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Psychological Visibility as a Source of Value in Friendship

Shailushi Baxi

In an excerpt from his book, *The Psychology of Romantic Love*, Nathaniel Branden attempts to give a reason to value friendship. Branden states that friendship gives us psychological visibility and functions as way for us objectively to see ourselves. However, Branden then goes on to make the further claim that the degree of visibility one experiences in a friendship contributes to the amount of overall value of the friendship. Branden does not explicitly state that value is a graded value, but does point out that we can “experience a greater or lesser degree of visibility, or a wider or narrower range” (71), and therefore, there are people who can give us different levels of visibility. Branden states that we “desire the fullest possible experience of reality . . . of our self[ves]” (68). Therefore, it seems the full extent of his claim is that the more we can objectively see ourselves in the form of our friend, the more value the friendship has. I, however, would like to argue that friendship is not measured on a “value scale.” Instead, it is the presence of psychological visibility that gives value to friendship and the presence of any visibility in a friendship gives it an absolute value that cannot be graded.

The value that we place on friendship as means of psychological visibility depends on how we define ourselves. As human beings, we

place value on certain aspects of ourselves. When we interact with others in the world, they too place value on certain aspects of our person. However, the characteristics of ourselves which we value and those which we use to interact with the the world are not necessarily the same.

Most people experience two different aspects or states in their lives. These states can be called the internal state and the external state. The external state can be defined as the public aspect of self, whereas the internal state is the private aspect. This distinction is not only important but also necessary to understanding the concept of psychological visibility, as both states are important in determining how much value we place on psychological visibility and therefore how much value we place on friendships, which provide this for us. In order to see how these two aspects of self differ, an extreme case of both will be described.

The public aspect of self is that part of ourselves with which we interact in the public world. Public interactions are most often between strangers, but more importantly they are governed by the rules of situational and circumstantial relationships. They are situational in that the situation in which the two people interact is the main determining factor in how these people interact. We have little choice in determining how we will interact with others in the external state; we merely fit the roles outlined for us. A good example of this type of interaction is a cashier/customer interaction, where the actions of each are determined by the rules of the situation. This is not to say that we have no control over what happens to us in situational interactions, but in the extreme case, situational guidelines strictly determine the course of the interaction. The other aspect of external state level relationships is, that they are to a high degree, random. Specific choices about with whom the interaction will occur do not occur. When I eat at a restaurant, I cannot choose who my waiter will be nor can my waiter chose whom he will wait upon. With whom we eventually interact as a result of our choices is not directly under our control.

How do these two features of public interactions shape what is

defined as the external state? The external state is the collection of personae and titles that we use to define ourselves in such situations. They are situational and circumstantial roles that allow us to understand the rules of this interaction. For example, when I go to a restaurant, I am situationally defined as the customer. The person I interact with is defined to me as the waiter. These roles determine the nature of the interaction circumstantially rather than by choice. The interaction between the waiter and myself was random and structured within the guidelines of how we were defined to each other, and therefore occurred at the level of the external state.

Internal state interactions can be considered the opposite of external state interactions. These interactions are private in nature, not on display for the whole world. It is because of the private nature of these interactions that public rules do not really apply. That is, internal state interactions are not defined by the situation in which the two people are placed. Lawrence Thomas offers a good description of these types of relationships in that they are “minimally structured” (52). The interaction is determined almost wholly by the people involved. A more important aspect of internal state interaction is that the external state bears little impact on the interaction itself. Those personae and titles that carry us through external state level interactions are unimportant for two people interacting wholly at the level of the internal state.

The other feature of internal state interactions is that internal state interactions are determined mainly by choice. Relationships between people at the level of the internal state are not random intersections of two people in the same place, time, and situation, but instead are actively chosen and pursued. The initial encounter may have been random, but the pursuit of further interaction with a person is completely under one’s control. How then would we define the internal state as an aspect of a person? Just as the external state is the set of roles and titles that we utilize for public interaction, the internal state are those aspects of ourselves we “utilize” for private interaction, the sum of beliefs, opinions, and attitudes that form the private aspect of oneself. This is usually what we call “personality”; for the extent of this paper, the internal

state will refer to what we identify as “true” self.

The line between external state and internal state is not as sharp as it is drawn here. The external state can affect what we include in our internal state, for example, our career and familial titles. Similarly, the internal state often finds its way into the external state. Because of this crossover, external state and internal state interaction are not cut and dry. It is more the case that external state and internal state interactions are on a continuous spectrum. One extreme is the external state interaction between two complete strangers in a very strictly structured society and the other extreme is an interaction that occurs between two people who are completely familiar with each other and have no outside impositions on the nature of the relationship.

