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TESTING GENERAL RELATIVITY AT THE QUANTUM LEVEL^{*}

Ephraim Fischbach[†] and Belvin S. Freeman

Institute for Theoretical Physics
State University of New York at Stony Brook
Stony Brook, New York 11794

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In a recent series of elegant experiments Colella, Overhauser, and Werner¹ (COW) have established that the quantum-mechanical behavior of thermal neutrons in gravitational field is exactly as predicted by Newtonian gravity. Since all known theories of quantum gravity reduce to the Newtonian result in the non-relativistic limit their result, while important, does not allow a discrimination among competing theories at the quantum level (e.g. Einstein versus Brans-Dicke). To achieve such a discrimination it is necessary to measure quantum effects that are characteristically smaller than the leading Newtonian contribution by a factor of $\beta = v/c$, where v is the velocity of the particles being studied and c is the speed of light. Since $\beta \approx 10^{-5}$ in the COW experiment there appears to be little hope of refining this experiment to achieve the necessary sensitivity. Other proposed experiments, such as those aimed at detecting the spin precession of slow neutrons in a gravitational field, are approximately 9-10 orders of magnitude below the required sensitivity. It is, however, extremely important to devise tests of relativistic quantum gravity (RQG) since there is always the possibility that new gravitational effects could manifest themselves at the quantum level whose existence would not have been anticipated by an extrapolation from the macroscopic realm.

As we will see shortly, the scale of RQG effects is set by the product of β and a constant η ,

$$\eta = \frac{g\hbar}{c}, \quad (1)$$

where g is the local acceleration of gravity, and \hbar is Planck's constant. At the surface of the Earth $\eta = 2.15 \times 10^{-23}$ eV, while for a typical neutron star $\eta \approx 10^{-12}$ eV. Although there is nothing that can be done about the intrinsic weakness of the gravitational interaction, we can hope to find systems in which RQG effects are enhanced because both β and η are large, and which at the same

time allow these effects to be studied by means of experimental techniques capable of great precision. What we wish to point out here for the first time is that both of these hopes may in fact be realized by the study of a new phenomenon, namely the violation of parity selection rules for electromagnetic radiation induced by a gravitational field.

We begin with the generally covariant Dirac equation for an electron in a gravitational field, expressed in terms of a set of matrices $\gamma^\mu(x)$ which satisfy

$$\gamma^\mu(x)\gamma^\nu(x) + \gamma^\nu(x)\gamma^\mu(x) = 2g^{\mu\nu}(x) , \quad (2)$$

where $g^{\mu\nu}(x)$ is the metric tensor. The matrices $\gamma^\mu(x)$ are related to the usual (constant) Dirac matrices γ^a ($a = 1, 2, 3, 0$) by

$$\gamma^\mu(x) = e_a^\mu(x)\gamma^a . \quad (3)$$

Here $e_a^\mu(x)$ are a set of tetrad fields which, for the case of a static spherically symmetric mass distribution, are given by

$$e_a^\mu(x) = \delta_{\mu a}(1+\phi) - 2\delta_{\mu 0}\delta_{a 0}\phi ,$$

$$\phi = \frac{-GM}{\rho c^2} \quad (4)$$

Here G is the Newtonian gravitational constant, ρ is the distance from the electron to the center of the matter distribution whose mass is M , and we assume that we are in the weak field limit $|\phi| \ll 1$. The Dirac equation obtained from Eqs. (2) - (4) can be expressed in terms of an equivalent Schrödinger Hamiltonian by means of a Foldy-Wouthuysen transformation. Combining the resulting expression for the electron with the analogous result for a proton

we find that the Hamiltonian for a hydrogen atom in an external gravitational field is given by

$$H(e-p) = (m_e + m_p) \vec{g} \cdot \vec{R} + (\gamma + \frac{1}{2}) \eta \alpha a_0 \hat{g} \cdot [\vec{r} \nabla^2 + \vec{\nabla} - \frac{1}{2} \vec{\sigma}_e \times \vec{\nabla}] . \quad (5)$$

Here \vec{g} is the local acceleration due to gravity, m_e and m_p are the electron and proton masses respectively, α is the fine structure constant, a_0 the Bohr radius, \vec{R} the center-of-mass (CM) coordinate, and \vec{r} is the relative e-p coordinate. We have explicitly exhibited the dependence of $H(e-p)$ on the parametrized post Newtonian (PPN) parameter γ which distinguishes among various theories of gravity. The term proportional to $\vec{g} \cdot \vec{R}$ (which is the only one probed in the COW experiment) gives the classical Newtonian potential which corresponds to a uniform acceleration $g = |\vec{g}|$ of the CM. By contrast the remaining terms in $H(e-p)$ induce transitions in hydrogen similar to those produced by an external electric or magnetic field. We see immediately that the terms proportional to η mix eigenstates of opposite parity, and that the magnitude of this admixture depends directly on the specific theory of gravity through the PPN parameter γ . Thus, for example, $\gamma = 1$ for the usual Einstein theory whereas $\gamma = (\omega+1)/(\omega+2)$ for the Brans-Dicke theory. It follows that a measurement of the violation of parity selection rules in hydrogen (or in some other atom) would allow us to discriminate among competing theories of gravity at the quantum level.

