for reproduction. Pruss’s remarks in the passage quoted above suggest that the one-flesh union exists only so long as there is actual striving for reproduction. Consequently, it seems that the result of a couple’s commitment to a lasting relationship is the creation of an obligation to form a one-flesh union periodically (or under certain circumstances) rather than an actual extension of the one-flesh union through time. Being committed to strive toward a certain goal on certain occasions is not the same as continuously striving for that goal.

The following passage suggests one way that Pruss might respond to the line of argument I have given here:

Sometimes this striving is at a fairly low level. Our hands have as their purpose the manipulation of objects. When we are asleep, our hands are not generally manipulating objects, and when they are, they are not doing so purposefully. However, the hands remain in readiness, full of life. The blood nourishes the cells of the hands, which in turn actively maintain themselves in a state responsive to any nerve signals they may receive (99-100).

Here, Pruss suggests that even while we are asleep our hands are striving to manipulate objects by keeping themselves ready to respond to nerve

signals. This claim strikes me as mistaken. By keeping themselves ready to respond to nerve signals, the hands are keeping themselves prepared to strive to manipulate objects but they are not actually striving to manipulate anything. The activity of the hands during sleep can enhance their capacity to succeed when they do begin to strive to manipulate objects, but it doesn't follow that their activity during sleep is itself a striving to manipulate objects. I devote a fair amount of effort toward activity intended to enhance my capacity to score points during basketball games, but it's not the case that when I'm running or lifting weights I'm actually striving to score points during basketball games. If this is right, then there is tension between Pruss's claims that (i) the one-flesh union exists only when there is actual striving for reproduction and (ii) by committing to one another married couples can extend the one-flesh union beyond those times at which they are actually engaged in sexual intercourse. Because Pruss places actual striving for reproduction at the heart of the one-flesh union, it is hard to see how his account can avoid the implication that the one-flesh union exists at most sporadically throughout marriage.

These difficulties suggest that we should look for an alternative way of understanding the one-body/flesh union. As Pruss points out, what we are looking for is a sense of "one body" that "captures the intended significance of the phrase" but is not necessarily "metaphysically or biologically literal" (91). The Genesis passage speaks of a man leaving his father and mother in order to join with his wife. The passage begins with the model of a family—parents and children. In a properly-functioning family, each member of the family subordinates his or her individual good to the good of the whole family. Of course, the possibility of individuals giving priority to what is good for a group to which they belong over what is good for them as individuals is not limited to family. Consider a professional sports team that can win the championship only if every member of the team sacrifices a significant degree of individual fame or wealth. What is good for each individual player is greater fame or wealth, but what is good for the team is winning the championship. Perhaps, then, husband and wife become one flesh in the sense that both commit to subordinating what is good for them as individuals to what is good for them as a pair until one of them dies. This proposal doesn't imply that every case in which individuals sacrifice their individual goods for the good of a group to which they belong involves a one-flesh union. Perhaps the significance of the Genesis passage is that what is distinctive of the one-flesh union is that it involves a commitment to sacrifice

one's individual good for the good of the pair *for the rest of one's life*. The talk of "flesh" may serve to highlight the similarity in this respect between membership in a marriage and membership in a biological family: unlike membership on a professional sports team, such memberships are for life.

On this account the one-flesh union is not constituted by cooperative reproductive striving. Instead, it is constituted by a lifelong version of what Pruss calls "union of heart and mind" (158), which includes "[a]cquiring a joint identity, surrendering one's autonomy, and having any goods and bads that happen to the other person happen to oneself" (159). One advantage of this construal of the one-flesh union over Pruss's is that this account offers a relatively straightforward explanation of how the one-flesh union can exist continuously throughout marriage. On this account, at the heart of the one-flesh union is not actual striving for reproduction but rather a commitment to subordinate what is good for oneself to what is good for the couple for the rest of one's life. Such a commitment can persist through the varied activities of a married couple and hence this sort of union does not come and go depending on the couple's sexual activity as Pruss's version of the one-flesh union seems to.

