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Original

How Difficult is it to Prepare a Quantum State? / Girolami, D.. - In: PHYSICAL REVIEW LETTERS. - ISSN 0031-9007. - 122:1(2019), p. 010505. [10.1103/PhysRevLett.122.010505]

Availability:

This version is available at: 11583/2849559 since: 2020-10-22T15:58:39Z

Publisher:

American Physical Society

Published

DOI:10.1103/PhysRevLett.122.010505

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How Difficult is it to Prepare a Quantum State?

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 (Received 9 August 2018; revised manuscript received 29 October 2018; published 11 January 2019)

Consider a quantum system prepared in an input state. One wants to drive it into a target state. Assuming classical states and operations as free resources, I identify a geometric cost function which quantifies the difficulty of the protocol in terms of how different it is from a classical process. The quantity determines a lower bound to the number of commuting unitary transformations required to complete the task. I then discuss the link between the quantum character of a state preparation and the amount of coherence and quantum correlations that are created in the target state.

DOI: 10.1103/PhysRevLett.122.010505

Introduction.—Quantum systems promise to outperform classical devices in information processing protocols, if prepared in certain complex configurations [1]. It is then interesting to measure the difficulty to drive a quantum system into a target state, and design the best strategies to complete the task. Previous works determined time optimal Hamiltonian control dynamics [2–8], and energy efficient out-of-equilibrium driving for classical and quantum systems [9–13]. Yet, the difficulty of preparing a useful quantum state is not plainly due to the consumption of physical resources, as classical processes can take more time or energy than quantum ones. An alternative, informative metric should evaluate how different is a transformation from being classical. While measures of quantum coherence and correlations mark the difference between classical and quantum states [14,15], there is no clear boundary between classical and quantum processes, as there is no quantifier of their quantumness.

Here I introduce a measure of the difficulty of a quantum state preparation in terms of how different it is from a classical process. First, I identify incoherent states and classical stochastic maps as well-motivated sets of free states and operations, being the only ones which do not display quantum superpositions, i.e., coherence. Creating coherence should never be easy because it can be sufficient for outmatching classical devices. This was proved by works in quantum information [14], cryptography [16], and communication [17], which yet left unknown the exact laws establishing how difficult is creating superpositions. Then, I introduce a design principle for quantum driving of general validity. The best preparation strategy is the input-target dynamics which minimizes a geometric index quantifying the quantum character of the transformation. The geometric measure, which overcomes the limitations of customary distance functions, lower bounds the operationally meaningful algorithmic cost to prepare a state via commuting operations. As a target state is expected to be

computationally useful, it is also interesting to establish a link to the creation of quantum resources. I derive quantitative relations between the quantumness of a process, a computable lower bound, and the coherence and quantum correlations created in the target.

Quantum state preparation: Free resources and cost.—Suppose a finite dimensional quantum system is in a state described by a density matrix ρ . How hard is it to drive the system into a target state τ ? I formulate the problem in a geometric framework [18,19]. The system dynamics is modeled by a curve $\gamma: t \rightarrow \gamma_t$ in the stratified manifold of quantum states \mathcal{M} , where $\gamma_t = \sum_i \lambda_i(t) |i(t)\rangle\langle i(t)|$, $\sum_i \lambda_i(t) = 1$, $\langle i(t)|j(t)\rangle = \delta_{ij}$, $\gamma_0 \equiv \rho$, $\gamma_T \equiv \tau$, is the spectral decomposition of the system state at time t . First, I identify what it is “easy” to obtain and to do. In the parlance of quantum information theory, this is represented by the free states and the free operations, respectively [20,21]. I aim at associating the difficulty of the computation $\rho \rightarrow \tau$ with its quantumness. Thus, free state preparations must be classical processes, which are characterized as follows. If an input state $\rho = \sum_i \lambda_i(0) |i(0)\rangle\langle i(0)|$, $|i(0)\rangle \equiv |i_R\rangle$, $\langle i_R|j_R\rangle = \delta_{ij}$, is given for free, then any state which is diagonal in the reference basis $\{|i_R\rangle\}$ can be prepared (deterministically or stochastically) via an operation such that the state of the system is at any time described by an element of $\mathcal{M}_{i_R} = \{\tilde{\rho} = \sum_i \tilde{\lambda}_i |i_R\rangle\langle i_R|\}$. The information about the basis is then redundant and the transformation is at any time a classical process. Hence, the free states are the density matrices in \mathcal{M}_{i_R} . The free operations are the maps such that the state of the system is at any time diagonal in a reference basis, $\gamma_t = \sum_i \lambda_i(t) |i_R\rangle\langle i_R| \in \mathcal{M}_{i_R}$, $\forall t \in [0, T]$. Note that the eigenspaces $\{|i_R\rangle\}$ are not necessarily of multiplicity one, and a state can be free with respect to more than one basis.

