States on timelike hypersurfaces in quantum field theory

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(Dated: 30 May 2005)

We investigate the possibility of defining states on timelike hypersurfaces in quantum field theory. To this end we consider hyperplanes in the real massive Klein-Gordon theory using the Schrödinger representation. We find a well defined vacuum wave functional, existing on any hyperplane, with the remarkable property that it changes smoothly even under Euclidean rotation through the light-cone.

Traditionally, Hilbert spaces of states in quantum field theory are associated with spacelike hypersurfaces. This is rooted in quantization prescriptions relying on the initial value problem, i.e., a correspondence between solutions of the equations of motion and initial data on a spacelike hypersurface. Furthermore, it may seem that causality requires hypersurfaces carrying states to be spacelike for a probability interpretation via the inner product to make sense.

On the other hand, quantum field theory shows properties suggesting that this restriction to spacelike hypersurfaces is artificial. In particular, the crossing symmetry of transition amplitudes may be taken as a strong hint that state spaces associated with more general hypersurfaces should make sense. One may push this line of reasoning further to arrive at an axiomatic formulation of quantum field theory in the spirit of topological quantum field theory. This view may also be motivated from quantum gravity.

We limit ourselves here to the investigation of states on spacelike hypersurfaces that are hyperplanes and consider the real massive Klein-Gordon theory in Minkowski space. Since the action $S$ is quadratic, the stationary phase approximation to this integral is exact. Using this fact, rewriting the action as a boundary integral and using a decomposition of classical solutions into positive and negative energy components yields the propagator

$$Z(\varphi, \varphi') = N \exp \left(-\frac{1}{2} \int d^3x \left(\varphi \cdot \varphi' \right) W \left(\varphi, \varphi' \right) \right).$$

The operator-valued matrix $W$ is given by

$$W = \frac{-i\omega}{\sin \omega \Delta} \begin{pmatrix} \cos \omega \Delta & -1 \\ -1 & \cos \omega \Delta \end{pmatrix},$$

where $\Delta = t' - t$ and $\omega = \sqrt{- \sum_{i \geq 1} \partial_i^2 + m^2}$.

The vacuum state is characterized by its invariance under time-evolution. We make the ansatz

$$\Psi_0(\varphi) = C \exp \left(-\frac{1}{2} \int d^3x \varphi(x) (A \varphi)(x) \right)$$

for an unknown operator $A$. Evolving the state using the propagator, we find that invariance is equivalent to the equation $A^2 = \omega^2$. We make the conventional choice $A = \omega$. A one-particle state of momentum $p$ is given by

$$\Psi_p(\varphi) = \hat{\varphi}(p) \Psi_0(\varphi),$$

where $\hat{\varphi}$ is the Fourier transform $\hat{\varphi}(p) = 2E \int d^3x e^{ipx} \varphi(x)$.

**VACUUM ON BOOSTED HYPERPLANES**

We shall now be interested in states on spacelike hyperplanes that are not normal to the time axis. Since the effect of spatial rotations is essentially trivial it suffices to single out the $x_1$-coordinate and consider hyperplanes whose normal vector lies in the plane spanned by
with $A = \hat{\omega}$ (we use a hat to indicate that the coordinate $\hat{x}_1$ instead of $x_1$ appears in $\omega$). Transforming the expression to $(s, x_2, x_3)$-coordinates affects both the operator $\hat{\omega}$ as well as the integral measure $d\hat{x}_1$. Explicitly, $d\hat{x}_1 = \rho \, ds$ and $\hat{\omega} = \sqrt{-\rho^{-2} \partial_s^2 - \sum_{i \geq 2} \partial_i^2 + m^2}$, where $\partial_s$ is the derivative in the $s$-coordinate. Abbreviating $(x_2, x_3)$ collectively by $\hat{x}$, we can write the resulting expression for the vacuum as

$$
\Psi_0(\varphi) = C \exp \left( -\frac{1}{2} \int ds \, d^2\hat{x} \, \varphi(s, \hat{x})(\tau\varphi)(s, \hat{x}) \right),
$$

where $\tau = \sqrt{-\partial_s^2 + \cos 2\alpha (-\sum_{i \geq 2} \partial_i^2 + m^2)}$.

