

# Path integrals in quantum mechanics & Semiclassical approximation

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# Topics of the presentation

## 1 Path integrals

- Feynman's original idea
- Equivalence with Schrödinger formalism
- Statistical physics

## 2 Semiclassical/WKB approximation

- Assumptions and validity
- Derivation
- Connection rules
- Born-Sommerfeld rule

## 3 End of the presentation

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# Definitions from classical mechanics

Physical system of interest

Non-relativistic 1D quantum particle in time-independent potential

- Classical **Lagrangian**

$$L(\dot{x}, x) = \frac{m}{2} \dot{x}^2 - V(x)$$

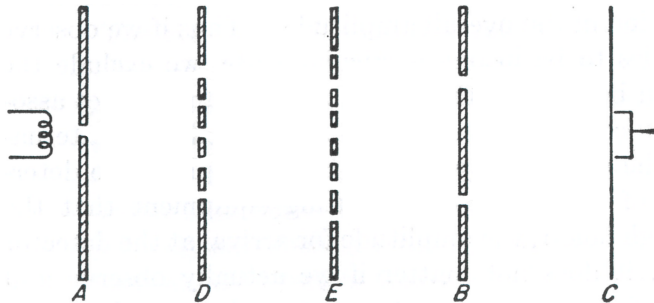
- Classical **action**

$$S[x(t)] = \int_{t_a}^{t_b} L(\dot{x}(t), x(t)) dt$$

- **Boundary conditions**

$$\begin{cases} x(t_a) = x_a \\ x(t_b) = x_b \\ T = t_b - t_a \end{cases}$$

# Feynman's thought experiment 1

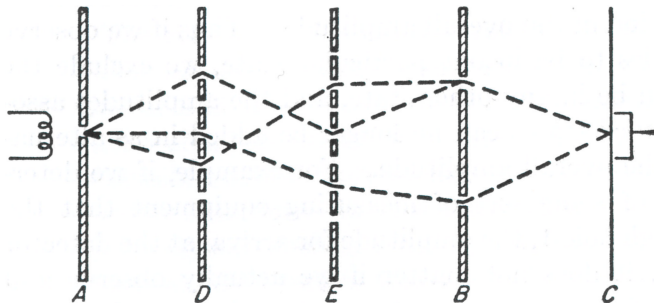


**Event:** a particle initially at  $A$  moves to  $C$

**Method:** a path between  $A$  and  $C$

Events are observed/measured, methods are not

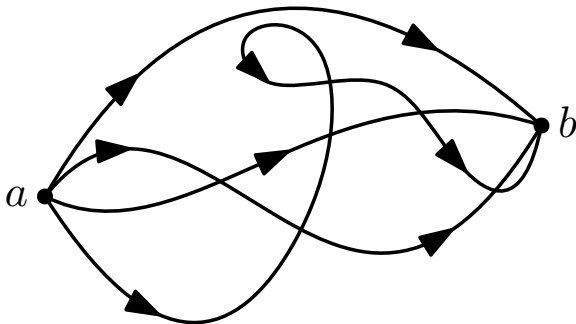
## Feynman's thought experiment 2



- **Event** can happen in different **methods**  $i = 1, 2, \dots$
- **Amplitude**  $\phi_i \in \mathbb{C}$  associated to method  $i$
- **Total amplitude**  $\phi = \phi_1 + \phi_2 + \dots$
- **Total probability**  $P = |\phi|^2 = |\phi_1 + \phi_2 + \dots|^2$

## Feynman's thought experiment 3

In the limit of infinitely many screens and holes



**Event:** a particle initially at  $a = (x_a, t_a)$  moves to  $b = (x_b, t_b)$

**Method:** a path between  $a = (x_a, t_a)$  and  $b = (x_b, t_b)$

# Feynman's postulates

The amplitude assigned to a method is

## Transition amplitude

$$\phi[x(t)] \sim \exp\left(\frac{i}{\hbar} S[x(t)]\right)$$

The total amplitude of the event is the sum over all methods

## Probability transition amplitude

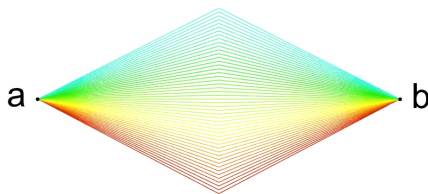
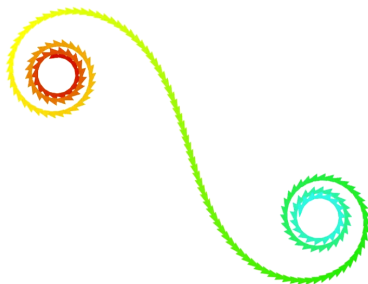
$$K(b, a) = \sum_{\substack{\text{all paths} \\ a \rightarrow b}} \phi[x(t)]$$



