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Citation: The Journal of Chemical Physics 140, 194306 (2014); doi: 10.1063/1.4873343
View online: http://dx.doi.org/10.1063/1.4873343
View Table of Contents: http://scitation.aip.org/content/aip/journal/jcp/140/19?ver=pdfcov
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Nuclear spin conversion of water inside fullerene cages detected by low-temperature nuclear magnetic resonance

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(Received 20 February 2014; accepted 25 March 2014; published online 20 May 2014)

The water-endofullerene H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ provides a unique chemical system in which freely rotating water molecules are confined inside homogeneous and symmetrical carbon cages. The spin conversion between the ortho and para species of the endohedral H$_2$O was studied in the solid phase by low-temperature nuclear magnetic resonance. The experimental data are consistent with a second-order kinetics, indicating a bimolecular spin conversion process. Numerical simulations suggest the simultaneous presence of a spin diffusion process allowing neighbouring ortho and para molecules to exchange their angular momenta. Cross-polarization experiments found no evidence that the spin conversion of the endohedral H$_2$O molecules is catalysed by $^{13}$C nuclei present in the cages.

I. INTRODUCTION

Small molecules with sufficient symmetry display the phenomenon of spin isomerism, in which the nuclear spin states and the spatial quantum states are entangled as a consequence of the Pauli principle. The seminal case is that of H$_2$, where the nuclear spin singlet state ($I = 0$) correlates with even rotational quantum numbers $J$ (para-H$_2$), while the nuclear spin triplet states ($I = 1$) correlate with odd values of $J$ (ortho-H$_2$).2 Spin isomerism is also exhibited by many other small symmetrical molecules, such as water,2-14 ethene,15-17 and methane18-21 as well as freely rotating parts of a molecule, such as methyl (-CH$_3$) groups with low rotational barriers.22-25 In many cases, the process of spin-isomer conversion, which requires a change in nuclear spin symmetry, is considerably slower than the spatial and nuclear spin transitions between quantum states of the same spin isomer. In extreme cases such as ortho- and para-H$_2$, the spin conversion process is so slow that the spin isomers behave as separate substances with different physical and chemical properties.1

Spin isomerism is linked to important phenomena in nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR). If a compound is enriched in a spin isomer, and reacted chemically, the reaction products may display enormous transient enhancements in the nuclear magnetic resonance signals.26 In the case of para-enriched H$_2$, this effect is the basis of para-hydrogen induced polarization (PHIP) methods.27-30 The phenomenon of spin isomerism is closely related to that of long-lived nuclear spin states (LLS), which are correlated states of nuclear spins with extended relaxation times, sometimes exceeding the conventional $T_1$ relaxation time of nuclear magnetization by more than an order of magnitude, and which may be used for a variety of purposes in NMR spectroscopy.31-39

The common isotopolog of water (H$_2$O) displays spin isomerism, with a correlation between the total nuclear spin $I$ and the rotational state designation $J_{K_u}$. Ortho-water has total nuclear spin $I = 1$ and odd parity for $K_u + K_r$ in the ground vibrational state. Para-water has total nuclear spin $I = 0$ and even parity for $K_u + K_r$ in the ground vibrational state.2 The energy splitting between the lowest para-water and ortho-water levels is ~2.95 meV in the gas phase.13

An understanding of water spin isomers and their interconversion is relevant for several reasons. In astrophysics, the ratio of ortho and para-water is used to estimate the temperature of comets and other interstellar objects.3-6 There are speculations that bulk para-enriched H$_2$O might be used to enhance NMR and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) experiments.7,8 Unfortunately, the spin conversion of water has proved difficult to study in the condensed phase. The bulk enrichment of water spin isomers through the selective absorption of water vapor on charcoal8 has been claimed, although the observation is contested.9 Small quantities of ortho and para-water have been separated in molecular beams in the presence of a magnetic field gradient.7

Proton exchange and intermolecular interactions between neighbouring water molecules may be inhibited by isolating the water molecules. One approach is to dilute the molecules in a frozen inert gas or para-hydrogen matrix.10-12 However, this approach only permits study at low temperature, does not eliminate the formation of dimers and clusters, and does not in general provide a homogeneous and controlled environment for the water molecules. A convenient alternative, which is used in this paper, is to isolate the water molecules by trapping them inside fullerenes (C$_{60}$) cages, in the form of the

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supramolecular compound H2O@C60 (see Figure 1(a)). This material has been synthesized in macroscopic quantities by a multistep chemical procedure.40, 41 It is a black solid which is stable under a wide range of physical conditions and is very convenient to handle. The C60 cage provides a robust and uniform environment which allows free rotation of the endohedral water molecules under a wide range of conditions.

