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# Quantum stochasticity and neuronal computations

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# Abstract

The nervous system probably cannot display macroscopic quantum (i.e. classically impossible) behaviours such as quantum entanglement, superposition or tunnelling (Koch and Hepp, Nature 440:611, 2006). However, in contrast to this quantum 'mysticism' there is an alternative way in which quantum events might influence the brain activity. The nervous system is a nonlinear system with many feedback loops at every level of its structural hierarchy. A conventional wisdom is that in macroscopic objects the quantum fluctuations are self-averaging and thus not important. Nevertheless this intuition might be misleading in the case of nonlinear complex systems. Because of a high sensitivity to initial conditions, in chaotic systems the microscopic fluctuations may be amplified upward and thereby affect the system's output. In this way stochastic quantum dynamics might sometimes alter the outcome of neuronal computations, not by generating classically impossible solutions, but by influencing the selection of many possible solutions (Satinover, Quantum Brain, Wiley & Sons, 2001). I am going to discuss recent theoretical proposals and experimental findings in quantum mechanics, complexity theory and computational neuroscience suggesting that biological evolution is able to take advantage of quantum-computational speed-up. I predict that the future research on quantum complex systems will provide us with novel interesting insights that might be relevant also for neurobiology and neurophilosophy.

Quantum Mind Conference 2007, Salzburg, Austria

# Definition

A **stochastic** system is one whose behavior is **indeterministic** in that its inputs and initial state do not fully determine its next state (output)

- The only **intrinsically** (objectively) **stochastic** (indeterministic) processes in physical world are **quantum processes**
- Does **quantum indeterminism** affect the **dynamics of neuronal networks**? Is our brain a deterministic machine or an indeterministic system?

**1. Criticism of quantum brain hypothesis**

**2. Two ways of taking advantage of quantum events in biology**

**3. Quantum neurophysiology – putative mechanisms of quantum computations in neuronal networks**

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# 1. Criticism of quantum brain hypothesis



Two main arguments:

**A.** neurons and neural networks are **too large** for quantum phenomena to play a significant role in their functioning.

→ all quantum events are **self-averaging**, so that fluctuations among quantum particles are not important

"Most biologists think that quantum effects all just **cancel out** in the brain."
Daniel Dennett

**B.** interaction of neurons/neuronal networks with their (noisy and warm) **environment** will **destroy** any **coherent** quantum states

# 1. Criticism of quantum brain hypothesis

NATURE|Vol 440|30 March 2006 ESSAY

## Quantum mechanics in the brain

Christof Koch and Klaus Hepp



“Molecular machines, such as ... pre- and post-synaptic receptors and the voltage- and ligand-gated channel proteins that ...underpin neuronal excitability, are **so large** that they can be treated as **classical objects**.”

“The critical question...is whether any components of the nervous system - a **300-degrees Kelvin** tissue **strongly coupled to its environment** - display macroscopic quantum behaviours, such as quantum *entanglement*“

“A neuron either spikes ...or it does not, but is not in a *superposition* of spike and nonspike states.”

**1. Criticism of quantum brain hypothesis**

**2. Two ways of taking advantage of quantum events in biology**

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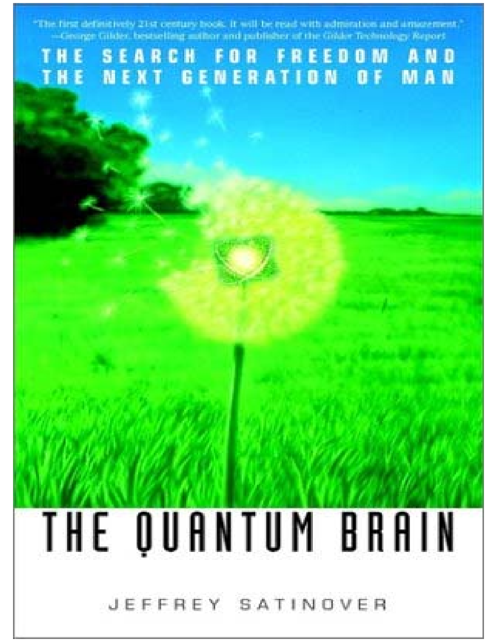
# 2. Two ways of quantum biological computations

• nervous system probably cannot display macroscopic quantum (classically impossible) behaviours such as quantum entanglement, superposition or tunnelling

however:

• there are two alternative (mutually related) ways in which quantum events might influence the brain activity

# 2. Two ways of quantum biological computations




1. quantum dynamics speeds up and modulates the computational processes at **microscopic** and **mesoscopic** levels for which **quantum effects** are **directly present**

   (biomolecules, e.g. enzymes, have **intrinsic, classically impossible, quantum properties** which are necessary for life to be possible at all)

2. because the brain is a **complex nonlinear** system, potentially capable of **chaotic** dynamics, it can **amplify** lowest scale **quantum** fluctuations upward, modulating larger-scale **macroscopic** activity patterns

# Quantum enzymology

NATURE | VOL 399 | 3 JUNE 1999 |

**Quantum enzymology**

**Tunnel vision**

**Dagmar Ringe and Gregory A. Petsko**

NATURE | VOL 399 | 3 JUNE 1999 |

**Enzyme dynamics and hydrogen tunnelling in a thermophilic alcohol dehydrogenase**

Amnon Kohen*, Raffaele Cannio†, Simonetta Bartolucci‡ & Judith P. Klinman*§

• empirical evidence shows that biomolecules (proteins, DNA) take **direct advantage of quantum effects** (in particular of **tunneling**)

• **protein folding** (into its functional three-dimensional structure) is a *minimization problem*

→ quantum tunneling of electrons and protons speeds up proper protein folding (even in a warm and noisy intracellular environment!)

