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Bose-Einstein Condensates

The Fifth State of Matter

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Chapter 1: The Discovery of Bose-Einstein Condensates

The discovery was, in the beginning, a mistake that worked. In the early 1920s, Satyendra Nath Bose was lecturing at the University of Dhaka on radiation and the ultraviolet catastrophe, the failure of classical physics to describe the colors of hot objects. He wanted to show his students that the accepted theory gave results that disagreed with experiment, and in the middle of the demonstration he made an error in applying it. The error was of a familiar kind, equivalent to arguing that flipping two fair coins produces two heads a third of the time, a slip that anyone with a basic grasp of statistics would catch, and it resembled a famous earlier blunder by the eighteenth-century mathematician Jean le Rond d'Alembert. But the answer it produced matched the experiments.

Bose had the presence of mind not to discard it. If the wrong counting gave the right physics, perhaps the counting was not wrong, and the accepted way of distributing energy among particles was. He recast his argument as a short paper, deriving the law of blackbody radiation with no reference to classical physics at all, counting identical particles as genuinely identical, and sent it to a European journal, where the referee rejected it. Undaunted, he mailed the manuscript to Albert Einstein directly, asking whether he would arrange its publication in Germany. Einstein read it, at once understood that the mistake was the discovery, translated the paper into German himself, and submitted it on Bose's behalf to the Zeitschrift für Physik, where it appeared in 1924. He added his name to nothing and took no credit; he simply published a stranger's paper and then wrote two of his own extending the idea.

Einstein's extension moved the statistics from light to matter. If photons could be counted the way Bose counted them, so could atoms, and the arithmetic had a consequence that had gone unnoticed: cool a gas of such particles far enough and the mathematics forces a collapse, a large fraction of the whole population dropping into the single lowest quantum state, a new form of matter. The papers of 1924 and 1925 contain the prediction that would take seventy years to test. Einstein's own manuscript for the translation, once believed lost, resurfaced in 2005, in a library at Leiden University, a quiet relic of the moment quantum statistics was born.

The reason Bose's wrong counting gave the right answer is worth stating plainly, because it is the heart of everything this book is about. Photons are identical to one another in a way coins are not: two photons carrying the same momentum and polarization are not two distinguishable objects that happen to look alike, but literally interchangeable occupants of the same state, and counting them as if they had identities is the error, not the correction. Bose's paper, titled on the hypothesis of light quanta, divided the radiation field into cells of the allowed size and counted only the number of photons per cell, never which photon sat where; the arithmetic of that count reproduces Planck's law exactly, with no detour through classical waves.

Einstein, translating, noticed a small refinement, replacing a factor Bose had included for two spin states with the two polarizations of light, and the paper went to press corrected in the founder's own hand. The episode has become the standard lesson in the philosophy of physics: sometimes the result that comes out right from a procedure everyone believes wrong is telling you that the procedure is right and the belief is wrong.

Einstein's two extension papers did more than translate the statistics into the language of matter; they asked what a gas of indistinguishable particles would actually do, and the answer is the reason this book exists. In the first, he applied the new counting to a gas of atoms and found the distribution of the particles among their energies; in the second, he noticed that the arithmetic had a singularity in it, a temperature below which the equations quietly stopped describing a gas of many atoms and began describing a single shared state, with a macroscopic fraction of the whole population in the ground state. He wrote of the effect with some bemusement, describing the condensed and uncondensed fractions as two phases of one gas, thermodynamically distinct, like steam and water, and the analogy he reached for, a vapor condensing, gave the phenomenon the name it carries. The papers appeared in the same journal, back to back, in 1924 and 1925, and the physics world read them as arithmetic, not prophecy; no one imagined that the singular temperature was reachable, and the seventy-year silence that followed was not skepticism so much as the quiet of an impossible direction.

Chapter 2: Bosons and Fermions: The Two Statistics

The physics that Bose stumbled into divides the microscopic world into two great families, and the division is the cleanest in all of physics. Particles carry a property called spin, and spin comes in two kinds: whole-number values, and half-values in between. Particles with whole-number spin, photons included, are called bosons, a name the physicist Paul Dirac coined in honor of the man whose counting made them a family. They obey what is now called Bose-Einstein statistics: they are not forbidden from sharing a state, and the more of them you put into one state, the more likely the next one is to join them. Particles with half-integer spin are called fermions, and they obey the other statistics, Fermi-Dirac: the Pauli exclusion principle forbids any two of them from occupying the same quantum state, a rule that builds the whole architecture of atoms and, on a larger scale, keeps stars from collapsing.

