Chiral Two-Body Currents and Neutrinoless Double-Beta Decay in the QRPA

J. Engel,¹ F. Šimkovic,² ³, ⁴ and P. Vogel⁵

¹Department of Physics and Astronomy, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, 27516-3255, USA
²Boboliubov Laboratory of Theoretical Physics, JINR 141980 Dubna, Russia
³Department of Nuclear Physics and Biophysics, Comenius University, Mlynská dolina F1, SK-842 48 Bratislava, Slovakia
⁴Institute of Experimental and Applied Physics, Czech Technical University in Prague, 128-00 Prague, Czech Republic
⁵Kellogg Radiation Laboratory, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, CA 91125, USA

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We test the effects of an approximate treatment of two-body contributions to the axial-vector current on the QRPA matrix elements for neutrinoless double-beta decay in a range of isotopes. The form and strength of the two-body terms come from chiral effective-field theory. The two-body currents typically reduce the matrix elements by about 20%, not as much as in shell-model calculations. One reason for the difference is that standard practice in the QRPA is to adjust the strength of the isoscalar pairing interaction to reproduce two-neutrino double-beta decay lifetimes. Another may be the larger QRPA single-particle space. Whatever the reasons, the effects on neutrinoless decay are significantly less than those on two-neutrino decay, both in the shell model and the QRPA.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The observation of neutrinoless double-beta (0νββ) decay would mean that neutrinos are Majorana particles. It would also tell us the overall neutrino mass scale if the nuclear matrix elements that help govern the decay could be calculated with sufficient accuracy. At present, the matrix elements from reasonable calculations differ from one another by up to factors of three. The true uncertainty might be larger if there is physics that none of the calculations capture.

One familiar source of uncertainty is the way in which the axial-vector coupling constant, in the parlance of nuclear physicists, is “renormalized in medium.” The renormalization has several apparent sources, not all of which are directly connected to the weak interactions. Truncation of the many-nucleon Hilbert space, for instance, appears to reduce the matrix elements of spin operators, whether or not they stem from weak interactions. But a separate source affects weak currents themselves: many-body operators that arise because nucleons are effective degrees of freedom. The many-body currents reduce matrix elements as well, though by amounts that are still in dispute.

Here, we focus on two-body currents in a very particular framework: chiral effective field theory (χEFT) in combination with the Quasiparticle Random Phase Approximation (QRPA). We build on several published papers. Refs. ¹ and ² extract coefficients of the χEFT interaction, and Refs. ³ and ⁴ present the form of the χEFT one- and two-body weak currents that follow. Refs. ⁵ and ⁶ use an isospin-symmetric Fermi gas model to substitute approximate effective one-body current operators for the complicated two-body operators, and use the renormalized one-body current to correct shell-model calculations of double-beta decay (in a particular limit that we describe later) ⁵ and WIMP-nucleus scattering (in more generality) ⁶. We will use the effective one-body operators from both references to calculate double-beta decay in the QRPA.

There is some reason, before beginning, to believe that the effects of two-body currents will be smaller in the QRPA, as usually applied, than in the shell model. The correlations in the QRPA are simpler than in the shell-model and in recent years QRPA practitioners have compensated by fitting a parameter in the interaction — the isoscalar particle-particle interaction — to reproduce measured two-neutrino double-beta (2νββ) decay rates. Addition to the axial current operator will be compensated by fitting a parameter in the interaction — to reproduce measured two-neutrino double-beta (2νββ) decay rates. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: Section Ⅱ describes the ingredients of our calculation, including the new two-body currents. Section Ⅲ displays our results for 0νββ matrix elements in a wide range of isotopes. Section Ⅳ is a conclusion.

