# Towards understanding polar heat transport enhancement in sub-glacial oceans on icy moons

**Robert Hartmann[1], Richard J. A. M. Stevens[1], Detlef Lohse[1,2], and Roberto Verzicco[1,3,4]**

[1]Physics of Fluids Group and Twente Max Planck Center, J.M. Burgers Center for Fluid Dynamics, University of Twente, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands
[2]Max Planck Institute for Dynamics and Self-Organisation, 37077 Göttingen, Germany
[3]Dipartimento di Ingegneria Industriale, University of Rome 'Tor Vergata', 00133 Rome, Italy
[4]Gran Sasso Science Institute, 67100 L'Aquila, Italy

**Key Points:**

- The polar heat transport in spherical rotating Rayleigh-Bénard convection experiences an enhancement by rotation.
- The influence of rotation differs at low latitudes: the heat flux is reduced and compensates the polar enhancement on the global average.
- Enhanced polar heat transport due to Ekman pumping through axial vortices could explain various phenomena on icy moons.

Corresponding author: Robert Hartmann, `r.hartmann@utwente.nl`

## Abstract

The interior oceans of several icy moons are considered as "moderately rotating". Observations suggest a larger heat transport around the poles than at the equator. Rotating Rayleigh-Bénard convection (RRBC) in planar configuration is known to show an enhanced heat transport compared to the non-rotating case for such "moderate" rotation. We investigate the potential for such a (polar) heat transport enhancement in these sub-glacial oceans by direct numerical simulations of RRBC in spherical geometry for $Ra = 10^6$ and $0.7 \leq Pr \leq 4.38$. We find an enhancement up to 28% in the "polar tangent cylinder", which is globally compensated by a reduced heat transport at low latitudes. As a result, the polar heat transport can exceed the equatorial by up to 50%. The enhancement is mostly insensitive to different radial gravity profiles, but decreases for thinner shells. In general, polar heat transport and its enhancement in spherical RRBC follow the same principles as in planar RRBC.


## Plain Language Summary

The icy moons of Jupiter and Saturn like e.g., Europa, Titan, or Enceladus are believed to have a water ocean beneath their ice crust. Several of them show phenomena in their polar regions like active geysers or a thinner crust than at the equator, all of which might be related to a larger heat transport around the poles from the underlying ocean. We simulate the flow dynamics and currents in these sub-glacial ocean by high-fidelity simulations, though still at less extreme parameters than in reality, to study the heat transport and provide a possible explanation of such a "polar heat transport enhancement". We find that the heat transport around the poles can be up to 50% larger than around the equator, and that the believed properties of the icy moons and their oceans would allow polar heat transport enhancement. Therefore, our results may help to improve the understanding of ocean currents and latitudinal variations in the oceanic heat transport and crustal thickness on icy moons.

## 1 Introduction

In the common understanding, most icy satellites in the solar system, e.g., the Jovian and Saturnian moons Europa, Ganymede, Titan, and Enceladus, contain a global ocean layer beneath their ice crust (e.g., Nimmo & Pappalardo, 2016), which gained a lot of interest in terms of habitable environments (e.g., Chyba & Hand, 2005; Vance et al., 2018). In order to asses their habitability, it is crucial to understand their flow dynamics. On Enceladus, for instance, eruptions from fault systems at the south pole (see, e.g., Nimmo & Pappalardo, 2016) suggest a strong polar anomaly of enhanced heat transport. Furthermore, the crustal thickness counterintuitively decreases from the equator towards the poles (e.g., Beuthe et al., 2016; Čadek et al., 2019; Hemingway & Mittal, 2019; Kang, 2022; Kang & Jansen, 2022), which suggests a large-scale latitudinal variation of the heat released from the sub-glacial ocean (Kihoulou et al., 2023). In this study, we investigate the dynamics inside and the heat transport out of these oceans by direct numerical simulations (DNSs) of rotating Rayleigh-Bénard convection (RRBC) in spherical geometry. Therewith, we aim to provide a possible explanation for the origin of the polar enhancement of the heat transport on icy moons.

The canonical system of RRBC in planar configuration has been extensively studied experimentally and numerically (see, e.g., the reviews by Kunnen, 2021; Ecke & Shishkina, 2023; Stevens et al., 2013; Plumley & Julien, 2019, and Refs. therein). Its dynamical behavior is fully controlled by three dimensionless parameters: the Prandtl number $Pr$ describing the fluid properties, the Rayleigh number $Ra$ setting the strength of thermal driving, and the inverse Rossby number $Ro^{-1}$ as a measure for the importance of rotation relative to buoyancy (full definitions in Sec. 2). The influence of rotation can alternatively be parameterized by the Ekman number $Ek = Ro\sqrt{Pr/Ra}$. Several flow regimes and

