



**HAL**  
open science

## **A thermodynamic theory of microbial growth.**

Elie Desmond-Le Quéméner, Théodore Bouchez

► **To cite this version:**

Elie Desmond-Le Quéméner, Théodore Bouchez. A thermodynamic theory of microbial growth.. The International Society of Microbiological Ecology Journal, 2014, 8 (8), pp.1747-51. <10.1038/ismej.2014.7>. <hal-00825781v3>

**HAL Id: hal-00825781**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00825781v3>**

Submitted on 26 Aug 2015

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

# A THERMODYNAMIC THEORY OF MICROBIAL GROWTH

## SHORT COMMUNICATION

SUBJECT CATEGORY: Microbial engineering

5

By Elie Desmond Le Quémener<sup>1</sup> and Théodore Bouchez<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Irstea, UR HBAN, 1 rue Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, 92761 Antony cedex, France.

\*Correspondence to: [theodore.bouchez@irstea.fr](mailto:theodore.bouchez@irstea.fr)

**Running Title:** Boltzmann statistics and microbial growth

10

## **ABSTRACT**

Our ability to model the growth of microbes only relies on empirical laws, fundamentally restricting our understanding and predictive capacity in many environmental systems. In particular, the link between energy balances and growth dynamics is still not understood. Here we demonstrate a microbial growth equation relying on an explicit theoretical ground sustained by Boltzmann statistics, thus establishing a relationship between microbial growth rate and available energy. The validity of our equation was then questioned by analyzing the microbial isotopic fractionation phenomenon, which can be viewed as a kinetic consequence of the differences in energy contents of isotopic isomers used for growth. We illustrate how the associated theoretical predictions are actually consistent with recent experimental evidences. Our work links microbial population dynamics to the thermodynamic driving forces of the ecosystem, which opens the door to many biotechnological and ecological developments.

**KEYWORDS:** Exergy/ Gibbs energy/ growth rate/ microbial division/ microbial isotopic fractionation/ statistical physics

25

In his famous book “What is life?”, Erwin Schrödinger opened the debate on how life could be envisioned from the thermodynamic standpoint (Schrödinger 1944). Ilya Prigogine (Prigogine 1955) then made an important contribution by pioneering the application of non-equilibrium thermodynamics to biology, underlying modern developments of biological flux-force models (Westerhoff et al 1982, Westerhoff et al 1983). Today, thermodynamic state functions are widely applied to living systems at different organization levels (Jørgensen and Svirezhev 2004). The study of microbes, the simplest form of life, however led to a deeper physical conceptualization of the problem (Heijnen and Vandijken 1992, Kleerebezem and Van Loosdrecht 2010, McCarty 1965, Rittmann and McCarty 2001, Roels 1980). In these contributions, microbial anabolism was linked to catabolism through energy dissipation, sometimes expressed as a universal efficiency factor. A relation between dissipated energy and growth stoichiometry was established, enabling the prediction and calculation of energy and matter balances of microbial growth. However, the key question of the link between microbial thermodynamics and growth kinetics remained unanswered.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, chemistry was facing a similar problem which finally resulted in a thermochemical kinetic theory eighty years ago (Eyring 1935). The existence of a high energy transition state, resulting from the collision of reactants, was postulated. Statistical physics was invoked to estimate the probability for the colliding molecules to have enough energy to overcome the transition state energy. A link between reaction kinetics and thermodynamic state of the system was thus established. Lotka (Lotka 1922b) suggested that a similar approach could be applied to biological units: "The similarity of the [biological] units invites statistical treatment [...], the units in the new statistical mechanics will be energy transformers subject to irreversible collisions of peculiar type-collisions in which trigger action is a dominant feature..."

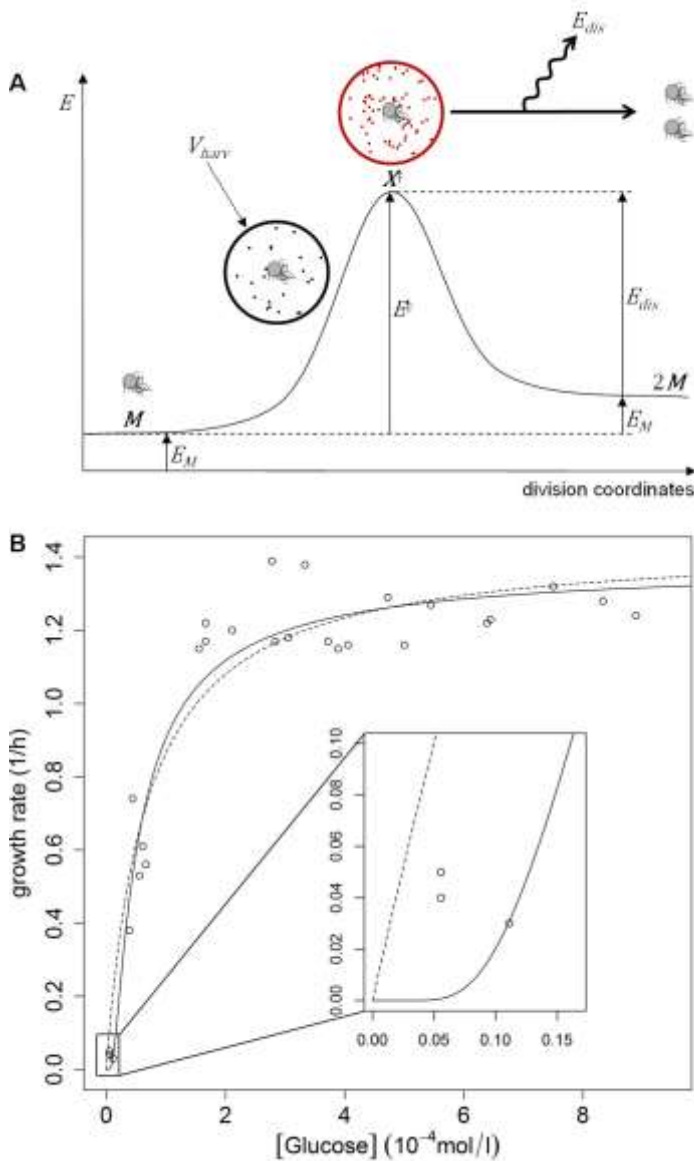
Let us treat statistically a clonal population of  $N$  microbes consuming substrates, transducing energy and dividing. For each individual, we propose that harvesting a threshold level of energy from the

50 environment fundamentally triggers the microbial division process. Each division can thus be described as a succession of two steps: (i) the reversible capture of energy by the microbe, (ii) its irreversible transduction leading to division. We indeed assume that the second irreversible step is a slow kinetically limiting process and that the first step can thus be considered as close to equilibrium. The elementary microbial division act can thus be symbolized as follows:



55 where  $M$  represents a microbe and  $X^\ddagger$  the intermediate microbial activated state in which the microbe is able to divide (Figure 1A).

During the first step, each microbe has access to a volume ( $V_{harv}$ ) in which it can harvest the chemical energy in the form of substrate molecules. The part of the chemical energy that is available for growth depends on the thermodynamic state of the environment surrounding the microbe. It can thus be transcribed using the meaningful concept of chemical catabolic exergy, which represents the maximum  
60 work available when bringing the substrate molecules in thermodynamic equilibrium with the microbe's environment (see supplementary material). Consequently, exergy levels can be attributed to each elementary volume  $V_{harv}$  and thus to each microbe. Using statistical physics, we demonstrate that the occupancies of exergy levels by microbes follow Boltzmann statistics (see Supplementary  
65 Information for the detailed demonstration). Let us denote  $E^\ddagger$  the threshold exergy level triggering division corresponding to both dissipated exergy  $E_{dis}$  and stored exergy  $E_M$  during growth (Figure 1A).



**Figure 1:** (A) Graphical representation of microbial exergy levels along division coordinates. Microbial exergy ( $E_M$ ) is augmented by the catabolic exergy within the harvesting volume ( $E_{cat} \cdot [S] \cdot V_{harv}$ , symbolized as dots in a circle surrounding the microbe). Reaching the threshold catabolic exergy ( $E_M + E^\ddagger$ ), the microbe is activated (a state denoted  $X^\ddagger$ ), and an irreversible division process is triggered, associated with exergy dissipation ( $E_{dis} = E^\ddagger - E_M$ ), resulting in two microbes. (B) Growth rate of *E. coli* as a function of glucose concentrations under aerobic conditions (Monod 1942). The plain curve shows the fit of Equation 2 on the data. The dashed curve shows the fit of a Monod equation. A detail of the growth rate/concentration dependency at low substrate concentration is shown, illustrating that the mathematical expression of our law naturally accounts for the existence of an apparent substrate threshold concentration for growth.

