

CS182

Sample Philosophy Essays

To provide guidance in what we are seeking in a philosophy paper, here are four essays from undergraduate students from past versions of CS182. The essays are in response to different questions than you have this year. None of these papers is perfect, but notable strengths and weaknesses are discussed below. Strong papers can take many different forms, but they share the general characteristics of stating a clear thesis, analytical rigor, clarity and concision, and confronting and answering strong objections.

The first two sample papers are in response to the following prompt:

Question: Beginning in 2014, the communication app WhatsApp enabled end-to-end encryption for all messages on the platform, making it impossible for third parties – including governments and WhatsApp itself – to read user messages. The company’s adoption of secure encryption (enabled by default) allows over a billion people globally to communicate without fear of surveillance.

Write an essay in which you develop a framework for morally (not legally) evaluating the decision of any tech company in enabling end-to-end encryption. In your answer, you should consider (at least) the interest of government and law enforcement access to encrypted data for public safety purposes. Your essay should explain what factors count most in favor of the decision to encrypt (if any count in favor), what factors count most against it (if any count against), and how those factors might interact (if any interact). Make sure to identify (and respond to) objections to your own view, and be sure to discuss three or more readings (assigned or supplementary) in the data privacy module.

Sample Paper A: An A Paper “Morally Evaluating End-to-End Encryption”

- Clear statement of question in first paragraph
- Clear roadmap for the paper in second paragraph, with unambiguous statement of the argument
- Judicious citation of texts
- Clear consideration of strong counterarguments
- Strong use of outside readings
- Analytical precision, concise prose.

Sample Paper B: A B/B- Paper

- Longer introduction before main argument and framework is stated
- Strong prose, somewhat less precision and concision in the argument
- Poor citation practices
- Engages only minimally with cited work, provides summary rather than synthesis and analysis
- Good consideration of counterarguments

The second group of sample papers are in response to the following prompt:

Question: Address two morally-informed policy questions concerning the deployment of autonomous vehicles in the realm of 1) optimizing passenger safety vs. human welfare, 2) increasing safety for vehicle passengers and pedestrians but marginally increasing the risk of harm for bicyclists or 3) a law that would require all vehicle manufacturers to provide a “human pilot” mode that would turn off the autonomous system.

Sample Paper C: An A Paper: “To Be or Not to Be: An Ethical Framework for the Use of Autonomous Vehicles”

- A clear framework and analytical precision in the argument.
- Effectively and concisely addresses all facets of the question prompt
- Builds a convincing and creative argument through efficient reference to the text and consideration of counterarguments
- Incorporates some outside research
- Excellent, simple style of writing.
- Negligible editing mistakes, grammar, or syntax problems.

Sample Paper D: B+/A- Paper (begins with Sebastian Thrun)

- Clear thesis and structure that is discussed throughout the paper.
- Explicitly references counterarguments, tensions between viewpoints, and provides adequate rationale for argumentative decisions.
- Concise framing of relevant work/research.
- Negligible editing mistakes, grammar, or syntax problems.