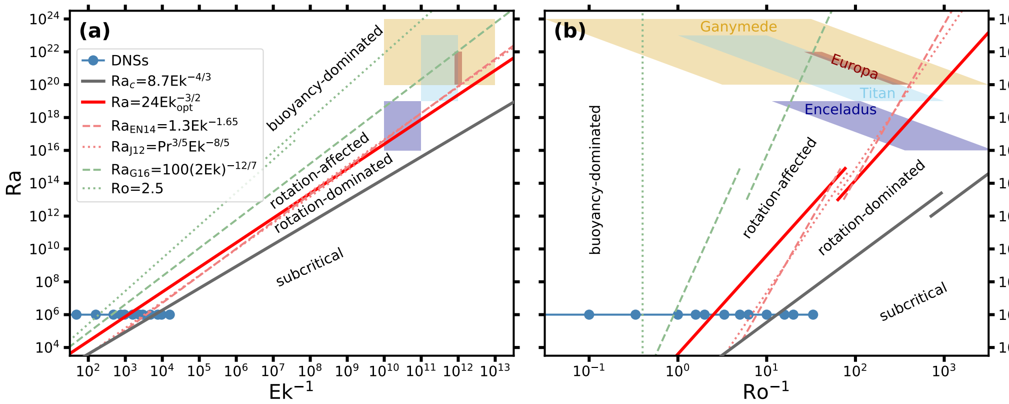


**Figure 1.** Regime diagram of (planar) RRBC in the parameter space of **(a)** $Ra$ and $Ek^{-1}$ and **(b)** $Ra$ and $Ro^{-1}$ (after Soderlund (2019), see also Kunnen (2021)): The solid gray line denotes the critical Rayleigh number $Ra_c$ for the onset of convection (Chandrasekhar, 1961). The solid red line depicts the transition between the rotation-dominated and the rotation-affected regimes for based on boundary layer crossing and heat transport maximum per fixed $Ra$ for $Pr > 1$ fluids (Yang et al., 2020). Dashed and dotted light red lines are alternative estimates for this transition by Ecke and Niemela (2014) and Julien, Knobloch, et al. (2012), respectively. The dashed and dotted green lines represent the transition between the rotation-affected and the buoyancy-dominated regimes based on Gastine et al. (2016) and for a cylinder with diameter-to-height ratio 1 (Weiss et al., 2010), respectively. The blue circles mark the simulations of spherical RRBC in this study ($Pr = 4.38$). The shaded areas show the predicted parameter range for several icy moons ($10 \leq Pr \leq 13$) as given in (Soderlund, 2019). Line offsets symbolize the $Pr$ dependence of any transition between $Pr = 4.38$ like in our simulations and $Pr = 13$ like the upper bound for the icy moons.

flow states were discovered and studied over the past decades. The three major regimes based on the trend of heat transport with variying rotation are (i) the *buoyancy-dominated* regime at relatively slow rotation, where heat transport and flow dynamics remain unaffected compared to the non-rotating case, (ii) the transitional *rotation-affected* regime, where intermediate or moderate rotation starts to alter the flow, and (iii) the *rotation-dominated* regime for rapid rotation, where the heat transport steeply decreases with increasing rotation that impedes vertical motion (Proudman, 1916; Taylor, 1917), see e.g., Kunnen (2021) and Ecke and Shishkina (2023). Both rotation-affected and rotation-dominated regimes show a broad variety of sub-regimes or flow states, all of which are characterized by columnar vortical structures aligned with the rotation axis (e.g., Julien et al., 1996; Sprague et al., 2006; Stevens et al., 2009; Julien, Rubio, et al., 2012; Stellmach et al., 2014; Cheng et al., 2015; Aguirre Guzmán et al., 2020). Due to the huge variety of flow states, there exist various estimates for the boundaries of the above regimes in the literature (see Kunnen (2021) for a detailed overview) - most of them based on RRBC data in the classical planar configuration. The most common ones are summarized Fig. 1.

An important peculiarity of planar RRBC with $Pr > 1$ is that Ekman pumping through vertically coherent vortices enhances the heat transport in the rotation-affected regime to exceed its non-rotating value (e.g., Rossby, 1969; Kunnen et al., 2006; Zhong et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 2013). For not too large $Ra$, the enhancing effect is most efficient when thermal and kinetic boundary layers have approximately the same thickness (Stevens et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2020). This creates a heat transport maximum (per fixed $Ra$) that follows $Ra \propto Ek^{-3/2}$ (Fig. 1, red line; King et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2020). For very turbulent flows, the maximum diverges towards weaker rotation (Yang et al., 2020).

Based on the estimated parameter ranges for Europa, Ganymede, Titan, and Enceladus by Soderlund (2019), their sub-glacial oceans most likely are in the rotation-affected regime (see Fig. 1). Given that the water of these oceans has $Pr \in [10, 13]$ (Soderlund, 2019), they arguably have the potential for heat transport enhancement - at least around the poles, where buoyancy is mostly aligned with the rotation axis as it is in planar RRBC. Evidence of such a polar heat transport enhancement spherical RRBC are present in several studies (Soderlund, 2019; Amit et al., 2020; Bire et al., 2022). We therefore distinguish between two types of heat transport enhancement: (i) enhancement above the non-rotating heat transport in a specific region is considered as *polar/global/... enhancement*, whereas (ii) a larger heat transport at the poles than at the equator is referred to as *latitudinal enhancement*. Since most simulations of spherical RRBC are conducted for $Pr = 1$ (e.g., Soderlund et al., 2012; Gastine et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021) and all studies on rotation-induced heat transport enhancement focus on planar RRBC (e.g., Stevens et al., 2009, 2010; Weiss et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2020), we aim to bridge this gap and elucidate the potential of spherical RRBC to show polar and/or global heat transport enhancement. Therefore, we set $Pr = 4.38$ as in many simulations and experiments of planar RRBC and cover the entire range of regimes (Fig. 1).

In the following, we introduce spherical RRBC, its control parameters, and our numerical method (Sec. 2). Then, latitudinal variations of the heat transport are analyzed and linked to the predominant structures in the flow (Sec. 3). Subsequently, we discuss the importance of $Pr > 1$ by a direct comparison with $Pr \leq 1$ (Sec. 4), the influence of the shell thickness, i.e., the ocean depth (Sec. 5), the sensitivity to different radial gravity profiles (Sec. 6), and the relevance of the ratio between thermal and kinetic boundary layers for heat transport enhancement in spherical RRBC (Sec. 7). The letter ends with conclusions (Sec. 8).

