

## On Alexander Pruss's *One Body*

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### Abstract

This essay considers one key aspect of Alexander Pruss's *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), namely, his judgment that many, perhaps most, of the fleshly intimacies possible among human persons ought to be evaluated and judged licit or illicit by their relation to the act whereby husband and wife become "one flesh." This account of fleshly intimacies is too restrictive, indeed absurdly so, and particularly if considered according to natural lights alone and in abstraction from Christian revelation and doctrine, which is what Pruss claims to do in the book.

Alexander Pruss's *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013) is an extended analysis of a kind of love. He calls this love, variously and sometimes interchangeably, erotic, romantic, and conjugal. He understands human lovers to seek union with their beloveds out of goodwill for and appreciation of them. All human loves are like this, he thinks, and particular loves are distinguished one from another by the mode of appreciation for beloveds at work in them, and,

correspondingly, by the kind of union sought. A lover may appreciate a beloved as friend, as parent, as child, as fleshly being, as maker of elegant philosophical arguments, as cook, as musician, and so on. The kinds of union proper to these loves differ correspondingly; you may be able to have the kind of union suggested by appreciating someone as a philosopher without ever being in their fleshly company; the union proper to the love that appreciates the beloved as a cook may need no kisses but only shared meals; and so on. Loves of one kind may happily co-exist with loves of another: you may love someone as friend, as cook, and as philosopher all at the same time, and the modes of union striven for by such a polyvalent love will be correspondingly various. But some particular loves cannot happily co-exist with others: appreciating a beloved simultaneously as your parent and as your child shows confusion, and simultaneously striving for the modes of union proper to each of those kinds of love is impossible.

On this understanding of love, particular loves are differentiated by specifying the kinds of appreciation and union-seeking at play in each. What then, in Pruss's view, about the character of erotic love? Erotic lovers appreciate their beloveds as sexual beings, he thinks, and seek union with them exactly as such – sexual union, that is to say. To seek sexual union with the beloved, moreover, is to seek to become one flesh with him or her. (Pruss is aware of the complexities of meaning in the flesh/body pair within the Christian tradition, and of the difficulties of resolving these complexities into a single consistent pattern of usage. He uses both words to characterize the kind of union sought in erotic love, sometimes calling it one-flesh union and sometimes one-body union. I'll always call it one-flesh union.) One-flesh union, then, is the kind of union appropriate to erotic love, and striving for it, when linked with appreciation for the beloved as a sexual being and goodwill for him or her, is what distinguishes this type of love from other kinds.

What, then, in more detail, about one-flesh union? The paradigmatic instance of this, Pruss thinks, is "morally upright, mutually pleasurable, cooperative, consensual, heterosexual intercourse that is intended both to be expressive of committed conjugal love and to be reproductive, engaged in under circumstances in which the couple both desires and can prudently welcome children" (113-114). In its physiological aspect, this act requires the ejaculation of sperm into one lover's vagina by the other lover's penis. For Pruss, this act, in its physiological and other aspects – the definition quoted mentions ancillary variables, such as pleasure and intentions of various kinds on the part of the lovers; and contextual ones, such as circumstances in which conception can be prudently welcomed – just is one-flesh union. It is what erotic love seeks, and, therefore, what those in erotic love seek in and from their beloveds. Pruss has much to say and many arguments to offer about why this is the best way to think about the kind of union at which erotic love aims; he offers occasional comments, too, about why this understanding of the nature and purpose of erotic love comports better than competitors with the doctrinal norms of Christianity (he seems in this matter to write and think as a Catholic Christian, but I didn't note anywhere in the book where he explicitly identifies himself as such; he does say that his work is intended to be philosophical rather than theological, and presupposes nothing about the authority of Scripture or the Christian tradition). He also has a good deal to say about what one-flesh union has to do with marriage and marriage with it, about whether one-flesh union is morally permissible for those not married, and about which fleshly intimacies other than one-flesh union are permissible for the married and/or the unmarried. The account he provides of what is

permissible for those in the one state is not always the same as the account he gives of what is permissible for those in the other.

Pruss's account of what is permissible in the realm of fleshly intimacy is a restrictive one in that most noncoital intimacies (roughly speaking, those that do not involve the insertion of a penis into a vagina) are judged impermissible for all lovers, married or not – this is true for fellatio, for cunnilingus, for sodomy (where that means penetration of the anal cavity with a penis, no matter the sex of the participants), and probably for many other uses of the tongue, lips, hands, fingers, feet, and toes whose particulars Pruss does not explore in detail. The pattern of thought that leads to such a restrictive view is simple enough: activities of these kinds, Pruss thinks, induce erotic pleasure without permitting, or at least without intending or resulting in, one-flesh union, and are therefore, at least to the extent that they do these things, defective. There are various ways in which such activities can be defective, but the most common, and the one on which Pruss spends the most time, is that they are deceptive: they deceive one or both participants by pointing to or aiming at a consummation (one-flesh union) whose realization their performance prevents. Such activities belong to erotic love but obstruct its consummation, and this is what makes them impermissible. Engaging in them is (a little) like speaking in such a way as to make communication impossible. So, anyway, Pruss thinks.

