



## Flirting with Things: Simmel on Coquetry and Money

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### Article abstract

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ARTHUR BUENO

## *Flirting with Things: Simmel on Coquetry and Money*

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### **Introduction**

As many have observed, the apparently fragmentary nature of Simmel's works presents challenges when it comes to their interpretation. A precursor to philosophy's shift toward particular objects that significantly influenced readers like Benjamin, Kracauer, and Adorno, Simmel explored a wide array of phenomena in his writings – from the grandest to the minutest, from the loftiest to the lowliest, from the most serious to the most mundane. In the prefaces to *Philosophy of Money* and *Rembrandt*, this approach was conceived as a critique of abstract philosophical systems. "Philosophical concepts", he argues, "should not always keep only their own company" (Simmel, 2005 [1916]: 3).<sup>1</sup> To the

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<sup>1</sup> Simmel's writings are referenced in this text according to their English translations, whenever available. All quotations were cross-referenced with the original German texts (as published in the *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*) and occasionally adjusted for precision. In cases where no existing English translation

extent that it maintains a distance from specific objects, the abstractly constructed system can merely posit the conditions under which objects might be extracted from their isolation, without actually doing so (see Simmel 2004 [1900/07]: 51-54). In contrast, Simmel suggests approaching the surface of existence on its own terms, leaving it “simply as it is and subject to its own immediate laws” (Simmel, 2005 [1916]: 3).

Still, a concern for universality permeates his writings; it doesn’t fade away with the rejection of the philosophical system. As Simmel conceives it, philosophy’s task is to “lower a plumb line through the immediate singular, the simply given, into the depths of ultimate intellectual meanings”, delving into “the network of lines that mediate its connection to the realm of ideas” (Simmel, 2005 [1916]: 3). The “totality of [life’s] meaning” should not be approached through abstraction from the immediacy and the concreteness of objects, but precisely on their basis (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 53). Nonetheless, the relationship between the particular and the universal isn’t thereby resolved; rather, it takes on a new form. In spite of the effort at mediation, every image of the universal remains contingent upon its initial standpoint. The totality of life appears differently when viewed through the lens of money or Rembrandt’s art, sociability or adventure, the meal or the handle.<sup>2</sup>

The question of the (lack of) unity of Simmel’s work is thus raised in a renewed way with each of his texts. The same holds for his essay on coquetry. Published in its initial version nine years after the first edition of *Philosophy of Money*, it maintains a peculiar relationship with that book. A continuity between them is immediately visible and lies precisely in the concern with the theme of life. In his 1900 magnum opus, Simmel sees money as an object

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was available, I have provided my own. Throughout the article, the term *Koketterie* is rendered as “coquetry” or “flirtation”.

<sup>2</sup> For a distinction of three moments in Simmel’s approach to life, see Bueno, 2018.

particularly well-suited to a philosophy whose “problem is nothing less than the totality of existence” (ibid.: 54). Being “indifference itself, in that its entire purposive significance does not lie in itself but rather in its transformation into other values”, money consists in the most “superficial and insubstantial” of all elements and, at the same time, is the most effective bearer of the network of lines one must unfold in order to approach the “inner substance of life” (ibid.: 53). Similarly, Simmel considers coquetry a phenomenon that “describes only the form of [love’s] expression and its superficial aspect” (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 133). Yet precisely because of this, it can be seen as symbolizing (erotic) life’s movement “in the form of a polarity, [...] the elements of which eternally seek one another, complement one another, and yet never overcome their own opposition” (ibid.: 149).

At first glance, therefore, what Simmel finds in coquetry is not much different from what he discerns in money. Both serve as examples of the same life shaped by unresolved oppositions and continuously propelled by their tensions. In fact, his analysis of flirtation reveals many similarities with the mechanisms observed in monetary transactions. In a short piece published in 1907 in *Jugend*, Simmel had suggested that love relationships might be comprehended through an analogy with economic exchanges:

When concluding any commercial transaction, the person who has less interest in the transaction than the other has an advantage from the outset. Quite paradoxically, this is repeated within love. In every love relationship the one who loves less holds the upper hand; they can, so to speak, set their terms, the other is at their mercy; for the latter is prevented by the inner attachment of love from noticing their advantages, and from taking advantage of the ones they notice. In marriage, all other things being equal, it is the one who invest the lesser feeling that tends to dominate (Simmel, 2004 [1907]: 437-438).

