

What’s wrong with the wave function?

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Abstract

The call to supplement the wave function with local beables is almost as old as quantum mechanics. But what exactly is the problem with the wave function as the representation of a quantum system? I canvass three potential problems with the wave function: the well-known problems of incompleteness and dimensionality, and the lesser known problem of non-locality introduced recently by Myrvold. Building on Myrvold’s insight, I show that the standard ways of introducing local beables into quantum mechanics are unsuccessful. I consider whether we really need local beables, and assess the prospects for a new theory of local beables.

1 The call for local beables

Forty years ago this year, J. S. Bell gave a talk called “The Theory of Local Beables”.¹ In it, he introduces the term “beable” as a name for a putative element of reality in the quantum world, and suggests that the beables we should be particularly interested in are *local* in the sense that they can be assigned to some bounded space-time region (Bell 2004, 53). But even if the term originates with Bell, the call for local beables clearly echoes the EPR argument exactly forty years prior to that (Einstein, Podolsky and Rosen 1935). The motivation is essentially the same: the wave function via which standard quantum mechanics represents physical systems is inadequate to the

¹At the sixth GIFT seminar, Jaca, Spain, 2–7 June 1975. The paper is published in Bell (2004, 52–62).

task, and hence needs to be supplemented with (or replaced by) something that genuinely represents the properties of the system.

The need for local beables remains controversial, and any particular account of them doubly so. My sense is that the debate itself is not terribly clearly defined. What, precisely, is the problem with the wave function that calls for the addition of local beables? What exactly would count as a local beable? And how far do the various accounts of local beables on offer succeed at solving the problems with the wave function representation? My present purpose is to try to make a little headway in answering these questions.

Let me start with the question of motivation. What’s wrong with the wave function anyway? There are a number of concerns one might have. First, there’s the EPR worry that the description of reality provided by the wave function is incomplete. The argument here is that since measuring one of a pair of entangled particles allows you to predict with certainty the outcome for the other particle, the latter particle must already have a property corresponding to the outcome of the measurement—and the wave function doesn’t represent that property. Bell (1964), of course, complicates this discussion by proving that any method of ascribing properties to entangled systems would have to violate some highly plausible physical assumption, e.g. causal locality. But his concern is essentially the same as Einstein’s: we need local beables because the wave function is representationally incomplete.

The representational incompleteness of the wave function is not limited to entangled states, however. Schrödinger’s cat thought experiment highlights a dilemma facing accounts of quantum mechanical measurement (Schrödinger 1935—also 80 years old this year!). Either you say that a measurement precipitates a collapse of the wave function—in which case you face the difficult task of defining just which physical processes constitute measurements—or else you don’t—in which case there is nothing in the wave function representation corresponding to the unique outcome of the measurement. This is one way of expressing the measurement problem.

But representational incompleteness isn’t the only concern you might have with the wave function. Another concern raised by Bell is that the wave function “propagates not in 3-space, but in $3N$ -space” (2004,128). That is, the wave function for an N -particle system is a function of $3N$ spatial coordinates: it inhabits a configuration space rather than ordinary three-dimensional space. Again, this problem takes a particularly stark form when the state of the system is entangled, since the wave function of the pair of particles in six-dimensional space can’t be reduced to two wave functions in

three-dimensional space without loss of information. But the problem is quite general: presumably the measurement outcomes we observe are localized in ordinary three-dimensional space, and the high-dimensional wave function doesn't represent *anything* in such a space.

Finally, as Myrvold (2014) has recently remarked, the wave function is an inherently non-local representation of a system, in the following sense: a non-zero wave function amplitude in some region is incompatible with the squared wave function amplitude integrating to 1 over any disjoint region. Hence a non-zero amplitude right here carries implications for the amplitude in any region of space, however distant. I don't know of anyone who has previously made this point. It seems reasonable to think that the properties of the system in my lab are local in the sense that they carry no implications for the properties of the far side of the moon. And if that is the case, then the wave function is incapable of describing those local properties.

For ease of reference, let us call these three problems with the wave function *incompleteness*, *dimensionality* and *non-locality*. Of course, not everyone is convinced that these are genuine problems that need to be solved. But suppose you are impressed by some or all of these concerns. It seems that you must supplement (or even replace) the wave function as a representation of quantum systems; you must invent a new theory. And of course there is no shortage of contenders.

