Catalyzed decay of false vacuum in four dimensions

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Abstract

The probability of destruction of a metastable vacuum state by the field of a highly virtual particle with energy $E$ is calculated for a (3+1) dimensional theory in the leading WKB approximation in the thin-wall limit. It is found that the induced nucleation rate of bubbles, capable of expansion, is exponentially small at any energy. The negative exponential power in the rate reaches its maximum at the energy, corresponding to the top of the barrier in the bubble energy, where it is a finite fraction of the same power in the probability of the spontaneous decay of the false vacuum, i.e. at $E = 0$. 
A number of problems in statistical physics and in cosmology involve a consideration of a metastable (false) vacuum state of quantum fields, which corresponds to a local, rather than global minimum of the Hamiltonian. Such state can spontaneously decay into either the true vacuum or a lower-energy false vacuum due to quantum fluctuations at zero temperature or due to thermal ones if the temperature is sufficiently high.

The decay proceeds through nucleation and subsequent expansion of bubbles filled with the lower-energy phase. The expansion is possible only for bubbles of sufficiently large size, for which the gain in the volume energy compensates the energy associated with the surface of the bubble. Thus the problem of calculation of the decay rate is reduced to a calculation of the probability of nucleation of the critical bubbles, which in the quantum case is a tunneling process. The rate of the spontaneous nucleation of critical bubbles due to tunneling is exponentially small in the inverse of the difference $\epsilon$ of the energy density between the metastable vacuum and the lower one. Thus it is especially interesting to look for mechanisms, which would enhance the decay rate.

If there are particles present in the false vacuum, they can facilitate nucleation of the bubbles thus catalyzing the decay process. The presence of a massive particle is known to enhance the tunneling rate, since the tunneling proceeds at energy equal to the particle mass rather than zero, whereas the problem of the catalysis of the false vacuum decay by collisions of particles thus far has been addressed either only for theories in two dimensions, or purely phenomenologically.

In this paper is calculated for a (3+1) dimensional theory the exponential power $-F(E)$ in the probability of the nucleation of critical and subcritical bubbles in the presence of a highly virtual field $\phi$: $|\langle B(E)|\phi|0\rangle|^2 \sim \exp(-F(E))$, with $|B(E)\rangle$ being a state of a bubble with energy $E$. The calculations are done within the so-called thin wall approximation, which assumes that the size of the bubbles is much larger that the thickness of its wall and which is applicable at small $\epsilon$. The result of this calculation is that the induced nucleation rate of critical bubbles is exponentially small in $\epsilon^{-1}$ at any energy $E$. The probability reaches its maximum at the value of energy $E_c$ corresponding to the top of the barrier, which separates the critical and subcritical regions. However at that point the factor $F$ in the exponent differs only numerically from that at $E = 0$. The value of the ratio is found to be $F(E_c)/F(0) \approx 0.160$. This behavior is different from the one derived for a two-dimensional theory, where the exponential suppression in $\epsilon^{-1}$ disappears at and above the top of the barrier, leaving only a possible exponential suppression in the inverse
of a coupling constant \( g \) in the theory: \( \exp(-\text{const}/g) \). As will be shown, the leading contribution to the critical bubble nucleation rate at energy below the top of the barrier is a product of two factors: one being the probability of excitation of a subcritical bubble with energy \( E \) and the other given by the tunneling rate at the same energy. At the top of the barrier the suppression due to the tunneling disappears, however the excitation factor is already exponentially small. The difference with the two-dimensional case arises from the fact that in the two-dimensional problem there is no subcritical region for the bubbles in the thin-wall approximation (the barrier starts at zero size of the bubble), hence the excitation factor there is not related to the parameter \( \epsilon^{-1} \), but rather, possibly, to \( g^{-1} \).

The problem under discussion in this paper is closely related to the one of multi particle production in high energy collisions in theories with weak interaction (for a recent review see e.g. [15]). Like some of the recent papers on that subject [16, 17, 18, 19, 20], the present calculation uses the Landau-WKB technique [21, 22] for evaluating matrix elements between strongly different states of a quantum system.