In the 1909 essay on coquetry (expanded and republished two years later in *Philosophical Culture*), the parallels between love and

money are presented in a more developed form. Although, for the most part, this connection is not made explicit by Simmel, the affinity of his arguments on flirtation with some of his analyses in *Philosophy of Money* is remarkable. However, approaching Simmel's work in this manner risks losing sight of something crucial about the meaning of coquetry, as well as about his method. If it were merely a matter of identifying the same life everywhere, then objects would lack distinct significance. Philosophy would dedicate itself to always revealing in a different phenomenon – here money, there flirtation – the same dynamics between contrasting elements.

A close reading of Simmel's essay on coquetry, however, reveals that this is not the case. While some of the fundamental categories from his investigations into money reappear, they undergo transformations that radically alter their meaning. Crucially, coquetry's proximity to the processes of play and art has a pivotal role. This has important implications not only for Simmel's metaphysical reflections on life but also for his diagnosis of modernity. As I will contend, the contradictions of the modern experience analyzed in his writings on money find in flirtation a space where they can present themselves in a reconciled (though still tragic) manner. Positioned between economy and art, coquetry holds for Simmel a significance that extends beyond erotic relationships, consisting in a broader form of engaging with the world.

### **Love as desire**

The essay on coquetry starts with Plato's characterization of love as an "intermediate state between having and not-having" (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 133). To be sure, Simmel notes that this definition does not concern "the profundity of love's essence but only one form of its manifestation" (ibid.). This intermediate state seems to describe only the surface aspect of love and not its "definitive quality" (ibid.). Nevertheless, it is on this basis that he comes to understand the

experience that takes shape in coquetry. As we saw above, for Simmel one can only grasp a phenomenon by taking seriously the surface of its existence. Whether, and in what sense, such an intermediate state corresponds to the “being of love” (*ibid.*) is a problem that cannot be settled before exploring how it immediately appears.

What is initially striking about this kind of love is its paradoxical nature. Situated between not-having and having, it is defined by the movement toward possession. And yet, at the moment one comes to possess what one longed for, one immediately leaves that in-between position. One ‘has’ what one desired and can enjoy it or be bored by it, but in any case, one no longer experiences love. Understood in this way, love is self-defeating: “when it has, it can no longer be the same as it was before” (*ibid.*). It vanishes as soon as it is fulfilled. From this perspective, if one wants to avoid the dissipation of love, one must maintain a necessarily unstable position. One must locate oneself, as it were, on the bridge rather than at any definite point of arrival (see Simmel, 1994 [1909]). In the fixed condition of pure having, as well as in that of pure not-having, love ceases to exist.

However, at the very moment of its disappearance, love can resurface. As it stabilizes and consequently perishes, it transforms once again into a state of not-having – thus reigniting the yearning for possession. Because this love is never satisfied, because the fulfillment of its longing means its own dissolution, it is compelled to keep moving. When one does not have the object of love, one yearns for possession; but when one comes to possess that object, love is gone, and one is again in a state of dispossession. Enthralled in this “rhythmic oscillation” (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 133), the lover is constantly in motion yet always in the same place: on the bridge between having and not-having.

## Desire for desire

The experience of love as an intermediate state thus appears to be marked by the same “restlessness, feverishness, and unrelenting character” that Simmel saw as defining of “the phenomena of modern culture as they are determined by the money economy” (Simmel, 1997 [1896]: 252; Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 46). As does money, this form of love looks like an “unremovable wheel that makes the machine of life a *perpetuum mobile*” (Simmel, 1997 [1896]: 252). In fact, at a closer look one can discern in Simmel’s work structural similarities between the two. Although he does not make this connection explicit in the essay on coquetry, one may recall here his analysis of the role of desire in economic exchange.

In the first chapter of the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel argues that value can only emerge when there is desire in the sense of a distance, and hence a tension, between a subject and an object (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 62 ff.). We only desire (and value) what we cannot yet enjoy. Desire occupies an intermediate position between proximity and distance: it is defined by the subject’s willingness to make an effort, or a “sacrifice”, to overcome the distance toward an object that is close enough to seem attainable but far enough to not be available for immediate enjoyment. Accordingly, when that object comes to be possessed and enjoyed, there is no longer a need for sacrifice and hence no longer desire.

It is therefore a feature of desire, whatever the area in which it is pursued, that it dissipates as soon as it is satisfied. Love as a state between having and not-having, with which Simmel begins his essay on coquetry, is a form of love-desire, or love as synonymous with desire.

