

electromagnetic field there occur, in addition to the densities of the electric charge, *only* the intensities of the field. The career of electromagnetic processes *in vacuo* appears to be completely determined by these equations, uninfluenced by other physical quantities. The electromagnetic fields appear as ultimate, irreducible realities, and at first it seems superfluous to postulate a homogeneous, isotropic ether-medium, and to envisage electromagnetic fields as states of this medium.

But on the other hand there is a weighty argument to be adduced in favour of the ether hypothesis. To deny the ether is ultimately to assume that empty space has no physical qualities whatever. The fundamental facts of mechanics do not harmonize with this view. For the mechanical behaviour of a corporeal system hovering freely in empty space depends not only on relative positions (distances) and relative velocities, but also on its state of rotation, which physically may be taken as a characteristic not pertaining to the system in itself. In order

to be able to look upon the rotation of the system, at least formally, as something real, Newton objectivises space. Since he classes his absolute space together with real things, for him rotation relative to an absolute space is also something real. Newton might no less well have called his absolute space "Ether"; what is essential is merely that besides observable objects, another thing, which is not perceptible, must be looked upon as real, to enable acceleration or rotation to be looked upon as something real.

It is true that Mach tried to avoid having to accept as real something which is not observable by endeavouring to substitute in mechanics a mean acceleration with reference to the totality of the masses in the universe in place of an acceleration with reference to absolute space. But inertial resistance opposed to relative acceleration of distant masses presupposes action at a distance; and as the modern physicist does not believe that he may accept this action at a distance, he comes back once more, if he

former, disregarding the causes which condition its state. Thus we may also say, I think, that the ether of the general theory of relativity is the outcome of the Lorentzian ether, through relativization.

As to the part which the new ether is to play in the physics of the future we are not yet clear. We know that it determines the metrical relations in the space-time continuum, e.g. the configurative possibilities of solid bodies as well as the gravitational fields; but we do not know whether it has an essential share in the structure of the electrical elementary particles constituting matter. Nor do we know whether it is only in the proximity of ponderable masses that its structure differs essentially from that of the Lorentzian ether; whether the geometry of spaces of cosmic extent is approximately Euclidean. But we can assert by reason of the relativistic equations of gravitation that there must be a departure from Euclidean relations, with spaces of cosmic order of magnitude, if there exists a positive mean density, no matter how small, of the matter in the universe.

In this case the universe must of necessity be spatially unbounded and of finite magnitude, its magnitude being determined by the value of that mean density.

If we consider the gravitational field and the electromagnetic field from the standpoint of the ether hypothesis, we find a remarkable difference between the two. There can be no space nor any part of space without gravitational potentials; for these counter upon space its metrical qualities, without which it cannot be imagined at all. The existence of the gravitational field is inseparably bound up with the existence of space. On the other hand a part of space may very well be imagined without an electromagnetic field; thus in contrast with the gravitational field, the electromagnetic field seems to be only secondarily linked to the ether, the formal nature of the electromagnetic field being as yet in no way determined by that of gravitational ether. From the present state of theory it looks as if the electromagnetic field, as opposed to the gravitational field, rests upon an entirely new formal *motif*, as though

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follows Mach, to the ether, which has to serve as medium for the effects of inertia. But this conception of the ether to which we are led by Mach's way of thinking differs essentially from the ether as conceived by Newton, by Fresnel, and by Lorentz. Mach's ether not only *conditions* the behaviour of inert masses, but is *also conditioned* in its state by them.

Mach's idea finds its full development in the ether of the general theory of relativity. According to this theory the metrical qualities of the continuum of space-time differ in the environment of different points of space-time, and are partly conditioned by the matter existing outside of the territory under consideration. This space-time variability of the reciprocal relations of the standards of space and time, or, perhaps, the recognition of the fact that "empty space" in its physical relation is neither homogeneous nor isotropic, compelling us to describe its state by ten functions (the gravitation potentials $g_{\mu\nu}$), has, I think, finally disposed of the view that

space is physically empty. But therewith the conception of the ether has again acquired an intelligible content, although this content differs widely from that of the ether of the mechanical undulatory theory of light. The ether of the general theory of relativity is a medium which is itself devoid of *all* mechanical and kinematical qualities, but helps to determine mechanical (and electromagnetic) events.

What is fundamentally new in the ether of the general theory of relativity as opposed to the ether of Lorentz consists in this, that the state of the former is at every place determined by connections with the matter and the state of the ether in neighbouring places, which are amenable to law in the form of differential equations; whereas the state of the Lorentzian ether in the absence of electromagnetic fields is conditioned by nothing outside itself, and is everywhere the same. The ether of the general theory of relativity is transmuted conceptually into the ether of Lorentz if we substitute constants for the functions of space which describe the

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tic of ponderable media, as consisting of parts which may be tracked through time. The idea of motion may not be applied to it.

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nature might just as well have endowed the gravitational ether with fields of quite another type, for example, with fields of a scalar potential, instead of fields of the electromagnetic type.

Since according to our present conceptions the elementary particles of matter are also, in their essence, nothing else than condensations of the electromagnetic field, our present view of the universe presents two realities which are completely separated from each other conceptually, although connected causally, namely, gravitational ether and electromagnetic field, or—as they might also be called—space and matter.

Of course it would be a great advance if we could succeed in comprehending the gravitational field and the electromagnetic field together as one unified conformation. Then for the first time the epoch of theoretical physics founded by Faraday and Maxwell would reach a satisfactory conclusion. The contrast between ether and matter would fade away, and through the general theory of relativity, the whole of

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physics would become a complete system of thought, like geometry, kinematics, and the theory of gravitation. An exceedingly ingenious attempt in this direction has been made by the mathematician H. Weyl; but I do not believe that his theory will hold its ground in relation to reality. Further, in contemplating the immediate future of theoretical physics we ought not unconditionally to reject the possibility that the facts comprised in the quantum theory may set bounds to the field theory beyond which it cannot pass.

Recapitulating, we may say that according to the general theory of relativity space is endowed with physical qualities; in this sense, therefore, there exists an ether. According to the general theory of relativity space without ether is unthinkable; for in such space there not only would be no propagation of light, but also no possibility of existence for standards of space and time (measuring-rods and clocks), nor therefore any space-time intervals in the physical sense. But this ether may not be thought of as endowed with the quality characteris-

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RELATIVITY: THE SPECIAL AND
THE GENERAL THEORY

I. ETHER AND RELATIVITY
II. GEOMETRY AND EXPERIENCE

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ETHER AND THE THEORY OF RELATIVITY

HOW does it come about that alongside of the idea of ponderable matter, which is derived by abstraction from everyday life, the physicists set the idea of the existence of another kind of matter, the ether? The explanation is probably to be sought in those phenomena which have given rise to the theory of action at a distance, and in the properties of light which have led to the undulatory theory. Let us devote a little while to the consideration of these two subjects.

Outside of physics we know nothing of action at a distance. When we try to connect cause and effect in the experiences which natural objects afford us, it seems at first as if there were no other