

Quantum Field Theory

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Introduction

These notes are based on the course lectured by Professor Nicholas Dorey in Michaelmas 2020. This was lectured online due to measures taken to counter the spread of Covid-19 in the UK. These are not necessarily an accurate representation of what was lectures, and represent solely my personal notes on the content of the course, combined with probably, very very many personal notes and digressions... Of course, any corrections/comments would be appreciated.

But, let's actually introduce the content of this course. What is quantum field theory? Quantum field theory (QFT) essentially succeeds in merging special relativity and quantum mechanics. Why is this so difficult? The first relativistic theory was electromagnetism, and the biggest idea that was introduced, and what truly set it apart from older theories was the idea of fields. In Newtonian theory, and much of what followed, the protagonist of the theory was a particle, or if not a particle, at least a body of some kind. Field theory changed. Now, there was a new protagonist: the field. What difference does that make, architectually? Firstly, the field theory is often simpler. But more importantly, the biggest structural difference is that field theory excels in describing "delayed interactions." When the particle is the protagonist, it is very difficult describe theories where forces are not instantaneous. Field theory avoids this. All interactions are made through the field, through which they propagate through space. Now, delayed responses become natural. In electromagnetism, the simplest expression thereof is electromagnetic waves: light.

What does this have to do with relativity? Well, as soon as high speeds become relevant, forces can no longer be considered instantaneous. As such, it is difficult to keep using particles as the protagonist of these theories. Consequently, the natural step is to make, instead of particles, fields the protagonist of this new quantum theory we are developing.

That is the goal of QFT. There is one important consequence though, once particles are no longer the protagonists of the theory. That is that particle number no longer has to be conserved. In the most elegant fashion, by removing the supremacy of the "particle" in our theory, and replacing it with the more powerful notion of the field, particles merely become phenomenon to be observed, and tools of analysis. In this context, it is only natural that particle number is no

longer conserved. Whereas before, the wavefunction was often associated with a wave-particle like object, now the wavefunction (which is a field) describes a multiparticle state. Well, really it describes the field, and the multiparticle state is something that can be deduced from it. Somehow, although this is just the beginning of the course, I feel that that's not that important anymore. It is deeply intriguing though, how the imposition of boundary conditions somehow forces a degree of discreteness onto this theory...

Well then, the overall architecture is more or less the same as standard quantum theory. It is probabilistic, and we assume a degree of symmetry under boosts, and rotations (isotropy and translation invariance). The fundamental approach to making predictions still boils down to the same calculation: evaluating

$$A_{i \rightarrow f} = \langle f | e^{iHT} | i \rangle$$

for probability amplitude A , initial state i , final state f , Hamiltonian (time translation generator) H , and time interval T .

There are two caveates with most of these field theories, though. Firstly, they have not been mathematically formalised, so often there are areas that are somewhat ambiguous. Secondly, contributing to this ambiguity, many of the sums are divergent, so the meaning of some calculations can really be somewhat ambiguous... How curious! I'd like to think about this a bit more...

1 Preliminaries

Anyways, getting down to business. We'll be mostly using natural units during this course. That means that $c = \hbar = 1$, and these can be added back into the calculation using dimensional analysis. The effect of this, is that the only unit used throughout all calculations is really a unit of mass-energy. As such, all quantities scale by a power of the unit of energy.

Definition 1 (dimension of X). Denoted $[X]$, this is δ , such that for unit of mass-energy M , X scales as M^δ . δ may also be called the scaling or the engineering dimension of X .

Also, for special relativity we use the convention that we are working on Minkowsky space-time $\mathbb{R}^{3,1}$, with metric tensor

$$\eta_{\mu\nu} = \text{diag}(1, -1, -1, -1).$$

2 Classical Field Theory

Fortunately for me, we are starting with a description of classical field theory, and we are starting, very simply, with scalar fields.

Definition 2 (Scalar Field). $\phi(t, \underline{x}) = \phi(x) : \mathbb{R}^{3,1} \rightarrow \mathbf{R}$ is a scalar field if it is Lorentz invariant, meaning that it follows the transformation rule

$$\phi(x) \rightarrow \phi(\Lambda^{-1}(x))$$

Here the domain is called the spacetime, and the codomain is called the **field space**. These may, and will be replaced with other spaces.

