



Einstein's Mistakes: The Human Failings of Genius

By Hans C. Ohanian

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“A thought-provoking critique of Einstein’s tantalizing combination of brilliance and blunder.” Andrew Robinson, *New Scientist*

Although Einstein was the greatest genius of the twentieth century, many of his groundbreaking discoveries were blighted by mistakes, ranging from serious errors in mathematics to bad misconceptions in physics and failures to grasp the subtleties of his own creations. This forensic biography dissects Einstein’s scientific mistakes and places them in the context of his turbulent life and times. In lively, accessible prose, Hans C. Ohanian paints a fresh, insightful portrait of the real Einstein at work, in contrast to the uncritical celebrity worship found in many biographies.

Of the approximately 180 original scientific papers that Einstein published in his lifetime, about 40 are infested with mistakes. For instance, Einstein’s first mathematical proof of the famous formula $E = mc^2$ was incomplete and only approximately valid; he struggled with this problem for many years, but he never found a complete proof (better mathematicians did). Einstein was often lured by irrational and mystical inspirations, but his extraordinary intuition about physics permitted him to discover profound truths despite—and sometimes because of—the mistakes he made along the way. He was a sleepwalker: his intuition told him where he needed to go, and he somehow managed to get there without quite knowing how.

As this book persuasively argues, the defining hallmark of Einstein’s genius was not any special mathematical ability but an uncanny talent to use his mistakes as stepping stones to formulate his revolutionary theories. 25 illustrations

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Editorial Review

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In *Einstein's Mistakes*, Hans C. Ohanian draws on his own background in physics to gleefully point out some of Einstein's more glaring errors. That part of the book is solid, and readers will find a capable guide in Ohanian. What might be less engaging is the author's fast-and-loose writing style (Van Gogh became a great artist "when he went bonkers") and a tendency to botch some of the historical facts (related to Einstein's research, his Nobel Prize, and so forth) that underpin much of the narrative. Still, the book's ambitious scope—when calling out Einstein, writers weak of heart need not apply—and Ohanian's self-assured reportage make this a worthwhile read. Bring your thinking cap.

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Starred Review In this “forensic biography,” Ohanian shows astonished readers that the most brilliant scientist of the twentieth century was frequently found making—in his own words—“a sacrifice on the altar of stupidity.” The great physicist’s admirers may already know that Einstein foolishly defied the quantum revolution he helped launch. The well-informed may even know something of Einstein’s disastrous missteps in his personal life. But it will come as a revelation to most readers that scientists have identified serious flaws in four of the five papers that established Einstein’s reputation during his annus mirabilis of 1905. Ohanian drops an even bigger bombshell in documenting Einstein’s repeated failure to provide a valid proof for his most famous equation: $E = mc^2$. More surprising than the number and severity of Einstein’s errors, however, is the mystifying way the Berne genius reached correct—even revolutionary—conclusions despite these mistakes. In strange ways, some of Einstein’s blunders (such as the synchronization error in his “Special Relativity” paper) actually helped him achieve theoretical breakthroughs. Drawing on Arthur Koestler’s provocative analysis of Kepler, Ohanian characterizes Einstein as a similarly charmed sleepwalker whose profound intuition guided him to epoch-making conclusions along tortured pathways. A compelling portrait of a titan who stumbled his way into immortality. --Bryce Christensen

Review

“Recounts [Einstein’s] chronicle of errors in clear and engaging prose, giving us in the process a short course in the history of modern physics and a witty and provocative account of the subject’s life.” (Darrin M. McMahon - Wall Street Journal)

“The book’s quixotic approach?retelling Einstein’s story by homing in on his blunders?makes for good intellectual entertainment. . . . [It] kept me eagerly turning the pages.” (George Johnson - Los Angeles Times)

“A wonderful story that is well worth taking the time to read....We get a short course in this history of modern physics, one that is well-written and entertaining as well.” (Alan S. McRae - Mathematical Reviews)

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