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# **QUANTUM FIELD THEORY**

## **From Operators to Path Integrals**

**Kerson Huang**

Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Cambridge, Massachusetts



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**Library of Congress Card No.:** Applied for  
**British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data:**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

**Bibliographic information published by**

**Die Deutsche Bibliothek**

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <<http://dnb.ddb.de>>.

© 1998 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

© 2004 WILEY-VCH Verlag GmbH & Co. KGaA, Weinheim

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Printed in the Federal Republic of Germany

Printed on acid-free paper

**Cover Design** Grafik-Design Schulz, Fußgönnheim

**Printing** Strauss GmbH, Mörlenbach

**Bookbinding** Großbuchbinderei J. Schäffer GmbH & Co. KG, KG Grünstadt

**ISBN-13:** 978-0-471-14120-4

**ISBN-10:** 0-471-14120-8

To *Rosemary*

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# Contents

<b>Preface</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Acknowledgment</b>	<b>xvii</b>
<b>1. Introducing Quantum Fields</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. The Classical String, 1	
1.2. The Quantum String, 5	
1.3. Second Quantization, 7	
1.4. Creation and Annihilation Operators, 10	
1.5. Bose and Fermi Statistics, 12	
Problems, 13	
References, 16	
<b>2. Scalar Fields</b>	<b>17</b>
2.1. Klein–Gordon Equation, 17	
2.2. Real Scalar Field, 18	
2.3. Energy and Momentum, 20	
2.4. Particle Spectrum, 22	
2.5. Continuum Normalization, 22	
2.6. Complex Scalar Field, 24	
2.7. Charge and Antiparticle, 25	
2.8. Microcausality, 27	
2.9. The Feynman Propagator, 28	
2.10. The Wave Functional, 31	
2.11. Functional Operations, 32	
2.12. Vacuum Wave Functional, 33	
2.13. The $\phi^4$ Theory, 35	
Problems, 37	

<b>3. Relativistic Fields</b>	<b>40</b>
3.1. Lorentz Transformations, 40	
3.2. Minimal Representation: $SL(2C)$ , 43	
3.3. The Poincaré Group, 44	
3.4. Scalar, Vector, and Spinor Fields, 46	
3.5. Relativistic Quantum Fields, 48	
3.6. One-Particle States, 50	
Problems, 52	
Reference, 53	
<b>4. Canonical Formalism</b>	<b>54</b>
4.1. Principle of Stationary Action, 54	
4.2. Noether's Theorem, 57	
4.3. Translational Invariance, 58	
4.4. Lorentz Invariance, 61	
4.5. Symmetrized Energy–Momentum Tensor, 63	
4.6. Gauge Invariance, 63	
Problems, 65	
Reference, 67	
<b>5. Electromagnetic Field</b>	<b>68</b>
5.1. Maxwell's Equations, 68	
5.2. Covariance of the Classical Theory, 70	
5.3. Canonical Formalism, 72	
5.4. Quantization in Coulomb Gauge, 75	
5.5. Spin Angular Momentum, 78	
5.6. Intrinsic Parity, 80	
5.7. Transverse Propagator, 81	
5.8. Vacuum Fluctuations, 82	
5.9. The Casimir Effect, 85	
5.10. The Gauge Principle, 88	
Problems, 90	
References, 93	
<b>6. Dirac Equation</b>	<b>94</b>
6.1. Dirac Algebra, 94	
6.2. Wave Functions and Current Density, 98	
6.3. Plane Waves, 99	
6.4. Lorentz Transformations, 102	
6.5. Interpretation of Dirac Matrices, 106	
6.6. External Electromagnetic Field, 107	
6.7. Nonrelativistic Limit, 109	
6.8. Thomas Precession, 111	
6.9. Hole Theory, 114	

