Temperature-induced changes in the magnetism of Laves phase rare-earth–iron intermetallics by \textit{ab initio} calculations

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Laves RFe\textsubscript{2} compounds, where R is a rare earth, exhibit technologically relevant properties associated with their lattice geometry and magnetism. We apply \textit{ab initio} calculations to explore how magnetic properties of Fe in RFe\textsubscript{2} systems vary with temperature. We found that the ratio between the orbital magnetic moment $\mu_{\text{orb}}$ and the spin magnetic moment $\mu_{\text{spin}}$ increases with increasing temperature for YFe\textsubscript{2}, GdFe\textsubscript{2}, TbFe\textsubscript{2}, DyFe\textsubscript{2}, and HoFe\textsubscript{2}. This increase is significant and it should be experimentally observable by means of x-ray magnetic circular dichroism. We conjecture that the predicted increase of the $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ ratio with temperature is linked to the reduction of hybridization between same-spin-channel states of atoms with fluctuating magnetic moments and to the associated increase of their atomic-like character.

I. INTRODUCTION

Intermetallic C15-type Laves phase compounds RFe\textsubscript{2}, where R is a rare earth, exhibit various properties linked to the interplay between magnetism and the crystal lattice [1]. One of them is a large or unusual magnetostrictive and magnetocaloric effect [2–4]. Another reason for interest comes from thermal or light induced magnetization switching studied intensively in doped amorphous Gd-Fe alloys with a composition close to GdFe\textsubscript{2} [5–7].

An essential part of the research on RFe\textsubscript{2} is exploring the various aspects how electronic states determine magnetism. An important goal is understanding the relation between orbital and spin contributions to the magnetic moments and how these contributions depend on parameters such as an external magnetic field or temperature. Recent interest in the relation between spin and orbital magnetism in situations when the system is not in the ground state [8] has been motivated, among other reasons, by efforts to understand the transfer between spin and orbital moments in ultrafast demagnetization \cite{9–11} and by pursuits to comprehend the temperature-dependence of magnetocrystalline anisotropy \cite{12}.

Concerning the RFe\textsubscript{2} systems, most attention has been paid to the magnetic moments of the rare earth component so far. One of the reasons is that the experimental research aiming to separate the spin and orbital moments often employed techniques such as magnetic Compton scattering combined with vibrating sample or superconducting quantum interference device magnetometry \cite{13–16}, which are sensitive to the sums of rare-earth- and transition-metal-related contributions. As the moment of the rare earth is larger than the moment of Fe, the Fe contribution to magnetism of RFe\textsubscript{2} is often hidden behind the contribution of the R atom. However, the intriguing properties of the RFe\textsubscript{2} compounds are significantly influenced also by the magnetism of the 3d element, because the interatomic interaction between the large 4f moments of the rare earth atoms depends on the exchange coupling mediated by the transition metal atoms.

Our aim is, therefore, to investigate magnetism of Fe in RFe\textsubscript{2}. For practical applications as well as for fundamental insight it is important to understand how magnetic moments change due to finite temperature. We employ \textit{ab initio} calculations to investigate how the spin magnetic moment $\mu_{\text{spin}}$, the orbital magnetic moment $\mu_{\text{orb}}$, and especially the ratio $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ vary for RFe\textsubscript{2} if the temperature increases from zero to the Curie temperature $T_C$. To perform thermal averaging, we employ the alloy analogy model, which proved to be useful in studying the temperature-dependence of various magnetism-related properties in the past \cite{17, 18}. We will show below that the $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ ratio for Fe in RFe\textsubscript{2} increases with increasing temperature by as much as 70 %.

II. THEORETICAL SCHEME

The calculations were performed within the \textit{ab-initio} framework of spin-density functional theory. A proper description of magnetism of rare earths requires special care for exchange and correlation effects due to the highly localized $f$ electrons. We used the open core method in this work: the $f$ electrons were treated as core electrons, with their numbers fixed during the self-consistency loop and with the spin and orbital moments set according to the \textit{LS} coupling scheme \cite{19, 20}. Despite its relative simplicity, many aspects of rare earths magnetism are described properly within this approach. Recently, this formalism was employed, e.g., to get parameters for the Landau-Lifshitz-Gilbert equation to describe heat-assisted magnetization switching in GdFe\textsubscript{2} and TbFe\textsubscript{2}. 

