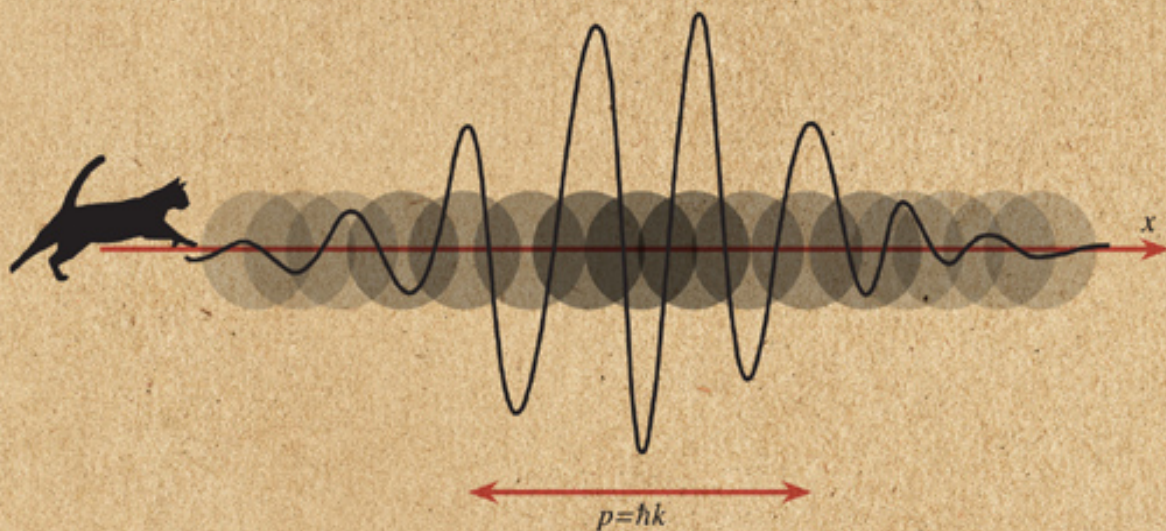


# 30-SECOND QUANTUM THEORY

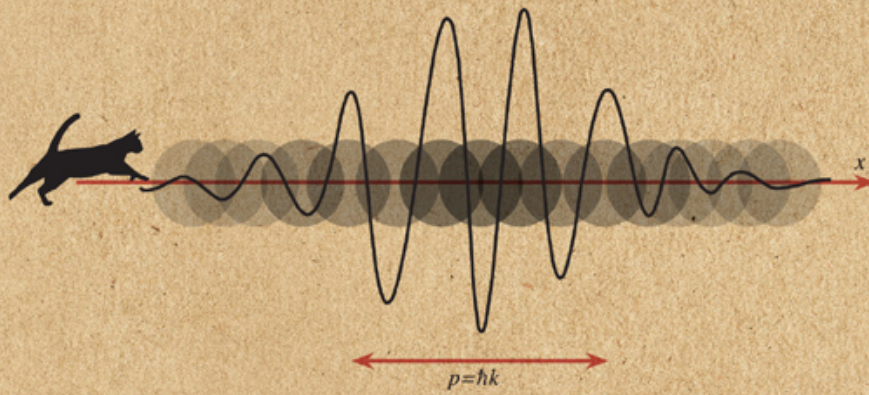
The 50 most important thought-provoking quantum concepts, each explained in half a minute



