

The Incompleteness of Observation

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

Alex Maybaum

February 2026

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 6×10^{-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.

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:

$$\rho_{\text{QM}} \sim \int_0^\Lambda \frac{d^3k}{(2\pi)^3} \frac{1}{2} \hbar \omega_k \sim 10^{110} \text{ J/m}^3$$

Sum up the minimum energy of every possible vibration, from the longest wavelengths to the shortest ones allowed by physics (the “Planck scale” cutoff Λ). You get an enormous number.

General relativity measures vacuum energy differently—by observing how it makes the universe expand:

$$\rho_{\text{grav}} \sim 6 \times 10^{-10} \text{ J/m}^3$$

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.

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.

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

Consider an analogy. Imagine you live inside a giant aquarium. You want to understand the water you’re swimming in. You have two instruments:

- A **thermometer**, which measures how violently the water molecules are bouncing around (their kinetic energy—the “fluctuation” measurement)
- A **pressure gauge**, which measures the net push the water exerts on your body (the “mean-field” measurement)

The thermometer gives a big number, because every molecule contributes positively—they’re all bouncing. The pressure gauge gives a much smaller number, because the molecules are pushing you in all directions and mostly cancel out. The net push is just the tiny residual left over after all that cancellation.

These two instruments aren’t giving you contradictory information about the water. They’re measuring *different statistical properties* of the same underlying reality. The thermometer measures the variance (total activity). The pressure gauge measures

the mean (net effect). For a system with billions of molecules pushing in random directions, the variance is naturally enormous compared to the mean.

The critical point is this: **you can't build a single instrument that measures both simultaneously.** The thermometer works by responding to each molecular impact individually. The pressure gauge works by averaging over all of them. These are fundamentally different operations. No single measurement procedure can do both at once.

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

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.

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:

$$\pi : \Omega \rightarrow S_C$$

where Ω is the complete state of the entire universe, S_C is what the observer can access (their “frame”), and π is the projection—the act of looking through the viewfinder.

The critical property is that π is **many-to-one**: many different complete universe states look the same through the observer's limited window. Just as many different landscapes might produce the same photograph if most of the scenery is behind the camera.

Wolpert proved two key results from this setup:

(a) The “Blind Spot” Theorem. There is always at least one fact about the universe that the observer simply *cannot* determine—no matter how clever they are,

how much computing power they have, or how deterministic the universe is. You're a character in a book trying to figure out how many pages the book has. You can read your own page and nearby pages, but you can never step outside the book to count them all.

(b) The “Mutual Inference” Impossibility. If two observers (or two methods) use genuinely different projections to study the same thing, they cannot fully reconstruct each other's conclusions. Two people are describing the same elephant: one using a tape measure (lengths and widths), the other using a thermometer (temperatures at different points). Each gets valid information, but neither can fully reconstruct the other's data from their own measurements alone.

These theorems aren't about technology limitations. They're about *logical structure*—in the same family as Gödel's incompleteness theorem for mathematics and Turing's halting problem for computers. They show that being embedded inside the system you're studying creates inescapable constraints.

This paper takes Wolpert's mathematical framework and applies it to the specific case of quantum mechanics and gravity. It shows that the “fluctuation measurement” (quantum mechanics) and the “mean-field measurement” (gravity) are exactly the kind of mutually exclusive probes that Wolpert's theorems say cannot be combined. The result is a **Complementarity Theorem**: no observer inside the universe can simultaneously determine both the quantum and gravitational descriptions of vacuum energy. The 10^{120} discrepancy is the quantitative signature of this structural impossibility.

What Makes the Hidden Sector Hidden?

This raises an immediate objection: what actually *prevents* the observer from accessing these hidden degrees of freedom? Could a sufficiently advanced civilization eventually see everything?

No. The hiddenness is enforced by physics itself—specifically, by the **speed of light**.

Nothing in the universe can transmit information faster than light. This isn't a technological limitation—it's a structural feature of spacetime, confirmed by every experiment ever conducted. And it has a profound consequence: it creates a boundary around every observer, beyond which information simply cannot reach them.

Formally: Splitting the Universe

The paper splits the universe’s degrees of freedom into two bins:

$$\Omega = (X, \Phi)$$

where X is everything the observer *can* access (particles they can detect, regions they can see) and Φ is the **hidden sector**—everything they *can’t* directly access. The projection that discards the hidden sector is:

$$\pi : (X, \Phi) \mapsto \rho(X)$$

Take the full state of the universe, throw away everything in the hidden sector, and what you’re left with is the observer’s reduced description $\rho(X)$.

What fills the hidden sector? Nothing exotic—just ordinary physics rendered inaccessible by geometry:

The cosmological horizon. The universe is 13.8 billion years old, and it’s been expanding since the Big Bang. Light has had a finite amount of time to travel, and the expansion of space has been stretching distances as it goes. The result is that there is a maximum distance from which light can ever reach us—about 46 billion light-years in every direction. Beyond that boundary—the cosmological horizon—the universe continues, but its light hasn’t had time to arrive. We are causally disconnected from everything beyond the horizon. It exists, but we cannot observe it, interact with it, or receive any information from it.

