

Albert Einstein- The Mystic

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“The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man.”

—Albert Einstein

GIFTS OF INCALCULABLE MAGNITUDE

Among scientists Albert Einstein was a rare soul of singular depth and sincerity, a straightforward personality. He was also a mystic engaged in a lifelong, honest search for the inexorable truth. He had an enquiring intellect. He struggled untiringly to satisfy questions about what he called “a superior intelligence that reveals itself in the knowable world.” These characteristics are gifts of incalculable magnitude. The sum of attributes he brought to bear on his dedicated, unwavering search for truth as a scientist qualified him to probe the inner secrets of nature and to respect nature’s revelations. His dedication to science and its mysteries was sustained by his deep spiritual conviction in the harmony of nature. It was not a mere sentiment for Einstein. He articulated the deep emotion that stirred his entire being: “The scientist is possessed by a sense of universal causation. . . . His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection. . . . It is beyond question closely akin to that which has possessed the religious geniuses of all ages.” He was keenly aware that ideas did not appear in his mind out of nothing. “Ideas come from God,” he said.

EARLY MYSTICAL TENDENCY

Einstein’s “instinctive sense of cosmic unity” was the essence that nourished his creative brilliance and imagination from an early age. One of the most celebrated stories about him suggests that his mystical reverence for nature’s hidden powers was aroused when he was only four or five years old, lying ill in bed with his father’s gift of the compass. To

Einstein, the gift was more than a mere toy. His Autobiographical Notes vividly record the sense of wonder that overwhelmed him: here was a needle, isolated and unreachable, totally enclosed, and caught in the grip of an invisible urge, a force or energy that made it strive determinedly northward. The revelation of the magnetic needle upset his simplistic view of an orderly physical world and contradicted his thinking. He recalled this experience many times throughout his life. "I can still remember . . . that this experience made a deep and lasting impression on me. Something deeply hidden had to be behind things." He was already familiar with pendulums and falling objects. He could not however realize at the time that they too presented a mystery awaiting his great contribution to our understanding of gravitation. Nonetheless, his curiosity, intuition and imagination were aroused. "I have no special gift—I am only passionately curious" he would say. His lifelong devotion to a unified field theory began with this experience of the compass.

Einstein's native constitution was meditative. His childlike awe of the "extra-personal world" that he found in science never left him. It sustained him for the rest of his life. One biographer has written:

The boy who had found neither security nor freedom in human relationships, and whose attempt to find them in religion had failed, would seek them now in science. Yet one is struck by Einstein's emphasis on the sympathy he felt with those he thought like-minded. "Similarly motivated men of the present and past," he went on, were "the friends, who could not be lost."

His Autobiographical Notes record his mood at that time:

Out yonder there was this huge world, which exists independently of us human beings and which stands before us like a great, eternal riddle, at least partly accessible to our inspection and thinking. The contemplation of this world beckoned like a liberation, and I soon noticed that many a man whom I had learned to esteem and to admire had found inner freedom and security in devoted occupation with it.

A long time would pass before he could master the art of concentrated reflection on the physical laws of the universe. He wrote to a Nobel prize-winning friend:

When I ask myself why it should have been me, rather than anyone else, who discovered the relativity theory, I think that this was due to the following circumstance: An adult does not reflect on the space-time problems. Anything that needs reflection of this matter he believes he did in his early childhood. I, on the other hand, developed so slowly that I only began to reflect about space and time when I was a grown-up. Naturally I then penetrated more deeply into these problems than an ordinary child would.

A RELIGIOUS TEMPERAMENT

Life was full of significance for him. The mystic in him saw that the entire scope of creation is rooted in profound mystery. The more deeply he pondered over the structure and nature of the universe, the more he was confronted by the colossal, all-pervading intelligence popularly called "God." When someone asked him if Christ existed historically, Einstein answered immediately, "Unquestionably! No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life."

If one is to know the great meaning of life, one has to be religious, or spiritually inclined. Einstein was the only eminent scientist to use the word "God" frequently and to articulate his ideas of cosmic religious consciousness in an "undivided voice." His colleagues did not refer to God while discussing the harmony apparent in nature. To Einstein, God was a metaphor for the transcendent Unity. Though he was vocal about his concept of God, many people thought he was an atheist because his God was not a theological God. Einstein's vision of unity was apparent to him in an impersonal God whose power pervades the entire cosmos, a God that can be seen in the laws governing the universe.