The behaviour of the endohedral water molecules in H2O@C60 has been studied by a variety of spectroscopic methods, including NMR, inelastic neutron scattering, and infrared spectroscopy.42 The rotational energy levels of the endohedral H2O are very similar to those in the gas phase, indicating free rotation of the water, even at cryogenic temperatures.42 Spin-isomer conversion was followed by equilibrating the sample at high temperature, cooling to low temperature, and following the spin isomer conversion by infrared spectroscopy and inelastic neutron scattering.42 The spin conversion process takes several hours at temperatures below ∼10 K. However, although neutron scattering and infrared spectroscopy provide a clear signature of spin isomer conversion, it is difficult to obtain detailed kinetic information. Neutron scattering suffers from poor time resolution, while the quality of the infrared data is compromised by the overlapping absorption bands from several different transitions.

This paper concerns nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) observations of spin isomer conversion in H2O@C60. A strength of NMR is that the interpretation of the data is relatively unambiguous, since the NMR signals of the endohedral ortho-H2O can be easily distinguished from other signals deriving from residual impurities or from the background of the apparatus. In addition, the good time resolution and high signal-to-noise ratio of the NMR measurements, especially when compared to neutron scattering, allows an accurate representation of the kinetics of spin isomer conversion. A disadvantage of NMR with respect to infrared spectroscopy and neutron scattering is that the para spin isomer has nuclear spin I = 0 and cannot be observed. The spin conversion process must be followed by a change in intensity of the ortho-H2O NMR signal.

As shown below, the kinetic evidence from NMR indicates that the ortho to para conversion of H2O@C60 is a bi-molecular process, involving the interaction between pairs of neighbouring ortho spin isomers.

NMR is able to probe the environment of the water molecules through double-resonance experiments. This allows evaluation of the role of nearby magnetic nuclei in spin-isomer conversion, as has been postulated in related systems.43, 44 In the current case, cross-polarization experiments indicate that the interactions between the H2O protons and the 13C nuclei in the enclosing fullerene cage play a negligible role in the ortho-para conversion of water in H2O@C60. Some observations on the possible spin-isomer conversion mechanism in H2O@C60 are given at the end of this paper.

II. 1H NMR AND ORTHO-PARA CONVERSION
A. Energy levels and spin isomers

The energy levels of H2O@C60 have been studied by inelastic neutron scattering, IR and NMR.42 The water molecules enjoy full rotational freedom even at cryogenic temperatures. The four lowest H2O rotational energy levels in H2O@C60 are compared to the gas phase levels in Figure 1(b). The main effect of the fullerene encapsulation, is a ∼0.6 meV splitting of the three-fold degenerate ground-state ortho level 1o, observed directly by inelastic neutron scattering.42 The lifting of degeneracy implies a breaking of local inversion symmetry, which is consistent with observations of an intramolecular dipole-dipole interaction between the water protons, as revealed by solid-state NMR.42 The origin of the lifted degeneracy is currently unknown but may be due to a
spontaneous symmetry-breaking in the H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ system, associated with a coupling between the H$_2$O electric dipole moment and the electric charge distribution in the fullerene cage, analogous to the Jahn-Teller effect.\textsuperscript{42}

Denote the fractional population of \textit{ortho}-H$_2$O by $\Phi_0$, so that the fractional population of \textit{para}-H$_2$O is $1 - \Phi$. In thermal equilibrium at temperature $T$, the spin-isomer populations are governed by the Boltzmann distribution:

$$
\Phi_{eq}(T) = Z(T)^{-1} \sum_o g_o \exp(-E_o/k_BT),
$$

where the partition function is

$$
Z(T) = \sum_o g_o \exp(-E_o/k_BT) + \sum_p g_p \exp(-E_p/k_BT),
$$

and the spin degeneracies are $g_o = 3$ and $g_p = 1$. The sums are taken over the \textit{ortho} energy levels (subscript $o$) and \textit{para} energy levels (subscript $p$). The temperature dependence of $\Phi_{eq}(T)$ follows a sigmoidal curve increasing rapidly from 0 at low temperature to $\Phi_{eq} \approx 3/4$ above 50 K. The steepest gradient of $\Phi_{eq}$ with respect to temperature is around 15 K (see Figure 1(c)). Spin-isomer conversion may therefore be induced by changing the sample temperature between values on either side of $\sim 15$ K.

\section*{B. 1H NMR}

Since \textit{ortho}-H$_2$O has total nuclear spin $I = 1$, while \textit{para}-H$_2$O has total nuclear spin $I = 0$, only the \textit{ortho}-H$_2$O species generate a $^1$H NMR signal.

Figure 2(a) shows the proton line shape of H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ as a function of temperature, on samples in full thermal equilibrium. At high temperature, the proton spectrum resembles a single Gaussian peak with width at half height of about 2 kHz. The peak broadens when the temperature is reduced. Below $\sim 15$ K, the peak splits into a slightly asymmetric doublet. The splitting is due to dipolar interactions between the water protons in \textit{ortho}-H$_2$O, associated with the lifted degeneracy of the ground rotational state $0_0$, as shown in Figure 1(b). There is also a minor chemical shift anisotropy effect, possibly caused by an asymmetric perturbation of the electron density in the cage.\textsuperscript{45} The low-temperature dipole-dipole coupling in H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ has also been observed by cryogenic magic angle spinning NMR.\textsuperscript{42} The dipolar splitting is not relevant to the spin conversion, and will not be discussed further.