The distinction rests on indistinguishability, and indistinguishability is easier to feel than to formalize. Consider a pair of particles, each free to sit in one of two states, and count the ways the pair can be arranged. If the particles are distinguishable, there are four configurations, two in which they sit separately and one each in which either particle occupies the upper state alone. If they are truly identical, the count collapses: which particle is which is no longer a fact about the world, and configurations that differ only by a swapping of labels are the same configuration. The count of arrangements, and with it the statistics of the whole ensemble, changes. At high temperatures and low densities the distinction becomes invisible, and both quantum

statistics melt into the classical Maxwell-Boltzmann rule; this is why the classical picture serves us so well at the dinner table and betrays us in the cold. In 1911, before the full theory, the physicist Wladyslaw Natanson had already noticed that the correct law of blackbody radiation requires that units of energy be treated as indistinguishable; Bose and Einstein, a decade later, gave the observation its machinery.

The two statistics also mark out the two great destinies of matter at high density. Squeeze fermions together, in a white dwarf or a neutron star or the electrons of any metal, and the exclusion principle itself supplies the pressure: the particles stack up the available states, one to a state, and the resulting degeneracy pressure holds up entire stars against gravity, a fact discovered in the 1920s that explained why white dwarfs do not collapse. Bosons under the same pressure have the opposite fate: they are permitted to gather, and at high enough density, or cold enough temperature, they gather catastrophically well. The universe therefore contains both kinds of degeneracy, the refusing kind and the joining kind, and the borderline between them is the quantum concentration, the density at which the atoms' wavelengths begin to overlap. Above the borderline the world is quantum; below it, classical; and every experiment in this book is the story of physicists carrying a gas across that line on purpose.

The union of spin with statistics, whole-number spins with Bose counting and half-spins with the exclusion principle, is one of the deepest facts in physics, and its full explanation lies deeper than this book's subject: the theorem that unites them, proved in the twentieth century's middle decades, rests on relativity and causality, and states that the two families must have the two behaviors, that the arithmetic and the spin are two faces of one property. For the working physicist the theorem is a license: look at the spin, and you know the statistics. The practical consequence for this story is that whole atoms can be either kind, depending on their parts, since the spins of the electrons and the nucleus add; the reader will meet atoms of one element that are bosons and sibling atoms of the same element that are fermions, and the difference between them, invisible in any chemistry, is the difference between a gas that can condense and a gas that must refuse.

Chapter 3: The Anatomy of a Condensate

What, physically, is a condensate? The honest answer is that it is the moment a gas stops being a crowd and becomes a chorus. At everyday temperatures an atom is, from the quantum point of view, a small thing: its matter wave, the wave that describes it, extends over a distance set by its temperature, and in a warm gas that distance is tiny compared with the space between atoms. Each atom waves its own wave, collides its own collisions, and the gas is a collection of individuals. Cooling the gas stretches each atom's wave; the colder the gas, the longer the wave, and nothing dramatic happens while the waves remain short compared with their spacing. There is a threshold, however, and the threshold is a comparison: when the stretched waves begin to overlap, when each atom's wave covers its neighbors, the gas cannot remain

a crowd of separate atoms because there is no longer a fact of the matter about which atom is which. The gas condenses.

The transition has the sharpness of a true phase transition, and it is characterized by a number physicists call the phase-space density, a comparison of the density of atoms with the volume each one's wave occupies. Push the phase-space density past a critical value and the gas changes its nature abruptly, not gradually: below the threshold almost no atoms occupy the lowest state, and a hair's breadth colder, a substantial fraction of the entire gas occupies it together. The fraction is the order parameter of the transition, the number that says how far the gas has gone. The critical temperature depends on how dense the gas is: the denser the gas, the warmer the transition, which is why the first experimenters had to choose their atoms with care and then chill them to nanokelvins, temperatures a hundred million times colder than anything in the natural universe, and only reachable in laboratories.

The condensate that forms is not a liquid and not a solid; it is a gas in which a large fraction of the atoms have become one object. It has a single wavefunction that can interfere with itself, the way a laser's light does; it flows without viscosity; and it is, by the standards of ordinary matter, almost unbelievably fragile, held together by nothing but cold. The chapters that follow follow this anatomy through its history: the liquid that approximated it, the machines that reached its temperature, and the things it does once made.