6.10. Charge Conjugation, 117	
6.11. Massless Particles, 118	
Problems, 119	
References, 122	
<b>7. The Dirac Field</b>	<b>123</b>
7.1. Quantization of the Dirac Field, 123	
7.2. Feynman Propagator, 126	
7.3. Normal Ordering, 128	
7.4. Electromagnetic Interactions, 129	
7.5. Isospin, 130	
7.6. Parity, 132	
7.7. Charge Conjugation, 133	
7.8. Time Reversal, 134	
Problems, 136	
Reference, 137	
<b>8. Dynamics of Interacting Fields</b>	<b>138</b>
8.1. Time Evolution, 138	
8.2. Interaction Picture, 139	
8.3. Adiabatic Switching, 142	
8.4. Correlation Functions in the Interaction Picture, 144	
8.5. $S$ Matrix and Scattering, 147	
8.6. Scattering Cross Section, 148	
8.7. Potential Scattering, 151	
8.8. Adiabatic Theorem, 154	
Problems, 158	
References, 159	
<b>9. Feynman Graphs</b>	<b>160</b>
9.1. Perturbation Theory, 160	
9.2. Time-Ordered and Normal Products, 161	
9.3. Wick's Theorem, 162	
9.4. Feynman Rules for Scalar Theory, 165	
9.5. Types of Feynman Graphs, 171	
9.5.1. Vacuum Graph, 171	
9.5.2. Self-Energy Graph, 171	
9.5.3. Connected Graph, 172	
9.6. Wick Rotation, 172	
9.7. Regularization Schemes, 173	
9.8. Linked-Cluster Theorem, 175	
9.9. Vacuum Graphs, 175	
Problems, 176	
Reference, 181	

<b>10. Vacuum Correlation Functions</b>	<b>182</b>
10.1. Feynman Rules, 182	
10.2. Reduction Formula, 185	
10.3. The Generating Functional, 188	
10.4. Connected Correlation Functions, 189	
10.5. Lehmann Representation, 190	
10.6. Dyson–Schwinger Equations, 193	
10.7. Bound States, 197	
10.8. Bethe–Salpeter Equation, 200	
Problems, 201	
References, 203	
<b>11. Quantum Electrodynamics</b>	<b>204</b>
11.1. Interaction Hamiltonian, 204	
11.2. Photon Propagator, 207	
11.3. Feynman Graphs, 210	
11.4. Feynman Rules, 215	
11.5. Properties of Feynman Graphs, 217	
Problems, 219	
References, 219	
<b>12. Processes in Quantum Electrodynamics</b>	<b>220</b>
12.1. Compton Scattering, 220	
12.2. Electromagnetic Form Factors, 224	
12.3. Anomalous Magnetic Moment, 229	
12.4. Charge Distribution, 232	
Problems, 234	
References, 235	
<b>13. Perturbative Renormalization</b>	<b>236</b>
13.1. Primitive Divergences in QED, 236	
13.2. Electron Self-Energy 237	
13.3. Vacuum Polarization, 243	
13.4. Running Coupling Constant, 247	
13.5. Full Vertex, 248	
13.6. Ward Identity, 249	
13.7. Renormalization to Second Order, 251	
13.8. Renormalization to All Orders, 252	
13.9. Callan–Symanzik Equation, 257	
13.10. Triviality, 259	
Problems, 260	
References, 263	



<b>14. Path Integrals</b>	<b>264</b>
14.1. Path Integrals in Quantum Mechanics, 264	
14.2. Imaginary Time, 268	
14.3. Path Integrals in Quantum Field Theory, 269	
14.4. Euclidean Space–Time, 271	
14.5. Vacuum Amplitudes, 272	
14.6. Statistical Mechanics, 274	
14.7. Gaussian Integrals, 276	
14.8. Perturbation Theory, 280	
14.9. The Loop Expansion, 283	
14.10. Boson and Fermion Loops, 284	
14.11. Grassmann Variables, 287	
Problems, 290	
References, 293	
 <b>15. Broken Symmetry</b>	 <b>294</b>
15.1. Why Broken Symmetry, 294	
15.2. Ferromagnetism, 296	
15.3. Spin Waves, 300	
15.4. Breaking Gauge Invariance, 303	
15.5. Superfluidity, 306	
15.6. Ginsburg–Landau Theory, 310	
15.7. Effective Action, 312	
15.8. Effective Potential, 314	
Problems, 315	
References, 318	
 <b>16. Renormalization</b>	 <b>320</b>
16.1. The Cutoff as Scale Parameter, 320	
16.2. Momentum Space RG, 324	
16.2.1. Designating Fast and Slow Modes, 325	
16.2.2. Coarse Graining, 326	
16.2.3. Rescaling, 326	
16.3. Real Space RG, 327	
16.3.1. Making Blocks, 328	
16.3.2. Coarse Graining, 329	
16.3.3. Rescaling, 330	
16.4. Renormalization of Correlation Functions, 330	
16.5. Relevant and Irrelevant Parameters, 331	
16.6. The Free Field, 332	
16.7. IR Fixed Point and Phase Transition, 334	
16.8. Crossover, 336	
16.9. Relation with Perturbative Renormalization, 337	

