

Topological Spin Glass in Diluted Spin Ice

Arnab Sen^{1,2} and R. Moessner²

¹Department of Theoretical Physics, Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, Kolkata-700032, India

²Max-Planck-Institut für Physik komplexer Systeme, 01187 Dresden, Germany

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It is a salient experimental fact that a large fraction of candidate spin liquid materials freeze as the temperature is lowered. The question naturally arises whether such freezing is intrinsic to the spin liquid (“disorder-free glassiness”) or extrinsic, in the sense that a topological phase simply coexists with standard freezing of impurities. Here, we demonstrate a surprising third alternative, namely, that freezing and topological liquidity are inseparably linked. The topological phase reacts to the introduction of disorder by generating degrees of freedom of a new type (along with interactions between them), which in turn undergo a freezing transition while the topological phase supporting them remains intact.

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Topology, liquidity, and glassiness.—The search for topological states of matter in magnetism over the last two decades has produced a good number of candidate classical and quantum spin liquids [1] which show no conventional ordering down to temperatures much lower than the energy scale Θ_W of their interactions. In experiment, such behavior often goes along with glassy behavior, be it for Ising [2] or Heisenberg [3–5] spins, in dimensions $d = 2$ [3,6,7] or $d = 3$ [2,4], and for different disorder types, e.g., distortions [8] or dilution [5]. In this way, the study of glassy physics has become one of the staples of the field. A comprehensive discussion is provided in Ref. [9].

A systematic understanding of the rich experimental findings has been slow to emerge. Even the minimal ingredients to obtain freezing remain unclear. A seductive idea was the prospect of disorder-free glassiness, where a rugged energy landscape was posited to exist even in the absence of quenched disorder, thus accounting for the slow dynamics [9,10]. A more pedestrian alternative is the realist view that any system exhibits some level of quenched disorder, and hence a tendency towards glassy behavior, which becomes frequently visible in the case of spin liquids as there, it is not preempted by other instabilities. Indeed, in the case of bond disorder [11], the existence of a conventional glass transition in the pyrochlores was shown to occur at a critical temperature set simply by the amplitude of the bond disorder [12].

Our work presents a third way towards glassiness in topological spin states: the interplay of disorder with the topological phase produces *emergent* degrees of freedom along with interactions between them; it is these new degrees of freedom which in turn undergo a freezing transition. This combination of “extrinsic” disorder teaming up with “intrinsic” properties of the topological state presents an attractive conceptual angle on the ubiquity of spin freezing in those systems; we call the resulting state “topological spin glass,” as spin freezing emerges from a

substrate of a topological spin liquid, in our example the topological Coulomb phase of spin ice.

Phase diagram of diluted spin ice.—Our central result is the phase diagram, Fig. 1, which shows the onset of the topological Coulomb regime at a temperature set by the cost of a topological defect (magnetic monopole) $\Theta_W \sim \Delta$. At a lower temperature, T_c —proportional to the dilution (density of missing spins) x —is a spin glass transition. Below T_c , the correlations characteristic of the topological Coulomb phase persist alongside a small frozen moment.

Remarkably, our theory is very simple when cast in terms of *missing* spins, which we call ghost spins. This occurs much in the same way that an almost filled band of electrons is most simply described in terms of dilute, positively charged holes, i.e., *missing* electrons.

The dumbbell model and ghost spins.—In dipolar spin ice, the degrees of freedom are Ising spins on the pyrochlore lattice (Fig. 2) whose local easy axis directions, \hat{e}_i , are defined by the line joining the centers of the pair of tetrahedra which share them; the simplest appropriate interaction Hamiltonian of Ising spins with moments $\vec{\mu}_{i,j}$ of size μ , separated by r_{ij} , contains short-range exchange interactions in addition to the usual magnetic dipolar term, DD_{ij} , of strength D , with

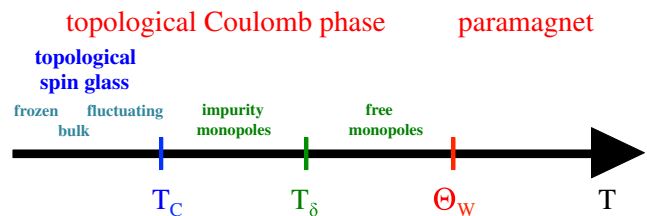


FIG. 1 (color online). Phase diagram of spin ice with a small density x of spins removed. The glass transition takes place at T_c , while the crossovers from the high-temperature paramagnet to the topological Coulomb phase, and to impurity dominated monopole excitations take place at Θ_W and T_δ , respectively.