Pruss's lexicon, purified only a little, is, then, as follows: there is *erotic love*, which benevolently appreciates beloveds as sexual beings, and strives for *one-flesh union* with them. There are *erotic intimacies*, which are any and all fleshly intimacies that strive for or are directed toward *one-flesh union*; such intimacies are *permissible* or *impermissible* according to whether they permit (occasion, result in, encourage, nurture, indicate, participate in, lead to) or oppose (hinder, performatively contradict, deceive about their nature and purpose, or otherwise obstruct) *one-flesh union*.



So far Pruss. *One Body* is long, argumentative, ingenious, serious, right in many of its conclusions and right-headed in many of the ways it arrives at them. But it also seems to me, if we're thinking, as he claims to be, as philosophers rather than as exegetes of Christian doctrine, seriously wrong-headed in its understanding of erotic love, and damagingly wrong in its conclusions about what is permissible and what impermissible in the sphere of erotic intimacy. Pruss makes two fundamental mistakes, as it seems to me, which I'll first identify briefly, and then take up at more length in what follows.

But first a procedural comment. In what follows, I prescind altogether from what Christian doctrine has to say about these matters. That is not because I think it false, irrelevant, or lacking in authority; I am a Catholic, and when I write as a theologian, as I often do, doctrine is authoritative for me, and I therefore treat it as such and respond to it as such. But in these remarks I leave doctrine aside for two reasons. First, because Pruss represents himself as doing so, and I should like to engage him in the same register. And second, because I'd like to try out a line of reasoning about these matters some of whose

conclusions stand in prima facie tension with what Catholic doctrine claims about these matters, and to do so as a prelude to subsequent work that will attempt to resolve the tension. Here, then, following Pruss, I perform a thought-experiment largely free from engagement with Christian doctrine, and assumptions about its authority.

Pruss's first mistake involves a confusion about erotic intimacies. Such intimacies, recall, are those that strive for one-flesh union by way of benevolently appreciating the beloved as a sexual being, and Pruss thinks it generally easy enough to tell which particular fleshly intimacies are of this kind and which are not. He offers a relaxed construal: very many actions are, on his understanding and according to his definition, erotic, which is to say sexual – some kinds of kissing, hugging, and hand-holding; many genital intimacies, especially, but not only, those that result in ejaculation on the male's part; and so on. This relaxed construal has as its counterpart the already-noted restrictive account of which among these many intimacies are permissible and which, because of their defects in relation to one-flesh union, are impermissible. Many intimacies, it turns out, are erotic, and only a small subset of them permissible. Pruss on erotic intimacies is rather like someone who, upon identifying one thing that human creatures do when they speak to one another (let's say, attempt to communicate the thought of the speaker to the hearer), categorizes many, perhaps even all, human vocalizations as striving for exactly that consummation (that's the relaxed construal), and then discriminates permissible from impermissible vocalizations by assessing which support and which obstruct that end (that's the restrictive account). Much – perhaps most – actual human vocalization would turn out, on such a view, to be impermissible, which is a risible conclusion. The conclusion in the case of erotic intimacies is almost equally risible. Pruss has rightly and eloquently identified a kind of union that lovers seek with their beloveds; has identified vastly too high a proportion of the fleshly intimacies sought by lovers with their beloveds as striving for (pointing to, indicating, properly culminating in) that union and thus as being properly assessed in terms of the relation they bear to it; and then finds unavoidable (not that he shows any sign of wishing to avoid it) the conclusion that many, even most, of these erotic-fleshly intimacies are impermissible because defective with respect to that kind of union. There is a better way, and I'll say more about it below.

