

CHARLES TALIAFERRO  
BENJAMIN LOUIS PEREZ

FEEL THE LOVE!  
REFLECTIONS ON ALEXANDER PRUSS' ESSAY  
IN CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS

Professor Pruss has published an extraordinary book, filled with clever, engaging arguments and thought experiments. There is much that we appreciate in this as a contribution to the philosophy of love (in general) and as a contribution to a distinctively Christian sexual ethic in particular. Our response will focus on what we challenge in Pruss' excellent work, but we begin by positively affirming his overall stress on how the object of love is all-important in articulating the nature of what it is to love someone or something:

If the nature of love calls for us to make the love take an appropriate form, then the form that the relationship should take is determined, at least in part, by facts outside the love itself. And this is how it must be since we need to appreciate the beloved as the beloved *really* is, to bestow things on the beloved that will *really* benefit him or her, and to unite with the beloved in reality. Thus, the characteristics of the beloved should have a role in determining the form of love.<sup>1</sup>

We believe that this stress on the good of the beloved—in which the lover should strive to focus on what is truly a benefit for her, rather than on what he merely thinks should be a benefit—and her true identity is foundational to any acceptable philosophy of love.

---

Prof. CHARLES TALIAFERRO—Professor of Philosophy at St. Olaf College; address for correspondence: St. Olaf College—Philosophy, Holland Hall 503, 1520 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield, Minnesota 55057; e-mail: [taliafer@stolaf.edu](mailto:taliafer@stolaf.edu)

BENJAMIN LOUIS PEREZ, B.A.—graduate of St. Olaf College with a degree in Mathematics, currently adjunct research staff at Institute for Defense Analyses; address for correspondence—e-mail: [perez@stolaf.edu](mailto:perez@stolaf.edu)

<sup>1</sup> Alexander PRUSS, *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 29.

In what follows, we focus on two aspects of Pruss' philosophy of love. The first and most important, from our point of view, concerns the extent to which love involves feeling(s). Second, we express some reservations about Pruss' understanding of the role of eros in romantic love.

#### LOVE WITHOUT FEELINGS?

Pruss offers several reasons for thinking that love does not involve (or should not be thought of as principally involving) feelings. We believe his position to be mistaken both in terms of beneficent love and unitive love.

To prevent our disagreement from falling into a merely verbal dispute over the meaning of the term 'feelings,' we will assume what we think of as a common sense, ordinary understanding of 'feelings.' We believe that if we love Pruss then (*ceteris paribus*) this involves our occurrent feeling or disposition to feel delight or pleasure in his good and our occurrent feeling or disposition to feel sad when some ill befalls him. We are not using the terms 'delight,' 'pleasure,' and 'sadness' in any technical fashion and recognize that other terms may be substituted (joy, happiness, gladness, etc.) and that these feelings come in degrees.

We propose that if we claim to love Pruss but feel no pleasure (or delight, or happiness, etc.) in his good, our so-called love is not truly love; rather, perhaps it is merely admiration or respect. For example, if we truly love Pruss, we will take pleasure in his writing a fine book. Similarly, if we feel no sadness or a disposition to feel sad when some ill befalls Pruss, we believe our "love" would be too cold to be considered a proper form of love. We further suggest that it would be conceptually bizarre to claim that our love for Pruss is unitive, i.e. that we long for being in his company, *ceteris paribus*, if we feel no pleasure or delight in spending time with him. In fact, we think that if we professed to love Pruss but felt sadness or displeasure in his good and in being in his company, then it would be more likely that we dislike him than love him.

Before turning to Pruss' reasons for not including feelings in his account of love, we also note that hatred without feelings would also be profoundly counter-intuitive. What makes hating another person so awful is that *we takes pleasure* in his or her misfortune or, in an extreme case, that nothing would make us happier than for the one we hate to have a pointless life and an extensive, painful dying.

