Modular Flows: Differential Molecular Generation

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Abstract

Generating new molecules is fundamental to advancing critical applications such as drug discovery and material synthesis. Flows can generate molecules effectively by inverting the encoding process, however, existing flow models either require artifactual dequantization or specific node/edge orderings, lack desiderata such as permutation invariance, or induce discrepancy between encoding and decoding steps that necessitates *post hoc* validity correction. We circumvent these issues with novel continuous normalizing E(3)-equivariant flows, based on a system of node ODEs coupled as a graph PDE, that repeatedly reconcile locally toward globally aligned densities. Our models can be cast as message passing temporal networks, and result in superlative performance on the tasks of density estimation and molecular generation. In particular, our generated samples achieve state of the art on both the standard QM9 and ZINC250K benchmarks.

1 Introduction

Generative models have rapidly become ubiquitous in machine learning with advances from image synthesis (Ramesh et al., 2022) to protein design (Ingraham et al., 2019). Molecular generation (Stokes et al., 2020) has also received significant attention owing to its promise for discovering new drugs and materials. Searching for valid molecules in prohibitively large discrete spaces is, however, challenging: estimates for drug-like structures range between 10^{23} and 10^{60} but only a tiny fraction - on the order of 10^8 - has been synthesized (Polishchuk et al., 2013; Merz et al., 2020). Thus, learning representations that exploit appropriate molecular inductive biases (e.g., spatial correlations) becomes crucial.

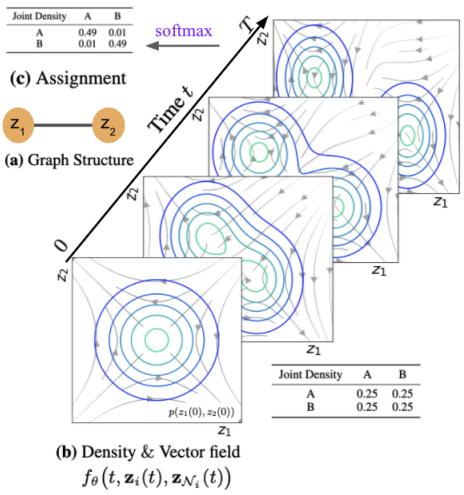

Figure 1: A toy illustration of `ModFlow` in action with a two-node graph. The two local flows - $\mathbf{z}_1$ and $\mathbf{z}_2$ - co-evolve toward a more complex joint density, both driven by the same differential f.

Earlier models focused on generating sequences based on the SMILES notation (Weininger, 1988) used in Chemistry to describe the molecular structure as strings. However, they were supplanted by generative models that capture valuable spatial information such as bond strengths and dihedral angles, e.g., by embedding molecular graphs via some graph neural network (GNNs) (Scarselli et al., 2009; Garg et al., 2020). Such models primarily include variants of Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), Variational Autoen-

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coders (VAEs), and Normalizing Flows (Dinh et al., 2014, 2016). Besides known issues with training, GANs (Goodfellow et al., 2014; Maziarka et al., 2020) suffer from the well-documented problem of mode collapse, thereby generating molecules that lack diversity. VAEs (Kingma and Welling, 2013; Lim et al., 2018; Jin et al., 2018), on the other hand, are susceptible to a distributional shift between the training data and the generated samples. Moreover, optimizing for likelihood via a surrogate lower bound is likely insufficient to capture the complex dependencies inherent in molecules.

Flows are especially appealing since, in principle, they enable estimating (and sampling from) complex data distributions using a sequence of invertible transformations on samples from a more tractable continuous distribution. Molecules are discrete, so many flow models (Madhawa et al., 2019; Honda et al., 2019; Shi et al., 2020) add noise during encoding and later apply a *dequantization* procedure. However, dequantization begets distortion and issues related to convergence (Luo et al., 2021). Moroever, many methods segregate the generation of atoms from bonds, so the assembled structure is often not a valid molecule and requires *post hoc* correction to ensure validity (Zang and Wang, 2020), effecting a discrepancy between the encoding and the decoded distributions. Permutation dependence is another undesirable artifact of these methods. Some alternatives have been explored to avoid dequantization, e.g., (Lippe and Gavves, 2021) encodes molecules in a continuous latent space via variational inference and jointly optimizes a flow model for generation. Discrete graph flows (Luo et al., 2021) also circumvent the many pitfalls of dequantization by resorting to discrete latent variables, and performing validity checks during the generative process. However, discrete flows follow an autoregressive procedure that requires a specific ordering of nodes and edges during training. In general, one shot methods can generate much faster than discrete flows.

