Russell, “Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge By Description”

For next week: Read and be prepared to discuss the readings listed under week 14 on the syllabus. You will get your problem sets back on Monday. I will likely e-mail grades to you before Monday.

Instructions for today: Discuss the following questions in groups and present them to the class for discussion. Be nice to Joseph and listen to him—even if he didn’t give me $70 on Wednesday. (Inside joke. That’s why you should come to class.)

1. What is acquaintance? (See p. 185.) According to Russell, what kinds of things do we have acquaintance with? (Hint: He says that there are four kinds of things with which we are *clearly* acquainted.) Do you think that Russell is right about the kinds of things that we are acquainted with? Things you might consider: does he need to add anything to his list? Or, does he need to take anything off of it? Do we seem to be ‘more acquainted’ with one kind of thing than another?

2. Russell *suggests* (only) that we are acquainted with the self. What considerations does he give in favor of the claim that we are acquainted with the self? What considerations does he give against the claim? Do you think that either side of the debate comes out stronger? Why, or why not?

3. According to Russell, what is knowledge by description? According to Russell, knowledge by description “enables us to pass beyond the limits of our private experience”. How does it enable us to do this? See his discussion of knowledge by description on p. 185. Also think of what Russell says about Bismark on p. 188 and what we have to posit in order to ‘get out of our own heads’ to achieve knowledge of things ‘out there’. Does this seem right? Does Russell avoid skepticism about the things ‘out there’?

4. In the last paragraph of the paper, Russell suggests that given the “very narrow range of our immediate experience”, “much of our knowledge must remain mysterious and therefore doubtful”. What does this mean? Why do you think he says this? Do you think he is right? Can Russell account for our knowledge that Julius Caesar was the founder of the Roman Empire?