Temperature-Dependent Magnetoelectric Effect from First Principles

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We show that nonrelativistic exchange interactions and spin fluctuations can give rise to a linear magnetoelectric effect in collinear antiferromagnets at elevated temperatures that can exceed relativistic magnetoelectric responses by more than 1 order of magnitude. We show how symmetry arguments, ab initio methods, and Monte Carlo simulations can be combined to calculate temperature-dependent magnetoelectric susceptibilities entirely from first principles. The application of our method to Cr$_2$O$_3$ gives quantitative agreement with experiment.

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Introduction.—Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in materials with coupled electric and magnetic dipoles motivated by the prospect of controlling spins with applied voltages and charges with applied magnetic fields in novel multifunctional devices. The simplest form of such a control is the linear magnetoelectric (ME) coupling between electric polarization and an applied magnetic field or, conversely, between magnetization and an applied electric field. Although the linear ME effect was theoretically predicted and experimentally discovered more than 50 years ago [1], finding technologically useful materials displaying strong ME coupling at room temperature remains a challenging problem [2].

Recent progress in the related field of multiferroic materials, in which ferroelectric polarizations are induced by noncentrosymmetric magnetic orderings, has led to a clarification of the microscopic origins for ME coupling [3]. In particular, two distinct coupling mechanisms have been identified. The first arises from relativistic effects linking electron spin and orbital momentum, resulting in the antisymmetric $S_1 \times S_2$ interaction between spins of different magnetic ions. The strength of this Dzyaloshinskii–Moriya interaction depends on polar displacements of ions, which can make magnets with noncollinear spiral orders becoming ferroelectric [4–7]. In the second mechanism, polar deformations of the lattice are induced by Heisenberg spin exchange interactions $S_1 \cdot S_2$, originating from the Fermi statistics of electrons [8,9]. This nonrelativistic mechanism can give rise to stronger spin-lattice couplings than those resulting from relativistic effects, which tend to be relatively weak in 3D transition metal compounds. Indeed, in multiferroics, the electric polarizations induced by exchange interactions in $Y_{1-x}$Lu$_x$MnO$_3$ and GdFeO$_3$ exceed the largest polarizations observed in spiral multiferroics by 1 order of magnitude [10,11]. It was recently suggested that Heisenberg exchange can also give rise to a relatively strong linear ME effect [12] which, however, seemed to require rather special noncollinear spin orderings and crystal structures, making it difficult to find such materials in nature.

In this Letter, we show that the Heisenberg exchange mechanism also works in antiferromagnets with simple collinear orderings. It gives rise to a ME effect that reaches its maximum at elevated temperatures where spin fluctuations are large. As an example, we use Cr$_2$O$_3$ — the first material in which the linear ME effect was discovered. By computing the temperature-dependent ME susceptibility of this material entirely from first principles, we show that its strong temperature dependence originates from the exchange mechanism.

This is not a straightforward computation since the ME response driven by Heisenberg interactions, which is strong at elevated temperatures, completely vanishes at zero temperature where ab initio methods apply. To circumvent this problem we extract the relevant ME couplings by calculating the electric polarizations of artificially imposed multiferroic spin orderings at zero temperature. The magnetoelectric susceptibility is then expressed in terms of spin correlation functions, which are calculated by using Monte Carlo simulations of the magnetic state at various temperatures. We show that spin fluctuations play a crucial role in the ME response of collinear magnets.

This work extends first-principles studies of magnetoelectric materials beyond their current boundaries and provides a unified approach to seemingly different phenomena, such as the linear ME effect and multiferroicity. It clarifies the dominant mechanism of the ME coupling in Cr$_2$O$_3$ and accurately describes the temperature dependence of its response with no adjustable parameters. Furthermore, since collinear antiferromagnets with high ordering temperatures are not uncommon, our study opens a route to engineering strong ME responses at room temperature.

