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A Philosophical Critique of Freedom in Milton Friedman's
Works: Examining the Conceptual Foundations and
Contemporary Challenges to Economic Libertarianism

Una crítica filosófica de la libertad en las obras de Milton
Friedman: Examen de los fundamentos conceptuales y los
desafíos contemporáneos del libertarismo económico

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta una crítica filosófica comprehensiva de la concepción de libertad de Milton Friedman, tal como se articula en sus obras seminales, particularmente *Capitalismo y Libertad* (1962) y *Libertad de Elegir* (1980). A través de un examen de la literatura filosófica contemporánea sobre libertad, dinámicas de poder y crítica estructural, este análisis argumenta que la conceptualización de la libertad de Friedman sufre de inadecuaciones teóricas fundamentales. El artículo demuestra que la concepción negativa de libertad de Friedman falla en explicar la dominación estructural, las asimetrías de poder, y la compleja relación entre arreglos económicos y agencia humana genuina. Basándose en estudios recientes en teoría republicana, filosofía crítica y análisis estructural, esta crítica revela cómo el marco de Friedman inadvertidamente legitima formas de coerción y dominación que contradicen su compromiso declarado con la libertad humana.

Palabras clave: Milton Friedman, libertad negativa, libertad económica, dominación, teoría republicana, crítica estructural.

Abstract

This paper presents a comprehensive philosophical critique of Milton Friedman's conception of freedom as articulated in his seminal works, particularly *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) and *Free to Choose* (1980). Through an examination of contemporary philosophical literature on liberty, power dynamics, and structural critique, this analysis argues that Friedman's conceptualization of freedom suffers from fundamental theoretical inadequacies. The paper demonstrates that Friedman's negative conception of freedom fails to account for structural domination, power asymmetries, and the complex relationship between economic arrangements and genuine human agency. Drawing upon recent scholarship in republican theory,

critical philosophy, and structural analysis, this critique reveals how Friedman's framework inadvertently legitimizes forms of coercion and domination that contradict his stated commitment to human freedom.

Key words: Milton Friedman, negative liberty, economic freedom, domination, republican theory, structural critique.

Introducción.

Milton Friedman's influence on twentieth-century economic and political thought can hardly be overstated. His work was instrumental in the turn toward free markets that defined the 1980s, and his full-throated defenses of capitalism and freedom resonated with audiences around the world, earning him the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1976 (Ebeling, 2024, p. 1). Friedman (1962) argues for economic freedom as a precondition for political freedom, constructing what he believed to be an unassailable philosophical foundation for minimal government intervention and maximal market freedom.

Yet despite Friedman's enormous influence—or perhaps because of it—his philosophical foundations deserve rigorous critical examination. As Preiss (2015) observes, "despite his great influence, there remains a dearth of scholarship on Friedman's social and political philosophy". (p. 157). This lacuna is particularly problematic given that Friedman's ideas have shaped policy decisions affecting billions of people worldwide, from the Reagan and Thatcher administrations to contemporary debates about economic inequality and the proper role of government.

This paper argues that Friedman's conception of freedom contains fundamental philosophical flaws that undermine both its theoretical coherence and its practical implications. Specifically, I contend that: (1) Friedman's negative

conception of freedom fails to account for structural forms of domination inherent in capitalist property relations; (2) his conflation of economic and political freedom obscures rather than illuminates the relationship between markets and liberty; (3) his framework systematically ignores power asymmetries that compromise the voluntariness he claims to protect; and (4) his conception inadvertently legitimizes forms of coercion that contradict his stated philosophical commitments.

2. Friedman's Conception of Freedom: Foundations and Framework

2.1 The Philosophical Architecture

Friedman (1962) argues for economic freedom as a precondition for political freedom, defining "liberal" in European Enlightenment terms, contrasting with an American usage that he believes has been corrupted since the Great Depression (p. 5). For Friedman, freedom fundamentally consists in the absence of coercion—what philosophers call "negative liberty." As he states, "the essence of political freedom is the absence of coercion of one man by his fellow men" (Friedman, 1962, p. 15).

