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> In Naming and Necessity Kripke argued against the possible existence of fictional characters. I show that his argument is invalid, analyze the confusion it involves, and explain why the view that fictional characters could not have existed is implausible.

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In the addendum (a) to *Naming and Necessity* (NN below), Kripke presented his view concerning the possible existence of fictional characters, a view against which I shall argue in this paper:

I hold the metaphysical view that, granted that there is no Sherlock Holmes, one cannot say of any possible person that he *would have been* Sherlock Holmes, had he existed. (NN, 158)

Kripke is cautious here (as he himself emphasized in discussion). He does not claim that Holmes *could not have existed*; rather, he claims that *one cannot say* of any possible person that he would have been Holmes, had he existed. But this formulation should not be interpreted epistemically. It is not that we humans lack some knowledge that had we possessed would have enabled us to say of some possible person that he would have been Holmes had he existed. Omniscient God is likewise in our predicament. As will become clear shortly, Kripke maintains that nothing could make any possible person identical with Holmes; that is why he calls his claim *metaphysical*.

I suspect that the stronger claim—namely, that Holmes could not have existed—follows from this one. Deciding this issue, however, is unnecessary for the purposes of this paper: my criticism below of Kripke's argument, if sound, does not enable him to derive either conclusion. To avoid unnecessary discussion I shall therefore stick to Kripke's formulation of his view.

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Kripke's view strikes many—initially at least—as implausible. And this first impression is not unreasonable.

First, it seems that we often do refer to a possible person who would have been Holmes had he existed, that is, to Holmes. Whenever we talk about Doyle's Holmes, it seems, we refer to that possible detective, Holmes.

Moreover, Kripke himself maintains that we can and do refer to Holmes. Kripke maintains that fictional characters really exist, but as *fictional* characters, not as real ones; therefore, he claims, we can refer to them (*Reference and Reality* (RR), Lectures 3 and 4). Fictional characters are, so to say, at our disposal: we refer to them, we may admire or despise them, ask questions concerning the identity of various fictional characters (e.g., were Zeus and Jupiter the same god?), and so on (*ibid.*, Lecture 3). So if we can refer to that fictional character, Holmes, and distinguish him from other fictional and real characters, in what sense are we not referring to a possible character who would have been Holmes had he existed?

Secondly, saying, for instance, something like 'If Sherlock Holmes had existed, he would have solved many unsolved crimes', seems unproblematic. And it seems that in saying that, we refer to a possible person—namely, to Holmes—and identify him as the person who would have been Holmes had he existed. So such legitimate assertions seem to entail the view, contrary to Kripke's, that we can refer to a possible character who would have been Holmes had he existed.

Lastly, Kripke himself had once held a view incompatible with the one he later adopted in NN. 'Holmes does not exist', he wrote (1963, 65), 'but in other states of affairs, he would have existed.' Yet in NN (158) he claims that this former assertion of his 'gives the erroneous impression that a fictional name such as "Holmes" names a particular possible-but-not-actual individual.'

So why did Kripke change his mind? Should we think that our, and his, reasonable first impressions are misleading?

Kripke's argument in NN for his later view is rather condensed. Another place where he treated the same subject in more detail was in his John Locke Lectures in Oxford, 1973, *Reference and Reality*. Here is, first, Kripke's argument in NN:

Several distinct possible people, and even actual ones such as Darwin or Jack the Ripper, might have performed the exploits of Holmes, but there is none of whom we can say that he would have *been* Holmes had he performed these exploits. For if so, which one? (NN, 158)

And this is the version of the argument in the second lecture of RR (I quote it at length as it may not be accessible to some readers; the exploits mentioned are those attributed by Doyle to Holmes):

The problem is that of course it's possible that someone might have done things just like this. For example Charles Darwin, who lived in the appropriate period and country might if he had decided to embark on another career have performed exploits of precisely this kind; and so might Jack the Ripper, and many other people; let alone the fact that there might have been people, who weren't in fact born, born and doing these exploits. And Conan Doyle might have written about any one of them, had he so chosen, and he might have called him 'Sherlock Holmes'. But which of these hypothetical people is supposed to be the one designated by the name 'Sherlock Holmes'? If one says that Sherlock Holmes might have existed and performed precisely these exploits, which hypothetical person is one talking about? Not some extra entity. On the contrary, the person who did these things might as I say, have been Darwin; it might have been Jack the Ripper; it might have been anyone. None of these situations, I think, has a special title to be called 'the situation in which Sherlock Holmes would have existed'.

The fact is that in introducing the name 'Sherlock Holmes' we name a particular man who would have done certain things, not just any old man who did these things. It will be part of this story of Sherlock Holmes that, of course, he may not be uniquely called forth to do these things. Holmes might remark to Watson that, had he not been such a great detective, his brother would have been equally good, but not wishing to be a rival, he went into another field. So 'Sherlock Holmes' doesn't designate the person, any old person, who did these things: it's supposed to be a name of a unique man. And there is no unique man being named, nor is there any possible man being named here.

