

It was good to see Neil Ashby's article about general relativity and the global positioning system. Let me add a few historical details.

In 1965, I landed a position with Aerospace Corp in El Segundo, California; I had completed a PhD in general relativity some years earlier. Aerospace Corp had become involved in developing what was eventually to become the GPS, and W. Begley of the tracking and radar department asked me to do a study of possible relativistic effects on clocks carried by satellites.

The project was classified, so all I was told was that the military had become very interested in setting up an ultraprecise navigation system. I was happy to help by writing a research report; a brief, unclassified version of it was later submitted for publication.<sup>1</sup>

Many years later, pocket-sized GPS receivers hit the civilian market, and I began to realize the full implications of my research. I could finally tell my wife what I had been up to 30 years before!

It is remarkable that the GPS is presently the only practical application of Einstein's gravitation theory. I urge that the general public be made more aware of this very useful result of a very abstract physical theory.

## Reference

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W. J. COCKE  
(cocke@as.arizona.edu)  
University of Arizona  
Tucson

**ASHBY REPLIES:** Dieter Proetel raises the very interesting question of whether the propagation speed of gravity,  $c_g$ , can be observed by accurate position measurements on satellites orbiting Earth. A clear answer cannot be given without also considering retardation effects from all important sources in the system, such as Earth, the Sun, and the Moon. Some terms in the approximate solutions of Einstein's field equations for the Solar System resemble the retarded Liénard-Wiechert potentials of electrodynamics. One can therefore obtain estimates of perturbations that are due to retardation by changing the speed  $c$  in such terms to a propagation speed  $c_g$  that is different from  $c$ . Electromagnetic waves that propagate with speed  $c$  are universally used, however, to make meaningful position and timing measurements in

Earth's neighborhood. One way to approach the problem is to introduce normal Fermi coordinates, which are simple to interpret in terms of proper distances and proper times.

If the propagation speed for gravity is  $c_g$ , one finds, after transforming to normal Fermi coordinates, several small new orbital effects that are proportional to the quantity  $Q = [(c/c_g)^2 - 1]$ . Such a form for the orbital perturbations results from a combination of many relativistic effects: Lorentz contraction, resynchronization of local clocks, rescaling of lengths due to external potentials, relativistic precession of axes, and so on. The calculation is lengthy.<sup>1</sup>

When  $c = c_g$ ,  $Q$  vanishes. There are then no surviving retardation corrections to the relativistic equations of motion of a satellite as it orbits Earth, to the order  $1/c^2$  of the calculation. This finding is consistent with the analysis by Steven Carlip,<sup>2</sup> who points out that such cancellations occur as a result of velocity-dependent terms in general relativity. He also says that, for a uniformly moving source, the force is directed toward the instantaneous, rather than the retarded, position of the source. Similar effects occur in electrodynamics.

Even if  $c$  and  $c_g$  are unequal, the coefficients of  $Q$  are discouragingly small. Considering only the Earth-Moon-satellite system as point masses, the coefficients of  $Q$  that correspond to corrections to lunar tidal displacements of Earth-orbiting satellites are far smaller than a millimeter. Furthermore, observations of the orbital decay of binary pulsars<sup>3</sup> imply  $Q < 0.02$ . It thus appears that retardation effects from the Moon's gravity field will be extremely small and difficult to detect. A more attractive possibility would be to look for retardation effects from the gravity field of Earth or the Sun on more rapidly moving satellites such as LAGEOS (Laser Geodynamic Satellite), for which the coefficients of  $Q$  are considerably larger—a few centimeters. Some years ago, I discussed this possibility with John Ries of the Texas Center for Space Research. He analyzed some LAGEOS data with retardation effects from Earth's and the Sun's gravity included, but found that such effects were too small to discern.

## References

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NEIL ASHBY  
(neil.ashby@colorado.edu)  
University of Colorado  
Boulder

## On the Chemical Purity of Marine Microfossils

As a paleontologist, I was pleased to see the 35-million-year-old shell of the planktonic foraminiferan *Cibicides lobatulus* grace the cover of PHYSICS TODAY (December 2001; story on page 16). Calcium carbonate-secreting microfossils are a powerful proxy for estimating sea-surface temperature change through time using stable oxygen isotopes. Another challenge that biogeochemists and geoscientists face is the alteration of in vivo isotopic values by mineral and chemical changes after an organism's death. Implicit in any isotopic analysis using calcite shells, or fossil mammal teeth, or even dinosaur bones, is the assumption that the original stable isotopes survived the passage of millions of years.

A hemisphere away from the late Cretaceous marine localities of Paul Pearson's work,<sup>1</sup> dinosaur bones lie buried in late Cretaceous clays above the Arctic Circle on the North Slope of Alaska.<sup>2</sup> They are so well preserved that an oil geologist in the 1960s originally identified them as the fossil remains of Ice Age mammals. A collection of those bones is cataloged in the University of California Museum of Paleontology. Under high magnification, the Alaska fossils reveal a beautifully preserved system of bone cells that are identical to the micron-scale architecture of a modern vertebrate bone. Similar to the Pearson group's foraminifera, the dinosaur bones are entombed in clay sediments and do not appear altered by secondary remineralization or recrystallization. Microbeam particle-induced x-ray emission analysis revealed, however, that the bones showed significant postmortem enrichment by metals, primarily iron and manganese, more than  $10^4$  times greater than in the bones of modern crocodilians and birds (a dinosaur's closest living relatives).<sup>3</sup> Clay surrounding the Alaska dinosaurs was also markedly enriched in these metals from the burial environment.