The Planck scale. Even within our cosmological horizon, there are degrees of freedom we cannot access. At distances smaller than the Planck length (about 10^{-35} meters) and timescales shorter than the Planck time (about 10^{-43} seconds), the energy required to probe the system becomes so large that it would create a black hole, swallowing the very information you were trying to extract. The speed of light, combined with the laws of gravity, creates a *floor* below which observation cannot penetrate. This is not a matter of building better microscopes. It’s a fundamental limit: the act of looking that closely destroys the thing you’re looking at.

Black hole horizons. Every black hole has an event horizon—a boundary inside which the escape velocity exceeds the speed of light. Anything that crosses this boundary is causally disconnected from the rest of the universe. The degrees of freedom inside a black hole are hidden from every observer outside it, permanently. And there are an enormous number of black holes in the observable universe, each one containing hidden degrees of freedom that contribute to the total but can never be directly measured.

The common thread: causal structure. In every case, what makes the hidden sector hidden is the *causal structure of spacetime*—the network of what can influence what, governed by the speed of light. The speed of light doesn’t just limit how fast you can send a message. It determines the *boundary of your observable reality*. Everything inside that boundary is your observable sector. Everything outside—whether it’s beyond the cosmological horizon, below the Planck scale, or inside a black hole—is the hidden sector.

Why the Projection Satisfies Wolpert’s Requirements

For Wolpert’s theorems to apply, the projection π needs to be **many-to-one**—many different configurations of the hidden sector must look the same from the observer’s perspective. This is clearly true: there are astronomically many different ways the interior of a black hole or the region beyond the cosmological horizon could be arranged, all of which are invisible to us.

The key insight: the boundary between “visible” and “hidden” isn’t a property of the hidden sector. It’s a property of *where the observer is standing*. Move the observer, and what counts as “hidden” changes. The stuff doesn’t.

This is why the hiddenness isn’t a temporary inconvenience or a technological limitation. It’s woven into the fabric of spacetime itself. The speed of light creates the projection—it defines the boundary between what you can see and what you can’t. And as Wolpert’s theorems guarantee, any observer bounded by such a projection faces irreducible limits on what it can know about the full system.

The 10^{122} degrees of freedom accessible to us—the Bekenstein–Hawking entropy of the cosmological horizon—is determined by the *area* of this light-speed boundary. The 10^{240} degrees of freedom in the hidden sector is what lies beyond it. The speed of light doesn’t just limit our communication. It determines the shape and size of the keyhole through which we observe the universe.

Two Projections, Two Answers

This is the heart of the argument. Quantum mechanics and gravity are measuring two different *statistical moments* of the same distribution—and the mathematics of embedded observation guarantees they cannot agree.

What Are Statistical Moments?

Imagine you run a company with 1,000 employees. Two people ask you questions:

- **Person A** asks: “How much do your employees’ salaries *vary*?” (This is asking about the **variance**—the spread of the distribution.)
- **Person B** asks: “What’s the *average* salary?” (This is asking about the **mean**—the center of the distribution.)

These are different questions about the same set of salaries, and they can give very different numbers. A company where everyone earns between \$95,000 and \$105,000 has a small variance but a large mean. A company with a mix of unpaid interns and millionaire executives could have a very large variance despite a modest mean.

Projection 1: Quantum Mechanics Measures Variance

The QFT vacuum energy calculation sums up the zero-point energy of every field mode:

$$\rho_{\text{QM}} \sim \sum_k \frac{1}{2} \hbar \omega_k$$

Why this is a variance-type quantity: for each mode k , the expectation values of position and momentum are both zero:

$$\langle 0 | x_k | 0 \rangle = 0 \quad \langle 0 | p_k | 0 \rangle = 0$$

So the zero-point energy is *entirely* due to the spread (variance) of position and momentum:

$$\langle 0 | H_k | 0 \rangle = \frac{1}{2} \text{Var}(p_k) + \frac{1}{2} \omega_k^2 \text{Var}(x_k)$$

In a classical vacuum, both variances would be zero and the vacuum energy would vanish. The entire $\frac{1}{2} \hbar \omega_k$ per mode is pure fluctuation content. You’re standing next to a calm lake—quantum mechanics measures how choppy the water is, the total wave energy from all the ripples, regardless of their direction. Every ripple contributes positively, so the total can be enormous.

Projection 2: Gravity Measures the Mean

The Einstein field equations couple spacetime curvature to the *expectation value* (average) of the stress-energy tensor:

$$G_{\mu\nu} = 8\pi G \langle T_{\mu\nu} \rangle$$

The left side (curvature) is smooth. The right side is an average over all quantum configurations. Gravity doesn’t care about individual ripples—it only feels the net, aggregate energy content.

Why this gives a much smaller number: when you have a huge number of contributions with random signs, the signed sum is much smaller than the unsigned sum. If 1,000 people each owe or are owed a random amount between $-\$100$ and $+\$100$, the total *absolute* amount of debt (the variance-like quantity) is roughly $1,000 \times \$50 = \$50,000$, while the *net* balance (the mean-like quantity) is roughly $\sqrt{1,000} \times \$50 \approx \$1,580$. The net balance is much smaller because positive and negative contributions cancel.