However, these determinations are not sufficient to characterize the dynamics of a monetary economy. According to Simmel, economic value starts to emerge when, in an exchange between two subjects, there is a reciprocal and inverse equivalence between their desires and the sacrifices made by each of them. Economic

exchange is, in this sense, “sacrificial exchange” (ibid.: 80). The object of the desire of one subject (let’s say, apples) is the content of the sacrifice of the other (for instance, oranges); and conversely, the object sacrificed by the former (oranges) is the content of the desire of the latter (apples). From this form of exchange emerges a form of (intersubjective) value located beyond the individual subjects and their desires. Yet, the exchange still culminates in the enjoyment of particular, concrete objects by those involved. The content of their desires is not the same: one desires apples, the other oranges.

And yet, as Simmel argues, the constitution of the money economy as an objective and relatively autonomous sphere entails a further transformation of desire. In this case, the content of the desires involved is not this or that particular object (an apple or an orange), but rather *desire itself*. Consider the buyer and seller of financial assets, for whom it does not matter which objects and processes are at stake, but only the value emerging from the transaction. To be more precise: involved here is not even the desire for a particular desire (i.e., the desire to be desired by a specific person). Rather, it is a desire for desire itself *in the abstract*: the desire for *any* desire. More than an intersubjective equivalence between two desires and sacrifices, we have here a general equivalence in which all desires are equivalent because their object is fundamentally the same: desire itself.

This form of desire is inherently paradoxical: a desire that desires desire cannot, by definition, be satisfied. As we saw above, what characterizes desire is precisely its distance from an object. At the moment of enjoyment, when this distance is overcome, desire necessarily fades away. It may resurface, but it will be in any case the desire for something specific: after eating an apple, I may want an orange. Something else takes place in an abstract desire for desire. As with any desire, it wishes to be satisfied; it wants to enjoy. Yet at the same time, as a desire *for desire*, it wishes *not* to be satisfied. As soon as it is satisfied, it is immediately dissatisfied; for what it wants



is not enjoyment but desire itself. Paradoxically, for such a form of desire, satisfaction is synonymous with dissatisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

Hence, there is a striking similarity between the form taken by desire in the money economy and love as an intermediate state between having and not-having. Their affinity goes beyond the mere fact that both are founded on desire. As described by Simmel, love as an intermediate state seems to lead to the same kind of paradoxical experience that takes place in the abstract desire for desire. What money accomplishes on a large scale can occur in the love relationship, namely, the emergence of a desire that never finds rest since its satisfaction immediately results in dissatisfaction. However, for this to happen it is necessary that, like money in the modern economy, love as an intermediate state become an end in itself. For Simmel, as we will see, this is what takes place in coquetry.

### The price of love

The suggestion of an affinity between love relationships and monetary exchanges becomes more explicit as Simmel explores the emergence of coquetry. He underscores how the behavior of the coquette does not only seek to please the other or stimulate their

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<sup>3</sup> This is how the paradoxical effects of the conversion of money into an end in itself, which Simmel initially conceived in terms of a theory of action, are formulated within his value theory. In his early writings, he designated these paradoxes as “psychological interruption of the teleological series” or “colonization of ends by means” (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 235; 1997 [1896]: 250). Due to the expansion of action chains in modernity and the increasing mediation of final purposes, we are led to concentrate our effort upon the immediately present means (e.g., money), which may then gain an autonomous significance. The more intricate and elaborate the technique of all domains of life becomes, “the greater [the] danger is of getting stuck in the labyrinth of means and thereby forgetting the ultimate goal” (Simmel, 1997 [1896]: 250–51). Correspondingly, Simmel’s value theory indicates how one might get stuck in the labyrinth of desire and fail to reach enjoyment.

“liking” (*Gefallen*).<sup>4</sup> To be sure, our desire is influenced by whether an object pleases us or not: the value we attribute to something tends to increase based on our liking of it and decrease if we dislike it. But there is an opposite tendency that is particularly significant for coquetry: “when possession and non-possession acquire significance and weight for us, on whatever basis, their object tends to excite our pleasure as well” (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 134). In other words, something might arouse our pleasure and become valuable precisely because we do not possess it. The connection between a possession and its valuation is here reversed: instead of desiring to possess an object because we like it, we come to like it because we do not possess it.

Thus it is not only the attractiveness of a commodity that determines the price we are willing to pay for it. There are, rather, countless occasions on which the item is attractive and desirable to us only because it costs something, because its acquisition is not a matter to be taken for granted but rather one that requires sacrifice and effort. (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 134)

This “psychological turn”, Simmel contends, is responsible not only for the determination of a commodity’s price but also for the development of a relationship into “the form of coquetry” (*ibid.*). Flirtation thus emerges as a form of love founded on the same kind of value relationship – with its characteristic reversals – inherent in the money economy. In both cases, desire is grounded not (merely) in the fact that an object pleases us but (especially) in the fact that we do not yet possess it.