Friedman (1962) promotes economic freedom as both a necessary freedom and also as a vital means for political freedom, arguing that "with the means for production under the auspices of the government, it is nearly impossible for real dissent and exchange of ideas to exist" (p. 9). This dual conception—economic freedom as both intrinsically valuable and instrumentally necessary for political freedom—forms the cornerstone of Friedman's entire philosophical edifice.

Friedman's market mechanism operates through what he considers genuinely voluntary exchange. As he illustrates, "the person who buys bread doesn't know whether the wheat from which it was made was grown by a pleader of the 5th Amendment or a McCarthyite, by a person whose skin is black or whose skin is white" (Friedman, 1962, p. 21). He argues that "the market is an impersonal

mechanism that separates economic activities of individuals from their personal characteristics" (Friedman, 1962, p. 21).

2.2 The Voluntariness Thesis

Central to Friedman's framework is the claim that market transactions are fundamentally voluntary and therefore non-coercive. Friedman (1962) contends that "economic freedom is important, since any 'bi-laterally voluntary and informed' transaction must benefit both parties to the transaction" (p. 13). This voluntariness thesis undergirds his entire argument for why capitalism enhances rather than diminishes human freedom.

According to Friedman (1962), "the consumer is protected from coercion by the seller because of the presence of other sellers with whom he can deal. The seller is protected from coercion by the consumer because of other consumers to whom he can sell. The employee is protected from coercion by the employer because of other employers for whom he can work" (p. 14).

Friedman (1962) argues that this mutual protection from coercion operates impersonally and without centralized authority, creating a system where the market provides economic freedom by eliminating arbitrary power relations (p. 14).

2.3 The Separation Thesis

Friedman maintains that economic and political power are fundamentally distinct and that market arrangements serve as a check on political power rather than reinforcing it. As he explains, "the fundamental danger to political freedom is the concentration of power. The existence of a large measure of power in the hands of a relatively few individuals enables them to use it to coerce their fellow man". (Friedman, 1962, p. 15).

For Friedman (1962), "by removing the organization of economic activity from the control of political authority, the market eliminates this source of coercive power. It enables economic strength to be a check to political power rather than a reinforcement" (p. 16).

3. Contemporary Philosophical Challenges to Friedman's Framework

3.1 The Problem of Structural Domination

Recent philosophical scholarship has identified fundamental problems with Friedman's negative conception of freedom. As Saner (2025) argues, "as a purported self-regulating system, however, the market functions as a system of necessity that facilitates and rules social life" and "Isaiah Berlin's defense of negative liberty leads to a paradox as it entails subjection to the external necessity of a self-regulating market". (p. 148).

The most powerful critique comes from scholars working in the republican tradition, particularly those influenced by the work of Philip Pettit and earlier republican theorists. Saner (2025) explains that "the argument for the self-defeating nature of negative liberty relies on two philosophical insights that have their roots in G. W. F. Hegel's theory of self-determination" (p. 149). First, "negative liberty fails to account for the inner and outer conditions of freedom and thus reduces to mere whim or arbitrariness, subject to heteronomous forces but masquerading as license." Second, "individual freedom is intersubjectively mediated in its deliberative process and framed by social and political institutions in its exercise; thus, free agency must be theorized as embedded agency" (Saner, 2025, p. 149).

3.2 G.A. Cohen's Critique: Money and Freedom

The philosopher G.A. Cohen developed one of the most devastating critiques of the Friedmanesque position on capitalism and freedom. As Slobodian (2023) summarizes Cohen's insight, "the most passionate supporters of capitalist property rights often defend their position by talking about the value of freedom. If asked to define their terms, they'll argue that freedom — or the kind of freedom they care most about — is freedom from interference". (p. 2).

Cohen's insight centers on the relationship between economic resources and freedom from interference. Slobodian (2023) explains that "the person who can't afford a ticket is being interfered with in just the same way as the person denied access to the plane by the national security state. Unequal distribution of wealth just is the unequal distribution of freedom from interference". (p. 3).

