

The Semiotics of Luxury in Intimate Relations

A Political Economy of Singularity and Sensibility, with a Justice Theory of Choice

[Working Draft]

On Coupling Degree, Existence-Attestation, and the Justice of Subject-Embedding

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昨夜星辰昨夜风，画楼西畔桂堂东。

*Last night—those stars, that wind;
the painted tower, the cassia hall.*

身无彩凤双飞翼，心有灵犀一点通。

*Without the phoenix wings to fly together,
our hearts are joined by the unicorn's single horn of light.*

—李商隐 Li Shangyin, *Untitled* (无题)

献给自己深爱的那位
喜欢文化、旅行与大自然的同乡女孩

*For her—
the girl from home,
who loves culture, travel, and the living world.*

路边那朵花，那个时刻，那个时空。
*The flower on the path, that moment, that spatiotemporal structure.
Nothing is more luxurious than this.*

也献给天下所有有情人。

Abstract

Which is more luxurious: a diamond ring or a flower found on a path? This question is not rhetorical. This paper develops a semiotics of luxury in intimate relations organised around three doctrines: the doctrine of nature and art (luxury as the transformation of natural materials through human craft); the doctrine of sign exchange value (following Baudrillard's critique of the consumer society, in which luxury functions as a system of social differentiation); and the doctrine of relational luxury, the paper's central concept.

Relational luxury is defined not by economic value but by the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure—the extent to which a subject's existence, their intentionality and presence and choice made specifically for this relational other, is embedded in the object. A flower found on a path may be more luxurious than any diamond; a diamond purchased by proxy may be relationally impoverished despite its economic magnificence. The coupling degree is developed along four dimensions (temporal depth, intentional intensity, non-substitutability, existential investment), producing a fourfold classification in which economic and relational luxury appear as orthogonal axes.

The paper then develops a justice theory of choice. The problem of **subject-embedding misrecognition** arises when an object is presented as carrying high subject-embedding but does not. The problem of **equivalent agency** arises when a subject who cannot provide existential embedding *A* substitutes another form *B*: such substitution is structurally heterogeneous, but may be just in the generative sense if four *necessary but not sufficient* conditions hold—symmetric generability, real constraint, genuine embedding, and transparency. Finally, selection justice holds that the choice of relational over economic luxury is a justice stance: a refusal to use exchangeable symbols to bear what is inexchangeable.

This is **Paper XVI** of the *Philosophy of Intimacy and the Theory of Justice* series, extending the political economy of **Paper XV** [11].

Keywords: relational luxury; coupling degree; existence-attestation; sign exchange value; justice theory; equivalent agency.

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1. Prelude: A Ring and a Flower

Two scenes.

In the first, a person walks into a jeweller's and purchases a diamond ring. The ring is expensive—the price of several months' salary, perhaps more. It is beautifully made: a round brilliant cut stone in a platinum setting, designed by craftspeople whose skills have been refined across generations, sourced from materials that took the earth millions of years to produce. The purchase is made deliberately, with care. It is intended as an expression of love.

In the second scene, a different person is walking a familiar path—a path walked many times, in different seasons and different moods. On the verge of the path, in a crack between the paving stones, there is a flower. It is not a rare flower. It has no particular monetary value. But the person stops, and in the moment of stopping, something happens: they think of the person they love—not in general, not as an abstraction, but specifically, in all the particular detail that months or years of shared life have made available. They pick the flower. They bring it home.

Which of these is the more luxurious gift?

The answer that the dominant framework of luxury theory would give is obvious: the diamond ring. It is more expensive, more durable, more socially recognised as an expression of serious commitment, more legible within the symbolic order as evidence of the depth of the giver's investment. The flower is charming but ephemeral, cheap, easily obtained. It is, in the terms of the dominant framework, not a luxury at all.

This paper argues that the dominant framework is wrong—not partially wrong, not wrong about some cases, but structurally wrong, missing the dimension of value that is most fundamental to intimate relational life. It argues that the flower, in the right circumstances, is more luxurious than the ring—not because it is rarer or more expensive or more socially prestigious, but because it carries a higher degree of coupling between the object and the relational subject's spatiotemporal structure. And it argues that this coupling degree—not economic value, not sign exchange value, not social prestige—is the true measure of luxury in intimate relations.

The central claim. The true measure of luxury in intimate relations is the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure: the extent to which a subject's existence—their intentionality, their presence, their choice made specifically for this relational other at this specific moment—is embedded within the object. Economic value and coupling degree are orthogonal dimensions: a flower can be more luxurious than a diamond, and a diamond can be more luxurious than a flower, depending on the degree of subject-embedding each carries.

This claim has consequences that extend beyond the question of what makes a good gift. It reveals a systematic misalignment between the dominant framework of luxury—organised around economic value, sign exchange value, and social prestige—and the relational reality of intimate life. It identifies a form of injustice specific to the domain of intimate relational luxury: the misrecognition of subject-embedding, the substitution of economic value for existential presence, the collective confusion of what luxury is. And it generates a justice theory of choice: the claim that the selection of relational luxury over economic luxury is a justice stance—a refusal to use exchangeable symbols to bear what is inexchangeable, a commitment to the primacy of the real register over the symbolic.

A word on this paper's place in the series. Paper XIV established that happiness in intimate relations is the emergent signal of co-evolutionary activity in the relational field [10]. Paper XV developed the political economy of that field, showing that Generative Relational Wealth (GRW) is its primary form of wealth—inexhaustible under use, non-possessable by either party, stored in the geometry of the shared attractor landscape [11]. The present paper asks: what objects can serve as the material media of this wealth? What physical things can carry, in their materiality, the trace of co-evolutionary events, the mark of shared existence, the existential embedding of one subject in the life of another? The answer is: relational luxury objects—objects whose coupling degree with a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure is high. The diamond ring and the flower are the paper's paradigm cases, but the analysis extends to every object that might, in the right circumstances, carry the mark of genuine subject-embedding.

The paper proceeds through three doctrines and a justice theory. The first doctrine (§3) analyses luxury as the transformation of natural materials through human craft—the Bulgari paradigm, in which the beauty of the natural world is given permanent form through the excellence of human making. The second doctrine (§4) follows Baudrillard's critique of the consumer society, showing how luxury functions in the symbolic order as a system of social differentiation [1, 2]. The third doctrine (§5) proposes the concept of relational luxury, defined by coupling degree, and develops its implications for the understanding of intimate relational life. The synthesis (§6) shows how the three doctrines interact. The justice theory (§8) develops the paper's normative conclusions.

2. The Conceptual Archaeology of Luxury

Before the three doctrines can be developed, the concept of luxury itself must be excavated—its historical sedimentation exposed, its internal tensions identified, its presuppositions made visible. The concept of luxury is not a neutral descriptive category; it is a historically produced and politically contested one, whose apparent self-evidence conceals a series of structural assumptions that the relational account will need to challenge.

2.1 Historical Forms: From Royal Prerogative to Democratic Consumption

The history of luxury is, in large part, a history of exclusion and its gradual relaxation. In pre-modern societies, luxury was constitutively tied to social position: the right to consume certain materials, wear certain garments, or display certain objects was legally reserved for specific social ranks, enforced by sumptuary laws that prescribed what each rank could and could not wear, eat, or own. The luxury object was, in this period, primarily a **marker of social position**—not merely an indicator of wealth but a legally constituted symbol of rank. The diamond was not merely expensive; it was, in many jurisdictions, legally restricted to those of sufficiently elevated social station.

The gradual dismantling of sumptuary law across the early modern period transformed the social function of luxury without eliminating its positional character. As legal restriction gave way to market restriction—luxury becoming available in principle to anyone who could afford it, rather than only to those of appropriate rank—the positional character of luxury was reproduced through a different mechanism: the price mechanism. The diamond ring remained a marker of social distinction, but the distinction it marked shifted from legal rank to economic class. Thorstein Veblen’s analysis of **conspicuous consumption** [8] captures the structure of this transition: luxury consumption in the market era functions as a display of surplus—the ability to spend beyond necessity—that signals to others the consumer’s position in the economic hierarchy.

The twentieth century brought a further transformation: the **democratisation of luxury**, in which the luxury industry developed strategies for extending its market to the aspirational middle class without losing the exclusivity that constituted its appeal. The development of accessible luxury lines, licensed products, and the expansion of the luxury market into new territories (cosmetics, perfume, fashion accessories) allowed the luxury industry to maintain the symbolic apparatus of exclusivity—the brand heritage, the artisanal craftsmanship, the association with high social status—while dramatically expanding the consumer base. The result is the contemporary luxury landscape: a market in which luxury objects are available to a far wider range of consumers than at any previous point in history, while remaining organised by the logic of social distinction that has structured luxury since the era of sumptuary law.

2.2 Scarcity, Craft, and Beauty: The Three Traditional Dimensions

The traditional definition of luxury organises itself around three dimensions that correspond to three different sources of value.

Scarcity is the most fundamental: the luxury object is, by definition, not available to everyone. This scarcity may be natural (the rarity of the gemstone, the difficulty of sourcing the material), artificial (the deliberate restriction of production to maintain exclusivity), or temporal (the limited edition that will not be reproduced). In all cases, the scarcity of the luxury object is constitutive of its value: what everyone can have is, by that very fact, not luxurious. The luxury object’s value is relational—it is defined by its position in a system of differential access, not by any intrinsic property of the object itself.

Craft is the second dimension: the luxury object is distinguished from the merely expensive object by the quality of its making. The handmade watch, the hand-stitched garment, the individually cut gemstone represent forms of human labour that are increasingly rare in an age of industrial production, and their rarity gives them a value that goes beyond the material cost of their production. Craft in luxury objects is not merely a productive process but a **form of attention**: the craftsman who spends weeks on a single watch movement, or months on a single garment, is performing a kind of attentive care for the object that is qualitatively different from the standardised repetition of industrial production. This attentive care is what the luxury object carries within itself: the trace of a human being's sustained engagement with the material.

Beauty is the third dimension: the luxury object is aesthetically distinguished from ordinary objects. This aesthetic distinction is not merely a matter of decoration—it reflects a philosophy of design in which the object's form is the expression of a vision of the beautiful, developed through the traditions of a particular craft culture and the aesthetic judgements of particular designers. The beauty of a Bulgari jewel is not the accidental result of expensive materials; it is the product of a long tradition of aesthetic thought about how natural materials can be given form that honours both their natural properties and the human capacity for aesthetic judgement.

These three dimensions interact: scarcity without craft or beauty produces merely the expensive; craft without scarcity or beauty produces the skilled but ordinary; beauty without scarcity or craft produces the aesthetically pleasing but not luxurious. The canonical luxury object—the hand-cut diamond in a hand-crafted setting, designed by a master of the tradition—combines all three.

2.3 The Instability of the Luxury/Necessity Distinction

The distinction between luxury and necessity that seems to anchor the concept of luxury is, on examination, unstable in ways that are philosophically significant. What counts as a necessity and what counts as a luxury is not a natural fact but a historically and culturally variable social construction—and the variation reveals the political character of the distinction.

At one level, the instability is obvious: what was a luxury in one era is a necessity in another (indoor plumbing, the telephone, electric lighting), and what is a luxury in one society is a necessity in another (the car in the suburban United States, the mobile phone in contemporary rural Africa). The relativity of the luxury/necessity distinction to historical and cultural context means that the concept of luxury is not defined by any intrinsic property of the objects classified as luxuries, but by their position in a particular social and economic context.

At a deeper level, the instability is philosophically revealing. The luxury/necessity distinction presupposes a conception of the human being and human needs that is itself contested: a conception of the **bare minimum**—the floor below which life is not sustainable—against which surplus is defined. But this floor is not naturally given; it is socially constructed, and the construction reflects relations of power. What is counted as a necessity is what is deemed

necessary for the reproduction of labour power; what is counted as a luxury is what exceeds this minimum. The political economy of the luxury/necessity distinction is therefore not neutral: it reflects and reproduces the interests of those who benefit from keeping the definition of necessity narrow.

This instability has a direct implication for the relational account of luxury developed in this paper: if the luxury/necessity distinction is already unstable within the dominant framework, the relational framework's proposal—that what constitutes true luxury is the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure—represents not an arbitrary redefinition but a principled attempt to locate the value of luxury in a dimension that the dominant framework has systematically missed.

2.4 The Contemporary Luxury Industry: Political Economy

The contemporary luxury industry is one of the most economically significant sectors of the global economy, and its political economy reveals the tensions within the concept of luxury that the three doctrines of this paper will develop. Several features of the contemporary luxury industry are particularly relevant.

The brand as the primary unit of value: In the contemporary luxury market, the primary unit of value is not the individual object but the brand—the accumulated cultural capital of a name, a heritage, and a set of aesthetic associations that gives any object bearing the brand's mark a premium over its unbranded equivalent. The brand is a symbolic entity: it exists in the collective imagination of consumers and non-consumers alike, and its value depends on the maintenance of its symbolic associations. Bulgari, Cartier, Tiffany, Van Cleef & Arpels: these names carry a symbolic weight that is the product of decades of marketing, cultural positioning, and the careful management of the brand's associations with beauty, excellence, and social distinction.

The primacy of the brand in contemporary luxury has a direct implication for the Baudrillard analysis developed in §4: the luxury object's value is organised primarily by its symbolic position rather than by its material properties or its craft quality. The diamond in a Tiffany setting is valued not primarily for the diamond's natural properties or the setting's craft quality, but for the Tiffany name—for what the Tiffany name means within the symbolic order of consumer society.

The globalisation of luxury and the management of aspiration: The contemporary luxury industry has globalised its market while managing the aspiration that drives consumption by maintaining the appearance of exclusivity even as the consumer base expands. The luxury industry's characteristic strategy is the creation of **accessible luxury**—products priced at the lower end of the luxury range, which allow aspirational consumers to participate in the symbolic system of luxury without access to its highest tiers. The handbag that costs a month's salary rather than a year's performs the same symbolic function as the handbag that costs a year's salary, for consumers at different points in the economic hierarchy.

The tension between craft and scale: The contemporary luxury industry faces a structural tension between its dependence on craft as a source of value and its need for scale as a commercial enterprise. The handmade watch that took a craftsman weeks to produce cannot be manufactured at the scale required by a publicly traded corporation; the solution, characteristic of the industry, is the combination of artisanal quality at the level of finishing and detail with industrial production at the level of components and structure. This tension reveals the gap between the craft mythology of luxury and its industrial reality—a gap that is managed through the careful control of the narrative of luxury, rather than through the actual maintenance of artisanal production at scale.

