

## Discussion

Rejoinder to Bissell, Register, and Sciabarra

### Keeping Context in Context: The Limits of Dialectics

*Roderick T. Long*

Much of the controversy surrounding Chris Matthew Sciabarra's "Dialectics and Liberty" trilogy has centered on two issues: the role of internal relations, and the adequacy of dialectics as a methodological orientation. In my review (Long 2001) of *Total Freedom*, I said much in praise and much in criticism; but with regard specifically to these two issues, I argued that Sciabarra's attempt to ground an *epistemologized* conception of internal relations on Ayn Rand's theory of contextual essence does not succeed in fully extricating his theory from an internalist metaphysics; and I also argued that a predominantly integrative, dialectical approach is methodologically incomplete and requires supplementation from an analytic, differentiative approach. It is on these two issues especially that Roger Bissell, Bryan Register, and Chris Sciabarra engage my criticisms in their thoughtful and fascinatingly different replies.

#### The Perils of Internalism

With regard to my charge that Sciabarra is still committed to an objectionable form of internalism, both Bissell and Register are convinced that I have made one crucial, fundamental mistake—but they disagree about what it is. Bissell agrees with me that internalism is bad, but denies that Sciabarra is committed to it. Register agrees with me that Sciabarra is committed to it, but denies that it is bad. I maintain, of course, that each is half right: Bissell is right in thinking that internalism is bad, and Register is right in thinking that Sciabarra is committed to it. (Hence my position emerges as a dialectical

synthesis of their thesis and antithesis.)

Bissell maintains that in attributing internalism to Sciabarra, I have confused methodological considerations with ontological ones;<sup>1</sup> specifically, I have confused dialectics (a methodological thesis that asks us to attend to internal relations) with organicism (an ontological thesis that claims internal relations are all there is). For Sciabarra, *not* every relation is internal—some are internal, others are external—and Bissell wonders how I could have failed to see that such is Sciabarra's view.

In reply to this I want to make two points. First, the claim I made in my review was not that Sciabarra *says* that all relations are internal (of course he doesn't), but rather that—as Register likewise observes—Sciabarra *says* things that seem to *commit* him to that conclusion. Second, the position that Bissell attributes to Sciabarra, while less extreme than the view that all relations are internal, is still objectionably internalist.

According to Bissell, the difference between dialectics and organicism is that organicism regards things as having internal relations *only*, while dialectics attends to their internal and external relations alike; hence dialectics is not guilty of the charge of excessive internalism. But this is not so clear; for I wish to object not only to the extreme claim that all relations are internal, but also to the less extreme claim that all *relata* are (at least) internally related. The methodological pronouncement “let us always consider not only the internal relations between X and Y, but their external relations also,” still presupposes that there *are* going to be (some) internal relations between X and Y; my objection is that such a presumption will frequently be false, and to assume otherwise is precisely to commit oneself to a metaphysic, which, while not strictly organicist, is bizarrely internalist; even if not all relations are internal, everything will still end up being internally related to everything else.<sup>2</sup>

Does Sciabarra really think that everything is internally related to everything else? No, of course not. Sciabarra (2002, 387) rightly repudiates “the a priori proposition that every X is embedded in a system.” But the question is not what Sciabarra *believes*, but what his theory *commits* him to. A dialectical methodology, Sciabarra tells us

repeatedly, is one that seeks to understand things in terms of their relations to a wider context. Now it would be pointless to try to understand X in terms of its relation to Y if X were merely *externally* related to Y, for external relations are not necessary for understanding. It makes sense to seek to understand X in terms of its relation to Y only if one is assuming an *internal* relation between X and Y. Hence, if a dialectical approach is one that seeks to understand things in terms of their relations to a wider context, then a dialectical approach embodies a presumption that the things it seeks to understand will be internally related to that context. Bissell to the contrary notwithstanding, a dialectical methodology is not ontologically neutral; as Register (2002, 366) points out, “a dialectician will *expect* the social world to be populated by things whose systemic and dynamic relations will be internal to them.”

To advocate a dialectical approach across the board, then, is to commit oneself to positing internal relationships in everything one studies. Sciabarra may not officially hold “the a priori proposition that every X is embedded in a system”; but if he advocates a dialectical account of every X, and if a dialectical account is one that seeks to understand X as being embedded in a system, then Sciabarra does appear to be committed, in spite of himself, to the proposition that every X is embedded in a system. (Even if we substitute “every social X” for “every X,” the claim is still too strong.)

Sciabarra (2002, 381–82) moreover maintains that in social theory “the object of our inquiry is society as such”—which certainly sounds internalist. But Sciabarra immediately goes on to say that, according to dialectics, “the attempt to deal with any given social problem will *often* entail an investigation of related social problems” (emphasis mine). That is certainly a correct and important insight; but the claim that investigating one social problem will *often* lead to the investigation of others does not support the thesis that “the object of our inquiry is society as such”; *that* thesis fits better with the more extreme claim that investigating one social problem must *always* lead to the investigation of others (and perhaps even of *all* others).

