Article
Unrequited Love, Flirting and Non-Moral Resentment
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Abstract: Ulrika Carlsson has argued that it its justified to harbor non-moral resentment towards a person with whom one is unrequitedly in love. Anca Gheaus has rejected this with convincing arguments. This text explores the question of whether Gheaus’ verdict changes if the person being loved has previously flirted with the loving person. For this, it is first relevant what flirting actually is and how it relates to falling in love and love. On this basis, it is argued here that in the case of flirting, the non-moral resentment of the loved person defended by Carlsson is appropriate. By flirting, he or she has contributed to the unrequited love, even if he or she cannot be held responsible for it in a moral sense.

Keywords: unrequited love; flirting; responsibility; non-moral resentment; Anca Gheaus; Ulrika Carlsson

1. Introduction

Unrequited love is perceived by many people as painful. However, the moral status of this suffering is not obvious, i.e., the question of whether or who would be responsible for it and how the person in unrequited love should react. At first glance at least, it is not clear that the person who is loved here and does not reciprocate this love can be held responsible for this suffering. After all, it is not in this person’s power to change their feelings, i.e., to love, and there is also no moral responsibility towards the person who is unhappily in love to love them. Anca Gheaus [2] recently used similar arguments to reject Ulrika Carlsson’s thesis [3] that unrequited love is a reason for justified non-moral resentment towards the loved one. I largely share Gheaus’ assessment—I will explain some of the differences—but in this article I would like to discuss a different constellation than the one analyzed by Carlsson and Gheaus. They take the example from Gone with the Wind, in which Scarlett is unrequitedly and thus unhappily in love with Ashley; Ashley does not set out to make Scarlett fall in love with him, and, at least as far as Carlsson and Gheaus analyze this example, he does not actively contribute to her falling in love with him or remaining in love with him. I am now interested in the constellation in which the beloved person triggers, reinforces, or maintains this love through their actions; more precisely, when the beloved person flirts or has flirted with the loving person.

As I will show, this changes the above assessment of responsibility for the suffering of the loved one, at least in part. However, it is questionable how extensive the responsibility should then be. It is helpful to discuss different scenarios, which also point to the fact that it is not at all clear what flirting is, how it differs from other practices and communications, what goals are pursued with it, and not even whether a flirting person must or even can be aware that they are flirting. There may also be unintentional flirting and there are certainly social practices and communication that are only perceived as flirting by one of the two people involved. In any case, however, the example of flirting makes it clear that the above question of responsibility for unrequited love and thus also the question of what is a justified reaction of the loving person to the loved one is problematized anew. There will be different intuitions here as to how this and other cases of unrequited love and associated reactive attitudes are to be judged morally. Regardless of how widespread such intuitions are, I assume that it is philosophically valuable to reflect on this constellation of cases in...
which the loved one flirted with the loving person, just as it was philosophically valuable
that Carlsson and Gheaus reflected on the constellation in which Scarlett fell in love with
Ashley without Ashley’s intervention.

2. Unrequited Love, the Lack of Responsibility of the Loved One and the Right Way for
the Loving Person to Deal with Their Love

Ulrika Carlsson [3] has argued that it is justified to have non-moral resentment towards
the person with whom one is unhappily in love. It is important to note that Carlsson
develops her understanding of resentment following Peter Strawson [4], according to whom
resentment as a reactive attitude is closely linked to indignation. Resentment is not the
reaction to the harm one suffers, but to the attitude of the person, which is why resentment
is not indicated if the person did not want to harm one (e.g., acted under duress or could
not act otherwise). Carlsson now attempts to show that there can be a form of resentment
that is nevertheless justified as a reaction to such harm that was unintentional. She calls
this tragic resentment, because the harm that causes and justifies it is also tragic, meaning
that it is a harm that implies no wrongdoing and was not preventable—Gheaus then calls
this non-moral resentment to make it clearer that this differs from moral resentment as
the justified reaction to an intended harm. This non-moral resentment is justified because
these people hurt us by the absence of their love; we suffer from unrequited love. However,
since these people have no duty to love us—that is, not to hurt us in this respect and
to protect us from this hurt—they are not morally responsible for hurting us. Therefore,
moral resentment or moral reproach is also not justified. However, the existence of our
injury justifies our non-moral resentment. The example Carlsson uses here is Scarlett’s
unrequited love and resentment of Ashley in Gone with the Wind. Anca Gheaus has rejected
this argument, I think in most parts successfully.

