

Ode to Happiness for Sunday July 25 2021

M13: The Great Globular Cluster in Hercules



Image Credit & Copyright: Martin Dufour

In 1716, English astronomer Edmond Halley noted, "This is but a little Patch, but it shews itself to the naked Eye, when the Sky is serene and the Moon absent." Of course, M13 is now less modestly recognized as the Great Globular Cluster in Hercules, one of the brightest globular star clusters in the northern sky.

Sharp telescopic views like this one reveal the spectacular cluster's hundreds of thousands of stars. At a distance of 25,000 light-years, the cluster stars crowd into a region 150 light-years in diameter.

Approaching the cluster core upwards of 100 stars could be contained in a cube just 3 light-years on a side. For comparison, the closest star to the Sun is over 4 light-years away. The remarkable range of brightness recorded in this image follows stars into the dense cluster core.

Distant background galaxies in the medium-wide field of view include NGC 6207 at the lower right.

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Darn skywriters spoiling a perfectly good sky.

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Jay Thomas Tells David Letterman his Lone Ranger Story



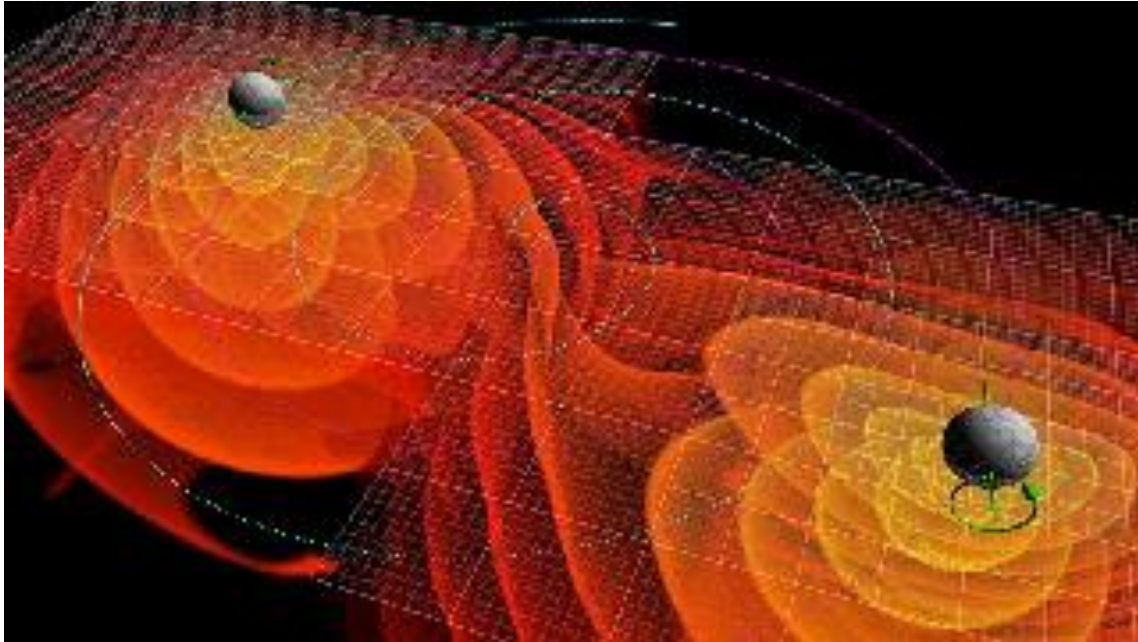
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KFabfnfhIaY>

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Famous Stephen Hawking Theory About Black Holes Confirmed

By Ben Turner -Live Science Staff Writer

The areas of black holes are tied to the amount of disorder in the universe



The gravitational waves emitted by two black holes as they spiral into each other, shown in a simulation.

(Image credit: C. Henze/NASA Ames Research Center)

One of Stephen Hawking's most famous theorems has been proven right, using ripples in space-time caused by the merging of two distant black holes.

The black hole area theorem, which Hawking derived in 1971 from Einstein's theory of general relativity, states that it is impossible for the surface area of a black hole to decrease over time. This rule interests physicists because it is closely related to another rule that appears to set time to run in a particular direction: the second law of thermodynamics, which states that the entropy, or disorder, of a closed system must always increase. Because a black hole's entropy is proportional to its surface area, both must always increase.

According to the new study, the researchers' confirmation of the area law seems to imply that the properties of black holes are significant clues to the hidden laws that govern the universe. Oddly, the area law seems to contradict another of the famous physicist's proven theorems: that black holes should evaporate over extremely long time scale, so figuring out the source of the contradiction between the two theories could reveal new physics.

"A black hole's surface area can't be decreased, which is like the second law of thermodynamics. It also has a conservation of mass, as you can't reduce its mass, so that's analogous to the conservation of energy," lead author Maximiliano Isi, an astrophysicist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told Live Science. "Initially people were like 'Wow, that's a cool parallel,' but we soon realized that this was fundamental. Black holes have an entropy, and it's proportional to their area. It's not just a funny coincidence, it's a deep fact about the world that they reveal."