I worry that Sciabarra may unwittingly be succumbing to the temptation to shift between an internalist version of dialectics (when

he is immersed in his theorizing) and a non-internalist version (when he is replying to criticisms). As we shall see, however, I think there *is* a legitimate way of resolving this tension and giving Sciabarra what he seems to want: an internalist methodology without an internalist metaphysics. But achieving this desideratum will require some alteration in his theory.

I've argued that, *pace* Bissell, Sciabarra is committed to an internalist ontology—or at least an internalist social ontology.<sup>3</sup> This is because: a) a methodological orientation toward contextual analysis presupposes that the objects of analysis will be internally related to their contexts, and b) Sciabarra regards such a methodological orientation as the proper approach to social science in general. From (a) and (b) it follows that Sciabarra is committed, despite himself, to regarding every object of social science as internally related to a wider context.<sup>4</sup>

Register agrees that Sciabarra is so committed, but thinks Sciabarra's embarrassment at this commitment is unwarranted; for Register, social phenomena *are* always internally related to a wider context, so dialectics is just what's needed. But this claim is overstated. I think the work of Mises (1976; 1978; 1996), Hayek (1943; 1979), and Rothbard (1976; 1977), for example, shows conclusively that it is possible to give a full analysis of the logical features of economic exchange *without* taking into account the psychological and cultural context.<sup>5</sup>

### The Perils of Contextualism

Register thinks that Sciabarra's commitment to an internalist social ontology is innocuous, so long as one keeps in mind his Rand-inspired epistemic contextualism. But Register offers us a more radical version of contextualism than anything to which Rand (or, I suspect, Sciabarra) would want to be committed. In my review of *Total Freedom*, I claimed that on Rand's metaphysics, whether something is an entity or not cannot be relative to epistemic context. Register agrees that Rand would say this, but insists that she would be inconsistent in doing so. Register argues that if, as Rand claims,

universals are epistemic rather than metaphysical, then all classifications, including the distinction between entities and non-entities, must be relative to epistemic context.

The issue is actually a bit more complex; for Rand *does* actually say, in a private seminar, that what counts as an entity is sometimes relative to epistemic context:

What about a square inch of ground? Is that an entity or not? You can, from an epistemological viewpoint, regard any part of an entity as a separate entity in that context . . . even though metaphysically, in reality, it's part of many, many other inches like it. The concept of "entity" is an issue of the context in which you define your terms. So that an entity has to be a material object, but what you regard as an entity in any given statement or inquiry depends on your definitions. You can regard part of an entity as a separate entity. And in that sense all the vital organs are entities, and you have a separate science for the brain or the heart or the stomach. And in the context of that science, you study them as separate entities, never dropping the context that they are vital organs of a total entity which is a human being. (Rand 1990, 269–70)

It is passages like these in Rand that can be developed into the sort of hypercontextualism endorsed by Register. But in the end, as Register admits, such hypercontextualism does go beyond Rand's intentions. For when Rand is asked if her view is that "whether you view a thing as an entity or not depends on the context in which you are viewing it," Rand replies:

Oh no. You can view a part of an entity as an entity without dropping the context: you will have to include the context that it is part of an entity, such as the human vital organs. . . . In the same way you can look at an inch of ground and consider it an entity, but that doesn't mean that you can then drop the context and say, "This inch is hanging alone in a

vacuum, it's not part of a plain." You can narrow or widen your view, but you can never drop the identity—the basic definition—of the entity which you are considering. . . . [T]hey're not all equal metaphysically. A valley, for instance, or society—those epistemologically can be regarded as entities. But a mountain is a primary entity; the valley is not . . . . But then what is the primary entity? . . . [I]t has to be a unit of some kind, tied or welded or integrated together, which has certain properties, and with actions being possible to it as a whole. (270–73)

In other words, something counts as an entity only if it is integrated into a unit, but there are more and less fundamental ways of being integrated into a unit. When I consider a square inch of ground by itself, I am integrating it into a unit for the purposes of studying it, and apart from my attention it is not so integrated; so *its* entityhood *is* relative to my epistemic context. But Rand is denying that this is true in all cases; in the case of a "primary entity," such as a mountain, or a human being, it remains an integrated unit even if nobody is thinking about it, so *its* entityhood is a metaphysical fact that is not epistemically relativized.

Regardless of Rand's intentions, however, Register argues that Rand's epistemologization of universals commits her to the epistemologization of properties (including entityhood) as well. Now I don't agree with Rand that the status of universals is purely epistemic. But even if I did, I don't see that that would commit me to saying that what properties a thing has must be relativized to epistemic context, as Register suggests. Rand writes:

Length does exist in reality, only it doesn't exist by itself. . . . The only thing that is epistemological and not metaphysical in the concept of "length" is the act of mental separation, of considering this attribute separately as if it were a separate thing. . . . [I]f to say it is epistemological rather than metaphysical is to say it exists only in relation to your grasp of it, or it requires your grasp of it in order to exist—it doesn't

Surely, if anything is metaphysical, attributes are. (278)

Thus Rand's view, as I understand it, is not that things have no properties until we form concepts about them, but rather that these pre-conceptualized properties are something like what contemporary philosophers call "tropes," that is, individualized property-instantiations, or particular features unique to their bearers. (Since an entity, for Rand, just *is* its attributes (276), those attributes must presumably themselves be particulars, i.e., tropes.) We form universal concepts by attending to the similarities among particulars.

