

[32] Friedman Conversation 12-5-05

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From: Gordon Brown  
To: Milton Friedman  
Sent: Monday, December 05, 2005 6:49 PM  
Subject: Postscript--Recommendation

Dr. Milton Friedman,

By way of a postscript, I would like to address two matters regarding our conversation.

First, there is a straight forward matter. For the purpose of keeping our “conversation” intact, I plan to copyright it. As is already the case, I plan to continue making it available on our website to anyone interested in pursuing the linkage between individualism and the free market. Of course, I will seek to accommodate any timely request you may have in this regard.

Second, I would like to put forth a suggestion for those who are focused on your free-market ideas and inclined toward implementing them into public policy and practice. My comments in this regard are prescriptive rather than descriptive, and as such, fall outside the scope of our conversation. That said, their inclusion by way of this postscript would seem appropriate. The context for this suggestion goes back to my initial inquiry and your initial response, both of which gave rise to our conversation.

Immediately after your presentation at the Hoover Institute’s 2004 Spring Retreat, I asked how you had arrived at your preference for individualism. We agreed that the term “individualism” included the assumption of the dignity and significance of the individual, as an individual, applicable to all human experience. I was baffled when you said that you had not thought about how you had developed your preference for individualism—you had “just always believed in it.”

I probably was not thinking carefully when you commented on my inquiry regarding the basis by which a preference for individual freedom could be established. You wrote that “The issue is certainly an interesting and important one and I wish I had something sensible to say about it, but I believe I do not.” [See 6-1-04.] I was intrigued by the prospect that a rational basis could be set forth describing how a person could begin with a free-market concept and logically arrive at a belief in individualism. I assumed you had done so without specifically thinking about it. Here, now, was a critical point: Reasonably or not, I interpreted some of your statements to indicate that you believed a free-market system could be a first step leading eventually to a philosophy of individualism. One specific example you have mentioned has to do with schooling—introducing a free-market approach by the use of vouchers—where the matter of individualism is addressed obliquely, if at all. I understand your position to be that a

free-market approach, such as a voucher program, could reasonably lead to the recipients developing a preference for individualism without this preference being specifically addressed.

During our year-long conversation, I did not find a rational basis for believing that a commitment to free-market principles would lead to a belief in individualism. As for schooling, I did form the following opinion: attempting to implement a voucher program without a commitment to individualism could have serious consequences. Without a doctrine of individualism to serve as a navigational beacon, generations of students and teachers could be encouraged to travel down a road, only to discover after many years that it ends with a cul-de-sac that tautologically turns upon itself. Even worse, government could impose a mutated form of a free market that lacks the essential element of voluntary action by narrowly limiting an individual's freedom to choose only within State-mandated interests. Not a good thing—for those embracing the principles of individual liberty. The likelihood of these unintended results can be seen to greatly increase when coupled with a belief in “cause and effect” and/or “a knowable external reality” and/or “one nation under God.”

My suggestion to those who would seek to implement their understanding of Milton Friedman's free market is as follows: In order to be successful—do what Milton Friedman did—begin with a belief in individualism. That belief in individualism can be arrived at rationally or intuitively. Social philosophers such as Locke and Hume have described a rational basis for individualism. As I see it, Milton Friedman seems to rely primarily on intuition for his belief in individualism. Perhaps he drew inspiration from his personal associations with social theorists such as Jacob Viner and F. A. Hayek. My point is that, however arrived at, a free market may be a necessary condition—but not sufficient—for making progress toward maximizing individual freedom. On the other hand, a belief in individualism is both necessary and sufficient. Arguably, a free market presupposes a belief in individualism.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to believe that celebrity status was bestowed on Milton Friedman for his contribution to society. However, there may be significant differences as to how that contribution may be described. On the one hand, there are those (perhaps including Friedman himself) who emphasize his articulation of a clear, rational, and engaging image of a free market. On the other hand, there are those who point out that his free-market concept was only a rational extension of his continuing belief in individualism. And, his sustained celebrity was the result of his ideas being widely embraced by both the rationally-rooted academic types and the faith-rooted common folk.

For the faith-rooted, and where I place myself, the distinction is critical. It would be a mistake for anyone to attempt to implement a free market without a sustaining philosophy of individualism. From this perspective, Milton Friedman primarily has been a man of faith who always believed in individualism. It also can be said that Milton Friedman is a man of passion. He could have become accomplished at any number of vocations given his ability to become passionate about whatever it is that he engages. And so, it can be reasonably said that just as Milton Friedman has never attempted to

embrace a free market without a passionate belief in individualism, neither should those who have been inspired by him.

Dr. Friedman: It has occurred to me that my perception of “Milton Friedman” may not be the same as yours. You may even find my characterization of you—as primarily a man of faith and passion—to be intrusive and unfounded. However, I do not seek your “agreement” with my characterization. On the other hand, I would be interested in whether you “do not disagree.” I understand you to use this phrase to mean that you agree the matter under consideration has been reasonably characterized even though it may not be your personal viewpoint. I do invite your response, and I believe any response you may wish to make (1) would address the matter of validating the characterization presented here and (2) could be of significant import to those attempting to embrace and implement your vision of a free market.

Best wishes,

Gordon