

RADIATION REACTION AND RADIATIVE FREQUENCY SHIFTS*

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ABSTRACT

We investigate the question of Quantum Electrodynamical radiative corrections to atomic transition frequencies. It is shown that the Heisenberg equations of motion allow a novel and fruitful exploitation of the concept of radiation reaction.

* Research partially supported by the U. S. Atomic Energy Commission and by the U. S. Army Research Office (Durham).

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Quantum Electrodynamics (QED) is usually regarded as the most successful example of a quantum field theory. Its predictions have been verified time after time by experiments of very high precision. Nevertheless, the logical foundations of QED are apparently unsound and encumbered with difficulties which have occupied the attention of large numbers of physicists.¹⁻⁶

It has been pointed out repeatedly^{1,3,5} that the conceptual indirectness of QED is one of its primary shortcomings. A simple, intuitive, general explanation for the most elementary radiative corrections to magnetic moments, spontaneous level shifts and level widths has yet to be given.⁷ In connection with atomic level shifts and widths, renewed attempts^{5,6} have been made recently to provide logically consistent alternatives to the usual QED by building on the intuitively clear classical idea of radiation reaction. These attempts have the very attractive feature that the ordinary time-dependent perturbation theory is not necessary for their calculations. Several authors^{2,5} have suggested that a theory which works directly with the dynamical variables of a problem may be superior to one which is phrased in terms of Schrodinger-picture probability amplitudes. A theory based on the Heisenberg picture would, at the least, come much closer in spirit to classical physics (and in particular to the spirit of Lorentz's work) where one's insights and intuitions may be more firmly founded.

We have taken these questions, comments, and suggestions seriously in considering some of the simplest non-trivial problems of electrodynamics. We have found that if QED itself is formulated in terms of its dynamical equations of motion, then it is possible to obtain non-perturbative approximate expressions for various radiative corrections, such as atomic frequency shifts and level widths.⁸

In this Letter, we illustrate the basic ideas and utility of our approach to QED by concentrating on the problem of spontaneous emission from a fictitious

two-level atom.⁸ A two-level model atom has been associated with the problem of natural line width from the beginning,⁹ and forms the basis of the Lee model used in discussing scattering and decay in quantum field theory.¹⁰ In our approach we solve approximately the Heisenberg equations for the electromagnetic field. The field solution is then substituted into the atomic operator equations. Radiation reaction effects are evident: the part of the field due to the atomic source current drives the atomic operators. We readily identify the radiative corrections without encountering renormalization divergences.

Since the atom has only two energy levels, there are only four atomic matrix elements, and thus only four independent atomic operators in the problem. One of these may be taken to be the unit operator. The other three are the dynamical variables of the atom: the atom's unperturbed energy, and the absorptive and dispersive parts of its electric dipole moment. Following Dicke's dimensionless notation,¹¹ these are written R_3 , $(1/2)(R_+ + R_-)$, and $(i/2)(R_- - R_+)$, where R_+ and R_- may be identified as the two atomic operators which respectively raise and lower the state of the atom. They are normalized to obey angular momentum algebra: $[R_3, R_{\pm}] = \pm R_{\pm}$, etc.

In this notation, in the dipole approximation and neglecting the A^2 term, the Hamiltonian for the problem may be written:

$$H = \hbar\omega_0 R_3(t) + i(\omega_0 d/c) [R_+(t) - R_-(t)] A_d(0,t) + \sum_{\lambda} \hbar\omega_{\lambda} a_{\lambda}^{\dagger}(t) a_{\lambda}(t) \quad (1)$$

Here ω_0 is the atom's transition frequency in the absence of interactions; d is the magnitude of the linear electric dipole matrix element; and $A_d(0,t)$ is the component of the vector potential operator along the direction of the dipole moment, evaluated at the center of the atom. It is useful to expand $A_d(0,t)$ in terms of the usual photon creation and destruction operators:

$$A_d(0,t) = \sum_{\lambda} g_{\lambda d} [a_{\lambda}(t) + a_{\lambda}^{\dagger}(t)] \quad (2)$$

Here $g_{\lambda d} \equiv (2\pi\hbar c^2/\omega_{\lambda} V)^{1/2} \epsilon_{\lambda d}$, V is the volume of the quantization region, and λ indexes both wave vector and polarization. As usual $[a_{\lambda}(t), a_{\lambda'}^{\dagger}(t)] = \delta_{\lambda\lambda'}$.