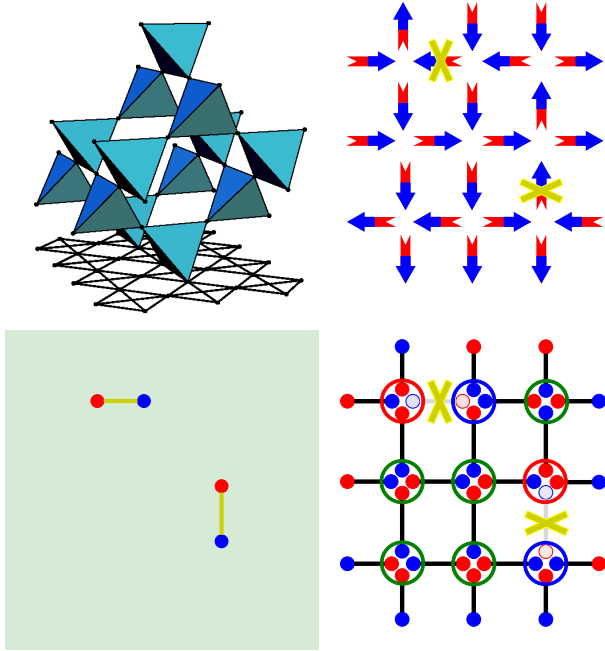


FIG. 2 (color online). Complexity reduction via genesis of ghost spins. The cartoons are for a projection of spin ice onto the two-dimensional plane (top left panel) for clarity; the diamond lattice defined by the centers of the tetrahedra thus turns into a square lattice. At low temperature $T \ll \delta, \Delta$, spin ice with a small density x of *missing spins* (crossed out in top right) is equivalent to a small density of *ghost spins* (bottom left). This is straightforwardly established by writing each spin as a dumbbell of equal and opposite magnetic charges. At vertices either end of a missing spin, the net charge is nonzero (red and blue circles), so that they form the ends of the dipole of the ghost spin. At all other vertices, the net charge vanishes (green circles) and can thus be omitted, so that this pristine bulk of spin ice only provides an effective medium (shaded green) carrying an interaction between the ghost spins, Eq. (3) and Fig. 3.

$$\mathcal{D}_{ij} = \frac{1}{\mu^2} \left(\frac{a}{r_{ij}} \right)^3 [\vec{\mu}_i \cdot \vec{\mu}_j - 3(\vec{\mu}_i \cdot \hat{r}_{ij})(\vec{\mu}_j \cdot \hat{r}_{ij})], \quad (1)$$

with a the nearest neighbor distance on the pyrochlore lattice, and $a_d = a\sqrt{3}/2$ the separation between the centers of the tetrahedra, which define a diamond lattice.

To derive our central results, we appeal to the equivalent dumbbell model introduced in the prediction of the existence of magnetic monopoles [13]. Here, each spin is represented by two equal and opposite magnetic charges $Q = \mu/a_d$. The only detail of the model we require is that the [13] are that the pairwise spin interactions can be rewritten as a pairwise interaction of the total charges of each tetrahedron, Q_{tet} . This includes a contact interaction $\Delta(a_d/2\mu)^2 \sum_{\text{tet}} Q_{\text{tet}}^2$ to reproduce the nearest neighbor interaction correctly, in addition to standard (magnetic) Coulomb interactions between any other pair of charges. From these and the nearest neighbor exchange J , we can construct two energy scales; $D = \mu_0 \mu^2 / (4\pi a^3)$, the

coupling constant of the dipolar interaction (with vacuum permeability μ_0) and $\Delta = (2J/3) + \frac{8}{3}(1 + \sqrt{3})D$, the energy cost of a $|Q_{\text{tet}}| = 2Q \neq 0$ defect.

Crucially, any of the exponentially many configurations satisfying the ice rule—that two spins point into each tetrahedron and two out [14]—is an exact ground state of this model. This amounts to each diamond lattice site being charge neutral: in any ground state, the charge density vanishes locally [13].

This is the basis for what follows. Removing a spin by chemical substitution of a magnetic by a nonmagnetic ion leaves behind two adjacent tetrahedra with equal and *opposite* charges $\pm Q$, a dipole $-\vec{\mu}$ —the ghost spin—with moment opposite to that of the removed spin. Just like the charge of a hole in a semiconductor being the opposite of that of the missing electron, here it is the spin's magnetic moment which has changed sign.

The effective energetics follows simply by keeping track of the interactions between those charges—the pairwise interaction between separated ghost spins, $\tilde{\mathcal{H}}_{ij}$ has the standard dipolar form (again in complete analogy to the Coulomb repulsion between holes in a semiconductor):

$$\tilde{\mathcal{H}}_{ij} = \tilde{D} \mathcal{D}_{ij}. \quad (2)$$

Note the tremendous complexity reduction—a dense, weakly diluted system of dipolar spins is described in terms of a low density of ghost spins. However, the intricate nature of the spin ice phase has not vanished entirely. The following are its most striking manifestations.

