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Quantum Discord Determines the Interferometric Power of Quantum States

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Quantum metrology exploits quantum mechanical laws to improve the precision in estimating technologically relevant parameters such as phase, frequency, or magnetic fields. Probe states are usually tailored to the particular dynamics whose parameters are being estimated. Here we consider a novel framework where quantum estimation is performed in an interferometric configuration, using bipartite probe states prepared when only the spectrum of the generating Hamiltonian is known. We introduce a figure of merit for the scheme, given by the worst-case precision over all suitable Hamiltonians, and prove that it amounts exactly to a computable measure of discord-type quantum correlations for the input probe. We complement our theoretical results with a metrology experiment, realized in a highly controllable room-temperature nuclear magnetic resonance setup, which provides a proof-of-concept demonstration for the usefulness of discord in sensing applications. Discordant probes are shown to guarantee a nonzero phase sensitivity for all the chosen generating Hamiltonians, while classically correlated probes are unable to accomplish the estimation in a worst-case setting. This work establishes a rigorous and direct operational interpretation for general quantum correlations, shedding light on their potential for quantum technology.

All quantitative sciences benefit from the spectacular developments in high-accuracy devices, such as atomic clocks, gravitational wave detectors, and navigation sensors. Quantum metrology studies how to harness quantum mechanics to gain precision in estimating quantities not amenable to direct observation [1–5]. The phase estimation paradigm with measurement schemes based on an interferometric setup [6] encompasses a broad and relevant class of metrology problems, which can be conveniently cast in terms of an input-output scheme [1]. An input probe state $\rho_{AB}$ enters a two-arm channel, in which the reference subsystem $B$ is unaffected while subsystem $A$ undergoes a local unitary evolution, so that the output density matrix can be written as $\rho'_{AB} = (U_A \otimes I_B) \rho_{AB} (U_A \otimes I_B)^\dagger$, with $U_A = e^{-i\phi H_A}$, where $\phi$ is the parameter we wish to estimate and $H_A$ is the local Hamiltonian generating the unitary dynamics. Information on $\phi$ is then recovered through an estimator function $\hat{\phi}$ constructed upon possibly joint measurements of suitable dependent observables performed on the output $\rho'_{AB}$. For any input state $\rho_{AB}$ and generator $H_A$, the maximum achievable precision is determined theoretically by the quantum Cramér-Rao bound [3]. Given repetitive interrogations via $\nu$ identical copies of $\rho_{AB}$, this fundamental relation sets a lower limit to the mean square error $\text{Var}^{\nu}_{\rho_{AB}} (\hat{\phi})$ that measures the statistical distance between $\hat{\phi}$ and $\phi$, $\text{Var}^{\nu}_{\rho_{AB}} (\hat{\phi}) \geq [\nu F(\rho_{AB}; H_A)]^{-1}$, where $F$ is the quantum Fisher information (QFI) [7], which quantifies how much information about $\phi$ is encoded in $\rho_{AB}$. The inequality is asymptotically tight as $\nu \to \infty$, provided the most informative quantum measurement is carried out at the output stage. Using this quantity as a figure of merit for independent and identically distributed trials, and under the assumption of complete prior knowledge of $H_A$, then “coherence” [8] in the eigenbasis of $H_A$ is the essential resource for the estimation [2]; as maximal coherence in a known basis can be reached by a superposition state of subsystem $A$ only, there is no need for a correlated (e.g., entangled) subsystem $B$ at all in this conventional case.

We show that the introduction of correlations is instead unavoidable when the assumption of full prior knowledge of $H_A$ is dropped. More precisely, we identify, in correlations commonly referred to as “quantum discord” between $A$ and $B$ [9,10], the necessary and sufficient resources rendering physical states able to store phase information in a unitary dynamics, independently of the specific Hamiltonian that generates it. Quantum discord is an indicator of quantumness of correlations in a composite system, usually revealed...
via the state disturbance induced by local measurements [9–12]; recent results suggest that discord might enable quantum advantages in specific computation or communication settings [13–19]. In this Letter a general quantitative equivalence between discord-type quantum correlations and the guaranteed precision in quantum estimation is established theoretically, and is observed experimentally in a liquid-state nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) proof-of-concept implementation [20,21].

