

[20] Friedman Conversation 11-11-04

From: Gordon Brown
To: Milton Friedman
Subject: Reflections on the Bay
Date: Thursday, November 11, 2004 3:58 PM

Dr. Friedman,

I appreciate your comments, and I am enjoying them and finding them useful in clarifying my own perspectives. As I see it, you are giving me the opportunity to see my views from your perspective and your formulations. It is as it was during my tennis playing days—it was the other player's game that gave me the opportunity to test the merits of my own and to achieve a new perspective of my game in terms of that other player's game.

Before responding to your "bay" illustration, here is a synopsis (and brief commentary) of what stood out to me in your last e-mail (10-8-04): First, it appears that we are achieving considerable clarification as to each of our respective positions on several critical points. As for school curriculum, I understand you to say that private ownership will be guided by free-market dynamics and that this will lead to the expression of an individualistic philosophy. We agree that you see private school ownership as giving rise to individualism; while I, reversing the process, see a clearly stated philosophy of individualism being essential to guiding the school curriculum toward free-market thinking. [I do not make a distinction of significance between the free-market dynamics involving ideas (philosophy) versus free-market thinking involving business (economics). I take the traditional view that philosophy is the broader concept and economics is a subdivision of philosophy as is science.]

I am delighted that we agree on the importance of the external-world issue as it relates to our respective positions. Such recognition is essential to my being able to present my perspective. [As I see it, the belief in an unknowable external reality is essential to several of my formulations, just as a belief in a knowable external reality can be seen as

essential to several of your formulations.]

As for using value statements, you again stated with clarity our respective positions. Here, I see your use of terms (such as *good*, *superior*, *right*, and *wrong*) to suggest or declare value judgments. I do not know the basis for arriving at value judgments. I know what it means to score high or low with respect to some criterion, but I do not know how a teacher can use a purely descriptive observation and come to a value-judgment conclusion. [I suspect this goes back to the assumption of a knowable external reality—but even here, there are logical hurdles for arguing that truth is “good”—try as I may, I have never found a way to jump high enough to clear these hurdles.]

As for your statement—“Markets are a means not an end....”—we are in complete agreement as to our respective positions; and, furthermore, our positions appear to be similar [of more significance in an assumed knowable world than an unknowable world].

Now—for your bay illustration: I agree, using conventional terms, you can “look out” your window, see the “blue” water, and go down to the bay and feel the “wet” water. [I did not know what characteristics you were referring to when you said “feel water,” so I will use “wet” to complete the thought.] As for using conventional terms, I have no objection when they are purely for recreational use; however, the use of such terms would come under considerable scrutiny if they are used to suggest that they reflect the characteristics of an external reality.

In this regard, I think we would agree that, physiologically speaking, we do not look “out” of our eyes; that agreement alone is sufficient for me to address your “bay” illustration. Under strict scrutiny, you can certainly choose to aim your head toward the bay. If light enters your pupils and is processed by your sensory system, you may very well experience what you call the “bay.” You may, using conventional terms, experience the water as *blue*, and you may be able to confirm your hypothesis that if you test the water, it will appear to be *wet*. However, while your experiences are real—that is, you do have such experiences—the question raised by the empiricist’s position is whether or not

such experiences reflect anything about the characteristics of an external world. I would describe your experience in very much the same way; however, I would not assume that the characteristics found in my experience, such as *blue* and *wet*, are characteristics existing independently of me and reflecting an external reality. As one philosopher put it, I can't jump out of my skin and see how the world looks independently of my sensory system—take away my sensory input and that is what is meant by “nothing.” As for scientific hypothesis-testing, that is limited to establishing the nature of individual experience, rather than establishing the characteristics of an external world—or, so asserts the empirical position. You can certainly confirm that you will feel something *cold* and *wet* if you put your hand in the bay. Most certainly, this says something about the nature of the human sensory experience; on the other hand, it says nothing about the characteristics of the stuff existing independently of that sensory system.

Gordon

P.S. For years, I have used the terms “absolute” (referring to the traditional belief in a knowable external reality) and “relative” (referring to the empiricists’ position of an unknowable external reality and the assumption that all we can ever have access to are relationships—describing something in terms of something else, but never unto itself). Personally, I have found these terms to be intuitively accommodating, pragmatically functional, and the most widely used terms (science or literature) when these two systems of thought are being addressed. Looking forward, do you mind if I use the terms “absolute” and “relative” when referring to either of these positions? On the other hand, if you prefer, we can use “traditional” and “empirical,” or any other distinguishing terms you find suitable.