Nuclear Physics Around the Unitarity Limit

Sebastian König,\(^1\), Harald W. Grießhammer,\(^4\) H.-W. Hammer,\(^2,3,4\) and U. van Kolck\(^5,6,8\)

\(^1\)Department of Physics, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210, USA
\(^2\)Institut für Kernphysik, Technische Universität Darmstadt, 64289 Darmstadt, Germany
\(^3\)ExtreMe Matter Institute EMMI, GSI Helmholtzzentrum für Schwerionenforschung GmbH, 64291 Darmstadt, Germany
\(^4\)Institute for Nuclear Studies, Department of Physics, George Washington University, Washington DC 20052, USA
\(^5\)Institut de Physique Nucléaire, CNRS-IN2P3, Univ. Paris-Sud, Université Paris-Saclay, 91406 Orsay, France
\(^6\)Department of Physics, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA

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We argue that many features of the structure of nuclei emerge from a strictly perturbative expansion around the unitarity limit, where the two-nucleon S waves have bound states at zero energy. In this limit, the gross features of states in the nuclear chart are correlated to only one dimensionful parameter, which is related to the breaking of scale invariance to a discrete scaling symmetry and set by the triton binding energy. Observables are moved to their physical values by small, perturbative corrections, much like in descriptions of the fine structure of atomic spectra. We provide evidence in favor of the conjecture that light, and possibly heavier, nuclei are bound weakly enough to be insensitive to the details of the interactions but strongly enough to be insensitive to the exact size of the two-nucleon system.

For the purposes of nuclear physics, QCD, the theory of strong interactions, has essentially two independent parameters, namely the up and down quark masses. Their average controls the pion mass and consequently the range of the nuclear force, \(R \sim M^{-1}_\pi \simeq 1.4\) fm. Their difference, plus electromagnetism, generates small differences in masses and interactions between neutrons and protons. At the physical point, the two-nucleon (NN) scattering length in the \(^3S_1\) channel is \(a_s \simeq 5.4\) fm, with the deuteron as a shallow bound state (\(B_D \simeq 2.224\) MeV); in the \(^1S_0\) channel, \(a_s \simeq -23.7\) fm, and a shallow virtual bound state exists at \(B_{NN^*} \simeq 0.068\) MeV. With relatively small changes in quark masses, these states become, respectively, unbound and bound \(^1\). In the physics of cold atoms near Feshbach resonances, external magnetic fields play a role similar to the quark masses and allow the scattering length to be tuned arbitrarily \(^5\).

Approximate correlations \(B_{D,N,N^*} \sim 1/(M_N a^2_{s,s})\), with \(M_N \simeq 940\) MeV the nucleon mass, hold because the size of all these scales is unnatural compared to the typical interaction range \(R\). The NN system therefore appears close to the unitarity (or unitary) limit, where both states cross zero energy, the scattering lengths become infinite \((1/a_{s,s} = 0)\), and cross sections saturate the unitarity bound. It has indeed been suggested that this happens not far from the physical point \(^6\). While this presumed proximity has been discussed qualitatively for a long time, it has traditionally not played any special role in constructing nuclear forces, and it is neither assessed nor exploited in order to simplify the description of nuclei. As an exception, Refs. \(^7,8\) use potential models to map out correlations between observables in three- and four-nucleon systems as the limit is approached at fixed \(a_{t}/a_{s}\).

Here we argue that the typical particle binding moment \(Q_A\) of the \(A\)-nucleon system satisfies \(1/a_{s,t} < Q_A < 1/R\), so that a combined expansion in \(Q_AR\) and \(1/(Q_ARA_{s,t})\) converges quickly and quantitatively reproduces the physical systems. With this, the gross features of states in the nuclear chart are determined by a very simple leading-order interaction (governed by a single parameter), whereas, much like the fine structure of atomic spectra, observables are moved to their physical values by small perturbative corrections. Our conjecture places nuclei in a sweet spot: bound weakly enough to be insensitive to the details of the interaction, but dense enough to be insensitive to the exact values of the large two-particle scattering lengths. One might surmise that due to the absence of scales, a theory at the unitarity limit allows only for trivial observables, like bound states with zero or infinite energies. However, the nontrivial renormalization of the three-body system introduces instead exactly one new dimensionful parameter, which sets the scale for all few-body observables. Indeed, the energies of bosonic clusters near unitarity are determined in terms of the trimer energy \(^9,10\).