**Theory.**—An experimenter Alice, assisted by her partner Bob, has to determine, as precisely as possible, an unknown parameter φ introduced by a “black box” device. The black box implements the transformation $U_A = e^{-iφH_A}$ and is controlled by a referee Charlie, see Fig. 1. Initially, only the spectrum of the generator $H_A$ is publicly known, and it is assumed to be nondegenerate. For instance, the experimenters might be asked to monitor a remote (uncooperative) target whose interaction with the probing signals is partially incognito [22]. Alice and Bob prepare ν copies of a bipartite (generally mixed) probe state $ρ_{AB}$ of their choice. Charlie then distributes ν identical copies of the black box, and Alice sends each of her subsystems through one iteration of the box. After the transformations, Charlie reveals the Hamiltonian $H_A$ used in the box, prompting Alice and Bob to perform the best possible joint measurement on the transformed state $(ρ_{AB}^{φ})^{⊗ν}$ in order to estimate φ [23]. Eventually, the experimenters infer a probability distribution associated to an optimal estimator $φ$ saturating the Cramér-Rao bound (for $ν ≫ 1$), so that the corresponding QFI determines exactly the estimation precision. For a given input probe state, a relevant figure of merit for this protocol is then given by the worst-case QFI over all possible black box settings,

$$P^A(ρ_{AB}) = \frac{1}{4} \min_{H_A} F(ρ_{AB}; H_A),$$

(1)

where the minimum is intended over all Hamiltonians with given spectrum (see also [27]), and we inserted a normalization factor 1/4 for convenience. We shall refer to $P^A(ρ_{AB})$ as the “interferometric power” (IP) of the input state $ρ_{AB}$, since it naturally quantifies the guaranteed sensitivity that such a state allows in an interferometric configuration (Fig. 1).

We prove that the quantity in Eq. (1) is a rigorous measure of discord-type quantum correlations of an arbitrary bipartite state $ρ_{AB}$ (see Supplemental Material [27]). If (and only if) the probe state is uncorrelated or only classically correlated, i.e., Alice and Bob prepare a density matrix $ρ_{AB}$ diagonal with respect to a local basis on $A$ [11,13,17], then no precision in the estimation is guaranteed; indeed, in this case there is always a particularly adverse choice for $H_A$, such that $[ρ_{AB}, H_A \otimes 1_B] = 0$ and no information about φ can be imprinted on the state, resulting in a vanishing IP. Conversely, the degree of discord-type correlations of the state $ρ_{AB}$ not only guarantees but also directly quantifies, via Eq. (1), its usefulness as a resource for estimation of a parameter φ, regardless of the generator $H_A$ of a given spectral class. For generic mixed probes $ρ_{AB}$, this is true even in the absence of entanglement.

Remarkably, we can obtain a closed formula for the IP of an arbitrary quantum state of a bipartite system when subsystem $A$ is a qubit. Deferring the proof to [27], this reads

$$P^A(ρ_{AB}) = \varsigma_{min}[M]$$

(2)

where $\varsigma_{min}[M]$ is the smallest eigenvalue of the $3 \times 3$ matrix $M$ of elements

$$M_{m,n} = \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i,j: q_i \neq q_j, q_i \neq 0} \frac{(q_i - q_j)^2}{q_i + q_j} × \langle ψ_i | σ_m A \otimes 1_B | ψ_j \rangle \langle ψ_i | σ_n A \otimes 1_B | ψ_j \rangle$$

with $\{q_i, |ψ_i\rangle\}$ being, respectively, the eigenvalues and eigenvectors of $ρ_{AB}$, $ρ_{AB} = \sum_i |ψ_i⟩⟨ψ_i|$. This renders $P^A(ρ_{AB})$ an operational and computable indicator of general nonclassical correlations for practical purposes.

**Experiment.**—We report an experimental implementation of black box estimation in a room temperature liquid-state NMR setting [20,21]. Here, quantum states are encoded in the spin configurations of magnetic nuclei of a $^{13}C$-labeled chloroform (CHCl$_3$) sample diluted in $d_6$ acetone. The $^1H$ and $^{13}C$ nuclear spins realize qubits $A$ and $B$, respectively; the states $ρ_{AB}$ are engineered as pseudopure states [26,28] by controlling the deviation matrix from a fully thermal ensemble [21]. A highly reliable implementation of unitary phase shifts can be obtained by means of radio frequency (rf) pulses. Referring to [27] for further details of the sample preparation and implementation, we now discuss the plan (Fig. 2) and the results (Fig. 3) of the experiment.