# Convergence of the path integral

## Path integral

$$K(b, a) = \int \exp \left( \frac{i}{\hbar} S[x(t)] \right) \mathcal{D}x(t)$$



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# Useful formulas for Schrödinger $\Rightarrow$ Feynman

## ■ Trotter's formula (omit limit)

$$e^{\hat{A}+\hat{B}} = \lim_{N \rightarrow \infty} \prod_{k=1}^N e^{\hat{A}/N} e^{\hat{B}/N}$$

## ■ Time evolution operator

$$\hat{U}(t_b, t_a) = \exp \left( -\frac{i}{\hbar} (t_b - t_a) \hat{H} \right)$$

## ■ Position-momentum sandwich

$$\langle x|p\rangle = \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi\hbar}} e^{ipx/\hbar}$$

## ■ Identity operator

$$1 = \int dx |x\rangle \langle x| = \int dp |p\rangle \langle p|$$

# Schrödinger $\Rightarrow$ Feynman 1

We expect the **propagator** to be equivalent to the path integral

Proposition to prove

$$\langle x_b | \hat{U}(t_b, t_a) | x_a \rangle \stackrel{?}{=} K(b, a)$$

Denote time-step  $\varepsilon = T/N$ , let  $N \rightarrow \infty$ , apply Trotter's formula

$$\begin{aligned} \langle x_b | \hat{U}(t_b, t_a) | x_a \rangle &= \langle x_b | e^{-iT(\hat{T}+\hat{V})/\hbar} | x_a \rangle \\ &= \left\langle x_b \left| \prod_{k=1}^N e^{-i\varepsilon\hat{T}/\hbar} e^{-i\varepsilon\hat{V}/\hbar} \right| x_a \right\rangle \\ &= \dots \end{aligned}$$

# Schrödinger $\Rightarrow$ Feynman 2

Insert  $N - 1$  identity operators ( $x_b = x_N$  and  $x_a = x_0$ )

$$\cdots = \int dx_1 \cdots \int dx_{N-1} \prod_{k=1}^N \left\langle x_k \left| e^{-i\varepsilon \hat{T}/\hbar} e^{-i\varepsilon V(\mathbf{x}_{k-1})/\hbar} \right| x_{k-1} \right\rangle = \cdots$$

Compute the sandwich with the position-momentum bracket

$$\begin{aligned} \left\langle x_k \left| e^{-i\varepsilon \hat{T}/\hbar} \right| x_{k-1} \right\rangle &= \\ &= \frac{1}{2\pi\hbar} \int dp \exp\left(\frac{ipx_k}{\hbar}\right) \exp\left(-\frac{i\varepsilon p^2}{2m\hbar}\right) \exp\left(-\frac{ipx_{k-1}}{\hbar}\right) \\ &= \frac{1}{2\pi\hbar} \int dp \exp\left(-\frac{i\varepsilon p^2}{2m} + \frac{ip(x_k - x_{k-1})}{\hbar}\right) \\ &= \sqrt{\frac{m}{2\pi i\hbar\varepsilon}} \exp\left(\frac{im}{2\hbar\varepsilon}(x_k - x_{k-1})^2\right) \end{aligned}$$