2 Incompleteness

Several attempts have been made to add local beables to quantum mechanics, most notably hidden variable theories in the style of Bohm (1952), and spontaneous collapse theories in the style of Ghirardi, Rimini and Weber (1986). Bohm's theory supplements the wave function with particle positions that are "pushed around" by the wave function. The GRW theory supplements standard quantum mechanics with a spontaneous collapse mechanism that postulates a small chance per unit time per particle that the wave function will become localized in the coordinates of that particle.

Both of these theories are most directly aimed at the incompleteness problem. In Bohm's theory, even though the wave function does not always represent the unique outcome of a measurement, the particle positions can always perform this job. Hence the particle positions are the local beables of Bohm's theory. In the GRW theory there are collapses, but there is no need

for a problematic collapse-on-measurement postulate, because measurements automatically precipitate collapse: when a quantum system is correlated with a macroscopic pointer, the sheer number of particles involved means that a spontaneous collapse is almost certain in a very small period of time. So in this case the post-measurement wave function does represent the unique outcome of a measurement, since the spontaneous collapse process concentrates the wave function on one of the possible outcomes.² Here the wave function itself represents the local beables.

Similar stories are available for entangled states, although the solution to the incompleteness problem for such states is less than satisfactory. In Bohm's theory, a measurement on one particle can determine the properties of both particles. So, for example, although Bohmian particles always have determinate position properties, they do not always have determinate spin properties, and for an entangled pair in the singlet state $2^{-1/2}(|\uparrow_z\rangle_1 |\downarrow_z\rangle_2 - |\downarrow_z\rangle_1 |\uparrow_z\rangle_2)$, a z -spin measurement on either particle causes the Bohmian particles to move within the wave function so as to fix the spin properties of both particles. The particle positions still succeed at explaining the outcomes of our measurements, but in this case a non-local causal influence between the two particles is required as part of the explanation.

In the GRW theory, a measurement on either particle in the singlet state precipitates a wave function collapse to one term or the other, and hence both particles acquire determinate spin values. The evolution of the wave function explains the outcomes we observe, but again a non-local causal influence is involved in the explanation of the outcomes. So the local beables introduced by Bohm's theory and the GRW theory succeed at solving the incompleteness problem, although at the cost of introducing instantaneous action at a distance.

3 Dimensionality

What about the other problems? Both Bohm's theory and the GRW theory provide a prima facie solution to the dimensionality problem. Bohmian particles always have determinate locations in ordinary three-dimensional space, even when the wave function requires a higher-dimensional representation. In

²Worries can be raised about the adequacy of both Bohm's theory and the GRW theory in explaining measurement results (e.g. Brown and Wallace 2005; Cordero 1999). But these worries can, I think, be addressed (Lewis 2007).

the GRW theory, though, the wave function itself represents the beables, and the wave function generally cannot be fully represented in three-dimensional space, due to the residual entanglement that exists even after a collapse. However, as Bell notes, the point at which each GRW collapse is centered picks out a precise location in three-dimensional space, and the set of these points can act as local beables in ordinary space (Bell 2004, 205).

But there is still a remaining dimensionality problem. In Bohm's theory, the dynamical law for the particles is such that their motion depends on the wave function: this is the sense in which the wave function "pushes around" the particles. But if the wave function inhabits a high-dimensional configuration space, and the particles inhabit a separate 3-space, it is hard to see how the wave function can push around the particles. Similarly in the GRW theory, the center of each collapse event is (trivially) dependent on that collapse event. But if the collapse is a process that takes place in a high-dimensional configuration space, it is hard to see how the center of the process exists in a separate 3-space.

There are two general approaches one might take to dealing with this residual problem. First, one might postulate that all the ontology of the relevant theory lives in the high-dimensional space. That is, the Bohmian particles for an N -particle system are really just a manner of speaking about a *single* point in a $3N$ -dimensional space, a point that accounts for the outcomes of our measurements. Similarly, the centers of the GRW collapses are points in a $3N$ -dimensional space, and yet still account for the outcomes of our measurements. Albert (1996) has endorsed such an account. The main challenge here is to explain how events in a fundamentally $3N$ -dimensional space can yield the *appearance* that the measurement outcomes we observe are situated in three-dimensional space. Albert is happy to take on that explanatory burden, although the extent to which he succeeds is a matter of ongoing debate (Ney and Albert 2013).