The simplest model, in which there is a false vacuum state, is the theory of one real scalar field \( \phi \) with the Lagrangian

\[
\mathcal{L} = \frac{1}{2} (\partial_\mu \phi)^2 - \frac{\lambda}{4} (\phi^2 - v^2)^2 - a \phi
\]

with \( \lambda, v \) and \( a \) being constants. In the limit of vanishing asymmetry parameter \( a \) the field has two degenerate vacuum states, corresponding to \( \langle \phi \rangle = \pm v \), For small positive \( a \) the state \( \phi_+ \) at \(+v\) becomes a local minimum (false vacuum) and the one near \(-v\) (\( \phi_- \)) becomes the true vacuum. The difference \( \epsilon \) in the energy density between these states is given by

\[
\epsilon \equiv \epsilon(\phi_+) - \epsilon(\phi_-) = 2v + O(a^2) .
\]

The bubbles in the false vacuum are droplets of the phase \( \phi_- \) embedded in the phase \( \phi_+ \). The transition region between the phases (bubble wall) is of the thickness \( \sim 1/(\sqrt{\lambda}v) \), and throughout this paper only the bubbles, whose characteristic size is much larger than this scale, will be considered (thin wall approximation). The energy \( E \) of a bubble, as measured in the false vacuum, consists of a negative part proportional to its volume: \(-\epsilon V\) and a positive part, associated with the surface energy density \( \mu \). For small asymmetry parameter \( a \) the surface density can be taken as that of the domain wall in the symmetrical limit.
\[ \mu = \frac{2}{3} \sqrt{2\lambda v^3} \quad . \tag{3} \]

In the tunneling process the lowest-action path is provided by spherical bubbles, which have the maximal volume to surface ratio. Thus in the leading WKB approximation it is sufficient to consider only spherically symmetrical bubbles, whose dynamics in the thin-wall approximation is described in terms of only one collective variable: the radius \( r \). The classical equations of motion are determined by the following relation \([3]\) for the Hamiltonian \( H \)

\[ (H + \ddot{r} r^3)^2 - p^2 = (\mu r)^2 \quad , \tag{4} \]

where \( p \) is the canonical momentum conjugate of \( r \) and the notation \( \ddot{r} = \frac{4\pi \epsilon}{3} \) and \( \mu = 4\pi \mu \) is introduced in order to minimize the appearance of factors of \( \pi \) in subsequent formulas.

According to eq.(4) the potential energy of a bubble is given by the sum of the (negative) volume term and the (positive) surface term:

\[ U(r) \equiv H(r, p = 0) = \mu r^2 - \ddot{r} r^3 \quad . \tag{5} \]

Thus, as shown in Figure 1, at an energy \( E \) such that \( 0 < E < E_c = \frac{4}{27} (\mu^3/\ddot{r}^2) \) there are two classically allowed regions for a bubble with energy \( E \): the subcritical region to the left of the barrier and the critical region to the right of the barrier. The bubbles in the subcritical region oscillate and relatively slowly\([23]\) dissipate their energy by emission of particles. The bubbles in the critical region infinitely expand thus destroying the false vacuum. At energy above \( E_c \) there is no distinction between the subcritical and critical bubbles, and nucleation of a bubble with such energy would automatically imply destruction of the false vacuum.

A semi-classical quantization of the effective theory with the Hamiltonian determined by eq.(4) enables one to calculate the rate of the spontaneous decay of the false vacuum\([2]\), and the same approach is used in what follows to calculate the matrix elements \( \langle B(E) | \phi | 0 \rangle \) by means of the Landau-WKB technique. According to Landau\([21, 22]\) for a system with the coordinates \( q \) the matrix element of an operator \( f(q) \) between two strongly different states \( |X(E_1)\rangle \) and \( |Y(E_2)\rangle \) with energies \( E_1 \) and \( E_2 \):

\[ \langle Y(E_2) | f | X(E_1) \rangle \] in the leading WKB approximation is given by

\[ |\langle Y(E_2) | f | X(E_1) \rangle| \sim \exp \left[ \Re \left( i \int_{q_1}^{q_2} p(q; E_1) dq + i \int_{q_2}^{q_1} p(q; E_2) dq \right) \right] , \tag{6} \]
where \( q^* \) is the (generally complex) ‘transition point’, i.e. the point of stationary phase of the expression

\[
\exp \left( i \int_{q_X}^{q^*} p(q; E_1) \, dq + i \int_{q^*}^{q_Y} p(q; E_2) \, dq \right), \tag{7}
\]

