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In 1926, Erwin Schrödinger published the first accounts of his now famous wave equation.[?] He later shared the Nobel prize with Paul A. M. Dirac in 1933 for this discovery. Schrödinger's wave function seemed extremely promising, as it contains all of the information available about a system. Unfortunately, most practical systems of interest consist of many interacting electrons, and the effort required to find solutions to Schrödinger's equation increases exponentially with the number of electrons, limiting this approach to systems with a small number of relevant electrons, $N \lesssim O(10)$.[?] Even if this rough estimate is off by an order of magnitude, a system with 100 electrons is still very small, for example, two Ru atoms if all the electrons are counted, or perhaps ten Pt atoms if only the valence electrons are counted. Thus, the wave function method, which has been extremely successful in studying the properties of small molecules, is unsuitable for studies of large, extended solids. Interestingly, this difficulty was recognized by Dirac as early as 1929, when he wrote "The underlying physical laws necessary for the mathematical theory of a large part of physics and the whole of chemistry are thus completely known, and the difficulty is only that the application of these laws leads to equations much too complicated to be soluble."[?]

In 1964, Hohenberg and Kohn showed that the ground state total energy of a system of interacting electrons is a unique functional of the electron density.[?] By definition, a function returns a number when given a number. For example, in $f(x) = x^2$, $f(x)$ is the function, and it equals four when $x = 2$. A functional returns a number when given a function. Thus, in $g(f(x)) = \int_0^\pi f(x)dx$, $g(f(x))$ is the functional, and it is equal to two when $f(x) = \sin(x)$. Hohenberg and Kohn further identified a variational principle that appeared to reduce the problem of finding the ground state energy of an electron gas in an external potential (i.e., in the presence of ion cores) to that of the minimization of a functional of the three-dimensional density function. Unfortunately, the definition of the functional involved a set of 3N-dimensional trial wave functions.

In 1965, Kohn and Sham made a significant breakthrough when they showed that the problem of many interacting electrons in an external potential can be mapped exactly to a set of noninteracting electrons in an

effective external potential.[?] This led to a set of self-consistent, single particle equations known as the Kohn-Sham (KS) equations:

$$\left(-\frac{1}{2}\nabla^2 + v_{eff}(\mathbf{r}) - \epsilon_j\right)\varphi_j(\mathbf{r}) = 0, \quad (1)$$

with

$$v_{eff}(\mathbf{r}) = v(\mathbf{r}) + \int \frac{n(\mathbf{r}')}{|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}'|} d\mathbf{r}' + v_{xc}(\mathbf{r}), \quad (2)$$

where $v(\mathbf{r})$ is the external potential and $v_{xc}(\mathbf{r})$ is the exchange-correlation potential, which depends on the entire density function. Thus, the density needs to be known in order to define the effective potential so that Eq. (1) can be solved. $\varphi_j(\mathbf{r})$ corresponds to the j^{th} KS orbital of energy ϵ_j .

The ground state density is given by:

$$n(\mathbf{r}) = \sum_{j=1}^N |\varphi_j(\mathbf{r})|^2 \quad (3)$$

To solve Eq. (1) then, an initial guess is used for $\varphi_j(r)$ which is used to generate Eq. (3), which is subsequently used in Eq. (2). This equation is then solved for $\varphi_j(\mathbf{r})$ iteratively until the $\varphi_j(\mathbf{r})$ that result from the solution are the same as the $\varphi_j(\mathbf{r})$ that are used to define the equations, that is, the solutions are self-consistent. Finally, the ground state energy is given by:

$$E = \sum_j \epsilon_j + E_{xc}[n(\mathbf{r})] - \int v_{xc}(\mathbf{r})n(\mathbf{r})d\mathbf{r} - \frac{1}{2} \int \frac{n(\mathbf{r})n(\mathbf{r}')}{|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}'|} d\mathbf{r}'d\mathbf{r}, \quad (4)$$

where $E_{xc}[n(\mathbf{r})]$ is the exchange-correlation energy functional. Walter Kohn shared the Nobel prize in Chemistry in 1998 for this work.[?] The other half of the prize went to John Pople for his efforts in wave function based quantum mechanical methods.[?] Provided the exchange-correlation energy functional is known, Eq. (4) is exact. However, the exact form of the exchange-correlation energy functional is not known, thus approximations for this functional must be used.