The Constant Cavity Pressure Casimir Inaptly Discarded

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Abstract

Casimir's celebrated result that the conducting plates of an unpowered rectangular cavity attract each other with a pressure inversely proportional to the fourth power of their separation entails an unphysical unbounded pressure as the plate separation goes to zero. An unphysical result isn't surprising in light of Casimir's unphysical assumption of perfectly conducting plates that zero out electric fields regardless of their frequency, which he sought to counteract via a physically foundationless discarding of the pressure between the cavity plates when they are sufficiently widely separated. Casimir himself, however, emphasized that real metal plates are transparent to sufficiently high electromagnetic frequencies, which makes removal of the frequency cutoff that he inserted unjustifiable at any stage of his calculation. Therefore his physically groundless discarding of the large-separation pressure isn't even needed, and when it is left out a constant attractive pressure between the plates exists when their separation is substantially larger than the cutoff wavelength. The intact cutoff furthermore implies zero pressure between the plates when their separation is zero, and also that Casimir's pressure is merely the subsidiary lowest-order correction term to the constant attractive pressure between the plates that is dominant when their separation substantially exceeds the cutoff wavelength.

Introduction

H. B. G. Casimir's groundbreaking 1948 presentation "On the attraction between two perfectly conducting plates" [1] is a fascinating chronicle of his strivings to extract theoretical physics sense from the ostensibly infinite electromagnetic-field ground-state energy $\frac{1}{2}\sum\hbar\omega$ that is captured in standing waves within a conducting rectangular cavity whose dimensions are $L_1 \times L_2 \times a$.

The method for "taming" this supposedly infinite energy which gained traction in Casimir's mind was to subtract from $\frac{1}{2}\sum\hbar\omega$ at any arbitrary value of the separation a between the cavity's two $L_1 \times L_2$ plates that sum's value at a sufficiently *large* value of that two-plate separation a. To be sure, the difference between two ostensibly infinite energy sums is ill-defined, but Casimir's plan to overcome that difficulty was to cut off both of the infinite-valued sums that are involved in precisely the same way, and then to *remove* that cutoff *after the subtraction* of the sum having a sufficiently large value of *a from* the sum having an arbitrary value of *a is safely accomplished*. Casimir of course hoped that this recipe would produce a result which is both finite and unique, and it turns out that for "reasonable" cutoffs Casimir's hope is actually fulfilled—we shall have much more to say below about how the criterion for a "reasonable" cutoff was entwined in Casimir's thinking with the response of *real* conducting metals to arbitrarily high-frequency electromagnetic fields, and about how *continuing* to think along those *physical* lines makes it obvious that the ostensibly "infinite" energy sums which bedeviled Casimir *are wholly unphysical*.

Before we delve further into that matter, however, it is important to underline a crucial *elementary consequence* of Casimir's above-described subtraction procedure *which Casimir himself failed to notice*: the results obtained from his subtraction procedure obviously cannot possibly properly describe the ground-state electromagnetic energy content of rectangular cavities which have sufficiently large values of the $L_1 \times L_2$ plate separation distance a because part of that energy content *has, of course, been subtracted away*. As a consequence, Casimir's results are inherently *incapable* of describing the pressure between cavity plates which are separated by a distance a that is sufficiently large. Indeed, Casimir's pressure results necessarily exhibit *short-range character as a function of a that is a pure unphysical artifact*.

To get a feeling for the artificiality which Casimir's subtraction procedure *injects* into his results, we note that his "subtracted energy" $\delta E(L_1, L_2, a)$ for the "perfectly conducting" rectangular cavity whose dimensions are $L_1 \times L_2 \times a$ with L_1 and L_2 sufficiently large and a (ostensibly) arbitrary is [1],

$$\delta E(L_1, L_2, a) = -\hbar c(\pi^2/720)L_1 L_2/a^3, \tag{1a}$$

which exhibits a drastically *different* dependence on a than it has on L_1 and L_2 *in the case where all three of these cavity dimensions are arbitrarily large*. We see that $\delta E(L_1, L_2, a)$ is very long-range in L_1 and L_2 *but short-range in a*, the latter being *an unphysical pure artifact of Casimir's subtraction procedure*.

