

Edited by Kristie Miller and Marlene Clark

DATING

PHILOSOPHY FOR EVERYONE



Flirting with Big Ideas

Foreword by Joshua Wolf Shenk

Series Editor: Fritz Allhoff



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A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2010
© 2010 Blackwell Publishing Ltd except for editorial material
and organization

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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in
February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been
merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical
business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate,
Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dating – philosophy for everyone: flirting with big ideas /
edited by Kristie Miller and Marlene Clark.

p. cm. — (Philosophy for everyone)

title: Dating – philosophy for everyone

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4443-3022-9 (pbk.: alk. paper) 1. Dating (Social customs) 2. Mate selection. I. Miller, Kristie Lyn. II. Clark, Marlene. III. Title: Dating – Philosophy for Everyone.

HQ801.D336 2010

646.7'709051—dc22

2010004708

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

JOSHUA WOLF SHENK

FOREWORD

Some years ago, I got my stomach in a twist about an Israeli-born actress (I'll call her Rachael). We were set up on a blind date in New York, and, when I saw her, I couldn't believe my luck. She had dark, curly hair, long legs, and a summer shirt that gave her hips plenty of room to breathe. Her smile warmed me like a heat lamp. I came upon her sitting on the stoop of the restaurant where we'd planned to meet. As she uncurled herself to greet me, I wondered if she would stretch beyond three dimensions. I barely had voice enough to suggest we go inside, and I hoped my legs wouldn't buckle on the way.

The restaurant was an intimate, narrow room. With the delicate smells and the soft light, the edges of the outside world dissolved. I felt myself fumbling at first in conversation, but she seemed to find my awkwardness charming. She laughed at my jokes, and her eyes went wide at my ruminations on how to find meaning in a life full of so much suffering.

I loved what she had to say, too. As we found our rhythm, I felt comfortable, assured even. The more I settled back into my chair, the more she leaned over the table towards me. But then, the more I felt her presence, the more I longed for her – and the more I found myself teetering on the edge. When she asked for a bite of my food, her lips closed around my fork, and she let her teeth slide faintly along its metal edge. It was one of the most erotic moments of my life – and one of the most precarious.

On one level, dating consists of a series of practical problems: How can we meet good people? How can we keep

them interested? But as the ritual that underlies our desire to connect with other people, dating also opens a window into the most basic existential dilemma of social creatures. The desire to connect is the desire to jointly create a mutual reality that transcends our separate selves – and even, in ecstatic moments, obliterate them. But our only prayer at making these connections comes in holding onto our discrete identities.

My only chance of realizing my desire for Rachael depended on deftly containing it.

And that only got harder. After dinner, she came back to my place and immediately made herself at home. She put an album on my stereo – Morcheeba’s “Big Calm,” which would make a rock melt. At some point in the night – I think it was right before she put a spoonful of ice cream on her breast for me to lick off – she told me she wouldn’t be my girlfriend. After we settled into bed for the night, she told me she wouldn’t have sex with me. In the morning, we went to the Russian baths, a cavernous, primordial cellar of steam heat in New York’s East Village. In the wet air, her eyes looked as deep as some fairy-tale well.

I waited as long as I could before I called her again.

In between, I talked about her incessantly. I didn’t just want to figure out the perfect next moves. I wanted to know: What did it all *mean*?

If you’re holding this book in your hand, you want to figure out what it all means, too. This volume will bring new light to some of your most familiar conversations – and also provoke new and surprising ones. How do we approach intimacy in a virtual space? What do brain science and psychology teach us about the real mental dynamics behind the “madness” of love? How do the ancient teachings connect to modern bar scenes?

On one level, it may seem odd to bring the weight of philosophical inquiry to the casual topic of dating. Actually,

there's no place where philosophy matters more. Camus said the most important philosophical question was suicide. Perhaps, but once you've decided to live, the question quickly becomes how to best relate to other people.

Oddly, these questions have long been neglected. For most of the last hundred years, we've considered "self" as the basic unit. René Descartes set the stage in 1641 when he declared that each self "inhabits its own subjective realm" with a mental life that "has an integrity prior to and independent of its interaction with other people." Though Descartes had his challengers this became a core assumption of the Enlightenment, as did Thomas Hobbes' notion that the natural state of man was "solitary" (as well as "poor, nasty, brutish, and short"). Following this line, the individual emerged as the fundamental focus for students of psychology, political theory, even linguistics. We talk of self-expression, self-realization.

