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Flirtation

Georg Simmel

Simmel was the only classical sociologist to address gender issues and sexual relations in a sustained way. In this multilayered essay, published in 1923, he discusses flirtation as a generalized type of sociation or interaction. As is typical of so many of Simmel's essays, a surface reading would suggest that he is concerned with the superficial unreflective actions of everyday life, but a more penetrating analysis reveals a work of far greater profundity. Simmel begins with a brilliant excursus on love, which he describes in terms of pleasure's dialectical tension between having and not having. Within this framework, he proceeds to dissect the complicated and ambiguous ways that the flirt plays on this tension, and then he locates this particular form of sociation in terms of his larger philosophy of life, which he defined as the "tragedy of culture."

Plato's wisdom concerning love—that it is an intermediate state between having and not-having—does not seem to touch the profundity of love's nature but only one form of its manifestation. It is not merely that his definition leaves no room for the love that says, "If I love you, what does that have to do with you?" Actually, it can refer only to the kind of love that expires with the fulfillment of its yearning. If love lies on the path from not-having to having, if its nature is exhausted in the movement to having, then when it "has," it can no longer be the same as it was before. It can no longer be love. On the contrary, its energy quantum is transformed into pleasure, or perhaps into lassitude.

This consequence of love—the yearning of one who lacks something for what he does not have—is not nullified by the consideration that love may arise anew in the very

moment of its passing. From the perspective of its meaning, love remains fixed within a process of rhythmic oscillation. The moments of fulfillment lie in its pauses. However, where love is anchored in the ultimate depths of the soul, the cycle of having and not-having describes only the shape of its expression and its outward aspect. The being of love, the pure phenomenon of which is desire, cannot be terminated by the appeasement of this desire.

Regardless of whether the desire for possession signifies the definitive quality of love or only the swelling of the rhythm of the waves that play above this quality, where the object of love is a woman and its subject a man, it rises above the characteristic psychic fact of "pleasure." Pleasure is the source from which having and not-having are fed when they acquire for us the status of delight or torment, desire or apprehension. Here as elsewhere, however, there is a reversal of the connection between a possession and its valuation. Importance and value do not merely augment the possession and nonpossession of the object that pleases us; when possession and nonpossession acquire significance and weight for us, on whatever basis, their object tends to excite our pleasure as well. 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. Its production is not a matter to be taken for granted but rather one that requires sacrifice and effort. The possibility of this psychological turn is responsible for the development of the relationship between men and women into the form of flirtation.

In itself, the fact that the flirt "wants to please" does not account for her behavior. To define flirtation as simply a "passion for pleasing" is to confuse the means to an end with the desire for this end. 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. This is because the distinctiveness of the flirt lies in the fact that she awakens de-

light and desire by means of a unique antithesis and synthesis: through the alternation or simultaneity of accommodation and denial; by a symbolic, allusive assent and dissent, acting "as if from a remote distance"; or, platonically expressed, through placing having and not-having in a state of polar tension even as she seems to make them felt concurrently. In the behavior of the flirt, the man feels the proximity and interpenetration of the ability and the inability to acquire something. This is the essence of "price." With that twist that turns value into the epigone of price, flirtation makes this acquisition seem valuable and desirable. The essence of flirtation, expressed with paradoxical brevity, is this: Where love is present, having and not-having are also present, whether in its fundament or in its external aspect. And thus where having and not-having are present—even if not in reality but only in play-love, or something that fills its place, is also present.

I shall apply this interpretation of flirtation first to some observations of experience. A sidelong glance with the head half-turned is characteristic of flirtation in its most banal guise. A hint of aversion lies in this gesture; but at the same time it connotes fleeting submission, a momentary focusing of attention on the other person, who in the same moment is symbolically rebuffed by the inclination of the body and the head. Physiologically, this glance cannot last longer than a few seconds, so that the withdrawal of the glance is already prefigured as something unavoidable in the glance itself. It has the charm of secrecy and furtiveness that cannot persist, and for this reason consent and refusal are inseparably combined in it.

The full face-to-face glance, no matter how penetrating and compelling it may be, never has this distinctive quality of flirtation. The swinging and swaying movement of the hips, the "strutting" walk, lies in the same category of flirtatious effects. It is not merely because this gait palpably stresses these effects through the motion of the parts of the body that generate sexual excitement, even though distance and reserve are in fact maintained at the same time, but rather because it incarnates concession and with-

drawal in the playful rhythm of constant alternation. If flirtation extends beyond the movements and the expression of its own subject, that is only a technical modification of this simultaneity of implicit consent and refusal. Flirtation is fond of utilizing what might be called extraneous objects: dogs, flowers, children. On the one hand, this diverts attention away from the person for whom the flirtation is intended. On the other hand, this very diversion makes it clear to him how enviable the apparent object is. It is a way of saying: "It is not you that interests me, but rather these things here." And yet at the same time: "This is a game I'm playing for your benefit. It is because of my interest in you that I turn to these other things."