This argument strikes at the heart of Friedman's voluntariness thesis. As Slobodian (2023) notes, "whether libertarians will approve or disapprove of any particular case of freedom being limited is a separate issue from whether freedom is in fact being limited". (p. 3). Cohen's analysis reveals that Friedman's framework systematically obscures how property rights themselves constitute a system of interference that limits the freedom of those without property.

3.3 Power Asymmetries and Coercion

Contemporary critics have identified how Friedman's framework fails to account for power asymmetries that compromise the voluntariness of market transactions. As one critic observes, "having choices should not be conflated with having the power or disposition to achieve what you want. The free market economic system has, for instance, come increasingly under the influence of large corporations" (ProQuest, 2013, p. 45).

The assumption of voluntary exchange breaks down under conditions of structural inequality. "The assumption that everyone ends up satisfied with the outcome of transactions and that everyone obtains what they want seems naïve and ignores the fact that markets are not free from coercion. Friedman does not consider the issue of how discriminating the exercise of economic strength might be in practise". (ProQuest, 2013, p. 46).

3.4 The Republican Critique: Freedom as Non-Domination

The republican tradition offers an alternative conception of freedom that highlights the inadequacies of Friedman's negative liberty framework. As Capussela (2024) argues, "the liberal conception of freedom as 'non-interference' may lie at the heart of this equation. He suggests that a republican notion of freedom as 'non-domination' might be more useful in addressing the problems of contemporary capitalism" (p. 23).

Republican theorists argue that true freedom requires not merely the absence of interference, but the absence of arbitrary power or domination. As contemporary anarchist critics note, "for the anarchists, the modern nation state and the institution of private property are antithetical to freedom as non-domination, acting as structural constraints to freedom rather than the means for its realisation" (Franks & Wilson, 2019, p. 847).

This perspective reveals how Friedman's framework legitimizes forms of structural domination. Even if market actors face no direct interference, they may still be subject to arbitrary power relations that undermine their freedom in fundamental ways.

4. The Analytical Deficits in Friedman's Approach

4.1 The Conflation Problem

Friedman systematically conflates the absence of state interference with the presence of freedom, but this conflation obscures more than it reveals. As Schwartz (2015) observes, "Friedman's sleight of hand, in his claim that freedom necessarily means free markets, is very much contestable. In fact, the question of what freedom means is itself a question that a liberal society has a right and duty to debate" (p. 4).

Schwartz (2015) further notes that "while it is clear certain forms of government do not fall under the rubric of a free society (e.g., socialist, communist, fascist, or totalitarian regimes), it is very much contestable how much freedom a free society needs to give a market" (p. 4). This conflation becomes particularly problematic when it obscures the ways in which market arrangements themselves can limit freedom.

4.2 The Historical Problem

Friedman's historical claims about the relationship between capitalism and freedom are empirically questionable. As noted in the literature, "political scientist C. B. Macpherson disagreed with Friedman's historical assessment of economic freedom leading to political freedom, suggesting that political freedom actually gave way to economic freedom for property-owning elites" (Wikipedia, 2025, para. 45).

Even Friedman (1962) acknowledges that "history suggests only that capitalism is a necessary condition for political freedom. Clearly it is not a sufficient condition" (p. 10). He admits that "Fascist Italy and Fascist Spain, Germany at various times in the last seventy years, Japan before World War I and II, tzarist Russia in the decades before World War I are all societies that cannot conceivably be described as politically free. Yet, in each, private enterprise was the dominant form of economic organization" (Friedman, 1962, p. 10).

This admission fatally undermines Friedman's strong claims about the relationship between economic and political freedom, revealing the contingent rather than necessary character of this relationship.

4.3 The Invisibility of Power

Perhaps most problematically, Friedman's framework renders invisible precisely those forms of power that most concern contemporary critics. While Friedman (1962) argues that "economic freedom has good economic consequences, but it is also a good thing apart from its consequences, since freedom is a good thing, and economic freedom is a form of freedom" (p. 8), this begs the question of whether the arrangements Friedman labels as "economic freedom" actually enhance or diminish human freedom when examined more carefully.