If this is right, then we need not accept Pruss's contention that sexual activity is always fundamentally about cooperative reproductive striving (though of course we can allow that it sometimes is). We can hold instead that sexual activity is one important way of supporting or enhancing the one-flesh union (understood as explained above). Sexual activity can be (though of course it is not always) an extremely effective means of increasing intimacy, trust, and emotional connectedness between partners. In this way, it can make the members of a partnership like marriage more disposed to subordinate their individual goods to what is good for the pair. Catholic theologians Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler put the idea this way: "Just and loving sexual union creates and nurtures love, the very essence of Christian discipleship; it *makes love*, as we say in everyday language" (2008, 127).

Anne Barnhill has recently explored the idea that many of the physical actions involved in sex are expressive and have default meanings—that sex is a kind of language. She explains:

Some of the physical actions typical of sex have a default expressive significance. For example, the default expressive significance of letting yourself be penetrated is, perhaps, that you trust the person who is penetrating you. Physical tenderness toward someone—touching her gently—expresses, by default, that you care for her and even that you cherish her. Physical attention to someone—touching her with

great precision, in order to cause her pleasure—expresses, by default, that you are sensitive to how she feels and are responsive to it (2013, 5).²

Barnhill’s account illustrates one way that sex can serve to strengthen the one-flesh union: it constitutes a distinctive way for the lovers to communicate with one another.

My suggestion, then, is that sex is a means of promoting the one-flesh union and that the one-flesh union itself is something quite different from cooperative reproductive striving. This account is in line with some remarks that the character Aristophanes makes in Plato’s *Symposium*. Aristophanes characterizes people in love with each other as follows:

These are people who live out whole lifetimes together, but still couldn’t say what it is they want from each other. I mean, no one can think it’s just sexual intercourse they want ... Imagine that Hephaestus with his tools stood over them while they were lying together and asked, “What is it, humans, that you want from each other? ... Is this what you desire, to be together so completely that you’re never apart from each other night and day? If this is what you desire, I’m prepared to fuse and weld you together, so that the two of you become one. Then the two of you would live a shared life, as long as you live, since you are one person ...” We know that no one who heard this offer would turn it down and it would become apparent that no one wanted anything else. Everyone would think that what he was hearing now was just what he’d longed for all this time: to come together and be fused with the one he loved and become one instead of two (*Symposium* 192c-d).

Hephaestus offers the lovers physical union but Aristophanes’s remarks suggest that what the lovers most want is to live a shared life and become one in a psychological sense so that their emotions and desires—and what is good for them—align perfectly. Thus, the physical union that Hephaestus offers is characterized as valuable primarily because it will facilitate a psychological union. While the “melding” that Hephaestus offers is unattainable it can be approximated by forming a partnership in which each partner values what is good for the pair more than she values what is good for herself.

Interestingly, ideas that bear some similarity to my proposal are advanced in John Paul II’s *Familiaris Consortio*:

[S]exuality, by means of which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses, is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost

² Barnhill finds the notion of sex as language in John Paul II’s *Familiaris Consortio*.

being of the human person as such. *It is realized in a truly human way only if it is an integral part of the love by which a man and a woman commit themselves totally to one another until death* (1981, § 11, emphasis added).

This passage, particularly the italicized sentence, suggests that at least one of the functions of sex can be to support a life-long commitment between partners.³ I should emphasize that, as far as I can see, Pruss can gladly agree that sex at least sometimes does the things that I have suggested. What Pruss and I disagree about is the best way of understanding the nature of the one-flesh union itself. Pruss holds that this union is constituted by cooperative reproductive striving and that sexual intercourse (of the right sort) *just is* the one-flesh union whereas I propose that the one-flesh union is a life-long union of heart and mind that is distinct from but can be strengthened and preserved through sexual activity.

Recall that the initial premise of both FPA and MNA is a claim about the object of sexual pleasure. Pruss assumes a view of pleasure according to which pleasure is “an affective perception of an independent good” (139). Of course, since Pruss also holds that there can be nonveridical pleasures it might be more accurate to say that on his view all pleasures are affective *representations* of independent goods. Pruss holds that in the specific case of sexual pleasure the independent good in question is the one-flesh union -- that is, sexual pleasure always has cooperative reproductive striving as its object.