I discuss a few examples to justify these definitions. A transformation between two orthogonal states $|i\rangle \rightarrow |j\rangle$,

$\langle i|j\rangle = \delta_{ij}$, can be synthesized via a unitary operation, as well as by a classical ‘‘amplitude damping’’ map $\gamma_t = (1 - t/T)|i\rangle\langle i| + t/T|j\rangle\langle j|$, in which the density matrix is diagonal at any time in a basis with elements $\{i, j\}$. Hence, it is not necessarily quantum. Conversely, noncommutativity between input and output density matrices implies that the process is quantum [22], as classical maps cannot create superpositions $|i\rangle \rightarrow a|i\rangle + b|j\rangle$, $a, b \in \mathbb{C}$. The quantumness of a process is independent of the basis in which the states are written. A transformation between commuting states displaying coherence in a basis, e.g., $a|i\rangle + b|j\rangle \rightarrow a|j\rangle - b|i\rangle$, always admits a classical implementation $\gamma_t = (1 - t/T)|+\rangle\langle +| + t/T|-\rangle\langle -|$, $|+\rangle = a|i\rangle + b|j\rangle$, $|-\rangle = a|j\rangle - b|i\rangle$. One observes that the free operations in a resource theory are often characterized by the form of their Kraus operators [21], but this is generally not sufficient to signal the quantumness of a transformation. A parametrized Kraus set for the amplitude damping is given by $K_1 = |+\rangle\langle +| + \sqrt{1 - t/T}|-\rangle\langle -|$, $K_2 = \sqrt{t/T}|+\rangle\langle -|$. Yet, the very same Kraus set transforms the input $|i\rangle$ into a noncommuting output. The quantum character of the continuous time evolution of a state is independent of reparametrizations of t . On this hand, continuous time classical maps seem more appropriate free operations for state preparation than incoherent operations [14]. For example, the unitary qubit transformation $e^{-i\sigma_y t}$ is a quantum map at any time t , but it is a (strictly) incoherent operation with respect to the basis $\{0, 1\}$ for $t = k\pi/2$ [23,24], creating coherence otherwise. It is hard to justify why a phase shift should be easy only for some values of t , as no experimental challenge emerges to implement this map at different times.

The difficulty of an input-target transformation can be then evaluated in terms of how different it is from a free operation, i.e., a classical process. This cannot be measured by distance functions, which quantify the ability to distinguish two states via measurements [1,25]. For example, two orthogonal states $|i\rangle, |j\rangle$, are more distinguishable than $|i\rangle$ and any state displaying coherence $a|i\rangle + b|j\rangle$, $a, b \neq 0$. I search for a function of input and target states $Q_\rho(\tau)$ which meets a set of desirable properties: faithfulness, being zero only when the target is a free state, $Q_\rho(\tau) = 0 \Leftrightarrow \tau \in \mathcal{M}_{i_R}$; invariance under free operations, taking the same value for all free states, $Q_\rho(\tau) = Q_{\tilde{\rho}}(\tau)$, $\forall \tilde{\rho} \in \mathcal{M}_{i_R}$; contractivity under mixing, $Q_\rho(\tau) \geq Q_{\Gamma(\rho)}(\Gamma(\tau))$, where Γ is a completely positive trace-preserving (CPTP) map.

Consider the energy of a curve at fixed boundaries

$$E^{\gamma_t}(\rho \rightarrow \tau) := \int_0^T \|\dot{\gamma}_t\|^2 dt, \quad \gamma_0 \equiv \rho, \quad \gamma_T \equiv \tau, \quad (1)$$

where the norm is induced by a Riemannian Fisher metric, the only class of contractive metrics under noisy maps on \mathcal{M} [26–28]. The quantity is formally equivalent to the kinetic energy (per unit of time) for a particle traveling on