We offer a different flow-based perspective tailored to molecules. Specifically, we suggest coupled continuous normalizing E(3)-equivariant flows that bestow generative capabilities from neural partial differential equation (PDE) models on graphs. Graph PDEs have been known to enable designing new embedding methods such as variants of GNNs (Chamberlain et al., 2021), extending GNNs to continuous layers as Neural ODEs (Poli et al., 2019), and accommodating spatial information (Iakovlev et al., 2020). We instead seek to bring to the fore their efficacy and elegance as tools to help generate complex objects, such as molecules, viewed as outcomes resulting from an interplay of co-adapting latent trajectories (i.e., underlying dynamics). Concretely, a flow is associated with each node of the graph, and these flows are conjoined as a joint ODE system conditioned on neighboring nodes. While these flows originate independently as samples from simple distributions, they adjust progressively toward more complex joint distributions as they repeatedly interact with the neighboring flows. We view molecules as samples generated from the globally aligned distributions obtained after many such local feedback iterations. We call the proposed method Modular Flows (`ModFlow`) to underscore that each node can be regarded as a module that coordinates with other modules. Table 1 summarizes the capabilities of `ModFlow` compared to some previous generative works.

Contributions. We propose to learn continuous-time, flow based generative models, grounded on graph PDEs, for generating molecules without any validity correction. In particular,

Table 1: A comparison of generative modeling approaches for molecules.

Method	One-shot	Modular	Invertible	Continuous-time	
JT-VAE	✓	✓	✗	✗	Jin et al. (2018)
MRNN	✗	✗	✗	✗	Popova et al. (2019)
GraphAF	✗	✗	✓	✗	Shi et al. (2020)
GraphDF	✗	✗	✓	✗	Luo et al. (2021)
MoFlow	✓	✗	✓	✗	Zang and Wang (2020)
GraphNVP	✓	✗	✓	✗	Madhawa et al. (2019)
`ModFlow`	✓	✓	✓	✓	this work

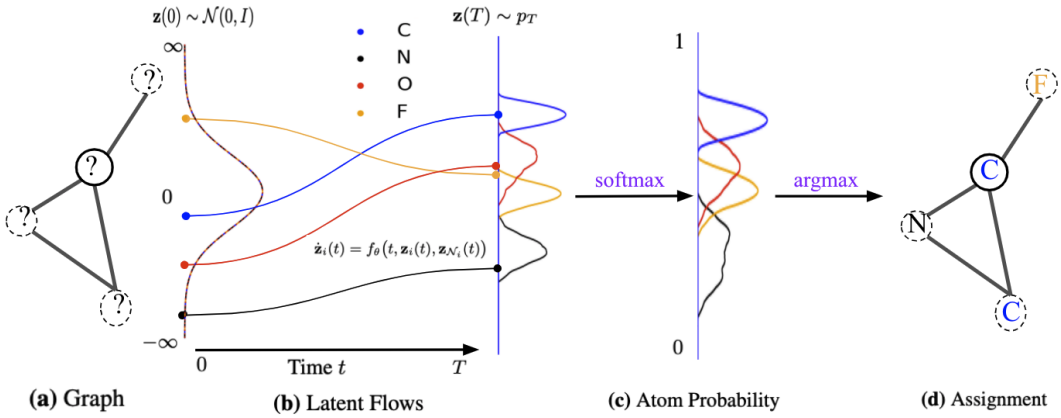


Figure 2: A demonstration of the modular flow generation. The initial Gaussian distributions $\mathcal{N}(0, I)$ evolve into complex densities $\mathbf{z}(T)$ by the flow f and are subsequently turned to probabilities and labels.

- we propose `ModFlow`, a novel generative model based on coupled continuous normalizing E(3)-equivariant flows. `ModFlow` encapsulates essential inductive bias using PDEs, and defines multiple flows that interact locally toward a globally consistent joint density;
- we encode permutation, translation, rotation, and reflection equivariance, with E(3) equivariant GNNs adapted to molecular generation, and can leverage 3D geometric information;
- `ModFlow` is end-to-end trainable, non-autoregressive, and obviates the need for any external validity checks or correction;
- empirically, `ModFlow` achieves state-of-the-art performance on both the standard QM9 (Ramakrishnan et al., 2014) and ZINC250K (Irwin et al., 2012) benchmarks.