Pruss's second mistake resonates with the image of erotic love and the one-flesh union it seeks that runs like a sparkly pink thread through the products of Hallmark Cards™. It's a romantic image, according to which there are unflawed erotic loves, and, correspondingly, unflawed erotic intimacies. The quotation from Pruss already given, in which one-flesh union is defined, ought to be of an ideal type. But, it seems to me, Pruss thinks it not just an ideal type but rather one that the sexual intercourse of actual couples (only married heterosexual ones, of course, given the definition) can instantiate. If he does think this, and the tenor of his argument suggests that he does even if the surface of his text doesn't quite say so, the ease and rapidity with which he can judge impermissible some kinds of fleshly intimacy is easy to understand. What's impermissible in the erotic sphere is what's flawed, and it's impermissible exactly because it's flawed. What's permissible, by contrast, is what isn't flawed, and actual, rather than theoretical or ideal-typical, one-flesh unions aren't flawed, or at least may not be, which is why they're permissible. I'm caricaturing a bit here, perhaps, though not all that much, and am doing so to make the shape of this error clear. The error is to think that any erotic intimacy, including one-flesh union as defined by Pruss, can in the actual world, be unflawed. And

if all erotic intimacies are flawed (none only that; all at least that), then none can be judged impermissible simply by indicating that they are so. All of them are that, including all actual one-flesh unions as Pruss defines them, and to think otherwise is to dissolve into romantic vapors. Pruss on this matter reads to me like a schoolgirl who dots her i's with pink hearts. There's a better way here, too, and I'll sketch it in what follows.

So much for the summary versions of Pruss's errors. Now to a more developed statement of how human erotic-fleshly intimacies might be thought about without making these mistakes, and, therefore, without ending in Pruss's apparently impoverished understanding of what the many fleshly intimacies that human creatures seek with one another are and are for.



I begin with two closely-related questions that Pruss does not ask, but should have: What is human flesh? What kinds of intimacies do human creatures seek with the flesh of other human creatures? From serious address to these questions flow answers to the question of which among the kinds of fleshly intimacy sought by humans ought be judged permissible very different from those given by Pruss. A summary version of the answer is: fleshly intimacies sufficiently loving to those with whom they are sought ought be judged permissible. This summary answer already indicates that the answer given in the case of particular fleshly intimacies need not be, and typically will not be, a simple 'yes, that's permissible,' or 'no, that's impermissible.' Analysis of such cases will instead locate them on a sliding scale by asking 'how much is enough?' It will not deploy or seek, as Pruss does, a set of categories for fleshly intimacies that permits clear and unambiguous judgments about the permissibility or impermissibility of all instances of a particular kind; and this is in part because of an assumption about fleshly intimacies in a world like the one we inhabit, which is that none is unflawed and none flawed without remainder. As already noted, this is an assumption that Pruss appears not to share.

Some brief definitions, responsive to but not identical with Pruss's.

First, I take love on the part of human creatures to be an appreciative and benevolent seeking of intimacy (not, notice, 'union,' a mode of entry into the question which inappropriately prejudices the outcome) with the beloved. Next, I take fleshly love to be a benevolent seeking of fleshly intimacy with the beloved appreciated for her or his flesh, as a fleshly creature. And then I take fleshly intimacy to be had most intensely in the sense of touch, which is to say in direct contact between the flesh of the lover and that of the beloved.

This is not to say that the other senses – visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory – are irrelevant to or excluded from fleshly intimacy. Lovers may certainly appreciate looking at their beloveds' flesh, hearing their voices, smelling their smells, and savoring their tastes (this last ordinarily involves touch as well), and such appreciations may certainly lead to seeking closer intimacy with those manifestations of the beloved's fleshly presence, as well as closer intimacy, typically by caress, with the beloved's flesh itself.

But still, the caress is the ordinary mark of fleshly intimacy, the touch of skin on skin in all the many ways in which that can be brought about. Appreciating your beloveds as flesh and seeking fleshly intimacy with them doesn't rule out other modes of appreciation – intellectual appreciation, for example – and it is the ordinary thing for human creatures and human intimacies that fleshly appreciation of beloveds is accompanied by appreciation of other aspects of their persons. Indeed, it might be right to say that seeking fleshly intimacy with human beloveds because of an exclusively fleshly appreciation of them is already deficient even as fleshly love. Even though all this is true about the complex relations between fleshly and other kinds of loves, and even though it is artificial to separate consideration of fleshly loves from others, there can still be some value in doing so, especially when the topic at hand is a book which does exactly that.

Further: I take flesh to be animate body, which means that fleshly intimacy can be sought only by living creatures with other living creatures. Whatever is to be said about the many intimacies I seek with inanimate creatures (wine on the palate, sunlight on the skin), and about the pleasures such intimacies bring, they do not count, on the definitions in play here, as properly fleshly intimacies, and that is because those require all participants in such intimacies to be alive. Kissing my wife and stroking my dog are fleshly intimacies; each depends on and is constituted by an appreciation of the beloved exactly as flesh (not inanimate body), and involves a seeking of intimacy between my flesh and theirs.