II. METHODS

A. One- and Two-body Currents

In χEFT, interactions and currents for nucleon and pion degrees of freedom are expanded in powers of momentum transfer p divided by a breakdown scale Λχ ≈ 500 MeV. Following Ref. ⁵, we equate O(p/m), where m is the nucleon mass, with O((p/Λχ)²). The interactions and currents should be derived consistently, either

*engelj@physics.unc.edu
through fitting or by matching onto the predictions of QCD. We will not use a \(\chi^EFT\) interaction, but can still do an approximately correct calculation by using \(\chi^EFT\) currents. Of course those currents will comprise operators for three, four, \ldots nucleons and there is no guarantee that the higher-order terms in the chiral expansion that generates these operators will be small in a many-body system. Truncating the expansion for the interaction at low order yields reasonable results, however, and it is worth exploring a similar approximation in the currents.

In a non-relativistic framework, one can write a general one-body current in the form

\[
J^\dagger_i (r) = \sum_{i=1}^A J^0_{i,1b} \delta (r - r_i) \tau_i^+ ,
\]

(1)

\[
J^\dagger (r) = \sum_{i=1}^A J_{i,1b} \delta (r - r_i) \tau_i^+ .
\]

where an operator with subscript \(i\) acts only on the \(i\)th nucleon and \(\tau^+\) changes a neutron into a proton. To third order in the counting, the one-body charge-changing weak current operators can be written as \([5]\)

\[
J^0_{i,1b} = g_V (p^2) - g_A (0) \frac{p \cdot \sigma_i + g_F (p^2) E \sigma_i \cdot p}{2m} ,
\]

(2)

\[
J_{i,1b} = \left( -g_A (p^2) \sigma_i + g_F (p^2) \frac{p (\sigma_i \cdot p)}{2m} \right)
- i (g_M (0) + g_V (0)) \frac{\sigma \times p + g_V (0) \frac{p}{2m}}{2m} ,
\]

(3)

where \(p = p_i - p_i', P = p_i + p_i', E = E_i - E_i'\), and, to the same order in the chiral expansion,

\[
g_V (p^2) = 1 - 2 \frac{p^2}{(850 \text{MeV})^2} ,
\]

(4)

\[
g_A (0) \left( 1 - 2 \frac{p^2}{(1040 \text{MeV})^2} \right) ,
\]

\[
g_A (0) = 1.27 ,
\]

\[
g_F (p^2) = 2 \frac{g_{\pi NN} F_\pi}{m_\pi^2 + m_N^2} - \frac{4m g_A (0)}{1040 \text{MeV}} ,
\]

\[
g_M (0) = 3.70
\]

with \(F_\pi = 92.4\ \text{MeV}, m_\pi = 138.04\ \text{MeV},\) and \(g_{\pi NN} = 13.05.\) In all these expressions \(p_i\) and \(p_i'\) stand for \(-i\nabla_i\) acting on the left and right of the delta functions in Eqs. (1) and (2).

As mentioned in the introduction, we will use two separate approximations schemes for two-body currents, one presented in Ref. [5] for 0\(\nu\beta\beta\) matrix elements in the shell model and an improved version presented by the same group in a paper on spin-dependent WIMP-nucleus scattering [6]. The first approximation scheme neglects the difference between the momentum transfers to the two nucleons. We use it nonetheless because it is the only scheme applied so far to double beta decay and we wish to compare our results with those of Ref. [5]. The two schemes will turn out to yield only minor differences.

Both schemes involve an effective correction to the one-body current through the assumption that one of the two nucleons in the two-body current lies in a spin-and-isospin symmetric core. The resulting approximation is crude but probably reasonable. Ref. [5] neglects tensor-like terms in the current, leading to a renormalization of \(g_A\) but not \(g_F\). Ref. [6] does a more complete calculation that leads to a separate renormalization of \(g_F\). Here we write explicitly only the effective current of [5]:

\[
\langle p_i \mid [\mathbf{T}^\text{eff}, \mathbf{r}_i] \mid p_i' \rangle = -g_A (p^2) \sigma_i \left( \frac{\rho}{F_\pi} \left[ \frac{c_D}{g_a \Lambda_x} + \frac{2}{3} \frac{c_3}{4m \pi^2 + p^2} \rho \right] + I (\rho, P) \left( \frac{1}{3} (2c_4 - c_3) + \frac{1}{6m} \right) \right) e^{-ipr} .
\]

