

The study of solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

Christian Joas
(LMU Munich)

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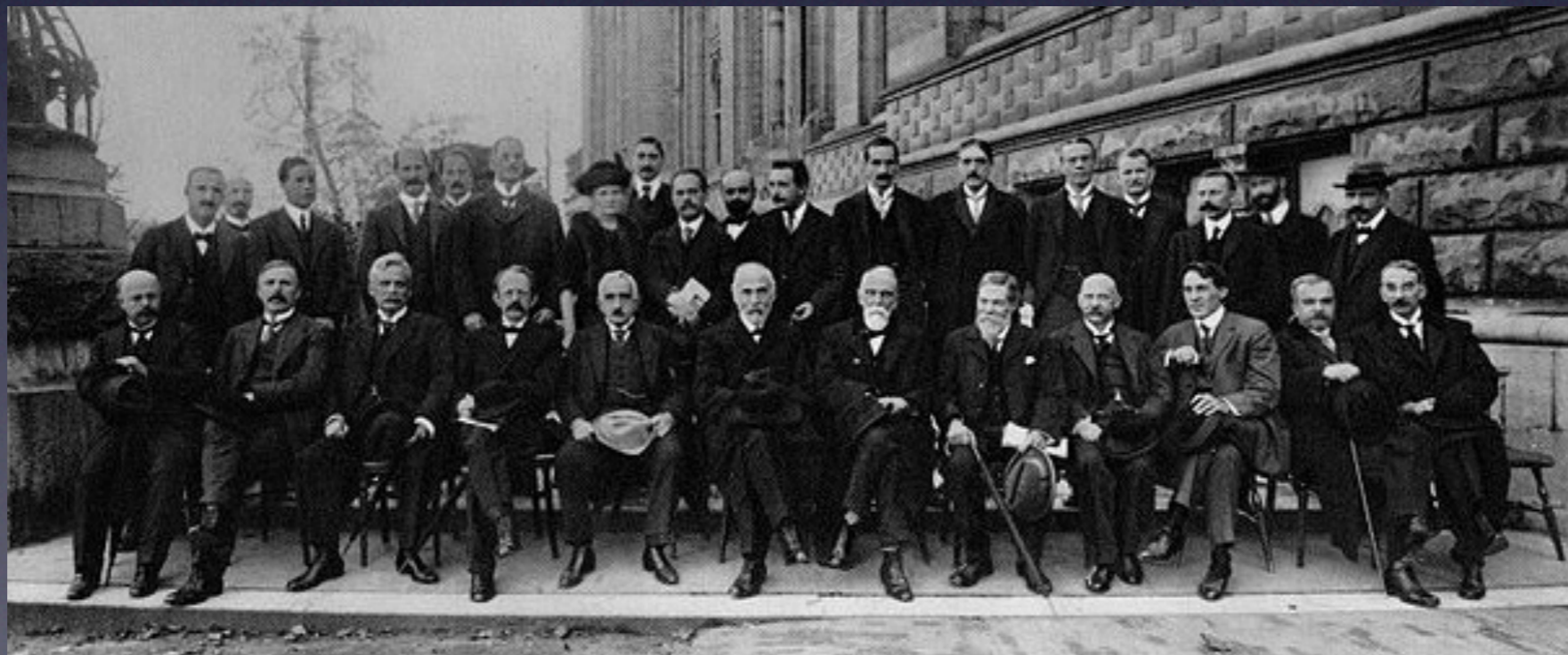


Outline

- Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics
- Three (interrelated) case studies:
 - Quantum statistics, complex spectra, and the many-body problem
 - Exchange, covalent bonds, and magnetism
 - Electron gas and metallic conduction
- Conclusions

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

- Study of solids and crystallography active fields of research already in **late 19th century** (Curie, Drude, Riecke, Voigt, ...).
- Leading figures of development of quantum theory in **early 20th century** interested in properties and behavior of solids (Bohr, Born, Debye, Einstein, Schrödinger, Sommerfeld, ...).
- Quantum theory **relevant** for solids (specific heat, lattice dynamics, magnetism, conductivity of metals).
- But what role did solids play in the development of quantum mechanics?



Second Solvay conference (1913): “The Structure of Matter.”

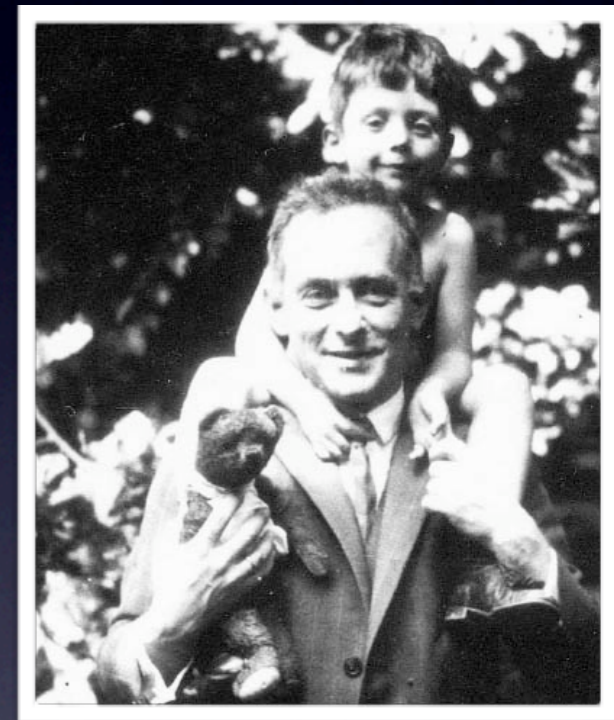
Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

- Developments in quantum theory immediately **fueling the formulation of quantum (and wave) mechanics** in 1925–1926 have little to do with the study of solids:
 - atomic spectroscopy
 - optical dispersion
 - gas statistics
- Very soon after the formulation of matrix and wave mechanics, several important protagonists turn attention at least partly to the study of solids.
- **Why did solids not play a role in the “crucial years” 1925–6?**
- **What makes them interesting objects of study so shortly thereafter?**

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

Why do solids not play a role in the “crucial years” 1925–6?

