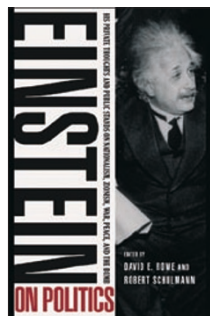


# A complex mind



## EINSTEIN ON POLITICS: HIS PRIVATE THOUGHTS AND PUBLIC STANDS ON NATIONALISM, ZIONISM, WAR, PEACE, AND THE BOMB EDITED BY DAVID E. ROWE & ROBERT SCHULMANN

Princeton Univ. Press: 2007. 560 pp. \$29.95

After the literary surge of 2005 — the Einstein centenary year — any new book on Einstein is bound to encounter some mental fatigue. Even when the authors are experts, as in the present case, it comes as a surprise that the new title is able to attract my attention. On first sight, the book is a collection of about 190 documents, most of them published before, covering Einstein's "private thoughts and public stands on nationalism, zionism, war, peace, and the bomb". The selected documents, articles and letters by Albert Einstein (except for one), are presented in ten themed chapters and cover about 60% of the text. The remaining 40% sets the book apart from Nathan and Norden's *Einstein on Peace* of 1957 (N&N).

Here, we encounter a lucid 60-page historical introduction at the beginning, special introductions for each chapter plus the authors' knowledgeable small-print comments accompanying each particular document. N&N often had cut down their copious supply of material to one or two sentences without properly identifying the source and the persons involved. Also different from N&N is the divide between Einstein's statements until 1933 and those made thereafter; in Rowe and Schulmann's book both periods are treated equally. In both books, within each chapter, the documents are ordered chronologically.

The text centres on Einstein's politics and its contextualization with regard to his inner reflections and the outside historical events. Precise descriptions of concepts such as 'political thought' and 'political activities' are avoided in favour of an illustration of their meaning by Einstein's statements on world peace, disarmament, the row by anti-relativists, anti-Semitism, oppression of people, socialism, the Soviet Union, nuclear arms, world government and so forth. Two main themes are Einstein's 'strive for international solidarity' and his 'embrace of the cultural Zionist movement'.

The authors describe Einstein as "pragmatic while never abandoning principle"; in this spirit they are careful to point out the complexity of Einstein's personality. From the outside, it seems as if he was regularly at odds with himself.

Examples for this are the possible conflicts between his internationalism and his support of Jewish nationalism; between his stress on individual freedom combined with a distrust of the state (for example, Kaiser Wilhelm's Reich) and his reliance on exactly this state for providing a safe harbour; between his quest for disarmament and his support of the building of the atom bomb; between his moral responsibility for the whole of mankind and lack of sensitivity for the ordinary human being.

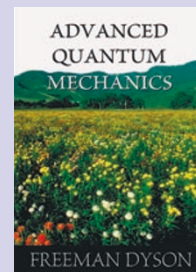
The authors note that Einstein drew on the expertise of informal advisors and had notable allies such as Paul Langevin, David Hilbert and Romain Rolland. However, none of them had political influence. I gladly follow the long route the authors take in order to show that Einstein was not the widely believed 'naive idealist'. About the only instance of disagreement occurs when they attest Einstein as having "recognized that politics was the art of achieving what is possible in a given situation". On the contrary, more than once he closed his eyes to reality and clung to his wishful ideas about how the world should be. Not only in the case of the Palestine problem do the documents provided by the authors show this. Einstein's commitments through his pen and through the media, in my view, remained restricted to those of a mostly convincing, highly respected moral 'voice in the wilderness' who, sadly, did not change the course of internal and external politics.

This book will satisfy the needs of historians; physicists particularly may appreciate the chapter on the relativity revolution. Nevertheless, the authors' and Einstein's texts are written in a language understandable by everyone. Anyone with an interest in Einstein's non-scientific activities in the public realm will profit from reading this book, or from using it as a source for further writing.

### Hubert Goenner

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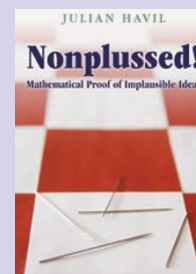
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