Figure 3 shows the $^1$H spin-lattice relaxation time constant $T_1$ for H$_2$O@C$_{60}$, as a function of inverse temperature, measured by a standard saturation-recovery procedure. The $^1$H $T_1$ values are less than 5 s over the full temperature range, reflecting the high mobility of the endohedral H$_2$O molecules. The $T_1$ minimum at $\sim 8$ K is probably associated with the $\sim 0.6$ meV splitting of the \textit{ortho}-H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ ground rotational state (see Figure 1(b)).

\section*{C. Spin isomer conversion}

At constant temperature, the amplitude of the NMR signal is proportional to the concentration of \textit{ortho}-water in the

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fig3.png}
\caption{$^1$H spin-lattice relaxation times $T_1$ as a function of inverse temperature for H$_2$O@C$_{60}$, in a magnetic field of 14.1 T. The vertical axis uses a logarithmic scale.}
\end{figure}
The sudden reduction of the signal intensity is again unrelated to spin-isomer conversion. The subsequent slow decay of the NMR signal intensity at the constant temperature of 32.5 K, while spin-isomer conversion takes tens of minutes or longer, this is a good approximation for the experiments described here.

Figure 4 shows the variation of the NMR signal intensity when the sample temperature was equilibrated at 50 K, changed from 50 K to 5 K over about 30 min, maintained at 5 K for several hours, and then raised to 32.5 K. Before the start of the experiment (t = 0), the sample was equilibrated for many hours at 50 K. The NMR signal intensity was constant until the temperature was reduced to 5 K. The cooling and stabilization of the probe required about 30 min. The strong increase in the NMR signal intensity upon cooling is due to the Curie term \( T^{-1} \) in Eq. (3), corresponding to the increased polarization of the nuclear spins at low temperature, and is unrelated to ortho-para conversion. The subsequent slow decay of the NMR signal intensity at the constant temperature of 5 K, over a duration of many hours, reflects the conversion of ortho-water into para-water. After monitoring the signal for about 10 h at 5 K, the temperature was rapidly increased to 32.5 K. The sudden reduction of the signal intensity is again due to the Curie factor \( T^{-1} \) and is unrelated to spin-isomer conversion. The subsequent recovery of the NMR signal is due to back-conversion of para-H2O to ortho-H2O, as a new thermal equilibrium is reached at the relatively high sample temperature of 32.5 K.

These results demonstrate that H2O nuclear spin conversion in H2O@C60 may be observed with excellent signal-to-noise ratio and time resolution by monitoring the \(^1\)H NMR signal after a temperature jump.

D. Spin-isomer conversion kinetics

Figures 5(a) and 5(b) show the experimental decays in the \(^1\)H NMR signal amplitude of H2O@C60 after full thermal equilibration at a temperature of 50 K and (a) cooling to 15 K (black dots), 10 K (blue dots), 5 K (gray dots) at a field of 14.1 T and (b) cooling to 4.2 K at a field of 0.86 T. The vertical scale is the integrated NMR signal amplitude normalised to its initial value, \( y(t) = ISNR(t)/ISNR(0) \). The NMR data are shown by dots with the best fit to Eq. (6) shown by solid lines, where \( A \) and \( k \) are fit parameters given in Table I and \( B = 1 - A \). In panel (b), the gray dashed line is the best fit of the experimental points to an exponential decay. Panels (c) and (d) show the data transformed as to provide straight-line plots for second-order kinetics. The signal was monitored via direct acquisition of the proton signal using the sequence in Figure 8(a) with a recycle delay between transients of 60 s for the experiments in panel (a) and 120 s for the experiment in panel (b).
equilibration at a temperature of 60 K and cooling to temperatures in the range 4 K to 15 K, in two different magnetic fields.

Previous studies of spin isomer conversion for H2O in inert gas matrices have observed exponential decays characteristic of a first-order process. However, the data in Figure 5 do not match an exponential form. This is readily seen in Figure 5(b) where the decay is too steep at the beginning and too slow at the end to be described by a single exponential.

Second-order kinetic behaviour has been observed for the ortho-para conversion of H2 in the solid state. We therefore explored the fitting of the NMR data to a second-order spin-conversion process, according to the rate equation:

\[ \frac{d\Delta \Phi}{dt} = -k_2\Delta \Phi^2, \]

where \( k_2 \) is the second-order rate constant, and \( \Delta \Phi = \Phi - \Phi_{eq} \) is the deviation of the ortho fraction from equilibrium at the sample temperature. The solution of Eq. (4) is

\[ \Delta \Phi(t)^{-1} = \Delta \Phi(0)^{-1} + k_2 t, \]

where \( \Delta \Phi(0) = \Phi(0) - \Phi_{eq} \) is the initial deviation of the ortho fraction from equilibrium.

