

# Switchable $\beta$ -alkylation of Secondary Alcohols with Primary Alcohols by a Well-Defined Cobalt Catalyst

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Cite This: *Organometallics* 2021, 40, 1207–1212



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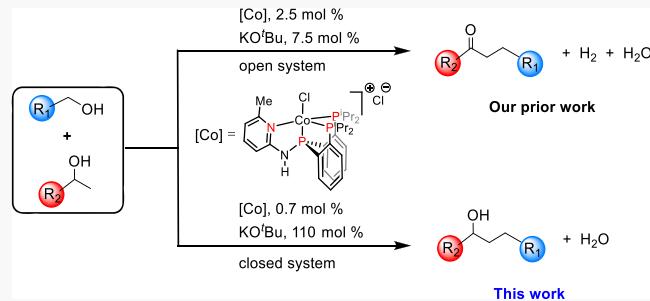
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**ABSTRACT:**  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary alcohols with primary alcohols to selectively generate alcohols by a well-defined Co catalyst is presented. Remarkably, a low catalyst loading of 0.7 mol % can be employed for the reaction. More significantly, this study represents the first Co-catalyzed switchable alcohol/ketone synthesis by simply manipulating the reaction parameters. In addition, the transformation is environmentally friendly, with water as the only byproduct.



**&**  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary alcohols is one of the prominent synthetic methods for the construction of C–C bonds.<sup>1</sup> In the conventional  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary alcohols to form alcohols or ketones, several drawbacks exist: stoichiometric oxidation, alkylation with toxic and mutagenic alkyl halides, stoichiometric reduction, and multistep processes, which inevitably generate copious wastes.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is appealing to explore new methods that are environmentally benign, are atom- and process-efficient, and utilize less toxic and abundantly available starting materials: e.g., alcohols. One such promising synthetic method is borrowing hydrogen (BH).<sup>3,4</sup> In a normally accepted BH process to synthesize alcohols, primary and secondary alcohols are first dehydrogenated to aldehydes and ketones, respectively, with the catalyst obtaining the hydrogen atoms. Next, a base and/or the catalyst mediates the  $\alpha$ -C–H activation of the ketones and forms the nucleophilic carbon anions which attack the electrophilic aldehydes, leading to the formation of the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ketone intermediates with loss of water. Finally, the hydrogenated catalyst reduces the *in situ* formed ketones to the alcohol products. Alternatively, hydrogen gas can be liberated from the hydrogenated catalyst with ketones as the final products. This process is recognized as the acceptorless dehydrogenative coupling (ADC).<sup>3,4</sup> Both BH and ADC have recently received increasing attention in both academia and industry, as they can offer significant advantages over conventional methods in terms of sustainability.

Currently, catalysts based on precious metals such as Rh,<sup>5</sup> Ir,<sup>6</sup> Ru,<sup>7</sup> and Pd<sup>8</sup> have dominated the field. It is more desirable to replace precious metal catalysts with inexpensive, less toxic, and earth-abundant base-metal surrogates, e.g. Fe,<sup>9</sup> Co,<sup>10</sup> Mn,<sup>11</sup> Ni,<sup>12</sup> and Cu,<sup>13</sup> due to increasing concerns regarding sustainability and economic issues.<sup>14</sup> To the best of our knowledge, there is only a single example of Co-catalyzed  $\beta$ -

alkylation of secondary alcohols with primary alcohols to form alcohols via the BH process, reported by Kempe and co-workers.<sup>10</sup> In their pioneering work, a Co complex supported by a PN<sup>5</sup>P pincer ligand was successfully employed. Nevertheless, a very high catalyst loading of 5 mol % was mandatory.

