



1984

Starting Point: An Introduction to the Dialectic of Existence (Book Review)

Gary Shapiro

University of richmond, gshapiro@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/philosophy-faculty-publications>

Recommended Citation

Shapiro, Gary. Review of *Starting Point: An Introduction to the Dialectic of Existence*, by Robert Denoon Cumming. *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (1984): 131.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Robert Denoon Cumming. *Starting Point: An Introduction to the Dialectic of Existence*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979. Pp. xv + 579 \$35.00.

This is a book of the first importance. First, it is a daring attempt to rethink the existential dialectic practiced by Kierkegaard, Sartre, and Heidegger and it offers a rigorous and sustained reading of some of their major texts. Second, it is also an example of a dialectical approach to writing philosophical history. Cumming, in this book, is a dialectician who distinguishes his dialectic from Hegel's (as do the thinkers he discusses) by insisting that an existential dialectic is open-ended, involves elements of dislocation, and will never culminate in a final synthesis. Cumming's dialectic is also to be differentiated from the Hegelian by its rejection of the notion of an absolute starting point. So *Starting Point* does not begin with the sense-certainty of the *Phenomenology* or with the Sein of the *Logic* but with a consideration of what it means to identify something as a philosophical movement. Cumming stresses the personal, social, and ontological senses of *movement*; he dislocates the expectations conventionally raised by his title by denying that there is any starting point other than the personal, understood in a sense which includes Kierkegaard's "that individual" and early Heidegger's stress on the *Jemeinigkeit of Dasein*. But, in contrast to the popular understanding of existentialism (which can find some support in a text such as Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism"), Cumming makes it clear that the starting point is not immediately available or obvious. To be at any starting point is to have a specific history involving dislocation and a struggle with self-deception. Human existence is to be understood in Heidegger's sense of *Wiederholung* as a constant attempt to come to terms with one's own historicity. To do that is to become aware of the stages or levels of human existence, as in Kierkegaard's or Sartre's analyses. Since Cumming rejects not only foundationalism but also the typical Anglo-American assumption of a clearcut distinction between philosophical principles and philosophical examples, he proceeds not by abstracting from his authors but by means of a close reading of their texts which includes an awareness of how they read one another.

Yet in a brief review it is impossible to capture the concreteness characteristic of Cumming's interrogation of particular texts and his assessments of individual thinkers. Among the distinctive themes which emerge, I will mention only two: spatiality and the confrontation with Hegel.

Spatiality: One traditional way of understanding continental philosophy, and in fact of establishing it as a tradition, is to see it as either moving back and forth between or combining Kant's emphasis on the temporality of human experience with Hegel's insight into its historical character. Cumming is aware of the truth of this view, but he believes that an existential dialectic also involves the sense both of site and place and of dislocation and disjunction (see chapter 3, "The Dislocated World"). He quotes Heidegger: "*Dasein* takes up space, and this is to be understood literally" (103). In developing a spatial thematics Cumming himself juxtaposes (through what he called a *topological* method in his first book, *Human Nature and History*) such *topoi* as Heideggerian *Entfernung*, Sartre's elucidation of the distance between the self and the other, and Kierkegaard's adaptation of Trendelenburg's critique of Hegel on the starting point: it must be real movement in space, not the abstract movement of the concept. Perhaps Cumming would like to follow the existentialists in spatializing time in a certain sense; however this is not done in the spirit which Bergson attributed to the tradition but as a way of preserving both a sense of genuine change and of places or "stages on life's way." Those who accept the one somewhat disingenuous statement in this book ("I have tried to write too for those not previously

exposed," ix), will want to approach dislocation by means of Cumming's chapter on "The Wiggling Bottom," which glosses Sartre's attention to spatial movement.

Hegel. It is not unusual to present existentialism as involving and even generating itself by means of a critique of Hegel. What is distinctive about Cumming's book here comes from his insistence that to understand existential dialectic we must see that the manner of writing or speaking, the form of communication is not just important but precisely what is at stake in existential philosophy. One sometimes finds such awareness of philosophy as a mode of discourse in English language discussions of Kierkegaard's indirect communication or of Nietzsche, a writer dismissed here for being overly biologistic, but Cumming has attempted to give a sustained account of all existential dialectic as a distinctive approach to discourse. As such, its great other is the Hegelian claim to absolute knowledge, to a universal language of an enlightened community based on full mutual recognition and self-knowledge. From a critical point of view, then, the crux of Hegelian philosophy (non-existential dialectic) is the transition from the aesthetic to the philosophical, which involves the claim that the apparent multiplicity and irreducibility of the artistic find their truth in the conceptual totality of absolute knowledge. It is at this reflective, meta philosophical level that Cumming sees Kierkegaard paradigmatically, but Sartre and Heidegger too, as shaping their own discourses which involve dislocating some rationalist contrasts between the philosophical and the poetic or rhetorical. Cumming gives a close reading of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* as a critique of the system of Hegelian aesthetics and as a demonstration of Hegel's attempted escape from the rough edges of existence by a Schein which renders his own philosophy merely aesthetic. The title of the most relevant chapter here, "Finish" (ch. 11), refers to an ambiguity between an artistic or craftsmanlike final coat which preserves a work and makes it shine forth, and Hegel's claim to have brought philosophy to an end. Cumming reads Kierkegaard on the aphoristic versus the finished in relation to Hegel on the finish of the masterpieces of European painting as anticipating the luminosity of a completed philosophy. The reading, as usual, is somewhat dislocating, but grounded in both hermeneutic rigor and linguistic sensitivity.

Cumming complicates his *Starting Point* by promising that it is to be followed by a second book which will offer an account of phenomenology, especially as practiced by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, from the standpoint of an existential dialectic. He justifies this reversal of the more usual expository order in which phenomenology precedes existentialism by citing the quirkiness of philosophical history in which English speaking readers have in fact generally been introduced to continental thinkers in this recapitulative, *wiederholend* manner. But I wonder whether a second volume alone can do justice to Cumming's ambitious attempt to clarify the nature of philosophy by means of existential reflection on ways of starting and ways of speaking. Noticeable in Cumming's topics, in his tone, and in his style of rigorous commentary and startling juxtaposition are some deep affinities with such post-existential writers as Derrida or Foucault. We should hope then not only to be able to read Cumming soon on the classical phenomenological line but also that he will eventually explain whether and how an existential dialectic differs from a philosophy of deconstruction and difference, to which it seems very close in the present book.

Gary Shapiro, University of Kansas