

# MERLIN LITTLE PHILOSOPHER'S DRIVE-IN

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## Featured Film: *Horton Hears a Who*

**Topic of Philosophical Exploration:** Epistemology\*

**Film Synopsis:** A delightful 2008 animated film adaptation of Dr. Seuss's classic book *Horton Hears a Who* directed by Jimmy Hayward & Steve Martino. Ripe with philosophical depth, this film involves age-old questions about epistemology & ethics and (while geared for children) is relevant for all ages. The film's main character — an elephant named Horton (Jim Carrey) — finds a speck of dust floating in the Jungle of Nool. Upon investigation of the speck, Horton discovers the tiny city of Who-ville and its residents, the Whos, which he can hear but cannot see. Over time, Horton forms a friendship with the mayor of Who-ville, Ned McDodd (Steve Carell), and promises to transport Who-ville to safety. However, Horton must face opposition from his jungle neighbors, who don't want to believe in the existence of Who-ville. With more than a hint of Plato's Socrates in the mix, as well as Galileo & Copernicus and the exploration of general matters such as rights, authority, and rebellion...this colorful film has philosophical foundations that run much deeper than one might anticipate. It is well worth the watch on many levels!

## Some Philosophical Objectives

- To consider how we know what we think we know
- To examine under what circumstances we should believe what some people tell us

## Some Philosophical Questions Raised in *Horton Hears a Who*

- Did Horton know there was a person on the dust speck when he heard the sound?
- How did he know it?
- Why do you think the other animals didn't believe him?
- Would you have believed Horton?
- When should we believe what we see or hear?
- Do you have to see, hear, or touch something yourself in order to believe it's there?
- Can you think of something you know exists even though you can't see, hear, or touch it?
- What does it mean to say, "a person's a person, no matter how small?"

## \*What is Epistemology?

Epistemology is concerned with knowledge – namely, how we come to know something, whether or not what and how we know has limits, how we can distinguish between truths and falsehoods, and justified beliefs. Modern epistemology typically involves debates between empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism claims that knowledge can be acquired through experience (i.e., what we can take in by the senses/experience). Rationalism claims that knowledge can be acquired via the use of reason (i.e., knowledge acquired independent of sensory data/experience).

Epistemology is important on a personal level because it is central to the ways that we think and relate with others. It is also important on a social level because our thoughts typically inform the ways in which we structure society (e.g., laws, politics, environment, education, city planning, other). More generically speaking, epistemology is important because without some means of understanding how we acquire knowledge, the role of sensory data, and how concepts develop and form in our minds, we have no coherent path for our thinking. In other words, a sound epistemology is a requisite for sound thinking and sound reasoning. In addition, insofar as our thoughts inform the constructs that obtain in our society, then a sound epistemology is also a requisite for (the possibility of) a sound society – i.e., one that is based upon and operating from sound reasoning and thinking.

Much more can be said about the matter. The above account is, at best, a very distilled version of a branch of philosophical study that has remained a central focus for thinkers across the centuries. As such, there are considerable permutations, complexities, and evolutions in thought about the philosophical study of knowledge not reflected above. If you are interested in learning more about epistemology and/or resources for sharing philosophy with kids, please contact me and I will be happy to provide you with additional resources and clarification.

## Resources

The objectives & philosophical questions raised in *Horton Hears a Who* are derived from Jana M. Lone & Michael D. Burroughs' *Philosophy in Education: Questioning and Dialogue in Schools* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

Other sources involved in the creation of this handout & philosophy drive-in event include Marietta McCarty's *Little Big Minds: Sharing Philosophy With Kids* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2006), David A. Whites' *Philosophy for Kids: 40 Fun Questions That Help You Wonder About Everything* (Waco, TX: Prufrock Press, Inc., 2001), and *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>).



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