Why space must be quantised on a different scale to matter

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Abstract

The scale of quantum mechanical effects in matter is set by Planck's constant, $\hbar$. This represents the quantisation scale for material objects. In this article, we give a simple argument why the quantisation scale for space, and hence for gravity, cannot be equal to $\hbar$. Indeed, assuming a single quantisation scale for both matter and geometry leads to the 'worst prediction in physics', namely, the huge difference between the observed and predicted vacuum energies. Conversely, assuming a different quantum of action for geometry, $\beta \neq \hbar$, allows us to recover the observed density of the Universe. Thus, by measuring its present-day expansion, we may in principle determine, empirically, the scale at which the geometric degrees of freedom must be quantised.

1 Wave–particle duality and $\hbar$

Classical mechanics is deterministic [1]. If its initial conditions are known, the probability of finding a particle at a given point on its trajectory, at the appropriate time t, is 100%. The corresponding state is described by a delta function, $\delta^3(\mathbf{x}-\mathbf{x}')$, with dimensions of $(\text{length})^{-3}$. This is the probability density of the particle located at $\mathbf{x}=\mathbf{x}'$.

In quantum mechanics (QM), probability amplitudes are fundamental. Position eigenstates, $|\mathbf{x}\rangle$, are the rigged basis vectors of an abstract Hilbert space, where $\langle \mathbf{x}|\mathbf{x}'\rangle = \delta^{\mathbf{3}}(\mathbf{x}-\mathbf{x}')$. These have dimensions of $(\text{length})^{-3/2}$ and more general states may be constructed by the principle of quantum superposition [2]. The resulting wave function, $\psi(\mathbf{x})$, represents the probability amplitude for finding the particle at each point in space, and the corresponding probability density is $|\psi(\mathbf{x})|^{\mathbf{2}}$ [3].

Since $\psi(\mathbf{x})$ can also be decomposed as a superposition of plane waves, $e^{i\mathbf{k}.\mathbf{x}}$, an immediate consequence is the uncertainty principle $\Delta_\psi x^i \Delta_\psi k_j \geq (1/2)\delta^i{}_j$, where $i,j \in \{1,2,3\}$ label orthogonal Cartesian axes. This is a purely mathematical property of ψ that follows from elementary results of functional analysis [4]. In canonical QM, we relate the particle momentum $\mathbf{p}$ to the wave number $\mathbf{k}$ via Planck's constant, following the proposal of de Broglie, $\mathbf{p}=\hbar\mathbf{k}$. It follows that

$$\Delta_\psi x^i \Delta_\psi p_j \geq (\hbar/2)\delta^i{}_j \, . \tag{1}$$

This is the familiar Heisenberg uncertainty principle (HUP). We stress that the HUP is a consequence of two distinct physical assumptions:

1. the principle of quantum superposition, and

2. the assumption that $\hbar$ determines the *scale* of wave–particle duality.

Let us also clarify the meaning of the word 'particle'. We stress that canonical QM treats all particles as point-like, so that eigenstates with zero position uncertainty may be realised, at least formally. However, gravitational effects are expected to modify the HUP by introducing a minimal length, $\Delta x > 0$ [5,6]. Next, we discuss how this relates to theoretical predictions of the vacuum energy.

2 Minimal length and the vacuum energy

In canonical QM, the background space is fixed and classical. Individual points are sharply defined and the distances between them can be determined with arbitrary precision [7]. By contrast, thought experiments in the quantum gravity regime suggest the existence of a minimum resolvable length scale of the order of the Planck length, $\Delta x \simeq l_{\rm Pl}$, where $l_{\rm Pl} = \sqrt{\hbar G/c^3} \simeq 10^{-33}$ cm [5]. Below this, the classical concept of length loses meaning, so that perfectly sharp space-time points cannot exist [6].

This motivates us to take $l_{\rm Pl}$ as the UV cut off for vacuum field modes, but doing so yields the so-called 'worst prediction in physics' [8], namely, the prediction of a Planck-scale vacuum density:

$$\rho_{\rm vac} \simeq \frac{\hbar}{c}\int_{k_{\rm dS}}^{k_{\rm Pl}} \sqrt{k^2 + \left(\frac{mc}{\hbar}\right)^2}\,{\rm d}^3k \simeq \rho_{\rm Pl} = \frac{c^5}{\hbar G^2} \simeq 10^{93}\,{\rm g}\,.\,{\rm cm}^{-3}\,. \tag{2}$$