- Answer: **Conscious narrowing of interests.**
- Best illustrated by Max Born’s research in the 1910s and 1920s.
- Around 1910, Born begins studying **crystals**: Born-von Kármán (1912) on vibrations of crystal lattices builds on Einstein’s theory of specific heats.
- This paper is **Born’s first contribution to quantum theory.**
- Born (1915) *Dynamik der Kristallgitter*.



Max Born with Son Gustav (1925)

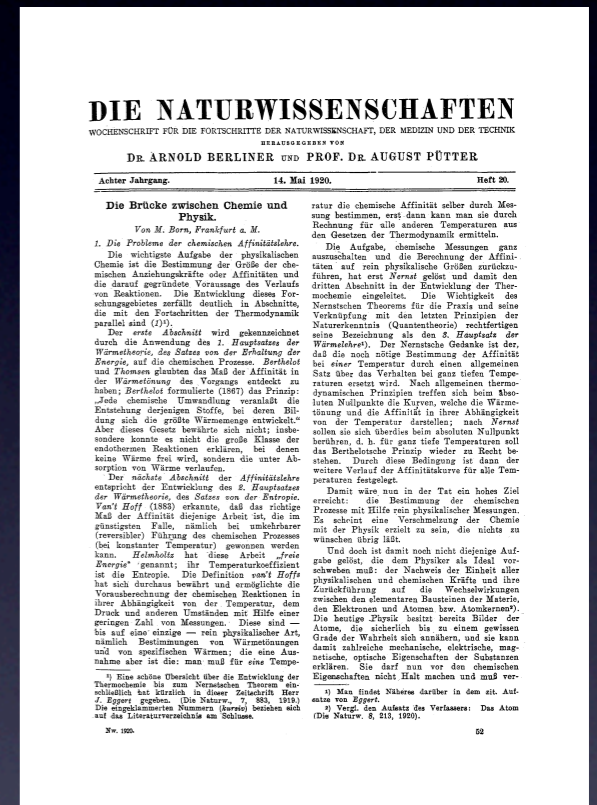
Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

Why do solids not play a role in the “crucial years” 1925–6?

- In a programmatic 1920 article entitled “The bridge between chemistry and physics,” Born advocates a “molecular physics” whose ultimate goal would be:

“proof of the **unity** of all physical and chemical forces and their **reduction** to the interactions of the basic building blocks of matter, electrons and atoms.”

- In the early 1920s, Born follows this research program together with his students in Göttingen and focuses on extending **perturbation theory** in terms of action-angle variables to **degenerate many-body systems** in order to treat **molecules** and **solids** (Born and Brody 1921, Born and Pauli 1922, Nordheim 1923, Born 1924).

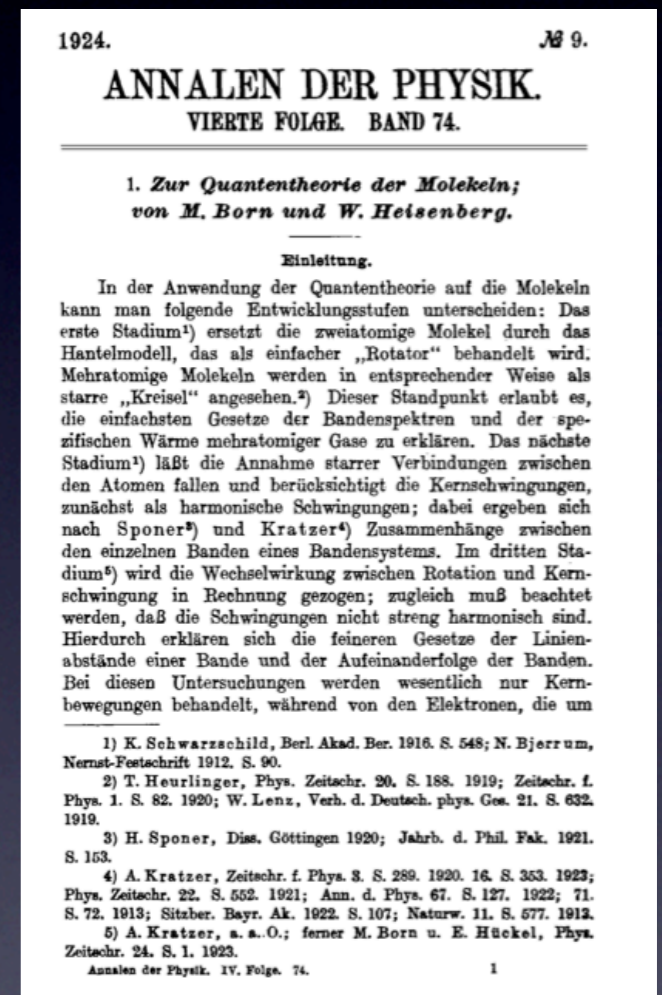


M. Born (1920). Die Brücke zwischen Chemie und Physik. *Die Naturwissenschaften*, 8, 373–382, p.373.

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

Why do solids not play a role in the “crucial years” 1925–6?

- In December 1923, Born together with Heisenberg provides a perturbative theory of **molecular spectra** (vibration, rotation) that is a direct precursor of the 1928 Born-Oppenheimer paper and its separation of nuclear and electronic motion.
- Neither Born nor Heisenberg follow up on this paper in 1925–6 but turn towards the **atom**.
- In June 1924, as a reaction to Bohr-Kramers-Slater theory, Born writes another programmatic paper entitled “Über Quantenmechanik“ [**On Quantum Mechanics**].



