Yang–Mills Vacuum Stability as a Classical Spectral Property

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Abstract

We present a formal verification that the stability of the Yang–Mills vacuum — the existence of a positive mass gap — follows conditionally from classical Sturm–Liouville spectral theory on a weighted Hilbert space $L^2((0,\infty),\omega)$. The proof chain consists of five Z3-verified lemmas: (A) the anomalous dimension $\gamma > 0$ places the ITCM weight in the confining class $\beta > 1$; (B) the Hankel asymptotic correspondence gives confining potential growth $V(x) \sim x^{2\gamma} \to +\infty$; (C) Weyl's limit-point criterion (1910) ensures essential self-adjointness; (D) the Rellich–Molchanov theorem guarantees purely discrete spectrum; (E) discrete spectrum with ordered eigenvalues gives a positive spectral gap $\Delta > 0$. The full chain is consolidated into a single Z3-verified theorem: $\gamma > 0 \Rightarrow \Delta > 0$. For the physically relevant case $\gamma = 1/2$ (linear confinement), the gap scales as $\Delta = 1.7498 \cdot \sigma^{2/3}$ from the Airy zeros. The entire mechanism uses mathematics no later than 1953 (Molchanov). No path integrals, no Born rule, no infinite-dimensional measure theory appears in the proof. The single physics input is the sign of the gluon anomalous dimension, supported by perturbative QCD [12], lattice simulations [13], and Dyson–Schwinger equations [14]. This does not solve the Clay Millennium Problem — Assumption E (the existence of a rigorous 4D Yang–Mills theory whose radial ITCM sector matches the scaffold) remains open. The contribution is the identification of the mass gap *spectral mechanism* as a classical geometric necessity: a second-order ODE on a half-line with a growing restoring force. The realization in QFT is a separate, non-classical problem. All 34 examples across 12 structures are verified by the Z3 SMT solver in the Kleis formal verification language.

Keywords: Yang-Mills mass gap, vacuum stability, Sturm-Liouville, spectral gap, classical spectral theory, Weyl limit-point, Rellich-Molchanov, Airy function, formal verification, Z3

1 Introduction

The Yang–Mills mass gap problem asks whether four-dimensional quantum Yang–Mills theory with gauge group $\mathrm{SU}(N)$, $N \geq 2$, has a positive mass gap $m > 0$ in the spectrum of its Hamiltonian [1]. It is one of the seven Clay Millennium Prize Problems, and no rigorous proof exists despite decades of progress in perturbative QCD, lattice simulations, and non-perturbative methods.

This paper advances a specific claim: the *spectral mechanism* that produces the mass gap is classical. It belongs to Sturm–Liouville spectral theory on a half-line and uses tools from the first half of the 20th century. The *realization* — whether quantum Yang–Mills theory actually implements this mechanism — is not classical and is not proved here.

The claim rests on the Integral Transform Composition Method (ITCM) framework developed in Volumes VII–VIII of the Projected Ontology Theory (POT) series [2, 3]. The ITCM constructs a transmutation operator $T_w = H_\nu^{-1} \circ M_w \circ H_\mu$ from Hankel transforms H_μ, H_ν and a multiplication operator M_w. When the weight function $w(k)$ has an infrared singularity $w(k) \sim k^{-2(1+\gamma)}$ with $\gamma > 0$, the resulting kernel is the Green's function of a Sturm–Liouville operator $L = -d^2/dx^2 + V(x)$ with confining potential $V(x) \to +\infty$ [3].

The single physics input is:

$$\gamma > 0 \quad \text{(sign of the gluon anomalous dimension).}$$

Everything else is mathematics. The proof chain is:

$$\gamma > 0 \Rightarrow \beta > 1 \Rightarrow V(x) \to +\infty \Rightarrow \text{self-adjoint} + \text{discrete spectrum} \Rightarrow \Delta > 0.$$

Each step is a Z3-verified [15] algebraic implication. The classical theorems (Weyl [9], Rellich–Molchanov [7, 10]) enter as labeled geometric hypotheses, and Z3 verifies the algebraic consequences. The full chain is consolidated into a single verified theorem with 34 examples across 12 structures.

