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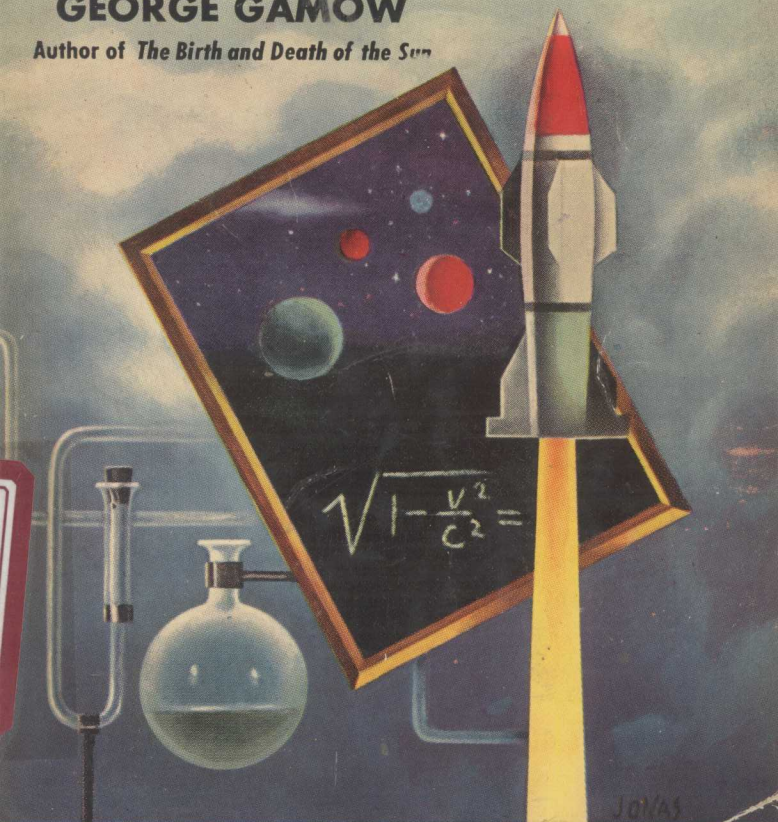
The Most Interesting Facts and Theories of
Modern Science Explained for the Layman

ONE TWO THREE... INFINITY

Facts and Speculations of Science

GEORGE GAMOW

Author of *The Birth and Death of the Sun*



A Mentor Book

Science for the Layman

Can space be bent?

Why does a rocket shrink?

How do you count an infinity?

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One Two Three . . .
INFINITY

FACTS & SPECULATIONS of SCIENCE

by GEORGE GAMOW

PROFESSOR OF THEORETICAL PHYSICS
GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

ILLUSTRATED by the ~~AUTHOR~~



A MENTOR BOOK

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To My Son IGOR
Who Would Rather Be A Cowboy

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"The time has come," the Walrus said,
"To talk of many things" . . .
LEWIS CARROLL, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Preface

. . . of atoms, stars, and nebulae, of entropy and genes; and whether one can bend space, and why the rocket shrinks. And indeed, in the course of this book we are going to discuss all these topics, and also many others of equal interest.

The book originated as an attempt to collect the most interesting facts and theories of modern science in such a way as to give the reader a general picture of the universe in its microscopic and macroscopic manifestations, as it presents itself to the eye of the scientist of today. In carrying out this broad plan, I have made no attempt to tell the whole story, knowing that any such attempt would inevitably result in an encyclopedia of many volumes. At the same time the subjects to be discussed have been selected so as to survey briefly the entire field of basic scientific knowledge, leaving no corner untouched.

Selection of subjects according to their importance and degree of interest, rather than according to their simplicity, necessarily has resulted in a certain unevenness of presentation. Some chapters of the book are simple enough to be understood by a child, whereas others will require some little concentration and study to be completely understood. It is hoped, however, that the layman reader will not encounter too serious difficulties in reading the book.

