

Legacy of the Influential German Physicist Who Pioneered Quantum Mechanics

author: Charles River Editors

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Synopsis

author	Charles River
readBy	Colin Fluxman
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There are many feel-good fictitious stories surrounding history's most brilliant minds, and one of the most famous involves Max Planck, a friend and contemporary of Albert Einstein. The story is said to have unfolded some time during Planck's national lecture tour in Germany in the autumn of 1918. An unnamed chauffeur escorted Planck to and from the varying universities and learning institutions on his agenda, day after day. But rather than wander off for a snack, sit down with a good book, or doze off in his chair in the back of the auditoriums, the chauffeur leaned forward with a keen ear and diligently filled the pages of his journal with notes.

After about a week or so, however, the chauffeur began to grow restless, for the traveling professor had been tasked with delivering a lecture on a certain subject, thereby making his classes more or less identical. The following day, the curious chauffeur approached his employer and boldly suggested, "Professor, I have heard you give the same lecture on quantum mechanics so many times that I now know it by heart. It must be very boring for you, so for tonight, why don't we swap roles? I'll deliver the lecture and you sit in the audience and wear my chauffeur's cap."

Intrigued, Planck agreed. Prior to entering the next lecture, the pair, now disguised as the other, arranged themselves in their respective positions and proceeded with class as normal. In an era prior to mass media and the worldwide web, such a ploy could easily be executed if done correctly. And so, the chauffeur, as it turns out, would not disappoint, and he delivered the lecture like a certified professional. The chauffeur's presentation carried on without a hitch until one of the spectators threw him off guard with a scrupulously investigated, complex question about quantum mechanics. Most would have broken down into a shivering and sweaty pile of nerves, but the chauffeur, without missing a beat, silenced him with this response: "I'm surprised that someone from the renowned city of Munich could ask such a basic question. This being the case, I will leave my chauffeur to

answer it.â€• With that, the â€œchauffeurâ€• humored the professor with a meticulously detailed answer and a knowing glint in his eye. </p> <p>The aforementioned tale has been relayed by some of the modern era's most gifted intellectuals and entrepreneurial powerhouses, including Charlie Munger, a business partner of Warren Buffet. The decades-old allegory is imparted not as an obscure episode in Planck's eventful life, but a story that showcases the difference between a pretentious, shallow understanding of a given subject (â€œchauffeur knowledgeâ€•) compared to an actual, in-depth comprehension of the subject, known as â€œPlanck knowledgeâ€•. </p>

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