In the following, we provide explicit evidence that our conjecture holds for the binding energies of three and four nucleons. Since the NN binding energies are small, their dynamics is dominated by large distances and small momenta, the regime of the effective range expansion (ERE) \(^11\). Its consequences are captured by an effective field theory (EFT) which, apart from long-range electromagnetic interactions mediated by photons \((A_{\mu})\), contains only contact interactions between nonrelativistic nucleon isospin doublets \(N = (p n)^T\) of proton and neutron fields. Following the notation of Ref. \(^12\), its
Lagrange density is
\[
L = N N! \left( iD_0 + \frac{D^2}{2M_N} \right) N + \sum_i C_{0,i} \left( N^T P_i N \right)^j \left( N^T P_i N \right) + D_0 \left( N^\dagger N \right)^3 + \cdots ,
\]
(1)
where \( D_\mu = \partial_\mu + ieA_\mu(1+\tau_3)/2 \), \( e \) is the proton charge, \( \tau_3 \) a Pauli matrix in isospin space, and \( P_i \) projectors onto the \( NN \) \( S \)-waves. \( C_{0,i} \), \( D_0 \), etc. are “low-energy constants” (LECs) determined from QCD or experiment. This “Pionless EFT” reproduces the ERE in the \( NN \) sector \[13\]–\[17\] but extends it to an arbitrary number of particles and interactions with external fields. The two-body interactions with LECs \( C_{0,i} \) are related to \( a_{s,t} \), while higher-derivative interactions are associated with the effective NN interactions with LECs \( B \), determined from QCD or experiment. This “Pionless EFT” reproduces the ERE in the \( NN \) sector \[13–17\] and of renormalization-group analyses \[42–44\]. As a consequence, the 3\( N \) LO strength parameter \( \Lambda_s \) and \( \Lambda_t \) together with the LO two-body interactions, determines the spectrum and scattering for systems with more particles \[10\]–\[34\]–\[44\]. This single relevant 3\( N \) parameter generates correlations among few-body observables such as the Phillips \[17\] and Tjon \[18\] lines.

The standard pionless formulation with finite scattering lengths as LO input explicitly breaks two important symmetries: first, the \( SU(4)_W \) Wigner symmetry of combined spin and isospin transformations \[44\] is broken in the two-body sector for \( a_i \neq a_s \), \[50\], while it is obeyed by the 3\( N \) interaction \[20\]. Second, discrete scale invariance leads to the log-periodic shape of the running coupling \( D_0 \), \[13\]–\[20\] and to an infinite geometric tower of Efimov states in the three-body system \[51\], both determined by the 3\( N \) LO strength parameter \( \Lambda_s \) (see Eq. \[5\] below). It, too, is broken for \( a_{s,t} \neq \infty \). (Note that in contrast to Refs. \[5\]–\[52\], scattering lengths are not rescaled with the discrete scaling factor here.)

The unitarity limit manifests both symmetries and has \( \Lambda_s \) left as single parameter. In our calculation, this is fixed at LO to reproduce the physical triton (degenerate with \( ^3\)He at this order) as one of the Efimov states. In fact, the 3\( N \) and 4\( N \) systems in the unitarity limit decouple into a symmetric piece, identical to a formulation of three- and four-boson systems, and an antisymmetric piece. At unitarity, a three-boson Efimov state with binding energy \( B_3 \) is associated with two four-boson states \[28\]—one relatively deep at \( B_3 / B_3 \approx 4.611 \), and one barely below the particle-trimer threshold, \( B_3 / B_3 \approx 1.002 \[40\] \). For the \( \alpha \) particle, the ground state is at \( B_\alpha / B_H \approx 3.66 \) and the excited state at \( B_\alpha / B_H \approx 1.05 \), where \( B_H \approx 7.72 \) MeV is the \( ^3\)He binding energy. In addition, models (see e.g. Ref. \[33\]) indicate the existence of a virtual 3\( N \) state at \( B_\alpha \gtrsim 0.5 \) MeV for physical scattering lengths, which becomes the second Efimov state as \( B_D \) is decreased. Thus, the 3\( N \) and 4\( N \) spectra are consistent with mildly broken discrete scale invariance, suggesting a perturbative treatment, described below.

