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Capturing atomic-scale carrier dynamics with electrons

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Light-driven electronic motion unfolds on times as short as the cycle period of light and on length scales as small as the distance between two neighboring atoms in a molecule. Visualizing fundamental light-matter interactions therefore requires access to attosecond and picometer dimensions. Here we report on a potential unification of electron diffraction and microscopy with attosecond spectroscopy, which could provide a full space-time access to elementary electronic processes in matter and materials. We review recent progress in ultrafast diffraction and microscopy towards temporal resolutions approaching 10 fs by use of state-of-the-art microwave technology and discuss our latest findings on all-optical compression approaches offering the potential for sub-femtosecond, sub-optical-cycle resolution. Four-dimensional electron diffraction with attosecond-picometer resolution will access all dynamics outside the atomic core, offering an all-embracing insight into fundamental electron-nuclear dynamics of complex materials.

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