Consider the following reason Pruss advances for seeing love as not involving feelings. Relying on the New Testament, Pruss notes that we are commanded to love others with agape love:

This implies that agape cannot indicate a loving feeling or emotion. For, first of all, feelings do not seem to be subject to direct control. While we can cause feelings in ourselves indirectly – say, rouse ourselves to feel indignation by dwelling on the wrongs someone has done – we cannot do so immediately and we cannot do so always, whereas we are always obliged to love.<sup>2</sup>

Consider three replies.

First, imagine Pruss is correct, and consider a case of agape love. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a likely candidate: this is a case in which a person who is considered a social inferior comes to the aid of another who has been injured, cares for him, and insures he is looked after once the Samaritan has to leave (Luke 10:25-29). Imagine that while the Samaritan is caring for the one injured, he has no feelings of sadness or unhappiness whatever. In fact, if feelings are irrelevant, imagine that he feels great pleasure in the fact that the victim was injured so badly. In such cases, the agape love of the Samaritan clearly is at least tarnished or imperfect. We would go further, however, and claim that in such a case there is no love whatever. The Samaritan might physically care for the victim the way a person would who truly loved the injured person, but the unfeeling (or sadistic) Samaritan would not be loving.

Second, when a normal, healthy person comes to understand that someone has been unjustly injured then such a person sees the injured person as deserving compassion as a feeling and deserving the kind of action that such feelings demand. If you are truly convinced that you observe some innocent person who is about to be tormented by having her eyeballs and teeth pulled out and are not aroused by a desperate desire to rescue her (and profound despair if you are unable to rescue her and she is tormented in front of you), then it seems to us you are either wicked or deeply impaired.

Third, imagine that Pruss is right, and we can only indirectly control our feelings. The command to love others might not be possible, then, for us to do on our own power. But isn't that what a range of Christian theologians think about our power to follow many divine precepts? In the recovery movement, it is routine for an addict to profess that he cannot give up his addiction without the help of a higher power. We conclude that there can

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9.

still be a command to love in which such love involves feelings even if it is not directly in our power to obey such a command.

Here is another reason why Pruss thinks that love does not involve feelings:

Secondly, feelings of affection are transitory. They disappear while one sleeps, and yet no one would say: "My wife does not love me, for she is asleep."<sup>3</sup>

This seems very odd in our view. Why believe that feelings are any more or less transitory than thoughts, actions, or intentions? Does one's wife not know that Paris is the capital of France when she is sleeping? Or has she ceased being a Christian when asleep if she is in a condition in which she has no beliefs or feelings of any kind? These results seem bizarre. Arguably, it makes perfect sense to think of a sleeping person as knowing and feeling all sorts of things, even if these are not conscious, current states. Otherwise, must we conclude that our enemies do not hate us all the time for, after all, when they are asleep their hatred has disappeared? This strikes us as quite counter-intuitive.

Feelings of hate and love are or can be (for worse or better) deep, settled parts of our character or, if you will, our soul. If you are truly loved by your partner, then, when she is not conscious, she is not at that time consciously loving you (by definition). However, her consciously loving you is probably essential in both explaining and understanding why she chose to sleep next to you. Sleeping together can be quite a vulnerable, meaningful act partly because one surrenders one's deliberate, conscious intentions. So, we suggest that emotions are not nearly as transitory as Pruss argues but that they can reflect settled intentions or aspects of our character.

Consider one more reason why Pruss proposes that love does not involve feelings:

Finally, feelings do not have the close connection to action that love has in the New Testament... A feeling need not be acted on, but can be ignored by force of will.<sup>4</sup>

We take exception to these claims. First, feelings can (at least sometimes) be thought of as an activity themselves. Someone may be feeling extreme malice or a deep, profound hatred of us right now and yet not act on it in terms of outward, physical behavior. It is still the case, however, that this

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

fellow is involved in an activity, a grievous activity that is corrosive to the soul. Second, while there may be some feelings that can be ignored by force of will, the same is true with thinking, thoughts, commitments, intentions, goals, and so on. While feelings might not be acted on (outwardly), acts themselves, once begun need not continue and can be aborted by force of will. Third, if we come to believe that someone has a feeling of, for example, great love for others, but he never acts on this feeling even when it is clear to him that there are genuine opportunities for good, beneficent action that he can perform without any counter-balancing evil, then we should doubt that he truly has such great love for others.