One might be surprised that the resulting expression takes a simple form in terms of Euclidean coordinates and angles. What is more, the vacuum functional appears to behave smoothly in the limit $\alpha \to \pi/4$ and even beyond the light-cone. Is it meaningful there?

## VACUUM ON TIMELIKE HYPERPLANES

Note that we could have used an alternative route to obtain a general expression for the vacuum functional. Namely, for a given hyperplane we could have worked out the field propagator to a parallel hyperplane and then imposed invariance under the propagation using the analogue of the ansatz (4). The result would have been identical to (4) due to the Lorentz covariance of our setup. On the other hand, this suggests a characterization of the vacuum beyond the spacelike case as being invariant under propagation to a parallel hyperplane.

As for spacelike hyperplanes it suffices to start with a given one and obtain any other one through a Lorentz transformation. Thus, we single out the hyperplane spanned by the coordinates $(t, x_2, x_3)$. We wish to define states in analogy with the spacelike case as functions on field configurations on the hyperplane. From a quantization point of view the configuration space should be “half” of the phase-space, which in turn corresponds to the space of classical solutions. This means in particular that a configuration must be extendible to a classical solution. In the spacelike hyperplane case this is trivial. Any (reasonable) scalar function in space extends to a solution in space-time. For a timelike hyperplane this is not so. We need to restrict to configurations that do extend to classical solutions, calling them physical configurations.

Next, we define “evolution” in an interval $[x_1, x_1']$ by the path integral over the space-time region defined by this interval, in analogy to (1). To evaluate the path integral we proceed in a manner analogous to the spacelike case (3). The role of positive and negative energy contributions is now played by contributions with positive and negative sign of the momentum component in the
$x_1$-direction. We arrive at the field propagator
\[ Z(\varphi, \varphi') = N \exp \left( -\frac{1}{2} \int dt d^2 \hat{x} \left( \varphi \varphi' \right) W \left( \frac{\varphi'}{\varphi} \right) \right). \] (7)

The operator-valued matrix $W$ is given by
\[ W = \frac{ik_1}{\sin \kappa_1 \Delta} \begin{pmatrix} \cos \kappa_1 \Delta & -1 \\ -1 & \cos \kappa_1 \Delta \end{pmatrix}, \]
where $\Delta = |x'_1 - x_1|$ and $\kappa_1 = \sqrt{-\partial_0^2 + \sum_{j \geq 2} \partial_j^2 - m^2}$.

We turn to the computation of the vacuum state. As already mentioned, we take as the characterizing condition the invariance under propagation between parallel hyperplanes. Making the ansatz \[ \hat{W} \] with respect to the $(t, x_2, x_3)$-hyperplane yields the condition $A^2 = \kappa_1^2$, similarly to the spacelike case. We set $A = \kappa_1$ and justify our choice of sign in a moment.

Given the candidate vacuum state we have defined we proceed to generalize it to arbitrary timelike hyperplanes by using Lorentz transformations. Without loss of generality we can restrict again to Lorentz boosts in the $(t, x_1)$-plane. Thus, consider the boost with parameter $\gamma$ transforming coordinates via \[ (t, x_1) \rightarrow (e^{\gamma} t, e^{\gamma} x_1), \]
again we express everything in terms of Euclidean coordinates and angles according to Figure 1. Since now the boosted hyperplane is spanned by $(\hat{t}, x_2, x_3)$ we find that the angle $\alpha$ in Figure 1 corresponds to the angle $\tilde{\alpha}$ in Figure 2. The coordinate $s$ is related to $\tilde{t}$ by the time dilation factor $\rho$ (the same $\rho$ as above) via $\tilde{t} = \rho s$. The relation between $\alpha$ and $\rho$ now takes the form $\cos 2\alpha = -\rho^2$. Transforming the operator $\kappa_1$ as well as the integration measure in the expression for the vacuum functional, we obtain precisely formula (4) again. However, this time the range for $\alpha$ is $\pi/4 < \alpha \leq \pi/2$. The agreement with the spacelike case in the limit $\alpha \rightarrow \pi/4$ fixes the sign ambiguity in the choice of $A$.