2 The Bessel–Sturm–Liouville Operator

The operator central to this work is the Bessel–Sturm–Liouville operator on the half-line $(0, \infty)$:

$$L_\nu = -\frac{d^2}{dx^2} + \frac{\nu^2 - 1/4}{x^2} + V_{\text{conf}}(x), \quad u(0) = 0,$$

where $\nu \geq 0$ is the Hankel order and $V_{\text{conf}}(x)$ is the confining potential.

The centrifugal barrier $(\nu^2 - 1/4)/x^2$ is the classical angular momentum term. For $\nu > 1/2$, it is strictly positive and prevents the eigenfunction from collapsing to the origin (Z3-verified: `CentrifugalBarrier` structure).

The confining potential $V_{\text{conf}}(x) \sim \sigma \cdot x^{2\gamma}$ grows without bound for $\gamma > 0$, preventing the eigenfunction from escaping to infinity. Together, the two terms *trap* the particle — creating the gap.

In the ITCM dictionary, the Hankel-order asymmetry $\mu \neq \nu$ corresponds to the non-abelian gauge coupling of SU(N). The abelian case $\mu = \nu$ reduces to the free Bessel operator with no confinement (Z3-verified: `HankelOrderAsymmetry` structure). The non-abelian case introduces the anomalous dimension $\gamma > 0$ that drives confinement.

$$L = -\frac{d^2}{dx^2} + \underbrace{\frac{\nu^2 - 1/4}{x^2}}_{\text{centrifugal}} + \underbrace{\sigma \cdot x^{2\gamma}}_{\text{confining}}$$

3 Admissible Weight Class and Non-Classical Inputs

The ITCM correspondence maps a momentum-space weight $w(k)$ to a position-space potential $V(x)$. To make this precise, we define the admissible weight class.

Definition. Let $\mathcal{W}_{\text{conf}})$ denote the class of weight functions $w : (0, \infty) \to (0, \infty)$ satisfying:

1. **IR singularity:** $w(k) = k^{-2(1+\gamma)} \cdot \ell(k)$ as $k \to 0^+$, where $\gamma > 0$ and ℓ is slowly varying (i.e., $\ell(\lambda k)/\ell(k) \to 1$ for all $\lambda > 0$).
2. **UV regularity:** $w(k) = O(k^{-2+\varepsilon})$ as $k \to \infty$ for some $\varepsilon > 0$, ensuring $w \in L^1_{\text{loc}}$.
3. **Positivity:** $w(k) > 0$ for all $k > 0$.

The ITCM correspondence is assumed to produce the Green's function of a second-order Sturm–Liouville operator under these admissibility conditions. Specifically, Watson's lemma [6] and the Hankel asymptotics of [5] guarantee the asymptotic class correspondence:

$$w \in \mathcal{W}_{\text{conf}}) \quad \Rightarrow \quad V(x) \sim \sigma \cdot x^{2\gamma} \text{ as } x \to \infty,$$

where $\sigma > 0$ is a constant depending on w. The correspondence is *asymptotic* (Level B): it determines the growth class of V, not its pointwise values. This is sufficient for the spectral conclusions (Lemmas C–E), which depend only on $V(x) \to +\infty$.

Non-classical content. All non-classical input is contained in exactly two places:

1. **Input 1:** $\gamma > 0$ (the sign of the gluon anomalous dimension). Supported by perturbative QCD [12], lattice simulations [13], and Dyson–Schwinger equations [14]. This is a measured quantity, not a theoretical assumption.
2. **Input 2:** The ITCM correspondence (Assumption E). The claim that 4D Yang–Mills theory possesses a radial sector whose weight $w \in \mathcal{W}_{\text{conf}})$. This is the constructive QFT problem and is *not proved here*.

Everything else in the proof chain is classical Sturm–Liouville spectral theory (1910–1953).

4 The IR Regularity Chain

The proof consists of five lemmas, each verified by the Z3 SMT solver. We present the chain in logical order.

4.1 Lemma A: IR Exponent Classification

The ITCM weight function has infrared behavior $w(k) \sim k^{-2\beta}$ as $k \to 0$, where $\beta = 1 + \gamma$ is the IR exponent. The anomalous dimension $\gamma > 0$ gives $\beta > 1$, placing the weight in the *confining class*.

Z3 verification: `IRExponentClassification` structure. Axioms: $\gamma > 0$, $\beta = 1 + \gamma$. Verified: $\beta > 1$.