While "similarity" for Rand cannot without circularity be cashed out as "falling under the same universal"—Register is right about that—it does not follow that similarities are simply the artifact of our epistemic context; rather, similarities are *pre-conceptual* (141), that is, they consist in *relational tropes* among particulars. Universals, for Rand, are not mind-independent, but particulars (including tropes) *are*, and these particulars place constraints on what universals we can legitimately form;<sup>6</sup> if X does not possess an entityhood-trope, we cannot classify X under the entityhood-universal. For Rand, identity is prior to identification.

Hence I'm not convinced that Rand's view of universals commits her to the kind of radical contextualism that Register favors. But, more importantly, if it should turn out to do so, it seems to me that that would cut against Rand's epistemologizing of universals rather than against her refusal to relativize entities to epistemic context. Register's claim that "whether something is an entity or not depends in part on the cognitive purposes of an acting investigator" (2002, 272) seems to prioritize consciousness over existence in a way that would rightly be anathema to Rand. Moreover, if every category into which X falls (including "entity") is relative to epistemic context, what sense can we make of saying that it is one and the same X that is classified one way in one context and another way in another context? If no classification of X is invariant across epistemic contexts, then what *is* X, exactly? A bare particular? A patch of primordial goo? By what criterion can we re-identify it in different contexts? Register's view comes close to asserting that acting investigators *create* or

constitute objects by investigating them—a popular thesis in some circles, but not one that would naturally be associated with Rand.

In any case, the thesis that “whether something is an entity or not depends in part on the cognitive purposes of an acting investigator” does not seem to be a coherent attitude for an “acting investigator” to take toward *herself*. What sense does it make for me to say that whether or not *I* am an entity depends on my epistemic context? How can I even have an epistemic context unless I am, first, an entity? The notion of an epistemic context would appear to be conceptually downstream from that of an entity; to relativize the latter to the former is to engage in what Rand calls “concept-stealing.”<sup>7</sup> Hence I conclude that if conceptual scheme A classifies as an entity what conceptual scheme B classifies as a non-entity, then at least one of the conceptual schemes must be mistaken. If that makes me an “imperialist,” Hail Caesar.

I am also unsure how to reconcile Register’s claim that a relation’s status as internal or external varies with epistemic context (367) with his claim that social phenomena *really are* internally related (366)—unless he means, as his language on page 371 perhaps suggests, that social phenomena (along with their internal relations) *exist* only in an epistemic context. In that case, a social relation is *internal* in all the epistemic contexts in which it *exists*. That would solve the question of how the same X can be internal in one context and external in another (it can’t: “treating X as external” is now a euphemism for excluding X from treatment); but the price, once again, seems to be a kind of metaphysical subjectivism.

Where does Sciabarra stand on this issue? When I describe him as trying to “epistemologize internal relations,” Sciabarra (2002, 386) paraphrases this as “to evaluate relations on the basis of a given context of knowledge, rather than on the basis of any speculations about the metaphysical nature of an entity.” But this does not capture what I mean.

First, I want to resist the suggested contrast between evaluating relations “on the basis of a given context of knowledge” and evaluating them “on the basis of any speculations about the metaphysical nature of an entity.” Speculations about the metaphysical

nature of an entity will themselves be carried out, necessarily, only within a given context of knowledge (one could hardly carry them out in an *ungiven* context of knowledge), so the contrast fails; epistemic contextualism does not rule out metaphysical speculation.

But second, and more importantly, when I speak of “epistemologizing internal relations,” I don’t mean a) the view that our *evaluation* of relations—our decision about whether to regard them as internal or external—depends on an epistemic context; I mean b) the view that their *status* as internal or external depends on an epistemic context. (Compare the distinction between the common-sense claim that our *decision* as to whether a certain putative historical event actually happened will depend on our epistemic context, and the metaphysically idealist claim that the event’s actually having *happened* depends on our epistemic context.) I interpreted Sciabarra as holding (b), because he connects internality to essence, and he accepts Rand’s thesis that which features are essential to something depends on an epistemic context. I am uncertain whether Sciabarra is now embracing or rejecting (b). He denies that “as our epistemic context expands, relations will shift from external to internal,” and he insists that “[t]o epistemologize relations is not to make them arbitrary or subjectify them” (386). All this sounds like a denial of (b). But Sciabarra immediately adds that “[b]y defining a context within which inquiry can proceed, we can distinguish between those relations that are essential or nonessential to the issues at hand *in that context*.” That suggests an affirmation of (b) after all.