I think that the view that all pleasures are affective representations of independent goods is false because some pleasures are not representational at all. At least some pleasures seem to be nothing more than what philosophers of mind call “qualia” or “raw feels”—sensations with no representational content. Such pleasures are non-intentional in that they are not about anything. And some of the bodily pleasures central to sexual activity seem to be paradigmatic examples of such non-intentional pleasures. Of course, sexual activity can include a whole host of varied pleasures. As Pruss points out, the pleasure of sexual activity often includes “the physical sensations of orgasm, as well as earlier and later physical sensations, and various associated higher-level emotional pleasures” (115). But even if some pleasures are representational in the way Pruss proposes, I see no compelling

³ Of course, John Paul II also endorses a number of positions that are at odds with the view I outline here, most notably that homosexual sex and the use of contraception are immoral.

reason to hold that sexual pleasure always includes pleasure that has cooperative reproductive striving as its object and hence I see no good reason to accept the initial premise of FPA and MNA—even if we are committed to taking seriously the biblical passages upon which Pruss draws in developing his account of the one-flesh union. The case for the view that sexual pleasure always includes pleasure that has the one-flesh union (as characterized by Pruss) as its object depends on Pruss’s case for the view that the one-flesh union is constituted by cooperative reproductive striving, and I take it that that case is not decisive, for the reasons given above. Thus, we are left with no compelling reason to accept the initial premise of FPA and MNA.

The alternative account that I have sketched does not imply that homosexual sex is immoral and it leaves open the possibility that homosexual couples can participate in the one-flesh union and, like heterosexual couples, can permissibly engage in sexual activity in order to strengthen such a union. I take each of these implications to constitute an advantage of the alternative account over Pruss’s account. I agree with Pruss that “a human being who never in his or her life unites sexually with another human being is missing out on a basic human good” (59). I also agree in a conditional sense with Pruss when he writes that “[w]e are creatures of God, and evil can deform us, but we need to be cautious about ruling basic human attitudes completely wrong” (169–70).⁴ Love and sexual desire, whether heterosexual or homosexual in nature, are basic human attitudes and hence we should be cautious about ruling them completely wrong. I hope to have sketched an account of the one-flesh union that both takes the biblical passages Pruss draws on seriously and avoids the implausible implication that homosexual sex is immoral. However, suppose that Pruss is right that his account of such passages is indeed the correct one. In that case, if the account of the one-flesh union that Pruss develops does indeed yield the conclusion that homosexual sex is wrong then what Pruss has given us is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the relevant biblical passages. The correct view, in my opinion, is the one advanced by Salzman and Lawler that “heterosexual intercourse that is mutually freely chosen, just, and loving will be deemed [i.e. is] moral ... and so too will homosexual intercourse [that meets those same conditions]” (2008, 234, [...] my addition).

⁴ When I say that I agree with Pruss in a conditional sense what I mean is that I accept the claim that *if* there is a God who has created us, then we need to be cautious about ruling basic human attitudes completely wrong.

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STOSUNEK HOMOSEKSUALNY
A POŁĄCZENIE DWOJGA W JEDNO CIAŁO

Streszczenie

Artykuł stanowi krytyczną analizę zaproponowanej przez Alexandra Prussa koncepcji zjednoczenia ciał opartej na opisie zawartym w Księdze Rodzaju (2,24). Pruss wykorzystuje tę koncepcję do sformułowania dwóch argumentów na rzecz tezy, iż akt seksualny pary homoseksualnej jest moralnie niewłaściwy. Proponuję alternatywne ujęcie zjednoczenia ciał, w świetle którego mogą w nim uczestniczyć zarówno pary heteroseksualne, jak i pary homoseksualne. Uważam, że ta konsekwencja mojego ujęcia daje mu istotną przewagę nad propozycją Prussa.

HOMOSEXUAL SEX AND THE ONE-FLESH UNION

Summary

I critically examine Alexander Pruss's conception of the one-body union described in Genesis 2:24. Pruss appeals to his conception of the one-body union to advance two arguments for the conclusion that homosexual sex is morally wrong. I propose an alternative conception of the one-body union that implies that heterosexual and homosexual couples alike can participate in the one-body union; I take that implication of my account to be a significant advantage over Pruss's account.

Słowa kluczowe: Alexander Pruss, jedno ciało, stosunek płciowy, miłość, małżeństwo, homoseksualizm.

Key words: Alexander Pruss, one-body, sex, love, marriage, homosexual.

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