→ quantum tunneling effects are involved in the **conformational changes** required for enzyme-mediated catalysis

NATURE|Vol 446|12 April 2007

BIOPHYSICS

# Quantum path to photosynthesis

Roseanne J. Sension



**Photosynthesis:**

**1.** *light excites* electrons in pigment molecules (chlorophyll)

**2.** *electronic excitation moves downhill* from higher energy level to lower energy level through the pigment molecules

**3.** the excitation is *trapped in a reaction centre*, where its remaining energy is used *to produce energy-rich carbohydrates*

**Computing problem:** to establish the easiest route for the electronic excitation (which transfers the energy downhill) to the reaction complex

NATURE|Vol 446|12 April 2007

BIOPHYSICS

# Quantum path to photosynthesis

Roseanne J. Sension

## Evidence for wavelike energy transfer through quantum coherence in photosynthetic systems

Gregory S. Engel[1,2], Tessa R. Calhoun[1,2], Elizabeth L. Read[1,2], Tae-Kyu Ahn[1,2], Tomáš Mančal[1,2]†, Yuan-Chung Cheng[1,2], Robert E. Blankenship[3,4] & Graham R. Fleming[1,2]

**Solution:**

- a clever quantum computation built into the photosynthetic algorithm
- (quantum) coherent energy transfer allows the ‘wavelike’ sampling of the energy landscape to find the easiest route for the electronic excitation
- the electronic excitation samples two or more states simultaneously
- much faster than the semi-classical (incoherent) mechanism
- the process is analogous to Grover’s algorithm in quantum computing

**Conclusion:** it is possible that evolution selected inherently quantum-mechanical process for the fast and efficient mechanism of light energy harvesting

EMBO *reports* VOL 7 | NO 10 | 2006

# A quantum leap in biology

*Philip Hunter*



**deterministic molecular mechanics vs. quantum molecular ‚mechanics‘ (Density functional theory)**

• whenever electrons and their associated energies need to be considered explicitly, quantum physics steps in (→ Schrödinger‘s equation)

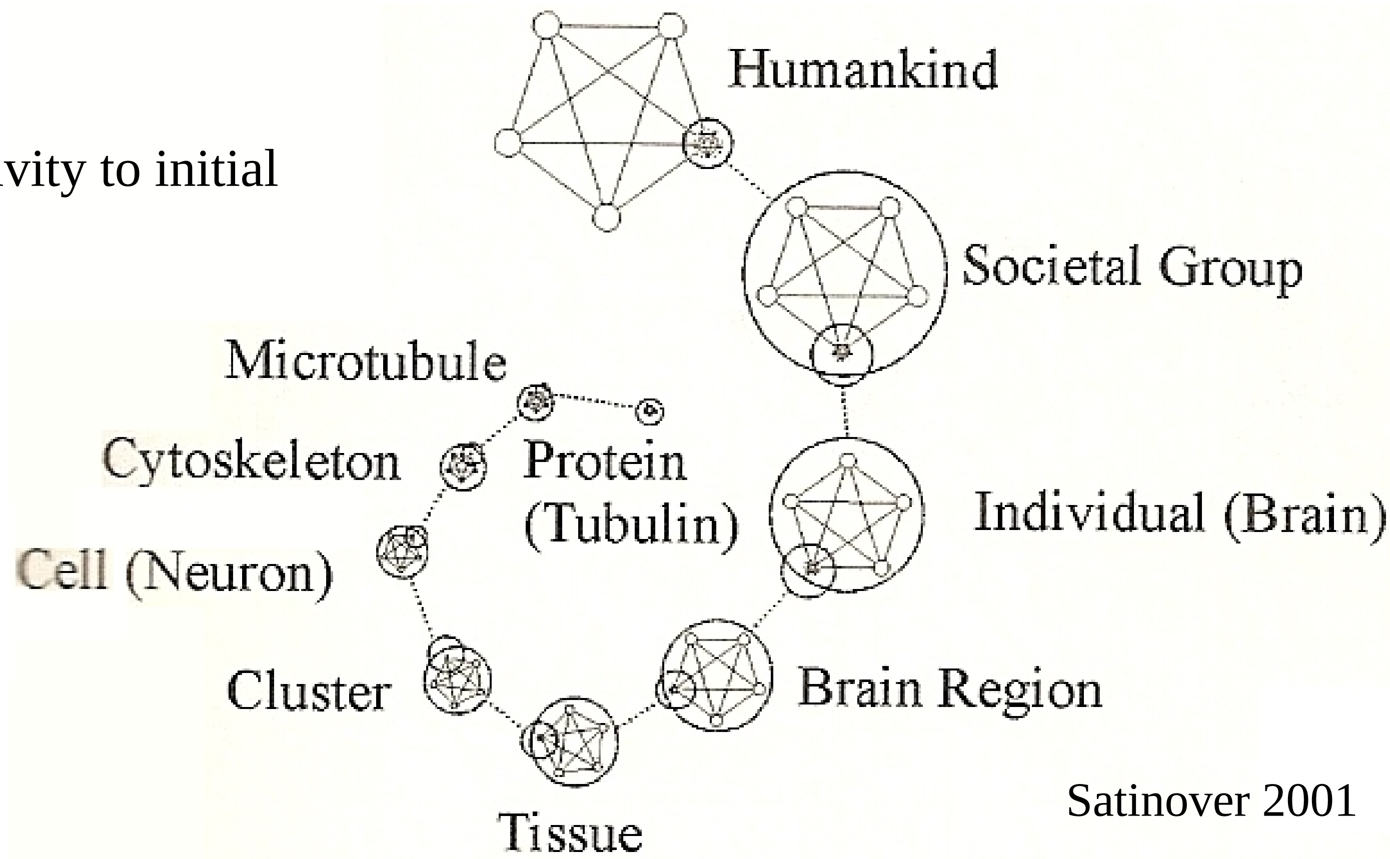
• DFT replaces the individual electrons of a molecule with a single electronic density function

