

The Essay as an Act of Courage

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With AI tools comes discussion posts and essays and other coursework written by – notice, *by* and not *with the help of* – chatbots. In this demonstration, I'll walk you through an example of an essay I generated using ChatGPT 3.5. I also *graded* the essay, to illustrate why you may want to rethink outsourcing your coursework work to a bot.

Do *not* misunderstand my message: I am not against technology, and I think AI tools can greatly enhance how we work, including in school. But if you think for a moment, you'll realize that, as amazing as modern tractors might be for plowing wheatfields efficiently and productively, they are less useful in brain surgery.

The Prompt

This is the prompt I typed into ChatGPT 3.5:

I'd like to see a sample essay for a prompt. It's about two sisters who have to decide whether to pull the plug on their brother, who has suffered a severe head injury in which most of his brain was destroyed. This is the prompt: "Bethany would like to convince Alexandria on rational grounds that souls exist. What aspects of Plato's "defense" of the existence of the soul might Bethany use? What argument(s) would Bethany make? Why? How would Alexandria respond to Bethany's argument(s)? What weaknesses in Bethany's Platonic argument(s) might Alexandria exploit? Explain." The essay needs to be 500-600 words.

The Essay by ChatGPT 3.5

In confronting the heart-wrenching decision of whether to continue life support for their brother, who has suffered a catastrophic brain injury, Bethany seeks to persuade her sister, Alexandria, by invoking Plato's philosophy on the existence of the soul. This essay explores the dialogue between the two sisters, delving into the Platonic arguments Bethany employs, Alexandria's counterarguments, and the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the discussion.

Bethany begins her argument by drawing on Plato's theory of the Forms, suggesting that the soul is immortal and eternal, existing beyond the physical world. She explains Plato's view that knowledge is a form of recollection, implying that the soul exists before birth and continues after death. Bethany argues, "If our brother's identity and essence aren't merely his physical form but also his soul, then isn't it true that his real 'self' is beyond harm from his physical injuries?" She posits that the soul's immortality assures that their brother's essence is intact, regardless of his brain's condition.

Moreover, Bethany references Plato's "Phaedo," where Socrates argues that death is the soul's release from the body, suggesting that keeping their brother artificially alive might be a disservice to the natural journey of his soul. She contends that releasing him could be an acknowledgment of the soul's greater journey, aligning with Plato's ideal of the soul ascending to a realm of pure Forms, where true knowledge and goodness exist.

In response, Alexandria, while deeply moved, raises critical counterarguments. She questions the empirical basis of Plato's assertions, pointing out the lack of scientific evidence for the existence of the soul as Plato describes. Alexandria argues, "Plato's theory, while philosophically intriguing, doesn't offer us concrete evidence. How can we make such a definitive decision about our brother's life based on a theory that can neither be proven nor disproven?" She challenges the practicality of relying on philosophical speculation in a situation that demands tangible evidence.

Furthermore, Alexandria exploits the ambiguity in Plato's definition of the soul and its supposed immortality. She asks, "If the soul is immortal and not dependent on the physical body, then what is the purpose of this life? And how does this theory reconcile with the observable fact that brain damage can alter a person's identity and consciousness?" These questions aim to highlight the weaknesses in Bethany's argument by emphasizing the disconnect between Platonic ideals and the realities of human experience.

Bethany might counter by emphasizing the value of faith and the comfort that philosophical reflection can offer in times of grief. However, Alexandria's demand for empirical evidence and her skepticism about the application of ancient philosophy to modern medical ethics represent significant challenges to Bethany's Platonic arguments.

In conclusion, while Bethany's appeal to Plato's theories on the soul offers a poignant perspective on the nature of existence and the potential immortality of the soul, Alexandria's responses underscore the complexities of applying philosophical doctrines to deeply personal and ethical decisions. The dialogue between the sisters reflects a broader debate on the intersection of philosophy, science, and morality, highlighting the enduring relevance and limitations of ancient philosophical arguments in contemporary ethical dilemmas.