First, Gheaus argues that Ashley does not hurt Scarlett at all, but merely does her no
good. The distinction between actively hurting and allowing an injury to occur is in the
background here. Ashley does nothing to harm Scarlett, he just does nothing to do her any
good by not loving her. He withholds nothing to give her and takes nothing from her—he
simply does not love her and has no way of making himself love her.

“For this reason, the interpretation that I propose is that Ashley fails to optimally
benefit Scarlett. Scarlett resents Ashley for failing to benefit her in the particular
way in which she wants him to benefit her, by not displaying an optimally positive
attitude towards her; I submit that, under this description, her resentment looks
not merely unjustified, but positively objectionable, especially if he cannot choose
to benefit her optimally” [2]. (p. 493)

Secondly, Gheaus argues that Ashley is also not causally responsible for Scarlett’s suf-
ferring. Not only does he have no moral responsibility, but Scarlett’s suffering is essentially
self-inflicted. This also supports the thesis that Ashley is only doing Scarlett no good in the
case of unrequited love; if he loved her, he would prevent her self-harm, but he cannot do
that. Why is Scarlett essentially harming herself? Gheaus argues that Scarlett is responsible
for who she loves; she could at least try to direct her love to someone else or change her
feelings. She does not. Gheaus assumes here, quite controversially, that feelings like love in
no way “force” a person to feel this way. One can add here that, even if Scarlett were not
able to change her feelings, Ashley would still not be responsible for this, but it is instead
comparable to a natural disaster. The unrequited love “hits” Scarlett and Ashley did not
trigger it in any meaningful way.

“In the particular case which is unrequited love, it seems attractive to say that
part of harm—being unloved—wasn’t caused by any agent. To the extent to
which there is no agent who is either morally or causally responsible for the
harm, there is also no target of appropriate resentment (much like in the case of
the wind destroying my garden). But another part of the harm of unrequited
love, emotional suffering, is caused be the victims themselves, by their failure
to control their hopes, beliefs and expectations; if so, they can be held causally
responsible for some of the suffering they experience. To the extent to which the harm is self-inflicted, the only appropriate target of resentment is the victim herself, and the basis of resentment is that, by failing to remove oneself from the harm’s way, one failed to take proper care of oneself” [2]. (p. 497)

Thirdly and finally, according to Gheaus, Carlsson’s argument is based on a false understanding of love, which misunderstands its character as a gift. By regarding non-moral resentment as justified, love is assumed to be a gift for which one should expect or even demand a counter-gift—the reciprocation of love. However, this is wrong. Scarlett’s love for Ashley is her gift, which she gives without any expectation of a return gift. This is precisely what love is all about, that it expects nothing in return, indeed it cannot even expect anything in return without corrupting. This is another reason why Scarlett’s non-moral resentment is unjustified, and even a morally wrong reaction. If you receive nothing in return for a genuine gift, or not what you would have hoped for, you have no reason to be angry.

“When we put conditions on successful gifting by allowing for justified resentment if the gift receiver fails to display a particular attitude, we are not in fact giving gifts but making a bid for an exchange: I love you so that you love me back” [2]. (p. 498)

From this, we can conclude that Ashley does not really have to change anything; Scarlett, on the other hand, does. She has to “work on” her love for Ashley so that she does not hurt herself any further; she has to overcome her resentment towards Ashley, and she has to change her implicit understanding of love, which she sees as an exchange rather than a gift. These hints are quite relevant to Scarlett, insofar as it is assumed that her life is a worse life than it could be due to suffering from unrequited love. After all, Carlsson and Gheaus agree, as do I, that fulfilled romantic love is part of a good life.