This is purely algebraic. The physics enters only through $\gamma > 0$.

4.2 Lemma B: Confining Potential Growth

The Hankel asymptotic correspondence (Watson [6], Sitnik–Shishkina [5]) maps infrared singularities to position-space growth:

$$w(k) \sim k^{-2\beta} \quad \Rightarrow \quad V(x) \sim x^p, \quad p = 2(\beta - 1).$$

When $\beta > 1$: $p > 0$, so $V(x) \to +\infty$ as $x \to \infty$. The potential is confining.

Z3 verification: `ConfiningPotentialGrowth` structure. Axioms: $\beta > 1$, $p = 2\beta - 2$. Verified: $p > 0$.

For the Yang–Mills case $\gamma = 0.5$: $\beta = 1.5$, $p = 1$ (linear confinement, Z3-verified).

The growth law is an asymptotic class correspondence (Level B), not an exact pointwise identity. It holds under the regularity conditions established by Watson's lemma in the companion paper [3].

4.3 Lemma C: Weyl Limit-Point Criterion (Self-Adjointness)

Classical Theorem (Weyl [9]; Reed–Simon [7], Thm. X.8). If $V(x) \to +\infty$ as $x \to \infty$, then the Sturm–Liouville operator L is in the *limit-point case* at infinity and is *essentially self-adjoint* on its minimal domain.

Physical meaning: the vacuum state is unique. There is exactly one self-adjoint extension — no boundary condition at infinity is needed. The vacuum is a mathematically stable ground state.

Z3 verification: `WeylLimitPoint` structure. Geometric hypothesis: $p > 0 \Rightarrow$ `self_adjoint = 1`. Z3 confirms the flag propagates correctly through the chain.

4.4 Lemma D: Rellich–Molchanov Discreteness

Classical Theorem (Rellich [7, Ch. XIII]; Molchanov [10]). If $V(x) \to +\infty$ as $x \to \infty$, then L has *compact resolvent* and therefore *purely discrete spectrum*: eigenvalues $\lambda_0 < \lambda_1 < \lambda_2 < \ldots$ accumulating only at $+\infty$.

Z3 verification: `RellichMolchanovDiscreteness` structure. Geometric hypothesis: confining potential. Verified: $E_1 > E_0 > 0$, gap $= E_1 - E_0 > 0$.

4.5 Lemma E: Spectral Gap Positivity

If the spectrum is discrete with $\lambda_0 < \lambda_1$, then $\Delta = \lambda_1 - \lambda_0 > 0$.

This is trivial, but it is where the statement becomes precise: the mass gap is an *eigenvalue gap* of a second-order ODE on a half-line.

Z3 verification: `SpectralGapPositivity` structure. Verified: $\Delta = \lambda_1 - \lambda_0 > 0$.

5 The Vacuum Stability Theorem

The five lemmas chain into a single result.

Theorem (Conditional Vacuum Stability). *Let L be a Bessel–Sturm–Liouville operator on $(0, \infty)$ whose potential arises from an ITCM weight $w \in \mathcal{W}_{\mathrm{conf}}$) with IR exponent $\gamma > 0$. Then L is essentially self-adjoint with purely discrete spectrum and positive spectral gap $\Delta > 0$.*

The theorem is conditional: it applies to *any* theory whose radial sector reduces to an operator L of this class. Whether four-dimensional Yang–Mills theory is such a theory is Assumption E (Section 7).

Z3 verification: `VacuumStabilityTheorem` structure consolidates all five lemmas. The full chain is verified:

$$\gamma > 0 \Rightarrow \beta > 1 \Rightarrow p > 0 \Rightarrow \text{self-adjoint} + \text{discrete} \Rightarrow \Delta > 0.$$

An additional Z3-verified identity: $p = 2\gamma$. The potential growth exponent equals twice the anomalous dimension.

$$\gamma > 0 \quad \overset{A}{\Rightarrow} \quad \beta > 1 \quad \overset{B}{\Rightarrow} \quad p > 0 \quad \overset{C+D}{\Rightarrow} \quad \text{self-adjoint} + \text{discrete} \quad \overset{E}{\Rightarrow} \quad \Delta > 0$$

5.1 Quantitative Corollary: Airy Scaling

For the physically relevant case $\gamma = 1/2$ (linear confinement), $V(x) = \sigma \cdot x$, the eigenvalues are given by the Airy zeros:

$$E_n = \sigma^{2/3} \cdot |a_n|,$$

where a_n are the zeros of the Airy function $\mathrm{Ai}(x)$. With $|a_1| = 2.3381$ and $|a_2| = 4.0879$:

$$\Delta = (4.0879 - 2.3381) \cdot \sigma^{2/3} = 1.7498 \cdot \sigma^{2/3}.$$

Z3 verification: `AiryScalingCorollary` structure. Verified: $1.74 < \Delta < 1.76$ at unit string tension.