But can we consider the self in isolation?

Increasingly, science is answering this question with a resounding No. The new field of social neuroscience shows how social connection bolsters psychological and physiological health, and how loneliness makes us wither – leading to everything from depression to obesity and heart disease.

Groundbreaking research into the way we form relationships as small children also shows how our reactions to other people operate beneath a level of ordinary detection. To see how infants respond to their mothers, it turns out, we need to film them and play it back frame by frame. We don't take in a social stimulus and then form a response. The two twist and leap together like figure skaters intimately entwined in their routine. From these roots of connections in our infancy comes our greatest adult desire. As much as we want contentment, "happiness," and so on, what really drives us is the pursuit of "ecstasy." The word

comes from the Greek *ekstasis*, which means “standing outside oneself.”

At first, when Rachael told me she wouldn't be my girlfriend, I thought she was bluffing. Maybe she was. Maybe she meant that she could only give herself to someone who didn't need her. Maybe she needed someone strong enough for her to bounce up against. Or maybe she just wanted, on some deep level, to replicate her relationship with her father, an explosive man who doted on her but never let her forget her faults.

It's not that she didn't like me. She did. Actually, in many ways, she saw the best in me, my smarts, my intuition, my impatience with bullshit. I took her seriously, and, like many beautiful people, she seemed always to fear she couldn't be seen as more than an object. But she decided that staying in this serious position meant withholding her affection. And that made me insane. On the first date, the potential to merge seemed limitless, and, fueled by that fantasy, I could stay rocked back on my heels. But the more it became clear that she wouldn't give herself to me, the more I rolled onto the balls of my feet, forever losing my balance.

One night, I got a message from her, and as I planned to call her back, I asked a friend if he would give me some kind of mantra to keep my head clear.

He told me to think: “I was complete before I met you. I'll be complete long after you're gone.” I thought this was brilliant. It was precisely the frame I needed to stay strong. But, of course, it wasn't true. If I really felt complete without her, I wouldn't have wanted to talk to her. This is a paradox I've never been able to work out, nor do I expect I will.

Let's turn it over to the philosophers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editors of this volume have never met or, for that matter, even spoken to one another on the telephone. To complicate matters even more, the entire time this book was in progress, one was (for the most part) in Sydney, Australia, while the other was (again, for the most part) in Brooklyn, New York. And so we must first thank each other for the great patience and flexibility extended to one another as we “worked together” on this book so distant from one another in space and time. The situation made for many late nights and early mornings, and a few groggy laughs, but we trust the quality of the book remained unharmed.

For that quality, we owe a great deal to our contributors, also far flung across the United States, Australia, and indeed the world. We communicated with all of them exclusively through email, and we greatly appreciate their prompt responses to our seemingly endless editorial nitpicking. The contributors represent a range of disciplines, though each shares a philosophical bent with the “true” philosophers of the group. Their essays, while often very different in subject matter and approach, share a seriously light-hearted attitude toward a topic over which people agonize and about which, in response to a need to quell the agony, numerous “experts” offer advice. That daters of all stripes can learn something from the often humorously profound insights of our contributors is without doubt true in this case.

We would also like to thank our publisher, Wiley-Blackwell, and especially our editorial contact there, Tiffany Mok. Most importantly, perhaps, we thank the *Philosophy for Everyone* series editor, Fritz Allhoff. How he keeps up with the email from all his editors is beyond us. Even more amazing, he

answers almost immediately, even at ungodly hours and on holidays. His unstinting attention to detail has made us better editors and we thank him for his patience and generosity.

Last but not least, we thank our readers. We hope you enjoy reading this book as much as we enjoyed pulling it together. If you date, we hope there's some wisdom here to help you date with greater awareness. If you don't date, maybe this book will change your mind – but if it doesn't, we do have one contributor who claims he got married without ever going on a single date!

Kristie Miller, Sydney
Marlene Clark, Brooklyn, New York

KRISTIE MILLER AND MARLENE CLARK

FLIRTING WITH BIG IDEAS

An Introduction to *Dating* - *Philosophy for Everyone*



The friendship between man and woman seems to be inherent in us by nature. For man is by nature more inclined to live in couples than to live as a social and political being, inasmuch as the household is earlier and more indispensable than the state, and to the extent that procreation is a bond more universal to all living things. In the case of other animals, the association goes no further than this. But human beings live together not merely for procreation, but also to secure the needs of life. There is division of labor from the very beginning and different functions for man and woman. Thus they satisfy one another's needs by contributing each his own to the common store. For that reason, this kind of friendship brings both usefulness and pleasantness with it, and if the

partners are good, it may even be based on virtue and excellence. For each partner has his own peculiar excellence and they can find joy in that fact.

Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, 1162a17-27

While dating in its current cultural guise is very different from anything Aristotle ever encountered, our chosen epigraph shows that philosophers have pondered the nature of the human drive to seek out intimate romantic relationships for as long as they have thought about anything. As Aristotle notes, the human drive to live in couples is stronger than even the very strong need to live as a social and political being. And not just for procreation. Aristotle, like most of today's theorists, believed that human fulfillment rests largely in the ability to form close and loving relationships with others. This book is a collection of essays that looks afresh at the complicated issues surrounding creating, fostering, engaging in, and evaluating our romantic relationships. Authors come from divergent backgrounds, including those of philosophy, psychology, political science, theology, cognitive science, mathematics, and computer science, to ask and answer both age-old questions and pressing new ones about the world of romance and dating.

If we think of dating as a sort of "game" we all play, a game with social rules that is, at least sometimes, pleasant in itself, but which is also designed to foster certain sorts of outcomes, we can ask ourselves important questions about the nature of that game. What are the rules of the game? Can the rules be broken and, if so, when and why? What is the aim of the game and how do we judge whether a particular round of the dating game is going to lead to the winning the game, i.e., the outcome we want? How does technology bear on the way the game is played? Does it change the game itself, the rules of the game, or just the particular way the game is manifested? When we think of

the project of forming intimate romantic relationships in this abstract way we attain enough distance from our subject matter to think seriously about the various ethical, practical, and psychological issues we all face in the exciting but scary process of discovering and forging connections with others. This book explores the delicate balance of dealing well with others while making careful and often strategic evaluation of other persons and our relationships with those persons.

The book has three key aims. The first is to bring a modern perspective to age-old questions about the ethics involved in romantic relationships. The pace of social change is frightening, and though the question of how to deal well, and ethically, with our fellow human beings is not a new one, the circumstances in which we each find ourselves change radically as society changes. Behaviors and practices that were once taboo are now acceptable. So it is important to bring the careful analytic skills of philosophers and their brethren to questions about how, in our current culture, we should approach romantic relationships. To that end, this book considers how we ought to think about and treat prospective romantic partners.

The second aim of the book is to use new research in philosophy and the empirical and social sciences to help us better understand what is going on in the process of mate selection. In the last fifty years or so research in evolutionary psychology and biology, for instance, has flourished, and with it, the field of philosophy of biology has burgeoned. Like all living things, human beings have evolved through natural selection. How it is that organisms select mates is a crucial research interest of evolutionary biologists. Yet, until recently, little of this research has informed our understanding of our own psychologies. The book aims to remedy this by introducing a number of essays that explore the ways in which our evolutionary history and

our evolved psychological mechanisms influence our decisions and behaviors within the dating arena.

The other new research that the book introduces comes not from the empirical sciences, but from mathematics and economics and philosophy. An odd combination of disciplines, one might think, to help shed any light on romantic relationships. But not so. While we can learn a lot from evolutionary psychologists about why we have the preferences we do, and we can learn a lot from ethicists about how to interact in a principled and virtuous manner with prospective partners, dating is also a process that involves making decisions. Whom should I date, for how long, and at what point should I either move on or get serious? Dating is goal directed. Fortunately, philosophers, mathematicians, and economists have been developing accounts of how to make decisions when we are faced with lots of options. Decision theory and game theory are relatively new research areas in philosophy, and both aim to tell us how to choose between various options given that we have certain desires, goals, or preferences. The book introduces some of this new research and applies it to the domain of dating.

The third aim of the book is to bring all of this research to bear on new questions about the nature of dating and intimate relationships that have only recently emerged in the light of new technologies. With the advent of the Internet, the prospects not just of finding a date online, but also of cyberdating, now present themselves. We can now meet others in an online world in which we might present ourselves in an entirely different light than we present ourselves in the real world. What sorts of ethical implications are raised by this technology? Is cyberdating really dating and can cyberdating involve cheating? What sorts of duties do I owe someone whom I only meet in a game? Can genuine relationships grow out of, or exist

entirely within, the online game? As we spend more and more time attached to our computers, should we be embracing technology as a way of finding like-minded people whom we might otherwise never connect with, or should we be worried that genuine relationships are not to be found in the cyberworld, and that our obsession with the computer is ruining our chances of finding true happiness? These are important questions that the book also takes up.