These exergies can be evaluated using energy balances for growth established by different authors (see  
80 Supplementary Information and reference (Kleerebezem and Van Loosdrecht 2010) for a review). Let  
us now finally introduce the parameter  $\mu_{max}$ , representing the division rate of an activated microbe (see  
Supplementary Information). Then comes the expression of microbial growth rate as a function of  
microbial exergy balance:

$$\mu = \mu_{max} \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S] \cdot E_{cat}}\right) \quad \text{Equation 2}$$

$S$  representing the energy limiting substrate,  $E_{cat}$  being the catabolic exergy of one molecule of energy  
85 limiting substrate.

Equation 2 introduces a flux-force relationship between microbial growth rate ( $\mu$ ) and catabolic exergy  
density ( $[S] \cdot E_{cat}$ ). It correctly transcribes the well-known microbial growth rate dependence on  
substrate concentration enabling the modeling of any microbial experimental growth data as illustrated  
using Monod's historical experiments (Figure 1B) (Monod 1942). Additionally, our theory naturally  
90 accounts for the existence of an apparent threshold substrate concentration for growth (Figure 1B,  
detail), correcting a flaw of previous empirical equations (Kovarova-Kovar and Egli 1998). However,  
the correct transcription of microbial growth rate dependence on substrate concentration is not *per se*  
sufficient to support the validity of our theory. This can indeed be achieved with any empirical  
equation exhibiting a sigmoid shape as outlined by Monod himself (Monod 1942). Moreover, the  
95 simple process of fitting growth rate equations with measurements do not provide a sufficiently precise  
framework to compare different growth models as already demonstrated (Senn et al 1994).

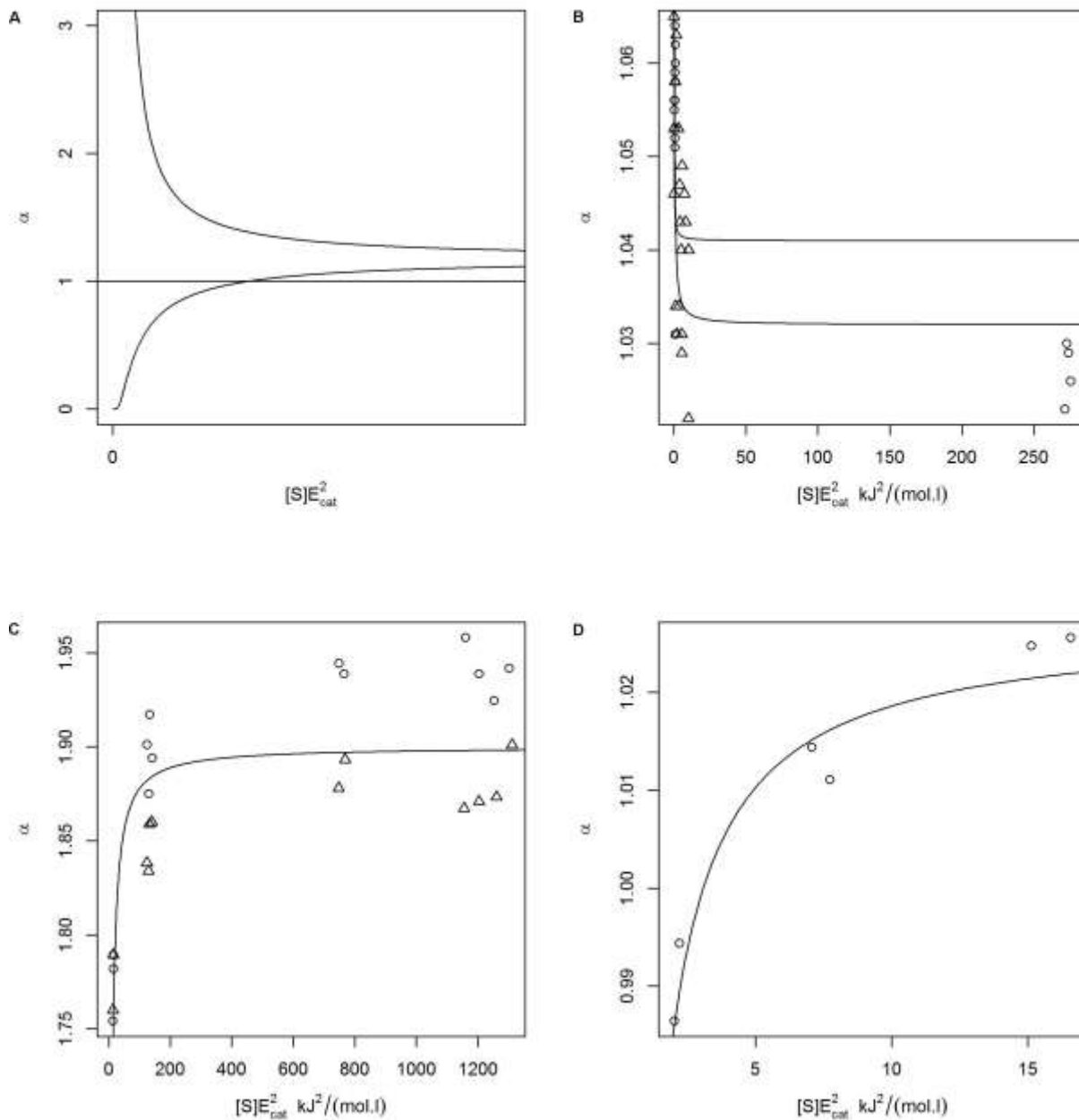
Hopefully, in our theory, the growth rate more exactly depends on the spatial distribution of exergy  
around microbes. This implies that, additionally to substrate concentration, the intrinsic thermodynamic  
properties of molecules involved in the metabolism also determine the growth rate. We thus realized  
100 that the study of microbial isotopic fractionation related to pure culture experiments could provide us

with an adequate experimental opportunity to challenge the fundamental nature of the relationship between exergy and growth rate. Indeed, for a given microbe and in relation to a well-defined metabolic reaction (i.e.  $\mu_{max}$  and  $V_{harv}$  are fixed), our theory predicts that the variation in catabolic exergy ( $E_{cat}$ ) due to the differences in thermodynamic properties of isotopic isomers (isotopomers) would induce slight differences in substrate consumption rates between heavy or light molecules, thus giving a theoretical ground to the well-known microbial isotopic fractionation phenomenon.

Using our theory, we therefore derived a literal expression of the widely employed empirical kinetic fractionation factor  $\alpha_{S/P}$  of substrates towards products (Mariotti et al 1981) (see Supplementary Information for details):

$$\alpha_{S/P} = \alpha_0 \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S] \cdot E_{cat}^2} \cdot \Delta E_{cat}^{h-l}\right) \quad \text{Equation 3}$$

$\alpha_0$  being the residual biochemical fractionation factor of the catabolic reaction,  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l}$  represents the difference between exergy of the catabolic reaction involving one molecule of the heavy isotopomer minus the exergy of its light counterpart.



115 **Figure 2:** Modeling the isotopic microbial fractionation phenomenon dependency on energy and  
 120 substrate concentrations as derived from our theory. (A) Isotopic microbial fractionation factor ( $\alpha$ ) as  
 a function of substrate concentration times the square of the catabolic exergy (X-axis) as predicted  
 from our microbial growth theory (Equation 3). (B) Experimental data from (Penning et al 2005)  
 (triangles) obtained with *Methanobacterium bryantii*; and (Valentine et al 2004) (circles) obtained  
 with *Methanothermobacter marburgensis*; on <sup>13</sup>C isotopic fractionation associated with  
 hydrogenotrophic methanogenesis confirming the existence of microbial overfractionation. (C)  
 Experimental data from (Kampara et al 2008) including fractionation factor obtained after 50%  
 (triangles) or 70% (circles) of toluene degradation by *Pseudomonas putida* under aerobic conditions

125 confirming the existence of microbial underfractionation. (D) Experimental data from (Goevert and Conrad 2009); on  $^{13}\text{C}$  isotopic fractionation associated with acetoclastic methanogenesis by pure cultures of *Methanosarcina barkeri* and *M. acetivorans*. Interestingly, in this case, it illustrates a switch between depletion ( $\alpha > 1$ ) and enrichment ( $\alpha < 1$ ) of reaction products in heavy isotope depending on the value of  $[S] \cdot E_{cat}^2$  as predicted by our model (see supplementary material).