As noted in contemporary analysis, Friedman argued in a 1962 essay that a "free society" would constitute a desirable but unstable equilibrium, due to an asymmetry between the visible benefits and the hidden harms of government intervention (Wikipedia, 2025, para. 12). Yet Friedman himself displays a troubling asymmetry in his analysis—he is highly sensitive to the coercive potential of government power while remaining largely blind to the coercive potential of private economic power.

5. The Problem of Economic Dependence and Vulnerability

5.1 Structural Constraints on Choice

Contemporary scholarship has identified how economic dependence creates structural constraints that compromise the freedom Friedman claims to protect. As one recent analysis explains, "I clarify what it is to have reasonable alternatives in the labor market but show that holding such options is insufficient to avoid structural

domination. I argue that the dependence at the heart of structural domination can be constituted multifariously and develop an additional criterion directed at capturing such dependence in production" (ResearchGate, 2011, abstract).

The mere existence of alternatives does not eliminate domination if those alternatives are systematically constrained by structural arrangements. Workers may have the formal freedom to choose between employers, but if all employers operate within the same structural constraints of capitalist property relations, this choice may be largely illusory.

This insight connects to broader critiques of how market relationships create forms of structural coercion. As contemporary critics note, the formal freedom to enter or exit market relationships may be meaningless when the structural conditions of the market systematically disadvantage certain groups or when the costs of exit are prohibitively high.

5.2 The Limits of Negative Income Tax

Interestingly, some contemporary scholars argue that Friedman's own negative income tax proposal points toward recognition of these problems. As Preiss (2015) argues, "the central tenet of Friedman's non-ideal theory, on this understanding, is: do not undertake my other proposed reforms unless a substantial negative income tax, or some other form of basic income, is in place. Otherwise, such policies threaten to leave individuals less substantively free" (p. 164).

This suggests that even within Friedman's framework, pure market arrangements may be insufficient to secure the freedom he values. Preiss (2015) continues: "a substantial basic income furthers effective economic freedom (on Friedman's own understanding), redeems his central claim that markets enable cooperation without coercion, and enables him to address his lifelong interlocutors

by mitigating concerns for the ways in which economic dependence and inequality undermine both freedom and democratic legitimacy" (p. 165).

The fact that Friedman himself proposed such a significant intervention suggests an implicit recognition that market outcomes alone may not be sufficient to ensure the kind of freedom he advocates. This creates a tension within his broader theoretical framework that he never fully resolved.

5.3 The Problem of Formal versus Substantive Freedom

A key issue in Friedman's approach is his focus on formal rather than substantive freedom. While individuals may formally have the right to make various choices, their actual capacity to exercise these rights may be severely constrained by material circumstances. This distinction, emphasized by critics from various philosophical traditions, reveals a crucial limitation in Friedman's framework.

The republican tradition's emphasis on non-domination provides a useful lens for understanding this problem. Even in the absence of direct interference, individuals may be subject to forms of structural domination that compromise their freedom in meaningful ways. This includes not only economic dependence but also the broader ways in which unequal power relations shape the options available to different actors.

6. The Tolerance Problem and Philosophical Foundations

6.1 Friedman's Appeal to Tolerance

Friedman grounds his philosophy not in the non-aggression principle typical of libertarianism, but in what he calls "tolerance." As he explains, "I regard the basic human value that underlies my own (political) beliefs as tolerance, based on

humility. I have no right to coerce someone else, because I cannot be sure that I am right and he is wrong" (Friedman, 1991, p. 17).

This philosophical foundation has drawn criticism for its relativistic implications. Block (2020) observes that "this relativistic, know-nothingism of Friedman's has been subjected to a withering rebuke," with critics arguing that "if no one can really know anything about anything, and are as humble as Milton Friedman claims to be, how can we even engage in political philosophy?" (p. 8).

6.2 The Performative Contradiction

More fundamentally, there appears to be a performative contradiction in Friedman's approach. As Block (2020) notes, "the strong implication, here, would appear to be that if we were vouchsafed such knowledge, then we would be justified in imposing our values on others. But this is hardly in keeping with the libertarian ethos" (p. 9).

If tolerance and humility are the foundations of Friedman's philosophy, it becomes unclear how he can make such confident claims about the superiority of market arrangements over alternative institutional forms. This creates a fundamental tension within his philosophical system that undermines its coherence.

