

## ELECTRON COLLISIONS IN HARSH ENVIRONMENTS

Faure, A.<sup>1</sup> and Tennyson, J.<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract.

We present our most recent **R**-matrix calculations on the electron-impact rotational excitation of astronomically important molecules. We show that electron collisions are very efficient in producing rotationally 'hot' molecules in harsh environments.

### 1 Introduction

Rate coefficients for the collisional excitation of molecules by electrons are crucial parameters for modelling the physical conditions of harsh environments such as diffuse interstellar clouds or photo-dissociation regions (PDRs), where electrons are abundant (Black 1998). In fact, even at modest electron fractions,  $n(e)/n(H) \approx 10^{-5}$ , electron collisions can dominate the molecular excitation because electron-impact collisional rates exceed that for excitation by neutral species (mainly H, He and H<sub>2</sub>) by typically 5 orders of magnitude.

The reference methods for obtaining electron-impact excitation rates have been the Coulomb-Born approximation for molecular ions and the Born approximation for neutral species. These methods assume that the collisional excitation rates can be simply determined by the dominant long-range interaction. Within this approach, these theories predict that only single jumps in rotational quanta are allowed for polar species. Recent **R**-matrix studies have shown that this prediction is incorrect (Faure & Tennyson 2003 and references therein). Indeed, **R**-matrix calculations have shown that the inclusion of short-range interactions can lead to rotational transitions with  $\Delta J$  up to 6.

### 2 Results

In environments below the critical density, it has often been assumed that molecular ions rotationally excited by electron impacts will emit  $j = 1 \rightarrow 0$  photons only.

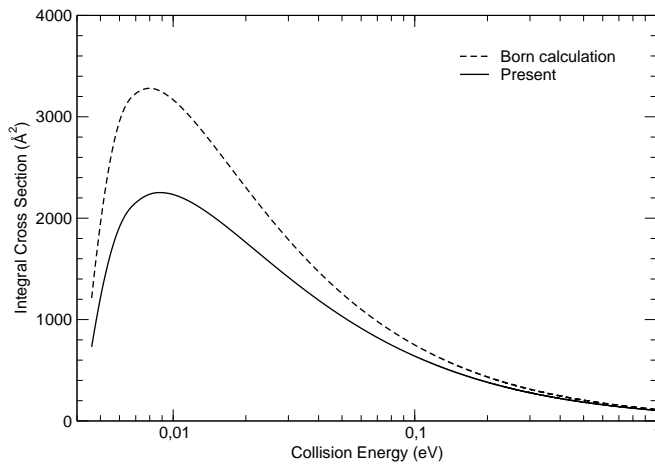
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<sup>1</sup> Laboratoire d'Astrophysique, Observatoire de Grenoble, BP 53, 38041 Grenoble Cédex 09, France

<sup>2</sup> Department of Physics and Astronomy, University College London, Gower Street, WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

Our recent **R**-matrix calculations have shown that in all cases considered so far a significant flux from higher rotational states should also be emitted. In particular, Faure & Tennyson (2003) have shown that electron collisions might contribute to the pumping of a maser in the  $(4, 4) \rightarrow (3, 1)$  transition of  $\text{H}_3^+$  at 217 GHz.

In the case of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ , Faure et al. (2003) have found that the dominant transitions are those for which  $\Delta J = 0, \pm 1$ , as predicted by the dipolar Born approximation. However, a pure Born treatment was found to overestimate the cross sections close to threshold energies (see figure) and to neglect important dipole-forbidden transitions. In the context of cometary water, the contribution of electron collisions might thus explain the need for large  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ - $\text{H}_2\text{O}$  collisional excitation rates in population models which neglect electrons.



**Fig. 1.** Rotational excitation cross section for the  $0_{00} - 1_{11}$  transition in  $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ . Our results are represented by the solid line. The dashed line gives the pure Born calculation.

### 3 Conclusion

We have shown that electron-impact excitation is a very efficient process to rotationally excite molecules in harsh environments. An important prediction concerns the contribution of electron collisions to the pumping of cosmic masers.

### References

- Black, J., 1998, *Faraday Discuss.*, 109, 257  
 Faure, A., Tennyson, J., 2003, *MNRAS*, 340, 468  
 Faure, A., Gorfinkiel J. D., Tennyson, J., *MNRAS*, submitted