A made condensate is a small, soft object, and the way experimenters see it is worth a paragraph. The cloud is typically a few tens of micrometers across, about the size of a biological cell, held in the middle of a vacuum chamber that is itself smaller than a shoebox; it is invisible to the naked eye and must be photographed through a microscope by a laser tuned to a wavelength the atoms scatter. Most images are destructive, taken by flashing the laser and letting the atoms cast shadows onto a camera, and since each experiment ends its cloud, the data of the field are millions of photographs of condensates that lived for a second each. Nondestructive imaging, which reads the cloud's refractive imprint without scattering much light, extends the life of a single condensate long enough to watch it evolve, and the great color images of the field, the portraits of the phase transition, are built from many such deaths: one cloud per point on the graph, sacrificed in the service of a curve.

The numbers give the difficulty honestly. A gas condensed in a laboratory is almost unimaginably thin, a hundred thousand times less dense than the air of the room, and the thinness is deliberate, because dense gases freeze solid long before they cool enough for their waves to overlap; the experimenters' trick was to accept a gas so thin that it cannot freeze, and pay for the thinness with temperature, pushing the critical point down to the nanokelvin range where the stretched waves of the thin gas finally meet. The arithmetic is a fair trade: every factor of thinness costs temperature, and the final bill, a few billionths of a degree, was simply the price of making a gas that could not otherwise exist. The reader who wants the difficulty of 1995 in one line has it: the experimenters did not cool a gas that existed; they cooled a gas they had to invent, a substance that exists nowhere else in the universe except in their machines.

Chapter 4: Helium: The Condensate That Was Already There

For most of the seventy years between prediction and proof, the only working approximation of a Bose-Einstein condensate on Earth sat in a bucket. In 1938, Pyotr Kapitsa in Moscow and John Allen and Don Misener in Cambridge, working independently, found that liquid helium-4, cooled below 2.17 degrees above absolute zero, stops behaving like a liquid and starts behaving like nothing else on Earth: it flows without any measurable viscosity, climbs the walls of its container, and refuses to boil in the ordinary way. The transition point was named the lambda point, for the shape of the curve the specific heat traces through it. Fritz London proposed within the year that the new superfluidity was Bose-Einstein condensation in disguise: helium-4 atoms are bosons, and the liquid was dense enough and cold enough to be past the threshold.

The proposal was right in essence and awkward in detail, and the details mattered. A liquid is a crowded place, and helium atoms in the liquid push and pull on one another constantly; the clean theory Einstein had written for a thin gas does not describe it, and had to be rebuilt with interactions included. The result is a strange compromise: measurements of superfluid helium show that only a fraction of the atoms, on the order of ten percent even near absolute zero, occupy the shared state, not nearly the whole liquid, because the interactions lock much of the condensate into ordinary liquid structure. Superfluid helium was therefore a partial condensate, proof that the idea worked in nature but not the clean demonstration the theorists wanted. It remains the most-studied superfluid and the everyday face of the field, and its most famous properties, zero viscosity and quantized vortices, reappeared exactly in the gaseous condensates of the 1990s.

Helium carried the idea further still, in a direction no one expected. The isotope helium-3 is a fermion, forbidden by the Pauli principle from condensing at all, yet in the 1970s helium-3 too became a superfluid, at temperatures a thousand times colder than its twin's. The resolution taught physics a lesson it would use again: the atoms pair up, two fermions combining into a bosonic molecule-like pair, and the pairs condense. The same trick, pairing, underlies superconductivity in metals and, decades later, the fermionic condensates made from gases; the reader should hold it as the second great route into the condensate state, the first being simple cold.

The superfluid state of helium kept producing physics after 1938, and its catalog of behaviors is the field's first textbook. The liquid climbs the walls of its container in a thin film and pours itself over the rim, the fountain effect, a behavior that looks like a party trick and is in fact the thermodynamics of a two-fluid system. It conducts heat by convection in a strange counterflow of its normal and superfluid components, carrying heat as a wave called second sound, a temperature wave that propagates the way pressure waves do in an ordinary fluid. Stirred, it forms the quantized vortices that later became a signature of the gaseous condensates, and the study of those

vortices in helium prepared the theorists who later wrote the same mathematics for the cold gases. The helium-3 story reached its own summit in 1972, when David Lee, Douglas Osheroff, and Robert Richardson found the fermionic isotope going superfluid at temperatures a thousandth of a degree above absolute zero, a discovery that carried off the 1996 Nobel Prize and completed the proof that pairing is the fermion's road to condensation.