Because we value the internal state over the external state, we also value interactions where our internal state can be expressed over interactions where our external state is expressed. However, very few interactions on a day-to-day level involve the internal state, and therefore, few people are allowed to value what we actually identify as the “self.” Instead, we are valued for external affectations of our person, those titles and roles that we have taken on for their functional value and that are coincidental to our person.

It is for this reason that psychological visibility is desired. Psychological visibility gives value to our internal state. It is not so much a process that occurs between two individuals but a label for what happens between two people who interact at the level of the internal state. It is not an active process or action that we can engage in, but the interactions that take place at the level of the internal state define the content and amount of psychological visibility within that relationship. This distinction may seem either repetitious or unnecessary. The important idea here is that psychological visibility is not an entity in and of itself. Rather, it is more or less a name for a collection of interactions in which we feel that we are valued for ourselves, the internal state, rather than our public personae, the external state.

It is important to understand that psychological visibility is not the only source of value in friendship. Often, other aspects of the friend-

ship—we can have fun with our friends, we trust our friends, we enjoy talking to them—seem more valuable and give us reasons to either count or discount relationships as friendships. However, it is important to note that in these previously mentioned features of friendship, psychological visibility has already played a foundational role.

Psychological visibility, in all three of these cases, has allowed for the establishment of any friendly interaction in the first place. Let us take the feature of enjoying conversation with one's friends as an example of psychological visibility as a means to friendly interaction.

In most, if not all, friendships, the two people involved in the relationship talk to each other at some point, and this conversation is usually a friendly one, enjoyed by both parties. The depth or emotional weight of this conversation is irrelevant; I can just as easily enjoy a conversation with my best friend about my career plans as I can enjoy a conversation with a lesser friend about an article in the paper. What is important is that this conversation is sought after and enjoyed by both people interacting.

Now, imagine that I am in a conversation with another person about last night's football game. This conversation must take place at the level of the internal state, by the very nature of the interaction. Why is this? Well, imagine if this interaction were to take place at the level of this external state. How could this conversation even take place? External state interactions are highly structured and defined in terms of how we are situationally defined to each other, and therefore do not involve any of our self that concerns our thoughts or feelings. Therefore, it is impossible for any conversation outside the scope of public interaction to occur on the level of the external state. Therefore any conversation of this nature, one not in the scope of public interactions, must take place at the level of the internal state. This interaction between two people, concerning the other's thoughts, feelings, and opinions, is within the realm of the internal state and occurs only because of psychological visibility. Because psychological visibility concerns those interactions which value the internal state over the external state, it plays the same role in all other aspects of friendship. Instead of play-

ing a functional part in the day-to-day activities between friends, it allows for the friendship to progress. In other words, psychological visibility provides a foundation from which to start the friendship.

It is because psychological visibility provides a foundation from which we can form friendships that it is not measured on a graded scale. The amount of psychological visibility is irrelevant to the value that it contributes to a friendship. Rather, because psychological visibility has a foundational value, the presence of any psychological visibility is valuable in establishing a friendship in the first place. The presence of psychological visibility within an interaction allows for the progression from external state interaction to internal state interaction and, consequently, provides psychological visibility. What is valuable in these interactions is how we feel that our internal state is valued.

It could be argued that because psychological visibility is not placed on a graded scale of zero value to complete value, then psychological visibility is not graded phenomenon. This is not necessarily true. Psychological visibility can be experienced in different amounts with different people. Our best friends provide for us a great deal more psychological visibility than a casual acquaintance. And consequently, those people with whom we experience more psychological visibility often become better friends with us. However, the presence of more or less psychological visibility does not add to or subtract from the value it confers on the friendship. Rather, psychological visibility has a set value; it is an all-or-none type of phenomenon. Therefore, the value of an interaction with little psychological visibility is equal in value to an interaction with a great deal of psychological visibility.

This said, how are various features of friendship affected by psychological visibility as a driving force towards establishing friendships? Certain qualities or characteristics are thought to be integral to friendship as a relationship between people. The question is whether psychological visibility can or does affect the necessity of these elements of friendship. Specifically, it appears that constancy is in danger of becoming irrelevant to friendship. Reciprocation is also a potential problem; can friendship exist without reciprocation of psychological

visibility between two persons? And, finally, what does psychological visibility contribute to the moral worth of friendship, if it does at all?

