AYN RAND IN THREE ACTS:

CHRIS SCIABARRA'S *AYN RAND: THE RUSSIAN RADICAL*

BRYAN CAPLAN

1. Introduction

Admirers of the philosophy of Ayn Rand have spent well over thirty years trying to introduce her viewpoint to mainstream academia. But up till now, most of the effort has been concentrated upon Anglo-American philosophy departments in the "analytic" tradition. What is unique about Chris Sciabarra's work[1] is that he make a surprising attempt to explicate Rand's thought to thinkers within the very different tradition of "Continental" philosophy. Now this is not to say that Sciabarra is aiming this work at a primarily European audience; but rather he seems to be aiming it at fields like political theory, political science, and literary criticism which orbit primarily around the geographically distant sages of Continental philosophy, rather than the indigenous analytic tradition.

Initially, this seems like a hopeless quest: while Rand herself looked upon contemporary Anglo-American philosophy with scorn, I suspect that much of the Continental tradition would have positively revulsed her. But upon reading Sciabarra's presentation, it seems that her aim of presenting a unified philosophic system, culminating in a "radical critique" of all existing societies, has many striking structural similarities to the Continental tradition that Rand so despised. At the very least, Rand's grandiose aim should find sympathy within the Continental tradition, whereas the more "single-issue" oriented analytics would probably be very dubious from the outset.

Sciabarra does a remarkably good job of translating Rand's viewpoints into a form more easily understood by those familiar with Continental philosophy. In the process, of course, he exposes himself to two risks. The first risk is alienating readers who liked Rand already; they don't want to see her views re-cast in new language, however accurate the translation. Properly, I think, Sciabarra ignores this risk. The other danger, however, is that something will be lost or added in the translation; in particular, since Sciabarra is trying to appeal to an audience familiar with the Continental tradition, there will always be a temptation to put a misleading spin on Rand's thought. Overall, I think that Sciabarra manages to avoid succumbing to this temptation in any serious way; but there are a few places where he might have done better.

The work is divided into three sections. The first is an historical treatment of the evolution of Rand's thought; the second is an eloquent but unsurprising explanation of her views; the final section is a quite astounding and innovative effort to place Rand squarely within the "radical" tradition. Sciabarra describes his approach as "historical", but this really draws our focus away from the most interesting part of the book, which is Sciabarra's effort to draw together a host of seemingly disparate strands in Rand's thought and show how they amount to a tightly woven critique of all historical human societies.

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25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

Bryan Caplan (bdcaplan@princeton.edu http://www.princeton.edu/~bdcaplan) is completing his PhD in economics at Princeton University. He did his undergraduate work at UC Berkeley, where he earned a major in economics and a minor in philosophy. He will be joining the faculty of George Mason University Department of Economics in the fall of 1997. Other Caplan writings are available from the Libertarian Alliance, and on Caplan's webpage.

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2. Sciabarra as Intellectual Historian

The first, historical section is quite engaging, but in the final analysis, Sciabarra simply didn't have a lot of material to work with. He puts great emphasis on Rand's only-named philosophy instructor, N.O. Lossky. Unfortunately, as Sciabarra concedes, we can't even be totally sure that Rand studied under Lossky. And while he does produce a few parallel quotations from Lossky and Rand, it just seems like circumstantial evidence.

The clearest connection, Sciabarra thinks, lies in the fact that both Lossky and Rand were supremely "dialectical" thinkers. Now while Rand did not use this phrase to describe her thought, Sciabarra makes a good case that it applies to her as it did to Lossky. The basic feature of dialectical thinking, as Sciabarra uses the term, is to consider the possibility that current philosophic debates are based upon a series of false alternatives; thus, a correct position must stake out a new position which incorporates the valuable elements of existing views while identifying their shared error. Aristotle frequently used this technique: laying out a list of prevailing positions, and trying to develop a correct position after appreciating the strengths and weaknesses of preceding views.

Now this is certainly a fair description of Rand's perspective; but what bothers me is that the "dialectical" genus is incredibly broad. There are so many routes to a "dialectical approach" that it seems rather odd to think that Lossky was the primary inspiration for this aspect of Rand's thought. In fact, it would be hard to name any thinkers who are *not* dialectical in the sense that Sciabarra discusses. Basically, only those thinkers who try to deduce their entire view from self-evident axioms — like Descartes in the *Meditations* or Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* — would fail to qualify for membership. While Rand probably relies on dialectical exposition more than some other modern thinkers, it seems that Sciabarra over-emphasizes the dialectical side of Rand's writing to the detriment of her many straightforward statement of and arguments for her controversial views.

When I ordered Sciabarra's book, I was expecting a much stronger effort to tie Rand to Russia's long history of philosophical novelists. He does discuss this connection somewhat, but I was hoping for a much more thorough comparison between Rand and e.g. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy. There certainly seems to be something both distinctively Russian and distinctively Randian about novels in which the characters personify abstract philosophical viewpoints. Moreover, the influence of the Russian novelists upon Rand's own thinking seems to have a great deal more textual support (in, e.g., *The Romantic Manifesto*) than Sciabarra's own "Lossky hypothesis".

Sciabarra deserves credit for linking the Russian followers of Nietzsche to Rand's thought. Ronald Merrill pointed out the extensive editorial changes that Rand made when *We The Living* was re-issued; changes which indicate that Rand's Nietzschean