

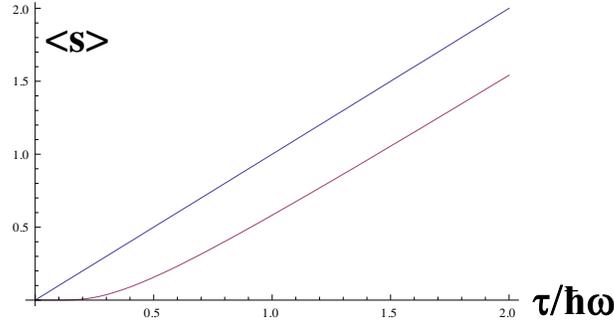
Lecture 11 Summary

Phys 404

We consider the spectrum of electromagnetic waves that emerge from a hollow box with walls at temperature τ . This problem has relevance to the cosmic microwave background spectrum, and the calibration of infrared thermometers.

Consider a single mode of a simple one-dimensional electromagnetic resonator. Imagine two parallel perfect-metal walls separated by a distance L . The fundamental mode of oscillation of the electromagnetic field will have a wavelength that is twice the distance between the plates to satisfy the boundary condition that the tangential electric field goes to zero at each wall. Hence $\lambda = 2L$, and the energy of this mode, according to Einstein is $E = \frac{hc}{\lambda} = \hbar\omega$, with $\omega = \frac{\pi c}{L}$ (This is where quantum mechanics sneaks into the argument). The unit of energy in the electromagnetic field, according to quantum mechanics, is called the “photon.” This particular mode can be occupied by either 0, 1, 2, 3, ... photons, the quantum of electromagnetic energy. Note that photon occupation of a mode is a separate issue from the energy of the mode. Photons are what we will later call “Bosons,” and any number of them can occupy the same mode. Einstein introduced the quantized energy value of the photon to explain the photoelectric effect. The higher the photon occupation number, the larger the amplitude of vibration of this particular mode. A classical electromagnetic wave would be recovered in the limit of large photon occupation number. The energy states of the mode now correspond to a ladder of energies $E = s\hbar\omega$, with $s = 0, 1, 2, 3, \dots$. This bears strong resemblance to the energy states of the quantum harmonic oscillator, except for the absence of the zero-point energy. Hence it is natural to consider the occupation of electromagnetic modes in terms of the energy states of a harmonic oscillator, as is done in the theory of quantum electrodynamics.

With this photon picture of the electromagnetic mode, we can now calculate the thermal average photon number in the mode by assuming the mode is in equilibrium with a reservoir at temperature τ . Start with the partition function $Z = \sum_s e^{-\varepsilon_s/\tau}$, where $\varepsilon_s = s\hbar\omega$, and $s = 0, 1, 2, 3, \dots$. The partition function was calculated in K+K Chapter 3, problem 3 for a harmonic oscillator: $Z = \frac{1}{1 - e^{-\hbar\omega/\tau}}$. The thermal average photon number is $\langle s \rangle = \frac{1}{Z} \sum_s s e^{-s\hbar\omega/\tau} = \frac{1}{e^{\hbar\omega/\tau} - 1}$, after some manipulation. The red curve below shows $\langle s \rangle$ as a function of $\tau/\hbar\omega$, while the blue (upper) curve simply shows $\tau/\hbar\omega$ (which is the classical prediction for the occupation of this mode). The two lines are parallel at large temperatures, but the photon theory shows that the thermal average photon number is exponentially suppressed at low temperatures, and this key result allowed Planck to fit the black body radiation spectrum with his newly invented quantum theory in 1900.



The thermal average energy in this single mode is $\langle \epsilon \rangle = \langle s\hbar\omega \rangle = \frac{\hbar\omega}{e^{\hbar\omega/\tau} - 1}$.

Now consider electromagnetic waves in a three-dimensional empty cube of side L with perfect-metal walls. Solutions to Maxwell's equations have eigen-frequencies of the form $\omega = \frac{n\pi c}{L}$, where

$n = \sqrt{n_x^2 + n_y^2 + n_z^2}$, and $n_x = 1, 2, 3, \dots$, $n_y = 1, 2, 3, \dots$, $n_z = 1, 2, 3, \dots$. There are an infinite number of

modes available and each of these modes can have $s = 0, 1, 2, 3, \dots$ photons occupying it. We have already calculated the thermal average photon number in each mode above. Now calculate the total energy of photons in the box by adding up the energy in each of the infinite number of modes:

$U = \sum_n \langle \epsilon_n \rangle = \sum_n \frac{\hbar\omega_n}{e^{\hbar\omega_n/\tau} - 1}$. Remember that n represents a list of three quantum numbers, so that

this is a triple sum. However the summand only depends on the magnitude of n , so we can convert the triple sum to a single integral on n . However we have to count the states properly in this conversion.

The modes can be described as dots in three-dimensional " n - space", spanned by the n_x, n_y, n_z axes.

Many high- n modes will be occupied, so that the n - space will be so dense with points that we can treat it as a continuous medium. All the points with nearly the same value of n will lie on or very near the surface of an octant. As this spherical surface expands out by a distance dn , it will include

$\frac{1}{8}(4\pi n^2)dn$ more points (because each point takes up a volume of 1 in n - space). Thus the triple sum

becomes $U = 2 \frac{4\pi}{8} \int_0^\infty \frac{\hbar\omega_n}{e^{\hbar\omega_n/\tau} - 1} n^2 dn$, where the factor of 2 comes from the two independent

polarization states that each photon can have. The result of the integral is $U/V = \frac{\pi^2 \tau^4}{15 \hbar^3 c^3}$, where $V = L^3$

is the volume of the box. The dependence of the energy density of the photon gas on the fourth power of temperature of the reservoir is the *Stefan-Boltzmann law*.

Looking at the integrand for U/V above, we can find how the energy density $u(\omega)$ is distributed

over frequency. This is the famous Planck blackbody radiation law: $u(\omega) = \frac{\hbar\omega^3/\pi^2 c^3}{e^{\hbar\omega/\tau} - 1}$, which gives the

energy per unit volume per unit frequency in the electromagnetic fields. The numerator of this expression is basically the classical prediction (Rayleigh-Jeans law), and leads to the "ultraviolet catastrophe" in the limit of large frequency. The exponential in the denominator suppresses the energy

density at high frequency (due to the quantized nature of the photon modes discussed above), avoids

the catastrophe, and gives excellent agreement with experimental data on blackbody radiators,

including the [cosmic microwave background radiation spectrum](#).