If we want to fix the polar coordinates of flirtation conceptually, it exhibits three possible syntheses. Flirtation as flattery: "Although you might indeed be able to conquer me, I won't allow myself to be conquered." Flirtation as contempt: "Although I would actually allow myself to be conquered, you aren't able to do it." Flirtation as provocation: "Perhaps you can conquer me, perhaps not—try it!" This movement between having and not-having—or, rather, this symbolic interpenetration of the two—clearly expresses the woman's focus of her attention on a man different from the one she really has in mind. This is not so brutally simple a matter as jealousy. Jealousy has a different locus, and when it is unconditionally provoked in order to intensify the desire for either acquisition or possession into a passion, it no longer falls in the category of flirtation. On the contrary, flirtation must make the person for whom it is intended feel the variable interplay between consent and refusal; the unwillingness to submit oneself that could be an indirect way to self-surrender; the surrender of the self behind which the withdrawal of the self stands, as a background, a possibility, and a threat.

Every conclusive decision brings flirtation to an end. The sovereign peak of its art is exhibited in its apparent approximation to a definitive condition, while at every moment balancing this condition by its opposite. When a woman flirts "with" one man in order to flirt with another who is the actual

object of her intentions, the double meaning of the word "with" is profoundly revealed. On the one hand, it refers to an instrument; on the other hand, to the member of a correlation, as if we could not make a person into an instrument without this functioning in a reciprocal and retroactive fashion as well.

Finally, a certain fact—whose primary significance is physical, even though it has a psychic significance as well—perhaps demonstrates the most direct coincidence of consent and refusal, which have equally legitimate places in the coloration of flirtation: the fact of "semi-concealment." Under this heading I understand all those internal and external cases in which submission or presentation of the self is suspended by partial concealment or refusal of the self, in such a way that the whole is fantasized all the more vividly and the desire for the totality of reality is excited all the more consciously and intensively, as a result of the tension between this form and that of reality as incompletely disclosed.

It is remarkable how the historical development of the concealment of the body demonstrates this motive of simultaneous presentation and refusal. In contemporary ethnography, it is regarded as certain that the covering of the sexual organs, and clothing in general, originally had nothing at all to do with the feeling of shame. Rather, it served only the need for ornamentation and the closely related intention of exercising sexual attraction by means of concealment. Among peoples who go naked, there are cases in which only prostitutes wear clothing! The girdles and petticoats that fulfill the function of a fig leaf are often quite minimal and designed in such a way that concealment as such simply cannot be their purpose at all. They must have another purpose. Another phenomenon shows what this purpose is: In an extraordinary number of cases, they are quite garishly colored and ornamented in the most striking fashion. Thus their purpose is clearly to draw attention to these parts of the body. Originally, therefore, this concealment is only ornamental, with the dual function of all ornament: first, only to make the ornamented entity more *noticeable*; and then to make this entity appear valuable and attrac-

tive, to appear eminently *worthy of attention*, as well.

However, this ornament, like the ornamentation of the body in general, can fulfill this function only insofar as it also conceals. Because of this coincidence, the moment of flirtation is given with the primitive form of attire: Here refusal and the withdrawal of the self are fused with the phenomenon of drawing attention to the self and presenting the self in one indivisible act. By ornamenting ourselves or a part of ourselves, we conceal what is adorned. And by concealing it, we draw attention to it and its attractions. This could be called an optical necessity which incorporates the simultaneity of consent and refusal—the formula of all flirtation—into the first stage of the development of clothing as well.

If we go deeper into this matter, we might claim that the entire dualism of this attitude is only the phenomenon or the empirical technique for the realization of a mode of conduct that is basically completely unified. I shall examine the nature of this unity later. Here, I shall only draw the conclusion that this concomitance of consent and refusal cannot be a static juxtaposition but must be a vital exchange, an intertwined form of mutual reference. Where this does not succeed, semi-concealment does not attain its significance as flirtation either but rather exhibits a disagreeable contradiction. . . .

