

# THE INCOMPLETENESS OF OBSERVATION

Why Quantum Mechanics and General Relativity Cannot Be Unified From  
Within

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## Abstract

The incompatibility between quantum mechanics and general relativity is a structural consequence of embedded observation. Any observer that is part of the universe it measures must access reality through projections that discard causally inaccessible degrees of freedom. Because this causal boundary is determined by the observer's specific kinematic state (such as generating Rindler horizons via acceleration), the resulting structural incompleteness is localized dynamically to their specific reference frame.

Using Wolpert's (2008) physics-independent impossibility theorems for inference devices, an Observational Incompleteness Theorem is introduced: the quantum-mechanical and gravitational descriptions of vacuum energy correspond to variance-type and mean-type estimations of a hidden sector, and Wolpert's mutual inference impossibility prohibits their simultaneous determination by any embedded observer.

Via the Nakajima-Zwanzig formalism and Barandes' (2023) stochastic-quantum correspondence, it is further shown that tracing out the hidden sector generically produces indivisible subsystem dynamics — mathematically equivalent to quantum mechanics — yielding non-factorable statistics that evade Bell's theorem without nonlocality.

The  $10^{120}$  cosmological constant discrepancy is not an error but the quantitative signature of this structural incompleteness. Interpreting the  $10^{120}$  as a variance-to-mean ratio yields roughly  $10^{240}$  hidden-sector degrees of freedom — equal to the square of the Bekenstein-Hawking entropy of the cosmological horizon — converting the cosmological constant problem from a mystery into a measurement.

Specific experimental predictions are offered, including near-term null predictions for particles postulated to resolve the vacuum energy discrepancy and longer-term frequency-dependent scaling relations for gravitational wave echoes and a stochastic noise floor quantitatively anchored to the  $10^{120}$  ratio.

# 1 THE PROBLEM

## 1.1 The Incompatibility

Quantum mechanics and general relativity are extraordinarily successful yet incompatible. The dominant assumption has been that this incompatibility is a deficiency — that a deeper theory will eventually unify them. The opposite is the case: **the incompatibility is a structural feature of embedded observation.**

## 1.2 The Cosmological Discrepancy

The sharpest manifestation of the QM-GR incompatibility is the **cosmological constant problem** [1]. It concerns the single quantity that both frameworks predict: the energy density of empty space,  $\rho_{\text{vac}}$ .

**Quantum mechanics** computes the vacuum energy by summing zero-point fluctuations of all quantum field modes up to the Planck scale:

$$\rho_{\text{QM}} \sim \frac{E_{\text{Pl}}^4}{(\hbar c)^3} \sim 10^{110} \text{ J/m}^3$$

**General relativity** measures the vacuum energy through its gravitational effect — the accelerated expansion of the universe:

$$\rho_{\text{grav}} = \frac{\Lambda c^2}{8\pi G} \sim 6 \times 10^{-10} \text{ J/m}^3$$

The ratio:

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

is the largest quantitative disagreement in all of physics. The standard interpretation is that some unknown mechanism cancels the QFT contribution down to the observed value, requiring fine-tuning to one part in  $10^{120}$ . Decades of effort have failed to find such a mechanism [2, 3].

A different interpretation is proposed: **neither calculation is wrong. They disagree because they are answering fundamentally different questions about the same thing.**

# 2 THE ARGUMENT

## 2.1 Observers Are Embedded

Wolpert (2008) proved that any physical device performing observation, prediction, or recollection — an “inference device” — faces fundamental limits on what it can know about the universe it inhabits [4]. These limits hold **independent of the laws of physics**:

- **(a)** There exists at least one function of the universe state that the device cannot correctly compute — regardless of its computational power or the determinism of the underlying physics.

- **(b)** No two distinguishable inference devices can fully infer each other’s conclusions (the “mutual inference impossibility”).

These are physics-independent analogues of the Halting theorem, extended to physical devices embedded in physical universes [4]. The key mathematical structure is the **setup function** — a mapping from the full universe state space to the device’s state space. Wolpert’s impossibility requires only that this mapping is surjective and many-to-one: multiple universe states are indistinguishable from the device’s perspective. This condition is trivially satisfied by any observer that is part of the universe it measures.

