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# **The Principles of Quantum Mechanics**

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## Contents

Preface to the Fourth Edition	v
From the Preface to the First Edition	vii
Chapter I. The Principle of Superposition	1
1. The Need for a Quantum Theory	1
2. The Polarization of Photons	4
3. Interference of Photons	7
4. Superposition and Indeterminacy	9
5. Mathematical Formulation of the Principle	13
6. Bra and Ket Vectors	17
Chapter II. Dynamical Variables and Observables	23
7. Linear Operators	23
8. Conjugate Relations	26
9. Eigenvalues and Eigenvectors	29
10. Observables	35
11. Functions of Observables	41
12. The General Physical Interpretation	45
13. Commutability and Compatibility	49
Chapter III. Representations	53
14. Basic Vectors	53
15. The $\delta$ Function	58
16. Properties of the Basic Vectors	62
17. The Representation of Linear Operators	67
18. Probability Amplitudes	73
19. Theorems about Functions of Observables	77
20. Developments in Notation	79
Chapter IV. The Quantum Conditions	85
21. Poisson Brackets	85
22. Schrödinger's Representation	90

23.	The Momentum Representation	96
24.	Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty	99
25.	Displacement Operators	101
26.	Unitary Transformations	105
Chapter V.	The Equations of Motion	111
27.	Schrödinger's Form for the Equations of Motion	111
28.	Heisenberg's Form for the Equations of Motion	114
29.	Stationary States	119
30.	The Free Particle	121
31.	The Motion of Wave Packets	124
32.	The Action Principle	128
33.	The Gibbs Ensemble	134
Chapter VI.	Elementary Applications	139
34.	The Harmonic Oscillator	139
35.	Angular Momentum	143
36.	Properties of Angular Momentum	148
37.	The Spin of the Electron	153
38.	Motion in a Central Field of Force	156
39.	Energy-levels of the Hydrogen Atom	161
40.	Selection Rules	164
41.	The Zeeman Effect for the Hydrogen Atom	170
Chapter VII.	Perturbation Theory	173
42.	General Remarks	173
43.	The Change in the Energy-levels Caused by a Perturbation	174
44.	The Perturbation Considered as Causing Transitions	178
45.	Application to Radiation	182
46.	Transitions Caused by a Perturbation Independent of the Time	184
47.	The Anomalous Zeeman Effect	187
Chapter VIII.	Collision Problems	193
48.	General Remarks	193
49.	The Scattering Coefficient	196
50.	Solution with the Momentum Representation	201
51.	Dispersive Scattering	207
52.	Resonance Scattering	209
53.	Emission and Absorption	212

Chapter IX. Systems Containing Several Similar Particles	217
54. Symmetrical and Antisymmetrical States	217
55. Permutations as Dynamical Variables	221
56. Permutations as Constants of the Motion	223
57. Determination of the Energy-levels	226
58. Application to Electrons	229
Chapter X. Theory of Radiation	235
59. An Assembly of Bosons	235
60. The Connexion between Bosons and Oscillators	237
61. Emission and Absorption of Bosons	243
62. Application to Photons	246
63. The Interaction Energy between Photons and an Atom	250
64. Emission, Absorption, and Scattering of Radiation	256
65. An Assembly of Fermions	260
Chapter XI. Relativistic Theory of the Electron	265
66. Relativistic Treatment of a Particle	265
67. The Wave Equation for the Electron	267
68. Invariance under a Lorentz Transformation	270
69. The Motion of a Free Electron	273
70. Existence of the Spin	276
71. Transition to Polar Variables	280
72. The Fine-structure of the Energy-levels of Hydrogen	282
73. Theory of the Positron	287
Chapter XII. Quantum Electrodynamics	291
74. The Electromagnetic Field in the Absence of Matter	291
75. Relativistic Form of the Quantum Conditions	295
76. The Dynamical Variables at One Time	299
77. The Supplementary Conditions	304
78. Electrons and Positrons by Themselves	308
79. The Interaction	315
80. The Physical Variables	320
81. Interpretation	324
82. Applications	328
Index	331

