THE THEORY OF PTOLEMY

Angelo Esposito







Istituto Nazionale di Fisica Nucleare

Roma Tre, June 18th, 2025

The PTOLEMY project touches many different fields. An extremely fascinating problem!

The PTOLEMY project touches many different fields. An extremely fascinating problem!

Particle physics

What's the neutrino mass? What does this tell us about new physics?

The PTOLEMY project touches many different fields. An extremely fascinating problem!

Particle physics

What's the neutrino mass? What does this tell us about new physics?

Cosmology

Can we observe the C_{\nu}B? What lessons about the very early Universe?

The PTOLEMY project touches many different fields. An extremely fascinating problem!

Particle physics

What's the neutrino mass? What does this tell us about new physics?

Cosmology

Can we observe the C_{\nu}B? What lessons about the very early Universe?

Nuclear physics

Find the best β -emitted Accurately calculation of nuclear matrix elements

The PTOLEMY project touches many different fields. An extremely fascinating problem!

Particle physics

What's the neutrino mass? What does this tell us about new physics?

Cosmology

Can we observe the CuB? What lessons about the very early Universe?

Nuclear physics

Find the best β -emitted Accurately calculation of nuclear matrix elements

Condensed matter

Spectral distortions induce by condensed matter d.o.f. Best substrate for CvB capture?

The PTOLEMY project touches many different fields. An extremely fascinating problem!

Particle physics

What's the neutrino mass? What does this tell us about new physics?

Cosmology

Can we observe the C_{\nu}B? What lessons about the very early Universe?

PTOLEMY

Nuclear physics

Find the best β -emitted Accurately calculation of nuclear matrix elements

Condensed matter

Spectral distortions induce by condensed matter d.o.f. Best substrate for CvB capture?

PTOLEMY will study the spectrum of the electron emitted by the β -processes of tritium, the lightest unstable nucleus

PTOLEMY will study the spectrum of the electron emitted by the β -processes of tritium, the lightest unstable nucleus

Measure the neutrino mass

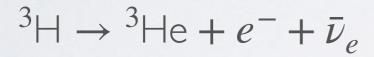
 β -decay part of the spectrum

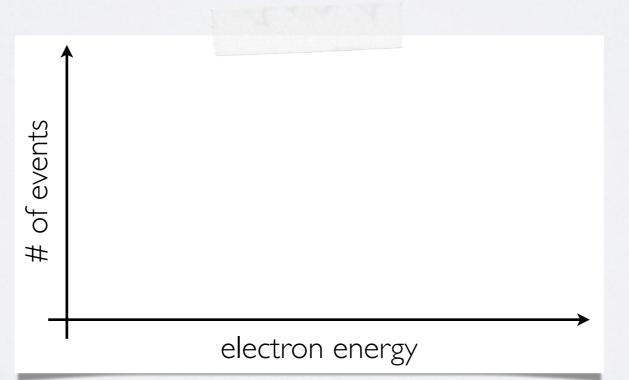
 $^{3}\text{H} \rightarrow ^{3}\text{He} + e^{-} + \bar{\nu}_{e}$

PTOLEMY will study the spectrum of the electron emitted by the β -processes of tritium, the lightest unstable nucleus

Measure the neutrino mass

 β -decay part of the spectrum



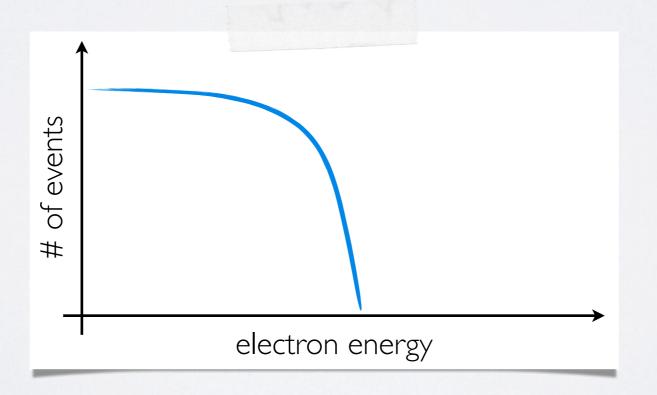


PTOLEMY will study the spectrum of the electron emitted by the β -processes of tritium, the lightest unstable nucleus

Measure the neutrino mass

 β -decay part of the spectrum

$$^{3}\text{H} \rightarrow ^{3}\text{He} + e^{-} + \bar{\nu}_{e}$$



PTOLEMY will study the spectrum of the electron emitted by the β -processes of tritium, the lightest unstable nucleus

Measure the neutrino mass

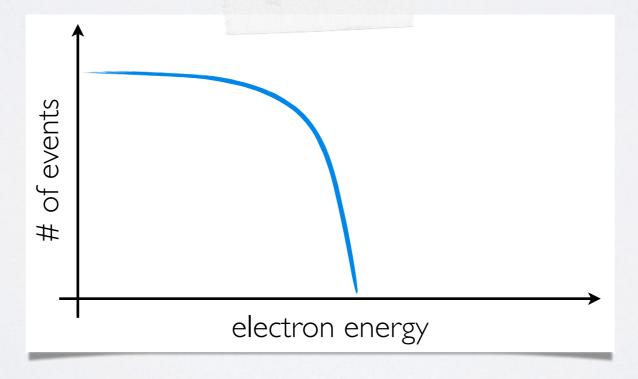
 β -decay part of the spectrum

$$^{3}\text{H} \rightarrow ^{3}\text{He} + e^{-} + \bar{\nu}_{e}$$

Observe relic neutrinos

Absorption part of the spectrum

$$\nu_e + {}^3\text{H} \rightarrow {}^3\text{He} + e^-$$



PTOLEMY will study the spectrum of the electron emitted by the β -processes of tritium, the lightest unstable nucleus