Changing the spacetime here corresponds to implementing gravity in some way or another, by changing the manifold we are working on. The field space corresponds to the complexity of what is being described. Since we will be describing multi-particle states with our wavefunction, this will become significantly more complex. And, I intentionally left the description of what it means to be Lorentz invariant a bit vague, since, well, in our case, it just means being invariant under the Lorentz transformations, which is the group of linear transformations that preserves the Minkowsky metric (ie. the set of matrices such that $\Lambda \eta \Lambda^T = \eta$). But really, while linearity makes a lot of sense in the context of linear Minkowsky space, I doubt (though I have no familiarity with this area) this remains the case when we are on an arbitrary manifold, which happens when we consider general relativity. As such, I prefer to think of Λ as any arbitrary invertible map on the manifold, corresponding to the symmetries we impose.

The difficulties that arise in combining quantum theory with general relativity are also quite clear. It does seem tremendously difficult. If we do not simply assume that general relativity simply bends space, which I will assume is not entirely the case, or else I feel a theory reconciling the two would have already been developed long ago, in spite of the tremendous difficulty of the calculations involved, and it also does not seem to make much sense of Hawking radiation, since in general relativity, the space at the centre of a black hole truly is cut off... Nevertheless, from what I've heard, if you want to turn gravity into a quantised force with mediator particle, then somehow the protagonist of that theory would be not only be a field, but somehow span the space of possible manifolds as well. Purely intuitively, I would imagine that we would be getting fields of the form $\phi : \mathcal{D} \rightarrow V$ where \mathcal{D} is an object that stitches many manifolds together. Brrr... I have not thought too deeply about this, but that does seem like a truly terrifying object indeed! Or perhaps not quite. Hm, it might be worth thinking a bit more about this...

Anyways, I also wanted to remark that having fields transform as $\phi(\Lambda^{-1}x)$ is more or less an arbitrary definition that is called the “active” definition of field transformations. Oh well, you can assign some intuition to it, but it is more or less convention to use the inverse of the matrix instead of the matrix itself.

Extending our notion of fields to vector fields, first note that notation wise, we use $\partial_\mu \phi = \frac{\partial \phi}{\partial x^\mu}$, and we define

Definition 3 (ϕ^μ transforms as a vector field). if

$$\phi \rightarrow \Lambda_\nu^\mu \phi^\nu(\Lambda^{-1}x)$$

This is just the transformation rule for rank 1 tensors, so is nothing particularly remarkable. The only remarkable part is that, as a result $\partial^\mu \phi$ transforms as vector, and so the following becomes a rank 0 tensor (ie, a scalar field) $\partial^\mu \phi \partial_\mu \phi$.

Well, that ends [lecture 1], for those of you interested.

2.1 The Lagrangian

We will review some of the tools from classical mechanics that we are using. The first is the Lagrangian. There are three advantages to using the lagrangian here:

- they are independent of coordinates
- the symmetries of the system can be easily expressed
- the path integral formulation follows immediately

although the Lagrangian is used much more heavily in the Advanced Quantum Field Theory course than the current course. Anyways, we review the Lagrangian, except that now we implement it on fields, so $L = L(\phi, \partial_\mu \phi)$ for (scalar) fields ϕ , and we make three requirements of our action/Lagrangian

- The action S is Lorentz invariant
- we require locality (see below)
- we have at most a second order time derivative

Locality essentially means that $L = \int dx^3 \mathcal{L}(\phi(x), \partial_\mu \phi(x))$, so the Lagrangian has an associated local Lagrangian density \mathcal{L} . From hereon, this \mathcal{L} will usually be referred to as the Lagrangian instead. We note that the action (over an infinite time scale) may now be expressed as

$$S = \int dx^4 \mathcal{L}(\phi, \partial_\mu \phi)$$

Now, Lorentz invariance essentially means that the Lagrangian density is a scalar field (a tensor really), meaning that it transforms as $\mathcal{L}(x) \mapsto \mathcal{L}(\Lambda^{-1}x)$. This corresponds to the action being Lorentz invariant since the Jacobian of a Lorentz transformation (the determinant) is 1, so the relevant change of variables, the action does not change.

Finally, using no more than a second order time derivative in the context of relativity means using no more than a second order derivative of any kind, and since we also are rank-0 tensors, we in fact, cannot have first order derivatives either. Consequently, we can write the general form of the Lagrangian as

$$\mathcal{L} = \frac{1}{2} F(\phi) \partial_\mu \phi \partial^\mu \phi - V(\phi)$$

(note that $\phi\partial_\mu\partial^\mu\phi$ is related to the above by integration by parts so can be safely ignored). Also, in practice in quantum theory we may neglect $F(\phi)$ leaving us with quite a simple general form.