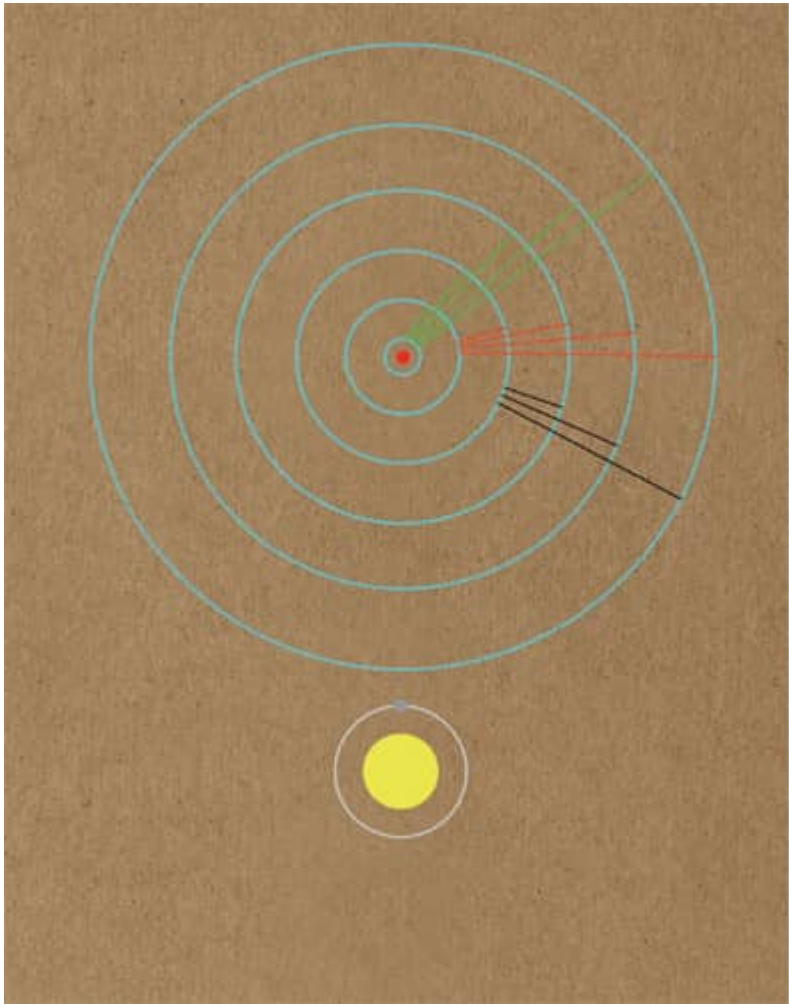
Editor  
**Brian Clegg**

# 30-SECOND QUANTUM THEORY

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# 30-SECOND QUANTUM THEORY

The 50 most thought-provoking quantum concepts, each explained in half a minute

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You know all about Schrödinger's cat, but how about his equation? How do lasers, transistors and electron microscopes work? What are the perils of renormalization? What makes a fluid a superfluid? And what will a quantum computer be capable of? Discover the history of some of science's greatest discoveries and ponder the future of physics and technology with this fascinating guide to quantum theory.

30-Second Quantum Theory tackles a mindbendingly mysterious area of physics, introducing the 50 most significant quantum quandaries and ideas. At a time when the quantum physics of electronics is an everyday essential and new quantum developments make headline news, you will visit parallel worlds, ride wave theory and learn enough to talk with certainty about Uncertainty Principle and to untangle the mysteries of quantum entanglement.