the manifold [29–31], while being generally not related to the physical energy. By decomposing the state as $\gamma_t = U_t \Lambda_t U_t^\dagger$, $U_0 = I$, where Λ_t is a diagonal matrix with the state eigenvalues as entries, the rate of change reads $\dot{\gamma}_t = U_t \dot{\Lambda}_t U_t^\dagger + i[\gamma_t, H_t]$, $H_t = i\dot{U}_t U_t^\dagger$. For classical processes, only the first term survives at any time t . On the other hand, a unitary transformation $\gamma_t^\# = U_t \Lambda_0 U_t^\dagger$, $\forall t$, is genuinely quantum. It changes the state eigenbasis while the spectrum is invariant, so only the second term appears at any time t . For a path corresponding to a general CPTP map, the two terms coexist. The key point is that, independently of the specific metric employed, the tangent space to \mathcal{M} has a direct sum structure such that $\|\dot{\gamma}_t\|^2 = \|U_t \dot{\Lambda}_t U_t^\dagger\|^2 + \|i[\gamma_t, H_t]\|^2$ [18,19]. Hence, it is possible to discriminate between classical and quantum components of the energy:

$$\begin{aligned} E^{\gamma_t}(\rho \rightarrow \tau) &= E_c^{\gamma_t}(\rho \rightarrow \tau) + E_q^{\gamma_t}(\rho \rightarrow \tau), \\ E_c^{\gamma_t}(\rho \rightarrow \tau) &:= \int_0^T \|U_t \dot{\Lambda}_t U_t^\dagger\|^2 dt, \\ E_q^{\gamma_t}(\rho \rightarrow \tau) &:= \int_0^T \|i[\gamma_t, H_t]\|^2 dt. \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Note that a distance function cannot be split. For unitary transformations, only the quantum term survives, capturing the sensitivity of the system to phase shifts. This property, called asymmetry [17], is the peculiar resource for phase estimation. Generalizing the concept of asymmetry to arbitrary CPTP maps, the basis changing component of the (squared) speed measures the sensitivity of the system in a state γ_t to a map Γ_t due to *quantum* effects. Hence, the quantumness of a computation $\rho \rightarrow \tau$, i.e., the difficulty of driving the system into the target state within a time T , is given by the minimum quantum component of the energy over all the possible maps linking a free state to the target:

$$\begin{aligned} Q_\rho(\tau) &:= E_q^{\tilde{\gamma}_t}(\tilde{\rho} \rightarrow \tau), \\ E_q^{\tilde{\gamma}_t}(\tilde{\rho} \rightarrow \tau) &= \min_{\tilde{\gamma}_t, \tilde{\rho}} E_q^{\tilde{\gamma}_t}(\tilde{\rho} \rightarrow \tau), \\ \tilde{\rho} &\in \mathcal{M}_{i_R}, \tilde{\gamma}_t: \tilde{\rho} \mapsto \tau. \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

The results I am going to present would hold for any Riemannian metric. Yet, for the sake of clarity, I employ from now on the Bures metric, which plays an important role in quantum statistics and quantum information theory [1,26,32,33]. The squared speed of the system at time t is

$$\|\dot{\gamma}_t\|^2 = \sum_i \frac{\dot{\lambda}_i(t)^2}{4\lambda_i(t)} + \sum_{i < j} \frac{|\langle i(t)|i[\gamma_t, H_t]|j(t)\rangle|^2}{\lambda_i(t) + \lambda_j(t)}. \quad (4)$$

The first term is the squared norm related to the classical Fisher metric, while the second one is the quantum contribution. For unitary transformations $\gamma_t^\#$, only the

$$\begin{aligned}
 |\psi_{\bar{\rho}^\mu}^{\text{purif}}\rangle &= \sum_i \sqrt{\bar{\rho}^\mu} |i_R\rangle \otimes |i_R\rangle, \\
 |\psi_\tau^{\text{purif}}\rangle &= \sum_i \frac{1}{\sqrt{\bar{\rho}^\mu}} \sqrt{\sqrt{\bar{\rho}^\mu} \tau \sqrt{\bar{\rho}^\mu}} |i_R\rangle \otimes |i_R\rangle. \quad (7)
 \end{aligned}$$