• examples: enzymatic reactions, photoreception, molecular motor proteins

# Nested hierarchy of nonlinear complex networks



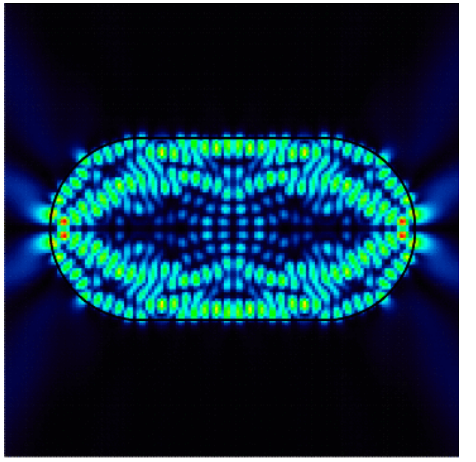
Extreme sensitivity to initial conditions




Satinover 2001

- In **iterative** hierarchies with **nonlinear** dynamics (prone to chaos), small (even infinitesimal) **fluctuations** are **not averaged away**, they can be **amplified**!
- Brain structure is iterative and its activity is prone to chaos

# Quantum nonlinear (chaotic) systems



- 4 kinds of dynamic systems:

1. nonchaotic: a) classical – regular, objectively predictable

   b) quantum – irregular, objectively unpredictable

2. **chaotic** a) classical – irregular, subjectively unpredictable

   **b) quantum** – probabilistic and regular, upredictable

- Paradoxically, quantum effects **stabilize** the behavior of (classically) **chaotic systems**
- At finite temperatures, **quantum coherence** can create **new patterns at a mesoscopic scale**
- Quantum chaotic systems can exhibit **persistent „fuzzy“ regular patterns**

# Summary I

1. **Quantum effects** are **directly present** at **microscopic** and **mesoscopic** levels speeding up biological processes (protein folding, enzymatic reactions, etc.)

2. Lowest scale quantum effects influence the initial state of the next scale, while the higher levels shape the boundary conditions of the lower scales. This **hierarchy of nested networks** with many feedback loops **amplifies the quantum events**

**Conclusion:** quantum dynamics influences the computation at all levels (proteins, metabolic pathways, cells, cellular networks, etc.) – not by producing classically impossible solutions but by having a profound effect on which of many possible solutions are selected (Satinover 2001)

Nature Precedings : doi:10.1038/npre.2009.3702.1 : Posted 31 Aug 2009

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# 3. Quantum neurophysiology – putative mechanisms of quantum computations in neuronal networks



| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Neuronal signaling: | 1. electric | 2. biochemical |

**A. transmembrane:** synaptic transmission (receptors)
intrinsic excitability (ion channels)

**B. cytoplasmic:** biochemical networks (kinases, phosphatases)

**C. nuclear:** genetic networks (gene expression)

Where can we find stochastic processes?

Everywhere…

Small number of molecules (vesicles for release, postsynaptic receptors, signaling molecules in spines) → stochastic nature of synaptic plasticity regulation

# 3. Quantum neurophysiology – putative mechanisms of quantum computations in neuronal networks

*TINS* Vol. 23, No. 3, 2000

**Channel noise in neurons**

John A. White, Jay T. Rubinstein and Alan R. Kay

*Neural Computation* **10, 1679–1703** (1998)

**Ion Channel Stochasticity May Be Critical in Determining the Reliability and Precision of Spike Timing**

Elad Schneidman, Barry Freedman, and Idan Segev

- probabilistic gating of voltage-dependent ion channels is a source of electrical ‘channel noise’ in neurons

