

The Philosophy of Flirting (Updated 12-12-06)

What is it to flirt? Do you have to intend to flirt with someone in order to count as doing so? Can such things as dressing a certain way count as flirting? Can one flirt with an AI character? With one's own long-term partner? With an idea?

The question of whether or not an act of flirtation has taken place is often highly significant in our practical decision-making. For example, one may want to know whether or not one's partner has been flirting with other people in order to decide whether to continue the relationship. Or one may want to know whether two of one's friends have been flirting with each other in order to decide whether to give them some time alone. To facilitate such decisions, it would be helpful to have a secure grasp on what flirting actually amounts to. And there are many other uses to which such a grasp could be put. If, say, one stands accused that one's own behaviour of the previous evening constituted an act of flirtation, one is equipped to respond to the accusation if one can point to some necessary condition on acts of flirtation which was not met in this case.

Dictionary definitions of flirting seem to be somewhat deficient, suggesting that *one cannot flirt when one has serious designs on the person being flirted with*. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, suggests one only counts as flirting if one lacks "serious intentions", and is "playing" at courtship, "without any intention of responding to the feelings awakened". Yet this seems to me to be false. A committed relationship could well begin with a flirtation between two people who have perfectly serious intentions towards each other. The definition also suggests that anyone playing at courtship will count as flirting, but this looks wrong too: clearly kids can play at weddings without flirting with each other.

Can we improve upon the proffered definitions? If we draw a few potentially important distinctions, I believe we can.

The first distinction is between flirting and behaving flirtatiously, where the latter is to be understood as behaving in ways that would, according to accepted social standards, normally constitute acts of flirtation. One can behave flirtatiously without flirting. There could be a person who, quite accidentally, acts in a way very similar to the way most people act when they are flirting, but does this entirely without realising, at any (even subconscious) level, that this behaviour is at all the sort of thing likely to excite or maintain anyone's admiration or sexual interest.

Suppose, for instance, that Joe has a habit of maintaining eye contact for just a few seconds longer than is usual, but this is due to the fact that his attention wanders very easily, with the result that he stares at whatever he is looking at for a few seconds before coming back online. Some of his behaviour could plausibly be described as flirtatious, but he is not flirting. Similarly, an English woman visiting Italy who touches her earlobes a lot in the presence of a particular person, without realising the cultural significance of this action, would be behaving flirtatiously in that context but is doing so without flirting.

I am also tempted to think that one can flirt without behaving flirtatiously. Provided the right background was in place, one could flirt in a very non-standard way. With someone one knew very well, for instance, humming a section of a Puccini aria or scratching one's forearm might constitute an act of flirtation, although it would not normally do so, and hence does not count as flirtatious behaviour.

The second distinction, or rather group of distinctions, is between flirting and various other actions (which, notwithstanding, may on some occasions constitute acts of flirtation). These are: making explicit *suggestions* of a romantic or sexual nature ("We could go the party as a couple"), making explicit *declarations* of feelings of that nature ("I'm really attracted to you"), and making explicit *requests* for interactions of that nature ("Will you go on a date with me?"). Flirting, I would suggest, is not in general the same thing as making such suggestions, declarations or requests. One can flirt without doing any of these things, and most or all of them can be done without flirting. (Which is not, of course, to deny that they can constitute acts of flirtation on particular occasions.)

Let me now turn to the question of what has to be true of someone in order for that person to count as flirting. I propose, controversially I expect, that one cannot flirt without *in some sense intending to do so*. That is to say, flirting is always intentional, although in quite a weak sense to be explained in a moment. Flirtatious behaviour where there is no underlying intention of the required kind is, by my lights, *mere* flirtatious behaviour, and does not constitute flirting.

The sense in which I want to claim that flirting is always intentional is weak in that I intend this claim to be consistent with its being possible to flirt without *realising* one is doing so, and consistent with its even being possible to flirt without possessing the concept of flirtation, or related concepts. These consistency facts are due to its being possible to possess the relevant kind of intention without being reflectively aware that one possesses it and/or without being aware that it constitutes an intention to flirt. Possession of this kind of intention is pretty cognitively undemanding, and it is therefore available to the conceptually unsophisticated.

The question is: what *does* one intend to do when one intends to flirt? To encourage or inspire attraction, perhaps? But one can flirt without that aim. It may already be common knowledge that the flirtee is already attracted to you, or you might know that this is a hopeless case, i.e. that the flirtee will not be attracted to you however much you flirt.

Perhaps the intention is to raise one's own attraction to the flirtee to salience for the flirtee? But this is not a necessary condition on flirting either: one needn't *be* attracted to the flirtee in order to flirt with him or her. It is also insufficient: there are ways of raising to salience one's own attraction without flirting (e.g. by making a straight-up declaration to that effect).

Another suggestion is that the intention is to raise the possibility of flirter-flirtee romance and/or sexual contact to salience. But again, it may be common knowledge that there is no such possibility. This does not prevent flirtation taking place. Maybe the intention is to raise the *issue* of flirtee-flirtee romance/sex to salience. But it can also happen that flirting occurs when this issue is already salient.

