

[8] Friedman Conversation 7-29-04

From: Milton Friedman
To: Gordon Brown
Subject: Re: Conversation Summary--June 22
Date: Thursday, July 29, 2004 3:58 PM

Dear Claudia and Gordon:

I have inserted in red below my comments. I apologize for being so late in getting back to you. Best wishes.

Yours,
Milton

July 11, 2004

Professor Friedman,

I have grouped into 4 Focus Points those issues raised by me during our June conversation, and I have followed each point with my recollection of your general response. I would very much appreciate your comments as to the general accuracy of my characterizations.

My next step will be to link my understanding of the positions taken by you to a theory of individualism. This linking, I anticipate, will take several weeks to complete. I will share with you a copy of my results because I would like to, and this will also provide an additional opportunity for checking my characterizations of your positions.

My Focus Point #1: Defining "Individualism"

Are we defining "individualism" in substantially the same way?

Your Response #1: You agreed with my working definition of individualism as "the contention that the individual person has dignity as an individual." Furthermore, you agreed that individualism is the foundation for your free-market approach to economic theory and, you noted, that you have included the idea in your work.

This is OK with me.

My Focus Point #2: Is it Free Will or Determinism?

I pointed out, as it appears to me, your descriptions of the free market could be used to support either a philosophy of freewill individualism or determinism. The "invisible hand of self interest" is not unlike Skinner's deterministic reinforcement theory; and the idea of each country doing what it does best does not seem to give the individual within each country much leverage for choosing a trade. Do we agree that freewill individualism and determinism are contradictory? Can a position embrace both and remain intelligible?

Your Response #2: You agreed that "determinism" is contrary to "individualism"; and that to embrace determinism would be to argue against free will. As you see it, there are viable arguments for both positions—neither can be proved. Personally, you believe in both free will and causation. However, you believe as a matter of faith—not the religious kind—that free will takes precedence over causation and determinism. As for contradictions, we are all faced with them and we learn to live with them. [I asked about your use of the term "faith."] You agreed on my working definition of "acting as if something were so without being able to demonstrate that it is so."

I would clarify my position. There is no conflict between free will and causation. Causation does not have to be universal whereas determinism does.

The issue of faith is more complex. I may believe something that is not true, e.g., that the world is flat. That is a case of mistaken belief which we might describe as taking something on faith. However, it is in principle possible to demonstrate to the person that he or she is in error. But that is a very different meaning of faith than belief in a god. With respect to such a statement, it is not possible to demonstrate that it is true. Equally, it is not possible to demonstrate that it is false. It must be taken or rejected on faith.

Clarifying your above position, you said that while society is best served by having the individual free to choose, who is to say upon what basis that choice is made. Arguably, you hypothesized, the "free choice" made by the individual could have itself been predetermined. That is the mystery of free will, and it is insolvable.

[I asked about the role of chance.] You stated that "chance" may turn out simply to be a reflection of our ignorance. Many things we attribute to chance today may be discovered tomorrow to have identifiable causes.

My Focus Point #3: As For Religion

I presented the suggestion that virtually all organized religions are contrary to individualism. I added, that as a theist myself, Job's position—if God disagrees with him, then "Let God come down here and argue his case"—represents one of the first celebrated, religious individualists. The focus is on personal integrity and a one-on-one relationship with God. As I saw it, it would be a real social contribution to describe a religious approach to living that would be consistent with individualism.

Your Response #3: You said you had no idea what I was talking about or what I was referring to by this one-on-one relationship. As for you, you do not find religious explanations to be of much use and you are not interested in them. Adding, a person can't prove the existence of God. When it is said that God caused everything, the question is raised, "Who caused God?" It is of no use. [We agreed to put "off the table" any discussion relating to religion or religious beliefs.]

My Focus Point #4: Linking Free Market and Individualism

I pointed out that, now more than ever, it appears to me your free-market ideas could be used to support either individualism or determinism. Now, more than ever, it appears to me that linking your thinking specifically to a theory of individualism would be a constructive addition to the public dialogue. And that is exactly what I would like to do.

Individualism is consistent with free markets in the sense that a free market provides a way in which people can cooperate with one another without coercion, each of his own free will. I do not see how free market ideas could be used to support determinism. A person who says he believes in determinism is in a logically contradictory position. He is a prerecorded phonograph record on which the words he is uttering are recorded. Can a phonograph record have beliefs?

Your Response #4: Such theoretical efforts, you said, do not provide the major incentive for change in public thinking. It's the outcomes that count. People do not need to know why the free market works. They are impressed by results. More people were convinced of the free market by the fall of the Soviet Union than by all of your writings and those of Hayek...and your other colleagues.

Nonetheless "linking your thinking specifically to a theory of individualism would be a constructive addition to the public dialogue."

In Closing

Professor Friedman, the above 4 topics are significant to me for establishing linking points between your free-market approach and my philosophic approach to individualism. Your comments regarding my characterizations of your positions would be most welcomed.

With best regards,
Gordon Brown

P.S. In the Addendum below, I have listed several topics included in our discussion, but they are not the focus of my current task, which is to link specifically the free market approach to a concept of individual freedom.

Addendum—Additional Points Discussed

1. Developing a Preference for Individualism

You mentioned that in high school, you were involved in the very lucrative business of selling fire works, or as you said it, "pyrotechnics." I described my grade-school experiences of delivering newspapers and establishing a lawn mowing business. We agreed that such experiences are consistent with developing a later preference for individualism—that is, activities that directly link effort/skill to rewards.

As for teaching self empowerment, I described a youth program I developed where inner-city youth earned enough money selling peanuts to pay for their own summer camp. I noted the intuitive appreciation by non-participants where money about to be stolen by older boys was passed over as "it's just peanut money."

2. My Approach to Individualism

I described my beginning point for conceptualizing individualism to be the contention that "conscious awareness" is the basic foundation for all human experience. And, conscious awareness is both private and personal to every individual. Freedom, as I see it, is a matter of each person being able to choose that with which the individual wishes to associate, and thereby giving rise to each individual's world of experience—freedom to choose your own world. I mentioned the supporting notion of "social contracts" as put forth by Hobbes and others.

You referred to the collectivists' argument and you took the role of "devil's advocate" (the collectivist). The argument in sequence was that: "No man is an island"; cooperation is essential to survival; central direction is therefore necessary; and thus, what follows is the loss of freedom to choose by the individual.

3. We Don't Need Government Telling Us What to Do

You described some everyday examples of complex product exchanges that are driven by self interest without involving the government directing anyone—home-delivered newspapers and milk at the local store.

4. As For the Public School System

You described the basis for your disapproval of the public school system: as if hostages, students are not free to choose the school; schools do not have control over the curriculum; unions have control over the whole system. The point being, there is little if any individual freedom to choose within the public school system.

5. Your Basic Premise

You agreed that it is one of your basic contentions: People should be free to do whatever they choose, so long as they do not interfere with others from doing the same.

6. Anti-Trust Laws

I raised the apparent virtue of anti-trust laws to individualism. You mentioned that you once favored them; you still think the idea is constructive to individual freedom; but you find that such laws have been used to rein in the free market, citing the government's recent effort to prevent Microsoft from freely competing in the market.