
BOOK REVIEWS

Stephen N. Dunning. *Dialectical Readings: Three Types of Interpretation*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997. 191p.

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In his thought-provoking work, *Dialectical Readings: Three Types of Interpretation*, philosopher Stephen N. Dunning attempts to ease the tensions which have emerged as an ever-expanding range of interpretative methods vie for privileged status. To accomplish this, he establishes a three-part dialectical typology which assesses various conflicting interdisciplinary approaches to the act of interpretation. Dunning's project centers on bringing a sense of order to conflicts which have frequently undermined the understanding of dialectical methods; thus, *Dialectical Readings* "offers a way to grasp the contextual character of all interpretation without succumbing to relativism, and a way to sort out which interpretation of a text or subject seems to be most adequate without ignoring the genuine contributions of other understandings" (3–4).

Dunning delineates a typological rubric featuring three dialectical types of interpretation. For example, theoretical interpretation is a dialectic of contradiction which finds truth in the clear distinctions of a pursuit of knowledge — either of the object or the self. Ambiguity is exploited, although theoretical interpretation assumes and asserts the validity of the fundamental binary oppositions it explores. Dunning explains that although this method of explanation strives to be objective, "it can also take a subjective form in reaction against such objectivity" (8). Thinkers he aligns with the theoretical include behavioral scientist B.F. Skinner, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, historian Lee Benson, and philosophers Roland Barthes, Frederick Nietzsche, and Michel Foucault. Dunning's second mode, transactional interpretation, may be seen as a critical response to the methodological dialectics of theoretical interpretation; it is a dialectic of reciprocity emphasizing the give and take between two consenting parties to a hermeneutical transaction. With mutual understanding and reciprocal relations goals of this method of interpretation, truth is found in dialogic interaction, harmony, and communication between subject and object as self and Other. Transactional thinkers in Dunning's paradigm are similarly situated in a wide range of disciplines and

include Jacques Ellul, Mary Douglas, E.H. Carr, Erich Fromm, Martin Buber, and E.D. Hirsch. The final division in the typology is transformational interpretation, grounded in the opposition between theoretical and transactional approaches. This is clearly a dialectic of paradox which combines the stricter methods of theoretical interpretation with the dialogic character of transactional interpretation, seeking ultimately to synthesize both explanation and understanding as parts of a larger whole. Truth, according to a transformational model, belongs to the subject matter and encourages more open access to a world revealed by the text, enabling the interpreter to see an old subject in a different manner. To demonstrate the transformational interpretation at work, Dunning uses the work of Thomas Kuhn, Joseph Campbell, Søren Kierkegaard, and Paul Ricoeur.

This three-part schema allows Dunning to provide fresh, and in many cases oddly perplexing, readings of many of these theorists, and it is quite evident that he favors transformational interpretation. Dunning acknowledges his debt to transformational thinking, indicating that the project “was initially conceived as an application of Søren Kierkegaard’s theory of the three stages in the development” (14). These three stages — aesthetic, ethical, and religious consciousness — of Kierkegaard’s cosmology have been transformed into the theoretical, transactional, and transformational types here, and “are arranged directionally, with theoretical at the beginning and transformational at the end” (13). Dunning deftly silences potential questioners by asserting that “[a]lthough others might wish to rearrange the three, they could do so only by redefining the dialectical character of each type” (13). Before launching into the exegetical portion of his project, Dunning acknowledges that “transformational interpretation is not superior for every topic or in the hands of every interpreter” (13), topics which he indicates might be the evaluation of surgical techniques or adjudicating labor disputes performed by the less adequately prepared dialectician. Thus, “when a problem demands technical expertise or a question requires an immediate and practical answer,” the rarified interests of transformational philosophy may not prove to be superior.

What is less clear is *why* transformational interpretation should be seen in a more favorable light. The examples of both theoretical and transactional interpretation appear to closely coincide with the typological rubric Dunning establishes for them; yet, it is evident that several of the theorists are targeted precisely for this correspondence. For instance, Dunning is very critical of the work of Lévi-Strauss and Foucault apparently *because* the work follows an essentially structuralist orientation which seeks to describe without assigning any type of interpretive meaning; a theoretical position Dunning evidently wants no part of. It seems

rather unusual that Dunning willingly chooses to use Foucault while he simultaneously denigrates his philosophical position and makes repeated sweeping generalizations regarding Foucault's supposed critical agenda. Utilizing one of Foucault's well-known, but less well-understood, texts, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1972), Dunning effectively collapses Foucault's entire output to a single and decidedly diminished point of view — a rhetorical maneuver whose purpose remains equivocal.

What is most interesting here, however, is that Dunning's own typology bears a striking resemblance to the three types of knowledge Foucault outlines in *The Order of Things* (1971). The focus of Foucault's divisions seem to mirror Dunning's dialectical types in reciprocal ways, ways which the derivation from Kierkegaard's theory of development to Dunning's dialectical typology are less obvious. By emphasizing his intellectual debt to Kierkegaard and the tradition of transformational thinking, Dunning may be overlooking other possible connections, such as the one to Foucault, which could bring this work to the attention of some of the more conservative voices in a variety of interdisciplinary fields. Whether arguing with or against the typology of *Dialectical Readings*, it is unlikely that anyone with an interest in interpretation could remain passive or neutral once engaged with this text; the ensuing dialogue regarding both Dunning's choices and readings of the various theorists results in a highly engrossing and thought-provoking textual interaction. ✨
