Dynamical singlets and correlation-assisted Peierls transition in VO$_2$

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A theory of the metal-insulator transition in vanadium dioxide from the high-temperature rutile to the low-temperature monoclinic phase is proposed on the basis of cluster dynamical mean field theory, in conjunction with the density functional scheme. The interplay of strong electronic Coulomb interactions and structural distortions, in particular the dimerization of vanadium atoms in the low temperature phase, plays a crucial role. We find that VO$_2$ is not a conventional Mott insulator, but that the formation of dynamical V-V singlet pairs due to strong Coulomb correlations is necessary to trigger the opening of a Peierls gap.

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Vanadium dioxide (VO$_2$) undergoes a first-order transition from a high-temperature metallic phase to a low-temperature insulating phase at almost room-temperature ($T = 340$ K). The resistivity jumps by several orders of magnitude through this transition, and the crystal structure changes from rutile (R-phase) at high-temperature to monoclinic (so-called M$_1$-phase) at low-temperature. The latter is characterized by a dimerization of the vanadium atoms into pairs, as well as a tilting of these pairs with respect to the c-axis.

Whether these structural changes are solely responsible for the insulating nature of the low-T phase, or whether correlation effects also play a role, has been a subject of much debate. The strong dimerization, as well as the fact that the insulating phase is non-magnetic suggests that VO$_2$ might be a typical case of a Peierls insulator. However, pioneering experimental work by Pouget et al. demonstrated that minute amounts of Cr-substitutions, as well as, remarkably, uniaxial stress applied to pure VO$_2$ leads to a new phase (M$_2$) in which only half of the V-atoms dimerize, while the other half forms chains of equally-spaced atoms behaving as spin-1/2 Heisenberg chains. That this phase is also insulating strongly suggests that the physics of VO$_2$ is very close to that of a Mott-Hubbard insulator. Zylbersztajn and Mott suggested that Coulomb repulsion indeed plays a major role in opening the insulating gap.

The main qualitative aspects of the electronic structure of VO$_2$ have been explained long ago by Goodenough. In the rutile structure (space group $P4_2/mnm$), the V-atoms are surrounded by O octahedra forming an edge-sharing chain along the c-axis. The d-levels of the V-ions are split into lower lying $t_{2g}$ states and $e_g^\pi$ states. The latter lie higher in energy and are therefore empty. The tetragonal crystal field further splits the $t_{2g}$ multiplet into an $a_{1g}$ state and an $e_g$ doublet ($d_\parallel$ and $\pi^*$ states, respectively in the terminology of Ref. [9]). The $a_{1g}$ orbitals are directed along the c-axis, with good $\sigma$-bonding of the V-V pair along this direction. In the monoclinic phase (space group $P2_1/c$), the dimerization and tilting of the V-V pairs results in two important effects. First, the $a_{1g}$ ($d_\parallel$) band is split into a lower-energy bonding combination and a higher-energy antibonding one. Second, the $V_{d-O_p}$ antibonding $e_g^\pi (\pi^*)$ states are pushed higher in energy, due to the tilting of the pairs which increases the overlap of these states with O states. In Goodenough’s picture, the single d-electron occupies the $d_\parallel$-bonding combination, resulting in a (Peierls-like) band gap.

Electronic structure calculations based on density functional theory within the local density approximation (DFT-LDA) have since provided support for this qualitative description in terms of molecular orbitals (see the recent work of Eyert for an extensive discussion and references). Molecular dynamics calculations by Wentzcovitch et al. with variable cell shape successfully found the M$_1$ structure to have the lowest total energy, with structural parameters in reasonable agreement with experiment. DFT-LDA calculations fail however to yield the opening of the band gap: the top of the bonding $d_\parallel$-band is found to overlap slightly with the bottom of the $\pi^*$-band (only for a hypothetical structure with larger dimerizations would the band gap fully open). Not surprisingly, recent DFT-LDA calculations of the M$_2$ phase also fail in producing an insulator.

This discussion makes clear that only a theoretical treatment in which structural aspects as well as correlations within V-V pairs are taken into account on equal footing, is able to successfully decide on the underlying mechanism for the metal-insulator transition in VO$_2$. In this Letter, we fulfill this goal by using a cluster extension of dynamical mean-field theory (C-DMFT) in combination with state-of-the-art DFT-LDA calculations within the recently developed Nth-order muffin-tin orbital (NMTO) implementation. This allows for a consistent description of both the metallic rutile phase and the insulating monoclinic phase. We find that the insulating state can be viewed as a molecular solid of singlet...
dimers in the Heitler-London (correlated) limit. While a description in terms of renormalised Peierls bands is possible at low-energy, broad Hubbard bands are present at higher energy. Recent photoemission experiments can be successfully interpreted on the basis of our results, which also yield specific predictions for inverse-photoemission spectra.