Measure the neutrino mass

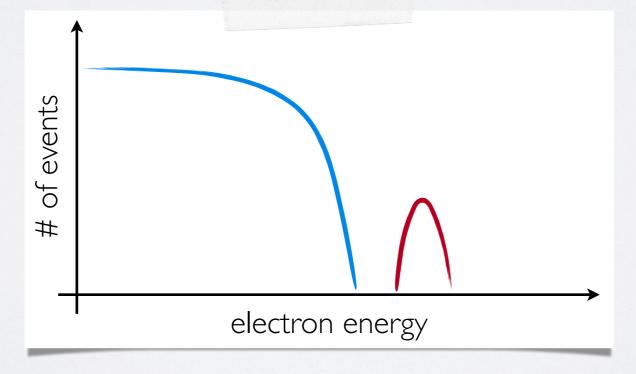
 β -decay part of the spectrum

$$^{3}\text{H} \rightarrow ^{3}\text{He} + e^{-} + \bar{\nu}_{e}$$

Observe relic neutrinos

Absorption part of the spectrum

$$\nu_e + {}^3\text{H} \rightarrow {}^3\text{He} + e^-$$



The key to the success of the project is graphene:

The key to the success of the project is graphene:

we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

The key to the success of the project is graphene:

we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

It also makes the theory side of the problem more challenging:

The key to the success of the project is graphene: we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

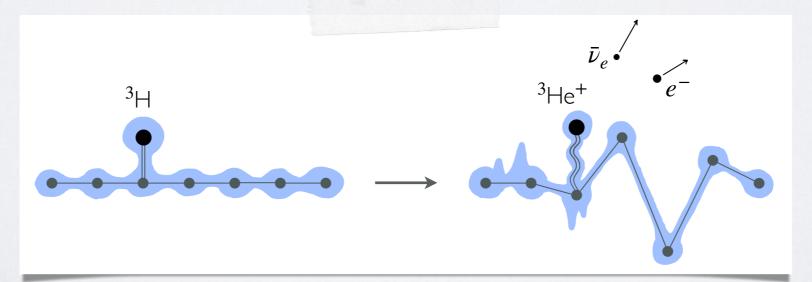
It also makes the theory side of the problem more challenging: we need to account for a plethora of condensed matter effects, making the situation qualitatively different from vacuum

The key to the success of the project is graphene: we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

It also makes the theory side of the problem more challenging: we need to account for a plethora of condensed matter effects, making the situation qualitatively different from vacuum

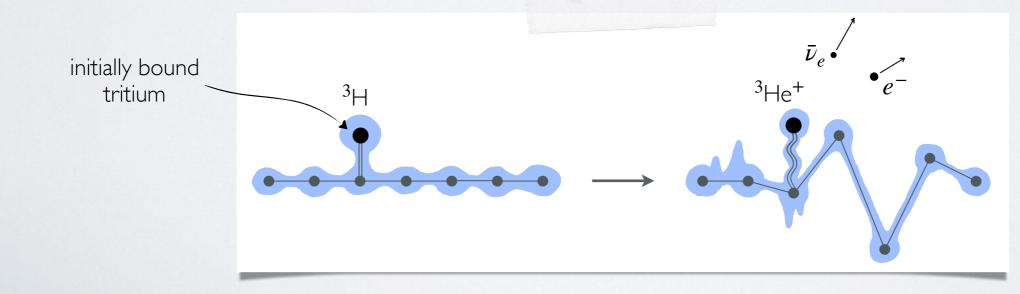
The key to the success of the project is graphene: we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

It also makes the theory side of the problem more challenging: we need to account for a plethora of condensed matter effects, making the situation qualitatively different from vacuum



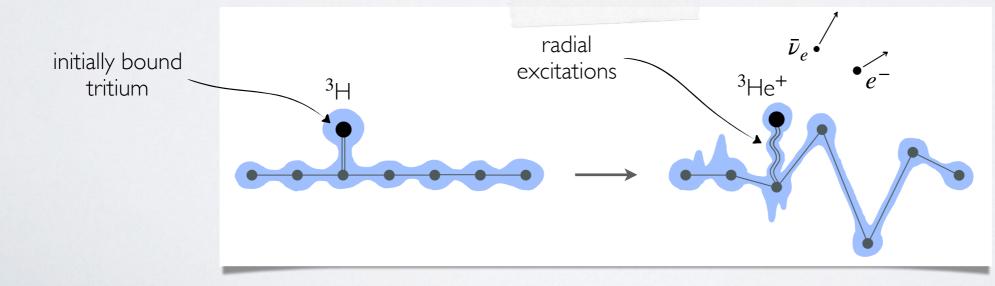
The key to the success of the project is graphene: we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

It also makes the theory side of the problem more challenging: we need to account for a plethora of condensed matter effects, making the situation qualitatively different from vacuum