2 Related works

Generative models. Earlier attempts for molecule generation (Kusner et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2018) aimed at representing molecules as SMILES strings (Weininger, 1988) and developed sequence generation models. One of the challenges of these approaches is to learn complicated grammar rules that can generate syntactically valid sequences of molecules. Recently, representing molecules as graphs has inspired new deep generative model for molecular generation (Segler et al., 2018; Samanta et al., 2018; Neil et al., 2018) ranging from VAEs (Jin et al., 2018; Kajino, 2019) to flows (Madhawa et al., 2019; Luo et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2020). The core idea is to learn to encode molecular graphs into a latent space, and subsequently decode samples from the latent space to generate new molecules (Atwood and Towsley, 2016; Xhonneux et al., 2020; You et al., 2018).

Graph partial differential equations. Graph PDEs is an emerging area that studies PDEs on structured data encoded as graphs. For instance, one can define a PDE on graphs to track the evolution of signals defined over the graph nodes under some dynamics. Graph PDEs have enabled, among others, design of new graph neural networks; see, e.g., works such as GRAND (Chamberlain et al., 2021), GNODE (Poli et al., 2019), NeuralPDE (Iakovlev et al., 2020), Neural operator (Li et al., 2020) and PDE-GCN (Eliasof et al., 2021). Different from all these works, we focus on using PDEs for generative modeling of molecules (graph-structured objects). Interestingly, `ModFlow` proposed in this work may be viewed as a new equivariant temporal graph network.

Validity oracles. A key challenge of molecular generative models is to be able to generate valid molecules, according to various criteria for molecular validity or feasibility. It is a common practice to use external chemical software as rejection oracles to reduce or exclude invalid molecules, or do validity checks as part of autoregressive generation. (Luo et al., 2021; Shi et al., 2020; Popova et al.,

2019). An important open question has been whether generative models can learn to achieve high generative validity *intrinsically*, i.e., without being aided by oracles or performing additional checks. `ModFlow` represents a major step forward toward that goal.

3 Modular Flows

We focus on unsupervised learning of an underlying graph density $p(G)$ using a dataset $\mathcal{D} = \{G_n\}_{n=1}^N$ of observed molecular graphs G_n. We learn a generative flow model $p_\theta(G)$ specified by flow parameters θ, and use it to sample novel high-probability molecules.

3.1 Molecular Representation

Graph representation. We represent the molecular graph $G = (V, E)$ of size M as a tuple of vertices $V = (v_1, \ldots, v_M)$ and edges $E \subset V \times V$. Each vertex takes value from an alphabet on atoms: $v \in \mathcal{A} = \{\mathtt{C}, \mathtt{H}, \mathtt{N}, \mathtt{O}, \mathtt{P}, \mathtt{S}, \ldots\}$; while the edges $e \in \mathcal{B} = \{1, 2, 3\}$ abstract the type of bond (i.e., single, double, or triple). We assume that, conditioned on the edges, the graph likelihood factorizes as a Categorical distribution over vertices given their latent representations:

$$p(G) := p(V|E) = \prod_{i=1}^{M} \mathrm{Cat}(v_i|\sigma(\mathbf{z}_i)), \tag{1}$$

where $\mathbf{z}_i = (z_{i\mathtt{C}}, z_{i\mathtt{H}}, \ldots) \in \mathbb{R}^{|\mathcal{A}|}$ is a set of atom score parameters, where $z_{ik} \in \mathbb{R}$ pertains to node i and type $k \in \mathcal{A}$, and σ is the softmax function

$$\sigma(\mathbf{z}_i)_k = \frac{\exp \mathbf{z}_{ik}}{\sum_{k'} \exp \mathbf{z}_{ik'}}\ , \tag{2}$$

which turns the real-valued scores $\mathbf{z}_i$ of a node i into normalized probabilities. `ModFlow` also supports 3D molecular graphs that contain atomic coordinates and angles.

Tree representations. We can obtain an alternative representation for molecules based on decomposing a molecule into a tree-like structure, by contracting certain vertices into a single node (denoted as a cluster) such that the molecular graph G becomes acyclic. Following the decomposition investigated by Jin et al. (2018), we restrict these clusters to ring-substructures present in the molecular data, in addition to the atom alphabet. Thus, we obtain an extended alphabet $\mathcal{A}_{\mathrm{tree}} = \{\mathtt{C}, \mathtt{H}, \mathtt{N}, \ldots, \mathtt{C}_1, \mathtt{C}_2, \ldots\}$, where each cluster label $\mathtt{C}_r$ corresponds to the some ring-substructure in the label vocabulary χ. We reduce the vocabulary to the 30 most commonly occurring substructures of $\mathcal{A}_{\mathrm{tree}}$. For further details, see Appendix A.1.

