On Begging the Question 'Who is N?'

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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)

Still, he offers an argument to show this last. This should be an easy argument, if its conclusion really is almost as obvious as the parallel claim about (b), say. From the outset, one feels that (b), in its imagined context, is indeed question-begging in a way that bars it from use with (on pain of uninterestingness for) the PID. And as we will see, this feeling is not hard to justify by defining that way. But I find Donnellan's argument about (c) a hard and puzzling one. As this short section of his paper ends, his readers, I think, could be forgiven for retaining doubts on two scores: (i) as to whether (c) can really be excluded on the *same* grounds as (a) and (b) (as one parsing of his word 'likewise' and the apparent thrust of his argument suggest), and (ii) assuming the worst here, as to whether (c) can indeed be excluded from use with the PID on any grounds at all.

My goal here will be to develop and resolve these doubts. I will first define a way of begging a question that (a) and (b), but not (c), exhibit vis-à-vis the imagined question common to all three. So far so bad, for the sameness of grounds wondered about in (i). However, I will find other grounds for excluding (c) from use with the PID, thus upholding Donnellan on (ii). These grounds will also uphold him on (i), by applying to (a) and (b) too. But they do not, I think, exclude (c) and the others as *question-begging*. For while I see this as a *general* status, my new grounds will apply only within a conceptual sphere which is special to the PID.

Before coming to these grounds, I will comment on Donnellan's argument that (c) begs a question. Some puzzles I list should establish that Donnellan at least fails to make it clear why (c) and its ilk cannot support the PID. I will then reformulate his argument as sympathetically as I can. However, my efforts here will yield an argument still flawed, no longer by unclarity but now by a major gap. (My new grounds for excluding (c) from use with the PID will enable us to close this gap.)

2 *Begging a question: A simple way*   Donnellan sees (a) and (b) as question-begging

> in the same way that 'What I have in my hand' would be question-begging
> in answer to the question, 'What are you holding in your hand?' (p. 366)

Modifying his question–answer pair just a little, we get:

(Q1)   What do you have in your hand?
(A1)   The entity that I have in my hand.

Now (A1), while a definite description in form, is surely to be seen, in the context of (Q1), as tantamount to the full sentence:

(A1a)   What I have in my hand is the entity that I have in my hand.

But (A1a) is in turn tantamount to:

(A1b)   The entity that I have in my hand is the entity that I have in my hand.

And tantamountness being transitive, (A1) is also tantamount to (A1b).

Extracting a criterion from this, I will say that a definite description A *begs a question* Q, in the simple way that Donnellan has in mind here, if A, qua

answer to Q, is tantamount to what we might call a *formally* question-begging answer like (A1b), namely, one of the form 'A is A'.

Let us now see what must be assumed in making out that (a) and (b) are question-begging in this simple way. We will need a question for them to beg, of the form 'Who is N?', since this is the form which elicits the "backing of descriptions" that figures in the PID. Taking our clue from (c) (since (a) and (b) offer none), this could be:

(Q2)   Who is Aristotle?

But (Q2) must be taken here not as "coming out of the blue" but rather as *prompted* (as in Donnellan's initial example) by a use of the name 'Aristotle' in an utterance U: it was asked by way of discovering the referent of that name as used in U. That is, (Q2) must be taken as tantamount to:

(Q2')   Who were you using 'Aristotle' to refer to in U?

And (b), for example, if it is to count as begging (Q2), must also be taken as implicitly referring to (U), being tantamount to:

(b')   the entity I was using 'Aristotle' to refer to in U.

But (b') stands to (Q2') very much as (A1) stands to (Q1).

Similarly, (a) could be shown to beg (Q2) in this simple way, but only, it would seem, by taking (Q2) and (a) to be respectively tantamount to:

(Q2*)   What entity did you have in mind in using 'Aristotle' to refer in U?

(a')   the entity I had in mind in using 'Aristotle' to refer in U.

