CHRISTIAAN HUYGHENS AND THE WAVE THEORY OF LIGHT

By Sir C. V. Raman

(*Memoir No.* 114 *from the Raman Research Institute, Bangalore*–6)

Received March 20, 1959

1. Introduction

The world, as we perceive it, is pictured for us by the rays of light which proceed from each point of the objects around us and form images of these objects on the retinæ of our eyes—a statement which needs no amendment even when the aid of optical instruments such as the telescope or the microscope is invoked to enlarge our powers of vision. To put it a little differently, the principles of geometrical optics suffice to describe the behaviour of light as commonly experienced, *viz.*, that the rays of light are propagated in straight lines; that the angles of incidence and of reflection are equal; and that in refraction the rays of light are bent according to the law of sines. In his celebrated *Traite de la Lumiere* published in the year 1690, Christiaan Huyghens showed that these facts of experience are consistent with the hypothesis that light is in the nature of wave-motion propagated through space and can indeed be satisfactorily explained on the basis of that hypothesis. The treatise of Huyghens contains much other material of importance; a perusal of it leaves on the mind of the reader the impression that it is a masterpiece of scientific thought and exposition which possesses an enduring value and interest.

In connection with some experimental investigations on the diffraction of light undertaken by the present author—the results of which will soon be published in these *Proceedings*—the need was felt for a careful study of the original ideas of Huyghens. The task was made much easier by using the literal translation of his treatise from the original French into English by Sylvanus P. Thompson published by the Chicago University Press in the year 1912. The results of the study were surprising; it emerged that the ideas of Huyghens were not fully or even correctly understood by later writers. This misunderstanding has had some far-reaching consequences. Especially in regard to the so-called " Principle of Huyghens " do we find that later writers have chosen a path for which there is no warrant in the writings of Huyghens. In view of these circumstances, it has appeared desirable to put forward a clear exposition of the ideas of Huyghens and supplement the same by a critical examination of the writings of later authors which claim to be based on those ideas.

2. The Nature of Light

In the first few pages of his book Huyghens set out the considerations which led him to infer that light is in the nature of a movement which spreads into space in all directions from a luminous source. He remarks that the terrestrial sources which are observed to emit light, such as fire or flame evidently contain bodies in rapid motion. Then again, when sunlight is collected by a concave mirror and concentrated on material objects, it has the same effects as fire, *viz.*, it disunites the particles of those objects. It is therefore natural to suppose that light is itself some kind of motion and that the sensation of light is excited when such movement is communicated to the nerves at the back of the human eye. Huyghens also remarks on the extreme speed with which light spreads on every side and on the circumstance that when light comes from different regions, even from those directly opposite each other, the rays traverse one another without hindrance. The facts indicate that light is a movement transmitted through space and not a transport of matter which reaches the eye from the source of light.

To account for the very high velocity of propagation of light—known from the observations of Römer on the eclipses of Jupiter's satellites—and the fact that light can pass through empty space, Huyghens proposed a physical picture of the ætherial medium which could explain its power to transmit waves with such high velocity. He suggested that the æther of space consists of an immense number of extremely small and extremely hard spherical particles in close contact with each other. Experiments on the percussion of elastic solid spheres on each other show that a medium of the nature postulated could propagate waves simultaneously in all directions with high velocity and in such manner that waves travelling in different directions at one and the same time would not hinder each other's progress. Huyghens further recognized that every luminous object would necessarily contain an immense number of centres emitting light and that from each of such centres thousands of waves might emerge in the smallest imaginable time; he pointed out that these considerations would make it easier to understand, why in spite of the enfeeblement of the individual waves by their spread through immense distances, the light of the distant stars continues to be perceptible to human eyes.

3. The Rectilinear Propagation of Light

The mechanical model of the æther proposed by Huyghens to account for the propagation of waves of light through it also enabled him to give a simple and satisfactory explanation of why light travels out from the original source in straight lines. Considering the medium which transmits light to be composed of an immense number of very small and very hard spherical particles in close contact with each other, it follows that each of these particles when it is displaced from its position by the passage over it of the parent wave sent out from the original source would itself function as the source of a wave which spreads out from it in all directions. The particular or partial waves of this nature recognized by Huyghens in his argument would be as numerous as the total number of the individual particles of æther contained in a sphere drawn with the source of the primary wave as centre and the distance to which it has travelled out as the radius. It is evident, also, that these partial waves, though present in enormous numbers within the volume of the sphere, would individually be of excessively feeble force. In theory, they are assumed to travel out from their respective centres in all directions but actually, by reason of their excessive feebleness the effect of all the partial waves may be totally ignored except of those which arrive together at the same instant, in other words, *simultaneously*, at the point of observation. For, in the latter case, their effects would be superposed and would add up to give an observable result. Such simultaneity in arrival and consequent superposition of effects would be possible only in the case of those partial waves which originate at points in the medium between the primary source of light and the point of observation which lie on the straight line joining them. The summation of the partial waves originating at such points and reaching the point of observation at the same instant would produce the luminous effect there observed. Thus the light which reaches the point of observation from the original source may be considered as having travelled out along the straight line joining the two points.