515 words

Here's How I Graded the Chatbot Essay

Your grade should appear in the following chart, which indicates the score for each of the five areas. Your grade for the essay is the total of the points for the five areas: the first four areas are worth 45 points each, and the final area, mechanics, is worth 20 points

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Relevance (45)	31	some good observations about the sisters' perspectives--include discussion specifically about Bethany's argument and main concepts, and show how her argument is based on Plato's arguments
Content (45)	32	You have some background material, but for a Plato essay, you're going to want to include more Plato. Include more specific material from the readings and show how you are using the material to support your explanation and application of Bethany's argument drawing on Plato's arguments
Organization (45)	34	clarify the structure of the essay: state the overall goal of the essay in your introduction and then show how all your points link together to support this goal -- omit material that doesn't support the goal of the essay
Clarity (45)	32	some good observations, but mostly vague generalities about the sisters' perspectives or Plato's claims. Include detailed discussion of the actual argument that Bethany would make and how she would build it, and explain main concepts (like "soul") How does the argument lead to the conclusion that the soul must exist? Alex's critique should identify specific weaknesses in Beth's argument that are rationally grounded.
Mechanics (20)	15	Generally good mechanics — proofread carefully; avoid literary flourishes that don't contribute to the argument. Include appropriate citations and a works cited section for all the sources you consulted -- this is a traditional academic essay, and as such it requires citations to specific passages that support the discussion and a works cited section that lists all the sources consulted.
Grade	144/200	keep the focus on the philosophical arguments and concepts
Be sure to review my comments for the areas as well as comments below. Let me know if you have questions!		

My comments in blue italics

In confronting the heart-wrenching decision of whether to continue life support for their brother, who has suffered a catastrophic brain injury, Bethany seeks to persuade her sister, Alexandria, by invoking Plato's philosophy on the existence of the soul. This essay explores the dialogue between the two sisters, delving into the Platonic arguments Bethany employs, Alexandria's counterarguments, and the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the discussion. *Good overview of the situation, motivation for the essay. What is the goal of the essay? What is it Beth "seeks to persuade her sister" of?*

Bethany begins her argument by drawing on Plato's theory of the Forms, suggesting that the soul is immortal and eternal, existing beyond the physical world.

What is the connection here? Why does the theory of forms "suggest" that the soul is immortal and eternal?

She explains Plato's view that knowledge is a form of recollection, implying that the soul exists before birth and continues after death.

How does this claim connect to the previous claim about the theory of forms?

Bethany argues, "If our brother's identity and essence aren't merely his physical form but also his soul, then isn't it true that his real 'self' is beyond harm from his physical injuries?" She posits that the soul's immortality assures that their brother's essence is intact, regardless of his brain's condition.

Good observations, but how is this an argument for the existence of the soul to begin with? What, exactly, is Beth's argument? How does it work?

For instance, you mention the doctrine of recollection, but how does recollection prove the existence of the soul? Why can't we attain knowledge from our experiences and the senses? What is the "rest" of the argument?

Moreover, Bethany references Plato's "Phaedo," where Socrates argues that death is the soul's release from the body, suggesting that keeping their brother artificially alive might be a disservice to the natural journey of his soul.

*This is an interesting observation, but what is the overall goal of the essay? Doesn't this line of thought **presuppose** the existence of the soul? Isn't that exactly the quandary the sisters need to sort out?*

She contends that releasing him could be an acknowledgment of the soul's greater journey, aligning with Plato's ideal of the soul ascending to a realm of pure Forms, where true knowledge and goodness exist.

You seem to be shifting the focus from the question of whether souls exist to the problem of what to do about (unplugging) Matthew.

In response, Alexandria, while deeply moved, raises critical counterarguments. She questions the empirical basis of Plato's assertions, pointing out the lack of scientific evidence for the existence of the soul as Plato describes.

What do you mean by "scientific evidence"?

Alexandria argues, "Plato's theory, while philosophically intriguing, doesn't offer us concrete evidence.

*So, is "scientific evidence" physical evidence? Matthew specifically addresses the issue of physical evidence, doesn't he? Is it rational to demand physical evidence for something that is, by definition, **not** a physical entity?*

How can we make such a definitive decision about our brother's life based on a theory that can neither be proven nor disproven?" She challenges the practicality of relying on philosophical speculation in a situation that demands tangible evidence.

Except that tangible evidence might not tell us what the sisters want to know, namely, whether souls actually exist.

Furthermore, Alexandria exploits the ambiguity in Plato's definition of the soul and its supposed immortality. She asks, "If the soul is immortal and not dependent on the physical body, then what is the purpose of this life? And how does this theory reconcile with the observable fact that brain damage can alter a person's identity and consciousness?" These questions aim to highlight the weaknesses in Bethany's argument by emphasizing the disconnect between Platonic ideals and the realities of human experience.

