Relational Time Dilation in General Relativity:

Why No Physical Clock Locally Detects Its Own "Slowing"

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March 11, 2026

Abstract

A physical clock, idealized as a device that ticks along a timelike worldline, locally measures only its own proper time. This fact, established operationally in standard treatments of relativity, raises a recurring pedagogical confusion: if each clock locally "runs normally," what does "time dilation" mean, and why does the language of "slowing" arise at all? We present a conservative, referee-safe clarification within standard general relativity: *time dilation is not a locally detectable physical effect acting on an isolated clock*. Rather, time dilation is a *relational statement* that becomes meaningful only when two or more worldlines are compared under an explicitly stated comparison protocol (reunion, signal exchange with a synchronization convention, or coordinate-based inference with a declared observer family/foliation). We emphasize non-detectability (what a single clock can or cannot measure locally), not metaphysical claims about "time itself." Worked examples in flat spacetime and in gravitational settings (weak-field, Rindler, Schwarzschild) are presented with protocol discipline, making explicit what each clock measures, what is being compared, and under which conventions the comparison is performed. To aid intuition, schematic spacetime diagrams for each protocol are provided.

Keywords

proper time; coordinate time; time dilation; gravitational redshift; operational definition; synchronization; foliation; pedagogy

1 Scope and guiding principle

This article is *interpretational hygiene* within standard general relativity. We adopt the operational starting point of Article #130-B: an ideal clock measures the proper time accumulated along its own timelike worldline. We do *not* redefine time, challenge general relativity, or introduce ontological claims.

Central operational claim (referee-safe).

> **Time dilation is not a locally detectable physical effect acting on an isolated clock.**

Equivalently:

> **No local experiment performed by a single clock can reveal its own time dilation.**

In what follows, the term "time dilation" will be used *only* when a comparison protocol is explicitly stated.

2 Local measurement vs. relational inference

2.1 What a single clock locally measures

Let a clock follow a timelike worldline γ parameterized by λ. The clock's reading is identified with proper time

$$\Delta\tau = \int_{\lambda_1}^{\lambda_2} \mathrm{d}\tau, \quad \text{where} \quad \mathrm{d}\tau = \sqrt{-\frac{1}{c^2}\, g_{\mu\nu} \frac{\mathrm{d}x^\mu}{\mathrm{d}\lambda} \frac{\mathrm{d}x^\nu}{\mathrm{d}\lambda}}\mathrm{d}\lambda. \tag{1}$$

This is a *local* statement: the clock has direct access only to its own ticks, i.e. its own $\Delta\tau$ along γ. There is no locally measurable quantity on a single worldline that corresponds to "its own time dilation" unless a second worldline and a comparison rule are introduced.

2.2 What "time dilation" refers to

Time dilation refers to a *relation* between accumulated proper times (or between proper time and a coordinate time) obtained via an explicit protocol. A generic comparison statement has the form

$$\frac{\Delta\tau_A}{\Delta\tau_B} = (\text{value inferred under a specified comparison protocol}). \tag{2}$$

The right-hand side is not a local observable of either clock alone; it is a relational inference that requires connecting information between worldlines.

3 Where does the language of "slowing" come from?

The word "slowing" is often used as informal shorthand for a comparison outcome. Used carefully, it refers to an inferred ratio between clock readings obtained under a stated protocol; used carelessly, it can be misread as a local dynamical process affecting a clock mechanism.

Mandatory operational sentence (meaning lock).

> **The word "slowing" does not describe a local physical process, but a relational comparison between accumulated proper times.**

3.1 What "slowing" does *not* mean

Within this article, "slowing" does *not* mean:

- a local experiential effect perceived by the clock,
- a local malfunction or dynamical modification of clock mechanisms,
- an observer-independent, unilateral property of a single worldline.

Instead, "slowing" is only a shorthand for an inequality such as $\Delta\tau_A < \Delta\tau_B$ that emerges after the worldlines are compared under an explicit rule.