## 2 Dynamical equations and numerical method

Spherical RRBC describes the dynamics of a fluid in a spherical shell confined by a hot inner and a cold outer sphere, rotating around a polar axis (Fig. 2(b)) (e.g., Roberts, 1968; Busse, 1970, 1983; Aurnou et al., 2015). The geometry of the system is determined by the inner and outer radii $r_i$ and $r_o$, defining the shell thickness $H = r_o - r_i$ expressed by the radius ratio $\eta = r_i/r_o$. The dynamics are controlled by the three dimensionless parameters $Pr$, $Ra$, and $Ro^{-1}$, defined as:

$$Pr = \frac{\nu}{\kappa} \ , \ Ra = \frac{\alpha g_0 \Delta T H^3}{\nu \kappa} \ , \ Ro^{-1} = \frac{2\Omega H}{\sqrt{\alpha g_0 \Delta T H}} \ . \tag{1}$$

Therein, $\nu$ is the kinematic viscosity, $\kappa$ the thermal diffusivity, $\alpha$ the isobaric thermal expansion coefficient, $g_0$ the reference gravitational acceleration at the outer sphere, $\Delta T$ the temperature difference between inner and outer sphere, and $\Omega$ the angular rotation rate, respectively. Under Oberbeck-Boussinesq approximation, the system is governed by the continuity, Navier-Stokes and temperature convection-diffusion equations, which are given in dimensionless form as:

$$\nabla \cdot \vec{u} = 0 \ , \tag{2}$$

$$\frac{\mathrm{d}\vec{u}}{\mathrm{d}t} = -\nabla P + \sqrt{\frac{Pr}{Ra}} \nabla^2 \vec{u} + \Theta \frac{g(r)}{g_0} \vec{e}_r - \frac{1}{Ro} \vec{e}_z \times \vec{u} \ , \tag{3}$$

$$\frac{\mathrm{d}\Theta}{\mathrm{d}t} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{Pr\, Ra}} \nabla^2 \Theta \ . \tag{4}$$

Therein, $\vec{u}$, $P$, and $\Theta$ denote the normalized velocity, pressure, and temperature fields, respectively. $\mathrm{d}/\mathrm{d}t$ denotes the full, so-called material derivative. $g(r) = g_0\,(r/r_o)^\gamma$ accounts for radial variations in the gravity profile. The equations are normalized by $H$ and the free-fall velocity $U_0 = \sqrt{\alpha g_0 \Delta T H}$. The temperature is normalized as $\Theta = \frac{T - T_{\text{top}}}{\Delta T} \in [0, 1]$. The pressure field $P$ is reduced by the hydrostatic balance and centrifugal contributions. We consider Coriolis forcing from constant rotation around the polar axis, but neglect centrifugal contributions on buoyancy. Isothermal and no-slip boundary conditions are imposed at the hot inner ($\Theta = 1$) and the cold outer ($\Theta = 0$) spheres.

In this study we conduct direct numerical simulations (DNSs) for $Ra = 10^6$ at $Pr = 4.38$, 1 and 0.7 while varying the radius ratio $\eta$ and gravity profile $g(r)$. The DNSs solve the governing equations (Eqs. 2-4) by a central second-order accurate finite-difference scheme based on a staggered grid discretization in spherical coordinates (Santelli et al., 2020), which has been rigorously validated in subsequent studies (Wang et al., 2021, 2022). The computational grid is uniformly spaced in the longitudinal and latitudinal directions, while the grid points in the radial direction are clustered towards the inner and outer spheres. This ensures an appropriate resolution of the Kolmogorov scales in the bulk, as well as of the boundary layers (Shishkina et al., 2010). A summary of grid sizes and numerical parameters can be found in the Supporting Information (Text S1, Tabs. S1-S3).

## 3 Polar heat transport enhancement

We begin our investigation on a rather thick shell of $\eta = 0.6$ with a constant gravity $g(r) = g_0$. The dimensionless heat transport is given by the Nusselt number $Nu$. We first consider $Nu$ on the outer sphere as a function of the latitude $\varphi$:

$$Nu_{r_o}(|\varphi|) = -\frac{1}{\eta}\partial_r \left\langle \Theta \right\rangle_{t,\vartheta,\pm\varphi}\Big|_{r_o} \quad . \tag{5}$$

Therein $\langle\cdot\rangle_{t,\vartheta,\pm\varphi}$ indicates averaging in time, longitude, and latitudinal symmetry around the equator. For no and slow rotation ($Ro^{-1} \leq 0.3$), the heat transport is expectably uniform over $\varphi$ (Fig. 2(a)). Accordingly, the flow is dominated by radial buoyant plumes (Fig. 2(c)), which can organize in a persistent large-scale circulation pattern. Such large-scale circulations are well known from other non-rotating geometries, e.g., RBC in cylindrical containers (e.g., Ahlers et al., 2009, and Refs. therein), 2D RBC (e.g., van der Poel et al., 2013, and Refs. therein), or extremely wide domains (Stevens et al., 2018). However, without rotation, the heat transport ideally is radially symmetric, defining a reference value $Nu_0 = \langle Nu_{r_o}\rangle_\varphi\,(Ro^{-1} = 0)$ (Fig. 2(a), horizontal dashed line).