For the calculation, the LO two-body potentials derived from Eq. \[1\] are written as
\[
V_i^{(0)} = \sum_i C_{0,i}^{(0)} |i\rangle |g\rangle |g\rangle |i\rangle ,
\]
(2)
where \( |i\rangle \) collects the spin-isospin structure and \( |g\rangle \) implements a separable regularization. With \( p \) the momentum corresponding to the kinetic energy \( E \) in the \( NN \) center-of-mass system, \( g(p) \equiv \langle p |g\rangle \) satisfies \( g(0) = 1 \) and \( g(p \gg \Lambda) \ll 1 \) for arbitrary cutoff \( \Lambda \). The results shown below have been obtained with two different implementations of the theory. For the \( ^3\)He calculation, we follow Ref. \[12\], which uses a sharp cutoff (step function) regulator \( g_s(p) = \theta(\Lambda - p) \) and includes the two-body interactions through dibaryon auxiliary fields, in lieu of Eq. \[2\]. Our new Faddeev-(Yukubovsky) calculations use a convenient Gaussian regulator instead, \( g_G(p) = \exp(-p^2 / \Lambda^2) \). Since only the LO calculation mandates a nonperturbative treatment, we use (distorted-wave) perturbation theory for higher orders, i.e., NLO results depend only linearly on NLO contributions. These are: \( (i) \) terms as in Eq. \[2\] accounting for LEC shifts \( C_{0,i}^{(0)} \rightarrow C_{0,i}^{(1)} \) corresponding to the expansion \( C_{0,i} = C_{0,i}^{(0)} + C_{0,i}^{(1)} + \cdots \) and shifting to the physical values of \( a_{s,t} \); \( (ii) \) one Coulomb interaction \( \sim e^2 M_N / (4\pi Q) \) in the pp channel; \( (iii) \) one isospin-breaking contact interaction in the pp channel as in Eq. \[2\] with \( C_{0,s}^{(0)} \rightarrow \Delta C_{0,s}^{(1)} \) required for proper renormalization of Coulomb effects; and \( (iv) \) one range correction per \( NN \) S wave.

In order to treat Coulomb effects in the 3\( N \) sector perturbatively, Ref. \[12\] expanded the \( ^1S_0 \) channel around the unitary limit. Here we also expand the \( ^3S_1 \) channel in \( 1/(Q \lambda a_s) \), which is a significantly more radical simplification, given that \( a_s \) is nearly as large as \( a_s \). The two-body amplitude is a geometric series that can be re-
summed analytically for a separable regulator. We remove the arbitrary \( \Lambda \) dependence from observables by demanding that the two inverse scattering lengths vanish at LO and enter linearly at NLO. Renormalization is achieved if
\[
C_{0,i}^{(0)} = \frac{-2\pi^2}{MN\Lambda} \theta^{-1}, \quad C_{0,i}^{(1)} = \frac{M_N}{4\pi a_i} C_{0,i}^{(0)} ,
\]
where \( \theta = \int dq \, g^2(q)/\Lambda \) is a regulator-dependent pure number. The LO amplitude takes then the scale invariant form \( T_i^{(0)}(E) \propto 1/\sqrt{-MN}E - i\epsilon \), with NLO corrections proportional to \( C_{0,i}^{(1)} \). The deuteron binding energy vanishes up to NLO, but \( (B_D)^{NLO} = 1/(MN a_i^2) \approx 1.41 \) MeV coincides with the standard zero-range value. For more details, see Ref. [54].

A 3\( N \) potential is needed at LO for renormalizability, i.e., to avoid the Thomas collapse [55] and ensure that three-body observables have a well-defined limit for \( \Lambda \gg 1/R \) [18–20]. We choose a separable form
\[
V_3^{(0)} = D_0^{(0)} |^3H| \langle \xi | |^3H| ,
\]
where \( |^3H\rangle \) denotes the projector onto the \( J = S = T = \frac{1}{2} \) 3\( N \) state and \( |\xi\rangle \) the regulator, either sharp or \( \langle u_1 u_2 | \xi \rangle = g_C(\sqrt{u_1^2 + 3u_2^2}/4) \) for Jacobi momenta \( u_{1,2} \).

We take the triton binding energy as the one observable needed to fix \( D_0^{(0)}(\Lambda) \).