The length or energy minimizing (generally not unitary) path between two mixed states is obtained by partial trace along the shortest (unitary) path between the closest purifications. Thus, one has $Q_\rho^u(\tau) \geq Q_{\psi_{\bar{\rho}^\mu}^{\text{purif}}}(\psi_\tau^{\text{purif}})$. The inequality is saturated for pure targets. Such a lower bound, which satisfies by construction faithfulness, invariance, and monotonicity properties, is computed as follows. Consider, for example, driving a qubit from an input state with Bloch form $\rho = 1/2(I + q_z \sigma_z)$, $q_z \neq 0$, to a target $\tau = 1/2(I + \vec{r} \cdot \vec{\sigma})$. The isospectral free states to the target are identified by $|q_z| = |\vec{r}|$. One has $Q_{\psi_{\bar{\rho}^\mu}^{\text{purif}}}(\psi_\tau^{\text{purif}}) = \{\cos^{-1}[(\sqrt{f_+} + \sqrt{f_-})/2]\}^2/T$, $f_\pm = 1 + |\vec{r}|r_z \pm \sqrt{|\vec{r}|^2 + 2|\vec{r}|r_z - |\vec{r}|^2(|\vec{r}|^2 - r_z^2 - 1)}$. The process is classical for $r_x = r_y = 0$, $|\vec{r}| = |r_z|$, while the maximum energy $\pi^2/(16T)$ is required to prepare the pure state given by $r_x^2 + r_y^2 = 1$, $r_z = 0$. The same method applies for systems of dimension $d > 2$, as their states admit a Bloch form $1/d(I + \vec{r} \cdot \vec{\Sigma})$, where $\vec{\Sigma}$ is a vector of $d \times d$ traceless matrices.

The geometric index $Q_\rho^u(\tau)$ can bound the size of preparation algorithms. Suppose that a unitary map $\gamma_t^\mu = \rho^\mu \mapsto \tau$ is synthesized by N commuting unitary operations, e.g., logic gates, $\gamma_t^\mu = U_t \rho^\mu U_t^\dagger$, $U_t = e^{-iHt}$, $H = \sum_{l=1}^N H_l$, $[H_l, H_k] = 0$, $\forall l, k$. The scenario describes the phase imprinting step in parallel estimation protocols [33], and the preparation of highly entangled symmetric states, $(a|0\rangle + b|1\rangle) \otimes |0\rangle^{\otimes N} \rightarrow a|0\rangle^{\otimes N+1} + b|1\rangle^{\otimes N+1}$, $a, b \in \mathbb{C}$, via controlled gates between the first and the $l+1$ th qubit. Consider the seminorm of each Hamiltonian $|H_l| = h_{l,M} - h_{l,m}$ being the difference between its largest and smallest eigenvalues [42]. It measures the complexity of H_l , as it depends on the number of gates implementing the Hamiltonian, and the size of the correlations they can build [42,43]. Since $4V_\rho(H) \leq |H|^2 \leq (\sum_l |H_l|)^2$, one has $E_{T_i}^u(\rho \rightarrow \tau) \leq TN^2 \overline{|H|^2}/4$, where $\overline{|H|^2}$ is the average squared seminorm over all the generators H_l . By assuming every Hamiltonian has the same seminorm $|H_l| = h$, $\forall l$, one has

$$N \geq \frac{2}{h} \left(\frac{Q_\rho^u(\tau)}{T} \right)^{1/2}. \quad (8)$$

The bound is saturated for superpositions of the largest and smallest eigenvalues of H , $|\psi_\rho\rangle = (|h_M\rangle + e^{i\phi}|h_m\rangle)/\sqrt{2}$, which are the most sensitive inputs to the map.

The quantumness of a transformation is also linked to the coherence the target displays with respect to the reference basis [14,44,45], here quantified by the distance to the set

of incoherent states $C_B^{i_R}(\tau) := \min_{\bar{\rho} \in \mathcal{M}_{i_R}} D_B(\bar{\rho}, \tau)$. (The distance function is determined by the chosen Riemannian metric.) One has

$$Q_\rho^u(\tau) \geq Q_{\psi_{\bar{\rho}^\mu}^{\text{purif}}}(\psi_\tau^{\text{purif}}) \geq (C_B^{i_R}(\tau))^2/T \geq Q_\rho(\tau), \quad (9)$$

where $Q_\rho^{(u)}(\tau) = 0 \Leftrightarrow C_B^{i_R}(\tau) = 0$. The chain holds as $Q_{\psi_{\bar{\rho}^\mu}^{\text{purif}}}(\psi_\tau^{\text{purif}}) = D_B^2(\bar{\rho}^\mu, \tau)/T$. For pure states, one has $C_B^{i_R}(\psi_\tau) = \cos^{-1} \max_{i_R} |\langle i_R | \psi_\tau \rangle|$ [46], which implies $D_B(\psi_{\bar{\rho}^\mu}, \psi_\tau) = C_B^{i_R}(\psi_\tau)$. In the multipartite case, the quantumness of the transformation upper bounds the quantum correlations in the target, whenever the reference basis is local or multilocal. Note that rather than the average or maximum ability of a map to create quantumness [47,48], I compute the minimum cost. The most general form of bipartite quantum correlations, quantum discord [15], can be measured by the minimum coherence over all the bilocal bases, $D_B(\rho_{12}) := \min_{i_1 j_2} C_B^{i_1 j_2}(\rho_{12})$, $\{i_1 j_2 := |i_1\rangle \otimes |j_2\rangle\}$. This is the symmetric discord [49,50], but the argument applies to the original asymmetric definition as well. Consider the set of free states being the zero discord states $\rho_{12} = \sum_{ij} p_{ij}^{12} |i_1 j_2\rangle \langle i_1 j_2|$, $\sum_{ij} p_{ij}^{12} = 1$, $\rho_{12} \in \mathcal{M}_{i_1 j_2}$. That is, the reference basis is the bilocal basis $\{i_1 j_2\}$. One has

