I was intimidated by the thought of reading Einstein – after all, not many people manage to grasp his concept of relativity. But I was pleasantly surprised. He writes in a very modest and easy to follow manner and these essays date back 70 years. They are like gold. They cover the period 1922 to 1934.

It was a great book and covers areas outside of his speciality. Worth reading.
Specific Bookthoughts:

- AE repeatedly mentions the importance of living plainly, rather than seeking out material wealth (property), luxury and status. Important values – truth, goodness, beauty and a sense of “fellowship with men of like mind” come across strongly.

- He discusses the meaning of life and suggests it is the domain of religion. And, that, he suggests may make people think the question is meaningless. But he points out that anyone who considers their life meaningless does not deserve to live. He also touches on what he calls “the religious feeling.” People filled with this feeling are often called atheists or heretics – such people “know no dogma and no God conceived in Man’s image.” It seems to me he refers to this experience as being connected to making new discoveries about the world and how it works (what scientists typically do). “A man’s ethical behaviour should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties; no religious basis is necessary.”

- AE is not religious in the sense that he believes in a God that is omniscient and omnipotent or one that rewards and punishes. And he does not believe in life after death. “Such notions are for the fears or absurd egotism of feeble souls.”

- “Let every man judge according to his own standards, by what he has himself read, not by what others tell him.”

- “In this materialistic age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people”

- He recognises that he does not have a need for direct contact with people and communities, but then highlights how odd it is that he then has such a passionate sense of “social justice” and “social responsibility”. And his feeling of the need for solitude has increased over the years.

- Force always attracts men of low morality.

- AE was clearly anti establishment. On people in an army: “that a man can take pleasure in marching in formation to the strains of a band is enough to make me despise him.” He also considered the State to be the servant of the individual and that the “chief duty of the State” was to give the individual the “opportunity to develop into a creative personality.” He points out that the State reverses the role when they go to war (the individual serves the state).

- AE understood human nature and was humble – which is why I struggle to accept that he had social disorders that are rumoured, like Asbergers or Autism. He understood that we are social animals and that we should do good to our fellow human beings. “The individual if left alone at birth would remain primitive and beast-like in his thoughts and feelings to a degree that we can hardly conceive.” Interesting point. “Nothing truly valuable can be achieved except by the unselfish co-operation of many individuals.”

- He talks about H.A. Lorentz – a Dutch physicist who won the Nobel prize for work in physics (that AE later used). But what AE admired most was his leadership skill. “Everyone followed him gladly, for they felt that he never set out to dominate but always simply to be of use.”

- AE felt the need to keep a broad understanding of a topic – like science. He felt that too much specialisation will handicap progress. “Every serious scientific is painfully conscious of this involuntary relegation to an ever-narrowing sphere of knowledge, which is threatening to deprive the investigator of his broad horizon and degrade him to a level of mechanic.”

- He discusses exaggerated respect that the public give certain people – like athletes, or in todays world, financial experts or celebrities. And he agrees that he was one who also received
exaggerated respect! He is so humble. Perhaps it is worth pointing out that he was perhaps the most important scientist ever. And scientists suffer from lack of recognition, not too much of it. One wonders whether we would have found a cure for AIDS or for spinal chord injuries had we placed due emphasis on scientific discovery.

- “Money only appeals to selfishness and always tempts its owners irresistibly to abuse it.” He asks whether Jesus, Moses or Gandhi would have been so good if they had the money of Carnegie.
- He visited Japan and enjoyed it.
- I enjoyed his description of priests who set up a hegemony in their singular ability to communicate with the deity.
- AE has respect for religion but is very sensitive to religions that operate under the threat of fear (fear of not going to heaven or going to hell for example). Eastern religions, as he points out, focus on the moral aspects, not the fear aspects. He sees this as good progress.
- He discusses cost of labour. The US is sparsely populated and labour is therefore expensive. This creates a drive for technology. The opposite is China, where population density is high and labour is cheap, reducing the need for technology. All this in the 1930’s.
- AE ranks knowledge and justice above wealth and power. Quite right.
- He discusses the importance of living in the moment. Americans, in his view, live for ambition and that means they are becoming, not being. In contrast, Europeans are being.
- He is against war. He makes an interesting point – we should abolish war entirely by shunning any nation that conflicts with another (say economic sanctions). Soldiers, he sees, represent the most extreme form of slavery. He discusses the League of Nations, an international organisation designed to encourage disarming of countries across the world – as a result of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles after the horrors of World War 1 (referred to as the Great War). AE was cynical about it and this seemed vindicated given the inability to prevent the aggression of the Axis powers (Germany, Italy, Japan) and WW2 (of course, the League of Nations is now the United Nations).
- It is interesting to see who AE wrote letters to – people like George Bernard Shaw, Sigmund Freud and H.G. Wells.
- He uses a phrase to describe technology, which applies to modern day nuclear armaments – “these hard-won achievements in the hands of our generation are like a razor in the hands of a child of three.”
- He makes the point that as long as armies exist, “any serious quarrel will lead to war.”
- He puts forward an interesting problem – technology has increased productivity whilst decreasing the need for labour. It has also created monopolies. Staff are being exploited. He suggests a minimum wage and the setting of a maximum number of workable hours per week. He also suggests price control where there are monopolies. In essence he wants to maintain free enterprise, whilst limiting the negative effects (“intolerable tyranny of the owners of the means of production (land, machinery) over wage earners”).
- AE believes in culture, especially where it promotes positive cooperation and good values. In order to have this, society needs to produce extra resources that can be used to fund these activities. There also needs to be a tradition of respect for moral/cultural values.
- We must not forget that Germany applied the Gold standard. Their currency was interchangeable with gold on a predetermined basis. As AE showed, this meant that when there is a shortage in supply of gold, there is a contraction in the economy. We know that eventually this system of currency for gold was only stopped in 1971 when President Nixon abolished it
(actually currencies across the world were pegged against the dollar which was pegged against a fixed gold price. It was the fixing of the gold price that was terminated by Nixon after pressure on the US fiscal system by the Vietnam War).

- Again AE reminds us of the folly of human nature – egotism and competition are far greater forces that “public spirit and sense of duty.”
- “Bureaucracy is the death of all sound work.”
- He was prescient with Europe when he suggested: “May our united efforts succeed in building a bridge of mutual trust between the nations.” Now we have the EU.
- AE is a committed Jew from the perspective of the cultural contribution the faith brings. He highlights the core tenets to which he ascribes – pursuit of knowledge, fanatical love of justice and the desire for personal independence. He does not look to the Torah as a guide. He feels that God is imaginary. “Judaism is thus no transcendental religion; it is concerned with life as we live it and can up to a point grasp it, and nothing else.” He doubts whether it should be called a religion. “To tack this on to the idea of God seems mere childish absurdity” – he was referring to the beauty and grandeur of the natural world.
- Whilst people like Spinoza and Marx were apparent atheists, AE ascribes the Jewish culture of the need for justice and reason as being central to their success.
- In addressing a Jewish audience he said: “the greatest enemies of the national consciousness and honour of the Jews are fatty degeneration – by which I mean the unconscionableness which comes from wealth and ease..."