Origin of strong magnetoelectric coupling in Cr$_2$O$_3$.—

The ME effect in Cr$_2$O$_3$ was predicted phenomenologically by Dzyaloshinskii [1] and measured by Astrov [13] shortly after the theoretical prediction. Cr$_2$O$_3$ has four magnetic Cr$^{3+}$ ions in the rhombohedral unit cell. Below $T_N = 307$ K, it develops a collinear $[1][1]$ spin ordering along the trigonal $z$ axis [14] [see Fig. 1(a)]. This ordering...
The combination of scalar products in the right-hand side of Eq. (2) transforms in the same way as $P^c$; this can be seen by inspection of Table I, which shows how the four inequivalent magnetic sites transform under the symmetry operations of Cr$_2$O$_3$.

Equation (2) is clearly appropriate for describing electric polarization induced by spin ordering in a multiferroic material. In addition, it applies to the linear ME effect, as can be seen from the following heuristic argument: In an applied magnetic field $H$, the average value of spin on the sublattice $\alpha$ changes by $\langle \delta S^z_{\alpha, i} \rangle \propto \chi_{\parallel} H^z$, where $\chi_{\parallel}$ is the longitudinal magnetic susceptibility. Equation (2) then gives $P^c \propto \lambda \chi_{\parallel} \langle \delta S^z_{\alpha, i} \rangle H^z \propto \lambda \chi_{\parallel} G^* H^z$, consistent with $P^c = -2 \frac{\partial F_{\text{me}}}{\partial H^z} = \alpha_{\parallel} H^z$ obtained from Eq. (1).

Equation (2) is meaningful only within the mean-field approach. To account for effects of spin fluctuations on the ME response of Cr$_2$O$_3$, we will use the microscopic expression for the exchange-driven polarization in terms of scalar products of Cr spins (rather than the sublattice magnetizations), which has the form

$$P^c = \frac{\lambda}{6N} \sum_j \sum_{n=1}^6 (S_{1,j} \cdot S_{3,j-b_n} - S_{2,j} \cdot S_{4,j-b_n}).$$

Here $j$ labels unit cells, $N$ is the total number of unit cells, $b_1 = a_1$, $b_2 = a_2$, $b_3 = a_3$, $b_4 = a_1 + a_2$, $b_5 = a_2 + a_3$, and $b_6 = a_1 + a_4$, $\lambda$ being the rhombohedral unit vectors). Remarkably, the exchange interaction between the fourth nearest-neighbor Cr ions separated by the distance $r_{1,3-a_1} = r_{1,3-a_1-a_2} = 3.65$ Å turns out to give rise to the linear ME effect in Cr$_2$O$_3$. The shorter-range exchange interactions do not couple the sublattices 1 and 3 (or 2 and 4) and, therefore, do not contribute to $P^c$, while other interactions between these sublattices correspond to much longer exchange paths and are negligibly small. This allows us to accurately pinpoint the microscopic origin of the strong ME effect in Cr$_2$O$_3$.

Importantly, Eqs. (2) and (3) apply to any four-sublattice spin ordering in Cr$_2$O$_3$. The $\|\|$ spin ordering realized in the low-temperature ground state of Cr$_2$O$_3$ induces no electric polarization, and so a straightforward density-functional study of Cr$_2$O$_3$ does not give information about $\alpha_{\parallel}$ at finite temperatures. However, the $\|\|$ ordering shown in Fig. 1(b) renders Cr$_2$O$_3$ multiferroic and induces the electric polarization

$$P \propto P^c(\|\|) = 2\lambda S^z.$$

We next extract $\lambda$ by using $ab\ initio$ methods by enforcing...
Subsequently, the Heisenberg exchange couplings express the temperature-dependent ME coefficient terms of spin correlation functions:

$$\alpha_{||} = \frac{\partial (P^c)}{\partial H^z} \bigg|_{H^z=0} = \frac{2\mu_B}{k_B T} \left\langle P^c \sum_{\alpha,j} S^z_{\alpha,j} \right\rangle,$$

where $\langle \ldots \rangle$ denotes the thermal average at temperature $T$, $k_B$ is the Boltzmann constant, and $\mu_B$ is the Bohr magneton.