(5)

with

\[
I (\rho, P) = 1 - \frac{3m_N^2}{2k_F^2} + \frac{3m_N^2}{2k_F^2} \frac{\text{acot} \left[ \frac{2m f}{m \pi} \right]}{2m \pi k_F} \left[ \frac{m_N^2 + (k_F - \frac{p}{2})^2}{m_N^2 + (k_F + \frac{p}{2})^2} \right] .
\]

(6)

In these equations \(k_F\) is the Fermi momentum and \(P\) is the center-of-mass momentum of the decaying nucleons, which can be set to zero without altering \(I (\rho, P)\) significantly [5]. The constants \(c_3, c_4,\) and \(c_D\) are the \(\chi^EFT\) parameters, fit to data in light nuclei. Their values depend on how the fit is carried out.

The above can be captured by defining new effective one-body current operators \(J^\mu_i\) as the operators \(J^\mu_i\) from Eq. (1) but with the factor \(g_A (p^2)\) multiplying \(\sigma_i\) in Eq. (3) replaced by an effective coupling \(g_A^\text{eff} (p^2)\), given by

\[
g_A^\text{eff} (p^2) = g_A (p^2) \left( 1 - \frac{\rho}{F_\pi} \left[ \frac{c_D}{g_a \Lambda_x} + \frac{2}{3} \frac{c_3}{4m \pi^2 + p^2} \rho \right]
+ I (\rho, 0) \left( \frac{1}{3} (2c_4 - c_3) + \frac{1}{6m} \right) \right) ,
\]

(7)

where \(P\) has been set to zero.

The treatment of WIMP scattering in Ref. [6] is more complete and involves much longer expressions. We refer the reader there for details on the renormalization of both \(g_F\) and \(g_A\).

**B. Decay Matrix Elements**

The two kinds of double-beta decay — \(2\nu\beta\beta\) and \(0\nu\beta\beta\)— transfer very different amounts of (virtual) momentum among nucleons. Two-neutrino decay is simply two successive virtual beta decays, with very little momentum transfer. Its matrix element can be written with excellent accuracy as

\[
M^\text{2\nu} = \left( \frac{g_A^\text{eff} (0)}{g_A (0)} \right)^2 \sum_{N,\tau,j} \frac{\langle F \mid \sigma_i \tau^+ i \mid N \rangle \langle N \mid \sigma_j \tau^+ j \rangle}{E_N - E_i + E_j} ,
\]

(8)
where the $|N\rangle$ are states in the intermediate nucleus with energy $E_N$, and $|I\rangle$ and $|F\rangle$ are the initial and final nuclear ground states, with energies $E_I$ and $E_F$. This matrix element and the neutrinoless version to follow differ from the unprimed $M^{0\nu}$ (and $M^{0\omega}$) used elsewhere in that $g_A$ is always set to $g_A(0) = 1.27$ (and not some effective value) in the phase space factor multiplying the matrix element, so that all effects of $g_A$ modification are in the matrix element itself.

Neutrinoless decay, in contrast to its two-neutrino counterpart, creates a virtual neutrino that typically carries about 100 MeV of momentum. The expression for its matrix element involves an integral over all neutrino momenta:

$$M^{0\nu} = \frac{R}{2\pi^2 g_A(0)^2} \sum_N \int d^3x d^3y d^3p \langle F| \mathcal{J}^{\mu\nu}(x) |N\rangle \langle N| \mathcal{J}_i^\mu(y) |I\rangle \frac{e^P(x-y)}{p(p + E_N - E_N/2)}, \tag{9}$$

where $R$ is the nuclear radius, inserted to make the matrix element dimensionless. Details on the evaluation of this still rather abstract expression appear, e.g., in Refs. [7] and [8]. The important point is that the 0$\nu\beta\beta$ matrix element depends on $g_A^\text{eff}(p^2)$ (and in the formulation of Ref. [6] on $g_A^\text{eff}(p^2)$ as well) because of the two current operators $\mathcal{J}^{\mu\nu}$, defined just above Eq. (7), and the integral over momentum.

