Unitary ambiguity of $NN$ contact interactions and the $3N$ force

L. Girlanda$^a$, A. Kievsky$^b$, L. E. Marcucci$^{b,c}$, and M. Viviani$^b$

$^a$Dipartimento di Matematica e Fisica, Università del Salento, and INFN Sezione di Lecce, Via Arnesano, I-73100 Lecce, Italy

$^b$INFN, Sezione di Pisa, Largo Bruno Pontecorvo 3, I-56127 Pisa, Italy

$^c$Dipartimento di Fisica, Università di Pisa, Largo Bruno Pontecorvo 3, I-56127 Pisa, Italy

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We identify a redundancy between two- and three-nucleon contact interactions at the fourth and fifth order of the chiral expansion respectively. In particular we show that tensor-type and spin-orbit three-nucleon contact interactions effectively account for that part of the two-nucleon interaction which depends on the total center-of-mass momentum and is unconstrained by relativity. This might give the chiral effective field theory enough flexibility to successfully address $A = 3$ scattering observables already at N3LO.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The modern understanding of nuclear interactions is based on the chiral effective field theory (ChEFT) framework \cite{1-5}. Compared to more phenomenological approaches, a low-momenta power counting allows in principle to improve systematically the accuracy of the theoretical description, pursuing the perturbative expansion to higher and higher orders, and at the same time to assess the theoretical uncertainty introduced by the truncation of the series \cite{6,7}. This is made possible by the approximate chiral symmetry of the underlying quantum chromodynamics (QCD), whose dynamical breakdown is responsible for the emergence of pseudo-Goldstone bosons, the pions, that interact weakly at low energy and are much lighter than all other hadrons. Pion exchanges among nucleons determine the longest range component of the nuclear interaction, while the dynamics at shorter distances, unresolved by the effective theory, is described in terms of multi-nucleon contact interactions. The associated low-energy constants (LECs), being unconstrained by chiral symmetry, need to be determined from experimental data. Their number increases as the perturbative series is pushed to higher orders, but their impact should decrease, provided the expansion is well behaved. Obviously, in order to fully exploit the predictive power of the theory, and to put it to a more stringent test, it is important to identify a minimal set of such LECs.

In this paper we concentrate on a redundancy between two nucleon ($NN$) contact couplings which arise at the fourth order of the low-energy expansion (N3LO) and the subleading three-nucleon ($3N$) contact interactions, which were classified in Ref. \cite{8} as consisting of 13 independent operators. The latter arise at the fifth order (N4LO) in the ChEFT \cite{9-17}, and as such they should be considered in conjunction with recent accurate versions of the $NN$ interaction developed at N4LO and beyond \cite{7,18,19,23,24}. The relevance of these operators has been repeatedly highlighted, in particular for solving long-standing discrepancies in low-energy $N - d$ elastic scattering, like the well known $A_y$ puzzle \cite{25-27}. As we are going to show, five of these operators are equivalent to a suitable redefinition of the short-range $NN$ potential, realized by specific unitary transformations of the nuclear Hamiltonian. Such unitary ambiguities are a common feature in all reductions from a quantum-field theoretical Lagrangian to quantum mechanics and affect also pion-mediated interactions \cite{28-30}. They are systematically exploited in the unitary transformation approach to nuclear forces and electroweak currents \cite{31,32} to enforce the renormalizability of nuclear potentials and transition operators \cite{33,34}. We single out in particular two additional transformations that can be used to drop total momentum ($P$)-dependent $NN$ interactions. Such interactions, which vanish in the center of mass frame cannot be determined from $NN$ scattering data alone. However, dropping these terms induces a 3N contact interaction mostly of tensor and spin-orbit type.

