Quantum Mechanics as an Approximation to
Classical Mechanics in Hilbert Space

A.J. Bracken *
DIFI, Università di Genova
Via Dodecaneso 33
Genova, 16146 ITALY

October 28, 2002

Abstract

Classical mechanics is formulated in Hilbert space with the introduction of a commutative product of operators, an antisymmetric bracket, and a quasidensity operator. These are analogues of the star product, the Moyal bracket, and the Wigner function in the phase space formulation of quantum mechanics. Classical mechanics can now be viewed as a deformation of quantum mechanics. The forms of semiquantum approximations to classical mechanics are indicated.

While our understanding of the relation between quantum mechanics and classical mechanics has steadily increased over the past 75 years, as a result of many studies from various points of view (see [1]-[7] and references therein), few would claim that it is complete. Meanwhile, increasing attention has focussed on the interface between the quantum and classical domains, because of advances in experimental science and engineering, and the associated development of ‘nanotechnology.’

Classical mechanics is usually formulated in real, finite-dimensional phase space; quantum mechanics in complex, infinite-dimensional Hilbert space. However, a completely equivalent reformulation of quantum mechanics in phase space is known [8]-[15], which shows that quantum mechanics is a

*Email: ajb@maths.uq.edu.au On leave from Centre for Mathematical Physics, Department of Mathematics, University of Queensland, Brisbane 4072, Australia. It is a pleasure to thank G. Cassinelli for his generous hospitality, and to thank him and J.G. Wood for helpful discussions.
deformation of classical mechanics [14], and which provides a natural setting for the formulation of semiclassical approximations [10, 1, 4]. These allow us to explore the interface between the two forms of mechanics when approached from the classical side.

In his remarkable 1946 paper, Groenewold [11] indicated the alternative possibility of reformulating classical mechanics as a quantum-like theory, although no details were given. (See also Bayen et al. [14].) That is the subject of the present note: Just as quantum mechanics can be reformulated in phase space, so classical mechanics can be reformulated in Hilbert space. Now classical mechanics is seen as a deformation of quantum mechanics. And now there arises the possibility of exploring the interface between quantum mechanics and classical mechanics from the other side, the quantum side, with the development of semiquantum approximations.

We limit discussion to a system with one linear degree of freedom. All formulas below can be generalized to many (possibly infinitely many!) degrees of freedom. Our presentation is formal and heuristic; there is no attempt at mathematical rigor.

A conservative classical system is usually described in terms of functions (classical observables) \( A_C(q,p) \) on phase space, together with a probability density \( \rho_C(q,p,t) \), characterizing the state of the system at time \( t \), with evolution equation

\[
\frac{\partial \rho_C}{\partial t} = \{H_C, \rho_C\}_P \equiv H_C J \rho_C,
\]

(1)

Here \( H_C \) is the Hamiltonian function, \( \{A, B\}_P \) denotes the Poisson bracket, and the superscripts \( L \) and \( R \) indicate the directions in which the differential operators act. The expectation value of the classical observable \( A_C(q,p) \) at time \( t \) is

\[
\langle A_C \rangle(t) = \int A_C(q,p) \rho_C(q,p,t) \, dq \, dp.
\]

(2)

In (2) and below, integrals are over all real values of the variables of integration.

A conservative quantum system is usually described in terms of a complex Hilbert space of square-integrable state functions \( \psi(x) \). Quantum observables are linear operators \( \hat{A}_Q \) acting on state functions as

\[
(\hat{A}_Q \psi)(x) = \int A_{QK}(x,y) \psi(y) \, dy,
\]

(3)

where \( A_{QK}(x,y) \) is a complex-valued function, the kernel of \( \hat{A}_Q \). In particular, the canonical coordinate and momentum operators \( \hat{q} \) and \( \hat{p} \) have kernels
\(x \delta(x - y)\) and \(-i \hbar \delta'(x - y)\), respectively, where \(\delta(x)\) is Dirac’s ‘delta function.’ If the observable quantity is real, the corresponding operator is Hermitian: \(A_{QK}(x, y) = A_{QK}(y, x)^*\). An important example is the quantum density operator \(\hat{\rho}_Q(t)\), which has a kernel

\[
\rho_{QK}(x, y, t) = \sum_r p_r \psi_r(x, t) \psi_r(y, t)^* \tag{4}
\]

when the system is in a state described by the ‘mixture’ of orthogonal state functions \(\psi_r(x, t)\) with associated probabilities \(p_r\) at time \(t\). The quantum density operator is positive definite, with unit trace, and the expectation value of the quantum observable \(\hat{A}_Q\) at time \(t\) is

\[
\langle \hat{A}_Q \rangle(t) = \text{Tr}(\hat{A}_Q \hat{\rho}_Q(t)) \tag{5}
\]

