

Discussion

Reply to Roderick Long

Mistaken Identity: Long's Conflation of Dialectics and Organicism

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The principal criticism Roderick T. Long (2001) makes of Chris Matthew Sciabarra's dialectical thesis is a complex one. He says that Sciabarra fails to clearly draw certain important distinctions (metaphysical vs. epistemic categories, logical vs. causal relations, and abstraction vs. idealization) and, as a result, fails to "extricate himself from internalism." As consequences of the latter, Sciabarra overstates his cases (a) against Rothbard's version of libertarianism, (b) for the closeness between Hayekian-Randian dialectics and Hegelian-Marxian dialectics, and (c) for the overall applicability and usefulness of dialectics (406).

This brief essay will not address all of these points, but will instead focus on what seems to be the linchpin of Long's case: the allegation that Sciabarra fails to sufficiently distance himself from internalism. The roots of this supposed failure (not drawing certain distinctions clearly enough) and the further results of this failure (misjudging Rothbard, Hegel-Marx, and the scope of dialectics) are thus outside the scope of these remarks. The aim here is merely to show that Sciabarra has maintained a consistent position regarding internalism from the very outset, and that Long has failed to read Sciabarra carefully enough to detect that consistency.

Vindicating Sciabarra's Dialectics

To start at the present and work backward: in *Total Freedom: Toward a Dialectical Libertarianism* (henceforth abbreviated as *TF*), Sciabarra (2000) defines dialectics as "an orientation toward contex-

tual *analysis* of the systemic and dynamic relations of components within a totality" (173; emphasis added). Compare this with Long's claim that dialectics is one-sided because it is integrative and synthetic, lacking the balance provided by analytic philosophy with its differentiative (distinction-drawing) and analytic nature (426–27). In other words, Long says, dialectics isn't truly dialectical—nor can it be! Because of its one-sided integrative, synthetic emphasis, it is not a "full blown methodological orientation" (426) and can only become so by giving up its identity and forming a hybrid approach that also uses the "precise conceptual tools of analytic philosophy" (427).

Long has not accurately portrayed Sciabarra's view. The definition just cited *includes* analyzing how components are related within a totality. In other words, Sciabarra defines dialectics as being *both* synthetic (of one-sided perspectives into a fuller, less distorted perspective) *and* analytic (of relations among components of a totality).

Also, Sciabarra thoroughly discusses the truly one-sided perspectives in regard to synthesis and analysis and in regard to internal relations and external relations, and he identifies these as "strict organicism" (synthetic, internal relations) and "strict atomism" (analytic, external relations). Thus, it is not the Sciabarran dialecticians, but the organicists (aka Absolute Idealists) who embody what Long objects to as a one-sided focus on internal relations and synthesis. It is these latter with whom Long and the analytic community (aka Realists) must pool perspectives, in order to transcend their respective limited viewpoints and arrive at something approximating Sciabarra's model of dialectics.

In both *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (1995b; hereinafter RR) and *TF*, Sciabarra explicitly disavows an internalist view of relations. He says that whether a given relation is external or internal depends upon context, and that an exclusively internalist (or externalist) commitment rests on begging the question, cosmologically speaking (RR, 59–61, 175–76; *TF*, 182). Yet, Long (2001) says, Sciabarra earlier seemed to suggest that dialectics *was* essentially "wedded" to the doctrine of internal relations (398). In support of this claim, Long first quotes from Sciabarra's *Marx, Hayek, and Utopia* (1995a,

henceforth *MHU*): "A dialectical perspective . . . focuses not on external connections between static elements, but on dynamic internal relations. . . . Dialectical analysis views things as internally related. Dualism views things as externally related" (24).

Unfortunately, Long overlooks a crucial distinction, possibly because of the ambiguity in the word "as." It is true that dualism and atomism view things *as being* externally related, *rather than* internally related. However, it should also be noted that organicism and monism view things *as being* internally related, *rather than* externally related. Dialectics, by contrast, views things *insofar as* they are *internally* related—and it *also* views things *insofar as* they are *externally* related.