# Schrödinger $\Rightarrow$ Feynman 3

With the following **normalization constant**

$$A^{-1} = \sqrt{\frac{m}{2\pi i \hbar \varepsilon}}$$

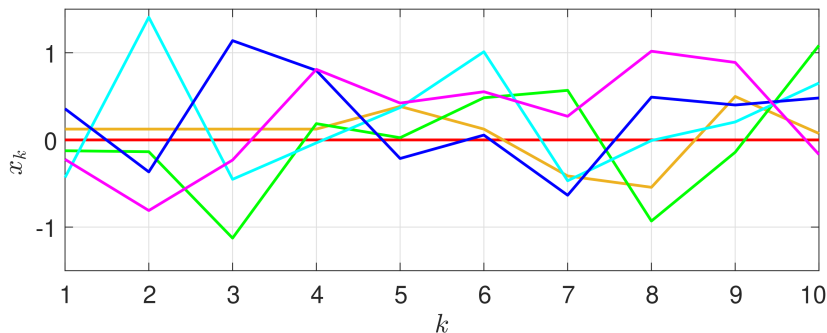
we stick everything together to get

$$\begin{aligned} \cdot \cdot &= \left\langle x_b \left| \hat{U}(t_b, t_a) \right| x_a \right\rangle = \\ &= \frac{1}{A^N} \int dx_1 \cdots \int dx_{N-1} \exp \left( \sum_{k=1}^N \left[ \frac{im}{2\hbar\varepsilon} (x_k - x_{k-1})^2 - i\frac{\varepsilon}{\hbar} V(x_{k-1}) \right] \right) \\ &= \int \frac{dx_1}{A} \cdots \int \frac{dx_{N-1}}{A} \frac{\exp}{A} \left( \frac{i\varepsilon}{\hbar} \sum_{k=1}^N \left[ \frac{m}{2} \left( \frac{x_k - x_{k-1}}{\varepsilon} \right)^2 - V(x_{k-1}) \right] \right) \end{aligned}$$

# Schrödinger $\Rightarrow$ Feynman 4

Interpreting the **red** and **blue** parts

$$\int \frac{dx_1}{A} \cdots \int \frac{dx_{N-1}}{A} \frac{\exp}{A} \left( \frac{i}{\hbar} \varepsilon \sum_{k=1}^N \left[ \frac{m}{2} \left( \frac{x_k - x_{k-1}}{\varepsilon} \right)^2 - V(x_{k-1}) \right] \right)$$



# Schrödinger $\Rightarrow$ Feynman 5

We end up with a **cumbersome definition**

$$\begin{aligned} \langle x_b | \hat{U}(t_b, t_a) | x_a \rangle &= \lim_{N \rightarrow \infty} \\ &\int \frac{dx_1}{A} \cdots \int \frac{dx_{N-1}}{A} \frac{\exp}{A} \left( \frac{i}{\hbar} \varepsilon \sum_{k=1}^N \left[ \frac{m}{2} \left( \frac{x_k - x_{k-1}}{\varepsilon} \right)^2 - V(x_{k-1}) \right] \right) \\ &= \int Dx(t) \exp \left( \frac{i}{\hbar} S[x(t)] \right) = K(b, a) \end{aligned}$$

We have indeed shown that

**Propagator**

$$\langle x_b | \hat{U}(t_b, t_a) | x_a \rangle = K(b, a)$$



# Schrödinger $\Rightarrow$ Feynman 6

Why is it called the propagator?

$$\begin{aligned}\psi(x_b, t_b) &= \langle x_b | \psi(t_b) \rangle = \langle x_b | \hat{U}(t_b, t_a) | \psi(t_a) \rangle \\ &= \int dx_a \langle x_b | \hat{U}(t_b, t_a) | x_a \rangle \langle x_a | \psi(t_a) \rangle \\ &= \int dx_a K(b, a) \psi(x_a, t_a)\end{aligned}$$

## Wavefunction time evolution

$$\psi(x_b, t_b) = \int K(b, a) \psi(x_a, t_a) dx_a$$

$K$  is called the **kernel** (of the convolution)

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## Link with statistical physics

Consider the **canonical ensemble** with **density matrix**

$$\hat{\rho} = e^{-\beta \hat{H}}$$

The **partition function** is

$$Z = \text{Tr}(\hat{\rho}) = \int dx' \langle x' | e^{-\beta \hat{H}} | x' \rangle$$