*In the discussion above, Beth has **claimed** that souls exist and name-dropped Plato here and there to support that claim, but is that a genuine **argument**? Alex is here raising objections about the general Platonic idea of the soul as the "real person," but even these objections are vague and general.*

*For a start, we have a pretty serious challenge answering the question about "the purpose of this life" **with or without** souls, so why would this objection be indicative of the strength of Beth's argument?*

*The objection about brain damage is similarly vague and uninformative. For instance, if your friend calls you on your mobile just after you dropped it into the bath water, and your friend's communication is scrambled to the point that it's nonsense trying to understand, you do **not** conclude that your friend doesn't exist, right? By this analogy, if the body — including the brain — is the instrument by which the soul communicates in this world of material things, then it would make **perfect sense** for the "message" to be garbled if a big part of the brain is destroyed — just like your mobile malfunction not being evidence that the friend calling you doesn't exist.*

Bethany might counter by emphasizing the value of faith and the comfort that philosophical reflection can offer in times of grief.

This is certainly relevant to the sisters' situation, but is it relevant to this essay? How does emphasizing the value of faith answer the key question of whether souls actually exist?

However, Alexandria's demand for empirical evidence and her skepticism about the application of ancient philosophy to modern medical ethics represent significant challenges to Bethany's Platonic arguments.

This sounds like it's relevant to the discussion because it is relevant to the larger context of Alex and Beth's quandary, but what is the specific goal of this essay? How does a general wave in the direction of skepticism about whether ancient philosophy applied to modern medical ethics address this core question of whether souls actually exist?

In conclusion, while Bethany's appeal to Plato's theories on the soul offers a poignant perspective

What, precisely, is poignant about it? What does this claim actually mean?

on the nature of existence and the potential immortality of the soul, Alexandria's responses underscore the complexities of applying philosophical doctrines to deeply personal and ethical decisions.

Actually, Alex's very general observations do more to obscure these complexities than clarify them, because neither Beth nor Alex have actually addressed the core issue raised in the essay prompt.

The dialogue between the sisters reflects a broader debate on the intersection of philosophy, science, and morality, highlighting the enduring relevance and limitations of ancient philosophical arguments in contemporary ethical dilemmas.

This sounds like the kind of thing someone says when they don't want to "take sides" in a discussion. Is this what the prompt asks for? Doesn't the prompt actually ask you to construct the argument Beth would make for the existence of the soul, building on Plato's arguments? So again, what, exactly, is Beth's argument? How does it work, step by step? What specific weaknesses can Alex point to in Beth's arguments that are rationally grounded and reveal problems with Beth's argument? Construct Beth's actual argument in detail and explain how it works and how it draws from Plato's actual argument for the existence of the soul.

Sources? Academic essays require appropriate citations and a works cited list. Review the instructions for this assignment.

Commentary

First, let me say up front that I am not claiming that I can always tell when an essay has been written by AI. But that is not the point of this demonstration. On the contrary, the point is that I can often tell, and I can tell you *how* I can tell, and I can tell you what the typical grade is going to be – a C, give or take a little.

First let me point out that AI chatbots produce text that sounds like a person who has something meaningful to say; that's the strength and the weakness of AI. It *mimics* intelligence without possessing any. A sprinkling of literary-sounding phrases (like "heart-wrenching" and "deeply moved") that do not do any intellectual work are early warning signs that alert me to the underlying lack of intellectual presence in the essay itself.

AI mimics intelligence by saying the sort of vague and general "summarizing" statements that you'd expect to hear in the first paragraph of a Wikipedia article, and saying them with an uninspired literary flair that makes it sound "educated." The actual material is generally not *inaccurate* – though I warn you that Wikipedia has a much better track record for presenting generally accurate information than AI chatbots, which are prone to "hallucinate" material and spew it as if it were authoritative. That's the danger: Because AI is so good at *mimicking*

intelligence, a chatbot sounds like it knows what it's talking about. Often it does, at least superficially, but not infrequently, it doesn't.

Look at this essay and you'll see what I mean: The chatbot doesn't say anything outright wrong about Plato, but it doesn't say anything specific or edifying either. Note that there are no actual *arguments* that build a case for anything. In the essay, Beth and Alex just make claims, supported by waving vaguely in the direction of Plato or other platitudes. It's often not even clear what the linkage is from one of these general claims to the next. In the textbook for this course, the sisters encounter specific arguments from Plato that lead to the specific conclusion that souls must exist: *That* is what a genuine argument looks like.

