

# Philosophy for Children Alberta



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

## **I'm the Biggest Thing in the Ocean**

*by Kevin Sherry*

### Summary:

A giant squid thinks he's the biggest thing in the ocean: he's bigger than all the shrimp, fish, jellyfish and turtles that he meets. But to his dismay he discovers he's not bigger than the whale that eats him! Not to worry, he soon realizes that though he might not be the biggest thing in the ocean, he's the biggest thing inside the whale.

### Themes:

1. *Valid Inferences (Knowledge),*
2. *Relations (Knowledge, Identity)*
3. *The Value of Different Characteristics*

### Guidelines for philosophical discussion:

“*I'm the Biggest Thing in the Ocean*” raises questions about (1) how we make inferences from a limited set of facts to claims that go beyond those facts; (2) the relational nature of certain concepts; and (3) the value or importance of different personal characteristics. Issues (1) and (2) fall into the philosophical field of epistemology – the study of knowledge. Issue (3) falls into the philosophical field of ethics or value theory.

The first set of questions deals with how we are able to make valid inferences from limited sets of facts to claims about the world that go beyond those facts. This type of reasoning is known as inductive reasoning, and is contrasted with what is known as deductive reasoning. In deductive reasoning, one infers a specific claim from a general premise: thus, from the general premise (i) all dogs have tails, we can deductively infer that (ii) if Spot is a dog, Spot has a tail. With inductive reasoning this process is reversed – we infer a general claim from a specific claim or set of specific claims. Thus, from the premises (i) Spot is a dog and has a tail, and (ii) Fido is a dog and has a tail, we might inductively infer that (iii) all dogs have tails. A question we must ask, however, is when is this inductive inference justified – when are we justified in making the general claim? Inferring that all dogs are brown just because Spot and Fido are brown, for instance, is clearly wrong since some dogs are black and others are white. In general, justification depends upon how strong the supporting evidence is, which is a function of the number of cases observed, and how representative those cases are of the world in general. So for example, if we have only ever seen Spot, then the justification for the inference that all

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dogs have tails is weaker than if we have seen both Spot *and* Fido, which is weaker still than if we have seen in addition one hundred other dogs, all of which have tails. Of course, having seen one hundred other dogs all of which have tails doesn't rule out the possibility that the next dog might be tailless. Thus, to avoid the uncertainty of inferring general claims, philosophers sometimes make more limited claims by employing the notion of probability. So instead of saying that *all* dogs have tails, they might infer instead that *it is likely* or *it is probable* that all dogs have tails, with the likelihood or probability of their inference varying by the strength of the evidence they can present – in this case the number of dogs they've seen with tails. Thinking about these sorts of issues will help your child to evaluate the plausibility of claims to knowledge, and to think about what evidence is important to justifying claims.

The second set of questions deals with (i) what it means for things *to be* in relations with other things, and (ii) what it means for us *to know* what things are *in terms of* their relations to other things. The first issue (i) has to do with *relational concepts*, which are interesting because they suggest that we can only know what some things are, because of how we know what *other* things are. So for example, we may know that some things are big or bigger, but only because we know that other things are small or smaller – we cannot know that something is big or small without having something else to compare it to. The second issue (ii) has to do with *relational identity*, which suggests that some things only *are* what they are, because of the way *other* things are. So for example, we might wonder *what we are*, given the relations we have to the food we eat, the ground we walk upon, and the sun and its gravitational effects on us – without any of these things, what are we? We might also wonder how what we are depends upon our social relations with other people. So for example, we might wonder what a human being would be like who grew up in total isolation with no social contact with anybody else. Similarly, we might wonder how the same person would be different under different social relations – what would they be like if they were a single child instead of a sibling, were born rich instead of poor, or were born in a different country or into a different religion? Raising these questions with your child will help them to think about what it means for different things (including themselves) to be what they are, and to wonder how those things might be different were the relations that define them to change. It can also help them think about how our knowledge of some things can depend upon our knowledge of other things. Readers who are religious may find it interesting to think about relationality in terms of God. Is God to be understood in terms of relations, is God beyond all relations, and if so does this mean that God is beyond all knowledge?

The third set of questions deals with the value or importance of different characteristics. Bigness is a characteristic the squid values in the story, but whether characteristics really are valuable seems to depend upon the context or situation: being big might be valuable in some situations, but in other situations it might be better to be smaller. How we decide which characteristics are valuable? This seems to depend upon our purposes and what we hope to achieve in the different situations we find ourselves in. Are there some characteristics which are valuable in all situations? Are there some characteristics which are valuable, but which can't all be enjoyed at the same time? If so, how do we decide which are more important, and what do we lose out by having to make decisions? Thinking about questions like this will help your child appreciate the value of different characteristics, and to think about why different characteristics are important, and how we sometimes have to make choices between them. This can lead to an appreciation of difference, and of the contextual nature of value.

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Questions for philosophical discussion:

*(A) How do we know that what we say is true?*

1. Why did the squid think that he was the biggest thing in the ocean?
2. Do you think that the squid is the biggest thing in the whale? Why or why not?
3. If the squid is bigger than the fish and the shrimp and the turtles and the octopus, but the whale is bigger than the squid, does this mean that the whale is the biggest thing in the ocean?
4. Can you think of a time when you thought something was true, but it turned out to be false?
5. How do you know when you know something? How do you know what you know is true?
6. Is there anything you can think of that you know to be true, that couldn't turn out not to be true?

*(B) Can some things only be what they are (or can we only know what some things are), because other things are what they are (or because of how we know other things are)?*

1. The squid wants to be the biggest thing in the ocean. Do you think there is a biggest thing in the ocean? Is there a smallest thing in the ocean?
2. Can something be big without other things being small? Could there be an ocean of only big fish?
3. Can something be the biggest thing in the world? What might this be?
4. If the squid is in the whale, is he now part of the whale, or is he the same as he was outside of the whale? If the whale is in the ocean, does that make him part of the ocean?
  - a) When you walk into your house, are you now part of your house, or are you the same as what you were outside of your house?
  - b) And is this any different from your lunch? When you eat your lunch, is it now part of you, or is it the same as what it was when outside of you?
5. What is the ocean? (Is the ocean just water, or is it also everything that lives in the ocean, and all the sand and rocks and sunken ships too?)

*(C) Which characteristics are better or worse?*

1. Why do you think the squid wants to be the biggest thing in the ocean (or in the whale)?
2. Is it always good or best to be the biggest?
  1. Can you think of a situation in which you would rather be bigger, not smaller?
  2. Can you think of a situation in which you would rather be smaller, not bigger?
3. If you were the biggest thing in the ocean, would your experiences be different than if you were the smallest? How? What would you miss out on by being smaller, and what would you miss out on by being bigger?
4. If there are advantages and disadvantages to being bigger and smaller, how do you decide which is better?
5. Are there some things it's good or valuable to be in all situations? If so, what might this be?