At constant temperature the NMR signal \( I_{NMR}(t) \) is proportional to the ortho fraction \( \Phi \). This leads to the following relationship for the normalised NMR signal intensity, defined as \( y(t) = I_{NMR}(t)/I_{NMR}(0) \):

\[ y(t) = A(1 + \kappa t)^{-1} + B, \]

where \( A + B = 1, A = \Delta \Phi(0)/\Phi(0), B = \Phi_{eq}/\Phi(0) \) and \( \kappa = \Delta \Phi(0)/k_2 \).

According to Eq. (6), a plot of \( A(y(t) - B) \) against \( t \) should be a straight line with slope \( \kappa \). The corresponding transformations of the NMR data are shown in Figures 5(c) and 5(d). In each case, the independent parameters \( A \) and \( \kappa \) were adjusted to obtain the best straight-line fit using the constraint \( B = 1 - A \). A good fit to the second-order kinetic law is found in all cases. The fit parameters and their confidence limits are shown in Table I.

The second-order rate constant may be estimated from the slope \( \kappa \) of the straight-line plot through the relationship

\[ k_2 = \kappa/\Delta \Phi(0) = \kappa/\Delta \Phi(0) \] where \( \Delta \Phi(0) \) is the deviation of ortho fraction from equilibrium at time point \( t = 0 \). Unfortunately this initial deviation is hard to estimate accurately with the current apparatus, since it takes several tens of minutes for the sample to cool and the temperature to stabilise, with ortho-para conversion proceeding at an unknown rate during the cooling interval. To obtain rough estimates of the second-order rate constant \( k_2 \) (last column in Table I), we assumed that \( \Phi(0) \) is between 0.50 and 0.75, with the upper value corresponding to thermal equilibrium at the higher temperature before cooling has taken place.

The estimated values in the last column of Table I indicate a temperature-dependent second-order process at low temperature, with a rapid increase in \( k_2 \) when the temperature is raised above 10 K. There is no evidence of a dependence on the static magnetic field strength.

### III. 13C NMR

It has been postulated that spin-isomer conversion may be catalyzed by neighbouring magnetic nuclei. In the current case of H2O@C60, this seems unlikely, since the kinetic evidence presented above indicates a dominant second-order process, which appears to be consistent with catalysis by extraneous nuclei. Nevertheless, it is of interest to explore whether natural abundance 13C nuclei in the C60 cages do influence the water spin conversion.

Since the natural abundance of 13C is 1.07%, 48% of the C60 cages contain at least one 13C nucleus. In principle, the role of 13C could be studied by preparing H2O@C60 samples which are either enriched or depleted in 13C, and comparing the nuclear spin conversion kinetics with the non-enriched material. That would be an expensive and laborious process. Fortunately, the involvement of 13C may also be explored without preparation of labelled or depleted material, by using Hartmann-Hahn cross-polarization (CP) to transfer magnetization from the endohedral ortho-H2O protons to nearby 13C nuclei.

When the 1H NMR signals are observed directly, almost equal contributions are made by H2O molecules in C60 cages containing no 13C nuclei, and those containing at least one 13C. In contrast, when cross-polarization from 1H to 13C is conducted under conditions that only allow short-range magnetization transfer, the resulting 13C signals are derived exclusively from C60 cages that contain at least one 13C nucleus, and which also encapsulate an ortho-H2O molecule. Any catalysis of spin conversion by 13C would show up as a difference in the spin-isomer conversion trajectories, as measured by 1H NMR and by cross-polarized 13C NMR.

Figure 6(a) shows a set of cross-polarized (CP) 13C spectra, acquired at a temperature of 5 K using Hartmann-Hahn contact times \( \tau_{CP} \) equal to 1 ms, 5 ms, and 10 ms. For the longer contact times, the 13C spectrum is roughly consistent with the theoretical line shape for randomly-oriented static chemical shift anisotropy (CSA) tensors, with principal values as reported in the literature, and shown in Figure 6(b). These spectra show that the rotational motion of the H2O@C60 cages is suppressed at cryogenic temperatures, as is well-known for C60 itself.