In refusing and conceding, the attitudes of the sexes are quite characteristically different. When a man refuses a woman who makes advances to him, this may be thoroughly justified, or even necessary, on ethical, personal, or aesthetic grounds. However, there is always something awkward, unchivalrous, and in a certain sense blameworthy about it. For the woman in this case, a rebuff can easily assume a tragic character. It is not proper for a man to reject a woman, regardless of whether it was improper for her to offer herself to him. In the other direction, however, the balance is struck perfectly clearly: Rebuffing the zealous suitor is, so to say, a thoroughly appropriate gesture for the woman. And yet at the same time—and in spite of a reservation that will be indicated at the conclusion of this essay—the woman's capacity to surrender herself is such a pro-

found, total, and exhaustive expression of her being that perhaps it can never be attained by a man in this way. In saying no and saying yes, in surrendering and refusing to surrender themselves, women are the masters.

This is the consummation of the sexual role that belongs to the female throughout the animal kingdom: to be the *chooser*. It is probably the basis of a phenomenon observed by Darwin: among our household pets, the females exhibit a much more individual attraction and aversion toward the males than the males demonstrate for the females. Since the woman is the chooser she is influenced much more by the individuality of the man than he is by hers. The fact that the man has this or that specific characteristic is responsible for her choice. The man, however, is more disposed to pursue the woman as woman—within the limits that civilization may also modify this fundamental relationship from both sides. This individual selection, which is the lot of the woman, gives her much more opportunity than the man has to leave the choice in abeyance. Thus it is no wonder that out of all these moments of flirtation, a form develops for women that does not suit men at all. In this form, there is a sense in which refusal and concession are simultaneously possible for women.

Reduced to its *most general* formulation, the motive responsible for this conduct on the part of the woman is the fascination of freedom and power. Normally there are only one or two occasions on which the woman is in a position to decide the fundamental questions of her life. And even in these crucial cases, the individual freedom of her resolution is quite often only apparent. In flirtation, however, there is a sense in which she chronically takes on this decision, even if only in a symbolic and approximate fashion. Suppose she creates the impression that consent and refusal, inclination and aversion either dominate one another by turns or have the same force. In that case, she withdraws herself from both and manipulates each as an instrument, behind which her own unbiased personality stands in complete freedom.

It is a universally confirmed observation that freedom does not remain limited to its

negative sense but, rather, immediately or simultaneously tends to be used for the acquisition and exercise of power. In the case of flirtation, these two senses become directly and inextricably interrelated. The power of the woman in relation to the man is exhibited in consent or refusal. 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. The power of the woman over consent and refusal is *prior* to the decision. Once she has decided, in either direction, her power is ended. Flirtation is a means of enjoying this power in an enduring form. And at least in a number of cases, it can be observed that women who are very domineering are also very flirtatious.

To clarify the typology of the situation, it should be stressed that all this hesitation and vacillation does not affect the being of the woman and the determinate quality of its alignment at all but only its discernability for her partner. There is no sense in which this betrays an objective and inner uncertainty on the part of the woman. Where this is the case, it produces a picture quite different from flirtation. Either this picture is only superficially similar to flirtation, or, in a certain embarrassment, it takes refuge in the forms of flirtation, perhaps in order to gain time for the decision. Inwardly, the flirtatious woman is completely resolved in either one direction or the other. The meaning of the entire situation lies only in the fact that she has to conceal her resolve and that, as regards something that intrinsically certain, she can place her partner in a state of uncertainty or vacillation which holds true only for *him*. 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.

Consider the fact that the man whose desire is captivated by the favor of the woman gives himself over to this game, and not merely because he has no other alternative. On the contrary, it is frequently as if he found

peculiar enticement and delight precisely in the fickle manner in which he is treated. In the first place, this is quite obviously a consequence of the well-known phenomenon that a sequence of experience oriented to a final feeling of happiness radiates a part of its eudaemonistic value onto the moments of the sequence that precede this final moment. Flirtation is one of the most trenchant cases of this experience. Originally, the only pleasure in the erotic sequence may have been physiological. The pleasure, however, has gradually come to include all the earlier moments of the sequence as well. Insofar as a purely psychological issue is at stake here, it is probable that a historical evolution has in fact taken place. This is because the meaning of pleasure extends to moments of the erotic domain which are all the more remote, allusive, and symbolic as the personality is more refined and cultivated. This process of psychic retreat can go so far that, for example, a young man in love draws more bliss from the first secret clasp of the hand than from any subsequent unconditional concession; and for many delicate and sensitive natures—who are by no means necessarily frigid or chaste—the kiss, or even the mere consciousness of the return of love, surpasses what might be called the more substantial erotic delights. In her interest in him and her desire to attract him, the man 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.

