

Einstein och universum

L.Barnett

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This is a book whose cover I recall from my childhood. My father must have bought it in the early 60's. The author by name of Barnett was a journalist who decided to write about Einstein and what he really had done. He noted that although most people have heard of Einstein, in fact he is the foremost icon among all scientists in the 20th century, yet very few of them have any idea of why he is famous (apart from being famous for being famous) and can only vaguely refer to him being crucial to the atomic bomb. The result is a short easily accessible account which covers the main ideas of special relativity as well as general. It existed in a preliminary form already at the end of the forties, when Einstein was still alive, who was then induced to write a foreword, prominently displayed at the very beginning of the book, while the present edition refers to Einsteins death seven years later. Einstein points out that writing a book on science aimed at the general public is a very difficult task. Either the author makes too many concessions to the uneducated mind (or what he believes to be the uneducated mind I would add) and presents simplifications that shy away from the core of the problems and actually mislead the reader to believe that he understands, when in fact he does not, but instead has been tricked and lied to. The opposite extreme is that the author is too conscientious and includes too many technical details such that the average reader gets overwhelmed and loses the motivation to pursue. Most of popular science writing belongs to at least one of the categories, while the book in question seems to avoid the pitfalls, Einstein points out. Is Einstein merely polite or does he speak the truth? True, the book is not exhaustive in anyway and contains no technical digressions, and also the main ideas are reasonably clear, although any expert (or would-be expert) can obviously find minor faults. The problem is that even if a popular book can be read by an expert without embarrassment and blushing, the average reader may nevertheless not get very much out of it, because even if it is presented with no mathematical formalism, the meaning of the concepts, even if simple, may not be clear. The expert knows the necessary context (and contexts are always necessary) and can properly interpret what is merely suggested. The sad fact is that you can never expect to get any solid knowledge from a popular book, but it can stimulate your imagination, so this is why the greatest value of such books is for the young.

I will not report on the book in detail, so even (or maybe because of it) containing no real mistakes, it does not stick in the mind. It is in fact hard to recall a few days afterwards what it really contained, offering no hands-on experience, as popular books are notoriously negligent on. However, one thing stands out at the end of the book, and that is the philosophical observation of what modern physicists, with Einstein in particular, are trying to do, is to figure out the Platonic reality behind the confusing manifestations the physical world provides. But in so doing, the author objects and laments, relegating in effect the rich sensual words to the shadows, much if not almost everything is lost by being rendered superfluous. What is left to us, if we are being deprived of the rich sensual world

of the senses? Intellectual satisfaction true, but for most of us, this provides but a small part of our appreciation of the world.

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