Chapter 22. Visibility can change behaviour by repurposing our biological bias towards approval and the avoidance of disapproval

Introduction

Human beings are not very good at seeing themselves.

We live inside our own habits, relationships, groups, institutions and societies. Much of what shapes our behaviour becomes normal simply because it surrounds us. Like fish swimming in a river, we experience the water continuously but rarely see the water itself.

AI changes that possibility. Combined with an explicit framework, it can give us much greater visibility of our behaviour, relationships and social systems. The importance is not simply that we can describe ourselves more clearly. Seeing ourselves can change how we behave.

That happens because visibility engages deeply rooted human predispositions. At the simplest level, we respond strongly to approval and disapproval. But belonging, status, reciprocation, fairness, consistency, competition, cooperation and reflection also affect how we respond when our behaviour becomes visible.

Once visibility is connected to an aim, comparison, interpretation, correction and feedback, it becomes more than observation. It becomes part of a control-and-correction system. Repeat that process through time and across levels, and visibility becomes part of a recursive learning system.

The chapter therefore develops a simple sequence:

We cannot easily see ourselves → AI increases visibility → behaviour becomes visible → visibility engages human predispositions → behaviour can change → feedback enables correction → repeated correction produces recursive learning.

How this chapter unfolds

1. **Fish in the river —** Human beings have difficulty seeing themselves because we live inside the systems that shape us. Habits, assumptions, relationships and institutions become part of the environment we take for granted.
2. **AI gives us new visibility —** AI can help make previously difficult-to-see patterns visible at the personal, group and national levels.

3. **Why seeing ourselves can change behaviour —** Visibility matters because it interacts with powerful human predispositions, particularly approval and disapproval, but also belonging, status, reciprocation, fairness, consistency, competition, cooperation and reflection.
4. **Visibility becomes part of control and correction —** Once observation is connected to an aim, sensing, comparison, interpretation, correction and feedback, visibility moves from description to active control and correction.
5. **Visibility becomes a recursive learning system —** When observation and correction are repeated through time and across individuals, groups, organisations and societies, the same process becomes a continuing and recursive learning system.
6. **What this means for humans —** Draws together Chapters 1–9 to show why visibility can strengthen reflection, self-restraint, correction and learning without removing human judgement or responsibility.
7. **What this means for AI —** Draws together Chapters 1–9 to show how AI can extend visibility, comparison, continuity and learning while remaining inside human aims, truth-seeking, legitimacy and control.

1. Fish in the river

The first problem is visibility.

We spend our lives inside systems that continuously shape the way we think and behave. We live inside families, organisations, cultures, institutions and societies. Their assumptions become our assumptions. Their behaviours become familiar. Their rewards and sanctions become ordinary. Their conventions become difficult to distinguish from reality itself. This creates several related difficulties.

- We see other people's behaviour more easily than our own. Our own behaviour is experienced from the inside and therefore often feels reasonable or inevitable.
- We notice exceptional events more readily than recurring patterns. The very patterns that matter most may become invisible precisely because they are familiar.
- We interpret events through existing assumptions. The frameworks through which we understand the world are themselves part of what may need to be examined.
- We can also become accustomed to systems that are producing poor outcomes. Incremental deterioration can become normal long before it becomes obvious.

- And we often cannot see how our own actions contribute to the wider system. Individual behaviour, group behaviour and institutional behaviour continually interact.

The metaphor of the fish in the river captures the problem. The fish does not normally experience the river as an object of investigation. It experiences it as the environment through which life happens.

Human beings face much the same difficulty. A person may not recognise a repeated pattern in the way they respond to criticism. A management team may not see the behavioural consequences of the way its meetings are conducted. A society may become accustomed to declining trust, increasing polarisation or weakening institutions because each change occurs incrementally. The problem is not necessarily unwillingness to learn. Often the relevant pattern is simply difficult to see from inside it.

Historically, human beings have created many ways of overcoming this problem. Other people can tell us what they see. Teachers, friends, therapists, advisers, journalists, researchers and institutions can provide forms of external observation. Data can show us outcomes that intuition misses. History can allow one society to see another more clearly.

But these mechanisms are uneven. They can be expensive, intermittent, inaccessible or themselves distorted by the observer. What has been missing is the ability to place a relatively persistent, inexpensive and increasingly capable observer alongside the individual or system.

AI begins to make that possible.

2. AI gives us new visibility

AI can help turn observation back onto the observer. Its importance is not that it possesses some privileged or infallible view of human beings. It does not.

