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Liquid-Liquid Transition in Water from First Principles

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3	Liquid-liquid transition in water from first principles
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18 Abstract:

A longstanding question in water research is the possibility that supercooled liquid water can undergo a liquid-liquid phase transition (LLT) into high- and low-density liquids. We used several complementary molecular simulation techniques to evaluate the possibility of an LLT in an *ab initio* neural network model of water trained on density functional theory calculations with the SCAN exchange correlation functional. We conclusively show the existence of a first-order LLT and an associated critical point in the SCAN description of water, representing the first definitive computational evidence for an LLT in water from first principles. 26 The idea that water may undergo a liquid-liquid phase transition (LLT) stems from a seminal work 27 by Poole et al. [1], who, inspired by experimental observations by Mishima and coworkers that 28 water's amorphous solid state exhibits distinct high- and low-density forms [2,3], used simulations 29 of the empirical ST2 water model to study supercooled liquid water and proposed the existence of 30 an LLT as a means of rationalizing their computational results. In the LLT viewpoint, if maintained 31 in the supercooled liquid state at low temperatures and moderate positive pressures, water (which 32 exists as a single liquid phase at ambient conditions) undergoes a phase transition into high-density 33 liquid (HDL) and low-density liquid (LDL) phases [4,5]. This line of phase coexistence terminates 34 in water's liquid-liquid critical point (LLCP), and critical fluctuations emanating from the LLCP 35 along the Widom line are responsible for several of liquid water's anomalous physical properties [5,6], such as sharp increases [7,8] and eventual maxima [9,10] in isothermal compressibility and 36 37 heat capacity upon cooling at ambient pressure.

38 Apart from providing a thermodynamic explanation for water's anomalies, LLTs are of 39 significant scientific and engineering interest. For example, LLTs in mixtures are widely used in 40 industrial separations processes [11], and LLTs play an increasingly scrutinized role in cellular 41 function [12]. However, relatively few pure substances undergo an LLT, a phenomenon that 42 largely occurs in liquids with strongly tetrahedral or network-forming character, such as phosphorous [13], sulphur [14], silicon [15], triphenyl phosphite [16], and (potentially) water [17]. 43 44 In an important step toward understanding the microscopic basis for the presence/absence of an 45 LLT in pure fluids, computational work has suggested that the stability of an LLT in tetrahedral liquids can be tuned via the softness of the interparticle interactions [18] or the angular flexibility 46 47 of directional attractive interactions [18,19]. In this context, definitively categorizing the

48 substances that exhibit an LLT and further illuminating the physical driving forces at play is an49 effort of both practical and fundamental importance.

50 Recent experiments on supercooled water have pushed closer to directly probing the LLT, 51 preventing crystallization in the deeply supercooled liquid via rapid cooling of small water droplets 52 [9,20] or rapid heating of water's amorphous solid phases [17,21]. While such efforts are providing 53 ever stronger evidence consistent with the existence of an LLT, precisely locating such a transition 54 in the temperature-pressure plane is challenging, due to the short time scales of the experiments. 55 On the computational side, classical molecular models such as ST2, TIP4P/2005, and TIP4P/Ice 56 have been rigorously shown to exhibit an LLT [22,23]. However, these models use simple 57 empirical expressions to model water's intermolecular interactions, parameterized to match experimental thermophysical data, and thus cannot in principle provide definitive evidence that 58 59 water itself possesses an LLT. Several other more complex models, some of which include 60 additional levels of chemical realism such as many-body and/or polarizability effects, have also 61 demonstrated evidence consistent with an LLCP [24-27]. Recently, the WAIL model, which 62 captures bond flexibility and polarizability effects via fits of relatively simple functional forms to 63 ab initio calculations, was rigorously shown to exhibit an LLT [28], confirming previous 64 suggestive simulations [24]. Together, this body of work suggests the existence of an LLT in 65 multiple families of empirical water models of progressively increasing complexity. However, 66 strictly nonempirical (i.e., purely predictive) computational evidence of water's LLT has 67 heretofore been lacking due to the significant increase in the computational cost of *ab initio* methods relative to empirical force fields [29]. 68

