

# The Incompleteness of Observation

## Why the Universe's Biggest Contradiction Might Not Be a Mistake

Alex Maybaum

February 2026

---

## 1 The Problem

Physics has a contradiction it cannot resolve. Its two most successful theories — quantum mechanics and general relativity — flatly disagree about the most basic property of empty space: how much energy it contains.

Quantum mechanics says the vacuum is seething with energy. If you add up the zero-point fluctuations of every quantum field, you get an energy density of roughly  $10^{110}$  joules per cubic meter. That's an unimaginably large number.

General relativity, meanwhile, measures the vacuum's energy through its gravitational effect — the accelerating expansion of the universe. That measurement gives about  $6 \times 10^{-10}$  joules per cubic meter. A tiny number.

The ratio between them is  $10^{120}$ . That's a 1 followed by 120 zeros. It's the largest disagreement between theory and observation in all of science. For context, the number of atoms in the observable universe is only about  $10^{80}$ .

For decades, physicists have assumed this means something has gone badly wrong — that one or both calculations must contain an error, and that finding the mistake will lead us to a “theory of everything” that unifies quantum mechanics and gravity.

This paper argues the opposite. **Neither calculation is wrong. They disagree because they're answering different questions about the same thing.** And they *have* to disagree, for a reason that has nothing to do with the specific physics involved.

### 1.1 The Two Calculations

To see why, it helps to look at what each theory actually computes.

Quantum mechanics says that every possible vibration mode of every quantum field contributes a tiny bit of energy, even in a vacuum. Imagine an infinitely large orchestra where every instrument is humming at its lowest possible note. You add up all those hums — summing the minimum energy of every possible vibration, from the longest wavelengths to the shortest ones allowed by physics (the “Planck scale” cutoff). You get an enormous number: roughly  $10^{110}$  joules per cubic meter.

General relativity measures vacuum energy differently — by observing how it makes the universe expand. Look at how fast the universe is actually accelerating, and work backwards

to figure out how much energy the vacuum must contain. You get a tiny number: roughly  $6 \times 10^{-10}$  joules per cubic meter.

The ratio:

$$\frac{\rho_{\text{QM}}}{\rho_{\text{grav}}} \sim 10^{120}$$

The standard view is that something must be wrong with one or both calculations. This paper proposes that neither calculation is wrong — they disagree because they are measuring *different statistical properties* of the same underlying thing.

---

## 2 The Core Idea: You Can’t See Everything From Inside

Consider an analogy. Imagine you want to understand the microscopic reality of a calm glass of water. You have two ways to measure its energy:

- A **thermometer**, which measures the total thermal energy of the water molecules bouncing around (their absolute kinetic energy — the “fluctuation” measurement)
- A **suspended speck of dust** (Brownian motion), which reveals the net mechanical push the water exerts on an object (the “mean-field” measurement)

The thermometer gives an enormous number, because every single molecule’s energy contributes positively to the total heat. They are all vibrating, and those vibrations add up.

The dust speck, however, barely jitters. Why? Because at any given microsecond, millions of molecules strike the speck from the left, and millions strike it from the right. Because they hit from random directions, their impacts mostly cancel each other out. The net push that actually moves the speck is just the tiny statistical residual left over after all that cancellation.

These two measurements aren’t giving you contradictory information about the water. They’re measuring *different statistical properties* of the same underlying reality. The thermometer measures the total activity (the variance). The dust speck’s movement measures the net effect (the mean). For a system with trillions of molecules pushing in random directions, the total unsigned activity is naturally enormous compared to the tiny, canceled-out net push.

The critical point is this: **these are fundamentally different operations**. The thermometer reading arises from adding up every individual impact. The net mechanical push arises from averaging over all of them. In classical physics, you can just build two different instruments. But what if you are trying to measure the very fabric of the universe from the inside, and you are forced to use the universe’s own structural projections to do it?

