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Jun Gao and Hua Xing Zhu
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Top-quark forward-backward asymmetry in $e^+e^-$ annihilation at NNLO in QCD

Jun Gao1,2,† and Hua Xing Zhu3,†

1Department of Physics, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX 75275-0175, USA
2High Energy Physics Division, Argonne National Laboratory, Argonne, IL 60439, USA
3SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94309, USA

We report on a complete calculation of electroweak production of top-quark pairs in $e^+e^-$ annihilation at next-to-next-to-leading order in Quantum Chromodynamics. Our setup is fully differential in phase space and can be used to calculate any infrared-safe observable. Especially we calculated the next-to-next-to-leading order corrections to the top-quark forward-backward asymmetry and found sizable effects. Our results show a large reduction of the theoretical uncertainties in predictions of the forward-backward asymmetry, and allow for a precision determination of the top quark electroweak couplings at future $e^+e^-$ colliders.

Introduction. Top-antitop quark pairs can be copiously produced at future International Linear Collider (ILC), facilitating a detailed study of top quark properties [1]. The clean environment of lepton collider allows measurement of the process $e^+e^- \rightarrow t\bar{t}$ to very high accuracy, which also demands high precision in theoretical calculation, in particular the inclusion of higher order QCD radiative corrections. In the past, significant theoretical efforts have been focused on $t\bar{t}$ production at threshold, for which the Next-to-Next-to-Leading Order (NNLO) QCD corrections are known for more than a decade [2], and even the next-to-next-to-next-to-leading order QCD corrections will be available in the near future [3]. However, for $t\bar{t}$ production in the continuum only the total cross section is known in the high energy expansion [4]. Ingredients for a fully differential NNLO calculation in the continuum have been obtained by different groups [5, 6]. Recently, we reported a fully differential NNLO calculation for the photon mediated contributions [7], using a NNLO generalization of phase space slicing method [8, 9]. In this Letter, we complete this calculation by including also the Standard Model (SM) Z boson contributions.

As an important application of our results, we consider the calculation of top-quark forward-backward (FB) asymmetry ($A_{FB}$) at NNLO in $e^+e^-$ collision in the continuum. In the limit of small top quark mass, this observable has been computed to NNLO in refs. [12]. The full mass effect is only known for the pure two-loop virtual contributions [13]. In this Letter we report the first calculation to this observable at NNLO in QCD, including both loop and real-radiation contributions. $A_{FB}$ is an important precision observable for the determination of neutral-current electroweak couplings of top quark to photon and $Z$ boson. Their precise measurement is an important probe of physics beyond the SM, such as Randall-Sundrum models [14], models of compositeness [15]. Information of top quark neutral coupling is encoded in the top-quark form factor. For on-shell $t\bar{t}$ pair, the form factor can be expressed by four independent scalar ones,

$$\Gamma_{\mu}(Q^2) = -ie \left[ \gamma_{\mu} \left( F_{1v}(Q^2) + \gamma_5 F_{1a}(Q^2) \right) + \left( \frac{\sigma_{\mu\nu}}{2m_t} Q''_{\nu} \left( i F_{2v}(Q^2) + \gamma_5 F_{2a}(Q^2) \right) \right) \right]$$

where $Q_{\mu}$ is the total four-momentum of $t\bar{t}$, $e$ is the positron charge, and $m_t$ is the top-quark mass. $V$ denotes photon ($\gamma$) or $Z$ boson. To Leading Order (LO) in electroweak theory and QCD, the vector and axial form factors, $F_{1v}(Q^2)$ and $F_{1a}(Q^2)$, are given by

$$F_{1v} = Qe, \quad F_{1a} = 0,$$

$$F_{1v}^Z = \frac{1}{\sin 2\theta} \left( \frac{1}{2} - 2Q_{\ell} \sin^2 \theta \right), \quad F_{1a}^Z = -\frac{1}{2 \sin 2\theta}$$

