

What Is Light? Wave, Quantum and Observer

IDE-019 · Fundamental Ideas

Concept essays for *The Universe and Its Observers*

Author: Juan Segurolo

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Related works: IDE-020, IDE-021, IDE-023

Epistemic profile: Established knowledge with interpretive boundaries

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Article Abstract

Light is not a wave on Mondays and a particle on Tuesdays. Maxwell's equations describe it as a propagating disturbance of the electromagnetic field, and that account explains interference, diffraction, polarization and the finite speed of propagation without remainder in its domain.[1] Einstein's 1905 argument added something the classical account could not give: energy is exchanged with matter in discrete amounts proportional to frequency, which Millikan then measured carefully enough to extract Planck's constant.[2,3] The reconciliation is not a compromise between two pictures but a single theory in which both families of phenomena are consequences. This article also examines nonclassical photon-statistics tests, the limited evidential force of the photoelectric effect by itself, and the physical role of an observer.[4,7]

In 60 Seconds

Classical electromagnetism gets light right wherever it applies: interference and diffraction follow from a field disturbance obeying wave equations, and the propagation speed comes out of two measurable electrical constants.[1] What it cannot do is explain why the energy of photoelectrons depends on frequency and not on intensity. Einstein proposed that energy is exchanged in quanta proportional to frequency, and Millikan, who set out sceptical, measured the relation precisely enough to determine Planck's constant from it.[2,3] Discreteness of exchange, though, is not evidence for tiny bullets. The experiment that shows light is not a classical wave with random arrival times is antibunching, in which a single emitter cannot produce two detections at once, and that behaviour has no classical wave description.[4] Environment-induced entanglement suppresses interference between macroscopically distinct records.[5]

Why This Question Matters

Light is where most people meet quantum physics, and it is where the worst popular formulations are installed. Wave-particle duality suggests two substances taking turns; the observer effect suggests that

looking changes reality; the photon is pictured as a small bright pellet with a trajectory. Each of these makes later physics harder to learn, because each has to be unlearned. Getting light right also fixes the vocabulary for the two articles that follow, since a photon is the cleanest example available of what the word particle can and cannot mean.

1. Light as a Disturbance of a Field

Maxwell's equations admit solutions in which electric and magnetic fields sustain each other and propagate. The speed of those solutions is fixed by two constants measurable in a laboratory with no optics in it, and it matched the measured speed of light, which is why Maxwell concluded that light is an electromagnetic disturbance.[1]

The account is not a metaphor. It predicts interference and diffraction quantitatively, explains polarization as the orientation of the field, and yields radiation pressure. In its domain it is complete: no experiment on interference requires anything to be added to it, and the classical theory remains the working description across radio, optics and much of astronomy.

What it does not describe is the exchange of energy between light and matter at low intensity. Classically, energy delivered to an electron should grow with the brightness of the illumination, and a dim source should simply take longer to accumulate what a bright source delivers quickly. That prediction fails, and the failure is not small.

Where That Leaves Us

Maxwell's field description of light explains interference, diffraction, polarization, radiation pressure and the propagation speed, and remains the working theory across most of the spectrum. Its failure is specific and located: it gets the exchange of energy with matter wrong. That failure is where the quantum enters, and it enters as a statement about exchange rather than about propagation.

2. The Quantum of Exchange

Einstein's 1905 paper is titled as a heuristic point of view, and its proposal is precise: in processes of emission and absorption, light behaves as though its energy were distributed in localized quanta proportional to frequency.[2] Applied to the photoelectric effect this predicts that the maximum kinetic energy of ejected electrons rises linearly with frequency, with a slope equal to Planck's constant, and does not depend on intensity.

Millikan spent a decade testing it, and was explicit that he had expected the hypothesis to fail. His 1916 measurements confirmed the linear relation and yielded a value of Planck's constant from the slope, which is a strong form of confirmation: the prediction was quantitative and the constant obtained agreed with values determined by unrelated means.[3]

Note what the result establishes and what it does not. It establishes that energy is exchanged in discrete amounts fixed by frequency. It does not establish that light travels as a stream of small objects, and Einstein's own framing as heuristic reflects that the argument was about the statistics of exchange rather than about a picture of propagation.

Where That Leaves Us

Einstein proposed that light exchanges energy in quanta proportional to frequency, and Millikan measured the resulting linear relation precisely enough to extract Planck's constant from its slope. The result is about exchange, not about a picture of what travels. Establishing that light is not a classical wave at all required a different and later experiment.

3. What a Photon Is Not

The photoelectric effect admits a semiclassical treatment with a classical electromagnetic field coupled to quantized matter; important photoelectric statistics therefore do not by themselves require field quantization.[7] Inference: the photoelectric effect alone is consequently weaker evidence for photons than a fully nonclassical optical test.