3.2 Differential modular flows

Normalizing flows (Kobyzev et al., 2021) provide a general recipe for constructing flexible probability distributions, used in density estimation (Cramer et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2018) and generative modeling (Zhen et al., 2020; Zang and Wang, 2020). We propose to model the atom scores $\mathbf{z}_i(t)$ as a Continuous-time Normalizing Flow (CNF) (Grathwohl et al., 2018) over time $t \in \mathbb{R}_+$. We assume the initial scores at time $t = 0$ follow an uninformative Gaussian base distribution $\mathbf{z}_i(0) \sim \mathcal{N}(0, I)$ for each node i. Node scores evolve in parallel over time by a differential equation,

$$\dot{\mathbf{z}}_i(t) := \frac{\partial \mathbf{z}_i(t)}{\partial t} = f_\theta\big(t, \mathbf{z}_i(t), \mathbf{z}_{\mathcal{N}_i}(t)\big), \qquad i = 1, \ldots, M \tag{3}$$

where $\mathcal{N}_i = \{\mathbf{z}_j : (i, j) \in E\}$ is the set of neighbor scores at time t, and θ are the parameters of the flow function f to be learned. By collecting all node differentials we obtain a *modular* joint, coupled

ODE, which is our key contribution:,

$$\dot{\mathbf{z}}(t) = \begin{pmatrix} \dot{\mathbf{z}}_1(t) \\ \vdots \\ \dot{\mathbf{z}}_M(t) \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} f_\theta\big(t, \mathbf{z}_1(t), \mathbf{z}_{\mathcal{N}_1}(t)\big) \\ \vdots \\ f_\theta\big(t, \mathbf{z}_M(t), \mathbf{z}_{\mathcal{N}_M}(t)\big) \end{pmatrix} \tag{4}$$

$$\mathbf{z}(T) = \mathbf{z}(0) + \int_0^T \dot{\mathbf{z}}(t)dt. \tag{5}$$

The coupled system of ODEs is equivalent to a graph PDE (Iakovlev et al., 2020; Chamberlain et al., 2021), where the evolution of each node only depends on its immediate neighbors.

The flow induces corresponding density changes by the divergence of f, (Chen et al., 2018)

$$\frac{d \log p_t(\mathbf{z}_i(t))}{dt} = -\operatorname{tr}\left(\frac{\partial f_\theta\big(t, \mathbf{z}_i(t), \mathbf{z}_{\mathcal{N}_i}(t)\big)}{\partial \mathbf{z}_i}\right), \tag{6}$$

starting from the base distribution $p_0(\mathbf{z}_i(0)) = \mathcal{N}(\mathbf{z}_i(0)|0, I)$. The trace picks only the diagonal elements of the Jacobian $\frac{\partial f}{\partial \mathbf{z}}$, which interprets the neighborhood input $\mathbf{z}_{\mathcal{N}_i}$ term as a 'control' for each node $\mathbf{z}_i$ at each instant t. The above system is usually solved via an ODE solver where gradients are computed via adjoint sensitivity method (Kolmogorov et al., 1962). This approach incurs a low memory cost, and explicitly controls numerical error. Notably, moving towards modular flows translates sparsity also to the adjoints.

Preposition 1: *Modular adjoints are sparser than regular adjoints. They can be computed by*

$$\frac{d\boldsymbol{\lambda}_i}{dt} = -\boldsymbol{\lambda}(t)^\top \frac{\partial f\big(t, \mathbf{z}_i(t), \mathbf{z}_{\mathcal{N}_i}(t)\big)}{\partial \mathbf{z}} = -\sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}_i \cup \{i\}} \boldsymbol{\lambda}_j(t)^\top \frac{\partial f\big(t, \mathbf{z}_i(t), \mathbf{z}_{\mathcal{N}_i}(t)\big)}{\partial \mathbf{z}_j}, \tag{7}$$

where the partial derivatives $\frac{\partial f}{\partial \mathbf{z}} = [\frac{\partial f_i}{\partial \mathbf{z}_j}]_{ij}$ *are sparse* (See Appendix A.5 for derivation).