We conclude that Pruss has not shown that love does not involve feelings as an essential component. Moreover, there seem to be clear cases when someone's claim to be loving seems to be tainted or not credible if shorn of feelings.

We now turn to briefly review and assess aspects of Pruss' philosophy of love in relationships.

#### RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOVE AND COMMITMENTS

In this second section, we take issue with Pruss' view that relationships like friendship do not centrally involve love and that unconditional love should be centrally viewed in terms of commitments irrespective of feelings. We will also offer a different picture of Christian self-love. Finally, we offer some reflections on Pruss on romantic relationships.

Here is Pruss' position on friendship. The context is his assertion that in a friendship, the true reason why we make sacrifices for our friends lies in our commitments, and not in our love:

Why not instead act on account of the value of the other person in the context of the relationship? It is true that love may be a central part of that relationship, but I want to suggest that love is not the part of the relationship that actually does the work of justifying the sacrifice. For suppose that I stopped loving my friend. Would that *in itself* take away my obligation to stand by him in his time of need? Certainly not. The *commitment* I had implicitly or explicitly undertaken while loving him, a commitment that made it appropriate for him to *expect* help from me, is sufficient for the justification. If I need to advert to my own love, then something has gone wrong.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 16.

This case is a sad case, from our point of view. Although this is not the occasion for articulating a full philosophy of friendship, we suggest that if you have ceased to love someone whom you consider a friend, then you are probably no longer a friend. You may be a “friend” in some extended sense in that you can be expected to act in a friendly manner and you might even make a great sacrifice in light of the fact that you once loved him. But in such a case, you are not standing by a friend, but a former friend, much as you might stand by an ex-wife or ex-husband after the dissolution of a marriage. You might continue to stand by the ex-spouse because once upon a time you both loved each other, and that love, while no longer a reality, still gives you a reason to be loyal to him or her when in need.

To bring home our point, imagine that the case Pruss introduces is one in which you are invited to celebrate with a friend you no longer love the anniversary of the start of your friendship. However, this anniversary coincides with a wedding in which he asks you to serve as his best man, because, as he puts it, “you are my best friend!” Surely there would be something cruelly dishonest about accepting the invitation to be his best man and celebrating the anniversary if you no longer love him.

We submit that at the center of the idea of being a friend, like being a parent, being a brother or sister, is the idea that the relationship of friendship, parenthood, brotherhood and sisterhood should have love as a central, essential quality. Imagine the painful case of brothers hating each other for no reason other than jealousy or envy. Such a scenario seems to be an offense against the notion of a sibling relationship, in which a relationship that should be loving has been twisted and subverted. The brother who hates us, for reasons grounded not in moral righteousness but in base vices, is not acting as a brother (where, in this secondary sense of ‘brother’ involves how male siblings ought to feel and act).

Let us now consider Pruss’ view of unconditional love. He describes unconditional love for all persons in terms of an unconditional commitment that is due to all persons in virtue of general features that all persons share. Pruss writes:

Unconditional love, thus, should be understood as unconditionally *committed* love, and if I am right that what justifies unconditional love is a general feature everybody shares, then it follows that everybody is unconditionally lovable.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 42.

We would only adjust this claim that love involves a disposition to feelings of pleasure and sadness (as noted earlier), and we would add that unconditional love is always merited insofar as the following is accepted: (a) love is always anchored in the good of the beloved and (b) any unitive love (the desire to be united with the beloved, romantically or not) is subordinate to beneficent love (desiring the good of the beloved), and (c) proper self-love which is also beneficent and unitive is essential. These conditions are necessary to prevent cases in which it seems that a person will ruin him or herself the sake of love of another. These conditions will also give us grounds for rejecting claims by a person that he intentionally harms the persons he loves (unless there is some compelling additional moral principle in play, e.g. the harm was to prevent even greater, more grave harm).

