What if Hubble Had Chosen Aging Instead of Expansion

Krunomir Dvorski
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A speculative essay in the history of science

In 1929 Edwin Hubble did something deceptively simple. He plotted the distances of galaxies against the redshift of their spectral lines. The points fell roughly along a straight line. The interpretation became one of the most powerful intellectual commitments in modern science: space itself is expanding.

But the observation itself did not logically require expansion. It required only a relation:

$$z \propto d$$

— the wavelength of light changes with distance traveled.

History remembers that Georges Lemaître interpreted this as cosmic expansion and that interpretation triumphed. Yet imagine a different intellectual turn. Suppose Hubble, instead of accepting expansion as the physical mechanism, had asked a different question:

What if light changes while traveling?

And suppose further he had proposed a very specific mechanism — not a simple exponential decay or energy leakage, but a Gaussian aging of photons, where frequency decreases smoothly with propagation time:

$$v(t) = v_o \exp\left(-\frac{t^2}{2\varsigma^2}\right)$$

In such a world, cosmology would not merely have taken another path.

It would have become a completely different science.

The Immediate Consequence: No Expanding Universe

The expanding-space interpretation solved a major philosophical problem of the early 20th century: Einstein's static universe was unstable. A dynamical universe restored consistency to general relativity.

But a Gaussian photon-aging model would have offered an alternative stability mechanism. The universe itself could remain globally stationary while appearance evolves. Distance would not stretch space — distance would accumulate time-interaction with vacuum.

Redshift would then be interpreted not as recession velocity, but as history encoded in light.

The night sky would not be a Doppler diagram.

It would be an archive.

The famous "Hubble law" would no longer be a kinematic law of galaxies.

It would be a propagation law of radiation.

Astronomy would resemble geology: light would carry layers of cosmic aging the way rocks carry sediment layers.

The Fate of the Big Bang

Without expansion, the Big Bang would almost certainly not have emerged in its familiar form.

The Big Bang is not simply an observation — it is an extrapolation. Expansion backwards in time leads mathematically to a singular origin. Remove expansion and the singular beginning disappears as a necessity.

Instead, cosmology might have developed toward a continuous-creation or steady-state-like ontology, but grounded not in matter creation (as in Hoyle's steady state) but in radiation transformation.

The early universe would not be a hot beginning.

It would be a low-entropy transparency — a state where photons were newly formed and therefore unaged.

The universe would not have a birth event.

It would have a process.

The Cosmic Microwave Background Reinterpreted

In our real history, the 1965 discovery of the cosmic microwave background (CMB) strongly reinforced the Big Bang model. A relic radiation at ~2.7 K fit naturally with a cooling expanding universe.

But under Gaussian photon aging, the CMB would have been interpreted differently.

Instead of:
"We see the leftover glow of the primordial fireball"

cosmologists might have said:
"We see the oldest surviving photons."

The CMB would represent not an early epoch, but the maximum aging state of radiation allowed by the universe — the asymptotic spectral equilibrium of photons traveling cosmological distances.

In that framework, temperature would not primarily measure thermal history.

It would measure photon lifetime statistics.

The microwave background would become a boundary condition of radiation physics rather than a fossil of cosmological explosion.

Dark Energy Would Never Be Born

In 1998 astronomers discovered that distant supernovae appeared dimmer than expected. In the expansion framework this forced a startling conclusion: expansion is accelerating. Dark energy was invented.

But under photon aging, the interpretation would be entirely different.

If light loses frequency progressively — and especially if the aging law is nonlinear (Gaussian) — then brightness and spectral shift would both depend on the cumulative propagation history. Distant supernovae would naturally appear fainter without requiring the universe itself to accelerate.

The cosmological constant might have remained a mathematical curiosity in Einstein's equations rather than a dominant component of cosmic energy.

Modern cosmology would therefore lack its largest mystery.

No dark energy crisis.

Instead, the central unsolved problem would be:
What property of the vacuum modifies photons over billions of years?

A Different Kind of Fundamental Physics

The consequences would not remain confined to astronomy. Particle physics and quantum field theory would have evolved under a different pressure.

Today the vacuum is usually treated as a passive stage populated by quantum fluctuations. But if photon aging were foundational, the vacuum could not be passive. It would need:

- a time-interaction property
- a cumulative statistical memory
- an energy-exchange mechanism that preserves local conservation while allowing long-term spectral evolution

The vacuum would be studied not primarily as a quantum field ground state, but as a cosmic medium — not an ether in the mechanical sense, but a dynamical informational substrate.

In that intellectual climate, the boundary between cosmology and quantum theory would have been crossed much earlier. The main question of 20th-century physics might not have been unification of forces, but:
Why does radiation age?

The Philosophical Shift

Most importantly, the metaphysics of the universe would have been transformed.

The expansion universe implies a dramatic narrative:
Birth → evolution → heat death.

Photon aging implies something quieter and stranger:
The universe persists, but information gradually transforms.

Time would not primarily be measured by the motion of matter.
It would be measured by the transformation of light.

Instead of a cosmology of motion, we would have a cosmology of propagation.

The sky would not be expanding away from us.
It would be growing older toward us.

The Irony

Ironically, Hubble himself was cautious. He often resisted strong cosmological interpretation and spoke carefully of "apparent velocities." Had he been slightly more skeptical of expansion and slightly more curious about radiation physics, cosmology might have divided into two competing traditions:

1. Kinematic cosmology — galaxies move apart.
2. Radiative cosmology — photons evolve in transit.

Science would then have spent a century not trying to measure the age of the universe, but trying to measure the age of light.

And perhaps the central instrument of cosmology would not have been the galaxy survey.

It would have been the spectrometer.

Conclusion

If Hubble had interpreted redshift as Gaussian photon aging rather than expansion, cosmology would likely not revolve around a beginning, a singularity, or dark energy. Instead, the universe would be understood as a stable large-scale structure in which radiation undergoes a gradual, law-governed transformation during propagation.

Our present cosmology is a history of moving galaxies.

That alternative cosmology would be a history of changing light.

In one universe, space expands.

In the other, time writes itself into photons.

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