

Dialectical Objectivism? A Review of Chris Sciabarra's *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*

Roger E. Bissell

Few works with the level of scholarship evidenced in historian and political theorist Chris Sciabarra's book about Ayn Rand's philosophy have generated such a visceral, polarized response: scathing hostility and scorn on the one extreme and glowing, enthusiastic praise on the other. While an examination of personalities and events surrounding the preparation and subsequent reception of this book would be a fascinating study in its own right, the present review will focus instead on the thesis that spawned the controversy.

Rand's philosophy of Objectivism was born in the aftermath of her final and most famous novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, though the spiritual core of its ethos apparently dates back to her adolescence in Russia. That Objectivism champions reality, reason, egoism, individualism, laissez-faire capitalism, and romantic art has been common knowledge to its supporters and enemies alike for several decades. What is new in Sciabarra's thesis, what has set everyone on their ears - with either delight or outrage - is his claim that the *methodology* by which Rand developed her philosophy is the "dialectic."

Although Sciabarra doesn't provide a one-sentence, genus-differentia definition of "dialectic," the description he gives (pp. 14-18) portrays dialectics as a methodological orientation with six basic, interrelated characteristics:

- (1) holism - a commitment to preserve "the analytical integrity of the whole," to see its essential parts as "distinctions within an organic unity...inseparable aspect[s] of a wider totality," which cannot be "fully understood in the absence of the other[s]."
- (2) contextualism - a commitment to perform both abstraction and integration when studying a "whole from the vantage point of any part," rather than reifying its parts and treating them atomistically as if they were independent of the whole;
- (3) synchronic, or structural, or systemic, internalism - a commitment to grasp the systemic, often reciprocal, interrelationships among the various parts that constitute a whole (and especially the various theoretical issues that together form a wider philosophic context);
- (4) diachronic, or dynamic, or historical, internalism - a commitment to recognize the historical, often conflictive, interrelationships among the various events in the origin, development, and modification of a whole (and especially the past, present, and future course of a system of ideas); and (as a consequence of the first four).

- (5) a "revolt against formal dualism" - a commitment to treat only fundamental alternatives as being "mutually exclusive or exhaustive" and to seek to transcend the limitations of the half-truths in traditional, false dichotomies, and
- (6) radicalism in theory and practice - a commitment both to strive for a fundamental, critical understanding of a system and to advocate and work toward fundamental, revolutionary changes in the system.

Although this description of dialectics seems to reveal quite clearly both its nature and its value, it is also, in this reviewer's opinion, a rather unwieldy checklist. But, then, the subject of methodology is not a simple one either. Eventually, one hopes, once the differences and similarities between dialectics and other methodological orientations are more fully sorted out, Sciabarra will zero in on a more elegant, concise (dare it be said: genus-differentia?) statement of what dialectics is. In the meantime, one other specific concern about his existing set of criteria should be addressed: the point about dualism appears to be overly one-sided (almost monistically so!) in its emphasis.

Sciabarra provides ample illustration of Rand's "revolt against formal dualism," i.e. her policy of consistently rejecting false alternatives in every branch of philosophy: e.g. materialism vs. idealism in metaphysics, rationalism vs. empiricism in epistemology, altruism vs. hedonism in ethics, and statism vs. anarchism in politics. She discovers the common false premise in each pair of "ism's" and projects the truly opposite alternative view. Or, as in the dichotomies "between mind and body, reason and emotion, fact and value, theory and practice," she clarifies the common ground, usually overlooked, that ties the two phenomena together in an integral whole. (p.17)

Yet, Rand's approach is not, strictly speaking, the "transcendence of opposites," but rather the transcendence of, or moving beyond the limitations of, *false* opposites. Indeed, she was all for legitimate polarizing, for insisting that certain basic distinctions be recognized: e.g. identity vs. the supernatural, reason vs. irrationality, individualism vs. collectivism, sacrifice vs. the "trader principle," individual rights vs. the initiation of force, and capitalism vs. statism.

In other words, Rand was just as adamant in opposing "monistic reductionism," the attempt to reduce one of two coequal principles to being a mere spinoff or disguised version of the other. Private property is *not* a form of theft, nor shouting "fire" in a crowded theater a form of free speech. Freely chosen acts between consenting adults are *not* a form of sacrificial exploitation, nor benevolent giving a form of self-sacrifice. Rational conviction is *not* a form of faith, nor reason a mere rationalization of one's underlying emotions. Non-existence is *not* a special kind of existence, nor consciousness a mere epiphenomenon of matter (or vice versa).

