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Physics from Symmetry

 Springer

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NATURE ALWAYS CREATES THE BEST OF ALL OPTIONS

ARISTOTLE

AS FAR AS I SEE, ALL A PRIORI STATEMENTS IN PHYSICS HAVE THEIR
ORIGIN IN SYMMETRY.

HERMANN WEYL

THE IMPORTANT THING IN SCIENCE IS NOT SO MUCH TO OBTAIN NEW FACTS
AS TO DISCOVER NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT THEM.

WILLIAM LAWRENCE BRAGG

Dedicated to my parents

Preface

The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is at all comprehensible.

- Albert Einstein¹

¹ As quoted in Jon Fripp, Deborah Fripp, and Michael Fripp. *Speaking of Science*. Newnes, 1st edition, 4 2000. ISBN 9781878707512

In the course of studying physics I became, like any student of physics, familiar with many fundamental equations and their solutions, but I wasn't really able to see their connection.

I was thrilled when I understood that most of them have a common origin: **Symmetry**. To me, the most beautiful thing in physics is when something incomprehensible, suddenly becomes comprehensible, because of a deep explanation. That's why I fell in love with symmetries.

For example, for quite some time I couldn't really understand spin, which is some kind of curious internal angular momentum that almost all fundamental particles carry. Then I learned that spin is a direct consequence of a symmetry, called Lorentz symmetry, and everything started to make sense.

Experiences like this were the motivation for this book and in some sense, I wrote the book I wished had existed when I started my journey in physics. Symmetries are beautiful explanations for many otherwise incomprehensible physical phenomena and this book is based on the idea that we can derive the fundamental theories of physics from symmetry.

One could say that this book's approach to physics starts at the end: Before we even talk about classical mechanics or non-relativistic quantum mechanics, we will use the (as far as we know) exact symmetries of nature to derive the fundamental equations of quantum field theory. Despite its unconventional approach, this book is about standard physics. We will not talk about speculative, experimentally unverified theories. We are going to use standard assumptions and develop standard theories.

Depending on the readers experience in physics, the book can be used in two different ways:

- It can be used as a quick primer for those who are relatively new to physics. The starting points for classical mechanics, electrodynamics, quantum mechanics, special relativity and quantum field theory are explained and after reading, the reader can decide which topics are worth studying in more detail. There are many good books that cover every topic mentioned here in greater depth and at the end of each chapter some further reading recommendations are listed. If you feel you fit into this category, you are encouraged to start with the mathematical appendices at the end of the book² before going any further.
- Alternatively, this book can be used to connect loose ends for more experienced students. Many things that may seem arbitrary or a little wild when learnt for the first time using the usual historical approach, can be seen as being inevitable and straightforward when studied from the symmetry point of view.

In any case, you are encouraged to read this book from cover to cover, because the chapters build on one another.

We start with a short chapter about special relativity, which is the foundation for everything that follows. We will see that one of the most powerful constraints is that our theories must respect special relativity. The second part develops the mathematics required to utilize symmetry ideas in a physical context. Most of these mathematical tools come from a branch of mathematics called group theory. Afterwards, the Lagrangian formalism is introduced, which makes working with symmetries in a physical context straightforward. In the fifth and sixth chapters the basic equations of modern physics are derived using the two tools introduced earlier: The Lagrangian formalism and group theory. In the final part of this book these equations are put into action. Considering a particle theory we end up with quantum mechanics, considering a field theory we end up with quantum field theory. Then we look at the non-relativistic and classical limits of these theories, which leads us to classical mechanics and electrodynamics.

Every chapter begins with a brief summary of the chapter. If you catch yourself thinking: "Why exactly are we doing this?", return to the summary at the beginning of the chapter and take a look at how this specific step fits into the bigger picture of the chapter. Every page has a big margin, so you can scribble down your own notes and ideas while reading³.

² Starting with Chap. A. In addition, the corresponding appendix chapters are mentioned when a new mathematical concept is used in the text.

³ On many pages I included in the margin some further information or pictures.

I hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

Karlsruhe, January 2015

Jakob Schwichtenberg

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Finally, my greatest debt is to my parents who always supported me and taught me to value education above all else.

If you find an error in the text I would appreciate a short email to errors@jakobschwichtenberg.com . All known errors are listed at <http://physicsfromsymmetry.com/errata> .

Contents

Part I Foundations

1	Introduction	3
1.1	What we Cannot Derive	3
1.2	Book Overview	5
1.3	Elementary Particles and Fundamental Forces	7
2	Special Relativity	11
2.1	The Invariant of Special Relativity	12
2.2	Proper Time	14
2.3	Upper Speed Limit	16
2.4	The Minkowski Notation	17
2.5	Lorentz Transformations	19
2.6	Invariance, Symmetry and Covariance	20

Part II Symmetry Tools

3	Lie Group Theory	25
3.1	Groups	26
3.2	Rotations in two Dimensions	29
3.2.1	Rotations with Unit Complex Numbers	31
3.3	Rotations in three Dimensions	33
3.3.1	Quaternions	34
3.4	Lie Algebras	38
3.4.1	The Generators and Lie Algebra of $SO(3)$	41
3.4.2	The Abstract Definition of a Lie Algebra	44
3.4.3	The Generators and Lie Algebra of $SU(2)$	45
3.4.4	The Abstract Definition of a Lie Group	47
3.5	Representation Theory	49
3.6	$SU(2)$	53
3.6.1	The Finite-dimensional Irreducible Representations of $SU(2)$	53

3.6.2	The Casimir Operator of $SU(2)$	56
3.6.3	The Representation of $SU(2)$ in one Dimension	57
3.6.4	The Representation of $SU(2)$ in two Dimensions	57
3.6.5	The Representation of $SU(2)$ in three Dimensions	58
3.7	The Lorentz Group $O(1,3)$	58
3.7.1	One Representation of the Lorentz Group	61
3.7.2	Generators of the Other Components of the Lorentz Group	64
3.7.3	The Lie Algebra of the Proper Orthochronous Lorentz Group	66
3.7.4	The $(0,0)$ Representation	67
3.7.5	The $(\frac{1}{2},0)$ Representation	68
3.7.6	The $(0,\frac{1}{2})$ Representation	69
3.7.7	Van der Waerden Notation	70
3.7.8	The $(\frac{1}{2},\frac{1}{2})$ Representation	75
3.7.9	Spinors and Parity	78
3.7.10	Spinors and Charge Conjugation	81
3.7.11	Infinite-Dimensional Representations	82
3.8	The Poincare Group	84
3.9	Elementary Particles	85
3.10	Appendix: Rotations in a Complex Vector Space	87
3.11	Appendix: Manifolds	87
4	The Framework	91
4.1	Lagrangian Formalism	91
4.1.1	Fermat's Principle	92
4.1.2	Variational Calculus - the Basic Idea	92
4.2	Restrictions	93
4.3	Particle Theories vs. Field Theories	94
4.4	Euler-Lagrange Equation	95
4.5	Noether's Theorem	97
4.5.1	Noether's Theorem for Particle Theories	97
4.5.2	Noether's Theorem for Field Theories - Spacetime Symmetries	101
4.5.3	Rotations and Boosts	104
4.5.4	Spin	105
4.5.5	Noether's Theorem for Field Theories - Internal Symmetries	106
4.6	Appendix: Conserved Quantity from Boost Invariance for Particle Theories	108
4.7	Appendix: Conserved Quantity from Boost Invariance for Field Theories	109