This paper argues that quantum mechanics and general relativity are exactly like the thermometer and the dust speck. Quantum mechanics measures the *fluctuation content* of the vacuum — the total, unsigned activity of the hidden degrees of freedom. General relativity measures the *net mechanical effect* — the aggregate, canceled-out push the vacuum exerts on spacetime. The  $10^{120}$  ratio between them is not an error. It’s the difference between an unsigned total and a canceled-out residual for a system with an astronomically large number of degrees of freedom.

---

### 3 Why This Isn't Just an Analogy

There's a branch of mathematics, developed by physicist David Wolpert in 2008, that proves something remarkable: **any observer that is part of the system it's trying to measure faces irreducible limits on what it can know.** These limits don't depend on the observer's technology, intelligence, or computational power. They follow purely from the mathematical structure of being inside the thing you're measuring.

#### 3.1 Wolpert's Framework

Think of the observer as a camera trying to photograph a landscape. The camera can only capture what's in its frame — a *projection* of the full scene. Mathematically, the observer has a mapping from the complete state of the entire universe to what they can access (their “frame”). The act of looking through the viewfinder is the projection.

Because the observer is part of the universe, the mapping is many-to-one: multiple distinct configurations of the universe produce the same observation. This is the key. When multiple possible states of reality all look identical from your vantage point, there are questions you cannot answer, no matter how smart you are or how long you think about it.

Wolpert formalized this into rigorous impossibility theorems:

1. There always exists at least one property of the universe that the observer cannot compute.
2. No two observers inside the universe can completely infer each other's conclusions.

These aren't limits of technology. They're structural limits that follow from being embedded in the system you're trying to describe.

#### 3.2 The Hidden Sector

This brings us to the concept of the **hidden sector**. Divide the universe into two parts:

- The **visible sector** — the degrees of freedom you can, in principle, observe.
- The **hidden sector** (denoted  $\Phi$ ) — the degrees of freedom you fundamentally cannot access.

The hidden sector isn't made of exotic particles. It consists of ordinary physics that is causally inaccessible to you:

- Regions of space beyond your cosmological horizon
- Sub-Planckian degrees of freedom smaller than your resolution limit
- The interior of black holes

The key point is that the projection from the full universe (visible + hidden) to just the visible sector is many-to-one. Many different configurations of the hidden sector  $\Phi$  produce the same observations in the visible sector. By Wolpert's theorem, there must be properties of  $\Phi$  that you cannot determine.

### 3.3 Vacuum Energy as Two Projections of the Hidden Sector

Vacuum energy — the energy density of empty space — is a property of the hidden sector. When you try to measure or calculate it, you are attempting to characterize  $\Phi$  from within the visible sector.

Here’s the crucial realization: there is more than one way to do this, and the different ways are not equivalent.

**Quantum mechanics** characterizes the hidden sector through its *fluctuation structure*. The QFT vacuum energy calculation sums zero-point fluctuations — it’s computing the total variance of how much the hidden sector influences observables. This is a variance-type quantity. For each field mode, the expectation values of position and momentum are zero, so the zero-point energy is identically the sum of their variances.

**General relativity** characterizes the hidden sector through its *net mechanical effect*. The observed vacuum energy  $\rho_{\text{grav}}$  is obtained by coupling to the expectation value of the stress-energy tensor — a mean-field quantity. The Einstein field equations explicitly compute a statistical mean: the left side is smooth spacetime curvature, and the right side is the expectation value of the stress-energy tensor averaged over all quantum configurations.

So quantum mechanics is computing a *variance*, and gravity is computing a *mean*. These are different statistical moments of the same underlying distribution.

For any distribution with many degrees of freedom, the variance can be astronomically larger than the mean. The  $10^{120}$  ratio is the quantitative expression of this difference.

### 3.4 Why the Ratio is $10^{120}$

To see how this works, consider  $N$  field modes, each contributing energy with a random sign (because of quantum phase cancellations).

The **unsigned sum** (fluctuation content) grows as  $N$ .

The **signed sum** (net mechanical effect) is a random walk, whose expectation scales as  $\sqrt{N}$  by the central limit theorem.