The tolerance-based foundation also raises questions about the status of Friedman's empirical claims. If genuine knowledge about social arrangements is impossible or uncertain, on what basis can he make confident assertions about the relationships between capitalism, freedom, and human flourishing?

6.3 The Problem of Value Neutrality

Friedman's claim to value neutrality—embodied in his distinction between positive and normative economics—further complicates his philosophical position. While he presents his economic analysis as objective and value-free, critics have noted that

this apparent neutrality often conceals implicit value commitments that favor particular distributions of power and resources.

The rhetoric of value neutrality can serve to depoliticize fundamentally political questions about how society should be organized. By presenting market arrangements as simply reflecting objective economic laws rather than embodying particular value choices, Friedman's framework may obscure the ways in which these arrangements serve some interests better than others. If Friedman claims to be, how can we even engage in political philosophy?

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7. Contemporary Responses and Developments

7.1 The Neo-Republican Revival

Contemporary political philosophy has seen a revival of republican ideas about freedom that directly challenge Friedman's framework. As Franks and Wilson (2019) note, "the contemporary anarchist neglect of republicanism is particularly unfortunate because it also points to the sidelining of a historical anarchist critique of republicanism" (p. 850). Yet the republican tradition offers resources for critiquing both state power and private economic power.

Pettit's influential work suggests that various progressive movements can be understood through a republican lens. As Franks and Wilson (2019) explain, Pettit argues that "'environmentalism, feminism, socialism, and multiculturalism' might all 'be cast as republican causes', since each sets out the negative conditions which freedom as non-domination ought to meet, whether freedom from environmental degradation or vulnerability, patriarchy, or the vicissitudes of capitalism" (p. 848).

This republican framework provides a more nuanced understanding of freedom that can account for the structural forms of domination that Friedman's negative liberty framework obscures. The republican emphasis on non-domination offers a way to critique both governmental and private forms of arbitrary power.

7.2 Structural Analyses of Capitalism

Recent scholarship has developed sophisticated analyses of how capitalist structures create systemic constraints on freedom that Friedman's framework cannot capture. As contemporary analysis notes, "Branko Milanović identifies four 'troublesome features' in 'meritocratic liberal capitalism'" (Xu, 2024, p. 2). These include "the rising share of capital income in total income, which undermines meritocracy; the very high concentration of capital income, which runs counter to the objective of a 'property-owning' democracy; the rising association of high capital and labour incomes in the same people or families, which exacerbates inequality; and the polarisation of society" (Xu, 2024, p. 2).

These structural developments suggest that the institutional features of contemporary capitalism may be antithetical to the freedom Friedman claims to champion. The concentration of economic power creates forms of domination that operate independently of government intervention, challenging Friedman's assumption that limiting state power necessarily enhances freedom.

7.3 The Problem of Market Power

Contemporary critics have also highlighted how market concentration and corporate power create new forms of domination that Friedman's framework fails to address adequately. The rise of large corporations with significant market power challenges the assumption that competitive markets necessarily protect individual freedom.

When a small number of firms control significant portions of particular markets, the supposed protection that competition provides against coercion may become largely illusory. Workers and consumers may face limited alternatives, undermining the voluntariness that Friedman sees as central to market freedom.

8. The Problem of Market Fundamentalism

8.1 Ideological Dimensions

Critics have identified how Friedman's framework functions ideologically to legitimize particular power arrangements. As Cohen (1981) observes, "the regime of private property is defended on the grounds that it enlivens production, safeguards freedom and conforms to principles of justice. We can call these the economic argument, the freedom argument and the justice argument" (p. 3).

The ideological function of Friedman's framework becomes particularly apparent when examining how it shapes political discourse. By defining freedom in terms of market relationships, Friedman's approach tends to delegitimize alternative conceptions of freedom and alternative forms of economic organization.

As noted in contemporary analysis, "Friedman's views on politics, economics and freedom can be characterised as neo-liberal. Neo-liberalism emerged in the 1940's in reaction to the British Keynesian state, the New Deal welfarism in the United State and socialism in Europe" (ProQuest, 2013, p. 12). This historical context helps explain how Friedman's ideas functioned to reshape political and economic thought in ways that favored particular class interests.