This point is crucial to understanding how the coquette behaves. As Simmel underscores, her attitude is not defined by a mere quest to please:

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<sup>4</sup> For the sake of textual consistency, throughout the article I follow Simmel in designating the woman as the subject of coquetry or flirtation. However, for Simmel himself, coquetry can be realized by persons of any gender. Accordingly, one can flirt with any human being – or thing.

A woman may exert herself in order to please in every way possible, from exercising the most subtle spiritual charms to the most audacious display of her physical attractions. In spite of all this, she can still be quite different from the flirt. (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 134)

What defines coquetry is rather the ability to stimulate desire through “a unique antithesis and synthesis” (ibid.): by saying yes *and* no simultaneously, or alternatively, the coquette places having and not-having in a state of tension even while holding them together. Pleasing others is a means of flirtation, rather than its drive: the flirt pleases *and* displeases; she concedes and refuses, affirms and denies, offers and withdraws. She elicits desire by promising enjoyment and requiring a sacrifice in return. In this respect, her behavior does not much differ from that of the merchant who offers a product and at the same time demands a price for it. In both cases, one “feels the proximity and interpenetration of the ability and the inability to acquire something” (ibid.). By instilling such a feeling in her partner, the coquette produces love as desire.

### **The power of pure possibility**

In doing so, coquetry may also constitute a form of freedom and power. At his time, Simmel argues, women could assume in flirtation a position that was often not available to them: they could take into their own hands, “even if only in a symbolic and approximate fashion”, the decision on the fundamental questions of their lives (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 141). By saying both yes and no, the coquette

withdraws herself from both and manipulates each as an instrument, behind which her own unbiased personality stands in complete freedom [...] It is precisely this antithesis – in which the conduct of the flirt alternates – that grounds the feeling of freedom, the independence of the self from the one as well as

the other, the autonomous existence that lies beyond the dominated oppositions. (ibid.)

As Simmel emphasizes, this is not merely a negative freedom in the sense of establishing a sphere of independence and personal choice; it also makes room for the exercise of power over the other. The coquette's power to decide, to say yes *or* no, is grounded in her display of an indecision between yes *and* no. Her hesitation does not reveal an inner uncertainty but is rather meant to produce an effect on the other. In this respect, the coquette acts in a way similar to the dealer negotiating the price of a product or the terms of a contract: inwardly, she may be completely resolved in either one direction or the other and yet, by concealing her resolve, she can place her partner in a state of uncertainty. "It is this that gives the flirt her power and her superiority: the fact that *she* is resolved and determined within herself, as a result of which an understanding obtains between her and the man that uproots *him* and makes *him* uncertain" (ibid.: 142). However, this power with respect to saying yes or saying no is present before the decision is made. As soon as she decides in either direction, that (kind of) power ends. This explains why coquetry can become an end in itself: persisting in this play of antithesis and synthesis, postponing a decision indefinitely, can be "a means of enjoying this power in an enduring form" (ibid.: 141).

A similar dynamic takes place in monetary actions. As we saw above, Simmel understands the conversion of money into an end in itself as resulting in a paradoxical state in which satisfaction and dissatisfaction coexist. But he also indicates how this interruption of the teleological series involves a peculiar sense of power – one that is experienced in a particularly acute manner by the greedy and the avaricious.

In the *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel explains the attractiveness of the pure accumulation of money by referring to how, in the monetary means, two dimensions of potentiality are presented in acute form. On the one hand, money is an "absolute *capacity*" – i.e.,

nothing but potential. “What one really possesses at the precise moment of [its] possession is nothing” (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 243). Here, the present owes all its meaning to the future to come; money is absolutely nothing without its actualization. Yet it is also, on the other hand, an “*absolute* capacity” – i.e., the most effective potential. Money is that which can be potentially concretized in absolutely everything, so that “the degree of certainty that it will materialize at the right moment” is much more comprehensive than in other capacities (ibid.). This explains why the conversion of money into an ultimate end can become particularly attractive even while – or precisely because – it does not lead to concrete enjoyment. Taking to their extreme these two dimensions of potentiality, the focus on the mere acquisition or possession of money may appear as a way of avoiding all frustration:

money is not expected to achieve anything for the greedy person over and above its mere ownership. It is a thing absolutely lacking in qualities and therefore cannot [...] conceal within itself any surprises or disappointments. Whoever really and definitely only wants money is absolutely safe from such experiences. (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 244-45)<sup>5</sup>

For the greedy and the avaricious, accumulating money without spending it presents the opportunity to indulge in the apparently unlimited possibilities for enjoyment it affords. At the same time, it allows them to avoid any frustration connected with the realization

