ALBERT EINSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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THERE is scarcely any fundamental area of human concern that did not challenge the thought of Albert Einstein. Although the great achievements of his genius belong especially in the fields of physics and mathematics, he also wrote on ethics, aesthetics, epistemology, metaphysics, political theory, education, sociology, history of scientific and philosophic thought, and a great deal on religion.[1] True it is that, except for his theories in the realm of physics and mathematics, he did not treat these fields systematically, scholarly and exhaustively. His writings, however, are abundant enough for the scholar to be able to unravel from their implications the general character of Einstein's thought on ultimate issues, and to appraise by way of internal criticism this thought in terms of Einstein's own dialectics.

As the name of Einstein immediately reminds one of the special and general theories of relativity, the Brownian movement of molecules, his influence on quantum analysis, and the many ways in which his penetrating scientific vision has revolutionized the thinking of modern man, one feels naturally inclined to associate him only with science, and particularly, with physical science. A consideration of Einstein's conception of science must be, therefore, illuminating and fruitful. Science is, he tells us, "the century-old endeavor to bring together by means of systematic thought the perceptible phenomena of this world into as thoroughgoing an association as possible. To put it boldly it is the attempt at the posterior reconstruction of existence by the process of conceptualization."[2] In his essay on "Physics and Reality" concerning what he calls "Stratification of the Scientific System" he states that "the aim of science is, on the one hand, a comprehension as complete as possible, of the connection between the sense experiences in their totality, and, on the other hand, the accomplishment of this aim by the use of a minimum of primary concepts and relations." Primary concepts, he adds, "directly connected with sense experiences."[3] Without entering into the epistemic implications that the following definition of Einstein's concepts of correspondence and correlation entail, especially his differences from and apparent agreement with Kantian epistemology, let us once more observe his constant reference to sense experience. In his essay on the "Fundamentals of Theoretical Physics" we are told that "Science is the attempt to make the chaotic diversity of our sense experience correspond to a logically uniform system of thought. In this system single experiences must be correlated with the theoretic structure in such a way that the resulting coordinating is unique and convincing. The sense experiences are the given subject matter."[4]

Sense experience, which is not all of

[1] Paul Schlipp, ed., *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, 730-56. Library of Living Philosophers, vol. 7, 1949.

[2] Albert Einstein, *Out of My Later Years*, 24, N. Y.: Phil. Library, 1950.

[3] Ibid, 63.

[4] Ibid, 98.

experience, and according to Einstein, not even the most important type of experience, is therefore, the subject matter of science. In his essay on "Science and Religion," for example, by way of further illustration, referring to scientific rationalism, he argues against the prevailing opinion among the advanced minds to the effect that belief should be replaced increasingly by knowledge. He observes that "according to this conception the sole function of education is that of opening the way to thinking and knowing, and the school, as the outstanding organ for the people's education must serve that end exclusively." But the weak point in this conception is, Einstein adds, "that those convictions which are necessary for our conduct and judgments, cannot be found solely along the solid scientific way." How could they be, we ask, not being sensorial and quantifiable? "The scientific method," Einstein explains, "can teach us nothing else beyond how facts are related to, and conditioned by each other. The aspiration toward such objective knowledge belongs to the highest of which man is capable. . . . Yet it is equally clear that knowledge of what *is* does not open the door to what *ought to be*. One can have the clearest and most complete knowledge of what *is* and yet not be able to deduct from that, what *ought to be the goal* of our human aspirations. Objective knowledge provides us with powerful instruments for the achievement of certain ends, but the ultimate goal itself and the longing to reach it must come from another source. And it is hardly necessary to argue for the view that our existence and our activity acquire meaning only by the setting up of such a goal and of corresponding values."[5] Thus, it is the setting up of such nonsensory goals and the cultivation of corresponding non-mechanical values, rather than the rationalistic correlation of sense experience, that, according to Einstein, impart upon existence and human activity transcendent significance and satisfactory justification. Naturally, the foregoing quotations and personal interpretations are not intended to read axiology into Einstein's pronouncements. It is not our purpose to eclipse with religious ideas the intrinsic worth of his scientific thought. But these words of Einstein are of great importance for interpreting his religious concepts.