$Q_{\ell} = 2/3$ is the top-quark charge in unit of $e$, and $\theta$ is the weak-mixing angle. At ILC the top-quark forward-backward asymmetry can be measured to a precision of around one percent, in both the fully hadronic or semi-leptonic channels [16–18], far beyond the precision the LHC can reach [17]. It thus provides strong sensitivity to any new physics that could modify the top-quark electroweak couplings. In this Letter, we computed the fully differential NNLO QCD corrections to the exclusive production of top-quark pairs, thereby obtain the $A_{FB}$ at NNLO for the first time. Our calculation provides the most precise QCD predictions on $A_{FB}$ including its theoretical uncertainties, and also allows corrections for experimental acceptance using the full kinematic information.

The formalism. A fully differential calculation for $e^+e^- \rightarrow t\bar{t}$ at NNLO in QCD involves three types of diagrams, namely the two-loop virtual diagrams, one-loop real-virtual diagrams, and double real-emission diagrams. The individual contributions of these diagrams are known for some time. However, combining them in a consistent way is a non-trivial task due to the presence of infrared singularities in QCD matrix elements. To this end, we employ a NNLO generalization of phase-space

† Independently, calculation of inclusive cross section for $e^+e^- \rightarrow \gamma^* \rightarrow t\bar{t}$ at NNLO based on massive generalization of antenna subtraction method [10] has been reported recently in ref. [11].
slicing method, described in detail in a previous publication [7]. We briefly summarize its essential features here.

In perturbative QCD, differential cross section for any infrared-safe observable \( O \) has a schematic form

\[
\frac{d\sigma}{dO} = \int dPS_{t \bar{t} + X} |M_{e^+e^- \to t \bar{t}X}|^2 \delta \left( O - F(\{p_i\}) \right), \tag{3}
\]

where \( O \) is calculated from the final-state momentum \( \{p_i\} \) through measurement function \( F \). Inserting a unit decomposition \( 1 = \Theta(\lambda - E_X) + \Theta(E_X - \lambda) \equiv \Theta_I + \Theta_{II} \), we can write Eq. (3) as

\[
\frac{d\sigma}{dO} = \frac{d\sigma_I}{dO} + \frac{d\sigma_{II}}{dO}, \tag{4}
\]

where

\[
\frac{d\sigma_I}{dO} = \int dPS_{t \bar{t} + X} |M_{e^+e^- \to t \bar{t}X}|^2 \delta \left( O - F(\{p_i\}) \right) \Theta_I, \quad \frac{d\sigma_{II}}{dO} = \int dPS_{t \bar{t} + X} |M_{e^+e^- \to t \bar{t}X}|^2 \delta \left( O - F(\{p_i\}) \right) \Theta_{II}
\]

Obtaining \( \mathcal{O}(\alpha_s^2) \) corrections to \( d\sigma/dO \) simply amounts to achieving the same order of accuracy for \( d\sigma_I/dO \) and \( d\sigma_{II}/dO \). For \( d\sigma/dO \) this is simple. The presence of theta function \( \Theta_{II} \) implies that other than the \( t\bar{t} \) pair, there is at least one parton with finite energy in the final state. The existence of this parton regulates the so-called double-unresolved divergences in the QCD matrix elements. The only infrared divergences (soft or collinear) left can be easily dealt with using any NLO subtraction scheme [19, 20]. In other words, the \( \mathcal{O}(\alpha_s^2) \) contributions to \( d\sigma_{II}/dO \) can be obtained from a standard NLO QCD calculation for \( e^+e^- \to t\bar{t}j \) [6]. The results will exhibit logarithmic dependence on the artificial parameter \( \lambda \). Our implementation of this calculation is as follows. We employ the massive version of dipole subtraction method [20] for infrared subtraction. The one-loop real-virtual calculation is carried out by the automated program GoSam2.0 [21] with loop integral reductions performed with Ninja [22, 23] and scalar integrals from OneLoOp [24, 25]. Note that when \( \sqrt{s} > 4m_t \), the channel for production of \( t\bar{t}t\bar{t} \) is open. However, these additional contributions are themselves infrared finite and small for the energy range considered here, thus are not included. Similarly, we do not include the real emission diagrams of which \( \gamma^*/Z^* \) couples to light or bottom quarks and the top quarks come from gluon splitting. Those contributions are also small, and do not contribute to the top-quark FB asymmetry.

