

The Chicken and the Egg

Which came first? Every chicken hatches from a chicken egg. But every chicken egg is laid by a chicken. So neither can come first. But surely one must.

Aristotle believed that species had always been around, and so had no beginning. So on his view neither would come first.

Now that we know that this is false, we have to solve the riddle empirically, by appeal to biology. Admittedly the notion of species has come in for criticism in recent years, and there are even those who deny their existence. But we set aside such scepticism.

One answer which has gained scientific popularity puts the egg first – ‘no egg, no chicken’:

A particular organism cannot change its own species during its lifetime. The change came about from a mutation when two organisms bred, producing a chicken egg. The egg preceded the chicken which hatched from it. So the egg came first.

On this view it doesn't matter who the parents were. Their species is not carried on through the egg because a mutation has taken place, and its genetic material determines the nature of the offspring. If it is a chicken egg, a chicken will hatch.

A competing answer puts it the other way round – ‘no chicken, no egg’:

Although the zygote results from both father and mother, the surrounding egg comes from the mother alone. Only a chicken can lay a chicken egg: so the chicken came first. (Waller in *Mind*, 1998.)

Waller says: ‘To call any egg a chicken egg on account of its embryonic passenger is like calling the mother's uterus a chicken uterus on account of its delivering a chicken’ (p. 852). He also points out that, unlike chickens, roosters are optional for egg producers.

On this view, presumably, a mutation takes place and produces a chicken (the zygote) as embryonic passenger, though it is inside an egg which is not a chicken egg. When it has hatched it will lay chicken eggs; but the chicken came first.

The puzzle is first mentioned by Plutarch (c. 46–c. 120).¹

Further reading

Roy Sorensen, *A Brief History of the Paradox*, Oxford, OUP. 2003, p. 11. (A fascinating history.)

David Waller, ‘The chicken and her egg’, *Mind* 1998, vol. 107.

¹ Thanks to Routledge for permission to reprint this entry.