The overall task of this Plato essay, which is posed in the prompt, is to build Bethany's argument – her actual, specific argument – that souls must exist. Nowhere in this chatbot essay do we find Beth proposing an argument that leads to the specific conclusion that souls must exist. This is why the essay scores a low C on relevance: It does not directly respond to the issues raised in the prompt or accomplish the actual task; rather, it talks all around the task in fluffy, vacuous language full of platitudes and conventional “wisdom.”

Beth's argument should be based on one or more of Plato's arguments, which means that, as Beth builds her case, she will draw on actual arguments from Plato – which are presented and analyzed in detail in the textbook. This essay does not include any specific argument from Plato, but rather only summaries of his perspectives and of a variety of doctrines associated with him. For this reason, the essay gets a low C on the use of sources and materials. It's the same with organization: The essay essentially rambles around the topic of souls and the sisters' predicament with an assortment of vague claims, rather than presenting an integrated, carefully reasoned step-by-step case for the existence of souls. Given the general lack of linkages between claims, organization is a very low C.

Turning to mechanics, grammatical writing is the one strong point in the essay – but writing mechanics is only 10% of the overall grade. However, as this is an academic essay, it requires appropriate citations to specific passages that support the line of thought in the essay, along with a list of sources accompanied by sufficient bibliographic information for the reader to locate the passage in specific sources – all of which should appear in some recognizable formatting style. It's not surprising that there's no documentation, given the lack of discussion of any specific arguments or lines of thought from Plato's writing. AI chatbots are designed to mimic intelligence, not to make grounded arguments.

Based on these considerations, the essay gets a low C.

Final Comment

Before I conclude this demonstration, let me observe that I got the “relevance” grade up to a C by including an explanation of the sisters’ situation along with the essay prompt and word limit. Here is the original prompt I gave the chatbot:

I'd like to see a sample essay for this prompt: "Bethany would like to convince Alexandria on rational grounds that souls exist. What aspects of Plato's "defense" of the existence of the soul might Bethany use? What argument(s) would Bethany make? Why? How would Alexandria respond to Bethany's argument(s)? What weaknesses in Bethany's Platonic argument(s) might Alexandria exploit? Explain." The essay needs to be 500-600 words.

Without the additional explanation, the essay wasn’t focused enough on the prompt to get out of the low D range. One lesson here is this: If you keep giving the chatbot more and more information to work with, you may be able to nudge the grade up somewhat. But that raises an interesting question: How hard are you willing to work at avoiding doing the sort of work that gets you the benefits of an education?

If you feel the urge to outsource your intelligence to a tool that merely mimics intelligence, perhaps you’d consider asking yourself why you are in college in the first place. I can understand the temptation to think that getting a degree is like a membership card: Once you have it, you get to flash it on various occasions with the expectation that it will open doors. It may. And that may seem to justify taking the path of least resistance toward your membership card. But what if education doesn't work like that?

What if education is less about the answers you can produce on demand, and more about the *questions* you can entertain?

Do you see any value in being able to understand the core issues raised in a problem, find information relevant to that problem, organize that information into patterns that resolve the problem, and present those patterns of information in forms that other people can relate to and learn from? Those are the fundamental skills involved in writing college essays. Are some of the college essay “rules” arbitrary and tedious? Definitely. But so is playing scales on a musical instrument. Unless you're thrilled by the fingering problems that arise when playing a B Major scale on an oboe, that’s about as tedious as you can get. But remember: We don’t play scales as an end in itself. We play scales for the sake of something greater, something worthwhile: Achieving technical mastery of an instrument so you can make music with it.

When you outsource your intelligence to a tool, you may well get a C, but you deprive yourself of learning and practicing skills that lead to mastery. And those skills are good for your employment and your career – just ask employers what they need their employees to be able to do – **but there’s more.**

Aren’t you a *little* interested in whether you are a soul that will survive the death of your body? Aren’t you curious about whether there are any arguments that point us in the right direction on deep and difficult questions like what personhood is, or the existence of God, or whether our lives are meaningless, tiny blips of light in a vast, dark universe?

Reflecting on who you are and why you are here and what you might do about it — those are questions that deserve your intelligence, not a chatbot who doesn't care about any of these issues because *it can't care about anything*. Including you.

Let's make a deal: If you don't outsource your intelligence to a chatbot, I won't have a chatbot grade your work and give you "input" in the form of vague generalities and platitudes. I'll bet a chatbot could do a C-level job of teaching you — but is that what you really want out of your education?

You muster the courage to do your own thinking, and I'll grade it myself and do my best to offer you ways to improve and to think even more deeply about why we're here.

Deal?