A black hole's surface area is set out by a spherical boundary known as the event horizon — beyond this point nothing, not even light, can escape its powerful gravitational pull. According to Hawking's interpretation of general relativity, as a black hole's surface area increases with its mass, and because no object thrown inside can exit, its surface area cannot decrease. But a black hole's surface area also shrinks the more it spins, so researchers wondered whether it would be possible to throw an object inside hard enough to make the black hole spin enough to decrease its area.

"You will make it spin more, but not enough to counterbalance the mass you've just added," Isi said. "Whatever you do, the mass and the spin will make it so that you end up with a bigger area."

To test out this theory, the researchers analyzed gravitational waves, or ripples in the fabric of space-time, created 1.3 billion years ago by two behemoth black holes as they spiraled toward each other at high speed. These were the first waves ever detected in 2015 by the Advanced Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO), a 1,864-mile-long (3,000 kilometers) laser beam capable of detecting the slightest distortions in space-time by how they alter its path length.

By splitting the signal into two halves — before and after the black holes merged — the researchers calculated mass and the spin of both the two original black holes and the new combined one. These numbers, in turn, allowed them to calculate the surface area of each black hole before and after the collision.

"As they spin around each other faster and faster, the gravitational waves increase in amplitude more and more until they eventually plunge into each other — making this big burst of waves," Isi said. "What you're left with is a new black hole that's in this excited state, which you can then study by analyzing how it's vibrating. It's like if you ping a bell, the specific pitches and durations it rings with will tell you the structure of that bell, and also what it's made out of."

The surface area of the newly created black hole was greater than that of the initial two combined, confirming Hawking's area law with a more than 95% level of confidence. According to the researchers, their results are pretty much in line with what they expected to find. The theory of general relativity — where the area law came from — does a very effective job of describing black holes and other large scale objects.

The real mystery however, begins when we try to integrate general relativity — the rules of big objects — with quantum mechanics — those of the very small. Weird events start to take place, wreaking havoc on all of our hard and fast rules, and breaking the area law completely.

This is because black holes cannot shrink according to general relativity, but they can according to quantum mechanics. The iconic British physicist behind the surface area law also developed a concept known as Hawking radiation — where a fog of particles are emitted at the edges of black holes through strange quantum effects. This phenomenon leads the black holes to shrink and, eventually, over a time period several times longer than the age of the universe, evaporate. This evaporation may happen

over timescales long enough to not violate the area law in the short term, but that's small consolation for physicists.

"Statistically, over a long period of time, the law is violated," Isi said. "It's like boiling water, you're getting steam evaporating from your pan, but if you only limit yourself to looking at the disappearing water inside of it, you might be tempted to say the entropy of the pan is decreasing. But if you take the steam into account too, your overall entropy has increased. It's the same with black holes and Hawking radiation."

With the area law established for short to medium time frames, the researchers' next steps will be to analyze data obtained from more gravitational waves for deeper insights that could be gleaned from black holes.

"I'm obsessed with these objects because of how paradoxical they are. They're extremely mysterious and confounding, yet at the same time we know them to be the simplest objects that exist," Isi said. "This, as well as the fact that they're where gravity meets quantum mechanics, makes them the perfect playgrounds for our understanding of what reality is."

The researchers published their findings May 26 in the Journal Physical Review Letters. Originally published on Live Science.

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Dogs Who Can't Figure Out Stairs



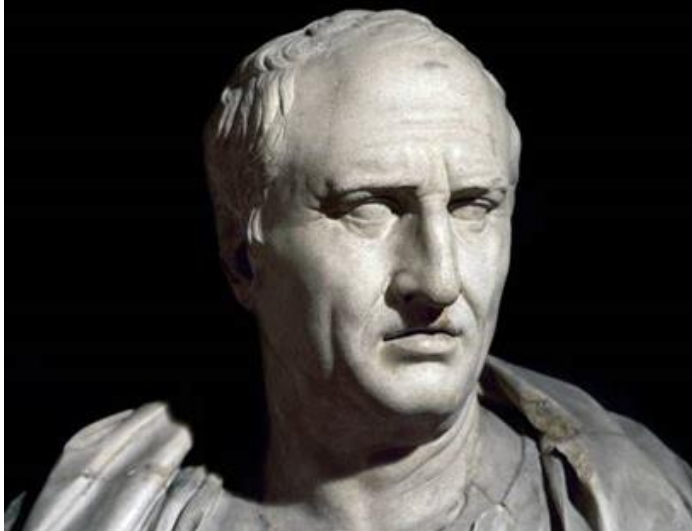
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0EKIw17N8A>

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The Best Political Quote of Any Era...



"The budget should be balanced, the treasury should be refilled, public debt should be reduced, the arrogance of officialdom should be tempered and controlled, and the assistance to foreign lands should be curtailed, lest Rome becomes bankrupt. People must again learn to work instead of living on public assistance."

Cicero, 55 BC.

Evidently, we have learned absolutely nothing over the past 2076 years.

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James Bond's New Car—The Aston Martin Valhalla



It has 937 horsepower from a pair of electric motors and a twin-turbo V8.