The digital transformation of luxury: The emergence of digital luxury—NFTs, virtual luxury goods, the use of luxury brands in digital environments—represents a further development of the sign exchange value logic identified by Baudrillard: the luxury object is increasingly abstracted from any material substrate, becoming a pure sign without a referent. The digital luxury object is, in Baudrillard’s terms, a **simulacrum**—a sign that refers only to other signs, with no connection to any material reality [1]. The implications of this development for the relational account of luxury are direct: a digital luxury object, which has no material substrate in which a subject’s spatiotemporal structure can be embedded, cannot in principle be a relational luxury object. The digital transformation of luxury is therefore the fullest expression of the tension between the sign exchange value logic of contemporary luxury and the relational reality of intimate life.

The conceptual archaeology’s conclusion. The concept of luxury is not a neutral descriptive category but a historically produced, politically contested, and structurally unstable one, organised in its dominant forms around the dimensions of scarcity, craft, and beauty, and in its contemporary market form around the primacy of brand as a symbolic entity. The relational account’s proposal—that the true measure of luxury in intimate relations is the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject’s spatiotemporal structure—is not a departure from the concept of luxury but a recovery of its most fundamental dimension: the dimension of attentive care, of the particular, of the irreplaceable.

3. The First Doctrine: Nature and Art—A Political Economy of Beauty

The first doctrine concerns what happens when natural materials—gemstones, gold, living things—are transformed by human craft into objects that can be given, worn, and held. This transformation is the founding act of luxury: the act by which the raw material of the natural world is given a form that makes it available to human desire, human exchange, and human intimacy. Understanding the structure of this transformation—what it does to the material, what it produces that was not there before, and what political economy governs its production

and distribution—is essential for understanding both what luxury is and why it matters for intimate relational life.

3.1 The Bulgari Paradigm: Natural Material Transformed by Artistic Vision

Bulgari—the Roman jewellery house founded in 1884, now one of the most recognised luxury brands in the world—offers perhaps the clearest paradigm for the first doctrine. Bulgari’s signature aesthetic is the transformation of bold, natural materials (large gemstones in vivid colours, heavy gold, ancient coins) into objects that are simultaneously archaic and modern, simultaneously natural and cultural. The serpent bracelet that wraps around the wrist is a snake—one of the oldest natural symbols in human culture—rendered in gold and set with gemstones; the *Monete* collection sets ancient Roman coins in contemporary jewellery settings. In each case, the natural material carries its own history—the geological time of the gemstone, the historical time of the ancient coin—and the craft transforms this natural history into something wearable, giveable, and intimately human.

The Bulgari paradigm reveals the first doctrine’s fundamental structure: the luxury object is the site of a **double temporality**. On one side is the temporality of nature: the gemstone formed over millions of years of geological process, the gold refined from ore deposited across geological epochs, the serpent symbol carried across millennia of human cultural history. On the other side is the temporality of craft: the hours of the craftsperson’s attention, the years of training that made the craft possible, the generational transmission of the techniques and the aesthetic vision. The luxury object is the meeting point of these two temporalities—the place where geological time and cultural time, natural permanence and human transience, are brought into contact.

This double temporality is what gives the luxury object its peculiar weight: the sense that it carries something larger than itself, something that exceeds the moment of its production and the moment of its use. When a Bulgari jewel is given as a gift in an intimate relation, what is given is not merely an expensive object; it is an object that carries within itself both the deep time of nature and the concentrated attention of human craft—a kind of concentrated time, material and historical and artisanal, that the giver offers to the receiver.

3.2 The Political Economy of Beauty

Beauty, in the context of luxury, is not a neutral aesthetic category. It is a politically and economically constituted one: what counts as beautiful, which natural materials are deemed precious, which craft traditions are valued, and whose aesthetic judgements are authoritative—all of these are determined by social relations of power that the political economy of beauty must examine.

The most fundamental question is: **whose beauty?** The decision that diamonds are precious and coal is not, that gold is noble and iron is base, that rubies are luxury and glass is common, is not a natural fact but a social one—a decision made in specific historical circumstances by specific social actors for specific reasons, and reproduced across generations through the mech-

anisms of cultural transmission, education, and the symbolic economy of distinction. Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of cultural capital [3] is relevant here: the capacity to recognise and appreciate the beauty of luxury objects is itself a form of cultural capital, unequally distributed across social classes, and the social recognition of certain aesthetic judgements as authoritative is part of the mechanism by which class distinction is reproduced.

The political economy of beauty also concerns the **labour of production**. The beauty of the luxury object is not produced by the natural material alone; it is produced by the labour of the craftsperson who gives the material its form. But the craftsperson’s labour is typically invisible in the luxury object’s presentation: what is foregrounded is the designer’s vision, the brand’s heritage, and the natural material’s properties, while the actual work of fabrication—the skilled manual labour that translates vision into object—is backgrounded or aestheticised into the mythology of *savoir-faire*. This invisibility of the craftsperson’s labour in the luxury object is structurally similar to the invisibility of care labour in the intimate relational field analysed in Paper XV [11]: in both cases, the labour that produces the value is rendered invisible by the dominant representational framework.

3.3 The Dialectic of Natural and Cultural Signs

The luxury object occupies a distinctive position in the semiotic landscape: it simultaneously functions as a natural sign (an index of the natural world’s properties—the hardness of the diamond, the rarity of the ruby, the luminosity of the pearl) and a cultural sign (a symbol of social distinction, craft excellence, and aesthetic tradition). This double sign function is not a contradiction but a productive tension that gives the luxury object its peculiar semiotic richness.

As a **natural sign**, the luxury object indexes the natural world’s temporality and materiality. The gemstone in the jewel is a piece of the earth’s geological history, formed under specific conditions of pressure and temperature over specific periods of time. When it is held in the hand or worn against the skin, the geological past is made physically present: the stone that took millions of years to form is now in contact with the body of a person who will live for decades. This temporal disproportion—the geological and the biographical brought into intimate contact—is part of what gives the luxury object its weight, its sense of transcending the ordinary temporality of human life.

As a **cultural sign**, the luxury object encodes the values, traditions, and aesthetic judgements of the culture that produced it. The Bulgari snake bracelet is not just a piece of gold shaped like a snake; it is a statement about the snake as a cultural symbol (associated with wisdom, eternity, transformation, and danger across many cultural traditions), about the aesthetic tradition of Roman jewellery design, and about the brand’s position within the contemporary luxury market. The cultural sign function is interpretive: it requires the receiver to have access to the cultural codes that make the object’s meaning legible.

The dialectic between natural and cultural signs is not stable but dynamic: the cultural sign function can colonise the natural sign function, reducing the object’s natural properties to mere

raw material for the cultural sign (the diamond is valuable because it is rare, and it is rare because the diamond industry has made it rare, and it is a symbol of love because De Beers decided in 1947 that it would be). Conversely, the natural sign function can exceed the cultural sign function, reminding the holder of the object's pre-cultural, pre-symbolic materiality—the simple weight of the gold, the simple hardness of the stone, the simple fact of natural existence that no cultural coding can fully subsume.

3.4 Singularity: Non-Replicability as the Essence of Luxury

The concept of **singularity**—the property of being unique, non-replicable, irreplaceable—is the first doctrine's most important contribution to the paper's central argument. Singularity is what distinguishes the genuine luxury object from the merely expensive one, and it is the bridge that connects the first doctrine's aesthetic and natural analysis to the third doctrine's account of relational luxury.

A luxury object is singular in several senses. It is singular in its **material**: no two gemstones are identical, no two pieces of gold have exactly the same history, no two handmade objects are precisely the same. Even within a production run of supposedly identical objects, the hand of the craftsperson introduces small variations that make each object unique. The singularity of the material is not merely a formal property; it is an indexical one, in Peirce's sense: it is the trace of the specific material process that produced this specific object, and no other.

It is singular in its **history**: the luxury object has a biography—a sequence of events, owners, contexts, and meanings that accumulates as the object passes through time and hands. Igor Kopytoff's account of the **cultural biography of things** [5] is relevant here: objects are not fixed entities but processes, whose identity and value are constituted through the accretion of the events and relationships they have been part of. The luxury object that has been worn by a specific person, given on a specific occasion, and associated with a specific relationship carries a biographical density that the new object, however expensive, does not yet possess.

It is singular in its **relation to the recipient**: a luxury object given in an intimate relation is not a generic luxury object but *this* object, given to *this* person, at *this* moment, by *this* giver. The relational context of the giving singularises the object further: it gives it a relational meaning that is not a property of the object itself but of its position in the history of a specific intimate relation.

Singularity as the bridge between doctrines. The singularity of the luxury object—its material non-replicability, its biographical density, its relational contextualisation—is the property that connects the first doctrine's aesthetic and natural analysis to the third doctrine's account of relational luxury. A genuinely singular object, one that carries the trace of specific natural processes, specific craft attention, and specific relational histories, is the kind of object most capable of bearing high coupling with a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure. Singularity is not merely an aesthetic property but an existential one: it is the mark of the

particular, the irreplaceable, the non-fungible—and it is precisely the non-fungible that can carry the existential embedding that relational luxury requires.

The connection between singularity and the relational account becomes clearest when we consider what happens to singularity in the contemporary luxury industry. The industrialisation of luxury production, the management of the brand as a symbolic entity, and the extension of the luxury market to a larger consumer base all tend to **reduce singularity**: to produce objects that are more standardised, more reproducible, and more legible within a global symbolic system, at the cost of the material, biographical, and relational particularity that makes an object genuinely singular. The tension between the luxury industry’s commercial requirements and the singularity that is the first doctrine’s essential contribution to the concept of luxury is one of the structural tensions that the paper’s critical analysis must address.

Arthur Danto’s account of the **transfiguration of the commonplace** [4]—the philosophical process by which an ordinary object is transformed into a work of art through its insertion into an artworld context—provides a further dimension of this analysis. Danto’s insight is that the aesthetic properties of an object are not intrinsic to its material but constituted by its position within a framework of interpretation and valuation. The luxury object undergoes an analogous transfiguration: the natural material is transformed into a luxury object not solely through the craft process but through its insertion into the social and symbolic framework of luxury—the brand context, the retail environment, the cultural codes of distinction and taste. And, in the intimate relational context, a further transfiguration occurs: the luxury object is transformed into a relational luxury object through its insertion into the framework of a specific intimate history, the specific caring attention of a specific giver, and the specific receiving of a specific beloved. This third transfiguration—the relational one—is what the third doctrine must theorise.

4. The Second Doctrine: Sign Exchange Value and the Consumer Society

The first doctrine reveals the aesthetic and material structure of luxury—what luxury objects are made of, how they are made, and what properties of singularity and double temporality make them genuinely valuable. But it does not account for the way luxury actually functions in contemporary consumer society—the way it is purchased, displayed, and circulated not primarily for the material and aesthetic properties that the first doctrine identifies but for the social signals it transmits. This is the domain of the second doctrine, whose primary theoretical resource is Jean Baudrillard’s analysis of the consumer society and the logic of sign exchange value.

4.1 The Three Logics of Value: Use, Exchange, and Sign

Baudrillard’s most fundamental contribution to the analysis of consumption is his identification of a third logic of value—sign exchange value—that operates alongside and increasingly

displaces the two logics identified by classical political economy: use value and exchange value [1].

Use value is the value of an object for what it does: the food that nourishes, the coat that warms, the tool that enables. Use value is oriented toward the object's material properties and their relation to human needs. It is, in principle, a natural rather than a social category: the food nourishes regardless of its social context, the coat warms regardless of who made it or who wore it before.

Exchange value is the value of an object as a quantity of abstract labour—the value it has in the market as a commodity that can be exchanged for other commodities or for money. Exchange value is the domain of classical political economy, from Smith through Ricardo to Marx: it is the value that organises the market, determines prices, and drives the accumulation of capital. Exchange value is social rather than natural—it is constituted through the social relations of production and exchange—but it is still oriented toward the object, toward the labour that produced it and the material it embodies.

Sign exchange value is the value of an object as a sign within a system of social differentiation: the value it has not for what it does or what it embodies, but for what it *means* within the social symbolic order. Sign exchange value is organised not by the object's material properties or its labour content but by its position within a system of differences—a system in which objects acquire meaning not by what they are but by what they are not, by the distinctions they mark and the social positions they signal.

In the consumer society, Baudrillard argues, sign exchange value increasingly dominates and organises the other two logics: objects are consumed not primarily for their use value or their exchange value but for the sign exchange value they carry—for the social distinctions they mark, the identities they construct, and the positions they signal within the symbolic order of consumption [2]. This analysis applies with particular force to luxury objects, whose sign exchange value is, by design, disproportionate to their use value: the diamond ring is not primarily consumed for what it does (it does very little) but for what it means.

4.2 Luxury as a System of Difference

Within the logic of sign exchange value, the luxury object's meaning is constituted not by any intrinsic property of the object but by its **differential position** within the system of consumer objects. Baudrillard follows Saussure here: just as the linguistic sign has no positive content but only differential value—the word “cat” means what it means because it is not “bat” or “car” or “cut”—the luxury object has its meaning by virtue of not being the non-luxury object, the mass-market product, the ordinary commodity.

This differential structure has several important implications for the analysis of luxury in intimate relations.

First, the meaning of the luxury gift is **relational within the sign system**: it is constituted by its position in a hierarchy of possible gifts, and its meaning changes as the hierarchy changes.

The diamond ring means what it means because it is above the semi-precious stone ring, which is above the silver ring, which is above the costume jewellery ring, which is above the flower. If the hierarchy shifts—if synthetic diamonds become indistinguishable from natural ones and far cheaper, as is already occurring—the diamond ring’s sign exchange value changes even though its material properties remain identical. The sign system is what determines the meaning, not the object.

Second, the luxury gift’s primary communicative function is **social rather than relational**: it communicates not primarily to the intimate partner but to the social world. The diamond ring that is worn in public communicates the wearer’s social position—their partner’s ability to spend, their own access to luxury, their position in the social hierarchy of consumption—rather than the depth of the intimate bond that occasioned the gift. This outward orientation of the luxury object’s sign exchange value is in structural tension with the inward orientation of genuine intimate relational life.