The paper is organized as follows. In section \ref{sec:nn} we classify the most general $NN$ contact unitary transformation at the $O(p^2)$ level. In Section \ref{sec:p_dependent} we relate two of these transformations to the $P$-dependent component of the $NN$ interaction and show that the latter depends on two extra LECs, unconstrained by relativity. In section \ref{sec:3n_contact} we study the impact of this transformation at the 3N level and obtain a reduced form of the subleading 3N contact interaction. Finally, the consequences of the above findings on the structure and convergence of the chiral expansion for 3N observables are discussed in section \ref{sec:conclusions}.
II. \textit{NN CONTACT UNITARY TRANSFORMATIONS AT O(p^2)}

Following Ref. \cite{19} we write the most general unitary transformation as \( U = \exp(\sum_n \alpha_n T_n) \) with \( \alpha_n \) real parameters and \( T_n \) a complete set of antihermmitian operators respecting all underlying symmetries. Since we are interested in purely nucleonic interactions, the generators \( T_n \) will only involve local products of nucleon fields, ordered in the low-energy expansion, according to the number of gradients. The first non trivial case will consists of two-nucleon operators. Rotational, isospin, parity and time-reversal symmetry require the presence of at least two gradients. At this level, a complete set consists of the following operators:

\begin{align}
T_1 &= \int d^3x N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i N \nabla^j(N^\dagger N) \sim \mathbf{k} \cdot \mathbf{Q}, \\
T_2 &= \int d^3x N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i \sigma^j N \nabla^j(N^\dagger \sigma^j N) \sim \mathbf{k} \cdot \mathbf{Q} \sigma_1 \cdot \sigma_2, \\
T_3 &= \int d^3x \left[ N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i \sigma^j \nabla^j(N^\dagger \sigma^j N) + N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i \sigma^j \nabla^j(N^\dagger \sigma^j N^\dagger N) \right] \sim \mathbf{k} \cdot \mathbf{Q} \sigma \cdot \sigma_2 + \mathbf{k} \cdot \sigma_2 \mathbf{Q} \cdot \sigma_1, \\
T_4 &= i \epsilon^{ijk} \int d^3x N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^j \sigma^k N \sim i \mathbf{P} \times \mathbf{Q} \cdot (\sigma_1 - \sigma_2), \\
T_5 &= \int d^3x \left[ N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i \sigma^j \nabla^j(N^\dagger \sigma^j N^\dagger N) - N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i \sigma^j \nabla^j(N^\dagger \sigma^j N^\dagger N^\dagger N) \right] \sim \mathbf{P} \cdot \sigma_1 \mathbf{k} \cdot \sigma_2 - \mathbf{P} \cdot \sigma_2 \mathbf{k} \cdot \sigma_1,
\end{align}

where \( N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i N = N^\dagger (\nabla^i N) - (\nabla^i N)^\dagger N \), and \( N(x) \) denotes the non-relativistic nucleon field operator. We have also introduced the dependence on the initial and final relative momenta \( \mathbf{p} \) and \( \mathbf{p}' \), or \( \mathbf{k} = \mathbf{p}' - \mathbf{p} \) and \( \mathbf{Q} = (\mathbf{p} + \mathbf{p}')/2 \), and on the total momentum \( \mathbf{P} = \mathbf{p}_1 + \mathbf{p}_2 \) of a two-nucleon system. The last two generators, which were not considered in Ref. \cite{19}, vanish in the two-nucleon center of mass frame. Their relevance will be clear in the following. In addition we can also define the corresponding isospin-dependent \( T_{n'} \) operators, involving \( \tau_1 \cdot \tau_2 \), but using the anticommuting nature of nucleon fields and Fierz reshuffling of spin and isospin indeces, one can express them in the above basis,

\begin{align}
T_{1'} &= -2T_1 - T_2, \\
T_{2'} &= -3T_1, \\
T_{3'} &= -2T_1 + 2T_2 - 3T_3, \\
T_{4'} &= -2T_3 - T_4, \\
T_{5'} &= -2T_4 - T_5.
\end{align}