And as we leave (a) and (b), let us note that taking (Q2) as tantamount to both (Q2') and (Q2*), thus (since tantamountness is symmetric as well as transitive) making (Q2') and (Q2*) tantamount to each other, presupposes a substantive view of reference: that referring to an object O involves having O somehow in mind. Consciously or not, I think we all hold this view, and that our holding it is what explains our inclination to regard (a) and (b) as in effect the *same* question-begging answer.

But coming now to (c), it is amply clear that no one will be even fleetingly tempted to advance tantamountness claims, for (c) and (Q2), that would yield an answer relating to its question as (b') does to (Q2') or as (a') does to (Q2*). Thus (c) strikingly fails to beg (Q2) in the simple way in which we have seen that both (a) and (b) do beg that PID question.

3 Donnellan's argument

> Call descriptions such as 'the author of the *Metaphysics*' *primary* descriptions; call those such as 'the man I believed to be the author of the *Metaphysics*' *secondary* descriptions. Suppose that all primary descriptions the user(s) of a name can supply are false of everything. The backing of secondary descriptions would be useless in the same way that 'the object I had in mind' would be. For if I cannot rely on my primary descriptions to pick out uniquely what I refer to, trying to identify the referent via a description of the form 'the one I believed to be (though it is not) ϕ' would amount to no more than trying to identify *the object I had in mind* when I held that belief. (p. 366)

In commenting on this argument, I will employ these mnemonic tags for its four sentences: 'CALL', 'SUPPOSE', 'THE', and 'FOR'. One puzzling feature is a shift, seen in both CALL and FOR, to the past tense, for the key verb 'believe', both in Donnellan's example of a secondary description and in his general form for the kind. For depending on what counts as being "such as" his example in CALL, (c) may not even qualify as a secondary description. Now this could hardly be, for the whole point of the exercise is to exclude (c) from use with the PID. Yet this shift to the past tense seems crucial to our having even an intelligible goal of exclusion, much less a coherent argument to reach it. For reversing the shift in FOR, in Donnellan's general form for a secondary description, yields 'the one I believe to be (though it is not) ϕ', and we are suddenly seeking to exclude descriptions of a form which, for reasons of Moore's Paradox, no user of a proper name would supply. Whatever role Donnellan's parenthetical '(though it is not)' plays in his argument for excluding a description which contains it, it cannot play that role in an argument for excluding (c); for (c), as a description which a user of a name might plausibly supply, cannot be read as even implicitly containing it. Thus his argument for an exclusion, whatever precisely it may be, would seem curiously unsuited to the particular goal of exclusion which gave it rise.

Also puzzling is the role of SUPPOSE. The basic thrust of the argument, as seen in FOR, can only be that when this supposition holds, secondary descriptions *reduce to* a particular question-begging one, namely, (a variant of) (a). Now if this conclusion really rests on this supposition, a question arises which Donnellan would seem remiss in ignoring: what will our rationale be for excluding secondary descriptions when this supposition does *not* hold? But momentary reflection makes it plain that this conclusion in fact does not rest on the supposition at all: the object I believed to be ϕ will *always* be, and analytically, the object I had in mind when I held that belief.

These two puzzles, about the past tense for 'believe' in Donnellan's secondary descriptions and the role of SUPPOSE in his argument, can both be solved, I think, by taking him to be somehow aware that, *pace* what he earlier implied, the PID would *not* "become uninteresting", through having its success guaranteed, if question-begging descriptions were merely *included* in the "backing". For in all its forms, the PID conducts a *vote* (among the descriptions of the "backing") to determine, for a given use of a name, whether there is a referent, and, if so, what it is, and the PID will "become uninteresting" in Donnellan's way only if we can be sure that the question-begging descriptions will always carry this vote. An obvious way to assure that is to keep all other descriptions out of the "backing". But a problem arises about doing this for descriptions like (c): if (c) is one description that a user of a proper name "could supply", will not the cognate primary description 'the author of the *Metaphysics*' be another? Now we can keep this cognate primary description out of the "backing" by having our user accept the supposition of SUPPOSE. This will keep (c) itself out too, however: our user will no longer have the belief which made (c) a description he "could supply". But while lacking (c), the "backing" will now contain a description like (c) except for having 'believe' in the past tense — with Donnellan's parenthetical insertion '(though it is not)' as an optional extra.