A better shot is that the intention is to do things that, in the kind of situation the flirter is in, *either* will raise flirter-flirtee romance/sex to salience between flirter and flirtee *or* would do so if it weren't already salient. However, we can object to this proposal by considering the case of "killer-flirts" (with apologies to Saul Kripke's notion of "killer yellow"). When a killer-flirt flirts with someone, both flirter and flirtee immediately die. So nothing would be raised to salience between them were the killer-flirt to flirt. According to the current proposal, no killer-flirt can start flirting in a situation where flirter-flirtee romance/sex is already salient. For we would need to appeal to the second option mentioned in the proposal to cover this case, but that clause is not true for killer-flirts. So despite appearances, killer-flirts are not that dangerous after all; just make sure that when you meet them, you keep mentioning how attractive they are.

Maybe the intention to flirt is the intention to act in ways that are *disposed* to raise flirter-flirtee romance and/or sexual contact to salience for the flirtee. (Philosophers are pretty widely agreed that something's being disposed to do X under conditions C is not the same as being such that it *would* do X were it in conditions C.) There is still an obvious objection to this as it stands, however, which is that there are many actions which are so disposed, yet are not such that intending to perform them would amount to intending to flirt. For instance, serious and sincere requests for romantic involvement are disposed to raise romance to salience, but do not plausibly count as acts of flirtation.

What matters, I suggest, for distinguishing flirtations from these other actions, is the fact that in any genuine flirtation there should be an element of *playfulness*. Flirtation is, of its essence, playful, and intentionally so. But, *contra* the dictionary definitions, this type of play need not be *mere* play. One can be playful in the required sense despite having perfectly serious intentions. This solves the problem of committed flirts, mentioned above. Also, we should note that not all play counts for these purposes. Flirtation involves a kind of *knowing* playfulness (which addresses the problem of kids playing at weddings). A third point to note here is that the play need not be enjoyable: you can force yourself to flirt, just as you can force yourself to play bridge or Monopoly.

So far, however, I have not considered whether the possibility of flirting depends in part on whom (if anyone) one is flirting with. At the extreme, we can ask whether it is possible to flirt without flirting with anyone at all. Or, less radically, we can ask whether it is possible to flirt without flirting with anyone *in particular*. The latter question may appear to be answerable in the positive. Suppose, for instance, that one leaves the house one morning with the intention of acting in ways disposed to raise the issue of romance/sex to salience, in the right (knowing, playful) kind of way, with whomever one meets. Will one end up flirting with everyone one meets? Perhaps. But this might plausibly be said to be in virtue of the fact that person-specific intentions of a similar nature are formed at each meeting, rather than in virtue of the general intention.

Is it ever possible to flirt without having a specific flirtee in mind? I think there must be some specification of a flirtee or group of flirtees, but I am not sure that a single flirtee need be singled out. It doesn't sound too bad to say that a performer can flirt with a live theatre audience, without his forming any specific intentions about each member of the audience. However, he would at best be flirting with his audience considered collectively and not distributively; it would sound wrong for an individual member of the audience to

claim that the actor had been flirting with *her*, just because he had been flirting with his audience.

Note that in saying that a flirter must have certain intentions which single out her flirtee(s), I do not mean that there must really *be* some person or persons with whom she intends to flirt, but that she must *intend* to flirt with some person or persons. Hence I am leaving room for the possibility of flirting with a purely imaginary person. Someone might count as flirting by dint of believing there to be a person present and having the right kind of intentions towards the imagined person. In that sense, it may be possible to flirt without flirting with anyone at all.

One final question worth considering is whether it is possible to flirt with non-people. I think it is, at least if one mistakes them for people, because what matters is the flirter's intentions. If the flirter believes the flirtee to be a person, (s)he can have all the normal flirtatious intentions towards the flirtee. But what if one *knows* that the target is not a person? Well, according to recent research (reported in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* on 17 March 2006, by Tony Tysome), "[p]eople frequently insult and flirt with computer characters placed in internet chatrooms to entertain or provide information..." despite knowing that they are talking to AI characters (or "chatbots") rather than real human beings.

It may be thought that this talk of "flirting" with chatbots is metaphorical, or at best derivative from the primary notion of flirtation, which requires the intention to flirt with another person. But I doubt whether this is necessarily correct. I suspect that what is important is the intention to flirt with something that can *respond* in some significant way. If one thinks of the chatbot as capable of thinking and feeling, and hence of responding in the required way, then one may count as flirting with it. If one does not, however, then one may still be behaving flirtatiously (perhaps *pretending* to flirt), but one won't be flirting.

For similar reasons, I take it that talk of flirtation with ideas, theories, pursuits and so on is (at least almost always) purely metaphorical, since these things are not generally taken to be capable of responding in the relevant way.

In short, I think we can fix on the following as a set of necessary and sufficient conditions on flirting. First, the flirter should act with the intention to do things which are disposed to raise flirter/flirtee romance and/or sex to salience for the flirtee, in a knowing yet playful way. Second, he or she should believe that the flirtee can respond in some significant way. No doubt there is room for reasonable disagreement about this proposal. But I am confident that it is an improvement on the existing dictionary definitions, and hopeful that the foregoing discussion will open avenues for further philosophical reflection in an underexplored field.

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