

RELATIVITY

THE SPECIAL AND GENERAL THEORY

BY

ALBERT EINSTEIN, Ph.D.

PROFESSOR OF PHYSICS IN THE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN

TRANSLATED BY

ROBERT W. LAWSON, M.Sc.

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD



NEW YORK
HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

1921

VIII

ON THE IDEA OF TIME IN PHYSICS

LIGHTNING has struck the rails on our railway embankment at two places *A* and *B* far distant from each other. I make the additional assertion that these two lightning flashes occurred simultaneously. If I ask you whether there is sense in this statement, you will answer my question with a decided "Yes." But if I now approach you with the request to explain to me the sense of the statement more precisely, you find after some consideration that the answer to this question is not so easy as it appears at first sight.

After some time perhaps the following answer would occur to you: "The significance of the statement is clear in itself and needs no further explanation; of course it would require some consideration if I were to be commissioned to determine by observations whether in the actual case the two events took place simultaneously or not." I cannot be satisfied with this answer for the following reason. Supposing that as a result of ingenious considerations an able meteorologist were to dis-

cover that the lightning must always strike the places A and B simultaneously, then we should be faced with the task of testing whether or not this theoretical result is in accordance with the reality. We encounter the same difficulty with all physical statements in which the conception "simultaneous" plays a part. The concept does not exist for the physicist until he has the possibility of discovering whether or not it is fulfilled in an actual case. We thus require a definition of simultaneity such that this definition supplies us with the method by means of which, in the present case, he can decide by experiment whether or not both the lightning strokes occurred simultaneously. As long as this requirement is not satisfied, I allow myself to be deceived as a physicist (and of course the same applies if I am not a physicist), when I imagine that I am able to attach a meaning to the statement of simultaneity. (I would ask the reader not to proceed farther until he is fully convinced on this point.)

After thinking the matter over for some time you then offer the following suggestion with which to test simultaneity. By measuring along the rails, the connecting line AB should be measured up and an observer placed at the mid-point M of the distance AB . This observer should be supplied with an arrangement (*e.g.* two mirrors inclined at 90°) which allows him visually to ob-

serve both places A and B at the same time. If the observer perceives the two flashes of lightning at the same time, then they are simultaneous.

I am very pleased with this suggestion, but for all that I cannot regard the matter as quite settled, because I feel constrained to raise the following objection: "Your definition would certainly be right, if I only knew that the light by means of which the observer at M perceives the lightning flashes travels along the length $A \longrightarrow M$ with the same velocity as along the length $B \longrightarrow M$. But an examination of this supposition would only be possible if we already had at our disposal the means of measuring time. It would thus appear as though we were moving here in a logical circle."

After further consideration you cast a somewhat disdainful glance at me—and rightly so—and you declare: "I maintain my previous definition nevertheless, because in reality it assumes absolutely nothing about light. There is only *one* demand to be made of the definition of simultaneity, namely, that in every real case it must supply us with an empirical decision as to whether or not the conception that has to be defined is fulfilled. That my definition satisfies this demand is indisputable. That light requires the same time to traverse the path $A \longrightarrow M$ as for the path $B \longrightarrow M$ is in reality neither a *supposition* nor a *hypothesis* about the physical nature of light,

but a *stipulation* which I can make of my own freewill in order to arrive at a definition of simultaneity."

It is clear that this definition can be used to give an exact meaning not only to *two* events, but to as many events as we care to choose, and independently of the positions of the scenes of the events with respect to the body of reference¹ (here the railway embankment). We are thus led also to a definition of "time" in physics. For this purpose we suppose that clocks of identical construction are placed at the points *A*, *B* and *C* of the railway line (co-ordinate system), and that they are set in such a manner that the positions of their pointers are simultaneously (in the above sense) the same. Under these conditions we understand by the "time" of an event the reading (position of the hands) of that one of these clocks which is in the immediate vicinity (in space) of the event. In this manner a time-value is associated with every event which is essentially capable of observation.

This stipulation contains a further physical

¹ We suppose further that, when three events *A*, *B* and *C* take place in different places in such a manner that, if *A* is simultaneous with *B*, and *B* is simultaneous with *C* (simultaneous in the sense of the above definition), then the criterion for the simultaneity of the pair of events *A*, *C* is also satisfied. This assumption is a physical hypothesis about the law of propagation of light; it must certainly be fulfilled if we are to maintain the law of the constancy of the velocity of light *in vacuo*.

hypothesis, the validity of which will hardly be doubted without empirical evidence to the contrary. It has been assumed that all these clocks go *at the same rate* if they are of identical construction. Stated more exactly: When two clocks arranged at rest in different places of a reference-body are set in such a manner that a *particular* position of the pointers of the one clock is *simultaneous* (in the above sense) with the *same* position of the pointers of the other clock, then identical "settings" are always simultaneous (in the sense of the above definition).