

God Does Not Play Dice

Einstein's Still Topical Critique of Quantum Mechanics

There is hardly a remark by Einstein as famous as his statement that God does not play dice. Not only is it included in many portrayals of Einstein's life and work, it has even provided the title for a

number of books on issues of modern physics and mathematics. The popularity of the sentence stands in notable contrast to the rather private context from which it originates. Einstein did not so much elucidate his comment in his writings on physics as he implemented it in his correspondence, and even more frequently in oral discussions with other physicists. The subject was the "statistical interpretation" of

seriously. Einstein's views on modern quantum mechanics (the same quantum mechanics still valid today) have piqued renewed interest on the part of many scholars.

The shift in the attitudes of scholarship to Einstein's arguments with quantum mechanics throws another light on his God who does not play dice. The more recent works emphasize that Einstein's critique of statistical interpretation is not the expression of an untenable view of physics, but rather refers to future potential developments of atomic theory, which still remain to be achieved. This also gives new meaning to the sentence about God not playing dice.

Similar to the manner in which Einstein left this remark unexplained, however, his entire position on quantum mechanics has not remained unambiguous. His dice metaphor provides latitude for opposing points of view. On the one hand it can be linked with recent results of research; on the other it points unchangingly to the reactionary elements in Einstein's thought. I will turn first to these latter elements, and then look at the opposing interpretation, which picks up on recent results.

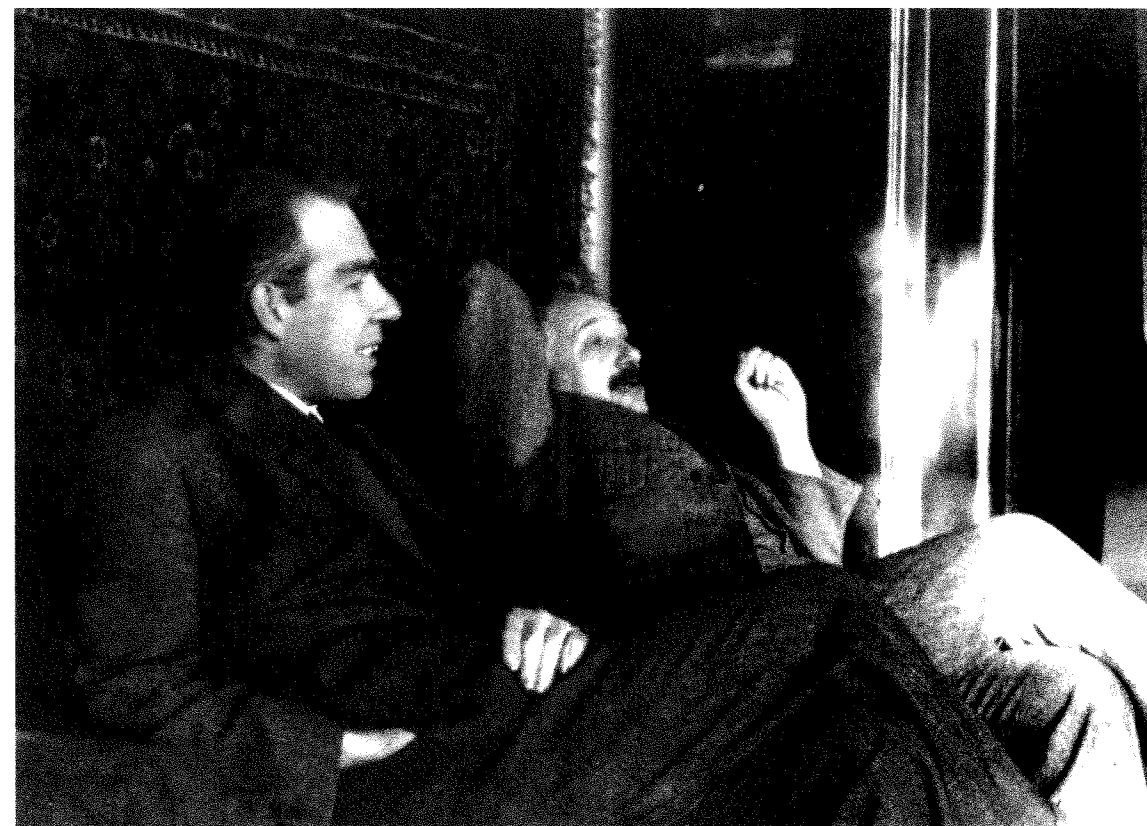
Isn't Chance at the Root of Natural Phenomena?