Kimble, Dagenais and Mandel observed antibunching in the fluorescence of a single atom: after a detection, the probability of a second immediate detection falls below what any classical wave description allows.[4] A single emitter that has just emitted must be re-excited before it can emit again, so its output cannot deliver two simultaneous detections, and a classical field of any intensity fluctuation profile cannot reproduce that.

This licenses the word photon and simultaneously constrains it. Antibunching in single-emitter fluorescence violates a classical-field bound and supports a quantized-field description.[4,7] It does not show that a photon has a position between emission and absorption, a trajectory, or a size; and the interference experiments that classical theory explains so well remain valid, which means whatever a photon is, it is not a small object following a path.

Where That Leaves Us

Antibunching in single-emitter fluorescence violates a classical-field bound and supports a quantized-field description.[4] That leaves what a detector is doing when it registers one.

4. The Observer Is an Interaction

The phrase observer effect invites the reading that a conscious act changes the outcome. What happens physically is that a detector interacts with the system and its state becomes correlated with what it detected, which is a physical process involving many degrees of freedom.

Decoherence describes the consequence. Environment-induced entanglement suppresses interference between macroscopically distinct records.[5]

What that result covers is worth stating exactly, because it is narrower than the popular version. Decoherence explains the suppression of interference and the emergence of a preferred set of stable states, which is what makes macroscopic records behave classically with respect to interference; the question of why one outcome rather than another is experienced remains open and is interpreted differently across the main readings of quantum theory.[5,8] The article makes the first claim and declines the second.

Where That Leaves Us

Decoherence does not settle why a particular outcome is experienced, and that boundary is deliberate. What remains is to state how one theory delivers both families of phenomena.

5. One Theory, Two Families of Phenomena

Quantum electrodynamics is a single theory of the electromagnetic field and its interaction with charged matter, and both the wave and the quantum phenomena are consequences of it.

Feynman's presentation makes the structure unusually clear: amplitudes are assigned to alternative ways an outcome could occur, and those amplitudes are added before the probability is taken.[6]

Interference is then not a wave phenomenon competing with a particle picture. It is what happens when several alternatives contribute amplitudes to the same detection event, which is why single photons sent one at a time through two slits still build an interference pattern over many events. Discreteness is not in competition either: each event is one detection, and the pattern is in the distribution of many.

Wave-particle duality was a useful scaffold while the theory was being built and is a poor description of the finished structure, because it suggests two things where there is one. The honest summary is that light is an excitation of the electromagnetic field, described by a theory whose amplitudes interfere and whose interactions are discrete.

Where That Leaves Us

Quantum electrodynamics produces both wave and quantum phenomena from one structure, in which alternative ways an outcome could occur contribute amplitudes that interfere before probabilities are taken. Duality was scaffolding, not a result. Since a photon turns out to be an excitation rather than an object, IDE-020 asks what the word particle can still mean.

What We Know, and How

- Classical electromagnetism explains interference, diffraction, polarization, radiation pressure and the propagation speed of light, and remains the working description in its domain.[1]
- Energy is exchanged between light and matter in quanta proportional to frequency; the photoelectric relation is linear in frequency and independent of intensity, and its slope yields Planck's constant.[2,3]
- Antibunching in single-emitter fluorescence violates a classical-field bound and supports a quantized-field description.[4,7]

What We Still Don't Know

- Why a particular outcome rather than another is registered in an individual event, which decoherence does not address and which the main interpretations of quantum theory answer differently.[5]
- Whether a fully satisfactory position observable can be defined for a photon, which remains a technical difficulty rather than a settled part of the theory.
- How the electromagnetic field is to be described in regimes where spacetime curvature is strong, which belongs to the unresolved relationship between quantum field theory and gravitation.

What Could Change Our Minds

- A reproducible source producing antibunched light that could be fully described by a classical stochastic field, with the second-order correlation at zero delay correctly measured below the classical bound, would remove the decisive evidence that no classical field description accounts for light.[4]
- A measured departure from the linear dependence of maximum photoelectron energy on frequency, under conditions where surface and space-charge effects are controlled as in the classic determinations, would contradict the quantum of exchange.[2,3]
- An experiment recovering interference between macroscopically distinct detector records, after entanglement with an environment of many degrees of freedom, would contradict the decoherence account of why that interference becomes unobservable under such coupling, which is what the account claims; it would not bear on why one outcome is obtained, which the account does not address.[5]

If You Remember Only One Thing

Light is an excitation of the electromagnetic field whose alternatives interfere and whose interactions are discrete; it is not a wave and a particle taking turns.

Related Articles

- IDE-020 — What Is a Particle?
- IDE-021 — What Is a Field?
- IDE-023 — What Is Observation?

References

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