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# INTRODUCTION

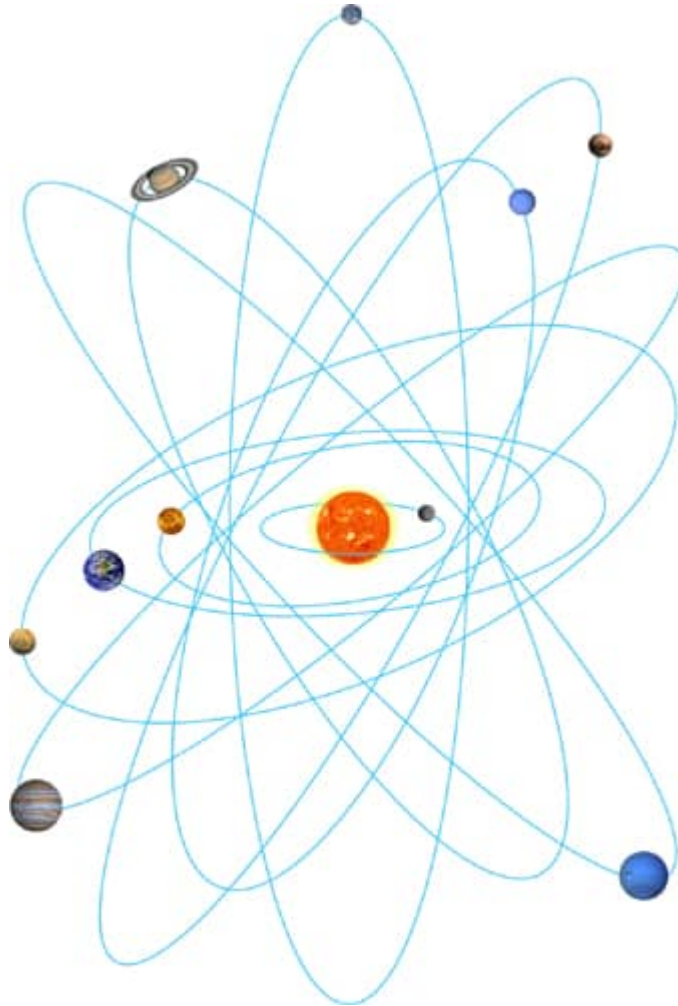
Brian Clegg

The physics we are taught at school can be, frankly, rather boring. It is worthy, 19th-century science – necessary, certainly, but hardly earth-shattering. What a shame we don't introduce schoolchildren earlier to the more exciting bits: and there is nothing more thrilling and mind-boggling in all of science than quantum theory.

## Small things

The idea that matter, stuff, is made up of tiny fragments goes all the way back to the ancient Greeks, but the ideas of the atomists (the name 'atom' comes from the greek word *atomos*, 'uncuttable') were largely sidelined by the four element theory that considered everything to be made up of earth, air, fire and water. By the end of the 19th century, atoms had made a comeback as useful concepts in chemistry and physics, but no one was quite sure what they were or how they worked. Some even doubted they existed. To the surprise of the scientists, atoms not only proved to be a reality, but these tiny components of everything from a human being to a speck of dust also behaved more strangely than anyone could expect.

It was initially assumed that atoms and their component parts would behave just like much smaller versions of the ordinary things that we see around us. Therefore, scientists thought that atoms would fly through the air just as a tennis ball does, if on a smaller scale. When it was discovered that atoms had internal structure, it was first theorized that they might be like plum puddings, with negative charges scattered through a positive body, but the revelation that most of their mass was in a central nucleus made it seem obvious that an atom was like a miniature solar system.



### **The quantum revolution**

Unsettlingly for the old guard of physics (though delightfully for the rest of us), this picture turned out to be impossible to maintain. An atom built like a solar system would not be stable, and quantum particles refused to behave as predictably as a tennis ball. As quantum theory was developed it became clear that there was a fundamental difference between the microscopic and the macroscopic world. Tennis balls followed clear paths depending on their mass and the forces acting on them. But quantum particles could only be given probabilities of behaving in a particular way. At the heart of their behaviour was randomness and before they were observed it was never possible to be certain exactly what they were up to.

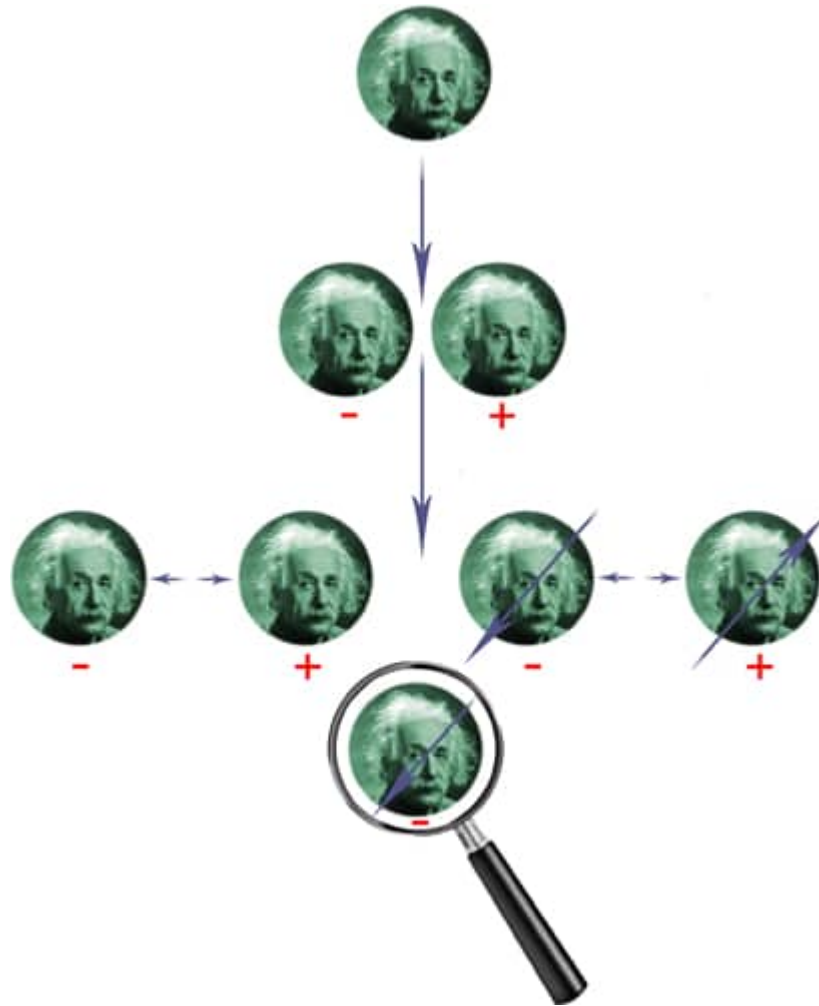
This horrified Einstein, inspiring him to write 'I find the idea quite intolerable that an electron exposed to radiation should choose of its own free will, not only its moment to