The calculation of \( d\sigma_I/dO \) is substantially more involved. However, significant simplification can be achieved if \( \lambda \ll m_t \). In that regime, universal factorization properties of QCD matrix elements allow one to write the distribution as soft-virtual contributions plus power suppressed terms

\[
\frac{d\sigma_I}{dO} = \frac{d\sigma_{T.V.}}{dO} + \mathcal{O} \left( \frac{\lambda}{m_t} \right), \tag{5}
\]

where a soft expansion has been performed in \( d\sigma_{T.V.}/dO \) through the phase-space volume, the matrix elements, and the measurement function. As explained in ref. [7], the soft-virtual contributions have a factorized form of product of hard function and soft function, each of which is known to \( \mathcal{O}(\alpha_s^2) \) in analytic form. The hard function is essentially the heavy quark form factors calculated in refs. [5], and the soft function is the phase-space integral in the eikonal limit. The soft function is the same for \( Z \) or \( t \) mediated contributions. Comparing with the vector contributions calculated in ref. [7], the only difference is the inclusion of axial-vector and anomaly contributions in the hard function. We note that \( d\sigma_{T.V.}/dO \) also exhibits logarithmic dependence on \( \lambda \).

Combining \( d\sigma_T/dO \) and \( d\sigma_{II}/dO \), we obtain a formally exact results for \( d\sigma/dO \), in the limit \( \lambda \to 0 \). However, such a limit can never be reached because \( d\sigma_{II}/dO \) is usually computed numerically. In practice, we choose the parameter sufficiently small such that the power suppressed terms can be safely neglected, and the kinematic approximation in the soft-virtual contributions can be justified. The appropriate choice of \( \lambda \) can be indicated by searching for an region in which the dependence on \( \lambda \) in \( d\sigma_{T.V.}/dO + d\sigma_{II}/dO \) is minimized.

\textbf{Total cross sections.} We first present our numeric results on total cross sections. We use two-loop running of the QCD coupling constant with \( N_t = 5 \) active quark flavors and \( \alpha_s(M_Z) = 0.118 \). We choose the \( G_F \) parametrization scheme [26] for the electroweak couplings with \( M_W = 80.385 \) GeV, \( M_Z = 91.1876 \) GeV, \( M_t = 173 \) GeV, and \( G_F = 1.166379 \times 10^{-5} \) GeV\(^{-2} \) [27]. The renormalization scale is set to the center of mass energy \( \sqrt{s} \) unless otherwise specified. The production cross sections through to NNLO in QCD can be expressed as

\[
\sigma_{NNLO} = \sigma_{LO} \left( 1 + \Delta^{(1)} + \Delta^{(2)} \right), \tag{6}
\]

where \( \Delta^{(1)} \) \( (\Delta^{(2)} \) denotes the \( \mathcal{O}(\alpha_s) \) \( \mathcal{O}(\alpha_s^2) \) QCD corrections. Analytic results for \( \Delta^{(2)} \) are presented for production near threshold [2] or by high energy expansions [4] with which we compare our numerical results.

Fig. 1 shows detailed comparison of our numerical results with the threshold [2] and high-energy expansion results [4] in a wide range of collision energy. It can be seen that our full results work well in the entire energy region, i.e., approaching the threshold results at lower energies and the high-energy expansions on the other end. The \( \mathcal{O}(\alpha_s^2) \) corrections can reach as large as 80% for \( \sqrt{s} = 350 \) GeV, due to Coulomb singularities at threshold. On the other hand it is about 2% at intermediate collision energies and decreases rapidly to below 1%.
at high energies. The good agreements of our results on total cross sections with the ones from threshold and high-energy expansions in the corresponding energy region further validate our calculation.

