

## ESSAY 33: Stanford and Amherst, hobbies and interests: Philosophy

Score: 90

Often I lie awake in my bed at night, not moving, too exhausted even to read. The ceiling fan turns slowly overhead, the sheets are smooth and comfortable, and the house lies in the quiet stillness of night, yet I do not sleep. For hours, I am lost in contemplation, my mind incessantly weaving threads of thought together in strange patterns. I silently drift in the darkness through a landscape of intangible ideas, groping for meaning behind the shadow of existence. What is it to be? I have spent years with this question, privately turning it over, searching for its nature, for the form of its answer. I have truly been haunted by Being.

Thus philosophy for me was at first a personal matter, a dream that forced its way into my head during the night. The thoughts arose as from a vacuum, unprovoked, and persisted in their senseless hold over my mind. Yet slowly I learned that others had faced these same questions, that they had spent their lives searching for the answers, and that, most importantly, they had left a written record of their search for meaning. Great minds throughout history had left a legacy which I could follow, turning my insoluble reflections into a legitimate, potentially life-long exploration. As time permitted, I studied philosophy, reading whatever I could find, and my quest for the nature of Being took on a more tangible presence.

Last year I joined the Humanities Forum, a program in which philosophy professors from Emory University and other Atlanta area colleges offer informal courses on a variety of themes. The classes permitted me to make a more systematic and rewarding study than my private readings allowed. Each class meets for two hours once a week, and is composed of undergraduate students, graduate students, and professionals from virtually every field. I am the youngest participant. I began the program with a twelve-week course called "Our Civilization," with primary readings from Alexis de Tocqueville, Adam Smith, and Friedrich Nietzsche, in which we evaluated what modern culture has lost in comparison to ancient Greek and medieval value systems and social structures. Later, in "Plato vs. Descartes: Ancient and Modern Philosophy," we explored the distinctive natures of the two philosophical eras by examining the thought of an influential thinker from each period. I am currently enrolled in "Heidegger, Metaphysics, and Nihilism." We are examining Heidegger's thesis that nihilism is the culmination of Western metaphysics by reading and discussing a variety of his works. Heidegger is the most profound thinker I have encountered; I often find myself forced to reread passages to grasp the meaning hidden within. In Heidegger, I have found the closest approach to the truth of Being, the truth I still contemplate alone at night.

Occasionally I come upon a familiar concept in my philosophical reading, one which I recognize as my own. To see my private musings, which seemed only ephemeral and abstract, expressed in the writings of a great thinker excites me to pure exhilaration. That this elusive creature Being has haunted others gives me hope; I now look forward to the setting of the sun and the sleepless night ahead.