Third, the system of sign exchange value is **inherently inflationary**: because meaning is constituted by difference, the maintenance of distinction requires the continuous escalation of luxury expenditure as lower-priced alternatives become more widely available. The luxury object that marked social distinction yesterday loses its distinctive power when it becomes accessible to a wider market, requiring the replacement with a more expensive object to restore the distinction. This inflationary dynamic drives the luxury market’s continuous expansion toward higher price points and greater exclusivity, while simultaneously democratising the lower tiers of luxury as they lose their distinctive power.

4.3 Luxury as Phallic Signifier in Intimate Relations

The connection between sign exchange value and the phallic signifier analysis of [Paper XV \[11\]](#) is direct and important. In the Lacanian framework, the phallus is the master signifier that organises the symbolic order around the logic of having and lacking: to have the phallus is to occupy the position of symbolic power, completeness, and authority; to lack it is to be in the position of need, incompleteness, and subordination.

Traditional luxury objects function as phallic signifiers in the symbolic economy of intimate relations: they are the objects through which the logic of having and lacking is most visibly enacted in the domain of intimate gift exchange. The giver who can provide an expensive luxury gift occupies, by that provision, the symbolic position of the one who has—who has the resources, the power, the social prestige that the luxury object materialises. The receiver is positioned as the one who lacks and who receives what they lack from the one who has.

This phallic structure of luxury gift exchange has several consequences. It **reproduces power asymmetry** within the intimate relation: the capacity to give expensive luxury gifts is not symmetrically distributed, and the systematic association of valuable luxury gifts with the expression of serious intimate commitment creates structural pressure toward asymmetric gift exchange that mirrors and reproduces the asymmetric distribution of economic resources. In intimate relations where material wealth is unequally distributed, the luxury gift economy

tends to reinforce the material asymmetry by giving it a symbolic expression.

It also **commodifies the expression of intimacy**: when the primary medium for the expression of intimate commitment is the luxury object whose value is constituted by its sign exchange value, the expression of intimacy is drawn into the logic of the market. The question “how much does this gift cost?” becomes, in the dominant framework, a proxy for the question “how much does this person love me?”—a substitution that reduces the irreducible particularity of intimate care to a quantity measurable in monetary units.

Georg Simmel’s analysis of money as the great leveller—the medium that reduces qualitative differences to quantitative ones, that makes everything comparable because everything has a price—is relevant here [7]. Luxury gifts, insofar as they function as sign exchange value, participate in the money logic: they translate the qualitative, irreducible particularity of intimate care into a quantitative, comparable, and therefore ultimately replaceable sign. The diamond ring that cost x can, in the sign exchange value logic, be replaced by another diamond ring that also costs x ; the flower that carried a specific subject’s specific attention in a specific moment cannot be replaced by anything, because it is constitutively singular.

The phallic structure of luxury gift exchange. Traditional luxury objects, functioning primarily through sign exchange value, operate as phallic signifiers in the symbolic economy of intimate relations: they enact the logic of having and lacking, reproduce power asymmetry, and commodify the expression of intimacy by reducing the qualitative particularity of care to a quantitative sign. This phallic structure is in direct structural conflict with the logic of GRW generation, which requires non-possessive co-evolutionary participation rather than asymmetric symbolic exchange.

4.4 The Limits of Baudrillard: Against Semiotic Nihilism

Baudrillard’s analysis is powerful and, within its domain, essentially correct: luxury objects in consumer society do function primarily as sign exchange value, the system of differences does organise consumption, and the logic of the simulacrum does increasingly colonise the domain of intimate gift exchange. But Baudrillard’s analysis has limits that the relational account must identify, because without identifying these limits, the entire domain of relational luxury collapses into the nihilism of the sign.

Baudrillard’s fundamental move is to argue that in the consumer society, the real is replaced by the simulation—that there is no longer any original referent, any use value, any material reality that the sign exchange system represents; there is only the play of signs, the system of differences, the simulacrum [1]. Applied to intimate gift exchange, this would imply that there is no genuine intimacy that the luxury gift expresses or fails to express—there is only the

sign system, within which the luxury gift occupies a position and through which the giver and receiver are positioned. The flower and the diamond ring would be, in this framework, simply different signs within the same system, with no claim to express anything more real than their differential positions.

This nihilism is philosophically untenable, and the GRB framework's relational ontology provides the resources to challenge it. If the real is relational—if there is a genuine relational field, with its own geometry and its own dynamics, that is irreducible to the symbolic order—then the sign exchange value system does not exhaust what is real about the luxury gift. There is a residue that exceeds the sign system: the specific weight of a specific object in a specific hand, the specific quality of attention that a specific giver brought to the act of giving, the specific moment of shared recognition in which the receiver understood not merely what the object signifies within the sign system but what it carries of the giver's existence. This residue—what Baudrillard's framework cannot see because it has, by theoretical fiat, eliminated the real—is precisely what the third doctrine's concept of relational luxury must theorise.

The limit of Baudrillard is therefore not an empirical limit—it is not that his analysis of sign exchange value is incorrect—but a **theoretical limit**: by eliminating the real from his theoretical framework, Baudrillard eliminates the possibility of distinguishing genuine from spurious intimacy, genuine from spurious luxury, the flower that carries a subject's existence from the diamond ring that merely occupies a position in the sign system. The third doctrine recovers this distinction by grounding it in the relational ontology of the GRB framework rather than in any naive realism that Baudrillard's critique correctly dismantles.

The limit of the second doctrine. Baudrillard's analysis of sign exchange value correctly identifies the dominant logic of luxury in consumer society but cannot distinguish genuine from spurious relational luxury because it has eliminated the real from its theoretical framework. The third doctrine recovers this distinction by grounding relational luxury in the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure—a real register phenomenon irreducible to any sign system.

5. The Third Doctrine: Relational Luxury and the Degree of Coupling

The first doctrine showed us what luxury is made of: natural materials transformed by human craft, carrying a double temporality of geological permanence and artisanal attention, achieving through singularity the mark of the irreplaceable. The second doctrine showed us how luxury functions in consumer society: as a system of sign exchange value, organised by differential position rather than intrinsic property, enacting the phallic logic of having and lacking. Both doctrines illuminate something real, but neither is sufficient. The first doctrine cannot explain

why a flower can be more luxurious than a diamond; the second doctrine cannot distinguish genuine from spurious intimate luxury without collapsing into semiotic nihilism.

The third doctrine proposes a concept that both completes and transforms the preceding analysis: **relational luxury**, defined not by economic value or sign exchange value but by the degree of coupling between an object and a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure. This doctrine is the paper's central theoretical contribution.

5.1 The Core Definition: Coupling Degree

The concept of relational luxury rests on a single fundamental definition:

The definition of relational luxury. An object is relationally luxurious to the degree to which it is coupled with a relational subject's spatiotemporal structure. The **coupling degree** (κ) of an object o with respect to a relational subject $\mathcal{S}$ is the measure of the extent to which $\mathcal{S}$'s existence—their intentionality, their presence in a specific spatiotemporal location, their choice made specifically for this relational other—is embedded within o . Coupling degree is independent of economic value: a flower can have higher κ than a diamond ring, and a diamond ring can have higher κ than a flower, depending on the spatiotemporal structure embedded in each.

This definition requires unpacking at every level. What does it mean for a subject's spatiotemporal structure to be “embedded” in an object? What is the relational subject whose structure is at stake? And what makes coupling degree a measure of luxury rather than merely a measure of personal investment?

The spatiotemporal structure of the subject: Every subject exists in a specific spatiotemporal location at every moment—in this place, at this time, with this history and this trajectory. The subject's spatiotemporal structure is not merely their physical location but the full dimensionality of their existence at a given moment: their attentional orientation (what they are noticing, what they are attending to), their intentional state (what they are caring about, what they are directed toward), their relational context (their awareness of the specific other for whom they are acting), and their existential investment (what they are bringing of themselves to this moment and this act).

Embedding: The subject's spatiotemporal structure is embedded in an object when the object carries, as a constitutive feature of its identity as this particular object, the trace of the subject's existence in a specific spatiotemporal moment. The embedding is not a psychological fact about the subject's feelings but an ontological fact about the object: the object has been constitutively shaped by the subject's existence, and it carries this shaping as an ineliminable feature of what it is. The flower that was noticed by a specific person at a specific moment, in the specific

context of attending to a specific beloved, carries the trace of that specific existence within itself—not as a property of the flower’s material constitution but as an existential layer that is inseparable from the flower’s identity as this particular object at this particular moment in this particular relational field.

The relational subject: The subject whose spatiotemporal structure is at stake is not the individual subject alone but the relational subject—the subject constituted through and in the co-evolutionary dynamics of the intimate relational field. The flower is noticed not by an individual in isolation but by an individual who is already, in their very mode of attention, shaped by the relation with the beloved: who notices the flower because the history of this specific relation has cultivated in them the attentional sensitivity that makes this flower visible as something to be shared. The embedding is therefore always already relational: it is the trace not merely of an individual subject’s existence but of a relational subject’s existence—of a mode of being-in-the-world that has been co-constituted through the shared life.

5.2 Existence-Attestation: The Ontological Event of Embedding

The embedding of a subject’s spatiotemporal structure in an object is not merely a psychological event—a matter of the subject’s intentions or feelings—but an **ontological event**: an event in which the subject’s existence, their mode of being-in-the-world at a specific moment, leaves a permanent trace in the object’s identity. We call this event **existence-attestation**: the act by which a subject’s existence is attested in an object, made present and permanent in a form that can be received by a relational other.

The concept of attestation is drawn from Paul Ricoeur’s account of selfhood and narrative identity [6]. For Ricoeur, attestation is the fundamental mode in which the self is known to itself and to others: not through Cartesian certainty or empirical verification, but through the performative act of bearing witness—testifying, through action and narrative, to what one is and what one cares about. Attestation is not proof; it is the fundamental mode of first-person self-knowledge and of the communication of that knowledge to others.

Existence-attestation in the relational luxury object is attestation through material form: the subject attests their existence—their presence, their attention, their care for the specific other—by embedding that existence in an object that can be received by the other. The flower that is brought to the beloved is not merely a pleasant object; it is the material attestation of the giver’s existence in a specific spatiotemporal moment, made permanent and giveable in the form of a living thing.

The ontological character of existence-attestation distinguishes it from psychological characterisations of the gift in terms of intention or sentiment. The giver’s intentions and sentiments are relevant—they determine whether genuine embedding occurs—but they are not themselves the embedding. The embedding is in the object, not in the subject’s psychology. This means that existence-attestation can be genuine or spurious: if the giver’s spatiotemporal structure is genuinely embedded in the object, the attestation is real; if the object merely carries the economic value that the sign system associates with serious intimate commitment, without

genuine subject-embedding, the attestation is spurious—a simulation of intimacy that has the form of attestation without its substance.

Existence-attestation as ontological event. Existence-attestation is the ontological event by which a subject’s spatiotemporal structure—their intentionality, their presence, their care directed specifically toward this relational other—becomes embedded in an object as an ineliminable feature of that object’s identity. It is not a psychological fact about the giver’s intentions but an ontological fact about the object. The relational luxury object is the object in which existence-attestation has genuinely occurred; the economically expensive but relationally empty object is the object in which existence-attestation has been simulated by sign exchange value without genuine subject-embedding.

5.3 The Four Dimensions of Coupling Degree

The coupling degree κ is not a single-dimensional measure but a four-dimensional one. The four dimensions correspond to the four ways in which a subject’s spatiotemporal structure can be more or less embedded in an object.

Temporal depth (κ_t): The temporal extent of the subject’s investment in the object. Temporal depth has two forms that must be distinguished: the **breadth** of immediate presence (the flower noticed and brought in the immediacy of a single moment, in which the subject’s full attention is present) and the **depth** of sustained investment (the diamond ring that represents years of saving, planning, and anticipatory attention). Both forms constitute temporal embedding, but they embed different qualities of the subject’s temporal existence: the flower embeds the fullness of a moment, the ring embeds the sustained trajectory of a period of life. Neither is inherently higher in κ_t ; they are different temporal structures, each genuinely embedded.

Intentional intensity (κ_i): The degree to which the object was chosen specifically for *this* relational other, with attention to their particular character, preferences, and relational history. High intentional intensity means: this object was chosen because of what this specific person is, not because it is the most expensive option in the relevant category, not because it is what social convention requires, but because the giver’s knowledge and attention to this specific person made this specific object the right one. The intentional intensity of the flower found on the path may be very high—the giver immediately thought of this specific person and their love of natural beauty—or very low—the giver picked it up absently without specific thought of anyone. The intentional intensity of the diamond ring may be high—chosen after careful attention to the specific beloved’s aesthetic preferences and the history of the relation—or very low—the most expensive ring in the jeweller’s, chosen because social convention says that the most expensive ring is the most serious expression of commitment.

Non-substitutability (κ_n): The degree to which the object is irreplaceable—the degree to which the specific object, found or made or chosen in this specific spatiotemporal context, could not have been replaced by any other object without loss of the embedding. A flower found in a specific crack in a specific pavement on a specific walk has high non-substitutability: no other flower, however similar, would carry the same embedding, because the embedding is constituted by the specific spatiotemporal moment of its finding. A diamond ring purchased from a catalogue has low non-substitutability: another ring of the same price and style would serve equally well as a carrier of the sign exchange value the ring is meant to convey, because the value is in the sign system position rather than in the specific object.

Existential investment (κ_e): The degree to which the subject has brought their full existence—not merely their resources but their attention, their vulnerability, their care—to the act of acquiring and giving the object. Existential investment is the most difficult of the four dimensions to specify, but it is also the most fundamental: it is the degree to which the subject has been genuinely present, in the full dimensionality of their being, to the act of giving. The giver who noticed the flower in the middle of a busy day, who stopped in the midst of their own concerns to attend to a moment of natural beauty and to carry that moment to the beloved, has invested existentially in a way that the giver who delegated the purchase to an assistant has not—regardless of the economic value of the resulting gifts.

The four dimensions are not independent but interact: high temporal depth combined with low intentional intensity produces a different kind of embedding from low temporal depth combined with high intentional intensity. The full coupling degree is a function of all four dimensions together, not a simple sum. And the four dimensions can be traded off against each other in ways that make the assessment of coupling degree contextually sensitive and not reducible to any single metric.