At intermediate rotation rates ($1 \leq Ro^{-1} \leq 5$), the heat transport is reduced towards the equator and enhanced towards the poles compared to the non-rotating reference (Fig. 2(a)). Taylor columns aligned with the rotation axis form in the flow (Fig. 2(d)) and alter the heat transport. Their vortical motion impedes the radial heat transport around the equator and leads to the formation of sheet-like thermal plumes around the columnar structures (similar to Soderlund et al., 2012; Aurnou et al., 2015). On the contrary, the Taylor columns support the radial heat transport around the poles by Ekman pumping through their interior (in presence of no-slip boundary conditions, e.g., Stellmach et al. (2014)). For $\eta = 0.6$, the polar tangent cylinder, i.e., the cylinder around the inner sphere aligned with the polar axis, intersects with the outer sphere at latitude $|\varphi_{\text{tc}}| = 53.13°$. We use $|\varphi_{\text{tc}}|$ to distinguish between the "polar region" ($|\varphi_{\text{tc}}| < |\varphi| < 90°$), in which ideal axial Taylor columns connect the hot inner sphere with cold outer sphere, and the "low latitude region" ($|\varphi_{\text{tc}}| > |\varphi| > 0°$), in which axial Taylor columns connect the Northern and Southern hemispheres of the outer sphere (Fig. 2(b)). For $1 \leq Ro^{-1} \leq 5$, $|\varphi_{\text{tc}}|$ clearly correlates with the transition from reduced to enhanced heat transport ($Nu_{r_o}(|\varphi_{\text{tc}}|) \approx Nu_0$). The rather smooth trend of $Nu_{r_o}(|\varphi|)$ across $|\varphi_{\text{tc}}|$ however suggests that the inclination between buoyancy (radial) and rotation (axial) additionally influences the enhancement with latitude.

For rapid rotation ($Ro^{-1} \geq 10$), the latitudinal trend in the heat transport is inverted (Fig. 2(a)). At high latitudes, the heat transport quickly decreases with increasing $Ro^{-1}$ down to $Nu_{r_o} = 1$. Towards the equator, the heat transport first increases slightly (compared to the reduction at intermediate rotation), before it also decreases with increasing $Ro^{-1}$. With increasing rotation the fluid motion is suppressed in the axial direction and