Its importance is that it can assemble information, ask questions, compare observations, detect recurring patterns, remember previous states, introduce alternative perspectives and apply an explicit framework repeatedly.

AI can now give us what was previously difficult to sustain: continuous visibility of ourselves at different levels. Three broad forms matter here.

1. Personal visibility helps an individual see recurring patterns in their own behaviour, assumptions, choices and relationships.
2. Group visibility helps a group see patterns in the way its members interact, cooperate, compete, communicate and make decisions.

3. National visibility helps us see recurring patterns in institutions, social relationships and collective behaviour.

These are not three separate technologies. They are applications of the same underlying idea at different levels.

The important change is that AI can make observation more continuous. A conventional assessment often produces a snapshot. AI-supported visibility can retain what was observed yesterday, compare it with what is happening today and ask whether anything is changing.

It can therefore begin to show:

- where we are;
- how we arrived there;
- what patterns keep recurring;
- where our account of ourselves conflicts with what we actually do;
- whether we are moving; and
- whether that movement is towards or away from what we say we want.

This is much more useful than simply asking AI for an opinion about us.

The framework matters because visibility needs a clear idea of what to look for. Evidence matters because interpretation needs something against which it can be tested. Human judgement matters because any interpretation can be wrong. Combined, these elements give us something unusual: the ability to make parts of ourselves and our systems visible while we are still living inside them.

The fish begins to see the river.

3. Why seeing ourselves can change behaviour

Seeing ourselves matters because human beings care about how we are seen. At its simplest, the mechanism is approval and disapproval.

Human beings are extraordinarily sensitive to signals about whether our behaviour is accepted, valued, admired, criticised or rejected. That sensitivity has deep social value. Human beings survive and flourish through relationships and groups. Signals about how others regard us therefore matter.

Visibility can make those signals clearer. Behaviour that was previously unnoticed can become visible. Behaviour that was rationalised privately can be compared with its effects on others. Behaviour that seemed exceptional can be revealed as repetitive.

But approval and disapproval are only the beginning. We also care about **belonging**. Human beings care about whether our behaviour keeps us inside or pushes us outside a valued group. We care about **status**. We notice our standing relative to others, and the visibility of that standing can affect how we behave. We are sensitive to **reciprocation**. Seeing what others contribute affects what we are prepared to contribute in return. We are also sensitive to **fairness**. When differences between stated rules and actual behaviour become visible, pressure for correction can increase.

People generally prefer to see themselves as behaving consistently with the values and commitments they claim to hold. Visibility can expose a gap between those two things.

Imagine an individual who repeatedly claims that listening is important but continually interrupts other people. The behaviour may remain largely invisible to the individual. Once the pattern is made visible, a discrepancy appears between the person's stated identity and observed behaviour. That discrepancy itself can create pressure for change.

The same mechanism can operate in a group.

- A management team may believe it welcomes disagreement while evidence shows that challenges are routinely closed down.
- A society may describe itself as highly meritocratic while persistent patterns suggest that opportunity is distributed very unevenly.

In each case, no command is required. The discrepancy simply becomes visible. Visibility can also activate competition and cooperation. Comparison can motivate improvement where people or groups care about relative performance. At the same time, visibility can make contribution, reliability and mutual dependence easier to recognise, strengthening cooperation. The effect depends partly on the framework and on what is made visible.

The same behavioural mechanisms operate across all three levels of visibility, but they appear differently depending on the scale of observation. Exhibit 11.1 makes that relationship explicit without changing the underlying mechanisms.

Behaviour mechanisms across three levels of visibility. Exhibit 22.1

Behavioural mechanism	Personal visibility	Group visibility	National visibility
Approval / disapproval	Recognise dependence on external validation.	Peer feedback shapes behaviour and norms.	Public approval creates legitimacy for institutions.
Belonging / exclusion	Observe need to belong.	Creates team cohesion or fragmentation.	National identity and civic inclusion/exclusion.
Status / recognition	Identify status-seeking.	Status allocated through contribution.	Merit, honours and institutional trust.
Trust	Personal trustworthiness.	Foundation of cooperation.	Foundation of democratic legitimacy.
Reciprocity	Notice give-and-take.	Supports cooperation over time.	Citizens accept temporary losses if reciprocity exists.
Fairness	Reflect on personal bias.	Fair participation and process.	Procedural justice across institutions.
Participation	Personal engagement.	Everyone heard in deliberation.	Participation creates legitimacy.
Learning / adaptation	Behaviour correction.	Collective learning.	Institutional learning and reform.
Paradox settlement	Recognise internal paradoxes.	Settle group trade-offs.	Settle enduring societal paradoxes.
Agency / responsibility	Personal ownership.	Shared accountability.	Active citizenship.
Evidence seeking	Challenge own assumptions.	Evidence-based dialogue.	Truth systems and public reasoning.
Control acceptance	Self-discipline.	Accept agreed group rules.	Acceptance of laws because processes are trusted.

