

# Philosophy for Children Alberta



Using  
**Collaborative Inquiry**  
to build  
**Critical Thinking Skills**  
and  
**Caring Communities**

## **An Extraordinary Egg**

*by Leo Lionni*

### Summary:

Jessica the frog discovers a special pebble – her friend Marilyn (who knows everything about everything!) tells her it's a chicken egg. When the egg hatches, they call the creature that emerges a chicken – but what sort of chicken is green, has four legs, and is scaly?

### Themes:

1. *Induction (Knowledge)*
2. *Identity*
3. *Intuitionism (Knowledge)*
4. *Trust*

### Guidelines for philosophical discussion:

“*An Extraordinary Egg*” raises questions about inductive knowledge, identity, and knowing by intuition. In some ways, the different question sets lead well into one another. This can provide for a deeper investigation of the various issues at stake, as you can apply questions from different sets to one another.

The first set of questions deals with inductive knowledge. We claim to know inductively when from a limited set of facts about the world, we claim to know things that go beyond those facts. For example, when as children we put our hands on a red hot stove and burn ourselves, we learn that whenever the stove is red if we touch it we will be burnt. Sometimes though we make these inferences prematurely or incorrectly. When this happens, our expectations of what the world is like turn out to be wrong. The question then is how do we respond – how do we go back and adjust what we think we know about the world? In the case of the story, the frogs think that the alligator egg contains a chicken. Of course, it turns out that none of them have ever seen a chicken – nor, it seems, an alligator. But how should they respond if they come across a *real* chicken egg? It could make sense for them to think (i) that anything that hatches from an egg is a chicken, but that there are very different types of chickens; or (ii) that one or other of the 'chickens' is an imposter (and they would then have to determine which). Either of these responses might be reasonable, but is one better than the other? The second response (ii) might seem better, but maybe only because *we* already know that alligators are not different types of chickens. To the *frogs*, however, based upon what *they* know, could the first response (i) might make more sense?

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Are we ever in situations like this? It might seem in fact that we regularly are, though we don't always realize it because the issues are usually much more complex and our knowledge about the world is interconnected. As a simple but perhaps important example, though, consider a child being told not to talk to strangers, but then also being told to go to a policeman or teacher if in trouble. Does the child infer that policemen and teachers are not strangers? Or does the child infer that you can talk to strangers if in trouble (and perhaps not just to strangers who are policemen and teachers)? By thinking through these questions about inferences, your child can begin to recognize the sorts of decisions we make about what to believe about the world, and how we might sometimes be mistaken in these decisions.

The second set of questions deals with how we know what things are. Thinking about identity is important in a number of different ways. It helps us to know whether something remains the same thing despite changing over time; it helps us to know when to group different things together as the same type of thing; and it helps us reflect on what might be important about considering different things as similar or identical. Philosophers investigating identity, then, are puzzled by such questions as follows: Is a caterpillar the same creature as a butterfly? Is a baby born now the same person in 80 years time? If a house is renovated and its original parts replaced, is it still the same house? If two things are similar in some ways (two legs and two wings), but dissimilar in others (colour, size, diet, habitation), when do we say they're the same type of thing, and when do we say that they're different? Any group of things can be seen as different from one another in a multitude of ways, but is it possible to even experience the world without ignoring much of the detail of the world? That is, can we even have concepts by which to make sense of the world (branch, pebble, yellow, etc.), if we don't ignore much of what makes things different from one another? Thinking about these questions will help your child reflect on what makes the things in the world what they are, and what is important about them being similar and dissimilar to one another.

The third set of questions deals with the notion of intuitionism. Intuitionism is the idea that there are some things we can just know, without having to rely upon any evidence apart from introspection. In the story, Marilyn says she knows that the pebble is a chicken egg, because “there are some things you just know.” In saying this, Marilyn appears to be appealing to intuition. But when – if ever – is intuitionist knowledge justified? For most claims about the world we need to give reasons for our beliefs or knowledge claims – we provide empirical evidence, logical or mathematical proofs, etc. If we don't or can't give reasons for our beliefs, why should we or anybody else accept them? Marilyn turns out to be wrong about her intuition – but does the alligator mother provide a different, more compelling example? Could her intuition be based on something else, and perhaps something more reliable? Or is it just as possible that she might be wrong too? Asking these sorts of questions makes us question our own claims to know what we do, and makes us think about when and to what extent we can and should demand justification for believing what we believe. (For religious families, this set of questions can lead to interesting enquiries about the nature of religious belief, the role and justification of revelation in religious knowledge, etc.)