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[21]. Apart for the open core formalism for the f electrons, we relied on the local density approximation using the Vosko, Wilk, and Nusair functional [22].

The temperature effects were included by means of the alloy analogy model [17]: temperature-induced atomic displacements and spin fluctuations are treated as localized and uncorrelated, giving rise to disorder that can be described using the coherent potential approximation (CPA). Atomic vibrations were described using 14 displacement vectors. Each of the vectors was assigned the same probability and their amplitude was connected with the temperature by means of the Debye theory [17]. The Debye temperature was estimated as a weighted average of the Debye temperatures of elements constituting the RFe₂ compound.

Spin fluctuations were described by assuming that the local magnetic moments can get oriented along predefined directions; we sampled 60 values for the polar angle and 3 values for the azimuthal angle. The probability for each orientation was obtained by relying on the mean-field theory, using as an input the ratio of the magnetization at the temperature T to the magnetization at T = 0, M(T)/M(0) (see Ref. 17 for more details). Note that the ratio M(T)/M(0) is used just to set the probabilities for pre-defined orientations of the magnetic moments; the values of respective spin and orbital moments are determined selfconsistently by the electronic structure calculation itself. Our approach differs in this respect from the rigid spin approximation, where it is assumed that the magnitude of magnetic moments is always the same no matter what the tilt angle is.

We allowed for atomic-element-dependent magnetization curves M(T) resulting in element-dependent spin orientation probabilities. The input data for M(T)/M(0) used in this work are shown in Fig. 1.

The calculations were done in a fully relativistic mode using the spin-polarized multiple-scattering or Korringa-Kohn-Rostoker (KKR) Green function formalism [25] as implemented in the SPRKKR code [26]. The potentials were subject to the atomic sphere approximation (ASA). We verified that this is not a severe restriction by performing the zero-temperature calculations not only in the ASA mode but also in the full-potential mode; the difference in magnetic moments was always less than 5%.

The energy integrals were evaluated by a contour integration on a semicircular path within the complex energy plane, using a Gaussian-Legendre quadrature on a mesh of 32 points. The k-space integration was carried out via sampling on a regular mesh, making use of the symmetry, on a grid of 30×30×30 points in the full Brillouin zone. For the multipole expansion of the Green function for valence electrons, the angular momentum cutoff ℓmax=2 was used.

### Table I. Magnetic moments for RFe₂ (R=Y, Gd, Tb, Dy, Ho) calculated for T = 0 K. The two top lines show moments for the R atom, then follow moments for the Fe atoms (for both symmetry-in equivalent sites if M∥[111]), and the last two lines show total moments per formula unit.

| R  | YFe₂ | GdFe₂ | TbFe₂ | DyFe₂ | HoFe₂ |
|----|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
|    | M∥[111] | M∥[111] | M∥[111] | M∥[001] | M∥[001] |
| µspin R | 0.499 | 7.732 | 6.670 | 5.622 | 4.580 |
| µorb R | -0.003 | -0.026 | 2.977 | 4.979 | 5.981 |
| µspin Fe-1 | -1.863 | -2.004 | -4.949 | -1.919 | -4.895 |
| µspin Fe-2 | -1.864 | -2.005 | -4.951 | — | — |
| µorb Fe-1 | -0.044 | -0.061 | -0.061 | -0.055 | -0.054 |
| µorb Fe-2 | -0.053 | -0.054 | -0.053 | — | — |
| µspin tot | -3.228 | 3.722 | 2.769 | 1.784 | 0.790 |
| µorb tot | -0.104 | -0.138 | 2.866 | 4.880 | 5.873 |

### Fig. 1. Element-specific magnetization curves M(T) used as input for our temperature-dependent calculations. Data for YFe₂ and GdFe₂ were taken from Morariu et al. [23], data for TbFe₂, DyFe₂, and HoFe₂ from Tang et al. [24].
III. RESULTS

A. Temperature-dependence of spin and orbital moments

Magnetic moments for RFe$_2$ (R = Y, Gd, Tb, Dy, Ho) calculated for zero temperature are presented in Tab. I. We show separately values of $\mu_{\text{spin}}$ and $\mu_{\text{orb}}$ for the rare earth and for Fe and also the total moments per formula unit. The signs are chosen so that the spin magnetic moment for the rare earth is positive. The magnetization direction $\mathbf{M}$ is set either parallel to [111] or to [001], as indicated in the header. This setting was chosen in accordance with the easy axis of magnetization for each compound [27–29]. For GdFe$_2$ the situation is unclear [23, 27, 30], we have chosen $\mathbf{M}$∥[111].