The ratio between them is  $\sqrt{N}$ .

For the vacuum,  $N$  is the number of hidden-sector degrees of freedom. If the ratio is  $10^{120}$ , then:

$$\sqrt{N} \sim 10^{120} \quad \Rightarrow \quad N \sim 10^{240}$$

This is a measurement. The  $10^{120}$  discrepancy tells us how many degrees of freedom are hidden from view.

Remarkably,  $10^{240}$  is exactly the square of the Bekenstein-Hawking entropy of the cosmological horizon. This is not a coincidence.

### 3.5 The Complementarity Theorem

This leads to a formal result, which can be stated as a theorem:

**Theorem (Complementarity).** Let the universe be partitioned into visible and hidden sectors. Let  $I_1$  compute the variance of the hidden sector’s influence (quantum mechanics), and

$I_2$  compute the mean (gravity). By Wolpert’s mutual inference impossibility, there exists no single observer that can simultaneously and correctly compute both projections for all states.

This is not a statement about our current technology or understanding. It is a structural impossibility theorem. The two projections require incompatible operations: quantum mechanics *traces out* the hidden sector (requires it to be inaccessible), while gravity *couples to* it (requires it to be mechanically present).

One operation hides the hidden sector. The other feels it. No single description available to an embedded observer can do both.

This is why quantum mechanics and gravity cannot be unified from within.

---

## 4 Why Quantum Mechanics?

If this argument is correct, it raises an obvious question: why does tracing out the hidden sector produce *quantum* mechanics specifically? Why not some other stochastic theory?

The answer comes from recent work by Jacob Barandes (2023) on the stochastic-quantum correspondence.

### 4.1 The Barandes Stochastic-Quantum Theorem

Barandes proved that *any* stochastic process with certain properties is mathematically equivalent to quantum mechanics. The key property is **indivisibility** — the process cannot be decomposed into simpler, independent sub-processes.

If you have a dynamical hidden sector with temporal correlations (i.e., what happens at one moment affects what happens at the next), and you trace it out, you generically produce an indivisible stochastic process. By Barandes’ theorem, this is quantum mechanics.

In other words:

$$\text{Hidden sector with correlations} + \text{Projection} = \text{Quantum mechanics}$$

This is not a new postulate. It’s a mathematical consequence of the projection structure.

Everything we call “quantum weirdness” — interference, superposition, entanglement, the Born rule — follows from the fact that we are observing a correlated hidden sector through a projection that discards information.

### 4.2 Where Does Quantum Mechanics Come From?

This gives us a clean answer to one of the deepest questions in physics: *Why does nature use quantum mechanics?*

Standard answer: “Because that’s the fundamental law.”

This framework’s answer: “Because observers are embedded in the system they observe, and tracing out any dynamical hidden sector with temporal correlations generically produces indivisible stochastic processes, which are mathematically equivalent to quantum mechanics.”

Quantum mechanics is not fundamental. It is the structure of what a hidden sector looks like when observed from within.

---

## 5 The $10^{240}$ Degrees of Freedom

The  $10^{120}$  cosmological constant discrepancy is usually treated as the worst prediction in the history of physics. This framework reinterprets it as a *measurement*.

Using the central limit theorem scaling (ratio =  $\sqrt{N}$ ), we extract:

$$N \sim 10^{240}$$

This is the number of hidden-sector degrees of freedom.

What is  $10^{240}$ ?

It is exactly the square of the Bekenstein-Hawking entropy of the cosmological horizon:

$$S_{\text{dS}} = \frac{\text{Area}}{4G\hbar} \sim 10^{120}$$

$$S_{\text{dS}}^2 \sim 10^{240}$$

Why the square? Because entropy counts the logarithm of the number of microstates. If  $S \sim \log N$ , then:

$$N \sim e^S \sim 10^{S/\log 10} \sim 10^{120}$$

But the  $10^{120}$  we observe is a *variance-to-mean ratio*, not entropy itself. Variance scales as the number of degrees of freedom, not its logarithm. The correct scaling is:

$$\text{Variance} \sim N \sim e^{2S} \sim 10^{240}$$

This is independently corroborated by Rafael Sorkin’s causal-set prediction (2004), which derived that the cosmological constant should be proportional to  $1/\sqrt{N}$  where  $N$  is the number of fundamental spacetime elements. Sorkin’s calculation also yields  $N \sim 10^{240}$ .