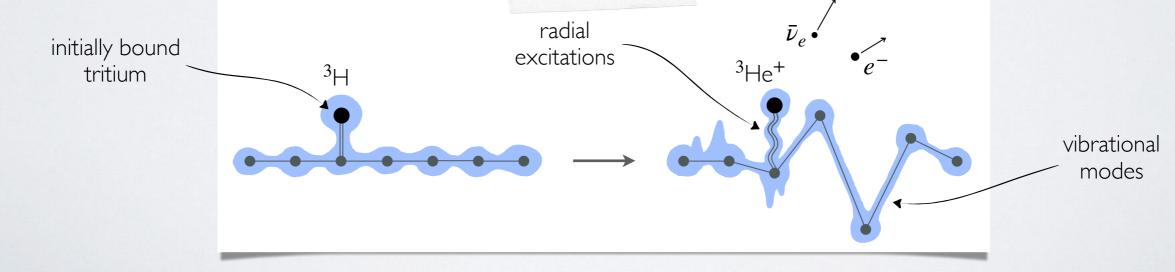
The key to the success of the project is graphene: we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

It also makes the theory side of the problem more challenging: we need to account for a plethora of condensed matter effects, making the situation qualitatively different from vacuum



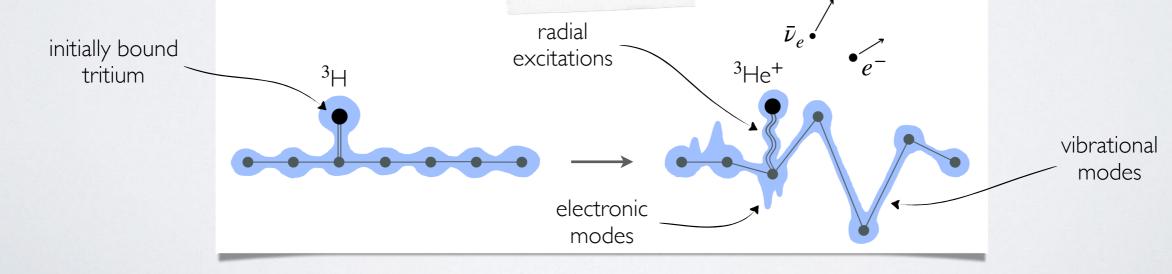
The key to the success of the project is graphene: we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

It also makes the theory side of the problem more challenging: we need to account for a plethora of condensed matter effects, making the situation qualitatively different from vacuum



The key to the success of the project is graphene: we can store large quantities of tritium in a small volume and achieve small energy resolutions

It also makes the theory side of the problem more challenging: we need to account for a plethora of condensed matter effects, making the situation qualitatively different from vacuum



The β -decay part of the spectrum depends parametrically on the effective neutrino mass:

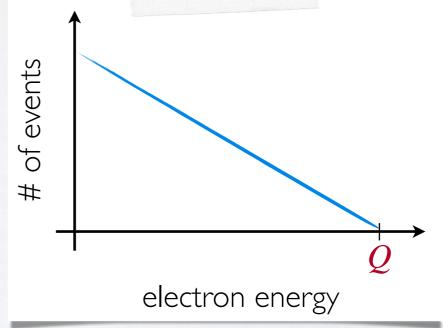
$$\frac{dN_{\beta}}{dK_{e}} \equiv f(E_{e}, m_{\nu}), \qquad m_{\nu}^{2} = \sum_{i=1}^{3} |U_{ei}|^{2} m_{i}^{2}$$

The β -decay part of the spectrum depends parametrically on the effective neutrino mass:

$$\frac{dN_{\beta}}{dK_{e}} \equiv f(E_{e}, m_{\nu}), \qquad m_{\nu}^{2} = \sum_{i=1}^{3} |U_{ei}|^{2} m_{i}^{2}$$

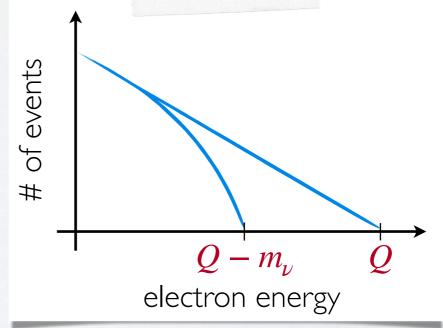
The β -decay part of the spectrum depends parametrically on the effective neutrino mass:

$$\frac{dN_{\beta}}{dK_{e}} \equiv f(E_{e}, m_{\nu}), \qquad m_{\nu}^{2} = \sum_{i=1}^{3} |U_{ei}|^{2} m_{i}^{2}$$



The β -decay part of the spectrum depends parametrically on the effective neutrino mass:

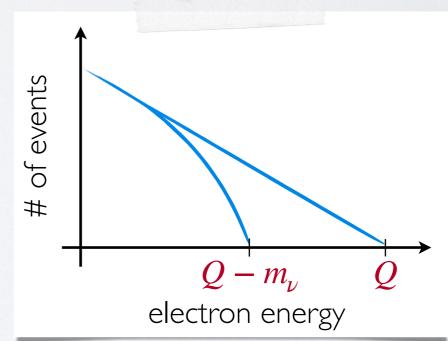
$$\frac{dN_{\beta}}{dK_{e}} \equiv f(E_{e}, m_{\nu}), \qquad m_{\nu}^{2} = \sum_{i=1}^{3} |U_{ei}|^{2} m_{i}^{2}$$



The β -decay part of the spectrum depends parametrically on the effective neutrino mass:

$$\frac{dN_{\beta}}{dK_{e}} \equiv f(E_{e}, m_{\nu}), \qquad m_{\nu}^{2} = \sum_{i=1}^{3} |U_{ei}|^{2} m_{i}^{2}$$





To correctly extract the neutrino mass we need a reliable model for the event rate, including all relevant effects

To correctly extract the neutrino mass we need a reliable model for the event rate, including all relevant effects

The simplest are those due to the initial ³H and the final ³He states

To correctly extract the neutrino mass we need a reliable model for the event rate, including all relevant effects