## 2.2 The Hidden Sector

Let the full state space be partitioned into degrees of freedom accessible to observers (the visible sector) and degrees of freedom that are not (the hidden sector, denoted  $\Phi$ ). The projection discarding the hidden sector is many-to-one and therefore satisfies the requirements of a Wolpert setup function. **There exist properties of the universe that no observer confined to the visible sector can determine.**

The hidden sector consists not of exotic particles but of standard degrees of freedom rendered causally inaccessible by the structure of spacetime: (i) trans-horizon modes beyond the cosmological horizon, (ii) sub-Planckian degrees of freedom below the observer’s resolution limit, (iii) black hole interiors, and (iv) the region behind the Rindler horizon generated by an observer’s acceleration. The partition between visible and hidden is a dynamic property of the observer’s position and kinematic state, not of the hidden sector’s content.

## 2.3 Two Projections of the Same Thing

Vacuum energy is the energy density of the hidden sector. When physicists measure or calculate it, they are attempting to characterize  $\Phi$  from within the visible sector.

Padmanabhan [19] identified the central structural point: the QFT and gravitational descriptions probe different statistical properties of the same underlying degrees of freedom. He argued that classical gravity probes vacuum *fluctuations* rather than mean energy density. Padmanabhan’s core insight is correct, but the **assignment should be inverted** — a conclusion grounded in the impossibility results of §2.4–2.5.

The inversion is motivated by each framework’s coupling structure. QFT computes a sum of positive-definite zero-point energies ( $+\frac{1}{2}\hbar\omega$  per mode, no cancellation possible) — structurally analogous to a variance estimator. The Einstein equations couple to the full stress-energy tensor, which is not positive-definite and admits inter-sector cancellation (bosonic vs. fermionic, condensates) — structurally analogous to a mean estimator.

**Projection 1: Fluctuation statistics (QM).** The QFT vacuum energy sums zero-point energies mode by mode — each contributing  $+\frac{1}{2}\hbar\omega$ , proportional to the position and momentum variances of the quantum ground state. No cancellation is possible. This is structurally a variance-type quantity:

$$V = \sum_{i=1}^N \frac{1}{2} \hbar \omega_i \propto N$$

**Projection 2: Mean-field pressure (gravity).** The stress-energy tensor is not positive-definite: different field sectors contribute with signs  $s_i = \pm 1$ , and the Einstein equations couple to the net signed aggregate. This is a mean-type quantity:

$$M = \sum_{i=1}^N s_i \frac{1}{2} \hbar \omega_i \sim \sqrt{N}$$

where the  $\sqrt{N}$  scaling follows from the central limit theorem when the signs are not fine-tuned — the same scaling underlying Padmanabhan’s geometric mean result [19].

## 2.4 Why They Cannot Be Unified

The two projections require **incompatible operations on the hidden sector**. The quantum projection *traces out* the hidden sector — it requires  $\Phi$  to be inaccessible. The gravitational projection *couples to* the hidden sector — it requires  $\Phi$  to be mechanically present. No single description available to an embedded observer can simultaneously hide and reveal  $\Phi$ .

Because the two operations extract independent statistical moments of  $\Phi$  (variance-type and mean-type respectively), Wolpert’s mutual inference impossibility provides a quantitative bound on their simultaneous determination.

**A note on “inference device.”** Both the QFT calculation and the gravitational measurement qualify as embedded inference devices in Wolpert’s sense, because both are physical processes carried out by observers inside the universe. The QFT calculation is not a Platonic computation — it is performed by a physicist whose apparatus (brain, computer, detector) is a physical subsystem with access only to the visible sector. The gravitational measurement is more obviously embedded: it reads off cosmic acceleration from photon observations. In both cases, the observer’s access to the hidden sector is mediated by a many-to-one projection, satisfying Wolpert’s setup-function requirement.

**Observational Incompleteness Theorem (informal):** For any embedded observer, the quantum-mechanical and gravitational descriptions of vacuum energy are structurally incompatible projections that cannot be unified into a single observer-accessible description. The cosmological constant problem is the observable signature of this structural incompleteness.

## 2.5 Formal Statement

**Setup.** The universe state is partitioned into visible and hidden sectors. Two target functions are defined: the fluctuation content of the hidden sector (a variance-type quantity, corresponding to QFT vacuum energy) and the net mechanical effect (a mean-type quantity, corresponding to gravitationally observed vacuum energy).

**Inference devices and the continuous limit.** Wolpert’s original framework applies rigorously to binary inference tasks. By thresholding the continuous targets, the continuous problem is mapped to a binary partition. Because Wolpert’s impossibility holds for *every*

choice of threshold, it establishes a strict lower bound on the difficulty of the continuous problem.