If one looks more closely at the subject of his criticism, it is not surprising that Einstein's critique of statistical interpretation seemed antiquated to his contemporaries. The interpretation he rejects picks up on perhaps the most revolutionary finding in the atomic physics of the past century: The individual events of atomic physics which have been measured – e.g. radioactive decay and the deflection of particle beams – can be predicted statistically, but not with precision. The point of time when a radioactive atom emits a certain particle, for instance, is chance in the mathematical sense; in principle, the point in time is arbitrary. Only the probabilities of emission can be calcu-

lated, and with a large number of particles this can result in a high precision of predicted measurement values.

Probabilities were introduced to physics long before quantum mechanics. They already played a key role in the atomic theories of 19th century classical physics, with which Einstein was extremely well acquainted. Statistical assumptions about the motions of the invisible atoms, distributed by chance, were used to explain measurable

this state? The dice metaphor stands for this consideration. If the conditions of the motions of a rolled dice were known well enough, it would be possible to predict how the dice would fall. This would then reveal how chance is produced according to causal laws. Formulated as a paradox, chance would lose any element of chance. But God already has this knowledge. Thus what humans see as a roll of the dice is, from a divine perspective, not chance at all.



Niels Bohr and Albert Einstein in Leiden, at the end of 1920s (photo: Paul Ehrenfest)

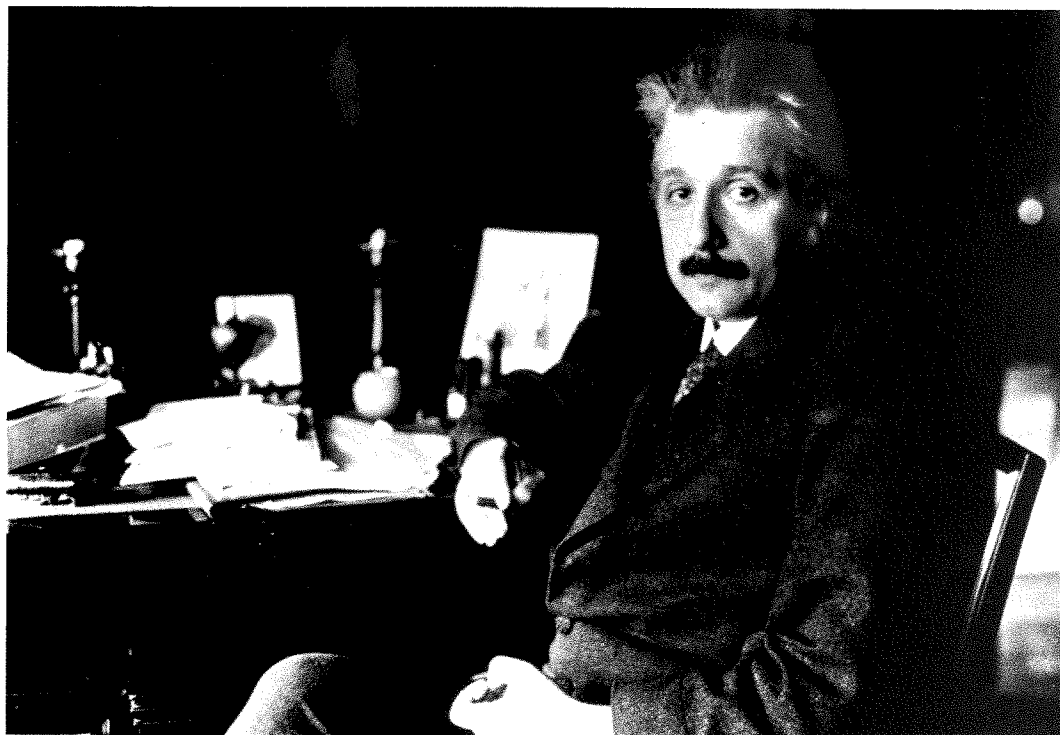
heat phenomena with classical theories. An increase in the temperature of a gas, for instance, was traced back to an increase in the average velocities of the gas atoms. It was believed that the knowledge about the motion of individual atoms, while not available at that time, would be obtained in the future. Why should it not be possible to determine the state of motion of an atom exactly and specify all causes that led to

The statistical interpretation of quantum mechanics asserts the inapplicability of such ideas to the field of the smallest dimensions. According to this interpretation, mathematically calculated probabilities are not an expression of ignorance about the state of atomic objects, but rather a characteristic of their state. All his life Einstein disagreed with this, because, in his view, one of the tasks of a theory is to give causes for the phenomena it