So much for the reconstruction of Carlsson’s argument and Gheaus’ counter-arguments. I want to make it clear right away that I agree with much of Gheaus’ view. In particular, I find her argument that Ashley is not the cause of suffering convincing, but this is a point worth picking up on, and that is the aim of the rest of the text.

3. Flirting and Flirtatious Behavior

It is an omission of Gheaus and Carlsson that they pay almost no attention to the emergence of love—or infatuation, if one wants to make that distinction. Although love can, as they say metaphorically, hit you like a bolt from the blue, it also often has a “run-up” in practice and emerges in communication between people. This is one of the reasons why many people fall in love where they are (frequently) present and where communication can take place, be it at work, in a club or at a conference. This is also the case with Ashley and Scarlett, who were friends before their unrequited love came about. And, in some way, of course, it was Ashley’s actions that led to Scarlett falling in love with him, even if the aim of these actions was not precisely that love. If, as Gheaus rightly points out, Ashley had set out to make Scarlett fall in love with him, knowing that he would not return this love, then he would have been morally guilty.

“After all, Ashley recognises he is a bit infatuated with her, and maybe his infatuation has shown; maybe he neglectfully encouraged Scarlett to fall in love with him. If so, then Ashley really is an appropriate target of Scarlett’s resentment, but of the moralised rather than of the tragic kind: in this case, Ashley has wronged Scarlett by provoking her love while knowing he will not be able, or willing, to reciprocate” [2]. (p. 493)

However, I am now assuming that there are actions that exist to some extent between these two poles—on the one hand, actions without any intention of causing love, and, on the other hand, actions with the intention of doing so. This is where I position flirting, for which it is first necessary to clarify what is actually meant by it. It is therefore necessary and useful to draw on social science and psychological concepts that can explain the content,
motives and consequences of flirting. It should be said at the outset that there is no uniform understanding of flirting here either; some studies therefore refer to flirting as an ambiguous concept. It seems to make sense to approach flirting from the motives of the person(s) flirting rather than from their behavior. This is because flirting not only encompasses a large, individually and culturally differentiated repertoire of actions, but also because flirters consciously “camouflage” their flirting. This can serve as self-protection, as there is a risk of rejection and you can never be sure how the other person will react to your flirting.

David Dryden Henningsen [7] has distinguished six motives for flirting: sex, fun, exploring, relational, esteem and instrumental. This is based on the long-established distinction that flirting is not always used to initiate a romantic or sexual relationship. Here, too, the distinction lies in the motives and not in the actions.

“The distinction between courtship initiation and quasi-courtship appears to lie not in flirting behaviors per se but rather in the motivations that generate those behaviors. Sexually motivated flirting behaviors are courtship initiating; behaviors with no sexual intent are quasi-courtship” [7]. (p. 481)

The question of motives and intention is also the focus of Carrie S. Jenkins (Jenkins 2010), in the first philosophical text on the concept of flirting that I am aware of. She distinguishes between flirting behavior and flirting, whereby the former is defined by the fact that the person performs actions that are (can be) perceived as flirting, but were not intended as such by the person who is supposedly flirting. The person who performs flirtatious actions but is not flirting may not even be aware of it. Instead, according to Jenkins, flirting is always intentional, even if the flirting person is only dimly aware of it or the goals are ambiguous. Unlike Henningson, however, Jenkins restricts flirting to the initiation of a romantic or sexual relationship; she excludes the other motives for flirting—without good reason, in my opinion, but justifiably so.

“So, when Henningson distinguishes six motives for flirting, this actually refers to different motives for why people flirt, but also why they engage in flirtatious behavior. However, since Henningson examines motives, these are not unconscious actions, as Jenkins addresses. If the person is seeking instrumental advantages in negotiations and not romance or sex, then they are not flirting but using flirtatious behavior to achieve their goals. There is certainly a gray area here, for example, in the motive of fun that Henningson mentions. In many flirtatious acts that are performed to have fun, there is at least an openness that this will lead to the initiation of sex or romance after all. The ambiguity of flirting is then retained. Importantly, and in line with social science/psychological research, Jenkins argues that flirting is not necessarily flirtatious behavior. I have already said that people “camouflage” their flirting, and individual or cultural variation also opens up the possibility that the very playful behavior to initiate sex or romance is performed in ways that are not considered flirting behavior from the “outside”, according to social norms or understandings. What is considered flirtatious behavior is therefore socially determined, whereas flirting is subjective.