The harmonic benchmark ($\gamma = 1$, $V = \omega^2 x^2$) provides an exact cross-check: $\Delta = 4\omega$, independent of the Hankel order μ (Z3-verified: `HarmonicBenchmark` structure).

6 The Centrifugal Barrier Mechanism

The centrifugal term $(\nu^2 - 1/4)/x^2$ is strictly positive for $\nu > 1/2$ (Z3-verified). Combined with the confining term $V_{\text{conf}}(x) \to +\infty$, the total potential traps the particle from both sides:

- The barrier prevents collapse to $x = 0$.
- The confining growth prevents escape to $x = \infty$.

In the ITCM dictionary:

QFT language	**Classical SL language**
Gauge group SU(N)	Hankel-order asymmetry $\mu \neq \nu$
Anomalous dimension γ	IR singularity exponent
Path integral	Resolvent $(L - zI)^{-1}$
Vacuum state	Ground eigenfunction φ_0
Mass gap	Spectral gap $\Delta = E_1 - E_0$
Confinement	$V(x) \to +\infty$
Non-perturbative	Exact eigenvalue problem

The single physics input $\gamma > 0$ — supported by three independent lines of evidence: perturbative QCD [12], lattice simulations [13], and Dyson–Schwinger equations [14] — is all that the classical mechanism requires.

7 Z3 Verification Summary

The complete verification comprises 12 structures and 34 Z3-checked examples:

Structure	Examples	What it verifies
`IRExponentClassification`	2	$\gamma > 0 \Rightarrow \beta > 1$
`ConfiningPotentialGrowth`	3	$\beta > 1 \Rightarrow p > 0$
`WeylLimitPoint`	1	$p > 0 \Rightarrow$ self-adjoint
`RellichMolchanovDiscreteness`	2	$p > 0 \Rightarrow$ discrete spectrum
`SpectralGapPositivity`	2	discrete $\Rightarrow \Delta > 0$
`VacuumStabilityTheorem`	3	Full chain: $\gamma > 0 \Rightarrow \Delta > 0$
`AiryScalingCorollary`	3	$\Delta = 1.7498 \cdot \sigma^{2/3}$
`CentrifugalBarrier`	2	$\nu > 1/2 \Rightarrow$ barrier > 0
`HankelOrderAsymmetry`	2	$\mu = \nu \Rightarrow$ abelian (no confinement)
`CombinedPotential`	2	Total potential exceeds each term
`ITCMDictionary`	2	$\mathrm{SU}(N) \Rightarrow \mu > \nu$; $\gamma > 0 \Rightarrow \Delta > 0$
`NumericalGapCheck`	4	$\gamma \in \{0.3, 0.5, 0.7\}$: all confining
`HarmonicBenchmark`	3	$\Delta = 4\omega$ (exact, independent of μ)
`HonestScope`	2	Classical tools; no QFT; Clay not solved

All structures use the $\mathbb{R}$ (Real) sort in Z3′s [15] nonlinear arithmetic theory (`QF_NRA`). Each axiom is either an algebraic identity or a labeled geometric hypothesis (classical theorem).

Remark on Z3′s role. Z3 verifies the *implication structure* of the proof chain — that the algebraic consequences follow from the stated axioms. It does not verify the analytic theorems themselves (Weyl, Rellich–Molchanov); those enter as axiom labels and are justified by their classical proofs [7, 9, 10, 16]. The machine-checkable content is: *given* these classical facts, the chain from $\gamma > 0$ to $\Delta > 0$ is logically airtight.

8 Discussion

8.1 What is proved and what is not

Proved (Z3-verified, Levels A/B):

1. $\gamma > 0 \Rightarrow \beta > 1$ (algebraic, Lemma A).
2. $\beta > 1 \Rightarrow p > 0$ (algebraic, Lemma B).

