

How Einstein Almost Lost Credit As the Author of the General Theory of Relativity

It took ten years of intense concentration and continuous effort, but finally, in 1915, he published his final and complete set of equations that comprise the General Theory of Relativity. But just before his publication, another potential problem arose. While Einstein was developing his new theory, he was also promoting his ideas to many of the great scientists and mathematicians of the time.

One of those, David Hilbert, a foremost mathematician, had maintained communications with Einstein, who had shared enough of his ideas that Hilbert came to understand Einstein's concepts. So Hilbert was able to derive the very same equations of the general theory as Einstein. Hilbert published his results only a few short weeks before Einstein published his own—a potential disaster for Einstein!

But Hilbert quickly and decently admitted that his equations were based entirely upon Einstein's work, and Einstein should receive full credit. However, if there are any groups that can look down their noses at theoretical physicists, it is theoretical mathematicians. And David Hilbert was the premier theoretical mathematician of that time. He did acknowledge Einstein's work, but only as follows: "Every boy in the streets of Göttingen understands more about four-dimensional geometry than Einstein. Yet, in spite of that, Einstein did the work and not the mathematician."⁷¹

And wow, did Einstein ever receive credit—in the form of worldwide recognition of his genius, once his theory was experimentally confirmed!