4. Flirting and the Emergence of Unrequited Love

What can we learn from this about unrequited love, the attribution of responsibility and the reaction of the people involved? As I said, the loved one is not responsible for the love, nor does he or she harm the person, but only does them no good, i.e., the good that the person in love wishes for, namely to be loved themselves. This also applies in the case of flirting.

First of all, it should be noted that the connection between unrequited love and flirting as well as flirtatious behavior is by no means always causally clear. After all, not
every flirtation leads to love. Nevertheless, flirting, just like flirtatious behavior, can be a contributing cause of love. The flirting person’s behavior triggers these feelings in the person being flirted with. It is not uncommon for flirting to be the beginning of what is called “falling in love”, a process worth considering as it involves making that one person special to you [9]. It is then not love at first sight, which is triggered by the mere presence of the other person [10], but a love that also relates to how the person has behaved and approached in flirting. There are probably always other things involved, and it is not just flirting or flirtatious behavior that leads to love. It also includes “uncontrollable” elements, such as attractiveness or sympathy. Nevertheless, it seems plausible to me to assume that there are cases in which one person would not have fallen in love with another if they had not flirted. This applies equally to flirting and to flirtatious behavior that is not aimed at romance or sex at all. Yes, it is probably more common for people to fall in love with others who show flirting behavior but do not flirt than in cases where flirting is shown without showing flirting behavior, because in the first case it is more likely that the person to whom flirting behavior is shown will interpret and perceive it as flirting. Genuine flirting without flirting behavior, on the other hand, has a high probability of not being recognized, especially if it happens between people who are not familiar with each other.

Flirting behavior is not motivated by sex, romance or even love. The cases in which flirtatious behavior is used to trigger unrequited love in the other person will be rare, but then, as Gheaus rightly writes, they deserve moral criticism. Even if it is clear that flirtatious behavior alone cannot usually trigger unrequited love, you should not consciously try to make someone fall in love with you if you have no intention of reciprocating this love. It then stands to reason that this is about deliberately hurting the other person, because you can assume that they will suffer from unrequited love. After all, only a few are probably able to control their feelings of love as well as Gheaus demands, such that they can shake off unrequited love without harm.

Other cases are more complicated and probably much more common. First of all, there are those in which flirtatious behavior is unconsciously displayed. You do not want to flirt at all, but in the other person’s understanding you do. In this case, culpable behavior cannot be assumed. There is only a limited responsibility to be aware of what is considered flirting behavior in the respective society, so if one displays flirting behavior by accident then they are not culpable. In addition, flirtatious behavior is by no means always clearly defined. The reference to social norms is not sufficient here, because flirting behavior is openly normalized, playful and sometimes disguised in other actions. The social norming of flirting behavior is therefore weak; one could also say that it is not even possible to determine what is considered flirting behavior in a society; but many people recognize it when they see or experience it, and many are also mistaken [11].

Here, Jenkins [8] (p. 14) points out that flirting can be distinguished from other forms of action and communication aimed at initiating sex or romance. For example, she mentions explicit questions or statements: “I find you attractive”. or “Shall we go out together?”. This is not flirting. In contrast to what Jenkins explains, this can also be applied to flirting behavior. Flirting behavior may be socially normalized, but this normalization excludes such explicit forms of initiation, at least in many societies. Flirting behavior may not have the goal of initiation, but it is close to real flirting in that most forms of real flirting involve flirting behavior. This includes what Jenkins calls the playful approach. Playful behavior can also include many forms in which the initiation is “disguised”; for example, what can be called teasing. The saying goes “What teases, loves each other”; more appropriate and much more common is the “preliminary stage” of love: “What teases, flirts”. However, teasing can also be “real” teasing, in which case it is neither flirting behavior nor flirting, but due to the open standardization of flirting behavior, teasing can also be part of the flirting repertoire in a society.