In response to my question whether all relations would be internal from the synoptic view, Sciabarra (388) rejects the premise of the question, on the grounds that he does not admit “the very notion of *any* synoptic view.”<sup>8</sup> But what exactly is it that Sciabarra is refusing to admit? There are two ways of understanding the synoptic view. We can understand it *metaphysically*, as the set of all truths, or *epistemically*, as the standpoint of one who knows all truths. There may be good reasons for rejecting epistemic synopticism as impossible; but we cannot coherently reject metaphysical synopticism without giving up on objective reality. There are some tendencies in current Objectivist thought that favor epistemologizing the notion of

*truth*, but this seems to me to jettison the central Objectivist insight of the primacy of existence over consciousness.<sup>9</sup> If truth is *not* epistemically relative, however, then the question whether or not all relations are internal from the (metaphysically) synoptic view cannot be dismissed as meaningless.

### The Perils of Synthesis

In my review, I charged Sciabarra's dialectical approach with stressing synthesis over analysis. Register thinks this is accurate but not negative; Bissell and Sciabarra think it is negative but not accurate.

Register regards the analytic, differentiative approach as appropriate to philosophy, and the synthetic, dialectical approach as appropriate to other disciplines (e.g., social science). I'm tempted to reply—adapting a remark of Kant's—that analytics without dialectics is empty, and dialectics without analytics is blind. I can't imagine how any discipline, philosophical or otherwise, could get anywhere without employing both. According to Register, however, the method of philosophy is conceptual, while the method of social science is empirical; therefore philosophers don't need to be dialectical, and social scientists don't need to be analytical. I disagree with both halves of this claim.<sup>10</sup> Social science gets nowhere if it is *purely* empirical; conceptual analysis plays a crucial role, as Hayek (1943) shows in his seminal article "The Facts of the Social Sciences,"<sup>11</sup> so social science can hardly forgo the use of analytics. Likewise, philosophers deal with *logical* relations among ideas, and logical relations are paradigm cases of *internal* relations, so philosophy can hardly forgo the use of dialectics.

Both Bissell (2002, 353) and Sciabarra (2002, 390) suggest that an emphasis on synthesis over analysis may be appropriate as a corrective to today's intellectual culture, with its emphasis on atomistic compartmentalization over integration. It is certainly true that there is too much atomistic compartmentalization nowadays. But it is also true that there is too much *spurious* integration; failing to see relevant connections is a common vice, but seeing connections that aren't

there is equally common. What we need is not necessarily to integrate *more*, but rather to integrate *better*—and likewise to differentiate better too. Some qualifications notwithstanding, my two favorite schools of thought within libertarianism (and, from the evidence, Sciabarra's two favorites as well) are the Objectivists and the Austrians—not just because of the *quantity* of their integrative moments (though that quantity is high), but because of the *quality*.

I am, incidentally, rather puzzled at Bissell's characterization of me as an *opponent* of dialectics; I number myself rather among its *adherents*, and I think of my own work as a contribution to dialectical libertarianism.<sup>12</sup> Bissell represents me as favoring analytic differentiation *rather than* dialectical synthesis; it is on this ground that he characterizes me as a "Formist," in Pepper's terminology. I do not find Pepper's classificatory scheme helpful; but, more to the point, I am not sure how Bissell can have missed my repeated stress that a proper methodology must include *both* analytic and dialectical aspects. In general, the disagreements between Sciabarra and myself seem to look larger to Bissell and Register than they do to me (and perhaps, as I suspect from his reply, than they do to Sciabarra).

Sciabarra and Bissell (unlike Register) both agree that synthetic approaches to social science need to be supplemented by analytic ones,<sup>13</sup> but they deny that this limits the legitimate scope of dialectics—since, they maintain, dialectics is as much analytic as it is synthetic. I think this reply is problematic. One of the pieces of evidence I quoted to support my contention that dialectics is primarily synthetic rather than analytic (or at least that Sciabarra is committed to so regarding it) is Sciabarra's claim in *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* that dialectics "focuses not on external connections between static elements, but on dynamic internal relations" (Sciabarra 1995a, 24). Another is Sciabarra's remark in his *Full Context* interview (1995b, 5) that dialectics has "an emphasis on Internal Relations." As Bissell points out, these statements are perfectly consistent with recognizing that some relations are external. But it is hard to see how they could be consistent with the view that dialectics emphasizes internal and external relations *equally*. Clearly it doesn't; dialectics has an internalist bias—and *there's nothing wrong with that*, so long as we recognize that the

limits of internalism are the limits of dialectics. There's nothing wrong with the fact that a hammer is a tool that is biased toward a "pounding" approach to problem-solving, so long as *we* aren't biased into thinking that a hammer is always what's called for.

