

Philosophy 1760

Third Short Paper

General Remarks

Below, you will find a few short quotations from papers we have read. Choose one of them and write a short (3–5 pages, 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 he says it. Having done this, you should explain, if appropriate, what role the thought expressed plays in the author's overall statement of, or argument for, his 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 Passages

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 Meaning", op. 27)

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)

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. 153)

The general moral of all this is that communication is much less a matter of explicit or disguised assertion that logicians used to suppose. . . . It is a part of the significance of expressions of the kind I am discussing that they can be used, in an immense variety of contexts, to make unique references. It is no part of their significance to assert that they are being so used or that the conditions of their being so used are fulfilled. (Sir Peter Strawson, “On Referring”, p. 333)