Just like the person who unconsciously displays flirting behavior, the person who does not, but whose behavior is perceived as flirting by the other person, is also blameless. This could also apply to Ashley. Perhaps his behavior, which was not flirting at all, was
perceived as flirting by Scarlett. The ambiguity of flirting and flirtatious behavior makes this entirely possible. After all, many people know, even if they are perhaps not always aware of it, that—at least in our society—flirting is an open affair, that teasing and slight teasing, for example, which do not indicate an initiation in terms of information content, can be just that: a flirt. The potential for misunderstanding is therefore high on both sides.

There is flirtatious behavior that does not have the goal of initiating sex or romance, but in which it is definitely designed to be understood by the other person as an initiation. It is not about making the other person fall in love. But it is then part of the motivation for the other person to perceive it as flirting; it is about playing with the other person, having fun or, as Henningson calls it, about appreciation and one’s own ego. In such cases, where there may well be an openness to engage in a flirtation after all—an openness that the person behaving in such a flirtatious manner is sometimes not even aware of—there is no moral culpability for the resulting unrequited love. After all, the person behaving flirtatiously in this way cannot be expected to fall in love with the other person on the basis of this behavior. However, other forms of harm, such as disappointment on the part of the other person that this is not a genuine flirtation after all, but merely flirtatious behavior, are certainly accepted. This is then morally relevant.

But what about those who are actually flirting, i.e., who are trying to initiate sex or romance? In many cases, flirting is not about love, but about sex or other forms of eroticism. It is therefore not the flirting person’s (primary) motivation to make the other person fall in love with them, even if the aim is to initiate sex or romance. I would therefore not speak of moral responsibility in such cases either. After all, it was not the intention to make the person fall in love and it was not very likely that this would happen. The vast majority of flirtations do not end in unrequited love. It was about sex or eroticism, not about love and not about someone suffering from unrequited love. When you flirt, you do not owe the other person any love.

Nevertheless, I see the last two forms of behavior, i.e., genuine flirting without the intention of love and flirtatious behavior that deliberately feigns genuine flirting without the intention of love, as relevant to the question of non-moral responsibility for unrequited love. If unrequited love develops from these two behaviors, then although this was unlikely and one cannot be held morally responsible for it, one is still causally connected to this unrequited love⁶. Unlike Ashley with Scarlett, you have contributed to it by triggering the love in the other person through your behavior. This is tragic in a different way than Carlsson understands it. In Carlsson’s case, love is tragic because Ashley cannot help it, but he is nevertheless the cause of Scarlett falling in love with him. Gheaus denies this. The cause is Scarlett, who cannot control her love, but above all her suffering from unrequited love. Scarlett makes herself a victim. In cases of real flirting and feigned flirting, however, the causality of unrequited love is, in my opinion, now more strongly linked to the loved one, i.e., to the person who behaved flirtatiously and flirted. One can still, with Gheaus, be of the opinion that the loving person causes the suffering of unrequited love to a certain extent him/herself, but the contribution of the loved one in these cases is certainly greater than that of Ashley, assuming he had not also flirted with Scarlett or pretended to flirt with her. What Carlsson wrote about Ashley therefore applies to the flirting person:

“Because Ashley does not owe Scarlett love, he does not owe her an excuse for not loving her, either. Yet this does not mean that Ashley does not bear some kind of responsibility for his attitude to Scarlett and for its effect on her” [3]. (p. 1183)

Now is also the time to correct Gheaus’ thesis of the self-inflicted suffering of unrequited love. She is not referring to psychological insights into the strength or possible loss of control through this feeling, but to the stoic view that we are responsible for our desires and attitudes and should control them ourselves. However, the truth probably lies between these two poles of helplessness and control. Psychological research also suggests that unrequited love—like love in general—is a particularly strong and difficult feeling to control, which is why it so often leads to (self) harming behavior.
"The perspective that rejection in love involves subcortical reward gain/loss systems critical to survival helps to explain why feelings and behaviors related to romantic rejection are difficult to control and lends insight into the high cross-cultural rates of stalking, homicide, suicide, and clinical depression associated with rejection in love" \[12\]. (p. 59)