The  $10^{120}$  discrepancy is not an error. It is the most precise measurement we have of the boundary between what an embedded observer can and cannot see.

---

## 6 What This Means for Dark Matter, Dark Energy, and the Arrow of Time

If the framework is correct, it has implications beyond the cosmological constant.

### 6.1 Dark Energy

The accelerated expansion of the universe is usually attributed to a mysterious “dark energy” that fills space. In this framework, dark energy is not a substance. It is the net mechanical

pressure of the hidden sector — the signed sum of all trans-horizon modes, sub-Planckian fluctuations, and black hole interiors.

The smallness of dark energy (compared to the QFT vacuum energy) is not a mystery. It's what you expect when summing over  $10^{240}$  contributions with random signs.

## 6.2 Dark Matter

Dark matter is inferred from gravitational effects that cannot be explained by visible matter. Could some of it be hidden-sector contributions that couple to gravity but not to other forces?

This is speculative, but testable. If dark matter halos have a component that arises from hidden-sector correlations, it should produce specific signatures in gravitational lensing and large-scale structure formation.

## 6.3 The Arrow of Time

Why does time have a direction? The standard answer involves the Second Law of Thermodynamics and the low-entropy initial conditions of the universe.

This framework suggests a different perspective. If you trace out a dynamical hidden sector, you generically produce irreversibility — even if the underlying dynamics is time-reversible. The arrow of time is not a property of the fundamental laws. It is a property of the projection.

This resolves a long-standing puzzle: why does quantum mechanics (which is fundamentally unitary and reversible) produce irreversible measurement outcomes? Answer: because measurement is a projection operation that traces out environmental degrees of freedom.

---

# 7 Reinterpreting String Theory

String theory posits extra spatial dimensions beyond the familiar three. These dimensions are typically assumed to be “compactified” — curled up at scales too small to observe.

This framework suggests a different interpretation: the “extra dimensions” are not literal spatial dimensions. They are hidden-sector degrees of freedom. The compactification scale is not a geometric property. It is the Planck length — the resolution limit below which degrees of freedom become causally inaccessible.

Under this reinterpretation, string theory is not wrong. It is correctly counting degrees of freedom. But those degrees of freedom are not compactified spatial dimensions. They are sub-Planckian modes of the hidden sector.

This also explains why string theory has struggled to make contact with experiment. If the “extra dimensions” are hidden-sector degrees of freedom that observers cannot directly access, then of course we cannot detect them. The theory was looking for spatial dimensions when it should have been looking for inaccessible correlations.

---

## 8 Reinterpreting the Quantum Postulates

Quantum mechanics is usually presented as a set of postulates (Hilbert spaces, operators, Born rule, etc.). These postulates seem arbitrary — they work, but no one knows why nature chose them.

This framework gives a derivation. Every quantum postulate follows from the projection structure:

- **Superposition:** Multiple hidden-sector configurations produce the same reduced state.
- **Interference:** Correlations between hidden-sector paths persist in the projection.
- **Entanglement:** Non-local correlations in the hidden sector appear as non-local correlations in the visible sector.
- **Measurement collapse:** Coupling to a macroscopic apparatus entangles it with the hidden sector, effectively selecting a branch.
- **Born rule:** The probability of an outcome is proportional to the measure of hidden-sector configurations that produce it.

None of these are fundamental postulates. They are all consequences of observing a correlated hidden sector through a many-to-one projection.

### 8.1 Why Is Charge Quantized?

Electric charge comes in discrete units (multiples of the electron charge  $e$ ). Why?

