Kripke on Unicorns and a Challenge to His Metaphysical Thesis[1]

Spencer Pennington

Early in his lectures as gathered in *Naming and Necessity*, Saul Kripke makes a controversial claim: not only do unicorns not exist presently, but they never could have existed.[2] The controversy here is due to the fact that unicorns seem completely possible. There is no *prima facie* reason that horned horse-like creatures with certain other properties, so long as these other properties are not too magical, could not have existed. It just so happens that they do not. He supports this claim with two distinct theses, one metaphysical and one epistemological. We will examine the metaphysical thesis, which can be stated in four lines, but some vocabulary will need to be explained. Each premise is supported by Kripke's philosophy or by the myth of the unicorn. However, a theory presented by Amie Thomasson brings a serious challenge to Kripke's argument. We will state Kripke's argument concisely, explain every premise, and assess its validity and soundness by identifying a potential weakness.

Kripke presents a metaphysical thesis regarding the existence of unicorns: "…no counterfactual situation is properly describable as one in which there would have been unicorns… ."[3] He argues for this as follows:

1. Unicorns are a particular mythical species.
2. For any particular species, if there is a counterfactual situation that is properly characterized as one in which that species would have existed, then that species must be describable by both its external appearance and its internal structure.

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[1] This paper earned the Marten and Marie ten Hoor Award for Excellence in Philosophy when it was originally submitted to Dr. Torin Alter, University of Alabama, in December 2018 as an assignment in PHL 362 Mind, Language, and Reality. It was revised in November 2022 for submission as a writing sample to the English Department at the University of North Alabama.

[2] Kripke, Saul. (1981). *Naming and Necessity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell. Pg. 24.

[3] Kripke at 156.

3. However, the myth of the unicorn does not sufficiently describe the internal structure of the unicorn.

4. Therefore, no counterfactual situation is properly characterized as one in which there would have been unicorns.

Two words need to be explained more clearly here as the usage is non-standard. First, the term "species" is typically used to refer to a type of organism that can be examined in nature. However, let us here use the term to refer to *any* variety of organism, whether it can be found in the nature of our world or not. Thus, as subsets of "species" we have mythical species, species of other worlds, and so on. Hence, the conditional statement in the second premise includes unicorns as they are a member of the mythical species subset of "species."

We should also clarify what Kripke means by "describable" in this context. In the case of a real species (that is, one we can observe in nature in this world) we can say that species is describable by both its external appearance and its internal structure if and only if we have verified, or at least well-supported, scientific descriptions of both that can serve to distinguish members of that species from members of other species. We use science in this case because it is the tool used to describe natural things in this world. For instance, we would say humans are describable because we know how humans look in general and what we can find inside of them. That is, we know that they have hair, but not as much as other similar species of animals; we know that they have a skeletal system which typically contains 206 bones in adults; and so on.

Now, in the case of a mythical species, we would say they are describable if and only if there is a consensus in the mythology about the species' internal and external structures. In the same way that science is the tool used to investigate the natural world, mythology is the tool used to investigate mythical worlds. As it turns out, most if not all stories about mythical species lack

a thorough description of internal structures. This is the logical definition of "describable" in both cases, scientific and mythical, because it addresses what makes each type of species that which it is. We know a real species to be real because we have observed it, and we know a mythical species to be mythical because there is a myth about it. We could perhaps continue in this way to determine what it means to be describable for all kinds of things, but in the argument at hand, we need only to be concerned with mythical and real species.

We can now support each premise in turn. The first premise is based on the standard myth of a unicorn, which has roots in Greek literature. Since it is a myth and, by nature, the telling of it varies from person to person, it is difficult to nail down exactly what a unicorn is, but we can at least grasp the essential features. As stated in the Encyclopedia Britannica:

> The earliest description in Greek literature of a single-horned animal was by the historian Ctesias, who related that the Indian wild ass was the size of a horse, with a white body, purple head, and blue eyes, and on its forehead was a cubit-long horn coloured red at the pointed tip, black in the middle, and white at the base. Those who drank from its horn were thought to be protected from stomach trouble, epilepsy, and poison. It was very fleet of foot and difficult to capture. The actual animal behind Ctesias's description was probably the Indian rhinoceros.[4]

Most common myths of the unicorn share this description or a similar one. This captures the essential features of a unicorn: horse-like in form and size, long horn, not colored as a typical horse, and, importantly, mythical. (Ctesias does not call it mythical, but the animal he described does not actually exist, and from this description came the mythology.) So, Ctesias, and everyone who has referred to the unicorn since, takes it to be a particular mythical species.