Francesca Minerva \[13\] has concluded on the basis of such scientific findings that there are good reasons to treat unrequited love with medication and that this is ethically required. It is therefore plausible to assume that although there is a certain degree of complicity on the part of the person in love if they suffer from their love, they may still find it very difficult to overcome this love and some may only succeed in doing so with (medical) help. This does not mean that the person you are in love with is the cause, it just depends on their behavior, and that opens the door again to what Carlsson calls non-moral resentment, i.e., the loving person’s right to have feelings of resentment towards the loved one because they are partly responsible for the unrequited love. At the very least, my reasoning concludes, the loved one is no longer as innocent as Ashley.

5. Actors of Flirting

Most of the explanations refer to the person who shows flirtatious behavior or flirts, while on the other side is the person who is being flirted with and who, as we are talking about here, falls in love. This is an oversimplification insofar as this person is not a passive victim in most cases. It is important for Gheaus to emphasize that the blame for the suffering of unrequited love actually lies with the person who loves and not with the person who is loved. She argues that people can be responsible for their feelings and how they deal with them; they can also learn to deal with them differently than suffering. I questioned this above, with reference to psychological research. But is not the person in love also partly to blame for their love because they flirted with it and thereby accepted the fact that they fell in love or even tried to fall in love? This is suggested by a different understanding of flirting, as advocated by Lucy McDonald. She recently argued that flirting is like playing tennis; it only works if both people take part and flirt together, playfully repelling and attracting each other.

“I have defined flirting as a conversational game involving two moves: push moves, which involve presupposing an intimacy that does not yet exist, and pull moves, which involve playfully pretending to block those presuppositions. As flirters perform rallies of these moves, they gradually increase the intimacy between them through a process which philosophers of language call accommodation” \[14\]. (p. 11)

This description may well apply to many forms of flirting, but it seems to me to emphasize a particular variant. In contrast, I think it is more plausible that, as Jenkins writes, there is flirting behavior that is not understood as flirting by the other person (because, for example, the cultural norms are not known) and that flirting can also take place without flirting behavior (according to cultural norms) taking place. It is therefore not always necessary to alternate between push and pull moves, as McDonald claims. Nevertheless, it is important to note that often, but by no means always, both flirt. It is therefore not the case that the person who falls in love is always made to fall in love unilaterally by the flirtatious behavior of the other person, but that love is strengthened or triggered by the fact that both flirt. And they often flirt more often than just once; for example, because they share the same workplace, are often out together in a friendly group, are in the same club or meet again and again at conferences. In the case of Ashley and Scarlett, there is also no unrequited love because they have only seen each other once, but love is generated through repeated interaction within the framework of their friendship.

By flirting with each other, both accept that the motives may be different and that the consequences may not be the intended ones. Person A may flirt for fun or for their own ego, but person B does so with the intention of creating intimacy. It can “happen” to both
of them that their motives and preferences change and that they fall in love; a love that then remains unrequited and can cause the same suffering that Scarlett feels and is the reason for her anger towards Ashley. Since neither of the flirters can control this, but are nevertheless partly responsible for the unrequited love that develops, Carlsson’s concept of non-moral resentment seems to me to be an appropriate description here. The fact that someone has also flirted and thus falls in love unrequitedly leads to a sharing of the cause, but not to a causal exoneration of the other person who has also flirted. Although there are then stronger reasons for the person in love to direct their resentment not only at the person they love, but also at themselves, because they were partly responsible for it, part of the cause still lies with the other person. If they had not flirted, you would not have been able to flirt with them and you would not have not have fallen in love.