- channel noise limits the reliability (repeatability) of neuronal responses

- channel stochasticity increases the range of spiking behaviors

- channel noise enhances information coding abilities of neurons

# 3. Quantum neurophysiology – putative mechanisms of quantum computations in neuronal networks



**Synaptic transmission** in the central nervous system has a **stochastic character**:

- when an action potential invades the presynaptic terminal there is a low release probability (20%)

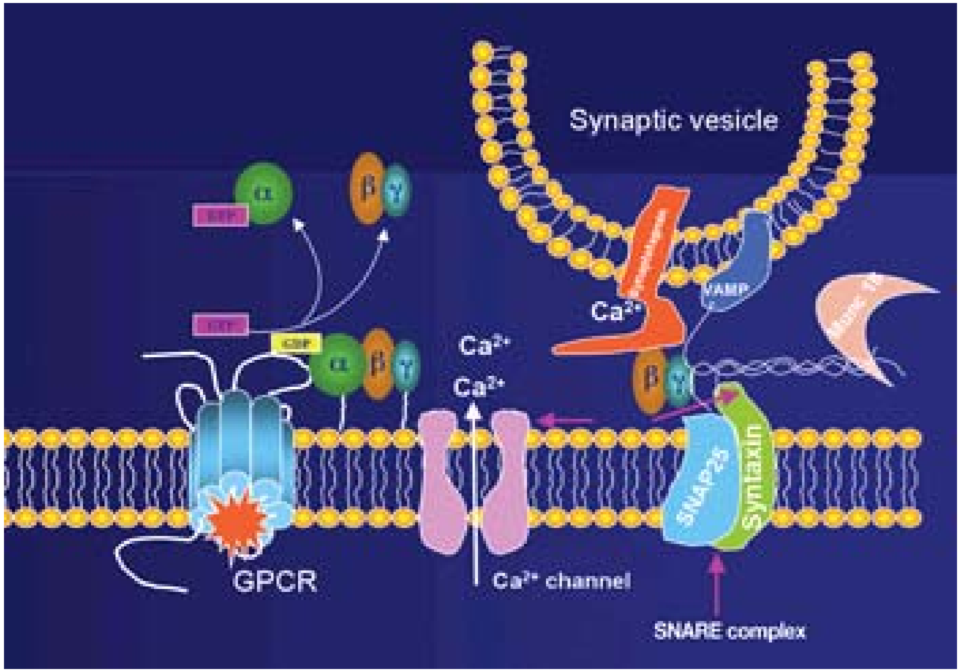
  → vesicular **neurotransmitter release** as a random **Poisson-like process**

- some synapses possess a small number of **postsynaptic receptors**, receptor fluctuations can influence postsynaptic responses

# 3. Quantum neurophysiology – putative mechanisms of quantum computations in neuronal networks



Stochastic neurotransmitter release

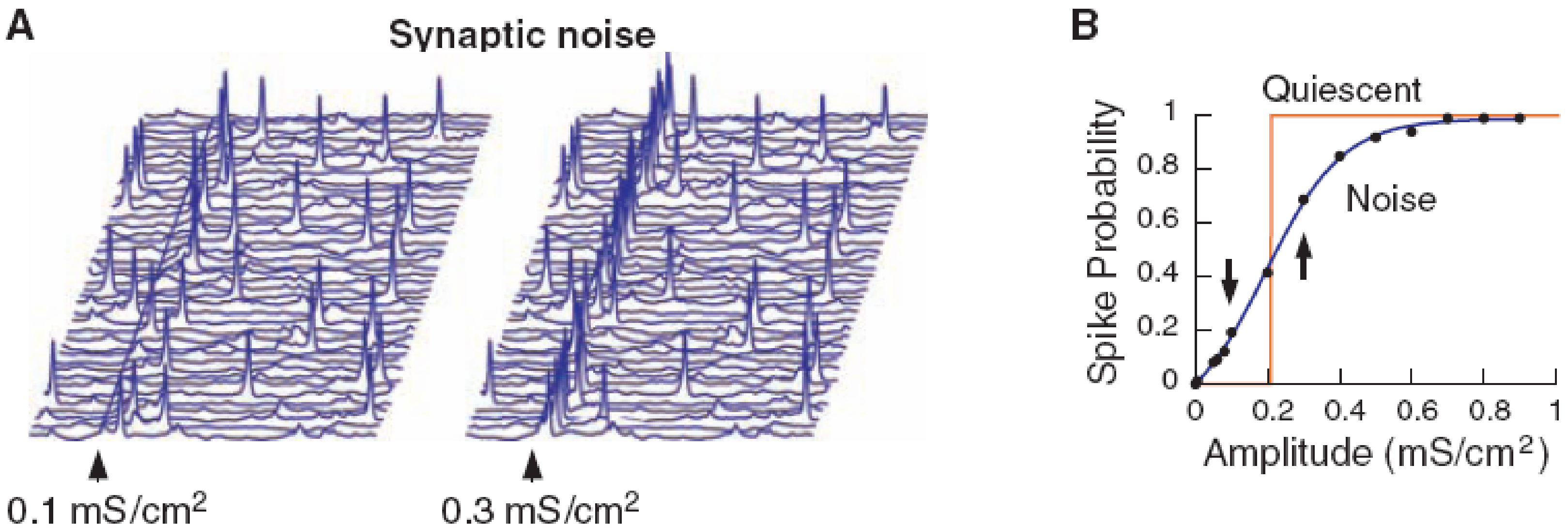



• Stochastic modeling of transmitter release can account for the synaptic plasticity data better than a deterministic model (Cai et al. J Neurophysiol 2007)

