

## Einstein's Insight into Human Nature

by Michael Michalko

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□Detailed descriptions of Albert Einstein's thinking process were discovered in his correspondence with his close friend Maurice Solovine, who was a student of philosophy. One day Solovine suggested reading and debating the works of great authors. Einstein agreed enthusiastically and soon mathematician Conrad Habicht became involved in what was to be known as the "Olympia Academy." Often their meetings, held in Einstein's flat, would last until the early morning hours where the three discussed issues while eating hard boiled eggs and smoking pipes and cigars.

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□Among the topics that intrigued them was thinking and believing. How do we think? Why do we believe what we believe. Einstein intuitively knew that thinking is speculative and how personal beliefs and theories distort what we observe. Once he observed jokingly, "If the facts don't confirm your theory, change your facts."

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□Einstein explained that psychologically, our beliefs and axioms rest upon our experiences. There exists, however, no logical path from experience to an axiom, but only an intuitive connection based on our interpretation of the experience, which is always subject to revocation. These interpretations shape our beliefs and perceptions which determine our theories about the world. Finally, our theories determine what we observe in the world and, paradoxically, we only observe what confirms our theories which further hardens our beliefs and axioms.

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□At one time, ancient astronomers believed that the heavens were eternal and made of ether. This theory made it impossible for them to observe meteors as burning stones from outer space. Although the ancients witnessed meteor showers and found some on the ground, they couldn't recognize them as meteors from outer space. They sought out and observed only those things that confirmed their theory about the heavens.

□We are like the ancient astronomers and actively seek out only that information that confirms our beliefs and theories about ourselves and the world. Religious people see evidence of God's handiwork everywhere; whereas, atheists see evidence of the absence of God everywhere. Conservatives see the evils of liberalism everywhere and liberals see the evils of conservatism everywhere. In fact, you do not need to watch and listen to

either Fox or MSNBC because you already know what their position will be on any given political issue.

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□Many of us are taught that belief is the result of reasoned thought which informed you and then you chose to believe or not believe. But actually, your beliefs are shaped by your subjective interpretations of your experiences. When you are thinking something, you have the feeling that the thoughts do nothing except inform you, and then you choose to do something and do it. But actually, the way you think and what you think is determined by your theories about yourself and life. Thought controls you more than you realize.

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□What is that object resting on the woman's head? When psychologists showed this sketch to people in East Africa, nearly all the participants said she was balancing a box or a can on her head. When nomads were shown the sketch they described a family sitting under a tree. Westerners place the family indoors and interpreted the rectangle above the woman's head as a window through which shrubbery can be seen. Different cultures interpret the picture differently because of different kinds of experiences.

□We automatically interpret all of our experiences without realizing it. Are they good experiences, bad ones, what do they mean and so on? We do this without much thought, if any, to what the interpretations mean. For instance, if someone bumps into you, you wonder why. The event of her bumping into you is neutral in itself. It has no meaning. It's your interpretation of the bumping that gives it meaning, and this meaning shapes your perception of the experience.

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□You may interpret the "bump" as rude behavior. You may interpret her as being deliberately aggressive, or you may feel you are of such little consequence that you're deliberately unnoticed and bumped around by others. Or you may feel the sidewalk is poorly designed for the amount of foot traffic forcing people to bump into each other, or perhaps you will take it as an example of your own carelessness. Or you may choose to use the experience as a political example of feminist aggression, or you may interpret the bump as her way of flirting with you. Your interpretation of the experience determines your perception.

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□Imagine that a group of curious bees land on the outside of a church window. Each bee gazes upon the interior through a different stained glass pane. To one bee, the church's interior is all red. To another it is all yellow, and so on. The bees cannot experience the inside of the church directly; they can only see it. They can never touch the interior or smell it or interact with it in any way. If bees could talk, they would end up arguing over the color of the interior. Each bee would stick to his version, not capable of understanding that the other bees were looking through different pieces of stained glass. It's the same with us when we end up arguing with someone about a theory or a belief. Both individuals are looking at the subject through their stained glass interpretation of experience.