Exhibit 11.1 shows why the same visibility logic can operate recursively. Approval, belonging, status, trust, reciprocity, fairness, participation, learning, paradox settlement, agency, evidence seeking and acceptance of control remain recognisable human mechanisms, while their expression changes from the individual to the group and then to the national level.

This is one reason visibility has to be designed carefully. Visibility is not automatically beneficial. What is measured, compared and reinforced affects the behaviour that follows.

But the underlying principle remains important.

A system in which people can observe their own behaviour and correct some of it themselves has a very different control structure from one that depends entirely on external coercion.

Visibility supplies feedback. Human predispositions supply some of the motivation to respond.

4. Visibility becomes part of control and correction

Once visibility is connected to an aim, it becomes part of a control-and-correction system.

Visibility that merely describes us is interesting. Visibility that helps us determine whether we are moving towards or away from an aim is operational. The underlying structure is straightforward:

Aim → Sense → Compare → Interpret → Correct → Learn

First there must be an **aim**. Without some idea of what better looks like, observation has no direction. The same behaviour may look desirable under one aim and undesirable under another. Diagnosis therefore cannot be separated entirely from purpose.

Visibility helps us sense what is actually happening. This is one of its most important functions. Systems cannot correct what they cannot see. An individual who cannot recognise a behavioural pattern cannot intentionally change it. A group that cannot see how decisions are actually being made cannot easily redesign the process. An institution that cannot observe its own outcomes cannot distinguish success from failure.

Visibility therefore increases observability. Observation alone is not enough. We must compare what is happening with what we intended or expected. That comparison creates the possibility of identifying a gap.

- What did we say we would do?
- What actually happened?
- What pattern are we now seeing?
- Are we moving towards the intended condition or away from it?

A difference does not automatically tell us why it exists or what should be done. The next step is interpretation. AI-supported visibility may help identify possible causes, recurring relationships, inconsistencies or alternative explanations. But human judgement remains necessary.

A visible deviation can have several causes. Acting on the wrong interpretation may make the problem worse. Visibility helps make the system more intelligible. It does not eliminate judgement.

Where **correction** is warranted, we can act.

We then observe what happened and **learn**.

Visibility participates throughout this loop. This changes its function fundamentally. Instead of:

Look → describe

we obtain:

Look → compare → understand → act → look again

The second sequence is a control loop.

For an individual, the loop may be very small. Someone notices a behavioural pattern, tries a different response and observes what happens. For a group, the same logic can operate across meetings, decisions or projects. At a societal level, the loop is harder because causation, authority, time horizons and competing aims become much more complicated.

The underlying requirement remains the same: systems need some means of seeing what they are doing if they are to correct themselves intelligently. Visibility therefore becomes part of the feedback architecture through which behaviour can change.

5. Visibility becomes a recursive learning system
The power of visibility increases when the cycle is repeated.

Visibility becomes much more useful when it does not operate only once. If observation is repeated, each cycle can use what was learned in the previous cycle:

Observe → interpret → act → observe again

The second observation is different from the first because it can ask:

- What changed?
- What did not change?
- Did the intervention have the expected effect?
- Did an improvement in one area create a problem somewhere else?
- Did the underlying pattern move or merely change form?

- What should be tried next?

This produces learning through time.

Visibility no longer tells us only where we are. It can begin to tell us how we are moving and what happens when we try to change direction. Each attempted correction also creates another source of information.

- We form an interpretation.
- We act.
- We observe the result.

The result either strengthens our interpretation or forces us to reconsider it.

That turns correction into a form of experimentation.

Visibility therefore contributes not merely to behavioural change but to learning about how change happens.

The process can also become recursive. The same basic architecture can operate at several levels.

- An individual can observe their own behaviour.
- A team can observe the interaction of its members.
- An organisation can observe the behaviour of its teams.
- A society can observe the operation of its institutions.