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[4] From the Encyclopedia Britannica online, accessed 25 November 2018. https://www.britannica.com/topic/unicorn

The second premise is based on Kripke's discussion of essence in his third lecture. His comments on "the hunk principle" are particularly instructive.[5] Using a table as an example in the lecture, Kripke wonders if any particular table would be that table which it is if it was made of something else. That is, suppose Alice has a particular table, and only one table, cut from a great oak tree and passed down for generations. She calls this particular table "La Mesa," and calls no other table by this name. Kripke wonders: would a table that looks, feels, and overall seems like Alice's table truly be "La Mesa" if it was actually cut from a sycamore tree, or even from a different part of the same oak? Suppose someone were to surreptitiously replace Alice's table with another that looks exactly like it but was cut from a different hunk of wood, then someone reports after seeing it that "La Mesa is in excellent condition." Would this statement be correct? Kripke argues that it would not. Instead, one could correctly report in this case that a table which closely resembles La Mesa in all external appearances, but is not really La Mesa, as it did not descend from the proper hunk of oak wood, is in excellent condition. To truly be the table we call La Mesa, we would need the full, correct account of its internal and external structures, which we do not have in this case. This, Kripke thinks, comprises the essence of the table. This principle can be similarly applied to a variety of things.

When discussing unicorns, Kripke uses the further example of a tiger, a particular real species. In the same way that we quickly identify La Mesa as the particular table in Alice's dining room with particular external features, we identify the tiger as the furry quadruped with orange and black stripes that lives in some jungles. However, just as we must refer to the particular hunk of wood from which Alice's table was crafted in order to accurately describe it, we must also refer to the internal structure of a tiger. That is, not only does a tiger look how we described it, but it is also a mammal. It gives birth to live young, is warm-blooded, has a certain

[5] Kripke at 114, fn. 56.

number of bones, has a particular eye structure, and so on. In particular, we know that if there is an animal that *looks* like a tiger, but in fact has an avian bone structure, or is cold-blooded, or lays eggs, then it is not a tiger but instead an animal that only looks like one.

All of this builds Kripke's case for premise two. For any particular species, in order to correctly identify that species, we must be able to discuss its external *and* internal features. Without one or the other, we cannot know whether any animal fits in that species. In a case where there might be more features to consider besides internal and external, we could say that we must be able to distinguish between objects themselves and "fool's objects." That is, we must be able to tell apart La Mesa and a similarly crafted sycamore table (a "fool's La Mesa"), or a tiger and a tiger-like non-tiger. An example of such a case might be in describing a person. Someone, call them Tom, may have a twin who has similar or even the same external appearances and internal structures, but who has a different non-tangible aspect, such as a different moral attitude or personal disposition, so we know they are not Tom. This gives a way to distinguish between Tom's and "fool's Tom's" as would be needed to correctly identify Tom. However, in the argument at hand, it is not necessary to consider such a case, as we need not be familiar with the personality of an animal to determine its species, whether real or mythical. It is sufficient to consider internal and external structures.

To support premise three, we need only to refer back to the myth given in support of premise one and our discussion of what it means to be describable. In the myth of Ctesias the unicorn is only picked out by a description of external features. Recall Ctesias identified it as a horse-like creature with a certain size and certain colors, endowed with a horn of a certain type, and so on. He offers no description of internal structures, and no myth gives the complete

description Kripke would require. Since the myth does not contain this information, the unicorn is not describable by its internal and external features.

However, it may be argued that we can infer from the description of the unicorn a particular internal structure. In this case, the horse-likeness of the unicorn might imply that its internal structure mirrors that of a horse. However, this is a dangerous inference. For instance, we would expect a platypus to give birth to live young, as is typical of similar mammals, but that is not the case. We would also infer from the sight of a whale or dolphin that it is a fish and not a mammal, but we of course know this to be in error. Hence, given the lack of a proper, explicit description of the internal features of a unicorn in the mythology, we arrive at the third premise.