# 3. Quantum neurophysiology – putative mechanisms of quantum computations in neuronal networks

Impact of synaptic noise on input-output relationships of single neurons



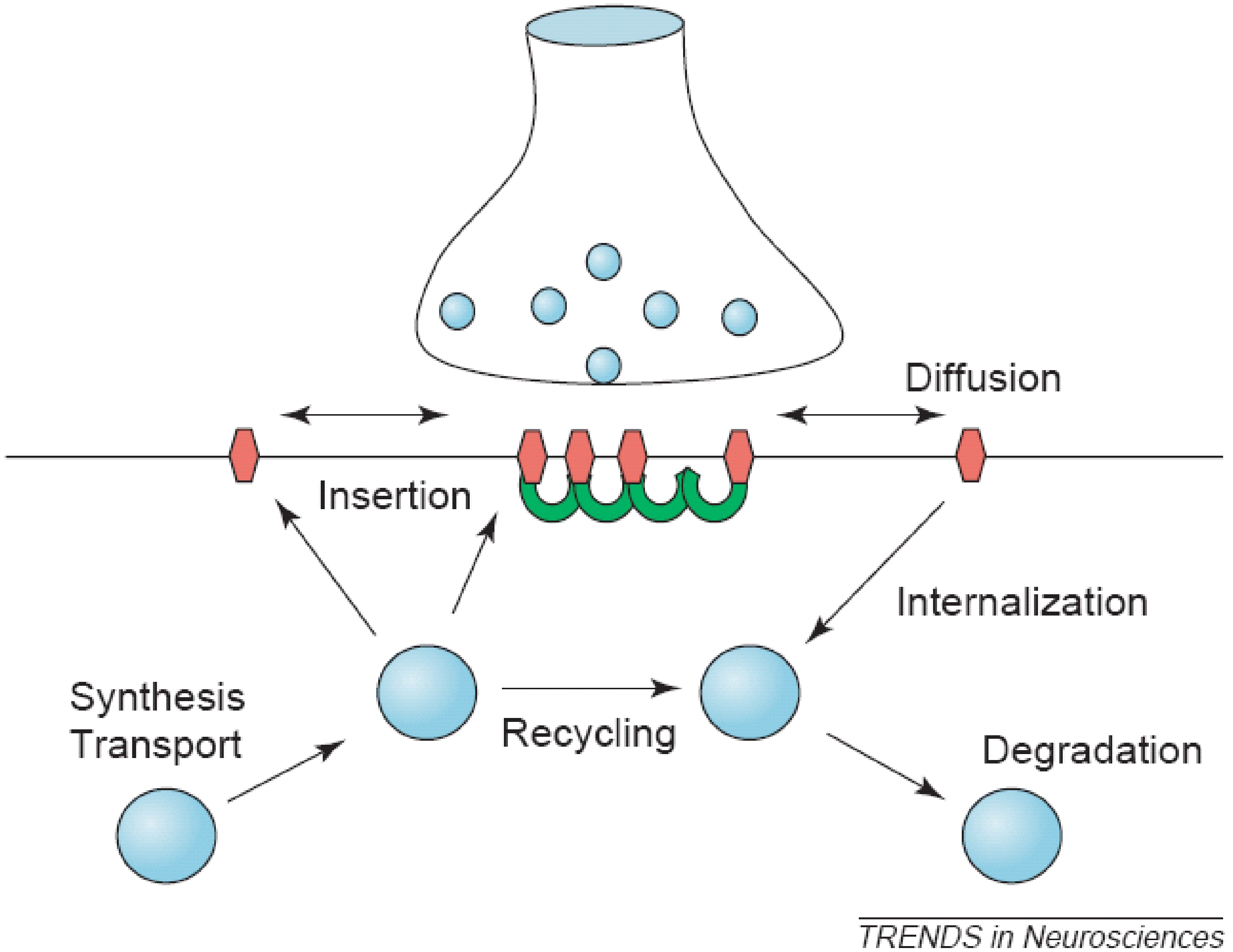



Destexhe and Contreras Science 2006

• in quiescent conditions: input-output curve is all-or-none

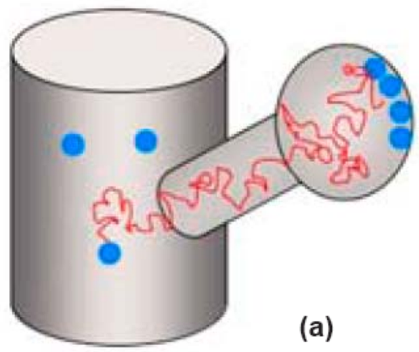
• with synaptic noise, subthreshold stimuli are boosted, while suprathreshold stimuli are attenuated