At each level, the system contains smaller systems and sits within larger ones. The same basic logic can therefore recur:

Aim → Sense → Compare → Interpret → Correct → Learn

Learning can then travel in more than one direction.

The behaviour of individuals changes groups. Group behaviour changes institutions. Institutional arrangements change the incentives and environments experienced by individuals.

Correction at one level can produce consequences at another level. Visibility makes some of those relationships visible. This is where the combination of AI, visibility and recursion becomes particularly important.

AI can potentially apply similar questions repeatedly across levels, retain previous observations and identify connections that would be difficult for a human observer to hold simultaneously.

The result is not a single perfect diagnosis. It is a recursive learning process. Each cycle produces another opportunity to see, compare, correct and learn.

AI-enabled visibility and behaviour. Exhibit 22.2

Dimension of AI impact	Behavioural / Animation Effect
Speed	People can correct behaviour while the animation is still active, not months later.
Continuity	Repeated reflection makes self-correction habitual rather than exceptional.
Process visibility	Makes live behaviour visible before it hardens into denial, conflict or failure.
Animation detection	Converts unconscious animation into nameable material for restraint and redirection.
Paradox monitoring	Prevents groups from mistaking one-sided intensity for wisdom or moral clarity.
Aim alignment	Exposes the gap between what people say they are doing and what the system is really animating.
Evidence assembly	Reduces defensiveness by making visibility more grounded, specific and harder to dismiss.
Simulation	Makes future harm or benefit emotionally available in the present decision.
Distributed construction	Makes behavioural correction cheap, repeatable and available in ordinary settings.
Recursive learning	Turns “I see the problem” into a learning loop: recognition, correction, feedback and reset.
Constraint integrity	Prevents competent, motivated people from feeling successful inside a structurally dangerous frame.
Control of visibility	Prevents reflection from becoming surveillance, manipulation or domination.

6. What this means for humans

The argument from Chapters 1 to 10 now comes together around one simple fact: people cannot correct what they cannot see.

We live inside holons and levels. Our brains react through survival, status, belonging and felt truth. Our institutions depend on truth, aims, control, correction and legitimate paradox settlement. Visibility connects those ideas. It makes the behaviour of the part and the condition of the whole easier to see while there is still time to act.

For an individual, visibility can expose the gap between what we say and what we do. For a group, it can show patterns of interruption, domination, silence, trust, reciprocity and cooperation that are difficult to see from inside the room. For a society, it can make institutional drift, loss of trust, weak truth-seeking and one-sided paradox settlements easier to recognise.

That matters because visibility can shift correction away from pure external coercion. When people can see their own behaviour, compare it with an aim and observe its effects on others, some correction can come from reflection, approval, disapproval, fairness, status, belonging and self-restraint.

But visibility is not automatically good. The same tools can become surveillance, public shaming or behavioural control. Human beings must therefore decide what should be visible, to whom, for what purpose, with what limits and with what right of challenge. Visibility must strengthen agency and correction, not destroy privacy, dignity or legitimate freedom.

The human opportunity is large. Better visibility gives us a better chance of seeing our own animation, our felt truths, the level of the problem, the effects of our choices and the condition of the wider system. It does not make us wise. It gives us a better chance to become wiser.

7. What this means for AI

AI now has a clearer role. It can become part of the visibility architecture through which people, groups and societies see themselves more accurately and learn faster.

AI can extend reach across evidence, hold patterns through time, compare stated aims with observed behaviour, show movement across levels and surface discrepancies that a human observer may miss. It can ask the same questions repeatedly and preserve earlier states, turning a one-off assessment into continuing observation.

AI can help locate the holon and level, expose brain-driven patterns and felt truths, strengthen truth-seeking, support sensing and comparison inside control loops, keep the aim visible, and show when a paradox settlement is drifting toward one destructive pole.

AI should not become the owner of the judgement. Visibility is shaped by what is measured, what evidence enters, what framework is used and who has authority to interpret the result. AI can be wrong. The framework can be wrong. The evidence can be partial. Human beings can misuse all three.

AI-supported visibility must itself sit inside control and correction. Its evidence, assumptions and interpretations must be contestable. Its use must be bounded. People must be able to challenge what it says, correct the record and understand how the conclusion was reached.

Used that way, AI does more than answer questions. It helps make the human system visible to itself. That visibility can then feed reflection, correction and recursive learning across individuals, groups, organisations and societies.