### III. RESULTS

The values of the parameters $c_3$, $c_4$, and $c_D$ come from fits to data in systems with very few nucleons. They depend on details of the fitting procedure; for this reason Ref. [5] gives several sets of possible values. It also evaluates the effective one-body current for a range of Fermi-gas densities $\rho$ (the gas represents the nuclear core) because the nuclear density, though roughly constant in the nuclear interior, is not exactly so. As a result, it finds a range of final shell-model $0\nu\beta\beta$ matrix elements, with the correct one probably somewhere within the range. Here we will use $c$ parameters and densities at the extremes of the reasonable range to set probable upper and lower limits on the effects of two-body currents.

![Fig. 1.](image.png)

The minimum quenching from the set of choices in Ref. [5] occurs when $c_3 = -3.2$, $c_4 = 8.6$, and $c_D = 0$ [1], a combination we call EM below (following Ref. [5]) while the maximum quenching corresponds to $c_3 = -2.4$, $c_4 = 4.8$ and $c_D = 0.0$ [2], a combination we call EGM+δc. (The units of the $c$ parameters are GeV$^{-1}$.) These choices result in values for $g_A^\text{eff}(0)/g_A$ in a range 0.66 – 0.85 that brackets the empirical value of that ratio derived from the analysis of ordinary Gamow-Teller beta decay; see e.g. Refs. [9] and [10]. Ref. [11] points out that single $\beta$ and two-neutrino double $\beta$ decay observables can be described simultaneously in the QRPA with $g_A^\text{eff}(0)/g_A$ in that range, implying that two-body currents can completely account for the renormalization of $g_A$. On the other hand, older meson-exchange models [12] suggest that the effects of many-body currents on allowed beta decay are small. The source of the disagreement between the strength of two-body currents in $\chi$EFT and exchange models is not completely clear to us.

There are several reasons for the first fact. As Ref. [5] shows, the degree of quenching decreases with increasing momentum transfer. An as we noted earlier, $2\nu\beta\beta$ decay involves almost no momentum transfer by the currents, while $0\nu\beta\beta$ decay involves momentum transfers that are typically about 100 MeV and still contribute non-negligibly at several hundred MeV. In addition, the $0\nu\beta\beta$ matrix element contains a Fermi part, for which we have assumed no quenching. While this assumption may not be completely accurate, it is implied at low momentum transfer by CVC. The overall quenching of the vector current is certain to be less than that of the axial-
TABLE I. The $0\nu\beta\beta$ matrix element $M_{0\nu}^{\text{1bc}}$ with one- and two-body nucleon current operators from the text and the Argonne-V18-G-matrix-based QRPA. We use several sets of values for the $\chi$EFT parameters and two nuclear densities, and both the simplest and more complete versions of the effective one-body current, from Refs. [5] and [6] respectively. $\langle M_{0\nu}^{\text{1bc}} \rangle$ is the matrix element averaged over these possibilities; its variance is in parentheses. The columns labeled a through d correspond to different $\chi$EFT-parameter choices (defined in Ref. [5]) and nuclear-density choices. These choices are a: EGM+$\delta c_i$, $\rho = 0.10$ fm$^{-3}$; b: EGM+$\delta c_i$, $\rho = 0.12$ fm$^{-3}$; c: EM, $\rho = 0.10$ fm$^{-3}$; d: EM, $\rho = 0.12$ fm$^{-3}$. The last column contains the percent suppression $\varepsilon$ of $\langle M_{0\nu}^{\text{1bc}} \rangle$ with respect to the value without two-body currents (displayed in the first column).