Helium also supplied the field's first theory of the two-fluid behavior, and the theory is a model of how physics handles a new state. Laszlo Tisza, and then Lev Landau with greater rigor, proposed in the late 1930s and early 1940s that superfluid helium be described not as one liquid but as two interpenetrating components, a normal fraction carrying entropy and viscosity and a superfluid fraction carrying neither, the proportions shifting with temperature until at absolute zero the liquid would be all superfluid. The model predicted the fountain effect and the strange thermal waves before they were fully measured, and its concepts, the order parameter, the two fluids, the critical velocity, survived the translation to the gases with almost no alteration; when the condensate experimenters of the 1990s needed language for the cloud they had made, they took it from helium's half-century-old dictionary. The debt is openly acknowledged in the literature, and the chapters of this book that describe the gaseous condensates are, in the accounting of ideas, helium's grandchildren.

Chapter 5: The Long Road to 1995

After 1938 the prediction had a demonstration case in the bucket of helium and a clean theory for a gas no one could make. The missing ingredient was temperature, and the route to it was not obvious. The obvious first candidate was the lightest atom there is: hydrogen. In 1976 two American physicists, William Stwalley and Lewis Nosanow, published a proposal that spin-polarized atomic hydrogen, its atoms aligned so they repel rather than recombine into molecules, should stay gaseous at arbitrarily low temperatures and therefore condense under conditions a laboratory could, in principle, reach. The paper opened a race, and four groups took it up immediately: Isaac Silvera at the University of Amsterdam, Walter Hardy at the University of British Columbia, Thomas Greytak at MIT, and David Lee at Cornell.

The race consumed two decades. Hydrogen turned out to be brutally difficult in practice: it sticks to every wall, recombines at the slightest provocation, and resists the tricks that work on heavier atoms, and the gas stubbornly refused to condense. The hydrogen hunters developed much of the technology of the ultracold along the way, notably the technique called evaporative cooling, the selective removal of the hottest atoms to cool what remains, the same trick that finally chills every condensate made today. The honor of the first condensate eluded them until 1998, when atomic hydrogen finally yielded, three years after the discovery that had made the quest historic.

The group that got there first had chosen a different atom for a practical reason, and the choice was the whole game. Alkali atoms, the family that includes rubidium, sodium, lithium, cesium, and potassium, are heavy enough to be slowed with light and

structured enough to be steered with magnetic fields, and in the 1980s a new technique, laser cooling, learned to chill them to the microkelvin range, a few millionths of a degree above absolute zero, before the real cooling even began. Hydrogen at the time could not be laser-cooled, and so it entered the last stage of the race already far behind. The lesson the trade drew from the two-decade race is worth holding: the first Bose-Einstein condensate was made not in the laboratory that planned best but in the one whose atom was easiest to chill.

Why the alkalis yielded where hydrogen resisted is a matter of atomic structure, and it is the hinge the whole history turned on. An atom can be laser-cooled only if it has a closed cycling transition, a pair of internal states between which it can absorb and re-emit light forever without wandering off into other states, and the alkali metals, with their single outer electron, possess ideal cycling transitions at wavelengths for which lasers exist; hydrogen's transition lies in the ultraviolet, where the necessary laser technology of the 1980s simply was not there. The alkalis also offer magnetic moments that make trapping straightforward, and their collision properties suit the evaporative endgame, so the same atom that made the first condensate was, in a sense, pre-selected by the laser catalogue. The lesson generalizes across the history of cold physics: the experiments follow the light, and the isotopes condensed in the decades after 1995 trace, almost one for one, the wavelengths over which lasers and control were mastered.

The hydrogen program deserves its own memorial, because it built the field's technology while losing its race. The MIT effort, led over the years by Daniel Kleppner and Thomas Greytak, kept the original 1976 faith through two decades of failed attempts, and in 1998, three years after the alkalis succeeded, the group made the hydrogen condensate, the hardest one ever achieved, at a temperature colder than the alkali clouds by another factor of ten. The techniques the hydrogen hunters invented and refined, the magnetic confinement of a spin-polarized gas, the evaporation of the hottest atoms, the measurement of a cloud too cold to see, were the techniques the alkali groups assembled for the easier atom; the race's losers built the road the winners drove. The trade has been kind to them in its way: the hydrogen condensate stands in the record as the proof of the original proposal, made twenty-two years late by the people who never stopped believing in it.

