Quantum mechanical modeling of crystal structures is limited by the extensive calculations involved, as well as by the prior need to know how the atoms are arranged. As a result the ionic model is often preferred for predicting crystal structures. Its classical two-body potential is simpler, making it feasible to model dynamic processes or to start the modeling with a random array of atoms, but the two-body potential ignores the important interaction between the bonds by requiring fixed targets for the bond lengths. Bond valences provide an alternative development of the ionic model. The electrostatic flux that links neighboring atoms is identified with the traditional chemical bond. Each bond is characterized by a flux, also known as its bond valence, that is closely correlated with its length, but the flux theory allows the use of a different set of classical electrostatic theorems. It cannot provide the energy of the crystal, but it complements energy-based models by providing the initial atomic positions required by the Schrödinger equation, and the interaction between neighboring bonds that is missing from the two-body potential model (Brown 2014).

The flux theory shows that for inorganic compounds the ionic model correctly describes both ionic and covalent interactions (Brown 2014). Each atom is represented by a point charge equal to its valence, and this generates a spherically symmetric distribution of the flux, leading to a symmetric arrangement of the bonds around most atoms. However, around some atoms, for example those with stereoactive lone pairs, this symmetry is broken. An article in this issue by Wander and Bickmore (2016) suggests that where this symmetry is broken, the distribution of flux around an atom can be expanded in a series of spherical harmonics. The monopole term describes the total flux incident on the atom, the dipole term describes the non-centrosymmetric distortions, and the quadrupole term describes the centrosymmetric distortion observed in the environments of Cu(II) and Mn(III). Wander and Bickmore show how the size of these multipoles can be determined using bond-valence vectors calculated from the observed lengths and directions of the bonds.

Their proposal can be developed in a number of different ways. For example anisotropy can be introduced into modeling by assigning values to the multipoles that seamlessly modify the flux field of the monopole, but Wander and Bickmore use the multipole expansion in a different way to construct a classical force field with which to calculate the energy. Instead of expressing this field in terms of the bond lengths, it is expressed in terms of the bond fluxes (bond valences), allowing it to incorporate the electrostatic theorems that describe the behavior of chemical bonds. The most powerful of these theorems is Gauss’ law, also known as the valence sum rule: the total flux passing through a closed surface is equal to the enclosed charge. This rule describes the interaction between the bonds and replaces the fixed bond-length targets of the traditional two-body potential. Similarly, the target dipole moment for a stereoactive lone pair can be calculated on the fly from the valence of the strongest bond formed by the lone-pair atom, as pointed out by the authors in an earlier paper (Bickmore et al. 2013).

The proof of concept described by Wander and Bickmore (2016) shows that by fitting the multipole parameters to a calibration set of aluminosilicate mineral structures, they were able to reproduce the energies of a second independent set of minerals to within 5 Kcal/mole per atom. As they point out, much work still needs to be done to extend their approach to structures containing a more varied group of elements having more significant dipole and quadrupole moments, but their paper shows how it is possible to combine the best features of two different but complementary models.

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