Born-Heisenberg (1924)
On the Quantum Theory
of Molecules

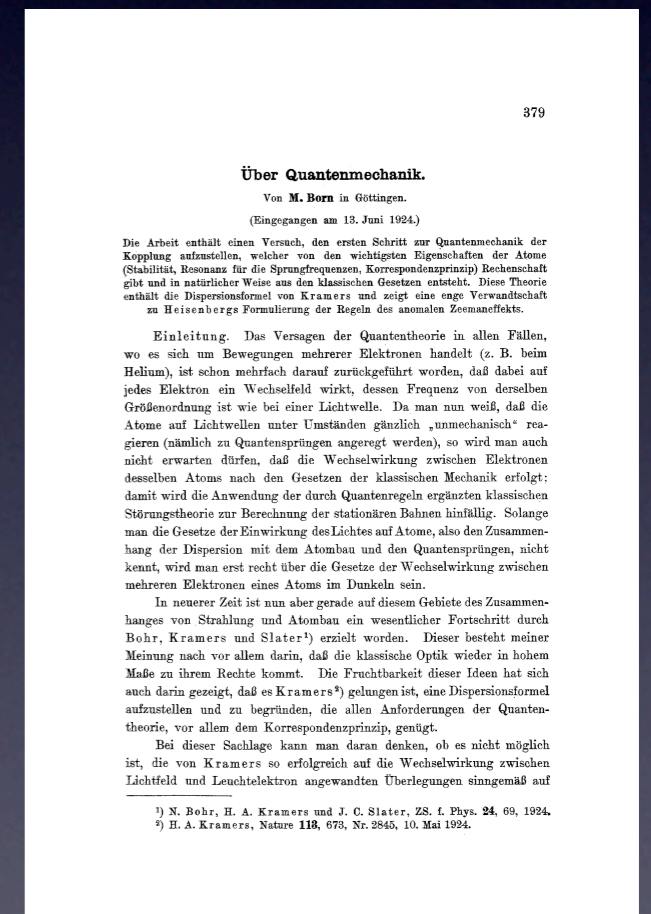
Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

Why do solids not play a role in the “crucial years” 1925–6?

- In the 1924 paper, Born identifies **optical dispersion** as the key to questions involving multiple electrons.

“The **failure of quantum theory** whenever one deals with the motion of **multiple electrons** (e.g., in the case of Helium) has already been traced back to the fact that the oscillatory field acting on the individual electrons is of the same order of magnitude as that of a light wave. [...]

As long as one does not know the laws of the **influence of light on the atom**, and thus the connection between dispersion, the structure of the atom, and the quantum jumps, one will certainly remain in the dark concerning the **interactions between multiple electrons** in an atom.”

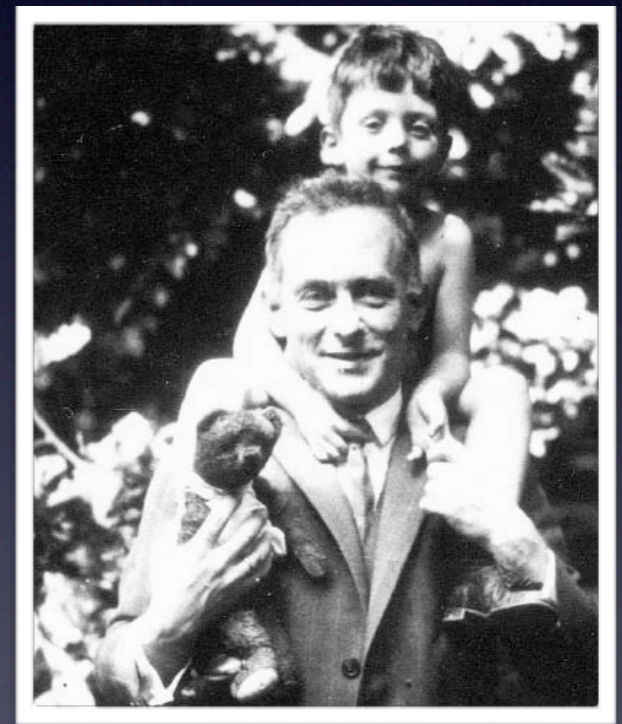


M. Born (1924). Über Quantenmechanik. *Zeitschrift für Physik*, 26, 379-395, p. 379.

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

Why do solids not play a role in the “crucial years” 1925–6?

- Born’s 1924 paper constitutes a **considerable readjustment** of his research program:
 - **first** solve the problem of atomic dispersion,
 - **only then** tackle complex spectra, molecules, and crystals.
- Born’s paper constitutes the basis for the 1925 Heisenberg-Kramers theory of dispersion and, eventually, Heisenberg’s mid-1925 *Umdeutung*.
- **Conscious narrowing of interests.**



Max Born with Son
Gustav (1925)

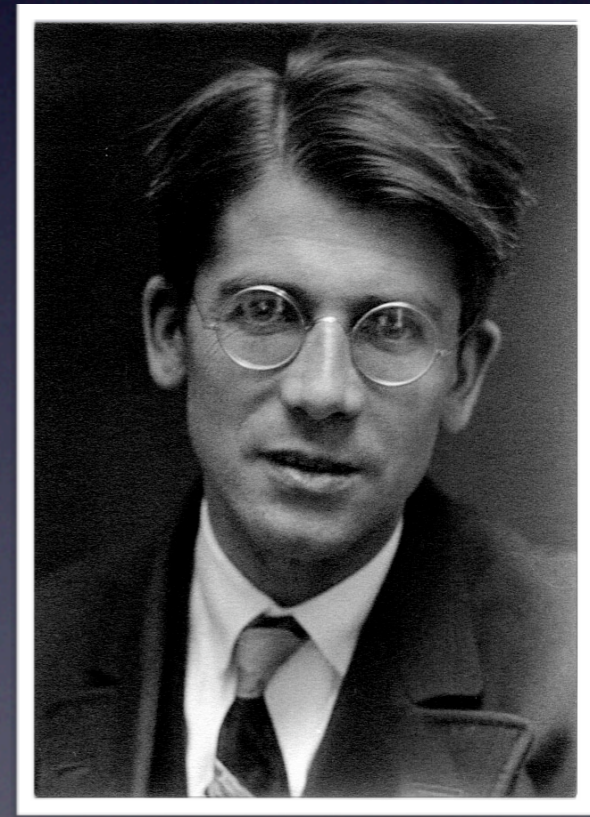
Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

What makes solids interesting objects of study so shortly thereafter?