4 Comparison protocols (explicit enumeration)

Time dilation statements are meaningful only under one (or more) of the following protocols:

1. **Reunion comparison (worldline intersection):** Two clocks separate and later reunite at the same spacetime event, allowing a direct comparison of their displayed proper times.

2. **Signal exchange (with a stated synchronization convention):** Clocks compare rates by exchanging light signals and adopting a convention for simultaneity/synchronization (e.g. Einstein synchronization within a chosen observer family).
3. **Coordinate-based inference (with declared slicing/observer family):** One introduces a coordinate time t tied to a specified foliation and compares $\mathrm{d}\tau/\mathrm{d}t$ for different worldlines within that chosen framework.

Protocol discipline rule. From this point onward, any occurrence of "time dilation" will be accompanied by at least one explicit protocol label from the list above.

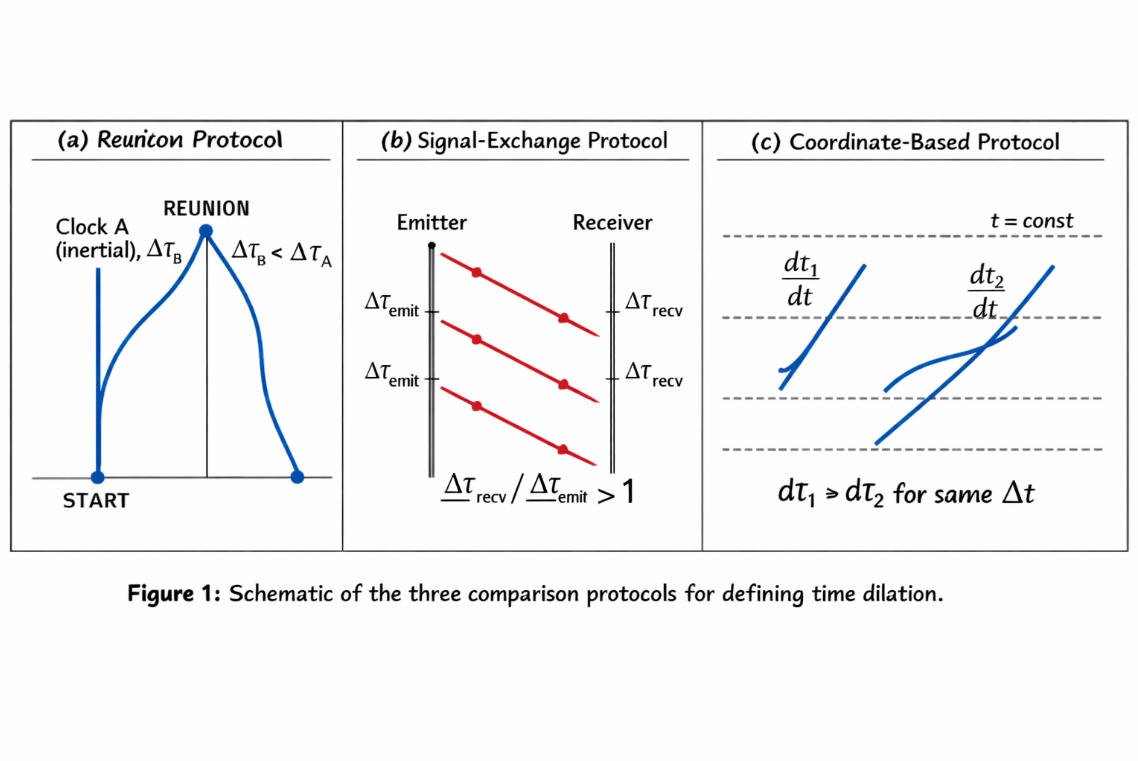

Figure 1: Schematic spacetime diagrams illustrating the three fundamental comparison protocols for defining time dilation. **(a) Reunion protocol:** Direct comparison of elapsed proper times $\Delta\tau$ at a common reunion event. **(b) Signal-exchange protocol:** Comparison of clock rates via exchange of light signals. **(c) Coordinate-based protocol:** Comparison of the proper time rate $\mathrm{d}\tau$ relative to a declared coordinate time $\mathrm{d}t$ of a chosen foliation (surfaces of constant t shown as dashed lines). Crucially, in all cases, neither clock can locally detect the "dilation"; it is only revealed through the specified relational procedure.