16.10. Why Correct Theories are Beautiful, 339	
Problems, 341	
References, 342	

## **17. The Gaussian Fixed Point 343**

17.1. Stability of the Free Field, 343
17.2. General Scalar Field, 344
17.3. Feynman Graphs, 345
17.4. Wegner–Houghton Formula, 347
17.5. Renormalized Couplings, 350
17.6. The RG Matrix, 352
17.7. Nontriviality and Asymptotic Freedom, 356
17.8. The Case $d = 2$ , 357
Problems, 359
References, 359

## **18. In Two Dimensions 360**

18.1. Absence of Long-Range Order, 360
18.2. Topological Order, 361
18.3. XY Model, 363
18.4. Kosterlitz–Thouless Transition, 367
18.5. Vortex Model, 368
18.6. 2D Superfluidity, 370
18.7. RG Trajectories, 372
18.8. Universal Jump of Superfluid Density, 376
Problems, 378
References, 378

## **19. Topological Excitations 380**

19.1. Topological Soliton, 380
19.2. Instanton and Tunneling, 383
19.3. Depinning of Charge Density Waves, 385
19.4. Nonlinear Sigma Model, 389
19.5. The Skyrmion, 391
19.6. The Hopf Invariant, 395
19.7. Fractional Spin, 398
19.8. Monopoles, Vortices, and Anomalies, 401
Problems, 403
References, 405

## **A. Background Material 406**

A.1. Notation, 406
--------------------

A.2. Classical Mechanics,	408
A.3. Quantum Mechanics,	408
<b>B. Linear Response</b>	<b>412</b>
References,	418
<b>Index</b>	<b>419</b>

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# Preface

Quantum field theory, the quantum mechanics of continuous systems, arose at the beginning of the quantum era, in the problem of blackbody radiation. It became fully developed in quantum electrodynamics, the most successful theory in physics. Since that time, it has been united with statistical mechanics through Feynman's path integral, and its domain has been expanded to cover particle physics, condensed-matter physics, astrophysics, and wherever path integrals are spoken.

This book is a textbook on the subject, aimed at readers conversant with what is usually called "advanced quantum mechanics," the equivalent of a first-year graduate course. Previous exposure to the Dirac equation and "second quantization" would be very helpful, but not absolutely necessary. The mathematical level is not higher than what is required in advanced quantum mechanics; but a degree of maturity is assumed.

In physics, a continuous system is one that appears to be so at long wavelengths or low frequencies. To model it as mathematically continuous, one runs into difficulties, in that the high-frequency modes often give rise to infinities. The usual procedure is to start with a discrete version, by discarding the high-frequency modes beyond some cutoff, and then try to approach the continuum limit, through a process called *renormalization*.

Renormalization is a relatively new concept, but its workings were already evident in classical physics. At the beginning of the atomic era, Boltzmann noted that classical equipartition of energy presents conceptual difficulties, when one seriously considers the atomic structure of matter. Since atoms are expected to contain smaller subunits, which in turn should be composed of even smaller subunits, and so *ad infinitum*, and each degree of freedom contributes equally to the thermal energy of a substance, the specific heat of matter would be infinite. The origin of this divergence lies in the extrapolation of known physical laws into the high-frequency domain, a characteristic shared by the infinities in quantum field theory.

Boltzmann's "paradox," however, matters not a whit when it comes to practical calculations, as evidenced by the great success of classical physics. The reason is that most equations of macroscopic physics, such as those in thermodynamics and

hydrodynamics, make no explicit reference to atoms, but depend on coefficients like the specific heat, which can be obtained from experiments. From a modern perspective, we say that such theories are “renormalizable,” in that the microstructure can be absorbed into measurable quantities.