We hope that the very different essays in this book, offering as they do very different perspectives on the dating world, will not only entertain, but also propel readers to think about romantic relationships in general, specifically, the reader's own role in his or her own relationships. Critical examination of our own motives, preferences, and decision-making processes is something we should all engage in from time to time, and we hope that the reader will find these essays both stimulating and helpful in this regard. With that in mind we thank readers for joining each of the writers on this journey and hope that it is both exciting and enjoyable.

In the second part of this introduction, we offer a more in-depth look at each unit and the essays contained within. A quick perusal of the table of contents informs the reader of our semi-chronological approach to dating: we begin with the vicissitudes of flirtation, and end the volume with essays about choosing a mate. As is the case with the dating life itself, a number of surprising and, we hope, fruitful and entertaining detours mark the path from the first flirtatious moment of eye contact to the squishy comfort of settling in with a mate of choice.

Our first unit focuses on the complex issue of the terms upon which we found a dating relationship. It asks, for instance, what is flirting, and how do we move from flirting with someone to dating someone? Do attitudes about flirting vary depending upon the attitude of one's peers?

What exactly is a date anyway – we all think we know one when we see it, but is that really true? Are there essential features that make a social interaction a date, rather than something else entirely, and if so, how do we all manage to figure out what those features are, and how do we know whether someone is a prospective date or a disinterested party? If we do manage to get a first date with a partner with potential, in what ways do we move the relationship along?

And so, “Getting Started: From Flirtation to Dating” begins with Carrie Jenkins’ groundbreaking essay on flirting. Her aim is to construct a useful account of flirtation that will enable each of us to consider our own and others’ behavior and determine whether some set of acts constitutes flirtation or not. In particular, Jenkins is keen to offer an account of when a person counts as flirting, rather than the related question of when the behaviors of that person are flirtatious, since she thinks that one can be flirtatious without flirting. For Jenkins, the crucial distinction is whether or not in engaging in flirtatious behavior one has certain intentions. According to Jenkins, only if one has particular sorts of intentions does one count as flirting.

In sharp contrast, Emily Langan looks at flirting from a seldom-seen vantage – that of conservative Christian men. To fully understand their viewpoint, Langan went straight to the source, interviewing young male daters who described themselves as “conservative,” asking some probing questions and incorporating parts of the resulting transcripts of these conversations in her thoughtful exploration of the topic. The candid responses from these men add another, analytical dimension to something most of us think of only as light-hearted fun.

Then, Jennifer A. Samp and Andrew I Cohen argue that traditional representations of dating and intimate relationships are hopelessly misleading. They suggest that

we are mistaken to suppose that unbridled and unconditioned passion or unconditional devotion is the defining feature of a healthy relationship. Instead, they suggest that dating is a process of social exchange in which each party constantly evaluates the features of the other party in an attempt to determine whether to maintain the relationship. While longstanding relationships might require considerable negative evaluation in order for it to be reasonable for us to decide to terminate them, no relationship fails to be subjected to evaluation in terms of the extent to which the needs of the parties are being met. This evaluative process is, they claim, entirely proper, and it is to our detriment to represent intimate relationships as being unconditional in any sense.

As with Jenkins, John Rowan and Patricia Hallen's final essay of this unit focuses on the communicative intentions of those involved in the romantic interaction. They use the appealing metaphor of an elevator ride to present their account of how we negotiate and communicate with one another to come to a mutual understanding about where a relationship is headed. They suggest that just as an elevator moves between floors, likewise relationships transition between phases. They stress the importance to those in the dating process of understanding these transitions and communicating to one's dating partner which "level" one is on.

The essays in our second unit, "No-No's: Dating Taboos," focus on what sorts of behaviors we ought *not* to engage in within the dating sphere. Dating "experts" abound, each elaborating the one, sure-fire plan to attract dates galore. But what of more unorthodox approaches, those that may yield insight, if not results, at odds with conventional wisdom? This unit explores a number of just such thoughts.