Recently, a revolution in molecular modeling has begun to bridge this gap, namely the use
of machine learning (ML) models trained to efficiently represent the potential energy surface (PES)

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71 predicted by computationally demanding first principles reference calculations [30-32]. These 72 approaches significantly accelerate *ab initio* molecular dynamics simulations by performing the 73 atomic energy and force calculations via a much-less-expensive surrogate ML model, rather than 74 performing a full electronic structure calculation at each timestep. These ML models represent 75 many-body correlations and capture polarizability effects present in the PES derived from 76 electronic structure methods, and they have been successfully used to push the boundaries of 77 problems accessible from first principles for a vast array of materials and fluids, including the properties and phase behavior of water [26,33-37]. In this work, we use one such ML simulation 78 79 method, Deep Potential Molecular Dynamics (DPMD) [38,39], with a neural network model for 80 water [33] trained on density functional theory (DFT) calculations with the Strongly-Constrained 81 and Appropriately-Normed (SCAN) [40] exchange correlation functional. SCAN has been shown 82 to be a leading semilocal functional in terms of providing a qualitatively accurate description of 83 water's properties [41]. We previously demonstrated that a SCAN-based DPMD model exhibits 84 physical properties consistent with the presence of an LLCP in water and provided a rough estimate 85 for the LLCP location [26]. An updated and expanded version of this model was recently shown 86 to successfully capture the equilibrium phase diagram of water's condensed phases, including 87 high-pressure superionic ice states [33]. Herein, we sample water's metastable supercooled liquid 88 state as predicted by the latest DPMD-SCAN model [33] using standard molecular dynamics 89 simulations and two complementary enhanced sampling methods. Our results definitively show 90 that this *ab initio* model exhibits an LLT and an LLCP at supercooled temperatures and positive 91 pressures.

92 Fig. 1 shows trajectories of mass density (ρ) versus time for isothermal-isobaric MD 93 simulations of metastable supercooled liquid water at temperature T = 235 K and pressure P =

3000, 3200, and 3400 bar. At low P, two trajectories initialized from different high- and low- ρ 94 95 starting configurations converge to a low- ρ state. At high P, the trajectories converge to a high- ρ final state. But, at intermediate P, we observe long-lived high- and low- ρ states, with reversible 96 97 transitions between them. Supplemental Material (SM) Fig. S1 [42] confirms liquid-like structural 98 relaxation at these conditions with no evidence of crystallization, though we do note a large 99 heterogeneity in structural relaxation time in the low- ρ state. Regardless, the lifetimes of the highand low- ρ liquids in a given trajectory are of a similar order (for LDL) or significantly longer (for 100 101 HDL) than the associated relaxation time(s) for that trajectory. SM Fig. S2 [42] shows structural 102 characterization of the high- and low- ρ states at T = 235 K, P = 3200 bar, exhibiting oxygen-103 oxygen radial distribution functions consistent with the HDL and LDL phases reported with 104 empirical molecular water models [23], and bimodal probability distributions in ρ and the pairwise 105 contribution to the excess entropy, s_2 (see Methods in the SM [42] for details on the s_2 calculation). 106 Such behavior is consistent with a first-order phase transition along the T = 235 K isotherm, with 107 LDL-HDL phase coexistence near P = 3200 bar.

