

ON THE NATURE OF REALITY

Albert Einstein in Conversation with Rabindranath Tagore

Rabindranath Tagore visited Einstein's house in Caputh, near Berlin, on July 14, 1930. The discussion between the two great men was recorded, and was subsequently published in the January, 1931 issue of *Modern Review*.

TAGORE: You have been busy, hunting down with mathematics, the two ancient entities, time and space, while I have been lecturing in this country on the eternal world of man, the universe of reality.

EINSTEIN: Do you believe in the divine isolated from the world?

TAGORE: Not isolated. The infinite personality of man comprehends the universe. There cannot be anything that cannot be subsumed by the human personality, and this proves that the truth of the universe is human truth.

EINSTEIN: There are two different conceptions about the nature of the universe — the world as a unity dependent on humanity, and the world as reality independent of the human factor.

TAGORE: When our universe is in harmony with man, the eternal, we know it as truth, we feel it as beauty.

EINSTEIN: This is a purely human conception of the universe.

TAGORE: The world is a human world — the scientific view of it is also that of the scientific man. Therefore, the world

apart from us does not exist; it is a relative world, depending for its reality upon our consciousness. There is some standard of reason and enjoyment which gives it truth, the standard of the eternal man whose experiences are made possible through our experiences.

EINSTEIN: This is a realization of the human entity.

TAGORE: Yes, one eternal entity. We have to realize it through our emotions and activities. We realize the supreme man, who has no individual limitations, through our limitations.

Science is concerned with that which is not confined to individuals; it is the impersonal human world of truths. Religion realizes these truths and links them up with our deeper needs. Our individual consciousness of truth gains universal significance. Religion applies values to truth, and we know truth as good through own harmony with it.

EINSTEIN: Truth, then, or beauty, is not independent of man?

TAGORE: No, I do not say so.

EINSTEIN: If there were no human beings any more, the Apollo Belvedere no longer would be beautiful?

TAGORE: No!

EINSTEIN: I agree with this conception of beauty, but not with regard to truth.

TAGORE: Why not? Truth is realized through men.

EINSTEIN: I cannot prove my conception is right, but that is my religion.

TAGORE: Beauty is in the ideal of perfect harmony, which is in the universal being; truth is the perfect comprehension of the universal mind. We individuals approach it through our

own mistakes and blunders, through our accumulated experience, through our illumined consciousness. How otherwise can we know truth?

EINSTEIN: I cannot prove, but I believe in the Pythagorean argument, that the truth is independent of human beings. It is the problem of the logic of continuity.

TAGORE : Truth, which is one with the universal being, must be essentially human; otherwise, whatever we individuals realize as true, never can be called truth. At least, the truth which is described as scientific and which only can be reached through the process of logic—in other words, by an organ of thought which is human. According to the Indian philosophy there is Brahman, the absolute truth, which cannot be conceived by the isolation of the individual mind or described by words, but can be realized only by merging the individual in its infinity. But such a truth cannot belong to science. The nature of truth which we are discussing is an appearance; that is to say, what appears to be true to the human mind, and therefore is human, and may be called maya, or illusion.

EINSTEIN: It is no illusion of the individual, but of the species.

TAGORE: The species also belongs to a unity, to humanity. Therefore the entire human mind realizes truth; the Indian and the European mind meet in a common realization.

EINSTEIN: The word species is used in German for all human beings; as a matter of fact, even the apes and the frogs would belong to it. The problem is whether truth is independent of our consciousness.

TAGORE: What we call truth lies in the rational harmony between the subjective and objective aspects of reality, both of which belong to the superpersonal man.

EINSTEIN: We do things with our mind, even in our everyday

life, for which we are not responsible. The mind acknowledges realities outside of it, independent of it. For instance, nobody may be in this house, yet that table remains where it is.

TAGORE: Yes, it remains outside the individual mind, but not the universal mind. The table is that which is perceptible by some kind of consciousness we possess.

EINSTEIN: If nobody were in the house the table would exist all the same, but this is already illegitimate from your point of view, because we cannot explain what it means, that the table is there, independently of us. Our natural point of view in regard to the existence of truth apart from humanity cannot be explained or proved, but it is a belief which nobody can lack—not even primitive beings. We attribute to truth a superhuman objectivity. It is indispensable for us—this reality which is independent of our existence and our experience and our mind—though we cannot say what it means.

TAGORE: In any case, if there be any truth absolutely unrelated to humanity, then for us it is absolutely non-existing.

EINSTEIN: Then I am more religious than you are!

TAGORE: My religion is in the reconciliation of the superpersonal man, the universal spirit, in my own individual being.