Notes for book on phil

References to Chomsky, Burgess?

Idea that at bottom is a dispute over realism, esp. the objectivity of the value of reason—or perhaps of the centrality of reason—etc.

Oddity that the philosophers, despite their realism, insistence on logic etc. are the ones who revive old philosophers’ ideas for their own contemporary projects, whereas e.g. modernism is dead. Why? Perhaps some Hegelian rot to the effect that truth has less to do with a relation to the world and more to do with the proximity to the present moment.

Science bad, wrong (Chomsky)? If this means that science does not capture the whole of the human experience, then true but harmless. If it means that science is a manifestation of white power and privilege, then false and dangerous.

Distinguish: “I am a white man and so therefore incapable of inhabiting any other perspective” (though, even here, certain of my markers of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexuality, gender etc. are apparently mutable) from “I am a white man and so therefore incapable of imagining how another sort of perspective may look”. The former is platitudinous; the latter seems hopelessly pessimistic and anti-humanist (and false).

We may not judge other cultures for their racism (?)—unless (?) that other culture is an earlier American culture….

Chapters: (?)

Descartes—emphasis on the subject—Protagoras

Idealism and Truth

Kant

The original idea for this book was an exploration of 19th- and 20th-century philosophy. In a great many Anglo-American philosophy departments these days, coverage of the historical tradition will begin with the ancient Greeks and continue up until Kant. As for historical philosophy after Kant, the advanced student might take a course on Frege and Russell or on Wittgenstein, but it is strangely uncommon to study, with any systematicity, the currents of philosophy that arose in responding to Kant (when, of course, there were many such currents). Thus later movements such as phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics and deconstruction, largely ignored by many philosophy departments, become standard fare, surprisingly, in other humanities’ departments, most especially English, Comparative Literature and the like. And so the original idea for this book was to give the contemporary philosopher a taste of what happened in Europe after Kant, and to try to say something about why these later ideas had fallen out of favor among professional philosophers.

But in the course of my research, it became all too clear that this strange neglect of recent philosophers was connected with another recent phenomenon of philosophy departments, viz. their relative decline in popularity among students. There was a time when philosophy was held in high esteem by academics in general, when many students were interested in pursuing philosophy for its own sake, and when philosophy enrollments were high. But the recent stereoptype of philosophy is of a tired old academic discipline, insensitive to sociopolitical change, too boring and sterile for the modern, progressively-minded student. Add to this the fact that philosophy departments often devote very little attention and resources toward any effort to keep philosophy alive and interesting for new undergraduate students and we have a very real concern for the endurance of philosophy as an academic enterprise.

As I say, the striking fact that dawned on me was that philosophy’s falling appeal was connected with its shunning of recent European thinkers. And so the book became, in my mind, something more. It would be not merely a synopsis of European philosophy in the last 200 years; it would be a sort of cautionary tale. It would be an attempt to explain why philosophy has seemed to stagnate in recent years, while other departments (English, Comparative Literature, Cultural Anthropology) have grown, and grown *by incorporating the philosphers that Philosophy departments had chosen to ignore!*

It is also worth noting (and explaining in more detail below) that the European philosophy of the last 200 years is often dismissed by 21st-century American philosophers not haphazardly, but rather with purpose. The theories are dismissed, often because the modern philosopher take herself to see in them one or several rather serious errors. And yet these same theories are lauded by thinkers in other departments, who perhaps take themselves to see serious errors in the philosophies of earlier centuries.

This, then, is the centerpiece of this book. I want to say something about (i) why many “analytic” philosophy department ignore the last 200 years of philosophy of continental Europe, (ii) why this same philosophy is attractive to other academic departments, and (iii) why it is that (i) and (ii) are leading to an increase in those other departments and a decline in philosophy.

There are a few broad themes that I shall highlight. The fundamental shift, it will be argued here, is a shift of focus away from the external world “out there” and toward the Subject herself. This re-orientation will, by degrees, have many dramatic consequences for European thought, such as: a removal of emphasis on the value of (pure) *rationality* or *reason*; an abandoment of the notion of objective or absolute truth; and a new importance attached to concrete material particulars, over and above abstract universals. Other consequences will be noted as well, such as the praise of art and literature over (or just as much as) natural science; in some writers, social science will take the central position. Philosophy becomes far less (as classically conceived) an analytical search for timeless answers to objective questions and far more a sociopolitical examination of an historically embedded Self among historically embedded Others.

Chapter 1.

Our story begins with Descartes. The building blocks for the dramatic change in European philosophy—a change not fully realized until the 20th century—were, I shall argue here, laid by Descartes. The primary move that Descartes makes is one away from metaphysics and toward epistemology. Descartes brings new attention to the idea that, if philosophy is a search for truth *by human beings*, then we must investigate the human being herself, as well as the nature of the complex relation between the world and the investigating human mind. Relatedly, the foundation of philosophy will be seen to reside not in a pre-established world order or in some supernaturally determined providence, but rather in the first-personal existence and thought of the Subject herself.