We compare two scenarios, where Alice and Bob prepare input probe states $ρ_{AB}$ either with or without discord. The chosen families of states are, respectively [25,29,30],

$$ρ_{AB}^Q = \frac{1}{4} \begin{pmatrix} 1 + p^2 & 0 & 0 & 2p \\ 0 & 1 - p^2 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 - p^2 & 0 \\ 2p & 0 & 0 & 1 + p^2 \end{pmatrix},$$

$$ρ_{AB}^C = \frac{1}{4} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & p^2 & p & p \\ p^2 & 1 & p & p \\ p & p & 1 & p^2 \\ p & p & p^2 & 1 \end{pmatrix}. $$

(3)

Both classes of states have the same purity, given by $Tr[(ρ_{AB}^{Q,C})^2] = (1/4)(1 + p^2)^2$, where $0 ≤ p ≤ 1$. This
allows us to focus on the role of initial correlations for the subsequent estimation, at tunable common degree of mixedness mimicking realistic environmental conditions. While the states $\rho_{AB}^\rho$ are classically correlated for all values of $\rho$, the states $\rho_{AB}^{\sigma}$ have discord increasing monotonically with $\rho > 0$. The probes are prepared by applying a chain of control operations to the initial Gibbs state (Fig. 2). We perform a full tomographical reconstruction of each input state to validate the quality of our state preparation, obtaining a mean fidelity of $(99.7 \pm 0.2)\%$ with the theoretical density matrices of Eq. (3) [27]. In the case of $\rho_{AB}^\rho$, we measure the degree of discord-type correlations in the probes by evaluating the closed formula (2) for the IP on the tomographically reconstructed input density matrices; this is displayed as black crosses in the top panel of Fig. 3 and is found in excellent agreement with the theoretical expectation $P(\rho_{AB}^{\sigma}) = p^2$.

Then, for each fixed input probe, and denoting by $q_0$ the true value of the unknown parameter $q$ to be estimated by Alice and Bob (which we set to $q_0 = \pi/4$ in the experiments without any loss of generality), we implement three different choices of Charlie’s black box transformation $U_A^{(k)} = e^{-i q_0 H_A^{(k)}} \otimes I_B$. These are given by $H_A^{(0)} = \sigma_z$, $H_A^{(1)} = (\sigma_x + i \sigma_y) / \sqrt{2}$, and $H_A^{(2)} = \sigma_x$, and are engineered by applying, respectively, the pulse sequences

![Diagram](image-url)
$U_A^{(1)} = (\pi/2)_x \rightarrow (\pi/2)_y \rightarrow (\pi/2)_x$, $U_A^{(2)} = (\pi/2)_{x,y}$, and $U_A^{(3)} = (\pi/2)_x$. A theoretical analysis asserts that the chosen settings encompass the best (setting $k = 1$) and worst (setting $k = 3$) case scenarios for both types of probes, while the setting $k = 2$ is an intermediate case [27].

For each input state and black box setting, we carry out the corresponding optimal measurement strategy for the estimation of $q$. This is given by projections on the eigenbasis $\{|\lambda_j\rangle\}$ of the symmetric logarithmic derivative (SLD) $L_q = \sum |j\rangle\langle \lambda_j|/|\lambda_j\rangle$, an operator satisfying $\partial_{q} \rho_{AB} = (1/2)(\rho_{AB}^* L_q + L_q \rho_{AB})$ [7]. The QFI is then given by [31]

$$F(\rho_{AB}; H_A) = \text{Tr}[\rho_{AB}^* L_q^2] = 4 \sum_{i\neq j} \frac{(q_i - q_j)^2}{(q_i + q_j)^2} |\langle y_i |(H_A \otimes I_B)|y_j\rangle|^2,$$

where $\{q_i, |y_i\rangle\}$ are the eigenvalues and eigenvectors of $\rho_{AB}$ as before. We implement a readout procedure based on a global rotation into the eigenbasis of the SLD, depicted as $V^{C,Q}$ in Fig. 2, followed by a pulsed field gradient $G_z$ to perform an ensemble measurement of the expectation values $d_j = |\langle \lambda_j |\rho_{AB}^* |\lambda_j\rangle|^{-1}$ averaged over $\nu \approx 10^{15}$ effectively independent probes [25,27]. These are read from the main diagonal of the output density matrices, circumventing the need for complete state tomography. The measurement basis is selected by a simulated adaptive procedure and the measured ensemble data $d_j^{\text{exp}}$ are reported in [27].

To accomplish the estimation, we need a statistical estimator for $q$. Denoting by $(k, s)$ an instance of the experiment (with $k = 1, 2, 3$ referring to the black box setting, and $s = C, Q$ referring to the input probes), an optimal estimator for $q$ which asymptotically saturates the quantum Cramér-Rao bound can be formally constructed as [31,32]

$$\tilde{q}^{(k,s)} = q_0 + (L_q^{(k,s)})^{-1} \left[ \nu F(\rho_{AB}^*; H_A^{(k,s)}) \right],$$

such that $\langle \tilde{q}^{(k,s)} \rangle = q_0$ and $\text{Var}(\tilde{q}^{(k,s)}) = [\nu F(\rho_{AB}^*; H_A^{(k,s)})]^{-1}$, because $(L_q^{(k,s)})_0 = 0$ by definition. However, the estimator in Eq. (4) requires the knowledge of the true value $q_0$ of the unknown parameter, which cannot be obtained by iterative procedures in our setup. We then infer directly the ensemble mean and variance of the optimal estimator from the available data, namely, the measured values $d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)}$ and the knowledge of the input probe states $\rho_{AB}$ prepared (and reconstructed) by Alice and Bob, the setting $k$ disclosed by Charlie, and the design eigenvalues $l_j$ of the SLD, which are independent of $q$.