An \textit{a priori} estimate of the typical \( A \)-body scale equidistributes the total binding energy amongst its constituents, i.e., \( Q_A \sim \sqrt{2MN B_A}/A \). For three nucleons, \( Q_3 \approx 70 \) MeV appears indeed in the sweet spot, namely larger than \( 1/\alpha_{s,t} \lesssim 45 \) MeV but smaller than the breakdown scale of Pionless EFT (expected to be about 140 MeV). We thus compare the running of \( D_0^{(0)} \) at full-unitarity LO with the result of standard pionless LO (scattering lengths at their physical values) and of \( ^1S_0 \) unitarity [12]. Taking the same sharp-momentum regulator, all three cases agree well with the log-periodic form [15–20]
\[
D_0^{(0)}(\Lambda) \propto \frac{1}{\Lambda^4} \sin \left( \frac{\log(\Lambda/\Lambda_u) - \arctan s_0^{-1}}{A} \right) ,
\]
where \( s_0 \approx 1.00624 \). The proportionality factor is scheme and regulator dependent. We find \( \Lambda_u \approx 175, 168, 234 \) MeV for standard Pionless EFT, \(^1S_0 \) unitarity, and full unitarity, respectively. The changes at \(^1S_0 \) and full unitarity go in opposite directions since the \(^1S_0 \) interaction is more attractive at unitarity than for the physical scattering length as LO input, while the \(^3S_1 \) interaction is less attractive.

At NLO the 3\( N \) interaction has the same form as in Eq. [4], with \( D_0^{(0)} \rightarrow D_0^{(1)} \) chosen to keep the triton energy unchanged. As a nontrivial check, we repeat the \(^3\text{He} \) calculation of Ref. [12] with a full-unitarity LO and add finite \( 1/\alpha_{s,t} \) plus one-photon exchange and its counterterm as NLO corrections. Figure 1 shows excellent agreement, with only small differences to \(^1S_0 \) unitarity. Convergence with the cutoff is evident. We predict a triton-helion splitting \( (B_T - B_H)^{NLO} \approx (0.92 \pm 0.18) \) MeV, compared to the experimental value \( (B_T - B_H)^{exp} \approx 0.764 \) MeV. Our 20\% error estimate follows Ref. [12] and is larger than the additional \( O(1/(Q_3 a_i)^2) \) from the new expansion.

At full unitarity, the LO spectrum consists of a series of states spaced by a factor of \( \exp(2\pi/s_0) \approx 515 \). An infinite number of states shallower than the triton/helion accumulates at zero energy. These lie outside the range of applicability of our expansion since their typical momenta are not large compared to \( 1/\alpha_{s,t} \). Nevertheless looking at their perturbative shifts, we find that at NLO they remain an order of magnitude shallower than the \( N^2\text{LO} \) deuteron, and generally we expect them to disappear above threshold at \( N^2\text{LO} \). In addition, with increasing cutoff, deeper 3\( N \) states enter the spectrum with binding momenta well above \( 1/R \). These are well outside the range of validity of the EFT and thus not a fundamental issue, but they complicate the numerical solution of the 4\( N \) problem. For now, we restrict our 4\( N \) calculations to a \( \Lambda \) range in which these are absent.

For simplicity, we neglect electromagnetic and range corrections at NLO, focusing on the \( 1/(Q_3 a_i) \) expansion.

Figure 2 shows results for the \( \alpha \)-particle binding energy \( B_\alpha(\Lambda) \). They are well fitted with a quadratic polynomial in \( 1/\Lambda \) for large \( \Lambda \), which we therefore use to extrapolate \( \Lambda \rightarrow \infty \). For standard Pionless EFT at LO, they are consistent with Refs. [25–27]. Implementing the unitarity-

\[\text{Figure 1. Three-nucleon binding energies at NLO as function of the 3N sharp cutoff. (Red) dashed curves: results of Ref. [12], keeping the physical \( a_i \) at LO. (Green) solid curves: effect of taking both S waves to the unitarity limit at LO and then including the physical values perturbatively at NLO, along with one-photon exchange and its counterterm. Horizontal lines: experimental values. Top (bottom) lines: \(^3\text{He} \) (\(^3\text{H} \), fitted).}\]
limit at LO leads to about 10 MeV more binding, as expected from a more attractive $3N$ interaction. We find a bound excited state just below the proton-triton breakup threshold, in contrast to 0.3 MeV above as indicated by experiment. The LO results ($B_\alpha/B_T)_{LO} = 4.66$ for the ground and ($B_\alpha/B_T)_{LO} = 1.002$ for the excited state of $^4$He agree with four-boson unitarity.