Tackling the first question first, it is important to first determine what is meant by constancy. As constancy is typically considered within friendships, one does not expect one's friends to be truly constant; that is, one does not expect one's friends to stay with them forever. Rather, I believe that what we expect from them is that they will remain constant as long as it provides an amount of psychological visibility with which they feel satisfied. At first, this may seem incompatible with friendship as a joint venture. But it is important to realize that psychological visibility is not considered an *actual* characteristic of friendship. It is instead an underlying driving force for other more easily observable features of the friendship. If psychological visibility begins to decline in a relationship, other, more obvious aspects will also be affected. As less psychological visibility exists within the overall friendship, those aspects of friendship which have their basis in psychological visibility begin to suffer. However, this is compatible with common conceptions of friendship. That psychological visibility tapers off as a friendship deteriorates poses no problem if one does not expect one's friends to stay with them forever.

Another possible problem with psychological visibility, considered as a driving force to friendship, is reciprocation. Popular conceptions of friendship usually require that friendship be reciprocated; both participants must participate on a semi-equal level. This has been accounted for and explained in many different ways. Thomas, for example, claims that mutual disclosure and authority are important in maintaining the equality of a friendship. If one party feels that it has more say in the relationship than the other, then equality cannot be maintained and the relationship becomes more like a parent/child relationship than a friendship (Thomas 53). Similarly, mutual disclosure is important in guaranteeing the equality of a friendship; if one party holds back a great deal while the other party discloses everything, one cannot maintain an equal relationship (Thomas 57). Kant explains the concept of reciprocation through a balance of love and respect. Whereas respect preserves equal-

ity, love opposes it. The overall balance of equality in friendship is the balance of these two factors. In one person contributes more love or respect, then the friendship is unequal and is therefore not truly reciprocated (Paton 150).

How does psychological visibility affect what we consider to be reciprocation? Reciprocation can be defined in terms of psychological visibility, as well. Just as both Paton, in his interpretation of Kant, and Thomas conceptually defined reciprocation as inequalities in some aspect of the friendship, lack of reciprocation can be defined as an inequality in psychological visibility. It follows that reciprocation is a necessary part of a psychological visibility-driven friendship. This is not to say that unequal reciprocation does not occur in relationships and friendships. In many friendships, the two parties have unequal roles in one or more aspect of the friendship or in the friendship overall. However, as in the examples by Kant and Thomas, a certain amount of unequal reciprocation can be tolerated. But at some point, this inequality causes the relationship to deteriorate. Translated into psychological visibility terms, a certain inequality in psychological visibility between two people can be tolerated; beyond that, the relationship begins to suffer.

Finally, one might wonder how psychological visibility affects morality in terms of friendship. There is much disagreement between interpretations of various moral theories on whether friendship even carries moral weight at all. If friendship really is outside the realm of moral consideration, then psychological visibility, as a concern of friendship, is also outside the realm of moral consideration. However, if friendship does carry moral weight, then psychological visibility must also have some moral significance. As currently described, psychological visibility provides a foundation for interaction to progress from external state to the internal state. This occurs because the internal state becomes valued over the external state as friendship progresses. What in this phenomenon can possibly fall under moral consideration?

Because psychological visibility places value on internal aspects of the person, this is where moral worth in a friendship is derived. The

act of valuing and the range of things that are under the scope of this action are under moral consideration. Because psychological visibility consists of valuing another person for their internal aspects, psychological visibility is a moral attitude. And because it places value on those things that others value in themselves, psychological visibility is a morally good attitude. Just as the value of psychological visibility of friendship does not increase or decrease with an increase or decrease in the amount of psychological visibility itself, the total amount of moral worth derived from psychological visibility is also ungraded. Rather, the moral worth that psychological visibility contributes to the overall standing of friendship is a fixed “amount” of moral goodness.

It is difficult to determine whether the moral worth of friendship contributes to the overall value that we place on friendship within our own lives. Moreover, it is difficult to say whether we would even want friendship to have value for moral reasons. Regardless of whether the moral weight of friendship affects the value that it actually has, psychological visibility contributes to the overall value of friendship. Friendly interactions provide us with psychological visibility and therefore we receive a certain amount of value from these interactions. However, unlike Branden’s claim that the value of friendly interaction changes in relation to the amount of psychological visibility received, I propose that the presence of any psychological visibility gives friendship value, which remains constant regardless of how much psychological visibility is present. Because of the presence of psychological visibility, friendship is always a valuable phenomenon. Whereas the total value of friendship can be graded according to other factors, the friendship has a basic value due simply to the presence of psychological visibility.

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