Sciabarra (2002, 393) and Bissell (2002, 351–52) both point out that the word "analysis" appears in Sciabarra's definition of dialectics. So it does; but the broad sense of "analysis" as it appears in Sciabarra's definition is not the narrow sense with which I am concerned. Whatever sense we give to the word "analysis," it is clear that, for Sciabarra, to understand something dialectically is to understand it in terms of its relations to a larger context or totality (Sciabarra 2000, 173); and the claim I am defending is that sometimes this is *not* the best way to understand something. The disagreement is substantive, not verbal.

Sciabarra (2002, 392) says that "[t]hose who propose to supplement dialectic with analytic modes are simply embracing a more *dialectical* view of dialectics." I agree; dialectics requires us to attend to context, and one way of attending to context is to inquire whether context is relevant—which is perfectly consistent with reaching a negative answer in any particular case. So dialectics *authorizes* us to neglect context in certain circumstances (so long as we first attended to context long enough to make sure it was okay to neglect it). But when we then proceed to examine X in isolation from its context, although we are doing something authorized by dialectics, it seems odd to say we are doing something dialectical. If we do say that, then in effect we are saying that to treat X dialectically is to treat X in whatever manner is correct—and, as I have said before, that is the description of an *end*, not a methodological means; a methodology defined in terms of correct results is rather like J. D. Rockefeller's (purported) advice to "get up early, work late, and strike oil." We risk depriving the notion of "dialectics" of all content if "permissible neglect of context" is allowed to count as "context-keeping."

Recall Sciabarra's repudiation of "the a priori proposition that every X is embedded in a system." I agree that dialectics *per se* is not committed to such a proposition, and so is not committed to the theoretical claim that context is always relevant. The good

dialectician will always check to see *whether* context is relevant. But merely following the advice "always check to see whether context is relevant" seems insufficient to qualify one's treatment as dialectical. Suppose that I propose to investigate X. As a good dialectician, I check to see whether X's context is relevant, and I decide it isn't; so I present an account of X that ignores context. Now my account of X doesn't *violate* dialectical methodology; after all, I did what dialecticians are supposed to do, I checked for relevant context, and there wasn't any. But although my account violates no dialectical strictures, it would be odd to say that I have offered a *dialectical* account of X. A dialectical account of X would be one that related X to its context, and that's precisely what my account doesn't do.

As I see it, then, dialectics demands less than the extreme claim that context is always relevant, but more than the mild injunction to check to see whether context is relevant. To give a dialectical account of X is to treat context as relevant to X; when context is not relevant, a dialectical account is inappropriate. That's why I can both affirm the importance of the dialectical approach, and deny that it can ever be an all-encompassing methodology.

I think there is a tension in Sciabarra's thought between two different conceptions of dialectics. But a choice must be made: either an investigation that (justifiably) ignores context *can* count as dialectical, or it *cannot*. If it *can*, then the concept of dialectics becomes methodologically vacuous; it turns into the prescription: "consider context when and only when context is relevant" (which is about as helpful as the moral advice "do X whenever X is the right thing to do"). If it *cannot*, then dialectics, though often methodologically appropriate, will not always be so, and so cannot constitute a self-sufficient methodological orientation. Since I prefer nonvacuous advice that is often accurate to vacuous advice that is always accurate, my vote is for the second option; we do *not* do dialectics a favor by downplaying its "synthetic" and "holistic" character.<sup>14</sup>

### The Perils of Precise Abstraction

Register challenges my critique of precise abstraction by

offering the example of a historian constructing an abstract model of the Battle of Gettysburg. But is this historian engaged in precise or in non-precise abstraction? Register assumes it must be the former; but this is not so clear. The fact that the model “ignores the overwhelming majority of the facts” does *not* render it precise; it need not stipulate the presence of such facts, so long as it does not stipulate their absence. What about the fact that the model treats the *average* starting time of Pickett’s Charge as *the* starting time? Well, it depends to how many significant figures the starting time is specified. Suppose the earliest soldier to start did so at 2:00:08, and the last soldier to start did so at 2:00:15. In that case, it would *not* be precise to say that the charge started at 2:00, but it *would* be precise to say that the charge started at 2:00:00. The historian may find a precise model useful; they often are, so long as they are used with care. But the alternative to a precise model is a non-precise one, *not* “an array of unintegrable facts” (Register 2002, 361).

Register (2002, 364) writes: “In order to understand society and history, it’s necessary to abstract parts of a society or historical events from the social or historical whole of which they are parts and then study them in relation to one another. But this is precise abstraction.” Well, it *can* be; but it *needn’t* be. There is nothing inherently precise about abstracting parts from wholes; it depends whether the part’s connection to the whole is specified as absent, or just not specified as present.

Register also states that precisely abstracting X from Y will falsify only if X is internally related to Y. I disagree. So long as X *is* related (albeit externally) to Y, if a precise abstraction treats X *as not* (rather than merely *not as*) related to Y, then falsification has occurred.