We recognise the path integral

$$K(b, a) = \left\langle x_b \left| e^{-i(t_b - t_a)/\hbar \hat{H}} \right| x_a \right\rangle$$

with paths respecting

- **Periodic boundary conditions**  $x_a = x_b = x'$
- **Time-temperature identification**

$$-\beta = -\frac{i}{\hbar}(t_b - t_a)$$

# Wick rotation

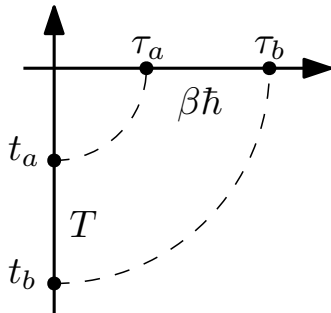
Time-temperature identification

$$\beta\hbar = i(t_b - t_a) = iT$$

suggests a **Wick rotation**

$$t \rightarrow it = \tau \in \mathbb{R}$$

to **imaginary time**



# Euclidean action 1

How does the path integral change under Wick rotation?

$$\begin{aligned}\langle x'|e^{-\beta\hat{H}}|x'\rangle &= \int \exp\left(\frac{i}{\hbar}S[x(t)]\right) \mathcal{D}x(t) \\ &= \int \exp\left(\frac{i}{\hbar}\int_{t_a}^{t_b} dt \left[\frac{m}{2}\left(\frac{dx}{dt}\right)^2 - V(x(t))\right]\right) \mathcal{D}x(t) = \cdots\end{aligned}$$

Change of variable  $it = \tau$ ,  $dt = -i d\tau$  yields

$$\cdots = \int \exp\left(-\frac{1}{\hbar}\int_{\tau_a}^{\tau_b} d\tau \left[\frac{m}{2}\left(\frac{dx}{d\tau}\right)^2 + V(x(\tau))\right]\right) \mathcal{D}x(\tau)$$

## Euclidean action 2

We recognize the classical **Hamiltonian**

$$H(\dot{x}, x) = \frac{m}{2} \dot{x}^2 + V(x)$$

Therefore we define

### Euclidean action

$$S_E[x(\tau)] = \int_{\tau_a}^{\tau_b} H(\dot{x}(\tau), x(\tau)) d\tau$$

Finally

$$\langle x' | e^{-\beta \hat{H}} | x' \rangle = \int \exp \left( -\frac{1}{\hbar} S_E[x(\tau)] \right) \mathcal{D}x(\tau)$$

# Euclidean action 3

The partition function becomes

Partition function  $\Leftrightarrow$  Path integral

$$Z = \int dx' \int \exp \left( -\frac{1}{\hbar} S_E[x(\tau)] \right) \mathcal{D}x(\tau)$$

provided PBCs and  $\beta\hbar = iT$

- Integration over  $x'$  ensures all possible paths are considered
- Practically one computes

$$\langle x | e^{-\beta \hat{H}} | x \rangle = K(b, a)|_{T=-i\beta\hbar}$$

# Harmonic oscillator 1

Remember!

$$K(b, a) = \sqrt{\frac{m\omega}{2\pi i\hbar \sin(\omega T)}} \cdot \exp\left(\frac{im\omega}{2\hbar \sin(\omega T)} \left[(x_a^2 + x_b^2) \cos(\omega T) - 2x_a x_b\right]\right)$$

We want to substitute  $T = -i\hbar\beta$ . Use properties

$$\begin{cases} \sin(ix) = i \sinh(x) \\ \cos(ix) = \cosh(x) \end{cases}$$



## Harmonic oscillator 2

We obtain

$$\langle x | e^{-\beta \hat{H}} | x \rangle = \sqrt{\frac{m\omega}{2\pi\hbar \sinh(\beta\hbar\omega)}} \exp\left(-\frac{m\omega x^2}{\hbar \sinh(\beta\hbar\omega)} [\cosh(\beta\hbar\omega) - 1]\right)$$

We compute the integral

$$\begin{aligned} Z &= \int dx \langle x | e^{-\beta \hat{H}} | x \rangle = \sqrt{\frac{m\omega}{2\pi\hbar \sinh(\beta\hbar\omega)}} \sqrt{\frac{\pi\hbar \sinh(\beta\hbar\omega)}{m\omega(\cosh(\beta\hbar\omega) - 1)}} \\ &= \dots \\ &= \frac{e^{-\beta\hbar\omega/2}}{1 - e^{-\beta\hbar\omega}} = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \exp\left(-\beta\hbar\omega \left(n + \frac{1}{2}\right)\right) \end{aligned}$$

