Decoherence Functional and Probability Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

We confirm that the diagonal elements of the Gell-Mann and Hartle’s decoherence functional are equal to the relative frequencies of the results of many identical experiments, when a set of alternative histories decoheres. We consider both cases of the pure and mixed initial states.
§ 1. Introduction

If quantum mechanics is the fundamental theory of physics, the entire universe should also be described quantum mechanically. Recently Gell-Mann and Hartle [1] generalized the quantum theory using the concept of coarse graining and decoherence. Similar frameworks were constructed primarily by Griffiths [2] and Omnès [3], and Yamada and Takagi [4] constructed independently the similar framework. They showed that, when a set of alternative histories decoheres, the diagonal elements of the decoherence functional satisfy the mathematical properties of probabilities, so they regarded these as physical probabilities.

On the other hand, Everett [5] and others [6-12] discussed that probability interpretation of the quantum theory can be explained by the fundamental framework of the theory itself, though a “measure” in Hilbert space is introduced. They considered the relative frequencies of the results of many \( N \) identical experiments. They showed that the absolute squares which are identified with probabilities in ordinary quantum mechanics are equal to the relative frequencies, when \( N \to \infty \).

In this paper we confirm that the diagonal elements of the Gell-Mann and Hartle’s decoherence functional are equal to the relative frequencies, when a set of alternative histories decoheres and \( N \to \infty \). We consider the pure state case in §2 and the mixed state case in §3.

§ 2. Pure State Case

In order to consider probability interpretation we need an ensemble of identical systems. In this section an individual system is a pure state \( |\psi\rangle \), and \( |\psi\rangle \) is normalized to unity, \( \langle \psi | \psi \rangle = 1 \). Suppose we have \( N \) identical systems, so that the total system is described by the state vector,

\[
|\Psi\rangle = |\psi\rangle^N = |\psi\rangle \cdots |\psi\rangle \quad (N \text{ terms}) .
\]  

(1)

Following Gell-Mann and Hartle [1] let us consider histories,

\[
C_\alpha = P_{\alpha_n}^n(t_n) \cdots P_{\alpha_1}^1(t_1) .
\]  

(2)

Here \( P_{\alpha_k}^k(t_k) \) \((k = 1, \cdots, n)\) are projection operators and satisfy

\[
\sum_\alpha P_\alpha^k(t) = 1 , \quad P_\alpha^k(t)P_\beta^k(t) = \delta_{\alpha\beta}P_\alpha^k(t) .
\]  

(3)
In $P^k_\alpha(t)$, $k$ labels the set, $\alpha$ the particular alternative, and $t$ its time.

The decoherence functional can be written as

$$D(C_{\alpha'}, C_\alpha) = \text{Tr} \left[ C_{\alpha'} \rho C^\dagger_\alpha \right] = \text{Tr} \left[ P^n_{\alpha_n}(t_n) \cdots P^1_{\alpha_1}(t_1) \rho P^1_{\alpha_1}(t_1) \cdots P^n_{\alpha_n}(t_n) \right],$$

where $\rho$ is the initial density matrix,

$$\rho = \langle \psi | \langle \psi |.$$

A set of histories, $C_\alpha, C_{\alpha'}$ is said to decohere, when

$$D(C_{\alpha'}, C_\alpha) = 0 \quad (\text{for any } \alpha'_k \neq \alpha_k).$$

In the following discussion we assume that the set of histories decoheres. From Eqs. (4)–(6) we obtain

$$D(C_{\alpha'}, C_\alpha) = \sum_{\psi'} \langle \psi' | C_{\alpha'} | \psi \rangle \langle \psi | C^\dagger_\alpha | \psi' \rangle = \langle \psi | C^\dagger_\alpha C_{\alpha'} | \psi \rangle = \delta_{\alpha\alpha'} \langle \psi | C^\dagger_\alpha C_{\alpha} | \psi \rangle,$$

with $\delta_{\alpha\alpha'} = \prod_{k=1}^n \delta_{\alpha_k \alpha'_k}.$

Denote the diagonal element of decoherence functional as $P[C_\alpha]$, that is

$$P[C_\alpha] = D(C_\alpha, C_\alpha).$$

Starting from $\sum_\beta \langle \psi | C^\dagger_\beta C_\alpha | \psi \rangle$ or $\sum_\beta \langle \psi | C^\dagger_\beta C_\alpha | \psi \rangle$, we can see

$$P[C_\alpha] = \langle \psi | C^\dagger_\alpha C_\alpha | \psi \rangle = \langle \psi | C_\alpha | \psi \rangle = \langle \psi | C^\dagger_\alpha | \psi \rangle.$$