| nucleus | $M_{0\nu}^{\text{1bc}}$ | $M_{0\nu}^{\text{2bc}}$ | $\langle M_{0\nu}^{\text{1bc}} \rangle$ | $\varepsilon$ |
|---------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------|
| $^{48}\text{Ca}$ | 0.684 | 0.641 | 0.580 | 0.558 | 0.637 | 0.637 | 0.60 | 0.592 | 0.61(0.03) | 11 |
| $^{76}\text{Ge}$ | 5.915 | 5.121 | 4.369 | 4.084 | 5.050 | 4.914 | 4.412 | 4.206 | 4.64(0.41) | 22 |
| $^{82}\text{Se}$ | 5.313 | 4.570 | 3.863 | 3.583 | 4.506 | 4.378 | 3.906 | 3.701 | 4.11(0.39) | 23 |
| $^{96}\text{Zr}$ | 3.224 | 2.999 | 2.636 | 2.506 | 2.946 | 2.894 | 2.651 | 2.573 | 2.76(0.19) | 14 |
| $^{100}\text{Mo}$ | 6.287 | 5.552 | 5.370 | 4.801 | 5.437 | 5.314 | 4.813 | 4.618 | 5.05(0.41) | 20 |
| $^{110}\text{Pd}$ | 6.675 | 5.795 | 5.607 | 5.037 | 5.763 | 5.540 | 4.833 | 4.528 | 4.83(0.41) | 20 |
| $^{116}\text{Cd}$ | 4.485 | 3.894 | 3.754 | 3.342 | 3.812 | 3.701 | 3.331 | 3.165 | 3.51(0.31) | 22 |
| $^{124}\text{Sn}$ | 3.974 | 3.599 | 3.511 | 3.118 | 3.521 | 3.464 | 3.211 | 3.143 | 3.35(0.19) | 16 |
| $^{130}\text{Te}$ | 4.610 | 4.031 | 3.890 | 3.445 | 3.949 | 3.855 | 3.465 | 3.313 | 3.65(0.32) | 21 |
| $^{130}\text{Xe}$ | 2.570 | 2.249 | 2.169 | 1.920 | 2.190 | 2.136 | 1.915 | 1.829 | 2.02(0.18) | 21 |

TABLE II. The same as Table I but for the CD-Bonn interaction instead of the Argonne V18 interaction.

| nucleus | $M_{0\nu}^{\text{1bc}}$ | $M_{0\nu}^{\text{2bc}}$ | $\langle M_{0\nu}^{\text{1bc}} \rangle$ | $\varepsilon$ |
|---------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------|
| $^{48}\text{Ca}$ | 0.649 | 0.615 | 0.561 | 0.542 | 0.606 | 0.606 | 0.570 | 0.569 | 0.58(0.03) | 10 |
| $^{76}\text{Ge}$ | 5.849 | 5.086 | 4.356 | 4.082 | 4.990 | 4.858 | 4.371 | 4.175 | 4.60(0.40) | 21 |
| $^{82}\text{Se}$ | 5.255 | 4.538 | 3.848 | 3.577 | 4.453 | 4.327 | 3.867 | 3.669 | 4.08(0.38) | 22 |
| $^{96}\text{Zr}$ | 3.144 | 2.953 | 2.608 | 2.485 | 2.883 | 2.835 | 2.603 | 2.532 | 2.72(0.18) | 12 |
| $^{100}\text{Mo}$ | 6.164 | 5.469 | 5.295 | 4.469 | 5.326 | 5.208 | 4.726 | 4.542 | 4.97(0.39) | 19 |
| $^{110}\text{Pd}$ | 6.532 | 5.772 | 5.589 | 4.758 | 5.629 | 5.497 | 4.998 | 4.806 | 5.26(0.40) | 19 |
| $^{116}\text{Cd}$ | 4.474 | 3.888 | 3.338 | 3.125 | 3.796 | 3.685 | 3.317 | 3.149 | 3.51(0.31) | 22 |
| $^{124}\text{Sn}$ | 4.024 | 3.646 | 3.273 | 3.158 | 3.553 | 3.494 | 3.239 | 3.170 | 3.29(0.20) | 16 |
| $^{130}\text{Te}$ | 4.642 | 4.063 | 3.473 | 3.242 | 3.958 | 3.861 | 3.468 | 3.313 | 3.66(0.32) | 21 |
| $^{130}\text{Xe}$ | 2.602 | 2.276 | 2.196 | 1.943 | 2.206 | 2.149 | 1.926 | 1.837 | 2.04(0.18) | 21 |
vector current. (In the results listed in Tables I and II the Fermi matrix elements are smaller than in some other calculations because the isovector particle-particle interaction was adjusted as explained in Ref. 13 to reflect isospin symmetry.)