130 Unexpectedly, two classes of isotopic fractionation behaviours are predicted from Equation 3 depending on the sign of  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l}$ , in relation to the thermodynamic properties of isotopomers (see supplementary material):

- if  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l} < 0$ , then  $\alpha$  should decrease when  $([S] \cdot E_{cat}^2)$  increases and this case could be named “microbial overfractionation” (Figure 2A, upper curve).
- Conversely, if  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l} > 0$ , then  $\alpha$  should increase when  $([S] \cdot E_{cat}^2)$  increases and this case  
135 could be named “microbial underfractionation” (Figure 2A, lower curve)

For both cases,  $\alpha$  should vary with substrate concentration and catabolic exergy, increasing  $[S] \cdot E_{cat}^2$  values leading to the convergence of microbial fractionation towards an asymptotical value ( $\alpha_0$ ). These theoretical predictions were then questioned with experimental microbial isotopic fractionation data from the literature.

140 Although it has long been considered that microbial isotopic fractionation was only dependent on the type of metabolism (Hayes 1993, Mariotti et al 1981), recent evidences have suggested that it could vary with environmental conditions (Conrad 1999, Conrad 2005). Strikingly, the dependency of microbial fractionation on substrate concentration (Goevert and Conrad 2009, Kampara et al 2008, Valentine et al 2004) and on Gibbs energy (Penning et al 2005) was recently evidenced. Figure 2-  
145 B/C/D illustrates how these experimental data are actually in agreement with the predictions obtained from our model and thus supports the dependency of microbial kinetics to the spatial distribution of exergy. Moreover, it demonstrates how the re-analysis of these data under a consistent theoretical framework (see supplementary information) show the existence of over- and under-fractionation as

predicted from our theory, which had never been explicitly claimed in the literature to our knowledge.

150 The fact that these two fractionation classes are related to the thermodynamic properties of molecules (the sign of  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l}$ ) is a strong argument in favour of a threshold microbial exergy level triggering division, as considered in our theory. Without denying the need for additional data on purposely designed and carefully controlled isotopic experiments using pure cultures, the overall consistency of the different mathematical predictions of our model with microbial isotopic fractionation data already  
155 strongly supports our theory of microbial growth sustained by Boltzmann statistics of exergy distribution.

For clarity reasons, our approach was exposed for a single substrate in the case of energy limited microbial growth. However, we also demonstrate how it can easily be extended to multiple substrates or to the cases of stoichiometric growth limitation (see Supplementary Information). Equation 2 applied  
160 to mixed cultures links microbial population dynamics to the thermodynamic driving forces of the ecosystem, which has wide practical and fundamental implications. For example, implemented into engineering models for environmental bioprocesses such as ADM1 for anaerobic digestion (Batstone et al 2002), it could thus naturally transcribe the well-known dependence of microbial activity to thermodynamic conditions (Jin and Bethke 2007), correcting a major flaw of current kinetic equations  
165 (Kleerebezem and van Loosdrecht 2006, Rodriguez et al 2006). Moreover, our model offers the possibility to couple multiple biochemical reactions through the concept of exergy and to infer the fluxes generated by the “microbial engines that drive earth’s biogeochemical cycles” (Falkowski et al 2008). On a fundamental point of view, our theory could constitute a mathematical framework to evaluate how microbial communities would evolve considering various thermodynamic goal functions  
170 such as the maximum power (DeLong 2008, Lotka 1922a, Lotka 1922b), maximum exergy (Jørgensen and Svirezhev 2004) or minimum entropy production (Prigogine 1955). More generally, we also

believe that the study of microbes, the simplest form of life, constitutes a fertile thinking ground for a deeper interlinking between physical and biological concepts.

175 **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

We thank Dr Bart Haegman for his very useful comments on this manuscript. Tim Vogel, Christian Duquennoi, Ivan Delbende and Stéphane Ghozzi are also acknowledged for sharing their views with us and giving their feedbacks, Ariane Bize and Laurent Mazéas for helpful discussions. This work was completed thanks to the support of Irstea (we especially thank  
180 Philippe Duchène, former head of Ecotechnology Department, who made this work possible), and Agence Nationale de la Recherche in the framework of the Programme Investissements d’Avenir ANR-10-BTBR-02. The two anonymous reviewers are also acknowledged for their useful comments.

185 **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest

Supplementary information is available at ISMEJ's website

190 **REFERENCES**

- Abramoff MD, Magalhães PJ, Ram SJ (2004). Image processing with ImageJ. *Biophotonics international* **11**: 36-42.
- Batstone DJ, Keller J, Angelidaki I, Kalyuzhnyi SV, Pavlostathis SG, Rozzi A *et al* (2002). The IWA Anaerobic Digestion Model No 1 (ADM1). *Water Science and Technology* **45**: 65-73.
- 195 Battley EH (1998). The development of direct and indirect methods for the study of the thermodynamics of microbial growth. *Thermochim Acta* **309**: 17-37.
- 200 Bigeleisen J (1965). Chemistry of Isotopes: Isotope chemistry has opened new areas of chemical physics, geochemistry, and molecular biology. *Science (New York, NY)* **147**.
- Conrad R (1999). Contribution of hydrogen to methane production and control of hydrogen concentrations in methanogenic soils and sediments. *Fems Microbiol Ecol* **28**: 193-202.
- 205 Conrad R (2005). Quantification of methanogenic pathways using stable carbon isotopic signatures: a review and a proposal. *Org Geochem* **36**: 739-752.
- DeLong JP (2008). The maximum power principle predicts the outcomes of two-species competition experiments. *Oikos* **117**: 1329-1336.
- 210 Eyring H (1935). The Activated Complex in Chemical Reactions. *Journal of Chemical Physics* **3**: 107-115.
- Falkowski PG, Fenchel T, Delong EF (2008). The microbial engines that drive Earth's biogeochemical cycles. *Science* **320**: 1034-1039.
- 215 Fry B, Cox J, Gest H, Hayes JM (1986). Discrimination between S-34 and S-32 during Bacterial Metabolism of Inorganic Sulfur-Compounds. *J Bacteriol* **165**: 328-330.
- Fry B, Gest H, Hayes JM (1988). S-34/S-32 Fractionation in Sulfur Cycles Catalyzed by Anaerobic-Bacteria. *Appl Environ Microb* **54**: 250-256.
- 220 Goevert D, Conrad R (2008). Carbon Isotope Fractionation by Sulfate-Reducing Bacteria Using Different Pathways for the Oxidation of Acetate. *Environ Sci Technol* **42**: 7813-7817.
- 225 Goevert D, Conrad R (2009). Effect of Substrate Concentration on Carbon Isotope Fractionation during Acetoclastic Methanogenesis by *Methanosarcina barkeri* and *M. acetivorans* and in Rice Field Soil. *Appl Environ Microbiol* **75**: 2605-2612.
- Hayes JM (1993). Factors Controlling C-13 Contents of Sedimentary Organic-Compounds - Principles and Evidence. *Mar Geol* **113**: 111-125.
- 230 Heijnen JJ, Vandijken JP (1992). In Search of a Thermodynamic Description of Biomass Yields for the Chemotropic Growth of Microorganisms. *Biotechnology and Bioengineering* **39**: 833-858.
- 235 Horita J (2001). Carbon isotope exchange in the system CO<sub>2</sub>-CH<sub>4</sub> at elevated temperatures. *Geochim Cosmochim Ac* **65**: 1907-1919.
- Jin Q, Bethke CM (2007). The thermodynamics and kinetics of microbial metabolism. *Am J Sci* **307**: 643-677.
- 240 Jørgensen SE, Svirezhev IM (2004). *Towards a thermodynamic theory for ecological systems*. Elsevier: Amsterdam; Boston.
- Kampara M, Thullner M, Richnow HH, Harms H, Wick LY (2008). Impact of bioavailability restrictions on microbially induced stable isotope fractionation. 2. Experimental evidence. *Environ Sci Technol* **42**: 6552-6558.
- 245