When transforming a nuclear Hamiltonian \( H \) by the above unitary transformation, one gets additional interactions,

\[ H \to U^\dagger H U = H + \sum_n \alpha_n [H, T_n] + ... = H + \sum_n \alpha_n \delta_n H + ..., \]

that amount to a shift of existing LECs, since \( H \) already contains all possible interactions allowed by the assumed symmetries. Thus, from the one-body kinetic energy,

\[ H_0 = -\frac{1}{2m} \int d^3x N^\dagger \nabla^2 N, \]

one gets e.g., using the canonical anticommutation relations \cite{37}

\[ \delta_1 H_0 = \frac{1}{2m} \int d^3x \left[ \nabla^i (N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i \vec{\nabla}^j N) \nabla^j (N^\dagger N) - \nabla^i (N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^i N^\dagger N) \nabla^j (N^\dagger \vec{\nabla}^j N) \right]. \]

In the two-nucleon system, the above operator yields an off-shell contribution \( \sim (\mathbf{p}^2 - \mathbf{p}'^2)^2 \). In Ref. \cite{19} the unitary transformations corresponding to \( n = 1, 2, 3 \), were used to absorb three of the \( O(p^3) \) \( NN \) couplings, reducing their number to twelve. As will be shown in Section \textit{IV} this also implies the appearance of induced subleading \( 3N \) contact interactions, which can be written as combinations of the 13 operators introduced in Ref. \cite{3}. The remaining transformations, corresponding to \( n = 4, 5 \), generate total momentum-dependent interactions which vanish in the center of mass frame, e.g. \( \delta_1 H_0 \sim i(\mathbf{p}^2 - \mathbf{p}'^2) \mathbf{P} \times (\mathbf{p} + \mathbf{p}') \cdot \mathbf{S} \), having denoted by \( \mathbf{S} \) the total spin operator, and will be discussed in the next Section.
III. P-DEPENDENT $NN$ CONTACT INTERACTIONS

Total momentum-dependent interactions are strongly constrained by Poincaré symmetry. In the instant form of relativistic dynamics [21], the three momentum and angular momentum are the same as in the free theory, described by the Dirac Lagrangian starting from the energy-momentum tensor $T^\mu\nu = (i/2)\bar{\psi}^\dagger\gamma^\mu\nabla^\nu\psi$, while the Hamiltonian $H$ and boost generators $K$ contain the interactions,

$$H = H_0 + H_I, \quad K = K_0 + K_I.$$  \hspace{1cm} (14)

Since the free generators already satisfy the Poincaré commutation relations, the interaction terms must satisfy

$$\begin{align*}
[J^i, K^j_1] &= ie^{ijk}K^k_1, \\
[K^i_1, P^j] &= i\delta^{ij}H_1, \\
[K^i_1, H_0] + [K^i_1, H_I] + [K^i_1, H_I] &= 0, \\
[K_0^i, K_1^j] &+ \frac{1}{2}K_1^i, K_1^j - i \leftrightarrow j = 0.
\end{align*}$$ \hspace{1cm} (15-18)

The first relation qualifies the interacting boost generator as a vector. The remaining ones are less trivial to satisfy. In the low-energy theory a non-relativistic reduction can be used to express these operators in terms of the non-relativistic nucleon field $N(x)$ as a series containing increasing powers of soft momenta. For example, the free Hamiltonian and boost generators are expanded as,

$$H_0 = H_0^{(0)} + H_0^{(2)} + H_0^{(4)} + \ldots, \quad K_0 = K_0^{(-1)} + K_0^{(1)} + K_0^{(3)} + \ldots,$$  \hspace{1cm} (19)

where the superscripts denote the assigned “soft power”. Explicitly,

$$\begin{align*}
H_0^{(0)} &= m\int d^3xN^\dagger N, \quad H_0^{(2)} = -\frac{1}{8m}\int d^3xN^\dagger \nabla^2 N, \ldots, \\
K_0^{(-1)} &= m\int d^3x N^\dagger N, \quad K_0^{(1)} = -\frac{1}{8m}\int d^3x x \left[ N^\dagger \nabla^2 N + i\nabla \cdot N^\dagger \vec{\sigma} \times \nabla N \right], \ldots.
\end{align*}$$ \hspace{1cm} (20)

