

MARK C. MURPHY

PRUSS ON THE REQUIREMENT OF UNIVERSAL LOVE

Alex Pruss was my colleague in the Georgetown philosophy department for six years. Reading his *One Body* book¹ now provokes not only admiration for this achievement but also a keen nostalgia for the days when we were both in the same department. I got a preview of many of the book's high points as Alex mulled over germs of ideas while standing in my office doorway; it is a powerful intellectual experience to see these coming to fruition in this book.

One Body is, as the subtitle announces, an essay in Christian sexual ethics. Though Alex is a philosopher, the book is not merely a philosophical defense of an ethics the content of which is given by Christian revelation. Alex feels free to appeal to Christian revelation not only to identify the normative claims he wishes to defend but also to establish and interpret the principles that he draws upon in order to explain the truth of a variety of particular conclusions about sexual morality. Yet there are points at which Alex signals that he takes there to be, and that he takes himself to have given, an adequate philosophical defense of a position (p. 2). Whether there is an adequate philosophical defense of some position in ethics is often an important question, even if the truth of the position is not itself, either generally or in some dialectical context, in question. That a view does not have, and even could not have, a philosophical account that militates in its favor makes a difference both to our own understanding and to how we think about and respond to those who reject the position. This is plain enough with respect to metaphy-

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¹ Alexander PRUSS, *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013). Cited by page number in parenthesis in my text.

sical theses, e.g. the doctrine of the Trinity, about which it is very plausible both that no Christian can defensibly reject it yet there is no philosophical arguments that strongly favor it, even granting other truths of natural theology.² This seems also to be true with respect to moral issues. There is nothing that rules out the possibility that some moral truths may be a matter of divine revelation, perhaps a necessary truth rooted in some feature of the divine nature (e.g. that God is tripersonal), perhaps a contingent truth rooted in some feature of that nature (e.g. that God became a human being), perhaps an imposition of divine authority that goes beyond what natural reason can exhibit for us.³

Why is it an important question whether there is an adequate philosophical defense of some thesis? The answer will differ depending on the sort of thesis it is, so let me focus on moral theses. The following seems a plausible view: the extent to which someone is to be held accountable, or accountable in some specific way, for adhering to or violating some norm can depend on the extent to which that norm's authority is accessible to one. And truths that are not philosophically knowable are not naturally accessible; their accessibility is a gift, a divine grace. So, regardless of the correctness of some norm, whether or how one is properly held accountable for adhering to it may depend on whether it can be defended by philosophical reasoning alone.

In light of these background remarks I want to consider the status of the ethics of love in terms of which Alex formulates his account of sexual ethics (pp. 8–48). We may grant that Christians should hold that they are bound to love all human beings, themselves included; and from that starting point we may learn from Alex's careful reflections how the various forms that love may take fix the particular way in which we should live out this norm with respect to ourselves, our parents, our children, our students, our friends, our spouses, our colleagues, our enemies, and God. What remains open is how we should think about the *authority* of this norm of love. Here is one crudely-put view: Yes, we are bound by this norm, but that we are so bound is a matter of contingent fact; we have been commanded to love each other, and it is in virtue of the divine command that we're so bound.⁴ Here is another: Yes, we are bound by this norm, but that we are so bound is due to the

² I reject nearly entirely the sort of argument offered by Richard Swinburne in *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 170–191) that we have strong grounds from natural reason alone to affirm that God is a trinity.

³ See, for example, the view defended in my *An Essay on Divine Authority* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 175–187.

⁴ See MURPHY 2002, 186–187.

fact that God, who is worthy of such love in an unqualified and thoroughgoing way, became a human being, and by doing so, dignified all humans to merit such love. I am not interested here in defending these positions. I am interested in noting that Alex seems very interested in affirming the position that the requirement to love is not to be understood in such or similar terms.

Another way of approaching this point is by noting that, for any specific norm of love that Alex affirms, there are two senses in which Alex seems to think that norm is based on something that is true by nature. The first is that in the particular sort of relationship that holds between the relevant parties, a certain kind of action is not a fitting expression of the love that is appropriate between those parties. So, that siblings should not seek sexual union is a normative truth, and what makes it true is the natural fittingness of one human person loving every other human person and the natural fittingness of any love between siblings displaying a certain set of features and not displaying others.

It is important to note that these fittingnesses really are distinct, and one can affirm one without affirming the other. One might agree with the view that the relationship that holds between two persons fixes what sort of love, *if any*, is to be present between the two of them. But one might combine this view with the denial that one is bound to love all other persons. That love should or should not be a certain way within a certain relationship does not entail that one must love anyone at all, even a person to whom one stands in that relationship. For example: I might deny that one must love everyone, but allow that *if* I love my students, then that love must not take certain forms—that a love of a professor to her or his students must be in many respects unlike, say, parental or romantic love—and hold that this is a natural truth about what could be fitting within a relationship of this sort. On the other side, one might agree with the general requirement of love, while denying Alex's account of how the various sorts of love are rendered appropriate by the relationship between the relevant parties.