The fourth set of questions deals with the notion of trust. When we trust others, we rely upon their knowledge claims without examining the evidence they have for those claims. Thus, if I trust you when you tell me it's 12 o'clock noon, then I accept you as having good evidence for your claim (perhaps I

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saw that you just looked at your watch, or I know that you're normally punctual), but do not confirm your evidence myself (I don't look at your watch myself, or look to see where the sun is in the sky). Trust is important because much of our knowledge of the world is based upon it: we trust what scientists tell us about how laws of nature behave; we trust what historians tell us about what happened in the past; we trust what sociologists tell us about human interaction; and we trust what journalists tell us about what's happening in the world. Each of these people can have good reasons for what they believe, but we don't usually investigate them due to issues of time or interest or expertise. Indeed, there's very little that we know in life that isn't based upon trust in one way or another. Importantly, then, we need to know what the conditions are for trusting people. What makes somebody trustworthy, and when is it important to check others' claims for ourselves? Should we trust only our friends, or do we sometimes have good reasons to trust strangers? We can also think about how important trust is for healthy communities and a healthy society. Do we want a society where we don't trust our neighbours, our journalists, our business leaders, and our politicians? How do we establish trust in social and communal life? Thinking about trust in these sorts of ways helps your child determine whom they should trust and when, and how important trust is to friendship and social living.

#### Questions for philosophical discussion:

##### *(A) Inductive Inferences (Knowledge)*

1. Why do the frogs think that the alligator is a chicken?
2. What do you think would happen if the frogs came across a *real* chicken egg? Would they think that inside would be a green scaly creature with four legs?
3. When this second egg hatches and out climbs a different creature than that which hatched out of the first egg, will they think that the second creature is also a chicken (which it is!), or will they think it's something else, or will they begin to wonder whether the *first* creature *isn't* a chicken?
4. Is anything wrong with any of these possible responses? Could all of them make sense? Is any response best?

##### *(B) Identity*

1. What makes a chicken a chicken? If a chicken was born with four legs and four wings, not two legs and two wings, is it still a chicken?
2. What if a chicken was born with no legs and no wings? Is it a chicken?
3. If a chicken is born with two legs and two wings, but then has an accident and loses its legs and wings, is it the same chicken that it was before, or is it now something else?
4. And what makes human beings human beings? Is it their arms and their legs, their noses and their ears? What if a person is born with no arms and no legs, or no ears and no nose, or loses these in an accident? Are they still human beings? Is someone in a coma or who's dead a human being?
5. At the end of the story, the frogs still think that the alligator is a chicken. Does their mistake matter at all? Does it matter that we call chickens 'chickens', and alligators 'alligators'? What if some people call chickens 'alligators', and other people call alligators 'chickens'?
6. Chickens (normally) have two legs and two wings, whereas alligators and frogs (normally) have four legs and are green. Human beings are different still – we (normally) have two legs and two arms, but don't have any wings and we're not green. Are we different from other animals like

chickens and frogs and alligators are different from one another? Or are we different in some special way? What, if anything, might this be?

*(C) Intuitionism (Knowledge)*

1. Marilyn identifies Jessica's pebble as a chicken egg, and explains how she knows this by saying 'There are some things you just know.' It turns out though that she's wrong – the chicken egg is really an alligator egg. Does this then mean that there are never things that you just know?
2. At the end of the story the mother alligator knows the baby alligator is hers. But if she's never seen the baby alligator before, how can she know it's hers? How can Marilyn be wrong about 'just knowing,' but the mother alligator be right?
3. Can you think of an example of something you 'just know'?
4. How do you know that you know this? And how would you convince somebody else that what you know is true?

*(D) Trust*

5. When Jessica brings back the egg to her friends, Marilyn tells them it's a chicken egg. Jessica and August have never seen an egg before. So why do they believe what Marilyn says?
6. What does it mean to trust someone? Why do you trust some people but not others?
7. Is trust important between friends? Why?
8. Do you need to trust people to be friends with them? If you don't know somebody, how do you begin to trust them?
9. Do you want to be somebody people trust? How would you let other people know that you're trustworthy?
10. If you were Jessica, and you found another special pebble, would you believe Marilyn if she told you she knew what it was? Why or why not?