

“Einstein’s God”

Albert Einstein’s name has become synonymous with braininess. With his swarm of frizzy, uncombed hair and puppy-dog, twinkling eyes, his face is instantly recognizable, even by the ninety-nine percent of the planet who have no clue about what his theories mean. No wonder TIME magazine in the year 2000 selected him as “Man of the Century.” He might just have been the man of the millennium. Who else are people going to remember a thousand years from now? Generals? Presidents? Mike Huckabee or Hillary Clinton? Einstein stands in the company of Aristotle and Copernicus.

For it was his insight into the equivalence of matter and energy that launched the atomic age. It was his Special Theory of Relativity that introduced clocks that slow down like molasses, time that stretches and compresses like silly putty, and his General Theory that forced ordinary people to bend their minds around the concept of curved space. He had a major hand in most everything that’s weird and surrealistic about modern science, from black holes to quantum theory. These days most scientific breakthroughs seem to take billions of dollars, Hubble space telescopes or giant accelerators. But Einstein made most of his discoveries with nothing more complicated than a paper and pencil, just by thinking about the world in ways no one had ever bothered to think before. Imagining what it might be like to race alongside a light beam, for example, or whirl around inside a bucket in the middle of empty space, or noticing that free falling in an elevator, you probably wouldn’t feel any gravity. Most people in falling elevators would presumably have their thoughts trained elsewhere. But not Einstein. He had a quirky twist to his intellect.

But it was his personality and spirit as much as his frontal cortex that captivated people. He was an old fashioned materialist, who was absolutely convinced in the independent reality of a physical universe, who bowed before iron clad laws of cause-and-effect, and who resisted with every fiber of his being what he called the “spooky” implications of sub-atomic poltergeists that don’t have any definite mass or location or velocity until they’re surveilled in the lab. He had his feet firmly on the ground (or thought he did), yet his head often seemed to be in the clouds, and there was an almost otherworldly cast to his make-up. He wore old clothes, favored baggy sweatshirts, liked dumpy wool caps pulled down to the ears and preferred no socks whenever he could get away with it. He was casual about money, and about his public image. He didn’t mind offending people in high places, but spoke his mind with refreshingly little concern for where the chips might fall.

He was also a bit of a lecher, but despite that always retained a certain childlike quality to his character (which in fact might have been part of his charm for so many women). He needed taking care of, like the boy who never grew up, and Einstein recognized this about himself. “When I ask myself how it happened that I in particular discovered the relativity theory, it seemed to lie in the following circumstance,” he reflected. “The ordinary adult never bothers his head about the problems of space and time. These are things he has thought of as a child. But I developed so slowly that I began to wonder

about space and time only when I was already grown up. Consequently, I probed more deeply into the problem than an ordinary child would have.”

The notion that this mental powerhouse flunked math in school is a sheer fiction. He had no problems with algebra. But he had sympathy for students who did struggle, and Einstein famously took time to help youngsters with their homework. “Do not worry about your difficulties in mathematics,” he assured one struggling student. “I can assure you that mine are even greater.” When an eight-year-old neighbor rang the professor’s bell one afternoon seeking help with her arithmetic, carrying a plate of fudge as a bribe, Einstein welcomed her in and later explained to her apologetic parents that the exchange was mutual; he was learning just as much from the girl as she was from him. He was a playful person.

Yet he was often estranged from his own children. His firstborn daughter was apparently given up for adoption, her father never bothering to lay eyes on the infant. Close emotional bonds seemed foreign to his nature. Some clinicians speculate now that Einstein may have been born with some mild form of Asperger’s Syndrome, which is often associated with high abilities for abstract reasoning and lower than average capacities for empathy. Einstein had a habit of repeating words and phrases, another possible sign of the disorder. Said one scientific colleague, “I do not know anyone as lonely and detached as Einstein. His heart never bleeds, and he moves through life with mild enjoyment and emotional indifference. His extreme kindness and decency are thoroughly impersonal and seem to come from another planet.”

He could be just as indifferent about his own fate. In 1931, on a transatlantic crossing, a terrific storm overtook the ship carrying him to America. Listening to the gale outside, feeling tossed upon the waves, the ship at the mercy of the elements, Einstein recorded in his diary, “One feels the insignificance of the individual, and it makes one happy.” In old age, faced with an inoperable aneurysm, he was equally philosophical, telling his assistant Helen Dukas that “It is tasteless to prolong life artificially. I have done my share, it is time to go. I will do it elegantly.”

With the same sense of formality and detachment, Einstein disliked Beethoven and the romantics, calling them “too personal, almost naked.” He preferred Mozart, whose music he said was “so pure and beautiful that I see it as a reflection of the inner beauty of the universe itself.” Faced with personal conflicts, Einstein typically retreated to his violin, or physics. But despite this aversion to interpersonal entanglements, he was passionate about social justice and cared deeply about people in the abstract.