The simplest are those due to the initial ³H and the final ³He states

The electron spectrum depends on the initial 3 H state, and must be summed over all possibile final 3 He⁺ states,

To correctly extract the neutrino mass we need a reliable model for the event rate, including all relevant effects

The simplest are those due to the initial ³H and the final ³He states

The electron spectrum depends on the initial 3 H state, and must be summed over all possibile final 3 He⁺ states,

$$\frac{d\Gamma_{\beta}}{d\mathbf{k}} = 2\pi \sum_{f,\mathbf{p}} \left| e \langle \mathbf{k} | \nu \langle \mathbf{p} | _{\mathrm{He}} \langle f | H_{w} | \mathbf{i} \rangle_{\mathrm{T}} \right|^{2} \delta(E_{i} - E_{f})$$

To correctly extract the neutrino mass we need a reliable model for the event rate, including all relevant effects

The simplest are those due to the initial ³H and the final ³He states

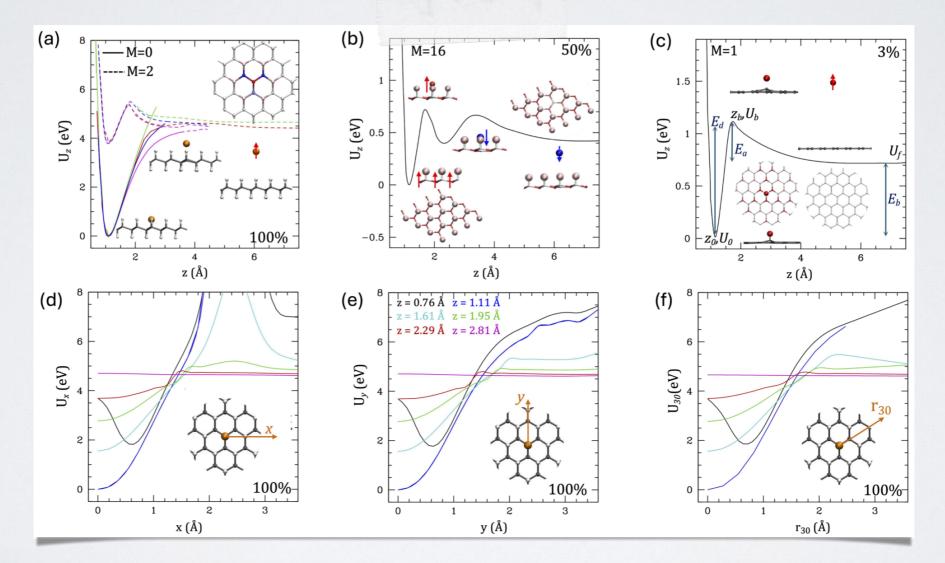
The electron spectrum depends on the initial 3 H state, and must be summed over all possibile final 3 He⁺ states,

$$\frac{d\Gamma_{\beta}}{d\mathbf{k}} = 2\pi \sum_{f,\mathbf{p}} \left| e \langle \mathbf{k} | \nu \langle \mathbf{p} | _{\mathrm{He}} \langle f | H_{w} | \mathbf{i} \rangle_{\mathrm{T}} \right|^{2} \delta(E_{i} - E_{f})$$

How do we determine these initial and final states?

We employed Density Functional Theory (DFT) to compute the potential between the initial ³H and graphene

We employed Density Functional Theory (DFT) to compute the potential between the initial ³H and graphene

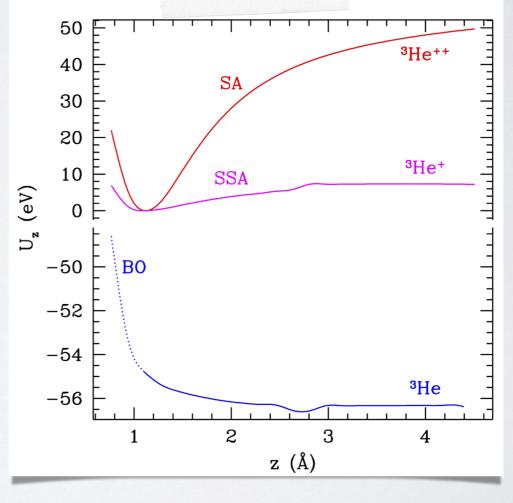


[Casale, AE, Menichetti, Tozzi 2504.13259]

To find the potential of the final ³He we had to find a way to combine DFT with the short time scales of the decay, $t_{\beta} \sim 10^{-18}$ s

To find the potential of the final ³He we had to find a way to combine DFT with the short time scales of the decay, $t_{\beta} \sim 10^{-18}$ s

Different ways of doing this, lead to very different potentials

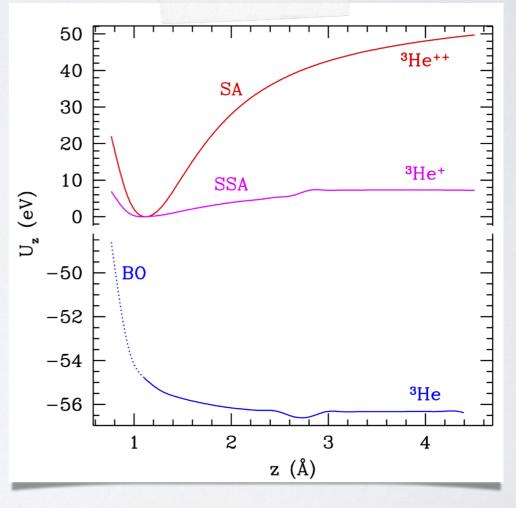


[Casale, AE, Menichetti, Tozzi 2504.13259]