The CP spectrum with short contact time \( \tau_{CP} = 1 \) ms displays a strong loss of signal intensity in the region around the isotropic chemical shift value of 143 ppm (Figure 6(a), lower spectrum). This selective loss of intensity at short \( \tau_{CP} \) can be understood from the following observations. (1) For small values of \( \tau_{CP} \), the transfer of polarization is short-range. To

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T/K</th>
<th>B/T</th>
<th>( k )(10^-6 s^-1)</th>
<th>( A )</th>
<th>( k_2 )(10^-6 s^-1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>210 ± 10</td>
<td>0.30 ± 0.02</td>
<td>1200 ± 250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>77 ± 3</td>
<td>0.56 ± 0.01</td>
<td>230 ± 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>64 ± 2</td>
<td>1.04 ± 0.03</td>
<td>100 ± 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>63 ± 2</td>
<td>1.00 ± 0.01</td>
<td>105 ± 20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE I. Best-fit second-order rate parameters for ortho-para conversion in H2O@C60 at four different temperatures and at two magnetic fields. The kinetic parameters refer to Eq. (6). The values of \( k_2 \) were estimated from the relation \( k_2 = \kappa/\Delta \Phi(0) \) using the assumption 0.5 \( \leq \Phi(0) \leq 0.75 \) for the initial value of the ortho fraction from equilibrium.
a good approximation, the $^1\text{H}$ magnetisation of ortho-$\text{H}_2\text{O}$ is exclusively transferred to $^{13}\text{C}$ nuclei located in the same fullerene cage. (2) The rate of polarization transfer depends on the secular component of the heteronuclear dipole-dipole interaction, which depends on the angle $\theta_{\text{CH}}$ between the $^1\text{H}$-$^{13}\text{C}$ internuclear vector and the magnetic field, according to the angular factor $P_2(\cos \theta_{\text{CH}}) = (3\cos^2 \theta_{\text{CH}} - 1)/2$.\cite{54} Since the quantum wavefunction of the endohedral $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ is localized near the center of the cage, the angle $\theta_{\text{CH}}$ is close to the angle subtended by the radial vector from the cage centre to the carbon position, and the applied magnetic field. The cross-polarization from ortho-$\text{H}_2\text{O}$ to $^{13}\text{C}$ is inefficient for $^{13}\text{C}$ sites located such that the radial vector $\theta_{\text{CH}}$ is close to the magic angle $\theta_m = \arctan \sqrt{2}$. (3) The $^{13}\text{C}$ CSA tensor in $\text{C}_6\text{O}$ has a small biaxiality ($\eta = 0.28$).\cite{52} (4) Ab initio calculations predict that the unique principal axis corresponding to the most shielded value subtends the small angle of $11.8^\circ$, which depends on the angle $\theta_m$.\cite{55} To a good approximation, the $^{13}\text{C}$ CSA tensors in $\text{C}_6\text{O}$ may therefore be visualised as ellipsoids with their long axis parallel to the cage radii (Figure 6(b)). (5) It follows that in $\text{H}_2\text{O}@@\text{C}_6\text{O}$ the rate of $^1\text{H}$-$^{13}\text{C}$ polarization transfer and the $^{13}\text{C}$ chemical shift are highly correlated. $^{13}\text{C}$ sites which resonate close to the isotropic chemical shift also have an angle $\theta_{\text{CH}}$ close to the magic angle, and therefore suffer from weak polarization transfer. This gives rise to a strong loss of spectral intensity around the isotropic $^{13}\text{C}$ chemical shift.

The observed “magic-angle hole” in the short-$\tau_{\text{CP}}$ $^{13}\text{C}$ spectra therefore provides strong confirmation that the cross-polarization is local to each $\text{H}_2\text{O}@@\text{C}_6\text{O}$ molecule. These are exactly the conditions required to examine the influence of $^{13}\text{C}$ on ortho-para conversion.

Figure 7(a) shows the decay in the $^{13}\text{C}$ CP signals due to ortho-para conversion of the endohedral $\text{H}_2\text{O}$, after a change in sample temperature from 60 K to 5 K, using a short contact interval $\tau_{\text{CP}} = 1$ ms. The decay in the cross-polarized $^{13}\text{C}$ spectral amplitude is indistinguishable from that of the directly observed $^1\text{H}$ signal, as shown by the superimposed curves in Figure 7(b). We conclude that the $^{13}\text{C}$ nuclei have no significant influence on the spin-isomer conversion of $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ in the case of $\text{H}_2\text{O}@@\text{C}_6\text{O}$.

### IV. MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### A. Sample preparation

$\text{H}_2\text{O}@@\text{C}_6\text{O}$ was prepared by the “molecular surgery” synthetic method.\cite{40,56} A set of chemical reactions is used to open an orifice in each fullerene cage, by adding exohedral groups to the cage. Water molecules are inserted into the open-cage fullerene molecules and the external shell reconstituted.

Preparations of $\text{H}_2\text{O}@@\text{C}_6\text{O}$ are typically solid solutions containing $\text{H}_2\text{O}@@\text{C}_6\text{O}$ as well as empty $\text{C}_6\text{O}$ cages. The “filling factor” $f$ specifies the fraction of cages that are filled with water. The synthetic procedure described above led to a sample of $\text{H}_2\text{O}@@\text{C}_6\text{O}$ with $f \approx 0.7$. This sample was enriched further by several cycles of high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). All experiments reported in this paper used a sample with a filling factor $f = 0.9$, as estimated by integrating the HPLC peaks corresponding to the empty and water-filled fullerenes.