- Kleerebezem R, van Loosdrecht MCM (2006). Critical analysis of some concepts proposed in ADM1. *Water Sci Technol* **54**: 51-57.
- 250 Kleerebezem R, Van Loosdrecht MCM (2010). A Generalized Method for Thermodynamic State Analysis of Environmental Systems. *Crit Rev Environ Sci Technol* **40**: 1-54.
- Kovarova-Kovar K, Egli T (1998). Growth kinetics of suspended microbial cells: From single-substrate-controlled growth to mixed-substrate kinetics. *Microbiol Mol Biol Rev* **62**: 646-+.
- 255 Lotka AJ (1922a). Contribution to the Energetics of Evolution. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* **8**.
- 260 Lotka AJ (1922b). Natural Selection as a Physical Principle. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* **8**.
- Mariotti A, Germon JC, Hubert P, Kaiser P, Letolle R, Tardieux A *et al* (1981). Experimental-Determination of Nitrogen Kinetic Isotope Fractionation - Some Principles - Illustration for the Denitrification and Nitrification Processes. *Plant Soil* **62**: 413-430.
- 265 McCarty PL (1965). Thermodynamics of biological synthesis and growth. *Air and water pollution* **9**.
- Monod J (1942). *Recherches sur la croissance des cultures bactériennes*: Paris.
- 270 Penning H, Plugge CM, Galand PE, Conrad R (2005). Variation of carbon isotope fractionation in hydrogenotrophic methanogenic microbial cultures and environmental samples at different energy status. *Global Change Biology* **11**: 2103-2113.
- 275 Porter KG, Feig YS (1980). THE USE OF DAPI FOR IDENTIFYING AND COUNTING AQUATIC MICROFLORA. *Limnol Oceanogr* **25**: 943-948.
- Prigogine I (1955). *Introduction to thermodynamics of irreversible processes*. Thomas: Springfield, Ill.
- Rittmann BE, McCarty PL (2001). *Environmental biotechnology: principles and applications*. McGraw-Hill: Boston.
- 280 Rodriguez J, Lema JM, van Loosdrecht MCM, Kleerebezem R (2006). Variable stoichiometry with thermodynamic control in ADM1. *Water Sci Technol* **54**: 101-110.
- 285 Roels JA (1980). Application of Macroscopic Principles to Microbial-Metabolism. *Biotechnology and Bioengineering* **22**: 2457-2514.
- Schrödinger E (1944). *What is life? : the physical aspect of the living cell*. The University Press: Cambridge.
- 290 Senn H, Lendenmann U, Snozzi M, Hamer G, Egli T (1994). THE GROWTH OF ESCHERICHIA-COLI IN GLUCOSE-LIMITED CHEMOSTAT CULTURES - A REEXAMINATION OF THE KINETICS. *Biochimica Et Biophysica Acta-General Subjects* **1201**: 424-436.
- Valentine DL, Chidthaisong A, Rice A, Reeburgh WS, Tyler SC (2004). Carbon and hydrogen isotope fractionation by moderately thermophilic methanogens. *Geochim Cosmochim Ac* **68**: 1571-1590.
- 295 von Stockar U, Maskow T, Liu JS, Marison IW, Patino R (2006). Thermodynamics of microbial growth and metabolism: An analysis of the current situation. *J Biotechnol* **121**: 517-533.
- 300 Westerhoff HV, Lolkema JS, Otto R, Hellingwerf KJ (1982). THERMODYNAMICS OF GROWTH - NON-EQUILIBRIUM THERMODYNAMICS OF BACTERIAL-GROWTH - THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND THE MOSAIC APPROACH. *Biochimica Et Biophysica Acta* **683**: 181-220.

Westerhoff HV, Hellingwerf KJ, Vandam K (1983). Thermodynamic Efficiency of Microbial-Growth Is Low but Optimal for Maximal Growth-Rate. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America-Biological Sciences* **80**: 305-309.

305

Zeebe RE, Wolf-Gladrow D (2001). *CO2 in seawater*. Elsevier: Amsterdam; London; New York [etc.].

310

# A THERMODYNAMIC THEORY OF MICROBIAL GROWTH

## SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION

By Elie Desmond Le Quéméner<sup>1</sup> and Théodore Bouchez<sup>1\*</sup>

315 <sup>1</sup> Irstea, UR HBAN, 1 rue Pierre-Gilles de Gennes, 92761 Antony cedex, France.

### **Demonstration of Boltzmann distribution of resource molecules among microbes**

Let us first consider the system constituted by an isolated 3D physical space in which a clonal population of  $N$  microbes is consuming a total pool of  $k$  molecules of substrate  $S$  and dividing. Each individual microbe has access to a volume ( $V_{harv}$ ) in which it can harvest the substrate. The  $n$  elementary volumes ( $n = V_{tot}/V_{harv}$ ) constituting the 3D space define the statistical units of our model. Then, let us also consider a microstate consisting of a specific distribution of substrate molecules in the different statistical units. We use the framework of statistical physics, in which the ensemble constituted by all the microstates of an isolated system like ours is called the microcanonical ensemble. Let us assume that the total volume accessible to the microbes ( $N \cdot V_{harv}$ ) is small compared to the rest of the system. Thus, three systems can be defined:

- $\Sigma$  the system constituted by the 3D physical space, with  $\Omega(n, k)$  its number of microstates.
- $\Sigma'$  the subsystem constituted by the  $N$  statistical units containing microbes (representing the volume accessible to the microbes).
- 330 -  $R$  the reservoir,  $R = \Sigma - \Sigma'$ .

Therefore, the microstates consisting of distributions of substrate molecules in the statistical units occupied by microbes ( $\Sigma'$ ) constitute a canonical ensemble. Consequently, the probability for a microbe to have  $i_0$  molecules in its harvesting volume follows a Boltzmann distribution:

$$p(i_0) = \frac{1}{Z} \exp(-\beta \cdot i_0)$$

with  $Z = \sum_{i=0}^k \exp(-\beta \cdot i)$  the partition function and  $\beta = \frac{\partial \ln(\Omega(n,k))}{\partial k}$  by definition.

335  $\beta$  can be inferred from the expression of  $\Omega(n, k)$ , which corresponds to the number of ways of distributing  $k$  indistinguishable objects in  $n$  boxes:

$$\Omega(n, k) = C_{n+k-1}^k = \frac{(n+k-1)!}{k!(n-1)!}$$

Using Stirling's formula,  $\ln(\Omega(n, k))$  can be expressed as a function of  $n$  and  $k$ :

$$\ln(\Omega(n, k)) \approx n \cdot \ln\left(\frac{n+k}{n}\right) + k \cdot \ln\left(\frac{n+k}{k}\right)$$

then

$$\beta = \frac{\partial}{\partial k} \left( n \cdot \ln\left(\frac{n+k}{n}\right) + k \cdot \ln\left(\frac{n+k}{k}\right) \right) = \ln\left(1 + \frac{n}{k}\right)$$

In the case for which  $k \gg n$  (the number of molecules is large compared to the number of statistical units, cf. discussion below) we obtain:

$$\beta \approx \frac{n}{k}$$

Knowing that  $n = \frac{V_{tot}}{V_{harv}}$  and  $k = V_{tot} \cdot [S]$ , it leads:

$$\beta = \frac{1}{V_{harv} \cdot [S]}$$

The proportion of activated microbes ( $N^\ddagger/N$ ) is then given by the probability of finding occupied elementary volumes with more than  $\nu$  molecules, a threshold number of substrates molecules necessary to trigger an elementary division:

$$\frac{N^\ddagger}{N} = \sum_{i=v}^k p(i) = \exp(-\beta \cdot v) \cdot \frac{1}{Z} \sum_{i=0}^{k-v} \exp(-\beta \cdot i)$$

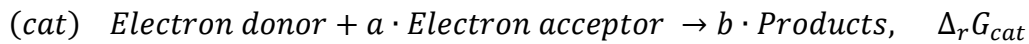
345 Finally, since  $v \ll k$  (the number of molecules required for one division is small compared to the total number of molecules in the system):

$$\frac{N^\ddagger}{N} = \exp(-\beta \cdot v)$$

### Energy limited growth - Calculating $v$ from the exergy balance of an elementary microbial division

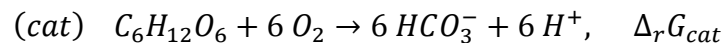
In many cases, growth is limited by the amount of energy available. The threshold level  $v$  of resources  
 350 necessary to trigger division then corresponds to a threshold level of energy  $E^\ddagger$  as presented in the main text. This threshold level can be estimated using different Gibbs energy balance methods summed up in (Kleerebezem and Van Loosdrecht 2010). The approaches presented in this paper were slightly modified in order to use the meaningful concept of exergy, which represents the maximum work available for a microorganism during a chemical transformation. We use the Gibbs energy dissipation  
 355 method initially proposed by Heijnen to determine the growth stoichiometry. For more clarity, the approach is illustrated with the example of *E. coli* growing aerobically on glucose.

