

Personal Statement for Application to the Philosophy Graduate Program at Boston College

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When I was in high school my older brother gave me a copy of *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid*. At the time I was focusing solely on mathematics, which made the book's logic puzzles and hefty rational bias a tempting diversion. I had not ever read any philosophy, and was hard-pressed to even identify a single subject that the book could be about until long after I had finished it.

The philosophy course offered by my high school was a profoundly negative experience, and when it was over I vowed to never take a philosophy class again. I spent my first year at Linfield College focusing almost exclusively on mathematics. Linfield required the usual liberal arts diversity credits, though, and mathematics satisfied none of them. I found myself signing up for an introductory philosophy class just to fill out my transcript, and discovered two important things: that introductory classes are extremely boring, and that even as I lost interest in the tepid class discussion I could not stop thinking about the material itself.

A friend convinced me to take a higher-level class with him, and I was immediately hooked on the culture of philosophical discourse. People who understood the text better and in a broader context than I did were challenging me in a subject I quickly realized I adored. From there it was a slippery slope: I was a philosophy minor for only about a week before declaring my double major, and the more I studied the more philosophy eclipsed mathematics not just as an academic interest but as a lens for understanding my world. Ancient and Modern philosophy provided a perfect path of discovery for me, letting me study the philosophical positions of celebrated mathematicians as well as those of people who disagreed with them. I was still using philosophy to try to justify my mathematical bias, but this habit was gradually eroding as I found more problems that a mathematical view of the universe was ill-equipped to solve.

But I had begun too late, and while I had been exposed to post-modern thinking I left college still struggling with the problems of modernity. I graduated a skeptic, rereading Hume to try to make sense of experience and ethics. I considered graduate school at the time, but I had gone through a considerable academic decline in mathematics and did not want to commit to philosophy in the same way until I felt certain my passion would endure. Not ready for graduate study in philosophy and no longer interested in mathematics, I got a job teaching swim lessons and wondered where to go next. I knew I needed to catch up on and really understand 20th-century philosophy, but while I tried working on Merleau-Ponty and Husserl I found little that addressed the basic philosophical understandings that were giving me trouble. I thought back to a colleague of mine at Linfield who had always been able to give me fresh perspective when I was stuck, patiently dissolving whatever assumptions were confining me. His work relied heavily on Heidegger, so I turned my attention to *Being and Time*. After two false starts, I sat down with a pad of paper and wrote a summary as I read. It took me a full year, but Heidegger's refutation of Cartesian dualism and his novel phenomenological approach were the new understanding and direction I needed. This

Careful reading also gave me a taste for more thorough study and analysis of philosophy than my undergraduate work had required.

I have since been somewhat dedicated to studying Heidegger. His approach leaves no room for assumptions and admits (sometimes even embraces) his inaccuracies. This probably appeals to the mathematician in me, who keeps approximation and assumption to a minimum until the end of the problem before declaring them prominently. That said, there are insoluble problems with the mathematical approach to logic and understanding. I think it is important for a philosopher to have Heidegger's sense of discovery instead of merely the determination to prove a particular conclusion. Mathematics, for all its utility, is a deductive system, and any conclusion one produces can only be an informative restatement of your starting point. I would like to do more than rearrange the dust.

Surprisingly, the most important thing I've done these past years besides studying Heidegger has been my work as a swimming coach and instructor. Having to teach something I already understood has been surprisingly challenging—I've learned that teaching requires more than an understanding of correct results, but a knowledge of every kind of wrong approach along the way as well as a Heideggerian relationship with truth that recognizes the need for individualized learning. Working with children has been similarly broadening in itself, showing me new ways of looking beyond my own perspective and giving me a real-time view of how changes in our society are affecting child development. I spent some time working with a child who has autism in the Northwest Behavior Associates program, and while I found their Skinnerian methods objectionable it whetted my appetite to apply a more human philosophical perspective to the problem.

These experiences have renewed my resolve to become an educator in a more significant way, and when I had the opportunity last Spring to deliver a brief lecture on the ethical content of Heidegger to a class at Seattle Pacific University I felt an incredible need to do more. I had been concerned about whether the unfinished business I had in the field would be permanent enough to justify graduate school, but in the intervening years I have become certain that philosophy is the only home for me. My greatest desire is to study philosophy not just for its own sake but with the express intention of becoming an educator in the field.

One thing that philosophy has instilled in me is a restlessness about believing the same thing for too long. I have been reading more diverse philosophers to try to gain new perspective, but so far none has shaken, or even developed, the insights I've gained by reading Heidegger except for Heidegger himself. Reading primary sources on my own is no longer enough; in order to continue my philosophical growth I need a community of scholars who will both challenge my position and force me to improve and articulate it. To that end, I am interested in performing my graduate studies in an environment where I can focus on Heidegger without being confined by his particulars. I have always admired the ability great professors have to force me to take another look at philosophers I have dismissed, and look forward to discovering what important angles I have overlooked.

My own religious and philosophical life has nurtured a great respect for the Jesuits, finding them dedicated to beliefs that endure testing and inform a thoughtful ethical standpoint. This pious commitment to understanding and careful growth is perhaps the most admirable trait for any educational institution to possess, and perhaps the most beneficial for any student of philosophy to cultivate within himself. I would consider it a great privilege as well as a profound educational advantage to have the opportunity to study philosophy at Boston College, and would be honored to be considered for admission to your graduate department of philosophy.