Previous theoretical work on VO$_2$ based on DMFT has recently appeared $^{12,13}$. These works, however, are based on a single-site DMFT approach. This is appropriate in the metallic phase, but not in the insulating phase. While we do find that by increasing $U$ to unphysically high values, a Mott insulator can be induced in a single-site DMFT approach, the formation of singlet pairs resulting from the strong dimerization can only be captured in a cluster extension of DMFT in which the dimers are taken as the key unit. Only then can a non-magnetic insulator with a spin-gap be obtained, in agreement with experiments. C-DMFT allows for a consistent extension to the solid-state of the simple Heitler-London picture of an isolated molecule. Electrons can be shared between all singlets through the self-consistent electronic bath, resulting in a “dynamical singlets” description.

Given the filling of one d-electron per vanadium, and the crystal-field splitting separating the $t_{2g}$ and $e_g$ states in both phases, it is appropriate to work within a set of localized V-centered $t_{2g}$ Wannier-orbitals, and to neglect the degrees of freedom from all other bands. As in Ref. $^{14}$, our Wannier orbitals are orthonormalized NMTOs, which have all partial waves other than $V$- $d_{xy}$, $d_{yz}$ and $d_{zx}$ downfolded. These notations refer to the local coordinate axes ($z || [110]$) attached to a given V atom surrounding the oxygen octahedron. DFT-LDA calculations followed by this downfolding procedure yield a Hamiltonian matrix $H_L^{\text{LDA}}(k)$ (of size $6 \times 6$ in the rutile phase, which has 2 V-atoms per unit cell, and 12×12 in the monoclinic phase, with 4 V atoms per unit cell). Our results for the DFT-LDA electronic structure in both phases are in agreement with previously published studies, and with the qualitative picture described above. The partial densities of states for the $a_{1g} \equiv d_{xy}$ and $e_g^\pi \equiv \{d_{yz}, d_{zx}\}$ are presented in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 for the rutile and monoclinic phases, respectively. The total $t_{2g}$ bandwidth is almost for both phases ($\sim 2.59$eV in rutile and $\sim 2.56$eV in monoclinic). In the rutile phase, the single d-electron is almost equally distributed between all three orbital components within LDA ($0.36$ in $a_{1g}$ and $0.32$ in each of the $e_g^\pi$'s). From the Hamiltonian matrix in real space, we can extract the hopping integrals between V centers. The largest one, $t_{xy,xy} = -0.31$eV is between $a_{1g}$ orbitals forming chains along the c-axis, but the hoppings $t_{xz,yz}$ within the chains and $t_{yz,yz}, t_{xz,xz}$ are only twice smaller ($0.17 - 0.19$eV). Given that there are 8 next-nearest neighbours of this type, and only 2 along the chains, the properties of the rutile metal are therefore fairly isotropic. The electronic structure drastically changes in the monoclinic phase (Fig. 2). The $a_{1g}$ state is split into a bonding combination below the Fermi level, and an antibonding combination higher in energy. The splitting between the bonding and antibonding states is set by the intra-dimer hopping, which we find to be $t_{xy,xy}^{\text{intra}} = -0.68$eV, hence a splitting of order $2t_{xy,xy} \sim 1.4$ eV. The two $a_{1g}$ peaks in the density of states (DOS) are very narrow, corresponding to the very small inter-dimer hopping $t_{xy,xy}^{\text{inter}} \sim -0.03$ eV. The intra-dimer hopping is by far the dominant one in this phase, with the second largest being $t_{xz,yz}$ in the [111] direction ($\sim 0.22$ eV) and all others much smaller. Also, the $e_g^\pi$ states are pushed higher in energy in the monoclinic phase, so that the LDA occupancies are now 0.74 for the $a_{1g}$ (bonding) band and only 0.12 and 0.14 for the $d_{yz}$ and $d_{zx}$, respectively. Still, these bands overlap weakly and the LDA fails to open the insulating gap ($\sim 0.6$ eV experimentally).