It will be noticed that the last part of the book, which discusses the "Macrocosmos," is considerably shorter than the part on "Microcosmos." This is primarily because I have already discussed in detail so many problems pertaining to the macrocosmos in *The Birth and Death of the Sun*, and *Biography of the Earth*,¹ and further detailed discussion here would be a tedious repetition. Therefore in this part I have

¹ The Viking Press, New York, 1940 and 1941, respectively; New American Library Mentor editions, 1945 and 1948, respectively.

restricted myself to a general account of physical facts and events in the world of planets, stars, and nebulae and the laws that govern them, going into greater detail only in discussing problems upon which new light has been shed by the advance of scientific knowledge during the last few years. Following this principle I have given especial attention to the recent views according to which vast stellar explosions, known as "supernovae," are caused by the so-called "neutrinos," the smallest particles known in physics, and the new planetary theory, which abolishes the currently accepted views that planets originated as the result of collisions between the sun and some other stars, and re-establishes the old half-forgotten views of Kant and Laplace.

I want to express my thanks to numerous artists and illustrators whose work, topologically transformed (see Section II, Ch. III), has served as the basis for many illustrations adorning the book. Above all my thanks are due to my young friend Marina von Neumann, who claims that she knows everything better than her famous father does, except, of course, mathematics, which she says she knows only equally well. After she had read in manuscript some of the chapters of the book, and told me about numerous things in it which she could not understand, I finally decided that this book is not for children as I had originally intended it to be.

G. GAMOW

*George Washington University
Washington, D. C.
December 1, 1946*

Contents

PART I. PLAYING WITH NUMBERS

- | | |
|------------------------------------|----|
| I. Big Numbers | 15 |
| II. Natural and Artificial Numbers | 34 |

PART II. SPACE, TIME & EINSTEIN

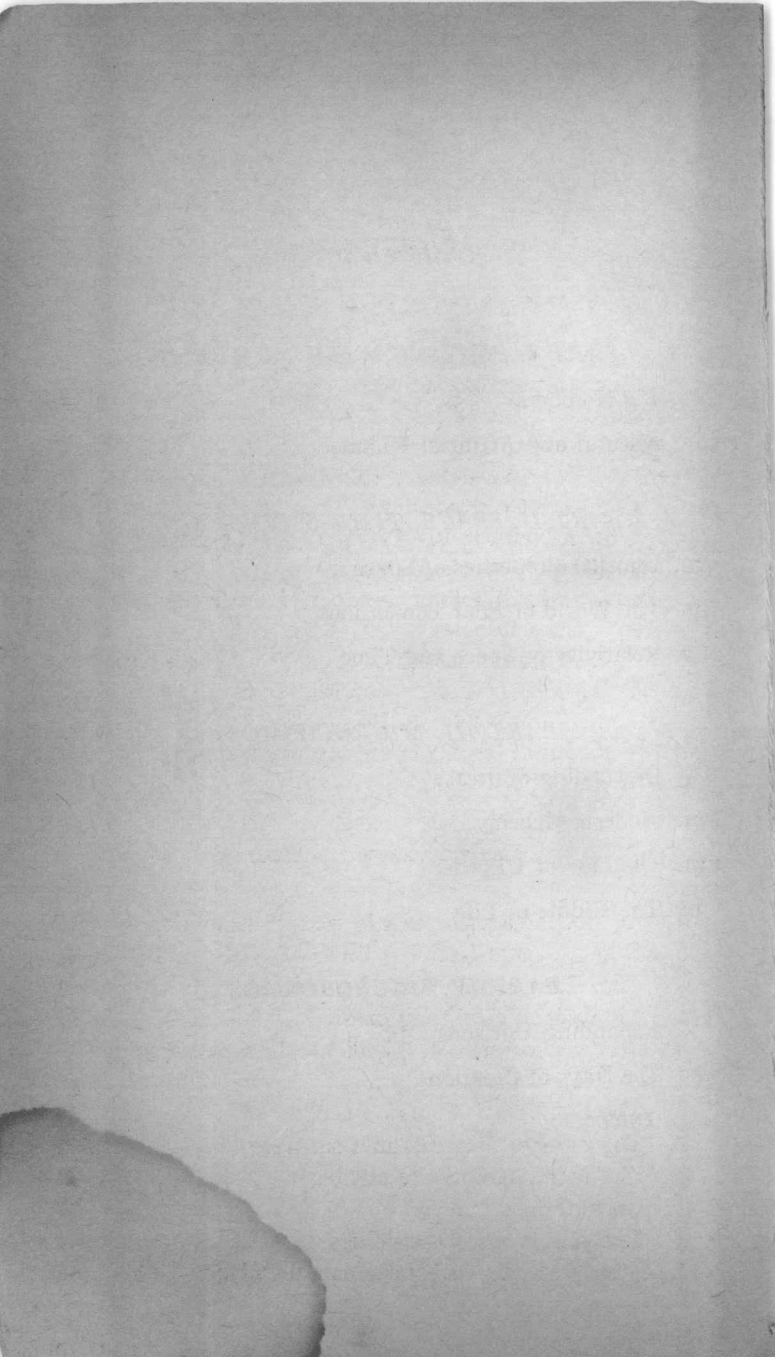
- | | |
|----------------------------------|----|
| III. Unusual Properties of Space | 49 |
| IV. The World of Four Dimensions | 70 |
| V. Relativity of Space and Time | 88 |