Gravity is measuring the net water level of the lake—are the waves pushing the average surface up or down? Since waves go up and down roughly equally, the net displacement is tiny compared to the total wave energy.

The Complementarity Theorem: Why Unification Is Impossible

The Informal Version

The quantum-mechanical and gravitational descriptions of vacuum energy are complementary projections that cannot be unified into a single observer-accessible description.

The two projections require **contradictory operations** on the hidden sector. The quantum projection works by *tracing out* the hidden sector—treating it as inaccessible and studying only the residual effects on the visible sector. The gravitational projection works by *coupling to* the hidden sector—feeling its mechanical presence through the curvature of spacetime. One hides it. The other feels it. No single description available to an embedded observer can simultaneously hide and reveal the same thing.

Imagine trying to study a pond by two methods: (1) seal off the pond and analyze the water pressure on the walls, and (2) drain the pond and map the bottom terrain. You can't seal and drain the pond at the same time.

The Formal Proof

Step 1: Define the setup. Split the universe into visible (V) and hidden (H) sectors:

$$u = (v, h) \in \Omega$$

Define two “target functions”—the two things we’re trying to measure:

$$\begin{aligned}\Gamma_{\text{fluc}}(u) &= \text{Var}_H[h] && \text{(total fluctuation content)} \\ \Gamma_{\text{mech}}(u) &= \mathbb{E}_H[h] && \text{(net mechanical effect)}\end{aligned}$$

These correspond to the QM and GR vacuum energies, respectively.

Step 2: Identify the observers as Wolpert inference devices. An observer confined to V is an “inference device” in Wolpert’s framework. They can only see V , so their setup function is the projection $\pi : \Omega \rightarrow V$.

- **Device 1** (the “quantum observer”) tries to determine Γ_{fluc} (the variance).
- **Device 2** (the “gravitational observer”) tries to determine Γ_{mech} (the mean).

Both devices share the same projection π —they’re the same observer trying to answer two different questions.

Step 3: Check the “independent configurability” condition. For Wolpert’s mutual inference impossibility to apply, the two targets must be *independently configurable*—it must be possible to change one without changing the other. In statistics, you can construct distributions with the same mean but different variances (e.g., compare a narrow bell curve with a wide bell curve, both centered at zero), and distributions with the same variance but different means (e.g., shift a bell curve left or right without changing its width). So mean and variance are indeed independently configurable.

Step 4: Apply Wolpert’s bound. Wolpert’s stochastic extension of the mutual inference impossibility gives:

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

where ϵ_{fluc} and ϵ_{mech} are the probabilities that the observer correctly infers each target.

If you get the variance exactly right ($\epsilon_{\text{fluc}} = 1$), your mean estimate can be no better than random chance ($\epsilon_{\text{mech}} \leq 1/4$). And vice versa. Perfect knowledge of one forces ignorance of the other. It’s like a seesaw—pushing one end up forces the other end down. The product of the two accuracies has a hard ceiling, and that ceiling is low.

The Inference–Ontology Bridge

There is an important subtlety here. Wolpert’s theorem is about *inference accuracy*, not physical quantities directly. The bridge works like this:

The values ρ_{QM} and ρ_{grav} are not observer-independent facts about the hidden sector. They are *outputs of specific measurement procedures*—QFT mode-summation and

gravitational coupling—each of which constitutes an inference operation in Wolpert’s sense.

There is no single “true” vacuum energy sitting behind both measurements. The two values are the best answers that two structurally different inference procedures can extract from the same hidden sector, and Wolpert guarantees they cannot converge.

The 10^{120} is not the gap between two bad estimates of one thing. It is the gap between two *different things* that embeddedness forces to be distinct.

Where Does Quantum Mechanics Come From?

This leads to a second claim, which may be the more consequential one.

When you’re inside a system and you “trace out” the parts you can’t see—when you mathematically discard the information about the hidden degrees of freedom—the resulting description of what you *can* see has a very specific mathematical structure. It’s not classical. It’s not random noise. It’s **quantum mechanics**.

The Barandes Stochastic–Quantum Correspondence

This result comes from a 2023 theorem by physicist Jacob Barandes, who proved that **any indivisible stochastic process is exactly equivalent to a quantum system**.

A stochastic process is any system that evolves with some randomness—a ball bouncing around in a box, say. Such a process is described by *transition matrices*: tables of probabilities telling you how likely the system is to go from state A to state B over some time interval.

A process is **divisible** if you can always break a long transition into a chain of shorter ones:

$$T(t_f, t_i) = T(t_f, t_m) \cdot T(t_m, t_i)$$

Think of driving from New York to Los Angeles. A divisible process is like driving on a highway—your probability of reaching LA can be computed by multiplying the probability of reaching Chicago by the probability of getting from Chicago to LA. Each segment is independent.