3.3 Equivariant local differential

Our goal is to have a differential function f that is a PDE operator used in Eq. 4, and that satisfies the natural equivariances and invariances of molecules. Specifically, the function must be (i) translation equivariant: translating the input results in an equivalent translation of the output; (ii) rotational (and reflection) invariant: rotating the input results in an equivalent rotation of the output; (iii) permutation invariant: permuting the input results in the same permutation of the output. Therefore, we chose to use E(3)-Equivariant GNN (EGNN) (Satorras et al., 2021), which is translation, rotation and reflection equivariant (E(n)), and permutation equivariant with respect to an input set of points (See Appendix A.2 for details). The input to the EGNN are the node embeddings and the geometric information (polar coordinates (2D) and spherical polar coordinates (3D)). Interestingly, `ModFlow` can be viewed as a message passing temporal graph network (Rossi et al., 2020) as shown next.

Preposition 2: *Modular Flows can be cast as Temporal Graph Networks (TGN). The operations are listed in Table 2, where* `ModFlow` *is subjected to a single layer of EGNN.* (See Appendix A.3 for more details).

3.4 Training objective

Normalizing flows are predominantly trained to minimize KL divergence $\mathrm{KL}[p_{\mathrm{data}}||p_\theta]$ between the unknown data distribution p and the flow-generated distribution p_θ. This is equivalent to maximizing their cross-entropy $\mathbb{E}_{p_{\mathrm{data}}}[\log p_\theta]$ (Papamakarios et al., 2021). However, this requires the observations to live in the flow space, which is not true for us: the discrete graphs G and continuous atom scores $\mathbf{z}(t)$ reside in different spaces. To apply normalizing flows, a mapping between the spaces is needed.

Table 2: `ModFlow` as temporal graph networks. We use the shorthand $\mathbf{r}_{ij} = (\mathbf{x}_i - \mathbf{x}_j)$, a_{ij} denote the attributes of the edge between nodes i and j, $\mathbf{s}_i$ is memory state of node (TGN), and $\mathbf{v}_i, \mathbf{e}_{ij}$ are, respectively, the node features and the edge features.

Method	TGN layer	`ModFlow`
Edge	$\mathbf{m}_i'(t) = \text{msg}\left(\mathbf{s}_i\left(t^-\right), t, \mathbf{v}_i(t)\right)$ $\overline{\mathbf{m}}_i'(t) = \text{agg}\left(\mathbf{m}_i'\left(t_1\right), \ldots, \mathbf{m}_i'\left(t_b\right)\right)$	$\mathbf{m}_{ij}(t) = \phi_e\left(\mathbf{z}_i(t), \mathbf{z}_j(t), \left\|\mathbf{r}_{ij}(t)\right\|^2, a_{ij}\right)$ $\hat{\mathbf{m}}_{ij}(t) = \mathbf{r}_{ij}(t) \cdot \phi_x\left(\mathbf{m}_{ij}(t)\right)$ $\mathbf{m}_i(t) = \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}(i)} \mathbf{m}_{ij}$ $\hat{\mathbf{m}}_i(t) = C \cdot \sum_{j \in \mathcal{N}(i)} \hat{\mathbf{m}}_{ij}(t)$
Memory state	$\mathbf{s}_i(t) = \text{mem}\left(\overline{\mathbf{m}}_i'(t), \mathbf{s}_i\left(t^-\right)\right)$	$\mathbf{x}_i(t+1) = \mathbf{x}_i(t) + \hat{\mathbf{m}}_i(t)$
Node	$\mathbf{z}_i'(t) = \sum_{j \in n_i^k([0,t])} h\left(\mathbf{s}_i(t), \mathbf{s}_j(t), \mathbf{e}_{ij}, \mathbf{v}_i(t), \mathbf{v}_j(t)\right)$	$\mathbf{z}_i(t+1) = \phi_h\left(\mathbf{z}_i(t), \mathbf{m}_i(t)\right)$

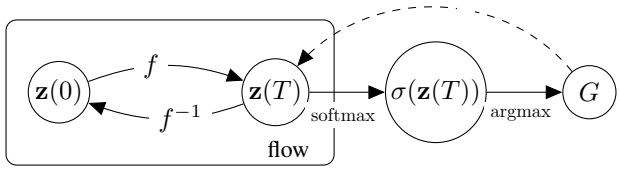


Figure 3: Plate diagram showing both the inference and generative components of `ModFlow`.

Earlier approaches use dequantisation to turn a graph G into a distribution of latent states, and argmax to deterministically map latent states to graphs (Zang and Wang, 2020).