To make all this work, we apply the principle of least action, which gives us the Euler Lagrange equation

$$\partial_\mu\partial_{\partial_mu\phi}\mathcal{L} = \partial_\phi\mathcal{L}$$

An important special case to consider is the case when the potential is quadratic, so $V(\phi) = \frac{1}{2}M^2\phi^2$, which means the Euler-Lagrange case is linear, leaving us with the so-called **Klein-Gordon Equation**

$$\partial_\mu\partial^\mu\phi + M^2\phi = 0$$

As one might expect, since in Minkowski spacetime $\partial_\mu\partial^\mu = \partial_t^2 - \nabla^2$ we get wavelike solutions

$$\phi \sim e^{ix \cdot p}$$

where $x \cdot p = \omega t - \vec{k} \cdot \vec{x}$, and the dispersion relation requires $\omega_k = \sqrt{k^2 + M^2}$.

On a philosophical note, I was wondering what difference using the principle of least action makes compared to just Newton's equations (on a philosophical level - it is obviously more practical), and as such I was wondering to what extent the Lagrangian formulation in a sense is just a tensor formulation of Newton's equations?

I also was wondering what locality means. When discussing life, I have remarked that really as long as one is not starving, etc., reality is little more than a medium for communication between people. This is certainly the case for particles, and objects, which do not have to worry about starvation, etc. But then I wonder, do particles really not need to worry about starvation? Many particles decay after all, although I doubt that has to do with a kind of starvation of any kind... [End of lecture 2]

2.2 Maxwell's Theory

Maxwell's theory uses a 4-vector potential $A^\mu = (\phi, \vec{A})$. This being a rank 1 tensor means it transforms as

$$A^\mu(x) \mapsto \Lambda^\mu_\nu A^\nu(\Lambda^{-1}x)$$

In electromagnetism, the **field strenght tensor** is given by

$$F^{\mu\nu} = \partial^\mu A^\nu - \partial^\nu A^\mu$$

and as a tensor, it transforms as appropriate. But it satisfies a further condition that it is invariant under Gauge transformations $A^\mu \mapsto A^\mu + \partial^\mu\lambda$. This leads to the **Bianchi identity**

$$\partial_\lambda F_{\mu\nu} + \partial_\mu F_{\nu\lambda} + \partial_\nu F_{\lambda\mu} = 0$$

which captures 2 out of Maxwell's 4 equations. The other two arise from the principle of least action applied to the **Maxwell Lagrangian**

$$\mathcal{L} = -\frac{1}{4}F_{\mu\nu}F^{\mu\nu}$$

We should note that there really are not that many options of Lagrangians here once one introduces the standard assumptions in addition to assuming it must be expressed in terms of physical quantities (the only candidate is the field strength vector used above)... Writing

$$\mathcal{L} = -\frac{1}{2}\partial_\mu A_\nu \partial^\mu A^\nu + \frac{1}{2}(\partial_\mu A^\mu)^2 \eta^{\mu\nu}$$

gives us (after Euler-Lagrange)

$$\partial_\mu F^{\mu\nu} = 0$$

which provides us with the rest of the Maxwell equations.

2.3 Symmetries in QFT

Symmetries (see the Symmetries, Fields, and Particles (SFP) course) are variations of fields that leave the action invariant. Symmetries have several effects in physics. Firstly, by Noether's theorem, they lead to conservation laws. Secondly, they restrict the form of the Lagrangian. In particular, Gauge symmetry is very powerful due to strong restrictions it puts on the form of the Lagrangian.

Common symmetries include (See SFP) translation invariance and Lorentz transformation invariance. Another symmetry occurs when either $m = 0, V = 0$ or the action is proportional to the field. In this case we get an additional "scale invariance" where $x^\mu \mapsto \lambda x^\mu$ and $\phi \mapsto \lambda^{-\Delta} \phi(\lambda^{-1}x)$ for engineering constant Δ .

Internal symmetries like charge, flavour or colour conservation also occur, further restricting the theory. These are not related to the space, and are somehow better expressed by the quantity they conserve. Another small curious symmetry is the following:

Example 1. For complex scalar fields with $\mathcal{L} = \partial_\mu \psi^* \partial^\mu \psi - V(|\psi|^2)$ the following is also a symmetry: $\psi \mapsto e^{i\alpha} \psi$ for real α . The lecturer does not go into any more detail about this.

Finally, we note that for continuous symmetries, which form Lie groups, we can take the set of elements of the group "near" the identity, $g = e^{\alpha X}$ where X sits in the Lie algebra of G . Working to 1st order we now may write

$$g \cdot \psi \mapsto \psi + \delta\psi = \psi + \alpha X\psi$$

to first order. [End of lecture 3]