Why is the QRPA 0νββ quenching less than that in the shell model? Part of the reason, as we noted in the introduction, is that in the QRPA the strength of the isoscalar pairing interaction, which we call g_{pp}^{T=0}, is adjusted to reproduce the measured 2νββ rate. The suppression of 2νββ decay by two-body currents implies that the value of g_{pp}^{T=0} is smaller than it would be without those currents. The smaller g_{pp}^{T=0} in turn implies less quenching for the 0νββ matrix element.

Figure 2 illustrates this idea. The upper panel shows the 2νββ matrix element, with (solid red) and without (dashed blue) two-body currents. The two vertical lines indicate the values of g_{pp}^{T=0} needed to reproduce the “measured” matrix element [14], defined as that which gives the lifetime under the assumption that g_A is unquenched. The value of g_{pp}^{T=0} that works with the two-body currents is smaller. The lower panel shows the consequences for 0νββ decay. The longer (purple) arrow represents the quenching that would obtain if g_{pp}^{T=0} were not adjusted for the presence of the two-body currents (as is the case in the shell model, where the interaction is fixed ahead of time). The shorter arrow represents the same quenching after adjusting g_{pp}^{T=0}. The requirement that we reproduce 2νββ decay thus means that the 0νββ matrix element is quenched noticeably less than it would otherwise be.

Another difference between the QRPA and the shell model is that the QRPA works in a much larger single-particle space (at the price of working with only a particular kind of correlation). This larger space presumably means larger contributions at high momentum transfer. Since the quenching decreases with momentum transfer, the contributions of the high-angular-momentum multipoles are less affected by the two-body currents than their low-angular-momentum counterparts. The large QRPA model space therefore suggests that the quenching of 0νββ decay is less than it would be in a shell model calculation. The size of this effect, however, is hard to quantify.

IV. DISCUSSION

It is clear, in today’s terminology, that some of the quenching of spin operators in nuclei is due to the use of restricted model spaces and some to many-body currents. Model-space truncation can exclude strength that may be pushed to high energies, and the omission of two-body currents leaves delta-hole excitations, among other things, unaccounted for. The question of which effect is more important is still open. If two-body currents are behind most of the quenching, as recent fits of the c parameters seem to suggest, then 2νββ decay is very likely more quenched than 0νββ decay and existing calculations of 0νββ decay that don’t include quenching are at least in the right ballpark. We’ve seen, under this assumption, that such is the case in the QRPA, even a bit more than in the shell model.

It is still possible, as older meson-exchange models suggest [12], that the effects of many-body currents are small. In that event the quenching of neutrinoless decay would be unrelated to the two-body currents and could be similar in magnitude to the quenching of two-neutrino decay, a state of affairs that would make 0νββ experiments less sensitive to a Majorana neutrino mass than we currently believe. A strong argument that this state of affairs is real, however, has yet to be presented. It seems likely to us that the quenching of 0νββ matrix elements is around the size indicated by the χEFT-plus-QRPA analysis carried out here.

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FIG. 2. (Color online) The quenching of 2νββ and 0νββ decay by two-body currents in χEFT. Top: M^{2ν} vs. the g_{pp}^{T=0}, the strength of isoscalar pairing. The solid (red) line is the unquenched matrix element and the dashed (blue) line the matrix element with quenching caused by two-body currents, with the parameterization EGM+δc_i from Ref. 5. The dotted black line is the measured matrix element [14] under the assumption that g_A is unquenched. The vertical lines are the values of g_{pp}^{T=0} that reproduce the measurement with and without two-body currents. Bottom: The same, for M^{0ν} (without a measured value). The long (purple) arrow represents the quenching when g_{pp}^{T=0} is not readjusted to reproduce 2νββ decay. The short (cyan) arrow is the quenching when g_{pp}^{T=0} is readjusted.

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