Max Born, around 1931

the atomic theory established in the 1920s known as "quantum mechanics." There is much to suggest that Einstein directed this remark against a view represented by this interpretation and still held in physics today: the belief that in the world of the very small, there are no causes for the spatial-temporal occurrence of individual events. For a long time Einstein's critique was held to be reactionary in the face of the innovations and successes of quantum mechanics. Einstein, thus the general opinion, was a representative of an antiquated worldview, whose proximity to Spinoza's determinism made it irreconcilable with the worldview of modern physics. In the last decades, however, scholars have expressed misgivings about this opinion, which deserve to be taken

Albert Einstein
in the library on
Haberlandstrasse,
1929



describes. One had to leave open the possibility of later providing a deterministic foundation for the formulation of any physical theory.

With this view Einstein falls back on the ideas of 19th century classical physics and on the worldview associated with it, of a strict system of natural laws, which is effective on a fundamental level and does not provide any room for coincidental events. In this sense his remark that God does not play dice refers to an outdated agenda for the deterministic explanation of nature.

Or Are Dice Not at the Root of Chance?

More recent history of science research has shown, however, that Einstein's critique is not exhausted in its backward-oriented, problematic elements. In 1986 Arthur Fine presented significant arguments to this end in his highly regarded book *The Shaky Game. Einstein, Realism and the Quantum Theory*. According to Fine's analyses, Einstein does not object to the mathematical

formalism of quantum mechanics, but rather to its conception as a complete theory in need of no further elaboration.

Einstein links his rejection of statistical interpretation's claim to integrity with the conviction that microphysical phenomena require a new kind of theory. In his view, the basic conceptualization of quantum mechanics should not be improved through minor corrections, but rather replaced by another "point of departure." Late formulations from the 1940s and 1950s suggest that he believed atomic theory would not be applicable in the future because of the still existing structural analogies and contextual relationships to classical physics. With this Einstein wanted to turn the tables on the critique directed against him: not his search for a realistic and causal theory of microphysics, but rather quantum mechanics in its present form would be far too bound up with a traditional conceptualization.

His previous rejection of what he called the "interference explanation" could also speak for a thrust

in this direction. It goes back to Werner Heisenberg and is still quite influential even today. According to this interpretation, the acausal character of measurements in atomic physics is a result of the fact that the measurement process inevitably and uncontrollably interferes with the objects it is

supposed to measure.

What is dubious about this assumption is the tacit prerequisite that the objects had classically definable local and pulse characteristics before their interaction with the measurement apparatus. Accordingly, the acausal



Werner Heisenberg,
around 1958 (photo:
Fritz Eschen)

character would not appear until after the fact and (in contrast to "statistical interpretation") not belong to the nature of the objects. By rejecting the interference explanation, Einstein intuitively – thus one could perceive his critique – abandons the attempt to ground the assertion of microphysical processes' supposedly undeceivable acausality by linking it back to ideas of classical physics.

From this perspective, his comment that God does not play dice appears in another light. The metaphor of playing dice expresses the conviction that coincidences are brought forth by nature, which is itself causally composed, in analogy to classical physics. If the conditions of the movements of the dice could be recorded exactly, then it would be possible to recognize the causes from which the results of each roll of the dice necessarily must proceed. Similar considerations can be related to the interference explanation: if interference through measurement could be minimized, then the deterministic basic structure of nature would be revealed. But God does not play dice. If the observable atomic coincidences are based on anything, it cannot be of anything like a dice game, whose causes can be researched in principle.

Today it remains unclear whether the contingency of atomic phenomena is part of their nature or whether it results from a process that is perhaps not coincidental. Einstein's comment and its effect have made a great contribution to keeping us aware that the solution of this problem is one of the tasks of future physics.

Albert Einstein

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have been published to accompany the exhibition of the same title: *Albert Einstein – Chief Engineer of the Universe*, which was conceived by the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science on the occasion of The Einstein Year 2005.