Contact interactions in $H_I$ can be classified according to the number of participating nucleons,

$$H_I = H_{NN} + H_{3N} + \ldots,$$  \hspace{1cm} (21)

and each component can be ordered by the same criterium as

$$\begin{align*}
H_{NN} &= H_{NN}^{(3)} + H_{NN}^{(5)} + H_{NN}^{(7)} + \ldots, \\
H_{3N} &= H_{3N}^{(6)} + H_{3N}^{(8)} + \ldots
\end{align*}$$ \hspace{1cm} (22-23)

The first term in $H_{NN}$ contains the two momentum-independent interactions parametrized by the LECs $C_S$ and $C_T$,

$$H_{NN}^{(3)} = C_SH_S + C_TH_T \equiv \int d^3x [C_SN^\dagger N^\dagger N + C_TN^\dagger \bar{\sigma}N \cdot N^\dagger \bar{\sigma}N].$$ \hspace{1cm} (24)

Starting with the following order we can have $P$-independent or $P$-dependent interactions. In $H_{NN}^{(5)}$, the formers are parametrized by the LECs $C_{1, \ldots, 7}$, while the latter are unambiguously fixed in terms of the leading LECs $C_S$ and $C_T$ as relativistic $1/m$ corrections [21]. At the following order, $H_{NN}^{(7)}$ contains $P$-independent interactions depending on the LECs $D_{1, \ldots, 15}$ and a set of $P$-dependent ones which have not yet been considered in the literature. Most of them take the form of relativistic corrections to lower order interactions, and as such they are fixed unambiguously in terms of the lower-order LECs. Instead, we will be concerned by those $P$-dependent contributions to $H_{NN}^{(7)}$ which are unconstrained by relativity and depend on extra LECs. As for the $3N$ interactions, their low-energy expansion starts with a momentum independent term, $H_{3N}^{(6)}$ parametrized by the LEC $c_E$ [13],

$$H_{3N}^{(6)} = \frac{c_E}{2F_2^4A_x} \int d^3xN^\dagger N^\dagger \tau^aN^\dagger \tau^aN,$$ \hspace{1cm} (25)
with the pion decay constant $F_{\pi}$ and the chiral symmetry breaking scale $\Lambda_\chi$ meant to provide the correct scaling based on naive dimensional analysis [22], and proceeds with the two-derivatives contact interactions parametrized by the LECs $E_{i,1,...,13}$ introduced in Ref. [8],

$$H^{(8)}_{dN} = \int d^3 x \sum_{i=1}^{13} E_i O_i,$$

(26)

where the explicit expressions for the operators $O_i$ can be read from Eqs. (14) and (16) of Ref. [8].

In order to satisfy the relation [16] a given interaction in $H_I$ implies a corresponding term in $K_I$ which we denote as $W$, such that

$$H_I = \int d^3 x H_I(x) \implies W = \int d^3 x H_I(x).$$

(27)

The most general form of the interacting part of the boost generator can be written as $K_I = W + \delta W$, up to a translationally invariant intrinsic boost, whose low-energy expansion starts with $\delta W^{(4)}$. In principle one can list three such operators,

$$\delta W_i^z = \int d^3 x \nabla \cdot \left( N^\dagger \sigma N \right) N^\dagger \sigma^i N,$$

(28)

$$\delta W_i^2 = i\epsilon_{ijk} \int d^3 x \left[ N^\dagger \nabla^j \sigma^k N N^\dagger N + N^\dagger \sigma^j N N^\dagger \nabla^k N \right],$$

(29)

$$\delta W_i^3 = i\epsilon_{ijk} \int d^3 x \left[ N^\dagger \nabla^j \sigma^k N N^\dagger N - N^\dagger \sigma^j N N^\dagger \nabla^k N \right],$$