Kripke's conclusion is that even if someone had performed Holmes' exploits, this would not have made him Holmes. I find this *part* of Kripke's argument valid, yet I think that his further claim—the one he attempted to establish—that 'one cannot say of any possible person that he *would have been* Sherlock Holmes, had he existed', does not follow from this conclusion.

Consider the following analogous case. Darwin could have performed Jack the Ripper's 'exploits', but that would not have turned him into Jack the Ripper; yet it does not follow from that that we cannot say of any possible person that he would have been Jack the Ripper, had he existed. In fact, Jack the Ripper did exist, and we of course say of him that he is Jack the Ripper. So from the fact that B, who is not A, would not have been A even if B had performed A's exploits, it does not follow that we cannot say of anybody that he would have been Ahad he existed. So Kripke's *whole* argument is invalid: Kripke's final conclusion, that one cannot say of any possible person that he would have been A had he existed, does not follow from the fact that doing A's deeds does not make one A.

Can one defend Kripke's argument against my criticism? We shall try several alternatives. First, one may argue at this point that there is a crucial dissimilarity between my example and Kripke's: his Sherlock Holmes *did not* exist, whereas my Jack the Ripper *did*. Jack the Ripper's being real, and as such having some properties that Sherlock Holmes lacks (e.g., existence; or, in some sense, completeness), makes it possible to refer to him, despite the fact that doing his deeds does not make one Jack the Ripper. These properties, which Holmes lacks,

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make Kripke's argument applicable only to the latter. Since Jack the Ripper was real he is, so to say, at our disposal, and we can refer to him; and that cannot be said of the fictional character Holmes. Only in the case of a fictional character do we have to fall back on descriptions; that is why Kripke's argument is applicable to fictional, and only to fictional, characters. By looking at the supposedly analogous case of an actual being (Jack the Ripper) I am missing the point.

This reply will not do, for several reasons. First, Kripke's argument does not mention any property that a fictional character, by contrast to a real one, lacks. His argument relies on the claim that doing *A*'s deeds does not make one *A*, and this applies to unreal as well as to real characters. My example, using real people, was therefore pertinent. In fact, in order to show that Kripke's argument is invalid without begging the question, I *had* to mention real characters and not unreal ones in my example: only the possible existence of the latter is the debated point.

Secondly, even according to Kripke himself, we *can* and *do* refer to Holmes. As was mentioned above, according to Kripke fictional characters do exist, albeit as fictional characters. Here are his words in RR (Lecture 3):

Everything seems to me to favor attributing to ordinary language an ontology of fictional entities, such as fictional characters, with respect to which ordinary language has the full apparatus of quantification and identity. I say 'full apparatus': well, we may not be able to make every possible statement; but both notions, at any rate, apply to these entities.

Consequently, Kripke maintains that we can refer to fictional characters (*ibid.*):

So in this sense [the sense in which fictional characters really exist], instead of saying that the name 'Hamlet' designates nothing, we say that it really does designate something, something that really exists in the real world, not in a Meinongian, shadowy land. [...] This allows us to have all names in fiction really refer.

So if, according to Kripke, 'all names in fiction really refer', then indeed we do not designate 'any old person' who did Holmes' exploits by the name 'Sherlock Holmes'. It *is* 'a name of a unique [character]'. Reference to Holmes and questions of identity concerning him and other persons, real or fictional, are not generally indeterminate. Holmes, like real people, is at our disposal as an object of reference. We do not have to fall back on descriptions in the case of fictional characters any more than in the case of real characters; and therefore the invalidity of Kripke's argument with respect to the latter *does* show it is invalid with respect to the former as well.

Despite the *ad hominem* character of my reply—its reliance on Kripke's ontology of fictional characters—I do not intend it only as such. Kripke's view, that we can and do refer to fictional characters and apply to them the notions of identity and quantification, is plausible, as he demonstrated in detail in RR (third and fourth lectures). And, as has just been shown, this view suffices for my criticism of his

argument against the possible existence of fictional characters. His additional claim, however, that fictional characters *really exist*, is, I think, both counterintuitive and otiose. I shall not try here to explain, though, what I think *is* involved in such reference, as this will take us far beyond the limited purpose of this paper (but see (Ben-Yami 2004)).

Of course, I have not said anything against the possibility of a *different* argument than Kripke's, relying perhaps on properties such as those mentioned above, that distinguish real from unreal characters, and establishes Kripke's conclusion. But examining alternative arguments is not the subject of this paper; we are considering *Kripke*'s argument, and trying to see whether *it* can be reinstated. Yet toward the end I shall say a few words against the likelihood that there is any such alternative valid argument.

Perhaps we should examine whether other ideas of Kripke's, central to his theory of modality, can help save his argument, despite not being mentioned by him at this context. In doing this we shall indeed be developing Kripkean ideas of unreal characters further than Kripke himself did, but it might give us a fuller picture of what is compatible with his views. This is what I shall now try to do.

One doctrine of Kripke's that may come to mind here is that of the necessity of origin (NN, 113–15). Holmes was represented by Conan Doyle as being an ordinary flesh-and-blood human being, and thus as the sort of thing that develops (at least in the real world) from a human zygote in the usual fashion. Yet perhaps there is no basis in Doyle's stories for saying anything about the identity of such a fictional zygote in Holmes' case. What Doyle does write in his novels may not be enough to determine Holmes' origin, yet the identity of a person is dependent upon his origin. Therefore, no possible person has been determined.