The catabolism is associated with a Gibbs energy variation, denoted  $\Delta_r G_{cat}$ :



$a$  and  $b$  being stoichiometric coefficients

In the case of *E. coli* growing aerobically on glucose:



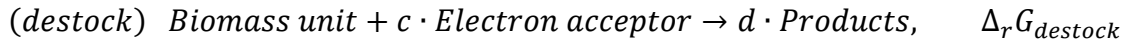
360

Thus, catabolic exergy (chemical energy available for the microbe) is:

$$E_{cat} = -\Delta_r G_{cat} \text{ if } \Delta_r G_{cat} < 0$$

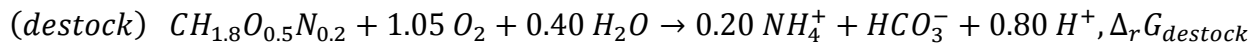
$$E_{cat} = 0 \text{ otherwise}$$

Let us then define microbial exergy  $E_M$  as the chemical energy available in a unit of biomass, in other  
 365 words the energy a microbe could virtually obtain by consuming its own biomass:



$c$  and  $d$  being stoichiometric coefficients

In the case of *E. coli* growing aerobically on glucose:



$\text{CH}_{1.8}\text{O}_{0.5}\text{N}_{0.2}$  represents a generic elemental composition of one C-mole of biomass.

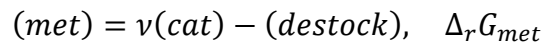
370

The microbial exergy is:

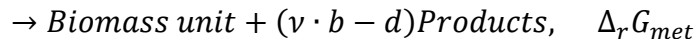
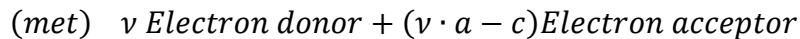
$$E_M = -\Delta_r G_{destock} \text{ if } \Delta_r G_{destock} < 0$$

$$E_M = 0 \text{ otherwise}$$

The metabolic equation of growth is a linear combination of equations (destock) and (cat).



375 Resulting in:



The exergy dissipated during growth corresponds to the opposite of metabolic Gibbs energy ( $E_{dis} = -\Delta_r G_{met}$ ). Using the Gibbs energy dissipation method,  $E_{dis}$  can be calculated for one unit of biomass

(Kleerebezem and Van Loosdrecht 2010). In the case of energy limited growth, the factor  $\nu$  representing the threshold number of molecules necessary to trigger an elementary division is thus

380 determined by the growth energy balance:

$$\nu = \frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{E_{cat}}$$

And the threshold exergy level  $E^\ddagger$  necessary for one division is:

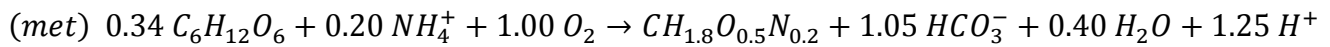
$$E^\ddagger = \nu \cdot E_{cat} = E_M + E_{dis}$$

385 The standard Gibbs energy of formation of all constituents is known, including the Gibbs energy of formation of one C-mol of biomass (Kleerebezem and Van Loosdrecht 2010).  $E_{cat}$  and  $E_M$  can thus be calculated from tables. Thus, in the case of *E. coli* growing aerobically on glucose, the standard Gibbs energies for (*cat*) and (*destock*) corrected for pH=7, denoted  $\Delta_r G^{01}$ , are:

$$\Delta_r G_{cat}^{01} = -2852 \text{ kJ/mol}$$

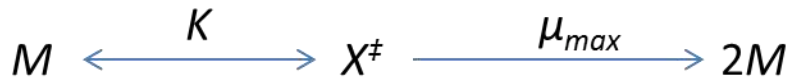
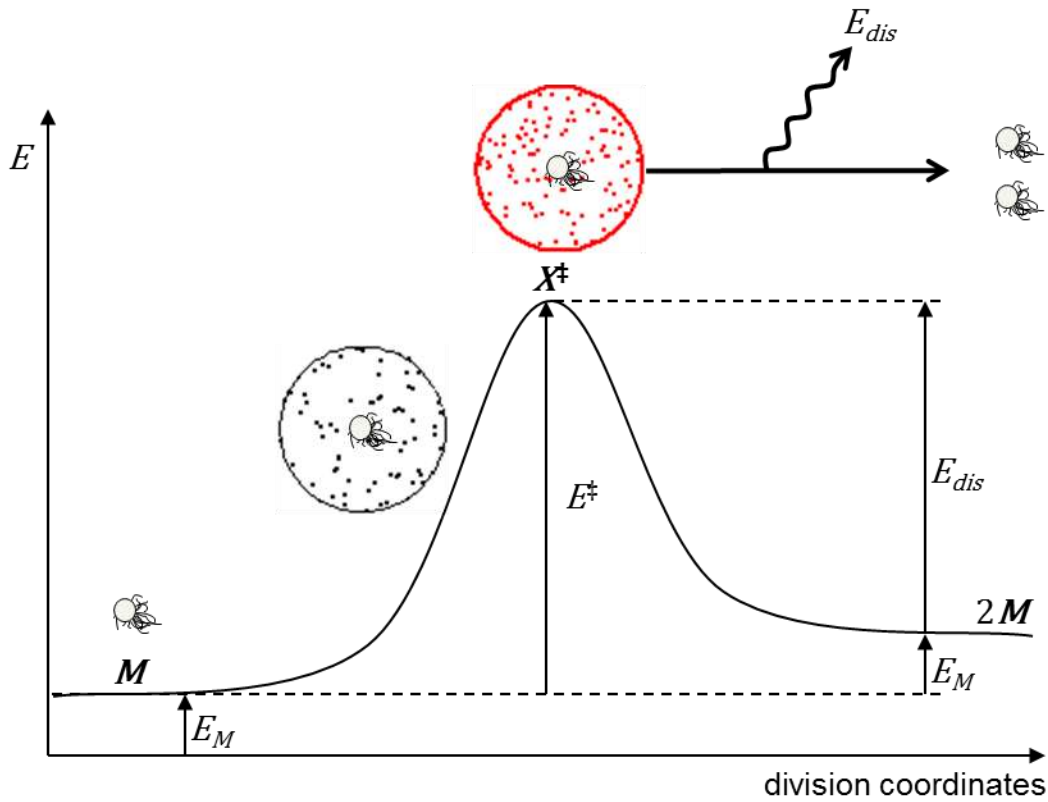
$$\Delta_r G_{destock}^{01} = -474 \text{ kJ/C - mol}$$

$E_{dis}$  can be calculated for one C-mol of biomass knowing the number of carbon atoms in a substrate molecule and its oxidation degree (Kleerebezem and Van Loosdrecht 2010). The factor  $\nu$  can then be obtained. For simplicity, it is possible to consider  $E_{dis} = 500 \text{ kJ/C - mol}$  as a good approximation of  
390 dissipated exergy (von Stockar et al 2006). Thus in standard conditions corrected for pH=7, we obtain  $\nu = 0.34$ , leading to the following stoichiometric metabolic growth equation:



### Energy limited growth - From the distribution of exergy among microbes to growth rate

The variables associated to an elementary microbial division act are summarized in the following  
395 figure:



As explained in the main text, we assumed that the first step is reversible and can be considered as close to equilibrium. Thus the equilibrium constant  $K$  can be expressed:

$$K = \frac{[X^\ddagger]}{[M]} = \frac{N^\ddagger}{N} = \exp(-\beta \cdot v) = \exp\left(-\frac{v}{V_{harv} \cdot [S]}\right)$$

$N^\ddagger$  corresponding to the number of activated microbes and  $N$  to the total number of microbes.

400 In the case of energy limited growth, we previously established that:

$$v = \frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{E_{cat}}$$

Thus:

$$\frac{N^\ddagger}{N} = \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S] \cdot E_{cat}}\right)$$

The kinetic of the elementary microbial division act is limited by the second irreversible step. The rate of this second step is denoted  $\mu_{max}$ . It should be noted that  $\mu_{max}$  is a parameter that depends on the type of microbe and substrate considered. At the level of the whole microbial population, the growth kinetic is then:

$$\frac{dN}{dt} = \mu_{max} \cdot N^\ddagger$$

Finally, the population growth rate  $\mu$  can be expressed:

$$\mu = \frac{1}{N} \cdot \frac{dN}{dt} = \mu_{max} \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S] \cdot E_{cat}}\right)$$

#### 410 **Generalization of our law to multiple substrates and to the case of elemental growth limitation**

We can now generalize this equation to multiple substrates  $\{S_i\}$ . If the different substrates distributions are independent, the joint probability is then the product of Boltzmann distributions for the different substrates and the proportion of activated microbes is given by:

$$\frac{N^\ddagger}{N} = \prod_i \exp(-\beta_i \cdot \nu_i)$$

with

$$415 \quad \beta_i = \frac{1}{V_{harv} \cdot [S_i]}$$

In the case of elemental limitation of growth, the coefficient  $\nu$  represents the stoichiometric coefficient of the molecule supplying the limiting element.  $\nu$  can thus be directly obtained from the elemental composition of biomass ( $CH_{1.8}O_{0.5}N_{0.2}$ ). Indeed if nitrogen is limiting and ammonium ions are the nitrogen source:  $\nu = 0.2 \frac{mol NH_4^+}{C-mol biomass}$ .

