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 suf-
ficiently familiar with the language or totality of designations to
which it belongs; but this serves only to illuminate a single as-
pect 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 knowl-
edge 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 [expressions
which can occur as singular logical subjects] 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)