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MARRIAGE, AUTONOMY, AND THE STATE: REPLY
TO CHRISTOPHER BENNETT

ABSTRACT. Christopher Bennett has argued that state support of conjugal relationships can be founded on the unique contribution such relationships make to the autonomy of their participants by providing them with various forms of recognition and support unavailable elsewhere. I argue that, in part because a long history of interaction between two people who need each other's validation tends to produce less meaningful responses over time, long-term conjugal relationships are unlikely to provide autonomy-enhancing support to their participants. To the extent that intimate relationships can provide a unique form of reciprocal support, Bennett fails to show that couples have an advantage over multiple-partner arrangements in doing so.

KEY WORDS: autonomy, courtship, intimacy, love, marriage, monogamy, polyamory

In 'Liberalism, Autonomy and Conjugal Love',¹ Christopher Bennett provides an appealing account of the value of conjugal relationships as promoting the ability of their participants to pursue their own good. He suggests that, to endorse state support for such relationships, one need only subscribe to the liberal value of autonomy.

Bennett argues that the special value of conjugal relationships derives from the particular forms of recognition and support that can be found only in such relationships. Because our sense of self is formed through the image that we see reflected in the eyes of others, the validation and support of others who know us are essential to our self-respect. Close friends provide a form of recognition not available in the public sphere, because they love us for the particular persons we are. An intimate partner, who knows your life in

¹ Christopher Bennett, 'Liberalism, Autonomy, and Conjugal Love', *Res Publica* 9/3 (2003) 285–301.

greater detail than anyone else, is in a position to provide a form of recognition that no one else can: validation for your worth as a whole person, all things considered. For partner validation to succeed, Bennett argues, it is essential that your partner has chosen you, and continues to choose you, in light of a comprehensive knowledge of your virtues and failings. That your partner continues to value you in light of such detailed knowledge provides a form of affirmation that is not available elsewhere. That this affirmation comes from a person whom you have similarly chosen adds immeasurably to its value. Thus, Bennett locates the value of marriage in the unique capacity of conjugal love to provide us with a foundation for self-respect. In a conjugal relationship, as well, each partner takes full responsibility for the other, and thus is uniquely well situated to provide comfort and support for the other through any problems that life may bring. Together, this recognition and support form the basis on which we can exercise autonomy – that is, formulate, revise, and act on a conception of the good life.

In this paper, I shall argue that there is good reason to suppose that persons who derive their sense of self-worth from validation by others have less autonomy in Bennett's sense than those who do not require such validation. I shall go on to argue that those who require substantial external validation to carry out their projects cannot obtain the appropriate form of validation from the choice of a long-term intimate partner to remain in the relationship. Finally, I shall argue that, to the extent that we need forms of material comfort and support that are found only in intimate relationships, those forms of support are at least as likely to be found in larger intimate networks as in couples. Thus, Bennett fails to establish that a foundation for state support of conjugal couplehood can be derived from the contribution of such relationships to the autonomy of their participants.

I

I begin with Bennett's plausible claim that being valued by others enables each of us to value ourselves, to maintain our self-respect, and to be able to act autonomously in the sense of being able to frame, revise, and pursue a conception of the good. In particular, being loved by intimate friends provides each of us with recognition

of our value as a unique individual, because only such friends know us in sufficient detail to affirm our unique value. When our need for this form of recognition is not met, Bennett argues, it is difficult to maintain a sense of the importance of our projects, and our autonomy is reduced.

Keeping in mind that the sense of autonomy Bennett has in mind is that of our ability to frame, revise, and pursue a conception of the good, it may already seem problematic to say that we do this best when our need for the support of intimate friends is met. For to the extent that we have a felt need for the support of our friends, we are likely to frame our conceptions of the good in terms that those friends will find acceptable, in order to continue to receive their support. To the extent that we are capable of flourishing independent of their support, on the other hand, we will be free to frame and pursue a conception of the good that invites their disapproval and withdrawal of support. Our autonomy is in an important sense greater to the extent that we are free from the need for the support and approval of others.