There is a further nuance of this relationship that acts with an independent force. Wherever the value of a final goal is already perceptible in its means or its preliminary stages, the quantum of the value that is enjoyed is modified by the following fact: There is no real sequence in which what is gained in an intermediate stage guarantees with absolute certainty that the decisive terminal value will also be obtained. The bill for this, which we have discounted with the foretaste of pleasure, may never be honored. In addition to unavoidable reduction in the value of the intermediate stages, this also results in an increase in their value as a result of the fascination of risk, especially if the ele-

ment of fate—which is inaccessible to a decision that lies within our own power and is intrinsic to all that we attain—heightens its mysterious attraction. If we calculated on the basis of its completely objective weight the chance of failure that lies between a preliminary stage and the final stage, then it would hardly come to an antedating of good fortune. But we also experience chance as an allure, an enticing gamble for the favor of the incalculable powers.

In the psychic conduct that the flirt understands how to provoke, there is a sense in which this eudaemonistic value of risk—the knowledge that one does not know whether he will succeed or fail—has been arrested and stabilized. On the one hand, this conduct draws anticipated happiness from the promise that flirtation implies. The reverse of this, on the other hand, the chance that anticipation may be disappointed by a change in the situation, results from the remoteness that the flirt makes her partner feel at the same time. Insofar as both are continually played off against each other, so that neither is sufficiently serious to repress the other from consciousness, the possibility of the Perhaps stands above the Negative. Indeed, this Perhaps, in which the passivity of submitting and the activity of succeeding form a unity of enticement, circumscribes the entire inner response to the behavior of the flirt.

Suppose that by virtue of his delight in risk and the characteristic concrete intermeshing of its polar possibilities, the reaction of the man signifies much more than simply being carried along with the oscillation of the game of flirtation. In that case, when he begins to play the game itself and is attracted by it, not by one of its possible definitive results, then ultimately his role far surpasses the status of a mere object. The entire action is really elevated into the sphere of play only under this condition. As long as the man still takes it seriously, it intersects with the sphere of reality. Now the man will go no further than the limits specified by flirtation. In view of the logical and genetic meaning of flirtation, this seems to nullify its concept. Actually, however, it produces the case that exhibits the pure form of flirtation, detached from every deviation and all pros-

pect of change. 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. Here flirtation completely relinquishes the role of an instrument or a mere provisional entity and assumes that of an ultimate value.

All the hedonistic value that flirtation acquired from the first role is extended into this second role. The provisional quality of flirtation has lost its quality of being conditioned by something final, or even by the idea of something final. Consider the fact that flirtation has this cachet of the provisional, of suspension and indecision. Although a logical contradiction, this is a psychological fact. It is the ultimate attraction of flirtation, in which there is no inquiry beyond the moment of its existence. This is why the consequence of flirtatious behavior—an uncertainty and uprootedness on the part of the man, a surrender to a Perhaps that is often full of despair, corresponding to the inner certainty of the flirt—is completely transformed into its opposite in this case. Where the man himself wants nothing more than this stage, it is precisely the conviction that the flirt is not serious that gives him a certain assurance in relation to her. 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.

This is no more than the clearest expression of the relationship between art and play, which is invariably characteristic of flirtation. Kant's claim about the nature of art—that it is "purposiveness without purpose"—holds true for flirtation to the greatest extent possible. The work of art has no "purpose" at all. However, 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. The flirt acts exactly as

if she were interested only in the man who happens to be her partner, as if her conduct should culminate in complete surrender, regardless of how qualified this surrender may be. However, this logical, purposive sense of her conduct—as it might be called—is not her own view at all. On the contrary, she leaves her conduct suspended in space in an inconsistent fashion by giving it an aim that is oriented in a completely different direction: to please, to captivate, to be desired, but without allowing herself to be taken seriously in any way. 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.

Of course what differentiates the inner or what might be called transcendental nature of flirtation from that of art is the following consideration. From the outset, art places itself beyond reality. It frees itself from reality by means of a perspective that is utterly averse to reality. While it is true that flirtation also does no more than *play* with reality, yet it is still *reality* with which it plays. The oscillation of impulse that it offers and calls forth never draws its fascination entirely from the purely detached forms of consent and refusal, from what could be called the abstract relationship of the sexes—even though this would be the real, albeit never completely attainable, consummation of flirtation. There is always a reminder of sensibilities whose home is to be found only in the sequence of reality. The pure relation of forms is suffused with them. It is true that the flirt and—in the case indicated in the foregoing—her partner as well play with, and in this respect detach themselves from, reality. Unlike the artist, however, they do not play with the appearance of reality but rather with reality itself. . . .

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