One goal of this book is to explain what renormalization is, how it works, and what makes some systems appear “renormalizable” and others not. We follow the historical route, discovering it in quantum electrodynamics through necessity, and then realizing its physical meaning through Wilson’s path-integral formulation.

This book, then, starts with a thorough introduction to the usual operator formalism, including Feynman graphs, from Chapters 1–10. This is followed by Chapters 11–14 on quantum electrodynamics, which illustrates how to do practical calculations, and includes a complete discussion of perturbative renormalization. The last part, Chapters 15–19, introduces the Feynman path integral, and discusses “modern” subjects, including the physical approach to renormalization, spontaneous symmetry breaking, and topological excitations. I have entirely omitted non-Abelian gauge fields and the standard model of particle physics, because these subjects are discussed in another book: K. Huang, *Quarks, Leptons, and Gauge Fields*, 2nd ed. (World Scientific, Singapore, 1992).

I have chosen to introduce path integrals only after the canonical approach is fully developed and applied. Others might want them discussed earlier. To accommodate different tastes, I have tried to make each chapter self-contained in as much as possible, so that a knowledgeable reader can pick and skip.

There is definitely a change in flavor when quantum field theory is conveyed through the path integral. Apart from the union with statistical mechanics, which immeasurably enriches the subject, it liberates our imagination by making it possible to contemplate virtual but fantastic deformations, such as altering the structure of space–time. I am reminded of the classification of things as “gray” or “green” by Freeman Dyson, in his book *Disturbing the Universe* (Harper & Row, New York, 1979). He classified physics gray (and I suppose that included quantum field theory,) as opposed to things green, such as poems and horse manure. In a private letter dated August 3, 1983, Dyson wrote, “Everyone has to make his own choice of what to call gray and green. I took my choice from Goethe:

*Grau, tenerer freund, ist alle Theorie,  
Und grün des Lebens Goldner Baum.*

Dear friend, all theory is grey,  
And green is the golden tree of life.

I must admit that Hilbert space does seem a bit dreary at times; but, with Feynman’s path integral, quantum field theory has surely turned green.

KERSON HUANG

December, 1997  
Marblehead, Massachusetts

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# Acknowledgments

I wish to thank my colleagues and students for helping me to learn the stuff in this book over the years, in particular Herman Feshbach, from whom I took the first course on the subject. I thank Jeffrey Goldstone, Roman Jackiw, and Ken Johnson, who can usually be relied on to provide correct and simple answers to difficult questions; and Patrick Lee, who taught a course with me on the subject, thereby broadening my horizon. Last but not least, I thank my editor Greg Franklin for his understanding and support.

K. H.

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# QUANTUM FIELD THEORY



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## CHAPTER ONE

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# Introducing Quantum Fields

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### 1.1 THE CLASSICAL STRING

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We obtain a quantum field by quantizing a classical field, of which the simplest example is the classical string. To be on firm mathematical grounds, we define the latter as the long-wavelength limit of a discrete chain. Consider  $N + 2$  masses described by the classical Lagrangian

$$L(q, \dot{q}) = \sum_{j=0}^{N+1} \left[ \frac{m}{2} \dot{q}_j^2 - \frac{\kappa}{2} (q_j - q_{j+1})^2 \right] \quad (1.1)$$

where  $m$  is the mass and  $\kappa$  a force constant. The coordinate  $q_j(t)$  represents the lateral displacement of the  $j$ th mass along a one-dimensional chain. We impose fixed-endpoint boundary conditions, by setting

$$q_0(t) = q_{N+1}(t) = 0 \quad (1.2)$$

The equations of motion for the  $N$  remaining movable masses are then

$$m\ddot{q}_j - \kappa(q_{j+1} - 2q_j + q_{j-1}) = 0 \quad (j = 1, \dots, N) \quad (1.3)$$

