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## Love and Psychological Visibility

*Nathaniel Branden*

We shall be dealing here with what I first called the Muttnik Principle and later, more formally, called the Principle of Psychological Visibility. An intense experience of *mutual psychological visibility* is, as we shall see, at the very center of romantic love. Let us see what this means and how and why it is so.

One afternoon in 1960, while sifting alone in the living room of my apartment, I found myself contemplating with pleasure a large philodendron plant standing against a wall. It was a pleasure I had experienced before, but suddenly it occurred to me to wonder: What is the nature of this pleasure? What is its cause?

During that period I would not describe myself as "a nature lover," although I subsequently became one. At the time I was aware of positive feelings that accompanied my contemplation of the philodendron; I was unable to explain them.

The pleasure was not primarily aesthetic. Were I to learn that the plant was artificial, its aesthetic characteristics would remain the same but my response would change radically; the special pleasure I experienced would vanish. It seemed clear that essential to my enjoyment was the knowledge that the plant was healthily and glowingly *alive*. There was a feeling of a bond, almost a kind of kinship, between the plant and me; surrounded by inanimate objects, we were united in the fact of possessing life. I thought of the motive of people who, in the most impoverished conditions plant flowers in boxes on their windowsills—for the pleasure of watching something grow. Apparently, observing successful life is of value to human beings.

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Suppose, I thought, I were on a dead planet where I had every material provision to ensure survival but where nothing was alive. I would feel like a metaphysical alien. Then suppose I came upon a living plant. Surely I would greet the sight with eagerness and pleasure. *Why?*

Because, I realized, all life—life by its very nature—entails a struggle, and struggle entails the possibility of defeat; we desire and find pleasure in seeing concrete instances of successful life as confirmation of our knowledge that successful life is possible. It is, in effect, a *metaphysical* experience. We desire the sight, not necessarily as a means of allaying doubts or of reassuring ourselves, but as a means of experiencing and confirming on the perceptual plane, the level of immediate reality, that which we know abstractly, conceptually.

If such is the value a plant can offer to a human being, I mused, then the sight of another being can offer a much more intense form of this experience. The successes and achievements of those around us, in their own persons and in their work, can provide fuel and inspiration for our efforts and strivings. Perhaps this is one of the greatest gifts human beings can offer one another. A greater gift than charity, a greater gift than any explicit teaching or any words of advice—the sight of happiness, achievement, success, fulfillment.

The next crucial step in my thinking occurred on an afternoon, some months later, when I sat on the floor playing with my dog, a wirehaired fox terrier named Muttnik.

We were jabbing at and boxing with each other in mock ferociousness. What I found delightful and fascinating was the extent to which Muttnik appeared to grasp the playfulness of my intention. She was snarling and snapping and striking back while being unfailingly gentle in a manner that projected total, fearless trust. The event was not unusual; it is one with which most dog owners are familiar. But a question suddenly occurred to me, of a kind I had never asked myself before: Why am I having such an enjoyable time? What is the nature and source of my pleasure?

Part of my response, I recognized, was simply the pleasure of watching the healthy self-assertiveness of a living entity. But that was not the essential factor causing my response. That factor pertained to the interaction between the dog and myself, a sense of interacting and communicating with a living consciousness.

If I were to view Muttnik as an automaton without consciousness or awareness and to view her actions and responses as entirely mechanical, then my enjoyment would vanish. The factor of consciousness was of primary importance.

Then I thought once again of being marooned on an uninhabited

island. Muttnik's presence not because she could survive, but because she shared a conscious entity to interact with now. *But why is that of value?*

The answer to this question, I would explain in my next column, in this issue is the psychological value of human companionship. A conscious entity seeks out another conscious entity because *consciousness is a value to be shared.*

When I identified Muttnik as a conscious entity because of the circumstances, I would consider the nature of her response.

The key to understanding Muttnik was in the sense of feedback she was providing. She responded in a playful manner that threatened; she projected a sense of surable excitement. When I responded, she would react in a purely playful manner; there could be no sense of actions, of apprehensions, of fear accordingly. Such communication among conscious entities is a mutual *seen*, to make Muttnik respond as a person.