An **indivisible** process violates this. The long-range transition *cannot* be decomposed into independent short steps. The system has *temporal memory*—what happened in the past influences the future in a way that can’t be captured by the present state alone. Imagine driving through a desert where the road conditions at noon depend on the temperature at 6 AM in ways that aren’t captured by the 9 AM temperature. You can’t just chain together 6-to-9 and 9-to-noon segments—you’d miss the 6 AM → noon correlation.

Barandes proved that if a stochastic process is indivisible, it *automatically* reproduces interference, entanglement, the Born rule, and superposition. These aren't added in by hand. They emerge mathematically from indivisibility.

Why Tracing Out the Hidden Sector Produces Indivisibility

This is where the Nakajima–Zwanzig formalism comes in. When you trace out part of a system, the remaining part obeys:

$$\frac{\partial \rho(X)}{\partial t} = \mathcal{L} \rho(X) + \int_0^t d\tau \mathcal{K}(t, \tau) \rho(X, \tau)$$

Unpacking this: $\rho(X)$ is the state of the visible sector; $\mathcal{L} \rho(X)$ is the “local” part—how X would evolve on its own; and $\int_0^t d\tau \mathcal{K}(t, \tau) \rho(X, \tau)$ is the **memory kernel**—how the hidden sector's past states influence the visible sector's present.

The memory kernel is the key. If the hidden sector has temporal correlations (perturbations in it persist for some time rather than vanishing instantly), then $\mathcal{K}(t, \tau)$ is nonzero, and the visible sector's dynamics has memory—it becomes non-Markovian.

Why the Hidden Sector Must Have Temporal Correlations

For the hidden sector to have *no* memory (white noise), it would need infinite propagation speed (disturbances vanish instantly) or zero internal structure (nothing to remember). Both are physically absurd. If the hidden sector has *any* characteristic speed (like the speed of light) or *any* internal dynamics, disturbances persist for a finite time. Memory is generic; memorylessness is the pathological special case.

The Complete Chain

Putting it all together:

Embedded observer \rightarrow Hidden sector exists \rightarrow Trace it out \rightarrow Memory kernel \rightarrow Indivisibility \rightarrow QM

1. You're inside the universe (embedded observer)
2. Therefore some degrees of freedom are inaccessible (hidden sector)
3. Your description discards them (trace out)
4. The hidden sector has temporal correlations, so your reduced description has memory (memory kernel)
5. Memory makes the process indivisible

6. Indivisible stochastic processes *are* quantum mechanics (Barandes)

A Technical Subtlety

A nonzero memory kernel is *necessary* for indivisibility but not automatically *sufficient*. In principle, fine-tuned cancellations between \mathcal{L} and \mathcal{K} could produce factorizing (divisible) dynamics. However, such cancellations would need to hold for *all times and all initial states simultaneously*—an extraordinarily special condition. When tracing out a hidden sector that constitutes the vast majority of the universe’s degrees of freedom, system–environment correlations are dominant, and indivisibility is robustly satisfied. It’s like asking whether a random 1,000-digit number could accidentally be divisible by 10^{999} —mathematically *possible* but so fine-tuned as to be absurd for any realistic scenario.

The punchline: Quantum mechanics isn’t a fundamental law—it’s what any embedded observer would see after tracing out a temporally correlated hidden sector. The weirdness of quantum mechanics is a *projection artifact*.

Explaining the Quantum World

One of the most striking features of this framework is that the counterintuitive phenomena of quantum mechanics—the ones that have occupied physicists and philosophers for a century—all follow as *consequences* of being an inside observer with missing information. They are not irreducible properties of reality. They are what reality looks like through an incomplete projection.

The major cases are outlined below. (*Readers already comfortable with quantum mechanics may wish to skip ahead to the section on Reinterpreting Gravity.*)

The Double-Slit Experiment and Interference

This is the most famous experiment in quantum physics. Fire particles (photons, electrons, even whole molecules) one at a time at a barrier with two slits. You’d expect them to land in two clumps behind the slits—one for each slit. Instead, they form an *interference pattern*: alternating bands of many hits and no hits, as if each particle went through both slits simultaneously and the two paths interfered with each other like overlapping ripples in a pond.

In the standard telling, this is deeply mysterious. How can a single particle go through two slits?

In this framework, the answer is straightforward. The particle’s path through the slit region involves the hidden sector—the degrees of freedom you can’t see. When you

try to describe the particle’s journey using only the information available to you (the projected description), the journey *cannot be decomposed* into “went through slit A” or “went through slit B.” The hidden sector retains correlations between the particle’s passage through the slits and its later arrival at the screen. These correlations—carried by the parts of reality you can’t see, not by the particle itself—produce the interference pattern.

The interference pattern isn’t the particle going through both slits. It’s the *signature of information you don’t have*—the hidden sector’s correlations leaking into your incomplete description.

This also explains the detector effect: if you add a detector at the slits to determine which one the particle went through, you force the hidden sector to give up that information. The correlations that produced the interference get disrupted. The pattern disappears, and you see two ordinary clumps.