We reduce the learning problem to maximizing the score cross-entropy $\mathbb{E}_{\hat{p}_{\text{data}}(\mathbf{z}(T))}[\log p_\theta(\mathbf{z}(T))]$, where we turn the observed set of graphs $\{G_n\}$ into a set of scores $\{\mathbf{z}_n\}$ by using one-hot encoding

$$\mathbf{z}_n(G_n; \epsilon) = (1-\epsilon)\ \text{onehot}(G_n)\ +\ \frac{\epsilon}{|\mathcal{A}_f|}\mathbf{1}_{M(n)}\mathbf{1}_{|\mathcal{A}_f|}^\top\ ,$$

where $\text{onehot}(G_n)$ is a matrix of size $M(n) \times |\mathcal{A}_f|$ (i.e., rows equal to number of nodes of G_n and columns equal to the number of possible node labels) such that $G_n(i,k) = 1$ if $v_i = a_k \in \mathcal{A}_f$, that is if the vertex i is labeled with atom k, and 0 otherwise; $\mathbf{1}_q$ is a vector with q entries each set to 1; $\mathcal{A}_f \in \{\mathcal{A}, \mathcal{A}_{\text{tree}}\}$; and $\epsilon \in [0,1]$ is added to model the noise in estimating the posterior $p(\mathbf{z}(T)|G)$ due to short-circuiting the inference process from G to $\mathbf{z}(T)$ skipping the intermediate dependencies, as shown in the plate diagram of Figure 3.

Effectively, we exploit the (non-reversible) composition of the argmax and softmax operations to transition from the continuous flow space to the discrete graph space, but skip this composition altogether in the reverse direction. Importantly, this short-circuiting allows `ModFlow` to keep the forward and backward flows between $\mathbf{z}(0)$ and $\mathbf{z}(T)$ completely aligned unlike previous approaches.

We thus maximize an objective over N training graphs,

$$\arg\max_\theta \qquad \mathcal{L} = \mathbb{E}_{\hat{p}_{\text{data}}(\mathbf{z})} \log p_\theta(\mathbf{z}) \tag{8}$$

$$\approx \frac{1}{N}\sum_{n=1}^{N} \log p_T\big(\mathbf{z}(T) = \mathbf{z}_n\big) \tag{9}$$

$$= \frac{1}{N}\sum_{n=1}^{N}\left(\sum_{i=1}^{M(n)} \log p_0(\mathbf{z}_i(0)) - \sum_{i=1}^{M(n)} \int_0^T \text{tr}\frac{\partial f_\theta(t, \mathbf{z}_i(t), \mathbf{z}_{\mathcal{N}_i}(t))}{\partial \mathbf{z}_i(t)} dt\right), \tag{10}$$

which factorises over the size $M(n)$ of the n'th training molecule. The encoding probability follows from the flow Eq. 6, where $\mathbf{z}(0)$ is the reverse solution from $\mathbf{z}_n$ at time T following the flow f backward in time until $t = 0$. In practice we solve ODE integrals using numerical solvers, such as Runge-Kutta. We delegate this task to a general solver of the form $\texttt{ODESolve}(\mathbf{z}, f_\theta, T)$, where map f_θ is applied for T steps starting on $\mathbf{z}$. An optimizer `optim` is also required for updating θ.

Algorithm 1 Training `ModFlow`

Require: Dataset $\mathcal{D}$, iterations n_{iter}, batch size B, number of batches n_B

Initialise parameters θ of `ModFlow` (EGNN)
for $k = 1, \ldots, n_{\text{iter}}$ **do**
  for $b = 1, \ldots, n_B$ **do**
    Sample $\mathcal{D}_b = (G_1, \ldots, G_B) \sim \mathcal{D}$
    Init $\mathbf{z}_b(T)$ to $\mathbf{z}_b(G_b; \epsilon)$
    $\mathbf{z}_b(0) = \texttt{ODESolve}(\mathbf{z}_b(T), f_\theta, T)$
    $\mathcal{L}_b = \log p_\theta(G_b)$
  end for
  $\theta \leftarrow \texttt{optim}(\frac{1}{n_B} \sum_{b=1}^{n_B} \mathcal{L}_b; \theta)$
end for

Algorithm 2 Generating using `ModFlow`

$\mathbf{z}(0) \sim \mathcal{N}(0, I)$
$\mathbf{z}(T) = \texttt{ODESolve}(\mathbf{z}(0), f_\theta^{-1}, T)$
Assign labels by $\text{argmax}(\sigma(\mathbf{z}(T)))$

3.5 Molecular generation

We generate novel molecules by sampling an initial state $\mathbf{z}(0) \sim \mathcal{N}(0, I)$ based on structure, and running the modular flow forward in time until $\mathbf{z}(T)$. This procedure maps a tractable base distribution p_0 to some more complex distribution p_T. We follow argmax to pick the most probable label assignment for each node (Zang and Wang, 2020). The pseudo algorithms are shown in Algorithms 1 and 2.