For later purposes we note that the scale of RQG effects in hydrogen is set by $\eta \alpha$ where $\alpha = e^2/\hbar c = v/c$ for the lowest Bohr orbit. This exhibits the first advantage of the hydrogen atom for our purposes, namely, the fact that the electron is essentially relativistic. The second advantage arises from the fact that the operator proportional to $\eta \alpha$ has nonzero matrix elements between nearly degenerate states, such as the $2S_{\frac{1}{2}}$ and $2P_{\frac{1}{2}}$ states whose separation is the

Lamb shift, $L = 4.38 \times 10^{-6}$ eV. The third, and perhaps most important, advantage of the H-atom is that the ubiquitous presence of hydrogen in the universe allows us to study the parity-violating effects produced by H(e-p) in regions where strong gravitational fields are present.

It is instructive to compare the magnitude of the matrix element of H(e-p) in Eq. (5) with that of the weak neutral current Hamiltonian H_W which also mixes the $2S_{1/2}$ and $2P_{1/2}$ states. If we assume that the electron and proton couple via a simple V-A interaction mediated by a massive Z^0 -boson, and ignore hyperfine effects, then²

$$\langle 2P_{1/2} | H_W | 2S_{1/2} \rangle = \frac{i\sqrt{3}}{32\pi\sqrt{2}} \frac{G_F \alpha}{a_0^3} = i 5.38 \times 10^{-17} \text{ eV}, \quad (6)$$

where G_F is the Fermi constant. The expression for H_W in the standard Weinberg-Salam model of H_W is more complicated², but the scale of the effects is the same as that given by Eq. (6). By comparison, using Eq. (5) and taking $\gamma = 1$ we find

$$\langle 2P_{1/2} | H(e-p) | 2S_{1/2} \rangle = -\frac{\sqrt{3}}{8} \alpha \eta = \begin{cases} -3.40 \times 10^{-26} \text{ eV (Earth)} \\ -1.53 \times 10^{-21} \text{ eV (40 Eri B)} \\ -5.57 \times 10^{-15} \text{ eV (neutron star)} \end{cases} \quad (7)$$

In Eq. (7) 40 Eri B is a white dwarf with mass $0.372M_\odot$ and radius $0.0152 R_\odot$. The mass and density of the neutron star have been taken to be $0.4M_\odot$ and $1 \times 10^{15} \text{ gm cm}^{-3}$, respectively. We observe from Eqs. (6) and (7) that the phases of $\langle H_W \rangle$ and $\langle H(e-p) \rangle$ are such that their interference will produce a circular

polarization P_γ in the transition $2S_{\frac{1}{2}} \rightarrow 1S_{\frac{1}{2}} + \gamma$. On Earth $|P_\gamma| \sim \langle H(e-p) \rangle / \langle H_W \rangle \approx 6 \times 10^{-10}$ whereas on 40 Eri B, $|P_\gamma| \approx 3 \times 10^{-5}$. Since circular polarization has already been detected³ in white dwarfs at the level of $\sim 10^{-3}$, it is conceivable that such observations could be refined to the point where a gravity induced contribution to P_γ could be detected. From Eqs. (6) and (7) we also note that at the surface of a typical neutron star the gravity-induced $2S_{\frac{1}{2}} - 2P_{\frac{1}{2}}$ admixture is actually much larger than that arising from the weak interactions, and they become comparable only at a distance of ~ 10 radii from the star. If we assume that a circular polarization at the level of 10^{-4} could be detected in the foreseeable future, then accreted hydrogen as far away as $\sim 10^3$ radii from the center of the star could contribute to the effect that we are looking for.

To distinguish between gravitational and non-gravitational sources of circular polarization we first note that the gravity-induced contribution to P_γ depends on $\vec{g} \cdot \vec{k}$ where \vec{g} is the local acceleration at the point of emission and \vec{k} is the photon momentum. It follows that radiation of a given frequency reaching the Earth from different regions of a source (such as the Sun) will be characterized by different values of $\vec{g} \cdot \vec{k}$ and hence different P_γ (see Fig. 1). For radiation from distant objects which appear as point sources use can be made of the fact that some of these sources are members of eclipsing binary systems. An example of this is the system Hercules X-1/HZ Herculis⁴ which is believed to contain a neutron star and accreted hydrogen orbiting a visible companion. During an eclipse (which occurs \sim every 1.7 days and lasts for several hours) $\vec{g} \cdot \vec{k}$ varies in a well defined way for light reaching the Earth, and this variation can be used to discriminate between the gravitational and non-gravitational contributions to P_γ . Other observations can also be used to effect such a discrimination including the variation of P_γ with $|\vec{g}|$, as

inferred by comparing different systems, and the characteristic dependence of P_γ on the nuclear charge Z for ionized hydrogen-like atoms.