In the context specifically of Sciabarra's comparison of dialectics and dualism, then, the *relevant* point is that dualism fails to acknowledge internal relations, while dialectics acknowledges them. In a contrast between dialectics and organicism (or monism), the appropriate relevant point would be that organicism fails to acknowledge *external* relations, while dialectics acknowledges them. Long, in his haste to categorize dialectics as a *synthetic, integrative, internalist* doctrine, misses this point entirely. Indeed, as Long notes in his reference to RR, Sciabarra sees internal relations as *contextual*, as an *aspect* of something's nature, which *also* includes its being *externally* related to certain other things.

Second, Long quotes Sciabarra's 1995 interview with *Full Context* (1995c): "[Dialectics has] an emphasis on Internal Relations. . . . [A]s a consequence of all of this, dialectics rejects formal dualism [which] stresses not integration and organic unity, but separation and opposition between spheres, and external relations between parts" (5). What Long misses here is the *reason* for the stress on internal relations: it is to correct the atomistic and dualistic tendency to view parts as being *non-integrated* and *separate from the whole of which they are parts*.

In other words, Sciabarra is *not* saying that external relations do not exist, but rather that characterizing parts as being externally related (rather than internally related) is simply incorrect. External relations are relations *between* wholes, considered as objects of focus

or inquiry, not relations *within* wholes, considered as “totalities” or structured unities—i.e., not *between the parts* of wholes, that have been identified through analytical investigation.¹

Speculating as to How Long Went Astray

Any of the above misinterpretations by Long of Sciabarra’s dialectics could be explained by itself as a simple, though regrettable, misunderstanding. As a consistent pattern, however, they indicate that a deeper influence may be at work. One suggestion that grows out of an appreciation of Sciabarra’s writings is that Long has fallen prey to the tendency to confuse methodological orientations with ontological or cosmological models of reality.

Sciabarra carefully and consistently avoids the pitfall of inappropriately cosmologizing the various approaches to investigating fields of academic study.² Rather than delving into the ontological implications of the dialectical approach in a way parallel to that of the dualist or monist or strict atomist or strict organicist orientations, Sciabarra remains steadfastly epistemological or methodological throughout his works. And he does so precisely because of the pitfalls suffered by the other orientations as they each attempt to establish their models not just as *a useful method of explaining* the nature of reality, but as *the fundamental explanation of* the nature of reality.

This hegemonistic tendency of particular cosmologies to elevate themselves to explanatory preeminence is thoroughly explored by Stephen C. Pepper in his classic, *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (1942). It might well have been subtitled “The Limits of Cosmology,” for that is precisely what Pepper seeks to clarify. Each world hypothesis or cosmology is explored in depth and compared with the others, and what emerges is a thorough parallel on a grand scale of the parable of the four blind men and the elephant.³ Each of the four “basically adequate” world hypotheses has strong points to recommend it, and they all have their serious shortcomings.

Pepper’s solution to the impasse arrived at is thus to strive for, as he puts it, “rational clarity in theory and reasonable eclecticism in

practice” (330). We should acknowledge that the “four alternative theories . . . supply us with a great deal more information on the subject than any one of them alone could have done,” and thus that we should make our judgments “in the most reasonable way possible . . . sensibly acting on all the evidence available” (331).⁴

The four world hypotheses that Pepper compares are Formism, Mechanism, Contextualism, and Organicism. Formism (Pepper’s name for “realism”) is connected with Plato, Aristotle, the Scholastics and Neoscholastics, the Neorealists, and the modern Cambridge realists—and, it would appear, Roderick Long. Mechanism (or “materialism”) is associated with the atomists and various early modern philosophers including Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Contextualism (or “pragmatism”) is connected with Peirce, James, Bergson, Dewey, and others. Organicism (or “absolute idealism”) is associated with Hegel, Bradley, and others (141–42).