By Jonathan M. Gitlin

Aston Martin has just added a new plug-in hybrid to its lineup. It's one that can tackle the Nürburgring as well as the Low Emission Zone, though it's probably more at home at the track; this is no city car like the Cygnet, nor the much-needed plug-in version of the DBX SUV (due in 2024). Instead, the boffins from Warwickshire have brought forth a mid-engined supercar with a V8 and two electric motors, a carbon-fiber chassis, more than 1,300 lbs of downforce, and a total power output of 937 hp. Oh, and it's also James Bond's new car.

At this point, you can be forgiven for having a bit of *deja vu*, but much has happened since we last visited Valhalla. Then, the mid-engined plug-in supercar was to be powered in part by a twin-turbo 3.0 L V6. This was being designed in-house by Aston Martin, its first in-house engine design since 1968.

But later that year, Aston Martin got a new boss, Tobias Moers, who wasn't impressed with the V6's level of development—or lack thereof. Instead, Moers looked to a newly updated technology sharing agreement between Aston Martin and his old employer, Mercedes-AMG, which just happened to have a new performance hybrid system.

When Ars spoke to Moers earlier this year, he told us that "we've got to create a bespoke Aston drivability. It makes no sense to just copy-paste AMG. It should be bespoke, because Aston is a different brand. We can use that toolbox, and we can create a more bespoke Aston Martin engine out of them."

The Valhalla's outrageously styled shape has been influenced to a large degree by the wind tunnel and computational fluid dynamics server farms of Formula 1. In the past, Aston Martin made mention of the Valhalla's link to legendary F1 aerodynamicist Adrian Newey, but now Aston Martin has its own F1 team, so this potentially embarrassing collaboration with the chief designer of a rival team (Red Bull Racing) is mentioned no more.

What Aston Martin does highlight is the fact that the shape produces up to 1,322 lbs (600 kg) of downforce at 150 mph (241 km/h) and the fact that it has an F1-style driving position, which means your feet are going to be higher up than your hips once you're ensconced in there.

The Valhalla's new powertrain combines an electric motor at each axle with a twin-turbo V8 and eight-speed dual clutch transmission mounted behind the cockpit. The V8 uses a flat-plane crankshaft and revs to 7,200 rpm and generates 737 hp (550 kW). The electric drive motor units are each capable of up to 201 hp (150 kW), although not at the same time—the 400 V lithium-ion traction battery is only capable of outputting 201 hp, so total output is 937 hp (700 kW) and 738 lb-ft (1,000 Nm).

However, that means that the hybrid system can send all 201 hp to the front axle—which it does in EV-only mode, for example. Or it can send all of that to the rear axle, although in practice the car will apportion battery power to both axles based on the road (or track) conditions and the demands of the person behind the wheel. The electric motors also eliminate the need for a reverse gear in the transmission.



The one thing I'm not quite sure about is how Bond is able to afford a Valhalla on a British civil servant's salary. Aston Martin hasn't revealed the exact pricing of the Valhalla, but we expect it to cost at least \$1.2 million.

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Chaichana the Bull Elephant Moves to Beethoven's Piano Music



https://youtu.be/CUHP_ZsBsro

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Tennessee Whiskey: Chris Stapleton



<https://youtu.be/4zAThXFOy2c>

Christopher Stapleton is an award-winning American singer-songwriter who wrote multiple hits for many country/rock/pop musicians before stepping into the limelight himself with his smash debut album, 'Traveller,' in 2015.

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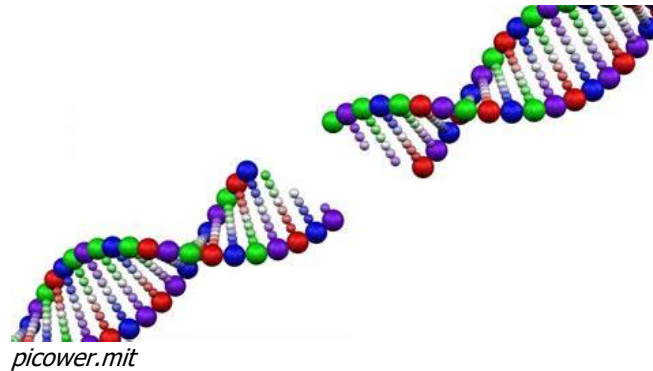
Mama Knows Where to Go in Case of Fire



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Memory Making Involves Extensive DNA Breaking

To quickly express genes needed for learning and memory, brain cells snap both strands of DNA in many more places and cell types than previously realized, a new study shows



The urgency to remember a dangerous experience requires the brain to make a series of potentially dangerous moves: Neurons and other brain cells snap open their DNA in numerous locations—more than previously realized, according to a new study—to provide quick access to genetic instructions for the mechanisms of memory storage.

The extent of these DNA double-strand breaks (DSBs) in multiple key brain regions is surprising and concerning, said study senior author Li-Huei Tsai, Picower Professor of Neuroscience at MIT and director of The Picower Institute for Learning and Memory, because while the breaks are routinely repaired, that process may become more flawed and fragile with age. Tsai's lab has shown that lingering DSBs are associated with neurodegeneration and cognitive decline and that repair mechanisms can falter.