4. The Reflection and Refraction of Light

In the second and third chapters of his treatise, Huyghens considered the phenomena which arise when light travelling in one medium reaches the boundary which separates it from another. In considering those phenomena, various physical questions arise and are discussed by him, as for example, why some materials are transparent to light and others are opaque, why the velocity of light in a material medium should differ from that in empty space and what the actual configuration of the boundary of the separation between two media is or can be.

The explanation of reflection and refraction in terms of the wave hypothesis is based on an idea which Huyghens found himself compelled to introduce, *viz.*, *that the elements of the area* of the boundary of separation between the two media act as sources of partial waves which travel out respectively into the two media. The partial waves returned from the boundary into the first medium build up the regularly reflected wave, while those travelling into the second medium give the refracted wave.

A simple geometric construction based on the foregoing ideas enabled Huyghens to explain the familiar law of reflection of light. Likewise, assuming the second medium to be transparent and that the velocity of light in it differs from that in the first, a similar geometric construction led him to the result that the sine of the angle of incidence and the sine of the angle of refraction bear to each other a constant ratio which is the same as the ratio of the velocities of light in the two media. The phenomena of the total internal reflection of light also found a satisfactory explanation. Huyghens showed further that his construction leads directly to Fermat's principle of minimum time for the passage of light from one point to another when the two points are in different media.

5. The Wave-Optics of Huyghens

Before proceeding to comment on the writing of later authors on the work of Huyghens, we may usefully here summarise the basic concepts of his theory. Huyghens put forward and sought to establish the proposition that when a wave of light diverges from its source, every small portion of the wave is capable of propagating itself independently with the same velocity as the rest of it; in an isotropic medium, the direction of such propagation is the wave-normal and hence this is also the direction of the ray in the sense of geometrical optics. The same idea forms the basis of Huyghens' explanation of the reflection and refraction of light. When the elements of area of an advancing wave-front reach the boundary between two media, each such element gives rise, respectively in the two media, to the elements of area in the reflected and refracted waves. These latter advance normally to themselves in such a direction that they can join up and form continuous wave-fronts. The geometric constructions employed by Huyghens enable these requirements to be satisfied. The propagation of light in an inhomogeneous medium considered in the fourth chapter of Huyghens' treatise can also be very simply dealt with on the same basis. The elements of area of the wave-front in such a medium advance normally to themselves with the velocity appropriate to their positions in the medium. As they advance, they join up to form new wave-fronts which are orthogonal to the path of the light-rays in the medium.

Later writers have criticised the arguments employed by Huyghens in his treatise. One remark which is often made is that the theory of Huyghens would result in his wave-fronts moving backwards as well as forwards and that he had given no explanation for the absence of backward propagation. But this criticism is not justified and is itself based on a misunderstanding. Huyghens was concerned with the behaviour of an *advancing* wave-front in a homogeneous medium. The partial waves which in his theory give the observed light intensity by their superposition are those which diverge from points lying on the straight line between the source and the observer; in order to reach the observer simultaneously they should all move *away* from the source and *towards* the point of observation, in other words move *forwards* towards the observer. The possibility of backward propagation is thus ruled out completely.

Another criticism which has frequently been advanced is that the theory of Huyghens is based on an arbitrary assumption, *viz.*, that only along the envelope of his partial waves would there by any observable intensity of light. This criticism is also based on a misunderstanding. It should be remembered that Huyghens was unaware that the waves of light are periodic disturbances having a definite wave-length. He assumed that light consists of *individual* waves which diverge in all directions from the original source and the partial waves contemplated in his theory would therefore also be of the same nature. The build-up of a finite intensity from the superposition of a very large number of such waves, each of which is extremely feeble, would accordingly be possible only if they arrive *simultaneously* at the point of observation. The diagram appearing in the first chapter of Huyghens' treatise is intended to assist the reader to appreciate the arguments set out in the text; *viz.*, at *each* point on the wave-front a great number of partial waves arrive *simultaneously* and build up the intensity at that point, while the entire wave may be itself considered as made up of a great number of elementary areas at which the light-intensity has thus been built up. In the later chapters in which Huyghens' theories of reflection and refraction and of the propagation of light in an inhomogeneous medium are expounded, the diagrams are intended to exhibit how the complete wave-front arising from these processes is built up out of its elementary parts or areas. Here again, the final result is an individual wave, and it may therefore be correctly described as the envelope of the partial waves which co-operate in building it up.

6. The Partial Waves of Huyghens

Since the concept of partial waves introduced by Huyghens in his treatise has played an important role in physical optics, it is appropriate that we consider it here in some detail. Though the words appear in several chapters of his treatise, it should be remarked that they do not have the same significance in each case. In the first chapter which seeks to explain the rectilinear propagation of light, the partial waves arise as a consequence of the assumed discrete structure of the luminiferous medium; each particle in the medium is regarded as a source of such waves. In the second and third chapters, the partial waves are assumed to arise when the primary wave reaches the boundary separating the two media with different properties. The elements of area of the boundary are here regarded as the source of partial waves. Since they travel with different velocities, they are distinct from each other in the two media. In the fourth chapter which deals with the propagation of light in inhomogeneous media, the partial waves are assumed to diverge from the elements of area of the advancing wave-front in such a medium.