Two religious utterances of Einstein have been widely discussed, namely, his belief in the "God of Spinoza" and his disbelief in a personal God. "I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals Himself," he says, "in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with fates and actions of Human beings. . . . I believe that intelligence is manifested throughout all nature. . . . The basis of all scientific work is the conviction that the world is an ordered and comprehensible entity, and not a thing of chance."[6] But as for the character of this God, personal attributes must not be ascribed to Him. We are told that "the doctrine of a personal God interfering with natural events could never be refuted in the real sense by science, for this doctrine can always take refuge in those domains in which scientific knowledge has not yet been able to set foot. But such a behavior on the part of representatives of religion would not only be unworthy but also fatal. . . . In their struggle for the ethical good, teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal God, that is, give up that source of fear and hope . . . In their labors they will have to avail themselves of those forces which are capable of cultivating the good, the true and the beautiful in humanity itself."[7] Less popularly known, but perhaps just as important as his statement on the God of Spinoza and his attitude toward the per-

[5] Ibid, 21-2.

[6] *The New York Times*, April 25, 1929.

[7] Einstein, *Out of My Later Years*, 28-9.

sonal God, are what he regards as the alternative levels of religious awareness. In his book *Cosmic Religion* he refers to the first stage as primitive religion—a religion of fear, seeking the appeasement of its deity. Such religion is stabilized, though not caused, by the work of a priestly cast. On the second stage he places prophetic religion, i.e., religion which springs from social consciousness. God now entails moral considerations, he rewards and punishes, comforts and sustains, and is conceived in the image of man. The third level, or to use his own phrase, "the cosmic religious sense" is to be found only in gifted individuals and even then, rarely in its pure form. Its characteristic trait is the realizations of "the vanity of human desires and aims and the nobility and marvelous order which are revealed in nature and the world of thought."[8] Buddha and Spinoza would naturally be the "gifted individuals" representing this highest level. God must be totally divested of all anthropomorphism. The anthropomorphic character of the traditional conception of God, is shown, we learn from Einstein, "by the fact that men appeal to the Divine Being in prayers and plead for the fulfilment of their wishes. . . . . By virtue of its simplicity, the idea of the existence of an omnipotent, just and omnibeneficent personal God is accessible to the most undeveloped mind, but," he adds, "there are decisive weaknesses attached to this idea, which have been painfully felt since the beginning of history." If God is omnipotent, Einstein observes, "every occurrence, including every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration is also His work." This being the case, he asks, "How is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thought before such an Almighty Being? In giving out punishment and rewards He would, to a certain extent, be passing judgment on Himself. How can this be combined with the goodness and righteousness ascribed to Him?"[9]

As one pauses to consider for a moment the logic involved in Einstein's love of Spinoza's God and his aversion for the anthropomorphism which belief in a personal God entails, several weaknesses and fallacies become self evident in the foregoing religious positions. Pantheism is a form of metaphysical absolutism. Philosophically it predicates that nature is all there is; and all that there is is nature. Nature, however, is identified with God, and God with nature. Logically substituting equals for equals, the resulting tautology of "All is All" heuristically speaking becomes inarticulate and useless. But even if the logical difficulties were to be obviated, the concept of the All or the Whole does not necessarily entail goodness, for a totally evil All might be conceived. Whatever else God is, however, philosophically speaking, He is the ultimate source of value. God is a value concept. Although logically cogent, these considerations may not be of immediate import religiously speaking; but they are applicable to Spinoza's pantheism which Einstein embraces. Yet, these observations are of minor significance compared to the inconsistency between the God of Spinoza and Einstein's conception of the sacramental worth of the human being and his persistent struggle for the safeguarding of freedom and individuality. Such freedom and individuality are necessarily rendered impossible by the metaphysical determinism of the Whole. Einstein speaks of freedom of communication indispensable for the development and extension of scientific knowledge; of economic freedom without which freedom of expression would be useless; and of the "inward freedom of the spirit" which is "a gift of nature, worthy objective for

[8] Albert Einstein, *Cosmic Religion*, 48, N. Y.: Covici Friede, 1931.

[9] *Out of My Later Years*, 26-7.