- Often, moves into areas other than atomic spectroscopy are interpreted as “**validations of the theory**” (Jammer) or as “**empirical foundations**” (Mehra and Rechenberg).

“By the end of 1926, the principles of quantum mechanics by and large had been **discovered**. With the Schrödinger equation, physicists since the spring of 1926 had at their hands a convenient procedure suited to their mathematical skills which allowed them to solve the simpler problems. These circumstances around 1927 led to a **flood of applications** and to the development of practical methods of calculation.”

F. Hund (1967). *Geschichte der Quantentheorie*. Mannheim: Bibl. Institut, p. 169.



Friedrich Hund
(1896–1997)

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

What makes solids interesting objects of study so shortly thereafter?

- Hund's hindsight view **overly optimistic**.
- **Many open problems** in quantum mechanics, 1926:
 - origin of Pauli principle?
 - two sets of statistics?
 - interpretation of wavefunction?
 - spin?
 - relativistic formulation?
 - quantum-mechanical many-body problem?
- Actors' move to empirical areas beyond the atom ("flood of applications," Hund) often motivated by desire to **resolve** these pending questions!

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

What makes solids interesting objects of study so shortly thereafter?

- Jeremiah James (MPIWG Berlin) and I are studying the **epistemological status of these early “applications”** of quantum mechanics.
- With the exception of Born’s scattering theory (June/July 1926), most accounts, e.g., on the prehistory of solid-state physics, treat the early “applications” to molecules, solids, and nuclei as **applications in a subordinate sense** (both subsequent and subsidiary).

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

What makes solids interesting objects of study so shortly thereafter?

- **Claim I:** Rather than being subordinate “tests” of a finished theory following a constructionist rationale, many early “applications” in areas beyond atomic physics contributed to extending quantum mechanics by providing **new concepts, techniques, and terminology** that are today seen as canonical elements of the core of quantum mechanics.
- **Claim II:** Often, the **physical meaning and interpretation** of key elements of the formalism were clarified in the context of early “applications.”
- **Claim III:** In many early “applications,” strong **continuities** to older approaches from classical or old quantum theory can be observed.

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

- Examples:
 - quantum statistics, complex spectra, and the many-body problem
 - exchange, covalent bonds, and magnetism
 - electron gas and metallic conduction
 - tunneling in molecules and nuclei
 - ...

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Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

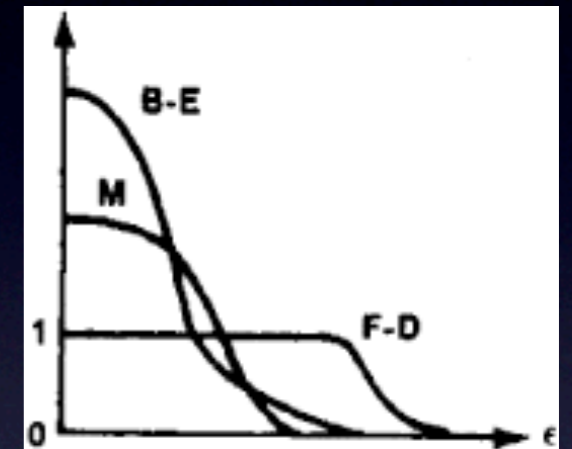
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Quantum statistics, complex spectra, and the many-body problem

- Connecting **statistical mechanics** to quantum theory a thriving activity already in the 1910s.
- Neither Bose nor Fermi statistics were originally derived within the framework of quantum mechanics, but within **old quantum theory**.
- The novel quantum statistics emerged **independently** from and almost simultaneously with the new mechanics and had to be **slowly and painfully** integrated into the new theory.
- Crucial role in this integration played by Pauli's January 1925 **exclusion principle** ("housing office for electrons"):

"The problem of a further justification of the occurrence of equivalent electrons in the atom [...] likely can only be tackled after a **future deepening** of the fundamental principles of quantum theory."

- Quantum mechanics at first did **not** provide this deepening.



Wolfgang Pauli

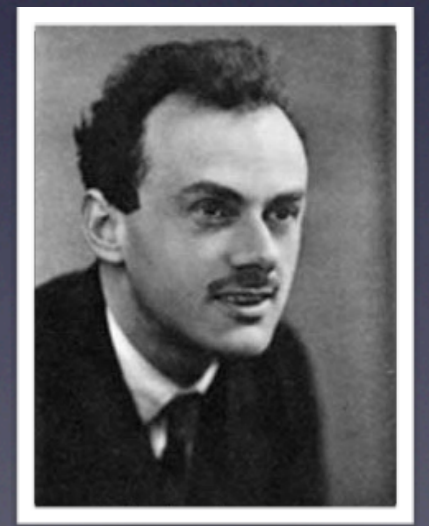
Quantum statistics, complex spectra, and the many-body problem

- Confusion about exclusion principle, quantum statistics and quantum mechanics lifted only **gradually** during the year 1926.
- In March 1926, unaware of the new quantum mechanics, **Fermi** shows that a gas of particles obeying Pauli's exclusion principle satisfies a **new statistics**.
- In August 1926, Dirac shows that the many-body problem within quantum mechanics allows for a complete solution in terms of either **symmetrical** or **antisymmetrical** eigenfunctions:

“The theory at present is **incapable** of deciding which solution is the correct one”



Enrico Fermi (1927)



Paul Dirac

Quantum statistics, complex spectra, and the many-body problem



Werner Heisenberg
(1927, photo by F. Hund)

- Already in late 1925, Heisenberg, Pauli and Bohr realize that the problem of ortho- and para-**Helium** is connected to the problem of the (still dubious) **spin**.
- Heisenberg (June 1926): Mehrkörperproblem und Resonanz in der Quantenmechanik [**Many-body problem and resonance in the quantum mechanics**]:

“Additional rules like Pauli’s exclusion of equivalent orbits in their present form do not have a place in the mathematical scheme of quantum mechanics. One could thus ponder a **failure of quantum mechanics** [...].”
- Heisenberg’s paper introduces the concept of **resonance** into quantum mechanics

Quantum statistics, complex spectra, and the many-body problem

Mehrkörperproblem und Resonanz in der Quantenmechanik.