The evolution equation for \(\hat{\rho}_Q(t)\) is

\[
\frac{\partial \hat{\rho}_Q}{\partial t} = \frac{1}{i \hbar} [\hat{H}_Q, \hat{\rho}_Q], \tag{6}
\]

where \(\hat{H}_Q\) is the Hamiltonian operator, and \([\hat{A}_Q, \hat{B}_Q]\) denotes the commutator.

In order to map the Hilbert space formulation of quantum mechanics into the phase space formulation, the Weyl-Wigner transform \(W\) is introduced. For each quantum observable \(\hat{A}_Q\) with kernel \(A_{QK}(x, y)\), a corresponding function \(A_Q = W(\hat{A}_Q)\) on phase space is defined by setting

\[
A_Q(q, p) = \int A_{QK}(q - x/2, q + x/2) e^{ipx/\hbar} dx. \tag{7}
\]

If \(\hat{A}_Q\) is Hermitian, then \(A_Q\) is real. The Wigner density function \(\rho_Q(t) = W(\hat{\rho}_Q(t))/(2\pi\hbar)\) is a particular case, in terms of which the quantum expectation value (5) can be rewritten as

\[
\langle \hat{A}_Q \rangle(t) = \int_A A_Q(q, p) \rho_Q(q, p, t) dq dp. \tag{8}
\]

This has the appearance of the classical average (2), but while the Wigner function is real and normalised, it is not in general nonnegative everywhere on phase space, and consequently can be interpreted only as a quasiprobability density.

In order to describe dynamics in the phase space formulation, the celebrated star product and star (or Moyal) bracket of quantum phase space
functions are introduced \([9, 11, 12]\):

\[
A_Q \ast B_Q = \mathcal{W}(\hat{A}_Q \hat{B}_Q),
\]

\[
\{A_Q, B_Q\}_* = \frac{1}{i\hbar} \mathcal{W}([\hat{A}_Q, \hat{B}_Q]) = \frac{1}{i\hbar} (A_Q \ast B_Q - B_Q \ast A_Q). \tag{9}
\]

Then \(q \ast p = qp + i\hbar/2, p \ast q = qp - i\hbar/2, q^2 \ast p^3 = q^2 p^3 + 3i\hbar qp^2 - 3\hbar^2 p, \) etc. The quantum evolution (6) is now replaced by

\[
\frac{\partial \rho_Q(t)}{\partial t} = \{H_Q, \rho_Q\}, \tag{10}
\]

where \(H_Q = \mathcal{W}(\hat{H}_Q)\).

For suitably smooth \(A_Q\) and \(B_Q\), in particular polynomials in \(q\) and \(p\), it can be shown from (9) that

\[
\{A_Q, B_Q\}_* = A_Q G B_Q, \quad G = \frac{2}{\hbar} \sin\left[\frac{\hbar}{2} J\right], \tag{11}
\]

where the sine function is to interpreted by its Taylor series, and \(J\) is as in (1). For more general \(A_Q, B_Q\), such an expansion has only an asymptotic meaning, so that (10) leads to

\[
\frac{\partial \rho_Q(t)}{\partial t} \sim H_Q J \rho_Q - \frac{\hbar^2}{3!} H_Q J^3 \rho_Q + \frac{\hbar^4}{5!} H_Q J^5 \rho_Q \ldots, \quad (\hbar \to 0). \tag{12}
\]

Equations (8) and (12) are to be compared with their classical counterparts (2) and (1), which are ‘obtained’ when \(\hbar \to 0\). It is not our purpose here to discuss the subtle mathematical difficulties associated with this limiting process \([1, 4]\). Suffice it to say that (8) and (12) form a natural starting point for discussions of the classical limit, and of semiclassical approximations to quantum mechanics as \(\hbar\) approaches 0.