the individual."[10] Concerning the function of education, it is his belief that the school "should develop in the young individuals those qualities and capabilities which are of value for the welfare of the commonwealth. But that does not mean that individuality should be destroyed and the individual become a mere tool of the community . . . The aim must be the training of independently acting and thinking individuals . . . "[11] This individuality and this freedom lie at the very heart of Einstein's world view. In private conversation he told Virgil G. Hinshaw once, "Never do anything against conscience, even if the state demands it," and Hinshaw establishes a parallelism between the words of Einstein and those of the *New Testament*, "But Peter and the apostles answered and said, we must obey God rather than men," (*Acts*, V: 29).[12] The individual is sacred, and his freedom is not subordinate even to the state. Indeed it goes even farther and deeper, for it lies at the ontic basis of thought itself. In his Oxford address during the summer of 1933 shortly before he left Europe for America, referring to physical theory he said, "The scientists of those times (18th and 19th centuries) were for the most part convinced that the basic concepts and laws of physics were not in a logical sense free inventions of the human mind, but rather they were derivable by abstraction, that is, by a logical process, from experiment. It was the general theory of relativity that showed in a convincing manner the incorrectness of this view." Einstein asks, "If it is the case that the axiomatic basis of theoretical physics cannot be an inference from experience, but must be free invention, have we any right to hope that we shall find the correct way? Still more —Does this correct approach exist at all save in our imagination?"[13] Here we certainly have an echo of Bowne's speculative argument for freedom, but its delightful profundity and infinite fruitfulness as a scientific and philosophic insight is cancelled by the metaphysical determinism of an absolutistic Spinozism which leaves no room for freedom or individuality. William Ernest Hocking seems to be right, therefore, when he observes that "while invoking science and Spinoza, Einstein appears to go beyond both, for while it belongs to science and Spinoza to assume that the things and events within the world have orderly and comprehensible connections, and that no such thing or event is a matter of chance, it belongs to neither science nor Spinoza to judge that the world as a whole is placed in a comprehensible order, or that its existence is an actual manifestation of intelligence."[14] The content of the phrase "not a thing of chance" frequently appears in the writings of Einstein. "I cannot believe that God plays dice with the world," he tells us, and adds, "God is sophisticated, but he is not malicious." On the other hand he frequently refers to the cosmic manifestation of intelligence, to his belief in the rationality of nature, to his amazement at the rational aspect of reality, to the reason revealed in the world, and even to the ultimate knowability of the cosmos. Together these concepts would never add up to the God of Spinoza. They add up to intelligent Christian Theism.

But Theism as such is repudiated by Einstein on the basis of its implied anthropomorphism. Since the times of Democritus and Epicurus belief in God has been assailed as anthropomorphic, and undoubtedly there is a great deal of

[10] Ibid, 12-4.

[11] Ibid, 32.

[12] *Albert Einstein : Philosopher-Scientist*, op cit., 653.

[13] Philipp Frank, *Einstein, His Life and Times*, 217-18; 282, N. Y.: Alfred Knopf, 1947.

[14] William Ernest Hocking, *Science and the Idea of God*, 16, U. of N. Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1944.

ridiculous anthropomorphism in religious practices, but for the intelligent believer the charge should be harmless. With the *Old Testament* writer the healthy believer dismisses the charge by keeping in mind that "God's ways are not our ways and His thoughts not our thoughts," while with the Man of Galilee he remembers the injunction to be perfect as The Father, for God is perfect and we are not. Strictly speaking, however, all thought is anthropomorphic, including scientific thought, because our common point of dialectical departure consists of our human sensations, our human experience, and our human logic. Perry's egocentric predicament applies to scientists, philosophers, artists, religionists, and all men alike. The question then is not that of anthropomorphism or no anthropomorphism, but rather, what kind of anthropomorphism. Edward Le Roy Long Jr. must be thinking along these lines when he says that "Einstein is anxious to avoid anthropomorphism but that there is reason to doubt that he succeeds, for the order and rationality that he attributes to nature may be no more than a mode of man's looking at the world . . . The laws of nature are convenient, and even arbitrary configurations imposed upon an external environment by the mind of man. We can hardly find in the order seen by science an escape from anthropomorphism."[15]

The foregoing considerations may sound casual or tangential, perhaps cumbersome or even irrelevant to our topic. The issue to be noted is, however, that of the presuppositions upon which Einstein's religious ideas rest, and how far we are to follow the implications of his conclusions. This calls for less expediency and for rigorous metaphysical inquiry. No better stimulus for this task, however, than the words of Einstein himself. "The fear of metaphysics is a malady of contemporary empiricistic philosophizing."[16] It may be that if Einstein follows his own words to their furthermost implications the problem of theodicy which has led him to the impersonal God may lead him instead to another alternative. Plato, Mani, Mill, F. C. S. Schiller, Wm. James, Bradley, H. G. Wells, Bergson, Whitehead, Montague, Brightman, Hartshorne, and others, struggling with the same problem of evil that has challenged Einstein's religious thought, apparently found dialectical peace in the theory of Finite Divinity. This theory does not represent our position, but being fairer to the facts of experience it is more coherent and therefore, metaphysically more penetrating than the concept of God in Spinoza.