Several things can be said in reply to this attempt to save Kripke's argument. First, this argument replaces, rather than corroborates, Kripke's own argument. Secondly, it would follow from this response that had Doyle introduced Holmes' zygote into his novels, we could have said of a possible person that he would have been Holmes had he existed; and this result weakens Kripke's original general claim. Thirdly, the claim that what we can or cannot say about the possible existence of a fictional character depends on whether the character's zygote has been mentioned in fiction sounds preposterous. And lastly, Kripke claims that the notion of identity applies to fictional characters (RR, Lecture 3), irrespective of any discussion of the question whether the character's zygote has been mentioned in fiction; he cannot therefore consistently claim that Holmes could not have existed because, owing to the fact that his origin was not mentioned, his identity was not determined. So even if something can be extracted in support of Kripke's position from his doctrine of the necessity of origin, it seems Kripke will at most win a Pyrrhic victory this way. Yet a fuller criticism of this suggestion should await a criticism of the latter doctrine.

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But perhaps another related doctrine of Kripke's could help him here. The case of Holmes is somewhat analogous to a different one discussed by Kripke, that of unicorns (NN, 23–4, 156–7; RR, Lecture 2). The term 'unicorn' has its origin in mythology. Now Kripke argues for a thesis about unicorns he considers metaphysical (not to be confused with another, epistemological one, irrelevant for our case): if unicorns did not in fact exist, then 'no counterfactual situation is properly describable as one in which there would have been unicorns' (NN, 156; RR, Lecture 2). Couldn't the argument Kripke provides in support of his unicorn thesis be applied to the Holmes case?

Again, Kripke's doctrine of natural kinds, and its corollary concerning unicorns, is problematic (Ben-Yami 2001). But secondly, what Kripke says about unicorns, if applicable with appropriate modifications to Holmes, seems to *invalidate* Kripke's conclusion. Unicorns are a mythological species, and the impossibility discussed does not concern specific individuals, but individuals of a specific kind. And according to Kripke, membership in a species is determined by internal structure. Now Kripke argues for his metaphysical thesis on the assumption 'that the myth provides insufficient information about [unicorns'] internal structure to determine a unique species' (NN, 157). Presumably, if sufficient information were supplied by a myth, a unique species would be determined, and the metaphysical thesis would not follow. So if we apply this reasoning to Holmes' case, and replace internal structure by zygote (or whatever else one deems appropriate), it seems to follow that if Holmes' zygote had been mentioned in fiction, we could have said of a possible person that he would have been Holmes had he existed. And as we have seen above, this both weakens Kripke's result and seems preposterous.

I cannot see how any other doctrine of Kripke's can save his argument from the criticisms developed above, and I therefore conclude that it is invalid. Let us then proceed to an analysis of the fallacy involved in his reasoning.

I think that Kripke made here a mistake against which he himself warned us in NN. He justly maintained there that a 'possible world isn't a distant country that we are coming across, or viewing through a telescope' (44). Yet this is exactly his conception of a possible world when he tries to determine who would have been Holmes in a counterfactual situation. He examines a 'distant' world, sees who performs 'the exploits of Holmes' in it, and on this basis tries to determine which person, if any, is Holmes. Further considerations then bring him to the conclusion that no one can be identified as Holmes.

But this is a mistaken procedure. As Kripke himself maintained, possible worlds are *stipulated*, not discovered or observed (*ibid*.). When considering Holmes' possible existence we should not be looking into exploits. We should rather ask, can we stipulate a world in which that fictional character, Sherlock Holmes, exists, and can we refer to him in that world?

The answer to both questions is affirmative. In fact, Doyle does just that in his novels. A novel, if consistent, is a stipulation, in Kripke's sense, of a possible world, which usually contains non-actual characters, that is, fictional characters. Fiction invents fictional characters, to whom we can then refer, as Kripke himself maintains. So there is a possible world in which Holmes exists and in which we refer to him, namely, the world described in Doyle's novels. That is why Kripke's claim sounds so counterintuitive and even paradoxical: Kripke refers to a character from a possible world and claims that there is no possible world in which we can refer to him.

Of course, what seems unproblematic might seem so only because we have not thought the matter through. Some incoherence might still be lurking, to be discovered only on further reflection. And Kripke's argument was intended to uncover exactly such incoherence. But his argument is invalid, as I tried to show. On the other hand, our talk of imaginary situations in which fictional characters exist and act is interwoven into our life in a myriad of ways; and this discourse contains reference to fictional characters as possible characters that might have existed. A claim that this discourse is fundamentally incoherent, or that we do not mean by it what we think we do, should in consequence seem highly implausible.

I therefore conclude that Kripke is mistaken. We have good reasons for thinking that we can say of a certain possible person that he would have been Sherlock Holmes had he existed—namely, of Holmes of Doyle's novels; and Kripke's argument to the contrary is invalid. Discovering where things went wrong may not have been elementary, my dear reader, but I hope the case *is* closed.

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