**Differential distributions and $A_{FB}$.** We can calculate the fully differential distributions through to NNLO in QCD based on the phase space slicing method. At LO, there is only one non-trivial kinematic variable, which we can choose either as cosine of the scattering angle between the final-state top quark and the initial-state electron $\cos \theta_t$, or transverse momentum of the top quark with respect to the beam line direction $p_{T,t}$. Similar to the inclusive cross section, we can define the $O(\alpha_s)$ and $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections for each kinematic bin as $\Delta_{bin}^{(1)}$ and $\Delta_{bin}^{(2)}$, in analogy to Eq. (6). The results are shown in Fig. 2 for $\cos \theta_t$ and Fig. 3 for $p_{T,t}$ distributions with a typical collision energy of 400 GeV. The $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections are about one fourth of the $O(\alpha_s)$ corrections for the total cross section. However, they show a different kinematic dependence. From Fig. 2 we can see that both the $O(\alpha_s)$ and $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections are larger in the forward direction and thus will increase the FB asymmetry. Moreover, the difference of $\Delta_{bin}^{(2)}$ in the forward and backward regions are of similar size as for $\Delta_{bin}^{(1)}$. Thus the $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections to $A_{FB}$ are as important as the $O(\alpha_s)$ corrections which will be shown later. The transverse momentum distribution in Fig. 3 shows a different feature as compared to the angular distribution since they are also affected by the energy spectrum of the top quark. The real corrections pull the energy spectrum to the lower end and thus the $p_{T,t}$ distribution as well. As shown in Fig. 3, the $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections are positive in low $p_T$ region and decrease to negative values near the kinematic limits. The $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections show a relatively larger impact in the $p_{T,t}$ distribution.

The forward-backward asymmetry $A_{FB}$ is defined as the number of top quark observed in the forward direction minus the one observed in the backward direction, divided by the total number of top quark observed,

$$A_{FB} = \frac{\sigma_A}{\sigma_S} = \frac{\sigma(\cos \theta_t > 0) - \sigma(\cos \theta_t < 0)}{\sigma(\cos \theta_t > 0) + \sigma(\cos \theta_t < 0)}$$  \hspace{1cm} (7)

We show $A_{FB}$ at LO as a function of the collision energy in the lower inset of Fig. 4. The $A_{FB}$ at NLO and NNLO are calculated by using the corresponding NLO and NNLO cross sections in both the denominator and numerator of Eq. (7), and are shown in the upper inset of Fig. 4. All curves are normalized to the $A_{FB}$ at LO. The $O(\alpha_s)$ corrections are about 2% for $\sqrt{s}$ around 500 GeV. The $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections further increase $A_{FB}$ by about 1.2% for the same region. We also plot the $A_{FB}$ calculated using the two-loop threshold cross sections [13] for comparison, which shows good agreement with our exact result in energy region just above the production threshold. This is expected since in the threshold region the former ones dominate. We further investigate uncertainties of predictions on $A_{FB}$ due to missing corrections beyond NNLO. A conventional way to estimate those uncertainties is by checking the residual QCD scale dependence. However, for ratios like $A_{FB}$, if we vary the scales simultaneously in $\sigma_A$ and $\sigma_S$, it tends to underesti-

![Fig. 1](image1.png)

**FIG. 1.** Comparison of $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections to total cross sections, $\Delta^{(2)}$, with the threshold results $\Delta_{th}^{(2)}$ and high-energy expansion results $\Delta_{he}^{(2)}$, as functions of the collision energy.