We use the LDA-NMTO Hamiltonian $H_{\text{LDA}}^{\text{LDA}}(k)$ as a starting point for the construction of a multi-band Hubbard Hamiltonian of the form of Eq. (1) in Ref. $^{14}$ involving direct and exchange terms of the screened on-site Coulomb interaction $U_{mn}$ and $J_{mn'}$, with the parametrization $U_{mn} = U$, $U_{mnm'} = U - 2J$ and $J_{mn'} = J$ for $m \neq m'$. We assume double counting corrections to be orbital-independent within the $t_{2g}$ manifold, thus resulting in a simple shift of the chemical potential. Recently, it has become feasible to solve this many-body Hamiltonian using the dynamical mean-field approximation (DMFT) and to obtain realistic physical properties, even when all off-diagonal terms in orbital space in the local self-energy $\Sigma_{mn'}$ are retained $^{14}$. Here, we go one step further by including also non-local terms in the self-energy. The latter are constructed from a cluster LDA+DMFT treatment $^{15}$. More precisely, instead of calculating the self-energy from a local impurity model embedding one single atom in a self-consistent bath, a pair of V atoms in the complex bath is explicitly considered. The self-energy $\Sigma_{ijc}$ and (Weiss) dynamical mean-field $G_{ijc}^{\text{LDA}}$ become matrices in both the orbital indices $m, m' = (xy, yz, zx)$ and the intra-dimer site indices $i_c, j_c = 1, 2$. The inter-dimer components of the self-energy as well as long-range correlations are neglected in this C-DMFT scheme. Using the crystal symmetries in the monoclinic phase, a $12 \times 12$ block-diagonal self-energy matrix is constructed from the $6 \times 6$ matrix $\Sigma_{ijc}^{\text{LDA}}$, so that the C-DMFT approximation to the self-energy takes in this case the form:

$$
\Sigma = \begin{pmatrix}
\Sigma_{11} & \Sigma_{12} & 0 & 0 \\
\Sigma_{21} & \Sigma_{22} & 0 & 0 \\
0 & 0 & \Sigma_{11} & \Sigma_{12} \\
0 & 0 & \Sigma_{21} & \Sigma_{22}
\end{pmatrix}
$$

(1)

where $\Sigma_{12}$ [$\Sigma_{11}$] denotes the $3 \times 3$ intersite [on-site] self-energy matrix in the space of the $t_{2g}$ orbitals. This is then
combined with $H_{\text{DMFT}}^{\text{LDA}}(\mathbf{k})$ in order to obtain the Green’s function at a given $\mathbf{k}$-point. After summation over $\mathbf{k}$, the intra-dimer block of the Green’s function $\hat{G}_{\text{inter}}^{\text{kin}}$ is extracted and used in the C-DMFT self-consistency condition. The 6-orbital impurity problem is solved by a numerically exact quantum Monte Carlo (QMC) scheme using up to 100 slices in imaginary time at temperatures down to 770 K. From the Green’s function on the imaginary-time axis we calculate the spectral function by using the maximum entropy technique.

We first discuss our results for the rutile phase (Fig.1). In this phase, we found that the results of single-site and cluster-DMFT calculations are indistinguishable for all practical purposes. Correlations reduce the total (occupied and unoccupied) bandwidth corresponding to the coherent part of the spectral density from 2.59 eV in LDA down to about 1.8 eV (see Fig. 1). This is consistent with the quasiparticle weight that we extract from the self-energy: $Z \approx 0.66$. Hence, the metallic phase of VO$_2$ can be characterized as a metal with an intermediate level of correlations. We observe however, that the occupied bandwidth is barely modified ($\sim 0.5\text{eV}$ in both the LDA and our results). This finding is in agreement with photoemission experiments [16, 17], and our work demonstrates that it is compatible with a local self-energy. A prominent quasi-particle coherence peak is found close to the Fermi level. This has recently been demonstrated experimentally in high photon energy bulk-sensitive photoemission experiments [17] (and is also suggested by low-photon energy PES provided surface contributions are subtracted [16]). Hubbard bands are apparent at higher energies, with a rather weak lower Hubbard band about $-1.5\text{ eV}$ below the Fermi level and a more pronounced upper Hubbard band at about $+2.5 - 3\text{ eV}$. The former has been observed in photoemission experiments [16, 17, 18], while the latter constitutes a prediction for BIS experiments. Finally, correlations result in a slight increase of the occupancy of the $a_{1g}$ band (0.42) relative to the $e^\pi_g$ ones (0.29, 0.29), in comparison to LDA: (0.36, 0.32, 0.32).