A last definitional restriction: human creatures very often appreciate the flesh of nonhuman creatures and seek intimacy with it. An eighteen-month-old might gleefully watch ants at work in her backyard and then happily ingest some of them; a woman might kiss and cuddle her dog, seeking and enjoying the licks the dog lavishes on her face; a man might penetrate a sheep's anal cavity with his erect penis and come to orgasm there; anyone might bury their nose in evening-fragrant jasmine blossom. Most common in this category, perhaps, is the human appreciation for the flesh of fruits and vegetables shown in seeking intimacy with that flesh by ingestion. I shall not consider any of these cases of fleshly desire, interesting and important though they are, and even though they have much to tell us about the nature of human fleshly loves. We could not, it seems to me, be human without more or less intimate relations with the flesh of nonhuman creatures, relations that include appreciation of them exactly as flesh and a seeking of intimacy with that flesh as such. Nevertheless, for the purposes of these brief remarks, I rule them out. Fleshly love and fleshly intimacy are here restricted by stipulative definition to relations between or among living human creatures.

To the extent possible, I'll abstract consideration of the permissibility of particular fleshly intimacies from matters extraneous to them. For instance, particular fleshly intimacies may be made impermissible for someone because they are promise-bound not to engage in them; or because the person with whom they seek them is so bound; or because local positive law forbids or constrains such intimacies; or because the particular church to which they belong forbids or constrains them; or because there is a history between these particular people that makes any fleshly intimacy between them inadvisable. And so on. Such considerations are pressing and important in particular cases, and may often yield the conclusion that intimacies of such-and-such a kind are locally inappropriate. But I'm concerned not with these matters but rather, as Pruss also mostly is, with the per se permissibility of particular kinds of intimacy, which is to say

independently of matters extraneous to the acts that constitute them. What is there, I'll be asking, about these intimacies considered in their fleshly particularity that indicates permissibility or its opposite? It's worth noting at this point that consent (and its absence) to a particular fleshly intimacy is not, or at least need not be, a matter extraneous to particular intimacies. Rape and torture, each very intimate in a fleshly way, are constituted in part by the absence of consent, and by the corresponding presence of violent compulsion – this is largely what makes these intimacies impermissible. And, in the other direction, at least some of the fleshly intimacies between parent and child have as an intrinsic and proper feature the absence of consent on the part of the child (the intimacies between a mother and her child before the child is born are paradigmatic here, for the child neither does nor can consent to any of these; Pruss is good on this). In this case and others like it, permissibility is unaffected by the absence of consent.

With these definitions and restrictions in mind, I turn now in more detail to my double-sided question: What is human flesh? What kinds of intimacies do human creatures seek with the flesh of other human creatures?



Human flesh, like all other creatures, is gift. For all creatures, both that they are and what they are is given; creatures do not make themselves. This is strongly suggested by phenomenological investigation, and by broadly empirical studies of human development and human biology. To be human flesh is to be given oneself as essentially and fundamentally erotically ecstatic, in the strict etymological sense of that latter term. That is, it is to be given oneself as intrinsically desirous of and delighting in fleshly intimacies with creatures other than oneself, and, in the case of human flesh, to be given this gift by caresses offered by other human creatures. The caress is the principal means by which the gift of the flesh as erotically ecstatic (a pleonasm, that; flesh is by definition ecstatically erotic; but the pleonasm serves as a reminder to those who might think that they have a concept of the fleshly independent of the erotic) is given. It is not given only by the caress offered by other humans: we are caressed by zephyrs, rain, sunlight, and many other things. Flesh, then, is the gift of the caress, which constitutes it as what it is, which is to say erotic. How, in more detail, does this work?

The first caress is that given by mother to child in the womb; the second is given immediately upon birth as the mother receives her newborn; the third is that of nipple to mouth and breast to cheek as the infant, urgently greedy for food, latches and sucks. That, anyway, is the ordinary story, a story that human flesh shares with other mammalian flesh. The storyline can be disrupted by technological intervention and by accident, among other things. But ordinarily, that's the way it goes. Following those first caresses, the child is ordinarily caressed by many other humans – family, friends, a widening circle as the child's sphere of activity expands and her interests and range of acquaintance bloom. Children, ordinarily, are eager for caresses, and largely nondiscriminating as to their source; they are likely to welcome caresses from all and sundry, human and nonhuman, and to return those caresses with passion. Children from birth to the age of

five or so seem, often, to have the ingestion of the cosmos as their central purpose: anything and everything is worthy of the intimate oral caress. Their appetites for giving and receiving the caress, which is just another way of saying their appetites for fleshly intimacy, are intense, omnidirectional, and reciprocal. That last term indicates that the child's caresses are prompted and made possible by the caresses of others. Those caresses, graceful gifts, are necessary conditions for the establishment of the child as flesh, which is to say as capable of caressing just and only because caressed. Without caresses from other humans, an infant ordinarily dies; and if, by some miracle, she lives, she certainly fails to flourish. Infants and children are, ordinarily, desperate in their search for the caress, which is to say also desperate in their desire to themselves be constituted as flesh.

