

2016

Review of Douglas Stone, *Einstein and the Quantum: The Quest of the Valiant Swabian*

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Recommended Citation

Leifer, M.S., 2016. A. Douglas Stone. *Einstein and the Quantum: The Quest of the Valiant Swabian*. 332 pp. Princeton University Press, 2013. *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science* 8, 105–108. doi:10.4245/sponge.v8i1.20940

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Comments

This article was originally published in *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science*, volume 332, in 2016. DOI: [10.4245/sponge.v8i1.20940](https://doi.org/10.4245/sponge.v8i1.20940)

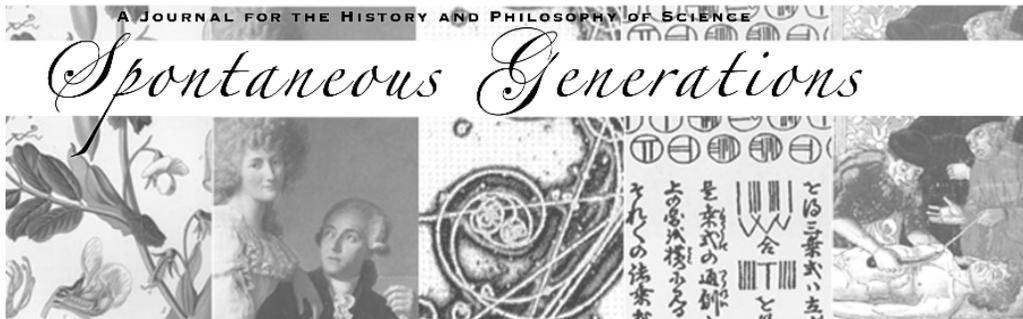
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REVIEW: A. Douglas Stone. *Einstein and the Quantum: The Quest of the Valiant Swabian*.

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Source: *Spontaneous Generations: A Journal for the History and Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2016) 105-108.

Published by: The University of Toronto

DOI: [10.4245/sponge.v8i1.20940](https://doi.org/10.4245/sponge.v8i1.20940)

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Published online at jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/SpontaneousGenerations
ISSN 1913 0465

Founded in 2006, *Spontaneous Generations* is an online academic journal published by graduate students at the Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto. There is no subscription or membership fee. *Spontaneous Generations* provides immediate open access to its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge.

REVIEWS

A. Douglas Stone. *Einstein and the Quantum: The Quest of the Valiant Swabian*. 332 pp. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013.*

Matthew Leifer[†]

This is, without a doubt, the most unusual biography of Einstein you will ever read. While most Einstein biographies focus on his development of special and general relativity, Stone's book is entirely focussed on his contributions to quantum theory. Furthermore, it is not about Einstein's later views and his famous debates with Bohr over the interpretation of quantum theory, which have received ample coverage elsewhere (see: Whitaker 1996, Lindley 2007, Kumar 2008), but rather about his contributions to the early development of the quantum theory. Stone's thesis is that Einstein's contribution is vastly undervalued in most histories of the subject: Einstein was so far ahead of the game that we might as well view quantum theory as entirely Einstein's baby until the likes of Bohr, Heisenberg and Schrödinger entered the scene.

At first sight, the idea that Einstein's contribution to quantum theory is in need of rehabilitation seems quite bizarre. Every undergraduate physicist learns of his explanations of the photoelectric effect and the specific heat of solids, and his role in discovering spontaneous emission, Bose-Einstein statistics, and Bose-Einstein condensation. This is already an impressive set of accomplishments, any one of which could serve as a basis for the entire career for an average physicist. However, the exact stories behind these discoveries and the multitude of other ways that Einstein contributed to quantum theory are not so well known. Stone's book aims to remedy this.

Stone makes a good case that only Einstein understood the significance of Planck's explanation of black-body radiation for a good decade or so after its discovery. Whereas most physicists viewed it as a technical trick, only Einstein argued from the very beginning that it required a radical reformulation of physics. Einstein returned to blackbody radiation multiple times, each time with more rigour, which eventually culminated in the derivation that we would today recognize as the correct approach.