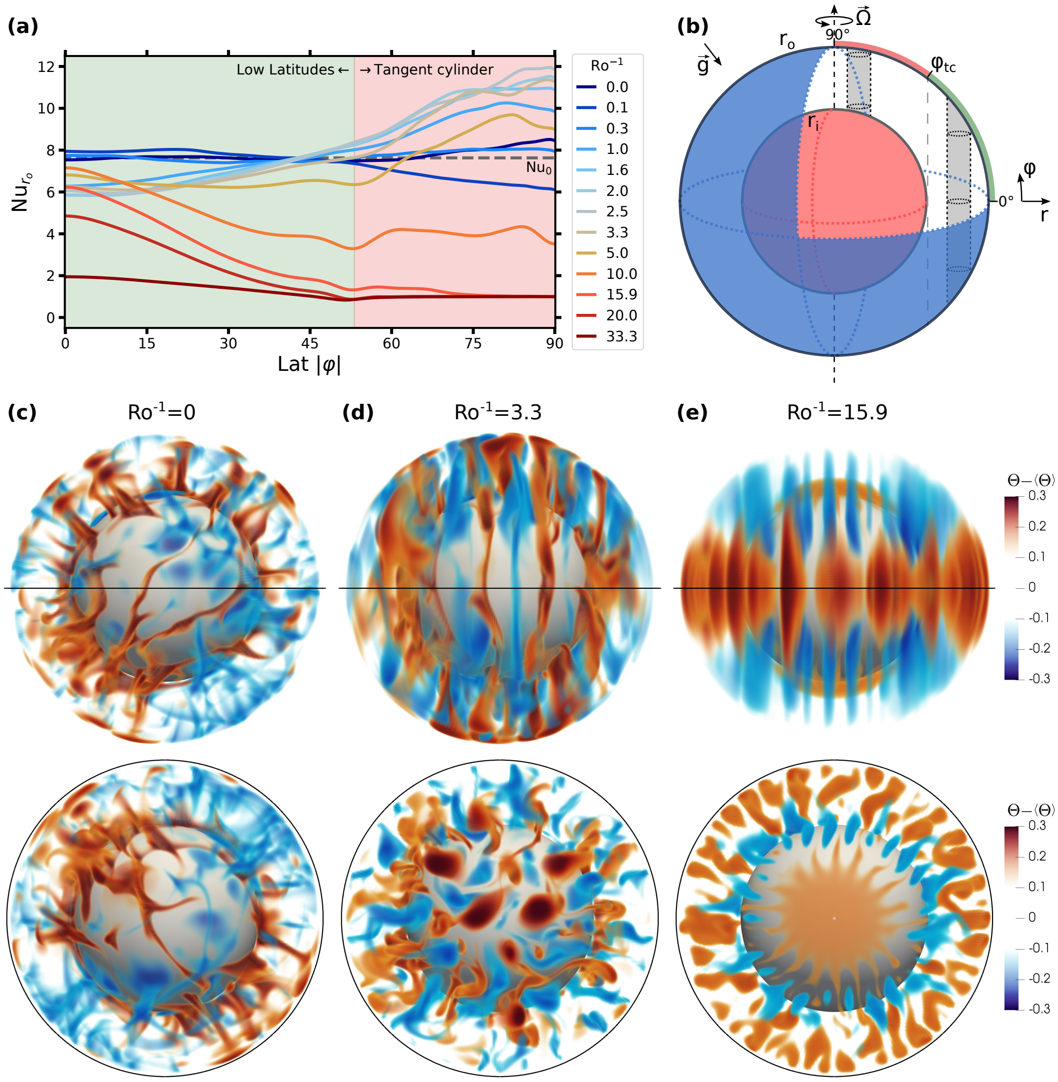


**Figure 2.** **(a)** Dimensionless heat transport at the outer sphere $Nu_{r_o}$ as function of the latitude $|\varphi|$ for various rotation rates $Ro^{-1}$ at $Ra = 10^6$ and $Pr = 4.38$ with $\eta = 0.6$ and constant $g(r) = g_0$. **(b)** Schematic view on spherical RRBC showing the idealized arrangement of axially aligned Taylor columns inside and outside the polar tangent cylinder. **(c-e)** Corresponding 3D snapshots of the temperature fluctuations $\Theta' = \Theta - \langle\Theta\rangle_{\vartheta,\varphi}$ at no rotation ($Ro^{-1} = 0$), intermediate rotation ($Ro^{-1} = 3.\bar{3}$), and rapid rotation ($Ro^{-1} = 15.9$), respectively, viewed from the equator (top) and the South pole (bottom).

becomes strongly focused in the orthogonal planes (Proudman, 1916; Taylor, 1917, 1923). Thus, convection halts inside the tangent cylinder and the radial heat transport mostly aligned with the rotation axis becomes purely conductive. Towards the equator, quasi-2D vortical motion aligns with radial buoyancy, which helps to longer sustain convective heat transport via sheet-like plumes (Fig. 2(e)). Also for rapid rotation, $|\varphi_{\mathrm{tc}}|$ depicts a major transition in the trend of $Nu_{r_o}(|\varphi|)$, namely where the heat transport starts to increase towards its equatorial peak value (Fig. 2(a), see also Wang et al., 2021; Gastine & Aurnou, 2023).

Overall, Fig. 2 shows that heat transport enhancement, as known from planar RRBC, is limited to high latitudes inside the tangent cylinder in spherical RRBC. In order to further quantify the polar enhancement, we consider the radial heat transport at the outer sphere averaged (i) over the polar region $Nu_{\mathrm{tc}} = \langle Nu_{r_o} \rangle_{|\varphi|>|\varphi_{\mathrm{tc}}|}$, (ii) in the complementary low latitude region $Nu_{\mathrm{ll}} = \langle Nu_{r_o} \rangle_{|\varphi|<|\varphi_{\mathrm{tc}}|}$, and (iii) globally over the entire sphere $\langle Nu_{r_o} \rangle_{\varphi}$. In this way, we can demonstrate that the heat transport in the polar region $Nu_{\mathrm{tc}}$ shows the typical enhancement behavior of planar RRBC (Fig. 3(a), red triangles). Together with the results above (Fig. 2), it becomes clear that the basic mechanisms, which cause the polar enhancement, remain the same, namely: the formation of axially coherent vortical structures bridging the bulk between the hot and the cold source, such that Ekman pumping of relatively hot/cold fluid from the boundary layers can support the heat transport along the axial direction. However, no enhancement is found for the global heat transport of the full Rayleigh-Bénard sphere (Fig. 3(a), gray circles). The enhanced heat transport inside the polar region is globally balanced by the reduced heat transport in the low latitude region (Fig. 3(a), green squares). It seems that the equatorial reduction strengthens as the polar enhancement increases.

The amplitude of polar heat transport enhancement compared to $Nu_0$ reaches $\approx$ 28% (Fig. 3(a), red triangles), which is comparable with the enhancement observed in planar RRBC (e.g., Zhong et al., 2009; Kunnen et al., 2011; Yang et al., 2020). The polar enhancement is even larger when only a narrower region directly around the poles is considered (see Supporting Information Fig. S1), which emphasizes the additional influence of the tilt between buoyancy and rotation. Despite the absence of a global heat transport enhancement (relative to $Nu_0$ of the non-rotating system), the spatial large-scale variations of the heat transport are more important in geo- and astrophysical contexts, like the ocean dynamics of the icy moons. A direct comparison of $Nu_{\mathrm{tc}}/Nu_{\mathrm{ll}}$ yields up to $\approx$ 50% larger heat transport in the polar region than in the low latitude region at the maximal polar enhancement (Fig. 3(b), full circles). For strong rotation this ratio inverts as convection halts earlier in the tangent cylinder and will again saturate at 1 once the system is fully in rest (Gastine & Aurnou, 2023).

## 4 Dependence on the Prandtl number

Heat transport enhancement relative to $Nu_0$ in planar RRBC essentially depends on $Pr$. No clear enhancement due to rotation is observed for $Pr < 1$ as the thermal boundary layer is always thinner than the kinetic Ekman layer (Stevens et al., 2010; Yang et al., 2020). To validate this $Pr$ dependence, we conducted additional series of DNSs for $Pr = 1$ and 0.7 (see Supporting Information Tab. S3). As expected, the heat transport enhancement $Nu/Nu_0$ inside the polar tangent cylinder of spherical RRBC vanishes (see Supporting Information Fig. S2(a)). Interestingly, the heat transport in the low-latitude region also decreases with smaller $Pr$. Therefore, we can still observe some latitudinal enhancement $Nu_{\mathrm{tc}}/Nu_{\mathrm{ll}} > 1$ for $Pr = 0.7$ (see Supporting Information Fig. S2(b)) without any polar enhancement $Nu/Nu_0 < 1$. This agrees with the results from Soderlund (2019) performed at $Pr = 1$. However, the latitudinal enhancement $Nu_{\mathrm{tc}}/Nu_{\mathrm{ll}}$ is significantly smaller than for $Pr = 4.38$. Based on this trend, we conclude that, the polar enhancement $Nu/Nu_0$, which typically intensifies with increasing $Pr$ above unity, will additionally amplify the latitudinal enhancement $Nu_{\mathrm{tc}}/Nu_{\mathrm{ll}}$. Since $Pr$ also affects the heat transport in the low latitude region,