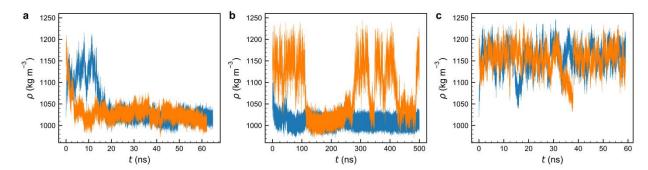




Fig. 1: Density from isothermal-isobaric simulations. Mass density (ρ) vs. time (*t*) trajectories for simulations with N = 192 molecules at T = 235 K and (a) P = 3000 bar, (b) P = 3200 bar, and (c) P = 3400 bar. In each panel, the orange trajectory was initialized in a high- ρ configuration, and the blue trajectory was initialized in a low- ρ configuration.

114 To confirm these results and provide rigorous thermodynamic evidence for an LLT, we 115 performed umbrella sampling (US) simulations along the s_2 order parameter. s_2 is a function of the

116 local structure of the fluid, and as shown in SM Fig. S2 [42], correlates closely with the density. 117 Our hypothesis was that the local nature of s_2 could help drive the structural transformation 118 between LDL and HDL more efficiently than a global order parameter (such as ρ). In Fig. 2, we 119 plot free energy surfaces in the (ρ, s_2) space obtained from US simulations at the same conditions 120 reported in Fig. 1. Confirming the results from the isothermal-isobaric simulations, following the 121 T = 235 K isotherm we observe a single dominant basin at (low- ρ , low- s_2) for low P, a dominant 122 basin at (high- ρ , high- s_2) for high P, and two basins in approximate phase coexistence (equal free 123 energy) at intermediate P. The right subfigure in each panel shows the free energy surface averaged 124 over all s_2 values, demonstrating that the uncertainty in the free energy is ~1 k_BT for all conditions, 125 where $k_{\rm B}$ is the Boltzmann constant. Crucially, SM Fig. S3 [42] shows that the locations of the 126 $(low-\rho, low-s_2)$ and $(high-\rho, high-s_2)$ basins obtained via US agree very closely with the set of (ρ, ρ) 127 s_2) values visited by the unbiased simulations reported in Fig. 1, lending credence to the validity of both results. Figs. 1 and 2 indicate a discontinuous first-order phase transition from LDL to 128 129 HDL as pressure increases along the T = 235 K isotherm, with approximate coexistence near P =130 3200 bar. We note that, at this state point, the free energy barrier separating the LDL and HDL 131 phases calculated from the projection of the free energy surface along ρ and s_2 is relatively mild 132 $(\sim 1.5 k_{\rm B}T)$ and only moderately larger than the uncertainty. Thus, sampling more deeply subcritical 133 conditions (i.e., lower temperatures) would allow us to explore more obviously separated LDL and 134 HDL phases.

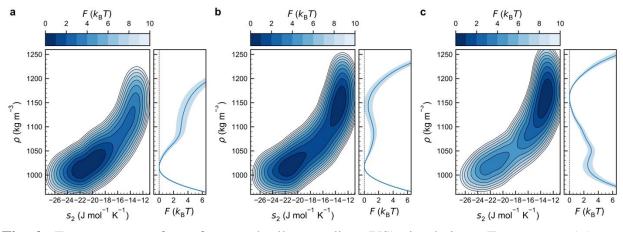


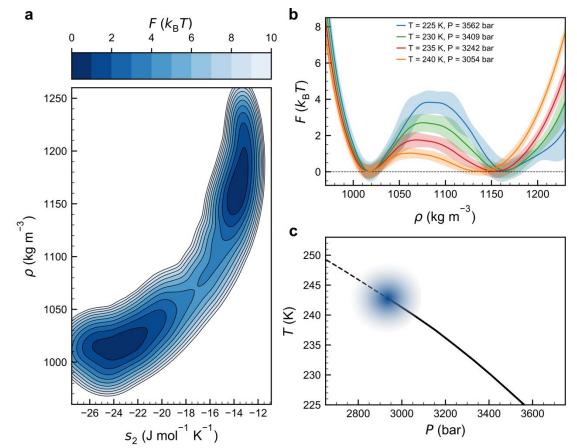
Fig. 2: Free energy surfaces from umbrella sampling (US) simulations. Free energy (*F*) as a function of ρ and s_2 from US simulations with N = 192 molecules at T = 235 K and (a) P = 3000bar, (b) P = 3200 bar, and (c) P = 3400 bar. In the left subfigure of each panel, contours represent k_BT . In the right subfigure of each panel, the solid blue line represents *F* averaged over all s_2 values, with the shaded regions representing 95% confidence intervals.