These are ordinary truths about the erotic-fleshly development of human creatures. I've given them in very broad terms, and a more detailed specification could go in many directions and would raise many controversial questions. None of these, neither the directions nor the questions, need, it seems to me, call into question the essential points of the account given. Those essentials are: human flesh is essentially and omnidirectionally ecstatically erotic; it is constituted as such by gift; and the caress is the essential flesh-constituting gesture. Without caress, no flesh; and even when flesh has been brought into being via caresses, it may, if deprived of caress – any kind of skin-on-skin human touch – degenerate from flesh toward (mere) body, the end of which degeneration is death, which is the removal of the flesh without remainder, leaving only a *corpus*, a body-as-corpse.

An interesting feature of human flesh as compared to other mammalian flesh is the relative underdetermination of its erotic appetites – its appetites for fleshly intimacy – by its genetic inheritance. Our fleshly appetites are very largely plastic, as is evident by the baroque variety of behaviors found among humans in service of those appetites. As Shakespeare's Troilus says to Cressida, in an ambiguous lovespeech, "This is the monstrosity in love, lady – that the will is infinite and the execution confined; that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit" (from Act 3, Scene 2). The desire is boundless because human flesh is such that it can and does seek fleshly intimacy in an infinite number of ways; the act is a slave to limit because there it not world enough or time to explore all these ways.

After childhood, with the coming of puberty, there is a new focus for fleshly eros, largely because of the new possibility of procreation. When children become men and women capable of begetting children, which can happen as young as ten or eleven, and may not happen until the late teens, some of their erotic appetites are channeled toward kinds of fleshly intimacy not possible for them before, kinds that include one-flesh intimacy. The intimate caress provided by a man for a woman and a woman for a man in potentially procreative acts, together with their precursors and accompaniments, begins to be sought, whether knowingly or not, by many, perhaps most, human creatures at that age. But even here it is implausible on the face of things to think that all the fleshly intimacies sought by adolescents with one another are directed toward or ordered to one-flesh union. When the members of a fourteen-year-old pair, delighting in one another's company, begin to write sonnets (or tweets) confessing endless passion to one another and for one another, hymning, perhaps as the Song of Songs does, the beauties of various parts of their bodies ("your lips are like a crimson thread / and your mouth is lovely"),

and affirming that their love is stronger than death and capable of overcoming all obstacles, it is, to put it very mildly, not obvious that the intimacies they seek from and with one another all have something to do with the one-flesh caress and should be assessed in terms of the relation they bear to it.

What they want from one another, as flesh and as spirit, is both vastly more and (often) vastly less than that.

It is more in the sense that their fleshly appetites for one another are in dramatic excess of the particular act that Pruss has defined. They're as likely to be interested in the toes and eyelashes of their beloveds as in their genitalia – to be interested in every aspect and element of the beloved's flesh, and thereby to eroticize the whole. That is part of the import of the quotation from *Troilus and Cressida* already given: our fleshly desires are radically excessive to any particular caress, even that of one-flesh intimacy. We are animals, yes, of course; but our desires for fleshly intimacy are unlike those of other animals exactly in their excessive nature. What we want by way of fleshly intimacy with other human creatures goes far beyond one-flesh intimacy. We want, for instance, to be face-to-face with them, to stare into the inscrutably dark pupils of their eyes, and to exchange open-mouthed kisses with them – and we want these things not just, or at all, because they are accompaniments of or ancillary to one-flesh intimacy, but because in some ways they exceed, as caresses, the intimacy of the one-flesh caress. It is easier to commercialize one-flesh intimacy, to bring it into the sphere of the pimp and the prostitute, than it is to do the same to the intimacy of the soulful gaze or the open-mouthed kiss. That is one sign of the difference, a difference of excess.

What the members of the loving pair want from each other may also be less than one-flesh intimacy, in the sense that they do not seek, and might reject if it becomes possible, precisely the act in which one-flesh intimacy consists. This might be for a variety of reasons: the intimacies of that fleshly act might be less delightful to them than the intimacies of other fleshly acts; they might want from one another kinds of continuing intimacy that they take procreation to preclude; and so on.

