

The value of Einstein's mistakes

Hans C. Ohanian



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The Value of Einstein's Mistakes

Steven Weinberg's love for and knowledge of history inform his instructive sampling of Albert Einstein's mistakes (PHYSICS TODAY, November 2005, page 31). One mistake, or at least one tantalizing omission, seems worth adding to the collection. In a May 1905 letter to Conrad Habicht, Einstein wrote that he thought his revolutionary contribution was the hypothesis that light consists of particles.¹

Consider his lifelong passion for unification, as in his resolution of the clash between Isaac Newton's mechanics and James Clerk Maxwell's electrodynamics (with the special theory of relativity modifying the former). It is hard to believe that Einstein did not worry about reconciling the well-established wave aspects of light with his new particle hypothesis. If he had pursued that connection, he could have developed one-photon quantum mechanics in 1905 or shortly afterward, by combining the Poynting-vector expression for the power intensity of light with his own relation between frequency and energy of a particle to obtain the photon-number intensity of a light beam. The wave equation is the Maxwell equations, and the probability interpretation pops up immediately.

Many observers have said that general relativity was one advance that would have taken a very long time without Einstein, but we have no direct test for that statement. However, if you accept my argument that Einstein could have developed the first true quantum mechanics, then we can say exactly how long it took the physics community to catch up—20 years for Heisenberg's matrix mechanics and Schrödinger's mathematically equivalent wave mechanics.

Letters and opinions are encouraged and should be sent to Letters, PHYSICS TODAY, American Center for Physics, One Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740-3842 or by e-mail to ptletter@aip.org (using your surname as "Subject"). Please include your affiliation, mailing address, and daytime phone number. We reserve the right to edit submissions.

Reference

1. A. Einstein, *The Collected Papers of Albert Einstein*, vol. 5, English translation, Princeton U. Press, Princeton, NJ (1995), p. 20.

Alfred Scharff Goldhaber
(goldhab@insti.physics.sunysb.edu)
C. N. Yang Institute for
Theoretical Physics
Stony Brook University
Stony Brook, New York

As Steven Weinberg points out, it's a good thing for people to understand that even the greatest scientists make mistakes. However, I think Weinberg grossly understates the issue. Maybe his article should have been titled "Einstein's Published Mistakes."

The practice of science, as PHYSICS TODAY readers surely know, involves making mistakes, realizations, corrections, and more mistakes. Trial and error is a fundamental part of the process. I think that point deserves emphasizing. Too many of our schoolchildren learn to avoid invention and new thinking because they have been convinced that making mistakes is shameful.

Tom Cornsweat
(tome@vispath.com)
Prescott, Arizona

In his thoughtful and timely article, Steven Weinberg analyzes some of Einstein's mistakes and notes some others. Another fundamental conceptual mistake is hidden in Einstein's celebrated 1905 paper on relativity.

In a lengthy discussion in the first part of that paper, Einstein showed that the speed of light can be made constant by adopting a clock synchronization based on two-way light signals. With that synchronization, measurements of the one-way speed of light become logically circular, and Einstein later declared that the constancy of the speed of light was "neither a *supposition* nor a *hypothesis* about the physical nature of light, but a *stipulation* which I can make at my free discretion to arrive at a definition of simultaneity."¹

However, Einstein overlooked that the validity of Newton's laws at low speeds in each reference frame permits the use of simple mechanical methods of synchronization, such as

slow clock transport or sound signals. Einstein's synchronization procedure with light signals is thus superfluous—it plays no fundamental role and is merely the most convenient of several possible synchronization procedures. Furthermore, if clocks are synchronized by slow clock transport or by some other mechanical procedure, then measurements of the one-way speed of light are not logically circular, and those measurements provide an unambiguous experimental test of the constancy of this speed. In fact, clock transport has been used in such experimental tests.^{2,3} Einstein should have considered the implications of alternative synchronization procedures for the conceptual foundations of relativity, and he should have recognized that the constancy of the speed of light had to be established by experiment, not by stipulation.

References

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Hans C. Ohanian
(hansohanian@cs.com)
University of Vermont
Burlington

Steven Weinberg writes, "Einstein rejected the notion that the laws of physics could deal with probabilities, famously decreeing that God does not play dice with the cosmos. But history gave its verdict against Einstein—quantum mechanics went on from success to success, leaving Einstein on the sidelines."

Einstein did not reject quantum theory merely because it is probabilistic. He wrote: "There is no doubt that quantum mechanics has seized hold of a beautiful element of truth, and that it will be a test stone for any future theoretical basis."¹ Nor was Einstein unilaterally opposed to God playing dice. He expected God to either play dice all the way or not at all. If individual events were totally undetermined, then the overall events should also be undetermined, and not display remarkable