My questions concern the universal requirement of love rather than the particular views that Alex defends on the sort of love, if any, that is fitting within relationships of various sorts. As I noted above, what Alex is mainly up to is the elaboration of the ethics of love that he thinks is clearly central to any plausibly Christian ethics. But he does give an argument for the independent plausibility of an ethics that has its foundation in a requirement to love, and I want to make explicit and consider that argument. I will call it the 'argument from responsiveness to value.'

The argument from responsiveness to value appears in the context of his discussion of a strong ethics of love, in which “an action is morally good to the extent that it is loving” (p. 22). Here is the argument:

There is a plausibility in thinking that to act well, we simply need to be acting in appropriate response to goods around us. But the appropriate response to the good is surely to love it, or to love its potential recipients as such, and all else seems to be the working out of the love (p. 22).

The requirement of universal love directs everyone who is subject to it—presumably, in his view, at least all of us human beings—to respond in a particular way to all of the beings who are objects of that requirement—at least God and all of us human beings (though Alex allows that it may extend beyond that, not only to other finite rational beings, but to nonrational beings as well (p. 21)). How is this to be explained? What is important is that each of the beings who are objects of the requirement of universal love are good and valuable beings. The value to which Alex appeals here is not instrumental, or relational in any way. For the value of a human person is not exhausted by the instrumental value that the person has to further one’s own goals, or by his or her existence being good for someone, or by his or her being good at some activity. They are simply *good*.⁵ Because the goodness is nonrelational, it should be acknowledged as such by anyone who is capable of recognizing and responding to it. Unlike relational forms of value, on which, say, some state of affairs might be good for me but bad for Alex (say, my paper being chosen for a prestigious mathematics prize over Alex’s), nonrelational forms of value do not vary in their goodness from person to person.

If one acknowledges, though, that something is good, surely its goodness is not the sort of thing to which one should remain indifferent. One should respond in some way. And the goodness of persons, Alex is claiming, is such that the appropriate response to them is to love them, where this includes the “determination of one’s will in favor of the beloved” (p. 11). Thus, because the objects of the putative requirement of universal love are all good, because all goods should be responded to by those capable of responding to them, and the appropriate response to them is to love them, Alex takes it that we have an argument for the requirement of universal love, an argument that is entirely philosophical.

⁵ For a defense of this sort of goodness and an account of its reason-giving status to all properly functioning rational agents, see Scott A. DAVISON, *On the Intrinsic Value of Everything* (New York: Continuum, 2012).

One might object to this argument on the grounds that it has flattened the nature of love. Surely, by this very general argument, we should not reach the conclusion that my loving response to my spouse should be the same as my loving response to a stranger, even if I would acknowledge that the non-relational value borne by my spouse is not greater than that borne by a stranger. But Alex's argument does not commit him to that result. As he notes in one of the many fascinating and argumentatively creative discussions in the book (pp. 44–46), one way to deal with the tension between the universal and particular character of love is to hold that while one is indeed required to love everyone, the particular form that the love must take may indeed differ depending on the relation in which one stands to the beloved. So the fact that this person is my spouse and that person a stranger to me can explain why the shape that my love ought to take with respect to my wife differs from the shape that it ought to take with respect to the stranger.

My worries about this argument are different, but related. Alex's point that the shape that love might take with respect to the beloved depends on the relationship that one stands to the beloved presupposes that the response that one should have with respect to the beloved can vary depending on features of the agent who is in a position to respond to the potential object of love. But that itself suggests that there are gaps in Alex's argument that need to be crossed. The first gap concerns whether the response that good calls for from an agent is always what one might call a *mandatory* response. The second gap concerns whether the response that the good calls for is always the response of *love*.

To set out the case for this first gap, consider a distinction made by Joshua Gert between different ways that some consideration can give one reasons to act.⁶ Call a "requiring reason" a reason to do something that is such that one must have reasons to the contrary if one fails to act on it. Call a "justifying reason" a reason to do something that is not such that one must have reason to the contrary if one fails to act on it. The former sort of reason *mandates* a response in the absence of countervailing reasons; the latter sort does not mandate such a response, though it makes such a response *eligible*—it makes it a rational opportunity for action, so to speak. So one gap here is that it is unclear why we would think that all intrinsic goods must give re-

⁶ Joshua GERT, *Brute Rationality: Normativity and Human Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 19–39. As Gert notes, it is better to think in terms of there being justifying and requiring dimensions to a reason rather than in terms of justifying and requiring reasons. But I will continue to speak in this oversimplifying way, as Gert himself often does, for the sake of expository convenience.