The Heisenberg equations of motion are:

$$dR_3/dt = (\omega_0 d/\hbar c) [R_+(t) + R_-(t)] A_d(0,t) \quad (3)$$

$$dR_{\pm}/dt = \pm i\omega_0 R_{\pm} - 2(\omega_0 d/\hbar c) R_3(t) A_d(0,t) \quad (4)$$

$$da_{\lambda}/dt = -i\omega_{\lambda} a_{\lambda}(t) + (\omega_0 d/\hbar c) g_{\lambda d} [R_+(t) - R_-(t)] \quad (5)$$

The equation for $a_{\lambda}(t)$ is basically simpler than the atomic equation because it contains no operator products, and it may be integrated formally:

$$a_{\lambda}(t) = a_{\lambda}^v(t) + (\omega_0 d/\hbar c) g_{\lambda d} \int_0^t dt' [R_+(t') - R_-(t')] e^{-i\omega_{\lambda}(t-t')}, \quad (6)$$

where $a_{\lambda}^v(t) = a_{\lambda}(0) \exp(-i\omega_{\lambda} t)$ is the free-field or 'vacuum part' of the solution.

Of course Eqs.(3), (4) and (6) cannot be solved explicitly. However, as far as the atom is concerned, spontaneous radiative decay is a very slow process, requiring many millions of cycles of dipole oscillation, on the average, before it is complete. Thus we assume that $R_{\pm}(t)$ may be written $S_{\pm}(t) \exp(\pm i\omega_0 t)$, where $S_{\pm}(t)$ is an unknown operator whose time variation, compared with $\exp(\pm i\omega_0 t)$, is very slow. Then the second term in (6), which we denote by $a_{\lambda}^s(t)$ and call the "source part" of the quantized field, may safely be approximated by replacing $S_{\pm}(t')$ by $S_{\pm}(t)$ outside the integral. The integral can then be carried out and, for sufficiently long times t , $a_{\lambda}^s(t)$ may be expressed in terms of $R_{\pm}(t)$ and Heitler's zeta function $[i\zeta(x) = (\lim t \rightarrow \infty) \int_0^t d\tau \exp(ix\tau) = iP/x + \pi\delta(x)]:$

$$a_{\lambda}^s(t) = i(\omega_0 d/\hbar c) g_{\lambda d} [R_-(t) \zeta^*(\omega_{\lambda} - \omega_0) - R_+(t) \zeta^*(\omega_{\lambda} + \omega_0)] \quad (7)$$

[The designation "source part" for $a_{\lambda}^s(t)$ serves as a reminder that the contribution of the second term in (6) to the vector potential (2) is the analog of the inhomogeneous or source term in the retarded time solution of the classical wave equation: $\vec{A}(r,t) = c^{-1} \int d^3r' |r-r'|^{-1} [\vec{J}(r',t)]_{ret}$].

As time goes on the source and vacuum parts of the field mode operator fail to commute with each other: While the vacuum part $a_\lambda^v(t)$ always operates in the Hilbert space of the free field, the source operators $R_\pm(t)$, which make up $a_\lambda^s(t)$, evolve into the joint atom-field space. That this must be the case is already shown by the occurrence of $A_d(Q,t)$ in Eqs.(3) and (4). However, it may be shown⁸ that both the vacuum part, as well as the total mode operator $a_\lambda(t) = a_\lambda^v(t) + a_\lambda^s(t)$, continue to obey Bose commutation relations for all time. Thus the "fundamental mathematical difficulty" of QED in the Heisenberg picture, discovered by Nesbet¹², is spurious. It arises from an incomplete treatment of the vacuum part of the field. Other versions of this "difficulty" occur in the work of Series⁶ and Bullough¹⁵ and have a similar resolution.

In order to obtain a complete solution to the coupled atom-field spontaneous emission problem, one would have to put (7) into (3) and (4) and integrate the atomic equations. This is not possible to do explicitly,¹² and is fortunately also unnecessary.