Von W. Heisenberg in Kopenhagen.

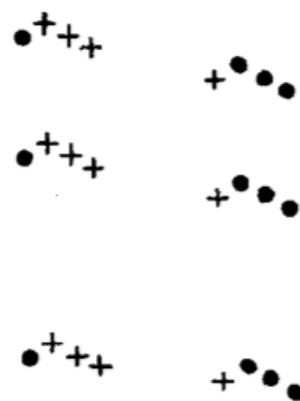
(Eingegangen am 11. Juni 1926.)

Die Arbeit versucht, eine Grundlage für die quantenmechanische Behandlung des Mehrkörperproblems zu geben. Zu diesem Zwecke wird ein für die Quantenmechanik des Mehrkörperproblems charakteristisches Resonanzphänomen ausführlich untersucht und ein Zusammenhang der auf Grund dieser Untersuchung gewonnenen Resultate mit der Einstein-Bosescen Abzählung und dem Paulischen Verbot äquivalenter Bahnen hergestellt.

Die Quantenmechanik ist bisher nur auf Systeme, die aus einem beweglichen Massenpunkt bestehen, angewandt worden. An dieser Beschränkung waren in erster Linie die mathematischen Schwierigkeiten schuld, die einer Berechnung der einzelnen Amplitudenelemente bisher im Wege standen. In der letzten Zeit ist in dieser Frage ein außerordentlicher Fortschritt erzielt worden durch die bedeutungsvollen Untersuchungen, in denen Schrödinger¹⁾, ausgehend von der de Broglieschen²⁾ Wellentheorie der Materie, einen neuen mathematisch wesentlich bequemeren Zugang zum Gebiet der Quantenmechanik entdeckt hat. Ebenso, wie seinerzeit eine große formale Ähnlichkeit der klassischen Mechanik mit einer geometrischen Optik von Hamilton aufgedeckt und zur Grundlegende mathematische Behandlungsweise klassischer Probleme besteht nach Schrödinger eine große formale Ähnlichkeit der Quantenmechanik mit einer Wellenoptik in mehrdimensionaler Hinsicht hier zur wirksamsten mathematischen Behandlung dieser Probleme führt. Bei einem System von n Teilchen führt Schrödinger das quantenmechanische Problem auf eine Aufgabe in einem Raum von f Dimensionen. Die Eigenwerte des Problems sind die Eigenwerte des Problems, die als Koeffizienten einer Entwicklung der Eigenfunktionen gefunden sind, durch reine Quadraturen ermittelt werden. Darstellung des mathematischen Formalismus

¹⁾ E. Schrödinger, Ann. d. Phys. 79, 36

²⁾ L. de Broglie, Ann. de phys. (10) 3, Zeitschrift für Physik. Bd. XXXVIII.



•+++

Fig. 5.

- Key idea: spectrum of coupled electrons splits up into noncombining subsets due to **resonance** between electronic states.

- For Helium, only one subset excludes equivalent orbits.

- Heisenberg generalizes to n particles and finds $n!$ subsets. He believes this explains the factor $1/n!$ in Bose-Einstein.

“Pauli’s exclusion prescription and Bose’s rule are the **same**, [...] they **do not contradict quantum mechanics**” (letter to Born)

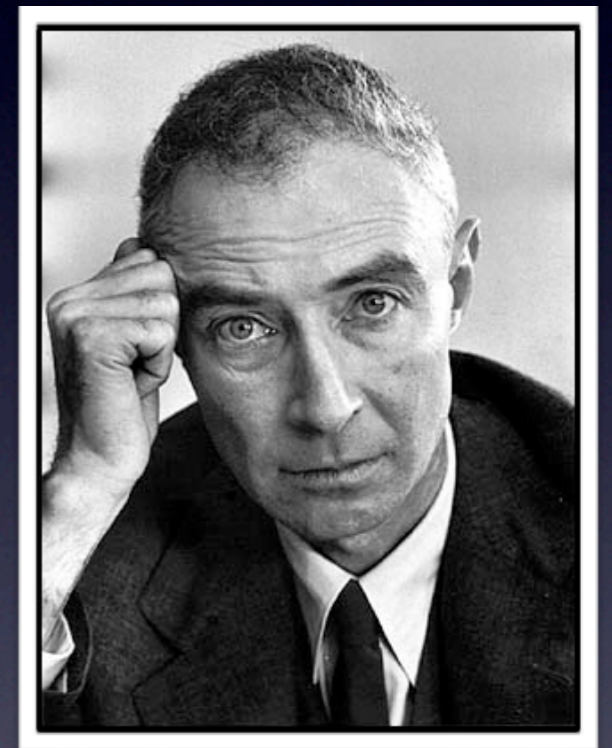
- Only in December 1926, Heisenberg manages to resolve this confusion and to show that for electrons, **Fermi-Dirac statistics** hold within quantum mechanics.

Quantum statistics, complex spectra, and the many-body problem

Oppenheimer on Heisenberg's paper:

“I regarded it as a kind of discovery of the **meaning of quantum theory**. [...]

I think that if Heisenberg had found that there wasn't anything new but just that the integrals of wave functions happened to give the helium spectrum right, it would have been problem solving. It was the fact that there was an **element of novelty** and something which had never been described before which turned it from solving a problem into **exploring the content and meaning [of quantum mechanics]**.”