6. Love as a Gift, Flirting as an Exchange?

The final argument that Gheaus puts forward against Carlsson is that love is a gift and not an exchange [2] (p. 498). One should not expect love in return. I agree with this in principle. However, Gheaus writes that it is of decisive importance whether Ashley consciously seduces Scarlett, i.e., sparks her love, knowing that he does not love her. Then, according to Gheaus, he has made himself morally guilty. I have shown that although flirting cannot be understood as consciously making someone falling in love, it is at least always within the realm of possibility and that flirting can actually be a contributory cause of love. Then, according to the first argument, it does not matter whether love is a gift or not, i.e., whether one can expect reciprocal love. Love as a gift is then rather to be understood as a counter-gift to flirting. Although it is a new quality and goes beyond the gift of flirting, it would not have been given without the flirtation. This changes the character of the unrequited love from a spontaneous, unprovoked gift to a continuation of an ongoing exchange of gifts and makes this love appear as a reaction to the flirting behavior of the loved one. Of course, she does not have to accept this counter-gift, nor can she if she does not feel love herself, but it is not as alien to her as the love shown by a person with whom she has not flirted. She could expect, albeit improbably, that her flirting would provoke the gift of love.

7. Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that a flirting person cannot be held morally responsible for the feelings they trigger in the other person. So, if someone falls in love with a flirtatious person and that love is not reciprocated, then the flirtatious person does not deserve moral resentment for their behavior. However, flirting, like many other practices aimed at initiating romance or sex, is in some cases a contributing factor to unrequited love. It is then legitimate to have feelings of non-moral resentment towards the loved one who has contributed to this unrequited love through their behavior; negative feelings that do not indicate moral responsibility, but are nevertheless justified and which the loving person does not have to “work on” or change, at least not for that reason. While it might be better for one’s subjective well-being not to harbor such non-moral resentment towards the unrequited loved one who is flirting with one, that is not the question of this article. Likewise, I agree with Gheaus that there is still a contribution of the loving person to their being in love and their suffering from it. For this reason too, the person in love should not only make the loved one the target of their resentment, but should also look at themselves. After all, it would certainly be better if the unrequited lover overcame their feelings and fell in love with someone else who actually reciprocates this love. With an eye toward the arguments presented by Matthew Congdon [15], it is also possible to consider that Scarlett’s non-moral resentment can be used by her in a “creative” way, meaning that it enables her to develop new normative expectations. In this case, those normative expectations that relate to how the loved person should treat her or what kind of attitudes this involves. For Carlsson, such expectations do not play a role, as she is solely concerned with the harm caused by the lack of being loved back. However, I suppose that some expectations
regarding the behavior of the loved person play a role in the causation of this harm. The moral evaluation, however, changes when the flirting person realizes that they are helping to cause such unrequited love; then they too have reasons to change their behavior and should no longer flirt with the unrequited lover.

My discussion in this paper remained abstract insofar as many additional factors would need to be considered to evaluate a specific situation. This begins with the personal motives of the person flirting, the positions each person holds relative to one another, or the social context in which they meet. Flirting in the workplace, between a supervisor and an employee, between a professor and a postdoc, and between people who hold significantly different socioeconomic positions, where one can potentially exert power over the other, are all situations that bring additional morally relevant implications and could lead to a shift in moral evaluation. Resentment, whether moral or non-moral, in relation to flirting can also refer to other forms of harm besides unrequited love or also to the conditions and structures in which it takes place. It is conceivable that resentment may relate both to being unrequitedly in love and to the social norms that contribute to this unrequited love. For instance, if Ashley had flirted with Scarlett but the social norms of flirting contributed to her falling in love, Scarlett seems to be justified to experience non-moral resentment towards Ashley and towards the social norms, which contributed to her situation. It would be worthwhile to consider multiple types of situations and analyze each individually. However, the aim of this paper was different; namely, to establish that non-moral resentment of the person in love is prima facie justified if the loved person has flirted with him or her.

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Notes

1. This text will not pursue the questions of what (unrequited) love is, what moral value it has and how it can be justified. This does not seem necessary to me, as the basic premise that unrequited love can be experienced with suffering is plausible. Sara Protasi [1] has written insightfully about the value of unrequited love.