Quantum Tunneling

In classical physics, if a ball doesn’t have enough energy to roll over a hill, it rolls back. It never gets to the other side. In quantum mechanics, particles routinely appear on the far side of energy barriers they shouldn’t be able to cross—as if they tunneled straight through the wall. Tunneling isn’t a theoretical curiosity; it’s the mechanism behind nuclear fusion in stars, radioactive decay, and the operation of every flash memory chip in your phone.

In this framework, tunneling is a detour through the hidden sector.

Imagine you’re a two-dimensional character living on a flat sheet of paper. A circle drawn around you is an impassable prison wall—there’s no path from inside to outside that stays on the paper. But a three-dimensional creature could simply lift you off the sheet, move you past the line, and set you down outside the circle. To you, the 2D observer, it looks like you teleported through an impenetrable barrier. To the 3D creature, you just took a path that didn’t exist in the two-dimensional projection.

The same logic applies here—though it’s important to note that the “extra dimension” in the analogy is not a literal spatial dimension. The hidden sector’s degrees of freedom are not additional directions you could point in; they are dynamical variables (field amplitudes, phases, correlations) that the observer’s projection cannot resolve. The “barrier” exists in the projected description—the mean-field picture of the particle’s energy landscape. But the full system includes the hidden sector, which has degrees of freedom that the projection doesn’t represent. The particle doesn’t go *through* the potential barrier; it utilizes degrees of freedom in the hidden sector to *bypass* the restriction that exists only in the observable sector. The barrier is real in the

projection but not in the full state space. Tunneling is the particle taking a perfectly ordinary path through the complete system—a path that your incomplete projection cannot resolve, and therefore describes as “impossible.”

The tunneling probability—which decreases exponentially with the barrier’s width and height—reflects how much of a “detour” the hidden sector requires. A thin, low barrier needs only a small excursion into hidden degrees of freedom, so tunneling is frequent. A thick, high barrier requires a long detour through many hidden-sector modes, so tunneling is rare.

Superposition

In this framework, superposition is what “incomplete information about the full state” looks like when the incompleteness has a specific mathematical structure (indivisibility). Many different configurations of the hidden sector are compatible with what you can observe. Your best description of the system—given that you’ve had to throw away all the hidden-sector information—is a superposition: a mathematical object that encodes all the possibilities that are consistent with what you know. The particle isn’t “really” in two states at once. The full state of the universe (particle + hidden sector) is perfectly definite. But your *projected view* of it, with the hidden sector traced out, is irreducibly fuzzy.

Entanglement

When two particles are entangled, measuring one instantly determines the state of the other, regardless of the distance between them. Einstein called this “spooky action at a distance” and considered it evidence that quantum mechanics was incomplete.

In a sense, he was right—but the incompleteness is not a flaw in the theory. It is the theory’s central feature.

In this framework, entanglement arises when the hidden sector mediates correlations between two spatially separated particles. The hidden degrees of freedom connect particle A’s behavior to particle B’s behavior through shared correlations that the observer can’t see directly. When you measure particle A, you’re getting information about the hidden sector—information that is *also* correlated with particle B. The apparent “instantaneous connection” isn’t a signal traveling between the particles. It’s the same hidden-sector correlations showing up in two places at once, like two thermometers reading the same temperature because they’re both immersed in the same water, not because one is sending signals to the other.

The Born Rule (Why Probability?)

In standard quantum mechanics, the rule that converts quantum states into probabilities is called the Born rule, and it's simply postulated. There's no deeper explanation for *why* probabilities follow this specific rule.

In this framework, the Born rule isn't a separate postulate at all. It's a *consequence* of the projection structure. When you trace out the hidden sector, the statistical distribution of measurement outcomes is determined by the mathematics of how incomplete descriptions work. The specific form of the Born rule—probabilities proportional to the square of the wavefunction amplitude—follows from the same indivisibility theorem (Barandes) that gives you quantum mechanics in the first place.

The Measurement Problem (Wavefunction “Collapse”)

This is perhaps the most debated issue in quantum mechanics. Before measurement, a quantum system is in a superposition of many states. Upon measurement, the superposition “collapses” to a single definite outcome.

In this framework, the measurement problem simply dissolves. There is no collapse in the full state of the universe. The underlying dynamics—involving both the observable sector and the hidden sector together—is smooth and continuous at all times. “Collapse” is something that happens in *your description*, not in reality. It's the moment when a measurement interaction entangles your apparatus with the system, causing previously hidden correlations to show up in the observable sector. Your *projected description* (the wavefunction) updates because you've gained new information—not because anything discontinuous happened in the actual universe.

The Uncertainty Principle

Heisenberg's uncertainty principle says you can't simultaneously know both the exact position and the exact momentum of a particle. In this framework, the uncertainty principle is the *local version* of the same structural impossibility that produces the 10^{120} . Position and momentum correspond to different ways of interrogating the hidden sector at infinitesimally separated moments in time. Pinning down the position at one instant constrains the projection in a way that leaves the momentum maximally unconstrained. The two measurements are incompatible projections of the same hidden-sector correlations—the same structure as the variance-vs-mean split, but operating within quantum mechanics rather than between quantum mechanics and gravity.