The normal modes have the form

$$q_j(t) = \cos(\omega t) \sin(jp) \quad (1.4)$$

To satisfy the boundary conditions, choose  $p$  to have one of the  $N$  possible values

$$p_n = \frac{\pi n}{N+1} \quad (n = 1, \dots, N) \quad (1.5)$$

## 2 Introducing Quantum Fields

Substituting this into the equations of motion, we obtain  $N$  independent normal frequencies  $\omega_n$ :

$$\omega_n^2 = \omega_0^2 \sin^2\left(\frac{\pi}{2} \frac{n}{N+1}\right) \quad (n = 1 \cdots N) \quad (1.6)$$

where

$$\omega_0 = 2\sqrt{\frac{\kappa}{m}} \quad (1.7)$$

This is a cutoff frequency, for the modes with  $n > N$  merely repeat the lower ones. For  $N = 4$ , for example, the independent modes correspond to  $n = 1, 2, 3, 4$ . The case  $n = 5$  is trivial, since  $p = \pi$ , and hence  $q_j(t) = 0$  by (1.4). The case  $n = 6$  is the same as that for  $n = 4$ , since  $\omega_6 = \omega_4$ , and  $\sin(jp_6) = -\sin(jp_4)$ .

When  $N$  is large, and we are not interested in the behavior near the endpoints, it is convenient to use periodic boundary conditions:

$$q_{j+N}(t) = q_j(t) \quad (1.8)$$

In this case the normal modes are

$$q_j(t) = e^{i(jp - \omega t)} \quad (1.9)$$

For  $N$  even, the boundary conditions can be satisfied by putting

$$p_n = \frac{2\pi n}{N} \quad \left(n = 0, \pm 1, \dots, \pm \frac{N}{2}\right) \quad (1.10)$$

The corresponding normal frequencies are

$$\omega_n^2 = \omega_0^2 \sin^2\left(\frac{\pi n}{N}\right) \quad (1.11)$$

Compared to the fixed-end case, the spacing between normal frequencies is now doubled; but each frequency is twofold degenerate, and the number of normal modes remains the same. A comparison of the two cases for  $N = 8$  is shown in Fig. 1.1.

The equilibrium distance  $a$  between masses does not explicitly appear in the Lagrangian; it merely supplies a length scale for physical distances. For example, it appears in the definition of the distance of a mass from an end of the chain:

$$x \equiv ja \quad (j = 1, \dots, N) \quad (1.12)$$

The total length of the chain is then defined as

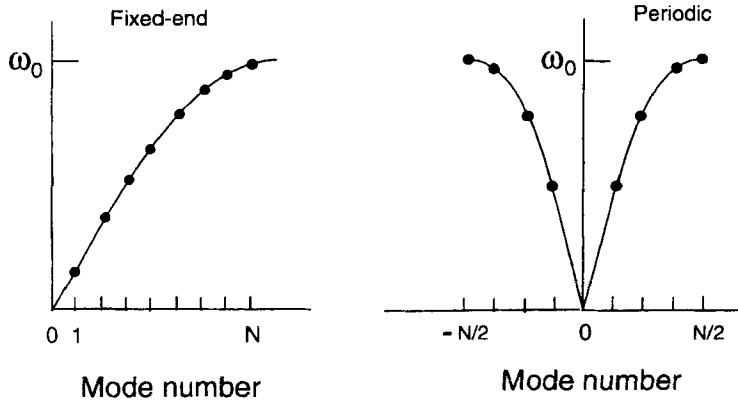


Figure 1.1 Normal modes of the classical chain for fixed-end and periodic boundary conditions.

$$R = Na \quad (1.13)$$

In the continuum limit

$$a \rightarrow 0 \quad N \rightarrow \infty \quad (R = Na \text{ fixed}) \quad (1.14)$$

the discrete chain approaches a continuous string, and the coordinate approaches a classical field defined by

$$q(x, t) \equiv q_j(t) \quad (1.15)$$

The Lagrangian in the continuum limit can be obtained by making the replacements

$$(q_{n+1} - q_j)^2 \rightarrow a^2 \left[ \frac{\partial q(x, t)}{\partial x} \right]^2$$

$$\sum_j \rightarrow \frac{1}{a} \int_0^R dx \quad (1.16)$$

Assuming that the mass density  $\rho$  and string tension  $\sigma$  approach finite limits

$$\rho = \frac{m}{a} \quad (1.17)$$

$$\sigma = \kappa a \quad (1.18)$$

we obtain the limit Lagrangian

#### 4 Introducing Quantum Fields

$$L_{\text{cont}} = \frac{1}{2} \int_0^R dx \left[ \rho \left( \frac{\partial q(x, t)}{\partial t} \right)^2 - \sigma \left( \frac{\partial q(x, t)}{\partial x} \right)^2 \right] \quad (1.19)$$

