

Philosophy 1765

First Short Paper

Below, you will find a few short quotations from papers we have read. Choose one of them and write a short (3-5 page, maximum of 1500 words) paper explaining what the author means to be saying in the passage in question (explaining any terms which may be used in unfamiliar or technical ways) and why they say it. Having done this, you should explain what role the thought expressed plays in the author's overall statement of, or argument for, their position.

As this is a short paper with a defined purpose, you need not worry about writing an introduction, about motivating what you are trying to do, or any such thing. Reproduce the passage about which you will be writing at the top of the first page and then launch directly into talking about it. If you need to introduce or refer to other aspects of the author's position to make sense of the passage, do so. But you should *not* attempt to explain, or introduce, aspects of the author's position which do not bear upon the interpretation of the passage, and you should not feel compelled to evaluate the position overall.

The Questions

1. It would seem that, when we make a statement about something only known by description, we often intend to make our statement, not in the form involving the description, but about the actual thing described. That is to say, when we say anything about Bismarck, we should like, if we could, to make the judgement which Bismarck alone can make, namely the judgement of which he himself is a constituent. In this we are necessarily defeated, since the actual Bismarck is unknown to us. But we know that there is an object B called Bismarck, and that B was an astute diplomatist. We can thus describe the proposition we should like to affirm, namely "B was an astute diplomatist", where B is the object which was

Bismarck. What enables us to communicate in spite of the varying descriptions we employ is that we know there is a true proposition concerning the actual Bismarck, and that however we may vary the description (so long as the description is correct), the proposition described is still the same. This proposition, which is described and is known to be true, is what interests us; but we are not acquainted with the proposition itself, and do not know *it*, though we know it is true. (Bertrand Russell, “Knowledge By Acquaintance and Knowledge By Description”, p. 116)

2. The sense of a proper name is grasped by everybody who is sufficiently familiar with the language or totality of designations to which it belongs; but this serves only to illuminate a single aspect of the thing meant, supposing it to have one. Comprehensive knowledge of the thing meant would require us to be able to say immediately whether any given sense attaches to it. To such knowledge we never obtain. (Gottlob Frege, “On Sense and Reference”, pp. 57–8)
3. This is the principle of the theory of denoting I wish to advocate: that denoting phrases never have any meaning in themselves, but that every proposition in whose verbal expression they occur has a meaning. (Bertrand Russell, “On Denoting”, p. 480)
4. The point of the conventions governing the uses of [referring] expressions is, along with the situation of utterance, to secure uniqueness of reference. But to do this, enough is enough. We do not, and we cannot, while referring, attain the point of complete explicitness at which the referring function is no longer performed. The actual unique reference made, if any, is a matter of the particular use in the particular context; the significance of the expression used is the set of rules or conventions which permit such references to be made. (Sir Peter Strawson, “On Referring”, p. 334)
5. ... [N]either Russell’s nor Strawson’s theory represents a correct account of the use of definite descriptions—Russell’s because it ignores altogether the referential use, Strawson’s because it fails to make the distinction between the referential and the attributive and mixes together truths about each. (Keith Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions”, p. 297)

6. Since the phenomenon Donnellan cites would arise in all the Russell languages, if they were spoken, the fact that they do arise in English, as actually spoken, can be no argument that English is not a Russell language. (Kripke, "Speaker's Reference and Semantic Reference, p. 115)
7. Alternatively, there were many questions asked in the reading notes. If you would prefer to write about one of them, you are welcome to make such a proposal to the instructor.