\( p(q, E_1) \) and \( p(q, E_2) \) are the momenta on the classical (generally complex) trajectory with energy \( E_1 \) \( (E_2) \), which runs between the points \( q_X \) and \( q^* \) \( (q^* \) and \( q_Y) \), and, finally, \( q_X \) and \( q_Y \) are points, chosen somewhere in the classically allowed regions for the states \( X \) and \( Y \) correspondingly. The particular choice of each of the latter points in a simply connected domain of the classically allowed region does not affect the real part of the integrals in eq.(6). The interpretation of the Landau formula (6) is straightforward within the approach consistently pursued in the Landau-Lifshits textbook in connection with the WKB calculation of various transition amplitudes: the amplitude is given by the exponent of the truncated classical action on the trajectory, which runs from the initial state to the final through a (complex) ‘transition point’.

Few remarks are in order in connection with the application of eq.(6) in the problem discussed here. First is that eq.(6) is written for the case, relevant to present calculation, when the classical value of the operator \( f \) is not exponential at the ‘transition point’ \( q^* \), so that the exponential factor, given by eq.(6) is not sensitive to the specific form of the operator. Second is that eq.(6) does not require the WKB approximation to be applicable for the wave functions of either of the states \( X \) and \( Y \) in the classically allowed region, i.e. where these wave functions are large. Thus it can be applied even if the lowest of the two energies, say \( E_1 \), is small, including the case \( E_1 = 0 \). The only condition for applicability of eq.(6) is that the states \( X \) and \( Y \) are ‘strongly different’ in the sense that the matrix element, given by this equation, contains large exponential power, i.e. that it is strongly exponentially suppressed. Third is that the branch of the function \( p(q, E) \) in the complex plane is to be chosen so that the exponential power in eq.(6) is negative. Finally, if there are several ‘transition points’ \( q^* \), only the contribution of the one which gives the maximal transition probability is to be retained.

In the matrix element \( \langle B(E) | \phi | 0 \rangle \) the field operator with zero spatial momentum (c.m. system) translates in the effective theory of the thin-wall bubbles into the operator

\[
\int (\phi(x) - \phi_+) \, d^3x = \frac{8}{3} \pi vr^3. \tag{8}
\]

Thus the whole problem can be reformulated in terms of the effective theory as a calculation
of the matrix element $\langle B(E)|r^3|0\rangle$ for a system with the Hamiltonian determined by eq.(4). Using the Landau formula (5) one can write the exponential estimate for this matrix element as

$$|\langle B(E)|\phi|0\rangle| \sim \exp \left[ -\text{Re} \left( \int_0^{r^*} \sqrt{\mu r^2 - (\bar{r} r^3)^2} \, dr + \int_{r^*}^{r(E)} \sqrt{(\mu r^2)^2 - (\bar{r} r^3 + E)^2} \, dr \right) \right]$$

$$= \exp \left[ -\frac{1}{\xi} \text{Re} \left( \int_0^{x^*} \frac{x^4 - x^6}{x^4 - (x^3 + w)^2} \, dx + \int_{x^*}^{x(E)} \frac{x^4 - (x^3 + w)^2}{x^4 - (x^3 + w)^2} \, dx \right) \right] , \quad (9)$$