## CHAPTER I

**The Principle of Superposition****1. The Need for a Quantum Theory**

Classical mechanics has been developed continuously from the time of Newton and applied to an ever-widening range of dynamical systems, including the electromagnetic field in interaction with matter. The underlying ideas and the laws governing their application form a simple and elegant scheme, which one would be inclined to think could not be seriously modified without having all its attractive features spoilt. Nevertheless it has been found possible to set up a new scheme, called quantum mechanics, which is more suitable for the description of phenomena on the atomic scale and which is in some respects more elegant and satisfying than the classical scheme. This possibility is due to the changes which the new scheme involves being of a very profound character and not clashing with the features of the classical theory that make it so attractive, as a result of which all these features can be incorporated in the new scheme.

The necessity for a departure from classical mechanics is clearly shown by experimental results. In the first place the forces known in classical electrodynamics are inadequate for the explanation of the remarkable stability of atoms and molecules, which is necessary in order that materials may have any definite physical and chemical properties at all. The introduction of new hypothetical forces will not save the situation, since there exist general principles of classical mechanics, holding for all kinds of forces, leading to results in direct disagreement with observation. For example, if an atomic system has its equilibrium disturbed in any way and is then left alone, it will be set in oscillation and the oscillations will get impressed on the surrounding electromagnetic field, so that their frequencies may be observed with a spectroscope. Now whatever the laws of force governing the equilibrium, one would expect to be able to include the various frequencies in a scheme comprising certain fundamental frequencies and their harmonics. This is not observed to be the

case. Instead, there is observed a new and unexpected connexion between the frequencies, called Ritz's Combination Law of Spectroscopy, according to which all the frequencies can be expressed as differences between certain terms, the number of terms being much less than the number of frequencies. This law is quite unintelligible from the classical standpoint.

One might try to get over the difficulty without departing from classical mechanics by assuming each of the spectroscopically observed frequencies to be a fundamental frequency with its own degree of freedom, the laws of force being such that the harmonic vibrations do not occur. Such a theory will not do, however, even apart from the fact that it would give no explanation of the Combination Law, since it would immediately bring one into conflict with the experimental evidence on specific heats. Classical statistical mechanics enables one to establish a general connexion between the total number of degrees of freedom of an assembly of vibrating systems and its specific heat. If one assumes all the spectroscopic frequencies of an atom to correspond to different degrees of freedom, one would get a specific heat for any kind of matter very much greater than the observed value. In fact the observed specific heats at ordinary temperatures are given fairly well by a theory that takes into account merely the motion of each atom as a whole and assigns no internal motion to it at all.

This leads us to a new clash between classical mechanics and the results of experiment. There must certainly be some internal motion in an atom to account for its spectrum, but the internal degrees of freedom, for some classically inexplicable reason, do not contribute to the specific heat. A similar clash is found in connexion with the energy of oscillation of the electromagnetic field in a vacuum. Classical mechanics requires the specific heat corresponding to this energy to be infinite, but it is observed to be quite finite. A general conclusion from experimental results is that oscillations of high frequency do not contribute their classical quota to the specific heat.

As another illustration of the failure of classical mechanics we may consider the behaviour of light. We have, on the one hand, the phenomena of interference and diffraction, which can be explained only on the basis of a wave theory; on the other, phenomena such as photo-electric emission and scattering by free electrons, which show that light is composed of small particles. These particles, which are called photons, have each a definite energy and momentum, depending on the frequency of the light, and appear to have just as real an existence as electrons, or any other particles known in physics. A fraction of a photon is never observed.

Experiments have shown that this anomalous behaviour is not peculiar to light, but is quite general. All material particles have wave properties, which can be exhibited under suitable conditions. We have here a very striking and general example of the breakdown of classical mechanics—not merely an inaccuracy in its laws of motion, but *an inadequacy of its concepts to supply us with a description of atomic events.*

The necessity to depart from classical ideas when one wishes to account for the ultimate structure of matter may be seen, not only from experimentally established facts, but also from general philosophical grounds. In a classical explanation of the constitution of matter, one would assume it to be made up of a large number of small constituent parts and one would postulate laws for the behaviour of these parts, from which the laws of the matter in bulk could be deduced. This would not complete the explanation, however, since the question of the structure and stability of the constituent parts is left untouched. To go into this question, it becomes necessary to postulate that each constituent part is itself made up of smaller parts, in terms of which its behaviour is to be explained. There is clearly no end to this procedure, so that one can never arrive at the ultimate structure of matter on these lines. So long as *big* and *small* are merely relative concepts, it is no help to explain the big in terms of the small. It is therefore necessary to modify classical ideas in such a way as to give an absolute meaning to size.