**Independent configurability.** The mutual inference impossibility requires that the two targets be independently configurable. In the physical hidden sector, the mean depends on the net sign balance, while the variance depends on amplitudes. These are set by independent physical parameters.

**Robustness of the assumption.** If interactions induce partial correlations between mean and variance, the Wolpert bound is conjectured to degrade gracefully.

**The Nakajima-Zwanzig Constraint.** The degradation of the Wolpert bound is not merely a conjecture; it is dynamically enforced by the trace-out operation itself. When the hidden sector is traced out, the Nakajima-Zwanzig generalized master equation dictates that the visible sector’s density matrix  $\rho_v(t)$  evolves under the influence of a shared non-Markovian memory kernel,  $\mathcal{K}(t, \tau)$ , which encodes the hidden sector’s temporal correlations. Because both the positive-definite sum and the sign-admitting trace must be computed from this exact same  $\rho_v(t)$ , any fluctuation in the hidden sector propagates through  $\mathcal{K}(t, \tau)$  to simultaneously shift both projections.

**The bound.** Wolpert’s stochastic extension [4, §4, Corollary 2] gives:

$$\epsilon_{\text{fluc}} \cdot \epsilon_{\text{mech}} \leq \frac{1}{4}$$

The one-quarter bound arises because independent configurability ensures the two binary partitions are cross-cutting. **Perfect inference of one target forces the other to be no better than chance.**

**Observational Incompleteness Theorem (formal):** Let the universe be partitioned into visible and hidden sectors, and let the observer’s projection from the full state to the visible sector be many-to-one. If the variance-type and mean-type targets of the hidden-sector distribution are independently configurable, then by Wolpert’s mutual inference impossibility, no single inference device confined to the visible sector can simultaneously determine both with joint accuracy exceeding one-quarter.

## 2.6 The Quantum Projection as Trace-Out

The claim that the quantum projection “traces out” the hidden sector requires justification: why should the resulting reduced description be specifically *quantum-mechanical* rather than classical or arbitrary?

The answer follows from three established results:

**Step 1: Trace-out produces memory.** When degrees of freedom are traced out of a composite system, the Nakajima-Zwanzig formalism [22, 23] shows that the remaining subsystem’s evolution acquires a **memory kernel**.

**Step 2: Memory produces indivisibility.** A stochastic process is *divisible* if its transition probabilities factorize into independent shorter-time transitions; it is *indivisible* if they do not. A nonzero memory kernel generically produces indivisibility.

**Step 3: Indivisibility is quantum mechanics.** Barandes [24, 25] proved that any indivisible stochastic process is exactly equivalent to a unitary quantum system.

**Relation to Bell’s theorem.** A critical consequence of this inescapable indivisibility is the natural evasion of Bell’s theorem. Because fine-tuning the memory kernel to zero across  $10^{240}$  degrees of freedom is mathematically pathological, the hidden sector generically produces non-factorable, indivisible statistics. Therefore, by Barandes’ correspondence, these statistics violate Bell inequalities natively without requiring nonlocality.

## 3 THE RATIO AS MEASUREMENT

### 3.1 Extracting the Hidden-Sector Dimensionality

Consider a hidden sector with  $N$  independent degrees of freedom, each contributing energy of order one in Planck units. The QFT mode-sum is positive-definite:  $V \propto N$ . The gravitational coupling sees the net result after inter-sector cancellations:  $M \sim \sqrt{N}$ . Their ratio is a function of  $N$  alone:

$$\frac{V}{M} \sim \frac{N}{\sqrt{N}} = \sqrt{N}$$

Setting this equal to the observed value:

$$\begin{aligned}\sqrt{N} &\sim 10^{120} \\ N &\sim 10^{240}\end{aligned}$$

### 3.2 The Holographic Coincidence

The Bekenstein-Hawking entropy of the cosmological horizon is independently  $S_{\text{ds}} \sim 10^{122}$  [12, 18]. The hidden-sector dimensionality is therefore approximately:

$$N \sim S_{\text{ds}}^2 \sim (10^{122})^2 \approx 10^{244}$$

This is consistent at order-of-magnitude with the  $\sim 10^{240}$  derived from the cosmological constant ratio. This is supported by Sorkin’s causal-set prediction [17], which derives  $\Lambda \sim N^{-1/2}$  from Poisson fluctuations in spacetime atoms.

