

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy 1A • Professor Andreas Teuber

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SAMPLE PAPER WITH TA'S COMMENTS

Do creatures like dogs and cats have **minds, or consciousness, or a degree of intelligence.** (1)

COMMENT 1: Using three different phrases suggests that you have three different concepts in mind. The reader is left asking: What's the difference between 'having a mind', 'having consciousness', and 'having a degree of intelligence'? If you do have three different things in mind, then you need to explain the differences. If not, then you should just use a single word or phrase, so that the reader isn't left wondering?

This question **has plagued mankind since we first began to reflect on our own capacity for conscious thought, and it has perplexed humanity's greatest thinkers even to the present day.** (2)

COMMENT 2: Some students feel the need to introduce their topic in an overly dramatic way. This is not necessary in a short paper for class. We already know that this is a fascinating question--that's why it was given to you as an assignment.

In this paper, I will **prove** (3) that cats and dogs do have a mind.

COMMENT 3: It is pretty much impossible to prove anything in philosophy. A good philosophy paper offers good reasons for believing its conclusion, but it never proves its conclusion beyond a shadow of a doubt. Don't hold yourself to impossible standards, and don't promise what you can't deliver.

They do not have minds which are exactly like ours. For example, they are not capable of **abstract thought.** (4)

COMMENT 4: It's not clear what 'abstract thought' means, since no examples are given. It's also not clear what the author's basis for this claim is supposed to be..

Still, I will **prove** that a dog can feel. (5)

COMMENT 5: The term 'feel' is ambiguous. I've had students use it to mean: 1) experience emotions, 2) have sensations like pains and visual images, 3) perceive objects by the sense of touch, 4) various combinations of 1-3.

This means that dogs and cats have a mind of some kind.

As Turing showed with his Turing Test, we can only know that other humans have minds because of how they behave in response to their environments. (6)

COMMENT 6: That might be what Turing thought, but maybe he was wrong. You may want to discuss a philosopher's view in your own paper, but you shouldn't assume that the view is true, just because a famous philosopher said so.

And in addition to this, **other people have brains. (7)**

COMMENT 7: The reader is left to guess what the significance of having a brain is supposed to be, since the author doesn't say. The idea seems to be that part of our evidence for the presence of minds in other humans is that they have brains, but this seems to contradict the previous sentence, which said that we can only know that other people have minds on the basis of their behavior. It seems like the author's views need to be revised somehow, but without a clear statement of those views, it's hard to determine what revision makes the most sense.

Dogs show their emotions through their behavior, and they have brains which are similar to ours. **Some dogs have even been known to rescue their owners from life-threatening situations. (8)**

COMMENT 8: This might be one source of evidence concerning the mental capacities of dogs, but without any further explanation it is just an irrelevant comment. It also seems to be out of place in this paragraph.

This shows that having a mind is a matter of having a brain, and of being able to behave like humans do in response to their environments. (9)

COMMENT 9: This sentence has two problems. First of all, it confuses necessity and sufficiency--a problem which I will discuss in a later comment. The second problem is that it confuses evidence that a creature has a mind with what it means for a creature to have a mind. For comparison, checking a sleeping person's pulse might give you good evidence that she is alive. But that does not show that being alive just means having a pulse. (A tree is alive, but it does not have a pulse. And perhaps someday a human being with heart failure could be kept alive by an artificial device which pumps blood continuously, rather than in pulses.) Now you might think that having a brain and behaving in appropriate ways to one's environment is just what it means to have a mind. But this is different from the (probably less controversial) claim that a creature's having a brain and behaving in a certain way constitutes good evidence that it has a mind. (In my opinion, Turing himself was not as clear as he could have been about this distinction.)

Webster's Dictionary defines perception as "the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses." (10)

COMMENT 10: Dictionaries just give the definitions of words, for the benefit of someone who doesn't know what those words mean. Don't assume that the dictionary is right about the relevant philosophical issues. The person who wrote this entry in the dictionary probably wasn't even thinking about these philosophical issues at the time.

Based on this definition, it is **obvious (11)** that dogs can have perceptions.

COMMENT 11: Even if we accept the dictionary's definition of 'perception', dogs and cats will fall under this definition only if they become aware of things through their senses. It might seem obvious to you that this is the case, but you shouldn't assume that it will be obvious to everyone else. It once seemed obvious to many people that the Earth doesn't

move. 'Obvious', like 'prove', is one of those words that assumes a level of confidence which is almost never appropriate in philosophy.