where instead of $r$ and $E$ the dimensionless variables $x$ and $w$ are introduced as $r = x \tilde{\mu}/\tilde{\epsilon}$ and $E = w \tilde{\mu}^3/\tilde{\epsilon}^2$ and $\xi = \tilde{\epsilon}^3/\tilde{\mu}^4$ is the small dimensionless constant in the effective theory of bubbles. In Figure 2 are shown the classical turning points for bubbles at zero energy and also for an energy $E < E_c$. At $E = 0$ the classically allowed domain consists of the region $x > 1$ and of the point $x = 0$. At a non-zero energy $E < E_c$ the classically allowed domain consists of two finite regions: to the left of barrier, $x < x_1(E)$, corresponding to subcritical bubbles and to the right of the barrier, $x > x_2(E)$, which corresponds to infinitely expanding critical bubbles. Accordingly the final point $x(E)$ of the transition trajectory in eq.(9) can be chosen either in the subcritical domain (path I + II in Fig. 2) or in the critical one (path I + III in Fig. 2). The former choice produces the amplitude of the excitation of a subcritical bubble: $A_- = \langle B_{\text{sub}-c}(E)|\phi|0\rangle$, while the latter choice gives the amplitude of production of an infinitely expanding critical bubble $A_+ = \langle B_c(E)|\phi|0\rangle$. In either case the transition path starts at the point $x = 0$ and with $E = 0$, which corresponds to absence of a bubble in the initial state. Strictly speaking, the thin-wall approximation is not applicable at $r = 0$. However, the inaccuracy of the approximation at the values of the radius of the order of the thickness of the wall does not affect the factors $\sim \exp(-\text{const}/\xi)$ which are being considered in this calculation. In other words, the expression in eq.(9) receives dominant contribution from the region of large $r$, and therefore is calculable within the thin-wall approximation. From the paths shown in Fig.2 it is clear that the amplitudes $A_+$ and $A_-$ are related as

$$|A_+| = |A_-| \exp(-b(E)/\xi) , \quad (10)$$

where

$$b(E)/\xi = \int_{r_1(E)}^{r_2(E)} |p(r; E)| \, dr = \frac{1}{\xi} \int_{x_1(E)}^{x_2(E)} \sqrt{x^4 - (x^3 + w)^2} \, dx , \quad (11)$$
is the exponential power in the barrier penetration rate at energy $E$. The relation (10) can thus be interpreted as stating that the production of the critical bubble at $E < E_c$ proceeds through excitation of a subcritical one with subsequent tunneling through the barrier.

According to the expression (7) the ‘transition point’ $x^*$ is determined by solution of the equation

$$\sqrt{x^4 - x^6} - \sqrt{x^4 - (x^3 + w)^2} = 0 \ .$$

(12)

The solutions to this equation are given by the three values of the cubic root $(-w/2)^{1/3}$. A simple inspection shows that as the appropriate ‘transition point’ one can choose either of the complex values of the root in the right half plane (choosing one instead of another gives the same result after proper redefinition of the branches of the expressions in eq.(8)). The integrals in eq.(8) were evaluated numerically to determine the functions $c(E)$ and $b(E)$, appearing in the amplitudes $A_-$ and $A_+$:

$$|A_-| \sim \exp \left( -\frac{c(E)}{\xi} \right) , \quad |A_+| \sim \exp \left( -\frac{c(E) + b(E)}{\xi} \right) .$$

(13)

The results of the numerical calculation are shown in Fig. 3. At the critical energy $E_c$, corresponding to the top of the barrier, the barrier penetration term $b(E)$ vanishes. However the excitation term $c(E)$ at this energy has a finite value $c(E_c) \approx 0.0314 \approx 0.160 b(0)$, where $b(0) = \pi/16$ is the value of the barrier penetration term for the spontaneous false vacuum decay. (In fact $c(E_c)$ can be found exactly in terms of elliptic integrals, but the final expression for the result is unusually cumbersome.)

The function $c(E)$ can be found analytically in the limit of large $w$ as well as of small $w$. For large $w$ one can neglect $x^4$ in comparison with $x^6$ and with $(x^3 + w)^2$ in eq.(8) and thus find

$$c(E) = \frac{3\sqrt{3}}{4} \left| \frac{w}{2} \right|^{\frac{3}{2}} \quad (w \gg 1) .$$

(14)