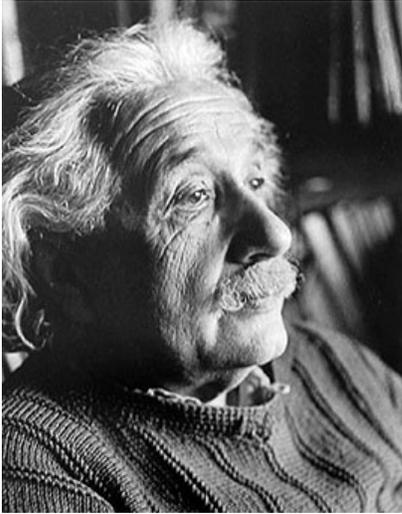
"The true value of a human being," he wrote, "is determined primarily by how he has attained liberation from the self." This inner spiritual evolution after controlling the lower nature and this estimation of human worth based on the expansion of spiritual consciousness are the ideals of mystics. Einstein wrote, "We have to go beyond the 'rabble of the senses' to discover the deep underlying unity behind the world of multiplicity which has been purchased at the price of emptiness of content." He expressed this idea again in 1936 in an essay, "Physics and Reality," a written defense of realism during the quantum mechanics debates:

The very fact that the totality of our sense experiences is such that, by means of thinking, it can be put in order, this fact is one that leaves us in awe. The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility . . . The fact that it is comprehensible is a miracle.

The more deeply he probed into the structure and nature of the universe, the more he faced a colossal and all-pervading intelligence, which he instinctively thought of as mysterious. In 1929, when his important paper on the unified field theory was published and thousands of copies sold in Europe and America, Einstein was interviewed by many journalists. He said to a British reporter:

It has been my greatest ambition to resolve the duality of natural laws into unity. The purpose of my work is to further this simplification, and particularly to reduce to one formula the explanation of the gravitational and electromagnetic fields. For this reason I call it a contribution to a "unified field theory" . . . Now, but only now, we know that the force that moves electrons in their ellipses about the nuclei of atoms is the same force that moves our earth in its annual course around the sun.

These remarks demonstrate his deep conviction of the unity or noumenon that lies behind all phenomena in the universe as well as his desire to prove this to himself and to the world once and for all. His scientific observation of an underlying, eternal reality behind



the phenomenal world was an inner religious conviction. When Solovine disapproved of his suggestion that there is something “religious” in material science, Einstein wrote to him, “I have no better expression than ‘religious’ for this confidence in the rational nature of reality and in its being accessible, to some degree, to human reason. When this feeling is missing, science degenerates into mindless empiricism.” There was always a place for non-rational wonder in science for him. He once wrote that “the sense of ‘wonder’ . . . increases ever more with the development of our knowledge.” Einstein did not respect the positivists and atheists who disagreed and whose respective philosophies attempted to make the universe “God-free and even wonder-free.” His conception of religion was rooted in a cosmic outlook.

“WHAT I BELIEVE”

In the summer of 1930 he was in Caputh, his beautiful retreat near Potsdam, southwest of Berlin. Relaxing in the privacy of his room or sailing on the Havel lakes, he composed his famous credo “What I Believe” (a quote from which begins this chapter). Einstein further wrote:

It is enough for me to contemplate the mystery of conscious life perpetuating itself through all eternity, to reflect upon the marvelous structure of the universe which we can dimly perceive, and to try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the intelligence manifested in nature.

Einstein wrote “What I Believe” in 1930 when it was spoken onto a record at the request of the German League for Human Rights. Subsequently, “What I Believe” was translated variously for several publications with the title “The World as I See It.” In the credo, Einstein describes himself as a “lone traveler” who is nevertheless aware of his obligation to society:

My passionate sense of social justice and social responsibility has always contrasted oddly with my pronounced lack of need for direct contact with other human beings and human communities. I am truly a “lone traveler” and have never belonged to my country, my home, my friends, or even my immediate family, with my whole heart; in the face of all these ties, I have never lost a sense of distance and a need for solitude—feelings that increase with the years.

His mind rose in solitude to spiritual heights for the permanent treasure that validated his steadfast and peaceful inner nature. Certain ideals inspired him to live a cosmocentric life: “I have never looked upon ease and happiness as ends in themselves—such an

ethical basis I call the ideal of a pigsty. . . . The ideals which have guided my way, and time after time have given me the energy to face life, have been Kindness, Beauty and Truth.”

These same ideals of the mystics are based on inner spiritual evolution after the lower nature is controlled. Expanded spiritual consciousness reveals the value of human birth. To enjoy the deep meditation Einstein describes in his credo one has to be absolutely free from egotism.

EINSTEIN AND SPINOZA

Einstein was a self-proclaimed disciple of Spinoza (1632-1677), the seventeenth-century Jewish philosopher and mystic. Like Spinoza, he found his highest thoughts and sense of purpose in seclusion. He wrote, “I am fascinated by Spinoza’s pantheism, but I admire even more his contribution to modern thought because he is the first philosopher to deal with the soul and body as one, and not two separate things.” Aloof from those lower values that grip the masses, Einstein and Spinoza shared a strong conviction in the existence of an impersonal Supreme Being. They both felt humility, reverence and awe before that Being’s divine power in nature.

Spinoza preferred obscurity, simplicity and independence to being in the limelight as a professor of philosophy at Heidelberg University. He led a frugal existence as a lens grinder and died at the age of forty-five from pulmonary tuberculosis. His will power, steadfast idealism and dedication made a deep and enduring impact on Einstein. Einstein pointed to Spinoza’s philosophy to explain his own:

My views are near those of Spinoza: admiration for the beauty of and belief in the logical simplicity of the order and harmony which we can grasp humbly and only imperfectly. I believe that we have to content ourselves with our imperfect knowledge and understanding and treat values and moral obligations as a purely human problem—the most important of all human problems.

