
Schrodinger Equation — Three Dimensions

The Hydrogen Atom

Completed and Analyzed in class, May 2, 2025

This is our last notebook. In the previous notebook, we did Schrodinger's equation for a free particle confined to a two-dimensional disk. The idea was to show you a problem that has some of the flavor of the full three-dimensional problem.

Now we will do analyze the most famous three-dimensional problem in quantum mechanics: the Hydrogen atom.

Time-Independent Schrodinger Equation in Three Dimensions

To go to three dimensions we now have second derivatives with respect to x, y , and z :

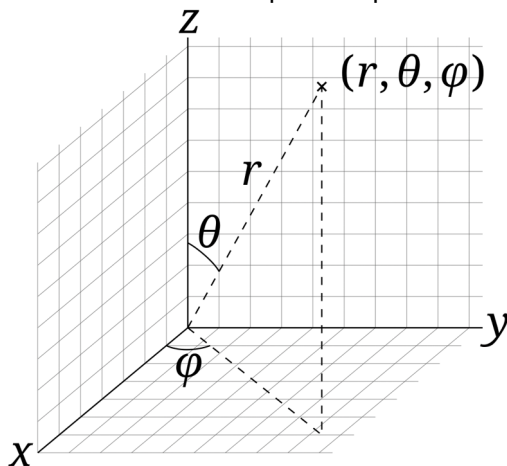
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In[1]:= -\frac{\hbar^2}{2\mu} (\text{Derivative}[2, 0, 0] [\psi] [x, y, z] +  
          \text{Derivative}[0, 2, 0] [\psi] [x, y, z] + \text{Derivative}[0, 0, 2] [\psi] [x, y, z]) +  
          \text{potential}[x, y, z] \times \psi[x, y, z] == \text{energy} \psi[x, y, z] // \text{TraditionalForm}
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Out[1]//TraditionalForm=

$$\text{potential}(x, y, z) \psi(x, y, z) - \frac{\hbar^2 (\psi^{(0,0,2)}(x, y, z) + \psi^{(0,2,0)}(x, y, z) + \psi^{(2,0,0)}(x, y, z))}{2\mu} = \text{energy} \psi(x, y, z)$$

Spherical Polar Coordinates

Just as in Harper and Tahm's External Rifle Ballistics notebook, it makes a load of progress toward a solution to switch to the spherical polar coordinates. The Wikipedia has a nice graphic:



The only thing to note about the Wikipedia's graphic is that we usually have the x -coordinate pointing right, and the y -coordinate going into the paper, so you have to imagine rotating the coordinates by 90° (counter-clockwise looking down on the $x - y$ plane), relative to what they have shown.

Now that we know what polar coordinates are, there is another, even nastier calculation that determines how the sum of three second derivatives becomes a sum of derivatives with respect to r , θ , and ϕ :

$$\frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial x^2} + \frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial y^2} + \frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial z^2} = \frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial r^2} + \frac{2}{r} \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial r} + \frac{1}{r^2 \sin^2 \theta} \left(\sin \theta \frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial \theta^2} + \cos \theta \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial \theta} \right) + \frac{1}{r^2 \sin^2 \theta} \frac{\partial^2 \psi}{\partial \phi^2}$$

Of course, I am not going to mess with that. You just have to trust that this combination of derivatives is what comes out of a lot of multi-variable calculus steps.

Quantum Particle Confined to a Disk

The above theory lets us rewrite, in polar coordinates, the time-independent Schrodinger equation for an electron orbiting a Hydrogen nucleus:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{hydrogenAtomProblem} = & \text{Module} \left[\{ \hbar = 1, \mu = 1 \}, \right. \\ & - \frac{\hbar^2}{2 \mu} \left(\text{Derivative}[2, 0, 0] [\psi] [r, \theta, \phi] + \frac{2}{r} \text{Derivative}[1, 0, 0] [\psi] [r, \theta, \phi] + \right. \\ & \quad \frac{1}{r^2 \sin[\theta]^2} (\sin[\theta] \text{Derivative}[0, 2, 0] [\psi] [r, \theta, \phi] + \\ & \quad \cos[\theta] \text{Derivative}[0, 1, 0] [\psi] [r, \theta, \phi]) + \\ & \quad \left. \frac{1}{r^2 \sin[\theta]^2} \text{Derivative}[0, 0, 2] [\psi] [r, \theta, \phi] \right) + \text{potential}[\\ & \left. r] \times \psi[r, \theta, \phi] = \text{energy} \psi[r, \theta, \phi] \right]; \end{aligned}$$