Editor	Jürgen Renn
Editorial Team	Sabine Bertram, Lindy Divarci, Tanja Starkowski Wolf-Dieter Mechler, Christoph Lehner (German edition)
Translators	Dieter Brill, Robert Culverhouse, Lindy Divarci, Nancy Joyce, Susan Richter, Ann Robertson
Image Editors	Hartmut Amon, Edith Hirte, Tanja Starkowski
Design/Production	Regelindis Westphal Grafik-Design, Berlin Antonia Becht, Berno Buff, Anja Gersmann, Norbert Lauterbach
Image Editing	Satzinform, Berlin
Print/Binding	NEUNPLUS1 – Verlag + Service GmbH, Berlin

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and Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin

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This publication was made possible due to the kind support of the
Fritz Thyssen Foundation for the Advancement of Science, Cologne

Booktrade edition
ISBN-10:3-527-40574-7
ISBN-13:978-3-527-40574-9

The essay volume accompanying the exhibition *Albert Einstein – Chief Engineer of the Universe* is published in German under the title *Albert Einstein – Ingenieur des Universums. Hundert Autoren für Einstein*
Book trade edition ISBN- 3-527-40579-8

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WILEY-VCH Verlag GmbH & Co. KGaA

Albert Einstein
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Exhibition in the Kronprinzenpalais, Berlin
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Organizers



MAX-PLANCK-GESELLSCHAFT

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CONTENTS

- Jürgen Renn
10 Preface
- Gerhard Schröder
12 Address at the Launch of the Einstein Year on 19 January 2005
- Yehuda Elkana
18 Einstein's Legacy

WORLDVIEW AND KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

- Jürgen Renn, Ulf von Rauchhaupt
26 In the Laboratory of Knowledge
- Henning Vierck
34 Comenius and Einstein as Educators
- Katja Bödeker
38 Time in the Embryonic Stage
- Renate Wahsner
44 Absolute Space: Mach vs. Newton
- Falk Müller
48 Why Does a Light Mill Revolve? A Historical Look
- Lidia Falomo, Carla Garbarino
52 The Leyden Jar
- Lucio Fregonese
56 Volta's Battery in Einstein and Infeld's *The Evolution of Physics*
- Fabio Bevilacqua, Stefano Bordoni
60 Electromagnetic Induction: Symmetries and Interpretations
- Shaul Katzir
64 Electricity and Heat: The Connections Between Two Invisible Forces
- Thomas Jung
68 Is Radiation Healthy or Does It Make Us Sick?
- Klaus A. Vogel
74 The Revolution in the Image of the Earth
- Enrico Antonio Giannetto
80 Giordano Bruno and the Origins of Relativity
- Jochen Büttner
84 Of Dwarves and Giants: The Transformation of Astronomical Worldviews
- Matthias Schemmel
90 Curved Universes Before Einstein: Karl Schwarzschild's Cosmological Speculations
- Eberhard Knobloch
94 Truth and Freedom in Mathematics: The Emergence of Non-Euclidean Geometry in the 19th Century
- Volkmar Schüller
98 Newton's Worldview

	EINSTEIN – HIS LIFE'S PATH
	Thomas de Padova
106	Riding on a Beam of Light
	Gereon Wolters
110	Albert Einstein and Ernst Mach
	Anne J. Kox
114	Hendrik Antoon Lorentz and Albert Einstein
	Clayton Gearhart
116	Black-Body Radiation
	Charlotte Bigg
120	Brownian Motion
	Jordi Cat
124	Einstein and James Clerk Maxwell: Unification, Imagination and Light
	Stefan Siemer
128	“In the Brightest Arc Lamps and Incandescent Lights”: The Electrical Factory <i>Jakob Einstein und Cie.</i>
	Peter Galison
134	Einstein's Compass
	Lea Cardinali
138	A Fifteen-Year-Old With Very Clear Ideas: Albert Einstein
	Fabio Bevilacqua, Stefano Bordoni
142	Einstein's 1895 Pavia Paper
	Volker Barth
146	Universal Exhibitions and the Popularization of Science in the 19th Century
	David Kaiser
152	Einstein's Teachers
	Robert Schulmann
156	Einstein's Swiss Years
	Scott Walter
162	Henri Poincaré and the Theory of Relativity
	Horst Kant
166	Albert Einstein and the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute for Physics in Berlin
	Christian Sichau
170	6 m² Wall Space and Two Misplaced Artifacts: The Theory of Relativity in the Deutsches Museum
	Domenico Giulini
174	What is Inertia?
	Daniel Kennefick
178	Astronomers Test General Relativity: Light-bending and the Solar Redshift
	Gerhard Hartl
182	The Confirmation of the General Theory of Relativity by the British Eclipse Expedition of 1919
	Hans Wilderotter
188	The Einstein Tower: Its Genesis and Function