This leads to the equation of motion

$$\frac{\partial^2 q(x, t)}{\partial t^2} - \frac{1}{c^2} \frac{\partial^2 q(x, t)}{\partial x^2} = 0 \quad (1.20)$$

which is a wave equation, with propagation velocity

$$c = \sqrt{\frac{\sigma}{\rho}} \quad (1.21)$$

The general solutions are the real and imaginary parts of

$$q(x, t) = e^{i(kx - \omega t)} \quad (1.22)$$

with a linear dispersion law

$$\omega = ck \quad (1.23)$$

For fixed-end boundary conditions

$$q(0, t) = q(R, t) = 0 \quad (1.24)$$

the normal modes of the continuous string are

$$q_n(x, t) = \cos(\omega_n t) \sin(k_n x) \quad (1.25)$$

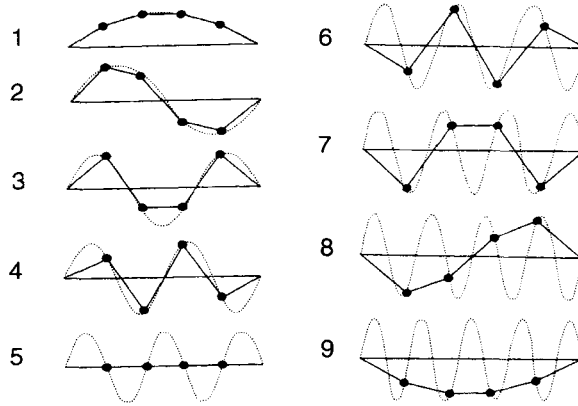
with  $\omega_n = ck_n$ , and

$$k_n = \frac{\pi n}{R} \quad (n = 0, 1, 2, \dots) \quad (1.26)$$

The normal frequencies  $\omega_n$  are the same as those for the discrete chain for  $n/N \ll 1$ , as given in (1.6). However, the number of modes of the continuum string is infinite, and only the first  $N$  modes have correspondence with those of the discrete string. This is illustrated in Fig. 1.2 for  $N = 4$ . Thus, there is a cutoff frequency

$$\omega_c \equiv \omega_N = \frac{\pi c}{a} \quad (1.27)$$

This is of the same order, but not same as the maximum frequency defined earlier,  $\omega_0 = 2c/a$ , for  $\omega_c$  is based on a linear dispersion law. The continuum model is an accurate representation of the discrete chain only for  $\omega \ll \omega_c$ .



**Figure 1.2** Normal modes of a discrete chain of four masses, compared with those of a continuous string. The former repeat themselves after the first four modes. (After J. C. Slater and N. H. Frank, *Mechanics*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1947.)

For periodic boundary conditions

$$q(0, t) = q(R, t) \quad (1.28)$$

the allowed wave numbers are

$$k_n = \frac{2\pi n}{R} \quad (n = 0, \pm 1, \pm 2, \dots) \quad (1.29)$$

We obtain the cutoff frequency  $\omega_c$  by setting  $n = N/2$ .

The high-frequency cutoff is a theoretical necessity. Without it, the specific heat of the string will diverge, since each normal mode contributes an amount  $kT$ . The value of the cutoff cannot be determined from the long-wavelength effective theory, because only the combination  $c = a\omega_c/\pi$  occurs. Absorbing the cutoff into measurable parameters, as done in (1.17), is called *renormalization*. A theory for which this can be done is said to be *renormalizable*.

Nonrenormalizable systems exhibit behavior that is sensitive to details on an atomic scale. Such behavior would appear to be random on a macroscopic scale, as in the propagation of cracks in materials, and the nucleation of raindrops.