Typesetting this equation for Mathematica makes it look even more complicated than it already is, so here is a screenshot of the combination of second derivatives from Howie Haber's UC Santa Cruz Physics 116C class that uses some special notation to make the second-derivatives especially elegant

In spherical coordinates, the Laplacian is given by

$$\nabla^2 = \frac{1}{r^2} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \left(r^2 \frac{\partial}{\partial r} \right) + \frac{1}{r^2 \sin^2 \theta} \frac{\partial}{\partial \theta} \left(\sin \theta \frac{\partial}{\partial \theta} \right) + \frac{1}{r^2 \sin^2 \theta} \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \phi^2}. \quad (1)$$

The Great Simplification Again — Separation of Variables

Once again our next step is the “separation of variables” trick. We **guess** that $\psi(r, \theta, \phi) = R(r) \Theta(\theta) \Phi(\phi)$.

To save myself a boatload of typesetting, I am again going to screenshot:

We shall solve Laplace's equation,

$$\vec{\nabla}^2 T(r, \theta, \phi) = 0, \quad (2)$$

using the method of separation of variables, by writing

$$T(r, \theta, \phi) = R(r)\Theta(\theta)\Phi(\phi).$$

Inserting this decomposition into the Laplace equation and multiplying through by $r^2/R\Theta\Phi$ yields

$$\frac{1}{R} \frac{d}{dr} \left(r^2 \frac{dR}{dr} \right) + \frac{1}{\Theta \sin \theta} \frac{d}{d\theta} \left(\sin \theta \frac{d\Theta}{d\theta} \right) + \frac{1}{\Phi \sin^2 \theta} \frac{d^2 \Phi}{d\phi^2} = 0.$$

Hence,

$$\frac{1}{\Phi} \frac{d^2 \Phi}{d\phi^2} = -\frac{\sin^2 \theta}{R} \frac{d}{dr} \left(r^2 \frac{dR}{dr} \right) - \frac{\sin \theta}{\Theta} \frac{d}{d\theta} \left(\sin \theta \frac{d\Theta}{d\theta} \right) = -m^2, \quad (3)$$

where $-m^2$ is the separation constant, which is chosen negative so that the solutions for $\Phi(\phi)$ are periodic in ϕ ,

$$\Phi(\phi) = \begin{cases} e^{im\phi} \\ e^{-im\phi} \end{cases} \quad \text{for } m = 0, 1, 2, 3, \dots$$

Note that m must be an integer since ϕ is a periodic variable and $\Phi(\phi + 2\pi) = \Phi(\phi)$. In the case of $m = 0$, the general solution is $\Phi(\phi) = a\phi + b$, but we must choose $a = 0$ to be consistent with $\Phi(\phi + 2\pi) = \Phi(\phi)$. Hence in the case of $m = 0$, only one solution is allowed.

One can now recast eq. (3) in the following form,

$$\frac{1}{R} \frac{d}{dr} \left(r^2 \frac{dR}{dr} \right) = -\frac{1}{\Theta \sin \theta} \frac{d}{d\theta} \left(\sin \theta \frac{d\Theta}{d\theta} \right) + \frac{m^2}{\sin^2 \theta} = \ell(\ell + 1), \quad (4)$$

Adding the Boundary Conditions — Quantum Numbers

Some of the boundary conditions have already been mentioned in the screenshot above. In particular, we have to have $\Phi(2\pi) = \Phi(0)$. Another boundary condition is that the wave function has to vanish as $r \rightarrow \infty$. Another boundary condition is that at $r = 0$ where the nucleus is, the wave function can blow up, but only in a very controlled way. The reason it can blow up at all is that the potential is the Coulomb potential which is

$$V(r) = -\frac{e^2}{4\pi\epsilon_0} \frac{1}{r}$$

and this potential blows up.

I mention these boundary conditions, because without them you would have no idea where things like m must be an integer comes from.

You will see that there are three integers in the exact solutions of the Hydrogen atom. They correspond to the total energy, the total angular momentum, and the component of the angular momentum

around the axis that we have chosen as the polar axis in our polar coordinates. These integers are called “**quantum numbers.**”

They are important because you have to specify them in order to specify which solution of the Hydrogen atom Schrodinger Equation you are talking about, and because they correspond to important physical quantities. They are usually denoted as n , l , and m , and their direct correspondence is to the energy, the angular momentum, and the component of the angular momentum in the z -direction of the electron orbiting the Hydrogen nucleus.

The Exact Solutions

Normalization

Time-Dependence