Remarkably, the first $1/(Q_4a_t)$ correction brings us very close to the standard Pionless EFT result. That is perhaps accidental due to the highly symmetrical nature of the $\alpha$ particle, the level of agreement in the helium being perhaps more representative. All results in Fig. 2 are uncorrected for electromagnetic and range effects. At present, no calculation of these effects in Pionless EFT exist, except for Ref. [46] where higher orders were however not treated perturbatively. With the uncertainty expected to be dominated by range corrections, $O(r_{s,t}/a_{s,t}) \approx 30\%$, we obtain $(B_\alpha_{NLO})_{r=0} = 29.5 \pm 8.7$ MeV with zero effective ranges. The ratio $(B_\alpha/B_T)_{NLO(r=0)} \approx 3.48$ is in good agreement with $(B_\alpha/B_T)_{exp} = 3.34$.

While slow convergence for the excited-state wavefunction puts its full NLO calculation beyond our current computational resources, we used a four-boson model tuned such that its LO is similar to the $^4$He system, namely choosing $B_3 = 8.5$ MeV. Since the four-boson and $4N$ systems are identical for exact $SU(4)_W$ symmetry, this is an adequate rendering of the more complex physical world. Calculations with $a_2 = 20$ fm and $a_2 = 5$ fm (covering the range of typical nuclear scales) indicate that first-order perturbations in $1/a_2$ indeed push the state at $B_\alpha \gtrsim 8.5$ MeV above threshold by about 0.2 and 0.5 MeV for $a_2 = 20$ and 5 fm, respectively. That corresponds to $(B_\alpha/B_3)^{NLO(r=0)}$ in the range 0.94...0.98, compared to $(B_\alpha/B_T)_{exp} = 0.96$. The four-body excited state and the particle-trimer threshold are close, but both are still far from the four-particle threshold; it is reassuring that we can improve the description of the excited state at NLO.

As a final test, Fig. 3 shows the Tjon line, i.e., the correlation between $3N$ and $4N$ binding energies, obtained by varying $\Lambda$. All results are calculated with $j_{max} = 3/2$ in the 4N system and use the $\Lambda \to \infty$ extrapolation discussed above. The extrapolation uncertainty is negligible compared to the 30% estimated EFT truncation error. The remarkable agreement in Fig. 2 persists off the physical point, providing further evidence of the power of a perturbative expansion around the unitarity limit. The relation between triton and $^4$He binding energies is still nearly perfectly linear at NLO.

Our results suggest good convergence of the expansion around unitarity, both order by order and to real-world values. While the condition $Q_A R < 1$ is better satisfied for lighter systems, it may provide at least qualitative insight into the binding mechanisms of even the heaviest nuclei ($B_A/A \approx 8$ MeV). Indeed, the rate of convergence in observables provides ample evidence that $Q_3 R$ is much smaller than its a priori estimate, see e.g. Refs. [12, 21, 23, 58, 61], and is suggestive that $Q_4 R$ is smaller, too [24, 46]. There is also circumstantial evidence that this may hold for $A > 4$ [10].

A recent expansion around the $SU(4)_W$ limit with the averaged physical values of the ERE parameters at LO found good convergence for $3N$ binding energies and radii [62]. Together with the fact that $SU(4)_W$ has some success in heavier nuclei (see e.g. Refs. [63, 64] and references therein), this adds further credibility to our conjecture. In the future, we will investigate our expansion in heavier nuclei, such as the isoscalars $^{16}$O [34] and $^6$Li [35], including observables beyond binding energies,
for example electromagnetic form factors. For nuclear matter, saturation energies and densities are correlated (Coester line) and conjectured to be correlated to the 3N binding energy. In the unitarity limit, this can be understood from discrete scale invariance.

In summary, we demonstrated that the physics of $A \leq 4$ nucleons is governed to a good first approximation by a single parameter $\Lambda_*$, with controlled corrections stemming from deviations from unitarity, the interaction range, and isospin-breaking effects. We conjecture that it also converges for other light nuclei and speculate about its relevance for heavy nuclei and nuclear matter. It may not be a surprise that our results in the unitarity limit are perturbatively close to those where the physical scattering lengths are used at LO. Surprising is, however, how well the expansion appears to converge. Our expansion turns the focus away from details of the two-body system, which has traditionally been taken as a starting point to the structure of higher-body bound states, and shifts it to a three-body interaction that underlies systems around unitarity. That adds the intriguing possibility that the approach developed here for nucleons may prove successful also in atomic and molecular physics, where finite scattering lengths are currently treated nonperturbatively.

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