Although additional theoretical work will be needed to elaborate the details of the calculations that we have outlined here, it appears from our present vantage point that such a program may offer the best hope for testing general relativity at the quantum level.

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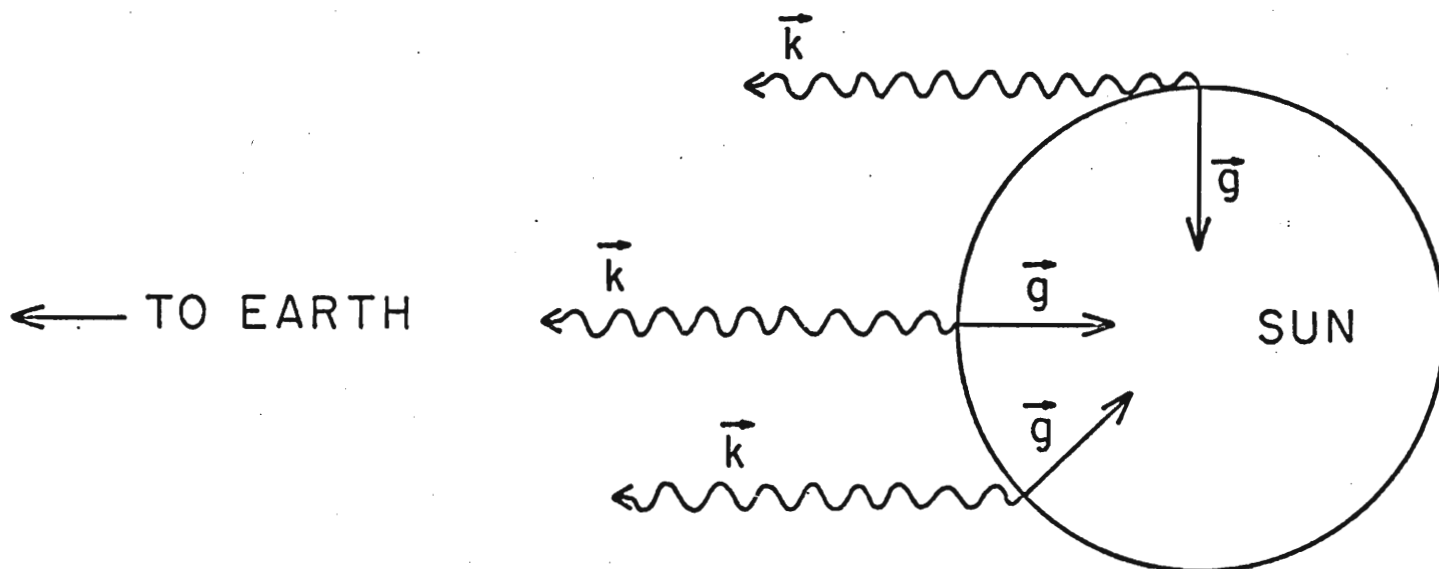


Fig. 1

EPHRAIM FISCHBACH is currently a Visiting Associate Professor at the Institute for Theoretical Physics (ITP), State University of New York at Stony Brook. He received his A. B. degree from Columbia in 1963 and his Ph.D. in theoretical physics from the University of Pennsylvania in 1967. From 1967-1969 he was a research associate at ITP-Stony Brook, and during 1969-1970 at the Niels Bohr Institute in Copenhagen. In 1970 he joined the Faculty of Purdue University from which he is presently on leave.

BELVIN S. FREEMAN is a graduate student at Purdue University. He received his B. S. degree with honors from the University of Oklahoma in 1975, and his M. S. degree from Purdue in 1977. He is currently a David Ross Fellow at Purdue on leave at the Institute for Theoretical Physics at Stony Brook.

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Ephraim Fischbach and Belvin S. Freeman

Institute for Theoretical Physics
State University of New York at Stony Brook
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SUMMARY

It is shown that the effect of a gravitational field on a hydrogen atom is to admix states of opposite parity such as $2S_{1/2}$ and $2P_{1/2}$. The phase of this admixture is such as to produce circular polarization of the radiation emitted in transitions such as $2S_{1/2} \rightarrow 1S_{1/2} + \gamma$ which arises from the interference between the gravity-induced amplitude and that due to the weak neutral current. The predicted magnitude of the circular polarization, which could be sufficiently large to be detected in white dwarfs or in certain binary systems, varies from theory to theory. It is thus possible that a study of this effect could provide a feasible means of testing general relativity at the quantum level.