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<sup>5</sup> However, in line with what has been previously pointed out, Simmel argues that money can only do so in an abstract and empty manner. It only safeguards us against all frustration on the condition that it provides us with no enjoyment at all: “If our wish does not extend beyond money towards a concrete goal, then a deadly disappointment must follow. Such a disappointment will always be experienced where monetary wealth, which has been passionately desired and considered an unquestionable happiness, reveals what it really is after it has been acquired: money is merely a means, whose elevation to an ultimate purpose cannot survive after it has been acquired” (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 244).

of these possibilities – precisely because they have not yet been turned into actual enjoyment. Similarly, the flirt’s hesitation between yes and no gives her the power to decide between yes or no, allowing her to experience both possibilities simultaneously – even though, or exactly because, they have not been realized. In both cases, what one experiences is the pure (unrealized) enjoyment of all possibilities, or a position of power as pure possibility.

### **The adventure**

But why does one submit to such a power? In fact, the coquette’s partner can willingly indulge in her oscillations: one may find a delight precisely in the elusive way in which one is treated. To explain why this can be the case, Simmel suggests considering coquetry in light of a broader phenomenon. He argues: “a sequence of experience oriented to a final feeling of happiness radiates a part of its eudemonistic value onto the moments of the sequence that precede this final moment” (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 142). Involved here is once again an analysis of the intricacies of teleological action. Whereas originally the only pleasure in the erotic sequence may have been physiological, such pleasure can extend to “moments of the erotic domain which are all the more remote, allusive, and symbolic” (ibid.). In this way, the physiological enjoyment which initially consisted in the ultimate goal of the erotic sequence transmits itself to the earlier moments of the sequence.

This explains why, for example, “a young man in love can extract more happiness from the first touch of the hands than he can afterwards from any other total permissiveness” (ibid.). Or how “for many delicate and sensitive natures [...] the kiss, the mere consciousness of being loved back, surpasses all the more substantial erotic joys” (ibid.). What takes place here is the same process of prolongation and interruption of the teleological series that Simmel identified in his analyses of money. Here, too, the value of the ultimate end is transmitted to the means for its attainment. If the acquisition or possession of money can become ends in

themselves, it is because the satisfactions that money can provide are enjoyed in advance – even if they never actually are.

In coquetry, Simmel contends, this outcome is intentionally produced. As we saw above, through the undecidability of her conduct (by saying yes *and* no), the coquette can enjoy in an enduring manner her power to decide (the freedom to say yes *or* no). Her enjoyment of the power to effectively decide is already transmitted to the previous moments in which this power is not yet exercised. Something similar applies with regard to the other person involved in flirtation. They can sense the flirt's yes, even if provisional and counterbalanced by her no, as already containing something of the definitive yes – even if it never occurs. The person “with whom a woman flirts already feels the somehow allusive charm of possessing her, in quite the same way that the promise of happiness already anticipates a part of the happiness attained” (ibid.).

Thus, not only the coquette but also the person with whom she flirts may seek to remain indefinitely in the intermediate state in which one can experience future possibilities without yet realizing them. However, this dynamic is affected by another factor: nothing guarantees that the promise of happiness will be fulfilled. “The bill for this, which we have discounted with the foretaste of pleasure, may never be honored” (ibid.: 143). This implies an unavoidable reduction in the value of coquetry: it then appears as a mere intermediate step toward the establishment of a love relationship, with no guarantee that its possibilities will be realized. “If we were to reckon the chance of failure, which interposes itself between the preliminary stage and the final stage, according to its full factual weight, that predating of happiness hardly occur” (Simmel, 2001 [1909]: 43). However, this uncertainty can also result in an increase in the value of coquetry “as a result of the fascination of risk” (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 143). After all, Simmel contends, “we also experience chance as an allure, an enticing gamble for the favor of

the incalculable powers” (ibid.). Coquetry then becomes a form of adventure (see Simmel, 1997 [1911]):

what makes the adventurer is that he treats the incalculable of life as unabashedly certain as the calculable, and precisely because he brings in practice the two so close together, he feels the tension between the two and the attraction of chance, of the mere maybe, of the veiled deity of fate all the more deeply and demonically. (Simmel, 2001 [1909]: 43)

Coquetry thus leads in two directions. On the one hand, it contains a promise of happiness felt anticipatedly as if already realized. On the other, the simultaneous distancing that the coquette makes her partner feel also points to the chance that such an anticipation will be belied by a turn of things. Insofar as both aspects are played off against each other by the coquette’s simultaneous yes and no, neither is serious or strong enough to expel the other from consciousness. Coquetry’s allure thus mirrors the attractiveness of money. On the one hand, being the “*absolute means*”, money holds the promise of countless satisfactions whose possibility can already be felt even before they are realized. On the other hand, as the “*absolute means*”, money is nothing in itself and contains the risk that the satisfactions it promises will never be fulfilled (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 242 ff.). Both in money and in coquetry, above the “yes” and the “no” stands a “perhaps” in which “the passivity of submitting and the activity of succeeding form a unity of enticement” (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 143). Their charm lies precisely in this “pause” (ibid.), the maintenance of the sequence of (erotic or economic) actions in an unresolved state.