That this is not a purely speculative matter is shown by the insights of systems theory in psychology.² According to that theory, to the extent that individuals require validation from others, they will tend to present themselves in such a way as to gain the approval they need, and to suppress those of their own traits and desires that elicit negative reactions from important others.³ In extreme cases, such individuals may have so little independent sense of self that they feel they 'disappear' when they are alone. More typically, they simply feel that they must choose between maintaining their sense of self and having close relationships with others. According to this theory, individuals function better in their relationships to the extent that they are capable of self-validation, and thus able to maintain close relationships without sacrificing their independence of thought. Such persons do not have an inflated sense of their own importance, nor do they fail to value positive feedback from others. Rather, they are able to tolerate negative feedback from individuals who are important to them, because they

² Systems theory was founded by Murray Bowen, who studied the intergenerational effects of interactions within families.

³ Here and in the rest of this paragraph I rely on the account given by David Schnarch in *Constructing the Sexual Crucible* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991).

have a secure sense of self independent of the assessment of important others. In short, although they appreciate validation provided by others, they can maintain their equanimity without it.

It is true that few individuals attain this state in its fullest, so that most of us are left needing at least some validation from others. The need itself interferes with our autonomy, but given that most of us have such a need, will our autonomy not be promoted by having that need met? Any need of ours – even the simple need for food – reduces our autonomy because we must spend some of our time satisfying it; but once the need is satisfied, our autonomy is increased. Thus it is fair to say that, *given* a need for validation by others in order to maintain our sense of self-worth, our autonomy is enhanced by having this need satisfied. Thus far, then, Bennett's observations are relevant to the large segment of the population that has not (or not yet) achieved a level of self-validation that obviates the need for validation by others.

Bennett argues persuasively that intimate friends provide for us forms of support that most will need and that are not available from strangers or in the public sphere. Our close friends are in a position to provide feedback on our personal problems, to provide reassurance of our overall value despite our known failings, and to provide comfort and support in time of loss. As well, friends affirm our particular value by their choice of us as friends, and we especially value the affirmation we get from being so chosen by those who we, in turn, choose to be our friends.

From here it seems a relatively short step to the conclusion that a lover provides these same forms of support and affirmation to a higher degree. I shall argue, however, that the dynamics of love relationships are such that the forms of affirmation they offer are less likely to contribute to our autonomy than are those we can obtain from less intimate relationships.

II

For Bennett, partner validation is superior to validation by others in two ways: the partner knows your life in greater detail than anyone else, and holds a position of unique importance in your life, and so can provide affirmation that you are worthwhile, all things considered, in a way that no one else can. Although there may be

others who know you intimately and who have great importance for you such as your parents, siblings, and children, neither they nor you have a choice about the relationship. The fact that the partner is a person chosen by you, who continues to choose you, gives the conjugal relationship unique importance as a source of voluntary validation.

There are thus three parts of the partner's special importance as a source of recognition: the partner's superior knowledge of your character and history; the partner's choice of you in preference to others; and the unique importance of each of you to the other. Paradoxically, however, a long history of interaction between two people, each of whom needs validation from the other, tends to produce less meaningful responses over time, as I shall explain. In addition, the voluntariness of the partner's choice to stay with you, and thus its significance for your sense of self-worth, declines as her knowledge of your habits and character deepens. Finally, to the extent that the intimate partners' choice of each other can provide a special kind of validation and support for each other, its value is not enhanced by the uniqueness or exclusivity of the relationship.

Bennett identifies three specific kinds of recognition that, as he says, everyone will need at some time: feedback on one's behavior in cases producing self-doubt; reassurance of one's overall value in light of failings; and comfort and support in time of loss from someone to whom our losses have particular importance because they are ours. I shall consider each of these in turn.