5.4 The Fourfold Classification: Economic and Relational Luxury as Orthogonal Dimensions

The independence of coupling degree from economic value produces a fourfold classification of objects in the intimate relational context, which represents the paper’s most practically accessible theoretical contribution:

	High sign exchange value	Low sign exchange value
High coupling degree (κ)	The long-saved diamond ring	The flower on the path
Low coupling degree (κ)	The proxy-purchased diamond	The absent-minded cheap gift

The upper-left cell—high sign exchange value, high coupling degree—represents objects that are both economically and relationally luxurious: the diamond ring that represents years of saving and sustained anticipatory attention to the specific beloved is both a sign of serious economic commitment and a genuine existence-attestation. The two forms of luxury are not in

conflict here; they reinforce each other, and the object carries both the social signal of economic commitment and the relational signal of genuine subject-embedding.

The upper-right cell—low sign exchange value, high coupling degree—represents objects that are relationally luxurious without being economically so: the flower found on the path, the handmade gift that cost nothing but hours of attentive labour, the old photograph discovered in a drawer and shared at exactly the right moment. These objects have low position in the sign exchange value system but may carry very high coupling degree; they are the purest instances of relational luxury, uncomplicated by the phallic logic of economic competition.

The lower-left cell—high sign exchange value, low coupling degree—represents objects that are economically luxurious without being relationally so: the expensive gift purchased without attention to the specific beloved, the diamond ring chosen because it is the most expensive option in the jeweller's rather than because it is right for this specific person. This cell is the domain of the phallic luxury analysed in §4.3: the object whose value is entirely in its sign system position, whose existence-attestation is spurious, and whose apparent luxury conceals a relational poverty.

The lower-right cell—low sign exchange value, low coupling degree—represents objects that are neither economically nor relationally luxurious: the absent-minded purchase, the conventional gift given without attention to the specific person or the specific moment. This cell is not inherently negative—there are many occasions when neither economic luxury nor relational luxury is appropriate—but in the context of intimate relational life, it represents a missed opportunity for existence-attestation.

5.5 The Dual Luxury of the Long-Saved Ring

The upper-left cell—the long-saved diamond ring—deserves particular attention, because it represents the most complex case for the theory of relational luxury and anticipates the justice theory of §8.

The diamond ring that a person saves for years to give to their beloved is both economically luxurious and relationally luxurious. Its economic luxury is constituted by its position in the sign exchange value system. Its relational luxury is constituted by the coupling degree: the years of saving and planning embed a substantial temporal structure of the giving subject's existence in the ring; the sustained anticipatory attention to the specific beloved embeds a high degree of intentional intensity; the ring's identity as the ring that was saved for, planned for, and chosen specifically for this person at this moment embeds a non-substitutability that a casually purchased equivalent ring would not carry.

The dual luxury of the long-saved ring demonstrates that economic and relational luxury are not opposed but can reinforce each other. The economic value of the ring is not merely a sign system position; it is also the material trace of the temporal investment—the years of labour and saving that the ring represents. The sign exchange value and the coupling degree overlap in this case: the economic value is itself a form of existence-attestation, because it represents

a substantial investment of the giving subject’s temporal and existential resources.

But the dual luxury of the long-saved ring also reveals the conditions under which economic luxury can generate relational luxury: economic value translates into coupling degree only when the economic investment itself represents a genuine temporal structure of the subject’s existence, when it is genuinely costly in existential terms rather than merely in monetary terms. The millionaire who buys the same ring without thought or effort has the same economic luxury but far lower coupling degree: the economic investment does not represent the same existential investment because it does not cost the same existential resources.

5.6 Reception Structure: The Completion of Coupling

The coupling between an object and a relational subject’s spatiotemporal structure is not completed at the moment of giving but at the moment of **receiving**. Receiving, in the context of relational luxury, is not a passive act of acceptance but an active act of recognition: the receiver must recognise and the existence-attestation embedded in the object for the coupling to be fully realised.

This means that the relational luxury of an object is not solely a property of the object itself but a property of the **relational event** of giving and receiving: it depends on both the giver’s existence-attestation and the receiver’s recognition. A flower given with high coupling degree but received without recognition of the embedding—received merely as a pleasant object rather than as the attestation of a specific existence at a specific moment—has not fully realised its relational luxury potential, even though the embedding is genuinely present.

The reception structure also reveals the dialogic character of relational luxury: genuine relational luxury requires a receiver who has developed the **sensibility**—the attentional capacity, the relational history, the qualitative awareness—to recognise existence-attestation when they encounter it. The development of this sensibility is the domain of §7, which examines sensibility as a cultivated relational capacity rather than an innate aesthetic property.

5.7 Relational Luxury as GRW Medium

The relational luxury object is not merely a gift within the intimate relation; it is a **medium of GRW generation and storage**. The high-coupling-degree object enters the relational field as a relational event—a spike in the couple’s co-evolutionary dynamics, a moment of heightened coupling that produces structural modification of the shared attractor landscape. The flower brought from the path is the paradigmatic happiness jar event: a contingent occurrence in the natural world, noticed by a subject whose attention has been shaped by the relation, transformed into a relational event through the act of sharing, and stored in the relational field as a permanent structural modification.

This connection between relational luxury and GRW completes the series’ trajectory from **Paper XIV**’s account of the shared flower as the paradigm of relational happiness [10], through **Paper XV**’s analysis of the happiness jar as GRW’s paradigmatic accumulation practice [11], to

the present paper’s account of relational luxury as the material dimension of GRW generation. The flower on the path is simultaneously: a moment of contingent beauty (Paper XIV), a happiness jar event that generates GRW (Paper XV), and a relational luxury object whose coupling degree constitutes its genuine luxuriousness (Paper XVI). The three accounts are not parallel but nested: each adds a dimension that the others do not capture, and together they constitute a complete account of what happens when one person brings a flower to another.

Relational luxury as GRW medium. The high-coupling-degree object functions as a medium of GRW generation: it enters the relational field as a relational event, produces structural modification of the shared attractor landscape through the existence-attestation it carries, and is stored in the happiness jar as a permanent trace of the co-evolutionary moment it generated. Relational luxury is not a supplement to GRW but one of its primary material forms: the form in which the abstract dynamics of co-evolutionary happiness generation become tangible, giveable, and receivable as objects in the world.

6. The Dialectical Synthesis of the Three Doctrines

The three doctrines have each illuminated a distinct dimension of luxury in intimate relations. The first doctrine showed us the aesthetic and material structure of the genuine luxury object: its double temporality, its craft singularity, its capacity for Danto’s transfiguration. The second doctrine showed us how luxury functions in the symbolic order: as sign exchange value, differential position, and phallic signifier. The third doctrine proposed the concept that transforms our understanding of both: the coupling degree between an object and a relational subject’s spatiotemporal structure, the existence-attestation that converts a material object into a relational luxury object. Now we must show how the three doctrines relate to each other—not as independent analyses of separate phenomena but as dialectically unified moments in a single account of luxury in intimate life.

6.1 The Three-Layer Structure of Luxury Experience

The deepest luxury experience in intimate relations is not the experience of any single doctrine alone but the experience of all three simultaneously—the moment in which the natural-artisanal, the symbolic, and the relational layers are all present and mutually reinforcing. This three-layer structure can be described phenomenologically before being given its theoretical articulation.

Consider a specific object: a piece of jewellery—a ring, let us say—that has been made by a craftsman using a gemstone with a distinctive natural colour, that carries the maker’s mark of a tradition the giver has long admired, that belongs to a recognisable luxury house but is not its most famous or most expensive piece, and that was chosen because the giver, over the

course of months of attentive attention to the beloved, recognised that this specific stone's colour was exactly the colour of a particular quality of light that the beloved had once pointed out on a walk together.

The first layer is present: the object carries the geological time of the stone and the artisanal time of the craftsperson's attention. Its singularity is material and biographical: this stone, with its specific colour and its specific inclusions, was formed under specific conditions that will never be exactly replicated; this setting was made by a craftsperson whose hands have shaped it in ways that distinguish it from every other setting of the same design.

The second layer is present: the object carries sign exchange value within the symbolic order of luxury. The maker's mark signals craft tradition and cultural prestige; the material signals economic investment; the form signals aesthetic judgement and cultural knowledge. Anyone familiar with the symbolic order of luxury will read these signals and understand something about the giver's social position and the seriousness of their commitment.

The third layer is present: the object carries a high coupling degree. The giver's temporally sustained attention to the beloved—months of noticing, of remembering, of attentive care—is embedded in the choice. The intentional intensity is high: the object was chosen specifically because this colour is the colour of a specific moment the beloved had pointed out, a moment that the giver had held in memory across months. The non-substitutability is high: no other ring would carry this specific connection to that specific moment of shared attention. The existential investment is genuine: the giver has brought something of their attentional history to this act of giving.

In the experience of receiving this ring, all three layers are simultaneously present. The receiver holds a piece of geological time in their hand; they read the symbolic signals of quality and commitment; and they recognise—in the colour of the stone—the trace of a specific shared moment, the evidence that the giver has been attentive across months to something the receiver once pointed out. The recognition of the third layer transforms the experience of the first two: the geological time of the stone becomes the geological time of *this* stone, chosen because of its colour; the sign exchange value of the luxury brand becomes the sign exchange value of *this* object, whose full value cannot be read from the sign system alone.

6.2 The Three Registers Revisited

The three doctrines map onto the three Lacanian registers—imaginary, symbolic, and real—in a structure that the GRB series has been developing across the preceding papers.

The first doctrine and the imaginary register: The aesthetic and natural dimension of luxury—the beauty of the gemstone, the elegance of the design, the ideal of craftsmanship—belongs primarily to the imaginary register: the register of the image, of idealisation, of the visual and the specular. The luxury object of the first doctrine is an idealised form: the natural world given ideal form through human craft, the beautiful made permanent and wearable. The pleasure of the luxury object at this level is the pleasure of the image—the

visual pleasure of a beautiful thing whose beauty has been stabilised and made available to sustained contemplation.

The second doctrine and the symbolic register: The sign exchange value dimension of luxury belongs to the symbolic register: the register of the signifier, of difference, of the social bond constituted through language and exchange. The luxury object of the second doctrine is a signifier in the social symbolic order: its value is constituted by its differential position in a system of differences, its meaning is socially produced and socially legible, and its function is to position the possessor within the symbolic hierarchy. The pleasure of the luxury object at this level is the pleasure of symbolic recognition—the pleasure of occupying a recognised and valued position in the social symbolic order.

The third doctrine and the real register: The coupling degree dimension of luxury belongs to the real register: the register of what resists symbolisation, of the irreducibly particular, of what exceeds every symbolic account. The relational luxury object of the third doctrine is not a sign within a sign system but an existence-attestation—a material trace of a specific subject’s specific existence at a specific moment, carrying within itself something that cannot be fully symbolised or exchanged. The pleasure of the relational luxury object at this level is not the pleasure of the image or the pleasure of symbolic recognition but the pleasure of genuine encounter—the encounter with the specific existence of the other, mediated through an object that carries that existence as an ineliminable feature of its identity.

The three-register structure reveals the conditions under which luxury can be genuinely intimate—genuinely connected to the reality of the intimate relational field—rather than merely imaginary (organised by idealisation) or merely symbolic (organised by sign exchange value). Genuine intimate luxury requires the real register to be present: requires that the object carry something that exceeds the imaginary and the symbolic, something that belongs to the irreducible particularity of a specific existence and a specific relational history.

6.3 The Transfiguration Sequence: Natural, Artisanal, Relational

Danto’s concept of the transfiguration of the commonplace [4] identified the first transformation: the conversion of the natural material into a luxury object through its insertion into the artworld context of craft tradition and aesthetic valuation. But there are two further transfigurations that the complete account of relational luxury requires.

The **first transfiguration** is artisanal: natural material is transformed into luxury object through the craftsman’s sustained attention. A rough diamond is transfigured into a cut stone; a bar of gold is transfigured into a jewellery setting; a piece of leather is transfigured into a luxury accessory. This transfiguration is the domain of the first doctrine: it produces the aesthetic and material properties that make the object a genuine luxury rather than merely an expensive commodity.

The **second transfiguration** is symbolic: the luxury object is transfigured into a sign exchange value carrier through its insertion into the symbolic order of the luxury market—through the

application of the brand's mark, the retail context, the social codes of luxury consumption. This transfiguration is the domain of the second doctrine: it produces the sign exchange value properties that make the object socially legible as luxury and organise its circulation within the consumer society.

The **third transfiguration** is relational: the luxury object is transfigured into a relational luxury object through its insertion into the specific history of an intimate relational field—through the giver's act of existence-attestation and the receiver's act of recognition. This transfiguration is the domain of the third doctrine: it produces the coupling degree that makes the object genuinely intimate, a material trace of the specific co-evolutionary dynamics of a specific relational field.

The three transfigurations are not necessarily sequential: all three can occur simultaneously, or any one can occur without the others. What distinguishes the relationally luxurious experience is the presence of the third transfiguration—which is why a flower can be more luxurious than a diamond ring, and why the long-saved diamond ring can be genuinely doubly luxurious while the proxy-purchased diamond ring is merely economically so.

The three transfigurations. Luxury in intimate relations involves three possible transfigurations: the artisanal transfiguration of natural material into aesthetic object (first doctrine), the symbolic transfiguration of aesthetic object into sign exchange value carrier (second doctrine), and the relational transfiguration of any object into existence-attestation through the giver's act of subject-embedding and the receiver's act of recognition (third doctrine). The presence of the third transfiguration is what constitutes genuine intimate luxury; the first and second transfigurations can support or complicate it, but they do not determine it. A flower can undergo the third transfiguration without the first or second; a diamond ring can undergo the first and second without the third.

6.4 The Tension Between Doctrines: When Sign Exchange Value Threatens Coupling

The three doctrines are not always harmonious. There are structural tensions between them—particularly between the second doctrine's sign exchange value logic and the third doctrine's coupling degree logic—that the synthesis must acknowledge rather than paper over.

The most significant tension is the **substitution pressure** that sign exchange value exerts on existence-attestation. Because the sign exchange value of a luxury object is organised by its position in a hierarchy of economic value, there is constant structural pressure to substitute higher-value objects for lower-value ones as expressions of intimate commitment: to replace the flower with the ring, the ring with the more expensive ring, the more expensive ring with the most expensive option. This substitution pressure is organised by the logic of conspicuous

consumption [8]: the more expensive the gift, the more seriously the commitment is taken by the social symbolic order, and therefore the more adequate the sign exchange value as an expression of the intimate bond.

