

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

A SAMPLE PAPER With TA comments plus a REVISION with Explanations

Preamble

David Barnett, a TA some years back for the **INTRO** course taught by Jim Pryor, wrote the following **WRITING SAMPLE** in response to an exercise assigned as was the first paper assigned in our course at Brandeis as an *ungraded writing exercise* to allow students to come to grips with making an argument for a controversial position, thinking of several strong objections to their argument and responding to them. Here's the Exercise:

Writing Exercise #1

Write a short, 1-2 page paper answering the following question:

Do creatures like cats and dogs have minds? Or are we just projecting our own reactions onto them, the way we do with baby dolls and stuffed animals? If you think they do have minds, explain what you think the evidence for this is. If you think they don't have minds, explain what your reasons are for thinking that. If you think they have "minds" in some senses but not others, explain what are the different senses you're thinking of.

These will be due at the start of class on Tuesday. They will not be graded, but everybody must do the exercise. Write as clearly as you can and keep in mind that *asserting a thesis again and again isn't an argument*. Neither do you count as *objecting* to a view if all you've done is *describe an opposing view*. You must offer *reasons* for or against the views you discuss. This exercise is intended to give you some practice writing philosophy, a sense of the kind of clarity and argument we'll be looking for in your graded papers.

In the next handout you will find the example of a paper in answer to the above question. It was written by David Barnett, a TA in the course, but it follows and draws upon a number of actual attempts by students in the class to answer the question. So it's a sample. In the handout following the original paper, there is handout of the paper plus the TA's general comments, followed by a handout with more detailed comments still and then a revision with the TA's explanations of what has been done to make the paper better and then a handout of the revision all by itself, The revision is not perfect, but it is an improvement. Nearly every paper published by a philosopher could stand some improvement, although the published version is most likely an improvement upon the first draft.

Here are David Barnett's comments on his writing the sample and the new improved version:

“The original ‘flawed’ paper and the ‘improved’ version of the same paper are similar in terms of the conclusion they arrive at and the arguments they give for those conclusions. But the improved paper is written in a clearer way. (I wrote both papers, but I tried to adapt them from the student papers I've been reading.)

The flawed paper has a lot of problems, which I discuss one-by-one in the comments. Some of these problems are incidental ones, but many of them are instances of the following three general categories of problems:

- 1. The author is assuming what he is supposed to be arguing for. A good paper presents relatively uncontroversial evidence, and then says why it is reasonable to believe the author's conclusion on the basis of that evidence. It doesn't just describe the evidence in a way that assumes that the conclusion is true.**
- 2. On a small scale, the author is being unclear about how he is using key terms. A good paper defines key terms where possible. And where it is difficult or impossible to give a precise definition (as if very often the case in philosophy), the author illustrates what he means with concrete examples.**
- 3. On a larger scale, the author is being unclear about the structure of the argument. A good paper is clear about what is happening where. For example, it says where a positive argument for the author's conclusion is being presented, and where an objection to that argument is being raised. It also states explicitly what the positive argument is, what the objection is, and what the response to that objection is.**

The improved paper is longer than the flawed paper, but that doesn't mean that longer is always better. You can make a paper longer by being long-winded, or by being repetitive, or by using a larger font--and none of these changes will improve your paper. In the case of these two papers, the improved paper is longer because it gives definitions, examples, and more explicit statements of the author's arguments and responses to objections. As long as you do these three things, brevity is a virtue.”

So, too, as is pointed out in **the Guidelines for Writing a Philosophy Paper**: “a good philosophy paper is modest and makes a small point; but it makes that point clearly and straightforwardly, and it offers good reasons in support of it. People very often attempt to accomplish too much in a philosophy paper. The usual result of this is a paper that's hard to read, and which is full of inadequately defended and poorly explained claims. So don't be over-ambitious. Don't try to establish grand, earth-shattering conclusions in your paper. Done properly, philosophy moves at a slow pace,”