8.2 The Naturalization of Market Relations

One of the most problematic aspects of Friedman's framework is how it tends to naturalize market relations, presenting them as reflecting natural laws rather than contingent social arrangements. This naturalization obscures the ways in which market institutions are themselves products of political choices and power relations. Friedman's (1962) claim that markets are "impersonal" and operate "without centralized authority" suggests that they exist outside of power relations altogether (p. 14). However, this obscures the ways in which market institutions are created and maintained through legal and political systems that embody particular distributions of power and privilege.

The apparent naturalness of market relations also serves to delegitimize efforts to reform or replace these institutions. If markets simply reflect natural economic laws, then attempts to alter their operation may appear to violate these laws rather than representing legitimate political choices about how to organize economic life.

8.3 The Democracy Problem

Friedman's framework also raises important questions about its relationship to democratic governance. While Friedman (1962) argues that economic freedom supports political freedom, critics have noted that concentrated economic power may actually undermine democratic institutions (p. 9).

When economic resources are highly concentrated, those who control these resources may have disproportionate influence over political processes. This can lead to a situation where formal political equality coexists with substantive political inequality, undermining the democratic values that Friedman claims to support.

The tension between economic inequality and democratic equality becomes particularly acute in contemporary societies where money plays an increasingly

important role in political campaigns and lobbying activities. Friedman's framework provides little guidance for addressing these tensions.

9. Alternative Conceptions of Freedom

9.1 Positive Liberty and Capability Approaches

Contemporary philosophers have developed alternative conceptions of freedom that address some of the limitations in Friedman's approach. The capability approach, developed by philosophers like Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, focuses on what people are actually able to do and be rather than simply on the absence of interference.

This approach recognizes that formal freedoms may be meaningless without the substantive capacity to exercise them. A person may have the legal right to attend university, for example, but lack the economic resources to do so. The capability approach would see this as a limitation on freedom that the negative liberty framework might miss.

Sen's work on development economics has shown how this broader conception of freedom can provide guidance for policy interventions aimed at enhancing human capabilities. This represents a significant departure from Friedman's approach, which tends to assume that limiting government intervention will automatically enhance freedom.

9.2 Republican Conceptions of Freedom

The republican tradition offers another alternative to Friedman's negative liberty framework. Republican theorists like Philip Pettit argue that freedom requires not just the absence of interference, but the absence of domination or arbitrary power.

This conception can capture forms of unfreedom that negative liberty approaches miss. A person may not currently be interfered with, but if they are subject to the arbitrary will of another, they lack freedom in the republican sense. This helps explain why economic dependence can be seen as a form of unfreedom even when it doesn't involve direct coercion.

The republican approach also provides resources for thinking about institutional design. Rather than simply minimizing interference, republican institutions should be designed to minimize domination and ensure that all citizens have equal standing in political and social life.

9.3 Relational Approaches to Freedom

Recent work in political philosophy has also emphasized the relational dimensions of freedom. These approaches recognize that freedom is not simply a property of isolated individuals, but emerges from particular kinds of social relationships.

From this perspective, Friedman's emphasis on individual choice and market relationships may actually undermine the social conditions necessary for genuine freedom. If freedom requires particular kinds of social solidarity and mutual recognition, then institutions that promote competition and individual self-interest may be antithetical to freedom.

This relational approach also highlights how domination and oppression operate through social relationships rather than simply through direct interference. Understanding these dynamics requires attention to power relations, social identities, and institutional structures in ways that go beyond Friedman's individualistic framework.

10. Implications for Contemporary Debates

10.1 Inequality and Freedom

One of the most significant challenges to Friedman's framework comes from growing economic inequality in contemporary societies. As Milanović and other economists have documented, the concentration of wealth and income has increased dramatically in recent decades, raising questions about the relationship between economic arrangements and freedom.

If freedom requires genuine alternatives and meaningful choice, then high levels of inequality may undermine freedom for those at the bottom of the economic distribution. This suggests that some degree of redistribution may be necessary to protect freedom, contrary to Friedman's general opposition to redistributive policies.

