Schrödinger centenary

The centenary of the birth of polymath Erwin Schrödinger was marked by a suitably multidisciplinary conference in April at London’s Imperial College, reflecting the impact of the man’s work on physics, chemistry, molecular biology and the history and philosophy of science.

Born in Vienna, Schrödinger had positions at Zurich, Berlin, Graz and Vienna but stayed longest in Dublin. E. T. S. Walton, from Dublin, and the senior of the many Nobel laureates at the meeting (he shared the 1951 award with John Cockcroft) delightedly maintained that the grandfather of particle physics, J. J. Thomson, would have scorned modern theoretical ideas.

Undeterred, Abdus Salam summarized today’s viewpoint while Steven Weinberg and Alexander Polyakov sketched the possibilities of unified ‘string’ theories.

C. N. Yang drew attention to a 1922 Schrödinger paper (predating the famous ones by several years) containing an embryo form of the path dependent phase factors so useful in modern gauge theory.

In a grand finale, Linus Pauling illustrated the impact of the celebrated equation on molecular biology. Although Schrödinger’s fame rests on his equation, he was more an ideas man, claimed Pauling, who like Max Perutz, was nevertheless sceptical of the role of Schrödinger’s widely-read book ‘What is life?’ in advancing modern molecular biology.

A 1948 BBC recording ‘Do electron’s think?’ testified to the quality of Schrödinger’s English, attributed by him to his maternal grandmother. Another vivid reminder came from his daughter Ruth Braunizer, who was delighted by the cat adorning the logo on the conference rostrum.

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