In the courtship phase of a love relationship, prospective partners engage in verbal self-disclosure; that is, they share those aspects of themselves that they choose to share. It is typical of this stage of a relationship that the partners receive from each other a great deal of gratification in the form of validation and acceptance. Here is a person you find highly attractive, who chooses you over all available others. Yet there is something lacking: you are still not sure that, when she comes to know you better, she will continue to choose you. The excitement you feel at being chosen at this stage, and the gratification you get from the new partner's continued interest, is only a weak source of self-esteem to the extent that you are aware that her knowledge of you is limited. And to the extent that the partner in fact has only limited information about you, it is unlikely that she will provide new insights into your behavior – that is, it is unlikely you will get valuable feedback from her.

As time goes on, and courtship gives way to an established relationship, the partner gains a much more comprehensive knowledge of you, based less on your verbal self-disclosure and more on observation of your behavior and interaction with you. A person with whom you share decisions and daily life knows things about you that you may not know yourself. As the partner's knowledge increases, she is in a better position to provide new insights into your behavior. But at the same time, it becomes less likely that the partners will present to each other an accurate picture of the events and dilemmas on which they are in need of feedback. In part, this is because, as a result of repeated similar interactions, you can predict your partner's reaction and seek to avoid negative reactions, or in other ways to manipulate outcomes. Those who place high value on the continuation of their relationship and also need the partner's validation to maintain their sense of self-worth will, little by little, begin to edit the picture they present to the partner. They will start to wonder whether they 'have to' tell the partner about incidents they know will arouse disapproval, or may seek, consciously or unconsciously, to present them in ways that will elicit a particular type of reaction. Honesty may become a duty to be narrowly complied with rather than an impulse to be embraced. Alternatively, they may remain willing to share their perceptions of events, but simply discount the partner's predictable response. As the recipient of the partner's disclosures, you may move from a generous tolerance of faults to impatience with their persistence over time; or you may block out perceptions that require a response you are not willing to give.⁴

It is in fact easier to sustain verbal self-disclosure and openness to feedback in relationships in which one's decisions don't directly affect the other person. Talking to a friend can help you gain perspective on how you are feeling about your own behavior or that of your partner outside the context of negotiation over what to do about it. Communicating dissatisfaction to your partner (at least over domestic issues) always raises the question of the partner's responsibility to do something about it; thus the partner's response may be defensive or combative rather than sympathetic.

⁴ In his book *Passionate Marriage* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997), Schnarch provides many illuminating examples of the various ways in which the communication of accurate information is blocked by the need for validation by the partner. See, e.g., Bill and Joan in chapters 1 and 2; Florence and Stan in chapter 9.

For example, suppose you are becoming anxious over the messiness of your house, while also feeling you have no time for additional cleaning efforts. Saying to your partner, 'I'm really concerned about how messy the house is getting,' will quite likely be interpreted as 'You don't do enough cleaning around here.' If, on the other hand, it's clear that you are the one responsible for the mess, your statement is likely to evoke renewed demands from your partner to spend more time cleaning. However you phrase your concern, to bring up the subject at all is to initiate negotiation rather than to invite sympathy. A friend who is not going to be affected by your decision on what to do about the issue is in a better position to listen sympathetically to your worries and to help you evaluate the conflicting demands on your time. Of course you'll eventually have to discuss it with your partner as well; but the point is that the degree of the partner's involvement in your life, as well as the importance of her validation to you, in themselves detract from the ease of self-disclosure.

Somewhere between the time when courtship is new and the time when your partner's responses become predictable, there is perhaps an ideal moment in which the partner knows enough about you to provide useful feedback which you are still willing to hear. But by its nature, this moment will pass. Some people can, of course, consistently maintain their ability to disclose vulnerability and to listen to feedback even when they predict (and get) an undesired reaction from the partner. But these are precisely those who do not rely on partner validation to maintain self-esteem. Just to the extent that we need the partner's validation, we will tend to limit our verbal disclosures to those likely to evoke it. Nor is it true that the ideal partner will consistently provide a supportive response despite uninhibited disclosure. Because human beings are not perfect, and no two share the same attitudes and values across the board, consistent validation in the face of full information can only be dishonest. If your partner always validates you despite having full information, it follows that she is not acting autonomously: instead, she is giving up her own conception of the good in favor of yours. The need of one or both partners for validation by the other thus interferes with their ability to provide each other with helpful feedback on personal problems. The flow of positive feedback between long-term partners who need partner validation can be maintained only by limiting

the exchange of information, thus commensurately limiting the extent to which each will feel supported as who they really are.