(30)

since the operators involving $\tau_1 \cdot \tau_2$ are Fierz related to the ones above. These intrinsic boosts were ignored in Ref. [21], since they do not play a role at the order considered there, respectively $O(p^4)$ and $O(p^5)$ for the relations [17] and [18],

$$\begin{align*}
\left[ K_0^{(-1),i}, H_I^{(5)} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(1),i}, H_I^{(3)} \right] + \left[ W^{(4)}, H_0^{(0)} \right] + \left[ \delta W^{(4)}, H_0^{(0)} \right] + \left[ W^{(2)}, H_0^{(2)} \right] &= 0, \\
\left[ K_0^{(-1)i}, W^{(4)i} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(1)i}, W^{(2)i} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(-1)i}, \delta W^{(4)i} \right] - i \leftrightarrow j &= 0.
\end{align*}$$

(31)

Indeed, in the first of the above equations, $\delta W$ is irrelevant, since it commutes with $H_0^{(0)}$. Moreover, as found in Ref. [21], Eq. [32] without the commutators involving $\delta W$ is valid as a consequence of Eq. [31]. This means that we must have

$$\left[ K_0^{(-1)i}, \delta W^{(4)i} \right] - i \leftrightarrow j = 0,$$

(33)

which rules out $\delta W_3$. In other words, only the $P$-independent intrinsic boosts $\delta W_1$ and $\delta W_2$ are allowed, and we can write the most general intrinsic boost $\delta W^{(4)}$ in terms of two constants, $\delta W^{(4)} = \sum_{i=1}^{2} \beta_i \delta W_i$. The two independent intrinsic boost generators are related to the transformations $T_4$ and $T_5$ of the previous section by the following relations,

$$\begin{align*}
\left[ K_0^{(-1)}, T_5 \right] &= -4 \delta W_1, \\
\left[ K_0^{(-1)}, T_4 \right] &= -2 \delta W_2.
\end{align*}$$

(34)

They start to play a role at the orders $O(p^6)$ and $O(p^5)$ respectively,

$$\begin{align*}
0 &= \left[ W^{(6)}, H_0^{(0)} \right] + \left[ W^{(4)}, H_0^{(2)} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(1)}, H_I^{(5)} \right] + \left[ W^{(2)}, H_0^{(4)} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(3)}, H_I^{(3)} \right] \\
&+ \left[ \delta W^{(4)}, H_0^{(2)} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(-1)}, H_I^{(7)} \right],
\end{align*}$$

(35)

$$\begin{align*}
0 &= \left[ K_0^{(-1)i}, W^{(6)i} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(1)i}, W^{(4)i} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(-1)i}, \delta W^{(4)i} \right] + \left[ K_0^{(3)i}, W^{(2)i} \right] - i \leftrightarrow j,
\end{align*}$$

(36)

which again involve only two-nucleon terms. From these equations the relativistic corrections in $H_I^{(7)}$ can be identified, following the steps of Ref. [21]. Indeed, the interactions in $H_I^{(7)}$ with corresponding minimal boosts $W^{(6)}$, must satisfy the above constraints. Considering Eq. [35], the first term vanishes, the second and third terms represent $1/m$
corrections to the interactions involving $C_i$, the fourth and fifth terms represent $1/m^3$ corrections to the interactions involving $C_S$ and $C_T$. Ignoring these $1/m$ corrections we are left either with $P$-independent terms in $H_I^{(7)}$, which commute with $H_0^{(1)}$, and thus satisfy Eq. (35) with $\delta W^{(4)} = 0$ (these are the operators multiplied by $D_1, \ldots, D_{15}$) or with $P$-dependent terms whose commutator with $K_0^{(1)}$ must be compensated by the terms involving $\delta W^{(4)}$. Thus there is a one-to-one correspondence between the possible forms of the intrinsic boost $\delta W^{(4)}$ (which we already classified as $\delta W_1$ and $\delta W_2$) and the allowed $P$-dependent interactions of $H_I^{(7)}$. It is possible to show that Eq. (34) then follows from Bianchi identities.