"We wanted to understand exactly how widespread and extensive this natural activity is in the brain upon memory formation because that can give us insight into how genomic instability could undermine brain health down the road," said Tsai, who is also a professor in the Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences and a leader of MIT's Aging Brain Initiative. "Clearly memory formation is an urgent priority for healthy brain function but these new results showing that several types of brain cells break their DNA in so many places to quickly express genes is still striking."

Tracking breaks

In 2015, Tsai's lab provided the first demonstration that neuronal activity caused DSBs and that they induced rapid gene expression. But those findings, mostly made in lab preparations of neurons, did not capture the full extent of the activity in the context of memory formation in a behaving animal and did not investigate what happened in cells other than neurons.

In the new study published July 1 in PLOS ONE, lead author and former graduate student Ryan Stott and co-author and former research technician Oleg Kritsky sought to investigate the full landscape of DSB activity in learning and memory. To do so, they

gave mice little electrical zaps to the feet when they entered a box, to condition a fear memory of that context. They then used several methods to assess DSBs and gene expression in the brains of the mice over the next half hour, particularly among a variety of cell types in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, two regions essential for the formation and storage of conditioned fear memories. They also made measurements in the brains of mice who did not experience the foot shock to establish a baseline of activity for comparison.

The creation of a fear memory doubled the number of DSBs among neurons in the hippocampus and the prefrontal cortex, affecting more than 300 genes in each region. Among 206 affected genes common to both regions, the researchers then looked at what those genes do. Many were associated with the function of the connections neurons make with each other, called synapses. This makes sense because learning arises when neurons change their connections (a phenomenon called “synaptic plasticity”) and memories are formed when groups of neurons connect together into ensembles called engrams.

“Many genes essential for neuronal function and memory formation, and significantly more of them than expected based on previous observations in cultured neurons...are potentially hotspots of DSB formation,” the authors wrote in the study.

In another analysis, the researchers confirmed through measurements of RNA that the increase in DSBs indeed correlated closely with increased transcription and expression of affected genes, including ones affecting synapse function, as quickly as 10-30 minutes after the foot shock exposure.

“Overall, we find transcriptional changes are more strongly associated with [DSBs] in the brain than anticipated,” they wrote. “Previously we observed 20 gene-associated [DSB] loci following stimulation of cultured neurons, while in the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex we see more than 100-150 gene associated [DSB] loci that are transcriptionally induced.”

Snapping with stress

In the analysis of gene expression, the neuroscientists looked at not only neurons but also non-neuronal brain cells, or glia, and found that they also showed changes in expression of hundreds of genes after fear conditioning. Glia called astrocytes are known to be involved in fear learning, for instance, and they showed significant DSB and gene expression changes after fear conditioning.

Among the most important functions of genes associated with fear conditioning-related DSBs in glia was the response to hormones. The researchers therefore looked to see which hormones might be particularly involved and discovered that it was glucocorticoids, which are secreted in response to stress. Sure enough, the study data showed that in glia, many of the DSBs that occurred following fear conditioning occurred at genomic sites related to glucocorticoid receptors. Further tests revealed that directly stimulating those hormone receptors could trigger the same DSBs that fear

conditioning did and that blocking the receptors could prevent transcription of key genes after fear conditioning.

Tsai said the finding that glia are so deeply involved in establishing memories from fear conditioning is an important surprise of the new study.

“The ability of glia to mount a robust transcriptional response to glucocorticoids suggest that glia may have a much larger role to play in the response to stress and its impact on the brain during learning than previously appreciated,” she and her co-authors wrote.

Damage and danger?

More research will have to be done to prove that the DSBs required for forming and storing fear memories are a threat to later brain health, but the new study only adds to evidence that it may be the case, the authors said.

“Overall we have identified sites of DSBs at genes important for neuronal and glial functions, suggesting that impaired DNA repair of these recurrent DNA breaks which are generated as part of brain activity could result in genomic instability that contribute to aging and disease in the brain,” they wrote.

The National Institutes of Health, The Glenn Foundation for Medical Research and the JPB Foundation provided funding for the research.

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Sheep Herding Movements from Above



https://flowingdata.com/2021/07/02/sheep-herding-movements-from-above/?utm_source=join1440&utm_medium=email&utm_placement=newsletter

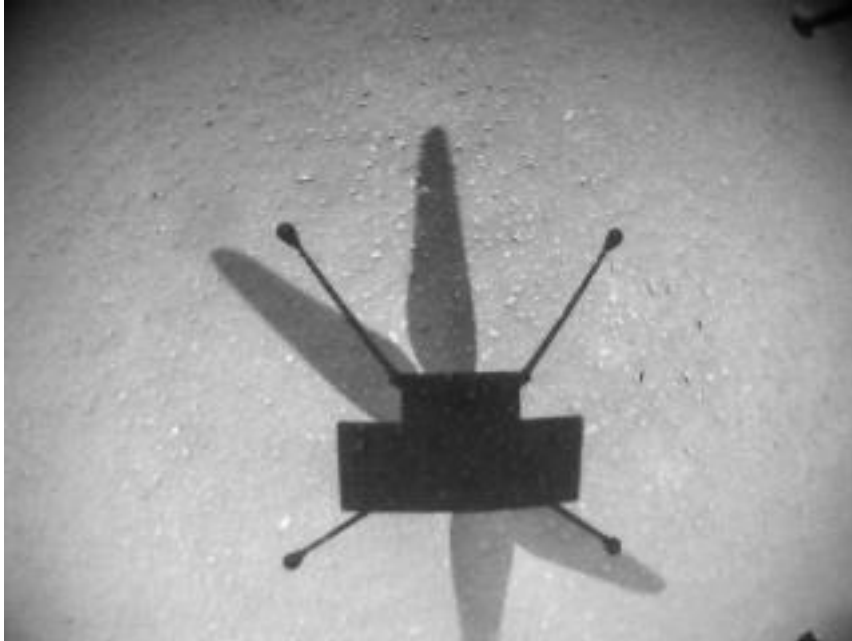
<https://flowingdata.com/2018/08/13/aerial-view-of-sheepdogs-herding-sheep/>

