ALEX C. MICHALOS

EINSTEIN, ETHICS AND SCIENCE*

ABSTRACT. In celebration of Einstein’s remarkable achievements in 1905, this essay examines some of his views on the role of “intellectuals” in developing and advocating socio-economic and political positions and policies, the historical roots of his ethical views and certain aspects of his philosophy of science. As an outstanding academic and public citizen, his life and ideas continue to provide good examples of a life well-used and worth remembering.

INTRODUCTION

One hundred years after Albert Einstein’s famous string of relativity papers were published, it might have been expected that there would be and indeed it has already turned out to be the case that there have been many conferences, symposia and individual presentations and articles produced in celebration of those papers. The original version of this essay began as an invited contribution to just such a celebratory symposium, and it has been altered a bit to fit the specific scope of this journal. Because Einstein was both a brilliant scientist and a political activist, there should be some benefit for ordinary scholars in an examination of some of his basic assumptions and motives. I believe this presumption is warranted, as I will show below.

EINSTEIN’S INTELLECTUALS

For any of the extraordinary, if not great, philosophers of the first half of the 20th century, the place to begin looking for an overview of their work is Paul Schilpp’s famous Library of Living Philosophers. One can find excellent, comprehensive analyses of the likes of Bertrand Russell, Sri Radhakrishnan, Rudoph Carnap, G.E. Moore, Karl Popper and Einstein, to mention a few. Each volume has about 25 essays by experts on various aspects of the philosopher’s work and life, and each has some sort of autobiography and replies to his critics.

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at a regional meeting of the Royal Society of Canada, held at the University of Guelph, Ontario, May 2, 2005. I would like to thank O.P. Dwivedi for inviting me to write the paper and Deborah C. Poff for helping me clarify some ideas in it.
The first thing that strikes one examining the Schilpp (1951) volume on Einstein is that of the 25 critical essays in the volume, only one deals with a subject not properly within the discipline of physics, namely, Hinshaw’s essay on “Einstein’s Social Philosophy.” The second thing that strikes one is that in Einstein’s replies to his critics in that volume, he did not reply to Hinshaw.

Hinshaw said it was “hard to discover, in Einstein’s speeches and writings, any systematic position in social ethics” (p. 649). So, he preferred to talk about Einstein’s “convictions” rather than Einstein’s “position, in social philosophy.” Among his convictions, Einstein thought that “intellectuals” should engage in social action. He never went as far as Gloria Steinem in favouring “anything that gets people off their asses” (a remark she made in a television interview), but typically he preferred action to inaction. He often used the term “intellectual” to refer to educated professionals of one sort or another. In contemporary terms, Einstein was a thorough-going elitist, who apparently accepted the special obligations of those having special talents, i.e., noblesse oblige. In 1931 or 1932 he wrote to Sigmund Freud, deprecating politicians and proposing an organization of intellectuals.

“Political leaders or governments” he said, “owe their position partly to force and partly to popular election. They cannot be regarded as representative of the best elements, morally or intellectually, in their respective nations. The intellectual elite have no direct influence on the history of nations in these days; their lack of cohesion prevents them from taking a direct part in the solution of contemporary problems. Don’t you think that a change might be brought about in this respect by a free association of people whose previous achievements and actions constitute a guarantee of their ability and purity of aim? This association of an international nature, . . . might, by defining its attitude in the Press . . . acquire a considerable and salutary moral influence over the settlement of political questions. Such an association would, of course, be a prey to all the ills which so often lead to degeneration in learned societies, dangers which are inseparably bound up with the imperfections of human nature. But should not an effort in this direction be risked in spite of this? I look upon such an attempt as nothing less than an imperative duty” (Einstein, 1954, pp. 104–105).

I am not a populist. Forty years of driving the sharpest ideas from history’s sharpest minds into the thick skulls of North America’s most intellectually advantaged youth strongly militates against any populist inclinations I may have had. Apart from the lessons of my own experience, there is the plain logical fact that the moral requirement to tell the truth implies due diligence in the pursuit of truth and the avoidance of falsehood. After all, without the latter, one’s ability to tell the truth is little more than a crap shoot, which would be considerably less than the moral maxim demands. Among other things, like moral courage and personal integrity, I suppose it is this willingness to pursue