Moving toward self-love, Pruss takes a fairly stern view that the love of a person for himself or herself needs to be detached from self-identity. In the example that follows, Francis is not supposed to love himself because he is Francis. He is to love Francis because Francis is lovable. Pruss puts his point as follows:

This then suggests another way in which well-ordered love of oneself is not self-seeking. When Francis virtuously loves himself, i.e., Francis, he does not love Francis because Francis is *himself*, but he loves Francis because Francis is a human being in the image and likeness of God. Or, at least, he does not *primarily* love Francis for being himself, but primarily loves him for the attributes that Francis shares with all other humans. Virtuous people love their neighbors as they love themselves. Conversely, they love themselves as they love their neighbors, namely, for the same reason. And in this sense the love is not self-seeking, since although the beloved is oneself, the beloved is loved primarily for reasons for which one loves one's neighbor rather than for being oneself.<sup>7</sup>

There seems to be something freeing about this approach to self-love. Perhaps there is something emancipatory in the sense that it would or should take our gaze off of our individual selves. We think that in certain relationships this kind of non-self-aware dimension is perfectly fitting. Especially among friends, we (Charles and Ben) might be equally delighted if one of us received some great good (a Nobel Prize). And in communities, such as highly well-functioning churches or monasteries or colleges, there might be equal joy or sorrow without there being anything special about which person is whom. That is, we might be delighted that someone in our college received an award without knowing whether that person was one of us. But if

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 47.

this kind of self-love were the norm we would be missing out on what might be called the quiddity (this-ness) of love.

As noted, in our own relationship, a friendship between Charles and Ben, we are such that, as friends, we both derive equal pleasure when one of us meets with some good and we feel sadness when one of us meets some misfortune. We therefore have a shared commitment to each other's welfare and, when welfare is impaired, to each other's restoration. But should this be the case in all relationships? Or, putting it more generally, would we miss out on something if we were to have no love of self insofar as I (Charles) love the fact that I am Charles and I (Ben) love the fact that I am Ben? We think so. This is because of the philosophy of love that Pruss adheres to that we cited at the outset of our essay. True love needs to be reflected in terms of the good of the beloved. To love Charles or Ben without appreciating that one of us is Charles and one of us is Ben would be bizarre. Similarly, for either of us to only love ourselves only insofar we think Charles or Ben is loveable would be bizarre.

We propose that Pruss' conception of self-love is commendable, but incomplete insofar as it overshadows the fact that each individual (as an individual thing or being or subject) is loveable, and not just because he or she is a Francis, Clare, Charles, Ben, or Alexander. Our point about the particularity of love might come to the fore if we imagine a case of fragmentation. Imagine that we become confused and are not sure whether Charles or Ben is lovable. We have heard they are both rather smug and unfeeling. Might it not still make sense under those conditions if a third party, Alexander, were to say to us: "Forget about being Charles or Ben, I love each of you and want you both to flourish."

Finally, let us look at romantic relationships. This will only be brief. Pruss writes:

[T]he desire for real union in erotic love includes a desire for sexual intercourse. It does not follow, however, that libido is an essential aspect of erotic love. First of all, it is not clear that the *desire* for union has to be present for love to be there. Love is defined by action and will, and it may be sufficient that one *aims at* or *strives for* union (or maybe aims at or strives for union for its own sake), without one actually *desiring* it. Or it may be that desire is the same thing as one's will being aimed at some goal, in which case all one requires for a desire for union is that one's will be directed at union, and not that one have any libido.

We register two questions. The first concerns romantic relationships in which there is sexual intimacy, and the second concerns romantic relations without libido, eros, or sexual intimacy.