There’s something hypnotic in these videos.

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NASA's Mars Helicopter Ingenuity Sails Through 9th Flight on the Red Planet

By Meghan Bartels for Space.Com



An image taken by the Ingenuity helicopter of its shadow on Mars during the chopper's ninth flight, on July 5, 2021.

(Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech)

NASA's experimental Mars helicopter Ingenuity has now flown nine times on the Red Planet, letting mission engineers test a host of capabilities that could pave the way for more Martian choppers.

Ingenuity made its ninth flight on Mars on Monday (July 5), when it remained aloft for 166.4 seconds and flew as fast as 16 feet (5 meters) per second, according to a tweet from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California, which oversees the project.

Before the flight, NASA announced that the little aircraft would attempt new feats on this sortie, including taking a shortcut over rocky terrain unsafe for the helicopter's much larger companion, the Perseverance rover, mission personnel wrote in a July 2 statement.

Ingenuity tested out some new tricks on its ninth flight.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8OGhNSaljbQ>

The Ingenuity helicopter is a technology demonstration project that trekked to Mars tucked away in Perseverance's belly and arrived on the Red Planet on Feb. 18. The rover deployed the 4-lb. (1.8 kilograms) chopper in early April for what was planned to be a five-flight, one-month mission. Ingenuity made history on April 19 when it executed the first powered flight on Mars.

But as Ingenuity aced flight after flight, NASA extended the little helicopter's mission, setting the experimental aircraft to keep pace with Perseverance as the rover begins its geology and astrobiology work, the heart of the mission.

As capable as Perseverance is, however, the rover faces limitations in terms of where it can safely explore, and that's what inspired Ingenuity's newest flight, which comes two weeks after the helicopter's most recent sortie.

"Perseverance is currently at the eastern edge of a scientifically interesting region called 'Séítah,' which is characterized by sandy ripples that could be very challenging terrain for wheeled vehicles like the rover," the helicopter's team wrote in the statement outlining plans for the ninth flight.

"Rather than continuing to skip ahead of the rover, however, we will now attempt to do something that only an aerial vehicle at Mars could accomplish — take a shortcut straight across a portion of the Séítah region and land on a plain to the south. On the way, we plan to take color aerial images of the rocks and ripples that we pass over."

NASA has not yet published the full statistics and image collection from the flight. Data from Ingenuity must pass first to Perseverance, then to one of the fleet of satellites orbiting Mars, then to Earth.

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Mothballs in the Nation's Closet



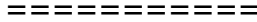
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uHzD1habYBo>

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Don't Even Think About Messing with My Baby.



Eric J. Smith



If you think you are smarter than the previous generation...50 years ago the owners manual of a car showed you how to adjust the valves. Today it warns you not to drink the contents of the battery.

Tanya Porter

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The Flight of the Carmen Torera



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bP67TwGWUh4>

André Rieu - España Cañí

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Amazing On-Stage Puppet Fight



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ehSBC6On2s>

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2021 Audibon Photography Award Winners



Northern Cardinal.

Steve Jessmore/Audubon Photography Awards/2021 Professional Award Winner

https://digg.com/2021/winners-2021-audubon-photography-awards-photos?utm_source=join1440&utm_medium=email&utm_placement=newsletter

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Complete vs. Finished vs. Completely Finished

Everyone can use a little "grammar" update now and then so here's ours for today.

"Likely a repeat but still funny for me anyway," says squadron mate Bart Halliday.

Is it "complete", "finished" or "completely finished"? No English dictionary has been able to adequately explain the difference between these two words - "Complete" and "Finished".

In a recent linguistic competition held in London and attended by, supposedly, the best in the world, Samdar Balgobin, a Guyanese man, was the clear winner with a standing ovation which lasted over 5 minutes.

The final question was: 'How do you explain the difference between COMPLETE and FINISHED in a way that is easy to understand? Some people say there is no difference between COMPLETE and FINISHED.'

Here is his astute answer:

"When you marry the right woman, you are COMPLETE. When you marry the wrong woman, you are FINISHED. And when the right one catches you with the wrong one, you are COMPLETELY FINISHED!"

He won a trip around the world and a case of 25 year old Scotch!