It is easy to see that $P[C_\alpha]$ satisfy the axiom of mathematical probability:

$$P[C_\alpha] \geq 0, \quad \sum_\alpha P[C_\alpha] = 1, \quad P[C_\alpha + C_\beta] = P[C_\alpha] + P[C_\beta] \quad (\alpha \neq \beta).$$

We will show that these $P[C_\alpha]$ are equal to the relative frequencies of the results of many $(N)$ identical experiments.
Consider that histories $C_{\alpha^I} = P_{\alpha^i}^n(t_n) \cdots P_{\alpha^1}^1(t_1)$ ($I = 1, \cdots, N$) are those of $N$ identical systems, but they may not be same histories. Here $P_{\alpha^k}^k(t_k)$ ($k = 1, \cdots, n$) act on $I$th factor of Eq. (1), upper indices of $\alpha$ distinguish the individual system, and lower indices distinguish the time slice.

Let us define the relative frequency $^\ast$ of $\alpha$ in the sequence $\alpha^1, \cdots, \alpha^N$ by

$$f_{\alpha} (\alpha^1, \cdots, \alpha^N) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{I=1}^{N} \delta_{\alpha \alpha^I} .$$

(11)

And let us define

$$\delta (\alpha^1, \cdots, \alpha^N) = \sum_{\alpha} \left[ f_{\alpha} (\alpha^1, \cdots, \alpha^N) - P[C_{\alpha}] \right]^2 ,$$

(12)

which measures the degree to which the sequence $\alpha^1, \cdots, \alpha^N$ deviates from a random sequence with weights $P[C_{\alpha}]$.

We write

$$|\alpha\rangle = \frac{C_{\alpha}|\psi\rangle}{\sqrt{\langle \psi | C_{\alpha} | \psi \rangle}} ,$$

(13)

and we obtain from Eqs. (2), (3), (7), (9)

$$\langle \alpha | \beta \rangle = \delta_{\alpha \beta} ,$$

$$|\psi\rangle = \sum_{\alpha} \langle \alpha | \psi \rangle |\alpha\rangle ,$$

(14)

$$|\langle \alpha | \psi \rangle|^2 = P[C_{\alpha}] .$$

With these ortho-normal vectors $|\alpha\rangle$ we can expand the total wave function as

$$|\Psi\rangle = |\psi\rangle^N = \sum_{\alpha^1 \cdots \alpha^N} \langle \alpha^1 | \psi \rangle \cdots \langle \alpha^N | \psi \rangle |\alpha^1 \rangle \cdots |\alpha^N \rangle .$$

(15)

Let $\epsilon$ be an arbitrarily small positive number and let us define

$$|\Psi_N^\epsilon\rangle = \sum_{\delta (\alpha^1 \cdots \alpha^N) < \epsilon} \langle \alpha^1 | \psi \rangle \cdots \langle \alpha^N | \psi \rangle |\alpha^1 \rangle \cdots |\alpha^N \rangle ,$$

$$|\chi_N^\epsilon\rangle = \sum_{\delta (\alpha^1 \cdots \alpha^N) \geq \epsilon} \langle \alpha^1 | \psi \rangle \cdots \langle \alpha^N | \psi \rangle |\alpha^1 \rangle \cdots |\alpha^N \rangle .$$

(16)

