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"Strange Seas of Thought"

ALBERT EINSTEIN was described after his death as one of the great men of the century. Most of us are obliged to accept his greatness on trust: we cannot feel its impact, or question it, unless we can understand his theory of relativity. And although books have been written to make the theory intelligible to the general reader, the subject remains impenetrable for those who are unable to approach it through higher mathematics. Tied to grosser interests, we can merely notice that physicists and mathematicians acknowledge Einstein as a master—the greatest, perhaps, since Newton. It is a symptom of the times we live in that there can be a sort of greatness which only a few men can measure.

Intellectual giants may be hard to understand, but they have a reassuring warmth of human error when they come down to the common level. Einstein was no exception. We can meet him with less constraint if he speaks of behaviour instead of its dimensional framework. Quotations from his writings and speeches, assembled in an article on page 8, are interesting for what they reveal of the man; but unless he is speaking of intellectual freedom they are neither brilliant nor very wise. Although he warned his colleagues against over-estimating the value of scientific methods in human problems, he could not avoid the naivety which seems to creep in when trained thinkers are outside their special fields.

Most men, no doubt, would gladly consent to be naive about many things if by so doing they could outsoar all others in a single achievement. But men are remembered for what they say and do; and they are remembered longest, as living persons, when

the sayings have poetry or wisdom and the actions are large and splendid. It can be said of Einstein, as Wordsworth said of Newton, that he was "voyaging through strange seas of thought alone." At the lower levels of thought, where words are soiled and dulled by much usage, he became a man who fumbled a little in his statements on religion, morality and politics. The true man, in whom there must have been some look and manner from that lonely voyaging, could be known only to those close to him; and since most of them were scientists, they are unlikely to have included a Boswell. These people have spoken of Einstein with affection and deep respect, and a few anecdotes illustrate his loyalty, humility and absent-minded charm. But the man himself is elusive.

Photographs revealed a frail and wistful face beneath a cloud of thinning hair. He was like a mind scarcely embodied; it is easy to think of his death as merely a withdrawal, with no promise of return, to those "strange seas of thought." And what is left? Mathematical symbols can change our view of the universe; they can supply a theoretical basis for scientific work which leads to the production of new instruments and weapons, and so eventually to the changing of the world. Very few men can have this mastery of abstract thinking. They are remote from us and contend only with their peers, so that we begin to think of them, a little dangerously, as if they were almost the fore-runners of another and higher species. And yet the face of Einstein, as we remember it from all the photographs, had the marks of suffering, almost bewilderment, as well as of intellectual power. There was so much that he, too, did not understand.

N.Z. LISTENER, MAY 6, 1955.