latex

5 Flat spacetime: the twin-paradox class (reunion protocol)

5.1 Setup and what each clock measures

Protocol: Reunion comparison. Consider two clocks A and B that depart from a common event and reunite at a later event. Clock A remains inertial; clock B follows a piecewise-inertial path with a turnaround. Each clock locally measures only its own $\Delta\tau$.

5.2 Relational outcome

In Minkowski spacetime,

$$\Delta\tau = \int \sqrt{1 - \frac{v(t)^2}{c^2}}\, \mathrm{d}t \tag{3}$$

for a worldline expressed in an inertial frame with coordinate time t and speed $v(t)$. For clock A (rest in that frame), $v = 0$ and $\Delta\tau_A = \Delta t$. For clock B with nonzero $v(t)$ during segments, $\Delta\tau_B < \Delta t$, hence $\Delta\tau_B < \Delta\tau_A$.

What "slowing" means here. No clock locally observes its own "rate change." The statement "B runs slow" is shorthand for the reunion outcome $\Delta\tau_B < \Delta\tau_A$.

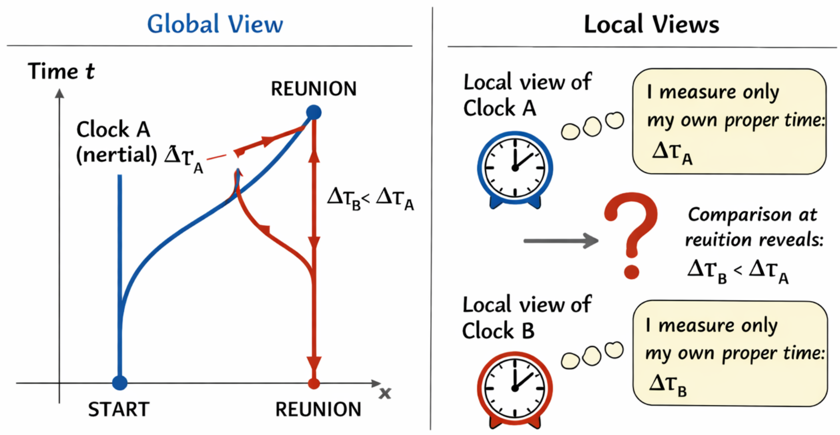

Figure 2: *The twin paradox illustrates the* **reunion protocol.** *The inequality of elapsed proper times is not locally detectable; it is a relational fact established only upon comparison.*

Figure 2: The twin paradox as a reunion protocol. **Left (Global View):** Spacetime diagram showing the inertial worldline of twin/clock A (vertical) and the non-inertial worldline of twin/clock B (triangular). The proper time accumulated by each is indicated along their paths. **Right (Local Views):** Emphasizing the central point of the article: each clock only has access to its own local proper time. Clock A measures $\Delta\tau_A$ and clock B measures $\Delta\tau_B$. The inequality $\Delta\tau_B < \Delta\tau_A$ is not a local experience for either; it is a relational fact established only at the reunion event (highlighted).

6 Signal exchange: gravitational redshift as a comparison outcome

6.1 Protocol statement

Protocol: Signal exchange with synchronization convention. Two stationary observers exchange periodic light signals. A rate comparison requires specifying how emission and reception events are paired (e.g. using stationary worldlines and a time-translation symmetry when available).

6.2 Operational content

What is locally measured are:

- the emitter's proper emission period $\Delta\tau_{\mathrm{emit}}$,
- the receiver's proper reception period $\Delta\tau_{\mathrm{recv}}$,

and the comparison is the inferred ratio $\Delta\tau_{\mathrm{recv}}/\Delta\tau_{\mathrm{emit}}$ under the specified signal protocol.