Unfortunately, the observed vacuum density is more than 120 orders of magnitude lower,

$$\rho_{\rm vac} \simeq \rho_{\Lambda} = \frac{\Lambda c^2}{8\pi G} \simeq 10^{-30}\,{\rm g}\,.\,{\rm cm}^{-3}\,. \tag{3}$$

In Eq. (2), the mass scale $m \ll m_{\rm Pl} = \hbar/(l_{\rm Pl}c) \simeq 10^{-5}$ g is set by the Standard Model of particle physics [10] and the limits of integration are $k_{\rm Pl} = 2\pi/l_{\rm Pl}$, $k_{\rm dS} = 2\pi/l_{\rm dS}$, where $l_{\rm dS} = \sqrt{3/\Lambda}$ is the de Sitter length. This is comparable to the present day radius of the Universe, $r_{\rm U} \simeq 10^{28}$ cm, which may be expressed in terms of the cosmological constant, $\Lambda \simeq 10^{-56}$ cm^{-2} [9].

More detailed calculations alleviate this discrepancy [11], but our naive calculation highlights the problem of treating $l_{\rm Pl}$ and $m_{\rm Pl}$ as interchangeable cutoffs. We now discuss an alternative way to obtain a minimum length of order $l_{\rm Pl}$ without generating unfeasibly high energies.

3 Wave–point duality and $\beta \neq \hbar$

Clearly, one way to implement a minimum length is to discretise the geometry, as in loop quantum gravity and related approaches [12]. However, in general, quantisation is *not* discretisation [13]. The key feature of quantum gravity is that it must allow us to assign a quantum state to the background, giving rise to geometric superpositions, and, therefore, superposed gravitational field states [14]. The associated spectrum may be discrete or continuous, finite or infinite.

But how to assign a quantum state to space itself? A simple answer is that we must first assign a quantum state to each *point* in the classical background. Individual points then map to superpositions of points and the unique classical geometry is mapped to a superposition of geometries, as required [15]. In effect, we apply our quantisation procedure point-wise, and, in the process, eliminate the concept of a 'point' from our description of physical reality.

This can be achieved by first associating a delta function with each coordinate '$\mathbf{x}$'. We then note that $\delta^3(\mathbf{x}-\mathbf{x}')$ is obtained as the zero-width limit of a Gaussian distribution, $|g(\mathbf{x}-\mathbf{x}')|^{\mathbf{2}}$, with standard deviation $\Delta_g x$. Taking $\Delta_g x > 0$ therefore 'smears' sharp spatial points over volumes of order $\sim (\Delta_g x)^3$, giving rise to a minimum observable length scale [15]. Motivated by thought experiments [5], we set $\Delta_g x \simeq l_{\rm Pl}$.

Since g may also be expressed as a superposition of plane waves, an immediate consequence is the wave-point uncertainty relation, $\Delta_g x^i \Delta_g k_j \geq (1/2)\delta^i{}_j$. This is an uncertainty relation for delocalised 'points', not point-particles in the classical background of canonical QM [15]. A key question we must then address is, what is the momentum of a geometry wave? For matter waves, $\mathbf{p} = \hbar\mathbf{k}$, but we have no *a priori* reason to believe that space must be quantised on the same scale as material bodies. In fact, setting $\Delta_g x \simeq l_{\rm Pl}$ and $\mathbf{p} = \hbar\mathbf{k}$ yields $\Delta_g p \simeq m_{\rm Pl}c$, giving a vacuum density of order $\rho_{\rm vac} \simeq (\Delta_g p)/(\Delta_g x)^3 c \simeq c^5/(\hbar G^2)$. This is essentially the same calculation as that given in Eq. (2), which results from the same physical assumptions. Hence, we set

$$\Delta_g x^i \Delta_g p_j \geq (\beta/2)\delta^i{}_j\,, \tag{4}$$

where $\beta \neq \hbar$ is the fundamental quantum of action for geometry.

Smearing each point in the background convolves the canonical probability density with a Planck-width Gaussian. The resulting total uncertainties are

$$\Delta_\Psi X^i = \sqrt{(\Delta_\psi x^i)^2 + (\Delta_g x^i)^2}\,, \quad \Delta_\Psi P_j = \sqrt{(\Delta_\psi p_j)^2 + (\Delta_g p_j)^2}\,, \tag{5}$$

for each $i, j \in \{1, 2, 3\}$, where $\Psi := \psi g$ denotes the composite wave function of a particle in smeared space [15]. Finally, we note that the existence of a finite cosmological horizon implies a corresponding limit on the particle momentum, which may be satisfied by setting $\Delta_g p \simeq \hbar\sqrt{\Lambda/3}$. The resulting quantum of action for geometry is

$$\beta \simeq \hbar\sqrt{\frac{\rho_\Lambda}{\rho_{\rm Pl}}} \simeq \hbar \times 10^{-61}\,. \tag{6}$$

The new constant β sets the Fourier transform scale for $g(\mathbf{x}-\mathbf{x}')$, whereas the matter component $\psi(\mathbf{x})$ transforms at $\hbar$ [15]. However, this does not violate the existing no-go theorems for the existence of multiple quantisation constants. These apply only to species of material particles [16], and still hold in the smeared-space theory, undisturbed by the quantisation of the background [17].