And, as part of the sense of visibility to myself, I would maintain a personality which, during the interaction, so the interaction would be a theme to which I shared.

What is significant about this interaction to me as a person is that I share, that is, in accordance with her, conveying to her. Her response, cowering, I would have been perceived by her and would have been shared.

While the example of Muttnik's dog may appear very simple, it is manifest, potentially, a complex interaction to each other. All positive interactions are based on a mutual sense of visibility to each other.

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island. Muttnik's presence there would be of enormous value to me, not because she could make any practical contribution to my physical survival, but because she offered a form of *companionship*. She would be a conscious entity to interact and communicate with—as I was doing now. *But why is that of value?*

The answer to this question, I realized, with a rising sense of excitement, would explain much more than the attachment to a pet. Involved in this issue is the psychological principle that underlies our desire for *human* companionship—the principle that would explain why a conscious entity seeks out and values other conscious entities, *why consciousness is a value to consciousness*.

When I identified the answer I called it the "Muttnik Principle" because of the circumstances under which it was discovered. Let us consider the nature of this principle.

The key to understanding my pleasurable reaction to playing with Muttnik was in the self-awareness that came from the nature of the feedback she was providing. From the moment that I began to "box," she responded in a playful manner; she conveyed no sign of feeling threatened; she projected an attitude of trust and pleasure and pleasurable excitement. Were I to push or jab at an inanimate object, it would react in a purely mechanical way; it would not be responding to *me*; there could be no possibility of its grasping the meaning of my actions, of apprehending my intentions, and of guiding its behavior accordingly. Such communication and response are possible only among conscious entities. The effect of Muttnik's behavior was to make me feel *seen*, to make me feel *psychologically visible* (to a modest extent). Muttnik was responding to me, not as a mechanical object, but as a person. \*

And, as part of the same process, I was experiencing a greater degree of visibility to *myself*; I was making contact with a playfulness in my personality which, during those years, I generally kept severely contained, so the interaction also contained elements of *self-discovery*, a theme to which I shall return shortly.

What is significant and must be stressed is that Muttnik was responding to me as a person in a way that I regarded as objectively appropriate, that is, in accordance with my view of myself and of what I was conveying to her. Had she responded with fear and an attitude of cowering, I would have experienced myself as being, in effect, misperceived by her and would not have felt pleasure.

While the example of an interaction between a human being and a dog may appear very primitive, I believe that it reflects a pattern that is manifest, potentially, between any two consciousnesses able to respond to each other. All positive interactions between human beings produce

the experience of visibility to a degree. The climax of that possibility is achieved in romantic love, as we shall see shortly.

So we must consider the question: Why do we value and find pleasure in the experience of self-awareness and psychological visibility that the appropriate response or feedback from another consciousness can evoke?

Consider the fact that we normally experience ourselves, in effect, as a process—in that consciousness itself is a process, an activity, and the contents of our mind are a shifting flow of perceptions, images, organic sensations, fantasies, thoughts, and emotions. Our mind is not an unmoving entity which we can contemplate objectively—that is, contemplate as a direct object of experience—as we contemplate objects in the external world.

We normally have, of course, a sense of ourselves, of our own identity, but it is experienced more as a feeling than a thought—a feeling which is very diffuse, which is interwoven with all our other feelings, and which is very hard, if not impossible, to isolate and consider by itself. Our “self-concept” is not a single concept, but a cluster of images and abstract perspectives on our various (real or imagined) traits and characteristics, the sum total of which can never be held in focal awareness at any one time; that sum is experienced, but it is not *perceived* as such.

In the course of our life, our values, goals, and ambitions are first conceived in our mind; that is, they exist as data of consciousness, and then—to the extent that our life is successful—are translated into action and objective reality. They become part of the “out there,” of the world that we perceive. They achieve expression and reality in material form. This is the proper and necessary pattern of human existence. *To live successfully is to put ourselves into the world, to give expression to our thoughts, values, and goals.* Our life is un-lived precisely to the extent that this process fails to occur.

Yet our most important value—our character, soul, psychological self, spiritual being—whatever name one wishes to give it—can never follow this pattern in a literal sense, can never exist apart from our own consciousness. It can never be perceived by us as part of the “out there.” But we *desire* a form of objective self-awareness and, in fact, *need* this experience.