The upshot is that even when puberty has made one-flesh intimacy possible, it is far from reasonable, *prima facie*, to think that all the fleshly intimacies sought by a post-pubertal couple are to be assessed in terms of the relation they bear to the one-flesh caress. Human appetites for fleshly intimacy are altogether too varied and too excessive for that to be a reasonable place to begin in thinking about the question of which kinds of caress are permissible and which are not. Much more reasonable is to observe the sheer excessive variety of human fleshly intimacy-seeking at every stage of life, and to begin from the following question: how does this, this kind of caress, this kind of fleshly intimacy, participate in love? To begin from that question is not to end with it; but it sets thought about these matters on a track different from that trodden by Pruss, a track I'll imagine the end of a little later in these remarks.

This sketch of an answer to what human flesh is and what kinds of fleshly intimacies humans seek with other humans ought not end with the passions of puberty and the intimacy-seeking of young adulthood. What the sketch has shown, or at least suggested – showing would need a much longer essay, and would take the skills of a good phenomenologist, or even a poet, to do well – is that human fleshly appetites are, among those belonging to mammals, uniquely plastic, uniquely open to possibility, and uniquely varied in the kinds of caress they seek and perform. This plasticity is, however,

rapidly shaped and formed by catechesis provided in accord with local norms about fleshly caresses. Small children, from infancy onward, are given stern and repeated instruction in these matters by adults, instruction repeated and intensified by peers at every stage of development. This instruction has to do not only with the flesh and its possibilities, but also with those of gender – the expressions and signs of sexual identity. By puberty, this catechesis will have had its effects, both with respect to desire for the exchange of fleshly caresses, and with respect to the kinds of caress actually exchanged. Expectations about the possibilities and nature of the flesh are by then in place, as are the beginnings of fleshly habits and habits of desire; and by the twenties, at latest, these habits are typically deeply formed, and no longer capable of significant alteration. By then, we are what we are with respect to the flesh, and there are only small possibilities for future change. Life is short, and habits run deep. Once one's flesh is scarified and overwritten by inclination and local catechesis, much as one's linguistic capacity is when one learns a mother tongue, not much will change later. What was plastic and ductile adopts a statue-like rigidity: one's fleshly tastes, like one's gait or one's accent, become effectively fixed. But even at this stage, there is no single configuration in which they are fixed. There are people who obsessively seek one-flesh intimacy with as many people as possible. There are people who eschew that kind of intimacy altogether, whether in favor of other caresses, or of none. And there are people whose repertoire of caresses is small and infrequently repeated, just as there are people with a wide repertoire, often and enthusiastically performed. Here too, the idea that all or most of the caresses sought and exchanged by adult, habituated human creatures ought be assessed for acceptability in terms of the relation they bear to the one-flesh caress, lacks all prima facie plausibility. I should think that, very conservatively, more than ninety percent of all caresses exchanged by adult human creatures have nothing obvious (in the order of seeming) and nothing in fact (in the order of being) to do with the one-flesh caress.



Given this account (it's the merest sketch), how might one think about which caresses are properly assessed for acceptability (or indeed in any other way) in terms of their relation to the one-flesh caress? The first, and most general, point to make here is that the onus probandi lies upon those who would argue that some particular caress which isn't the one-flesh caress ought or must be assessed in terms of its relation to that caress. Perhaps, for instance, a particular caress doesn't involve male ejaculation; or doesn't involve a penis or a vagina at all; or involves a penis but no vagina; or a vagina but no penis; and so on. Each of these kinds of caress by definition is not the one-flesh caress, and some among them are very distant in apparent form and purpose from the one-flesh caress. If some among them, or all of them (Pruss approaches maximalism on this question), are to be assessed in terms of their relationship to the one-flesh caress, the case needs to be made, and it is not easy to make because of its prima facie implausibility and its typical deep connection to a still more implausible understanding of human flesh – one at odds with the sketch of that matter I've just given. That is not to say that the task cannot be

performed; only that it is difficult. I'd like to make it more difficult by adducing some particular examples. They may seem – perhaps they are – indelicate, anatomically too specific, perhaps pornographic. I don't intend them to be. Specificity is needed for the general points just made to be seen for what they are.

Five examples, then, of fleshly caresses – intimacies sought and performed principally with the sense of touch – which are not the one-flesh caress. First, the open-mouthed kiss, understood as a mutual caress of the lips and tongue and other parts of the inner mouth, performed face-to-face and with open eyes. Second, fellatio, understood as the stimulation of someone's erect penis by someone's tongue and mouth, leading to ejaculation inside the mouth. Third, cunnilingus, understood as the stimulation of someone's clitoris and vagina by someone's tongue and mouth, leading to orgasm. Fourth, sodomy, understood as the penetration of someone's anal cavity by someone's erect penis, leading to ejaculation therein. Fifth, toe-sucking, in which someone's toes are extensively licked and sucked by the mouth and tongue of someone else. In the first and fifth of these cases, the participants may be of either sex and any gender; in the second, third, and fourth, the sex of one participant is determined (male in two cases, female in one), but that of the other is left open; and the gender of each is open. Four of the cases use the mouth as the main organ of stimulation (from babyhood onward, the mouth is the principal organ for the caress); two involve the penis; one involves the female genitalia. None of these caresses looks very much like the one-flesh caress – two of them, the kiss and the toe-sucking, involve none of the organs used in that caress; and, of course, none of them is potentially procreative. What to say about these caresses?