Regardless of the degree to which partners who need validation for autonomy are capable of truly supportive verbal interactions, there is a measure of affirmation provided by the partner's choice of you as a lover, and by her continuing choice to stay with you. Because our relationships with friends and lovers are based on choice, Bennett argues, they provide greater affirmation than do relationships with parents and siblings. But in adulthood, one's siblings, one's adult children, and even one's parents do have a choice about whether to continue to associate with you, and especially, about how close that association will be. Indeed, because it is possible to dissolve or weaken the relationship gradually (they don't share finances, living space, etc.) they typically have more choice over this than does a spouse.

Notice that it is the very fragility of choice that gives it value as a source of validation: 'You chose me, when you could have chosen anyone. So in your eyes, I am the best.' During courtship, the partners' choice to continue the relationship is fragile in just the way that is necessary for it to serve as affirmation for the other. But in a typical long-standing partnership, the partner chooses you 'above all others' largely on the basis of a life shared so far. Your misbehavior with respect to others is not accorded the same weight as your misbehavior toward the partner; a partner is, properly, the opposite of objective in such matters. From the long-term domestic partner's continuing choice to remain with you, you can reasonably infer only that the sum of your behavior with respect to the partner, plus the value of long shared memory, shared offspring, shared friends, and the social and financial upheaval that would result from parting, are together enough to outweigh everything that can be said against your character. Indeed, there is more reason to 'value' in this sense the more fragile choices of intimate partners who do not have their exit options constrained by legal or financial entanglements.

But no intimate partner, regardless of entanglements beyond the emotional, or lack thereof, has the kind of objective view of your failings needed to make a meaningful evaluation of your overall worth. A more realistic foundation for self-esteem can be gleaned from associations that lack a long history or affectionate ties, such as the respect of work mates and the more distant members of one's social circle.

Bennett is right that this latter type of respect can leave you wondering whether you are worthy of respect as a whole person, rather than in isolated aspects of your behavior. Perhaps your work mates wouldn't respect you as much if they knew about your shameful tendency to let your friends down when they need you most, or if they knew how often you lost patience with your children. But the sad truth is that the fact that your partner loves and values you despite knowing all of this and more is not a free-standing basis for overall self-respect either. To assess your worth as a whole person, you will have to make your own estimation, adding to and subtracting from the (apparent) estimates of various others in light of what they do and do not know.

Bennett correctly observes that, apart from our need for validation by others, all of us are liable to need comfort in time of loss, such as through the death of a loved one, rejection in love, etc., and that we are best comforted by those who consider our loss important just because it is ours. An intimate partner is likely to be able to provide just the kind of comfort needed when one of the other's parents dies. But many of our other important losses – loss of a job, disabling or disfiguring illness, death of a close friend – will be direct losses for the partner as well as for us. And to the extent that this is true, each of the partners (each being himself in need of comfort) will find it difficult to provide comfort for the other, and will find it an additional burden to be asked or expected to do so. People are best able to provide comfort for others when they are not currently burdened by a crisis of their own. A person whose emotional energy is taken up with his own grief has little to spare for others. This means that a long-term intimate partner will often be relatively unavailable to comfort us in time of grief. Marriages often end in the wake of terrible mutual losses, such as the death of a child, for just this reason. Again, the value of intimate friendships is not easily extended to love relationships.

Bennett further argues that the two-person conjugal relationship is uniquely important because it provides affirmation of your value as the unique individual you are. Each partner chooses the other on the basis of the qualities that make them unique. In making this choice, each chooses to take full responsibility for the other, and for no one else. Although I agree with Bennett that conjugal partners accept more responsibility for our well-being than do friends, I

shall argue that this fact does not provide a basis for privileging conjugal couples over more expansive intimate groupings.