To find the potential of the final ³He we had to find a way to combine DFT with the short time scales of the decay, $t_{\beta} \sim 10^{-18}$ s

Different ways of doing this, lead to very different potentials

This is due to the ill-defined concept of potential in a time-dependent problem



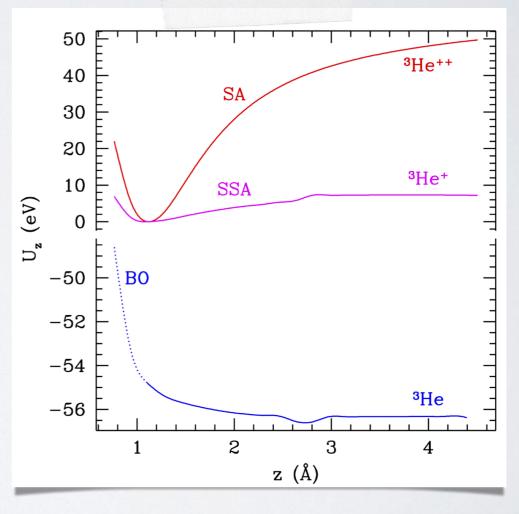
[Casale, AE, Menichetti, Tozzi 2504.13259]

To find the potential of the final ³He we had to find a way to combine DFT with the short time scales of the decay, $t_{\beta} \sim 10^{-18}$ s

Different ways of doing this, lead to very different potentials

This is due to the ill-defined concept of potential in a time-dependent problem

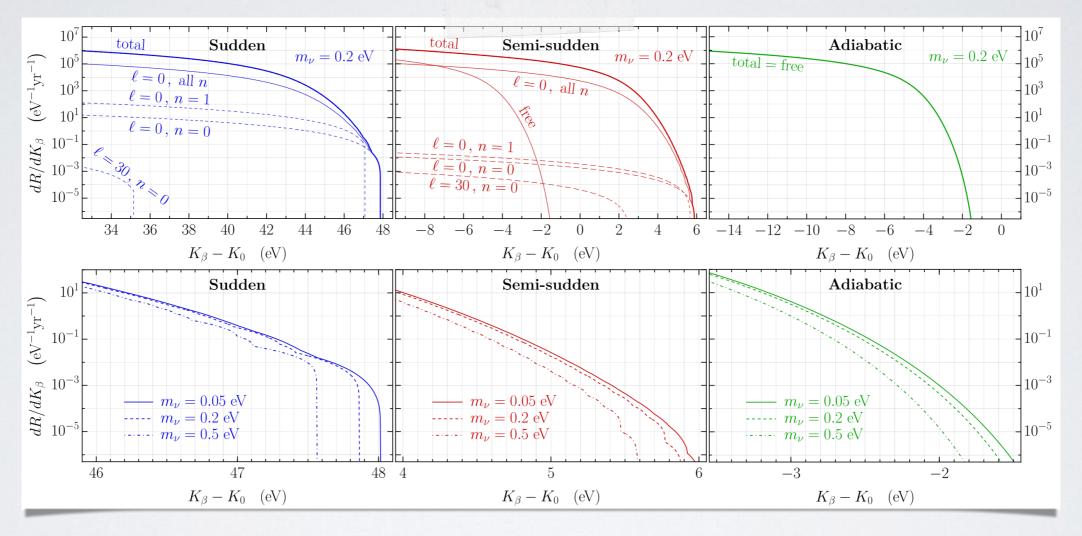
For now, this is our dominant theory systematics





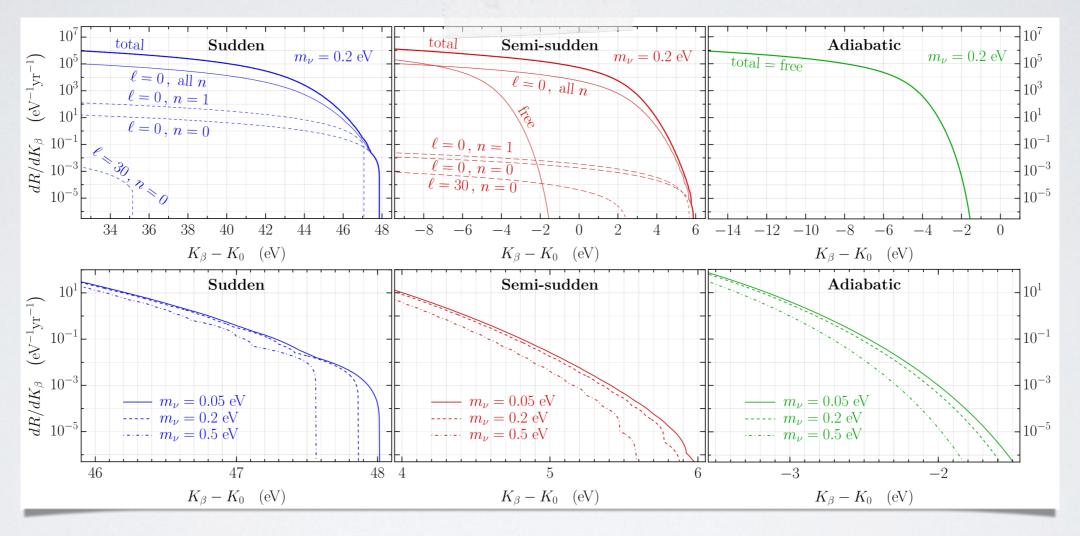
Different computed potentials reflect into different predicted spectra