Since non-precise abstraction (in Objectivist terms, measurement-omission) is the process by which we form concepts, Register concludes that the product of a non-precise abstraction is always a concept; but I don’t see why. An abstract model of the Battle of Gettysburg is not a concept; but if it leaves features out by failing to specify their presence, rather than by specifying their absence, then it clearly is a product of non-precise abstraction. Likewise, (not just the concepts but) the *assertions* of Austrian praxeology are the

products of non-precise abstraction. I’m puzzled at Register’s insistence that the products of non-precise abstraction can never have truth-values, when in the previous paragraph he seems to have granted the status of my “sample praxeological claim” as a “conceptual truth” reached by non-precise abstraction.<sup>15</sup> I likewise cannot accept Register’s assumption that precise abstraction abstracts *parts* from *wholes*, while non-precise abstraction abstracts *features* from their *bearers*. Precise and non-precise abstraction are distinguished by *how*, rather than *what*, they abstract.

Here is how I understand the distinction. Consider any two relata X and Y. (Their relation might be that of part to whole, that of feature to bearer, or something else.) Consider, further, some way of viewing X that does not include X’s relation to Y. (This “way of viewing” might be a concept, a proposition, a model, a theory, or anything else.) If this way of viewing X specifies the *absence* of X’s relation to Y, then it is precise; if it merely fails to specify the *presence* of X’s relation to Y, then it is non-precise. Hence, I strongly disagree with Register’s claim that whenever we consider parts in abstraction from their social whole we are engaged in precise abstraction.<sup>16</sup>

### Sundry Miscellaneous Minor Perils, Together With the Means of Deliverance Therefrom

Let me close by responding to a handful of less central points. Register thinks that on Rand’s view, what I call “quidditative essence” applies only to classes and not to individuals; in other words, on his view it doesn’t make sense to ask “what is the essence of this individual?” One must instead ask, “what is the essence of this grouping?” But this seems unlikely. Suppose a gigantic alien administrator from Betelgeuse kidnaps me, injects me with venom to render me immobile, and then uses me as a paperweight on her desk. I am now a member of both the class of human beings and the class of paperweights. *Qua* human, I share essential characteristics (e.g., rationality) with all humans; *qua* paperweight, I share essential characteristics with all paperweights: like my fellow paperweights, I

am solid, immobile, heavy enough to hold papers down but not too heavy for the person using me to lift, etc. But would Rand really say that "human" and "paperweight" are equally fundamental characterizations of me as an individual? On the contrary, it seems certain that Rand would consider my human characteristics more explanatory of me, as an individual entity, than my paperweight characteristics. (She might not use the word "essence" in the case of an individual, but the question at hand concerns her views, not the terminology in which she would express them.)

Register is also unconvinced by my argument for the claim that treating all abstraction as falsification commits us to treating all relations as internal. So let me restate the proof somewhat more formally. (I do not, of course, mean to endorse the first premise, but merely to show what it implies.)

1. Any account of something that leaves out some of its properties is a partial falsification of it.
2. For any relata X and Y, and any relation between them, X's being related in that way to Y is one of X's properties.
3. For any relata X and Y, and any relation between them, if any account of X that leaves out its being related in that way to Y is a partial falsification of X, then being related in that way to Y is essential to X.
4. For any relata X and Y, and any relation between them, if being related in that way to Y is essential to X, then X can neither be nor be understood apart from its being related in that way to Y.
5. Therefore, for any relata X and Y, and any relation between them, any account of X that leaves out its being related in that way to Y is a partial falsification of X. (from 1 and 2)
6. Therefore, for any relata X and Y, and any relation between them, being related in that way to Y is essential to X. (from 3 and 5)
7. Therefore, for any relata X and Y, and any relation between them, X can neither be nor be understood apart

from its being related in that way to Y. (from 4 and 6)

The first premise is equivalent to the claim that all abstraction is falsification. The other premises are truisms. The conclusion is equivalent to the claim that all relations are internal. Ergo, etc.

On the issue of quidditative versus modal essence, I want to resist Sciabarra's suggestion (2002, 386–87) that a trait counts as modally essential if its loss leads *causally* to its bearer's destruction. Rather, the connection is a *logical* one; a trait is modally essential to X if nothing that lacked that trait would *count* as being X. If losing a trait merely puts me in *danger*, then it is *I* who have been put in danger, and so obviously I must have survived the loss of the trait. (What no longer exists cannot be endangered.) Now if I lose my life, that will certainly put my corpse in danger, since a corpse cannot run away from predators or take steps to forestall its own decomposition; but *that's* not what makes life modally essential to me. The corpse whose persistence is endangered by my death is not *me* to begin with; if that thing were still *me*, then it wouldn't have been *life* that I lost.