First, we infer the expected value of the optimal estimator $\tilde{q}^{(k,s)}$ by means of a statistical least-squares processing. We derive theoretical model expressions for the measured data $d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)}$ defined by

$$d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)} = \langle \lambda_j^{(k,s)} \rangle \left| \left< e^{-i q H_A^{(k)}} \right| \rho_{AB}^* \left| e^{i q H_A^{(k)}} \right| \lambda_j^{(k,s)} \right|^2,$$

and we calculate the value of $q$ that minimizes the least-squares function $Y^{(k,s)}(q) = \sum d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)} \left( q - d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)} \right)^2$ (equivalent to maximizing the log-likelihood assuming that each $d_j$ is Gaussian distributed over the ensemble). For each setting $(k, s)$, the value of $q$ that solves the least-squares problem is chosen as the expected value $\langle \tilde{q}^{(k,s)} \rangle$ of our estimator. These values are plotted in row (c) of Fig. 3. One can appreciate the agreement with the true value $q_0 = \pi/4$ of the unknown phase shift for all settings but the pathological one (C, 3). In the latter case, the estimation is completely unreliable because the classical probes commute with the corresponding Hamiltonian generator, thus failing the estimation task.

Next, by expanding the SLD in its eigenbasis (see Table SI in [27]), we obtain the experimental QFIs measured from our data, $F_{\text{exp}}(\rho_{AB}^*; H_A^{(k)}) = \sum (l_j^{(k)})^2 d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)}$. These are plotted (normalized by a factor 1/4) for the various settings in row (a) of Fig. 3, together with the lower bound given by the IP of $\rho_{AB}^*$. We remark that the QFIs are obtained from the output estimation data, while the IP is measured on the input probe states. In both cases an excellent agreement with theoretical expectations is retrieved for all settings.

Notice how in cases $k = 2, 3$ the quantum probes achieve a QFI that saturates the lower bound given by the IP. Notice also that for $k = 3$ the classical states yield strictly zero QFI, as $l_j^{(3)} = 0 \forall j$.

Finally, we infer the variance of the optimal estimator over the spin ensemble. This is obtained by replacing $q_0$ with $\langle \tilde{q}^{(k,s)} \rangle$ in Eq. (4) and calculating $\text{Var}(\tilde{q}^{(k,s)})$ by expanding it in terms of the design weight values $l_j^{(k,s)}$ and the measured data $d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)}$, namely, $\text{Var}(\tilde{q}^{(k,s)}) = \sum (l_j^{(k,s)})^2 d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)} - \sum (l_j^{(k,s)})^4 d_j^{\text{exp}(k,s)}^2 / \nu F_{\text{exp}}(\rho_{AB}^*; H_A^{(k)})^2$. The resulting variances $\text{Var}(\tilde{q}^{(k,s)})$ of our metrology experiment are then plotted in row (b) of Fig. 3. The obtained quantities are in neat agreement with the inverse relation $\text{Var}(\tilde{q}^{(k,s)}) \approx \nu F_{\text{exp}}(\rho_{AB}^*; H_A^{(k)})^{-1}$, which allows us to conclude that the implemented estimator with experimentally determined mean $\tilde{q}^{(k,s)}$ and variance $\text{Var}(\tilde{q}^{(k,s)})$, constructed from our ensemble data, saturates the quantum Cramér-Rao bound: this confirms that an optimal detection strategy was carried out in all settings. Overall, this clearly shows that discord-type quantum correlations, which establish a priori the guaranteed precision for any bipartite probe state via the quantifier $\mathcal{P}$, are the key resource for black box estimation, demonstrating the central claim of this Letter.

Conclusion.—In summary, we investigated black box parameter estimation as a metrology primitive. We introduced the IP of a bipartite quantum state, which measures its ability to store phase information in a worst-case scenario. This was proven equivalent to a measure of the general quantum correlations of the state. We demonstrated the operational significance of discord-type correlations by implementing a proof-of-concept NMR black box
estimation experiment, where the high controllability on state preparation and gate implementation allowed us to retain the hypothesis of unitary dynamics, and to verify the saturation of the Cramér-Rao bound for optimal estimation. Our results suggest that in highly disordered settings, e.g., NMR systems, and under adverse conditions, quantum correlations even without entanglement can be a promising resource for realizing quantum technology.

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