First question: what desire for union between lovers that involves sexual intercourse should not include libido or eros or at least the desire for eros or libido? This inclusion seems absolutely essential. To see why this is so, imagine the opposite. Although we don't ask readers to entertain pornographic imagery, we find it hard to imagine a couple involved in sexual intercourse who were not expressing, wanting to express, or at least imitating feelings of eros and libido.<sup>8</sup>

Second question: Wouldn't it be possible for there to be a romantically loving couple who have emotional intimacy and who take great delight in unitive love without sexual intimacy (or perhaps there could be sexual sensuality but not intercourse)? We think that romantic love between two persons might be rich, deep, life-long, and the equivalent of a marriage, irrespective of libido or eros in the usual sense of these terms. That is, we think that it is possible to be enraptured with another person, to be ecstatic about his or her sensuality, and to have a romantic bond with that person even if it is not erotic or involving a desire for sexual union. So, above we proposed that it would be odd to have a romantic, loving relationship with sexual intimacy without libido or eros, but in a case where sexual intimacy is not a factor for whatever reason (e.g. illness, injury, age, opportunity, legal prohibitions, voluntary renunciation for some religious cause, sexual indifference, or lack of sexual competence), then a relationship might still be deeply romantic, emotionally intimate, and the equivalent in value of love (apart from procreation) between married persons.

#### FEELINGS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND LOVE

We conclude with gratitude for this opportunity to engage the work of Professor Pruss. His book is undoubtedly one of the most engaging we have seen in recent years on sexual ethics. The disagreements we have articulated are presented with respect and a desire to see how Professor Pruss might respond, correcting any misinterpretations we may be guilty of or, perhaps, whether Professor Pruss might modify his positions to take on board some of our proposals.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 56.

## REFERENCES

PRUSS, Alexander. *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013.

POCZUJ MIŁOŚĆ!  
REFLEKSJE NA TEMAT CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEJ ETYKI SEKSUALNEJ  
ALEXANDRA PRUSSA

## Streszczenie

Pruss rozwija filozofię miłości, na której gruncie (właściwie) traktuje miłość w kategoriach dobroczynności (rozumianej jako odpowiedź na dobro ukochanego) i miłości jednoczącej (pragnienie bycia przy ukochanym). Tym niemniej Pruss podkreśla charakter miłości w kategoriach działania i motywacji, a nie w kategoriach uczuć. Uważamy, że odczuwanie odpowiednio przyjemności z powodu (stosownego) dobra i cierpienia wobec choroby (nieuzasadnionego cierpienia), które go spotyka, są istotnymi elementami ludzkiej miłości. Kwestionujemy zaproponowaną przez Prussa interpretację przypowieści o dobrym Samarytaninie. Na zakończenie odnosimy się do Prussa ujęcia miłości własnej, które uważamy za pouczające (Franciszek powinien sam siebie darzyć miłością, ponieważ jest tego wart), choć niepełne (osoba, którą jest Franciszek, powinna kochać samą siebie, nawet jeśli nie jest świadoma bycia Franciszkiem). Ostatni punkt wiąże się z afirmacją istoty (*haecceitas*) miłości.

FEEL THE LOVE!  
REFLECTIONS ON ALEXANDER PRUSS' ESSAY  
IN CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS

## Summary

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, uczucia, emocje, dobroczynność, jedność.

**Key words:** love, feelings, emotions, beneficence, unitive.

**Information about Authors:**

Prof. CHARLES TALIAFERRO—Professor of Philosophy at St. Olaf College; address for correspondence: St. Olaf College—Philosophy, Holland Hall 503, 1520 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield, Minnesota 55057; e-mail: [taliafer@stolaf.edu](mailto:taliafer@stolaf.edu)

BENJAMIN LOUIS PEREZ, B.A.—graduate of St. Olaf College with a degree in Mathematics, currently adjunct research staff at Institute for Defense Analyses; address for correspondence—e-mail: [perez@stolaf.edu](mailto:perez@stolaf.edu)