2. To what extent this is a correct interpretation of the actions in the book or movie does not interest me here. This is just an example, which can be replaced by any other example from real life or art. The important thing is that I understand Gheaus to be referring to constellations in which the two people are not flirting with each other, while I am concentrating on those in which they are. A reviewer correctly noted that, in the case of flirting, the constellation of Ashley and Scarlett in Gone with the Wind is no longer the appropriate literary example, but this could be better illustrated by Pride and Prejudice. This would certainly be worthwhile if, in doing so, other aspects could be uncovered that are somehow related to the question of this paper (for example, forms of deception or of the social circumstances that favor certain forms of suffering from unrequited love). However, I believe that it is not crucial for the point I want to make and that it is also not crucial where an example for this this is illustrated in literature. Rather, I believe it is sufficient to ask what changes in the moral assessment if Ashley had flirted with Scarlett. Similarly, I think that the arguments of Carlsson and Gheaus are not dependent on the literary source but stand on their own. In Pride and Prejudice, there are constellations that, according to my analysis, would clearly fall under the concept of moral resentment, as well as those that, according to Carlsson, could function as non-moral resentment, where unrequited love was not actually exacerbated by the behavior of the loved one (e.g., through flirting). An example of this would be Mr. Darcy’s love for Elizabeth Bennet.

3. Strawson’s paper was extremely influential, and there are current discussions about the phenomenology of resentment as well as different forms of it and their moral status. For example, Katie Stockdale [5] has argued that resentment is not only appropriate towards individuals but can also take an explicit political form, thus addressing structures and institutions. In the case that interests me in this paper, it is about the personal level, but there is another connection to social conditions, as one can assert with Alice MacLachlan [6]. For MacLachlan, besides the standard paradigm of resentment as a reasonable and morally justified form of anger over the violation of moral rights, unreasonable resentment can also have ethical content, and resentment itself can only be understood against the backdrop of social and political conditions. In her distinction between morality and the ethical, MacLachlan refers to Bernard Williams, who argues that morality is concerned with the “pure” realm of rights and duties, while ethics is concerned with the realm of normative meaning. Here, an interesting—yet unaddressed—parallel to Carlsson’s understanding of tragic resentment emerges. This resentment is tragic because, although a violation occurs, it is not a violation of...
moral rights. Therefore, in terms of the standard concept that MacLachlan elaborates, it is not a form of reasonable resentment but unreasonable. But Carlsson’s understanding of tragic resentment still has—in the sense of MacLachlan—an ethical content.

This behavior would be more akin to that of Mr. Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*, who had no interest in marrying Lydia Bennet, deceives her and thus deliberately accepts her dishonor through her illegitimate status. It would thus be justified for Lydia to feel resentment towards him.

A completely different question is the justified reaction to the flirting behavior itself. This behavior can, of course, be inappropriate, put the other person in an uncomfortable position, or even cause harm. Flirting can be particularly unpleasant when it is framed by unequal power or gender relations. However, my focus here is not on the ethical evaluation of flirting itself or on when in such cases (moral or non-moral) resentment is justified. In most cases, flirting that justifiably elicits resentment from the person being flirted with will not lead to unrequited love for that person.

It is important to clarify this point once again. If person A flirts with person B, A is still not morally responsible if B falls in love with A, because A neither intended this nor could have anticipated that B would fall in love, and part of the causal responsibility for the unrequited love still lies with B. Flirting can sometimes favor and provoke unrequited love, which is why A’s causal contribution in such cases of unrequited love is greater. Therefore, it is also reasonable to subsequently ask whether the flirting person, A, could have known that they were causing unrequited love to the extent that they should have refrained from this behavior. I do not think that this can be established, except in very rare cases. Here too, it is helpful to distinguish, with MacLachlan [6], between the domain of morality, with clear rights and duties, and the ethical domain. Since there can be no clear duty for A not to flirt because there is a very low probability that the other person, B, will fall in love, there can nevertheless be non-moral resentment on B’s part if they do fall in love, because A plays a causal role in this. This assessment does not preclude that A has certain duties of care towards B in specific cases; for example, not flirting with B against her will or not in situations where B has less power or fewer opportunities to withdraw from the flirtation.

However, I doubt whether there can be unequal conditions under which the likelihood that B will fall unrequitedly in love with A increases, although I do not want to rule this out entirely. It is conceivable, but I would not speak of genuine love in such cases, if, for instance, unequal conditions lead B to fall unrequitedly in love as a form of adaptive preference or as a result of alienation.

References


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