Different computed potentials reflect into different predicted spectra



[Casale, AE, Menichetti, Tozzi 2504.13259]

Different computed potentials reflect into different predicted spectra



[Casale, AE, Menichetti, Tozzi 2504.13259]

All of them have features due to condensed matter effects

Many degrees of freedom yet to be included:

Many degrees of freedom yet to be included:

• vibrational degrees of freedom

Many degrees of freedom yet to be included:

- vibrational degrees of freedom
- electronic degrees of freedom

Many degrees of freedom yet to be included:

- vibrational degrees of freedom
- electronic degrees of freedom

help from correlation functions methods

Many degrees of freedom yet to be included:

- vibrational degrees of freedom
- electronic degrees of freedom

help from correlation functions methods

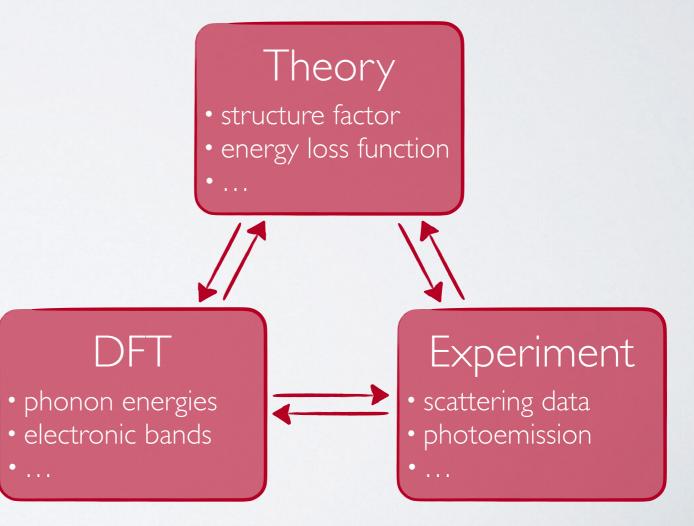
To pin them down with sufficient accuracy will require lots of feedback from different corners of the field

Many degrees of freedom yet to be included:

- vibrational degrees of freedom
- electronic degrees of freedom

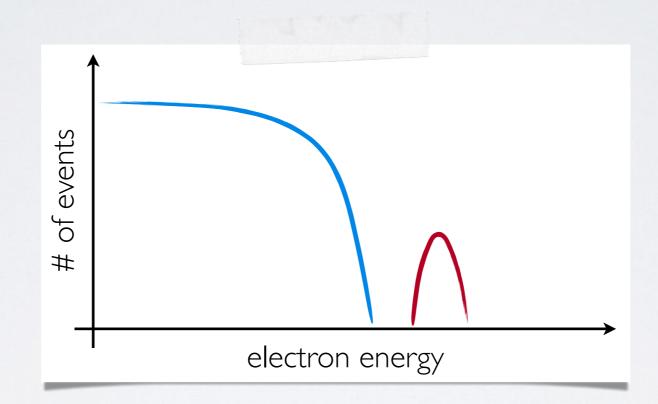
help from correlation functions methods

To pin them down with sufficient accuracy will require lots of feedback from different corners of the field

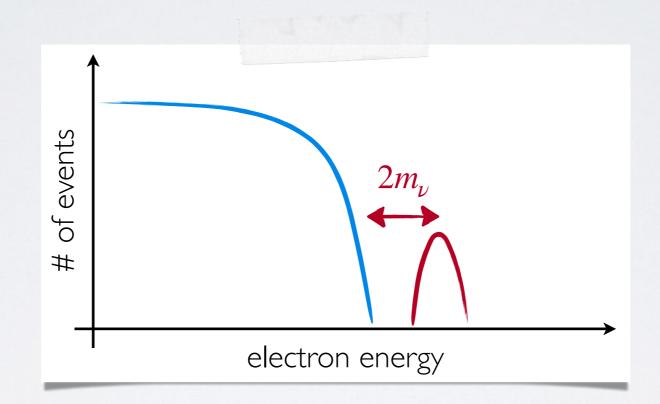


To hunt for the $C\nu B$ one must try to observe the tiny peak coming from the absorption process

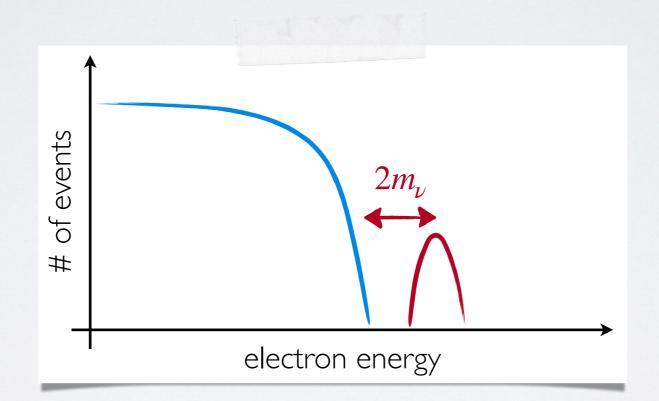
To hunt for the $C\nu B$ one must try to observe the tiny peak coming from the absorption process



To hunt for the $C\nu B$ one must try to observe the tiny peak coming from the absorption process



To hunt for the $C\nu B$ one must try to observe the tiny peak coming from the absorption process



It crucial to be able to distinguish the peak from the "background" coming from the β -decay part of the spectrum

But good old Heisenberg tells us that:

But good old Heisenberg tells us that:

localization in $\mathbf{x} \longleftrightarrow$ delocalization in \mathbf{p}

But good old Heisenberg tells us that:

localization in $\mathbf{x} \longleftrightarrow$ delocalization in \mathbf{p}

An uncertainty in the tritium momentum implies an intrinsic quantum distortion in the electron energy,

$$\Delta K_e \sim \frac{k_e}{m_T} \frac{1}{\Delta x_T}$$

But good old Heisenberg tells us that:

localization in $\mathbf{x} \longleftrightarrow$ delocalization in \mathbf{p}

An uncertainty in the tritium momentum implies an intrinsic quantum distortion in the electron energy,

$$\Delta K_e \sim \frac{k_e}{m_T} \frac{1}{\Delta x_T}$$
for graphene $\Delta x_T \simeq 0.08$ Å

But good old Heisenberg tells us that:

localization in $\mathbf{x} \longleftrightarrow$ delocalization in \mathbf{p}

An uncertainty in the tritium momentum implies an intrinsic quantum distortion in the electron energy,

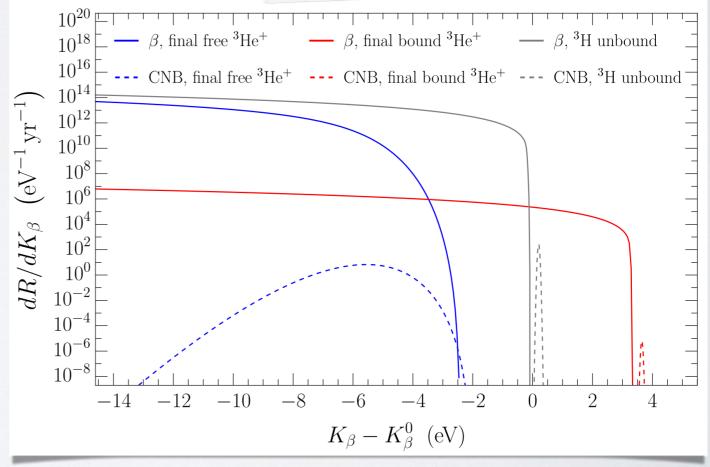
$$\Delta K_e \sim \frac{k_e}{m_T} \frac{1}{\Delta x_T} \simeq 1 \text{ eV} \gtrsim 2m_{\nu}$$
for graphene $\Delta x_T \simeq 0.08 \text{ Å}$

But good old Heisenberg tells us that:

localization in $\mathbf{x} \leftrightarrow \mathbf{b}$ delocalization in \mathbf{p}

An uncertainty in the tritium momentum implies an intrinsic quantum distortion in the electron energy,

$$\Delta K_e \sim \frac{k_e}{m_T} \frac{1}{\Delta x_T} \simeq 1 \text{ eV} \gtrsim 2m_{\nu}$$
for graphene $\Delta x_T \simeq 0.08 \text{ Å}$

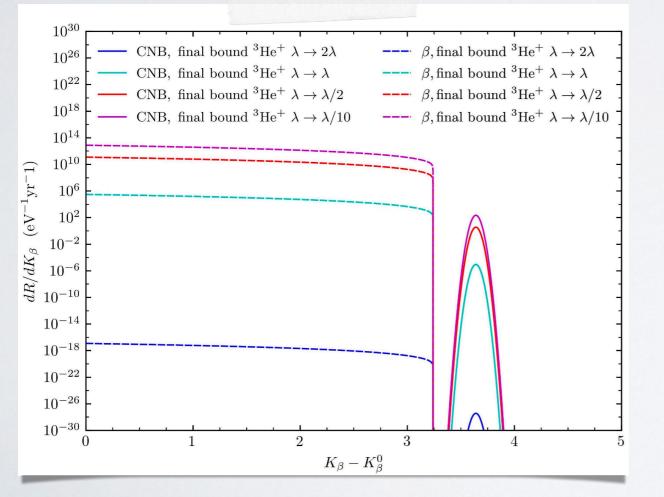


[PTOLEMY - PRD 2022]

Flat graphene is not ideal for $C\nu B$ detection. What should we do?

Flat graphene is not ideal for $C\nu B$ detection. What should we do?

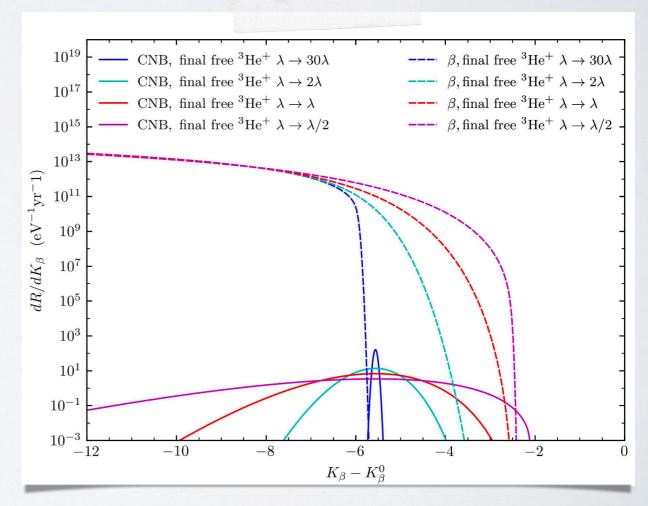
Localize tritium more right-most peak gets enhanced



[Andrea Casale's Master's thesis]

Flat graphene is not ideal for $C\nu B$ detection. What should we do?

Localize tritium less left-most peak emerges from β -decay



[Andrea Casale's Master's thesis]

How much should we delocalize the initial tritium?