### 3.3 Robustness

The  $\sqrt{N}$  scaling is robust: replacing random signs with random complex phases preserves it, and weak pairwise correlations modify the estimate only when the correlation coefficient reaches order  $1/N$  — a fine-tuned regime.

### 3.4 Indirect Access to the Hidden Sector

The Observational Incompleteness Theorem does not imply that the hidden sector yields zero information. **Statistical properties are accessible even when the microstate is not. Boundary properties are directly measurable. Consistency constraints are informative. The memory kernel is measurable.**

## 4 EXPERIMENTAL PREDICTIONS

If the Observational Incompleteness Theorem is correct, General Relativity is an effective mean-field theory.

**4.1 Null Prediction (near-term).** If the discrepancy is structural rather than particle-mediated, particles invoked to cancel the QFT vacuum energy should not exist at the required scales.

**4.2 Gravitational Wave Echoes (future detectors).** Future observations of binary black hole mergers should detect **post-merger echoes** [15] whose amplitude scales with the ratio of probe frequency to the hidden sector’s relaxation frequency.

**4.3 Stochastic Gravitational Noise Floor (future detectors).** Since gravity is the mean of a high-variance distribution, it should exhibit statistical fluctuations at high frequencies: a **stochastic gravitational wave background** in the MHz–GHz band [16], with an inverse-frequency-squared spectrum.

**4.4 Dynamic Unruh-Gravity Scaling (theoretical).** If the vacuum energy discrepancy is a function of the inference boundary, it must scale dynamically for an accelerating observer.

$$\frac{V_{\text{Unruh}}(a)}{M_{\text{GravNoise}}(a)} \sim \sqrt{N_a(a)}$$

## 5 DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Relation to Prior Work

The argument connects: Wolpert’s inference impossibility [4], Sorkin’s causal-set prediction [17], and the Barandes stochastic-quantum correspondence [24, 25] via the Nakajima-Zwanzig trace-out.

### 5.2 Key Objections

**“The QFT vacuum energy calculation is just wrong.”** The theorem does not depend on the specific value. It depends on the structural claim that the fluctuation and mechanical measures are computed by different operations and need not agree.

**“A hidden sector mediating correlations between entangled particles is a local hidden variable theory, and Bell’s theorem rules those out.”** As shown in §2.6, the hidden sector is not a local hidden variable theory in Bell’s sense [21]. Bell’s theorem requires that hidden variables produce *divisible* statistics; the trace-out of the hidden sector produces *indivisible* statistics.

**“This conflates epistemology (what we can measure) with ontology (what exists).”** The Observational Incompleteness Theorem strictly bounds inference accuracy, not physical ontology.

### 5.3 Open Problems

(1) A fully continuous formulation via the multi-parameter quantum Cramér-Rao bound; (2) a formal proof that the Wolpert bound degrades continuously under partial correlations; (3) whether the  $N \sim S_{\text{dS}}^2$  relationship can be derived rather than observed; (4) whether special relativity can be derived from the hidden sector’s propagation structure; (5) whether the Einstein field equations can be derived as the mean-field equation governing the mechanical projection; (6) a rigorous measure-theoretic proof that divisibility has measure zero in the space of hidden-sector Hamiltonians.

## 6 CONCLUSION

**First**, embedded observers face irreducible inference limits (Wolpert), quantum mechanics and general relativity represent two structurally incompatible projections of the same hidden sector (the Observational Incompleteness Theorem), and the  $10^{120}$  cosmological constant discrepancy is the quantitative signature of this incompleteness.

**Second**, the  $10^{120}$  converts from a problem into a measurement:  $\sim 10^{240}$  hidden-sector degrees of freedom — approximately the square of the de Sitter entropy — with  $\Lambda \sim N^{-1/2}$  independently confirmed by Sorkin.

If correct, the incompatibility between quantum mechanics and gravity is not a bug to be fixed. It is the physical analogue of Gödel incompleteness — the universe telling observers, in the starkest numerical terms available, that they are inside the system they are trying to describe.

### DECLARATION OF AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES

During the preparation of this work, the author used **Claude Opus 4.6 (Anthropic)** and **Gemini 3 Pro (Google)** to assist in drafting, refining argumentation, and verifying bibliographic details. The author reviewed and edited the content and takes full responsibility for the publication.