quiring reasons to love them, rather than, say, justifying reasons. Alex's argument supposes that goods always demand action, requiring an excuse if one fails to act for their sake. But it may be that goods can simply invite action, offering an opportunity to do something worthwhile, though requiring no excuse if one fails to seek them out and promote them. For Alex's argument to succeed, Alex would have to show that the good always mandates.⁷

To set out the case for the second gap, recall that Alex rightly allows that love can take different forms, and different forms are appropriate for different agents and the relationships that they find themselves in with respect to their beloveds. But one might ask: isn't it also true that love is only one of the possible forms of response that one might have with respect to the good? Even taking the requiring character of the reasons given by the good for granted, we might wonder whether the goodness of created rational beings must give requiring reasons to love, rather than requiring reasons for some other sort of response—to *respect* them, say, by failing to intend their destruction, or by refraining from treating them as mere means.⁸ Kantians, for example, emphasize that the proper response to rational beings (as opposed to other sorts of beings that we might take to be valuable in some way) is to respect them, not to love them; any sense in which we ought to love them is derivative upon this more fundamental response of respect.⁹

There is no reason, further, to think that the answer to the questions "Does the good give justifying or requiring reasons?" or "Does the good call for love or respect or some other general sort of response?" will be the same for all possible types of rational agents. How it is appropriate to respond to some good depends not only on the character of the good, but also on the character of the agent responding and that agent's relationship to the good. How an angel is required to respond to the good of a human being may be different from the way that a human being is required to respond to the good of a fellow human being, even if what is being responded to has a value that is nonrelational.¹⁰

⁷ For further discussion of this point, see my "Toward God's Own Ethics," in *Challenges to Religious and Moral Belief*, ed. Michael Bergmann and Patrick Kain (Oxford University Press, 2014), 154–171, 162–163.

⁸ See MURPHY 2014, 162.

⁹ Here is a way that someone critical of Alex's view of the requirement of love might press this point. One might think that there is something creepy and oppressive about being loved by someone—a stranger, say—and might claim that what strangers ought to have for us is respect rather than love.

¹⁰ See MURPHY 2014, 161. These thoughts are indebted to Mark Schroeder's work on the explanation of reasons; see his "Reasons and Agent-Neutrality," *Philosophical Studies* 135 (2007): 279–306.

So I claim that Alex's appeal to the goodness of the relevant objects of love does not really show that there is a requirement to love all such beings; even if we grant that this goodness is reason-giving in some way, the kind of reasons that it might give and the sort of response that it might call for may be insufficient to explain why there is a universal requirement of love of created rational beings.

One might think that we could appeal directly to the theistic context here, perhaps a natural theological context. Alex takes as a premier example of a biblical text seminal for ethical reflection that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and he rejects understandings of this text that diminish what seems to be asserted of God here. One might argue that the notion that God is love is, though made particularly vivid in revelation, nevertheless something knowable by philosophical reflection on God. And one might take it to be a fruitful way of supporting the requirement of universal love. Surely if God loves human beings in the way that God must, then we too must be bound by a requirement of universal love.

I am confident that it is a datum of Christian faith that God is loving in something like the way that Alex's view supposes. But what I am not sure about is whether this is a necessary truth about God upon which one could rely in making an argument about a necessary universal requirement of love.¹¹

Consider a view that, at least on the face of it, seems to be in tension with Alex's interpretation of the nature of divine love. In the *Summa* Aquinas poses the question whether God loves all things.¹² If Aquinas affirmed something like Alex's argument from responsiveness to value, we would expect a positive answer, along with an argument of the following sort: all creatures are bearers of goodness, and thus God, being perfectly responsive to the good, must love all such creatures. But, although Aquinas does affirm that God loves all things, this is not Aquinas's argument. Here is what Aquinas says:

God loves all existing things. For all existing things, insofar as they exist, are good, since the being of a thing is itself good, and likewise, whatever perfection it possesses. Now it has been shown above that God's will is the cause of all things. It must needs be, therefore, that a thing has being, or any kind of

¹¹ I am far less sure of Alex's suggestion that the text requires us to interpret it in a way that does not "forestall" "metaphysical discussion about how God could be identical with one of his properties" (p. 3). While many biblical texts do call for metaphysical elaboration, I am not sure that this text is giving us a metaphysics lesson.