jump off, but also its direction. In that case, I would rather be a cobbler, or even an employee in a gaming house, than a physicist,' and produced his famous comments along the lines of 'God does not play dice.' But others were fascinated.

The great American quantum physicist Richard Feynman said 'I'm going to describe to you how Nature is – and if you don't like it, that's going to get in the way of your understanding it... [Quantum theory] describes Nature as absurd from the point of view of common sense. And it agrees fully with experiment. So I hope you can accept Nature as she is – absurd.' I hope that this book will give you a chance to experience and echo Feynman's enjoyment of the sheer strangeness and absurdity of the quantum world.

### **Dividing the quantum**

There surely can be few topics that are more suited to being divided up in bite-sized, easily digested chunks than quantum theory. The 50 articles that follow are split into seven sections, each taking on a part of this significant undertaking. We begin, aptly enough, with **The Birth of the Theory**, which describes how the classical view that atoms were no different from the objects we see around us was undermined by observation and how the endeavour to find a way that atoms could be stable at all required a very different approach.



From the origins we move on to **The Essentials**, the key components of quantum theory, some of which, like Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, have escaped the confines of physics to become part of popular culture. With these fundamentals in place we can open up the science of practically all of our everyday experience, **The Physics of Light & Matter**. Quantum electrodynamics, the theory that explains everything from the way sunlight can warm us to the reason why you don't fall straight through your chair, required a whole new way of looking at the quantum world and has become the most successful theory ever in terms of the accuracy with which it predicts what is observed.

From here we move onto some key **Quantum Effects & Interpretation**, explaining how we can both see through and see a reflection in a window, or how quantum tunnelling keeps the Sun working – and the thorny matter of quantum interpretation. Quantum theory is almost unique in this respect. It is excellent at predicting what we observe, but no

one is sure exactly what the theory itself represents. Descriptions like the Copenhagen, Many Worlds and Bohm interpretations attempt to put what is observed into a framework that explains why such observations are made, yet we have no way to distinguish between these options, choosing on personal preference rather than good scientific logic.

In the next section we encounter quantum theory's most remarkable phenomenon, **Quantum Entanglement**. Described by Einstein (who hoped to use the concept to disprove quantum theory) as 'spooky action at a distance', entanglement makes it possible for one quantum particle to influence another instantly at any distance, seemingly in contradiction to special relativity's limit of the speed of light – and yet experiment after experiment has confirmed its existence, and applications like quantum encryption and quantum computers rely on entanglement to work.

The final two sections look at the ways in which technology based on quantum theory has penetrated our everyday lives, and the extreme possibilities that quantum physics makes possible. In **Quantum Applications**, we discover the laser, the transistor, the MRI scanner and more. Whenever we use electricity we are making use of a quantum phenomenon, but electronics has made an explicit knowledge of quantum theory an important part of the design of technology, to the extent that it is estimated that around one-third of the GDP of developed nations comes from technology based on quantum theory.