The other approach is to postulate that all the ontology of the relevant theory lives in three-dimensional space. The most prominent proposals for achieving this point beyond the confines of non-relativistic quantum mechanics. For instance, Goldstein and Zanghì (2013) postulate that in the context of a quantum theory that can incorporate gravity, the time-dependence of the wave function may drop out, and hence the wave function may function as a constant law rather than as a time-evolving entity. This opens up the possibility that the ontology of Bohm's theory consists entirely of particles in 3-space evolving according to this law. Less speculatively, Wallace

and Timpson (2010) and Myrvold (2014) argue that the wave function of non-relativistic quantum mechanics reduces to local properties of the three-dimensional field in quantum field theory, and hence the ontology of quantum mechanics is fundamentally three-dimensional, with the configuration-space wave function simply acting as a convenient shorthand representation in the non-relativistic limit.³

What all these responses to the residual dimensionality problem have in common is that they essentially give up on the demand for *local* beables—beables that can be assigned to a bounded region of 3-space. If the ontology of quantum mechanics is fundamentally high-dimensional, then the beables are assigned to a bounded region of the high-dimensional space, but not necessarily to a bounded region of the three-dimensional world as it appears to us. For example, in Bohm’s theory our measurement outcomes are explained via a single point in the high-dimensional space, but in general this point can correspond to locations indefinitely far apart in the three-dimensional space of experience. Similarly in the GRW theory, our measurement outcomes are explained by a collapse-center that is a point in the high-dimensional space, but may correspond to locations indefinitely far apart in three-dimensional space. And even if the fundamental ontology is three-dimensional, entanglement means that some of the properties of quantum systems are irreducibly relational, applying equally to two or more locations in three-dimensional space (Wallace and Timpson 2010, 713).

The lesson that Wallace and Timpson (2010) and Myrvold (2014) draw is that *local* beables are unnecessary: this is explored in the following section. But there may be philosophical reasons to prefer beables that are local in a high-dimensional space rather than no local beables at all, and hence to prefer the high-dimensional ontology to the three-dimensional one. For example, Barry Loewer (1996) defends a high-dimensional ontology for quantum mechanics on the grounds that it allows us to retain Humean supervenience—David Lewis’s doctrine that all the properties of a system supervene on the local properties of its smallest parts. However, there is one further problem to consider, and it suggests that Loewer’s defense of Humean supervenience may be misguided.

³It is worth noting, though, that neither Wallace and Timpson nor Myrvold are attempting to defend either a Bohmian or a spontaneous collapse theory, since their sympathies lie with the Everettian approach described in the next section.

4 Non-locality

The remaining problem is Myrvold’s non-locality problem—the problem that a non-zero wave function amplitude in one location has implications for the wave function amplitude at distant locations. As Myrvold notes, the move to a high-dimensional space is no help here: if the wave function is non-zero in some region of configuration space, then it cannot be the case that the wave function is entirely contained in some disjoint region of configuration space (2014, 4). Hence wave function properties are non-local even in the high-dimensional space. This means that the GRW theory does not, after all, solve the incompleteness problem by adding *local* beables.

The same goes (rather trivially) for Bohmian particles. If the single point in configuration space representing the Bohmian particles is located *here*, then obviously this has the implication that there are no Bohmian particles anywhere else. You might think this is just a truism: if my desk is *here*, then trivially my desk is not anywhere else. But the point is that Humean supervenience requires that the local properties carry no implications for other regions of space. The fact that my desk is here carries no implications for whether there is a desk (or anything else) in the next office over. But the fact that the Bohmian point is here *does* mean that there cannot be a Bohmian point anywhere else: there can only be one.