4 Experiments

We evaluated `ModFlow` models trained, variously, on (i) 2D coordinates (ii) 3D coordinates (iii) 2D coordinates + Tree representation, (iv) 3D coordinates + Tree representation on the tasks of density estimation and molecular generation. We show that `ModFlow` compares favorably to other prominent flow-based molecular generative models including GraphDF (Luo et al., 2021), GraphNVP (Madhawa et al., 2019), GraphAF (Shi et al., 2020) and MoFlow (Zang and Wang, 2020). Notably, `ModFlow`achieves state-of-the-art results without validity checks or post hoc correction. We also provide ablation results to underscore the relevance of geometric features and equivariance toward this superlative empirical performance.

4.1 Density Estimation

We now demonstrate the high expressive power of Modular Flows (`ModFlow`) on learning highly discontinuous patterns on 2D grid graphs.

We considered two variants of chessboard pattern as (i) 4×4 grid where every node has opposite value to its neighbors (ii) 16×16 grid where blocks of 4×4 nodes have uniform values, but opposite across blocks, and (iii) a 20×20 grid describing alternating stripes. Figure 4 shows that we can learn a neural differential f_θ function that reproduces the patterns almost perfectly, indicating sufficient capacity to model complex patterns. Our model is able to transform the initial Gaussian into multi-modal and discontinuous distributions.

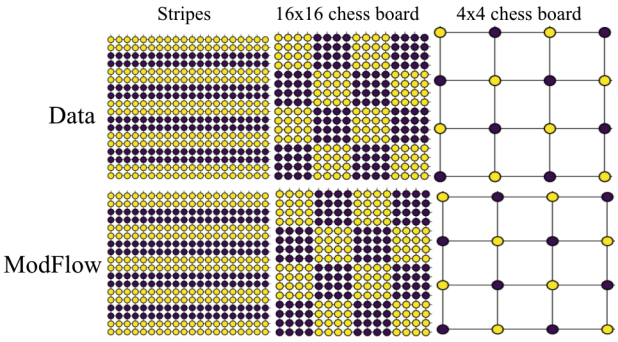


Figure 4: `ModFlow` can accurately learn to reproduce complex, discontinuous graph patterns.

4.2 Molecule Generation

Data. We train and evaluate the models on ZINC250k (Irwin et al., 2012) and QM9 (Ramakrishnan et al., 2014) datasets. The ZINC250k set contains 250,000 drug-like molecules up to 38 atoms. The QM9 set contains 134,000 stable small organic molecules consisting of `CHONF` atoms. The molecules are in kekulized form with hydrogens removed by the RDkit software (Landrum et al., 2013).

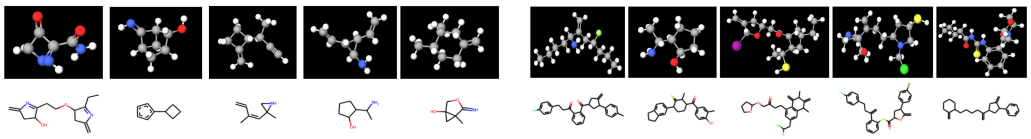
Setup. We adopt common quality metrics to evaluate molecular generation. (i) **Validity** is the fraction of molecules that do not violate chemical valency rule. In this work we strictly limit ourselves to comparing all methods on validity *without external correction procedures* (ii) **Uniqueness** is the fraction of non-duplicate generations, and (iii) **Novelty** is the fraction not present in training data. (iv) **Reconstruction** is the fraction of molecules that can be reconstructed from their encoding. We train the model over 5 different seed initialization, and generate 50,000 molecular graphs for evaluation. We report the mean and the standard deviation of the results from different seeds.

Implementation. The models are implemented in PyTorch (Paszke et al., 2019). The EGNN method used only a single layer with embedding dimension of 32. The input concatenates time and scalar vocabulary scores, per node. We traing with Adam optimizer (Kingma and Ba, 2014), for 100 epochs with batch size 1000 and learning rate 0.001. For more details, see Appendix A.4.

Results. Tables 3 and 4 show the results on QM9 and ZINC250K. `ModFlow` achieves state-of-the-art results across all metrics. Notably, its reconstruction rate is 100% similar to other flow models; in addition, however, novelty (100%) and uniqueness scores (99%) are also very high. Moreover, `ModFlow` surpassed all early methods on validity (95%-99%). These results underscore the promise of `ModFlow`as an effective tool for graph density estimation and molecular generation.

