

Einstein and the Mind of God: Einstein's God

Discussion Questions:

1. In describing his religious views, Einstein wrote, "I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the type of which we are conscious in ourselves. Enough for me, the mystery of the eternity of life and the inking of the marvelous structure of reality, together with the single-hearted endeavor to comprehend a portion, be it ever so tiny, of the reason that manifests itself in nature."
 - *Do you find it difficult to imagine a God who is capable of both creating the universe and taking an interest in the lives of individual human beings? Why or why not?*
 - *What experiences have given you an "inkling of the marvelous structure of reality"? For example, birthing a child, witnessing an eclipse, harvesting a garden, etc. How did these experiences inform your understanding of God?*

2. Einstein describes his childhood experience of seeing a compass for the first time: "This needle behaved in such a determined way and did not fit into the usual explanation of how the world works. That is that you must touch something to move it." The experience made a deep and lasting impression that prompted him to conclude, "There must be something deeply hidden behind everything." He spent his life seeking to comprehend that hidden order and to describe it mathematically. Einstein often spoke of this as his longing to understand what God was thinking.
 - *What is your earliest recollection of an experience that "did not fit into the usual explanation of how the world works"? Was it a positive experience that prompted wonder, or a negative experience that led to disillusionment?*
 - *In your view, does the idea that mathematics reveals a hidden order behind everything support or detract from the notion of a divine Creator?*

3. In an address at a conference on science, philosophy and religion in 1941, Albert Einstein declared that science can only be created by those who aspire toward truth and understanding. He famously concluded: "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind."
 - *What examples (recent or historical) can you think of that might illustrate Einstein's statement, "Science without religion is lame. Religion without science is blind"?*
 - *In contemporary culture, do you feel there is a good balance between science and religion, or is one considered more authoritative than the other?*

4. Physicist Freeman Dyson states, "The world is full of mysteries . . . Every time we discover something, we find two more questions to ask, and so there is no end of mysteries in science. That's what it's all about. And the same is true of religion."
 - *Have you ever thought of science as something that is characterized by mystery? Why or why not?*
 - *Are you more comfortable with the idea of mystery in science or in religion?*
 - *In your experience, is religion more about a pursuit of questions or a pursuit of answers?*

5. Einstein thought a great deal about measuring time. His theory of relativity identifies the so-called Big Bang as the origin of time—that there is no time before it. Physicist Paul Davies points out that

Augustine, a fifth-century theologian, considered the same issue and arrived at a similar conclusion—that the world and time were created simultaneously. According to Davies, Augustine “placed God outside of time altogether, a timeless, eternal being.”

- *Do you find it surprising that both a scientist and a theologian would arrive at similar conclusions about the concept of eternity? Why or why not?*
- *What is your view of the concept of eternity?*
- *What answer might you give to a child who asks, “What was God doing before he created the universe?”*

6. Paul Davies draws a parallel between Einstein’s view of time and the Australian aboriginal concept of “Dreamtime.” Dreamtime acknowledges two times—the one by which we live our lives, and then an abstract notion that might be considered the opposite of time—perhaps eternity. This dualism acknowledges that there is time and there is eternity, and some things have an existence outside of time.

- *Do you believe time and eternity are like parallel lines—coexistent but separate? Or do you believe time and eternity may be interactive—that it’s possible to have points of contact between the two?*
- *Have you ever had an experience in which time felt absent or altered? Describe what happened.*
- *Assuming the dualism of Dreamtime, what things (or beings) would you like to imagine having an existence outside of time?*

7. In acknowledging how physics impacts one’s view of the universe and our place within it, Paul Davies first notes the perspective of physicist Steven Weinberg who has said, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.” Davies then articulates his own perspective: “Weinberg sees the same facts as I do but without coming himself to believe that there’s any point behind it all. And that’s where he and I will part company. We’d agree on all of the science, but to me it overwhelmingly suggests that the universe is about something, that there is a point to it, and that we’re part of whatever point that is.” So Davies, contrary to Weinberg, maintains that the more we understand about the universe, the more likely it is that we will share in its meaning.

- *Whose perspective—Weinberg’s or Davies’—comes closest to your view?*
- *Assuming Davies’ perspective, what do you imagine might be the point or purpose of the universe? What role would humanity play in achieving that purpose?*

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