Although Sciabarra notes many such points and correctly states that "dialectical method is neither dualistic nor monistic" (p.16), a glance at the index of his book reveals a staggering disparity in the amount of treatment he gives to dualism (references covering 1-1/2 columns) compared to the three lines he gives monism. If, as it seems, Objectivism is just as much a revolt against the latter - and if, as Sciabarra says, "the best way to

understand the dialectical impulse is to view it as a technique to overcome formal dualism and monistic reductionism" (p.16) - one would hope that this inequity would be addressed in any future editions.

As to the structure of the book itself, each of its three main sections explores Rand's philosophy from a distinct, important perspective and in a very smooth, readable style throughout. Not surprisingly, Sciabarra finds the dialectical method to be unmistakably implicated in each instance and supports his case with voluminous citations derived from a thorough knowledge of the Objectivist literature. (His task was made considerably more difficult, and his achievement all the more admirable, by the fact that so much of Objectivism exists not in printed form, but as taped lectures).

The four chapters of Part I, "The Process of Becoming," constitute a "diachronic" focus on the intellectual roots of Objectivism, i.e. on the historical process involved in "Rand's intellectual groping toward synthesis." (p.11) Sciabarra's talents as an intellectual historian shine forth as he delves deeply into both Rand's educational background and the cultural conditions in Czarist and Revolutionary Russia, and as he carefully traces the gradual development of her outlook and ideas after she moved to America. He finds much evidence to suggest that Rand, throughout her life, was "a profoundly *Russian* thinker" whose views were, in large part, "an evolved response to the dualities that [she] confronted in Soviet Russia." (p.10)

At times, due to handicaps such as the spottiness of academic records during Rand's college years and incomplete disclosure of Rand's early journals, Sciabarra was forced to resort to "argument from best explanation." The most intriguing examples of this approach were in regard to the questions about whether Rand actually studied, as she claimed, with Nicholas O. Lossky at Petrograd University during the 1921-22 academic year, and whether she might have gone through a Nietzschean phase, seemingly represented by certain colorful passages appearing in the 1933 edition of *We the Living* but removed from the 1959 revised edition (and which she referred to as "editorial line-changes," attributed to her earlier awkwardness in writing in English). In both instances, Sciabarra's "best explanation" ends up extending the benefit of the doubt to Rand, but questions remain.

Part II, "The Revolt Against Dualism," is a "synchronic" presentation, in six chapters, of the formal structure of Objectivism, beginning with the more abstract theoretical domains of metaphysics and epistemology and working on down through psychology and aesthetics to ethics and politics. Aside from Leonard Peikoff's recent book (*Objectivism: The Philosophy of Ayn Rand*, 1991, Dutton), this is probably the best overview of Rand's philosophy available. And it has the additional virtue of highlighting the important work done in epistemology by David Kelley, in psychology by Nathaniel Branden, and in ethics and value theory by Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl, names seldom written or uttered by Peikoff and those in his, the more "orthodox" faction of the Objectivist movement.

Throughout this section, Sciabarra's reconstruction of Objectivism shows repeatedly "how it is an inherently dialectical and nondualistic formulation that differs considerably from conventional alternatives." (p.11) Frequently, this entails elucidating the necessary

"internal" relations between, for instance, existence and consciousness and identity and causality; between reason and emotion, cognition and evaluation, conscious and subconscious processes; between life, the rational, and the good; between the moral, the practical, and the happy; etc. Such a vista of conceptual connections, composed of elements in relations of "reciprocal causation and mutual reinforcement" actually seems more consonant with Rand's discussions of the various ideas than the standard hierarchical "strict logical dependence, or one-way causality" model we are more used to seeing from Objectivist writers.

Packed into the three chapters of Part III, "The Radical Rand," is the most original and challenging part of Sciabarra's thesis and the strongest part of the book. One of the key aspects of dialectics, and the major consequence of the "revolt against formal dualism," is the commitment to radicalism: the refusal to bifurcate human life into two hermetically sealed domains of theoretical, abstract, ivory-tower knowledge and practical, concrete, real-world action. The impulse to radicalism was prominent in Russian intellectual history and was fully expressed in Rand's philosophy. Sciabarra's acumen as a political theorist is highly impressive. He seems not to miss a single opportunity to weave together the many seemingly unintegrable aspects of Rand's thought into a highly compressed microcosm of Rand's own radical outlook.