**PARTICLES ON TIMELIKE HYPERPLANES**

While the expression for a vacuum state found above is very suggestive, a convincing justification that states on timelike hyperplanes are sensible requires us to consider particle states. We may expect crucial differences between such particle states and those on spacelike hypersurfaces. It will be sufficient to consider particle states on the hyperplane spanned by $(t, x_2, x_3)$.

Since a state is a function on physical configurations on the hyperplane, a basis of one-particle states may be characterized by the Fourier modes in this hyperplane. In the standard spacelike case these are labeled by 3-momentum. In the present timelike case these are labeled by the energy and the momentum in the $x_2$- and $x_3$-directions. The restriction of the energy to satisfy $E^2 \geq \rho^2 + m^2$ corresponds precisely to the restriction for configurations to physical ones.

Comparison with the spacelike situation \[ \text{(3)} \] suggests that a one-particle state should be described by the functional
\[ \Psi_{E, \tilde{p}}(\varphi) = \varphi^\dagger(E, \tilde{p}) \Psi_0(\varphi), \] (8)
where now $\varphi$ is the Fourier transform in the hyperplane,
\[ \varphi^\dagger(E, \tilde{p}) = 2p_1 \int dt d^2 \hat{x} e^{\pm i(E - \tilde{p})t} \varphi(t, \hat{x}). \]

We use here the convention that $E \geq 0$ and the actual sign of the energy is encoded in the extra index $\pm$. Indeed, one can check that the state (3) is an eigenstate under propagation between parallel hyperplanes. Its eigenvalue is $e^{\pm \Delta}$ where $\Delta = |x'_1 - x_1|$ and $p_1$ is the positive square root of $E^2 - \tilde{p}^2 - m^2$.

What is the interpretation of such states? In the spacelike case causality prescribes that a state must be purely incoming or outgoing depending on whether it lies at the beginning or the end of a (time-)evolution process. An analogue of this does not hold in the timelike case. Any individual particle might now be either incoming or outgoing. This choice is reflected in \[ \text{(3)} \] by the index $\pm$, representing the sign of the energy value. To agree with the spacelike case (concerning the sign of the momentum components $p_2$ and $p_3$) we identify $\Psi^-$ as an in-particle state and $\Psi^+$ as an out-particle state.

In spite of this apparent extra choice in the timelike case, the degrees of freedom of a particle are identical to those in the spacelike case. The reason is that the “missing” sign of the momentum component $p_1$ in the timelike case must be correlated with the sign of the energy. Namely, the momentum of an in-particle needs to point from the hyperplane into the propagation region and that of an out-particle outward. Thus, in both the space- and the timelike case we may characterize a particle by its 3-momentum.

Complex conjugation converts an in-particle state $\Psi_{E, \tilde{p}}$ to an out-particle state $\Psi_{E, \tilde{p}}^+$ and vice versa. Moreover, if we put the complex conjugate of a state on the opposite hyperplane (i.e., on the other side of the evolution region), then it describes the *same* state in terms of the particle 3-momentum. This also parallels the situation in the spacelike case, although it is more implicit there. Namely, consider a transition amplitude from a 1-particle state with momentum $p$ to a 1-particle state of momentum $p'$,

\[ \langle \Psi_{p'} | U(\Delta) | \Psi_p \rangle = \int D\varphi D\varphi' \Psi_{p}(\varphi) \Psi_{p'}^*(\varphi') Z(\varphi, \varphi'). \] (9)

The usual interpretation of course is that the complex conjugation comes from the inner product, as we are pairing a bra- with a ket-state. However, we could equally well say that a change of orientation of the hyperplane on which the state lives requires a complex conjugation to describe the original state. That is, while on the
in-oriented hyperplane a 1-particle state of momentum $p'$ is described by the wave functional $\Psi^\prime_{p'}$, on the out-oriented hyperplane it is described by the wave functional $\Psi_{-p'}$. While this difference of interpretation seems of little consequence in the spacelike case, it becomes significant in the timelike case. Indeed, the bra-ket notation is inherently linked to an orientation of the time-axis chosen from the outset, i.e., we can distinguish between “earlier” and “later”. In space, on the other hand, we can continuously rotate any orientation into its opposite, so fixing an orientation from the outset makes no sense.