	Christian Sichau
194	The Gradual Disappearance of Einstein: Georg Joos' Experiments on the Theory of Relativity
	Tilman Sauer
200	Gravitational Lensing
	Hubert Goenner
204	Einstein in Berlin: Unified Field Theory
	Karl von Meyenn
206	Pauli and Einstein
	Anton Zeilinger
212	Albert Einstein: Reluctant Creator of Quantum Technology
	Michael Eckert
216	Einstein and Arnold Sommerfeld: Impressions from their Correspondence
	Milena Wazeck
222	“Einstein on the Murder List!”: The Attacks on Einstein and the Theory of Relativity in 1922
	Andreas Kleinert
226	Philipp Lenard and Johannes Stark: Two Nobel Laureates Against Einstein
	Wolfgang Trageser
230	Why Einstein Did Not Go to Frankfurt
	Dieter B. Herrmann
234	Einstein and Archenhold: Two Champions for the Popularization of the Natural Sciences
	Karl Wolfgang Graff
238	The Automatic “Concrete People's Refrigerator” CITOGEL by Albert Einstein and Leo Szilard
	Roger Highfield
242	Einstein's Women
	Barbara Wolff
250	Albert Einstein and Music
	Horst Bredekamp
256	Albert Einstein and the Avant-garde
	Dieter Hoffmann
260	Einstein's Berlin
	Wolf-Dieter Mechler
266	Einstein's Residences in Berlin
	Erika Britzke
272	Einstein in Caputh
	Britta Scheideler
280	Democrat with an Elitist Self-Image: Albert Einstein Between 1914 and 1933
	Kenji Sugimoto
284	Einstein and Japan
	Alfredo Tiomno Tolmasquim
290	Einstein's Journey to South America

294	Circe Mary Silva da Silva	The Theory of Relativity in Brazil: Reception, Opposition and Public Interest
298	C.V. Vishveshwara	Einstein and India
302	Ze'ev Rosenkranz	Albert Einstein and the German Zionist Movement
308	Christian Dirks	The Scapegoats' Attorney: Albert Einstein and his Commitment to the Cause of the Eastern Jews
314	Hanoch Gutfreund	Albert Einstein and the Hebrew University
320	Richard H. Beyler	The Physics Community in the National Socialist Era
324	Michael Schüring	Albert Einstein and His Fellow Expellees from the Kaiser Wilhelm Society
328	Barbara Picht	Succor and Political Action: How Einstein Related to Emigration
332	Gerald Holton	The Woman in Einstein's Shadow
336	Don Salisbury	Albert Einstein and Peter Bergmann
340	Jörg Zaun	Josef Scharl and Albert Einstein: The Story of a Friendship
344	Tibor Frank	Closely Associated: Leo Szilard and Albert Einstein
348	Mark Walker	Albert Einstein, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, and the Atomic Bomb
350	Erdmut Wizisla	An Excellent Play for the Spoiled Contemporaries: Einstein writes to Brecht about Galileo
354	John Stachel	Einstein and the American Left
358	Helge Kragh	Einstein as a Historian of Science
		EINSTEIN'S WORLD TODAY
364	Jürgen Ehlers	Einstein's General Theory of Relativity in Contemporary Physics
368	Ulf von Rauchhaupt	Lots Happening in Spacetime
374	Tevian Dray	The Nature of Time in Relativity

378	Axel Jessner	Pulsars: Einstein's Cosmic Clocks
382	Gerhard Börner	Expansion: From Redshift to Dark Matter
388	Erhard Scholz	The Standard Model of Contemporary Cosmology
394	Erhard Scholz	Einstein-Weyl Models of Cosmology
398	Günther Hasinger	Black Holes: The Beginning as Well as the End?
402	Bruno Bertotti	The Cassini Experiment: Investigating the Nature of Gravity
406	Bernard Schutz	Gravitational Waves
410	Gregor Schiemann	God Does Not Play Dice
414	Thomas de Padova	The <i>Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire</i> (CERN)
418	David Cassidy	The Einstein Myths
422	Dieter Hoffmann	"1905 was his Great Year": Interview with Hans Bethe
426	Reiner Braun	The Russell-Einstein Manifesto
430	Horst Kant	German Scientists and the Effects of the Russell-Einstein Manifesto
434	Dieter Hoffmann	Einstein's Political File
440	Angelo Baracca	The Dark Side of Einstein's Heritage: The Nuclear Age
444	Danian Hu	Einstein and Relativity in China, 1917–1979
448	Diana Kormos-Buchwald	The Einstein Papers Project 1955–2005
454		STATEMENTS ON EINSTEIN'S HERITAGE
		APPENDIX
458		Authors
460		Bibliography
467		Links
468		Name Index
471		Image Index