### **Play for play’s sake**

Still, one’s response to coquetry may go beyond simply being carried along with its oscillations. Instead of being the mere object of flirtation – even if willfully so – one can try to become its subject. As with the coquette, her partner may engage in coquetry without any expectation of a final outcome. This shifts the dynamics of their



interaction. Until now, although the perspective of turning flirtation into an end in itself could appear attractive to both the coquette and her partner, this occurred for different reasons. For the former, flirting offered the opportunity to exercise the power of decision based on the display of indecision. For the latter, the submission to this power contained something of the charm of adventure: it allowed them to feel a promise of happiness anticipatedly and to have it intensified by the risk that it might not be fulfilled. However, when the coquette's partner takes the same perspective as her, that power cannot be exerted (and neither felt) in the same manner. Flirtation then turns into a mutual relationship that finds its purpose from both sides in nothing but itself. It distances itself from reality sufficiently for it to become a play.

When one of the participants in coquetry still takes it seriously, it continues to retain some connection to external purposes. One of them, although subjected to the oscillations between yes *and* no, ultimately expects a definitive outcome – a decision between yes *or* no. But when both act coquettishly, then “the entire action is really elevated into the sphere of play [*Spiel*]” (ibid.: 144). In this case, there is no longer that uncertainty and uprootedness on the part of the person with whom the coquette flirts, no longer that “surrender to a Perhaps that is often full of despair” (ibid.). If one does not want anything more than coquetry itself, the conviction that the other is not serious actually provides a certain assurance:

Where consent is not desired and refusal is not feared – and yet also where the possible obstacles to his longing do not need to be considered – he can abandon himself to the fascination of this game more completely than would be the case if he wished – or perhaps somehow feared as well – that the path once taken also led to the final point. (ibid.)

When both participants are involved in this play for play's sake – when no one can be rejected because no one seriously longs for anything – coquetry reaches its “pure form” (ibid.). It abandons its

role as a means to an end and assumes for both the participants that of a final value:

All the hedonistic value that flirtation acquired from the first role [being a means] is extended into this second role [being a final value]. The provisional quality of flirtation has lost its quality of being conditioned by something final, or even by the idea of something final. (ibid.)

Precisely the provisional, fluctuating, and hesitant character of flirtation then becomes its ultimate charm. One could say that now both participants are in the position of power and of the one who submits to it. Yet this power cannot be the same as the one exercised before. Instead of the effective power of decision over one's partner, what then takes place is power *as play*, or the power of play. At this point, coquetry projects to nothing beyond the moment of its own existence. Exerted by both parties and devoid of any purpose external to itself, it comes closer to art: "It is less the art of *pleasing* – which is still somehow projected into the sphere of reality – than the *art* of pleasing that constitutes the pivotal point of the relationship and its attractions" (ibid.).

With the transformation of coquetry into mutual play for its own sake, it becomes – like art in Kant's famous definition – a realm of purposiveness without purpose (*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*). A work of art has no practical purpose, says Simmel, yet "its parts seem to be so significant and inextricably interrelated, with each necessarily in its place, that it is as if they worked together to realize a completely specifiable purpose" (ibid.: 144-145). Similarly, there is a purposive sense to the coquette's behavior, since she acts as if she were seriously interested in the one with whom she flirts, "as if her conduct should culminate in complete surrender" (ibid.: 145). And yet, she leaves her conduct suspended in space in an inconsistent fashion by not allowing herself to be taken seriously. "She proceeds in a thoroughly purposive fashion but repudiates the 'purpose' to which her conduct would have to lead in the sequence of reality, sublimating it into the purely subjective delights of play" (ibid.).