PART III. MICROCOSMOS

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----|
| VI. Descending Staircase | 115 |
| VII. Modern Alchemy | 146 |
| VIII. The Law of Disorder | 184 |
| IX. The Riddle of Life | 220 |

PART IV. MACROCOSMOS

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----|
| X. Expanding Horizons | 253 |
| XI. The Days of Creation | 279 |
| INDEX | 315 |



Illustrations

PLATES (*between pages 160 and 161*)

- I. Hexamethylbenzene Molecule
- II. A. Cosmis Ray Shower
B. Nuclear Disintegration
- III. Transformations of Atomic Nuclei
 - A. A Fast Deuteron Hits Another Deuteron
 - B. A Fast Proton Hits Boron Nucleus
 - C. A Neutron Breaks a Nucleus of Nitrogen
- IV. Uranium-Nucleus Fission
- V. A. and B. Photomicrographs of Fruit-Fly Chromosomes
C. Photomicrograph of Fruit-Fly Female Larva
- VI. Particles of Tobacco-Mosaic Virus
- VII. A. Spiral Nebula in Ursa Major
B. Spiral Nebula in Coma Berenices
- VIII. The Crab Nebula

ILLUSTRATIONS IN TEXT

	PAGE
1. An ancient Roman tries to write "one million."	17
2. Grand Vizier Sissa Ben Dahir asks his reward.	19
3. The "End of the World" problem.	21
4. An automatic printing press.	22
5. An African native and Prof. G. Cantor comparing their counting ability.	26
6. The number of points on a line.	32
7. The number of points in a square.	32
8. The first three infinite numbers.	33
9. Eratosthenes' "sieve."	37
10. Real and imaginary numbers.	44
11. Treasure hunt with imaginary numbers.	46

Illustrations

PAGE

12.	Co-ordinate systems.	50
13.	A subdivided sphere transformed into a polyhedron.	52
14.	Five regular polyhedrons and one monstrosity.	54
15.	Proof of Euler's theorem.	55
16.	Two rivals of the ordinary cube.	57
17.	Topological maps.	58
18.	Double apple eaten by two worms.	61
19.	A double apple turned into a doughnut.	63
20.	Inside-out universe.	65
21.	Right- and left-hand objects alike but different.	66
22.	Two dimensional "shadow-creatures" in a plane.	67
23.	Surface of Möbius, and Klein's bottle.	69
24.	Squeezing a three-dimensional body into a two-dimensional surface.	70
25.	Two-dimensional creatures look at shadow of three-dimensional cube.	71
26.	A visitor from the Fourth Dimension!	72
27.	Plane projection of the globe.	73
28.	Space-time cube.	75
29.	Space-time span of a man.	76
30.	World-lines of sun, earth, and comet.	77
31.	Galileo measures velocity of light.	79
32.	An "event" in the four-dimensional world.	84
33.	Prof. Einstein as magician.	85
34.	Axis-cross of two space-coordinates.	89
35.	Four-dimensional axis-cross.	90
36.	Michelson's apparatus.	97
37.	Bodies distorted by space distortions.	101
38.	Universal shortening of moving objects.	102
39.	Two-dimensional scientists check Euclidian theorem.	106
40.	A. Measuring curved space.	109
	B. Measuring angles formed by beam of light.	110
41.	Two-dimensional analogy to Einstein's curved space theory.	111