We now stand the foregoing on its head. With each classical phase space function \(A_C(q, p)\) we associate a linear operator \(\hat{A}_C = \mathcal{W}^{-1}(A_C)\). This defines \(\hat{A}_C\) as the operator with kernel

\[
A_{CK}(x, y) = \frac{1}{2\pi\hbar} \int A_C([x + y]/2, p) e^{ip(x-y)/\hbar} \, dp. \tag{13}
\]

If \(A_C\) is real, then \(\hat{A}_C\) is Hermitian. This is the usual Weyl mapping \([8]\) from functions to operators, but our intention here is not to quantize, but
to reformulate classical mechanics in Hilbert space. It may then be objected that Planck’s constant is not available to us in a classical theory. We treat \( \hbar \) for the moment as a parameter with dimensions of action, whose value is to be specified at our convenience.

As a special case, we define

\[
\hat{\rho}_C(t) = \frac{2\pi\hbar}{W^{-1}(\rho_C(q,p,t))}.
\]

This can be seen to be bounded, with unit trace, but unlike a true quantum density operator, it is not always positive-definite. Just as the Wigner density function \( \rho_Q(q,p,t) \) is only a quasiprobability density, so \( \hat{\rho}_C(t) \) is so also a quasidensity operator [11]. But just as quantum averages can be calculated using the Wigner function in the ‘classical’ formula (8), so classical averages can be calculated using \( \hat{\rho}_C(t) \) in the ‘quantum’ formula

\[
\langle A_C \rangle(t) = \text{Tr}(\hat{A}_C \hat{\rho}_C(t)),
\]

where \( \hat{A}_C \) is the operator corresponding to the classical function \( A_C(q,p) \).

In order to describe classical dynamics in Hilbert space, we first introduce a distributive, associative and commutative ‘odot’ product of operators,

\[
\hat{A}_C \odot \hat{B}_C = W^{-1}(A_CB_C) = \hat{B}_C \odot \hat{A}_C.
\]

Then for example, \( \hat{q} \odot \hat{p} = \hat{p} \odot \hat{q} = (\hat{q}\hat{p} + \hat{p}\hat{q})/2, \hat{q}^2 \odot \hat{p}^3 = \hat{p}^3 \odot \hat{q}^2 = (q^2p^3 + 2qp^3q + p^3q^2)/4, \) etc. More generally, \( \{\hat{q}^k\hat{p}^l\} \odot \{\hat{q}^m\hat{p}^n\} = \{\hat{q}^{k+m}\hat{p}^{l+n}\} \), where \( \{\hat{q}^k\hat{p}^l\} \) denotes the Weyl-ordered operator [8, 13] corresponding to the classical monomial \( q^kp^l \). This follows from (16) because \( \{\hat{q}^k\hat{p}^l\} = W^{-1}(q^kp^l) \).

Most generally, it can be seen from (13) that the kernels of the operators \( \hat{A}_C, \hat{B}_C \) and \( \hat{A}_C \odot \hat{B}_C \) are related by

\[
(\hat{A}_C \odot \hat{B}_C)_K(x,y) = (\hat{B}_C \odot \hat{A}_C)_K(x,y)
= \int A_CK([3x+y-2u]/4,[x+3y+2u]/4)
\times B_CK([3x+y+2u]/4,[x+3y-2u]/4)\ du.
\]

It is helpful to introduce the notations

\[
A_q = \partial A/\partial q, \quad A_{qp} = \partial^2 A/\partial q\partial p, \ldots
\]
\[
\hat{A}_q = \frac{1}{i\hbar}[\hat{A},\hat{p}], \quad \hat{A}_{qp} = (\frac{1}{i\hbar})^2[\hat{q},[\hat{A},\hat{p}]], \ldots
\]

and to note that, because \( A_{qp} = qG(AGp) \), etc., and

\[
W^{-1}(AGB) = \frac{1}{i\hbar}[\hat{A},\hat{B}],
\]
we have $\mathcal{W}^{-1}(A_{qp}) = \hat{A}_{qp}$, etc. In (18), $\hat{q}$ and $\hat{p}$ are the usual canonical operators, except with commutator involving the parameter $\hbar$, whose value has not yet been fixed.