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The celebrated Casimir pressure result between the two $L_1 \times L_2$ plates of this "perfectly conducting" $L_1 \times L_2 \times a$ rectangular cavity is of course given by [1],

$$-\left(\frac{\partial \delta E(L_1, L_2, a)}{\partial a}\right)(L_1 L_2)^{-1} = -\pi^2 \hbar c/(240 a^4), \tag{1b}$$

which *not only* is short-range in a, but *also* is unphysically *unbounded* as the separation a between the two $L_1 \times L_2$ plates goes to zero! Likewise, Casimir's "subtracted energy" of Eq. (1a) is unphysically *unbounded* as the separation a between the two $L_1 \times L_2$ plates goes to zero. Thus there is a *second* pathology intrinsic to Casimir's celebrated pressure result, one which is the *consequence* of the wholly unphysical "perfect conductivity" of Casimir's cavity *even notwithstanding* the finite and unique nature of Casimir's "subtracted energy" result $\delta E(L_1, L_2, a)$ of Eq. (1a)—the *mere finite uniqueness* of Casimir's "subtracted energy" result *of course does not per se imply that that result is physically correct or sound*!

This *second* pathology in Casimir's celebrated pressure result focuses our attention on Casimir's *own comment* that any "reasonable" cutoff of $\frac{1}{2}\sum \hbar\omega$ which is to be applied *before* his subtraction procedure and his subsequent *removal* of that cutoff is undertaken *must adequately model the fact that real conducting metals are transparent to sufficiently high-frequency electromagnetic fields*. Casimir's recipe for a "reasonable" cutoff of a sum $\frac{1}{2}\sum \hbar\omega$ incorporates that feature via the *replacement* of such a sum by $\frac{1}{2}\sum \hbar\omega f(\omega/(c\kappa))$, where $f(x)$ has the salient characteristics of e^{-x} or e^{-x^2} for $x > 0$, namely $f(x)$ is positive and decreases monotonically *from its value of unity at* $x = 0$ in such a way that $f(1) = e^{-1}$ and $f(x)$ *tends very strongly to zero as* $x \to +\infty$. Therefore if Casimir had not been so intensely *preoccupied* with actually *carrying through* his programme of cutoff, subtraction and finally *removal* of the cutoff, it surely would have *dawned* on him *that the physical nature of real conducting metals forbids the removal at any stage whatsoever in his calculation of the just-described cutoff which he inserts into it*. Given that Casimir's cutoff *is physically required to be permanently in place*, it *also* would have dawned on Casimir that the entire raison d'être of his (in fact physically counterproductive) subtraction procedure *simply falls away*. (It might *even* then have dawned on Casimir *just how physically counterproductive* the effect of his subtraction procedure on his result *actually is*.)

In the following section we therefore *redo* Casimir's calculation of $\frac{1}{2}\sum \hbar\omega f(\omega/(c\kappa))$, leaving $f(\omega/(c\kappa))$ *permanently in place*—we specifically choose $f(x) = e^{-x}$ because that choice is calculationally advantageous. Of course *we entirely omit Casimir's counterproductive subtraction procedure*.

A simple model of the attraction between two real metal cavity walls

We use Casimir's techniques to model and calculate the standing-wave electromagnetic-field ground-state energy $\frac{1}{2}\sum \hbar\omega \exp(-\omega/(c\kappa))$ captured by an $L_1 \times L_2 \times a$ rectangular real metal cavity under the assumption that $L_1 \gg 1/\kappa$ and $L_2 \gg 1/\kappa$, but without making any assumption about the relation of a to κ. Taking account of the field polarizations in the way that Casimir does [1] produces,

$$\begin{aligned} E(L_1, L_2, a; \kappa) &\stackrel{\text{def}}{=} \tfrac{1}{2}\textstyle\sum \hbar\omega \exp(-\omega/(c\kappa)) = \\ \hbar c \int_0^\infty dm_1 \int_0^\infty dm_2 &\Bigg[\tfrac{1}{2}\left(\left(\tfrac{\pi m_1}{L_1}\right)^2 + \left(\tfrac{\pi m_2}{L_2}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}} e^{-\left(\left(\frac{\pi m_1}{\kappa L_1}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\pi m_2}{\kappa L_2}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}}} \\ &+ \sum_{n=1}^\infty \left(\left(\tfrac{\pi m_1}{L_1}\right)^2 + \left(\tfrac{\pi m_2}{L_2}\right)^2 + \left(\tfrac{\pi n}{a}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}} e^{-\left(\left(\frac{\pi m_1}{\kappa L_1}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\pi m_2}{\kappa L_2}\right)^2 + \left(\frac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}}} \Bigg]. \end{aligned} \tag{2a}$$