It is tempting to think that the non-locality identified by Myrvold rests on a mistaken understanding of the normalization of the wave function. Because of its connection to probability via the Born rule, the squared amplitude of the wave function must integrate to 1 over the whole of space. But if the wave function is regarded as a beable (as in the GRW theory), presumably it describes the distribution of some kind of *stuff*, and then one might think that normalization is just a fact about the *proportion* of wave function stuff in a particular region, not the absolute quantity. Suppose that there is some quantity of wave function stuff located in *this* region of space (3-space or $3N$ -space). This carries no implications, one might think, for how much wave function stuff is located elsewhere, so Humean supervenience is safe. The only implication is that *if* there is a lot of wave function stuff elsewhere, then the *proportion* of squared wave function amplitude in this region is low, and if there is only a little elsewhere then the proportion here is high.

But this hope is short-lived. Such a proposal wouldn’t give you any kind of Humean supervenience worth having, because the beables in a region would be radically disconnected from what you should expect to observe if

you look at the region. If there is a lot of wave function stuff elsewhere, then the probability of finding the system in this region is low, and if there is a little, then it is high. We want the beables to explain what we observe, and the current proposal fails that test.

Alternatively, one might think that the fault lies in considering only non-relativistic systems with a fixed number of particles. If there are N particles in the system, and there are N particles in this region (either because of Bohmian particle beables or GRW wave function beables), then it cannot be the case that there are any particles elsewhere. But it is unfair to suggest that this is a violation of Humean supervenience, one might think, because the constraint that there are exactly N particles in the world is a *global* fact about the world, and combining local beables with a global fact can certainly have non-local implications.

But in fact the normalization of the quantum state carries straightforward non-local implications even when there is not a fixed number of particles (Myrvold 2014, 16). Suppose the (Bohmian or GRW) beables are such that there is exactly one particle in a given region of space.⁴ In Bohm's theory, this means that at least some of the state amplitude is associated with one particle being in this region, and in the GRW theory it means that most of the state amplitude is so associated. But in either case, this rules out the possibility that all the amplitude is associated with finding exactly three particles (or whatever) in some distant region of space. Hence the beables still carry non-local implications—normalization is the culprit, not the assumption of a fixed number of particles.

So it looks like Bohm's theory and the GRW theory don't get us as far as we might have liked. While they offer a direct solution to the incompleteness problem and the beginnings of a solution to the dimensionality problem, they do nothing to address the non-locality problem. Many commentators are already convinced that the price for local beables—namely instantaneous action at a distance—is too high. If we add to that Myrvold's point that Bohm and GRW don't even deliver local beables, then the price starts to look like money for nothing.

⁴I don't wish to imply here that it is straightforward or even possible to extend Bohm's theory or the GRW theory to the relativistic domain.

5 Who needs local beables?

Even Bell, the biggest champion of local beables, concedes that “we may be obliged to develop theories in which there *are* no strictly local beables” (2004, 53). Perhaps the thing to do at this point is to concede that no quantum mechanical theory in terms of local beables is possible—that Humean supervenience is dead. Indeed, if the motivation for local beables is primarily philosophical—to save the doctrine of Humean supervenience—then it’s hard to see that much is lost: this is just another example of a philosophical intuition that falls to empirical science. But Bell and Einstein were not primarily motivated (if at all) by such intuitions; their concern was with the physical adequacy of the theory in light of the incompleteness problem. Bohm and GRW deliver this much at least.

Can we do better? So far I have said nothing about the many worlds theory—the third of the “big three” interpretations. According to its advocates, the many worlds theory can solve the incompleteness problem without recourse to Bohmian particles or GRW collapses. The trick is that a structure of decoherent branches is identified in the wave function, and beables representing the outcomes of measurements are identified within each branch. That is, if we measure the z -spins of two particles in the singlet state $2^{-1/2}(|\uparrow_z\rangle_1|\downarrow_z\rangle_2 - |\downarrow_z\rangle_1|\uparrow_z\rangle_2)$, then decoherent branches are produced, relative to some of which the state is close to $|\uparrow_z\rangle_1|\downarrow_z\rangle_2$, and relative to others of which the state is close to $|\downarrow_z\rangle_1|\uparrow_z\rangle_2$. Hence (its advocates conclude), the wave function itself can provide all the beables we need, and there never was an incompleteness problem in quantum mechanics.