If the magnetization is parallel to [111], the spin orbit coupling reduces the symmetry of the system with respect to the case when there is no spin orbit coupling. This means that the four Fe sites which belong to the same type in the absence of spin orbit coupling are split into two types when it is included: the Fe-1 type comprises one site and the Fe-2 type comprises the other three sites. For $\mathbf{M}$∥[001] this symmetry reduction does not occur. The results presented in Tab. I are in a good agreement with earlier theoretical and experimental works for YFe$_2$ [31, 32], GdFe$_2$ [21, 33, 34], TbFe$_2$ [21, 28], DyFe$_2$ [28], and HoFe$_2$ [28, 35].

The calculated temperature-dependence of $\mu_{\text{spin}}$, $\mu_{\text{orb}}$, and $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ for the Fe sites is shown in Fig. 2. We monitor two quantities, namely, (i) the magnitude of the magnetic moment and (ii) its projection on the easy axis of magnetization. These quantities were obtained by evaluating their configuration average by means of the alloy analogy model (Sec. II). We choose the notation $\langle |\mu| \rangle$ for the magnitude of the moment and $\langle \mu^{(z)} \rangle$ for its projection, with $\mu$ representing the magnetic moment (spin or orbital). By the superscript ($z$) we always mean the common magnetization direction (in our case, either [111] or [001]).

Concerning the projections of the magnetic moments, one can observe by inspecting Fig. 2 that if the temperature increases, both $\langle \mu^{(z)}_{\text{spin}} \rangle$ and $\langle \mu^{(z)}_{\text{orb}} \rangle$ decrease so that they are zero at $T = T_C$, as mandated by the model. However, the situation differs for the magnitudes of the magnetic moments, where $\langle |\mu_{\text{spin}}| \rangle$ still decreases with increasing $T$ but to a finite nonzero value at $T = T_C$, whereas $\langle |\mu_{\text{orb}}| \rangle$ increases with $T$. The fact that the local magnetic moments for Fe atoms are nonzero even at $T_C$ resemble the behavior of Fe in other systems [36]. For the ratio $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ it does not matter whether we evaluate the ratio of the projections $\langle \mu^{(z)}_{\text{orb}} \rangle / \langle \mu^{(z)}_{\text{spin}} \rangle$ or the ratio of the magnitudes $\langle |\mu_{\text{orb}}| \rangle / \langle |\mu_{\text{spin}}| \rangle$, both quantities increase with increasing $T$ in the same way. This increase is by about 70% in the interval from $T = 0$ K to $T = T_C$.

As mentioned in connection with Tab. I, there are two inequivalent Fe atomic types for $\mathbf{M}$∥[111]. This distinction does not lead to apparent differences concerning the values of $\mu_{\text{spin}}$ but there are clear differences for $\mu_{\text{orb}}$. If the temperature increases, these differences decrease (cf. the middle graphs in Fig. 2).

Further analysis shows that the temperature dependence of the magnetic moments is associated mainly with the fluctuations of the spin moments directions. Namely, additional calculations demonstrate that if the lattice vibrations are ignored, the results presented in Figs. 2 practically do not change (results not shown).

The electronic structure of the rare earth elements (Gd, Tb, Dy, Ho) is treated within the open core approach. The magnitude of the corresponding magnetic moments is thus temperature-independent and their projection on the common magnetization axis $\mathbf{M}$ is just the average of the projections of the pre-defined spin directions weighted by corresponding thermodynamic probabilities (see Sec. II). In other words, the temperature dependence of the $f$ electrons-related moments simply reproduces the respective input $M(T)$ curves shown in Fig. 1. As the $f$-electrons moments are dominant in rare earths, the same applies also to total spin and orbital moments of Gd, Tb, Dy, and Ho atoms. For this reason we do not show the curves here. Magnetism of Y in YFe$_2$ is induced by Fe and its temperature-dependence (not shown) therefore completely follows the temperature-dependence of the Fe moments.