Einstein's philosophy of religion, however, is not exhausted in the simple beliefs which we have sketched. For the last thirty-five years he has been known as a vigorous champion for the cause of cultural Zionism; a strong advocate for world government; for pacifism, modified only in the case of Facism, Nazism, or any other organized movement jeopardizing the sanctity of life and the free work of intelligence. He has written in defense of the negro, the Jews, the refugees and other minority groups; he has challenged the intellectuals of the nation and of the world to enlightened citizenship and social responsibility; he has clamored for a moral and spiritual awakening of the nations, and has championed the cause of democratic socialism even at the sacrificial cost of the repeated charge of fellow-travelling with communists.

According to Einstein the highest principles for our aspirations and judgments are given to us in the Jewish-Christian religions tradition,[17] and because he is so profoundly convinced that science cannot supply goals or purposes, he is as

[15] Edward LeRoy Long, Jr., *Religious Beliefs of American Scientists*, 25, Phil.: Westminster Press, 1952.

[16] *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, op. cit., 289.

[17] *Out of My Later Years*, op. cit., 23.

Philipp Frank observes, "Far from disputing the usefulness of church organizations. He views the institutional churches as invested with the greatest of responsibilities for moral education." "To the sphere of religion," says Einstein, "belongs the faith that the regulations valid for the world of existence are rational, and that it is comprehensible to reason. I cannot conceive of a genuine scientist," he declares, "without this profound faith." "The situation may be expressed by an image," he adds, "science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind," (which reminds us of St. Agustine's, *credo ut intelligam, intelligo ut credam*).

"The most incomprehensible thing about the universe," he tells us, "is that it is comprehensible, and this is a miracle."[18] Einstein's religious experience derives from this awareness; or rather, this awareness constitutes his religious experience. "The cosmic religious experience," he explains, "is the strongest and the noblest deriving from behind scientific research. No one who does not appreciate the terrific exertions, the devotion, without which pioneer creation in scientific thought cannot come into being can judge the strength of the feeling out of which alone such work, turned away as it is from immediate practical life, can grow. What deep faith in the rationality of the strucutre of the world, there must have been in Kepler and Newton! . ." One can almost agree with Einstein as one repeats with him his glowing words of rapturous beauty: "The most beautiful emotion we can experience," he says, "is the mystical. It is the sower of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is strange, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms—this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of devoutly religious men."[19]

In all genuine mystical experience, ecstasy always flowers out in social action. It was so in Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Jesus and Paul. It was so in Lao-Tzé, Buddha, Shankara. It was so in Augustine, St. Francis and the Spanish mystics. It was so in Wycliff, Cox and Wesley. It is so in Einstein. Philipp Frank, the logical positivist, characterizes Einstein as a "hard-boiled mystic" implying that the mystic joy of Einstein never ends in ecstasy but translates itself into dynamic constructive action. This reveals in Frank, however, some bias and lack of historical perspective, for the fact is that in the history of mystical thought it is difficult to find an exception to what Einstein illustrates. Mystical experiences have been different in different individuals, but for the most part the outcome has always been the same, namely: dynamic and passionate social concern and action. Thus, side by side with his rapturous and religious amazement at the rationality and knowability of the universe, which for him is miracle,[20] is Einstein's concern for man, not for universal man, but for the individual man of flesh and bone. Thus he admonishes, "Concern for man himself and his fate must always form the chief interest of all technical endeavors . . . . . Never forget this in the midst of your diagrams and equations."[21] Elsewhere he tells us, "Knowledge must continuously be renewed by ceaseless effort, if it is not to be lost. It resembles a statue of marble which stands in the desert and is continuously threatened with burial by the shifting sand. *The*

[18] Ibid, 61.

[19] Frank, op. cit., 284.

[20] *Out of My Later Years,* op. cit., 61.

[21] Robert S. Lynd, *Knowledge for What,* 114, Princeton: 1939, and *Albert Einstein: Philosopher Scientist,* op. cit., 649.

hands of service must ever be at work in order that the marble continue lastingly to shine in the sun. *To these serving hands mine also shall belong.*"[22] Life finds its meaning and joy in serving others, he explains, and finally he adds, "Morality is the standpoint from which all questions which arise in life could and should be judged . . . Can you imagine that any man truly filled with this ideal could be content, were he to receive from his fellowmen a much greater return in goods and services than most other men ever receive? Were his country, because it feels itself for the time being militarily secure, to stand aloof from the aspiration to create a supranational system of security and justice? Could he look on passively, or perhaps even with indifference, when elsewhere in the world innocent people are being brutally persecuted, deprived of their rights or even massacred . . . ?"[23] Such is the manner of Albert Einstein ! ! !, a scientist, a phillosopher, a prophet, a mystic, a lover of humanity . . .

[22] *Out of My Later Years*, op. cit., 31-32.

[23] Ibid, 19-20.