

Fluxions, Forces, and Fields:

An overview of the mathematisation of physics in Europe through the modern period

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Tracing Back

- Let's take a convenient starting point: Einstein, special relativity, & **aether theory**
- Much of the groundwork had been laid by Lorentz, with his *Theory of Corresponding States*¹
- Much of the work Lorentz built on was done by George Fitzgerald, who was also influenced greatly by Maxwell

¹Janssen and Stachel, 2004.

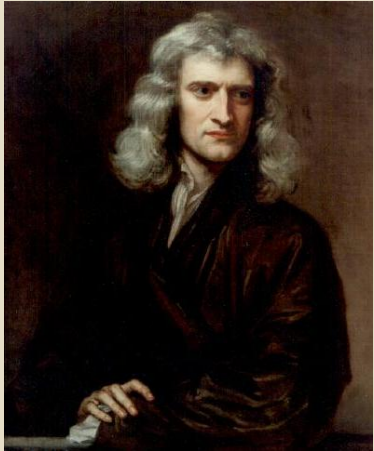
Beyond Maxwell

- 'Mentored' by William Thomson² (later Lord Kelvin)... who was a major figure in shaping physics (or natural philosophy) in C19
- Physics in Thomson's day had been centred around energy (and thus dynamics)...
- ... Which followed from continental development furthered by figures such as Lagrange and Laplace...
- ... Who worked using methods derived from Newton's work on celestial motion

²Smith, 1978.

The Birth of an Era: Isaac Newton

(1643-1727)



Newtonian Mathematical Ideals

- Saw God as mathematical, with a fondness for geometry
- Fluxions & Fluentsⁱ
- Clashes with Cartesianism³

³Westfall, 1981.

ⁱFor reading on notational impact, see: Guicciardini, 1989; Guicciardini, 2004; Boyer, 2012

Experimental Philosophy

- The method of **resolution** & **composition**:
 1. Observe and “come to the general properties of things”⁴
 2. Assume said properties and describe further phenomena
- **Hypotheses non fingo**⁵ - ignorance is acceptable!
- Nature able to be quantised (e.g. fluxional calculus & Halley’s Comet)
 - Concept of forces at a distance

⁴Newton and McGuire, 1970.

⁵Newton, Cohen, et al., 1999.

The Dynamical Age:
Pierre-Simon
Laplace

(1749-1827)



Laplacian Physics

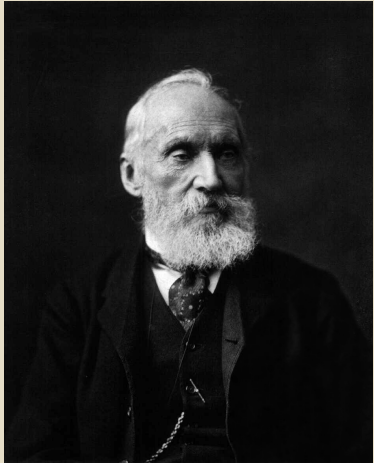
- The rise of French scientific dominance
- Physics spearheaded by Laplace in early C19, who took an “astronomical view of nature”⁶
- Prevalence of central-force based models, for even minute scales⁷
- Competitions set-up with e.g. the Society of Arcueil to promote mathematical collaboration
- Development of light, heat, and electromagnetic theory with various contestants (e.g. Fourier) - via Laplacian methods

⁶Merz, 1896.

⁷Fox, 1974.

Heating Up: William Thomson

(1824-1907)



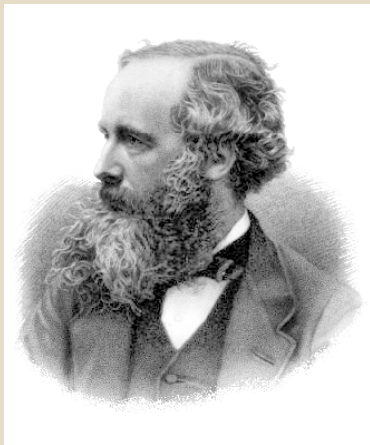
- Ideas of *vis-viva* around since Leibniz, *caloric* furthered by e.g. Carnot in early C19
- Natural philosophy shifted towards a focus on (conservation of) energy - in particular heat⁸
- Thomson follows Newtonian ideals - refusing to assign hypotheses
- There exist “absolute numerical relations” between heat and power⁹

⁸Smith, 1978.

⁹Thomson, 1851.

**Models and
Mathematics:
James Clerk Maxwell**

(1831-1879)



The Birth of Electromagnetism

- Faraday had done groundbreaking work on electromagnetism, but almost entirely qualitative
- Maxwell reticent to attribute any physical cause; *Faraday's Lines*¹⁰ makes no claim of physicality
- *Dynamical Theory*¹¹ made little note of aether as it was mathematically unnecessary
- *Physical Lines*¹² - first postulates light being electromagnetic, as well as displacement current

¹⁰Maxwell, 1856.

¹¹Maxwell, 1865.

¹²Maxwell, 1861.

Maxwell & Vectors

- Greatly develops ~~vector~~ calculus out of necessity for his mechanical models - Maxwell didn't have vector notation at his disposal!
- Modern formulation only introduced in 1884, by Heavyside¹³
- Vector notation itself only introduced in 1843, by Hamilton¹⁴

¹³Hunt, 2012.

¹⁴Crowe, 1994.

**Transformations &
Time:
Henri Poincaré**

(1854-1912)



The First Cracks

- Following Maxwell's work, electromagnetism became dominant¹⁵
- The nature of the aether was hotly debated
- Lorentz develops ideas of 'local time' & 'corresponding states' (co-ordinate transforms - *but only of EM waves*¹⁶)

¹⁵Hunt, 1994.

¹⁶Brown, 2005.

Developing Physicality

- Develops theory to be (functionally) identical to modern Lorentz transformations¹⁷
- Willing to ignore aether hypotheses, as mathematically unnecessary¹⁸
 - Unwilling to fully commit to ideas: “Of hypotheses there is never lack”¹⁹
- Einstein would soon go on to have his *annus mirabilis* and completely shift away from aether theory

¹⁷Darrigol, 1995.

¹⁸Poincaré, Blondin, and Neculcea, 1901.

¹⁹Poincaré and Halsted, 1929.

Conclusion

To Sum Up...

- Initial shift with Newton's development of *experimental philosophy* and quantisation of nature
- Development of continental force-based physics
- Shift towards disciplinary rigour with Thomson and others
- Maxwellian development of electromagnetic theory
- The final steps away from the aether - after thousands of years

Thank You

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