But the substitution logic is precisely what destroys coupling degree: the object chosen because it is the most expensive option has, typically, lower coupling degree than the object chosen because it is right for this specific person at this specific moment. The flower that cannot be substituted by any more expensive flower—because its coupling degree is constituted by its specific spatiotemporal context, not by its market position—is precisely what the substitution logic cannot accommodate. The substitution logic treats objects as commensurable, as replaceable by more expensive equivalents, and it is therefore constitutively hostile to the non-substitutability that is one of the four dimensions of coupling degree.

A second tension is the **social visibility pressure** that sign exchange value exerts on the intimacy of the relational event. The sign exchange value of the luxury gift is constituted by its social legibility: its value depends on being seen, recognised, and read as luxury within the social symbolic order. This social legibility is oriented outward—toward the social world that reads the sign—rather than inward, toward the intimate relational field that constitutes the authentic context of the gift. The relational luxury object, by contrast, is constituted by its inward orientation: its coupling degree is a property of the specific relational history that it embeds, and this property may be entirely invisible to the social symbolic order. The most relationally luxurious gifts are often socially invisible: the flower, the handmade object, the found thing that carries a shared memory invisible to any observer outside the specific relation.

The tension between social visibility and relational intimacy is the tension between the second and third doctrines in its most acute form. It is managed, in mature intimate relations, by a cultivated capacity to hold both orientations simultaneously—to appreciate both the social meaning and the relational meaning of an object, and to ensure that the relational meaning is primary. But the structural pressure of consumer society, which continuously reinforces the social over the relational orientation, makes this management a genuine ethical and practical challenge.

6.5 Synthesis: The Hierarchy of Doctrines in Intimate Life

The dialectical synthesis of the three doctrines does not dissolve their tensions into a harmonious unity but proposes a **hierarchy of doctrines** that is appropriate to the context of intimate relational life: a hierarchy in which the third doctrine is primary, the first doctrine is supporting, and the second doctrine is secondary.

The third doctrine is primary in intimate relational life because the primary value of intimate relations is co-evolutionary generativity—the generation of GRW through the coupling of two relational subjects’ co-evolutionary dynamics. In this context, the coupling degree of objects is the most fundamental measure of their value as intimate gifts: what matters most is whether the object carries the existence-attestation of the giver, whether it embeds a genuine relational event in a material form that can be received and held.

The first doctrine is supporting: the aesthetic and material properties of the luxury object can deepen and enrich the coupling degree by providing a carrier of appropriate weight, beauty, and singularity for the existence-attestation it is meant to embody. A beautiful, singular, well-crafted object is a more adequate carrier for a high-coupling-degree existence-attestation than a cheap, mass-produced one—not because beauty is necessary for relational luxury (the flower is neither expensive nor crafted) but because the first doctrine’s singularity resonates with the third doctrine’s non-substitutability, and the first doctrine’s double temporality resonates with the third doctrine’s temporal depth.

The second doctrine is secondary in intimate relational life—not absent but subordinate. The sign exchange value of the luxury gift is not irrelevant: it carries genuine information about the giver’s social position and the seriousness of their commitment, and in contexts where material security is at issue, this information is genuinely important. But the second doctrine’s value is instrumental rather than intrinsic in the intimate context: it matters insofar as it supports the material conditions for GRW generation, not insofar as it positions the couple within the social symbolic order.

This hierarchy is not a universal claim about the value of the three doctrines in all contexts; it is a contextual claim about their appropriate weighting in the specific context of intimate relational life. In other contexts—the assessment of investment value, the study of social distinction, the analysis of the luxury market—the hierarchy might be different. But in the context of intimate relations, where the primary value is co-evolutionary flourishing and the primary form of wealth is GRW, the third doctrine’s coupling degree is the measure that matters most.

7. The Political Economy of Sensibility

The theory of relational luxury developed in the preceding sections has identified coupling degree as the true measure of luxury in intimate relations and existence-attestation as its ontological foundation. But this theory presupposes a capacity that has not yet been adequately theorised: the capacity to **recognise** coupling degree—to perceive, in a specific object given in a specific relational context, the existence-attestation it carries; to identify, in the colour of a stone, the trace of a shared moment; to understand, in the act of receiving, what has been attested. We call this capacity **sensibility**, and we argue that its cultivation is both a personal ethical achievement and a political-economic problem.

7.1 Sensibility as a Cultivated Recognitional Capacity

Sensibility, in the context of relational luxury, is not a natural gift—an innate capacity to appreciate beauty or to feel deeply—but a **cultivated recognitional capacity**: a developed ability to perceive the coupling degree of objects in intimate relational contexts, to distinguish existence-attestation from sign exchange value simulation, and to receive with appropriate recognition what has been genuinely embedded.

The distinction between natural gift and cultivated capacity is philosophically important. A natural gift is given, not achieved; it reflects the contingent endowment of the recipient and cannot be systematically developed through practice. A cultivated capacity is achieved through sustained practice and appropriate conditions; it can be developed, deepened, and shared, and its development is a legitimate object of pedagogical and political concern.

Sensibility in the recognitional sense has three components. The first is **attentional sensitivity**: the capacity to notice the particular—to perceive the specific colour of this stone, the specific texture of this material, the specific quality of this moment—rather than the generic categories within which the particular is typically subsumed. The attentive receiver of a relational luxury gift is not the receiver who categorises the gift by its economic value, its brand, or its social signal, but the receiver who perceives its particular properties and can relate those properties to the specific history of the intimate relation.

The second component is **relational memory**: the accumulated history of shared attentive experience that allows the receiver to recognise, in the specific properties of the gift, the trace of a shared moment or a shared attentiveness. The receiver who can identify the colour of the stone as the colour of a specific quality of light that the giver once pointed out on a walk together has, through the shared history of the relation, developed a relational memory that makes this recognition possible. Without this relational memory—without the accumulated history of joint attention and shared noticing that constitutes the intimate relational field—the recognition of existence-attestation is impossible: there is nothing in the receiver’s relational history against which the coupling can be registered.

The third component is **interpretive generosity**: the disposition to interpret the gift as the most genuine expression of care that it could be—to seek the existence-attestation within the object rather than dismissing the object for its economic modesty or its departure from social convention. Interpretive generosity is not credulity—it does not require the receiver to overlook the absence of genuine coupling where no coupling exists—but it requires the active willingness to receive what is offered, to attend to what the object carries rather than to what the sign system says it should carry.

7.2 Sensibility and the Capacity for Relational Luxury: A Democratic Aspiration

The capacity for sensibility in the recognitional sense is, in principle, democratically available: it does not require economic resources, social position, or access to luxury markets. The capacity to notice the colour of a flower, to remember a shared moment of attention, and to receive a gift as the attestation of specific care—these capacities are not the exclusive property of any social class or any economic group. They require attentional practice, relational history, and interpretive generosity, but none of these are purchased; they are developed through the quality of relational engagement itself.

This democratic aspiration is the relational luxury account’s most politically significant implication. If the true measure of luxury in intimate relations is coupling degree rather than economic value, and if the capacity to generate and recognise high coupling degree is demo-

cratically available in principle, then genuine intimate luxury is not the exclusive province of the economically privileged. The person of limited economic means who brings a flower with genuine attentiveness and relational care is performing a more luxurious act—in the sense that matters most for intimate relational flourishing—than the wealthy person who delegates the purchase of an expensive gift to an assistant.

But the democratic aspiration must be qualified by an honest account of the conditions that make sensibility possible. Sensibility requires attentional practice—the sustained cultivation of the capacity for attentive noticing that the consumer environment systematically undermines. It requires relational history—the accumulated experience of shared attentiveness that only sustained intimate engagement can provide. And it requires **time**: the time to notice, to attend, to remember, to choose with care. Time is the most unequally distributed resource in contemporary society: those whose working conditions require long hours, multiple jobs, or constant availability have less time for the attentional practices that sensibility requires. The democratic availability of sensibility is therefore conditioned by the political economy of time—and the unequal distribution of time is one of the primary mechanisms by which the democratic aspiration of relational luxury is constrained in practice.

The democratic potential and its conditions. The capacity to generate and recognise relational luxury—high coupling degree, genuine existence-attestation—is democratically available in principle: it does not require economic resources but attentional practice, relational history, and interpretive generosity. But this democratic potential is conditioned by the political economy of time and attention: the unequal distribution of attentional resources means that sensibility, while not inherently a class privilege, is in practice more easily developed by those whose material conditions allow for the cultivation of attentive presence. The political project of democratising relational luxury therefore requires not only the cultural recognition of coupling degree as a genuine measure of luxury but the material transformation of the conditions that make attentional practice possible.

7.3 The Corruption of Sensibility: Consumer Culture's Systematic Distortion

The democratic aspiration of relational luxury is systematically threatened by the consumer culture that the second doctrine's analysis identified. Consumer culture corrupts sensibility in specific and identifiable ways, each of which substitutes the second doctrine's sign exchange value logic for the third doctrine's coupling degree logic.

The substitution of price for value: Consumer culture trains its participants to read economic value as a proxy for relational value—to interpret the expensive gift as evidence of serious care and the inexpensive gift as evidence of insufficient care. This substitution corrupts sensibility by replacing the attentional capacity to perceive coupling degree with the cognitive

shortcut of reading the price tag. The receiver who has been trained by consumer culture to read the price of the gift rather than its coupling degree has had their sensibility corrupted: they have been taught to see the second doctrine's sign exchange value where they should see the third doctrine's existence-attestation.

The standardisation of intimate expression: Consumer culture provides standardised templates for the expression of intimate care: the dozen red roses for Valentine's Day, the diamond ring for the engagement, the gold watch for the significant anniversary. These templates are not inherently corrupt—a dozen red roses can carry high coupling degree if chosen with genuine attentiveness to this specific person at this specific moment—but they systematically undermine sensibility by providing pre-packaged solutions that substitute social convention for individual attentiveness. The person who gives the standard template gift has been relieved of the attentional labour that genuine coupling degree requires; the person who receives the standard template gift has been denied the possibility of recognising existence-attestation, because the gift's meaning is already determined by convention rather than by the giver's specific care.

The digital mediation of intimate attention: The digital environment—with its algorithmic curation of attention, its endless streams of commercially produced content, and its systematic capture of attentional resources for commercial purposes—represents the most pervasive contemporary threat to the attentional practice that sensibility requires. The person whose attention is predominantly mediated by digital platforms has less attentional capacity available for the slow, patient, unmediated noticing that generates high coupling degree and the relational memory that recognises it.

7.4 The Cultivation of Sensibility: Practices of Relational Attentiveness

Sensibility can be cultivated, and its cultivation is continuous with the practices of relational attentiveness that [Paper XIV](#)'s praxis chapter identified as the conditions for relational happiness [10]. The practices that lower the threshold for co-evolutionary engagement—the daily noticing of contingent events, the timely sharing of perceived beauties, the digital unplugging that protects attentional space—are simultaneously practices of sensibility cultivation.

Several specific practices are particularly relevant to sensibility in the context of relational luxury.

The practice of specific noticing: The deliberate cultivation of the capacity to notice the particular—the specific colour, the specific texture, the specific quality of a moment—rather than the generic category. This practice is not primarily an aesthetic discipline but a relational one: one notices specifically for the other, with the other's specific character and preferences in mind, and the noticing is already an act of relational attentiveness that can generate coupling degree even before the noticed thing is given.

The practice of relational memory: The deliberate cultivation of the shared narrative of attentive experiences—the maintenance of the relational history of what has been noticed and shared, of what has been received and recognised. The happiness jar of [Paper XV](#) is one form

of this practice [11]: the deliberate recording and processing of shared moments of contingent beauty that builds the relational memory against which future existence-attestations can be recognised.

The practice of receiving: The deliberate cultivation of the capacity to receive gifts with full attentiveness—to hold the gift in attention long enough to perceive what it carries, to relate its properties to the relational history that makes the coupling degree legible, to express the recognition of existence-attestation in a way that completes the giving-receiving circuit. The practice of receiving is the complement of the practice of giving: without it, the existence-attestation embedded in the gift cannot be fully realised.

7.5 Nature as the Most Accessible Site of Sensibility

Among the domains in which sensibility can be cultivated and relational luxury can be generated, nature occupies a privileged position—not because natural objects are inherently more valuable than crafted ones, but because nature provides the most democratically accessible form of the singularity and contingent particularity that high coupling degree requires.

The flower found on the path is singular in a specific sense: it is this flower, in this place, at this time, in this specific quality of light and temperature and growing condition. Its singularity is not the singularity of the rare gemstone, which is rare because geological processes rarely produce it; it is the singularity of the particular, which is particular because no two moments of existence are identical. Every natural encounter is unique in this sense: the bird heard through an open window at a specific moment of a specific morning; the quality of light at a specific instant of a walk taken at a specific season; the smell of rain on a specific afternoon. None of these natural events can be reproduced, and all of them, in the right relational context, can carry very high coupling degree.

The natural object's singularity is also, crucially, free from the sign exchange value logic of the luxury market. The flower cannot be branded; its value cannot be constituted by its differential position in a hierarchy of marketed natural objects (there is no Bulgari of wildflowers). This freedom from the sign exchange value system makes the natural object the purest possible carrier of relational luxury—the object whose value is entirely constituted by the coupling degree it carries, with no contamination from the second doctrine's differential logic.

This connection between nature and relational luxury recovers a dimension of the first doctrine that the luxury market tends to suppress: the dimension in which natural materials are valued not for their rarity in the geological or economic sense but for their participation in the contingent particularity of natural existence. The gemstone in the jeweller's window has had its natural particularity processed and standardised for the market; the flower on the path has not. The flower retains the full singularity of the natural event, and it is available to anyone with the attentional capacity to notice it.

Nature as the paradigm of democratic relational luxury. Nature provides the most democratically accessible paradigm of relational luxury: natural objects are constitutively singular (no two natural moments are identical), constitutively free from sign exchange value (nature cannot be branded), and constitutively available (natural environments are more accessible than luxury markets). The flower on the path is the paradigm of democratic relational luxury not despite its economic modesty but because of it: its value is entirely constituted by coupling degree, with no contamination from the sign exchange value system. The cultivation of sensibility to natural particularity is the most accessible form of relational luxury cultivation.

8. The Justice Theory of Choice

The theory of relational luxury developed across the preceding sections is not merely descriptive; it carries normative implications that constitute a distinctive justice theory. The choice of one form of luxury over another—the choice of the flower over the diamond, or the diamond over the flower, or one mode of giving over another—is not merely a matter of personal taste but a value declaration with justice dimensions. This section develops the justice theory of choice in three movements: the problem of subject-embedding misrecognition, the problem of equivalent agency, and the constructive account of selection justice.