# Harmonic oscillator 3

Indeed we obtain

$$Z = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \exp \left( -\beta \hbar \omega \left( n + \frac{1}{2} \right) \right) = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} e^{-\beta E_n}$$

with the **energy spectrum**

$$E_n = \hbar \omega \left( n + \frac{1}{2} \right)$$

Remember!

$$Z = \text{Tr}(\hat{\rho}) = \sum_n \langle n | e^{-\beta \hat{H}} | n \rangle = \sum_n e^{-\beta E_n} \quad \hat{H} | n \rangle = E_n | n \rangle$$

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# Initial definitions

## Physical system of interest

Particle of energy  $E$  in a 1D time-independent potential  $V(x)$

- **Local momentum** (squared)

$$p(x)^2 = 2m(E - V(x))$$

- **Local wavevector**

$$k(x) = \frac{p(x)}{\hbar}$$

- **Local de Broglie wavelength**

$$\lambda(x) = \frac{2\pi}{k(x)} = \frac{2\pi\hbar}{p(x)}$$

# Criterion of validity

We will show that it must be

## WKB criterion 1

$$\lambda(x) \ll L$$

$L$  characteristic length scale for  $V(x)$  variation

or equivalently

## WKB criterion 2

$$\left| \frac{d\lambda}{dx} \right| = 2\pi\hbar \left| \frac{p'(x)}{p(x)} \right| \sim \lambda \left| \frac{V'(x)}{E - V(x)} \right| \ll 1$$

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# Derivation of the WKB wavefunction 1

Schrödinger equation

$$\left[ -\frac{\hbar^2}{2m} \frac{d^2}{dx^2} + V(x) \right] \psi(x) = E\psi(x)$$

put in the form

$$\hbar^2 \left[ \frac{d^2}{dx^2} + p(x)^2 \right] \psi(x) = 0$$

Remember!

$$p(x)^2 = 2m(E - V(x))$$



## Derivation of the WKB wavefunction 2

**Eikonal**  $S(x)$  defined such that

$$\psi(x) = e^{iS(x)/\hbar}$$

Schrödinger equation becomes

$$\left(\frac{dS}{dx}\right)^2 - i\hbar \frac{d^2S}{dx^2} = p(x)^2$$

Semiclassical expansion of eikonal

$$S(x) = \sum_{j=0}^{\infty} \hbar^j S_j(x) = S_0 + \hbar S_1 + \hbar^2 S_2 + \dots$$

# Derivation of the WKB wavefunction 3

Group orders of  $\hbar^j$  to get tower of ODEs

$$\hbar^0 : \quad \left( \frac{dS_0}{dx} \right)^2 = p(x)^2$$

$$\hbar^1 : \quad 2 \frac{dS_0}{dx} \frac{dS_1}{dx} = i \frac{d^2 S_0}{dx^2}$$

$$\hbar^2 : \quad 2 \frac{dS_0}{dx} \frac{dS_2}{dx} = - \left( \frac{dS_1}{dx} \right)^2 + i \frac{d^2 S_1}{dx^2}$$

$$\hbar^{j \geq 3} : \quad \dots$$

(A recurrence relation can be derived)

# Derivation of the WKB wavefunction 4

Solutions for each ODE are

$$\hbar^0 : \quad S_0(x) = \pm \int_{x_0}^x p(y) dy$$

$$\hbar^1 : \quad S_1(x) = \frac{1}{i} \ln \left( \frac{1}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \right) + \text{const.}$$

$$\hbar^2 : \quad S_2(x) = \int_{x_0}^x \frac{3p'(y)^2 - 2p(y)p''(y)}{8p(y)^3} dy = O\left(\frac{\lambda}{L}\right)$$

## WKB criterion 1

At second order in  $\hbar$ , WKB valid only when  $\lambda(x) \ll L$

# The WKB wavefunction 1

## WKB wavefunction

$$\psi_{\pm}(x) = e^{i(S_0(x) + \hbar S_1(x))/\hbar} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \exp\left(\pm \frac{i}{\hbar} \int_{x_0}^x p(y) dy\right)$$