J. Robert Oppenheimer

Oppenheimer interview by T. S. Kuhn, Nov 20, 1963, AHQP

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Exchange, covalent bonds, and magnetism

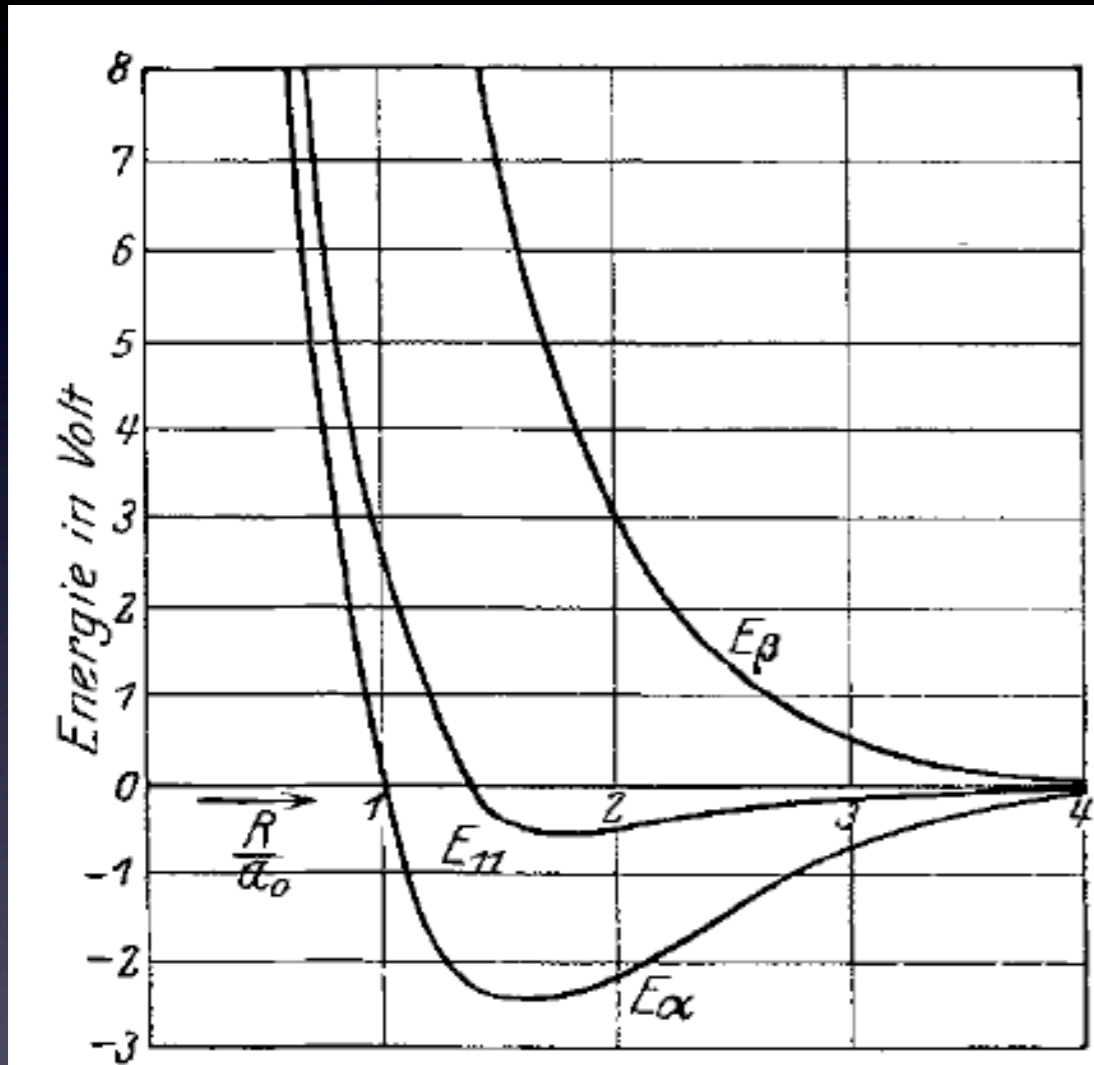
- Heitler and London, “Interaction Between Neutral Atoms and the Homopolar Bond According to Quantum Mechanics” (1927).
- “We were aware of the fact that the **spin** was the problem, which we couldn’t solve, that it was just attached to Schrödinger’s wave equation or superimposed on it, but **there was no natural amalgamation between wave mechanics and the spin**...It would never have occurred to us that you could combine the wave equation of Schrödinger with some matrix mechanical ideas...”

[Heitler interview by Heilbron, March 1963,AHQP]



Linus and Ava Helen Pauling in Munich, with Walter Heitler (left) and Fritz London (right), 1927.

Exchange, covalent bonds, and magnetism



E_{II} without exchange
 E_{α} “symmetric” bonding
 E_{β} “anti-symmetric” repelling

- Heitler and London construct two antisymmetric wave functions by hand, and perform a perturbative approximation.
- They analyze the resulting integral into “Coulomb” and “exchange” components and show that the exchange component leads to a **bonding** state.
- They associate this state with the formation of the **covalent bond**.

Exchange, covalent bonds, and magnetism

“For a long time I really thought it was a major and ununderstood problem of quantum mechanics to explain **what the exchange really means** [...]

One can define a frequency of exchange in a certain manner... But this does not really occur in the finished molecule...I think the only honest answer today is that the exchange is something typical of quantum mechanics, and should not be interpreted—or one should not try to interpret it—in terms of classical physics.”