At this stage it becomes important to remember that science is concerned only with observable things and that we can observe an object only by letting it interact with some outside influence. An act of observation is thus necessarily accompanied by some disturbance of the object observed. We may define an object to be big when the disturbance accompanying our observation of it may be neglected, and small when the disturbance cannot be neglected. This definition is in close agreement with the common meanings of big and small.

It is usually assumed that, by being careful, we may cut down the disturbance accompanying our observation to any desired extent. The concepts of big and small are then purely relative and refer to the gentleness of our means of observation as well as to the object being described. In order to give an absolute meaning to size, such as is required for any theory of the ultimate structure of matter, we have to assume that *there is a limit to the fineness of our powers of observation and the smallness of the accompanying disturbance—a limit which is inherent in the nature of things and can never be surpassed by improved technique or increased skill on the part of the observer.* If the object under observation is such

that the unavoidable limiting disturbance is negligible, then the object is big in the absolute sense and we may apply classical mechanics to it. If, on the other hand, the limiting disturbance is not negligible, then the object is small in the absolute sense and we require a new theory for dealing with it.

A consequence of the preceding discussion is that we must revise our ideas of causality. Causality applies only to a system which is left undisturbed. If a system is small, we cannot observe it without producing a serious disturbance and hence we cannot expect to find any causal connexion between the results of our observations. Causality will still be assumed to apply to undisturbed systems and the equations which will be set up to describe an undisturbed system will be differential equations expressing a causal connexion between conditions at one time and conditions at a later time. These equations will be in close correspondence with the equations of classical mechanics, but they will be connected only indirectly with the results of observations. There is an unavoidable indeterminacy in the calculation of observational results, the theory enabling us to calculate in general only the probability of our obtaining a particular result when we make an observation.

## 2. The Polarization of Photons

The discussion in the preceding section about the limit to the gentleness with which observations can be made and the consequent indeterminacy in the results of those observations does not provide any quantitative basis for the building up of quantum mechanics. For this purpose a new set of accurate laws of nature is required. One of the most fundamental and most drastic of these is the *Principle of Superposition of States*. We shall lead up to a general formulation of this principle through a consideration of some special cases, taking first the example provided by the polarization of light.

It is known experimentally that when plane-polarized light is used for ejecting photo-electrons, there is a preferential direction for the electron emission. Thus the polarization properties of light are closely connected with its corpuscular properties and one must ascribe a polarization to the photons. One must consider, for instance, a beam of light plane-polarized in a certain direction as consisting of photons each of which is plane-polarized in that direction and a beam of circularly polarized light as consisting of photons each circularly polarized. Every photon is in a certain *state of polarization*, as we shall say. The problem we must now

consider is how to fit in these ideas with the known facts about the resolution of light into polarized components and the recombination of these components.

Let us take a definite case. Suppose we have a beam of light passing through a crystal of tourmaline, which has the property of letting through only light plane-polarized perpendicular to its optic axis. Classical electrodynamics tells us what will happen for any given polarization of the incident beam. If this beam is polarized perpendicular to the optic axis, it will all go through the crystal; if parallel to the axis, none of it will go through; while if polarized at an angle  $\alpha$  to the axis, a fraction  $\sin^2 \alpha$  will go through. How are we to understand these results on a photon basis?

A beam that is plane-polarized in a certain direction is to be pictured as made up of photons each plane-polarized in that direction. This picture leads to no difficulty in the cases when our incident beam is polarized perpendicular or parallel to the optic axis. We merely have to suppose that each photon polarized perpendicular to the axis passes unhindered and unchanged through the crystal, while each photon polarized parallel to the axis is stopped and absorbed. A difficulty arises, however, in the case of the obliquely polarized incident beam. Each of the incident photons is then obliquely polarized and it is not clear what will happen to such a photon when it reaches the tourmaline.