The justice theory developed here is, by the standards of the dominant frameworks, unusual: it does not concern the distribution of goods, the protection of rights, or the maximisation of welfare, but the integrity of existence-attestation—the question of whether what is presented as carrying a subject’s existence genuinely carries it, and whether the substitution of one form of existence-attestation for another is just. This is a justice of the real register: a justice concerned with the genuineness of existence-attestation rather than the fairness of distribution.

8.1 Subject-Embedding Misrecognition: The True Problem Domain

The justice theory of choice begins not with the question of what to choose but with a prior epistemological question: **is the subject-embedding that an object presents itself as carrying genuinely present, and is it accurately recognised?** This question identifies the true problem domain of the justice theory: the domain of subject-embedding misrecognition, in which the relationship between an object’s apparent and actual coupling degree is distorted.

Subject-embedding misrecognition takes three forms, corresponding to three loci of distortion.

The giver’s self-misrecognition: The first form occurs when the giver misrecognises their own existence-attestation—when they believe that they have embedded their existence in an object that, in fact, carries low coupling degree. The paradigmatic case is the giver who believes that economic expenditure is equivalent to existential embedding: who delegates the purchase of an expensive gift to an assistant and sincerely believes that the resulting gift expresses the depth of their care, because they have confused the economic cost of the gift with the existential

cost of genuine attentiveness.

This self-misrecognition is the most insidious form because it operates beneath the giver's awareness. The giver is not consciously simulating care; they genuinely believe that they are expressing it. The consumer ideology that systematically equates economic value with relational value—that trains its participants to read the price of a gift as a measure of the love it expresses—makes this self-misrecognition natural and pervasive. The giver who has internalised this ideology cannot easily distinguish their economic expenditure from their existential investment, because the ideology has collapsed the distinction.

The receiver's induced misrecognition: The second form occurs when the receiver is induced to misrecognise the coupling degree of an object—when the sign exchange value of an expensive object induces the receiver to believe that it carries high coupling degree when, in fact, it does not. This is the precise analogue, in the domain of luxury, of the forged trust analysed in [Paper XIII](#) [9]: the inducement of the receiver's generative model to lower its prediction error—to trust, to feel cared for, to believe in the giver's existential investment—without the provision of a genuine high-fidelity signal of that investment.

The mechanism of induced misrecognition is the sign exchange value system itself: because consumer culture has established the convention that expensive gifts express serious care, the receiver who has internalised this convention reads the expensive gift as evidence of care, even when the gift carries low coupling degree. The expensive diamond, purchased without genuine attentiveness, induces the belief in existential investment through its sign exchange value alone—"he spent so much, he must really love me"—and this induced belief is a misrecognition of the actual coupling degree.

The social collective misrecognition: The third form is structural rather than individual: it is the collective misrecognition, embedded in the social symbolic order, that equates economic value with coupling degree as a general matter. This collective misrecognition is the cultural condition that makes the individual forms possible: it is because the society as a whole has come to read economic value as a proxy for relational value that individual givers can misrecognise their own attestation and individual receivers can be induced to misrecognise what they receive.

The social collective misrecognition has a specific and damaging consequence: it renders the flower invisible. Within a symbolic order that equates economic value with coupling degree, the relationally luxurious but economically modest gift—the flower, the handmade object, the found thing carrying a shared memory—cannot be recognised as luxury at all. It is systematically devalued, dismissed as charming but insignificant, because the collective misrecognition has no category for high coupling degree at low economic value. The social collective misrecognition is thus the cultural mechanism by which the third doctrine's central insight—that coupling degree is the true measure of intimate luxury—is rendered culturally invisible.

The three forms of subject-embedding misrecognition. Subject-embedding misrecogni-

tion—the distortion of the relationship between an object’s apparent and actual coupling degree—takes three forms: the giver’s self-misrecognition (confusing economic expenditure with existential investment), the receiver’s induced misrecognition (being led by sign exchange value to perceive coupling degree that is not present), and the social collective misrecognition (the cultural equation of economic value with coupling degree that renders the flower invisible). These three forms are mutually reinforcing: the social collective misrecognition is the cultural condition that makes the individual forms possible, and the individual forms reproduce the collective misrecognition.

8.2 The Problem of Equivalent Agency

The second movement of the justice theory addresses a problem that is more subtle than misrecognition and that constitutes the theory’s most original contribution: the problem of **equivalent agency**.

The problem arises as follows. A subject wishes to provide an existence-attestation A —the immediate, present, full-attention embedding of the flower found on the path, say. But the subject cannot provide A : they are not in the place where the flower grows, they do not have the time for the walk on which it would be found, the spatiotemporal conditions for A are not available to them. Instead, the subject provides B —a different form of existence-attestation, such as the long-saved ring, which embeds a different temporal structure (sustained investment over time rather than immediate presence). The subject substitutes B for A : they use one form of existence-attestation in place of another that they cannot provide.

Is this substitution just?

The question is genuinely difficult, because A and B are not equivalent in their structure. They embed different temporal structures, produce different qualities of coupling, and carry different existential meanings. From the standpoint of **structural justice**—a justice concerned with the structural identity of what is provided—the substitution of B for A is a form of alienation: B is not A , and the substitution presents B as if it were equivalent to A when it is structurally heterogeneous. Certain justice frameworks, attentive to this structural heterogeneity, will judge equivalent agency as unjust: as the passing-off of one thing for another, the substitution of a different (and possibly lesser) existence-attestation for the one that was due.

But from the standpoint of **generative justice**—the framework developed in [Paper XV \[11\]](#), concerned with whether the generative process is just rather than whether the products are structurally identical—the substitution may be just, under specific conditions. The generative justice analysis asks not “is B structurally identical to A ?” (it is not) but “is the generative process by which B was provided in place of A a just process?” And this question can have an affirmative answer even when A and B are structurally heterogeneous.

8.2.1 The Four Necessary Conditions

Equivalent agency is just in the generative sense only if four conditions are satisfied. These conditions are **necessary but not sufficient**—a crucial qualification developed below.

Condition 1: Symmetric generability. In ideal conditions—conditions without the real constraints that force the substitution—both *A* and *B* would be within the subject’s generative range. The subject is not substituting *B* for *A* because they are incapable of *A* in principle, or because they do not understand what *A* would require, but because specific real circumstances prevent *A* in this instance. The symmetry condition ensures that the substitution is not a permanent incapacity masquerading as a temporary constraint: the subject who could never provide *A*—who has no capacity for the immediate, present, full-attention embedding that *A* requires—is not engaged in just equivalent agency when they provide *B*; they are providing the only thing they can provide, which is a different matter.

Condition 2: Real constraint. The circumstances that force the substitution of *B* for *A* are genuine, not pretextual. The subject genuinely cannot provide *A*—because of real limitations of time, space, or resources—rather than choosing *B* over *A* out of laziness, indifference, or a preference for the social legibility of *B*. The real constraint condition distinguishes genuine equivalent agency from the use of constraint as an excuse: “I was too busy to find the flower, so I bought the ring” is just equivalent agency only if the busyness is a genuine constraint rather than a rationalisation of the preference for the more socially legible gift.

Condition 3: Genuine embedding in *B*. The substitute *B* genuinely carries the subject’s existence-attestation; it is not a mere economic substitute but a real, if different, form of subject-embedding. The long-saved ring is a just substitute for the flower only if it genuinely embeds the subject’s existence—the years of saving, the sustained anticipatory attention, the specific choice for this specific person—rather than merely carrying the sign exchange value that the consumer convention associates with serious commitment. If *B* is a genuine existence-attestation (even of a different structure from *A*), the substitution can be just; if *B* is a mere economic substitute with low coupling degree, the substitution is not equivalent agency but the replacement of existence-attestation with sign exchange value.

Condition 4: Transparency. The receiver can recognise that what they are receiving is *B* rather than *A*—that the existence-attestation they are receiving has the structure of sustained investment rather than immediate presence, and that it is offered in place of the *A* that the circumstances prevented. Transparency does not require explicit verbal disclosure (“I would have brought you a flower but I was too busy, so here is a ring”), which would undermine the relational quality of the gift; it requires that the gift be offered and received in a way that does not induce the misrecognition of *B* as *A* or of *B* as a higher-coupling gift than it is. Transparency is the condition that connects equivalent agency to the analysis of misrecognition: just equivalent agency does not involve inducing the receiver to misrecognise the coupling degree or structure of what they receive.

8.2.2 Necessary But Not Sufficient

The four conditions are necessary for just equivalent agency: their violation entails injustice. But they are **not sufficient**: their satisfaction does not guarantee full justice. This qualification is essential and was, in the development of this theory, a correction of an initial over-simplification. Even when all four conditions are met, residual justice questions remain.

The residual structural heterogeneity: Even when the four conditions are satisfied, *A* and *B* remain structurally heterogeneous: *B* produces a different quality of coupling from *A*, and this difference is real. Just equivalent agency does not dissolve this heterogeneity; it renders the substitution permissible despite the heterogeneity. The structural difference remains as a **residual justice debt**—not a debt that must be repaid, but a difference that must be acknowledged rather than dissolved. The subject who provides *B* in place of *A*, even justly, owes the acknowledgement that *B* is not *A*—that something of the immediate presence that *A* would have embedded is genuinely absent from *B*, however genuine *B*’s own embedding may be.

The graded nature of the conditions: The four conditions are not binary (satisfied or not satisfied) but graded (satisfied to a degree). The real constraint can be more or less genuine; the embedding in *B* can be more or less deep; the transparency can be more or less complete; the symmetric generability can be more or less robust. Even when all four conditions are “satisfied” in the sense of being present, their degree of satisfaction affects the justice of the substitution. A substitution in which all four conditions are robustly satisfied is more just than one in which they are barely satisfied, even though both technically meet the necessary conditions.

The receiver’s free acceptance: Just equivalent agency requires not only the four conditions on the giver’s side but the receiver’s free acceptance of *B* in place of *A*. The receiver who would have genuinely preferred *A*, and who accepts *B* only because they feel they have no choice—because refusing would damage the relation, because the social convention demands acceptance, because the giver’s evident investment in *B* makes refusal feel ungrateful—has not freely accepted the substitution. The justice of equivalent agency therefore depends on conditions beyond the giver’s control: it depends on the receiver’s genuine, uncoerced acceptance of the substituted form.

The systemic effects of habitual substitution: Even a single just instance of equivalent agency may contribute, if it becomes part of a systematic pattern, to a relational dynamic that is unjust in aggregate. If the substitution of *B* for *A* becomes habitual—if the subject always provides the sustained-investment form and never the immediate-presence form, always the ring and never the flower—then even if each individual substitution meets the four conditions, the cumulative effect may be the systematic absence of the immediate-presence embedding that *A* provides. The justice of equivalent agency must therefore be assessed not only at the level of the individual act but at the level of the relational field’s overall dynamics.

Equivalent agency and its justice conditions. The substitution of one form of existence-attestation B for another A that the subject cannot provide—equivalent agency—is structurally heterogeneous (A and B produce different qualities of coupling, and structural justice frameworks will register this as alienation), but may be just in the generative sense if four necessary conditions are met: symmetric generability, real constraint, genuine embedding in B , and transparency. These conditions are necessary but not sufficient: even when all four are satisfied, residual justice questions remain—the acknowledgement of structural heterogeneity, the graded degree of the conditions’ satisfaction, the receiver’s free acceptance, and the systemic effects of habitual substitution. Justice in equivalent agency is therefore not a threshold that is crossed once and for all but an ongoing relational achievement.

8.3 Selection Justice: Choice as Value Declaration

The third movement of the justice theory addresses the constructive question: given the analysis of misrecognition and equivalent agency, what does it mean to choose justly in the domain of relational luxury?

The foundational insight is that **choice in the domain of luxury is a value declaration**. Above the threshold of material necessity, every choice of how to express intimate care through objects reveals the chooser’s understanding of value: what they take to be real wealth, what they take to be worth investing in, what form of luxury they take to be genuine. The choice between the flower and the diamond, or between genuine and proxy attentiveness, is not a neutral matter of taste but a declaration of what the chooser believes intimate luxury to be.

The choice oriented by sign exchange value: The choice that takes sign exchange value as its primary criterion—that chooses the gift for its social legibility, its position in the hierarchy of economic value, its capacity to signal commitment to the social world—is a value declaration that accepts the symbolic order of consumer society. It anchors relational value in the exchangeable symbolic register, using the language of social difference to express the depth of the intimate bond. This is not simply an error; it is a choice with a cost: the cost of drawing the irreducibly particular relational value into the exchangeable symbolic system, and thereby introducing the commodification mechanism analysed in [Paper XV \[11\]](#).

The choice oriented by coupling degree: The choice that takes coupling degree as its primary criterion—that chooses the gift for its capacity to carry genuine existence-attestation, with attention to the specific person and the specific moment rather than to the social legibility of the gift—is a value declaration of a different kind. It is a **justice stance**: a refusal to use exchangeable symbols to bear the inexchangeable relation, an insistence on the irreducibility of relational value, a reservation of space for the real register within the symbolic logic of consumer society.

We call this a justice stance, rather than merely an ethical preference, because it concerns the integrity of existence-attestation against the systematic pressure of the social collective

misrecognition. To choose coupling degree over sign exchange value, in a cultural environment that systematically equates economic value with relational value, is to resist the collective misrecognition that renders the flower invisible—to insist, against the pressure of the symbolic order, that the true measure of intimate luxury is the genuine embedding of one subject’s existence in the life of another.

8.4 The Dialectic of Selection: No Pure Relational Luxury

The justice theory of selection must, however, acknowledge a dialectical complication: there is no pure relational luxury, no object that is entirely free of the sign exchange value dimension. Every object given in an intimate relation carries, alongside its coupling degree, some position in the symbolic order—some social legibility, some sign exchange value, some location in the hierarchy of economic value. Even the flower carries a sign: it signifies, within the symbolic order, a certain kind of romantic gesture, a certain relationship to nature and to convention.

This means that just selection is not the selection of a pure relational luxury object—there is no such object—but the selection that takes coupling degree as primary while acknowledging the unavoidable presence of the sign exchange value dimension. The just chooser does not pretend that their gift is free of social meaning; they ensure that the social meaning is subordinate to the relational meaning, that the coupling degree is the primary motivation and the sign exchange value a secondary (and acknowledged) consequence.