* Received February 28, 2014. Accepted March 21, 2014

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Stone also makes compelling arguments that Einstein initiated several other aspects of quantum theory that are usually attributed to others. For example, I did not previously realize that Einstein was the first to introduce inherent probabilities into quantum theory via his theory of spontaneous emission. The originators of quantum atomic theory, such as Bohr and Sommerfeld, all thought that transitions between energy levels would be driven deterministically by classical electromagnetic fields. It was Einstein who introduced indeterministic jumps. Stone successfully argues that this was the key inspiration for Born's statistical interpretation of the wave function.

Stone's discussion of Einstein's early thought experiments in quantum theory will be of special interest to those who work on the foundations of quantum theory. Whilst the EPR argument paradox and his Einstein's Solvay debates with Bohr are well-known, it is not common knowledge that Einstein was worrying about similar issues for many years before the final form of quantum mechanics was pinned down. For example, in 1908, Einstein produced a thermodynamic argument aimed at showing that both wave and particle aspects of light must be real; by 1916, he was already worrying about the "spherical wave paradox," namely how can a spherical wave produce a point-like detection event at a single place without nonlocal influences. The latter worry is essentially the same as his better-known argument, that Einstein articulated at the 1927 Solvay conference, which eventually turned into the EPR argument.

There are a couple of places where I think Stone over-eggs the pudding in his arguments for Einstein's prescience. In Chapter 22, Stone describes Einstein's idea of understanding wave-particle duality in terms of "ghost fields," which he discussed from 1918 onwards. The idea is that electromagnetic radiation is composed of particles, which are guided by ghost fields that obey classical electromagnetism. The particles are the things that we directly detect, whereas the ghost fields merely reveal their presence via a stochastic influence on the motion of the particles. Stone cites this as a direct precursor to Born's statistical interpretation of the wave function. However, to my mind, Einstein's understanding is much closer to the de Broglie-Bohm theory, with the main difference being that Einstein intended the ghost fields to have a stochastic influence on the particles rather than a deterministic one. There is a big difference between saying that ghost fields are not directly detectable and saying that they are somehow insubstantive or less real than the particles, but Stone leaps effortlessly over this chasm. I doubt Einstein would have agreed.

Later on in the same chapter, Stone cites Einstein's work on Bohr-Sommerfeld quantization as a precursor to modern quantum chaos theory. The evidence for this is Einstein's observation that such a quantization procedure would not work for non-periodic orbits. To my mind,

this is quite far from modern quantum chaos theory, which has to do with understanding how classical chaotic motion can emerge from quantum theory. In other words, we have no problem quantizing such systems, but rather we struggle with working out how they get dequantized. Einstein's issue seems more to do with the fact that the full theory of quantum mechanics had not been worked out yet, rather than being a precursor to modern quantum chaos.

It is worth mentioning that Stone's book is aimed at the lay reader, so it does not give any technical details. Those who study quantum theory professionally will want to supplement the book with some of Einstein's papers or a scientific biography like Pais (1982). As a popular book, Stone's work suffers a bit from the "audience problem," in that the topic is a bit too specialized to attract a wide lay audience, but it does not include enough technical detail for the specialist. It is hard to imagine that many readers with no background in physics would want to read this work rather than a general biography of Einstein, such as Isaacson's (2007). Similarly, Lindley (2007) would be better for a first encounter with the history of quantum theory. However, Stone's book does serve well for Einstein buffs who have already read those things, for physics undergraduates who want to know more history, and for professional historians, physicists and philosophers who want a gentle introduction to Einstein's role in the early development of quantum theory. Stone has a great narrative facility and a judicious eye for a good quotations. In particular, the young Einstein's personality shines through the early chapters and I often found myself laughing at his wit and cheekiness. I would strongly recommend this book to anyone with an interest in the early history of quantum theory.

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