Describing this as "time dilation" is acceptable only as shorthand for this relational signal-based ratio.

Non-detectability emphasis. Neither clock, operating alone without exchange, can produce the ratio. The ratio is the effect.

7 Coordinate-based inference: what is true and what is conventional

7.1 Protocol statement

Protocol: Coordinate-based inference with declared slicing. Choose a family of observers (a congruence) and an associated coordinate time t (a foliation). One then computes $\mathrm{d}\tau/\mathrm{d}t$ for specific worldlines relative to that choice.

7.2 What the computation means

A statement like "clock A runs at rate $\mathrm{d}\tau_A/\mathrm{d}t$" is not a claim about a locally detectable effect on A; it is a statement about the relationship between A's proper time and the chosen coordinate time t, which is itself tied to a declared observer family and slicing.

Pedagogical warning (referee-safe). Coordinate-time rate differences are properties of a chosen foliation or observer family, not properties of an individual clock.

8 Worked examples with strict protocol discipline

In each example below, we explicitly state: (i) what each clock measures locally (its own τ), (ii) what is being compared, (iii) under which protocol, observer family, and/or slicing.

8.1 Weak-field, static gravity (signal exchange or coordinate inference)

Setup. Two clocks A and B are held at different heights in a weak, approximately static gravitational field. Each locally measures its own proper time.

Protocol 1: Signal exchange. Clock A emits ticks (light pulses) separated by its own $\Delta\tau_A$. Clock B receives them with separation $\Delta\tau_B$. The measured ratio is $\Delta\tau_B/\Delta\tau_A$ as defined by the signal pairing.

Protocol 2: Coordinate-based inference. Choose a static coordinate time t adapted to the stationary observers. In the weak-field limit,

$$\mathrm{d}\tau \approx \left(1 + \frac{\Phi}{c^2}\right)\mathrm{d}t, \tag{4}$$

so two stationary clocks at potentials Φ_A, Φ_B satisfy

$$\frac{\mathrm{d}\tau_A}{\mathrm{d}t} \approx 1 + \frac{\Phi_A}{c^2}, \qquad \frac{\mathrm{d}\tau_B}{\mathrm{d}t} \approx 1 + \frac{\Phi_B}{c^2}. \tag{5}$$

Any "time dilation" statement must specify that the comparison is to the shared coordinate time t of the chosen stationary slicing.

Meaning of "slowing." The phrase "lower clock runs slow" is shorthand for a protocol-defined inequality in either signal periods or $\mathrm{d}\tau/\mathrm{d}t$ within the stated slicing; it does not denote a locally detectable process acting on the clock.

8.2 Rindler observers (accelerated frame; coordinate inference + optional signal exchange)

Setup. Consider uniformly accelerated observers (Rindler congruence) in flat spacetime. Each observer carries a clock measuring its own proper time.

Protocol: Coordinate-based inference with declared slicing. Introduce Rindler time η for the accelerated congruence. Different worldlines at different Rindler "heights" have different relations between τ and η. The statement "time dilation between two Rindler observers" is meaningful only relative to η (the congruence time) or via signal exchange within that congruence with a stated synchronization convention.

Meaning lock. No single Rindler clock, operating locally, can detect "its own time dilation." The comparison arises only through (i) reference to η or (ii) exchanged signals.

8.3 Schwarzschild exterior (static observers; coordinate inference and signal exchange)

Setup. Two static observers at radii r_A and r_B outside a spherically symmetric, non-rotating mass in the Schwarzschild exterior. Each carries a clock and measures only its own proper time.

Protocol 1: Coordinate-based inference (static slicing). Using Schwarzschild coordinate time t associated with the static Killing field in the exterior region,

$$\mathrm{d}\tau = \sqrt{1 - \frac{2GM}{rc^2}}\,\mathrm{d}t \tag{6}$$

for static observers at radius r. A "time dilation" statement must specify the comparison is to this t and that the observer family is the static congruence.