This reveals a hierarchy. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle is the *within-physics* version of embedded-observer incompleteness. The Complementarity Theorem (the

10^{120}) is the *between-physics* version. Same root cause, different scales.

Quantization: Why Is Energy Discrete?

One of the founding discoveries of quantum mechanics was that energy comes in discrete packets (quanta) rather than continuous amounts. Planck's constant, \hbar , sets the size of these packets. But *why* should energy be discrete?

This framework offers a reinterpretation: **quantization is a sampling artifact**. The underlying reality (the hidden sector) may well be continuous. But the observer is accessing it through a projection with finite bandwidth—and that finite bandwidth imposes discrete structure on what is actually a smooth underlying system.

The analogy is a digital camera photographing a smooth landscape. The landscape has no pixels—the rolling hills, the gradient of the sunset, the curve of the river are all perfectly continuous. But the camera's sensor has a finite number of photosites, each of which reports a single color value for a small patch of the image. The result is pixels: discrete blocks of color that aren't in the landscape itself but are an inevitable consequence of capturing a continuous scene through a finite-resolution channel.

Planck's constant, in this reading, is the single most important number in physics not because it tells us about the graininess of reality, but because it tells us about the **bandwidth of the channel** through which we access reality. It's the conversion factor between the hidden sector's continuous dynamics and the observer's discrete description—the physical analogue of a camera's pixel pitch.

Quantum Computing

Quantum computing promises to solve certain problems exponentially faster than any classical computer. In this framework, the reason is clear: a quantum computer is a device that deliberately exploits the indivisible correlations of the projected dynamics—the same hidden-sector correlations that produce interference in the double-slit experiment and entanglement between distant particles. A quantum algorithm engineers these correlations so that wrong answers interfere destructively and right answers interfere constructively. Classical computers can't do this because classical descriptions are *divisible*—they can be broken into independent steps—and divisible processes can't produce interference.

The biggest engineering challenge, *decoherence*, is equally clear: it happens when uncontrolled environmental interactions disrupt the carefully prepared hidden-sector correlations, forcing the system into a new projection where those correlations no longer exist.

Dark Energy

In mainstream physics, dark energy is the substance or field responsible for the accelerating expansion of the universe. It constitutes roughly 68% of the total energy content of the cosmos, and its nature remains unknown.

In this framework, dark energy isn't a substance at all. It's the **mean-field residual** of the hidden sector. Remember the aquarium analogy: the pressure gauge reads a small but nonzero value because the random molecular pushes don't *perfectly* cancel out. With 10^{240} hidden-sector degrees of freedom pushing in random directions, basic statistics (the central limit theorem) predicts that the leftover net push should be roughly 10^{120} times smaller than the total activity—which is exactly what we observe.

The Arrow of Time

Why does time only move forward? The fundamental laws of physics are time-symmetric—they work identically whether you play the tape forward or backward. Yet our experience is irreversibly one-directional.

In this framework, entropy isn't a mysterious force driving things to disorder. It's the **rate of information loss to the hidden sector**. Information naturally flows from a small container to a vast ocean, not the other way around. The hidden sector is astronomically larger than the observable sector. The probability of all that scattered information spontaneously reconcentrating into the observable sector is not zero, but it's so vanishingly small—suppressed by factors related to the 10^{240} hidden-sector degrees of freedom—that it will never happen in the lifetime of the universe.

We perceive this one-way information leak as “time passing.” The Arrow of Time is the universe's information flowing downhill—from the small, bright observable sector into the vast, dark hidden sector—exactly as statistics demands.

The Holographic Principle

One of the deepest discoveries in theoretical physics is that the maximum amount of information that can be stored in a region of space is proportional to its *surface area*, not its volume. This is the holographic principle.

This framework offers a natural explanation. The hidden sector occupies the full “volume” of the state space. But the observer doesn't access the hidden sector directly. The observer accesses it only through the projection—the interface between the observable and hidden sectors. The bandwidth of this interface—how much information it can transmit—is proportional to the *area* of the boundary, not the volume behind it. The holographic principle isn't a strange fact about the universe—it's a natural

consequence of how embedded observation works.

Reinterpreting Gravity

The sections that follow explore implications of the framework that go beyond what the technical paper formally derives. The core argument—the Complementarity Theorem, the derivation of quantum mechanics via Barandes, and the 10^{240} degree-of-freedom count—is presented in §§1–4 of the full paper. What follows are extrapolations: reinterpretations of known physics that are consistent with the framework and illustrative of its explanatory reach, but which should be understood as directions for future investigation rather than established results.

What Gravity Actually Is

In Einstein’s general relativity, gravity isn’t a force—it’s the curvature of spacetime caused by the presence of mass and energy. But general relativity doesn’t explain *why* mass curves spacetime. It simply states the relationship (the Einstein field equations) and moves on.

In this framework, gravity is the **mean-field projection** of the hidden sector. It averages over the 10^{240} hidden degrees of freedom and reports the net mechanical result: spacetime curvature. Gravity, in this reading, is not a fundamental force. It’s a *statistical summary*—the first moment of an enormously complex distribution, smoothed into the clean geometric language of curved spacetime.