Approximation breaks down at **turning points**  $x^*$

$$p(x^*) = \sqrt{2m(E - V(x^*))} = 0 \quad \Leftrightarrow \quad V(x^*) = E$$

## WKB criterion 2

$$\lambda \left| \frac{V'(x)}{E - V(x)} \right| \ll 1$$

# The WKB wavefunction 2

- If  $E > V(x)$

$$\psi_{\pm}(x) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \exp\left(\pm \frac{i}{\hbar} \int_{x_0}^x p(y) dy\right)$$

- If  $E < V(x)$

$$\psi_{\pm}(x) = \frac{1}{\sqrt{|p(x)|}} \exp\left(\pm \frac{1}{\hbar} \int_{x_0}^x |p(y)| dy\right)$$

## Remember!

If  $E < V(x)$  then

$$p(x) = \sqrt{2m(E - V(x))} = \sqrt{-2m|E - V(x)|} = \pm i|p(x)|$$

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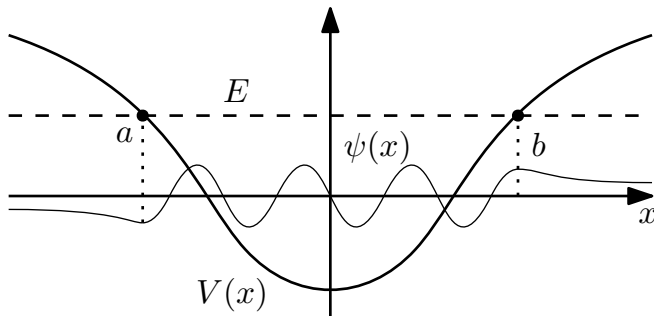
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# Stitching solutions together 1

- $a < x < b$ : oscillatory solution
- $x < a$  or  $x > b$ : exponential decay



Focus on turning point  $b = x_0$ , can get  $a$  by analogy

## Stitching solutions together 2

We have two cases

- If  $x < b$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{C_1}{\sqrt{p}} \exp\left(\frac{i}{\hbar} \int_b^x p(y) dy\right) + \frac{C_2}{\sqrt{p}} \exp\left(-\frac{i}{\hbar} \int_b^x p(y) dy\right)$$

- If  $x > b$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{C}{\sqrt{|p(x)|}} \exp\left(-\frac{1}{\hbar} \int_b^x |p(y)| dy\right)$$

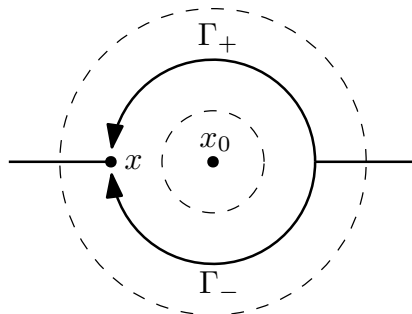
with  $C, C_1, C_2 \in \mathbb{C}$



# Contouring the turning point

Can't just match  $C, C_1, C_2$  at  $x_0 = b$

- Allow  $x, x_0 \in \mathbb{C}$
- Analytically extend  $p(x), V(x)$  on complex plane
- Linearly approximate  $E - V(x)$



## Contouring the turning point 3

We find

$$|p(x)| \xrightarrow{\Gamma_{\pm}} p(x) e^{\pm i\pi/2}$$

### Remember!

- If  $x > b$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{C}{\sqrt{|p(x)|}} \exp\left(-\frac{1}{\hbar} \int_b^x |p(y)| dy\right)$$

- If  $x < b$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{C_1}{\sqrt{p}} \exp\left(\frac{i}{\hbar} \int_b^x p(y) dy\right) + \frac{C_2}{\sqrt{p}} \exp\left(-\frac{i}{\hbar} \int_b^x p(y) dy\right)$$

# Contouring the turning point 4

Therefore

$$\Gamma_+ \rightarrow C_2 = Ce^{-i\pi/4}$$

$$\Gamma_- \rightarrow C_1 = Ce^{i\pi/4}$$

and finally for  $x < b$

$$\begin{aligned}\psi(x) &= \frac{C_1}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \exp\left(\frac{i}{\hbar} \int_b^x p(y) dy\right) + \frac{C_2}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \exp\left(-\frac{i}{\hbar} \int_b^x p(y) dy\right) \\ &= \frac{2C}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \cos\left(\int_b^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy + \frac{\pi}{4}\right)\end{aligned}$$