The standard answer involves gauge symmetry and compact groups. This framework suggests a projection-based explanation: if charge is a conserved quantity in a hidden sector with discrete microstates, then the projection to the visible sector will preserve the discreteness.

This is speculative, but it points to a broader principle: many “fundamental” properties of physics (charge quantization, spin-statistics, CPT invariance) may be projection artifacts rather than primary features of reality.

---

## 9 The Logical Structure of Incompleteness

The argument of this paper belongs to a family. Two of the deepest results in twentieth-century logic established that self-referential systems face irreducible limits — not because of insufficient cleverness, but because of their internal structure. The Complementarity Theorem is the physical member of this family, and the correspondences are not loose analogies. They are structurally precise.

### 9.1 Turing’s Halting Problem and the Impossibility of Unification

In 1936, Alan Turing proved that no computer program can exist that correctly predicts, for every possible program, whether it will eventually halt or run forever. The proof works by self-reference: if such a “halting checker” existed, you could feed it a description of itself, producing



a contradiction. The impossibility isn't a technological limitation — it's a theorem about what self-referential computational systems can and cannot do.

The Complementarity Theorem has the same structure. The “halting checker” that physics has been searching for is a unified theory — a single framework that simultaneously captures both the fluctuation content (quantum mechanics) and the net mechanical effect (gravity) of reality. The Complementarity Theorem says this framework cannot exist for an embedded observer, and for the same structural reason: the observer is part of the system it is trying to describe. The two projections require incompatible operations on the hidden sector — one hides it, the other couples to it — and no single description available from within can do both. The quest for a “Theory of Everything” is, in this reading, the physicist's version of the quest for a universal halting checker: a project that feels like it should be possible, but whose impossibility is guaranteed by the logical structure of self-reference.

This doesn't mean the quest was wasted. Turing's proof didn't end computer science — it *focused* it, by drawing a sharp boundary between what computation can and cannot do. Similarly, the Complementarity Theorem doesn't end the search for deeper physics. It redirects it: instead of seeking one description that eliminates the tension, the goal becomes understanding the precise mathematical relationship between two complementary descriptions — and that relationship *is* the theory of quantum gravity, properly understood.

## 9.2 Gödel's Incompleteness and the Hidden Sector

In 1931, five years before Turing, Kurt Gödel proved that any mathematical system powerful enough to describe arithmetic contains true statements that the system itself cannot prove. The “unprovable truths” aren't errors or gaps — they are an inevitable consequence of the system being rich enough to refer to itself. Gödel's result didn't break mathematics. It revealed a structural boundary: there are always truths that are real but inaccessible from within.

The physical counterpart is the hidden sector. The full state of the universe is definite — it exists and has a specific configuration. But an observer confined to the visible sector cannot access the hidden sector. The hidden sector is made of ordinary physics — galaxies beyond the cosmological horizon, interiors of black holes, sub-Planckian degrees of freedom — that is real but causally inaccessible. The observer's projection discards this information, not because it doesn't exist, but because the causal structure of spacetime prevents the observer from reaching it.

Gödel's “unprovable truths” live in the logical structure of arithmetic. The hidden sector's inaccessible degrees of freedom live in the causal structure of spacetime. In both cases, the incompleteness is not a deficiency of the observer or the system — it is a structural feature of being powerful enough (or embedded enough) to encounter the limits of self-reference.

## 9.3 The $10^{120}$ as a Quantitative Marker

What makes this framework different from a philosophical observation is that the incompleteness has a *number*. In Gödel's proof, the unprovable statement is constructed using a specific encoding — a “Gödel number” that the system can reference but cannot resolve. In this framework, the  $10^{120}$  cosmological constant discrepancy plays the same role. It is the quantitative signature of what the embedded observer cannot see: the gap between the variance and the mean of a hidden sector with roughly  $10^{240}$  degrees of freedom.

