

[17] Friedman Conversation 10-30-04

From: Gordon Brown
To: Milton Friedman
Subject: 1st Reply to Your Response of 10-28-04
Date: Saturday, October 30, 2004 10:36 AM

Dr. Friedman,

Here are a couple of items for clarification. I am seeking a wording that I feel comfortable with for the purpose of being consistent with a philosophy of individualism; so, if my re-phrasing of your wording does not match the point you intended, please let me know. If there is a mismatch, I will either change it or ask you to elaborate on your intended meaning for the purpose of identifying whether any such difference is critical to my perspective on individualism or simply a preference for an alternative use of terms with substantially the same meaning. For me, the “devil” is often in the details—once ignored, each has the potential to later become the intractable and hidden lynchpin preventing the resolution of later major matters.

As for your statement:

(1) I take it we agree that there is an external reality. (2) I take it we agree that although individuals can never know for certain about external reality, their personal observations enable them to formulate an hypothesis about the characteristics of that external reality. It can enable them to go further and act upon that hypothesis. That does mean that all hypotheses about external reality are tentative and uncertain, but it does not mean they don't exist.

My response:

As for (1), yes, I think we have basic agreement. My preferred wording is that “it is reasonable to believe that there is an external reality.” I tend to remind myself that it is a statement of belief rather than an observation.

As for (2), as used, the phrase “personal observations” gets close to suggesting we are looking outward. For me, this is a critical point. Any “observation” is the sequential result of some “stuff” first being picked up by some individual’s sensory system and then formatted using the characteristics unique to conscious experience. A major contribution by the empiricists was to formalize the argument that, while it is reasonable to believe something is there, the characteristics of conscious experience are not characteristics of that external world. The experience of “color” was the example frequently used—green is not an external characteristic of the tree; it is unique to the nature of conscious experience. Using arguments similar to that used with color, writers such as Berkeley and Kant asserted that every other characteristic of conscious experience could be shown to exist exclusively within the domain of conscious experience and specifically not in some theoretical external world. I think it was the mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead who described our experience as having a relationship with the “stuff” out there, but we cannot know what it is and neither do we need to know in order to have that relationship.

This point, as I see it, is a threshold matter to the philosophy of individualism. While we could set this matter aside until later, I know it would be helpful to me if we at least clarify, if not come to agreement, as to our respective positions on this matter before addressing your other statements. I am eager to respond to your three categories and where we each see ourselves and each other. In addition, your perception on the use of power intrigues me. But, then, everything in its time.

Gordon