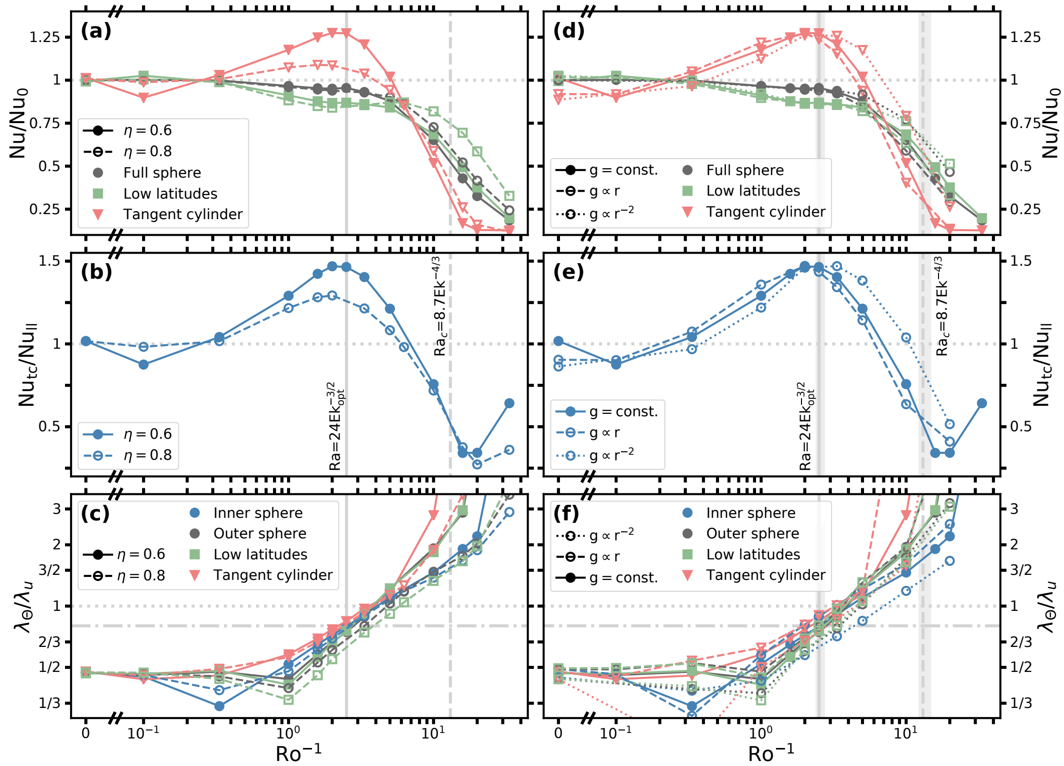


**Figure 3.** **(a,d)** Heat transport $Nu$ relative to the non-rotating reference $Nu_0$ as a function of $Ro^{-1}$ for the full sphere ($Nu \equiv \langle Nu_{r_o} \rangle_\varphi$), in the polar region ($Nu_{\rm tc} = \langle Nu_{r_o} \rangle_{|\varphi|>|\varphi_{\rm tc}|}$), and in the complementary low latitude region ($Nu_{\rm ll} = \langle Nu_{r_o} \rangle_{|\varphi|<|\varphi_{\rm tc}|}$). **(b,e)** Ratio between the heat transport in the polar region $Nu_{\rm tc}$ and the low latitude region $Nu_{\rm ll}$ as a function of $Ro^{-1}$. **(c,f)** Ratio of thermal and kinetic boundary layer thicknesses $\lambda_\Theta/\lambda_u$ as a function of $Ro^{-1}$ averaged over the inner sphere, the outer sphere, the polar region, and the low latitude region. **(left)** For different $\eta$ with constant $g(r) = g_0$, and **(right)** for different $g(r) \propto r^\gamma$ with fixed $\eta = 0.6$. All data at $Pr = 4.38$, $Ra = 10^6$. The solid and dashed vertical lines mark the predicted optimal rotation rate $Ro_{\rm opt}^{-1}$ in planar RRBC given by $Ra = 24Ek^{-3/2}$ (Yang et al., 2020; King et al., 2012) and the predicted onset of convection in planar RRBC given by $Ra_c = 8.7Ek^{-4/3}$ (Chandrasekhar, 1961), respectively. The influence of $Ra_{\rm eff}$ on these transitions (shaded areas) are very limited (see Sec. 6, 7). The dotted and dashed-dotted horizontal lines emphasize ratio 1 and 0.8, respectively.

we speculate that for $Pr \gg 1$, even an enhancement of the global heat transport $Nu/Nu_0$ is possible.