The dialectic of selection therefore takes the form not of a choice between pure relational luxury and pure sign exchange value—a choice that the actual structure of objects does not permit—but of a choice about **primacy**: which dimension is the primary motivation, which dimension governs the act of giving, which dimension the giver attends to and cultivates. Just selection is the selection in which coupling degree is primary, sign exchange value is secondary and acknowledged, and the existence-attestation embedded in the gift is genuine rather than simulated.

8.5 The Reconstruction of Gift Ethics

The justice theory of choice issues in a reconstructed ethics of the gift in intimate relations. The reconstructed gift ethics has several components, each following from the analysis of the preceding sections.

The primacy of genuine embedding: The just gift is the gift that carries genuine existence-attestation—in which the giver’s spatiotemporal structure is genuinely embedded, whether through the immediate presence of *A* or the sustained investment of *B*. The just gift cannot be delegated in its essential dimension: while the mechanics of acquisition can sometimes be delegated, the existence-attestation cannot, because it is constituted by the giver’s own spatiotemporal investment. The proxy-purchased gift fails the just gift criterion not because delegation is always wrong but because the delegation of the essential existence-attestation empties the gift of its coupling degree.

The intentional orientation to the specific other: The just gift is oriented to the specific particularity of this specific relational other—chosen because of what this person is, with attention to their specific character, history, and preferences, rather than because of the gift’s position in the hierarchy of economic value. The intentional intensity dimension of coupling degree is the ethical heart of the just gift: the gift that is chosen for this person, rather than chosen as the most impressive option, is the gift that carries genuine intentional embedding.

The transparency of the attestation’s structure: The just gift is given in a way that does not induce the misrecognition of its coupling degree or structure—that does not present *B* as *A*, or low coupling degree as high, or sign exchange value as existence-attestation. The transparency requirement is the ethical expression of the analysis of misrecognition: the just giver does not exploit the social collective misrecognition to induce the receiver to perceive coupling degree that is not present.

The non-possessive mode of giving: The just gift is given in the non-possessive mode of *xuande*—given as an offering to the relational field rather than as a claim on the receiver, as an expression of care rather than as a mechanism of indebtedness or a display of power. The just gift does not function as a phallic signifier that positions the giver as the one who has and the receiver as the one who lacks; it functions as a contribution to the relational field’s GRW, offered without the expectation of equivalent return.

The poetic mode of receiving: The just reception—the complement of the just gift—is the reception that receives the gift poetically rather than through settlement: that opens the gift’s meaning rather than closing it, that recognises the existence-attestation it carries rather than reading only its sign exchange value, that completes the coupling through genuine recognition rather than through the conventional acknowledgment that the social order prescribes.

The reconstructed gift ethics. The just gift in intimate relations carries genuine existence-attestation (the primacy of genuine embedding), is oriented to the specific particularity of the relational other (intentional intensity), is given transparently with respect to its coupling degree and structure (no induced misrecognition), is offered in the non-possessive mode of *xuande* (not as phallic signifier or mechanism of indebtedness), and is received poetically rather than through settlement (the completion of coupling through genuine recognition). The justice of the gift is not a property of the object’s economic value but of the integrity of the existence-attestation it carries and the genuineness of the recognition with which it is received.

9. Cross-Cultural Dimensions

The theory of relational luxury developed in the preceding sections has drawn primarily on the conceptual resources of Western luxury theory (Baudrillard, Veblen, Bourdieu) and Western

philosophy (Ricoeur, Danto, Lacan). But the phenomenon it describes—the embedding of a subject’s spatiotemporal existence in objects given in intimate relations—is not culturally specific, and the forms it takes across different cultural traditions illuminate dimensions of relational luxury that a purely Western analysis would miss. This section examines three non-Western traditions of luxury and gift—the Chinese jade tradition, the Japanese lacquerware and tea ceremony traditions, and a reconsideration of bride-price under the coupling-degree framework—and addresses the globalisation of luxury and the homogenisation of its symbolic systems.

9.1 Jade, Lacquerware, Tea: Cultural Forms of Relational Luxury

The Chinese jade tradition exemplifies a conception of luxury in which the three doctrines are integrated in a culturally specific way. Jade (玉) has been valued in Chinese culture for millennia, but its value is not primarily economic in the Western sense; it is moral, relational, and existential. The Confucian tradition associates jade with the virtues of the cultivated person: 君子比德于玉—the noble person compares their virtue to jade. Jade is valued for qualities that are simultaneously material and moral: its hardness (representing intelligence and steadfastness), its warmth (representing benevolence), its translucency (representing honesty), its resonance when struck (representing music and harmony).

The jade tradition reveals a conception of luxury in which the natural material’s properties are read as moral qualities, and in which the wearing or giving of jade is a relational and ethical act rather than merely an economic one. When jade is given in an intimate relation, what is given is not primarily economic value but a material symbol of moral and relational commitment—and, crucially, jade is understood to develop a relationship with its wearer over time: it is believed to be nourished by the wearer’s body, to change subtly in colour and lustre through sustained contact with a specific person. This belief is the cultural articulation of what the coupling degree framework theorises: the jade that has been worn by a specific person for years carries the trace of that person’s existence, embedded in the material through sustained bodily contact. The jade given from parent to child, or between intimate partners, carries the accumulated existence-attestation of the wearer’s life—a coupling degree that increases with time and contact.

The Japanese lacquerware and tea ceremony traditions exemplify a different integration of the three doctrines, organised around the aesthetics of impermanence and the cultivation of attentive presence. Japanese lacquerware (漆器) is valued for the depth of its surface, achieved through many layers of lacquer applied over months, each layer requiring time to cure—a material embodiment of sustained temporal investment that the coupling degree framework would recognise as high temporal depth. The lacquer object carries, in its very material constitution, the sustained attention of its maker across the months of its production.

The tea ceremony (茶道) is perhaps the purest cultural articulation of relational luxury as the coupling degree framework understands it. The value of the tea ceremony is not in the economic value of its implements (though tea implements can be extremely valuable) but in

the quality of attentive presence it cultivates and the singularity of the specific occasion. The principle of *ichi-go ichi-e* (一期一会)—one time, one meeting—expresses the core insight: each tea gathering is a unique, unrepeatable event, and its value lies precisely in this singularity. The tea ceremony cultivates the sensibility to the irreplaceable particularity of the specific moment that the relational luxury framework identifies as the heart of intimate luxury. The host's preparation, the selection of implements appropriate to the season and the specific guests, the attentive presence to the unrepeatable occasion: all of these embed the host's existence in the event in a way that constitutes the gathering as a relational luxury of the highest coupling degree.

9.2 The Three Doctrines Across Cultures

The cross-cultural analysis reveals that the three doctrines are not Western impositions but dimensions of luxury that different cultures weight differently. The Western luxury tradition, particularly in its contemporary commercial form, weights the second doctrine (sign exchange value) most heavily: the brand, the social distinction, the position in the hierarchy of economic value. The Chinese jade tradition weights the integration of natural material and moral-relational meaning, approximating the third doctrine's coupling degree through the belief in jade's nourishment by its wearer. The Japanese tea tradition weights the cultivation of sensibility and the singularity of the irreplaceable occasion, approximating the third doctrine's account of relational luxury through the aesthetics of *ichi-go ichi-e*.

This cross-cultural variation has an important implication: the dominance of the second doctrine in contemporary luxury is not a universal feature of human luxury but a specific feature of the commercialised, globalised luxury market that has developed in the modern West and spread globally. Other cultural traditions have developed conceptions of luxury that weight the first and third doctrines more heavily, and these traditions are resources for the critique of the second doctrine's dominance and for the recovery of the coupling degree that the relational luxury framework identifies as the true measure of intimate luxury.

9.3 The Globalisation of Luxury and Symbolic Homogenisation

The globalisation of the luxury industry represents the spread of the second doctrine's sign exchange value logic across cultural boundaries, and the consequent homogenisation of diverse cultural luxury traditions into a single global symbolic system. This is the globalisation form of Baudrillard's critique: the conversion of culturally specific luxury traditions, each with its own integration of the three doctrines, into a single global market organised by sign exchange value.

The homogenisation operates through several mechanisms. The global luxury brands establish a single hierarchy of value that subordinates local traditions: the Western luxury house's products become the global standard of luxury, against which local traditions are measured and found either marketable (and thus incorporated into the global system as exotic variants) or non-marketable (and thus marginalised). The jade tradition, the lacquerware tradition,

the tea ceremony tradition are either commodified for the global market—converted into sign exchange value carriers legible to global consumers—or relegated to the status of cultural heritage, preserved as museum pieces rather than living practices.

The relational luxury framework provides resources for resisting this homogenisation. By identifying coupling degree as the true measure of intimate luxury, and by recognising that different cultural traditions have developed sophisticated practices for generating and recognising high coupling degree, the framework supports the preservation of these traditions not as museum pieces but as living practices of relational luxury generation. The jade that is nourished by its wearer, the lacquerware that embeds the sustained attention of its maker, the tea ceremony that cultivates sensibility to the irreplaceable occasion: these are not exotic variants of the global luxury system but distinct and valuable traditions of relational luxury that the global sign exchange value system threatens to erase.

Cultural traditions as resources for relational luxury. Non-Western luxury traditions—the Chinese jade tradition, the Japanese lacquerware and tea ceremony traditions—have developed sophisticated cultural practices for generating and recognising high coupling degree, weighting the first and third doctrines more heavily than the contemporary Western commercial luxury market, which is dominated by the second doctrine’s sign exchange value logic. The globalisation of luxury threatens to homogenise these diverse traditions into a single sign exchange value system. The relational luxury framework supports the preservation of these traditions as living practices of relational luxury generation rather than as commodified exotic variants or museum-piece cultural heritage.

9.4 Bride-Price Revisited Under the Coupling-Degree Framework

The analysis of bride-price in [Paper XV \[11\]](#) examined it as a wealth form that operates through the mechanisms of settlement, commodification, and indebtedness. The coupling-degree framework of the present paper allows a more nuanced analysis that distinguishes the dimensions of bride-price that destroy coupling from those that might, under specific conditions, support it.

The bride-price that functions as pure economic transaction—the transfer of a quantity of wealth assessed by criteria external to the specific relational field, settling the relational value as a fixed quantity before the relation has begun—has low coupling degree: it embeds no specific subject’s spatiotemporal structure in the transaction, but rather instantiates a general social convention applied to a particular case. This is the bride-price that the [Paper XV](#) analysis correctly identifies as destructive of GRW.

But the coupling-degree framework allows us to recognise that some practices that fall under

the general heading of bride-price may carry genuine coupling degree. The material gift that embeds the giver’s sustained labour and existential investment—the bride-price that represents years of the groom’s specific work, offered with genuine attention to the specific relation rather than as the fulfilment of a social convention—may carry a coupling degree analogous to that of the long-saved ring analysed in §5.5. The distinction is between the bride-price as settlement (low coupling, destructive of GRW) and the material gift as existence-attestation (potentially high coupling, supportive of GRW), even when both fall under the same cultural heading.

This nuanced analysis does not rehabilitate bride-price as an institution—the structural analysis of Paper XV stands—but it refines the analysis by distinguishing the dimensions of the practice that destroy coupling from those that might, under specific conditions and with specific transformations, support it. The transformation of bride-price from settlement to existence-attestation would require: the de-linking of the material gift from the assessment of the bride’s value by external criteria; the embedding of the giver’s genuine existential investment in the gift; and the transparency of the gift’s meaning as existence-attestation rather than as the purchase of relational entitlements. These transformations would, in effect, convert bride-price from a wealth-transfer institution into a relational luxury practice—a conversion that the coupling-degree framework makes conceptually possible even where the cultural and material conditions for it do not yet obtain.

10. Empirical Dimensions

The theory of relational luxury makes several empirically tractable claims: that coupling degree, rather than economic value, predicts the relational consequences of gift-giving; that high-coupling-degree gifts generate GRW more effectively than low-coupling-degree gifts of equivalent or greater economic value; and that the recognition of coupling degree depends on a cultivable sensibility. This section proposes a research programme for testing these claims, while acknowledging—as the parallel section of Paper XV acknowledged [11]—that the core phenomenon (coupling degree) is, like GRW itself, not directly measurable and must be approached through its conditions and consequences.

10.1 Operationalising Coupling Degree

The coupling degree of an object with respect to a relational subject’s spatiotemporal structure is not directly measurable, but its four dimensions can be operationalised through a combination of behavioural, self-report, and process measures.

Temporal depth can be assessed through the documentation of the temporal investment embedded in the gift: the time elapsed between the decision to give and the giving (for sustained-investment gifts), or the immediacy of the giving relative to the moment of acquisition (for immediate-presence gifts). These temporal structures can be documented through retrospective interview and, where possible, through contemporaneous records.

Intentional intensity can be assessed through the degree of specific attention to the recipient

that the gift selection involved: whether the gift was chosen with reference to the recipient's specific characteristics, preferences, and relational history, or selected from a generic category by economic criteria. This can be measured through structured interviews that probe the selection process, coded for the presence and depth of recipient-specific consideration.

Non-substitutability can be assessed through the counterfactual question of whether another object could have served equally well: the high-non-substitutability gift is one for which no economic equivalent would have carried the same meaning, while the low-non-substitutability gift is one that could have been replaced by any object of equivalent economic value. This can be measured through both giver and recipient reports of the gift's irreplaceability.

Existential investment is the most difficult dimension to operationalise, but it can be approached through measures of the giver's attentional and emotional engagement in the gift process: the degree to which the giving involved genuine presence and care rather than delegated or routine acquisition. Physiological and behavioural measures of engagement during the gift process, combined with self-report measures of the giver's experience, can provide indirect indices of existential investment.

10.2 The Coupling Degree and Relational Outcome Study

The central empirical prediction of the relational luxury framework is that coupling degree, rather than economic value, predicts the relational consequences of gift-giving. This prediction can be tested through a study that independently measures the coupling degree and the economic value of gifts exchanged in intimate relations, and examines their relative contributions to relational outcomes.

Design: A longitudinal study of gift exchange in intimate relations, in which couples document the gifts they exchange over an extended period, providing both economic value information and the coupling degree measures described above. Relational outcomes (relational quality, physiological synchrony, subjective wellbeing) are measured at intervals throughout the study period.