Bennett correctly points out that it is not possible to sustain an unlimited number of love relationships. Although I have argued that there are important constraints on the ability of long-term partners to provide for each other the goods that Bennett claims they can, I do not dispute that spending significant amounts of time together is necessary for the creation and maintenance of an intimate bond. But Bennett goes on to argue that, regardless of the sustainability of multiple love relationships, exclusivity (though not necessarily sexual exclusivity) is essential to the value of conjugal relationships. It seems, though, that the three- or four-person relationship might satisfy Bennett's concerns as well as, or even better than, the couple. If, for example, we begin by imagining a status quo in which the *ménage à trois* (or, in more contemporary terms, the triad) is the norm, it quickly becomes apparent that the kinds of considerations Bennett advances would not be adequate to motivate a change to couplehood.

Bennett rejects the triad as equivalent in value to the couple because it does not involve the choice of you above everyone else. Instead, it involves the choice of you and one other person above everyone else, thus, apparently, indicating that you are not uniquely important to the partner. This might be problematic from the point of view of feelings of self-worth if the partner is uniquely important to you, because you will feel that your choice of her is not fully reciprocated. But in the case of the triad, each chooses both of the other partners. Your choice of Partner A is fully reciprocated; she chooses you and Partner B, and you choose her and Partner B. It is still true that you are chosen, and choose each of the others, for the things that make them unique (including, presumably, their sharing of your preference for the triad arrangement). Only if we begin from the assumption that the couple is the ideal will we find anything lacking in the recognition provided by this arrangement. The same can be said of a looser polyamorous arrangement in which each person has a different partner, at least as long as each party has, or is permitted to have, an equal number of partners.

Bennett's second argument for the couple is that it provides you with one person who takes full responsibility for you, and who has a special duty to support you through problems in all areas of your

life, and has nothing more important to do. This is already questionable where there are children or where either partner is employed and either needs the money or is needed at work. But to the extent that the argument holds, the virtue of the triad is that it provides you with not one but two such people. The denizens of our imaginary society might well respond that, indeed, it is essential to have two such people to guard against the likelihood that one will be preoccupied with other matters or that someone will be needed to take care of the children while the other partner rushes off to the hospital where you have been taken. Moreover, the couple relationship all but guarantees that one partner will be left all alone when the other dies. In the triad relationship, this may happen but is not guaranteed to do so; there may be a sufficient lapse of time between deaths to replace the missing member. It is, no doubt, beneficial to have some person or set of persons who will be specially motivated to take care of you in time of need, but there is no reason to think putting all of the responsibility on one person will have better results.

III

I have argued that we are most likely to be able to get verbal validation from our partners during courtship, but that it is only after courtship is over that our partners will have the detailed knowledge required to provide us with meaningful feedback. Similarly, the choice of a partner to stay with us is meaningful only when it is relatively unconstrained, but again, lack of constraints characterizes courtship, while depth of knowledge on which to base the choice characterizes the long-term partner, whose choice is significantly more constrained. Meaningful evaluation of one's self-worth may be based on the evaluations of various others, but cannot be drawn wholesale from any one person's evaluation. Close friends may be better able than intimate partners to provide both help with personal problems and comfort in time of loss, precisely because of the relative lack of entanglement of their lives with ours. Finally, to the extent that couples can provide a source of reciprocal support to each other, the same is true of somewhat larger groups of intimate partners. Given the competing values at stake and the varying preferences of citizens for intimacy and excitement versus the secu-

rity of deep attachment (not to mention for the more outré forms of domestic life), it is not clear that the state should provide incentives for developing or remaining in any particular form of conjugal relationship, despite the obvious value of such relationships to the participants.

In short, the argument for government support of two-person, long-term conjugal relationships on the basis of their contribution to autonomy is no stronger than a similar argument for government support of relationships of more limited duration, or for those involving multiple partners.

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