The two puzzles I found in Donnellan's argument can both be solved by

assuming that he sought the drama of disqualifying descriptions like (c) *at their most potent*, in cases in which they were sure to carry the PID vote, thus assuring "uninteresting" success for the PID. Ironically, there are no such cases: sewing up the vote, as we saw, calls for abandoning descriptions like (c). But if this was Donnellan's strategy, was it even necessary? Can we not credit him with a less dramatic but perfectly solid disqualification, based on the claim that descriptions like (c) should be given *no vote* in the PID determination of a referent, since they *always* "amount to" a certain question-begging description, namely, a variant of (a)?

But here we must note a fallacy. As question-begging in our simple Section 2 way, this variant of (a), 'the object I had in mind', had to be read as (a')—that is, as specifying an object of reference. While as what a secondary description will "amount to", it must be read rather as specifying an object of belief. Thus the secondary description itself will *not* "be useless in the same way" that (a) is, *contra* Donnellan's claim. His argument, then, as I read it, cannot be held to establish a basis for excluding (c).

4 Closing the gap   Such a basis could reside, however, in *another* way in which secondary descriptions, now meaning ones like (c), were suitably "useless". Now this might seem unpromising, for is it not plausible that they could be use-*ful* in such situations as the PID envisions? With (c), for example, not relating to (Q2) as (a) and (b) do, it will not, even in the context of (Q2), amount to a tautology—but as a nontautology there, why should (c) not be as able as any other to supply information that satisfies an author of (Q2)? Less abstractly, (c) specifies someone as the object of a belief—but do we not often *know* what object it is which someone has a particular belief about? Why should information of this kind have to be less useful, to someone asking (Q2), than information about, say, what the object wrote or where it was born? Can we not indeed imagine situations in which it would be *more* useful?

Still, a way can be found in which secondary descriptions are "useless". For this, let us consider Donnellan's case of Alpha, his first counterexample to the PID and the only one in which he invokes what he sees as the question-begging status of descriptions like (c). Here, we have a speaker S, who is unknowingly wearing inverting spectacles, looking at "two squares of identical size and color, one directly above the other" (p. 368). Being asked to name them, he assigns the name 'Alpha' to one of the squares, the one for which he might give either of these descriptions:

(d) the top square
(e) the square I believe to be the top one.

Now the bottom square changes color, and S reports:

(U)   Alpha has just changed color.

And this report prompts the question:

(Q3)   What entity did S use 'Alpha' to refer to in (U)?

Now Donnellan's answer to (Q3), expressing an intuition that will surely be widely shared, is that S was using 'Alpha' in (U) to refer to the bottom

square. He then ingeniously elaborates the case so as to block rivals to (d) other than ones, including (e), which he would disallow as question-begging. This leaves (d) as the whole "backing" available to the PID, which will then predict a sharply wrong referent. We might note in passing that the PID would be in trouble enough even if (e) were allowed to join (d) in the "backing": its vote for the bottom square would cancel that of (d) for the top one, and the PID would be forced to a finding of *no* referent for 'Alpha' here. If I am right that Donnellan has not shown (e) to be question-begging, this "no referent" trouble is all he can now claim. But our new way in which (e) would be "useless" will legitimize the "wrong referent" claim he wants to make.