First, and most fundamentally, each is an instance of ecstatic eros. They are, that is to say, reciprocal caresses in which the flesh of one person is deeply and mutually involved with the flesh of another in the giving and taking of pleasure. This is not to say that all caresses with this form are reciprocal in this sense; neither is it to say that all of them are pleasurable for either or both of those engaging in them. Any of them may be inflicted by violence, against the will of one of the participants. And it will ordinarily be the case that each of them is, to some extent, concupiscent in the sense that it is inflected with a desire to dominate and control the flesh of the other for the purposes of self-gratification. But these deformations apply to all fleshly caresses, including the one-flesh caress: recall the point made earlier about the impossibility of undamaged (non-concupiscent) caresses in the actual world. And so these failings do not differentiate the examples given from the one-flesh caress. In the respects just mentioned – mutuality, pleasurable-ness, capacity for concupiscence – it is not obvious how or why the five kinds of caress mentioned differ from the one-flesh caress.

Second, and perhaps rather more controversially, each of the five instances given may be deeply implicated in and part of the gift of love given by one human creature to another – in accord with the definition given earlier, that means the gift of an appreciative and benevolent seeking of intimacy with the beloved appreciated for her or his flesh, as a fleshly creature. Why not, after all? What is it about these caresses, severally or collectively, that makes it impossible for them to be that? What is it about them that makes it impossible for them to contribute to a passionate intertwining of the lives of two human creatures in such a way that each of them might self-sacrificially seek the good of the other over the course of a life? Nothing obvious, certainly; and, so far as I can see, nothing written on the surface of the gestures, nothing given by their form. When

thinking according to natural lights, it is an empirical question whether, how often, and in what ways these various caresses are gifts of love. My own sense of things, impressionistic of course, is that they very often are, and that they very often are not. In this, again, they do not differ from the one-flesh caress: it, too, can be separated from love, a gesture of quite another kind.

Third, and no doubt much more controversially, these caresses may reasonably be performed, contemplated, thought about, and understood without considering their relation to the one-flesh caress. None of them is, *prima facie*, a defective or deceptive form of the one-flesh caress, *pace* Pruss; and none of them need be understood as a precursor to or preparation for the one-flesh caress, or indeed as in any interesting way related to it, again *pace* Pruss. A little more detail on each of the five examples will support this view, if it isn't already obvious enough not to need support. The open-mouthed kiss: this caress uses none of the body-parts central to the one-flesh caress; it can and often does occur without leading to or suggesting to its participants that they might or should engage in the one-flesh caress; and the one-flesh caress can and often does occur without having the open-mouthed kiss among its precursors. All the same things are true, even more obviously, in the case of toe-sucking. It may be the case that toe-sucking is less common as a caress than the open-mouthed kiss; but even if that is the case, it can serve as a type of many caresses directed toward body-parts other than the penis and vagina. It also serves as an example of caresses often exchanged not only between adults, but also between adults and children. The cunnilingual caress: this shares some features with the one-flesh caress in that both involve caress of the vagina and clitoris. But it is hard to see why cunnilingus should be thought of as a simulacrum or deceptive form of the one-flesh caress. It – cunnilingus – is in principle not procreative, and does not require, though it may involve, a heterosexual couple. It may be an instrument and expression of love independent, quite, of those matters. Similarly with fellatio and sodomy. These are like the one-flesh caress in that they involve the penis and ejaculation. But in the other respects just mentioned, they are unlike it.