*Since we are the motor of our own actions, since our concept of who we are, of the person we have evolved, is central to all our motivation, we desire and need the fullest possible experience of the reality and objectivity of that person, of our self.*

When we stand before a mirror, we are able to perceive our own face

as an object in reality, contemplating the physical being able to look and experience of objectivity.

To say it once again: the internal is of the very nature included in this process.

And, in an *indirect* sense, every time we say what we only express through words.

But in a *direct* sense? *psychological* self? In words. Yes. The mirror is another.

As individuals alone, at least to some extent. We have the opportunity for us to express objects “out there.”

Of course, some people use the “mirrors” they provide in amusement park’s character visibility requires consistency, with our own.

Here is the limitation: not enough, in her responses to her own personality. But visibility only in a relative range of awareness, through

A word of clarification: to imply that first we acquire any human relationship through interaction with others, as some writers have suggested, responses and feedback we acquire. All of us, to a degree, we are in the context of human being our personal sequences of many past actions, a combination of many responses keep growing and evolving.

In successful romantic relationships and fascination with, there can be, for each

as an object in reality, and we normally find pleasure in doing so, in contemplating the physical entity that is ourself. There is a value in being able to look and think, "That's me." The value lies in the experience of objectivity.

To say it once again: The externalization of the objectification of the internal is of the very nature of successful life. We wish to see our *self* included in this process.

And, in an *indirect* sense, it is, every time we act on our judgment, every time we say what we think or feel or mean, every time we honestly express through word and deed our internal reality, our inner being.

But in a *direct* sense? Is there a mirror in which we can perceive our *psychological* self? In which we can, as it were, perceive our own soul? Yes. The mirror is another consciousness.

As individuals alone, we are able to know ourselves conceptually—at least to some extent. What another consciousness can offer is the opportunity for us to experience ourselves perceptually, as concrete objects "out there."

Of course, some people's consciousnesses are so alien to our own that the "mirrors" they provide yield the wildly distorted reflections of an amusement park's chamber of horrors. The experience of significant visibility requires consciousnesses congruent, to some meaningful extent, with our own.

Here is the limitation of Muttnik, or of any lower animal. True enough, in her response I was able to see reflected a small aspect of my own personality. But we can experience optimal self-awareness and visibility only in a relationship with a consciousness possessing an equal range of awareness, that is, another human being.

A word of clarification seems necessary at this point. I do not wish to imply that first we acquire a sense of identity entirely independent of any human relationships, and *then* seek the experience of visibility in interaction with others. Our self-concept is not the creation of others, as some writers have suggested, but obviously our relationships and the responses and feedback we receive contribute to the sense of self we acquire. All of us, to a profoundly important extent, experience who we are in the context of our relationships. When we encounter a new human being our personality contains, among other things, the consequences of many past encounters, many experiences, the internalization of many responses and instances of feedback from others. And we keep growing and evolving *through our encounters*.

In successful romantic love, there is a unique depth of absorption by, and fascination with, the being and personality of the partner. Hence there can be, for each, a uniquely powerful experience of visibility.

Even if this state is not realized optimally, it may still be realized to an unprecedented degree. And this is one of the main sources of the excitement—and nourishment—of romantic love.

But much more needs to be said about the *process* of psychological visibility—how it is engendered and what it entails.

Our basic premises and values, our sense of life, the level of our intelligence, our characteristic manner of processing experience, our basic biological rhythm, and other features commonly referred to as “temperament”—all are made manifest in our personality. “Personality” is the externally perceivable sum of all of the psychological traits and characteristics that distinguish a human being from all other human beings.

Our psychology is expressed through behavior, through the things we say and do, and through the ways we say and do them. It is in this sense that our self is an object of perception to others. When others react to us, to their view of us and of our behavior, their perception is in turn expressed through *their* behavior, by the way they look at us, by the way they speak to us, by the way they respond, and so forth. If their view of us is consonant with our deepest vision of who we are (which may be different from whom we profess to be), and if their view is transmitted by their behavior, we feel perceived, we feel psychologically visible. We experience a sense of the objectivity of our self and of our psychological state of being. We perceive the reflection of our self in their behavior. It is in this sense that others can be a psychological mirror.