# Connection rules 1

At turning point  $x_0 = b$  we have

## Connection rules at $x_0 = b$

- If  $x < b$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{2C}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \cos \left( \int_b^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy + \frac{\pi}{4} \right)$$

- If  $x > b$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{C}{\sqrt{|p(x)|}} \exp \left( -\frac{1}{\hbar} \int_b^x |p(y)| dy \right)$$

## Connection rules 2

By analogy, at turning point  $x_0 = a$  we have

### Connection rules at $x_0 = a$

- If  $x > a$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{2C}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \cos \left( \int_a^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy - \frac{\pi}{4} \right)$$

- If  $x < a$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{C}{\sqrt{|p(x)|}} \exp \left( + \frac{1}{\hbar} \int_a^x |p(y)| dy \right)$$

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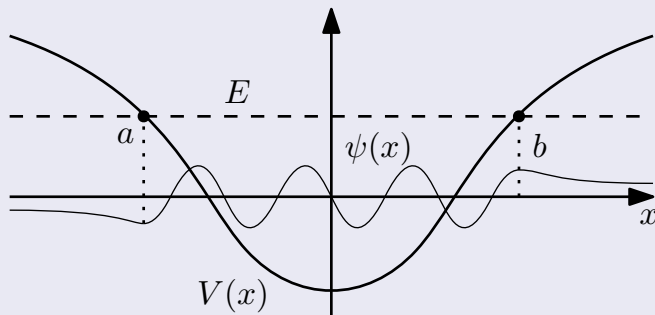
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# Derivation of the Born-Sommerfeld quantization rule 1

Let's apply the connection rules to a potential well

Remember!



# Derivation of the Born-Sommerfeld quantization rule 2

- If  $x > a$  at  $x_0 = a$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{2C}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \cos \left( \int_a^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy - \frac{\pi}{4} \right)$$

- If  $x < b$  at  $x_0 = b$

$$\psi(x) = \frac{2C}{\sqrt{p(x)}} \cos \left( \int_b^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy + \frac{\pi}{4} \right)$$

$$\cos \left( \int_a^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy - \frac{\pi}{4} \right) = \pm \cos \left( \int_b^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy + \frac{\pi}{4} \right)$$

Therefore for  $n \in \mathbb{N}$

$$\int_a^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy - \frac{\pi}{4} = \int_b^x \frac{p(y)}{\hbar} dy + \frac{\pi}{4} + n\pi$$



# Born-Sommerfeld quantization rule

## Born-Sommerfeld quantization rule

$$\int_a^b p(x) dx = \pi \hbar \left( n + \frac{1}{2} \right)$$

$n$  number of half-waves  $\Leftrightarrow$   $n$  number of nodes of  $\psi$

- WKB criterion implies  $n \gg 1$
- For example, harmonic oscillator gives exact result

$$\begin{cases} V(x) = \frac{1}{2} m \omega^2 x^2 \\ b = -a = \sqrt{\frac{2E}{m\omega^2}} \end{cases} \Rightarrow E = \hbar \omega \left( n + \frac{1}{2} \right)$$

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## 1 Path integrals

- Feynman's original idea
- Equivalence with Schrödinger formalism
- Statistical physics

## 2 Semiclassical/WKB approximation

- Assumptions and validity
- Derivation
- Connection rules
- Born-Sommerfeld rule

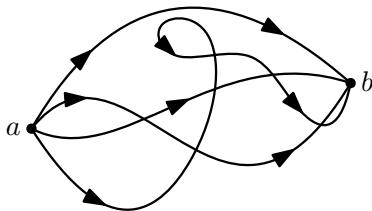
## 3 End of the presentation

# End of the presentation 1

In this presentation we learned about

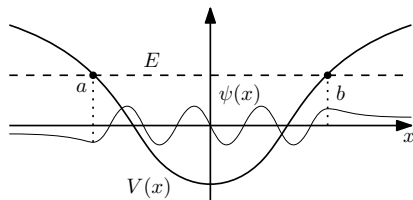
## Path integrals

$$\int \exp\left(\frac{i}{\hbar} S[x(t)]\right) Dx(t)$$



## Semiclassical approximation

$$\psi(x) = \exp\left(\frac{i}{\hbar} S(x)\right)$$



## End of the presentation 2

Thank you for your attention!

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