The deepest question raised by these examples – and it is easily possible to multiply them; human creatures are ingenious in imagining and performing caresses – is that of categorization. All of them, including the one-flesh caress, are instances of the flesh's ecstatic eroticism according to the analysis I've given. But I don't see any reason, again when thinking according to natural lights, to make the categorial move that Pruss does, which is to make the one-flesh caress paradigmatic of the ecstatically erotic, and then to assess all or most of ecstatically erotic caresses (Pruss is inevitably vague about which caresses do not need to be considered in terms of their relation to the one-flesh caress) in terms of their relation to this putatively paradigmatic one-flesh caress. Another way to put this difficulty is to say that the boundaries around the category of the sexual are part of the problem here. Why not do what I've just tried to do, and renounce this category as a way of organizing thought about caresses? We might then be able to think what it seems *prima facie* plausible to think, given morphological and body-part considerations (what does this caress look like? which body-parts does it use?), and given considerations about outcomes (what does this caress do? what does or may it bring about?), that many of the caresses that we might, given local norms, be disposed to think of as sexual, are in fact very unlike one another and need not be assessed or categorized in terms of their likeness to one another. This is an exhilarating thought experiment, it

seems to me. Pruss's stipulative definition of the sexual as mutual striving for reproduction, and, therefore, of the one-flesh caress as the paradigm of the sexual caress according to whose lineaments and purposes all other (sexual: but how do we know which are sexual?) caresses are to be assessed for acceptability, prevent thought from going along this track – but not for any good reasons that I can see, or that Pruss gives.



The closest that Pruss gets to considering seriously the kind of line I've just taken is in his brief comments (365-367) on an argument offered by James Alison, to the effect that desire for fleshly intimacy with persons of the same sex as oneself need not be understood as a distorted form of desire for fleshly intimacy with persons of a different sex than oneself. It might, rather, be understood as a *sui generis* form of desire, one whose permissibility ought then be assessed on grounds other than its relation to opposite-sex desire. Alison thinks, according to Pruss, that science can provide the answer to whether same-sex desire is of this kind. Like Pruss, I don't think that's right, or necessary for Alison's position to be plausible. Leaving that aspect of the argument aside, Pruss's comments on how to decide what is a distorted version of what – this is a form of the categorization question I've mentioned above – are interesting, and revealing of the deep structure of his thought about these matters.

Pruss writes, rightly, that same-sex desires do "not seem to motivate the couple to vaginal-penile intercourse" (366), but rather to other kinds of acts. He calls these other acts "sexual," which, according to the definition of the sexual he's working with, assumes and requires the outcome he wants, which is that the desires that lead to (e.g.) sodomy and fellatio really are distorted forms of the desires that lead to the one-flesh caress – and, correspondingly, that sodomy and fellatio are, as caresses, distortions of the one-flesh caress. But that is to win the game by simple stipulation. No argument is provided. Pruss goes on to write, again rightly, that some of the caresses exchanged by same-sex couples are also exchanged by opposite-sex couples; and he concludes from this that "it is plausible that in the heterosexual case these acts do not fulfill some *sui generis* desire, but at most fulfill a variant or distortion of the desire for sexual union" (366). But the conclusion is "plausible" only given a particular understanding of the content and bounds of the sexual, which is exactly the point at issue.

Alison is right, it seems to me, that determinations of what counts as a distorted version of what are not easy to arrive at; he is right, too, that in the case of the fleshly intimacy of the caress in all its manifold variety, it is especially difficult to see, on the basis of empirical or phenomenological studies of the flesh, its desires, and its caresses, what is a distorted form of what. Pruss is right that this is a conceptual matter, not one subject to determination by, for example, neurological studies. But he is surely wrong, and Alison is surely right, that any conceptual position on the lovely and convoluted question of which fleshly caresses are distorted and which are not requires thoughtful, descriptive attention to the range and kinds of caresses human creatures seek from and with one another. Pruss's work is not like this. It is, instead, the product of heavy earth-

moving equipment driven by a single conceptual decision, which is to assess altogether too many human caresses in terms of their putative relation to the one-flesh caress. That decision is, it seems to me, a mistake, at least if we are reasoning according to natural lights, as Pruss, most of the time, is. When doing that, it is prima facie absurd to think that, for example, toe-sucking or the open-mouthed lip-kiss are, if performed by those who do not also and licitly perform the one-flesh caress, are morally wrong because distorted and deceptive. That conclusion may be true; but it can't be arrived at in the way that Pruss does.



In these brief remarks I've certainly not done justice to the scope and depth of Pruss's work. Much of what he writes is good and true and beautiful. Some of it, in the deep structure of its commitments, seems to me not only wrong but absurd, as should be evident from what I've written. I should like thought about these matters, at least when proceeding according to natural lights, to move along a very different track. Such thought would largely abjure, for analytical purposes, the category of the sexual; it would look seriously and closely at the range and kinds of caress that human creatures seek and exchange with one another; it would articulate that investigation with attention to the goods intrinsic to those caresses – those goods would include the flesh-constituting, as described above, and the establishment and support of a variety of continuing intimate relations; it would abjure both an excessive romanticism about love and an excessive focus on the importance of the one-flesh caress. In doing these things, a more relaxed and nuanced understanding than Pruss offers of what human flesh is and what it is capable of might be arrived at, and that is a good devoutly to be wished.