The sample was purified by sublimation to remove occluded impurities and solvents. The description of the sublimation apparatus and procedure will be reported elsewhere.\cite{41} Finally the sample was placed in Pyrex tubes, evacuated for several hours and sealed under vacuum. In all the cases, the fullerenes contained $^{13}\text{C}$ nuclei in natural abundance.

About 7 mg of material were used for the experiments at 14.1 T. For the low field experiments (0.86 T) about 60 mg were used.

#### B. NMR equipment

The 14.1 T NMR spectra were obtained using a Bruker AVANCE-II+ spectrometer and a home-built NMR probe.
with a 2 mm diameter solenoid. The NMR probe was mounted in an Oxford Instruments continuous-flow cryostat (spectrostatNMR) using helium coolant. An insulated transfer line was used to drive the cold He gas from a 60 L Dewar into the cryostat. The He flow rate could be adjusted up to a value of 2.5 litres per hour and its temperature was regulated by a thermo-resistance heater placed close to the sample. No sample rotation was used.

A calibrated Cernox sensor (accuracy of ±0.15 K), in good thermal contact with the sample container (2 mm Pyrex tube) and isolated from the cold helium gas stream, was used as an indicator of the sample temperature. The temperature calibration procedure is described elsewhere.57

The sample temperature was left to stabilize at 50 K for about one hour before inducing spin-isomer conversion by changing the temperature. In the 14.1 T apparatus, the cooling from 50 K to any temperature below 20 K took between 30 and 60 min while warming and stabilization from 5 K to any temperature up to 60 K took between 5 and 10 min.

The NMR data recorded at 0.86 T were obtained using a TecMag Apollo spectrometer and a superconducting magnet system supplied by Cryogenic Ltd. The latter incorporated a helium cryostat with the sample accommodated inside a home-built cryogenic NMR probe. The 90° pulse length was 2 μs and the ring-down time was 7 μs. For the duration of the experiment, extending to two days, the magnet was permanently energised at constant current by a stabilised power supply. For the magnetisation vs. time experiments, the final stage of the sample cooling process between 30 K and 4.2 K took approximately 6 min. The time between measurements of magnetisation was long compared with \( T_1 \).

C. NMR experiments

\(^1\text{H}\) spectra were acquired using a pulse sequence composed by a saturation comb of 200 90° pulses separated by 100 μs on the proton channel, followed by a recovery delay \( \tau \), followed by a single 90° pulse, a ring-down delay of 5 μs, and signal detection (see Figure 8(a)). The durations of the 90° pulses were adjusted at each temperature, varying from 7 μs at room temperature to 3.6 μs for all the spectra below 50 K. The \(^1\text{H}\) chemical shift scale was calibrated by setting the narrow room-temperature \(^1\text{H}\) resonance of \( \text{H}_2\text{O}@\text{C}_{60} \) to −4.8 ppm.

The sequence of Figure 8(a) was used to measure \(^1\text{H}\) spin-lattice relaxation times by monitoring the integrated NMR signal as function of the delay \( \tau \). For each temperature \( T \), the spin-lattice relaxation time \( T_1 \) was obtained by fitting the experimental recovery curve to the exponential saturation-recovery law \( I_{\text{NMR}}(\tau) = a + b(1 - \exp(-\tau/T_1)) \).

A recovery delay of \( \tau = 60 \) s was used between transients when monitoring spin conversion at 15, 10, and 5 K. A recovery delay of \( \tau = 120 \) s was used in the experiment at 4.2 K. These recovery delays are much longer than the measured proton spin-lattice relaxation time \( T_1 \) at all temperatures, see Figure 3.

\(^{13}\text{C}\) spectra were acquired using cross-polarization from \(^1\text{H}\) with no decoupling during acquisition, preceded by saturation pulses on the proton channel followed by a recovery delay \( \tau \) (see Figure 8(b)). Three sets of measurements were performed with contact intervals \( t_{\text{CP}} \) of 1, 5, and 10 ms. The \(^{13}\text{C}\) chemical shift scale was calibrated by setting the narrow room-temperature \(^{13}\text{C}\) resonance of \( \text{H}_2\text{O}@\text{C}_{60} \) to 144 ppm.

D. Simulations

The numerical simulations shown in Figure 10 were obtained by a similar method to the studies of percolation networks.58 The network is represented by an object in Python which consists of a list of nodes represented by indices (\( i, j, k \)), each index ranging from 0 to 19. Each node corresponds to a \( \text{C}_{60} \) cage. When the network is initialized, each node is filled with a water molecule with probability \( f = 0.9 \), corresponding to the substance used in the experiments. Initially, each filled node is added to the lists of \( \text{ortho} \) and \( \text{para} \) molecules with probabilities of 75% and 25%, respectively, corresponding to the room temperature equilibrium ratio.