In view of Eqs. (24), the above statement can be immediately understood: a unitary transformation involving $T_4$ and $T_5$ will generate from $H_0$ some $P$-dependent interaction terms of $H_I^{(7)}$. At the same time, as it is clear from Eq. (33), from the free boost generator $K_0$ one gets the interacting intrinsic boosts that exactly compensate for these terms, such that the Poincaré commutation relations (33) and (34) remain satisfied, as they should by unitarity. This means that there are two $P$-dependent $NN$ contact interactions in $H_I^{(7)}$ which are completely unconstrained, depending on two free LECs. A possible parametrization of the resulting $P$-dependent $NN$ potential is in terms of two extra LECs, $D_{16}$ and $D_{17}$, such that

$$V_{NN}(P) = D_{16} k \cdot Q \times P \cdot (\sigma_1 - \sigma_2) + D_{17} k \cdot Q \cdot (k \times P) \cdot (\sigma_1 \times \sigma_2).$$

These LECs cannot be determined from $NN$ scattering data, but only in $A > 2$ systems, or as a high-order contribution to the two-nucleon electromagnetic current. While it is true that they can be ignored, by absorbing them with a unitary transformation, one obtains at the same time an induced $3N$ interaction, as will be discussed in the next Section.

IV. IMPACT ON THE 3N SECTOR

If $H$ in Eq. (11) is a two-nucleon operator then the unitary transformations defined in Section III generate three-nucleon operators. At the leading order we have the following contributions induced by the transformations of $H_S$ and $H_T$ appearing in Eq. (24),

$$\delta_1 H_S = -4 \int d^3 x \nabla^i (N^i N) \nabla^j (N^j N)(N^i N),$$

$$\delta_1 H_T = -4 \int d^3 x \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N),$$

$$\delta_2 H_S = \delta_1 H_T,$nabla^i \sigma^j N N^k N - \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) \nabla^j (N^i \sigma^j N) N^i N,$nabla^i \sigma^j N N^k N + \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) \nabla^j (N^i \sigma^j N) N^i N$,

$$\delta_3 H_S = -4 \int d^3 x \left[ \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) \nabla^j (N^i \sigma^j N) N^i \sigma^j N + \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) \nabla^j (N^i \sigma^j N) N^i \sigma^j N \right],$$

$$\delta_4 H_T = 4 \int d^3 x \left[ i \sigma^i \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) N^j \nabla^k \sigma^k N + \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) N^j \nabla^k \sigma^k N \right].$$

$$\delta_5 H_S = 0,$nabla^i \sigma^j N N^k N - \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) \nabla^j (N^i \sigma^j N) N^i \sigma^j N$$

$$\delta_6 H_S = 0,$nabla^i \sigma^j N N^k N - \nabla^i (N^i \sigma^j N) \nabla^j (N^i \sigma^j N) N^i \sigma^j N$$

These operators can be expressed in terms of the basis $\{O_i\}$ defined in Eq. (26), using the identities derived in Ref. [8]. As a result, the general unitary transformation of the two-nucleon Hamiltonian in Eq. (24) produces the
following contribution,

\[
H_{NN} = \sum_{n=1}^{5} \alpha_n T_n = \int d^3 \mathbf{x} \sum_{i=1}^{13} \delta E_i O_i,
\]

