

The Foundation of a Philosophical Conversation



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Liberty is something that everyone claims to want, but something which they will rarely take the time to define. It means so many things to so many people, that our conversations about it can become useless and argumentative quickly. This happens because we tend to just move forward in a conversation that presumes "liberty" as the accepted goal, before we have taken time to define it. I don't know how many times I've seen, or been involved myself, in a conversation between two people arguing about the minutia and intricacies of a piece of legislation or a plan for government operations, when they just skipped right past what should be the foundation of such a conversation... a shared and specifically defined value being sought. All of the contention, hyperbole, and emotion that follow are just two people lashing out at each other based on each of their own different ideas. They took no time to see if there really was any foundation of a common goal before having such a conversation.

The use of labels adds to this problem. Although they are useful to shorten our communications, and essential in our own minds as containers for a larger concept or principles, labels can work against clarity. When we are using a common label that is not grounded to a specific and shared definition, it becomes unlikely that the conclusions will be agreed upon. This is all too true with the label "liberty." People want to see those who disagree with them as "enemies of liberty" (or whatever value is being sought), but unless you took the time to establish a common definition of that value, and they specifically indicated opposition, they're not an enemy to anything but your own privately held notion. I can almost guarantee you that they have their own notion of "liberty" that they believe to be advancing, and to which they probably see *you* as an "enemy." It is not until those notions are addressed specifically and either accepted as objectively correct or rejected as problematic, that undertaking to advance liberty makes any sense.

Stunningly, people will often resist efforts to examine the ideas that these word labels represent with any specificity. They often do this with a great degree of emotion and

hostility. I suspect from my own experience that we do this because we know that our core concept is flawed, or at best unexamined. This practice of building conclusions on unexamined or flawed original concepts doesn't just happen in our conversations. This is a deep and abiding habit in our own personal thinking into which we can easily fall. Once we have, our emotional investments in the conclusions we have formed through a process of avoiding the examination of our premises (and spent years reinforcing with selective evidence) will cause us to resist an examination of those foundational premises at their base. This is, to borrow an analogy from a great innovator in philosophy named Ayn Rand, a lot like building a skyscraper by starting at the thirtieth floor.

The first thing we should do is take a look at what is presumed by the very act of conversation. Despite what many people imply by the way they engage in conversation, to do so is not a neutral undertaking and it is not an action which exists in its own little vacuum apart from the surrounding reality. The act of conversing with others to communicate is an act which contains several implicit assumptions. Therefore any time the content of a conversation contradicts one of these premises the conversation has become an absurdity. Let me explain more clearly what I mean.

By engaging in a conversation, every party involved is presuming certain things by that very act. These presumptions need to be accounted for as the basis of any conversation, instead of ignored as immaterial to its content.

1. By having a conversation, you are presuming that each person involved (including yourself) actually exists. Unless there is a common, objective reality which each participant exists within, the act of conversation is an absurdity. "Am I really even having this discussion? Is the person I'm speaking with real?" Why would you (or the non-existent entity acting as you) be trying to convince a non-existent entity of something? "Are they even in a reality that has the same rules as me? If not, then why bother?" If you don't believe you've answered those questions, that is where your effort needs to be focused instead of upon the act of exchanging information with another in a way that presumes an answer to all of those questions. You would be surprised how much time and energy can be spent, and ultimately wasted, trying to establish this seemingly obvious common ground for a conversation. I will assume that this is a non-controversial point for you, the reader, and not spend any time convincing you to accept it... because the very act of convincing presumes that it is already true. If these questions seem open to you, and fascinate you, be wary because you are perfect fodder for an army of word-tweakers and opportunists masquerading as "intellectuals." You will have to explore them somewhere other than this column. For more detailed arguments, I would recommend the writings of Aristotle, Locke and Rand on the nature of reality (metaphysics) and how humans come to know it (epistemology).

2. By having a conversation, you are inherently presuming that the objective reality

mentioned above not only exists, but that **adherence to that reality is both desirable and obligatory for all participants of the conversation**. Otherwise, why convey something about that reality to another? Why should it alter their conclusions or actions? Does not the act of conveying things to another imply that they should act in their accordance and alter their conclusions to account for the reality to which you are drawing their attention?

While these may all just seem to be stating the obvious, they have a lot of implications that most people fail to draw or at least to keep in mind when progressing through a conversation. We must not enter a conversation viewing it as an isolated little sphere of consideration detached from the rest of reality. We should always stay grounded to these assumptions in any discussion. This will help us avoid entertaining and getting bogged down in absurdities and contradictions. It will also help by giving a context for evaluating the validity of any given concept or assertion that may come up in the process. In my next column, we'll build on this foundation to find a definition of liberty.