How much should we delocalize the initial tritium?

 $\Delta K_e \sim 100 \text{ meV}$

How much should we delocalize the initial tritium?

$$\Delta K_e \sim 100 \text{ meV} \implies \Delta x_T \sim 1 \text{ Å}$$

How much should we delocalize the initial tritium?

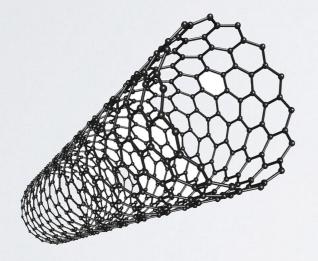
$$\Delta K_e \sim 100 \text{ meV} \implies \Delta x_T \sim 1 \text{ Å}$$

Can we find a substrate that does this job?

How much should we delocalize the initial tritium?

$$\Delta K_e \sim 100 \text{ meV} \implies \Delta x_T \sim 1 \text{ Å}$$

Can we find a substrate that does this job?

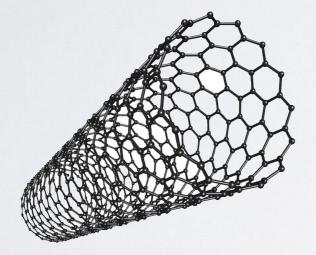


nanotubes?

How much should we delocalize the initial tritium?

$$\Delta K_e \sim 100 \text{ meV} \implies \Delta x_T \sim 1 \text{ Å}$$

Can we find a substrate that does this job?



nanotubes?

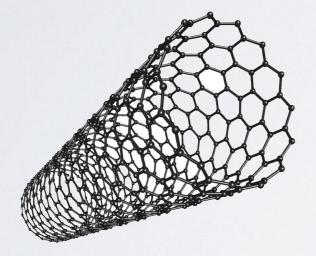


fullerenes?

How much should we delocalize the initial tritium?

$$\Delta K_e \sim 100 \text{ meV} \implies \Delta x_T \sim 1 \text{ Å}$$

Can we find a substrate that does this job?



nanotubes?



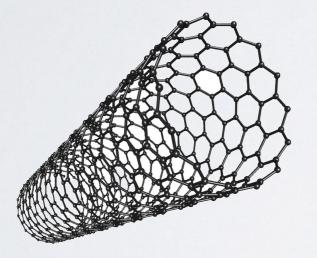
fullerenes?

...what else?

How much should we delocalize the initial tritium?

$$\Delta K_e \sim 100 \text{ meV} \implies \Delta x_T \sim 1 \text{ Å}$$

Can we find a substrate that does this job?





nanotubes?

fullerenes?

We need to be creative and get to work!

... what else?

There's a lot theory involved in the PTOLEMY project. It's challenging, interesting... and worth doing it!

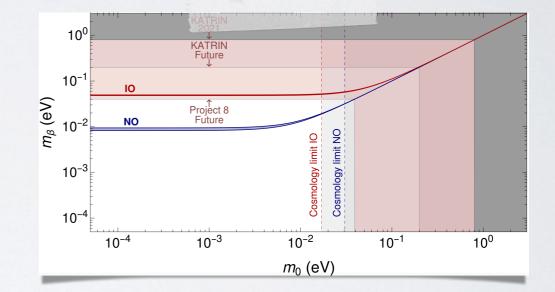
There's a lot theory involved in the PTOLEMY project. It's challenging, interesting... and worth doing it!

It mandates for an interplay between high and low energy physics

There's a lot theory involved in the PTOLEMY project. It's challenging, interesting... and worth doing it!

It mandates for an interplay between high and low energy physics

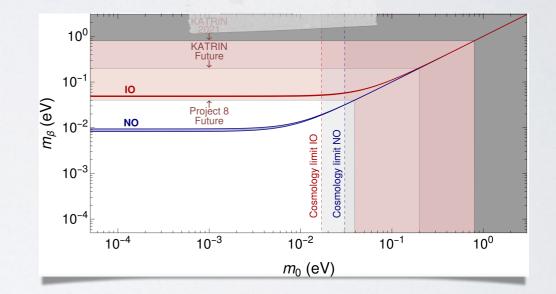
There is the potential to close the window on the neutrino mass... but we need *accurate* and *systematic* theory models!



There's a lot theory involved in the PTOLEMY project. It's challenging, interesting... and worth doing it!

It mandates for an interplay between high and low energy physics

There is the potential to close the window on the neutrino mass... but we need *accurate* and *systematic* theory models!

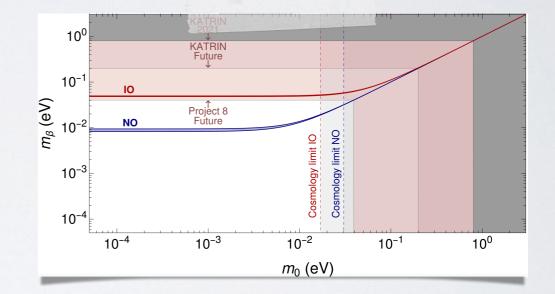


To hunt for the $C\nu B$ we need to study possible substrates to win against Heisenberg. Lots of studies to be done!

There's a lot theory involved in the PTOLEMY project. It's challenging, interesting... and worth doing it!

It mandates for an interplay between high and low energy physics

There is the potential to close the window on the neutrino mass... but we need *accurate* and *systematic* theory models!



To hunt for the $C\nu B$ we need to study possible substrates to win against Heisenberg. Lots of studies to be done!

Thanks for your attention!