Illustrations

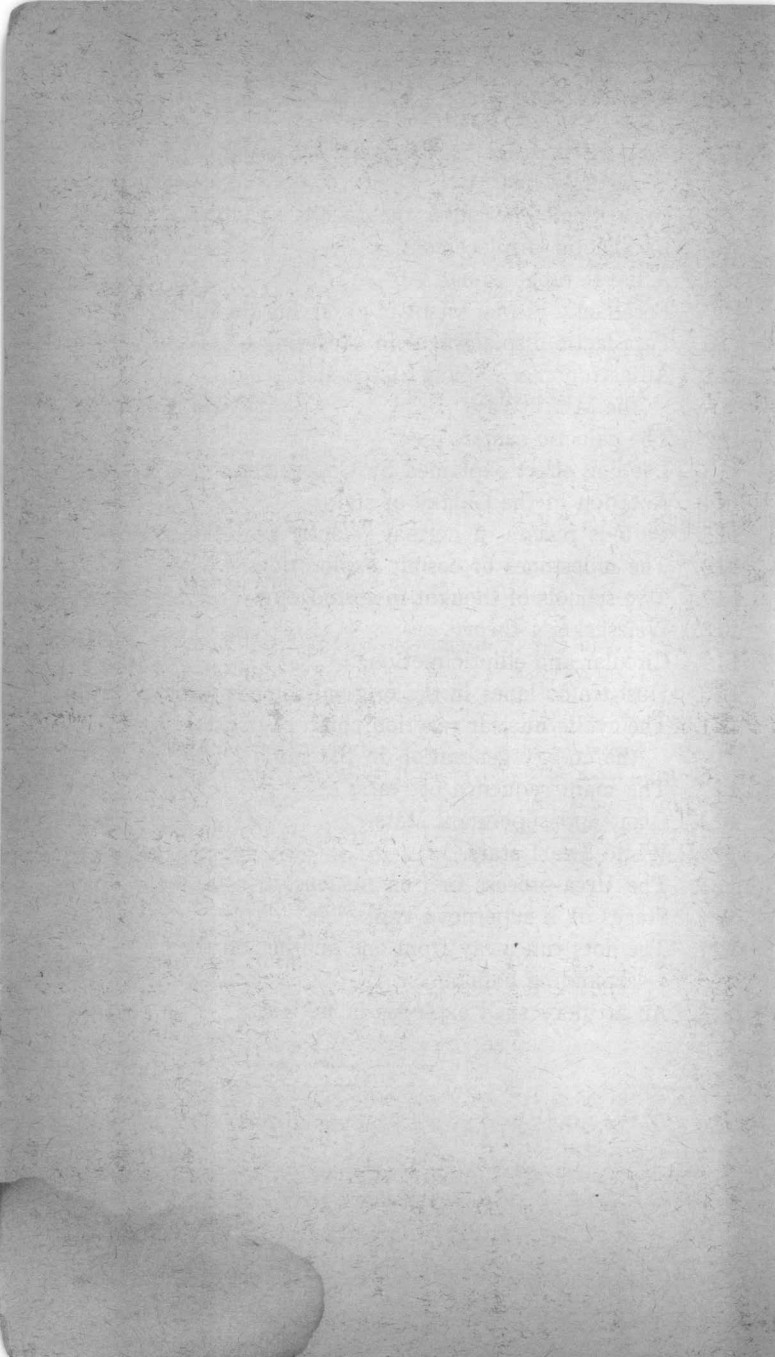
	PAGE
42. Flat and curved space.	113
43. Thin oil layer on a water surface.	122
44. Demonstrating molecular structure of matter.	123
45. Stern's device for studying molecular beam velocity.	125
46. Abbé's mathematical theory of the microscope.	127
47. Water molecule.	129
48. Thomson's conception of the atom.	130
49. Thomson's apparatus for measuring atom's charge/mass ratio.	131
50. Rutherford's picture of the atom.	133
51. The periodic table of elements.	134
52. Union of atoms in sodium chloride molecule.	136
53. Electrical and gravitational attraction.	138
54. Electronic motion in the atom.	142
55. Reflection and refraction of light.	143
56. The notion of trajectory.	145
57. Prout's hypothesis.	148
58. "Annihilation" process of two electrons giving rise to an electromagnetic wave, and "creation" of a pair.	150
59. The origin of a cosmic ray shower.	153
60. Negative and positive beta decay.	155
61. The recoil problem in artillery and nuclear physics.	157
62. Chart of elementary particles of modern physics.	158
63. Explanation of surface-tension forces in a liquid.	160
64. "Deimos."	161
65. Fission and fusion of two droplets.	163
66. Union of carbon and oxygen.	165
67. How the atom was split the first time.	167
68. The scheme of Wilson's cloud-chamber.	169
69. Principle of the electrostatic generator.	170
70. Principle of a cyclotron.	171
71. Principle of a linear accelerator.	172
72. Atomic bombardment.	175