## 5 Influence of shell thickness

In fact, the oceans of icy satellites are much thinner water layers, i.e., characterized by a much larger radius ratio than the previous $\eta = 0.6$. For the popular icy satellites indicated in Fig. 1, the estimates are in a range of $0.74 < \eta < 0.99$ (Vance et al., 2018; Soderlund, 2019). A larger $\eta$ also results in a larger polar tangent cylinder, in which the axial columns connect inner and outer sphere. When we increase the radius ratio to $\eta = 0.8$, the tangent cylinder starts already at $\varphi_{\mathrm{tc}} \approx 36.87$ (compared to $\varphi_{\mathrm{tc}} \approx 53.13$ for $\eta = 0.6$). Interestingly, the heat transport enhancement in the polar tangent cylinder drops to only $\approx 9\%$, whereas the full sphere average remains unchanged throughout the rotation-affected regime (Fig. 3(a), open symbols). This seems very counterintuitive since one would rather expect that a constant enhancement amplitude in the enlarged tangent cylinder, which also affects the global heat transport. We speculate that increasing inclination between radial buoyancy and axial rotation towards the edge of the tangent cylinder reduces the efficiency of vortices pumping heat in the axial direction. However, we note that even at the poles the heat transport enhancement is smaller for $\eta = 0.8$ than for $\eta = 0.6$. (see Supporting Information Fig. S3). Regardless, the heat transport in the polar region can still be significantly larger than at the equator for $\eta = 0.8$, resulting in a latitudinal enhancement up to $\approx 25\%$ (Fig. 3(b), open symbols). The optimal rotation rate $Ro^{-1}_{\mathrm{opt}}$ at which the maximal enhancements are achieved, however, remains mostly unaffected.

In the rotation-dominated regime, the heat transport in the polar region decreases similarly with $Ro^{-1}$ for both $\eta$. Convection in the tangent cylinder ceases around $Ro_c^{-1} = 8.7^{-3/4} Pr^{1/2} Ra^{1/4} \approx 13.06$ (Fig. 3(a), vertical dashed line), derived from the predicted critical Rayleigh number $Ra_c = 8.7 Ek^{-4/3}$ in planar RRBC (Chandrasekhar, 1961). On the contrary, faster rotation is necessary to suppress convective heat transport in the low latitude region for larger $\eta$. Consequently, the equatorial onset of convection in spherical RRBC additionally depends on $\eta$, in contrast to $Ra_c$ in planar RRBC valid in the likewise oriented tangent cylinder. Together with the data from Gastine et al. (2016) and Gastine and Aurnou (2023), this reflects that the equatorial onset of convection in spherical RRBC is different than in planar RRBC, i.e., $Ra_{c,sp} = f(\eta, ...)\, Ek^{-4/3}$ rather than $Ra_c = 8.7\, Ek^{-4/3}$.

Lastly, we note the different slopes of the heat transport in the polar and the low latitude region in the rotation-dominated regime. They can be attributed to "steep scaling" $Nu \propto (Ra\, Ek^{4/3})^3 \propto Ro^4$ in the polar region where Ekman puming plays an active role (King et al., 2012, 2013; Julien et al., 2016; Plumley et al., 2016; Gastine & Aurnou, 2023) and (the onset of) "diffusion-free scaling" $Nu \propto (Ra\, Ek^{4/3})^{3/2} \propto Ro^2$ (Gastine et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2021). More detailed evidence for this can be found in the Supporting Information (Text S2, Fig. S4).

## 6 Sensitivity to different gravity profiles

We further investigate the influence of different radial gravity profiles $g(r) = g_0\ (r/r_o)^{\gamma}$. Besides a constant gravity ($\gamma = 0$), we apply a homogeneous self-gravitating profile ($\gamma = 1$) and a mass-centered profile ($\gamma = -2$). For this, we stick to $\eta = 0.6$, because the radial gravity variation is larger in thicker shells and so is its expected impact on the heat transport. Aside from minor deviations, we cannot observe major differences in the normalized heat transport $Nu/Nu_0$ in the rotation-affected regime (until the polar heat transport maximum), including the amplitude of the polar and latitudinal enhancement maxima and their optimal rotation rate $Ro^{-1}_{\mathrm{opt}}$ (Fig. 3(d,e)). One might spot a small shift in $Ro^{-1}$ with $\gamma$. Its trend likely arises from a change of the effective Rayleigh number of the system $Ra_{\mathrm{eff}} = \langle Ra(r) \rangle_r$, when the gravity varies with $r$: $Ra_{\mathrm{eff}}(\gamma = 1) < Ra_{\mathrm{eff}}(\gamma = 0) = Ra < Ra_{\mathrm{eff}}(\gamma = -2)$ (see Supporting Information Text S3). Solely in the rotation-dominant regime (beyond the polar heat transport maximum), the heat transport remains considerably larger for smaller $\gamma$, i.e., increasing $Ra_{\rm eff}$. Thus, the relative heat transport enhancement $Nu/Nu_0$ for $Ro^{-1} \leq Ro^{-1}_{\rm opt}$ is mostly unaffected by the gravity profile $g(r) = r^\gamma$, in contrast to the absolute values $Nu$ (Gastine et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2022). Especially the amplitude of the polar enhancement maximum $Nu_{\rm max}/Nu_0$ seems to be insensitive to $g(r)$.

## 7 Relevance of the boundary layer ratio

In planar RRBC, the heat transport maximum for not too large $Ra$ is typically associated with an equal thickness of the thermal and kinetic boundary layers $\lambda_\Theta$ and $\lambda_u$ (Stevens et al., 2010), which theoretically scales as $\lambda_\Theta/\lambda_u \propto Ek^{3/2}Ra$ (King et al., 2012) giving an estimate for the optimal rotation rate at relatively low $Ra$ (Yang et al., 2020):

$$Ro^{-1}_{\rm opt} \approx 0.12\, Pr^{1/2} Ra^{1/6} \quad \text{or} \quad Ra \approx 24\, Ek^{-3/2}_{\rm opt} \ . \tag{6}$$

The predicted $Ro^{-1}_{\rm opt}$ nicely aligns with the heat transport maxima in the polar tangent cylinder independent of $\eta$ and $g(r)$ (Fig. 3(a,d), solid vertical line). Taking $Ra_{\rm eff}$ into account yields $Ro^{-1}_{{\rm opt},\gamma=1} \approx 0.97\, Ro^{-1}_{{\rm opt},\gamma=0}$ and $Ro^{-1}_{{\rm opt},\gamma=-2} \approx 1.07\, Ro^{-1}_{{\rm opt},\gamma=0}$ (see Supporting Information Text S3). Both predicted and observed shifts of $Ro^{-1}_{\rm opt}$ with $\gamma$ are mostly negligible.