---

## 1.2 THE QUANTUM STRING

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We now quantize the classical chain, to obtain a quantum field in the continuum limit. The Hamiltonian of the classical discrete chain is given by

## 6 Introducing Quantum Fields

$$H(p, q) = \sum_{j=1}^N \left[ \frac{p_j^2}{2m} + \frac{\kappa}{2} (q_j - q_{j+1})^2 \right] \quad (1.30)$$

where  $p_j = m\dot{q}_j$ . The system can be quantized by replacing  $p_j$  and  $q_j$  by Hermitian operators satisfying the commutation relations

$$[p_j, q_k] = -i\delta_{jk} \quad (1.31)$$

We impose periodic boundary conditions, and expand these operators in Fourier series:

$$\begin{aligned} q_j &= \frac{1}{\sqrt{N}} \sum_{n=-N/2}^{N/2} Q_n e^{i2\pi nj/N} \\ p_j &= \frac{1}{\sqrt{N}} \sum_{n=-N/2}^{N/2} P_n e^{i2\pi nj/N} \end{aligned} \quad (1.32)$$

where  $P_n$  and  $Q_n$  are operators satisfying

$$\begin{aligned} [P_n^\dagger, Q_m] &= -i\delta_{nm} \\ P_n^\dagger &= P_{-n} \\ Q_n^\dagger &= Q_{-n} \end{aligned} \quad (1.33)$$

The system is reduced to a sum of independent harmonic oscillators:

$$\begin{aligned} H &= \sum_{n=-N/2}^{N/2} \left[ \frac{1}{2m} P_n^\dagger P_n + \frac{1}{2} m\omega_n^2 Q_n^\dagger Q_n \right] \\ \omega_n^2 &= \frac{4\kappa}{m} \sin^2\left(\frac{\pi n}{N}\right) \end{aligned} \quad (1.34)$$

The eigenvalues are labeled by a set of occupation numbers  $\{\alpha_n\}$ :

$$E_\alpha = \sum_{n=-N/2}^{N/2} \omega_n (\alpha_n + \tfrac{1}{2}) \quad (1.35)$$

where  $\alpha_n = 0, 1, 2, \dots$ . The frequency  $\omega_n$  is taken to be the positive root of  $\omega_n^2$ , since  $H$  is positive-definite.

In the continuum limit (1.14) the Hamiltonian becomes

$$H_{\text{cont}} = \int_0^R dx \left[ \frac{1}{2\rho} p^2(x, t) + \frac{\sigma}{2} \left( \frac{\partial q(x, t)}{\partial x} \right)^2 \right] \quad (1.36)$$

where, with  $x = ja$ ,



$$p(x, t) = \frac{p_f(t)}{a} = \rho \frac{\partial q(x, t)}{\partial t} \quad (1.37)$$

The quantum field  $q(x, t)$  and its canonical conjugate  $p(x, t)$  satisfy the equal-time commutation relation

$$[p(x, t), q(x', t)] = -i\delta(x - x') \quad (1.38)$$

Just as in the classical case, we have to introduce a cutoff frequency  $\omega_c$ . General properties of the quantum field will be discussed more fully in Chapter 2.

---

### 1.3 SECOND QUANTIZATION

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Another way to obtain a quantum field is to consider a collection of identical particles in quantum mechanics. In this case, the quantum field is an equivalent description of the system. Identical particles are defined by a Hamiltonian that is (1) invariant under a permutation of the particle coordinates and (2) has the same form for any number of particles. The quantized-field description is called “second quantization” for historical reasons, but quantization was actually done only once.

Let  $\mathcal{H}_N$  be the Hilbert space of a system of  $N$  identical nonrelativistic particles. The union of all  $\mathcal{H}_N$  is called the Fock space:

$$\mathcal{F} = \bigcup_{N=0}^{\infty} \mathcal{H}_N \quad (1.39)$$

The subspace with  $N = 0$  contains the vacuum state as its only member. We assume that  $N$  is the eigenvalues of a “number operator”  $N_{\text{op}}$ , which commutes with the Hamiltonian. It is natural to introduce operators on Fock space that connect subspaces of different  $N$ . An elementary operator of this kind creates or annihilates one particle at a point in space. Such an operator is a quantum field operator, since it is a spatial function. This is why a quantum-mechanical many-particle system automatically gives rise to a quantum field.