Table 3: Random generation performance on QM9 dataset without post-hoc validity corrections. Results with * are taken from Luo et al. (2021). Higher values are better for all columns.

Method	Validity %	Uniqueness %	Novelty %	Reconstruction %
GraphNVP*	83.1	99.2	58.2	100
GRF*	84.5	66	58.6	100
GraphAF*	67	94.2	88.8	100
GraphDF*	82.7	97.6	98.1	100
MoFlow*	89.0	98.5	96.4	100
`ModFlow` (2D-EGNN)	**96.2** $\pm$ 1.7	**99.5**	**100**	100
`ModFlow` (3D-EGNN)	**98.3** $\pm$ 0.7	99.1	**100**	100
`ModFlow` (JT-2D-EGNN)	**97.9** $\pm$ 1.2	99.2	**100**	100
`ModFlow` (JT-3D-EGNN)	**99.1** $\pm$ 0.8	99.3	**100**	100



(a) QM9 Dataset (b) ZINC250K Dataset

Figure 5: Samples of molecules generated by `ModFlow`. More examples are shown in Appendix A.6.

4.3 Ablation Studies

We performed ablation experiments to gain further insights about `ModFlow`, as described next.

Table 4: Random generation performance on ZINC250K dataset without post-hoc validity corrections. Results with * are taken from Luo et al. (2021). Higher values are better for all columns.

Method	Validity %	Uniqueness %	Novelty %	Reconstruction %
GraphNVP*	42.6	94.8	100	100
GRF*	73.4	53.7	100	100
GraphAF*	68	99.1	100	100
GraphDF*	89	99.2	100	100
MoFlow*	50.3	**99.9**	100	100
`ModFlow` (2D-EGNN)	**94.8** ± 1.0	99.4	100	100
`ModFlow` (3D-EGNN)	**95.4** ± 1.2	99.7	100	100
`ModFlow` (JT-2D-EGNN)	**97.4** ± 1.4	99.1	100	100
`ModFlow` (JT-3D-EGNN)	**98.1** ± 0.9	99.3	100	100

E(3) Equivariant vs Not Equivariant. Molecules exhibit translational and rotational symmetries, so we conducted an ablation study to quantify the effect of incorporating these symmetries in our model. We compare the results obtained via using EGNN to non-equivariant graph convolutional networks (GCN). We used a 3-layer GCN with layer sizes 64-32-32. Table 5 provides strong evidence in favor of modeling symmetries explicitly in Modular Flows.

Table 5: Random generation performance on ZINC250K and QM9 dataset with E(3)-EGNN vs GCN.

Dataset	Method	Validity %	Uniqueness %	Novelty %
ZINC250K	`ModFlow` (3D-EGNN)	95.4 ± 1.2	99.7	100
	`ModFlow` (GCN)	90.3 ± 1.9	99.7	100
QM9	`ModFlow` (3D-EGNN)	98.3 ± 0.7	99.1	100
	`ModFlow` (GCN)	93.3 ± 0.5	98.8	100

2D vs 3D. Finally, we study whether including 3D coordinate information improves the model. The EGNN coupled differential function obtains either the 2D or 3D positions as polar coordinates, whereas 3D has an extra degree of freedom. Table 6 shows that transitioning to 3D gives a consistent $\approx 2\%$ percentage unit performance improvement with respect to validity.

Table 6: Random generation performance on ZINC250K and QM9 dataset with 2D vs 3D features

Dataset	Method	Validity %	Uniqueness %	Novelty %
ZINC250K	`ModFlow` (3D-EGNN)	95.4 ± 1.2	99.7	100
	`ModFlow` (2D-EGNN)	94.8 ± 1.0	99.4	100
QM9	`ModFlow` (3D-EGNN)	98.3 ± 0.7	99.1	100
	`ModFlow` (2D-EGNN)	96.2 ± 1.7	99.5	100

5 Conclusion

We proposed `ModFlow`, a new generative flow model where multiple flows interact locally according to a coupled ODE, resulting in accurate modeling of graph densities and high quality molecular generation without any validity checks or correction.

Interesting avenues open up, including the design of (a) more nuanced mappings between discrete and continuous spaces, and (b) extensions of modular flows to (semi-)supervised settings.

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   (a) Do the main claims made in the abstract and introduction accurately reflect the paper's contributions and scope? [Yes]
   (b) Did you describe the limitations of your work? [Yes]
   (c) Did you discuss any potential negative societal impacts of your work? [N/A]
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