Black Holes: The Projection Pushed to Its Limit

Black holes are what happens when the mean-field projection is pushed to its absolute limit.

The event horizon is an inference boundary. In this framework, it’s the surface beyond which the observer’s projection becomes *maximally lossy*. Inside the horizon, the hidden sector dominates so completely that the projection can extract almost no information about what’s happening. The only things that survive the averaging process are the coarsest possible summaries: total mass, total charge, total spin. This is why black holes are described by just three numbers (the “no-hair theorem”)—not because the interior is simple, but because the projection can’t resolve any of its internal complexity.

Hawking radiation is information leaking between projections. Information “disappears” from the mechanical projection (it falls behind the horizon) and “re-emerges” in the fluctuation projection (as correlations in the Hawking radiation).

We perceive a paradox only because we assume there should be a single, unified description that tracks the information throughout.

The singularity is where the average stops working. The singularity isn't a place where physics breaks down. It's a place where the *averaging process* breaks down, and you'd need the full fluctuation description to say anything meaningful—which is precisely the projection that the gravitational description doesn't have access to.

Dark Matter

About 27% of the universe's energy budget consists of “dark matter”—something that has gravitational effects but doesn't interact with light or any other force we can detect. Despite decades of increasingly sensitive experiments, no dark matter particle has ever been found.

This framework suggests—speculatively—an alternative interpretation. If the hidden sector's contributions to the mean-field average aren't perfectly uniform across space, some regions will have a larger-than-average net effect. These regions would curve spacetime, attract ordinary matter, and bend light, but wouldn't show up in non-gravitational experiments because the correlations are in the *mean-field structure*, not in the fluctuation statistics that produce electromagnetism and nuclear forces. Dark matter, in this reading, would be a *spatial pattern in the gravitational projection*—statistical eddies rather than undiscovered particles.

This is among the most speculative implications of the framework and is offered as an illustration of how the two-projection structure naturally produces a universe where most of the gravitational budget is “dark,” not as a developed alternative to particle dark matter models.

Why 95% of the Universe Is Invisible

In mainstream cosmology, it's considered deeply mysterious that only about 5% of the universe's energy is ordinary visible matter, with the rest split between dark energy (68%) and dark matter (27%).

This framework says: it would be more surprising if it weren't. An embedded observer accessing reality through a mean-field projection that compresses 10^{240} degrees of freedom into an average is, almost by definition, going to see a universe dominated by statistical residuals. The 5% that's visible is the small fraction of modes organized into coherent, structured matter. The 95% that's dark is the vast statistical background. The real question isn't “why is 95% dark?” It's “how did 5% manage to be bright?”

The Quest for Quantum Gravity

For decades, physicists have been searching for a “theory of quantum gravity”—a single framework that combines quantum mechanics and general relativity into one unified description. This framework suggests that the quest, as traditionally conceived, is structurally impossible—for the same reason that Gödel showed you can’t have a complete and consistent axiomatization of arithmetic.

This doesn’t mean the research is wasted. It means the *goal* needs to be reconceived. Instead of seeking a single description that eliminates the tension, physicists could seek a framework that makes both projections explicit—one that tells you precisely when and how the two descriptions can be safely combined and when they fundamentally cannot.

What About String Theory?

String Theory proposes that all fundamental particles are vibrating loops of one-dimensional “string.” It is mathematically rich and has produced some of the deepest structural insights in modern physics. It has also, after four decades, failed to produce a single testable prediction about our universe.

This framework does not reject String Theory. It *reinterprets* it—and in doing so, may explain both why it succeeds mathematically and why it cannot make contact with observation.

The holographic duality. String Theory’s greatest achievement is the AdS/CFT correspondence—the discovery that a theory of gravity in a three-dimensional volume is mathematically identical to a quantum field theory on its two-dimensional boundary. In this framework, that’s exactly what you’d expect. The gravitational description is the mean-field projection. The quantum description is the fluctuation projection. The AdS/CFT correspondence is the mathematical dictionary for translating between the two projections of the same hidden sector.

Extra dimensions aren’t extra dimensions. String Theory requires 10 or 11 dimensions of spacetime. In this framework, the extra dimensions aren’t tiny tubes of physical space at all. They’re the **degrees of freedom of the hidden sector**. When String Theory’s math says a vibration “moves into the fifth dimension,” the translation is: that correlation has moved into the hidden sector—beyond your projection horizon.

The Landscape Problem—solved. String Theory’s equations have roughly 10^{500} possible solutions. This framework offers a simpler explanation: the hidden sector has roughly 10^{240} degrees of freedom. If each degree of freedom can be in even two possible states, the total number of configurations is 2 raised to the power of 10^{240} —a number that dwarfs 10^{500} . The “Landscape” isn’t a catalogue of different universes.

It's the **internal complexity of the hidden sector of this one universe**. This eliminates the need for a multiverse.