His pronouncements on world affairs were labeled naïve—just as saints and prophets have always been called naïve—but most were right on target, according to my way of thinking. He was a pacifist, a world federalist, a socialist. He hated militarism and the kind of super-patriotism that resulted in goose-stepping armies and blind obedience to authority. “When a person can take pleasure in marching in step to a piece of music, it is enough to make me despise him,” he scoffed. “He has been given his big brain only by mistake.” He warned that the Third World War might be fought with guided missiles,

but the Fourth World War would be fought with rocks. By the end of life, his commitment to non-violence was so complete that he gave up eating meat, though with a typical disregard for dogmatism, he told his sister Maja (who was also a vegetarian but loved hot dogs) that weiners might be considered a vegetable.

Einstein's social conscience was undoubtedly part of his Jewish heritage. Early on, he had renounced Judaism. On a form requesting to be removed from German citizenship in 1896, he listed his religious affiliation as "none." But as anti-Semitism surged in Europe, he identified more and more with his spiritual heritage, and despite calling nationalism "an infantile disease, the measles of mankind," he became an increasingly ardent Zionist, who before the end of life would be offered (and decline) the position as president in the newly created state of Israel.

Though his God was not exactly the God of the Bible, his deity was a mostly wise and benevolent Creator. "I'm not an atheist," as Einstein explained. "The problem involved is too vast for our limited minds. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn't know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God. We see the universe marvelously arranged and obeying certain laws but only dimly understand" what they are.

For Einstein, of course, the language the cosmic author used was not Hebrew or Greek, but the language of mathematics, and to the end of his life he would search for the unified field theory that would unlock the greatest riddles of existence—not only of why things are as they are, but why the universe goes to the bother of existing at all, and why the equations behind it should be so transparent to the human mind. As he remarked, the most incomprehensible thing about the cosmos is its very comprehensibility.

As he put it more than once, God doesn't play dice. Events happen for a reason, in other words. It can't all just be chalked up to accident. "The Lord God is subtle," he affirmed, "but not malicious." One gets the sense that many modern physicists like Stephen Hawking refer to the "mind of God" a little glibly, because they know it makes their own work seem more metaphysical and profound. But when Einstein referred to the creator as "The Old One" he wasn't just speaking poetically. The idea of God has a spiritual resonance for him.

That was why he distanced himself from the non-believers of his own day like Sigmund Freud and Bertrand Russell, and why he would probably look dimly on militant atheists of the twenty-first century like biologist Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*. "The fanatical atheists," he wrote, "are like slaves who are still feeling the weight of their chains which they have thrown off after hard struggle. They are creatures who—in their grudge against traditional religion as the 'opium of the masses'—cannot hear the music of the spheres." Most of these atheists were know-it-alls, he observed, arrogant in the

self-certainty of their own negations. “What separates me from most so-called atheists is a feeling of utter humility toward the unattainable secrets of the harmony of the cosmos.”

“Science without religion is lame,” he said. “Religion without science is blind.” One evening in Berlin, Einstein and his wife Elsa were at a dinner party where the topic of astrology came up. Casting horoscopes was just superstitious, Einstein suggested. Then another guest began to disparage religion in general. Belief in God, he insisted, was likewise superstitious nonsense, a collection of old wives tales. Trying to turn the conversation, the host observed that even Einstein harbored religious beliefs. “It isn’t possible!” the guest exclaimed, turning to the great thinker to ask if he were truly religious. “Yes, you can call it that,” Einstein answered. “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.”

That kind of faith might not satisfy true believers, but for Einstein, it did was enough. It instilled a lifelong sense of wonder and reverence for the creation. It fueled his curiosity and imagination. It provided a sense of gratitude for being permitted to glimpse even a small part of the limitless ocean of truth. And at the end of life, it brought the consolation of being part of something larger than himself.

Albert Einstein never embraced any hopes for personal immortality. The notion that the universe might have eternal use for his paltry ego might survive seemed to him a strange conceit. But a few weeks before his own death, lamenting the demise of Michele Besso, his friend of over sixty years, he wrote in sympathy to Besso’s widow Anna Winteler that her husband had “departed this strange world a little ahead of me. That means nothing. For us believing physicists, the distinction between pasts, present and future is only a stubborn illusion.”

Einstein died a few weeks later at the age of seventy-six. By his bedside were twelve pages of closely written equations, with erasures and multiple cross-outs, part of his quest to delve the mystery of being that continued until the very end. The son of an electrical engineer, he had begun his career working as an unknown functionary in a Swiss patent office. And oddly, he claimed several patents in his own name, mostly for improved refrigerator. To the best of my knowledge, he never sold or made any money for his iceboxes. But that didn’t bother him. His greatest discoveries became the property of the ages. His soul belonged to the universe.