Dogs can perceive objects in their environment and react to them, for example when they see food in their bowl and run over to it to alleviate their feeling of hunger. They also recoil in pain when something is hurting them. (12)

COMMENT 12: The observable behavior of dogs may be a good source of evidence that they can experience pain and perceive objects in their environment. But it's important to distinguish the dogs' behavior, which we can observe directly, from the dogs' experiences and perceptions, which we can't observe directly. These descriptions of the dogs' behavior just assume that the behaviors result from the experiences and perceptions in question.

I have also observed my dog Winston's emotions, which shows that he has a mind. When I came home from a long trip to the Bahamas when I was 13, Winston wagged his tail excitedly, since he had been really lonely without me. (13)

COMMENT 13: This passage makes the same mistake as the preceding one--i.e., the assumption that your dog had the experiences in question is just built into the description of the dog's observed behaviors. (You didn't observe the dog's emotions, you observed behaviors from which you infer the presence of emotions.) In addition, the passage includes an unnecessary amount of autobiographical detail. We're all glad that you had a fun trip to the Bahamas, but a class paper isn't the appropriate place to tell us about it.

Winston also loves to lie on my lap and be petted. And he gets excited when he knows he is about to get a treat. He also loves to go for walks, and to chase squirrels in our back yard. (14)

COMMENT 14: Again, this describes the observed behavior in a way that simply assumes that the behavior results from these experiences. And at this point, just listing off one behavior after another is getting repetitive. Unless these particular behaviors show something which the earlier behaviors didn't, including them isn't furthering the argument.

Dog brains are not as large and sophisticated as our brains. But do their brains differ so much from ours that it prevents them from having minds? (15)

COMMENT 15: The problem with rhetorical questions is that it's not always obvious to your reader what the answer is supposed to be, or how this answer is supposed to fit into the overall argument.

We can see that **this argument (16)** is pretty weak, since even human brains come in different sizes.

COMMENT 16: What argument? The argument hasn't been stated explicitly, so it's hard to evaluate whether a compelling response to it has been given.

This shows that **since dogs have brains, they have experiences, even if their brains are smaller than ours. (17)**

COMMENT 17: The conclusion of this paragraph says that the presence of a brain (even a small one) shows that dogs and cats have experiences. But everything which came before it just said that the size of their brains is consistent with their having experiences.

[missing paragraph] (18)

COMMENT 18: Until now, this paper has been giving a positive argument that dogs and cats have minds. In the paragraphs to come, it will consider some objections to this argument. But the paper does not highlight for the reader that this shift in focus is about to occur.

Dogs are not like robots. Dogs can perceive and have emotions, while **a robot just follows a program. (19)**

COMMENT 19: It isn't explained what it means to 'follow a program,' or how this is supposed to rule out having emotions and perceptions.

What if you made a robotic dog that wags its tail? Would it be excited, like a real dog? (20)

COMMENT 20: Again, it's not clear what is going on with these questions. Is the author sincerely asking, or are they rhetorical questions, or what? From the context, the reader might guess that these questions are being attributed to someone who is objecting to the author's views. But since this isn't made clear by the author, the reader has to guess.

We can see that this argument is also pretty weak, **because dogs have brains. (21)** and they aren't following a program.

COMMENT 21: This may be a relevant piece of evidence. But its relevance has not been explained. Don't assume that your reader can connect the dots' for himself. Do it for him.

Not every animal with a brain has a mind, like dogs and cats do. **An earthworm has a brain, but I have claimed that dogs and cats have minds because they have emotions. If so, then an earthworm does not have a mind because it does not have emotions like cats and dogs do. For example, if you had a pet earthworm, it would not be excited to see you when you came home. (22)**

COMMENT 22: This confuses a necessary and a sufficient condition for having a mind. Earlier in the paper it was implied that having emotions is sufficient for having a mind. That means that only creatures with minds can have emotions. This was implicit in the earlier claim that since the author's dog Winston has emotions, Winston has a mind. But that doesn't mean that having emotions is necessary for having a mind. That would mean that a creature could have a mind only if it had emotions. The claim of necessity is being assumed in this passage, but all that was implied earlier was the claim of sufficiency. The author probably wouldn't have made this mistake if he had been more explicit about what he was claiming in the earlier passage.

So this is no objection to my argument. (23)

COMMENT 23: You have not explained what the objection to your view is, so it's hard for the reader to assess the adequacy of the objection.