Chapter 6: The Coldest Place on Earth: June 1995

The discovery came on 5 June 1995, in a laboratory run jointly by the University of Colorado and the National Institute of Standards and Technology, in Boulder, where Eric Cornell and Carl Wieman had built an apparatus around a few thousand atoms of rubidium-87. The atoms were captured in a magnetic trap, first slowed by laser light and then evaporatively cooled, the hottest among them skimmed away again and again until the remainder collapsed into the coldest gas ever made: about two thousand atoms at 170 billionths of a degree above absolute zero, 170 nanokelvins. Below the threshold, the trap held not a gas but a condensate, the first pure one ever made, and the physics world learned of it within weeks.

The proof was a picture, and the picture became one of the most reproduced images in modern physics. The experimenters released the trap, let the atom cloud fly apart freely for a fraction of a second, and photographed the distribution of velocities; the images were false-colored so that white marked where the atoms were densest. A warm gas shows a rounded, smooth blob, the familiar thermal distribution. The condensate shows a second, sharp peak at the center: the atoms of the condensate, all sharing one state, are nearly standing still relative to one another, and they pile up at zero velocity. The peak is not infinitely sharp, because Heisenberg's uncertainty principle forbids atoms confined in space from having an exactly defined velocity; its width and, tellingly, its shape, elongated along the direction where the trap held the atoms most loosely, are pure quantum-mechanical signatures that no classical gas could show, and the two-color image of a thermal blob with a cold spike growing out of it is, in effect, the portrait of a phase transition.

Four months later, Wolfgang Ketterle's group at MIT produced a condensate of sodium-23 with a hundred times more atoms, big enough for the experiments that a two-thousand-atom cloud could not support, and it was Ketterle's group that soon demonstrated the most theatrical property of the new state: two condensates, released from neighboring traps, interfered with one another like overlapping beams of laser light, matter waves producing visible interference fringes. In the same season Randall Hulet's group at Rice University condensed lithium, an atom whose atoms attract one another, and watched the condensate fight its own instability; only the quantum pressure of tight confinement held it together. Cornell, Wieman, and Ketterle shared the 2001 Nobel Prize in Physics for the achievement, and the Nobel citation credited not only the making of the condensates but the first studies of what they could do.

The discovery's aftermath moved at unusual speed, and the reason is worth recording. Within two years of the Boulder announcement there were condensates at MIT and Rice and, soon, in laboratories in Europe and Asia; within five there were hundreds; today there are thousands of groups, and an advanced student can build a condensate machine from published designs. The speed had a precedent in superconductivity and a cause in openness: the JILA and MIT groups published their methods in generous detail, the lasers and vacuum designs were standard laboratory equipment, and the technique scaled. Wieman, who had begun his career in atomic physics, brought to the project an obsession with teaching as well as research, and both the discovery and its teaching have propagated with comparable vigor. There is a second lesson, quieter: the condensate was not a discovery that closed a question but one that opened a field, and the thousands of papers since 1995 measure how much had been waiting behind the temperature barrier.

The news of the first condensate broke in the season of the announcement, and the world's newspapers printed the two-color image that has since opened a thousand lectures: the thermal blob and the cold spike, side by side, the portrait of the transition. Physics had not made such a picture since the bubble-chamber photographs of new particles, and the reason the image became famous is that it requires no translation; a viewer who knows nothing of statistics can see that the gas

on the right has become something the gas on the left is not. The other texture of the season was competitive: the Boulder and MIT groups were building toward the same threshold in the same months, and the difference of four months in the announcements, rubidium in June and sodium in September, was the margin by which a race of two decades was decided, the closest finish in the history of the cold.

Chapter 7: The Instruments of Cold

A Bose-Einstein condensate cannot be made in a thermos; it requires a machine of connected stages, each one colder and emptier than the last, and the machine is a story in itself. The first stage is laser cooling, and it sounds like a paradox: light, used to slow atoms down. A laser tuned just below the frequency an atom absorbs will be pushed against by its own reflected glow, and an atom swimming through a properly arranged pattern of laser beams feels drag from every direction, like a marble in molasses; six beams, one for each direction of space, can slow a cloud of atoms from the speed of a jet to the pace of a strolling ant, into the range of millionths of a degree. The technique's inventors, Steven Chu, Claude Cohen-Tannoudji, and William Phillips, shared the 1997 Nobel Prize in Physics for it, two years before the condensate it helped make took the next one.