The relationship between inequality and freedom also raises questions about the sustainability of democratic institutions. As economic inequality increases, those with fewer resources may have less capacity to participate effectively in democratic processes, potentially undermining the political freedom that Friedman claims to value.

10.2 Climate Change and Market Failure

Contemporary environmental challenges also pose significant problems for Friedman's framework. Climate change represents a massive market failure that cannot be addressed through market mechanisms alone, requiring coordinated government action on a global scale.

Friedman's (1962) framework acknowledges that government intervention may be justified to address "neighborhood effects" or externalities (p. 27). However, the scale and urgency of environmental problems like climate change may require forms of government intervention that go far beyond what Friedman's framework would permit.

This raises fundamental questions about whether Friedman's approach is adequate for addressing the collective action problems that characterize contemporary societies. If market mechanisms are insufficient to address these problems, then broader forms of democratic coordination may be necessary.

10.3 Technology and Economic Power

The rise of large technology companies also poses challenges to Friedman's framework. These companies often have significant market power and control over information flows, creating new forms of potential domination that Friedman's approach may not adequately address.

The network effects and economies of scale that characterize many technology markets can lead to winner-take-all dynamics that undermine the competitive conditions that Friedman sees as essential for protecting freedom. This suggests that antitrust enforcement and regulation may be necessary to maintain the competitive conditions that Friedman's theory requires.

11. Conclusion

This analysis has revealed fundamental philosophical problems with Milton Friedman's conception of freedom that undermine both its theoretical coherence and its practical implications. Friedman's negative conception of freedom fails to account for structural forms of domination inherent in capitalist property relations, systematically ignores power asymmetries that compromise genuine voluntariness, and conflates the absence of state interference with the presence of freedom in ways that obscure rather than illuminate the relationship between economic arrangements and human liberty.

Contemporary philosophical scholarship, particularly work in the republican tradition and structural critiques of capitalism, has provided compelling alternatives to Friedman's framework that better account for the complex relationships between economic institutions, power relations, and human freedom. G.A. Cohen's demonstration that property rights themselves constitute a system of interference, republican theorists' emphasis on freedom as non-domination, and structural analyses of how capitalist institutions create systematic constraints on human agency all point toward the need for more sophisticated understandings of freedom than Friedman's framework provides.

Perhaps most problematically, Friedman's approach tends to naturalize market relations and obscure their political character, functioning ideologically to legitimize particular distributions of power and privilege while delegitimizing alternative forms of economic organization. This naturalization serves to depoliticize fundamentally political questions about how society should be organized, undermining the democratic values that Friedman claims to support.

The implications of this critique extend far beyond academic philosophy. Friedman's ideas have shaped policy decisions affecting billions of people worldwide, from structural adjustment programs in developing countries to deregulation and privatization initiatives in developed economies. If the philosophical foundations of these policies are flawed, then the policies themselves may be undermining rather than promoting the human freedom they claim to advance.

Contemporary challenges like growing economic inequality, climate change, and the concentration of economic power in large corporations all point toward the need for approaches that can account for structural constraints on freedom and the collective action problems that characterize modern societies. Friedman's individualistic, market-oriented framework appears inadequate for addressing these challenges.

This does not necessarily imply a wholesale rejection of market mechanisms or individual choice, but rather suggests the need for more nuanced approaches that can account for the complex relationships between economic institutions, power relations, and human freedom. The republican emphasis on non-domination, capability approaches that focus on substantive rather than merely formal freedoms, and relational approaches that recognize the social dimensions of freedom all offer promising directions for developing more adequate conceptions of freedom for contemporary societies.

Ultimately, this critique suggests that genuine human freedom requires not the minimization of government intervention in markets, but rather the careful design of institutions—both governmental and economic—that minimize arbitrary domination and ensure that all members of society have meaningful opportunities to shape their own lives and participate in collective decision-making. This represents a fundamental challenge to Friedman's framework and points toward the need for new approaches to thinking about freedom, democracy, and economic organization in the twenty-first century.

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