The neighbours of each node are obtained by changing two of the node’s indices by ±1, so that each node has 12 neighbours, corresponding to the FCC lattice. Periodic boundary conditions are used.

To study the conversion of \( \text{ortho} \) to \( \text{para} \) molecules, the network is propagated in time as follows: (1) at each step, iterate over all the \( \text{ortho} \) molecules; (2) for each \( \text{ortho} \) molecule, find all neighbouring cages that also contain an \( \text{ortho} \) molecule; (3) with probability \( p = 1\% \) change the molecule and its neighbour to \( \text{para} \); and (4) if the change took place, go to the next molecule in the list of \( \text{ortho} \) molecules. One \( \text{ortho} \) molecule may be part of multiple pairs and, if no flaw occurs, the algorithm will also revisit those \( \text{ortho} \) molecules which have already been tested against their neighbours. In Figure 10(b), the exchange of neighbouring \( \text{ortho} \) \( \text{para} \) molecules with probability 1% is also implemented.

No back-conversion from \( \text{para} \) to \( \text{ortho} \) is included in the simulations shown in Figure 10. We have also implemented simulations which include this process, which is significant at higher temperatures. No unusual effects were observed.

V. DISCUSSION

The NMR evidence described above indicates that: (1) the \( \text{ortho} \)-\( \text{para} \) conversion process in \( \text{H}_2\text{O}@\text{C}_{60} \) follows...
a second-order rate law; (2) at temperatures below ∼10 K, the conversion kinetics are temperature-independent; and (3) the $^{13}$C nuclei in the cage do not play a significant role in the spin-isomer conversion of H$_2$O.

The second-order kinetic rate law suggests a bimolecular process in which neighbouring ortho-H$_2$O pairs interact at close range. We propose a bimolecular mechanism of the form

$$o + o \rightarrow p + p^*,$$

where the left-hand side indicates a pair of neighbouring H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ molecules, each containing ortho-H$_2$O. Equation (7) suggests that the neighbouring ortho-H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ molecules may interact to generate a pair of para-H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ molecules. The asterisk indicates the generation of a para-H$_2$O in a rotationally excited state. This is required for energetic reasons (see Figure 9). After conversion the excess energy of the $p^*$ molecule is rapidly dissipated to the lattice.

It is well-known that bimolecular processes give rise to second-order kinetics in the case of solution-state chemical reactions, where reagents freely diffuse in space. It is less obvious whether this also applies to a three-dimensional solid, where the molecules are fixed in space.

To investigate this issue we performed numerical simulations using a simple lattice automaton, based on a model in which each H$_2$ molecule interacts only with the nearest neighbours in the crystalline phase of C$_{60}$ with 90% of lattice sites occupied by an endohedral water, as in the experimental situation. At the start of the simulation, 75% of the available H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ sites are assigned as ortho, with the remaining 25% set as para. This corresponds to the high-temperature ortho:para ratio. On each simulation step, neighbouring ortho pairs have a 1% chance of converting to a pair of para molecules.

Figure 10(a) shows the conversion kinetics generated by this process. The linearised representation of the second-order kinetics, shown in Figure 10(a), shows that the process initially follows a second-order rate law to a good approximation, but that strong deviations are observed at long times, when the fraction of remaining ortho molecules becomes low. The conversion becomes “stuck” since a significant fraction of ortho molecules are left without a nearby ortho partner, and cannot convert.

The long-term persistence of “stuck” ortho-H$_2$O molecules is not observed for H$_2$O@C$_{60}$. There are several

![FIG. 9. Schematic representation of the spin conversion process in H$_2$O@C$_{60}$ in which two molecules of ortho-H$_2$O convert into two para-H$_2$O molecules. The process shown is the most energetically favorable among the bimolecular processes since the ortho state 101 is half-way in energy at 2.3 meV between the two para states 000 and 111 separated by 4.6 meV.](image-url)
possible explanations for this: (1) the $o + o \rightarrow p + p$ conversion process may take place at distances much larger than a nearest-neighbour approach; and (2) a second process occurs which allows ortho molecules to “diffuse” through the lattice, and “find” an ortho partner, allowing recombination. Indeed, in the case of $\text{H}_2$, such diffusion processes are known to occur.\textsuperscript{47,48,61,62}

There can be no physical diffusion of ortho-$\text{H}_2\text{O}@\text{C}_{60}$ through the low-temperature lattice. However, it is plausible that neighbouring ortho and para molecules have a finite probability of exchanging identity, i.e.,

$$o + p \rightarrow p + o. \quad (8)$$

This process generates a form of spin diffusion, analogous to the diffusion of tunnelling energy in solids containing unhindered methyl rotors.\textsuperscript{63} Figure 10(b) shows the result of a lattice automaton simulation in which the processes in Eqs. (7) and (8) occur with equal probability. As expected, the ortho-para exchange process in Eq. (8) allows diffusion of isolated ortho molecules through a para-rich lattice, allowing them to find a ortho partner and accomplish spin conversion. When this process is included, second-order kinetics is followed fairly accurately out to long times.