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142 However, due to the slow structural relaxation times and significant computational expense of these simulations (~100x slower than classical empirical models), performing standard 143 144 simulations at such low temperatures is computationally prohibitive at present. Thus, we turned to 145 another advanced simulation technique, multithermal-multibaric (MTMB) sampling [43], in which 146 biased sampling and histogram reweighting techniques enable exploration of a wide range of 147 temperatures and pressures from only a single simulation. In the MTMB approach, results can be 148 reweighted to any (T, P), provided that configurations relevant to that state point are appropriately sampled during the simulation. Thus, in our case, simulations can be performed at a nominally 149 150 higher temperature (where thermalization of the liquid is easier to achieve) and reweighted to 151 provide results at low-T. SM Fig. S4 [42] shows free energy surfaces obtained by MTMB run at a 152 nominal temperature of T = 280 K and then reweighted to the same set of state points explored in 153 Figs. 1 and 2 (see Methods), which demonstrate near-quantitative agreement between all three methods. Fig. 3a shows the free energy surface reweighted down to T = 225 K and P = 3525 bar, 154 which has an LDL basin near $\rho = 1015$ kg m⁻³ and $s_2 = -24$ J mol⁻¹ K⁻¹, and an HDL basin near ρ 155

156 = 1170 kg m⁻³ and s_2 = -14 J mol⁻¹ K⁻¹. In Fig. 3b we show free energy surfaces from MTMB as a 157 function of ρ for a set of (*T*, *P*) that exhibit HDL and LDL basins at equal free energy (i.e., phase 158 coexistence). As expected, the free energy barrier for the transition grows with decreasing 159 temperature, reaching ~4 k_BT at T = 225 K. Furthermore, this set of (*T*, *P*) defines the binodal line 160 for the LLT, which we plot as a solid line in Fig. 3c.

161 One may approximately locate the LLCP as the (T, P) along the binodal at which the free 162 energy barrier between HDL and LDL disappears. Based on the shape and location of the binodal, 163 we locate the critical temperature and pressure as $T_c = 242 \pm 5$ K and $P_c = 2950 \pm 150$ bar, indicated 164 by the shaded region in Fig. 3c. We note that due to the uncertainty in the free energy surfaces (~1 165 $k_{\rm B}T$), this approach only provides an estimate of the critical temperature and pressure. However, 166 free energy surfaces calculated along isotherms and isobars sufficiently far from the critical point 167 (SM Fig. S5 [42]) show a continuous crossover from low to high ρ at supercritical temperatures 168 or low pressures and a discontinuous transition at subcritical temperatures or high pressures. This 169 result demonstrates definitively that an LLCP does exist in this model, somewhere in the region 170 225 K < T < 245 K and 2750 bar < P < 3250 bar. The extension of the binodal line to supercritical 171 conditions is the Widom line, which we illustrate via the locus of maximum isothermal 172 compressibility (dashed line in Fig. 3c), which extends from the critical point to higher T and lower 173 Р.