We further verify the predicted boundary layer crossing by directly computing $\lambda_\Theta$ and $\lambda_u$ from our DNSs as the height of the first peak in the radial profiles of the laterally averaged root-mean-square temperature and lateral velocity, respectively. Due to the asymmetry of cooling and heating in spherical RRBC, the boundary layer thicknesses differ between inner and outer sphere (Gastine et al., 2015). Therefore, we consider $\lambda_\Theta$ and $\lambda_u$ separately averaged over (i) the inner and (ii) the outer spheres. In addition to the spatial average over the full spheres, we again distinguish between (iii) the polar and (iv) the low latitude regions on the outer sphere. Our data confirms such a typical boundary layer crossing for all the regions (i)-(iv) in the spherical geometry – independent of $\eta$ (Fig. 3(c)). Furthermore, the polar heat transport maxima and the predicted $Ro^{-1}_{\rm opt}$ perfectly match to an observed boundary layer ratio of $\lambda_\Theta/\lambda_u \approx 0.8$ (dotted horizontal line), especially for the polar region (red symbols) and the inner sphere (blue symbols). This fully agrees with the observations of Yang et al. (2020) in planar RRBC based on the same boundary layer definitions. Only for the thinner $\eta = 0.8$ shell, the boundary layer ratio of the low latitude region (and consequently also for the full outer sphere) lie slightly below the expected $\lambda_\Theta/\lambda_u \approx 0.8$. We also relate this to the different flow orientation at the equator, where the inner and outer shells act more like a sidewall for the axial vortex structures compared to the classical configuration in planar RRBC and the alike tangent cylinder. It therefore is even more remarkable that the boundary layer ratio also matches for the low latitude region in the other cases. For variations of $g(r)$, the agreement with 0.8 is still very good (Fig. 3(f)).

## 8 Conclusions

Our DNSs of spherical RRBC with $Pr$ larger than unity ($Pr = 4.38$) confirm the main features of heat transport enhancement, as known from planar RRBC, to similarly occur in the spherical geometry:

(i) The three major regimes (buoyancy-dominated, rotation-affected, rotation-dominated) for the heat transport behavior of RRBC can be identified (Kunnen, 2021; Ecke & Shishkina, 2023).

(ii) *Intermediate* rotation enhances the heat transport up to $\approx 28\%$ compared to the non-rotating case inside the polar tangent cylinder, where buoyancy is mostly aligned with the rotation axis and axially coherent vortices (Taylor columns) connect the hot inner with the cold outer shell.

(iii) The maximal (polar) enhancement is determined by an equal thickness of the thermal and kinetic boundary layers $\lambda_\Theta/\lambda_u \approx 1$. The associated optimal rotation rate $Ro_{\mathrm{opt}}^{-1} \Leftrightarrow Ek_{\mathrm{opt}}^{-1}$ can still be predicted via $Ra \approx 24\,Ek^{-3/2}$ as in planar RRBC (King et al., 2012; Yang et al., 2020).

We however find that the polar heat transport enhancement is accompanied by a reduced heat transport at low latitudes outside the tangent cylinder, where buoyancy is mostly orthogonal to the rotation axis and the axially coherent vortices can only connect both hemispheres of the cold outer shell. The equatorial reduction compensates the polar enhancement on the global average on the one hand, which on the other hand results in an even larger latitudinal enhancement of up to $\approx 50\%$ between the polar and the low latitude region.

We further clarified that the relative heat transport enhancements $Nu/Nu_0$ and $Nu_{\mathrm{tc}}/Nu_{\mathrm{ll}}$ are mostly unaffected by the radial gravity profile. Rather surprisingly, a thinner shell ($\eta = 0.8$), which comes along with a larger tangent cylinder, shows less but still significant enhancement ($\approx 9\%$ for $Nu/Nu_0$ and $\approx 25\%$ for $Nu_{\mathrm{tc}}/Nu_{\mathrm{ll}}$). The fact that the polar enhancement decreases to remain balanced by the equatorial reduction depicts a non-trivial coupling between the polar and the low latitude region in spherical RRBC.

The existence of polar heat transport enhancement in spherical RRBC, which increases the latitudinal difference between polar and equatorial heat transport, implies that accounting for $Pr > 1$ can be crucial for simulations of icy satellite oceans. Heat transport enhancement on the one hand increases with larger $Pr$ (e.g., Zhong et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 2010) but on the other hand decreases with larger $Ra$ (e.g., Yang et al., 2020). Hence, the question on how much enhancement persists on icy satellites with $Pr > 4.38$ ($10 \lesssim Pr \lesssim 13$) and $Ra \gg 10^6$ ($10^{16} \lesssim Ra \lesssim 10^{24}$) needs to be addressed differently as DNS cannot reach these parameters. However, our findings show, in line with evidences from previous studies (Soderlund, 2019; Amit et al., 2020; Bire et al., 2022), that in principle large $Pr$ related heat transport enhancement could serve as an explanation for latitudinal heat transport and associated ice thickness variations on icy satellites.

## Open Research Section

### Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in *4TU.ResearchData* at `http://doi.org/tba_on_publication`.


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