Sciabarra identifies three levels of analysis of the power relations that underlie and sustain statist social systems: the personal (relating to ethics and mental function), the cultural (regarding language and ideology), and the structural (economics and politics). Rand had much to say about each of these distinct, but inseparable aspects of social systems, and she saw a thorough, deep-seated parallel between the political trends, culture, and lifestyle of the "social sphere" and the individual life path, conscious convictions, and subconscious of the "individual sphere." Sciabarra's tightly integrated treatment of Rand's radical social philosophy must be read to be fully appreciated.

Notwithstanding the engaging qualities of the main part of the book, it would be a sad oversight not to mention Sciabarra's excellent Notes, References, and Index. The Notes, in particular, give a fascinating peek at some of the behind-the-scenes work Sciabarra had to do in preparing his book.

Note 20 on p.408 is particularly noteworthy, since it concerns the concept of "objective" itself. Sciabarra points out the Peikoff, in his original course on Objectivism in 1976, referred to perception as "objective," as an application of the trichotomy of objective-subjective-intrinsic. Rand corrected him, on the assumption that "normative terms such as 'objectivity' cannot be applied to automatic processes such as perception." This reviewer finds Peikoff's unfortunate recanting of his original, illuminating discussion of the metaphysical status of sense data to result in a conflation of the normative sense of "objective" with the *relational* sense pertaining to the three kinds of phenomena focused on by the trichotomy.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that, despite the overwhelming evidence and logic Sciabarra offers in his book, certain Objectivists have spoken out in rather caustic terms against his perspective. They vehemently resist identifying Rand's philosophic

method with the dialectic, mainly it seems because of their acceptance of the traditional assumption that dialectical method is equivalent to Hegelianism or Marxism. Rand is not Marxist, therefore (they reason), her method could not be dialectical.

Sciabarra, however, firmly lays to rest both this assumption and the false conclusion drawn from it. He points out that even Hegel referred in laudatory manner to Aristotle as the "Father of Dialectic" and that Rand herself said that the only intellectual debt she would acknowledge was to Aristotle: "Rand was profoundly correct to view her own system as the heir to Aristotelianism. Ultimately, it might be said that her debt to Aristotle concerns *both* the form and the content of her thought." (p.19)

In addition, Sciabarra shows just how thoroughly entrenched the dialectical method was in Russian culture - especially in her textbooks and in the minds of her professors - at the time Rand went to college. This argues convincingly for the strong likelihood that Rand absorbed the dialectical methodology from her milieu, even while emphatically rejecting the various religious and Marxist conclusions others derived with it. By this many-faceted approach, Sciabarra claims (and this reviewer concurs), he has offered "the best explanation yet published for the origins of Rand's unique approach to philosophic and social analysis." (p.19)

In this connection, it must be noted that certain Objectivists often voice another nagging concern (and, unfortunately, not always in a calm, civil manner), namely, that linking Rand and Objectivism in any way, even methodologically, with thinkers she so despised as Marx and Hegel, will ultimately cause serious harm to the Objectivist movement and philosophy. But as Rand herself was fond of saying about allegedly fragile situations, "It is obvious that a boat which cannot stand rocking is doomed already and that it had better be rocked hard, if it is to regain its course..." Surely this dictum applies no less to her own system of ideas. And aside from those with a vested interest in the pristine isolation of Objectivism from rigorous academic scrutiny, it is difficult to imagine who could find fault with Sciabarra's masterful efforts to garner more mainstream attention to (not to mention respect for) Rand's philosophy. The truth will out.

In any case, while Sciabarra's methodological insights place Rand's development and that of her philosophy much more clearly in historical perspective, these revelations, he stresses, need not in any way tarnish her reputation as a staunch anti-Marxist nor lessen her originality and importance as a thinker. They simply identify the fact that "Rand's use of dialectical method was as essential to her historic formulation of Objectivist principles, as was her original synthesis in the realm of content." (p.20) And although neither the various parts of its content, nor the use of dialectical method, is peculiar to Objectivism, when the method and content are considered together, they constitute Objectivism's fundamental distinguishing (i.e. defining) characteristic. It is their integration into a new system of thought that is unique, Sciabarra says, and therefore worthy of serious, deep study by scholars.

As Sciabarra observes: "Objectivism is a seamless conjunction of method and content - of a dialectical method and a realist-egoist-individualist-libertarian content." (p.381) This unique synthesis, linking "a multilevel, dialectical analysis to a libertarian politics...is

Rand's most important contribution to twentieth-century radical social theory." (pp.319, 381) And, this reviewer would like to add, with *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*, as well as *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* (SUNY, 1995), now under his belt, Chris Matthew Sciabarra has emerged as one of the most provocative, and enjoyable, writers on the history of ideas of the twentieth century.