B. Influence of a moment tilt on $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$

For further understanding, we examine what happens if the moment at a single Fe atom is gradually tilted with respect to the rest, taking GdFe$_2$ as an example. We assume that all magnetic moments are oriented along the same direction except for a single Fe atom, where the moment is tilted by the angle $\theta$. The results for the magnitudes of spin and orbital moments and for their ratios are summarized in Fig. 3. One can see that the magnetic moment of a tilted Fe atom in GdFe$_2$ remains finite even for $\theta = 90^\circ$.

This provides another view on the $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ ratio for the Fe atoms. Namely, the bottom graph of Fig. 3 shows that $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ increases for Fe atoms with an increasing magnetization tilt angle. This is consistent with the increase of the $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ ratio with increasing temperature demonstrated in Fig 2: within the alloy analogy model, larger temperature means bigger statistical weight of configurations with larger tilt angle (see Sec. II).

IV. DISCUSSION

We predict for several RFe$_2$ compounds that the ratio $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ increases with increasing temperature. This prediction should be verifiable by x-ray magnetic circular dichroism (XMCD) experiments, because even though evaluating $\mu_{\text{spin}}$ and $\mu_{\text{orb}}$ separately by means of the
XMCD sum rules [37, 38] is not always straightforward, the determination of their ratio $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ is much more robust and can serve as an indicator of even quite subtle effects [39]. In addition it should be noted that XMCD is robust and can serve as an indicator of even quite subtle effects [39]. In addition it should be noted that XMCD is already used for studying the temperature dependence of $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ for Sm atoms in Laves compound Sm$_{0.974}$Gd$_{0.026}$Al$_2$ [40].

An intuitive explanation for the increase of $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ with increasing temperature might be sought based on the lower graph of Fig. 3. Here we see that if the magnetic moment of a single Fe atom is tilted, the ratio $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ increases; for the tilt angle $\theta = 90^\circ$ this increase is 20%. Tilting the moment means reducing the hybridization between the states of the tilted atom and and the states of surrounding atoms belonging to the same spin channel. In other words, the electron states associated with the tilted Fe atom become more atomic-like. In this limit, the experience shows that the $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ ratio generally increases with respect to the bulk — compare,
FIG. 3. Dependence of $\mu_{\text{spin}}$, $\mu_{\text{orb}}$, and the ratio $R = \mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ for a Fe atom in GdFe$_2$ on the angle $\theta$ by which the moment for a single Fe atom is rotated. The quantities were evaluated for $T = 0$ K and normalized to their values at $\theta = 0$°.

The increase of $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ with increasing temperature appears to be quite a robust effect for RFe$_2$ systems. It occurs for any orientation of the magnetization and for any choice of R we considered. Note that R does not need to be a rare earth element — the effect occurs also for YFe$_2$. One can expect that a similar effect, namely, temperature-related increase of the $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ ratio, should occur for other systems as well. Prime candidates would be compounds with Fe atoms which have non-zero magnitude of the local magnetic moment even at temperatures close to $T_C$.

Let us now turn to the difference in $\mu_{\text{orb}}$ for symmetry-inequivalent Fe sites, as it happens for $M \parallel [111]$ (see the graphs for YFe$_2$, GdFe$_2$, and TbFe$_2$ in Fig. 2). If the temperature approaches $T_C$, the difference between $\mu_{\text{orb}}$ at both sites gradually disappears. This is a consequence of the increased disorder in the spin directions when the temperature increases. At $T = T_C$ this disorder gets maximum, the magnetization direction $M$ ceases to have any meaning and the Fe sites become equivalent, similarly as they would be in the absence of spin-orbit coupling.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Ab-initio calculations with finite-temperature effects included by means of the alloy analogy model predict that the $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ ratio increases with increasing temperature for RFe$_2$ Laves compounds. We interpret this as a consequence of reduced hybridization between states (within the same spin channel) of atoms with fluctuating spin magnetic moments and the associated increase of their atomic-like character if the temperature increases. The predicted enhancement of $\mu_{\text{orb}}/\mu_{\text{spin}}$ is large enough to be seen by XMCD experiments.

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