For definiteness, consider  $N$  nonrelativistic particles in three spatial dimensions, with coordinates  $\{\mathbf{r}_1, \dots, \mathbf{r}_N\}$ . The Hamiltonian is

$$H = -\frac{1}{2m} \sum_{i=1}^N \nabla_i^2 + V(\mathbf{r}_1, \dots, \mathbf{r}_N) \quad (1.40)$$

where  $\nabla_i^2$  is the Laplacian with respect to  $\mathbf{r}_i$ , and where  $V$  is a symmetric function of its arguments. The eigenfunctions  $\Psi_n$  are defined by

$$H\Psi_n(\mathbf{r}_1, \dots, \mathbf{r}_N) = E_n\Psi_n(\mathbf{r}_1, \dots, \mathbf{r}_N) \quad (1.41)$$

## 8 Introducing Quantum Fields

For Bose or Fermi statistics,  $\Psi_n$  is respectively symmetric or antisymmetric under an interchange of any two coordinates  $\mathbf{r}_i$  and  $\mathbf{r}_j$ . The particles are called *bosons* or *fermions*, respectively.

We now describe the equivalent quantum field theory, and justify it later. Let  $\psi(\mathbf{r})$  be the Schrödinger-picture operator that annihilates one particle at  $\mathbf{r}$ . Its Hermitian conjugate  $\psi^\dagger(\mathbf{r})$  will create one particle at  $\mathbf{r}$ . They are defined through the commutation relations

$$\begin{aligned} [\psi(\mathbf{r}), \psi^\dagger(\mathbf{r}')]_{\pm} &= \delta^3(\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}') \\ [\psi(\mathbf{r}), \psi(\mathbf{r}')]_{\pm} &= 0 \end{aligned} \quad (1.42)$$

where  $[A, B]_{\pm} = AB \pm BA$ , with the plus sign corresponding to bosons and the minus sign to fermions. The Fock-space Hamiltonian is defined in such a manner that it reduces to (1.40) in the  $N$ -particle subspace.

A general  $N$ -particle Hamiltonian has the structure

$$H = \sum_i f(\mathbf{r}_i) + \sum_{i < j} g(\mathbf{r}_i, \mathbf{r}_j) + \sum_{i < j < k} h(\mathbf{r}_i, \mathbf{r}_j, \mathbf{r}_k) + \cdots \quad (1.43)$$

where the functions  $g$ ,  $h$ , and so on are symmetric functions of their arguments. The first term is a “one-particle operator,” a sum of operators of the form  $f(\mathbf{r})$ , which act on one particle only. The second term is a “two-particle operator,” a sum of operators of the form  $g(\mathbf{r}_1, \mathbf{r}_2)$ , over all distinct pairs. Generally, an “ $n$ -particle operator” is a sum of operators that depend only on a set of  $n$  coordinates. To construct the Hamiltonian on Fock space, we associate an  $n$ -particle operator with an operator on Fock space, with the following correspondences:

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_i f(\mathbf{r}_i) &\rightarrow \int d^3r \psi^\dagger(\mathbf{r}) f(\mathbf{r}) \psi(\mathbf{r}) \\ \sum_{i < j} g(\mathbf{r}_i, \mathbf{r}_j) &\rightarrow \frac{1}{2} \int d^3r_1 d^3r_2 \psi_1^\dagger \psi_2^\dagger g_{12} \psi_2 \psi_1 \\ \sum_{i < j < k} h(\mathbf{r}_i, \mathbf{r}_j, \mathbf{r}_k) &\rightarrow \frac{1}{3!} \int d^3r_1 d^3r_2 d^3r_3 \psi_1^\dagger \psi_2^\dagger \psi_3^\dagger h_{123} \psi_3 \psi_2 \psi_1 \\ &\vdots \end{aligned} \quad (1.44)$$

where for brevity we have written  $\psi_i = \psi(\mathbf{r}_i)$ ,  $g_{12} = g(\mathbf{r}_1, \mathbf{r}_2)$ , and so on.

As an example, suppose the potential in (1.40) is a sum of two-body potentials:

$$V(\mathbf{r}_1, \dots, \mathbf{r}_N) = \sum_{i < j} v(\mathbf{r}_i, \mathbf{r}_j) \quad (1.45)$$

Then the corresponding Fock-space Hamiltonian, also denoted  $H$ , takes the form