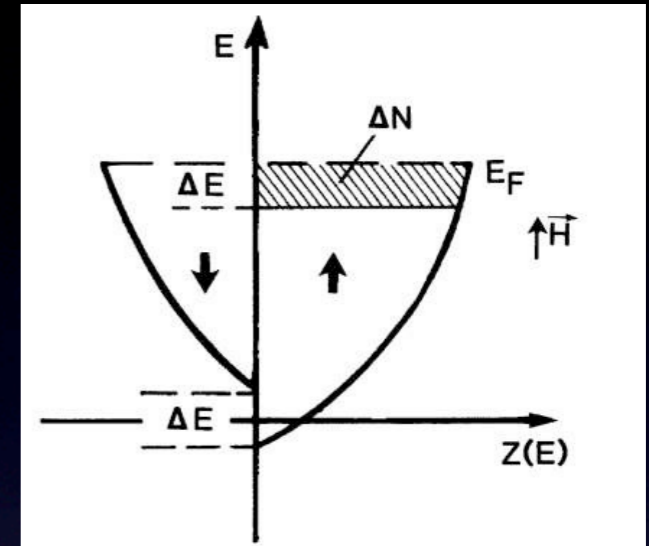
[Heitler interview by Heilbron, March 1963, AHQP]



Walter Heitler

Exchange, covalent bonds, and magnetism

- Pauli (Dec 1926):
“Heisenberg has converted me to believe that not the **Einstein-Bose** statistics of gas degeneracy, but rather **Fermi’s**, which is based on the ‘housing office,’ is the correct one.”
- Pauli generalizes Fermi’s treatment and explains weak **paramagnetism** of metals, thus putting an important objection against the **spin hypothesis** at rest.
- Heisenberg (Nov. 1926 in letters to Pauli):
ferromagnetism due to resonance. **Conductivity** likely, too (“resonance peregrination à la Hund”).
- Heisenberg (1928), building on the work of Heitler and London, clarifies nature of the Weiss molecular field as an exchange phenomenon in his theory of **ferromagnetism**.



Pauli paramagnetism

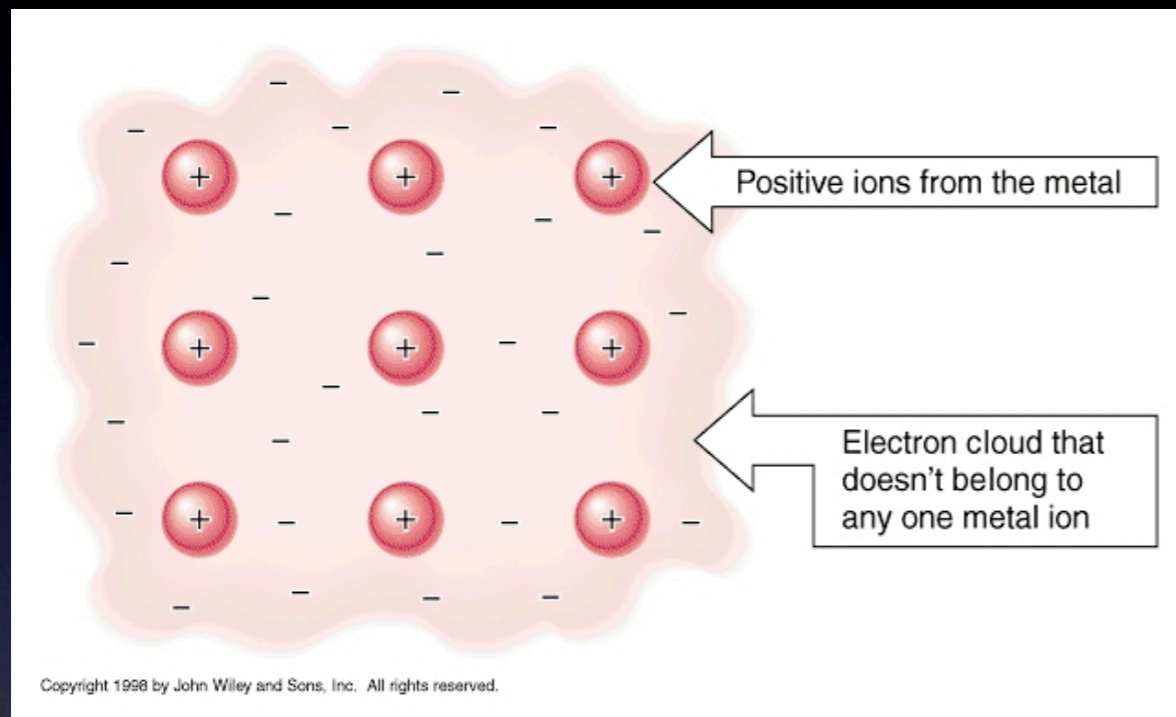


Bohr, Heisenberg, Pauli

Solids and the genesis of quantum mechanics

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Electron gas and metallic conduction



- **Drude** 1900, 1904
- **Lorentz** 1905
- **Bohr**, dissertation, 1911
- **prototypical model** in statistical mechanics, despite glaring shortcomings with respect to experiment.

“The example of Bohr’s dissertation makes it clear that the electron gas theories did not arise simply as applications of new microscopic concepts, but were **harbingers of the quantum revolution**. The dilemma of diamagnetism in metals [...] was one reason for [Bohr] to turn his attention to bound electrons.”

Electron gas and metallic conduction

- In the late 1910s and 1920s, Bridgman experiments with metals at high pressures and proposes a radically different **quantum-theoretical mechanism** for conduction, based on Bohr's atomic model rather than on the electron gas model:
 - At absolute zero, metals are “**naturally perfect conductors** in the sense that the electrons may pass without resistance from atom to atom when the atoms are in contact at rest.”
 - At finite temperature, the motion of electrons from Bohr orbit to Bohr orbit is impeded by periodically formed “**gaps**”.
- Similar models by Fritz **Haber** and Albert **Einstein**.
- Question of metallic conduction (electron gas? conduction chains?) **wide open** when quantum mechanics takes center stage.