Due to this detachment from any purpose, both art and coquetry maintain a certain indifference as to their objects. As the values that art extracts from things are not altered regardless of how they are measured on the basis of non-aesthetic standards, in coquetry this detachment from the non-aesthetic value of things is expressed in a simultaneously positive and negative behavior toward them. There is an “impartiality” with which the flirt places all objective polarities of every sort at her disposal:

In the same way that all things must be at the disposal of the artist because he wants nothing from them except their form, so they must also be at the disposal of the flirt because she wants only to incorporate them into the game of holding and releasing, compliance and aversion. (ibid.: 146)

Unlike art, however, coquetry does not place itself from the outset beyond reality. Rather, it distances itself *from* reality to the extent that it plays *with* it: “flirtation [...] does no more than *play* with reality, yet it is still *reality* with which it plays” (ibid.: 145). Its oscillation between yes and no never comes to constitute a purely detached form; it never becomes an entirely “abstract relationship of the sexes” (ibid.). Coquetry does not stand above having and not-having, as art does, but between them.

Coquetry’s peculiar relationship to reality distinguishes it not only from art but also from money. With the transformation of flirtation into play for play’s sake, it projects to nothing beyond the moment of its own existence: there is no desire external to the desire for coquetry itself or – since coquetry itself is oriented toward the production of desire – the desire for desire itself. As we have seen, this form of desire also appears in monetary relations. Yet there is an important difference. Money remains bound to the seriousness of purposes external to it. No matter how much it tends to autonomize itself as ultimate value, it remains a universal means of exchange supposed to grant access to virtually anything. In order to

find something similar to play for play's sake in the realm of economic relationships, one would have to imagine a situation in which bargaining went on indefinitely, just for the sake of bargaining, without ever materializing into an actual transaction. However, in such a scenario, money would cease to be what it is: an object whose "entire purposive significance does not lie in itself but rather in its transformation into other values" (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 53). No matter how playfully one treats money, it must continue to be able to realize serious purposes and give access to things in the world.

Accordingly, coquetry's indifference toward objects differs not only from the one implied in art but also from the indifference of money. The monetary means abstracts from the concrete qualities of objects; it makes them commensurable insofar as it subjects them to the same quantitative measure of value. Money retains from things only the quantity of value that one thing has in relation to another. If money can be said to be the *coincidentia oppositorum*, "where all the antagonisms and irreconcilable elements of the world find an equalization and unification" (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 243), it is only on condition that such opposites are stripped of their concrete qualities and reduced to abstract quantities. In coquetry, the unification of opposites occurs through another operation. Despite its similarity to the economic negotiation of a price, coquetry does not perform a similar abstraction. Flirtation detaches from everything insofar as any affirmation is accompanied by its negation, that is, insofar as one makes two opposite statements. The coquette is indifferent to things not because she reduces them to the same *quantitative* measure but because she establishes (and plays with) two opposing *qualitative* statements about them.

### **The indecisiveness of life**

The more coquetry is constituted as play for play's sake, the more it comes to be decisively distinguished from monetary relations. More precisely, it submits monetary categories to the procedures of play and art. In the third chapter of his *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel

examines a series of “hypertrophied” attitudes toward monetary means (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 239; see Bueno, 2020). Such behaviors appear as internally problematic either because they establish money as an ultimate end (as in greed and avarice) or because in seeking to refuse money altogether, they end up reinforcing its significance and mirroring its form (as in squandering, asceticism, cynicism, and the blasé attitude). Precisely for this reason, in each of these postures a contradiction inherent to money is revealed in a particularly acute way. On the one hand, money is “the *absolute* means” insofar as it gives access to virtually any object and offers the promise of unlimited possibilities for enjoyment. On the other, money is the “absolute *means*” since it has no inherent purpose and is nothing but a crossing point between things. It does not provide in itself any form of concrete enjoyment and thus embodies the relativity of desire, i.e., the fact that we are driven by an infinite series of purposes which can never reach a standstill (Simmel, [1900/07] 2004: 236 ff.). Moving between the possibility of having everything and the actuality of having nothing, each of the types addressed by Simmel comes to be marked by an “abstract form of enjoyment which, none the less, is not enjoyed” (ibid.: 243).

As we have seen, this concomitance between possession and non-possession is also present in coquetry. However, to the extent that it comes closer to art and becomes play for its own sake, flirtation provides that tension with a different meaning. It does not take the form of an insoluble contradiction given by the simultaneity between having and not-having, between the desire to enjoy everything and the effective enjoyment of nothing. In coquetry, while these poles are still deemed incompatible, they present themselves as if they could coexist in their very difference. The flirt says yes and no; she withdraws at the moment she concedes. However, this withdrawal is not absolute and does not completely annul the concession; something of the latter remains, even if under

the sign of the negative. Correspondingly, the offer is also not absolute, and withdrawal is present within what is conceded.