![Fig. 2](image2.png)

**FIG. 2.** $O(\alpha_s)$ and $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections in different $\cos \theta$ bins of top quark, $\Delta_{bin}^{(1)}$ and $\Delta_{bin}^{(2)}$, for $\sqrt{s} = 400$ GeV.

![Fig. 3](image3.png)

**FIG. 3.** $O(\alpha_s)$ and $O(\alpha_s^2)$ corrections in different $p_T$ bins of top quark, $\Delta_{bin}^{(1)}$ and $\Delta_{bin}^{(2)}$, for $\sqrt{s} = 400$ GeV.
We can also study top-quark FB asymmetry at a more
exclusive level, namely the FB asymmetry in different
$|\cos \theta_t|$ bins, $A_{FB, bin}$. In Fig. 5 we plot ratios of the
NLO and NNLO predictions on $A_{FB,bin}$ to the LO ones
for $\sqrt{s} = 400$ GeV. Both the $O(\alpha_s)$ and $O(\alpha_s^2)$ correc-
tions are almost flat on $|\cos \theta_t|$ for $\sqrt{s} = 400$ GeV.
They decrease slightly with increasing $|\cos \theta_t|$ for $\sqrt{s} = 500$
GeV which is not shown here due to limited space.

Conclusions. We have presented the first complete
NNLO QCD corrections to top-quark pair production at $e^+e^-$
collisions. The calculation is at fully differential
level based on a generalization of phase slicing method to
NNLO in QCD [7]. We have studied in detail the correc-
tions to top-quark forward-backward asymmetry $A_{FB}$. The
NNLO corrections to $A_{FB}$ are half the size of the
NLO corrections or even larger, for a typical collision ener-
y of $400 \sim 500$ GeV at future linear colliders. More-
over, our results show a large reduction of the theoretical
uncertainties for predictions on $A_{FB}$. The residual scale
uncertainty is well below the projected experimental pre-
cision. Our results allow for a precise determination of the
top-quark neutral-current couplings at future linear
colliders, which can be used to probe various new physics
beyond the SM. Besides, there could be several interesting
applications of the method and results presented here.
Firstly, it would be interesting to apply this calculation to
charm and bottom quark production at Z boson mass
pole. Secondly, decay of Higgs boson to massive
quarks can be calculated in a similar way to NNLO in QCD,
since the two-loop matrix elements are available [28].
Thirdly, it should be straightforward to combine produc-
tion and leptonic decay [8, 29] of top-quark pair in $e^+e^-$
collisions within narrow width approximation at NNLO.
Last but not least, our calculation may also be used to
improve the accuracy of event shape resummation related
to heavy-quark mass measurement [30].

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\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\sqrt{s} [GeV] & $A_{FB}^{LO}$ & $A_{FB}^{NLO}$ & $A_{FB}^{NNLO}$ & $\delta A_{FB}^{NNLO}$ \\
\hline
400 & 0.2820 & 0.2944 $\pm$ 0.076 & 0.2958 $\pm$ 0.046 & $\pm$0.026 \\
500 & 0.4156 & 0.4339 $\pm$ 0.059 & 0.4289 $\pm$ 0.025 & $\pm$0.012 \\
800 & 0.5368 & 0.5391 $\pm$ 0.033 & 0.5407 $\pm$ 0.008 & $\pm$0.004 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Top-quark forward-backward asymmetry at differ-
ent perturbative orders for representative $\sqrt{s}$ choices. The
FB asymmetries are shown in percentage.}
\end{table}

FIG. 4. Lower inset: top-quark $A_{FB}$ at the LO as a function
of collision energy; upper inset: ratios of $A_{FB}$ at the NLO
and NNLO to $A_{FB}$ at the LO. The threshold approximation
is denoted as th..

FIG. 5. Top-quark forward-backward asymmetry in different
$|\cos \theta_t|$ bins, $A_{FB,bin}$, normalized to the LO predictions, for
$\sqrt{s} = 400$ GeV.
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