Part III The Equations of Nature

5	Measuring Nature	113
5.1	The Operators of Quantum Mechanics	113
5.1.1	Spin and Angular Momentum	114
5.2	The Operators of Quantum Field Theory	115
6	Free Theory	117
6.1	Lorentz Covariance and Invariance	117
6.2	Klein-Gordon Equation	118
6.2.1	Complex Klein-Gordon Field	119
6.3	Dirac Equation	120
6.4	Proca Equation	123
7	Interaction Theory	127
7.1	$U(1)$ Interactions	129
7.1.1	Internal Symmetry of Free Spin $\frac{1}{2}$ Fields	129
7.1.2	Internal Symmetry of Free Spin 1 Fields	131
7.1.3	Putting the Puzzle Pieces Together	132
7.1.4	Inhomogeneous Maxwell Equations and Minimal Coupling	134
7.1.5	Charge Conjugation, Again	135
7.1.6	Noether's Theorem for Internal $U(1)$ Symmetry	136
7.1.7	Interaction of Massive Spin 0 Fields	138
7.1.8	Interaction of Massive Spin 1 Fields	138
7.2	$SU(2)$ Interactions	139
7.3	Mass Terms and Unification of $SU(2)$ and $U(1)$	145
7.4	Parity Violation	152
7.5	Lepton Mass Terms	156
7.6	Quark Mass Terms	160
7.7	Isospin	161
7.7.1	Labelling States	162
7.8	$SU(3)$ Interactions	164
7.8.1	Color	166
7.8.2	Quark Description	167
7.9	The Interplay Between Fermions and Bosons	169

Part IV Applications

8	Quantum Mechanics	173
8.1	Particle Theory Identifications	174
8.2	Relativistic Energy-Momentum Relation	174
8.3	The Quantum Formalism	175
8.3.1	Expectation Value	177

8.4	The Schrödinger Equation	178
8.4.1	Schrödinger Equation with External Field	180
8.5	From Wave Equations to Particle Motion	180
8.5.1	Example: Free Particle	181
8.5.2	Example: Particle in a Box	181
8.5.3	Dirac Notation	185
8.5.4	Example: Particle in a Box, Again	187
8.5.5	Spin	187
8.6	Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle	191
8.7	Comments on Interpretations	192
8.8	Appendix: Interpretation of the Dirac Spinor Components	194
8.9	Appendix: Solving the Dirac Equation	199
8.10	Appendix: Dirac Spinors in Different Bases	200
8.10.1	Solutions of the Dirac Equation in the Mass Basis	202
9	Quantum Field Theory	205
9.1	Field Theory Identifications	206
9.2	Free Spin 0 Field Theory	207
9.3	Free Spin $\frac{1}{2}$ Theory	212
9.4	Free Spin 1 Theory	215
9.5	Interacting Field Theory	215
9.5.1	Scatter Amplitudes	216
9.5.2	Time Evolution of States	216
9.5.3	Dyson Series	220
9.5.4	Evaluating the Series	221
9.6	Appendix: Most General Solution of the Klein-Gordon Equation	225
10	Classical Mechanics	227
10.1	Relativistic Mechanics	229
10.2	The Lagrangian of Non-Relativistic Mechanics	230
11	Electrodynamics	233
11.1	The Homogeneous Maxwell Equations	234
11.2	The Lorentz Force	235
11.3	Coulomb Potential	237
12	Gravity	239
13	Closing Words	245
Part V Appendices		
A	Vector calculus	249

A.1	Basis Vectors	250
A.2	Change of Coordinate Systems	251
A.3	Matrix Multiplication	253
A.4	Scalars	254
A.5	Right-handed and Left-handed Coordinate Systems	254
B	Calculus	257
B.1	Product Rule	257
B.2	Integration by Parts	257
B.3	The Taylor Series	258
B.4	Series	260
B.4.1	Important Series	260
B.4.2	Splitting Sums	262
B.4.3	Einstein's Sum Convention	262
B.5	Index Notation	263
B.5.1	Dummy Indices	263
B.5.2	Objects with more than One Index	264
B.5.3	Symmetric and Antisymmetric Indices	264
B.5.4	Antisymmetric \times Symmetric Sums	265
B.5.5	Two Important Symbols	265
C	Linear Algebra	267
C.1	Basic Transformations	267
C.2	Matrix Exponential Function	268
C.3	Determinants	268
C.4	Eigenvalues and Eigenvectors	269
C.5	Diagonalization	269
D	Additional Mathematical Notions	271
D.1	Fourier Transform	271
D.2	Delta Distribution	272
	Bibliography	273
	Index	277