If the luminiferous medium were empty space, the assumption that it consists of discrete particles which can function as emitters of partial waves would be difficult to justify. In the case of material media, however, there is good reason for assuming that the discrete atoms of which they are composed could function as sources of secondary or partial waves. Even so, however, these partial waves would reinforce each other in the direction of propagation of the primary wave and merge with it, while in other directions they would interfere and cancel out each other's effects. Thus, they would, in all cases, cease to be observable. Accordingly, the notion of partial waves can, in such circumstances, be regarded only as hypothetical or virtual and not as an observable or physical reality. The same remarks would also be applicable in regard to the propagation of light in a medium which is inhomogeneous. Indeed, as already remarked, this particular case could be dealt with in a very simple manner without making any use of the concept of partial waves. Thus, finally, we are left with the phenomena arising from the incidence of light on the boundary between two material media. Huyghens' construction explains the geometric laws of reflection and refraction in so natural and convincing a fashion that it is difficult to resist the conclusion that his concept of partial waves is well-grounded and is a physical reality in these particular cases.

7. THE SO-CALLED PRINCIPLE OF HUYGHENS

It will be evident from what has been said above that the ideas of Huyghens were not correctly understood or appreciated by later writers. It is not surprising therefore that the whole of the vast literature which was subsequently published and which claims to base itself on the ideas of Huyghens, in reality proceeds on a different basis altogether. This is evident from the fact that the mathematicians whose objective was to develop a " Rigorous

Formulation of the Principle of Huyghens" concerned themselves with precisely the case in which Huyghens' concept of partial waves has no physical meaning or justification, namely the undisturbed propagation of waves from a source situated in a structureless and uniform continuum.

The well-known formula developed by Kirchhoff is an illustration of the foregoing remarks. Here, the disturbance due to the source at the point of observation is expressed as an integral taken over the area of a closed surface within which the point of observation is included but not the source. Each elementary area of the surface appears in the formula as a source from waves diverge with amplitudes which vary with the direction of emission. The line joining the source and the point of observation is also the direction of maximum amplitude for the waves radiated by the element of area which lies on that line *between* them, and of zero amplitude for an element of area which also lies on the same line but on the *opposite side*. Kirchhoff's formula as actually developed refers to the case of sound-waves, and the attempts made to extend it to the case of light have not met with success. But our present concern is not with the mathematics of the formula but with the physics of the subject. The association of the formula with the name of Huyghens—honoured as the founder of the wave-theory of light—has naturally disposed whole generations of physicists to look upon it with favour. It has, however, been made clear by the foregoing remarks that Kirchhoff's approach to the subject is quite different from that of Huyghens. We have, therefore, to ask ourselves: Is Kirchhoff's formula really meaningful? Has it any claim to validity or acceptance considered from the standpoint of optical theory? We shall proceed to consider these questions.

As has already been remarked, one of Huyghens' striking successes is his explanation of the geometric laws of reflection and refraction. His concept of partial waves takes its clearest and most acceptable form in this case, *viz.*, that each element of area of the physical boundary acts as a source of partial waves. Since these move with different velocities in the two media, they should be considered as distinct. In other words, the partial waves in each medium are hemispherical, and it becomes a meaningful physical problem to determine the dependence of the amplitude of the waves with direction on the surface of these hemispheres. It would presumably be a maximum in the direction of the normal to the boundary and zero in directions parallel to the boundary. On the other hand, the very generality of Kirchhoff's formula indicates that it has no physical validity or significance. For, it is not possible to discover or assign any reason why an element of area set at an arbitrary orientation in a continuous structureless medium should function as a source of secondary waves with specific features related to that orientation. If the concept of partial or secondary waves is at all to be meaningful, the waves should have a physically recognizable origin, *e.g.*, a local discontinuity in physical properties. In its absence, the formula ceases to have any physical content. Kirchhoff's formula thus reveals itself to be a mathematical abstraction which is not relevant or valid in relation to the actual problems of physical optics.

8. SUMMARY

The " Principle of Huyghens " has played an important role in physical optics and especially in the explanation of the phenomena of the diffraction of light. An examination of Huyghen's own ideas as expounded in his original treatise is therefore of interest and is undertaken in the present memoir. It emerges that the particular form given to the " Principle " by mathematical analysts, notably Kirchhoff, does not find any support or warrant in the writings of Huyghens. The concept of " partial waves " introduced by Huyghens in his treatise is based on specific physical considerations. These are totally lacking in relation to the free and uninterrupted propagation of waves in a continuous structureless medium. The latter case is considered in Kirchhoff's theory and it follows that the Kirchhoff formula is a mathematical abstraction which has no relevance or validity in relation to the actual problems of physical optics.