For $w \ll 1$ the expression in eq.(8) is determined by the region of $x$ near the classical turning point $x_1(E)$. In this region one can neglect in eq.(8) $x^6$ in comparison with $x^4$ and also neglect $x^3$ in comparison with $w$. Then $c(E)$ can be found as

$$c(E) = \int_0^L x^2 \, dx - \int_{\sqrt{w}}^L \sqrt{x^4 - w^2} \, dx = \frac{\sqrt{\pi} \Gamma(1/4)}{6 \Gamma(3/4)} w^{\frac{3}{2}} \approx 0.874 w^{\frac{3}{2}} \quad (w \ll 1) ,$$

(15)
where both integrals run along the real axis and $L$ is a cutoff parameter, $L \gg \sqrt{w}$. The difference of the integrals is determined by the region $x \sim \sqrt{w}$, which substantiates the approximation, leading from eq.(11) to eq.(15). The full exponential power in the excitation amplitude $A_-$ for small $w$ is thus given by $c(E)/\xi = \text{const} \sqrt{E/\mu}$ which coincides with the result for the amplitude of excitation of a bubble with energy $E$ in the case of degenerate vacua obtained in [20]. (Clearly, in that case only subcritical bubbles exist). One should however keep in mind that the region of small $w$ is limited from below by the condition of applicability of the thin-wall approximation, which implies that the characteristic size of the bubbles in the relevant region $r \sim \sqrt{w \tilde{\mu}/\tilde{\epsilon}}$ is larger than the thickness of the wall. In terms of $E$ this translates into the condition $[20] E \gg \mu^{1/3}$.

It can be also noticed that at small energy the barrier penetration term

$$b(E) = \frac{\pi}{16} - w + o(w)$$  \hspace{1cm} (16)$$

decreases faster than the $w^{3/2}$ growth of the $c(E)$. Therefore the probability of the induced decay of the false vacuum grows with energy in this region. As is seen from Fig. 3, this behavior continues up to the top of the barrier, where $b(E)$ vanishes.

The behavior of the induced tunneling amplitude calculated in this paper is similar to the one observed \[18,19\] in the quantum-mechanical example with the double well potential $(x^2 - 1)^2$, where at the top of the barrier the exponential power in the excitation probability is a finite fraction, namely one half, of that in the tunneling probability at $E = 0$. That the ratio of the exponential powers in that case is exactly one half is a consequence of the reflection symmetry of the potential and of the standard relation of the Hamiltonian to the kinetic and the potential energy. Both these features do not hold for the problem discussed here, hence the particular value of the ratio of the exponential powers is different, and is approximately equal to 0.160.

As a final remark one can note, that the Landau formula (3) is not sensitive in the leading exponential approximation to the particular form of the operator $f(q)$, provided that the function $f(q)$ by itself is not exponential in the parameters in the problem. Therefore, though for definiteness the catalysis of the false vacuum decay by the particular operator $\phi$ has been discussed, the same results should be applicable for destruction of the false vacuum in any few-particle process at energy $E$. Also one can notice, that the particular form of the Lagrangian in eq.(11) was used only to give the parameters $\epsilon$ and $\mu$ a particular expression in terms of the underlying theory. The rest of the calculation is based on the relation (4) for the Hamiltonian of the effective theory, which is a general relation for the
dynamics of spherical bubbles in the thin-wall approximation. Therefore the results of the present calculation are applicable whenever the latter approximation is valid.

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Figure captions

Fig. 1. Potential energy of a bubble vs. its radius.

Fig. 2. Classical turning points and the transition path in the Landau formula for the bubbles. $x = 1$ is the turning point on the right of the barrier at zero energy. $x_1$ and $x_2$ are the turning points on the left and on the right of the barrier at energy $E$. The transition trajectory starts at $x = 0$ and goes with energy $E = 0$ to the ‘transition point’ $x^*$ (the link I), then it goes with energy $E$ either to the subcritical region (the link II) or to the critical one (the link III).

Fig. 3. The barrier penetration function $b(E)$ (dashed), the excitation function $c(E)$ (dotted), and their sum (solid) vs. $w = E \tilde{c}^2/\tilde{\mu}^3$. At the point $w_c = 4/27$ and beyond the barrier disappears, hence $b(E) = 0$ and the sum coincides with $c(E)$. 

Fig. 2