4 The vacuum energy, revisited

The introduction of a new quantisation scale for space radically alters our picture of the vacuum, including our naive estimate of the vacuum energy. This must be consistent with the generalised uncertainty relations (5). Expanding $\Delta_\Psi X^i$ with $\Delta_g x^i \simeq l_{\rm Pl}$ gives the generalised uncertainty principle (GUP) and expanding $\Delta_\Psi P_j$ with $\Delta_g p_j \simeq \hbar\sqrt{\Lambda/3}$ yields the extended uncertainty principle (EUP), previously considered in the quantum gravity literature [18, 19].

Equations (5) may also be combined with the HUP, which holds independently for ψ [15], to give two new uncertainty relations of the form $\Delta_\Psi X^i\, \Delta_\Psi P_j \geq \dots \geq (\hbar+\beta)/2\,.\,\delta^i{}_j$. The central terms in each relation depend on either $\Delta_\psi x^i$ or $\Delta_\psi p_j$, exclusively. Minimising the product of the generalised uncertainties, $\Delta_\Psi X^i\, \Delta_\Psi P_j$, we obtain the following length and momentum scales:

$$\begin{aligned}(\Delta_\psi x)_{\rm opt} &\simeq l_\Lambda := \sqrt{l_{\rm Pl} l_{\rm dS}} \simeq 0.1\,{\rm mm}\,,\\ (\Delta_\psi p)_{\rm opt} &\simeq m_\Lambda c := \sqrt{m_{\rm Pl} m_{\rm dS}}c \simeq 10^{-3}\,{\rm eV}/c\,,\end{aligned} \tag{7}$$

where $m_{\text{dS}} = \hbar/(l_{\text{dS}}c) \simeq 10^{-66}$ g is the de Sitter mass. This gives a vacuum energy of order

$$\rho_{\text{vac}} \simeq \frac{3}{4\pi}\frac{(\Delta_\psi p)_{\text{opt}}}{(\Delta_\psi x)^3_{\text{opt}}c} \simeq \rho_\Lambda = \frac{\Lambda c^2}{8\pi G} \simeq 10^{-30}\,\text{g}\,.\,\text{cm}^{-3}\,, \tag{8}$$

as required. Taking $k_\Lambda = 2\pi/l_\Lambda$ as the UV cut off in Eq. (2), with $m = m_\Lambda$, also gives the correct value order of magnitude, $\rho_{\text{vac}} \simeq \rho_\Lambda$ [15].

In this model, vacuum modes seek to optimise the generalised uncertainty relations induced by both $\hbar$ and β, yielding the observed vacuum energy. Any attempt to excite higher-order modes leads to increased pair-production of neutral dark energy particles, of mass $m_\Lambda \simeq 10^{-3}\,\text{eV}/c^2$, together with the concomitant expansion of space required to accommodate them, rather than an increase in energy density [17]. The vacuum energy remains approximately constant over large distances, but exhibits granularity on scales of order $l_\Lambda \simeq 0.1$ mm [15, 20]. It is therefore intriguing that tentative evidence for small oscillations in the gravitational force, with approximately this wavelength, has already been observed [21, 22].

5 Summary

This simple analysis shows that, if space-time points are delocalised at the Planck length, $\Delta x \simeq l_{\text{Pl}}$, the associated momentum uncertainty cannot be of the order of the Planck momentum, $\Delta p \neq \hbar/\Delta x \simeq m_{\text{Pl}}c$. We are then prompted to ask: is it reasonable to assume that quantised waves of space-time carry the same momentum as matter waves? Though a common assumption, underlying virtually all attempts to quantise gravity that utilise a single action scale, $\hbar$, we note that it has, *a priori*, no theoretical justification. We have shown that relaxing this stringent requirement by introducing a new quantum of action for geometry, $\beta \neq \hbar$, leads to interesting possibilities, with the potential to open brand new avenues in quantum gravity research [23, 24]. These include the proposal that the observed vacuum energy is related to the quantisation scale of space itself [15, 17].

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