

[23] Friedman Conversation—12-23-04

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From: Gordon Brown  
To: Milton Friedman  
Subject: Your 12-09-04 Comments  
Date: Thursday, December 23, 2004 12:08 PM

Professor Friedman,

As always, I appreciated your comments. In response, I have one point of clarification and two points to make with reference to your comments.

### **Clarification Regarding "Opening the Conversation"**

I am inclined to continue our conversation as long as you are willing—at least for the next few months. During this time, it is my preference to not open the "linking" discussion to others simply because of the complexity of communication. Everyone uses different mental tools when engaged in problem solving, and individual interests vary widely. I have a specific interest in seeing how my views on individualism interface with your views on a free-market economy. I am also beginning to grasp somewhat some of the conceptual tools you use when formulating your positions. My task is, in part, to distinguish between: (a) those tools that are merely alternatives and easily accommodated—such as your "invisible hand" and my "law of effect"; and (b) those tools that appear to represent significant differences as to logical consequences—such as an assumption of a "knowable external universe or approximation thereof" versus an assumption of a "totally unknowable external universe." While I am generously rewarded with insights into my own thinking, I do spend days and even weeks deliberating over the points you raise. To open up this conversation to others, along with their own interests and unique conceptual tools, would create a complexity that is beyond my interest to address effectively.

That said, when you reach a point where you are no longer inclined to actively continue our conversation, my interest in the "linking topic" itself is sufficiently high so that I would like to have others pick up the dialogue—with our conversation providing a jump start. It is within this context that I had mentioned the idea of "opening up" the conversation. As for now, I intend on simply continuing as we have—a conversation between two individuals.

Now then, here are two points in response to your comments.

### **#1 Regarding the Truth About an External World and the Truth About Relationships**

We appear to agree somewhat that absolute knowledge (the truth about the intrinsic nature of things) is inaccessible to human experience directly, whether one is talking about "objects" in that external world or the relationships between "objects" in that external world.

We appear to differ somewhat as to what, if anything, can be said indirectly about the characteristics of those objects or their reciprocal relationships. I understand you to be saying that "conjectures" can be made about the true nature of that external world; and furthermore, levels of confidence can be ascertained regarding such conjectures. I, on the other hand, see no basis for even making conjectural statements regarding the intrinsic nature of an external world; and, as it would follow, I do not see how one would establish levels of confidence regarding such conjectures.

Specifically, there appears to be some degree of difference as to how we view the role of science. I understand you to say that science, while not able to deliver truth, can deliver those "conjectures" about truth. In contrast, it is my position that the scientific method can deliver neither the truth nor even a conjecture about truth (the nature of reality as it exists independently of the individual perceiver). We just cannot jump out of our skin and look at it; and neither does it follow that some instrument can assess that external world independently of its own wiring system. Studying the "beep" from a Geiger counter will tell us little about the external characteristics of uranium. As it is with the Geiger counter, an individual can only experience a reality generated by h/er own wiring. When we remove all of our sensory input, that is what we mean by "nothing."

What science can deliver are findings of agreement among individual perceivers; and those findings will always be in terms of measurements artificially created by the scientists themselves-it is not the "water" they observe, but the measurements taken of "water." And, whether one is talking about liters or calories, such measurements can be reasonably argued to exist nowhere except in the mind of a perceiver. The task of science is to conceptualize human experience; the goal of science is to improve our quality of life. While telling us something about how we can favorably interact with that external world; science need not, and cannot, tell us about the intrinsic nature of that external world. As it is said, "Science is a horse to be worked, not a cow to be worshiped."

As for us mortals, the bottom line for all human experience is that an individual can know his or her own experience when interacting with the "stuff" of that external world. In this context, I use the term "relationship" to simply refer to one's own personal experience of an event. For example, I can tell you what I experience-"cold" and "wet"-when I place my hand into the Bay waters. In this sense I do "know" my experience and using conventional terms, as you put it, I can share that experience with you. On the other hand, I would make no assumptions as to the characteristics of that stuff called "water" as it exists independently of my sensory system. Perhaps as a modern-day physicist would put it, "I can have a relationship with that 'water' without ever knowing or needing to know its intrinsic characteristics." From this perspective, my experience of "reality" is always relative to me and it is always undergoing dynamic change. And the converse

holds. Absolute truth, and conjectures about such truth, are simply inaccessible-and, arguably, unintelligible.

To summarize my position, human nature presents an ultimate barrier to having any knowledge or opinions about the nature of a reality as it exists independently of our sensory system. Correspondingly, the "reality" an individual can know (and the only reality any individual can know) is that experienced by that individual perceiver. And, this reality is always somewhat unique to each individual and always changing. Now, getting to the heart of the matter, it is the foregoing reasoning that provides the primary basis for a philosophy of individualism, which in turn is the foundation upon which a free-market economy can be solidly erected.

## **#2 "It is Religion Not Science that Delivers the Truth"**

I too have a sense of humor and believe you to be jesting. I assume we agree that those methodologies typically associated with religion are "not useful" in understanding anything.

That said, it is my belief that there is a bur under the saddle of civilization's horse that is impeding progress. The bur has to do with traditional views on religion. Organized religions are typically rooted in truth systems; and, as such, tend to be contrary to the principles of individualism and free-market thinking. What is needed, as I see it, is a conceptualization of religion that is consistent with individualism. Such an accomplishment would get the bur out from under and enable civilization to ride off peaceable and productively into the future. As I see it, only after this happens, will society enthusiastically embrace my individualism and your free market.

Best wishes,  
Gordon

P.S. You may have noticed that I occasionally use the imprudent terms "always" and "never." Permit this bit of bravado on my part-I am so confident in the facts supporting the position I have taken that I am prepared to give others the easiest of challenges-they need only show one exception to maintain a contrary position. It's a little bit as if I had a Straight Flush and I am convinced that a person holding an alternative position has no better than a Full House.