To describe classical dynamics, we need to introduce a new bracket, equal except for a convenient factor to the image of the Poisson bracket under the inverse Weyl-Wigner transform. We set

$$
\left[ \hat{A}_C, \hat{B}_C \right]_{\Diamond} = i\hbar \mathcal{W}^{-1}(\{A_C, B_C\}_P) = i\hbar(\hat{A}_{Cq} \odot \hat{B}_{Cp} - \hat{A}_{Cp} \odot \hat{B}_{Cq}).
$$

Now the classical evolution equation (1) is replaced by

$$
\frac{\partial \hat{\rho}_C}{\partial t} = \frac{1}{i\hbar} \left[ \hat{H}_C, \hat{\rho}_C \right]_{\Diamond}.
$$

We emphasize that this reformulation of classical mechanics in terms of linear operators on Hilbert space, incorporating the arbitrary parameter $\hbar$, and with key equations (15) and (21), is entirely equivalent to the usual phase space formulation. We can go back and forth between the two descriptions with the help of the Weyl-Wigner transform $\mathcal{W}$ and its inverse $\mathcal{W}^{-1}$.

Next we make an expansion of the odot bracket, analogous to the expansion (11). Noting that

$$
\theta = \sin \theta(1 + \theta^2/6 + 7\theta^4/360 - \ldots, \quad |\theta| < \pi,
$$

we write

$$
A JB = AGB + \frac{1}{6} \left( \frac{\hbar}{2} \right)^2 A J^2 GB
$$

$$
+ \frac{7}{360} \left( \frac{\hbar}{2} \right)^4 A J^4 GB - \ldots = AGB
$$

$$
+ \frac{1}{6} \left( \frac{\hbar}{2} \right)^2 (A_{qq} GB_{pp} - 2A_{qp} GB_{qp} + A_{pp} GB_{qq}) + \ldots
$$

and then, applying $\mathcal{W}^{-1}$ to both sides,

$$
[\hat{A}, \hat{B}]_{\Diamond} = [\hat{A}, \hat{B}]
$$

$$
+ \frac{1}{6} \left( \frac{\hbar}{2} \right)^2 ([\hat{A}_{qq}, \hat{B}_{pp}] - 2[\hat{A}_{qp}, \hat{B}_{qp}] + [\hat{A}_{pp}, \hat{B}_{qq}]) + \ldots
$$

(24)
The series (23) and (24) terminate if at least one of $A$ and $B$ is a polynomial in $q$ and $p$. For more general $A$ and $B$, we may expect that the series have well-defined meanings as asymptotic expansions when $\hbar \to 0$.

The classical evolution (1) then takes the form

$$\frac{\partial \hat{\rho}_C}{\partial t} \sim \frac{1}{i\hbar} [\hat{H}_C, \hat{\rho}_C]$$

$$- \frac{i\hbar}{24} ([\hat{H}_{Cqq}, \hat{\rho}_{Cpp}] - 2[\hat{H}_{Cqp}, \hat{\rho}_{Cqp}] + [\hat{H}_{Cpp}, \hat{\rho}_{Cqq}])$$

$$- \ldots, \quad (\hbar \to 0).$$

(25)

If $H_C$ is a polynomial in $q$ and $p$, then this series terminates and the asymptotic result becomes exact.

If $H_C = H(q, p) = p^2/(2m) + V(q)$, then (25) reduces to

$$\frac{\partial \hat{\rho}_C}{\partial t} \sim \frac{1}{i\hbar} [H(\hat{q}, \hat{p}), \hat{\rho}_C] - \frac{i\hbar}{24} [V''(\hat{q}), \hat{\rho}_{Cpp}]$$

$$- \frac{7i\hbar^3}{5760} [V^{(iv)}(\hat{q}), \hat{\rho}_{Cppp}] + \ldots, \quad (\hbar \to 0),$$

(26)

which is an analogue of Wigner’s equation for the evolution of his density function [10].

If we now identify \(\hbar\) with Planck’s constant, we see that the equations (5) and (6) of quantum mechanics are obtained formally as \(\hbar\) approaches 0, and that classical mechanics can be regarded as a deformation of quantum mechanics, with deformation parameter \(\hbar\). Most interesting is that (15) and (25) may be expected to form a suitable starting point for semiquantum approximations to classical mechanics, analogous to semiclassical approximations to quantum mechanics.