Percy W. Bridgman

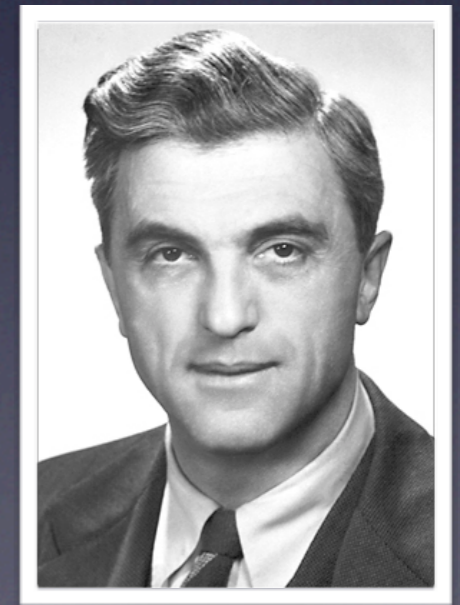
Electron gas and metallic conduction

- Sommerfeld (Jan 1927), impressed by Pauli's success in explaining the weak paramagnetism of metals by using Fermi statistics, introduces Fermi-Dirac statistics into the **model of the electron gas**.
- Despite huge **successes**, e.g., in deriving the Wiedemann-Franz law, there are also glaring shortcomings, e.g., no explanation for the **long mean-free path** of the electrons in metals.
- In 1928, Bloch attacks the problem of metallic conduction by considering **electrons in a periodic potential** using wave mechanics and the insights of Heisenberg and Heitler and London; develops the concept of the so-called **Bloch wave**.



Fermi

Sommerfeld

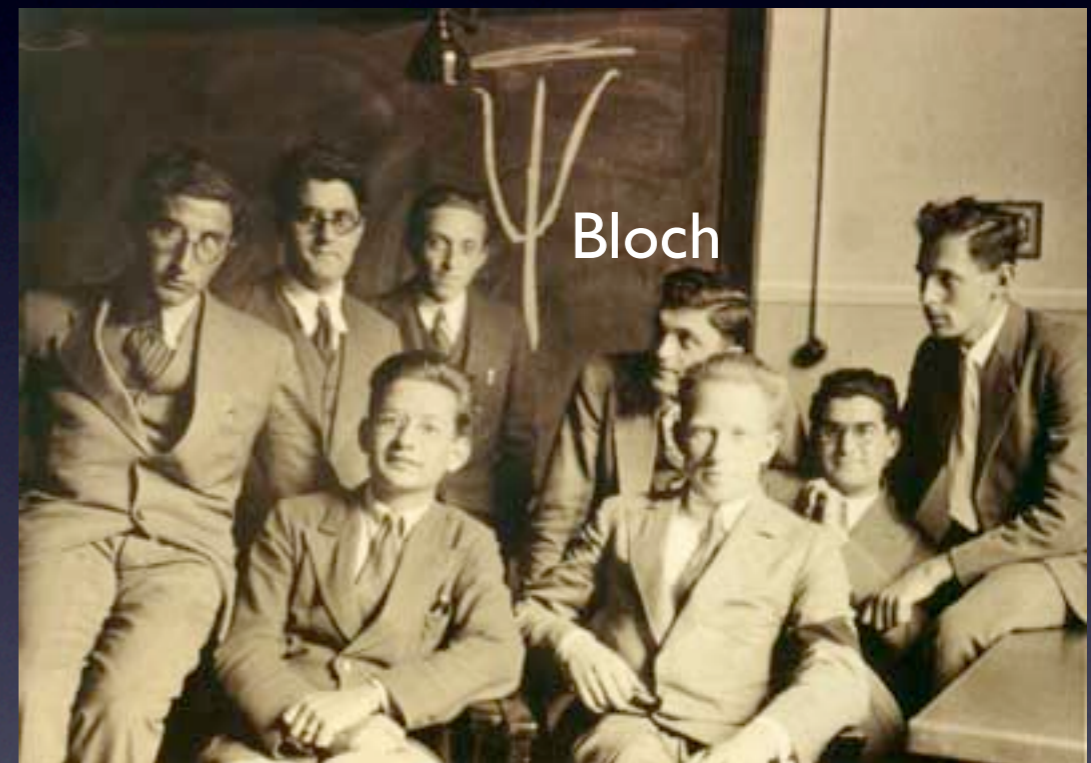


Felix Bloch

Electron gas and metallic conduction

“[...] Heitler and London had already shown-how electrons could jump between two atoms in a molecule to form a covalent bond, and the main difference between a molecule and a crystal was only that there were many more atoms in a periodic arrangement. To make my life easy, I began by considering wave functions in a one-dimensional **periodic potential**. By straight Fourier analysis I found to my delight that the wave differed from the plane wave of free electrons only by a periodic modulation.

This was so simple that I didn't think it could be much of a **discovery**, but when I showed it to Heisenberg he said right away: **‘That's it!’**”



Felix Bloch, Heisenberg and the Early Days of Quantum Mechanics, Physics Today, December 1976.

Electron gas and metallic conduction

- Hoddeson and Baym (1980): electron theory of metals goes through three phases: **classical** (Drude), **semi-classical** (Sommerfeld) and **quantum mechanical** (Bloch):

“[only with Bloch] the **full machinery of quantum mechanics**, developed in 1925 to 1926, was brought to bear on solids.”
- Bloch’s theory is more than a mere quantum-mechanical **extension** of Sommerfeld’s theory of metals: Bloch’s achievement is the integration of a whole **body of knowledge** of the old quantum theory (Einstein-Debye theories of specific heat, Born-von Kármán theory of lattice dynamics) into the quantum-mechanical description of solids.
- There is no evidence (to my knowledge) that Bloch knew the **alternative theories of conduction** advanced in the 1910s by Bridgman, Haber, Einstein, which were based on conduction chains between adjacent Bohr atoms. His quantum-mechanical approach, however, displays intriguing similarities to these theories.

Conclusions

- **Continuity:** Techniques for handling quantum many-body problem began developing in old quantum theory and were neither immediately nor fully replaced by quantum mechanics.
- **Practicability:** New concepts (resonance and exchange, tunneling) only arose in context of “applications,” yet today form an integral part of what we call quantum mechanics.
- **Meaning:** Use and physical meaning of quantum-theoretical concepts (exclusion principle, Bose-Einstein and Fermi-Dirac statistics, spin) were clarified in context of extending quantum mechanics to solve various many-body problems.
- This alters the **epistemological significance** of early researches in solid-state and chemical physics and invites a **reexamination** of the relationships between “mainstream” or “fundamental” physics and the emerging “peripheral” subdisciplines.