We turn to the dynamics in the form of transition amplitudes. Mindful of the inadequacy of the bra-ket notation we denote an amplitude between states $\Psi$ and $\Psi'$ by $[\Psi, \Psi']$. States are understood as specified with respect not only to the hyperplane they live in, but also with respect to its orientation relative to the propagation region. Thus, no explicit complex conjugation as in $\Psi$ appears. Concretely, a transition amplitude between states $\Psi$ and $\Psi'$ on parallel hyperplanes located at $x_1$ and $x'_1$ respectively takes the form

$$[\Psi, \Psi'] = \int D\varphi D\varphi' \Psi(\varphi)\Psi'(\varphi')Z(\varphi, \varphi').$$

Here the integrals are over physical configurations $\varphi, \varphi'$ on the hyperplanes and $Z(\varphi, \varphi')$ is the propagator.

Inserting an in-particle of momentum $p$ on the hyperplane at $x_1$ and an out-particle of momentum $p'$ at $x'_1$ we find the amplitude to be

$$2p_1(2\pi)^3\delta(E - E')\delta^2(\tilde{p} - \tilde{p'})e^{ip_1\Delta}.$$ 

On the other hand, the transition amplitude between in-particles on both hyperplanes or out-particles on both hyperplanes is zero. Both results are exactly what should be expected. The probability (and hence the amplitude) of having two particles go into the propagation region and none coming out should be zero, and vice versa. In contrast, having one particle coming in and one going out should mean in the non-interacting theory we consider that they are the “same” particle, hence the delta functions. The latter situation parallels the spacelike case.

We finally turn to multi-particle states. As in the spacelike case, an $n$-particle wave functional is a certain polynomial of degree $n$ in functionals $\hat{\varphi}^\pm(E, \tilde{p})$ and delta functions, multiplied with the vacuum functional. Indeed, the structure of the polynomial is exactly the same as in the spacelike case (see Fig. 4 for the latter). One only has to take into account that the sign in the delta functions relating to one in- and one out-particle will be reversed due to our convention of “externalizing” the sign of the energy. Furthermore, delta functions relating to two in- or two out-particles may be dropped as they can never be satisfied.

A WORD ON UNITARITY

The failure of the bra-ket notation in the timelike case indicates that the role and interpretation of the inner product has to be considered carefully. Usually, an inner product and associated probability interpretation is implemented early on in the construction of a quantum mechanical model, before the dynamics. Consistency then requires that the dynamics be compatible with the inner product, i.e., be unitary.

The present context suggests a different route. We start by defining state spaces associated to hyperplanes, and transition amplitudes. States on the same hyperplane, but with different orientation belong a priori to different spaces. However, physically there is a correspondence between such states, i.e., we know whether a given in-particle is the “same” (has the same 3-momentum) as a given out-particle. We saw that this identification is given by the complex conjugation of the wave functional.

We can now demand that evolving a given state for 0 time duration (or space distance) yields the same state with probability one. The resulting expression yields the normalization condition for states, $\int D\varphi \Psi(\varphi)\overline{\Psi}(\varphi) = 1$, where the integral is over physical configurations only. Indeed, this gives rise to an inner product and with it the possibility of evaluating the overlap of states etc. Unitarity is now hidden in the requirement that identification between states on opposite hyperplanes be preserved under propagation. Thus, we recover an essentially conventional probability interpretation. However, it is important to recognize that probabilities are in general conditional probabilities implicating the whole measurement process. More precisely, amplitudes give rise to probabilities for certain particles on both hyperplanes to be observed, conditional on certain other particles on both hyperplanes to be present (prepared).

I thank the Perimeter Institute in Waterloo, Canada, for hospitality, where part of this research was carried out.

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