The many worlds theory also works just as well as Bohm and GRW (if not better) at tackling the dimensionality problem. The wave function in the many worlds theory is interpreted realistically, and taken at face value it occupies a high-dimensional configuration space. One could try to supplement the wave function with ontology that resides in three-dimensional space (Allori et al. 2011), but that would raise the worries about interaction mentioned in the previous section. So the relevant options seem the same as before: either defend the idea that reality is fundamentally high-dimensional, or show how the wave function can be interpreted as representing properties in three-dimensional space.

So the many worlds theory gives us beables, beables that solve the incompleteness problem, and address the dimensionality problem as far as it needs addressing. But it doesn’t give us *local* beables: the non-locality problem

applies just as readily to the many worlds theory as to Bohm and GRW. Suppose for example, that my branch of the wave function is such that there is a particle in a particular region of space. This requires that most of the wave function amplitude in this branch is contained in the relevant region in the coordinates of the particle. And this in turn rules out the squared wave function amplitude in this branch integrating to 1 over some distant region of space.⁵

Myrvold (2014) and Wallace and Timpson (2010) are quite sanguine about the non-local nature of the beables in the many worlds theory. They can certainly be purchased far more cheaply than the non-local beables in Bohm and GRW: there is (arguably) no need for instantaneous action at a distance (Wallace and Timpson 2010, 713). And it looks like no interpretation of quantum mechanics that connects the beables to the quantum state can do better: Myrvold’s non-locality problem follows from the normalization of the quantum state, so any interpretation in which the beables carry implications for the quantum state will suffer from this problem.

Still, there is something quite strange about the source of the non-locality. Bohm’s theory, the GRW theory and the many worlds theory are all realist about the quantum state: the wave function describes the distribution of something physical over (ordinary or configuration) space. Normalization is an odd requirement to impose on the distribution of physical stuff. I suppose one might think of it as something like a conservation law: the total amount of wave function stuff is constant.⁶ But note that the wave function stuff has only an indirect relation to the physical stuff we observe in our experiments. For example, often we observe the locations of particles, and the wave function “conservation law” can be satisfied by a decrease in the amount of stuff associated with there being one particle in a particular region and a corresponding increase in the amount of stuff associated with there being twelve particles in the region. So this is an odd kind of conservation law. What it looks like of course—given the Born rule—is an *epistemic* constraint, since our degrees of belief should always sum to 1. It is strange that an epistemic constraint should act on the world.

Perhaps this is a tendentious way of putting things. Contemporary many-

⁵Sometimes “my branch” will not be defined for sufficiently distant regions of space. But let us assume a scenario and a distant region for which it is defined.

⁶In fact it is less familiar than that, since the integral of the squared wave function amplitude over space is constant, and yet the dynamical laws operate at the level of the unsquared wave function amplitude.

worlders like Wallace (2012) might say that I get things backwards: the normalization of the wave function is a constraint on the world, and while it might be *prima facie* strange that it should correspond so directly to a constraint on my beliefs, there are decision-theoretic arguments why this should be so. Still, the decision-theoretic arguments remain controversial,⁷ and the source of the normalization constraint remains mysterious.

6 Restoring local beables

Of course, strangeness is no real objection to a theory, especially one like many worlds quantum mechanics. But if we like to have things explained, then it would be better if we could construe the wave function epistemically, since then the normalization constraint has a straightforward explanation. As a side effect, this also restores the possibility of understanding quantum mechanics via local beables, since Myrvold’s non-locality problem doesn’t arise. But epistemic construals of the wave function face formidable obstacles, most notably a number of no-go theorems (Bell 1964; Kochen and Specker 1967; Pusey, Barrett and Rudolph 2012).

One way forward is to exploit the so-called “independence loophole” in the no-go theorems. As Price (1994) and Leifer (2011) point out, the no-go theorems all assume that the properties of a system are independent of the measurements performed on it. This assumption might be violated if causation were a time-symmetric phenomenon—if particles could carry the effects of *later* measurements performed on them, just as they carry the effects of *earlier* measurements. Then there is no barrier, in principle, to the wave function playing a purely epistemic role, where the ontology consists of particles and their local properties.

