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The Quantum Design of Photosynthesis

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Photosynthesis has found an ultrafast and highly efficient way of converting the energy of the sun into electrochemical energy. The solar energy is collected by Light-Harvesting complexes (LHC) and then transferred to the Reaction Center (RC) where the excitation energy is converted into a charge separated state with almost 100% efficiency. That separation of charges creates an electrochemical gradient across the photosynthetic membrane which ultimately powers the photosynthetic organism. The understanding of the molecular mechanisms of light harvesting and charge separation will provide a template for the design of efficient artificial solar energy conversion systems.

Upon excitation of the photosynthetic system the energy is delocalized over several cofactors creating collective excited states (excitons) that provide efficient and ultrafast paths for energy transfer using the principles of quantum mechanics. In the reaction center the excitons become mixed with charge transfer (CT) character (exciton-CT states), which provide ultrafast channels for charge transfer. However, both the LHC and the RC have to cope with a counter effect: disorder. The slow protein motions (static disorder) produce slightly different conformations which, in turn, modulate the energy of the exciton-CT states. In this scenario, in some of the LHC/RC complexes within the sample ensemble the energy could be trapped in some unproductive states leading to unacceptable energy losses.

Here I will show that LHCs and RCs have found a unique solution for overcoming this barrier: they use the principles of quantum mechanics to probe many possible pathways at the same time and to select the most efficient one that fits their realization of the disorder. They use electronic coherence for ultrafast energy and electron transfer and have selected specific vibrations to sustain those coherences. In this way photosynthetic energy transfer and charge separation have achieved their amazing efficiency. At the same time these same interactions are used to photoprotect the system against unwanted byproducts of light harvesting and charge separation at high light intensities.

Are you currently a postgraduate student? (Yes/No)

No

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