Figure 2 displays the spectral functions for the monoclinic phase calculated within cluster-DMFT in comparison with the LDA DOS. The key point is that inclusion of non-local self-energy effects succeeds in opening up a gap of about 0.6 eV, in reasonable agreement with experiments. Our calculations also yield a large redistribution of the electronic occupancies in favor of the $a_{1g}$ orbital which now carries 0.8 electrons per vanadium (with only $\sim (0.1, 0.1)$ remaining in the $e^\pi_g$ orbitals). This charge redistribution is a common feature of many models of VO$_2$, whether correlations- or band-driven, and is also observed in experiments. In the present context, the fact that the single electron occupies almost entirely the $a_{1g}$ orbital, together with the fact that $U$ is larger than the intra-dimer hopping (itself much bigger than other hoppings), means that the ground-state of each dimer is close to the Heitler-London limit. In this limit, one has two electrons with opposite spins on each site forming a singlet state, rather than an uncorrelated wave-function in which two electrons (per dimer) are placed in the bonding combination of atomic orbitals (hence a large double occupancy). The transition into the insulating state is facilitated by the Heitler-London stabilisation energy. This confirms the early proposal of Sommers and Doniach [3]. As a result, the dominant excitation when adding an electron in the $a_{1g}$ orbital costs an energy which is set by $U$. This is apparent on our spectra: the antibonding combination of $a_{1g}$ orbitals corresponding to the narrow peak at $\sim +1.5\text{ eV}$ present in the LDA calculation is replaced by a broad upper Hubbard band centered at $\sim +2.2\text{ eV}$.

FIG. 1: Spectral function for the rutile phase as calculated within DMFT with $U = 4\text{eV}$, $J = 0.68\text{eV}$ (solid lines) in comparison to the LDA DOS (dashed lines). The red (blue) lines show the partial contributions of the $a_{1g}$ ($e^\pi_g$) bands.

FIG. 2: Spectral function for the monoclinic phase as calculated within cluster-DMFT with $U = 4\text{eV}$, $J = 0.68\text{eV}$ (solid lines) in comparison to the LDA DOS (dashed lines). The red [blue] lines show the partial contributions of the $a_{1g}$ [$e^\pi_g$ (averaged)] bands.
Correspondingly, there is a (weak) lower Hubbard band at $\sim -1.8$ eV. The low-energy nature of this singlet insulator, however, is quite different from that of a standard Mott insulator in which local moments are formed in the insulator, but at an energy considerably below the gap appears in the insulator but at an energy $\sim -0.8$ eV below the gap, which carries most of the spectral weight for $\omega < 0$. This peak should not be interpreted as an incoherent lower Hubbard band, but rather as a quasiparticle which has been gapped out ($Z_i$ can be interpreted as the spectral weight of the gapped low-energy quasiparticle in the insulator). Hence, at low-energy, the physics is that of a renormalised Peierls insulator (analogously, a correlated Kondo insulator can be viewed as a renormalised hybridisation-gap insulator at low-energy). The bonding-antibonding splitting is renormalized down by correlations. Indeed, a weaker $a_{1g}$ peak is visible in our spectra at the upper gap edge, at an energy considerably smaller than the antibonding peak in the LDA DOS. The $e_g^\pi$ band, in contrast to the $a_{1g}$, is weakly correlated, as evident from the self-energy in Fig. 3 and expected from the low electron occupancy. Its bottom lies in the same energy range than the “renormalised” antibonding peak, so that the gap can as well be considered to open between the $a_{1g}$ and the $e_g^\pi$ band.

Finally, let us mention that we have discussed the results obtained for a specific choice of the interaction parameters $U = 4$ eV and $J = 0.68$ eV. We have actually performed calculations for other choices. In particular, we found that it is possible to stabilize an insulating state within C-DMFT for smaller values of $U$ (e.g $U = 2$ eV), but only if the Hund’s coupling $J$ is taken to be small (in which case it is easier to redistribute the charge towards the $a_{1g}$ orbital). Also, we emphasize that a single-site DMFT calculation can lead to an insulating state for rather large values of $U$ ($U \geq 5$ eV). However, this insulating solution is a conventional Mott insulator with a local moment, and therefore would display a large magnetic susceptibility which does not correspond to the actual physics of insulating VO$_2$.

In conclusion, we have presented LDA+CDMFT calculations for vanadium dioxide. Both the metallic rutile phase and the insulating monoclinic phase are correctly captured by this approach.

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