Firstly, the fractionalized excitations of the topological spin ice phase can be nucleated at the missing spin. In detail, a pair of ghost spins can be turned into a pair of impurity magnetic monopoles by flipping a string of spins arranged head-to-tail running between them. For well-separated monopoles, the resulting configuration is higher in energy by $\delta = 4\sqrt{2}D/(3\sqrt{3})$ per monopole.

Secondly, the ghost spins do not disrupt the correlations in spin ice, as they have zero net magnetic charge, so that in particular the pinch points [15–17] found in neutron scattering, which reflect the emergent gauge field defining the Coulomb phase, remain intact.

Thirdly, the effective dipolar coupling constant between the ghost spins \tilde{D} , Eq. (2), has a contribution coming from the fluctuations of the spins in the bulk on top of the simple magnetostatic coupling constant D :

$$\tilde{D} = D + \frac{3T}{\sqrt{2}\pi}. \quad (3)$$

This happens because the number of spin ice states compatible with a given configuration of ghost spins depends on their relative orientation; this yields an entropic contribution, J^{ent} , to the spin interaction [15]—for details, see the Supplemental Material, where we derive the expression

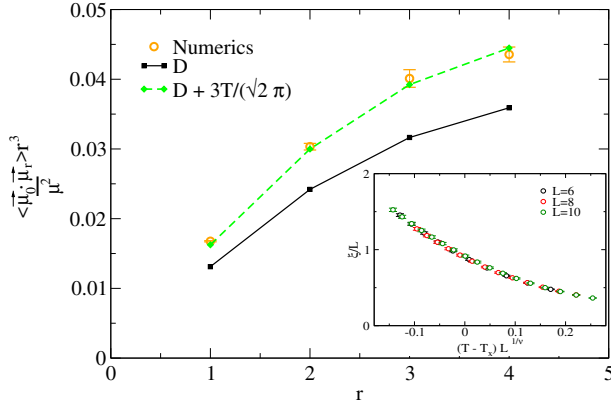


FIG. 3 (color online). Correlations between a pair of ghost spins $\vec{\mu}_0$ and $\vec{\mu}_r$ in an otherwise fully populated sample of spin ice (of linear dimension $L = 12$, with $D = 1.41$ and $T = 0.5$ K), separated by r units in the $[101]$ direction. This is compared to two isolated magnetic dipoles in an otherwise empty unit cell; agreement with numerics is only achieved upon including the entropic interactions mediated by the spin ice bulk, for which the dashed line denotes the asymptotic form, Eq. (3). The inset shows the freezing transition of the ghost spins. Number of spins equals $16L^3x$ in a system with L^3 unit cells, with $x = 1/16$. The data collapse of ξ/L for different system sizes, using $\nu = 1.16(8)$ and critical temperature $T_x = 0.082(3)$, shows a continuous spin glass transition (see Supplemental Material [18]).

$$J_{ij}^{\text{ent}} = -T \langle \sigma_i \sigma_j \rangle_{\text{nn}}, \quad (4)$$

where $\langle \sigma_i \sigma_j \rangle_{\text{nn}}$ stands for the correlations between Ising spins on sites i and j in spin ice with the dipolar interactions switched off entirely; this gives Eq. (3) for $r_{ij} \gg a_d$ but is accurate also for small r_{ij} (Fig. 3).

In other words, thanks to the Coulomb phase, the missing dipolar spins know about the correlations they would have if they were neither missing nor dipolar.

Freezing of the ghost spins.—It is notoriously hard to simulate spin freezing transitions [19–21], all the more so in this case where a small number of ghost spins requires simulation of a much larger number of bulk spins. However, thanks to the abovementioned complexity reduction, this effective problem, Eq. (2), can be analyzed, still with a considerable amount of numerical effort (see Supplemental Material [18] for details).

We have demonstrated numerically that there is spin freezing for the random dipolar model (inset of Fig. 3 and Supplemental Material [18]). We find a critical temperature $T_x \propto x$, as one would expect for a dipolar system with typical distance between spins $r \sim x^{-1/3}$, and hence dipolar interaction energy scale $\sim r^{-3} \sim x$ [22]. We find numerically that $T_x \approx 0.95Dx$, which implies an entropically renormalized value of $T_c(x) = T_x/[1 - (3T_x/\sqrt{2\pi D})]$ for the freezing transition into the topological spin glass.

This complements known cases of freezing for random dipoles, namely, dense dipoles on a cubic lattice with random orientations [23], or dilute but collinear dipoles on

a cubic lattice [24,25]. In our case, the dipoles are dilute and their orientations are neither random nor collinear, being picked from the local easy axes of the occupied sites, respecting the cubic symmetry of the pyrochlore lattice.