Einstein further said, “I believe in Spinoza’s God who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of all that exists, but not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind.”

“GOD DOES NOT PLAY DICE WITH THE WORLD”

Einstein was well aware of the unity behind the many and the liberating power of that conviction. He wrote:

A human being is part of the whole called by us “the universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison

for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free us from this prison by widening our circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

“Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself a part of the liberation and a foundation for inner security,” he wrote.

His legendary phrase, “God does not play dice with the world,” reflects Einstein’s sincere humility, a quality he shared with Newton, who expressed it in this way:

I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself now and then, finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than [the] ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

Einstein’s cosmic consciousness definitely goes beyond creeds and dogma. Cosmic consciousness is the pure essence of religion; it cannot be reduced to a theological system and avoids the common anthropomorphic concept of God. He did not believe in a personal God of rewards and punishments with a will analogous to our own. He had a “very strong” conviction about the existence of a principle or order that manifests itself in the world of matter and in the mind: “The great scientists of all centuries of our civilization have paid tribute, in some measure, to the power and principle back of the universe—the titanic First Cause which still mothers creation.” He professed to be a deeply religious person driven by this conviction of a unifying higher principle.

“DO SCIENTISTS PRAY?”

During one of his visits to New York, a six-year-old girl asked him, “Do scientists pray?” He at once understood the simplicity and profundity of her question and her need for a truthful answer. He also trusted that she could grasp his equally profound twofold reply:

Scientific research is based on the idea that everything that takes place is determined by laws of nature, and this holds for the actions of people. For this reason, a scientist will hardly be inclined to believe that events could be influenced by prayer, in other words, by a wish addressed to a supernatural Being.

Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble. In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort, which is indeed quite different from the religiosity of someone more naïve.

His concept of “cosmic religion” required no place of worship, sacred scripture or religious dogma. “It is very difficult to elucidate this [cosmic religious] feeling to anyone who is entirely without it,” he wrote.

Over the years, he had to clarify his religious views to others. One very skeptical guest at a dinner party in Berlin was surprised to learn from Einstein himself that he was religious:

Yes, you can call it that. Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find that, behind all the discernible laws and connections, there remains something subtle, intangible and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything that we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent I am, in fact, religious.

Einstein visualized the universe as a rational entity that exhibits superior intelligence and reason. These words of his are often quoted:

The individual feels the vanity of human desires and aims, and the nobility and marvelous order which are revealed in nature and in the world of thought. He feels the individual destiny as an imprisonment and seeks to experience the totality of existence as a unity full of significance.

My religiosity consists of a human admiration of the infinitely superior spirit that reveals itself in the little that we can comprehend of the knowable world. The deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God.

EINSTEIN'S HARMONY OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

To Einstein, science and religion were complimentary. He gives us an exact visualization of the interdependence of science and religion: “Science without religion is lame—religion without science is blind.” He believed cosmic religious feeling provides the motivation in all scientific projects. Einstein writes:

I assert that the cosmic religious experience is the strongest and noblest driving force behind scientific research. . . . The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma and no God conceived in man's image. In my view it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.

His humility was born of his awareness of the stupendous vastness of a superior power behind all phenomena. Max Born said of him, “He knew, as did Socrates, that we know nothing.” Einstein never lost his holy curiosity in the hope of unraveling that mystery. The intuitive flash that led him to the special theory of relativity in 1905 at age twenty-six—that “Time cannot be absolutely defined, and there is an inseparable relation between time and signal velocity” (i.e., two events that appear to be simultaneous to one spectator will not appear to be simultaneous to another spectator who is moving rapidly. was a great imaginative leap in science. This momentous insight was a strange, impervious and compelling birth pang that signaled the fact of his lifelong spiritual hunger and thirst.

He confided to a Berlin colleague that he had discovered the theory of relativity because of his firm conviction “of the harmony of the universe.” It may be said, “Science improves the means; religion makes the man human.” Einstein, like T. H. Huxley, was fully conscious of the limitations of science. It was Huxley’s feeling that however great, science “could never lay its hands, could never touch, even with the tip of its finger, that dream with which our little life is rounded.” Einstein agreed: “The cosmic religious feeling is the strongest and noblest motive for scientific research.” There was no conflict between his humble faith in a greater Reality and his life as a scientist. He was able to reconcile the two: “Science can be created only by those who are thoroughly imbued with the aspiration toward truth and understanding. This source of feeling, however, springs from the sphere of religion.”

He remained a votary of Truth at the altar of the supreme mysterious Entity pervading the universe. His deep spiritual convictions, his utter unselfishness that spurned name and fame, and his dedication to human welfare remind us of an ideal Indian sage committed to plain living and high thinking. Though immersed in secular life, he appeared to many to have an aura of holiness. The author C. P. Snow wrote, “To me, he appears as, out of comparison, the greatest intellect of this century and almost certainly the greatest personification of moral experience. He was in many ways different from the rest of the species.”

ENDNOTES

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