with

\[
\begin{align*}
\delta E_1 &= 2\alpha_1 (C_S + C_T) + 2\alpha_2 (C_S - 2C_T), \\
\delta E_2 &= 6\alpha_2 C_T + 4\alpha_3 C_T - 8\alpha_4 C_T + 4\alpha_5 C_T, \\
\delta E_3 &= 4\alpha_1 C_T + 2\alpha_2 (2C_S - C_T) + \frac{4}{3}\alpha_3 (2C_S - C_T) + 8\alpha_4 C_T - 4\alpha_5 C_T, \\
\delta E_4 &= \frac{4}{3}\alpha_1 C_T + \frac{2}{3}\alpha_2 (2C_S - 7C_T) - \frac{4}{3}\alpha_3 C_T + \frac{8}{3}\alpha_4 C_T - \frac{4}{3}\alpha_5 C_T, \\
\delta E_5 &= 4\alpha_1 C_T + 2\alpha_2 (C_S - 2C_T) + \frac{4}{3}\alpha_3 (2C_S - C_T) + 8\alpha_4 C_T - 4\alpha_5 C_T, \\
\delta E_6 &= \frac{4}{3}\alpha_1 C_T + \frac{4}{3}\alpha_2 (C_S - 2C_T) - \frac{4}{3}\alpha_3 C_T + \frac{8}{3}\alpha_4 C_T - \frac{4}{3}\alpha_5 C_T, \\
\delta E_7 &= 16\alpha_4 C_T, \\
\delta E_8 &= \frac{1}{3}\delta E_7, \\
\delta E_9 &= 6\alpha_1 C_T + 6\alpha_2 (C_S - 2C_T) + 4\alpha_3 (C_S - 2C_T) - 2\alpha_4 (C_S - 5C_T) - 8\alpha_5 C_T, \\
\delta E_{10} &= 2\alpha_1 C_T + 2\alpha_2 (C_S - 2C_T) - \frac{2}{3}\alpha_4 (3C_S - 7C_T), \\
\delta E_{11} &= 6\alpha_1 C_T + 6\alpha_2 (C_S - 2C_T) + 4\alpha_3 (C_S - 2C_T) + 2\alpha_4 (C_S - 5C_T) + 8\alpha_5 C_T, \\
\delta E_{12} &= 2\alpha_1 C_T + 2\alpha_2 (C_S - 2C_T) + \frac{2}{3}\alpha_4 (3C_S - 7C_T), \\
\delta E_{13} &= -16\alpha_4 C_T + 8\alpha_5 C_T,
\end{align*}
\]

which amounts to a shift of the thirteen subleading LECs \(E_i\) in Eq. (26),

\[
H_{3N}^{(8)} \rightarrow \int d^3 \mathbf{x} \sum_{i=1}^{13} (E_i + \delta E_i) O_i \equiv \int d^3 \mathbf{x} \sum_{i=1}^{13} E_i^{(\alpha)} O_i.
\]

Therefore, for all nonzero values of \(C_S\) and \(C_T\), the five parameters \(\alpha_n\) defining the unitary transformation can be chosen so that five of the thirteen subleading LECs can be eliminated, i.e. \(E_i^{(\alpha)} = 0\). The sum in Eq. (26) can then be restricted e.g. to \(i = 2, \ldots, 9\). This happens at the price of considering a more elaborate \(NN\) interaction, comprising all of the N4LO LECs \(D_{1,\ldots,15}\) as well as the ones parametrizing the \(P\)-dependent \(NN\) interaction.

Another point of view can be adopted. It is generally accepted that the \(3N\) interaction is parameter-free at N3LO \([16, 17]\), the LECs \(E_i\) of Eq. (24) contributing only at N4LO. However, the (N3LO) effect of the \(P\)-dependent, or of the off-shell component of the \(NN\) interaction is equivalent to a contact \(3N\) interaction. Thus the shifts \(\delta E_i\) in Eq. (62) might be regarded as an effect at N3LO.

We emphasize in particular the role of the \(P\)-dependent \(NN\) interaction, which has never been taken into account, since it cannot be determined from the \(NN\) scattering data. Even if the complete \(NN\) interaction (including all of the LECs \(D_{1,\ldots,15}\)) is used in \(3N\) calculations, the necessity to discard the \(P\)-dependent terms leads to the appearance of a subleading \(3N\) contact interaction already at N3LO. The exact form of this interaction can be read from Eqs. (19)-(61) by inspecting the terms proportional to \(\alpha_4\) and \(\alpha_5\), which can be regarded as a sort of LECs. In other words, supplementing the \(NN\) interaction with its \(P\)-dependent component, Eq. (37), the corresponding interactions can be absorbed by a unitary transformation with parameters

\[
\alpha_4 = \frac{m}{4} D_{16}, \quad \alpha_5 = \frac{m}{4} D_{17},
\]