$$Q_{\psi_{\bar{\rho}^\mu \in \mathcal{M}_{i_1 j_2}}^{\text{purif}}}(\psi_{\tau_{12}}^{\text{purif}}) \geq D_B^2(\tau_{12})/T. \quad (10)$$

Yet, $D_B(\tau_{12}) = 0 \not\Rightarrow Q_{\rho \in \mathcal{M}_{i_1 j_2}}^{(u)}(\tau_{12}) = 0$. For example, the qutrit-qubit map $p|0\rangle\langle 0| \otimes |0\rangle\langle 0| + (1-p)|1\rangle\langle 1| \otimes |1\rangle\langle 1| \rightarrow p|0\rangle\langle 0| \otimes |0\rangle\langle 0| + (1-p)/2(|1\rangle + |2\rangle)(\langle 1| + \langle 2|) \otimes |1\rangle\langle 1|$ does not create discord, but it generates coherence with respect to the basis $\{0, 1, 2\}$ [24]. I extend the bound to a hierarchy of measures of coherence and genuine multipartite correlations of different orders [51–55]. Given an N -local reference basis $\{i_1, \dots, i_N\}$, the coarse-grained bases containing up to k -local terms read $\{i^k\} := \{i_{12, \dots, k_1}, i_{k_1+1, k_2, \dots, k_2}, \dots, i_{k_{j-1}+1, k_{j-1}+2, \dots, k_j}\}$, $\sum_j k_j = N$, $k \geq k_j$, $\forall j$. The Bures quantum discord of “order higher than k ” in an N -partite target state $\tau_{1, \dots, N}$ is $\mathcal{D}_B^{k \rightarrow N}(\tau_{1, \dots, N}) := \min_{i^k} C_B^{i^k}(\tau_{1, \dots, N})$. Suppose the free states to be the incoherent states in a coarse-grained basis \bar{i}_k , $\rho_{1, \dots, N} = \sum_{\bar{i}^k} p_{\bar{i}^k} |\bar{i}^k\rangle \langle \bar{i}^k|$, i.e., a subset of the states without quantum discord of order higher than k . One has

$$Q_{\psi_{\bar{\rho}^\mu \in \mathcal{M}_{\bar{i}^k}}^{\text{purif}}}(\psi_{\tau_{1, \dots, N}}^{\text{purif}}) \geq (\mathcal{D}_B^{k \rightarrow N}(\tau_{1, \dots, N}))^2/T. \quad (11)$$

A bound for the total amount of quantum correlations is obtained for $k = 1$, where $\mathcal{D}_B^{1 \rightarrow N}(\tau_{1, \dots, N})$ is the distance of the target to the classically correlated states. As geometric measures of discord upper bound measures of entanglement [56], being equal to them for pure states, the

quantumness of a process upper bounds measures of multipartite entanglement in the target.

Conclusion.—I have quantified the difficulty of preparing a quantum system in a target state by measuring the process quantumness. The optimal dynamics is obtained by solving the geometric problem of minimizing the quantum contribution to the energy of the associated curve. The result highlights the usefulness of geometric methods to establish fundamental limits of quantum information processing. Geometric bounds could provide a benchmark to evaluate the performance of methods for shortening quantum algorithms [57], which is of renewed interest due to the applicability of machine learning techniques. Also, the resource theory approach can be fruitful to solve critical quantum control problems [58].

I thank F. Anzà, I. Bengtsson, C. Cafaro, P. Gibilisco, A. Jencova, S. Luo, R. Maity, V. Moretti, B. Yadin, and K. Życzkowski for fruitful discussions. I acknowledge support from LANL through the LDRD Project No. 20180702PRD1 and the LDRD Rapid Response project “Unraveling Entanglement in a black box quantum computer.” Also, this research was supported in part by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. NSF PHY-1748958, as part of the work was carried out at the KITP in Santa Barbara.

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