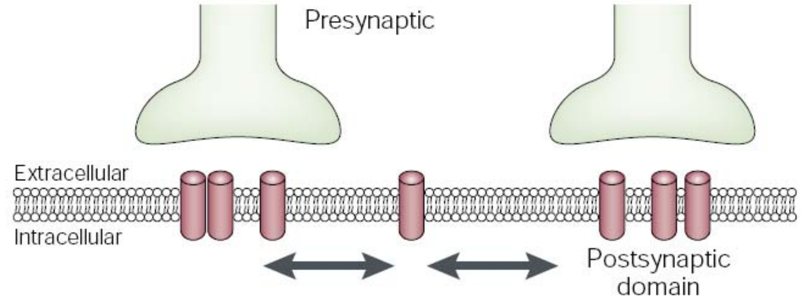
# Postsynaptic trafficking of receptors




Triller and Choquet 2003 TINS

# Postsynaptic membrane as a stochastic nanomachine

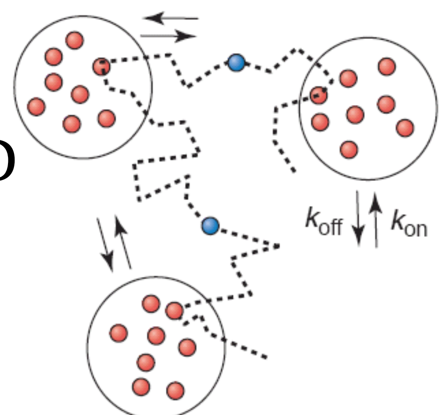


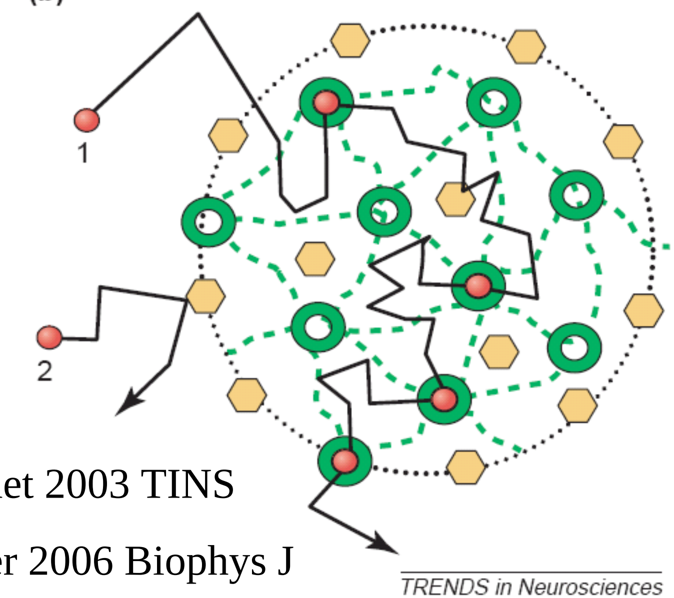



(a)

(b)

PSD



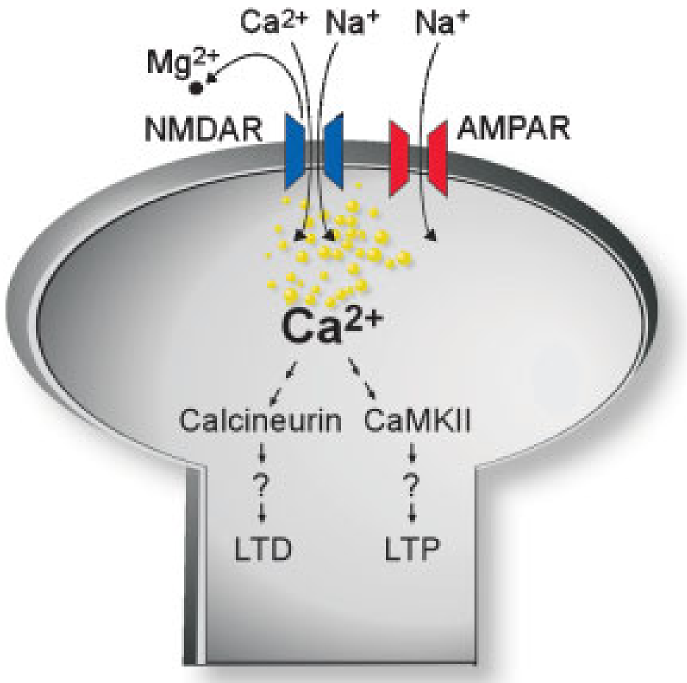

Triller and Choquet 2003 TINS

Holcman & Triller 2006 Biophys J

- Receptors traffic by random motion in and out from the PSD
- In the PSD they can be stabilized by binding to scaffolding proteins
- When a few (<15) receptors are involved, a stochastic model is necessary

# Stochastic calcium signaling in synaptic spines






Franks & Sejnowski, Bioessays 2002

- Stochastic nature of signaling becomes important when the number of molecules is small
- E.g., a 50 nm calcium concentration in a dendritic spine → 3 free calcium ions;