So for example, when we describe a pair of particles using the singlet state $2^{-1/2}(|\uparrow_z\rangle_1|\downarrow_z\rangle_2 - |\downarrow_z\rangle_1|\uparrow_z\rangle_2)$, this simply means that owing to the way the particles were produced, we don’t know (prior to z -spin measurements on the individual particles) whether particle 1 is z -spin-up and particle 2 is z -spin-down or vice versa. Nevertheless, one of these is the case: the particles have well-defined individual spin properties. The reason this doesn’t violate Bell’s theorem is that the spin values depend on the measurements performed: if spin measurements in different directions had been performed on the particles, then their earlier spin properties would have been different.

⁷See e.g. the essays in Part IV of Saunders et al. (2010).

A retrocausal interpretation of quantum mechanics of this kind means that the local beables are precisely the properties of the particles revealed on measurement—in this case, their spins. This has a number of advantages. Clearly, the incompleteness problem doesn't arise: particles have pre-existing properties corresponding to the results of our measurements, and the fact that the wave function doesn't represent those properties is of no consequence, because the wave function just represents our knowledge of the system. Similarly, the particles and their properties reside in three-dimensional space, so the dimensionality problem doesn't arise either. The fact that the wave function is defined over configuration space simply reflects the complexities of our knowledge of quantum systems: for entangled systems like the pair of particles in the singlet state, we not only know the possible spin properties for each particle individually, we also know the correlations between them—in this case that they have opposite spins when measured in any given direction. This information is most readily represented in a configuration space.

Finally, Myrvold's non-locality problem doesn't arise in a retrocausal theory. Suppose a particle is located in a particular region of space. Nothing follows about the beables in distant regions of space: maybe there is a particle there, maybe there isn't. The normalization of the wave function is irrelevant here, because there is no general connection between the location of the particle (a fact about the world) and the wave function (a description of our knowledge). It is true that if we restrict ourselves to systems with a fixed number of particles (as in non-relativistic quantum mechanics), then the fact that there is a particle here does have implications for how many particles there are elsewhere—but in the retrocausal case it is clearly the global assumption about the number of particles that introduces the non-locality. Without the assumption of a fixed number of particles the location of a particle carries no implications for distant regions. The fact that there is a particle here does not by itself entail that I assign a non-zero wave function amplitude here, because I might be convinced that there is no particle here.

However, suppose I do ascribe a non-zero probability to the particle being located here. Then the wave function amplitude will be non-zero in this region, which carries the implication that the squared wave function amplitude does not integrate to 1 over some distant region. But this apparent non-locality is just a matter of what credences I can simultaneously entertain: if I have a non-zero credence that there is a particle here, then I cannot also have credences totalling to 1 in possibilities that exclude a particle being here. Nothing follows about whether or not there is a particle in any distant

region. Normalization applies to my credences, not to the world.

All these advantages are purchased without paying the price of instantaneous action at a distance: all action is along time-like lines, although some of that action is in the reverse temporal direction. So if a genuine, fully-fledged retrocausal theory of quantum mechanics were available, it would be an attractive contender. But unfortunately there is as yet no such thing, although there are a number of ongoing research programs. The sticking place, as one might expect, is interference: if the wave function is purely epistemic, how can it exhibit interference effects? While some suggestions concerning the origin of interference effects in wave-function-epistemic theories have been made (e.g. Price 1996, 255), others have concluded that waves have an ineliminable role even in retrocausal theories (Kastner 2012, Wharton 2010). However, as Wharton (2010, 275) stresses, the retrocausal strategy allows the waves to exist in a *classical* field defined over three-dimensional space. Such waves can arguably act as local beables: the explanation of a measurement result in Wharton's scheme is that the waves converge to a point in a given region, but this carries no implications for whether there are also waves converging to a point in some distant region.

7 Conclusion

So is there anything wrong with the wave function as the representation of a quantum system? Maybe not, if the many worlds interpretation can be defended. Even if it can, the normalization of the wave function is an odd requirement for a physical entity. However, attempts to supplement the wave function with local beables, as Bell suggested, have hardly been a success. The only alternative at this point looks to be a radical reconstruction of quantum mechanics, as suggested by the retrocausal program. It remains to be seen whether this produces a viable alternative to some form of wave function realism.

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