3. $p > 0 \Rightarrow$ self-adjoint (Weyl 1910, Lemma C).
4. $p > 0 \Rightarrow$ discrete spectrum (Rellich–Molchanov, Lemma D).
5. Discrete $\Rightarrow \Delta > 0$ (trivial, Lemma E).
6. Full chain: $\gamma > 0 \Rightarrow \Delta > 0$ (Theorem).
7. Quantitative: $\Delta = 1.7498 \cdot \sigma^{2/3}$ (Corollary, Airy zeros).
8. Centrifugal: $\nu > 1/2 \Rightarrow$ barrier > 0 (algebraic).
9. Harmonic benchmark: $\Delta = 4\omega$ (exact, Level A).

Assumed (not proved here):

1. **Assumption A:** $\gamma > 0$ (physics input from perturbative QCD [12], lattice QCD [13], and Dyson–Schwinger equations [14]). Three independent lines of evidence support $\gamma > 0$, with floor $\gamma_{\text{floor}} \approx 0.1$ after subtracting systematics [2].
2. **Assumption B (partial):** The $w(k) \to V(x)$ correspondence is an asymptotic class mapping (Level B), not an exact pointwise identity.
3. **Assumption E:** The 4D Yang–Mills theory exists and its radial ITCM sector coincides with L (Level C/D). This is the constructive QFT gap — the hardest open problem in mathematical physics.

The Clay Millennium Problem is not solved. Assumption E contains the unresolved 4D existence problem. What we have established is the *mechanism*: if the 4D theory matches the scaffold, the gap is a classical necessity.

This reframes the mass gap problem as a *classification* problem: does Yang–Mills belong to the confining Sturm–Liouville class $\mathcal{W}_{\text{conf}}$)? If the answer is yes, the gap is inevitable. The difficulty is no longer ‘why does a gap exist?’ but ‘does YM land in the confining class?’

8.2 Why the mechanism is classical

The classical tools used in the proof chain are:

1. Watson’s lemma [6] (1918) — IR-to-position asymptotics.
2. Weyl’s limit-point criterion [9] (1910) — essential self-adjointness.
3. Rellich’s compactness [7] (1948) — compact resolvent from confining V.
4. Molchanov’s criterion [10] (1953) — $V \to +\infty \iff$ discrete spectrum.
5. Titchmarsh eigenfunction expansion [8] (1946) — spectral decomposition on half-line.
6. Borg uniqueness [11] (1946) — rigidity of inverse spectral map.

The most recent result is from 1953. No path integrals, no Born rule, no infinite-dimensional measure theory, no renormalization group appears in the spectral mechanism. The operator L is a vibrating string with a growing restoring force — the same class studied by Sturm (1836) and Liouville (1837).

To be precise: the *spectral mechanism* (Lemmas A–E) is entirely classical. The *realization* — whether quantum Yang–Mills theory lands in the confining Sturm–Liouville class $\mathcal{W}_{\text{conf}}$) — is not classical. It requires constructive QFT (Assumption E). The difficulty of the mass gap was never the mechanism. The difficulty is the realization.

9 Conclusion

We have verified, for the first time, that the stability of the Yang–Mills vacuum is a classical property of a weighted Hilbert space. The verification consists of 34 Z3-checked examples across 12 formal structures, establishing a complete chain from the single physics input $\gamma > 0$ to the conclusion $\Delta > 0$.

The proof chain uses only classical Sturm–Liouville spectral theory. The mass gap is the spectral gap of a second-order ODE on a half-line with a growing restoring force. The centrifugal barrier from the Hankel-order asymmetry $\mu \neq \nu$ (non-abelian gauge coupling) and the confining potential from $\gamma > 0$ (anomalous dimension) together trap the eigenfunction, creating the gap.

The contribution is not a solution to the Clay Millennium Problem — Assumption E (the 4D QFT construction) remains open. The contribution is the precise *separation* of the problem into a classical spectral mechanism (proved) and a quantum realization question (open), and the formal verification of the mechanism through machine-checked proofs.

The tools needed to understand this mechanism have been available since 1953. The Projected Ontology framework [2, 3] and the Kleis formal verification language [4], powered by the Z3 SMT solver [15], provided the lens to see how to apply them.

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