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Einstein's Mistakes: The Human Failings of Genius

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 $E = mc2$ 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.

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