Laser cooling alone cannot reach the nanokelvin threshold, because the light that cools also scatters and heats, so the machine's second stage hands the atoms to a magnetic trap: a carefully shaped field that holds the atoms, which carry a small magnetic moment, in a vacuum chamber without walls, suspended in emptiness. The third stage is evaporative cooling, the hydrogen hunters' gift to the field. The trap's field is lowered gradually, and the most energetic atoms, the ones moving fastest, spill over the edge and are lost; the remainder re-equilibrates at a lower temperature, and repeating the trick, skimming the fastest atoms again and again, drives the temperature down through orders of magnitude, the way a cup of coffee cools by letting its steam go. At the end of the sequence the cloud crosses the phase-space threshold and condenses.

Two further instruments complete the modern toolkit. The Feshbach resonance, discovered in the theory of nuclear reactions and applied to cold gases, lets an experimenter tune the strength of the interaction between two atoms with a magnetic field, dialing a gas from strongly repulsive to strongly attractive without touching the atoms, and it is the tool that later opened the physics of strongly interacting gases and of molecule-making. The optical lattice, an interference pattern of crossed laser beams, prints a standing-wave crystal of light into the vacuum, and atoms placed in it behave as if they were electrons in a solid: the lattice, cheap and perfect, made the condensate a laboratory for all of condensed-matter physics, a simulator in which the material's every knob can be turned.

The machine's final component is the emptiness itself. A condensate lives in a vacuum chamber pumped to pressures so low that the residual air, were it at everyday density, would occupy a volume the size of a cathedral, and the emptiness is not a convenience but a necessity: a single room-temperature air molecule striking the cold

cloud delivers enough heat to end the experiment. The chamber is surrounded by magnetic shields, because the ambient field of the building would otherwise distort the trap, and the sequence, capture, laser cool, trap, evaporate, image, runs on automated timing, because no human hand is fast enough for the final milliseconds. The result is a machine that looks like a physics experiment and works like a bakery: every run produces one fresh condensate, measured once and consumed.

Evaporation, the last stage, deserves the honor of one more paragraph, because it is the stage that makes the whole machine possible and because its logic is beautiful. The atoms held in the trap are not all at the same energy; the population is a distribution, a few fast and many slow. A radio-frequency field, tuned to flip the spin of an atom at a chosen height in the trap, works as a knife: the fastest atoms, whose orbits climb highest, pass through the height first, are flipped, and are ejected, and the knife is lowered gradually, each lower setting shaving a still-cooler layer from the top of the distribution. What remains after each shave re-equilibrates, because collisions share the energy among the survivors, and the temperature of the whole falls as the knife descends. The technique is neither gentle nor fast, and it wastes almost all the atoms it starts with, but it is the only ladder that reaches the nanokelvin floor, and every condensate made on Earth has climbed it.

Chapter 8: The Theory of the Wave

A condensate is one wave, and the theory of the condensate is the theory of that wave, and the theory turns out to be a masterpiece of the physicist's art of approximation. The full problem, thousands of atoms interacting, is beyond any direct calculation; the insight, contributed in the 1960s by the theorists whose names the equations carry, Gross and Pitaevskii working independently, is that the condensate barely notices its own atoms as individuals. Each atom, they argued, feels all the others as a smooth background, a mean field, the way a person in a crowd feels the crowd and not each neighbor; the condensate can then be described as a single wave moving through its own averaged influence, a nonlinear equation that one wave obeys instead of thousands of particles. The equation cannot be solved in most practical cases by hand, but it can be integrated on ordinary computers, and for a generation the field's standard exercise has been to predict a condensate's shape and breathing numerically and then photograph the real cloud and compare.

The mean-field theory carries several of the field's working concepts, and each can be said in a sentence. The condensate has a healing length, the distance over which it smooths out a disturbance, the way a puddle heals a dent: poke it and the wave re-forms within a few healing lengths, which is why a condensate tolerates defects without falling apart. It has a speed of sound, and sound in a condensate is a subtle thing: at long wavelengths the disturbance travels like an ordinary wave, but at short wavelengths, where the wave begins to feel the atoms as grains, the character changes, and the change, the spectrum first worked out by Bogoliubov in 1947, predicts and explains why a condensate is superfluid, unable to accept small deposits of energy because there is nothing for the energy to become. And when the atoms

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aira Astralis is a science writer specializing in astronomy and space exploration. Her work spans the full breadth of humanity's relationship with the cosmos -- from the earliest naked-eye observations to the engineering marvels of modern space missions.

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