420 A more detailed chemical composition of biomass (Battley 1998) can be used in order to model microbial growth under various types of elemental limitation (P, S, K, Mg, Ca,...) applying the same principle to obtain  $v$ .

### 425 **Range of values commonly encountered in practical growth situations and validity of our approximations**

The demonstration of Boltzmann distribution of activated microbes requires two main approximations:

- First, in order to use the canonical ensemble formalism and to derive the statistical distribution of molecules in elementary units, the volume not accessible to the microbes should constitute a reservoir of molecules. In practice, this situation is fulfilled when the volume of  $\Sigma'$  is a small fraction of the volume of  $\Sigma$  ( $N \cdot V_{harv} \ll V_{tot}$ ). In environmental conditions such as seawater, bacterial densities commonly encountered range around  $10^6$  cells/ml (Porter and Feig 1980). In these conditions, one cell is, on the average, surrounded by  $10^6 \mu\text{m}^3$  of medium. In these cases, a harvesting volume ( $V_{harv}$ ) up to  $10^5 \mu\text{m}^3$  assures a ratio less than 1/10 between occupied and non-occupied volumes. This harvesting volume is consistent with the volume estimated from Figure 1B (fitted  $V_{harv} \approx 1 \cdot 10^5 \mu\text{m}^3$  see below). Our first hypothesis is therefore justified in many environmental conditions. However, in high density cultures, such as those obtained in laboratory conditions, *E. coli* can grow up to a density of  $10^9$  cells/ml. In these cases, the free volume around each cell is only  $10^3 \mu\text{m}^3$  on the average and the harvesting volume should be less than  $100 \mu\text{m}^3$  to assure a ratio 1/10 between occupied and non-occupied volumes. Our model might therefore reach the limits of its validity domain under such high density conditions. However, as growth is exponential, it would still be applicable for most of the bacterial generations before reaching the saturation plateau, and thus for the major part of the growth curve. More generally, the adaptation of our equation to real complex environmental

445

situations (high microbial density environments, presence of aggregates such as flocs, biofilms,...) requires further developments on our model , which are beyond the scope of the current paper.

- The second approximation stipulates that the total number of statistical units  $n$  is negligible with respect to the number  $k$  of molecules in the media ( $k \gg n$ ). The fraction  $n/k$  can be expressed as a function of substrate concentration and harvesting volume (cf. above):

$$\frac{n}{k} = \frac{1}{V_{harv} \cdot [S] \cdot N_a}$$

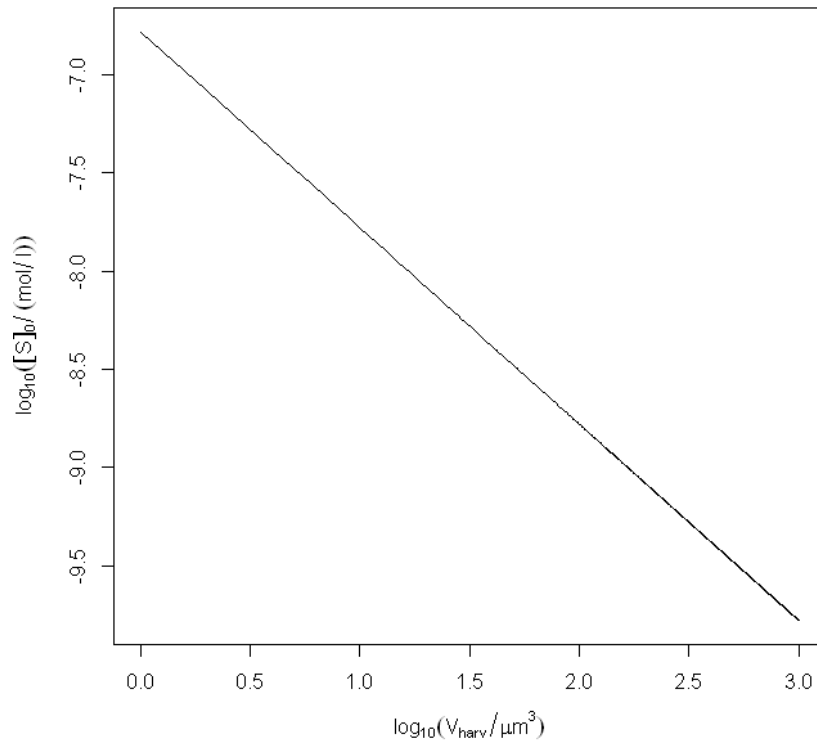
450

In this case, to allow practical evaluations,  $[S]$  is expressed in *mol/l* and  $N_a$  (Avogadro number) is therefore introduced in the expression.

If we take  $\frac{k}{n} = 100$  as a threshold ratio, we can compute a corresponding limit concentration:

$$[S]_0 = \frac{100}{V_{harv} \cdot N_a}$$

The hypothesis ( $k > 100 \cdot n$ ) is then fulfilled if  $[S] > [S]_0$ . In order to estimate the robustness of this hypothesis, let us plot  $\log([S]_0)$  as a function of  $\log(V_{harv})$ :

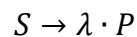


455

In the least favourable cases, corresponding to small harvesting volumes ( $1 \mu\text{m}^3$  to  $10^3 \mu\text{m}^3$ ), threshold concentrations are still very low ( $[S]_0 < 1 \mu\text{mol/l}$ ). The second hypothesis is therefore not limiting the applicability of the model.

460 **The microbial isotopic fractionation phenomenon as viewed from our theory**

Let us consider the isotope fractionation phenomena due to the following reaction catalyzed by microbes:



with  $S$  the substrate,  $P$  the product and  $\lambda$  a stoichiometric coefficient. Substrate and product with a heavy isotope will be denoted  $S^h$  and  $P^h$ , substrate and product with a light isotope will be denoted  $S^l$  and  $P^l$ .

465

The kinetic fractionation factor  $\alpha_{S/P}$  of substrate towards product (sometimes  $\alpha_{P/S} = 1/\alpha_{S/P}$  is used instead) (Mariotti et al 1981) of the reaction is:

$$\alpha_{S/P} = \frac{\frac{[S^h]}{[S^l]}}{\frac{\partial[P^h]}{\partial[P^l]}}$$

With  $\delta[P^l] = -\lambda \cdot \delta[S^l]$  and  $\delta[P^h] = -\lambda \cdot \delta[S^h]$ , let us rewrite  $\alpha_{S/P}$ :

$$\alpha_{S/P} = \frac{\frac{\partial[S^l]}{[S^l]}}{\frac{\partial[S^h]}{[S^h]}}$$

470 With our theory, kinetic isotopic fractionation can be explained by the difference between exergy of molecules containing light or heavy isotopes. Indeed the harvesting rates  $r^h$  and  $r^l$  for a microbe consuming only heavy or only light substrate are given by:

$$r^h = -\nu \cdot [M] \cdot \mu^h = -\nu \cdot [M] \cdot \mu_{max}^h \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S] \cdot E_{cat}^h}\right)$$

$$r^l = -\nu \cdot [M] \cdot \mu^l = -\nu \cdot [M] \cdot \mu_{max}^l \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S] \cdot E_{cat}^l}\right)$$

$\mu_{max}^h$  and  $\mu_{max}^l$  are the maximal growth rates for heavy and light substrate respectively.

$E_{cat}^h$  and  $E_{cat}^l$  represents the catabolic exergy for the catabolic reaction with heavy or light substrates respectively (see thermodynamic properties of isotopomers below).