This new way will be one in which (e) cannot *serve*, as I will say, to answer (Q3), thus identifying a referent for 'Alpha' as used by S in (U). The general notion of a description's serving to identify an object is of course familiar in various settings. In particular, it is all but explicit in the PID's very name. As cousin to the notion of knowing who or what someone or something is, it would, were we to scratch its surface, no doubt prove relative to the situation and purposes of a person (see [1]). In our context, this will be a person with a question like (Q3) on his mind: this much about situation and purpose will be fixed. As for its content, the modicum given by two necessary conditions will suffice for us. One of these states that someone for whom a description D serves to identify an object must be able to answer (appropriately to his situation and purpose) an obvious certain question derived from D—'Who is D?', for example.

Illustrating this notion of service as we apply it, for (e) to serve to identify for us a referent for 'Alpha' as used by S in (U), thus answering (Q3), we must be able to answer this question:

(Q4)   What entity does S believe to be the top square?

On the face of it, these two questions call for distinct kinds of knowledge: (Q3) asks about an object of reference while (Q4) asks about an object of belief. Still, I will now show that their two answers *could not fail to specify the same object*. This result, through connecting with an upcoming second necessary condition for a description's serving to identify an object, will be my basis for denying that (e) can serve to answer (Q3). It will follow from two subresults that (Q3) and (Q4) must each have answers that specify the same object as an answer to an upcoming third question. (This will be like showing two numbers to be equal to each other by showing each to be equal to a third.) We can begin to establish the second of these two subresults by expanding (d) and (e) thus:

(D)   Alpha is the top square.
(E)   Alpha is the square I believe to be the top one.

These are expansions in the sense that S, in giving (d) or (e) as a description of Alpha (that is, of the square to which he has recently assigned the name 'Alpha'), would in effect be asserting (D) or (E), respectively. Such assertions would have to be *sincere*, moreover, for (d) or (e) to count as a description that S "could supply". And roughly, (D) expresses the belief that S would be presenting himself as having in uttering (E). (Nonroughly, (D) expresses a belief whose divergence from this one is not such as to upset this conclusion.[2]) So suppose

that S has given (e) as a description of Alpha, thus in effect sincerely asserting (E). Given S's sincerity here, I take it to be assured that S will *have* the belief that (D) expresses. For simplicity, I will further suppose that S utters (D) by way of expressing this belief. Then here is a question standing to (D) as (Q3) stands to (U), whose answer obviously must specify the same object as an answer to (Q4):

(Q5) What entity did S use 'Alpha' to refer to in (D)?

(At a cost to simplicity, my further supposition here is dispensable. Without supposing such an utterance of (D), my argument could employ a counterfactual cognate to (Q5): "Were S to utter (D) to express the belief he would present himself as having in uttering (E), what entity would S be using 'Alpha' to refer to in (D)?" Plainly, (Q4) and that question must also, no less than (Q4) and (Q5), have answers that specify the same object. And it will be plain too that this counterfactual question could replace (Q5) in my argument below for the other of my two subresults, concerning (Q3).)

But a pair of answers to (Q3) and (Q5) must also specify the same object: S's uses of 'Alpha' to refer, in this context, can of course be expected to be completely *uniform*. (S must be using 'Alpha' to refer to the same object in (E) as in (U), if (E) is to be relevant to the PID. And S must also be using 'Alpha' to refer to the same object in (E) and (D), if (D) is to express the belief that S presents himself as having in uttering (E).)

But if the question-pairs (Q4),(Q5) and (Q3),(Q5) both need answers that specify the same object, so must the pair (Q3),(Q4).

But if we can thus *reason*, with this last as one of two main subresults, that answers to (Q3) and (Q4) must specify the same object, can we not say that to answer (Q4) *is* to answer (Q3)? Since an answer must follow the form of its question, there is a sense in which this is false. But our reasoning also supports a sense in which it is true: anyone facing (Q3) in the imagined context may as well, given the fact of that reasoning, address it directly as turn to (Q4) in hopes of answering (Q3) through answering (Q4). For any fact that could reveal an object O as the one that S believes to be the top square, thus answering (Q4), would, with that reasoning, also reveal O as the referent of 'Alpha' as used by S in (U), thus answering (Q3).