A question about what will happen to a particular photon under certain conditions is not really very precise. To make it precise one must imagine some experiment performed having a bearing on the question and inquire what will be the result of the experiment. Only questions about the results of experiments have a real significance and it is only such questions that theoretical physics has to consider.

In our present example the obvious experiment is to use an incident beam consisting of only a single photon and to observe what appears on the back side of the crystal. According to quantum mechanics the result of this experiment will be that sometimes one will find a whole photon, of energy equal to the energy of the incident photon, on the back side and other times one will find nothing. When one finds a whole photon, it will be polarized perpendicular to the optic axis. One will never find only a part of a photon on the back side. If one repeats the experiment a large number of times, one will find the photon on the back side in a fraction  $\sin^2 \alpha$  of the total number of times. Thus we may say that the photon has a probability  $\sin^2 \alpha$  of passing through the tourmaline and appearing on the back side polarized perpendicular to the axis and a probability  $\cos^2 \alpha$  of being absorbed. These values for the probabilities lead to the

correct classical results for an incident beam containing a large number of photons.

In this way we preserve the individuality of the photon in all cases. We are able to do this, however, only because we abandon the determinacy of the classical theory. The result of an experiment is not determined, as it would be according to classical ideas, by the conditions under the control of the experimenter. The most that can be predicted is a set of possible results, with a probability of occurrence for each.

The foregoing discussion about the result of an experiment with a single obliquely polarized photon incident on a crystal of tourmaline answers all that can legitimately be asked about what happens to an obliquely polarized photon when it reaches the tourmaline. Questions about what decides whether the photon is to go through or not and how it changes its direction of polarization when it does go through cannot be investigated by experiment and should be regarded as outside the domain of science. Nevertheless some further description is necessary in order to correlate the results of this experiment with the results of other experiments that might be performed with photons and to fit them all into a general scheme. Such further description should be regarded, not as an attempt to answer questions outside the domain of science, but as an aid to the formulation of rules for expressing concisely the results of large numbers of experiments.

The further description provided by quantum mechanics runs as follows. It is supposed that a photon polarized obliquely to the optic axis may be regarded as being partly in the state of polarization parallel to the axis and partly in the state of polarization perpendicular to the axis. The state of oblique polarization may be considered as the result of some kind of superposition process applied to the two states of parallel and perpendicular polarization. This implies a certain special kind of relationship between the various states of polarization, a relationship similar to that between polarized beams in classical optics, but which is now to be applied, not to beams, but to the states of polarization of one particular photon. This relationship allows any state of polarization to be resolved into, or expressed as a superposition of, any two mutually perpendicular states of polarization.

When we make the photon meet a tourmaline crystal, we are subjecting it to an observation. We are observing whether it is polarized parallel or perpendicular to the optic axis. The effect of making this observation is to force the photon entirely into the state of parallel or entirely into the state of perpendicular polarization. It has to make a sudden jump from be-

ing partly in each of these two states to being entirely in one or other of them. Which of the two states it will jump into cannot be predicted, but is governed only by probability laws. If it jumps into the parallel state it gets absorbed and if it jumps into the perpendicular state it passes through the crystal and appears on the other side preserving this state of polarization.

### 3. Interference of Photons

In this section we shall deal with another example of superposition. We shall again take photons, but shall be concerned with their position in space and their momentum instead of their polarization. If we are given a beam of roughly monochromatic light, then we know something about the location and momentum of the associated photons. We know that each of them is located somewhere in the region of space through which the beam is passing and has a momentum in the direction of the beam of magnitude given in terms of the frequency of the beam by Einstein's photo-electric law—momentum equals frequency multiplied by a universal constant. When we have such information about the location and momentum of a photon we shall say that it is in a definite *translational state*.

We shall discuss the description which quantum mechanics provides of the interference of photons. Let us take a definite experiment demonstrating interference. Suppose we have a beam of light which is passed through some kind of interferometer, so that it gets split up into two components and the two components are subsequently made to interfere. We may, as in the preceding section, take an incident beam consisting of only a single photon and inquire what will happen to it as it goes through the apparatus. This will present to us the difficulty of the conflict between the wave and corpuscular theories of light in an acute form.