In the mean-field approximation (details in supplementary material [27]) one obtains [16,17]

$$\alpha_{||} = \frac{\lambda v_0 G^z \chi_{\perp}}{8 \mu_B},$$

where $v_0$ is the unit cell volume, in agreement with the simple argument given above. The mean-field expression qualitatively explains the observed temperature dependence of $\alpha_{||}$: It first grows, together with the order parameter $G^z$, as the temperature drops below $T_N$, and then subsequently decreases and vanishes at $T = 0$, together with the longitudinal magnetic susceptibility $\chi_{\perp}$.

In Ref. [18] an attempt was made to take into account the effects of spin fluctuations by using a higher-order decoupling scheme. This approximation fails, however, close to the transition temperature where spin fluctuations are large. We include spin fluctuations by calculating $\alpha_{||}$ numerically by using Monte Carlo simulations of a system of 864 classical spins with exchange constants and the magnetoelectric coupling $\lambda$ obtained from our first-principles calculations, as described above.

In a finite-sized system of Heisenberg spins, the antiferromagnetic order parameter is free to rotate during the simulation, which corresponds to exploration of different domains. The correlation function on the right-hand side of Eq. (5) is zero unless a single antiferromagnetic domain is selected. We therefore apply to our system a weak staggered field along the $z$ axis, $h(-)^z$, where $\alpha = 1, 2, 3, 4$ labels magnetic sublattices. This field mimics the presence of the magnetic easy axis of Cr$_2$O$_3$ as well as the magnetoelectric annealing used in experiment to select the domain with a given sign of magnetic order parameter. The field strength was chosen so that it is small compared to the scale of exchange interactions but large enough to make the Monte Carlo results independent of $h$.

Figure 2 shows the temperature dependence of $\alpha_{||}$ obtained from Monte Carlo simulations (blue circles) and in the mean-field approximation described above (red solid line). The onset of the ME response in our Monte Carlo simulations, as well as the sharp peak in the specific heat (inset), shows that the antiferromagnetic order sets in at $\sim$290 K, close to the experimentally observed transition
temperature $T_N = 307$ K. The maximal value of the ME coefficient obtained from our simulations is $0.9 \times 10^{-4}$ (in Gaussian units), in excellent agreement with the experimental value of $1.0 \times 10^{-4}$ (see Ref. [15]). The maximum value is reached at $\sim 240$ K that compares well to $T_{\text{max}} \sim 260$ K found in experiment. The mean-field transition temperature (425 K) and maximal $\alpha_{\parallel}$ are significantly higher than the Monte Carlo values, indicating the importance of spin fluctuations in this material.

Conclusions.—We have presented the first ab initio calculation of a temperature-dependent linear magnetoelectric response. The quantitative agreement of our results with experimental data on $\text{Cr}_2\text{O}_3$ demonstrates that the dominant magnetoelectric coupling in this material originates from nonrelativistic exchange interactions between electrons. The strong temperature dependence of the magnetoelectric coefficient $\alpha_{\parallel}$ underscores the general importance of spin fluctuations for magnetoelectric responses of materials with collinear spin orders. Our study shows that the linear magnetoelectric effect and multiferroicity originate from the same microscopic mechanisms and can be described in a unified way. In both cases magnetoelectric effects resulting from nonrelativistic exchange interactions exceed relativistic effects by more than 1 order of magnitude.

Finite-temperature calculations using a similar approach have been reported previously for fixed temperature [28], but in this case the couplings could be extracted directly from first-principles calculations by using perturbations around the ground state. The approach used in this Letter, specifically the combination of first-principles calculations for artificially imposed magnetic states with Monte Carlo simulations of magnetoelectric response at elevated temperatures, opens a route to theoretical studies of a large variety of temperature-dependent static and dynamic magnetoelectric phenomena. It applies to other materials with strong temperature variations of ME susceptibility, such as $\text{Fe}_2\text{TeO}_6$ [29], ($\text{GaFe})\text{O}_3$ [30], and $\text{Ti}_2\text{O}_3$ [31], and can be extended to account for relativistic effects. Accurate predictions of the magnitude of magnetoelectric responses at finite temperature will greatly facilitate the search for and design of materials with the strongest responses.

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[27] See supplementary material at http://link.aps.org/supplemental/10.1103/PhysRevLett.105.087202 for derivation of mean-field expressions and an enumeration of the microscopic couplings for $\alpha_{\perp}$ (not considered in this work).