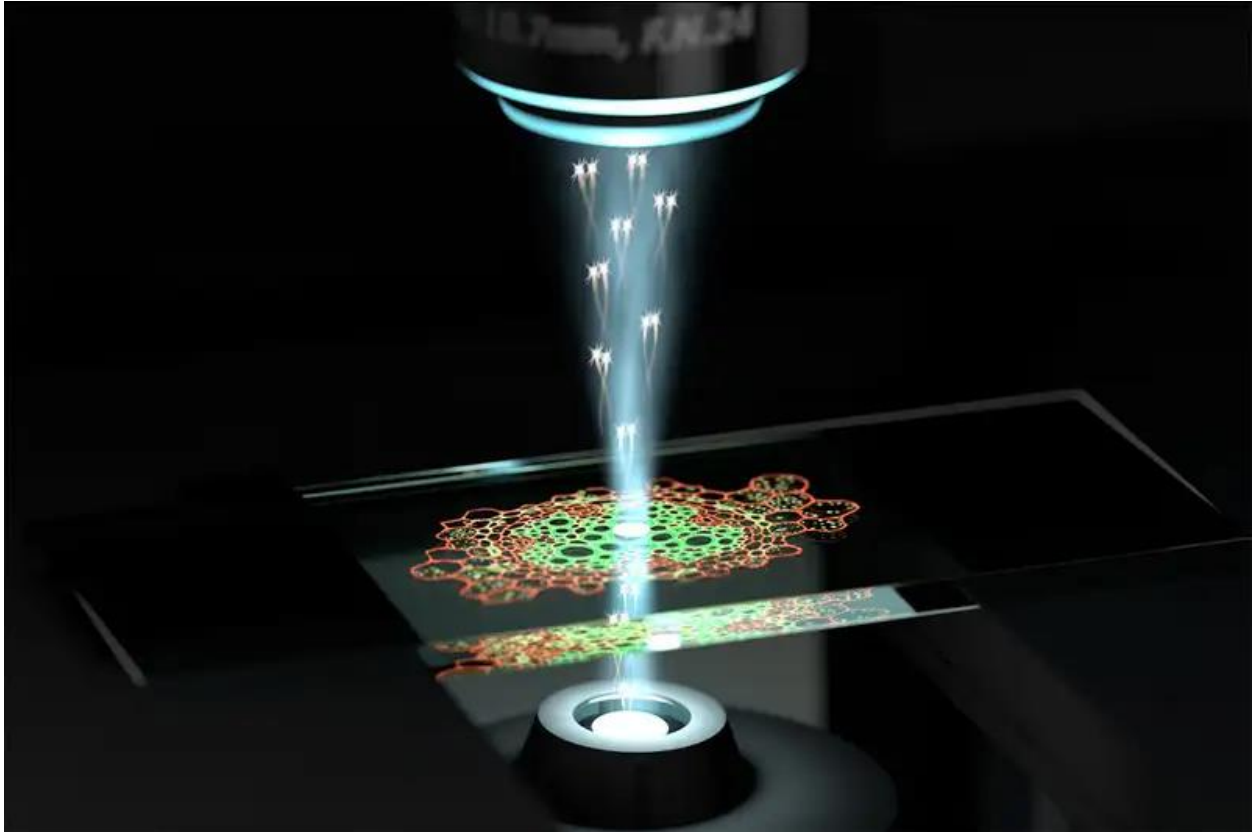
[I wonder why they bothered with the trip.]

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Quantum Microscope Can Examine Cells In Unprecedented Detail

TECHNOLOGY 9 June 2021

By Leah Crane For Technology



An artist's impression of a quantum microscope
The University of Queensland

Powerful microscopes have made a quantum leap. Using a quantum trick with light has allowed researchers to examine living cells in unprecedented detail without destroying them, a technique that could improve medical diagnoses and microbiology research.

The microscopes that are generally used to examine living biological systems shine one or two bright lights on their targets, and more powerful light sources allow researchers to see the cells in greater detail. But this approach has a fundamental limit to the precision it can achieve: at some point, a bright enough light will destroy a living cell.

"Our understanding of life as it is now has relied almost entirely on the quality of our microscopes," says Warwick Bowen at the University of Queensland in Australia. "We're really limited by technology, and it's not obvious how to break the existing limits because we've already pushed the intensity as high as we can without destroying the cell."

Bowen and his colleagues have found a way to overcome this problem. They used a type of microscope with two laser light sources, but sent one of the beams through a specially designed crystal that "squeezes" the light. It does so by introducing [quantum correlations](#) in the photons – the particles of light in the laser beam.

The photons were coupled into correlated pairs, and any of them that had energies unlike the others were discarded instead of being paired off. That process lowered the

intensity of the beam while decreasing its noise, which allowed for more precise imaging.

When the researchers tested their system, they found that they were able to make measurements that were 35 per cent sharper than a similar device that didn't use squeezed light.

"In order to achieve this kind of measurement without quantum correlations, you'd have to turn the intensity up," says Bowen. "But if you turned up the intensity enough to match these results, you'd destroy the sample, so we're able to examine things that previously would have been impossible to see."