The verdict. If this framework is correct, then String Theory isn't a failed Theory of Everything. It's a **successful theory of the hidden sector**—a remarkably detailed mathematical characterization of the degrees of freedom beyond our projection. It works because it's describing something real. It fails to make predictions about our observable world because it's trying to describe both the hidden sector *and* the observable sector within a single framework—exactly the operation that the Complementarity Theorem says is impossible for any embedded observer.

What This Framework Doesn't Explain

It's important to be honest about the boundaries. This framework derives the *structure* of quantum mechanics—interference, superposition, entanglement, the Born rule—but it doesn't tell you *which* quantum theory describes our universe. Why are there three fundamental forces and not two or five? Why is the electron 1,836 times lighter than the proton? Why do the forces have the specific strengths they do?

These details depend on the internal structure of the hidden sector—the specific way its degrees of freedom are organized—and the framework deliberately leaves that unspecified. This is a strength, not a weakness. A framework that claimed to derive everything from nothing would be unfalsifiable. This one draws a clear line: here is what follows from being an embedded observer, and here is what requires additional information about the specific universe we inhabit.

But What *Is* the Hidden Sector?

The hidden sector is made of the same stuff as everything else—just the parts we can't see. It's "dark" because the lights are off, not because it's made of strange stuff. Specifically, the hidden sector consists of three things we know exist but cannot access:

The rest of the universe, beyond the horizon. We sit inside a bubble of observable space roughly 93 billion light-years across. We know for a fact that space continues beyond that bubble—almost certainly forever. What's out there? Galaxies, stars, gas, photons—standard energy and matter. It's "hidden" only because light from those regions hasn't had time to reach us since the Big Bang.

The interiors of black holes. Every galaxy is speckled with black holes—regions where matter has collapsed so densely that not even light can escape. What's inside them? The star that collapsed, the gas it ate, the light it trapped—ordinary matter and energy that has crossed the event horizon and exited our observable projection. Black holes aren't holes in reality. They're data sinks—places where degrees of freedom

leave our observable description but continue to exist on the other side of the projection boundary.

The sub-Planckian world. If you zoom into a digital photograph far enough, you eventually see square pixels. The Planck scale is physics’ pixel boundary. Below about 10^{-35} meters, the energy required to probe the system is so enormous that it would create a micro black hole. What’s down there? Presumably, the continuous geometric reality that our “pixelated” measurements can’t resolve.

Here’s a way to picture it. Imagine you’re in a massive, crowded stadium, but you’re wearing a blindfold and noise-canceling headphones. You can feel the *thump-thump-thump* of the crowd jumping in unison—that’s gravity, the mean-field effect. You can feel the random jostling of the person right next to you—that’s quantum mechanics, the fluctuation effect. The hidden sector is just the rest of the crowd, whose collective energy shapes everything you experience.

Why this matters. Standard physics, when it encounters the “dark” 95% of the universe, assumes there must be new, exotic particles. This framework says something fundamentally different: the hidden sector is made of *standard* degrees of freedom that are simply causally separated from us by horizons or by scale. The darkness isn’t a property of the stuff. It’s a property of our position—inside a finite bubble, above a minimum resolution, outside every event horizon. Move the observer, and what counts as “hidden” changes. The stuff doesn’t.

What the 10^{120} Tells Us

If the 10^{120} ratio is the variance-to-mean ratio of the hidden sector, we can work backwards and ask: how many independent degrees of freedom must the hidden sector have to produce a ratio this large?

The Random-Sign Cancellation Model

Imagine the hidden sector has N independent degrees of freedom. Each one contributes an energy:

$$X_i = s_i \mu + \epsilon_i$$

where $s_i = \pm 1$ is a random sign, μ is a characteristic energy per mode, and ϵ_i is a random fluctuation with mean zero and variance σ^2 .

The quantum projection sums all contributions without regard to sign—it measures total activity. The gravitational projection sums them *with* their signs—it measures the net effect. With N random signs, the net sum grows only as \sqrt{N} while the total activity grows as N . The ratio between them is \sqrt{N} .

Setting this equal to 10^{120} :

$$\sqrt{N} \sim 10^{120} \implies N \sim 10^{240}$$

The Holographic Connection

The answer—about 10^{240} —is not arbitrary. It turns out to be exactly the *square* of another well-known number in physics: the Bekenstein–Hawking entropy of the cosmological horizon, which is roughly 10^{122} .

This “coincidence”—that the hidden sector has exactly $(10^{122})^2$ degrees of freedom—suggests a deep connection to the holographic principle, the idea that the information content of a region of space is proportional to its surface area rather than its volume. The paper argues this is not a coincidence: the 10^{120} is the one number where both projections make contact with the same physical reality, and it encodes the hidden sector’s structure directly.

The cosmological constant problem, in this reading, isn’t a problem. It’s a *measurement*—the most precise measurement we have of the dimensionality of the parts of reality we cannot see.

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.

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.

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, $\Omega = (X, \Phi)$, is definite—it exists and has a specific configuration. But an observer confined to the visible sector X cannot access Φ . 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 projection $\pi : \Omega \rightarrow \rho(X)$ 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.

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 $N \sim 10^{240}$ 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 we are inside the system we are trying to describe.

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.

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 we 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 implications in both documents.

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.