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QUANTUM THEORY

Interference still a puzzle

Particle theory of light can't explain interference patterns

One of the paradoxical points of modern quantum theory is its declaration that light is a wave and a stream of particles at the same time. It requires that all optical phenomena be explicable on either basis.

One phenomenon, double-slit interference, is not. If coherent light beams pass through two nearby slits and fall on a screen, a pattern of dark and light fringes appears. On a wave basis this can be explained by saying that wave trains from each slit arrive at a point on the screen either in or out of phase with each other according to the distance each has gone from its slit.

But if one thinks of light as a stream of photons, then how does an individual which presumably photon. passes through only one slit, know that the other slit is there and that it may not go to certain spots on the screen? Physicists thought that if they reduced the light intensity until they could count individual photons, they might see how each one made its choice.

When they did, nothing explanatory happened. The experimenters threw up their hands and said that the only possible quantum explanation is that one photon went through both slits and interfered with itself.

Paradoxical as the single-photon explanation seems to be, it is easier to take if the light beam originates in a single source and is split in two on its way through the optical system. If two independent sources are used and two separate beams maintained, it is very difficult to imagine how one single photon could ever have been in both beams.

Despite the persistent suggestions, nevertheless, that the experiment be tried with independent beams, until lasers came along this was not feasible; there was no way other than using a single source for getting coherent beams.

But with the development of lasers, the two-beam experiment could be tried, and it has been. Drs. R. L. Pfleegor and Leonard Mandel of the University of Rochester did and found no new result. They conclude a bit helplessly: "... it would seem to be impossible to describe each photon as being in both beams at once. Nevertheless to some extent this is the conclusion to which we are driven. . . .'



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338/science news/vol. 93/6 april 1968