

# On Frogs, Princes and Yellow Elephants

(Our first meetings with Rebecca)

One day I received a philosophical novel by Ronald Reed. Rebecca, a little girl, is reasoning about what will happen if a girl kisses a frog. Will he turn into a prince?

I decided on discussing this problem with the children of my philosophical inquiry group (the children are now between eight and ten years old). Since 1983 we have been meeting twice a month to do philosophy outside school. Doing philosophy means for us asking questions and looking for answers, clarifying concepts, making distinctions between good and bad reasons for beliefs, and thinking together about ideas (sometimes very crazy ideas!). Our rules of discussion are: to listen attentively to the child speaking, to pay attention to everybody's opinion, to prove every reason and to discuss problems together.

Rebecca is also a girl who likes questions and ideas (sometimes very crazy ideas!). For that reason I decided to publish the novel in Germany. I hope that many children, parents and teachers will enjoy the princes, frogs, and coloured elephants.

When the book was published I showed it to my five-year-old son Frederick. At breakfast we had an interesting conversation:

Frederick (looking attentively at the cover): Elephants are always grey, Mum!

Barbara: Are you sure?

Frederick: Hm ... There is also a prince. Probably, that is a fairy-tale because princes only exist in fairy-tales.

Barbara: And do yellow elephants also only appear in fairy-tales?

(Frederick nods approvingly and looks at the cover). After some minutes.

Barbara: Are you sure that princes only exist in fairy-tales?

Frederick: I didn't see princes anywhere else!

Barbara: Okay, I will disguise myself as a prince. Then you see a prince somewhere else ...

Frederick: You aren't a real prince. You have no castle and no princess ... Mum, I don't like the prince who was painted by Imke!

Barbara: Why's that?

Frederick: He looks so stern ... Not friendly ... Maybe Rebecca doesn't like princes! That's why he is flying away into the sky ... Away, away, so she need not think of him any longer!

Looking at the cover, the children of my group also argued about the relations between the frog, the prince and the yellow elephant. In contrast to Frederick they didn't wonder about the yellow elephant. In previous sessions that had already discovered that things and persons may appear in another way in fantasy.

We started our first meeting with *Rebecca's Thoughts* by some language games because the children had decided to read the book at home before speaking about it in the group.

Language games are a good way of making clear to the children that Rebecca — in contrast to other book heroes — is dealing with thoughts, questions and reasons — that means with mental activities.

At first we looked at the drawings in the book. Every child had to choose his favourite drawing. Then we started the first language game "guessing concepts": Everyone chose a concept for his favourite drawing. One child described his concept while the others had to guess what was meant, for example:

"On a man it is very small, but in the book it is very big. Every man has two of them to find his way in the world. In reality it is rose-coloured, but in the book it is black and white" (Nina) (fantasy-ear)

We set up the rule of the game that the child who had first guessed what was meant, received a prize. This game is very good to practise describing in abstract terms. Most first-, second- and third graders described things in terms of physical characteristics such as form, color or size because their cognitive capacities mostly aim at perception. It is difficult for them to use more abstract terms of description, such as, for example, the function of a thing. Nina used in her description of the fantasy-ear terms of physical characteristics (size and color) as well as more abstract terms, such as the function: to find his way in the world. (She didn't say "to hear" because it would have been too easy for the others to find out the concept.)

Parents and teachers can encourage children to pay attention to more abstract terms of description while asking them for example: Why do we use ... the ear? I don't think that descriptions only include an enumeration of characteristics. They focus on a selection of important and unimportant qualities. The children had to give reasons why they had chosen certain characteristics to make clear to the others what was meant. They also practise listening to other people's concepts. We should not forget that concepts are the main tools of thought and communication.

The children chose the following concepts for their favourite: the ear, the elephant (who eats sunflowers), the frog (at the end of the book), the backyard (of Rebecca) the girl (who kisses the frog) and the snowman.

In the second game we tried to replace these concepts by other ones, that means by new ones. The rule was that the new concepts had to imply important characteristics of "the old concepts." Here some examples (the new concepts are difficult to translate into English because there are for example two different words for "man" in German):

snowman	
winterbeing	(Sanna)
Carrot-nose-being	(Sandra)
ice-creation	(Janique)
snowball-being	(Ole)
elephant	
four-legger	(Nina)
giant-trunk-colossus	(Stefan)
slouch-ear-animal	(Anja)
pachyderm	(Barbara)
heavy-weight-animal	(Nina)

ear  
eavesdropper (Sanna)  
listener (Anja)  
sound-detector (Ole)  
perceptor (Nina)  
glasses-supporter (Janique)

The child who had found out most new of the concepts became the winner of the game.

This game has the function of "setting in motion" fixed concepts which determine our language use: The children try to become "word-creators." I think that this game is a pre-stage of defining. In contrast to describing, defining means that we actively influence the language use by rules (the children know rules from their usual games). If we understand the word "to define" in the sense of the Latin verb "definire" — that means to set up borders (lines) then we can say that the children of my group defined the meaning of the concepts snowman, elephant, and ear. They clarified these fixed concepts by new meanings.

We played this game for more than an hour because the children liked it very much. When they became tired of it I asked them to characterize by concepts Rebecca (they had only seen the drawings in the book). The children chose the following concepts — we should not forget that they have been doing philosophy for three years: dreamer, frog-kisser, questioner, animal-friend, thinker. If you played this game with children with no experience in doing philosophy then it would be better to find out one new concept at the beginning which may consist of two or more composed words, for example: It would be wrong to say four-legged animal. The right expression must be four-legger, etc.