* In this case it is also possible to define an operator which corresponds to the relative frequency: $\hat{F}_{\alpha} = \sum_{\alpha^1 \cdots \alpha^N} |\alpha^1 \rangle \cdots |\alpha^N \rangle f_{\alpha} (\alpha^1, \cdots, \alpha^N) \langle \alpha^N | \cdots \langle \alpha^1 |$ (See Ref. [8], [9], [12]).
Then from Eqs. (10), (11), (12), (14), (16) and Eq. (4.13) of Ref. [11], we can prove that

\[
\langle \chi^\epsilon_N | \chi^\epsilon_N \rangle = \sum_{\delta(\alpha^1 \ldots \alpha^N) \geq \epsilon} |\langle \alpha^1 | \psi \rangle|^2 \ldots |\langle \alpha^N | \psi \rangle|^2 \\
\leq \frac{1}{\epsilon} \sum_{\alpha^1 \ldots \alpha^N} \delta(\alpha^1, \ldots, \alpha^N) |\langle \alpha^1 | \psi \rangle|^2 \ldots |\langle \alpha^N | \psi \rangle|^2 \\
= \frac{1}{\epsilon} \sum_{\alpha \alpha^1 \ldots \alpha^N} \left[ f_\alpha (\alpha^1, \ldots, \alpha^N) - |\langle \alpha | \psi \rangle|^2 \right]^2 |\langle \alpha^1 | \psi \rangle|^2 \ldots |\langle \alpha^N | \psi \rangle|^2 \\
= \frac{1}{\epsilon} \sum_{\alpha} \frac{1}{N} |\langle \alpha | \psi \rangle|^2 (1 - |\langle \alpha | \psi \rangle|^2) \\
\leq \frac{1}{N \epsilon} .
\]

No matter how small we choose \( \epsilon \), we can always find an \( N \) big enough so that the norm of \( |\chi^\epsilon_N \rangle \) becomes smaller than any positive number. This means that

\[
\lim_{N \to \infty} |\Psi^\epsilon_N \rangle = |\Psi \rangle .
\]

Therefore we have shown that \( P[C_\alpha] \) are equal to the relative frequencies.

§ 3. Mixed State Case

In this section an individual system is a mixed state \( \rho \) :

\[
\rho = \sum_i |\psi_i \rangle \pi_i \langle \psi_i | ,
\]

\[
\sum_i \pi_i = 1 , \quad \langle \psi_i | \psi_i \rangle = 1 .
\]  

The total system is written by the density matrix,

\[
\rho^N = \sum_{i^1 \ldots i^N} |\psi_{i^1} \rangle \ldots |\psi_{i^N} \rangle \pi_{i^1} \ldots \pi_{i^N} \langle \psi_{i^1} | \ldots \langle \psi_{i^N} | .
\]

Here upper indices of \( i \) distinguish the individual system. In the following discussion we assume the decoherence :

\[
D(C_\alpha', C_\alpha) = \sum_i \pi_i \langle \psi_i | C_\alpha^\dagger C_\alpha' | \psi_i \rangle \\
= \delta_{\alpha \alpha'} \sum_i \pi_i \langle \psi_i | C_\alpha^\dagger C_\alpha | \psi_i \rangle ,
\]

(21)
where we have used Eqs. (4), (6), (19). We find

\[
P[C_\alpha] = \sum_i \pi_i \langle \psi_i | C_\alpha ^\dagger C_\alpha | \psi_i \rangle = \sum_i \pi_i \langle \psi_i | C_\alpha ^\dagger | \psi_i \rangle ,
\] (22)

using Eqs. (2), (3), (8), (21). The Eqs. (10) hold in this case, too. We will show that \( P[C_\alpha] \) are equal to the relative frequencies.