Corresponding to the description that we had in the case of the polarization, we must now describe the photon as going partly into each of the two components into which the incident beam is split. The photon is then, as we may say, in a translational state given by the superposition of the two translational states associated with the two components. We are thus led to a generalization of the term 'translational state' applied to a photon. For a photon to be in a definite translational state it need not be associated with one single beam of light, but may be associated with two or more beams of light which are the components into which one original

beam has been split.<sup>1</sup> In the accurate mathematical theory each translational state is associated with one of the wave functions of ordinary wave optics, which wave function may describe either a single beam or two or more beams into which one original beam has been split. Translational states are thus superposable in a similar way to wave functions.

Let us consider now what happens when we determine the energy in one of the components. The result of such a determination must be either the whole photon or nothing at all. Thus the photon must change suddenly from being partly in one beam and partly in the other to being entirely in one of the beams. This sudden change is due to the disturbance in the translational state of the photon which the observation necessarily makes. It is impossible to predict in which of the two beams the photon will be found. Only the probability of either result can be calculated from the previous distribution of the photon over the two beams.

One could carry out the energy measurement without destroying the component beam by, for example, reflecting the beam from a movable mirror and observing the recoil. Our description of the photon allows us to infer that, *after* such an energy measurement, it would not be possible to bring about any interference effects between the two components. So long as the photon is partly in one beam and partly in the other, interference can occur when the two beams are superposed, but this possibility disappears when the photon is forced entirely into one of the beams by an observation. The other beam then no longer enters into the description of the photon, so that it counts as being entirely in the one beam in the ordinary way for any experiment that may subsequently be performed on it.

On these lines quantum mechanics is able to effect a reconciliation of the wave and corpuscular properties of light. The essential point is the association of each of the translational states of a photon with one of the wave functions of ordinary wave optics. The nature of this association cannot be pictured on a basis of classical mechanics, but is something entirely new. It would be quite wrong to picture the photon and its associated wave as interacting in the way in which particles and waves can interact in classical mechanics. The association can be interpreted only statistically, the wave function giving us information about the probability of our finding the photon in any particular place when we make an

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<sup>1</sup>The circumstance that the superposition idea requires us to generalize our original meaning of translational states, but that no corresponding generalization was needed for the states of polarization of the preceding section, is an accidental one with no underlying theoretical significance.

observation of where it is.

Some time before the discovery of quantum mechanics people realized that the connexion between light waves and photons must be of a statistical character. What they did not clearly realize, however, was that the wave function gives information about the probability of *one* photon being in a particular place and not the probable number of photons in that place. The importance of the distinction can be made clear in the following way. Suppose we have a beam of light consisting of a large number of photons split up into two components of equal intensity. On the assumption that the intensity of a beam is connected with the probable number of photons in it, we should have half the total number of photons going into each component. If the two components are now made to interfere, we should require a photon in one component to be able to interfere with one in the other. Sometimes these two photons would have to annihilate one another and other times they would have to produce four photons. This would contradict the conservation of energy. The new theory, which connects the wave function with probabilities for one photon, gets over the difficulty by making each photon go partly into each of the two components. Each photon then interferes only with itself. Interference between two different photons never occurs.

The association of particles with waves discussed above is not restricted to the case of light, but is, according to modern theory, of universal applicability. All kinds of particles are associated with waves in this way and conversely all wave motion is associated with particles. Thus all particles can be made to exhibit interference effects and all wave motion has its energy in the form of quanta. The reason why these general phenomena are not more obvious is on account of a law of proportionality between the mass or energy of the particles and the frequency of the waves, the coefficient being such that for waves of familiar frequencies the associated quanta are extremely small, while for particles even as light as electrons the associated wave frequency is so high that it is not easy to demonstrate interference.

#### 4. Superposition and Indeterminacy

The reader may possibly feel dissatisfied with the attempt in the two preceding sections to fit in the existence of photons with the classical theory of light. He may argue that a very strange idea has been introduced—the possibility of a photon being partly in each of two states of polariza-