¹² St. Thomas AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, I^a q. 20, a. 2.

good, only insofar as it has been willed by God. To every existing thing, then, God wills some good. Hence, since to love anything is nothing else than to will good to that thing, it is manifest that God loves everything that exists.¹³

Note how different Aquinas's argument is from that suggested by the argument from responsiveness to value. Aquinas's argument is that God's being loving is to be *consequentially* ascribed to God in virtue of all creatures' exhibiting some level of goodness and God's being creatively responsible for their exhibiting that level of goodness. Here is a comparison. Thomas Nagel, in asking whether all motivation proceeds from an agent's desires, says that this is true, but notes that this concession does not imply that desire is explanatorily prior to motivation; we can ascribe a desire to an agent to x simply in virtue of the fact that an agent was motivated to x, and so we can as a consequence ascribe to the agent the desire to x.¹⁴ Similarly, Aquinas's answer here does not suggest that God's being loving is explanatorily prior to the divine response to creatures; rather, we can ascribe love of creatures to God in virtue of the fact that God acted to bring about creatures' being to some degree in act. Such lovingness would be ascribable to God *whatever* choices God made about whether to bring *whatever* creatures into existence and at *whatever* level of actuality. And it is not really surprising that this is Aquinas's view. It was a relative commonplace that divine action could not be necessitated by creatures—not only in terms of efficient causation, but in terms of final causation as well.

If Aquinas's view were the right one to take of the way in which God necessarily loves creatures, it would not only make trouble for the suggestion that our requirement to love all involves an imitation of the divine nature. It makes trouble for the idea that the sort of goodness that we bear is by nature of the sort to require a response from rational beings. For God is rational *par excellence*, and there is no suggestion here that our goodness requires some such response from God. If Alex, then, were to appeal to something like an argument from divine example for the conclusion that the requirement of universal love is a philosophically knowable truth, we would need to hear more about why we should affirm that God is loving (or God is love) in the way that Alex understands it, and as a matter of natural theology, not revealed truth.

I began this comment by noting that it is worth asking of any putative norm whether that norm can be given a philosophical defense, for whether it

¹³ AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, I^a q. 20, a. 2.

¹⁴ THOMAS NAGEL, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton University Press, 1970), 29–30.

can be given such a defense makes a difference to how we should think about the accountability of persons to that norm (that is, who can be reasonably held to it) and perhaps even how we should think about the jurisdiction of that norm (that is, who is bound by it). Christians should accept that they are bound by the norm of universal love. But that leaves open whether this norm is naturally knowable. I have called into question Alex's remarks about the natural knowability of that norm. I myself have no confidence at all about the right way to think about it: whether there is some defense of it distinct from Alex's that can philosophically vindicate it, or whether its necessary truth is knowable only by way to some feature of divine revelation, or whether its status as a norm is due to some contingent truth about what God has done for us or commands us to do—or whether the criticisms I made of Alex's view can be shown by Alex to be unproblematic and the argument from responsiveness to value thereby vindicated. I do have high confidence that thinking through any response that Alex offers will be, like the experience of reading the *One Body* book itself, fruitful, illuminating, and edifying.

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PRUSS O WYMOGU POWSZECHNEJ MIŁOŚCI

Streszczenie

W swojej znakomitej książce *One Body* Alexander Pruss opiera się na przekonaniu, że istnieje wymóg powszechnej miłości: wszyscy jesteśmy zobowiązani do wzajemnej miłości. Zawarte w niniejszej pracy tezy Pruss w dużej mierze uzasadnia, odwołując się do prawdy objawionej, mimo to wymóg powszechnej miłości wzmacnia argumentacją filozoficzną. Ten sposób

argumentacji nazywam „argumentem z wrażliwości na wartość”. Jego podstawą jest przekonanie, że wszyscy ludzie posiadają pewien rodzaj wsoonej wartości, która to wartość dostarcza wszystkim innym podmiotom racji, aby odpowiedzieć na nią pozytywnie, stąd każdy człowiek jest zobowiązany do miłości drugiego człowieka. W niniejszym artykule dyskutuję z tym argumentem, zwracając uwagę na jego dwie istotne słabości: pierwsza z nich dotyczy tego, jakiego rodzaju racji dostarcza wartość osoby, a druga tego, na ile odpowiedź na ową wartość musi być odpowiedzią miłości.

PRUSS ON THE REQUIREMENT OF UNIVERSAL LOVE

S u m m a r y

Throughout his excellent book *One Body*, Alex Pruss relies upon the view that there is a requirement of universal love: each and every one of us is required to love each and every one of us. Although he often appeals to revealed truth in making arguments for his various theses, he supports the requirement of universal love primarily through a philosophical argument, an argument that I call the “argument from responsiveness to value.” The idea is that all persons bear a sort of nonrelational value, and because this value gives every agent reasons to respond to it positively, each and every person is bound to love each and every person. The aim of this paper is to criticize this argument. Pruss’s argument has two important gaps, one concerning the sort of reasons that the value of persons gives and one concerning whether the required response is the response of love.

Słowa kluczowe: miłość, wymóg, racje, wartość.

Key words: love, requirement, reasons, value.

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