These included the wall of a yeast cell (*Saccharomyces cerevisiae*), which is about 10 nanometres thick, as well as the fluid within a cell, both of which would be faint even with the best non-quantum microscopes, and completely invisible with standard microscopes. Observing these minuscule parts of living tissues could help us understand the basics of life at the smallest scales.

"This is a very exciting advance in the field of optical microscopy that opens the door for improving how state-of-the-art microscopes can work, at light intensities that are right at the threshold of damaging biological samples," says Frank Vollmer at the University of Exeter in the UK.

Quantum microscopes will also have practical applications, Bowen says. For example, light-based microscopes are often used to [determine if cells are cancerous](#) or to diagnose other diseases, and squeezed light could significantly improve the sensitivity of those tests as well as speeding them up, he says.

Journal reference: Nature, DOI: 10.1038/s41586-021-03528-w

Read more: <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2280216-quantum-microscope-can-examine-cells-in-unprecedented-detail/#ixzz6xOGUxtro>

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My Walking Thoughts

Ramblings and Shamblings: A Dodderer's Progress

Now I'm retired, my days have taken on a different pulse: different challenges, different rewards, different priorities, each set against routines that are reasonably predictable. The most important of these are my walks in which I look to post around 40 miles a week.

I capture proof of such achievements on an ugly black wrist thing that in conjunction with counting steps, lets me know the time; counts and summarizes my heart beats down to the very last hertz, records my REM sleep with dubious accuracy; and displays my blood pressure at a never-changing 122/62. Should I complain to Amazon about this? Not on your life. I like 122/62.

As for the walks themselves, I can usually be found on one of six basic routes, each with minor side excursions to keep them from becoming stale. Of any 100 walks, I'd

guess 92 involve one of these routes. The remainder respond to pop-up events or things that strike my curiosity; a construction project, an appointment taking me to exotic destinations such as downtown Camarillo, the Oxnard VA Center, or the Santa Paula Airport because I like airplanes.

I dress casually; chinos, long sleeve shirt (I don't like looking at my crinkled skin and choose to spare others of the sight as well), cheap walking shoes—K-Mark or Target will do because I'm going to consign them to end-of-life care with the local garbage company before they ruin my feet—a light windbreaker during that short period of time per year it's necessary, and if I'm heading off into the boonies (10% of the time) a surplus military canteen slung from a cartridge belt. Fashionable John.

While my feet and eyeballs are set to preserve situational awareness, I allow my mind free rein...unless there is some pressing issue that needs my full attention.

There used to be a wonderful television series titled *Connections*, in which the host, James Burke, wove a fabric of slightly linked events that after 50 minutes or so came full circle. Fascinating stuff.

Well, my connections don't accomplish such terrific ends—they're closer to James Joyce's stream of consciousness gobbledygook though nowhere nearly as spicy—but they make for interesting companions...almost an internal dialog.

So to the chase, allow me to use the past Saturday's venture into Ojai's northern front to show how the process works.

Sorokin's Vision

It began with thoughts about *personal responsibility* viewed in conjunction with concepts of liberty, freedom, and justice, relationships that have been on my mind lately. This led almost immediately to a proposition advanced by philosopher Pitirim Sorokin and others; *good people will have good laws and good rulers*, a premise that holds that we the people—read that you and I—are responsible for the character of our governance.

If Sorokin's postulate is correct, how do we rate our performance?

How indeed do I rate my own performance put to this test? I will no doubt pose this question to my wandering soul on an upcoming journey but for the moment I would have to say, "Not well."

Willie and Rick

For some reason, rather than following through on personal responsibility my thoughts turned to a man I'll call Rick, a friend from four decades ago.

Much of what I think I know of Rick came from his buddy, Willie, who had been Rick's running mate during their time on the streets of Los Angeles in the early days of World War Two.

If you looked at them in the 1970s and 80s, you'd have thought Rick, then in his fifties, was twenty years younger than Willie, whose face and movements were living monuments to a lifetime of privation and pain.

By contrast, Rick was a muscular, compact man of medium height, sandy hair, handsome—sometimes feral—features, dressed in the manner befitting a Newport Beach trust fund beneficiary, which in a very strange way he was.

As a homeless truant teenager, Rick lived on the street, constantly looking for a hustle. Running numbers for 'the mob', he was one of the thousands of kids orphaned by the great depression, whose only hope for survival lay in their wits and willingness to accept risks.

Thus, when Rick was 15, some men of unknown occupation came to him with a proposition: Their leader had been arrested for murdering a rival hood and was not pleased at the prospect of spending the rest of his life in prison.

If Rick, a juvenile, were to confess to the murder, he would spend the next three years in a youth correction facility. On turning 18 he would be released with the entire episode expunged from his record.

In return for such a service, his recruiters explained, the gratitude of the exonerated boss would make for an entirely different life than the one his present circumstances promised. Rick, no dummy, accepted, and as promised by these men of honor, good fortune did indeed await him.

Maintaining their end of the bargain was not as easy for his benefactors, owing to the fact that Rick had a mind and skill set all his own. To say that his future career would be checkered would bring gales of laughter to anyone who knows him. The best way I can explain it without getting into the bowels of his achievements is to say that you were to lay an honest \$20 bill on the table next to a tainted \$1, Rick would go for the George Washington every time...you could bet the farm on it. As a result, Rick's 'good fairy' was called into action time and again.