If one of the participants takes this dynamic seriously, then for them coquetry may constitute nothing more than a negotiation, an economic exchange not yet concluded. It can then appear as something superficial, provisional, or a mere nothing: one does not possess anything yet, nor has one already relinquished possession. But when both partners see coquetry as play, its meaning changes: having and not-having cease to (only) exclude each other and begin to (also) present themselves as internal to each other. Through flirtation, says Simmel, “not-having grows into having” – and accordingly, having grows into not-having (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 149). “Both form aspects of a relational unity, the most extreme and passionate form of which ultimately lies in having something that one at the same time does not have” (ibid.).

The play of coquetry thus makes it possible to reconcile opposites that in money appear irreconcilable. Reconciliation here does not mean a dissolution of difference; it does not involve a definitive possession or a definitive non-possession. Rather, it implies a relation between them in which each comes to be internal to the other even while maintaining their contrast. Transformed into an end in itself, money maintains having and not-having in a state of maximum tension. It promises the possession or enjoyment of everything – yet, precisely because it does so, it delivers nothing. Coquetry as play for its own sake, on the other hand, indicates that it is not possible to have everything – and for this reason it offers something. It “shows that in definitive having, there is still a sense in which we do not have” and “that in definitive not-having, there is still a sense in which we can have” (ibid.: 150). In flirtation, “each of these opposing elements [...] is exhibited more clearly in its antithesis”; at the same time, they “penetrate deeply into one another” (ibid.).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> To be sure, in the *Philosophy of Money* Simmel also contemplated money as a locus of reconciliation, albeit in a very different sense. Reconciliation didn’t entail

Coquetry thus goes beyond erotic relations and symbolizes something more general about life. As the extended use of the verb *kokettieren* indicates, flirtation is a “thoroughly general, formal mode of conduct” (ibid.:151) that can apply to many areas other than sexual relationships. Wherever we are confronted with mutually exclusive options, we can approach them in a playful manner by experiencing “the charms of the simultaneous For and Against, the Perhaps, the protracted reservation of the decision which permits a foretaste of the enjoyment of both its aspects together” (ibid.). Coquetry, in this extended sense, is “the form in which the indecisiveness of life is crystallized into a thoroughly positive way of acting” and made into an intrinsic pleasure (ibid.). It can then appear as a response to the problems of modern culture pointed out by Simmel in his analysis of money. In his essay on coquetry, this question is considered from the general perspective of a metaphysics of life. “It is part of the problematic of life”, Simmel says, “that that there are many things with regard to which life has no unambiguous, a priori, settled locus, even though life cannot simply repudiate a relationship to them” (ibid.). However, as is indicated by his other writings, in modernity this problematic takes on a particularly tragic aspect. Already in his texts of the 1890s, long before his famous essay “On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture” (Simmel, 1997 [1911-12]), he saw modern experience in those terms: “As increasing development magnifies the antitheses everywhere, driving asunder into opposition what was uniformly

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the interpenetration of opposites, as in flirtation. Rather, it consisted in the possibility of finding a symbol for these oppositions in a “particular fact” (i.e., money) where they present themselves in maximum tension: “since the opposition between what is apparently most superficial and insubstantial and the inner substance of life reaches a peak here, there must be the most effective reconciliation if this particular fact not only permeates, actively and passively, the entire range of the intellectual [*geistigen*] world but also manifests itself as the symbol of the essential forms of movement within this world” (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 53).

joined in the embryonic state, so too life has also become terrible, fearful and tragic” (Simmel, 1997 [1893]: 260).

It is from this perspective that Simmel approached many phenomena of his time, each of which he saw as embodying that tragedy in a distinctive manner but as leading to similar forms of experience. Modern life is “neurasthenic” insofar as it implies a constant oscillation between urgency and exhaustion, saturation and insufficiency, “hyperesthesia” and “anesthesia” (Simmel, 1992 [1896]: 214; see Bueno, 2013). However, it was in money that he found the most prominent embodiment of this condition: money is a “symbol of [life’s] essential forms of movement” for it constitutes the point at which the tension between its superficial and its substantial aspects is most radically intensified (Simmel, 2004 [1900/07]: 53). For Simmel, coquetry is also such a symbol; yet here life presents itself under a different guise. It does not appear in the form of a “dialectics without reconciliation” (Landmann, 1968: 16) in which oppositions are aggravated in a unity that asks for resolution but cannot provide it. Coquetry does not eliminate this dialectical tension; and still, by showing how having and not-having penetrate into one another, it allows that “tragic moment of life” to “clothe itself in the playful, precarious form, lacking all commitments, that we call flirting with things” (Simmel, 1984 [1911]: 152).

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