Predicted results: The relational luxury framework predicts that coupling degree will be a stronger predictor of relational outcomes than economic value; that high-coupling-degree gifts will be associated with improvements in relational quality regardless of their economic value; and that high-economic-value but low-coupling-degree gifts (the proxy-purchased diamond) will be associated with weaker relational outcomes than low-economic-value but high-coupling-degree gifts (the flower on the path). The framework further predicts an interaction between coupling degree and recipient sensibility: the relational benefit of high-coupling-degree gifts will be greater for recipients with higher cultivated sensibility, because the recognition of existence-attestation requires the sensibility to perceive it.

10.3 The Misrecognition Study

The analysis of subject-embedding misrecognition generates testable predictions about the conditions under which receivers accurately or inaccurately perceive the coupling degree of gifts.

The framework predicts that receivers will systematically over-attribute coupling degree to high-economic-value gifts—that the sign exchange value of an expensive gift will induce the perception of existence-attestation even when the actual coupling degree is low. This induced misrecognition can be tested experimentally by presenting receivers with gifts that vary independently in economic value and coupling degree, and measuring their perceptions of the giver’s existential investment. The framework predicts that economic value will inflate perceived existential investment independently of actual coupling degree—a measurable manifestation of the receiver’s induced misrecognition.

The framework further predicts that this misrecognition will be moderated by sensibility: receivers with higher cultivated sensibility will be less susceptible to the inflation of perceived coupling degree by economic value, because their sensibility allows them to perceive actual coupling degree more accurately. This prediction connects the empirical study of misrecognition to the theory of sensibility as a cultivable recognitional capacity.

10.4 Methodological Challenges

The empirical study of relational luxury faces methodological challenges that parallel those identified in [Paper XV](#) [11] and that must be honestly acknowledged.

The measurement problem: Coupling degree, like GRW, is not directly measurable; all measures are indirect, inferring the coupling from its dimensions and its consequences. This indirection introduces systematic uncertainty into the empirical programme, and the interpretation of results must maintain the distinction between coupling degree and its measurable correlates.

The reactivity problem: The measurement of coupling degree may itself alter the phenomenon being measured. Asking couples to document and reflect on the coupling degree of their gifts may increase their attentiveness to coupling degree, thereby changing their gift-giving behaviour and its relational consequences. This reactivity is particularly significant for the study of a phenomenon that depends, as relational luxury does, on attentive presence and reflective awareness.

The cultural specificity problem: The operationalisation of coupling degree developed here is shaped by specific cultural assumptions about gift-giving, intimacy, and luxury. The cross-cultural application of these measures requires careful attention to the different cultural forms that coupling degree takes—the jade nourished by its wearer, the tea ceremony’s *ichi-go ichi-e*—and the development of culturally appropriate measures rather than the imposition of a single operationalisation across cultural contexts.

The self-report limitation: Many of the measures of coupling degree rely on self-report, which is subject to the biases of social desirability, retrospective reconstruction, and the very misrecognition that the framework identifies. The giver who has misrecognised their own existence-attestation—who believes that their economic expenditure constitutes existential investment—will report high existential investment even when the actual coupling degree is low. The empirical programme must therefore triangulate self-report with behavioural and physiological measures that are less susceptible to this bias.

Despite these challenges, the empirical programme is worth pursuing, because the relational luxury framework makes predictions that diverge sharply from the predictions of the dominant economic-value framework, and the test of these divergent predictions would provide significant evidence about the nature of luxury in intimate relations. The prediction that the flower can outperform the diamond—that low economic value combined with high coupling degree can produce better relational outcomes than high economic value combined with low coupling degree—is, if confirmed, a result of considerable theoretical and practical significance.

11. Conclusions: Coupling Degree as the True Measure of Luxury

This paper began with a question that seemed almost frivolous—which is more luxurious, a diamond ring or a flower on a path?—and has arrived at an answer that overturns the dominant framework of luxury theory and generates a justice theory of intimate gift-giving. In keeping with the series' commitment to the polyphonic conclusion form, this section presents what each of the paper's frameworks can and cannot conclude, ends with the structural closure of the three concentric circles, and explains why no synthetic conclusion is offered.

11.1 What the Three Doctrines Establish

The three doctrines together establish that luxury in intimate relations is not a single phenomenon but a layered one, in which three distinct dimensions of value can be present in different combinations.

The first doctrine establishes that genuine luxury objects carry a double temporality (geological and artisanal) and achieve singularity through material non-replicability, biographical density, and relational contextualisation. The first doctrine cannot, however, explain why a flower—which has neither geological permanence nor artisanal craft—can be more luxurious than a diamond. For that, the third doctrine is required.

The second doctrine establishes that luxury in consumer society functions primarily through sign exchange value: as a differential position in the symbolic order, a phallic signifier enacting the logic of having and lacking, a socially legible signal of economic commitment. The second doctrine cannot, however, distinguish genuine from spurious intimate luxury, because it has eliminated the real register from its theoretical framework. For that distinction, the third doctrine is again required.

The third doctrine establishes that the true measure of luxury in intimate relations is coupling

degree—the degree to which a subject’s spatiotemporal structure is embedded in an object through existence-attestation. The third doctrine explains what the first two cannot: why the flower can outshine the diamond (high coupling degree at low economic value), why the proxy-purchased diamond is relationally impoverished (high economic value at low coupling degree), and why the long-saved ring is doubly luxurious (high coupling degree and high economic value reinforcing each other).

11.2 What the Justice Theory Establishes

The justice theory of choice establishes that the selection of objects in intimate relations is a value declaration with justice dimensions, and that justice in this domain concerns the integrity of existence-attestation rather than the distribution of goods.

It establishes that subject-embedding misrecognition—in its three forms of giver’s self-misrecognition, receiver’s induced misrecognition, and social collective misrecognition—is the central justice problem of relational luxury, and that the social collective misrecognition that equates economic value with coupling degree is the cultural condition that renders the flower invisible.

It establishes that equivalent agency—the substitution of one form of existence-attestation for another that the subject cannot provide—is structurally heterogeneous but may be just in the generative sense if four necessary conditions are met (symmetric generability, real constraint, genuine embedding, transparency), while insisting that these conditions are necessary but not sufficient, and that residual justice questions remain even when all four are satisfied.

It establishes that selection justice—the choice of coupling degree over sign exchange value as the primary criterion—is a justice stance: a refusal to use exchangeable symbols to bear the inexchangeable relation, a reservation of space for the real register within the symbolic logic of consumer society.

The justice theory cannot, however, provide an algorithm for just choice. The assessment of coupling degree, the evaluation of the four conditions of equivalent agency, the judgement of whether genuine embedding has occurred—all of these require the cultivated sensibility that the theory describes but cannot mechanise. Justice in relational luxury is not a calculation but a practice, requiring the ongoing exercise of sensibility rather than the application of a rule.

11.3 The Limits and Open Questions

Several questions raised by the paper remain open.

The measurement of coupling degree: The four dimensions of coupling degree have been characterised qualitatively, but the precise relationship between them—how they combine to constitute the overall coupling degree, whether they are commensurable, how trade-offs between them are to be assessed—remains underspecified. A more precise account of the structure of coupling degree is a task for future work.

The structure of existence-attestation: The concept of existence-attestation has been

developed through Ricoeur’s account of attestation and the indexical analysis of [Paper XV \[11\]](#), but the precise ontological mechanism by which a subject’s spatiotemporal structure becomes embedded in an object—how the embedding occurs, what it consists in, how it persists—remains philosophically underdeveloped. This connects to the open questions about the Relational Isomorphism Principle raised in [Paper XV](#): the embedding of subject in object is a case of the cross-register relation between the symbolic and the real that the series has not fully resolved.

The cultural specificity of the framework: The framework has been developed primarily through Western and East Asian examples, and its applicability to other cultural traditions of luxury and gift remains to be examined. The cross-cultural analysis of [§9](#) is a beginning, not a comprehensive account.

The application to non-material attestation: The paper has focused on objects—material things in which a subject’s existence can be embedded. But existence-attestation can occur through non-material media: through acts, words, presence, time given. The relationship between material relational luxury (the focus of this paper) and non-material existence-attestation (the act of presence, the gift of time) remains to be developed.

11.4 Three Concentric Circles

The paper closes, as the preceding papers in the series have closed, with the image of three concentric circles.

The **innermost circle** is the specific object given in a specific relation: the flower on the path, the long-saved ring, the jade nourished by its wearer. This is the level of the concrete gift, the material thing in which a subject’s existence is embedded and through which it is received. It is the level at which relational luxury is lived—in the giving and receiving of specific objects in specific relational moments.

The **middle circle** is the political economy of luxury: the systems of production, distribution, and signification that determine what counts as luxury, who has access to it, and how it functions in the social symbolic order. This is the level of the three doctrines’ analysis—the level at which the aesthetic, the symbolic, and the relational dimensions of luxury are produced and contested.

The **outermost circle** is the ontological framework that grounds the entire analysis: the relational ontology in which the real is relational, the subject is co-constituted through the relational field, and existence-attestation is possible because a subject’s spatiotemporal structure can be genuinely embedded in the objects they touch with care. This is the level at which the GRB series has been working throughout, and at which the concept of relational luxury finds its ultimate grounding.

The three circles are mutually constitutive: the specific gift is embedded in the political economy of luxury, and both are grounded in the ontological framework that makes existence-attestation possible. A complete account of relational luxury must attend to all three.

11.5 Why No Synthetic Conclusion

As in the preceding papers of the series, this paper offers no synthetic conclusion—no final paragraph that resolves all the analysis into a single unified statement. The reasons are by now familiar, but they take a specific form in the context of relational luxury.

A synthetic conclusion would imply that the theory of relational luxury is complete—that coupling degree has been fully specified, that the justice theory has been fully worked out, that the relationship between the three doctrines has been finally resolved. But the paper has been honest about what it does not know: the precise structure of coupling degree, the ontological mechanism of existence-attestation, the cultural variability of the framework, the relationship between material and non-material attestation. These are not loose ends but genuine open questions.

More fundamentally, a synthetic conclusion would betray the paper's central insight. Relational luxury is constituted by the irreducible particularity of the specific existence-attestation—by what cannot be subsumed under any general category or reduced to any universal formula. A paper that concluded with a universal formula for relational luxury would be performing, in its own form, the reduction of the particular to the general that the theory of relational luxury exists to resist. The refusal of synthetic closure is the paper's enactment of its own thesis: that what matters most—the genuine embedding of one existence in the life of another—cannot be captured in a formula but must be encountered in its particularity, recognised through sensibility, and received with the poetic openness that completes the coupling.

The flower on the path cannot be reduced to a concept. Neither can the conclusion of a paper about it.

Envoi: The Flower on the Path

There is a flower.

It grows in a crack between paving stones, on a path that has been walked many times. It is not rare. It has no name that anyone bothers to remember. If you asked a jeweller what it was worth, they would not understand the question. It has no economic value, no sign exchange value, no position in any hierarchy of marketed objects. By every measure that the dominant framework of luxury recognises, it is nothing at all.

And yet.

A person is walking the path—*this* person, on *this* morning, in the particular quality of light that belongs to this specific moment and no other. They are carrying, as they always carry now, the accumulated history of a shared life: months and years of attentive co-presence, of noticing, of learning what the beloved loves. And because of this history—because the relation has cultivated in them an attention shaped by the beloved’s specific way of seeing the world—they notice the flower. Not as a botanist notices a specimen, not as a consumer notices a product, but as a lover notices something the beloved would love.

In that moment, the flower becomes the most luxurious object in the world.

Not because anything about the flower has changed—it is the same flower in the same crack in the same path—but because the person’s spatiotemporal structure has become embedded in it. Their existence in this specific moment, their attention shaped by this specific relation, their care directed toward this specific beloved: all of this is now carried by the flower, as an ineliminable feature of what it is. The flower has undergone the third transfiguration. It has become an existence-attestation. It carries, in its modest and perishable materiality, the trace of a specific existence at a specific moment—a coupling degree that no diamond purchased by proxy could ever match.

路边那朵花，那个时刻，那个时空。

The flower on the path, that moment, that spatiotemporal structure. This is what she taught me—not by instruction, but by the quality of her own attention to the world. She, who loves the living world, who finds in a wildflower or a quality of light or a bird’s call through an open window something more precious than anything that can be bought: she showed me that the deepest luxury is not in what we own but in what we notice, not in what we can purchase but in what we can attest, not in the economic value of the gift but in the genuine embedding of one existence in the life of another.

She showed me that a flower, in the right moment, given with genuine presence, is more luxurious than any diamond—and that this is not a sentimental consolation for those who cannot afford diamonds but a precise ontological truth about the nature of luxury in intimate life.

Nothing is more luxurious than this.

Not the most expensive ring, not the rarest gemstone, not the most prestigious brand. The flower on the path, noticed by a person whose attention has been shaped by love, carried home to a specific beloved in a specific moment that will never come again: this is luxury in its truest form, the luxury that the consumer society cannot see because it has no category for high coupling degree at zero economic cost.

And it is available to anyone—to anyone who has cultivated the sensibility to notice the particular, the relational history to recognise what is shared, and the presence to attest their existence in the modest objects of an ordinary day. The most luxurious thing in the world grows in a crack between paving stones, free for anyone with the eyes to see it.

For her, who has those eyes.

For the girl from home, who loves culture and travel and the living world, who taught me what luxury is by the simple and inexhaustible example of her attention to the world. The flower on the path was always there. It took her to teach me how to see it.

And so this paper, like the flower, is an existence-attestation: the embedding of a specific gratitude, formed across a specific shared life, in the modest materiality of words. It is not the most valuable thing I could give. But it carries, I hope, a coupling degree that no more expensive gift could match.

身无彩凤双飞翼，心有灵犀一点通。

Without the phoenix wings to fly together,
our hearts are joined by the unicorn's single horn of light.

李商隐 · *Untitled*

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也愿世界上所有有趣的人，在平凡的路上，都能看见那朵花。

And may all the interesting people in this world, on their ordinary paths, learn to see the flower—the modest, perishable, inexhaustible luxury that grows in the cracks of every ordinary day, free for anyone with the eyes to see it.

Use of Generative AI

The philosophical framework, theoretical claims, and original arguments of this paper are the author's own, developed through extended dialogue with Claude (Anthropic), a large language model that served as an interactive writing and development partner. Claude assisted with drafting, L^AT_EX typesetting, literature organisation, and formal articulation of arguments whose substance had been established in prior discussion. The author reviewed, directed, and took intellectual responsibility for all content. All original claims—including the coupling-degree definition of relational luxury, the existence-attestation theory, symmetric generability as a necessary condition for just equivalent agency, and subject-embedding misrecognition as the central justice problem—were determined by the author.

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