Our present concern is whether (e) can *serve*, as I put it, to answer (Q3), by identifying that referent. My necessary condition for such service was that we be able to answer a certain question derived from the description that serves. For (e) and (Q3), that question can be (Q4): (e) will serve to answer (Q3), for someone, only if he can answer (Q4). But a second necessary condition now seems obvious. Omitting a general formulation, I will say that (e) could serve to answer (Q3), for anyone, only if (Q4), qua "certain question", were *not* such that to answer (Q4) would *be*, in the sense just upheld, to answer (Q3). Adopting this condition, what we have recently seen about (e) and (Q3) can be put thus: (e) *could not* serve to answer (Q3).

This inability to serve, as I will shortly urge, can be our basis for excluding secondary descriptions, ones like (c) and (e), from use with the PID. But first let us recognize it as a basis for excluding question-begging descriptions too. Just as (e) gets excluded, vis-à-vis (Q3), by giving rise to (Q4) as its "certain question",

(A1), say, which begs (Q1) in Section 2, will get excluded by giving rise to this "certain question":

(Q6)   What is the entity that you have in your hand?

   For (Q1) and (Q6) amount to the *same* question, leaving *no* sense in which it fails to be true that to answer (Q6) *is* to answer (Q1).

5 Justifying the exclusion   Why should the inability of descriptions like (c) and (e) to serve, in the special sense just illustrated, to answer questions like (Q2) and (Q3), respectively, be a basis for excluding them from use with the PID? We can take a clue from Donnellan's claim that if such descriptions could be invoked by PID defenders, "the principle would become uninteresting" (p. 365). He is saying this about descriptions like (a) and (b) too, and I take his claim to be that allowing the use of descriptions of either of these two kinds, question-begging or secondary, would *trivialize* the PID. For question-begging descriptions, there can be no quarrel here, at least if we pretend that they could be the whole "backing". (Without this pretense, there is no quarrel about allowing them no vote in PID determinations of referents.) But for the *distinct* category of secondary ones, a sense in which the PID would be trivialized needs to be defined. My response here has been to establish a sense in which, in the envisioned context of use with the PID, to answer (Q4) would *be* to answer (Q3): in that context, we could *reason* that the *same* object must be specified in answering the two questions. But the object for (Q4), and so the one for (Q3) too, could only be the one that (e) fits, for to ask (Q4) is in effect to ask what object (e) fits. The PID would thus become immune from refutation were we to allow it to employ, at least as the whole "backing", descriptions like (c) and (e).

   While aware of this looming immunity, Donnellan fails to assign it a source distinct from that of the immunity promised by question-begging descriptions — that is, ones like (a) and (b). He has both these descriptions and secondary ones in mind when he writes: "No argument could be devised to show that the referent of a name need not be denoted by these descriptions" (p. 365). But unlike my immunity for secondary descriptions, the immunity for question-begging ones will be that of an *analytic* claim. For where D is the "backing" that S can supply, the PID makes a claim of this general form:

(C)   The referent of N as used by S in U is the object that D fits.

   But since the description 'the object that D fits' and D itself could not fail to denote the same object, (C) is tantamount to:

(C′)   The referent of N as used by S in U is D.[3]

   And if D is a question-begging description, in the style of (b′), say, (C′) can be further specified as some such analytic form as:

(C*)   The referent of N as used by S in U is the entity S was using N to refer
        to in U.

   Now my immunity for secondary descriptions rests on no such blatant analytic claim. But recalling my argument that (Q3) and (Q4) need answers that specify the same object, it does rest on certain conceptual truths. (Foremost

among these is one linking an object of reference and an object of belief.) However, does the PID itself not purport to *be* a conceptual truth? If it were right, it *would* be one, and so irrefutable: that is, it would enjoy an immunity from refutation which rested on (its) conceptual truth. Yet this immunity could not be held to trivialize the PID or make it "uninteresting". So my immunity for secondary descriptions cannot be thus faulted merely for the broad kind of truth on which it rests.