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Fig. 3: Phase coexistence from multithermal-multibaric (MTMB) simulations. (a) Free energy (F) 175 as a function of ρ and s_2 from MTMB simulations with N = 192 molecules at T = 225 K and P =176 3525 bar. (b) F vs. ρ at various T and P as marked. Shaded regions represent 95% confidence 177 intervals. (c) Liquid-liquid binodal (solid black line), approximate critical point location (shaded 178 179 blue region), and line of maximum isothermal compressibility (dashed solid line) in the T-P plane. 180 These results provide strong computational evidence that liquid water exhibits a metastable 181 182 LLT and LLCP at supercooled temperatures (i.e., well below the melting temperature of ice 183 predicted from SCAN [33,34]) and positive pressures. Three separate sampling methods show results in near-quantitative agreement, and two different free energy estimates rigorously show 184 185 liquid-liquid coexistence with a discontinuous transition in density under sufficiently supercooled conditions. We note that our estimate for the critical point location ($T_c = 242 \pm 5$ K and $P_c = 2950$ 186 187 \pm 150 bar) is at somewhat higher T and P than recent estimates from available experimental data 188 [44,45]. However, SCAN is known to overestimate the strength of water's hydrogen bond [33,46],

which may stabilize the LDL phase with respect to HDL due to LDL's highly tetrahedral local
structure, and correspondingly shift the LDL-HDL phase boundary to higher *T* and *P*. With further
developments in computing power and simulation algorithms it may be quite instructive to perform
a similar study with a ML model trained on higher levels of theory, such as DFT based on a hybrid
functional, coupled cluster methods, etc. Similarly, evaluating potential system size effects
(including verifying the expected scaling of the LDL-HDL free energy barrier with system size
[22]) would also be a worthwhile avenue for future work.

196 We emphasize that this study was performed with a slightly different model than our prior 197 work on the LLCP in a DPMD-SCAN model [26], the training set herein being expanded to include 198 additional configurations at high temperatures and pressures [33]. The critical point location 199 reported in our prior study ($T_c = 224 \pm 3$ K, $P_c = 2687 \pm 68$ bar) [26] is at somewhat lower T and 200 P than our present estimate. Some portion of this discrepancy may come from differences in the 201 DPMD training dataset between the two model versions. However, our prior work also used an 202 equation-of-state approach that was fit to simulation data collected at supercritical conditions and 203 then extrapolated to provide information at low T. That approach, while helpful in providing an 204 initial estimate for the critical point location in a computationally-efficient manner, may not be 205 quantitatively accurate due to the extrapolation needed to reach near-critical conditions. We argue 206 that the present work, which instead samples the LLT directly, should be considered the more 207 definitive estimate for the LLCP location predicted by SCAN. Nevertheless, it is important to note 208 that in both studies, the training dataset did not explicitly include any configurations specifically 209 targeted toward the LLT, only the various ordered solid phases and liquid water across a wide 210 range of (T, P). We posit that the fact that both versions of the model exhibit physical properties 211 consistent with an LLT/LLCP, despite only being trained on water's equilibrium ice and liquid

212 phases, makes the present results qualitatively robust to the particularities of the model's training 213 dataset, provided that the ML model sufficiently reproduces SCAN's potential energy surface. In 214 other words, the presence of the LLCP has significant effects even at (T, P) far away from 215 criticality, such that properties learned at state points away from the LLCP still encode its existence 216 in the ML model.

217 Our results represent some of the strongest computational evidence to date for water's LLT, 218 as they were obtained from nonempirical (purely *ab initio*) approaches. Apart from adding to our 219 current understanding of water's physical chemistry, we anticipate that similar approaches (ML-220 based *ab initio* models combined with enhanced sampling techniques) will provide fertile ground 221 to push the boundaries of computational physics/chemistry for other fluids and materials, as has 222 been recently demonstrated for the LLT in phosphorous [47].

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Methods, Data, and Code Availability:

224 Detailed methods are provided in the SM [42], which includes Refs. [48-58]. All data and code 225 related to this work, including simulation input files, raw simulation trajectory data, analysis 226 scripts, and processed data used to create all figures in the manuscript, are available for download 227 at the Princeton DataSpace repository [59].

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Author contributions:

- 236 P.G.D., A.Z.P., and T.E.G. conceived of the project; T.E.G. and P.M.P. performed research; all
- authors designed research, discussed results, and wrote the paper.

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