

Einstein and the Mind of God: Einstein's Ethics

Discussion Questions:

1. Although Einstein was not an observant Jew, biographer Tom Levenson describes Einstein's view of Judaism as one grounded in ethical behavior: "how to live in this world, how to do justice in this world, how to be charitable in this world, how to be honorable in this world, what's required of you to be a good person." He sums up Einstein's perspective by citing the classic phrase in Hebrew of the obligation of the Jew, *tikkun olam*, "to heal the world."
 - *What is the foundation for your understanding of ethics?*

2. In the periods surrounding both World Wars, when so many of Einstein's esteemed colleagues threw themselves behind warmongering nationalism and, later, fascism, Einstein felt they had betrayed not only their personal morals but their primary allegiance as scientists. "[Einstein] thought that science had not just a method—a way of thinking about the natural world that would produce rigorous results—[but that] science had a social order as well," states biographer Tom Levenson. "He saw science and the scientific community as a transnational kind of super nation of good, well-thinking, moral individuals."
 - *Do you think it's possible today for the global scientific community to transcend nationalistic concerns—not only for the advancement of science but also for the greater good of humanity? Why or why not? What recent examples support your point of view?*
 - *Is the scientific community unique in its potential to transcend nationalistic concerns, or do other fields of endeavor (i.e., business, the arts, education, etc.) also have the capacity to become a "transnational kind of super nation of good, well-thinking, moral individuals"?*

3. Einstein had a very strong sense of justice. He used his fame and prominence as a platform to agitate for the Jewish people and political prisoners in fascist Europe. He championed nonviolent resistance, fought racial segregation in America, and worried that humankind was not equal to the moral responsibilities of scientific advance.
 - *What do you think drove Einstein, a scientist, to speak out so forcefully on issues of social and moral concern?*
 - *Are there leading thinkers today—in science or other arenas—who exercise a similar moral authority to speak out on issues of injustice? What names, if any, come to mind?*

4. The empathy so evident in Einstein's public ethics fell short in his personal life. He was a fairly remote figure for most of his two sons' lives, and he once wrote of his first wife, Mileva, "I treat my wife as an employee I cannot fire." Levenson notes: "In certain of his relationships, he was deeply flawed. He really hurt many of the people closest to him. The temptation with a great figure like Einstein or anyone else is always to try and see them as unalloyed greatness, some kind of pure essence of something the rest of us are not."
 - *When it comes to prominent figures like Einstein and others, how do you account for the apparent contradiction between public and private behavior?*

- *When you hear about the moral failure or shortcomings of a political, social or business leader, does it automatically diminish your view of their professional integrity? Why or why not?*
 - *In terms of ethics, do you think we sometimes view figures like Einstein as the “pure essence of something the rest of us are not” as a way of letting ourselves off the hook? In other words, that such persons are either immune to the temptations we face or possess a degree of moral courage we cannot attain?*
- 5.** Einstein greatly admired his contemporary, India’s Mahatma Gandhi. He wrote, “I believe that Gandhi’s views were the most enlightened of all the political men in our time. We should strive to do things in his spirit, not to use violence in fighting for our cause, but by nonparticipation in anything you believe is evil.”
- *Have you, or has someone you know, ever suffered consequences for choosing not to participate in something you considered evil?*
 - *Under what circumstances, if any, would you consider violence an appropriate response to evil? What historical or contemporary examples illustrate your view?*
- 6.** Physicist S. James Gates, Jr. ponders how a musical composer, a physicist, or someone in any field of endeavor might respond to the question, “How does your work . . . impact your sense of humanity and ethics?” Gates responds, “Those of us who work in these areas come away with a deep sense of mystery and a deep sense of our own humanity.”
- *How would you answer Gates’ question? If possible, share a personal experience that illustrates your response.*
 - *Generally speaking, do the tasks and relationships you engage in on a daily basis tend to challenge or affirm your ethics?*
- 7.** Gates describes how the scientific virtues of curiosity and creativity informed not only Einstein’s science, but also his social ethics, and perhaps especially his views on race. “[Einstein] asked the question, ‘What if I was a person of African heritage?’ And because he had the capability to ask the what-if question, it opened the door to what I think is, perhaps, the deepest marker of humanity, and that’s empathy.”
- *Empathy is the ability to identify with or understand another person’s feelings or difficulties. Do you think empathy has application beyond personal relationships? For example, should governments allow empathy to play a role in shaping foreign policy? Why or why not?*
 - *Describe someone who is very different from you, or with whom you don’t get along. What thoughts come to mind when you ask the question, “What if I were that person?”*
- 8.** When awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1945, Einstein feared, but, in fact, fear has increased tremendously since the termination of the war. The world was promised freedom from want, but large parts of the world are faced with starvation while others are living in abundance. As far as we, the physicists, are concerned, we are no politicians. But we know a few things that the politicians do not know: that there is no escape into easy comfort, there is no distance ahead for proceeding little by little until they make the necessary changes into an indefinite future. The situation calls for a courageous effort, for a radical change in our whole attitude in the entire political content.”
- *What parallels do you see between Einstein’s description of the world in 1945 and the world today?*
 - *How has the world progressed or regressed in its efforts to achieve freedom from fear and want since 1945?*

- *In order to make progress, do you feel there is still a need for a “radical change in our whole attitude in the entire political content”? What changes would you like to see?*

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