Protocol 2: Signal exchange (gravitational redshift). If A emits pulses separated by $\Delta\tau_A$ and B receives them separated by $\Delta\tau_B$, the ratio is an operational outcome of the exchange protocol. It is not a local property of A or B in isolation.

No horizon narratives without qualification. This article does not attribute any observer-independent "freezing" to clocks. Any discussion near strong fields must remain protocol-explicit (which observer family, which slicing, which comparison).

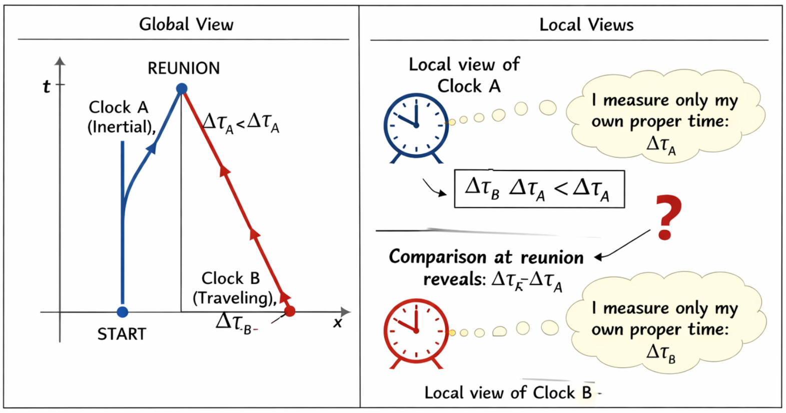

Figure 2: The twin paradox illustrates the reunion protocol. Tw aefining dilation. The inequality of elapsed proper times is not locally detectable; it is a relational fact estabiished only upon comparison.

Figure 3: Gravitational redshift as a signal-exchange protocol. Two stationary clocks at different gravitational potentials (e.g., $r_B < r_A$ in Schwarzschild geometry). Clock B (lower/stronger field) emits light pulses at constant proper intervals $\Delta\tau_B$. Clock A (higher/weaker field) receives them with larger proper intervals $\Delta\tau_A$, where $\Delta\tau_A/\Delta\tau_B = \sqrt{g_{tt}(r_B)/g_{tt}(r_A)} > 1$. The local experience of each clock is normal; the "slowing" of B relative to A is a relational conclusion drawn from the exchanged signals. The spacetime diagram shows the worldlines and light cones (at 45°).

9 Why time dilation is never locally observable

A single clock has access only to:

- its internal tick count,
- local physical processes in its immediate neighborhood,
- local comparisons to co-located clocks (which are not "dilation" comparisons unless worldlines differ and a protocol links them).

Time dilation requires a *nonlocal* comparison structure: either a reunion event (worldline intersection), exchanged signals, or a coordinate construction that relates separated events by a convention. Therefore, no purely local experiment performed by one clock can reveal "its own time dilation."

10 Common pedagogical misreadings (and protocol-corrected replacements)

- **Misreading:** "A clock in gravity runs slow."
  Protocol-corrected: "Relative to a declared stationary observer family and its coordinate time (or via a stated signal-exchange protocol), the clock's accumulated proper time differs from that of another clock on a different worldline."
- **Misreading:** "The clock experiences slowing."
  Protocol-corrected: "The clock measures its own proper time normally; the inequality arises only when comparing two worldlines under a stated protocol."

- **Misreading:** "Time itself slows down."
  Protocol-corrected: "No local clock detects its own rate change; the effect is not locally observable and is defined only by comparison."

11 Conclusion (pedagogical lock)

The operational content of time dilation in general relativity is exhausted by comparison outcomes between distinct worldlines under explicitly stated protocols. A single clock does not possess a local observable corresponding to "its own time dilation." The phrase "clock slowing" is pedagogically acceptable only as shorthand for a relational inequality in accumulated proper times (or in protocol-defined signal periods), never as a local dynamical process.

> **Time dilation is not something a clock experiences; it is something inferred when clocks are compared.**

Acknowledgments

This manuscript is written in the collective voice of IRCBHC for pedagogical clarification within standard general relativity.

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