The experimental observation of second-order kinetics for the spin conversion in $\text{H}_2\text{O}@\text{C}_{60}$ is therefore consistent with a bimolecular spin conversion mechanism for neighbouring endohedral ortho-$\text{H}_2\text{O}$ molecules, combined with a spin-diffusion-like process allowing exchange of ortho and para identities between neighbouring molecules. However we cannot exclude alternatives to spin diffusion, such as the presence of a longer range $o + o \rightarrow p + p$ process.

The processes in Eqs. (7) and (8) provide a plausible explanation for the second-order kinetics of spin isomer conversion in $\text{H}_2\text{O}@\text{C}_{60}$. But what is the microscopic mechanism for these processes?

In the case of $\text{H}_2$, spin isomer conversion is induced by magnetic fields that are inhomogeneous on a molecular scale.\textsuperscript{36,64} Since ortho-$\text{H}_2\text{O}$ possesses a nuclear magnetic moment, while para-$\text{H}_2\text{O}$ does not, it is plausible that magnetic dipole-dipole interactions between the $^1\text{H}$ nuclei of $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ molecules in neighbouring cages provide a mechanism for the bimolecular conversion process in Eq. (7). However, such interactions are exceedingly small due to the relatively large size of the cages. Furthermore, the experiments described above indicate that $^{13}\text{C}$ nuclei on the same cage as the endohedral $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ do not cause significant ortho-para conversion. Although $^{13}\text{C}$ is less magnetic than $^1\text{H}$, a $^{13}\text{C}$ nucleus in the same cage is much closer to an endohedral proton than an endohedral neighbour. The magnetic dipole coupling between protons in neighbouring cages is $(\mu_0/8\pi r^2)\mathbf{\gamma}_p^2\mathbf{r}_{p-H}\approx-120\text{Hz}$ where $r_{p-H}$ is the proton-proton distance (estimated to be $r_{p-H}\approx 10\ \text{Å}$) and $\gamma_p$ is the proton magnetogyric ratio. The coupling between a proton at the center of a cage and a $^{13}\text{C}$ nucleus inside the same cage is $(\mu_0/8\pi r^2)\mathbf{\gamma}_p^2\mathbf{r}_{p-C}\approx 700\text{Hz}$, where $\gamma_C$ is the magnetic-grotyric ratio for $^{13}\text{C}$. The interaction of a water proton with a cage $^{13}\text{C}$ nucleus is therefore expected to be about 6 times larger than the interaction between ortho-water protons in neighbouring cages. It is implausible that a nearby $^{13}\text{C}$ in the same cage would not induce spin conversion, while a remote $^1\text{H}$ in a neighbouring cage would. For these reasons we discount the intermolecular nuclear magnetic dipole-dipole interaction as a plausible spin conversion mechanism, in the current case.

At this stage the detailed mechanism of spin-isomer conversion in $\text{H}_2\text{O}@\text{C}_{60}$ is unknown. It is clear that the interaction between two ortho neighbours is involved. But which interaction is that? In our opinion, a strong candidate involves the interaction of the electric dipole moments of neighbouring $\text{H}_2\text{O}$ molecules, possibly mediated by cage-cage interactions. The electric dipole moments couple to the molecular angular momenta in the $J = 1$ states, which are in turn coupled to the nuclear spins through the spin-rotation mechanism—which is already known as a route to unimolecular spin conversion for water in high rotational states.\textsuperscript{65,66} The mechanism postulated here would extend the spin-rotation mechanism to bimolecular processes in a low-temperature solid. The rapid increase in the spin conversion rates above 10 K (Table 1) could be associated with an increased population of higher rotational levels, which have larger spin-rotation interactions.

Further experiments are needed to elucidate the spin-conversion mechanism. We plan to study the effect of diluting $\text{H}_2\text{O}@\text{C}_{60}$ cages in unfilled $\text{C}_{60}$ cages, and the effect of other molecular species and ortho-para spin diffusion on the spin conversion process.

\textbf{Note added in proof:} Sami Jannin (EPFL, Switzerland) has pointed out correctly that the presence of ortho-para spin exchange (Eq. (8)) weakens the case for $^{13}\text{C}$ nuclei playing no significant role in the spin conversion process.

\textbf{ACKNOWLEDGMENTS}

The authors acknowledge the support of EPSRC-UK, the National Science Foundation, and the European Research Council. The authors at Columbia thank the National Science Foundation for its support through Grant No. CHE 11-11392. We thank Yasujiro Murata for advice and discussions.