Understandably, such factors are

site specific and most likely vary by sediment layer and location. Their range and potential influence on a paleobiological isotopic signature remains largely unknown. Until that situation changes, the potential alteration of stable isotope values in fossil shells, bones, and teeth prevents the rejection of the null hypothesis that all fossil material is altered.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and exceptional fossil preservation, even at the micron level, does not guarantee pristine chemistry.

## References

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3. M. B. Goodwin, G. S. Bench, *J. Vertebr. Paleontol.* **20**(3), 45A (2000).

**MARK B. GOODWIN**  
(mark@uclink4.berkeley.edu)  
University of California, Berkeley

**PEARSON COMMENTS:** Mark Goodwin is right, of course, that we cannot guarantee, on textural evidence alone, that any given fossil is chemically pristine. In our studies of the calcite shells of marine microfossils, we have combined detailed morphological study with a range of chemical and isotopic analyses. We find that texturally pristine fossils always have a wider range of interspecies isotopic differences than more recrystallized ones, and infer that the data more nearly reflect differences in the original chemistry at the time the various organisms lived. However, we can never rule out the possibility of secondary alteration.

Bone is especially problematic because its porous and intricately sculpted apatite structure makes it prone to rapid recrystallization. Bone quickly acquires a chemical signal from its environment after burial.<sup>1</sup> In our foraminifer shells, recrystallization is undoubtedly slower, and by focusing our studies on carbon and oxygen isotopes (major constituents of calcium carbonate), we are less apt to isolate a secondary signal than we would be if, for example, we analyzed just the trace elements that are abundant in the surrounding sediment.

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**PAUL N. PEARSON**  
(paul.pearson@bristol.ac.uk)  
University of Bristol  
Bristol, England

# Heitler, Herzberg Observed that Nitrogen Nuclei Obey Bose

In their historical article "Enrico Fermi in Rome, 1931–32" (*PHYSICS TODAY*, June 2002, page 28), authors Hans A. Bethe and Henry Bethe state, "One of Fermi's colleagues observed the band spectrum of gaseous nitrogen and found that nitrogen nuclei obey Bose statistics." I offer a clarification. Indeed, Franco Rasetti observed the rotational Raman spectrum of gaseous N<sub>2</sub> in 1929. However, Walter Heitler and Gerhard Herzberg were the ones who recognized the difference in intensity alternation of rotational lines from that in H<sub>2</sub>: Even-numbered lines were more intense than the odd-numbered lines. Heitler and Herzberg therefore concluded that N nuclei obey Bose statistics.<sup>1</sup> The explanation was, of course, only clarified after the discovery of the neutron three years later.

## Reference

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**BORIS P. STOICHEFF**  
(bps@physics.utoronto.ca)  
University of Toronto  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

# Alan Cromer Is Alive

In our letter "Experience is Best Teacher for Scientists in the Classroom" (*PHYSICS TODAY*, July 2002, page 10), we incorrectly referred to one of the cofounders of Northeastern University's SEED and RESEED programs as the "late Alan Cromer." Christos Zahopoulos tells us that Alan Cromer is alive. Four years ago Alan suffered a cardiac arrest; he remains in recovery.

**CLAUDE KACSER**  
(claude\_kacser@umail.umd.edu)  
University of Maryland  
College Park

**DAVID W. WEISS**  
(daveweiss@erols.com)  
Silver Spring, Maryland

# Correction

**October 2002, page 76**—The Web address at the end of the letter by Daniel M. Boye, Shila Garg, and Gerald A. Goldin should be <http://www.phy.davidson.edu/NSFGRF.htm>.

## STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION

(Act of 12 August 1970; Section 3685, Title 39, USC)

1. Title of publication: *PHYSICS TODAY*
2. Publication no.: 0031-9228
3. Date of Filing: 1 October 2002
4. Frequency of issue: Monthly
5. No. of issues published annually: 12
6. Annual subscription price: \$230.00
7. Location of known office of publication: 2 Huntington Quadrangle, Melville, NY 11747-4502
8. Location of the headquarters or general business offices of the publisher: One Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740-3842
9. Names and addresses of publisher, editor and managing editor:  
Publisher: Randolph A. Nanna, American Institute of Physics, One Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740-3842  
Editor: Stephen G. Benka, American Institute of Physics, One Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740-3842  
Managing Editor: None
10. Owner (if owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, its name and address, as well as that of each individual, must be given. If the publication is published by a nonprofit organization, its name and address must be stated.): American Institute of Physics, One Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740-3842
11. Known bondholders, mortgagees and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: None
12. The purpose, function and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for Federal income tax purposes: Has not changed during the preceding 12 months
13. Publication name: *PHYSICS TODAY*
14. Issue date for circulation data below: August
15. Extent and nature of circulation:  
A. Total number of copies (net press run)  
Average\* 125 706 August\*\* 128 709  
B. Paid and/or requested subscriptions  
1,2. Paid or requested mail subscriptions  
Average\* 120 507 August\*\* 123 372  
3,4. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales; other classes mailed  
Average\* none August\*\* none  
C. Total paid and/or requested circulation  
sum of B1–B4)  
Average\* 120 507 August\*\* 123 372  
D. Free distribution (samples, complimentary and other free)  
Average\* none August\*\* none  
E. Free distribution outside the mail (carriers or other means)  
Average\* 3 440 August\*\* 2 697  
F. Total free distribution (sum of D and E)  
Average\* 3 440 August\*\* 2 697  
G. Total distribution (sum of C and F)  
Average\* 123 947 August\*\* 126 069  
H. Copies not distributed (office use, leftovers and spoiled)  
Average\* 1 759 August\*\* 2 640  
I. Total (sum of G and H—should equal net press run shown in A)  
Average\* 125 706 August\*\* 128 709

Percent paid and/or requested circulation

(C/G×100)  
Average\* 97.22% August\*\* 97.86%

\* Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months

\*\* Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date.

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