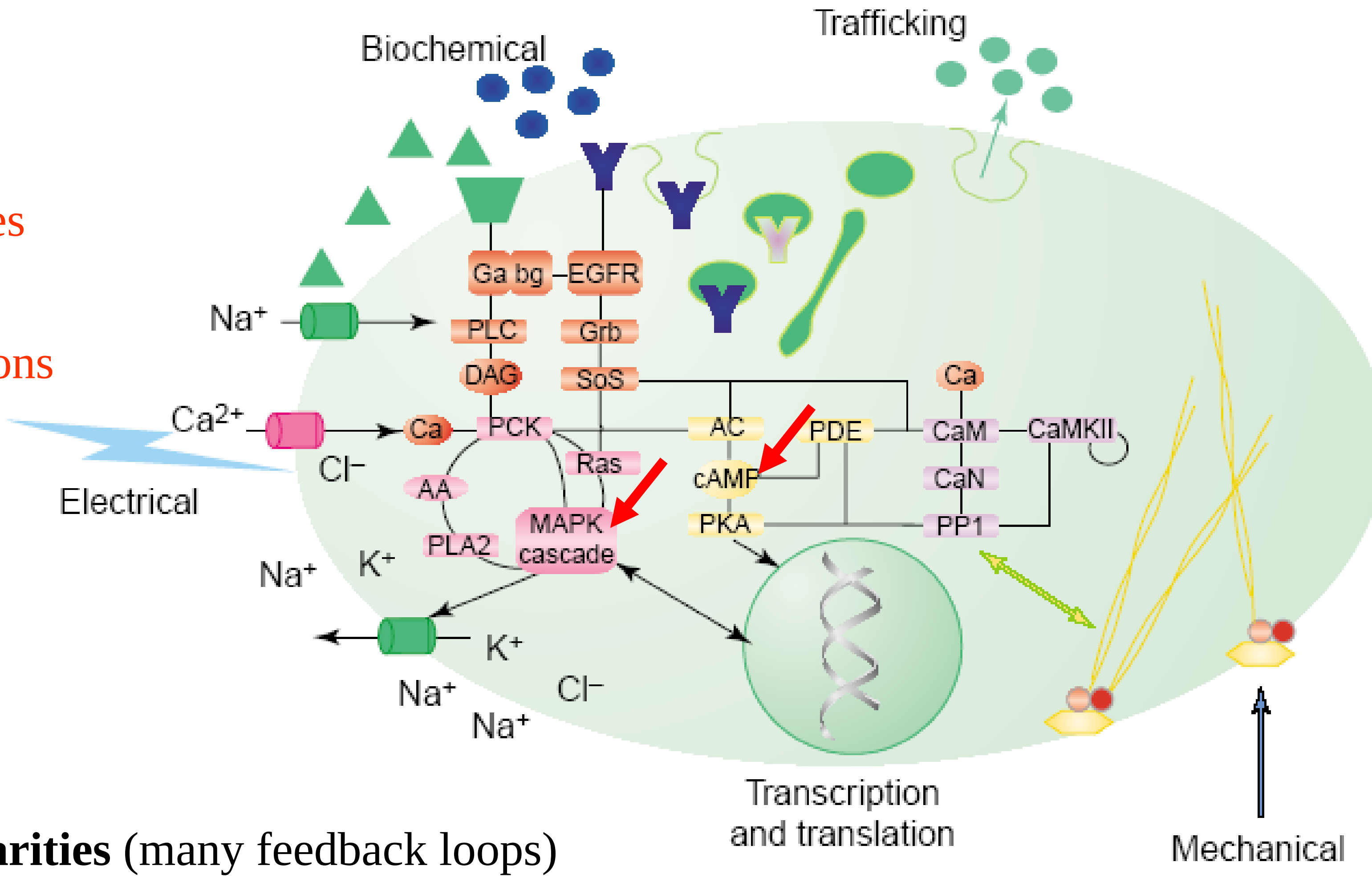
  1 mM (calcium able to induce biochemical changes) → 60 free ions

→ Stochastic modeling (Monte-Carlo simulations) is needed to represent the postsynaptic calcium signaling realistically

# Stochastic signaling in biochemical intraneuronal networks

**Nodes:**
molecules

**Links:**
interactions



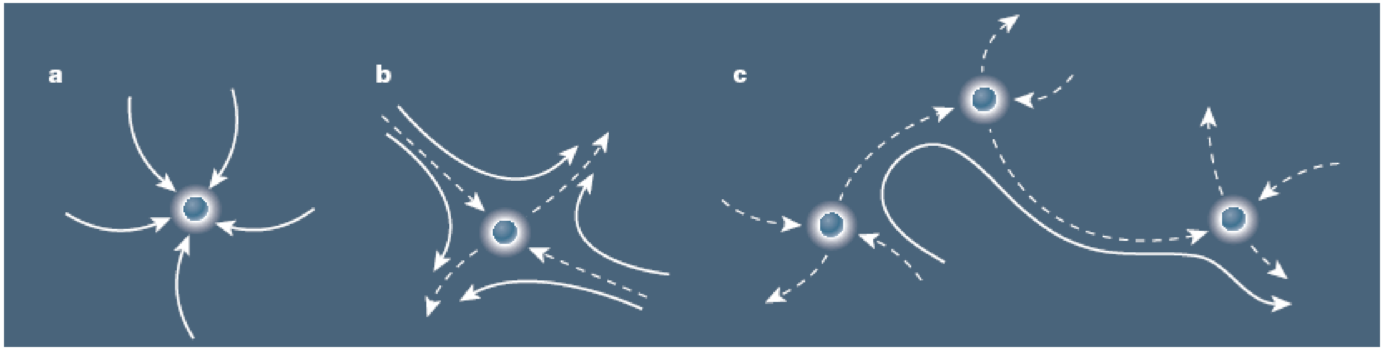

modified after Bhalla, Curr Op Genet Develop 2004

- **nonlinearities** (many feedback loops)
- **self-similar**, **scale-free** structure
- functional **modules** (amplifiers, filters, switches, oscillators, etc.)
- **stochastic events**