i.e. by the transformation of the kinetic energy operator of Eq. (12),

\[
[H_0, \alpha_4 T_4 + \alpha_5 T_5] = -V_{NN}(P),
\]

that in turn generates the \(3N\) couplings \(E_i\)’s according to Eqs. (49)-(61).
Notice that the order mismatch between N3LO and N4LO is removed in the Weinberg counting, i.e. $m \sim O(\Lambda_p^2/p)$. Thus we can say that, contrary to the commonly accepted wisdom, the 3N force is not parameter-free at N3LO, but depends on five LECs. Three of them are combinations of the LECs $D_1$, ..., $D_{15}$, if one removes them from the $NN$ potential, as done in Ref. [19]. Two more correspond to the new LECs $D_{16}$ and $D_{17}$, which can be viewed as contributions to the subleading 3N contact potential,

$$V_{3N} = \frac{m}{2} D_{16} \left[ -C_S (O_9 + O_{10} - O_{11} - O_{12}) + C_T \left( 4O_3 + \frac{4}{3}O_4 + 4O_5 + \frac{4}{3}O_6 + 8O_7 + \frac{8}{3}O_8 + 5O_9 - \frac{7}{3}O_{10} - 5O_{11} - \frac{7}{3}O_{12} - 8O_{13} \right) \right] + m D_{17} C_T \left( O_2 - O_3 - \frac{1}{3}O_4 - O_5 - \frac{1}{3}O_6 - 2O_9 + 2O_{11} + 2O_{13} \right). \tag{65}$$

Due to the fact that, on phenomenological grounds, $C_S \gg C_T$, the main effect of the new $P$-dependent $NN$ interactions amounts in this limit to the first line of the above equation, and involves a single LEC $m D_{16}$. On the other hand, the large numerical coefficients multiplying $C_T$ in $\delta E_7$, i.e. most notably for the spin-orbit operator $O_7$, might explain its instrumental role in the resolution of the $A_y$ puzzle of low-energy $N - d$ scattering [25–27, 35].

It is worth mentioning that no genuine three-nucleon unitary transformation can be used to the same purpose. For instance, taking

$$T_{3N} = i \int d^3x N^\dagger \vec{\sigma} N \times N^\dagger \vec{\sigma} N \cdot N^\dagger \vec{\sigma} N, \tag{66}$$

then $[H_0, T_{3N}] = 0$, due to the antisymmetry with respect to the nucleon labels.

**V. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

By examining the most general $NN$ contact unitary transformation we have identified the precise relation between the subleading contact 3N interaction and specific off-shell or $P$-dependent components of the $NN$ interaction. Provided the full $NN$ interaction up to $O(p^4)$ is determined from experimental data, including the off-shell components encoded in the LECs $D_i$ and the $P$-dependent contributions (which might require considering electromagnetic observables depending on the same LECs), then five of the 3N subleading LECs $E_i$ become redundant. Alternatively, one can disregard these contributions in the two-nucleon systems, at the price of a more involved 3N contact interaction. We have identified in particular the two unitary transformations that allow to drop the free LECs parametrizing the $P$-dependent component of the $NN$ interaction, Eq. (37), which cannot be determined from a fit to $NN$ scattering data alone. These interactions would contribute in larger systems, like $A = 3$, together with “drift terms” representing relativistic $1/m$ corrections, but they are never considered in actual calculations. Their effect can be traded with two specific combinations of the subleading 3N contact operators, which can be read from Eqs. (69)-(81) as the contributions proportional to $\alpha_4$ and $\alpha_5$, the latter given in turn by Eqs. (53). We notice that these unitary transformations reshuffle the individual terms of the low-energy expansion. In particular, by absorbing the N3LO $NN$ contact LECs $D_i$’s, their effect is attributed to the N4LO $3N$ contact LECs $E_i$’s. Therefore, we argue that this procedure could modify the expected convergence pattern of the chiral series, and explain the difficulty of the N3LO 3N chiral interactions to address the $A = 3$ scattering observables [30] justifying the observed prominent role of the spin-orbit and tensor 3N contact interactions [27].

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