Defining

\[
|\alpha, i\rangle = \frac{C_\alpha |\psi_i\rangle}{\sqrt{\sum_j \pi_j \langle \psi_j | C_\alpha | \psi_j \rangle}} ,
\] (23)

we obtain from Eqs. (2), (3), (21), (22) that

\[
\sum_i \pi_i \langle \alpha, i | \beta, i \rangle = \delta_{\alpha \beta} ,
\]

\[
|\psi_i\rangle = \sum_{\alpha} \sum_j \pi_j \langle \alpha, j | \psi_j \rangle |\alpha, i\rangle ,
\] (24)

\[
\left| \sum_i \pi_i \langle \alpha, i | \psi_i \rangle \right|^2 = P[C_\alpha] .
\]

We can expand \( \rho^N \) by these vectors \( |\alpha, i\rangle \) and write

\[
\rho^N = \sum_{i_1 \ldots i_N} |\Psi_{i_1 \ldots i_N}\rangle \pi_{i_1} \ldots \pi_{i_N} \langle \Psi_{i_1 \ldots i_N}| ,
\]

\[
|\Psi_{i_1 \ldots i_N}\rangle = |\psi_{i_1}\rangle \cdots |\psi_{i_N}\rangle
\]

\[
= \sum_{\alpha} \sum_{j} \pi_{j_1} \cdots \pi_{j_N} \langle \alpha^1, j^1 | \psi_{j_1}\rangle \cdots \langle \alpha^N, j^N | \psi_{j_N}\rangle \times |\alpha^1, i^1\rangle \cdots |\alpha^N, i^N\rangle .
\] (25)

Let us define
\[ |\Psi_{\xi^1 \cdots \xi^N} \rangle = \sum_{\alpha^1 \cdots \alpha^N, \delta \alpha^1 \cdots \alpha^N < \epsilon} \pi_{j^1} \cdots \pi_{j^N} \langle \alpha^1, j^1 | \psi_{j^1} \rangle \cdots \langle \alpha^N, j^N | \psi_{j^N} \rangle \times |\alpha^1, i^1 \rangle \cdots |\alpha^N, i^N \rangle \]  
\[ |\chi_{\xi^1 \cdots \xi^N} \rangle = \sum_{\alpha^1 \cdots \alpha^N, \delta \alpha^1 \cdots \alpha^N \geq \epsilon} \pi_{j^1} \cdots \pi_{j^N} \langle \alpha^1, j^1 | \psi_{j^1} \rangle \cdots \langle \alpha^N, j^N | \psi_{j^N} \rangle \times |\alpha^1, i^1 \rangle \cdots |\alpha^N, i^N \rangle. \]  
(26)

Again we can prove from Eqs. (10), (11), (12), (24), (26) and Eq. (4.13) of Ref. [11] that

\[ \sum_{i^1 \cdots i^N} \pi_{i^1} \cdots \pi_{i^N} \langle \chi_{\xi^1 \cdots \xi^N} | \chi_{\xi^1 \cdots \xi^N} \rangle \leq \frac{1}{N \epsilon}. \]  
(27)

Now if we assume

\[ \langle \chi_{\xi^1 \cdots \xi^N} | \chi_{\xi^1 \cdots \xi^N} \rangle \geq c \quad (\exists c > 0), \]  
(28)

when \( N \to \infty \), then Eq. (27) means

\[ \sum_{i^1 \cdots i^N} \pi_{i^1} \cdots \pi_{i^N} c \leq \frac{1}{N \epsilon} \quad (N \to \infty). \]  
(29)

From Eqs. (19), (29) we obtain that

\[ c \leq \frac{1}{N \epsilon} \quad (N \to \infty), \]  
(30)

but this is a contradiction to \( c > 0 \). Hence

\[ \lim_{N \to \infty} \langle \chi_{\xi^1 \cdots \xi^N} | \chi_{\xi^1 \cdots \xi^N} \rangle = 0. \]  
(31)

This Eq. (31) means that in the expansion (25) we only need such \( \alpha^I \) that satisfy \( \delta (\alpha^1, \cdots, \alpha^N) < \epsilon \), if we consider the limit of \( N \to \infty \). So we have confirmed that \( P[C_{\alpha}] \) are equal to the relative frequencies.

§ 4. Summary

In order to confirm the physical probability interpretation of the Gell-Mann and Hartle’s generalized quantum theory, we started from \( N \) identical systems, which were pure
states (§2) or mixed states (§3). We found that the relative frequencies of histories $C_\alpha$ are equal to the diagonal elements of decoherence functional $P[C_\alpha]$, when the set of alternative histories decoheres and $N \to \infty$.

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