On Begging the Question 'Who is N?'

THOMAS E. PATTON

1 Introduction   In [2] Keith Donnellan offers counterexamples to a certain theory as to how the referents of proper names (as used in particular utterances) are to be determined.[1] This "principle of identifying descriptions" (PID) employs a certain "backing of descriptions" in a way that Donnellan explains:

> If I say, for example, 'Homer is my favorite poet', then, roughly speaking, the descriptions I could supply in answer to the question, 'Who is Homer?', provide the 'backing of descriptions'. And these in turn either pick out a single individual as the referent of the name (as it occurs in my utterance) in virtue of his fitting these descriptions or make it true that there is no referent—that Homer did not exist. (p. 356)

But before launching his counterexamples, Donnellan proposes to exclude—that is, to disallow as ones to which a PID defender could resort—certain forms of description "which I shall count as 'question-begging'. . ." (p. 365)

   (a) the entity I had in mind
   (b) the entity I referred to
   (c) the entity I believe to be the author of the *Metaphysics*.

Broadly, Donnellan faults these forms for making life too easy for the PID. "No argument could be devised to show that the referent of a name need not be denoted by these descriptions" (p. 365). Yet subscribers to the PID, he claims, "would hardly have these descriptions in mind or want to rely on them in defence of the principle" (p. 365). This reluctance he would no doubt trace to a realization, as he would say, that if the "backing" could include descriptions like these, "the principle would become uninteresting" (p. 365).

Now all this, I would say, is at least much less obvious for (c) than for either (a) or (b). Donnellan disagrees:

> It is only a little bit less obvious that descriptions of the form 'the object I believe to be O', such as (c) above, must likewise be excluded from the set of identifying descriptions. (p. 365)