475 In practice, the microbe is always consuming a mixture of light and heavy molecules. Consumption rates of heavy and light substrates can be expressed in respect to the relative proportion of light ( $[S^l]/[S]$ ) and heavy ( $[S^h]/[S]$ ) molecules:

$$\frac{\partial[S^h]}{\partial t} = \frac{[S^h]}{[S]} \cdot r^h$$

$$\frac{\partial[S^l]}{\partial t} = \frac{[S^l]}{[S]} \cdot r^l$$

Let us then calculate the kinetic fractionation factor:

$$\alpha_{S/P} = \frac{\frac{\partial[S^l]}{[S^l]}}{\frac{\partial[S^h]}{[S^h]}} = \frac{r^l}{r^h} = \frac{\mu_{max}^l}{\mu_{max}^h} \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S]} \left(\frac{1}{E_{cat}^l} - \frac{1}{E_{cat}^h}\right)\right)$$

$$\Rightarrow \alpha_{S/P} = \frac{\mu_{max}^l}{\mu_{max}^h} \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S] \cdot (E_{cat}^h \cdot E_{cat}^l)} (E_{cat}^h - E_{cat}^l)\right)$$

Considering that  $E_{cat}^h \approx E_{cat}^l$  we have  $E_{cat}^h \cdot E_{cat}^l \approx E_{cat}^2$

480 Let us denote  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l} = E_{cat}^h - E_{cat}^l$

$$\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l} = \left(\Delta G^{l0} + RT \cdot \log(\Pi)\right) - \left(\Delta G^{h0} + RT \cdot \log(\Pi)\right) = \Delta G^{l0} - \Delta G^{h0}$$

This difference is independent from chemical concentrations. It only depends on intrinsic characteristics of the molecules considered, i.e. the stabilization of the electronic bonds by the isotopes within the molecules as predicted from quantum theory (Zeebe and Wolf-Gladrow 2001). Then comes the expression:

$$\alpha_{S/P} = \alpha_0 \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot [S_{lim}] \cdot E_{cat}^2} \Delta E_{cat}^{h-l}\right)$$

485 With  $S_{lim}$  the limiting substrate and  $\alpha_0 = \frac{\mu_{max}^h}{\mu_{max}^l}$ .

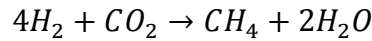
Contrary to the classical derivation of a constant kinetic fractionation factor (Mariotti et al 1981) this expression predicts the dependency of the fractionation to exergy and substrate concentration as recently evidenced in various experimental reports (Goevert and Conrad 2009, Kampara et al 2008, Penning et al 2005, Valentine et al 2004).

490

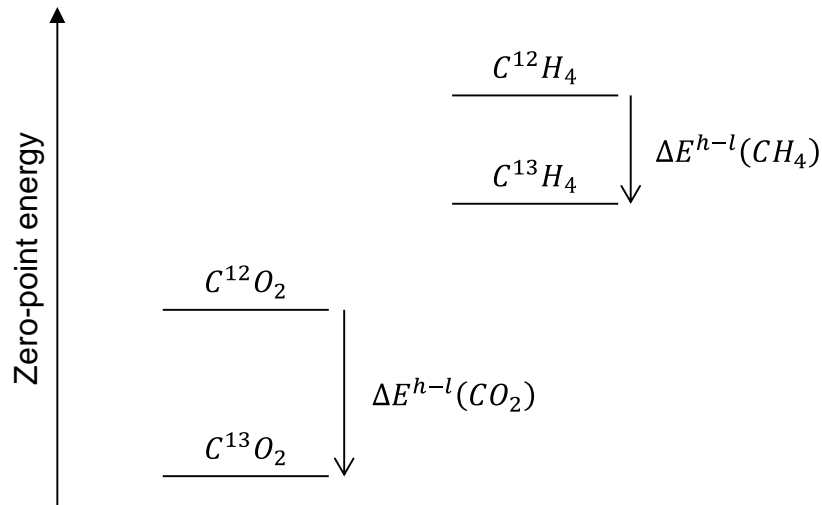
**Predicting different classes of microbial isotopic fractionation from the thermodynamic properties of isotopomers**

Different isotopomers have different energy levels (Zeebe and Wolf-Gladrow 2001). Indeed a molecule containing a heavy isotope has stronger bonds than a molecule with a light isotope.

495 Let us consider hydrogenotrophic methanogenesis:



Putative zero point energies for light and heavy carbonate and methane are shown on the graph below:

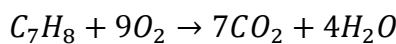


500 Covalent bonds are stabilized by heavy atoms thus exergies of heavy molecules are lower than exergies of light molecules. In addition C-O bonds are relatively more stabilized by  $C^{13}$  than C-H bonds (Zeebe and Wolf-Gladrow 2001), thus heavy carbonate is relatively more stabilized than heavy methane:

$$\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l} = \Delta E^{h-l}(CH_4) - \Delta E^{h-l}(CO_2) < 0$$

This calculation is consistent with known carbon equilibrium fractionation for the system  $CO_2$ - $CH_4$  over a wide range of temperature (Horita 2001). Together with Equation 3, this simple argument thus predicts overfractionation for hydrogenotrophic methanogenesis.

505 If we now consider aerobic degradation of toluene:



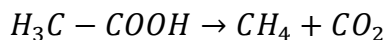
Bigeleisen reports that equilibrium fractionation factor of protium-deuterium between toluene and water is smaller than one (Bigeleisen 1965). Thus water is relatively more stabilized by deuterium than

toluene. It is consistent with a simple rule established by Bigeleisen: "*The heavy isotope goes preferentially to the chemical compound in which the element is bound most strongly.*" (Bigeleisen 510 1965). Thus:

$$\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l} = \Delta E^{h-l}(H_2O) - \Delta E^{h-l}(C_7H_8) > 0$$

Again, the sign of this inequality together with Equation 3 implies the existence of microbial underfractionation.

For acetoclastic methanogenesis:



515 Evaluating the isotope stabilization effect on a polyatomic molecule such as acetate is a complicated task because of the existence of multiple vibrational and rotational modes. Moreover, experimental data on equilibrium fractionation of  $^{13}C$  between acetate and methane/carbon dioxide had never been reported to our knowledge, precluding any theoretical prediction about the nature of the acetoclastic microbial fractionation phenomenon. However, if our theory is correct, the microbial 520 underfractionation phenomenon deduced from (Goevert and Conrad 2009) (cf. figure 2D) conversely implies that  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l}$  of the catabolic microbial reaction is positive. It thus suggests that  $^{13}C$  stabilizes more methane than acetate.

525 **Confronting predictions to experimental data**

Illustrating microbial growth rate dependence on substrate concentration using Monod's historical experiment (Figure 1B)

We estimate two parameters ( $\mu_{max}$  and  $K_S$ ) for our model and Monod model on Monod's data for the growth of *E. coli* on glucose ((Monod 1942) table XVII p 72.):

530 Our model:

$$\mu = \mu_{max} \cdot \exp\left(-\frac{K_S}{[S]}\right)$$

With  $K_S = \frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{V_{harv} \cdot E_{cat}}$

Monod model:

$$\mu = \mu_{max} \cdot \frac{[S]}{K_S + [S]}$$

Estimation is made minimizing the residual sum of squares (RSS) on growth rates with a nonlinear regression.

$$RSS(\mu) = \sum (\mu_{measured} - \mu_{predicted})^2$$

535 RSS values show that our model fits slightly better on the data than the Monod model.

Parameters values estimated for both model are shown in the table below:

	<b>Our model</b>	<b>Monod model</b>
$\mu_{max}$ (1/h)	1.38	1.44
$K_S$ ( $10^{-4}$ mol/l)	0.42	0.67

The  $K_S$  value estimated for our model enable the calculation of the harvesting volume

$$V_{harv} = \frac{E_M + E_{dis}}{K_S \cdot E_{cat}}$$

For *E. coli* growing on glucose (cf. sup mat 1):

540  $E_{cat} = 2.9 \cdot 10^3 \text{ kJ/mol}$

$$E_{dis} = 0.5 \cdot 10^3 \text{ kJ/C} - \text{mol}$$

$$E_M = 0.5 \cdot 10^3 \text{ kJ/C} - \text{mol}$$

$$\Rightarrow V_{harv} = 8.2 \cdot 10^3 \text{ l/C} - \text{mol}$$

A dry cell of *E. coli* weight  $3e-13 \text{ g}$  with 50% carbon and thus contains  $1.2e-14 \text{ C-mol/cell}$ .

$$\Rightarrow V_{harv} = 9.9 \cdot 10^{-10} \text{ l/cell}$$

$$\Rightarrow V_{harv} \approx 1 \cdot 10^5 \text{ } \mu\text{m}^3/\text{cell}$$

### Challenging prediction about microbial isotopic fractionation with experimental data (Figure 2)

545 Data for isotopic fractionation were taken from (Goevert and Conrad 2009, Kampara et al 2008, Penning et al 2005, Valentine et al 2004).

Values from (Kampara et al 2008) (Figure 2C) and (Penning et al 2005) (Figure 2B triangles) were interpolated using ImageJ (Abramoff et al 2004). Values from (Valentine et al 2004) were picked from Table 6 (Figure 2B circles) and values from *Methanosarcina barkeri* and *M. acetivorans* experiments

550 (Goevert and Conrad 2009) (for Figure 2D) were picked from Table 1.