I will say rather that it trivializes the PID through resting on *wrong* conceptual truths, namely, ones that have no particular bearing on proper names. For the same immunity would arise in applying the PID to uses of definite descriptions, a mode of application as easy to imagine as it may be lacking in philosophical point. My displays for showing this will be:

(U′)   My favorite movie star is a Scorpio.
(Q3′)   What entity did S use 'my favorite movie star' to refer to in (U′)?
(d′)   the actress who played Jessica in *Dune*
(e′)   the actress I believe to have played Jessica in *Dune*
(D′)   My favorite movie star is the actress who played Jessica in *Dune*.
(E′)   My favorite movie star is the actress I believe to have played Jessica in *Dune*.
(Q4′)   What entity does S believe to have played Jessica in *Dune*?
(Q5′)   What entity did S use 'my favorite movie star' to refer to in (D′)?

We can imagine that S, not having seen *Dune*, but reading about it and another film in a review column, has come to the false belief that Goldie Hawn played Jessica in it. So it is she to whom S is referring in expressing his false belief in (D′). But S is also referring to her in (U′). So the same object must be specified in answers to (Q5′) and (Q3′). But we can also argue as before that the same object must also be specified in answers to (Q4′) and (Q5′), and so again in answers to (Q3′) and (Q4′). Thus S's "backing" (e′) could not fail to pick out the referent of 'my favorite movie star' as used by S in (U′). Allowing secondary descriptions as the "backing" makes the PID as immune from refutation as before, but here this could not be the mere immunity of being right about the referents of proper names.

6 Conclusion   A story exists about a mathematician who, when challenged on a claim that a certain statement in a proof was obvious, thought hard for some minutes and then repeated the claim: "Yes, it's obvious." In disagreeing with Donnellan about its being "only a little bit less obvious" (than it is for question-begging ones) that descriptions like (c) must be excluded from use with the PID, have I been laboring the obvious? Or is it rather that he has standards for the obvious which few outside mathematics would adopt? In closing, I will resist the first of these disjuncts without insisting upon the second.

As to the first disjunct, I can imagine its being felt that in the case of Alpha, for example, we can *easily* see that (e) could not fail to fit the referent of 'Alpha' as used by S in (U). I will make two comments here. One is that if the story of *how* we see this is fully told, I suspect it will not be much shorter than, or indeed much different from, my own argument to this conclusion. My

second comment is that if it *takes* the case of Alpha, or some other, to show us that secondary descriptions cannot fail to fit certain referents, then at least an implicit claim of Donnellan's as to the *order* in which his conclusions can unfold is false. For the necessity of excluding secondary descriptions was supposed to be as obvious as it would ever get *before* we were enlightened by his counterexample cases.

This necessity rests on what Donnellan would also find pretty obvious: roughly, that a certain object of reference will not differ from a certain object of belief. Now suppose we grant that this last is indeed pretty obvious. Should we not then call an argument like Donnellan's, which needs it as a premise while failing to list it as one, an enthymeme rather than fallacious? His argument is at least unlike typical enthymemes, however, and takes on a vivid flavor of fallacy, by managing to *seem* wholly gapless.

Had he let this necessity *become* obvious, through the case of Alpha, say, claiming that it was so as a part of his argument for the morals he saw there, we could at most have charged him with adopting a mathematician's standards for the obvious. But in trying to establish it as a *preliminary* to his cases, through a puzzling and, as I would say, fallacious argument, he created, I think, a need for unobvious clarification, which I have tried to supply.

NOTES

1. All page numbers in this paper refer to [2].

2. The belief that S presents himself as having in uttering (E) is surely less well expressed by (D) than by: "It is Alpha which is the top square".

3. I have chosen brevity over use-mention propriety in my use of 'D' in (C′).

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