Pepper groups these four cosmologies in two basic ways. First, he distinguishes between *analytic* and *synthetic* world theories, viewing Formism and Mechanism as analytic and Contextualism and Organicism as synthetic. Secondly, he distinguishes between theories that have “inadequate scope,” which he labels as *integrative* and theories that have “inadequate precision,” which he labels as *dispersive*—the integrative theories being Mechanism and Organicism and the dispersive (Pepper’s term) or differentiative (Long’s term) theories being Formism and Contextualism (142).

With this twofold classification scheme in hand, Pepper is able to characterize Organicism as an integrative, synthetic theory (146)—which is precisely how Long attempts to describe Sciabarra’s dialectics—a description that more appropriately applies to strict organicism as Sciabarra defines and discusses it. Also, consider the fact that Pepper characterizes Formism as a dispersive, analytic theory (146). If we then take “dispersive” as equivalent to “differentiative,” and if we further acknowledge other clear signs that Long places himself squarely within the Platonic/Aristotelian realist tradition, there can hardly be any doubt that Long’s view is a version of the world hypothesis Pepper calls Formism.

Thus, it would appear that Long has engaged in a cosmologically

tinged and overly narrow critique of Sciabarra's position. He under credits the Pepperian "rational clarity . . . and reasonable eclecticism" in Sciabarra's approach and sees it instead as harboring the specter of (strict) organicism—the narrower, synthetic-integrative arch rival to his own analytic-differentiative, Formist approach. As I have shown, however, it's a case of mistaken identity, pure and simple.

Conclusion

As one reads Sciabarra's growing body of thought, one can discern a consistent, continuous thread, running from *MHU* through *RR* to *TF*. Dialectics, as Sciabarra conceives it, encompasses and transcends the more limited perspectives of the synthesis-oriented organicists and monists and the analysis-oriented atomists and dualists (including Long's own analytic perspective).

It is certainly true, as Long states, that more understanding can be reached by pooling the valuable techniques and insights of each perspective—and he generously admits that his own perspective is enriched by the complementary efforts of the synthetic, integrative approach.⁵ Where Long errs, however, is in assuming that Sciabarra and dialectics are on the other side of the fence from the analytic tradition. On the contrary, Sciabarra the dialectician has consistently sought to transcend the limiting perspectives of the analysts and the synthesists, while incorporating their strengths into his dialectical "bag of tricks" for use when apropos.

Notes

1. I draw here on Sciabarra's distinction discussed in *TF* (173, 176).

2. It is instructive to compare Sciabarra's position with that of Ayn Rand (1997). In remarks written in 1958, Rand firmly insists that "[c]osmology has to be thrown out of philosophy," because "a metaphysical attempt to establish the literal nature of reality . . . usurps the domain of physics and proposes to solve the problems of physics by some non-scientific, and therefore mystical, means" (698). This kind of "rationalizing from an arrested state of knowledge," she says, takes "partial knowledge as omniscience" and is the pathway to all sorts of "fantastic irrationalities of philosophical metaphysics" (698, 699).

3. Sciabarra himself mentions this parable in *RR*, 380.

4. The similarity between Pepper's and Sciabarra's surveys of alternate views and their own preferred solutions is striking.

5. There is at least one significant discrepancy between the ways that Long and Pepper view the potential for cooperation between the synthetic, integrative approach and the analytic, dispersive/differentiative approach. Whereas Long is laudably gracious in calling for peaceful coexistence and sharing of research results and perspectives, Pepper sees Formism and Organicism as being "especially hostile to each other. There is nothing that an organicist so enjoys as devastating the 'linear' or 'atomic' logic of the formist, nor anything a formist so enjoys as tearing down and into small pieces the 'muddled' and 'psychologized' logic of the organicist" (147–48).

References

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