➤ Data interpolated from (Penning et al 2005) figures 2 and 3:

<b>P(H<sub>2</sub>) (kPa)</b>	<b><math>\alpha</math></b>	<b><math>\Delta G</math> (kJ/mol)</b>
0,142	1,046	-71,748
1,326	1,031	-91,385
2,036	1,034	-95,105
2,964	1,029	-98,229
2,775	1,04	-98,08
2,424	1,043	-96,89
2,301	1,047	-96,295
1,856	1,053	-93,617
1,108	1,063	-87,815
0,199	1,079	-69,516
0,143	1,053	-70,409
0,143	1,065	-69,814
0,914	1,034	-87,964
2,9	1,031	-98,973
4,957	1,022	-103,882
4,971	1,04	-104,477
4,1	1,043	-102,394
3,757	1,046	-101,353
3,057	1,049	-98,973
1,957	1,053	-93,766
0,686	1,058	-82,459

➤ Data interpolated from (Kampara et al 2008) figure 2:

555 Enrichment factors for 50% degradation of substrate (triangles in Figure 2C):

$\log_{10}(C/1\mu\text{M})$	$\varepsilon$
1,961	-958,118
2,011	-941,932
1,977	-938,897
1,994	-924,532
1,78	-938,897
1,77	-944,36
1,02	-917,248
0,991	-901,265
1,044	-894,183
1,011	-874,962
0,035	-754,173
0,058	-781,892
0,08	-789,378

Enrichment factors for 70% degradation of substrate (circles in Figure 2c):

$\log_{10}(C/1\mu\text{M})$	$\epsilon$
2,014	-901,062
1,997	-873,343
1,977	-870,916
1,959	-867,274
1,782	-893,171
1,77	-877,997
1,042	-859,939
1,017	-858,877
0,991	-838,392
1,009	-833,991
0,032	-760,04
0,056	-743,045
0,079	-707,84

560

As shown above, our theory directly implies the dependence of  $\alpha_{S/P}$  to  $[S] \cdot E_{cat}^2$  (see Equation 3). This theoretical relationship is depicted on Figure 2A, where increasing  $[S] \cdot E_{cat}^2$  leads to the convergence of microbial fractionation towards an asymptotical value ( $\alpha_0$ ) whereas the behavior is divergent at low values of  $[S] \cdot E_{cat}^2$ . In the literature, it has long been claimed that microbial isotopic fractionation was only dependent on the nature of the metabolism involved (Hayes 1993, Mariotti et al 1981). Recent evidences however increasingly testify that, for a given metabolism, it also varies with environmental conditions (Conrad 1999, Conrad 2005). Reported isotopic fractionation data confirms the predicted

565

dependency on Gibbs energy (Penning et al 2005) and substrate concentration (Goevert and Conrad 2009, Kampara et al 2008, Valentine et al 2004). Moreover, from our theory, two classes of fractionation behaviours are expected (Figure 2A, upper and lower curves) depending on the thermodynamic properties of isotopomers considered (see above). The upper curve corresponds to the case  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l} < 0$  for which  $\alpha$  decreases when  $([S] \cdot E_{cat}^2)$  increases and could be named “microbial overfractionation”. The lower curve (i.e. “microbial underfractionation”) corresponds to the case  $\Delta E_{cat}^{h-l} > 0$  for which  $\alpha$  increases with  $([S] \cdot E_{cat}^2)$ . Figure 2B/C/D illustrates the fitting of Equation 3 on experimental data. Two sets of independently obtained data on  $^{13}\text{C}$  isotopic fractionation associated with hydrogenotrophic methanogenesis confirm the existence of microbial overfractionation as shown on Figure 2B (Penning et al 2005) (Valentine et al 2004). Conversely, experimental data on  $^2\text{D}/^1\text{H}$  fractionation obtained on aerobic toluene degradation (Kampara et al 2008) attest the existence of the microbial underfractionation phenomena (Figure 2C). Strikingly, in the case of microbial underfractionation, Equation 3 predicts that microbial isotopic fractionation can either enrich ( $\alpha < 1$ ) or deplete ( $\alpha > 1$ ) reaction products in heavy isotope depending on the value of  $([S] \cdot E_{cat}^2)$ . The existence of such a phenomenon has never been clearly stated in the literature and would require further confirmation. Nevertheless, several sets of experimental data appear to support this prediction although alternative hypotheses were sometimes raised to account for these observations (Fry et al 1986, Fry et al 1988, Goevert and Conrad 2008, Goevert and Conrad 2009). An illustration of how Equation 3 could give a theoretical ground to such kind of observations is illustrated using data from (Goevert and Conrad 2009); on  $^{13}\text{C}$  isotopic fractionation associated with acetoclastic methanogenesis, for which experimental values of  $\alpha$  shows an apparent inversion of the isotopic fractionation phenomena (Figure 2D).

590

## REFERENCES

- 595 Abramoff MD, Magalhães PJ, Ram SJ (2004). Image processing with ImageJ. *Biophotonics international* **11**: 36-42.
- Battley EH (1998). The development of direct and indirect methods for the study of the thermodynamics of microbial growth. *Thermochim Acta* **309**: 17-37.
- 600 Bigeleisen J (1965). Chemistry of Isotopes: Isotope chemistry has opened new areas of chemical physics, geochemistry, and molecular biology. *Science (New York, NY)* **147**.
- Conrad R (1999). Contribution of hydrogen to methane production and control of hydrogen concentrations in methanogenic soils and sediments. *Fems Microbiol Ecol* **28**: 193-202.
- 605 Conrad R (2005). Quantification of methanogenic pathways using stable carbon isotopic signatures: a review and a proposal. *Org Geochem* **36**: 739-752.
- Fry B, Cox J, Gest H, Hayes JM (1986). Discrimination between S-34 and S-32 during Bacterial Metabolism of Inorganic Sulfur-Compounds. *J Bacteriol* **165**: 328-330.
- 610 Fry B, Gest H, Hayes JM (1988). S-34/S-32 Fractionation in Sulfur Cycles Catalyzed by Anaerobic-Bacteria. *Appl Environ Microb* **54**: 250-256.
- Goevert D, Conrad R (2008). Carbon Isotope Fractionation by Sulfate-Reducing Bacteria Using Different Pathways for the Oxidation of Acetate. *Environ Sci Technol* **42**: 7813-7817.
- 615 Goevert D, Conrad R (2009). Effect of Substrate Concentration on Carbon Isotope Fractionation during Acetoclastic Methanogenesis by *Methanosarcina barkeri* and *M. acetivorans* and in Rice Field Soil. *Appl Environ Microbiol* **75**: 2605-2612.
- 620 Hayes JM (1993). Factors Controlling C-13 Contents of Sedimentary Organic-Compounds - Principles and Evidence. *Mar Geol* **113**: 111-125.
- Horita J (2001). Carbon isotope exchange in the system CO<sub>2</sub>-CH<sub>4</sub> at elevated temperatures. *Geochim Cosmochim Ac* **65**: 1907-1919.
- 625 Kampara M, Thullner M, Richnow HH, Harms H, Wick LY (2008). Impact of bioavailability restrictions on microbially induced stable isotope fractionation. 2. Experimental evidence. *Environ Sci Technol* **42**: 6552-6558.
- 630 Kleerebezem R, Van Loosdrecht MCM (2010). A Generalized Method for Thermodynamic State Analysis of Environmental Systems. *Crit Rev Environ Sci Technol* **40**: 1-54.
- Mariotti A, Germon JC, Hubert P, Kaiser P, Letolle R, Tardieux A *et al* (1981). Experimental-Determination of Nitrogen Kinetic Isotope Fractionation - Some Principles - Illustration for the Denitrification and Nitrification Processes. *Plant Soil* **62**: 413-430.
- 635 Monod J (1942). *Recherches sur la croissance des cultures bactériennes*: Paris.
- Penning H, Plugge CM, Galand PE, Conrad R (2005). Variation of carbon isotope fractionation in hydrogenotrophic methanogenic microbial cultures and environmental samples at different energy status. *Global Change Biology* **11**: 2103-2113.
- 640 Porter KG, Feig YS (1980). THE USE OF DAPI FOR IDENTIFYING AND COUNTING AQUATIC MICROFLORA. *Limnol Oceanogr* **25**: 943-948.
- 645 Valentine DL, Chidthaisong A, Rice A, Reeburgh WS, Tyler SC (2004). Carbon and hydrogen isotope fractionation by moderately thermophilic methanogens. *Geochim Cosmochim Ac* **68**: 1571-1590.

650 von Stockar U, Maskow T, Liu JS, Marison IW, Patino R (2006). Thermodynamics of microbial growth and metabolism:  
An analysis of the current situation. *J Biotechnol* **121**: 517-533.

Zeebe RE, Wolf-Gladrow D (2001). *CO<sub>2</sub> in seawater*. Elsevier: Amsterdam; London; New York [etc.].

655