For our present purpose it is enough to derive the vacuum expectation value of the dipole operator itself. After (6) has been approximately integrated as above and substituted into (4), one finds¹³

$$\frac{d}{dt} \langle R_+(t) \rangle - i\omega_0 \langle R_+(t) \rangle = \left\{ -i\Delta - \frac{A}{2} \right\} \langle R_+(t) \rangle + \text{h.c.} \quad (8)$$

The real and the imaginary parts of the coefficient of $\langle R_+ \rangle$ on the right hand side of (8) act to modify the natural frequency ω_0 and thus impart a width and a shift to the transition. In the continuum limit of the mode sums, the real part becomes one half the usual Einstein A coefficient, as expected:

$$A = \frac{4}{3} \frac{\omega_0^2 d^2}{\hbar c^3} \int_0^\infty \{ \delta(\omega_\lambda - \omega_0) + \delta(\omega_\lambda + \omega_0) \} \omega_\lambda d\omega_\lambda, \quad (9)$$

whilst the imaginary part, the frequency shift, is:

$$\Delta = \frac{8\pi}{3\hbar c} \left(\frac{\omega_0 d}{2\pi c}\right)^2 \int_0^\infty \left\{ \frac{P}{\omega_\lambda - \omega_0} - \frac{P}{\omega_\lambda + \omega_0} \right\} \omega_\lambda d\omega_\lambda \quad (10)$$

This expression for the shift is remarkable on several counts. In the first place it does not agree with the standard expression for the Weisskopf-Wigner frequency shift.⁹ This is because of the term $1/(\omega_\lambda + \omega_0)$ in the integrand. In the second place, again because of the same term, the leading divergence of Δ is not linear, but merely logarithmic, as it must be in a correct non-relativistic calculation.¹⁴ And, thirdly, Δ is not merely similar to, but exactly the same as, the completely mass-renormalized frequency shift which one could calculate in second-order non-relativistic perturbation theory [however, see footnote 14].

A number of conclusions follow from these results. The simplest is that the usual treatments⁹ of the Weisskopf-Wigner problem involve an important oversight. Even Källén's careful discussion⁹ misses the point that if the essential states assumption is relaxed enough to admit sum-frequency terms [such as $R_+(t)$ in Eq. (7)], the problem can still be solved almost exactly, and for the frequency shift one then finds the equivalent of Bethe's result.¹⁴

Furthermore, some very recent work on many-atom emission phenomena is flawed by the same oversight, but in a more serious way. Although the original Weisskopf-Wigner solution was not claimed to provide insight into the frequency shift problem, the essential states method has been adopted widely to attack problems in correlated many-atom systems. Where questions of frequency shifts are raised,¹⁵ this work must be re-examined.

In addition, our results show that the conventional "explanation" of spontaneous decay, that "the vacuum fluctuations 'stimulate' the atom to emit

spontaneously"¹⁶ need not be adopted. Our work shows, in fact, that the vacuum part of the field, $a_{\lambda}^V(t)$, plays essentially no role in determining either the frequency shift Δ or the decay rate A .

It seems to us that a much more natural interpretation of our (Quantum Electrodynamics) results, based on the old idea of radiation reaction, is to be preferred. One sees in the transition from Eq.(4) to Eq.(8) that the vacuum part of the field drops away, and the total Lamb shift and decay rate come from the source part of the field in interaction with the atom. That is, in very classical language, it is not the presence of vacuum fields but of the dipole's own radiation field, the source field, that modifies the atom's characteristics in such a way as to produce a finite decay rate, and a shift of the non-interacting natural transition frequency.

We speculate that our method is more general than the simple model presented in this Letter would suggest, and can provide an interpretation of radiative corrections in other situations. In particular we have in mind the real many-level-atom Lamb shift,⁸ many-atom emission phenomena, resonance fluorescence and the anomalous moment of the electron.¹⁷

We are grateful to Professor F. Rohrlich for a careful reading of an earlier version of the paper, and for critical suggestions. Two of us (P. K. and J. E.) thank Professors S. D. Drell and A. L. Schawlow for their hospitality during 1971-72 at Stanford, where part of this work was done.

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