Sciabarra and I disagree about the extent of the connection between Aristotelian dialectic and Hegelian-Marxian dialectics. Sciabarra argues for a close connection, because he sees the quasi-Hegelian doctrine that "we can achieve contextual alterations in our inquiry by varying our vantage point or 'point of view'" (383) as the central moral of the *Topics*, Aristotle's treatise on (what Aristotle calls) dialectic. But Sciabarra and I interpret Aristotle's *Topics* differently. I take the rules that Aristotle calls "topics" or "commonplaces" to be not so much "points of view" as Aristotle's rules for reasoning—his *substantive* rules, as opposed to the purely formal rules of his logic. Far from being highly context-sensitive, the "topics"—by contrast with the principles of the special sciences—are supposed to be common to all intellectual endeavors, and so to be, in effect, *invariant across contexts*.

Sciabarra and I also disagree about the relevance to Hegel's master-slave dialectic of Aristotle's doctrine that *master* and *slave* are correlative terms. Sciabarra (396 n. 5) writes: "Aristotle does indeed view the master-slave distinction . . . as a *logical* relationship of

'correlatives,' whereas for Hegel it is a *causal* one. What is important in this context, however, is that the Aristotelian master-slave distinction was *reconceived* by later thinkers . . . in ways that fundamentally undermined the concept of slavery . . ." But what I want to resist here is the claim that it is this *same idea* of Aristotle's that is being reconceived by these later thinkers; I don't think the earlier and the later idea have enough in common for the latter to count as a reconceiving of the former. One is an innocuous formal point, the other is an earth-shaking substantive one.

Sciabarra and I likewise differ in our evaluations of Marx. (Like Kira in the 1936 edition of *We the Living*, Sciabarra loathes the Marxists' ideals, but admires their methods—their methods of social analysis, that is.) Sciabarra notes that while much of Marx's theorizing is mistaken, and while Marx is not the first thinker to exhibit dialectical sensibilities, he is the first to set out an "explicitly enunciated dialectical model for social theorizing" (384). In other words, it's not that Marx did it best, or even that he did it first, but rather that he was the first to be explicit and self-conscious about it. But even if that's true (why can't Hegel, at least, claim chronological priority on that score?), for me the thorough wrong-headedness of Marx's major theoretical contributions vitiates any attractions associated with his methodology. But since Sciabarra has gotten so much snide and unintelligent heat (as opposed, of course, to my scintillatingly brilliant and urbane heat) for his engagement with Marxism, I'm not inclined to press the point.<sup>17</sup> (In any case, the reality of contemporary academia is that someone in political theory, like Sciabarra, *needs* to engage with Marxism, in a way that someone in analytic philosophy, like me, doesn't.)

With regard to Rothbardian anarchism, I had objected, on historical grounds, to Sciabarra's claim that "the market has *always* existed within the parameters of state involvement." Sciabarra (396, n. 6) now replies that "[s]tates and state-like predatory institutions are as old as production itself" (emphasis added). To this statement, *thus qualified*, I have no objection. (But the qualification is crucial.)

I also remain unpersuaded that the concept of "dualism" is helpful in understanding Rothbard's thought, or that Rothbard is like

the Pythagoreans in viewing duality *per se* "as a negative" (394). It is true that Rothbard is troubled by the opposition between state and society, and by the further polarities and oppositions that he sees statism as fostering in everyday life. But his objection to these dualistic oppositions is not that they are dualistic and oppositional, but rather that they involve violent aggression against individuals and frustration of their peaceful interests. Certainly Rothbard is a vigorous supporter of the "methodological dualism" that has traditionally characterized the Austrian School: i.e., the idea that one methodological approach is appropriate to the natural sciences, and quite another to the social sciences. In this case, the opposition between the two is harmless and benign, so long as each operates in its proper sphere; and a monistic absorption of one into the other is precisely the danger to be avoided. Thus, Rothbard has no *general* project of tracking down dualisms and monistically resolving them.

My various disagreements, great and small, with Sciabarra's approach, should not be allowed to obscure my enormous admiration and sympathy for his overall project. I have argued, against Sciabarra and Bissell, that any non-vacuous version of dialectics must emphasize synthetic integration over analytic differentiation, and so that embracing dialectics as a general methodology commits one to an internalist ontology; and I have argued, against Register, that an internalist ontology is indefensible, and that any attempt to defang internalism by epistemologizing it must end in a still less defensible metaphysical subjectivism. But I have also argued that dialectics is an indispensable methodological tool—so long as its scope is not exaggerated. I come to praise dialectics, not to bury it.

## Notes

1. The charge is somewhat ironic, since such a confusion is exactly what I complained of in Sciabarra.

2. Perhaps Bissell will say that dialectics, rather than treating every X and Y as internally related, treats those that are internally related as internally related, those that are externally related as externally related, and those that are both as both. But I think this would understate the extent of Sciabarra's commitment to a focus on internal relations (see below). It would also be the statement of a desired result, not of a methodology; cf. Long 2001, 426.

3. This latter qualification is suggested by Register (2002, 366) and Sciabarra (2002, 387).

4. Note that what generates this undesirable commitment is not the mere employment of dialectical methodology, but rather the assumption of that methodology's universal adequacy.