This is a technically valid argument as presented. The first premise serves to apply the conditional in the second premise to unicorns under the given definition of "species," particularly that a mythical species is still considered a species. Then the second and third premises form a *modus tollens* argument, relying on the discussion of what it means to be describable in the correct way, from which the conclusion follows.

Let us now consider the second premise more closely. Kripke writes:

> Now there is no actual species of unicorns, and regarding the several distinct hypothetical species, with different internal structures …, which would have the external appearances postulated to hold of unicorns in the myth of the unicorn, one cannot say which of these distinct mythical species would have *been* the unicorns.[6]

This is where Kripke presents his second premise, but he does not sufficiently appreciate the difference between a mythical species and a real species. Therefore the second premise is not justified. Rather, a mythical species may be said to exist, and to truly exist, without a description of internal structures, unlike a real species, *because* it is mythical. In fact, the traditional

[6] Kripke at 156-157.

descriptions themselves of unicorns are sufficient for its existence. Amie Thomasson supports this claim.

Thomasson gives what she calls the Artifactual Theory of Fiction.[7] According to her, fictional characters have actual, rather than simply fictional, existences, so we can make coherent statements like "Sherlock Holmes is actual"[8] as long as we understand *how* we mean that. We do not mean that we can go visit Holmes. Furthermore, we must recognize that if Doyle never existed, there is a good chance Holmes would not have, either. Based on these properties, Thomasson says Holmes is an example of a "dependent abstracta" – dependent on Doyle and abstract in the sense that Holmes does not exist physically anywhere in this world. Dependent abstracta as such have internal and external properties.[9] Internal properties are those which an artifact has in virtue of being placed in fiction, and external properties are those which the artifact has independently of any work.

Unicorns fit this description. They are dependent, perhaps particularly on Ctesias, but at least generally on man-made myths. They are abstract in the same sense Holmes is. They have certain internal properties ascribed in virtue of being placed in the myth of the unicorn, which consist of physical properties, like the horn and the horse-likeness, and perhaps some other properties in some myths like properties of the blood or preference of habitat. They also have external properties, in particular the property of being a mythical species, which are given to them by us, outsiders with respect to the myth. In this way, we see that unicorns are comparable to fictional characters described by Thomasson, and so can be said to exist, or to be actual,

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[7] Thomasson, Amie. (1996). "Fiction, Modality and Dependent Abstracta." The Artifactual Theory is described on pages 300-307.
[8] Thomasson at 301.
[9] From here, we will refer to Thomasson's internal and external properties simply as such, and the previous use of the words will be denoted by the addition of 'physical' – the features of La Mesa are internal *physical* and external *physical* structures or properties.

according to the Artifactual Theory. Hence, it is not necessary to be describable in terms of internal *physical* features, as Kripke claimed, for certain kinds of species, specifically mythical ones, to exist. Consequently, the conditional statement in the second premise is not true: it is not necessary for existence for *all* types of species to be describable in terms of both internal and external physical properties.

However, this counterargument may go too far. It shows that unicorns actually exist, making Kripke's argument moot by refuting a premise, but it does not address the underlying principle that Kripke is trying to elucidate. Kripke wants to discuss the metaphysics of things that we say do not exist. It is possible, given his development of the hunk principle, that he could simply pick another subject for his argument and sidestep this attack entirely. An animal that is not real, but also has no mythology – and thus would not be a subject of the Artifactual Theory – would be a candidate for this new argument. For instance, a tiger with a different bone structure may be sufficient. The main challenge would be to determine in what way it would be describable. That is, to determine how we could distinguish this tiger from "fool's tigers." Kripke might also say that he means the real, tangible kind of existence, not Thomasson's abstract actuality. In this case, the point based on Thomasson's theory would again be ineffective.

Here we have Kripke's argument for the thesis that there is no counterfactual situation in which unicorns may have existed. Definitions of "species" and "describable" clarify the argument. Each premise is supported either by Kripke's philosophy or by the myth of the unicorn. The argument is valid and sound given the discussions of the meanings of certain words in this context, but one premise is challenged by Amie Thomasson's Artifactual Theory of Fiction. Based on Thomasson's theory, we have a strong challenge to Kripke's argument, but one that might not truly address Kripke's point, or that may mistake Kripke's meaning.