Here, for example, Mary Beth Yount playfully asks whether dating is like being mentally ill in certain ways. She suggests

that although daters and those in the early phases of romantic love are clearly not, in any good sense, mentally ill, there are surprisingly many features of the behaviors and psychological profiles of daters that are very like those of people suffering from psychological problems. She also argues that it helps to understand the nature of romantic love, in all its permutations, under the premise that if one understands the nature of the “illness,” one is less likely to be driven “crazy” by it.

Next, in a surprising turn, Kristie Miller asks whether there are any behaviors *at all* that ought to be taboo when it comes to dating. As she puts it, is it okay to date my sister or a gorilla? Tantalizingly, she answers in the affirmative. This essay focuses not on the ethical “ought” but on the prudential “ought.” It asks what each of us ought to do, if we are primarily interested in getting what we most want. The suggestion is that there are no sets of behaviors that we should presuppose are prudentially bad for us: nothing is taboo.

Anne Barnhill, on the other hand, is interested in the ethical “ought.” Her essay considers the extent to which, in the process of dating, one can violate the boundaries of another individual in order to facilitate a relationship. As Barnhill frames the question: When is serenading a prospective but unwilling party harassment and boundary violation, and when is it perfectly acceptable and how can we tell the difference? To gain some insight, she sets out a range of criteria designed to tell us when we are being pushy, rude, and manipulative, and when we are violating a boundary in an acceptable manner.

Then, in the final essay of this unit, Kyla Reid and Tinashe Dune take issue with the dating commandments set forward in books like *The Rules* that have recently become so popular. They argue that the sorts of rules espoused in these guides will not lead to a happy dating life or to finding

a good partner. Indeed, they argue that this rules-based approach promotes a psychology in women slanting them towards obeying the “rules,” behavior which is, in important respects, much like that of prostitutes and professional girlfriends. This, they argue, is no way to cultivate a real relationship.

Unit three, “Rolling Right Along: Dating Like a Pro,” focuses on how we *ought* to date, rather than on how we ought not to date. Though the ways in which dating taboos often can be turned on their head to good effect are made evident in the previous unit, this unit returns to topics more in keeping with received ideas about dating – not that the authors move lock-step with what many accept as “conventional wisdom” in the dating area. On the contrary, at least two of the essays in this unit argue forcefully – though often humorously – that time-held assumptions about such conventions as the “fix-up” and dating as the one sure route to mating just don’t hold water. These essays point to what Nabokov might have called the “signposts and tombstones” dotting the dating landscape glimpsed while rolling right along the dating route.

Accordingly, the first essay here, by Joshua S. Heter, is a manifesto against matchmaking in favor of what Heter argues are more natural ways of bringing people together in a romantic setting. Heter believes the artificiality of a fix-up presages the death knell of any potential relationship attempted under such circumstances; rather, he follows Aristotle in holding that each of us has a natural function, and that living according to that function makes us happy and fulfilled. For men especially, part of that function is to actively seek out a life partner in a masterful manner. Since matchmaking usurps this mastery it is antithetical to individual flourishing and not therefore a good way to find a romantic partner.

Likewise, Richard Hamilton's essay also focuses on an Aristotelean account of ethics and flourishing. Hamilton offers a critique of some of the recent books aimed at offering men a guide to attracting women by using a set of tricks or devices. He suggests that if we are at all worried about these books, it must be because we think that there is some small grain of truth in there somewhere: we suspect that some of these tricks might just work. Hamilton's claim is that the various tricks offered by these books are really just ways of trying to make a man appear to be a jerk rather than a nice guy, where for Hamilton, being a certain kind of jerk is being authentic and fulfilling one's human function, while being a nice guy is not. No surprise then, argues Hamilton, that women are attracted to jerks and not nice guys. By Hamilton's lights, successful daters should focus on being the right kind of jerk, and avoid being the wrong sort of nice guy!

There follows another essay in a counterintuitive mode much like Joshua Heter's manifesto against matchmaking, Andrew Terjesen's "I've Never Been on a Date (yet Somehow I got Married!)," which delves more deeply into the question of just what it is that constitutes a date. After all, the sorts of typical behaviors associated with dating can just as well be associated with interactions that are not dates. So how do we know when we're on a date and how does one manage to marry without dating? Terjesen's answer is that we mind-read: we use, albeit often unconsciously, a complex theory about others' intentions and mental states based on reasoning we engage in from our own behaviors and mental states. This is a complex process, which explains both why having dinner with someone is not in itself sufficient for an event to count as a date, but also why people can sometimes be confused as to the intentions of the other party, and thus confused as to whether they really are on a date or not. True dating