These results may seem paradoxical. We have introduced \(\hbar\) into a reformulation of classical mechanics, without affecting its predictions in any way, and see that as that parameter approaches 0, the equations of quantum mechanics emerge. Usually we say, speaking loosely, that classical mechanics is obtained from quantum mechanics as \(\hbar\) approaches 0. Viewing things from the perspective provided by the above results, we argue that it is more appropriate to say that classical mechanics and quantum mechanics become asymptotically equivalent as \(\hbar \to 0\): the interface can be approached from either side.

We close with a few remarks about interesting side issues.

• The fundamental importance in quantum mechanics of the spectra of selfadjoint operators, the superposability of state functions, and the nonunitary change in the density operator following a measurement, are obscured
in the phase space formulation. They underlie the determination of averages (8) and of initial values of Wigner functions. On the other hand, the Hilbert space formulation of classical mechanics begs the question: What are the relevance to classical mechanics, when formulated in this way, of operator spectra and the superposability of vectors?

- Consider a normalized classical density at some fixed time given by

\[ \rho_c(q, p) = \frac{\sqrt{\alpha \beta}}{\pi} e^{-(\alpha q^2 + \beta p^2)}. \]  

The corresponding quasidensity operator \( \hat{\rho}_c \) has kernel

\[ \rho_{CK}(x, y) = \sqrt{\frac{\alpha}{\pi}} e^{-\alpha(x+y)^2/4} e^{-(x-y)^2/(4\beta \hbar^2)}. \]  

It is easy to check that this operator is bounded, with unit trace, but it is not in general positive definite. If \( \alpha \beta = \frac{1}{(\hbar)^2} \), so that the product of the uncertainties of \( q \) and \( p \) equals \( \hbar/2 \), the kernel factorizes:

\[ \rho_{CK} = \psi(x)\psi(y)^*, \quad \psi(x) = \sqrt{\frac{\alpha}{\pi}} e^{-\alpha x^2/2}, \]  

and the operator has the form of a true, positive-definite density operator, corresponding to the pure coherent state \( \psi(x) \). More generally, a little thought shows that the only positive-definite quasidensity operators are those corresponding to convex linear combinations of Gaussian \( \rho_c(q, p) \), each with the product of the uncertainties in \( q \) and \( p \) equal to \( \hbar/2 \). At the other extreme, as \( \alpha \to \infty \) and \( \beta \to \infty \), then \( \rho_c(q, p) \to \delta(q)\delta(p) \) and \( \rho_{CK}(x, y) \to 2\delta(x+y) \). This defines the starting point of a classical trajectory, as described in the Hilbert space formulation.

- Consider a classical system exhibiting chaos [3], for example the Henon-Heiles oscillator with 2 degrees of freedom and Hamiltonian

\[ H_C = H(q_1, q_2, p_1, p_2) = a(p_1^2 + p_2^2) + b(q_1^2 + q_2^2) + cq_1(3q_2^2 - q_1^2). \]  

This system is described in Hilbert space by (15) and (the obvious generalization of) (26), with the series terminating after the terms of order \( \hbar \). If we choose a Gaussian initial density, generalizing (27), with arbitrarily small uncertainties in the dynamical variables then, with the help of a computer, we can in principle track the average evolution of the classical system, again with arbitrarily small uncertainties, and even if the motion is chaotic, while working in the Hilbert space formalism. This is remarkable because in the
leading ‘quantum approximation,’ obtained by neglecting the terms of order $\hbar$ in (26), the classical chaos is suppressed [1, 3].

- The new bracket has the ‘odot derivation property’ and ‘odot Jacobi identity,’ which it inherits from the Poisson bracket:

$$[\hat{A}, \hat{B} \odot \hat{C}]_\odot = \hat{C} \odot [\hat{A}, \hat{B}]_\odot + \hat{B} \odot [\hat{A}, \hat{C}]_\odot$$

$$[[\hat{A}, \hat{B}]_\odot, \hat{C}]_\odot + [[\hat{B}, \hat{C}]_\odot, \hat{A}]_\odot + [[\hat{C}, \hat{A}]_\odot, \hat{B}]_\odot = 0.$$  \hspace{1cm} (31)

Poisson algebras of phase space functions, and associated groups, should translate into interesting odot operator structures in Hilbert space.

References