5. Admittedly, as Wittgenstein shows, the concepts involved in any such logical analysis cannot be *formed* or *employed* apart from a certain context of psychological judgments; see Long (unpublished). But this still allows us to leave out a great deal.

6. One reason I'm inclined to treat universals as metaphysical, rather than epistemological, is that *this* fact—the fact that mind-independent particulars place constraints on what universals we can legitimately form—is itself mind-independent; and it's not clear how the existence of these mind-independent constraints is distinct from the existence of mind-independent universals. However, it would be a Platonizing mistake to reify these universals as some sort of immaterial *entities*. Universals are fact-like, not thing-like; they are, or consist in, facts about particulars. But the metaphysical status of "facts" remains obscure.

7. The self-referentially paradoxical character of Register's thesis is highlighted by his own remark (2002, 367) that "[s]ome knower . . . is internal to each instance of internality or externality." If I, as a knower, bear an internal relation to the relations I consider as internal, must there be a *second* knower who bears an internal relation to my internal relation to those internal relations? And so on *ad infinitum*? That would be awkward.

Or do I instead simultaneously confer internality both on the relations I'm considering and on my relation to them? If I have to be an entity in order to be a knower, and I have to know myself in order to count as an entity, this would seem to require me to be a *causa sui*, bootstrapping myself into existence via a Godlike act of creative self-knowledge—which likewise seems awkward.

8. Though Sciabarra does add that, *were* a synoptic view possible, this would still not imply "universal internal relations."

9. As I have written elsewhere (Long 2000, 106–7, 118 n.):

What does it mean to say that a given conclusion counts as knowledge in one context but no longer as knowledge in another context? If by "knowledge" Rand means no more than *justification*, then the claim is plausible enough, but her use of the word "knowledge" will then count as highly eccentric, since a belief can be justified and yet later turn out to be false, whereas *knowledge* is ordinarily understood as entailing truth; the skeptic could fairly charge Rand with changing the subject. If, on the other hand, it is knowledge in the truth-entailing sense that is supposed to be contextual, then the same proposition will be true for one person and false for another; but this is a relativist thesis radically at odds with Rand's insistence on the primacy of existence over consciousness. . . . In similar vein, Peikoff claims that hypotheses that cannot *presently* be confirmed (e.g., the existence of intelligent life on other planets) are, *at present*, neither true nor false. I do not know whether Rand would agree with this subjectivist-sounding claim, but it strikes me as confusing metaphysics with epistemology. . . .

10. Despite my having a certain fondness for Wittgenstein, I also most emphatically do not agree with his dictum, quoted by Register (2002, 360), that philosophy does, or should, "leave everything as it is."

11. For discussion and defense of Hayek's claim, see Long (unpublished).

12. Indeed, judging from Sciabarra's own remarks, I may actually be a bigger fan of the *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* schema than he is.

13. Sciabarra (2002, 398 n.12) suggests that I exaggerate his distaste for analytic philosophy; he emphasizes that it is only "in a *single* footnote" that he expresses "a less than glowing view of the analytic tradition." (Compare his reminder (395 n. 2) that the index to *Total Freedom* contains "no more than six page references on the subject of triads in a 400+ page book.") I can't resist the retort that I was, of course, treating his remark not as an isolated atom but as internally related to a larger totality!

14. I also think Sciabarra shouldn't be quite so quick to downplay his affection for triads. Since dialectical inquiry is, quite properly, biased toward internal relations (that's what makes it dialectical), to examine an opposition dialectically is to look for internal relations between apparently opposed terms, an approach favorable to a *thesis-antithesis-synthesis* schema. (Of course, the hunt for triads will not be appropriate in those cases where the dialectical approach itself is not appropriate.) I teased Sciabarra about his list of triads (Sciabarra 2000, 58–59; cf. 24–25 n. 14), not because I'm any less fond of the dialectical waltz than he is—much of my own work involves waltzing toward synthesis—but because most of them didn't look especially *dialectical* to me; the only common denominator I could detect was threeness!

15. I would also note that although concepts cannot be true or false, they can agree or conflict with the concretes from which they were formed; in that sense, then, a precise concept will "falsify" the concretes on which it is based (though it *may* apply correctly to other aspects of reality), while a non-precise one will not. (See the soul/angel example at Long 2001, 409–10.)

16. As Mises (1976, Ch. 2, Sec. 3) writes:

It is quite true . . . of the concepts of economics that they are "never empirically identifiable in reality" in their "conceptual purity." Concepts are never and nowhere to be found in reality; they belong rather to the province of thought. They are the intellectual means by which we seek to grasp reality in thought. Yet it cannot be contended that these concepts of economic theory are obtained through "one-sided intensification of one or several aspects. . . ." On the contrary, they are obtained through reflections having in view the comprehension of what is contained in *each* of the individual phenomena taken into consideration.

17. I will also admit to finding much of interest in many thinkers in the Marxist tradition (e.g., the Frankfurt School)—though their most interesting aspects are not necessarily their most Marxian ones.

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