MEANINGS AND MONSTERS*

1. Introduction

The humorist James Thurber tells a story of a man who one day reports to his wife that he saw a unicorn in the garden. "But a unicorn is a fabulous beast" replied the wife, hurrying to call the police to commit her husband to an asylum. The story ends with the wife being taken to the asylum, for she insists on telling the policeman that her husband saw a unicorn in the garden, while he explains that unicorns are legendary beasts.

Is the fact that a unicorn is a legendary beast a sufficient reason for the impossibility of discovering one in the garden or anywhere else? And conversely, are there conditions—and what are they—that if met we can indeed say that a unicorn was discovered in the garden? The question of the unicorn can occasion further questions of the same sort: Is it possible to discover remnants of the manna in the desert? Can Atlantis be discovered, or the Ten Lost Tribes located? Can the monster from Loch Ness ever be caught, or remains of Noah's ark or of Troy's horse be put on display in the British Museum? Have traces of the Flood, or the Troy of Paris and Helen really been discovered?

While these questions might seem to be taken from an "Introduction to Transcendental Zoology (or Archaeology)", treating "possible discoveries", my main intention in dealing with them is to clarify a few topics related to the semantics of fictitious names.

I intend to concentrate on instances that create grave difficulties for the "causal" theory of names, and more specifically, for the claim that a name, if it satisfies certain "causal" conditions, can designate an object even if all the definite descriptions of this object fail to apply to it. Many names appearing in different legends have a real origin in our world. Yet, the descriptions of this origin in the legend are clearly false. Our interest lies in determining whether, and under what circumstances, a name which appears in a legend is to be considered a name of that real origin.
Wittgenstein asked a question similar to ours. But his phrasing makes it clear that he doubted the possibility of providing it with a satisfactory answer, or any answer at all:

Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc.—they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc. Later, questions about the existence of things do of course arise: "Is there such a thing as a unicorn?" and so on. But such a question is possible only because as a rule no corresponding question presents itself, for how does one know how to set about satisfying oneself of the existence of unicorns? How did one learn the method for determining whether something exists or not?³

Kripke’s position regarding the existence of unicorns is similar to Wittgenstein’s:

Perhaps according to me the truth should not be put in terms of saying that it is necessary that there be no unicorns, but just that we cannot say under what circumstances there would have been unicorns.⁴

Kripke goes on to claim, and this is the crux of his position, that if archaeologists or geologists were to discover evidence sufficient for the complete reconstruction of the beast satisfying all the descriptions of unicorns available in legends, that would not constitute discovery of a unicorn. This, of course, assuming that the authors of the legends never encountered such beasts, or, if they had, then not bearing the name “unicorn”. Kripke supports this by saying that external characterizations of a unicorn taken from the legends can serve neither as identity conditions nor as identifying conditions for the species of unicorn in counter-factual situations (or other possible worlds). Had we discovered, for example, both reptiles and mammals, all satisfying the external descriptions of a unicorn as given in the legends, we still would not have known in principle which of them is a unicorn. But it would have been clear to us that it is impossible for both reptiles and mammals to be unicorns simultaneously.

My question is concerned less with what would happen were a discovered beast to answer all the descriptions of a unicorn. I ask, rather, what would happen were we to discover that there is a causal (historical) connection between the name “unicorn” and a certain beast, although this beast does not satisfy the descriptions in legend. In other words, is a unicorn a rhinoceros?