The Nature of the α Rays emitted by Radio-active Substances.

THE α rays emitted by radium and other radio-active substances have been shown by Rutherford ("Radio-activity," pp. 115-141) to consist of positively charged particles for which $e/m=6 \times 10^8$. They are rapidly absorbed by gases and solids, the absorption coefficient being approximately proportional to the density of the absorbing medium. The value of the absorption coefficient in air divided by the density varies between 350 and 1300 for different types of α rays. The velocity of these rays is about $1/10$ th to $1/20$ th that of light.

It is interesting to compare the properties of these rays with those of cathode rays moving with about the same velocity; e/m for such rays is about 10^7 , and the value of their absorption coefficient in air at 1 mm. pressure is 0.85 (Lenard, *Ann. der Phys.*, Bd. 12, p. 714, 1903) when the velocity is $1/10$ th that of light and 3.9 when it is $1/20$ th.

The absorption coefficient for these rays is also proportional approximately to the density of the absorbing medium. Dividing 0.85 by the density of air at 1 mm. pressure we get 540,000, and in the same way 3.9 gives 2,500,000. The corresponding numbers for the α rays are about 350 and 1300. Thus we see that the α rays are nearly 2000 times as penetrating as cathode rays moving with the same velocity.

Assuming that $-e$ for the cathode rays is equal to e for the α rays, we have for the ratio of their masses $10^7/6 \times 10^8 = 1/60$. It thus appears that the penetrating power of the α rays is to that of cathode rays, moving with the same velocity, approximately as the mass of the α rays is to the mass of the cathode rays. We may conclude from this that an α particle loses as much energy in colliding with an atom as a cathode-ray particle or corpuscle. If we regard the α particles as being of atomic dimensions (that is, as having a radius about 10^{-8} cm.), while an electron or corpuscle only has a radius of about 10^{-13} cm., it is very difficult to understand this result. On the view that all atoms are assemblies of electrons, the fact that the absorption of cathode rays depends only on the density of the absorbing medium is regarded as indicating that the electrons penetrate the atoms and are absorbed by colliding with the electrons which compose the atoms. Since α particles lose the same amount of energy as electrons in penetrating matter, it seems probable that they also penetrate the atoms and lose energy by colliding with the electrons in exactly the same way. If this view is taken, it becomes difficult to regard an α particle as of atomic dimensions, and we may look upon it as a positive electron exactly similar in character to an ordinary negative electron. The mass (m) of an electron is now regarded as being purely electromagnetic in character, and is given by the formula $m = 2e^2/3a$, where a is its radius and e its charge. For a negative electron this gives $a = 10^{-13}$ cm. Regarding an α particle as a positive electron, we get in the same way for its radius about $\frac{1}{2} \times 10^{-16}$ cm. On this view, therefore, the α particles are enormously smaller than the negative electrons.

The properties and modes of occurrence of the α particles are in agreement with the view that they are really positive electrons. For example, they are produced like cathode rays in electric discharges at low pressures (being then known as canalstrahlen), and have very similar properties to cathode rays. The writer therefore suggests the view that α particles may be positive electrons having a radius about 2000 times smaller than negative electrons.

Trinity College, Cambridge.

HAROLD A. WILSON.

A Suggested Explanation of Radio-activity.

I AM venturing, in the present note, to add another to the already large number of suggestions as to the meaning of the phenomenon of radio-activity.

It seems to be well established that the apparent instability of the atoms of radio-active substances is not to any great extent dependent on the temperature of the mass; the instability, therefore, is not the outcome of intermolecular collisions. Neither does it seem to arise from

an excess of the internal energy of the molecule. For the internal agitation of the molecule, so far as is known, shows itself in the emission of light, and this is associated with high mass-temperature. There is, of course, the possibility, suggested by Prof. J. J. Thomson, that there are internal degrees of freedom not represented in the spectrum of the gas, and that it is the energy of these which forms the starting point of the radio-active process. On the other hand, it is possible that the atomic instability, not being the result of the agitation of the molecules or of the component material parts (ions or corpuscles) of which the molecules are composed, must be traced to the agitation of the ultimate constituents of these ions or corpuscles. If, for instance, we take a definite mechanical illustration, and imagine our universe constructed on the model suggested by Prof. Osborne Reynolds, the source of instability must be looked for in the agitation of the "grains" of which he supposes the ether to be constituted. The velocities of these grains follow Maxwell's law of distribution, so that very high velocities, although rare, are not impossible. It is at least thinkable that a grain moving with exceptionally high velocity may succeed in breaking down the normal piling in its immediate neighbourhood when this is possible (i.e., probably, when in the immediate proximity of matter), and may therefore effect a rearrangement of the adjacent ether structure. A process of this kind would be independent of the mass-temperature; it would, so to speak, depend solely on the ether temperature, which is supposed, on Prof. Reynolds's hypothesis, to be constant throughout space. It seems probable that the rearrangement would consist of the combination and mutual annihilation of two ether strains of opposite kinds, i.e., in the coalescence of a positive and negative ion, and would therefore result in the disappearance of a certain amount of mass. There would, therefore, be conservation neither of mass nor of material energy; the process of radio-activity would consist in an increase of material energy at the expense of the destruction of a certain amount of matter.

Apart, however, from this special mechanical model, it seems probable, on grounds of general dynamics, that the ether does not transmit waves in a perfectly unaltered form, and that there is therefore a continual degradation of the energy of regular waves into an energy of random agitation of the ultimate ether structure. This agitation would afford a sufficient cause for the beginnings of the process which results in the breaking up of the atom. Naturally this agitation would have the best chance of effecting a rearrangement when the strain is greatest, and therefore when the ions are most closely packed together. A larger energy of agitation would be necessary when the ions were less closely packed. We should, therefore, expect all matter to be radio-active to some extent, but should expect the greatest amount of radio-activity to be shown by the heavier atoms.

If the instability results from a rearrangement of an ether structure, and not solely of a material structure, we should, *a priori*, on general grounds of physical dimensions, expect the velocity of the ejection to be comparable with the velocity of waves in the ether, this being the only unit appropriate to the measurement of processes depending on the physical constants of the ether. [Just as, for instance, the velocity of a gas streaming into a vacuum might, *a priori*, be expected to be comparable with the velocity of sound in the gas.] The suggested cause of instability is therefore in agreement with the observed velocity of the α particles.

J. H. JEANS.

Trinity College, Cambridge.

The First Record of Glacial Action in Tasmania.

In a recent paper on the Glacial geology of Tasmania (*Quart. Journ. Geol. Soc.*, vol. lx. p. 38), I referred to Gould's recognition of Glacial action in Tasmania as not having been directly published. This view I accepted on the strength of the statement by Mr. R. M. Johnston ("The Glacial Epoch of Australasia," *Proc. Roy. Soc. Tasmania*, vol. iv., 1893, 1894, pp. 92-3), than whom no one knows better the geological literature of Tasmania, that it was "through verbal communication to a personal friend of my