The standard interpretation of the  $10^{120}$  is that it represents a calculational failure — the worst prediction in the history of physics. This framework says it is the opposite: it is the most

precise measurement we have of the boundary between what an embedded observer can and cannot know. It is not an error. It is the physical world’s Gödel sentence — a number that encodes, in the starkest possible terms, the fact that observers are inside the system they are trying to describe.

---

## 10 Can We Test This?

The framework makes several testable predictions:

**The null prediction (testable now).** If the vacuum energy discrepancy is structural rather than caused by hidden particles, then the particles that many physicists have postulated to “fix” the problem — supersymmetric partners, inflatons — should not exist. Their continued absence at the Large Hadron Collider and future colliders is evidence *for* this framework. Every year that passes without finding these particles makes the structural explanation more plausible. Similarly, if String Theory’s “extra dimensions” are hidden-sector degrees of freedom rather than literal spatial dimensions, then no experiment should ever detect a compactified spatial dimension — another null prediction that gains strength with each negative result.

**Gravitational wave echoes (future detectors).** If the event horizon of a black hole is really the boundary of the mean-field description rather than a clean geometric surface, then gravitational waves from black hole mergers should produce faint echoes — repeated signals bouncing off this boundary. The framework predicts these echoes should get *stronger* at higher frequencies, because higher frequencies probe shorter timescales where the mean-field averaging breaks down. Current detectors aren’t sensitive enough, but the scaling pattern is a specific prediction that future instruments can test.

**A gravitational noise floor (future detectors).** If gravity is the mean of a high-variance distribution, it should be slightly “grainy” at high frequencies — a faint hiss of gravitational noise unrelated to any astrophysical source. The framework predicts a specific amplitude and spectral shape for this noise, anchored to the  $10^{120}$  ratio.

**Correlated running of constants.** The strength of gravity and the vacuum energy should change with the energy scale at which you measure them, and they should change in a correlated way — converging toward each other at very high energies. This is testable through precision observations of the cosmic microwave background.

---

## 11 What This Means

If this argument is correct, the century-long search for a unified theory that combines quantum mechanics and gravity into a single framework is asking the wrong question. It’s like asking for a single instrument that simultaneously measures both temperature and pressure by being a thermometer and a barometer at the same time. The request is structurally impossible — not because physicists haven’t been clever enough, but because the two measurements require fundamentally different operations on the same underlying system.

This doesn’t mean physics is stuck. It means physics needs to recognize what kind of problem it’s facing. The incompatibility between quantum mechanics and gravity is not a deficiency waiting to be repaired. It is a *structural feature* of what it means to observe the universe from the inside — a feature that comes with a precise numerical signature ( $10^{120}$ ), a

derivable quantum framework, and testable predictions.

The universe is not broken. We are just observing it from within, which sets fundamental limits on our ability to unify certain projections of reality.

In 1926, Einstein wrote to Max Born: “I, at any rate, am convinced that He does not throw dice.” For a century, this has been read as Einstein being wrong — as a great mind unable to accept the fundamental randomness of quantum mechanics. This framework suggests a different reading. Einstein’s intuition was correct: the underlying reality, the full state of the universe including its hidden sector, is definite. The dice are real, but they belong to the projection, not to reality itself. What Einstein called “the secret of the Old One” is not randomness. It is the structural fact that no observer inside the universe can see the whole game — and what we call quantum mechanics is what the game looks like through the keyhole.

---

*This is a simplified overview of the full technical paper “The Incompleteness of Observation: Why Quantum Mechanics and Gravity Cannot Be Unified From Within” (Maybaum, February 2026). The core argument — including mathematical proofs, formal theorems, and detailed experimental predictions — is presented in the companion paper. Several of the reinterpretations explored in this explainer (the arrow of time, dark matter, quantization, String Theory) go beyond the formal results and are flagged as speculative; they are presented here as directions for future investigation rather than established results.*

**Acknowledgment of AI-Assisted Technologies:** The author acknowledges the use of **Claude Opus 4.6** and **Gemini 3 Pro** to assist in synthesizing technical concepts and refining the clarity of this explainer. The final text and all scientific claims were reviewed and verified by the author.