Energy scales and the role of perturbations.—Let us now examine the phase diagram Fig. 1 in more detail. At high temperature, $T \gg \Delta$, we have an ordinary disordered paramagnet. Below $\Theta_W \sim \Delta$, the ice rules are enforced, yielding the topological Coulomb regime with experimentally sparse monopoles as elementary excitations, $\rho \sim e^{-\Delta/T}$ [13]. However, the impurity magnetic monopoles mentioned above have a cheaper energy cost $\delta < \Delta$ than a monopole in the bulk as no energy needs to be paid for violating the ice rule in the first place—this is taken care of by the quenched chemical dilution. The corresponding density is $\rho_x \sim x e^{-\delta/T}$, which dominates over ρ at lower temperatures below $T_\delta = (\delta - \Delta)/\ln x$.

The enhanced monopole density on account of the presence of the impurity monopoles manifests itself in all quantities depending on ρ such as, e.g., the width of the pinch points in equilibrium [16]. However, perhaps their most useful function is in a reduction of the massive slowing down of the dynamics [26]. Whether this slow down is a cooperative or a single-ion effect (e.g., due to a thermal activation factor in an attempt rate for single spin flips, τ_a) is an important open question, and “doping” with impurity monopoles would allow tuning ρ , involved in the cooperative physics, independently of any change in τ_a . Further, at T_c , the glass transition occurs, at which (presumably [27,28]) Ising symmetry is broken. The bulk spins in the Coulomb phase continue to fluctuate, however.

This is the above-mentioned coexistence of the topological phase and the spin glass phase for which it provides the substrate—the topological spin glass.

The frozen moment—the “order parameter” $q_{EA} = (1/N) \sum_{i=1}^N \langle \vec{\mu}_i \cdot \hat{e}_i \rangle^2 / \mu^2$ of the spin glass—appears at T_c and grows as the temperature is lowered, as do static local fields set up by the frozen moments $B_f \sim (\mu_0 \mu x \sqrt{q_{EA}}) / (4\pi a^3)$ [29]. The resultant Zeeman energy $\sim D \sqrt{q_{EA}} x$ will try to pin the bulk spins to point along the direction of the local fields, against the entropy of fluctuations between different spin ice configurations [30], estimated by Pauling to be $S_p \approx \frac{1}{2} \ln \frac{3}{2}$ per spin. The glass transition at T_c being continuous, for $T \lesssim T_c$ the frozen moment and concomitant Zeeman energies will be very small, and the bulk spins will continue to fluctuate essentially like in pure spin ice. As T is lowered further, the entropic contribution of the bulk fluctuations to the free energy vanishes approximately $\propto T$, while q_{EA} grows, so that the system eventually freezes into one spin ice configuration. Since the static fields are too weak to break the ice rules, the frozen state still exhibits the correlations of the Coulomb phase when averaged over the entire sample [14,31]. The interplay between the liquidity and glassiness

thus leads to a gradual but complete loss of the Pauling entropy as the temperature is lowered further below $T_c(x)$, which can be detected experimentally in specific heat. The pinch points in neutron scattering, however, persist even below $T_c(x)$.

Comments on experiment and outlook.—Generally speaking, the low-temperature physics of frustrated systems is nonuniversal, and the topological spin glass may be preempted by perturbations to the dumbbell Hamiltonian if they are large enough. Indeed, the question of what happens in diluted spin ice compounds [32] was recently addressed in detailed numerical simulations [33], which emphasized the need to consider the complete Hamiltonian to obtain a fit of theory to experiment. The question of whether freezing generically occurs was not settled there.

The central point of our work is that there exists a *microscopic* Hamiltonian for which the existence of the topological spin glass can be predicted with a high degree of confidence. Features such as the simultaneous appearance of topological spin liquidity and glassiness appear naturally, along with the presence of a small frozen moment alongside a sizable fluctuating component. The challenge for establishing its existence in experiment is thence to find a compound avoiding other instabilities both of the non-dynamic and dynamic nature, such as a noncooperative slowing down [34,35]. This seems a very realistic prospect given the wide range of spin ices available nowadays, with the combination alone of $A_2B_2O_7$, ($A = \text{Dy, Ho, Tb, Yb, } \dots, B = \text{Ti, Ge, Sn, } \dots$) providing numerous examples differing in many fundamental parameters such as the relative size of exchange and dipolar interactions, as well as many single-ion properties [36]. More broadly, we would like to emphasize the genericity of the ingredients involved in our study. We used the “vacuum” of a Coulomb phase and its local charge neutrality, and the fact that defects therein will have an interaction determined by the emergent gauge theory describing the low energy physics of the topological phase. The detailed resulting collective behavior will be as varied as the richness of the latter ingredients; therefore, it is clear that an outcome in which randomly located emergent degrees of freedom interact via highly frustrated interactions is a generic one, and so is the expectation of a topological spin glass.

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