When I first met him, he had just 'inherited' an 8,000 square foot office building across the street from the Orange County (soon to become John Wayne) Airport, from which he could do his *shuckin' and jivin'* with the best of the Newport Beach aristocracy.

I don't have enough time left on the planet to go into even half the scams that emerged from his fertile brain, so I'll get to the point of why I admire him...a tale that leads back to Willie.

While different from Lennie and George, the relationship between Willie and Rick had much of the same pathos and devotion penned by John Steinbeck in his magnificent *Of Mice and Men*.

While you would not have confused Willie for Lennie-- the former was in possession of his faculties--he was in many ways just as much 'damaged goods' as Steinbeck's lost character. Unlike Rick, Willie maintained his street ways as he moved into his adult years, maintaining a low profile while doing his bosses' biddings.

When I came to know them in the late 1970s, Willie had settled in as Rick's shadow...a sort of valet with all the courtliness and grace the title suggests. But one day I got a phone call from Rick.

Willie was in jail for a murder he had committed thirty years before. After admitting to a deed eerily reminiscent of the one Rick had *not* committed, Willie was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in the prison at Tehachapi...a life not destined to last long as he suffered from an incurable cancer, He was diagnosed with less than a year to live.

Rick wanted help in getting a judge to grant Willie's release into his custody where he could spend his remaining days in the care of friends in some semblance of dignity. Pulling out all the stops Rick succeeded in this quest, proceeding to shower his old friend with the love and affection that today when I think of it, brings tears to my jaded eyes. And I know one more thing. Were it I who needed his help, his comfort, his whatever, it would be mine...no question or repayment asked.

Could someone count on me for such selfless devotion? I wonder. The subject for another walk?

Which brings me to the last leg of last Saturday's mosey.

Humpy

In 1978, as publisher of a tabloid titled *Motoracing News*, I had the pleasure of meeting and writing an article on Howard Augustine Wheeler, known to the racing world as *Humpy*.

The occasion was the running of that year's NASCAR NAPA National 500 at Carolina Speedway in Charlotte of which Wheeler was president. While the tabloid had a stringer covering NASCAR events, I decided it was high time to see for myself what made the series so popular.

"Just a bunch of rustic moonshiners," pretty much summed up the vision held by the more genteel racing establishments that frowned on bashing fenders or punting rivals into cow pastures beyond the four-cornered circuits defining NASCAR battlegrounds, many of which occupied sites made famous by the Civil War.

Thusly prepared for a trip into the past, I found myself blindsided by a man named Humpy that caused me to title the article I wrote on the weekend, *Can a Guy Named Humpy Be the Smartest Man in Racing?* My answer then and now is a resounding "Yes."

The kingdom over which Humpy presided was a 1.5 mile quadrangle in Concord, NC, built atop a landfill. Founder, auto dealer Bruton Smith, turned over operational control to Wheeler in 1976, and amazing things began to happen.

One of the first things Humpy did was improve the grandstands and top them with audio/visual configured suites he then leased to Fortune 500 companies, in effect making them partners in the NASCAR world. He then set about bringing up a new batch of 'good old boys' to become the organization's spokesmen.

In explaining this to me, Wheeler beckoned to a youngster named Darrel Waltrip—*Jaws* to his friends and enemies alike—who proceeded to dazzle me with a 10 minute soliloquy on why NASCAR was going to consign the other racing organizations to the dump heap similar to the one beneath our feet. He used the word 'consign' and quite a few other less than rustic terms, showing me what Humpy was focusing on...racers who could wow a TV audience with their curious blend of down-home folksiness underlying an unexpected eloquence.

"I don't give a damn whether they can drive or not," Wheeler explained, "TV is the key." Turned out Waltrip could do both.

Humpy's greatest failure was his inability to bring Trans-Am Series superstar, Willie T Ribbs into NASCAR's fold. Ribbs, a militant black had no mind being turned into an icon. He was a serious racer who was not about to put up with condescension of any stripe, besides which he possessed a solid left hook and a temper to go with it...perhaps the source of another walking story.

The NAPA National 500

This particular race, featuring the driving skills of the older 'good old boys', took place for the first time in front of a national TV audience. True to expectations, the race was full of wrecks and high drama provided by enthusiastic drivers and spectators alike. Still it all could have come to naught were it not for a next-to-the-last lap wreck involving the leaders that led to a live bare-knuckles battle between turns three and four that took the TV spotlight away from the race's finish.

As I recall, the TV announcer did manage to inform the audience of who won the race, though I, as I suspect was true of everyone else in the audience that day, can't remember and never cared. The cameraman, knowing a good thing when he saw it, continued to chronicle in wonderful black and white video what was to make NASCAR the darling of the roundy-round race car world.

From that day to this, aficionados from the east, west, and in between remain as mesmerized as those from the piney woods by the antics of today's well-quaffed media stars who no longer stoop to fisticuffs to decide who deserves the checkered flag.

What I personally know, even after Bruton Smith sacked him for some unknown affront, Humpy was, is, and will always be the true NASCAR champion. The smartest guy in racing.

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