



Albert Einstein as a Philosopher of Science

Einstein's philosophical habit of mind, cultivated by undergraduate training and lifelong dialogue, had a profound effect on the way he did physics.

Don A. Howard

Nowadays, explicit engagement with the philosophy of science plays almost no role in the training of physicists or in physics research. What little the student learns about philosophical issues is typically learned casually, by a kind of intellectual osmosis. One picks up ideas and opinions in the lecture hall, in the laboratory, and in collaboration with one's supervisor. Careful reflection on philosophical ideas is rare. Even rarer is systematic instruction. Worse still, publicly indulging an interest in philosophy of science is often treated as a social blunder. To be fair, more than a few physicists do think philosophically. Still, explicitly philosophical approaches to physics are the exception. Things were not always so.

"Independence of judgment"

In December 1944 Robert A. Thornton had a new job teaching physics at the University of Puerto Rico. He was fresh from the University of Minnesota, where he had written his PhD thesis on "Measurement, Concept Formation, and Principles of Simplicity: A Study in the Logic and Methodology of Physics" under Herbert Feigl, a noted philosopher of science. Wanting to incorporate the philosophy of science into his teaching of introductory physics, Thornton wrote to Albert Einstein for help in persuading his colleagues to accept that innovation. Einstein replied:

I fully agree with you about the significance and educational value of methodology as well as history and philosophy of science. So many people today—and even professional scientists—seem to me like someone who has seen thousands of trees but has never seen a forest. A knowledge of the historic and philosophical background gives that kind of independence from prejudices of his generation from which most scientists are suffering. This independence created by philosophical insight is—in my opinion—the mark of distinction between a mere artisan or specialist and a real seeker after truth.¹

Einstein was not just being polite; he really meant this.

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He had been saying the same thing for nearly 30 years. He knew from his experience at the forefront of the revolutions in early 20th-century physics that having cultivated a philosophical habit of mind had made him a better physicist.

A few years after his letter to Thornton, Einstein wrote in a contribution to *Albert Einstein: Philosopher-Scientist*, "The reciprocal relationship of epistemology and science is of noteworthy kind. They are dependent upon each other. Epistemology without contact with science becomes an empty scheme. Science without epistemology is—insofar as it is thinkable at all—primitive and muddled."²

In a 1936 article entitled "Physics and Reality," he explained why the physicist cannot simply defer to the philosopher but must be a philosopher himself:

It has often been said, and certainly not without justification, that the man of science is a poor philosopher. Why then should it not be the right thing for the physicist to let the philosopher do the philosophizing? Such might indeed be the right thing to do at a time when the physicist believes he has at his disposal a rigid system of fundamental concepts and fundamental laws which are so well established that waves of doubt can't reach them; but it cannot be right at a time when the very foundations of physics itself have become problematic as they are now. At a time like the present, when experience forces us to seek a newer and more solid foundation, the physicist cannot simply surrender to the philosopher the critical contemplation of theoretical foundations; for he himself knows best and feels more surely where the shoe pinches. In looking for a new foundation, he must try to make clear in his own mind just how far the concepts which he uses are justified, and are necessities.³

Already in 1916, just after completing his general theory of relativity, Einstein had discussed philosophy's relation to physics in an obituary for the physicist and philosopher Ernst Mach:

How does it happen that a properly endowed natural scientist comes to concern himself with epistemology? Is there not some more valuable work to be done in his specialty? That's what I hear many of my colleagues ask, and I sense it from many more. But I cannot share this sentiment. When I think about the ablest students whom I have encountered in my teaching—that

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