We now change the two integration variables to $u_1 = (\pi m_1)/(\kappa L_1)$ and $u_2 = (\pi m_2)/(\kappa L_2)$ and also take advantage of the fact that the integrand is an even function of those integration variables to obtain,

$$\begin{aligned} E(L_1, L_2, a; \kappa) = (2\pi)^{-2} \hbar c \kappa^3 L_1 L_2 \int_{-\infty}^\infty du_1 \int_{-\infty}^\infty du_2 &\Bigg[\tfrac{1}{2}(u_1^2 + u_2^2)^{\frac{1}{2}} e^{-(u_1^2 + u_2^2)^{\frac{1}{2}}} \\ &+ \sum_{n=1}^\infty \left(u_1^2 + u_2^2 + \left(\tfrac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}} e^{-\left(u_1^2 + u_2^2 + \left(\frac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}}} \Bigg]. \end{aligned} \tag{2b}$$

We now switch to polar coordinates, i.e., $u = (u_1^2 + u_2^2)^{\frac{1}{2}}$, and are able to immediately integrate over the polar angle to obtain,

$$E(L_1, L_2, a; \kappa) = (4\pi)^{-1} \hbar c \kappa^3 L_1 L_2 \int_0^\infty 2u\,du \left[\tfrac{1}{2} u e^{-u} + \sum_{n=1}^\infty \left(u^2 + \left(\tfrac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}} e^{-\left(u^2 + \left(\frac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}}} \right]. \tag{2c}$$

We can now carry out one elementary integration, and under the summation sign change the integration variable to $x = u^2$ to obtain,

$$E(L_1, L_2, a; \kappa) = (4\pi)^{-1}\hbar c\kappa^3 L_1 L_2 \left[2 + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty}\int_0^{\infty} dx \left(x + \left(\tfrac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}} e^{-\left(x + \left(\frac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)^2\right)^{\frac{1}{2}}}\right]. \qquad (2d)$$

We now carry out one last change of integration variable to $w = (x + ((\pi n)/(\kappa a))^2)^{\frac{1}{2}}$, which implies that $dx = 2wdw$ and yields,

$$E(L_1, L_2, a; \kappa) = (2\pi)^{-1}\hbar c\kappa^3 L_1 L_2 \left[1 + \sum_{n=1}^{\infty}\int_{\left(\frac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)}^{\infty} dw\, w^2 e^{-w}\right]. \qquad (2e)$$

At this point it is convenient to switch from the energy within the cavity to the pressure between the two $L_1 \times L_2$ plates, namely,

$$\begin{aligned} P(a; \kappa) &= -\left(\tfrac{\partial E(L_1, L_2, a; \kappa)}{\partial a}\right)(L_1 L_2)^{-1} = -(2\pi)^{-1}\hbar c(\kappa^3/a)\sum_{n=1}^{\infty}\left(\tfrac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)^3 e^{-\left(\frac{\pi n}{\kappa a}\right)} \\ &= -(2a^4)^{-1}\pi^2\hbar c\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} n^3\left(e^{-\left(\frac{\pi}{\kappa a}\right)}\right)^n. \end{aligned} \qquad (2f)$$

From the familiar geometric series sum $\sum_{n=0}^{\infty}\varepsilon^n = (1-\varepsilon)^{-1}$ for $|\varepsilon| < 1$, it can (with patience) be worked out that $\sum_{n=1}^{\infty} n^3\varepsilon^n = \varepsilon(1 + 4\varepsilon + \varepsilon^2)(1-\varepsilon)^{-4}$ for $|\varepsilon| < 1$. Combining this with Eq. (2f) yields for $P(a; \kappa)$, the pressure between the two $L_1 \times L_2$ plates,

$$\begin{aligned} P(a; \kappa) &= -\tfrac{1}{2}\pi^2\hbar c e^{-\left(\frac{\pi}{\kappa a}\right)}\left(1 + 4e^{-\left(\frac{\pi}{\kappa a}\right)} + e^{-2\left(\frac{\pi}{\kappa a}\right)}\right)\left[a\left(1 - e^{-\left(\frac{\pi}{\kappa a}\right)}\right)\right]^{-4} \\ &= -\pi^{-2}\hbar c\kappa^4(2 + \cosh(\pi/(\kappa a)))(((2\kappa a)/\pi)\sinh(\pi/(2\kappa a)))^{-4}. \end{aligned} \qquad (2g)$$

From Eq. (2g) it is apparent that the pressure $P(a; \kappa)$ between the two $L_1 \times L_2$ plates is *always* attractive, and that when $a \gg \pi/\kappa$, $P(a; \kappa) = -3\pi^{-2}\hbar c\kappa^4$, which is the large-separation attractive constant pressure that Casimir's physically counterproductive subtraction procedure *completely deletes from his celebrated pressure result* $-\pi^2\hbar c/(240a^4)$.