More precisely, this is one of the senses in which others can be a psychological mirror. There is another.

When we encounter a person who thinks as we do, who notices what we notice, who values the things we value, who tends to respond to different situations as we do, not only do we experience a strong sense of affinity with such a person but also we can experience our self through our perception of that person. This is another form of the experience of objectivity. This is another manner of perceiving our self in the world, external to consciousness, as it were. And as such, this is another form of experiencing psychological visibility. The pleasure and excitement that we experience in the presence of such a person, with whom we can enjoy this sense of affinity, underscores the importance of the need that is being satisfied.

The experience of visibility, then, is not merely a function of how another individual responds to us. It is also a function of how that individual responds to the world. These considerations apply equally to all instances of visibility, from the most casual encounter to the most intense love affair.

Just as there are many forms of life, so we may feel many different relationships. We may feel a wider or narrower range of the nature of the person and our interaction.

Sometimes, the relationship is a character trait; sometimes it is some action; sometimes it is a conditional response; sometimes, to a matter of psychology; sometimes, the relationship is almost invisible.

All the forms of relationship—spiritual, intellectual, emotional—provide a perceptual evidence of our self to particular people. Most of us are largely unaware only of the particular person, with whom we have a sense of affinity or connection.

The mere fact of being perceived as a person in relationships, with a far more profound sense of our inner self.

I shall have more of a particular relationship with a particular quality of intellect, of behavior toward life, is the particular person which is the essence of love. A friend, said A, is an experience to the person myself. A lover idealizes the person in the person of another person. We perceive the person in our consciousness—and, we can.

Here, then, we can desire for companionship. We can perceive our self as an individual through and by our relationships with other beings.

Just as there are many different aspects to our personality and inner life, so we may feel visible in different respects in various human relationships. We may experience a greater or lesser degree of visibility, or a wider or narrower range, of our total personality, depending on the nature of the person with whom we are dealing and on the nature of our interaction.

Sometimes, the aspect in which we feel visible pertains to a basic character trait; sometimes, to the nature of our intention in performing some action; sometimes, to the reasons behind a particular emotional response; sometimes, to an issue involving our sense of life; sometimes, to a matter concerning our work; sometimes, to our sexual psychology; sometimes, to our aesthetic values. The range of possibilities is almost inexhaustible.

All the forms of interaction and communication among people—spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical—combine to give us the perceptual evidence of our visibility in one respect or another; or, relative to particular people, can produce in us the impression of invisibility. Most of us are largely unaware of the process by which this occurs; we are aware only of the results. We are aware that, in the presence of a particular person, we do or do not feel “at home,” do or do not feel a sense of affinity or understanding or emotional attachment.

The mere fact of holding a conversation with another human being entails a marginal experience of visibility, if only the experience of being perceived as a conscious entity. However, in intimate human relationships, with a person we deeply admire and care for, we expect a far more profound visibility, involving highly individual and personal aspects of our inner life.

I shall have more to say about the determinants of visibility in any particular relationship. But it is fairly obvious that a significant mutuality of intellect, of basic premises and values, of fundamental attitude toward life, is the precondition of that projection of mutual visibility which is the essence of authentic friendship, or, above all, of romantic love. A friend, said Aristotle, is another self. This is precisely what lovers experience to the most intense degree. In loving you, I encounter myself. A lover ideally reacts to us as, in effect, we would react to our self in the person of another. Thus, we perceive our self through our lover's reaction. We perceive our own person through its consequences in the consciousness—and, as a result, in the behavior of our partner.

Here, then, we can discern one of the main roots of the human desire for companionship, for friendship and for love: *the desire to perceive our self as an entity in reality, to experience the perspective of objectivity through and by means of the reactions and response of other human beings.*

The principle involved, the Muttnik Principle—let us call it the Principle of Psychological Visibility—may be summarized as follows: *Human beings desire and need the experience of self-awareness that results from perceiving the self as an objective existent, and they are able to achieve this experience through interaction with the consciousness of other living beings.*

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# FRIENDSHIP

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