Predicting Vibrational Mean Free Paths in Disordered Systems

Understanding thermal transport in crystalline systems requires detailed knowledge of phonons, which are the quanta of energy associated with atomic vibrations. By definition, phonons are non-localized vibrations that transport energy over distances much larger than the atomic spacing. For disordered materials (e.g., high concentration alloys, amorphous phases), with the exception of long wavelength modes, the vibrational modes do not propagate. The Einstein model assigns a mean free path to these vibrations of the average interatomic distance and takes their group velocity to be the speed of sound. The Cahill-Pohl model assumes that the mean free path of these modes is equal to half of their wavelength and also uses the speed of sound. While these approaches can be used to estimate the thermal conductivity of disordered systems, they only provide a qualitative description of the vibrations that contribute to the lattice thermal conductivity.

Using lattice dynamics calculations and molecular dynamics simulations on Lennard-Jones argon and Stillinger-Weber silicon crystalline, alloy, and amorphous systems, we predict and characterize the contributions from phonons and localized vibrations to lattice thermal conductivity. Of particular importance is predicting a representative group velocity for propagating vibrational modes in disordered systems, which allows the prediction of thermal conductivity mean free path spectra and accumulation function.

Jason: my thinking is as follows. First, separate propagons and diffusions. Second: for propagons, challenge is specifying the velocity in order to get a mfp; for diffusions, use Allen Feldman. Diffusons do not have a mfp and make the thermal conductivity accumulation start at a finite value, as opposed to zero for a perfect crystal.