Furthermore, it is clear from Eq. (2g) that as the plate separation a goes to zero, so does pressure $P(a; \kappa)$ between those plates. That physically sensible result stands in the starkest imaginable contrast to the fact that the magnitude of Casimir's attractive pressure $-\pi^2\hbar c/(240a^4)$ increases rapidly and without bound as the plate separation a goes to zero.

Notwithstanding the above devastating obvervations Casimir's pressure *does* in fact play a *subsidiary* physical role: it turns out to be *the lowest-order correction* (in powers of $(\pi/(\kappa a))$) to the large-separation *constant* attractive pressure $-3\pi^{-2}\hbar c\kappa^4$ between the two $L_1 \times L_2$ plates. One obtains the successive *corrections* to that large-separation *constant* attractive pressure $-3\pi^{-2}\hbar c\kappa^4$ by simply expanding out the Eq. (2g) result for $P(a; \kappa)$ in powers of $(\pi/(\kappa a))$, a dimensionless physical parameter which we conveniently denote as α.

From inspection of Eq. (2g) we see that we require the expansion in powers of α of $(2 + \cosh(\alpha))$,

$$(2 + \cosh(\alpha)) = 3(1 + \alpha^2/6 + \alpha^4/72 + \alpha^6/2160 + \cdots),$$

and we see that we also require the expansion in powers of α of,

$$((2/\alpha)\sinh(\alpha/2))^4 = ((2/\alpha^2)(\cosh(\alpha) - 1))^2 = (2/\alpha^4)(\cosh(2\alpha) - 4\cosh(\alpha) + 3),$$

from which with some effort we obtain,

$$((2/\alpha)\sinh(\alpha/2))^4 = (1 + \alpha^2/6 + \alpha^4/80 + 17\alpha^6/30240 + \cdots).$$

Therefore,

$$(2 + \cosh(\alpha))((2/\alpha)\sinh(\alpha/2))^{-4} = 3(1 + \alpha^4/720 - \alpha^6/3024 + \cdots),$$

and therefore the first two corrections of the large-separation constant attractive pressure $-3\pi^{-2}\hbar c\kappa^4$ in powers of $(\pi/(\kappa a))$ (which is equal to α) are as follows,

$$P(a;\kappa) = -3\pi^{-2}\hbar c\kappa^4 - \pi^2\hbar c/(240a^4) + (\pi^2\hbar c/(1008a^4))(\pi/(\kappa a))^2 + \cdots. \tag{2h}$$

The attractive Casimir pressure $-\pi^2\hbar c/(240a^4)$ is therefore *the lowest-order correction in powers of* $(\pi/(\kappa a))$ *of the large-separation constant attractive pressure* $-3\pi^{-2}\hbar c\kappa^4$. We note that the Casimir pressure can never be the dominant term of Eq. (2h) because that would require $\alpha \stackrel{\text{def}}{=} (\pi/(\kappa a))$ to *simultaneously* satisfy *both* $\alpha > (720)^{\frac{1}{4}} = 5.18$ *and* $\alpha < (3024/720)^{\frac{1}{2}} = 2.05$, which isn't possible.

However, because the Casimir pressure $-\pi^2\hbar c/(240a^4)$ varies rapidly with the plate separation a and corrects the constant pressure term $-3\pi^{-2}\hbar c\kappa^4$ *which doesn't vary at all with plate separation* a, the Casimir pressure ought to be *discernible* even under circumstances in which it is a relatively small correction.

That being said, it is nevertheless very important to understand that the Casimir pressure *is merely a correction term*; it is definitely *not* a physically viable *complete description* of the attractive pressure between two parallel plates of an unpowered rectangular cavity.

References

[1] H. B. G. Casimir, "On the attraction between two perfectly conducting plates", www.dwc.knaw.nl/DL/publications/PU00018547.pdf (1948).