NONLINEAR DYNAMICS NATURE|Vol 436|7 July 2005

# When instability makes sense

Peter Ashwin and Marc Timme

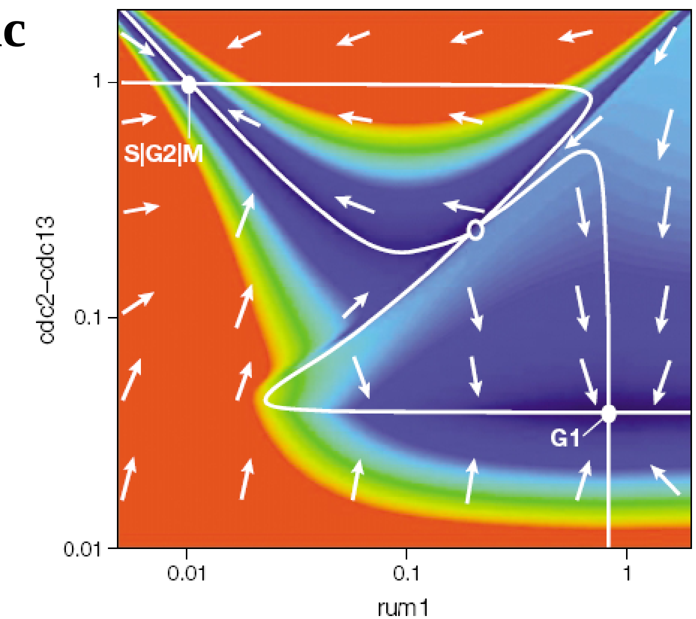



**Network** of interacting **proteins/genes** is a **dynamic system**

**State**: a point in a multidimensional system

Change: **vectors** defined by kinetic equations

**Bifurcation** points: thresholds




Feedback loops → instabilities → **state transitions**

Tyson et al. Nat Rev Mol Biol 2001

Stochastic kinetic equations: **quantum phase transitions**? (Coleman, Nature 2007)

# Biochemical regulation at the nanomolar scale: it's a noisy business!



- Stochastic **genetic** expression has been observed directly (intrinsic vs. extrinsic noise)

- Molecular stochastic **fluctuations** play an important role in determining cellular functions by inducing spontaneous **state transitions** (e.g. in a **bistable** molecular **LTP/LTD switch** in **synaptic plasticity** )

- A theory combining cellular regulatory **modules** and **stochastic dynamics** is emerging

- **Nonintuitive** cellular/organismal **responses** driven by **molecular fluctuations → powerful new signaling** and regulatory **modes**

McAdams and Arkin, Trends in Genet 1999

Goutsias, Biophys J 2007

Samoilov, Price & Arkin, Sci. STKE 2006

Song et al. Biophys J 2006

# Biological benefits of stochastic mechanisms

- Increase of **variability**, diversity, flexibility, novelty → **increase of survival**

  (unpredictabile behavior in a competitive environment,
  better adaptation over a wide range of environments,
  broader spectrum of internal states)

- Interaction of **stochasticity** with **nonlinearities** leads to **novel and even paradoxical neuronal dynamics**! (Swain and Longtin, Chaos 2006; Destexhe and Contreras, Science 2006):

  - benefitial to associative memories by avoiding convergence to spurious states
  - enables networks to follow high-frequency stimuli
  - boosts the propagation of complex waves of activity
  - enhances input detection abilities
  - enables rapid neuronal responses
  - sustains faithful propagation of firing rates

# Summary II

Neuronal computations are **inherently stochastic** at all levels:
**transmembrane** (ion channel noise and synaptic noise)
**cytoplasmic** (stochastic protein interactions)
**nuclear** (stochastic gene expression)

↓

„**Membrane voltage** is the product of interactions at the atomic level, many of which are **governed by quantum physics**.

… interactions between **action potentials** and **transmitter release** as well as interactions between transmitter molecules and **postsynaptic receptors** … seem likely to be **fundamentally indeterminate**.“

Glimcher Annu. Rev. Psychol. 2005

# Outlook – interesting research problems

- Quantum - **intrinsic** sources vs. **extrinsic** sources of stochasticity (environment, thermal noise)

- **Quantum chaotic** activity **patterns** at a mesoscopic scale – quantum complex phenomena in neurobiology

- Quantum neurophysiology of **consciousness, free will** – quantum stochasticity in simple vs. complex systems

  (**emergence** of novel dynamics and properties)