As for those **Quantum Extremes**, here we can take in the mystery of zero point energy, beloved of fringe science, but a real quantum effect that means that even a vacuum is not empty, the peculiar behaviour of extreme low temperatures, and the extension of quantum theory into the atomic nucleus, gravity and even biology.

## **Jumping in**

Each topic, supported by a exciting illustration, is broken down to make it accessible. The 30-second theory section gives the main description, while the 3-second flash summarizes the topic at a glance. If you would like to find out more, the 3-minute thought takes a particularly intriguing aspect of the topic and expands on it. The related theories point to other topics that will follow on naturally, while the 3-second biographies identify key names in the development of this area.

The format of 30-Second Quantum Theory is itself quantized, breaking up the essentials to discover, enjoy and absorb what is arguably the most fascinating and mind-bending aspect of all science. Everything we do, everything we see, has quantum particles at the heart of the action – and yet these particles are so very different from anything we ever directly experience. That’s the paradox and the delight of quantum theory, as you are about to discover.



# **THE BIRTH OF THEORY**



# THE BIRTH OF THEORY

## GLOSSARY

**black body** A hypothetical object absorbing all light that hits it, whatever the frequency or direction. A black body at a constant temperature emits a light spectrum (black body radiation) purely dependent on its temperature and not influenced by the nature of the body.

**black holes** A location at which matter has been made so compact that it collapses to a point under gravitational pull. Most frequently formed by the collapse of a massive star. The apparent size of the black hole is its 'event horizon', which is the distance from the centre where nothing, not even light, can escape. The black hole itself is a singularity, a dimensionless point.

**complementarity** Because in quantum theory the act of measurement influences the result, different measurements are complementary to each other. So, for instance, depending how you make a measurement on light it can appear to be a wave or a particle, but not both at the same time. Complementarity states that reality is neither of these but a whole of which we can only detect a part with any one experiment.

**frequency** The number of times a repeating phenomenon occurs in a second. Often used for a wave, describing the number of cycles the wave makes in a second (measured in hertz, where 1 Hz is one cycle per second). A wave's frequency is its velocity divided by its wavelength. For a quantum object the frequency is proportional to the energy of the object.

**Hawking radiation** This quantum effect, predicted by Stephen Hawking, is produced when virtual particles briefly appear and disappear in space. Usually they leave no trace, but if

this happens near a black hole's event horizon, one particle can be pulled into the hole while the other flies off, creating radiation. (So black holes aren't truly black.) Hawking radiation is an example of black body radiation, equivalent to that of a black body at a temperature inversely proportional to the black hole's mass.

**lepton** A fundamental particle with a quantum spin value of  $1/2$ , the best known example of which is the electron. Other leptons are the muon, the tau and the three types of neutrino.

**photon** A quantum particle of light and the carrier of the electromagnetic force. Until the 20th century light was thought to be a wave, but both theory and experiment show that it is also a massless particle.

**Planck's constant** A fundamental constant of nature, technically the 'quantum of action', where action is a mathematical representation of a system's energy as it moves along a path. The constant, denoted by Planck himself as  $h$ , describes the relationship of the energy of a photon to its frequency (colour). It is very small: just over  $6.6 \times 10^{-34}$  joule seconds.

**Planck's formula/relation** The relationship between the energy of a photon and its frequency, given by  $E=h\nu$  where  $h$  is Planck's constant and  $\nu$  is the frequency.

**quantum leap** Despite its popular use to describe a significant change, a quantum leap is usually a tiny jump – the change between two levels of a quantized system, for instance the jump an electron makes between adjacent electron orbits.

**quanta** The plural of 'quantum' (literally 'how much', as in quantity), but used to indicate a particle or 'packet' providing the minimum unit of energy or matter. Hence 'quantum theory', describing the behaviour of particles of matter and of light. When a value is 'quantized' it comes in discrete amounts. An average family, for instance, may have 2.3

children, but children are quantized, so an actual family can only have a whole number of children.

**wavelength** The length of a repeating wave in which it passes through a complete cycle, returning to the starting point of the cycle. Wavelength is velocity divided by frequency.