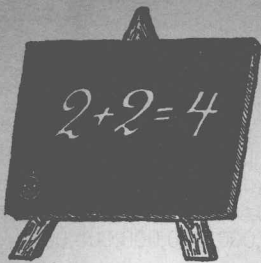
Illustrations

	PAGE
73. Successive stages of the fission process.	177
74. A nuclear chain reaction in a spherical piece of fissionable material.	179
75. Separation of isotopes.	181
76. A uranium pile.	183
77. A bacterium tossed around by molecular impacts.	185
78. Thermal agitation.	187
79. The destructive effect of temperature.	190
80. Drunkard's walk.	192
81. Six walking drunkards.	195
82. Diffusion.	196
83. Four possible combinations in tossing two coins.	199
84. Relative number of tails and heads.	201
85. A flush (of spades).	202
86. Full house.	203
87. Captain Kidd's Message.	207
88. Matches and flag problem.	210
89. <i>Sinus</i> of the match problem.	211
90. Various types of cells.	222
91. An alcohol molecule as organizer.	224
92. Successive stages of cell division (mitosis).	226
93. Formation of gametes, and fertilization of the egg cell.	229
94. Face value difference between man and woman.	231
95. From egg cell to man.	233
96. Heredity of color blindness.	235
97. Dominant and recessive characteristics.	237
98. A version of Mendel's discovery.	238
99. Chromosome transfer.	239
100. Characteristics of the fruit fly.	240
101. Hereditary "charm bracelet."	245
102. Spontaneous mutation of a fruit fly.	246
103. Comparison between bacteria, viruses, and molecules.	249
104. The world of the ancients.	254

Illustrations

	PAGE
105. An argument against the spherical shape of the earth.	255
106. Eratosthenes measures the Earth.	256
107. Parallax displacement.	258
108. A naval range finder.	259
109. Parallax displacement in observing the moon.	260
110. Parallax displacement in observing 61 Cygni.	262
111. An astronomer looking at the stellar system of the Milky Way.	265
112. The galactic center.	267
113. Looping effect explained by Copernicus.	268
114. Rotation of the Galaxy of stars.	269
115. Various phases of normal galactic evolution.	273
116. The milestones of cosmic exploration.	275
117. Two schools of thought in cosmogony.	282
118. Weizsäcker's theory.	287
119. Circular and elliptic motion.	290
120. Dust-traffic lanes in the original solar envelope.	292
121. The cyclic nuclear reaction chain responsible for the energy generation in the sun.	296
122. The main sequence of stars.	298
123. Giant and supergiant stars.	299
124. White dwarf stars.	300
125. The Urca-process in iron nucleus.	305
126. Stages of a supernova explosion.	306
127. The dots run away from one another on the expanding balloon.	310
128. An artillery shell explodes in midair.	312





PART I

Playing with Numbers

CHAPTER I

Big Numbers

1. HOW HIGH CAN YOU COUNT?

THERE IS A STORY about two Hungarian aristocrats who decided to play a game in which the one who calls the largest number wins.

"Well," said one of them, "you name your number first."

After a few minutes of hard mental work the second aristocrat finally named the largest number he could think of.

"Three," he said.

Now it was the turn of the first one to do the thinking, but after a quarter of an hour he finally gave up.

"You've won," he agreed.

Of course these two Hungarian aristocrats do not represent a very high degree of intelligence¹ and this story is probably just a malicious slander, but such a conversation might actually have taken place if the two men had been, not Hungarians, but Hottentots. We have it indeed on the authority of African explorers that many Hottentot tribes do not have in their vocabulary the names for numbers larger than three. Ask a native down there how many sons he has or how many enemies he has slain, and if the number is more than three he will answer "many." Thus in the Hottentot country in the art of counting fierce warriors would be beaten by an American child of kindergarten age who could boast the ability to count up to ten!

Nowadays we are quite accustomed to the idea that we

¹ This statement can be supported by another story of the same collection in which a group of Hungarian aristocrats lost their way hiking in the Alps. One of them, it is said, took out a map, and after studying it for a long time, exclaimed: "Now I know where we are!" "Where?" asked the others. "See that big mountain over there? We are right on top of it."