The children of my group had not only seen the drawings in the book but also its back cover. That's why they knew that Rebecca's problem is to find out if frogs can turn into princes. I asked them spontaneously how they would solve this problem. They all were convinced, including the younger children, that frogs can't become princes. We made up a list with good reasons:

1. Frogs will not turn into princes because animals cannot become a character of a fairy-tale. (Sandra).
2. Frogs will not turn into princes because an animal will not become a man. (Janique).
3. Frogs will not turn into princes because they cannot become different from what they are. (Stefan).
4. Frogs will not turn into princes because frogs are green. (Barbara)

We looked together at our list of reasons in order to decide which was the best one:

Barbara: Which reason isn't a good one?

Janique: The reason which you have given, isn't a good one. I think that it isn't important if a frog is green or not.

Anja: On yeah! It is important for the frog to be green. Green is his camouflage.

Sandra: It is important for the frog to be green but it is unimportant for his metamorphosis. If the green colour were an important reason then the frog would become a prince because of his colour.

Barbara: Could a yellow frog turn into a prince, Anja?

Ole: It isn't important if the frog is yellow or green! He cannot become a prince!

Barbara: Why that?

Ole: I think that Sandra gave a good reason for that. A frog is a living animal. He cannot turn into a character of a fairy-tale.

Stefan: But a fairy-tale frog is able to turn into a fairy-tale prince.

Nina: But a living frog who breathes and moves cannot turn into a character of a fairy-tale which is invented by someone.

Barbara: Do you all think that Sandra's reason is the best one? What about Stefan's reason "the frog had to become different"?

Anja: Different in which way?

Janique: The frog should turn into a creature of fantasy. He wouldn't be able to move and croak any longer.

Nine: He should get new characteristics, for example physically, that is unrealistic.

Anja: Does Rebecca kiss the frog in this story?

Barbara: This still shall be a secret!

I think that this dialogue proves once more that the children of my group aren't doing philosophy for the first time. They have already developed critical attitudes towards opinions, reasons and points of view.

If you are doing philosophy with children for the first time you should pay attention to the following features:

1. In the first lessons on *Rebecca's Thoughts* it is important that children learn to describe exactly. Let them first describe things and situations and later on feelings and thoughts (the games 1 and 2).
2. Let the children always give reasons for their opinions, beliefs and values, that means: Every statement should be backed by an argument (the game 3).

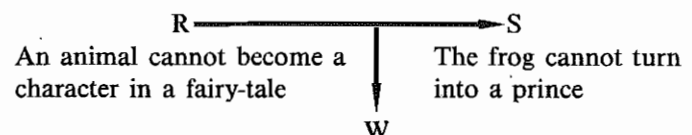


An animal cannot become a character in a fairy-tale

The frog cannot turn into a prince

For a philosophical discussion it is necessary to achieve a higher level, I prefer the following features:

1. Descriptions must lead to definitions, that means to an active language use (creation of new concepts, discovery of rules how to use a concept in a certain context etc. (the game 2)
2. Examination of reasons, in the sense: Are the reasons given good reasons for backing my statements? That's why we have to give a reason for the reason called warrant. The warrant explains the connection between the reason and the statement:



Living beings breathe and move. They can't become a creature of fantasy.

3. The ability of listening to other children has to be

cultivated by the ability of discussing with other — of organizing a dialogue (discussion after the 3rd game).

At the end I will just continue with what happened on the second meeting. We started our discussion by telling which of Rebecca's thoughts had been most interesting. Nearly all children enjoyed the yellow ear walking around the street. We read the very passage together. Ole, Nina, Anja and Nadine had already written into the book which situation would be the funniest in the world, for example: going to school in Tarzan's outfit, walking around like an ape and so on. While reading the passage Janique interrupted our activity and asked: "Why is Rebecca sure that we will laugh about a yellow ear walking around the street?" And suddenly we had the following discussion:

- Ole: Rebecca is sure that we must laugh because a yellow ear is something unusual. It is something to die of laughing if a yellow ear appears in the streets.
- Barbara: Are you sure?
- Anja: I also would laugh. An ear belongs to the man and if you suddenly see it in the streets . . .
- Sandra: But Rebecca doesn't know us. How does she come to know that we would laugh?
- Anja: Do you think that yellow ears are a funny thing or not?
- Sandra: Yes, I think so.
- Barbara: Well, Rebecca is right that we must laugh.
- Nina: She supposes that we must laugh because yellow ears are something unusual. But she isn't able to know that all children must laugh about such an unusual thing.
- Janique: And she isn't able to know that all children believe that a yellow ear is something unusual . . .

In our further discussion we dealt with the difference between "to suppose" and "to be sure" by means of the remarks and exercise of the manual by Ronald Reed. I think that *Rebecca's Thoughts* and the little manual for teachers and parents contribute to the cultivation of children's and adult's reasoning and imagination. It is important for all people to find criteria to distinguish better thinking from worse, and only philosophy provides such criteria by its principles of concept-clarification, argumentation and critical thinking. If children engage in philosophical discussions such as on *Rebecca* they learn to listen to each other, how to give reasons and warrants for beliefs and how to examine other people's reasons — that means they learn how to set up a communication. And that's why I involve in philosophy outside school because children take a social advantage from it. Doing philosophy capitalizes upon the desire everywhere to discuss problems. The ability of giving reasons and so on is essential for a better understanding of people and thus for the benefit of a democratical society.

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1. The model of argumentation see: Steven Toulmin, *The Use of Arguments*, Scriptor Verlag, 1975, p. 89.