We have recently developed a new P,N mixed  $i$ Pr<sup>2</sup>PPPNN<sup>H</sup>Py<sup>Me</sup> tetradentate ligand.<sup>15</sup> Its Co complex A is an efficient catalyst for dehydrogenation of secondary alcohols to ketones,<sup>15</sup> ADC of primary alcohols to esters,<sup>16</sup> and switchable alcohol amine couplings to imines or amines.<sup>17</sup> We recently reported the first example of Co-catalyzed  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary alcohols with primary alcohols to selectively form ketones.<sup>18</sup>

Encouraged by the findings from our prior work, we envision that A could also be employed to achieve selective  $\beta$ -alkylated alcohol formations by manipulating the reaction parameters. Notably, the selectivity control of the products via BH or ADC, i.e., alcohol versus ketones, is critical but is also a challenge for the  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary alcohols with primary alcohols.

Herein, we disclose a novel homogeneous Co catalytic system for efficient and selective  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary alcohols to alcohols utilizing a significantly reduced Co catalyst loading of as low as 0.7 mol %. We also discovered that a switchable alcohol and ketone synthesis can be achieved by simply tuning the reaction parameters, such as the base loadings, with the same Co catalyst (Scheme 1), which to the

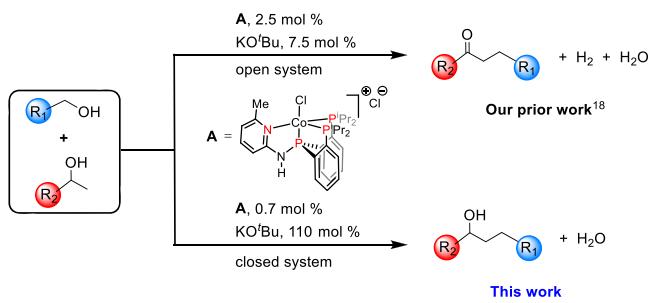
Received: March 10, 2021

Published: April 28, 2021



best of our knowledge, has not been reported for base-transition-metal catalysis using Co, Fe, or Mn.<sup>19</sup>

**Scheme 1. Switchable  $\beta$ -Alkylation of Secondary Alcohols with Primary Alcohols Catalyzed by a Cobalt Complex**



At the outset, 1-phenylethanol (**1a**) and benzyl alcohol (**2a**) were selected as the model substrates. Interestingly, it was revealed that an excess amount of base (110 mol %) was required for the selective formation of 1,3-diphenylpropan-1-ol (**3a**) (**Table 1**, entries 1–4), which was in stark contrast to the

**Table 1. Optimization of the Reaction Conditions<sup>a,b</sup>**

		base (mol %)	A (mol %)	solvent	yield (%)
1	KOtBu	0	2.5	toluene	0
2	KOtBu	30	2.5	toluene	31
3	KOtBu	80	2.5	toluene	53
4	KOtBu	110	2.5	toluene	73
5	KOtBu	110	0.7	toluene	80, 75, <sup>c</sup> 79 <sup>d</sup>
6	KOtBu	110	0	toluene	8
7	NaO <sup>t</sup> Bu	110	0.7	toluene	80
8	KHMDS	110	0.7	toluene	77
9	KOH	110	0.7	toluene	26
10	K <sub>2</sub> CO <sub>3</sub>	110	0.7	toluene	0
11	Cs <sub>2</sub> CO <sub>3</sub>	110	0.7	toluene	0
12	KOtBu	110	0.7	toluene	67 <sup>e</sup>
13	KOtBu	110	0.7	toluene	71 <sup>f</sup>
14	KOtBu	110	0.7	1,4-dioxane	12
15	KOtBu	110	0.7	THF	5
16	KOtBu	110	0.7	benzene	68

<sup>a</sup>Reaction conditions unless specified otherwise: 1-phenylethanol-1-ol (0.375 mmol), benzyl alcohol (0.25 mmol), A, base, and solvent (1.5 mL) were heated in a closed 15 mL reaction tube for 24 h under N<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>b</sup><sup>1</sup>H NMR yield using 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene as internal standard.

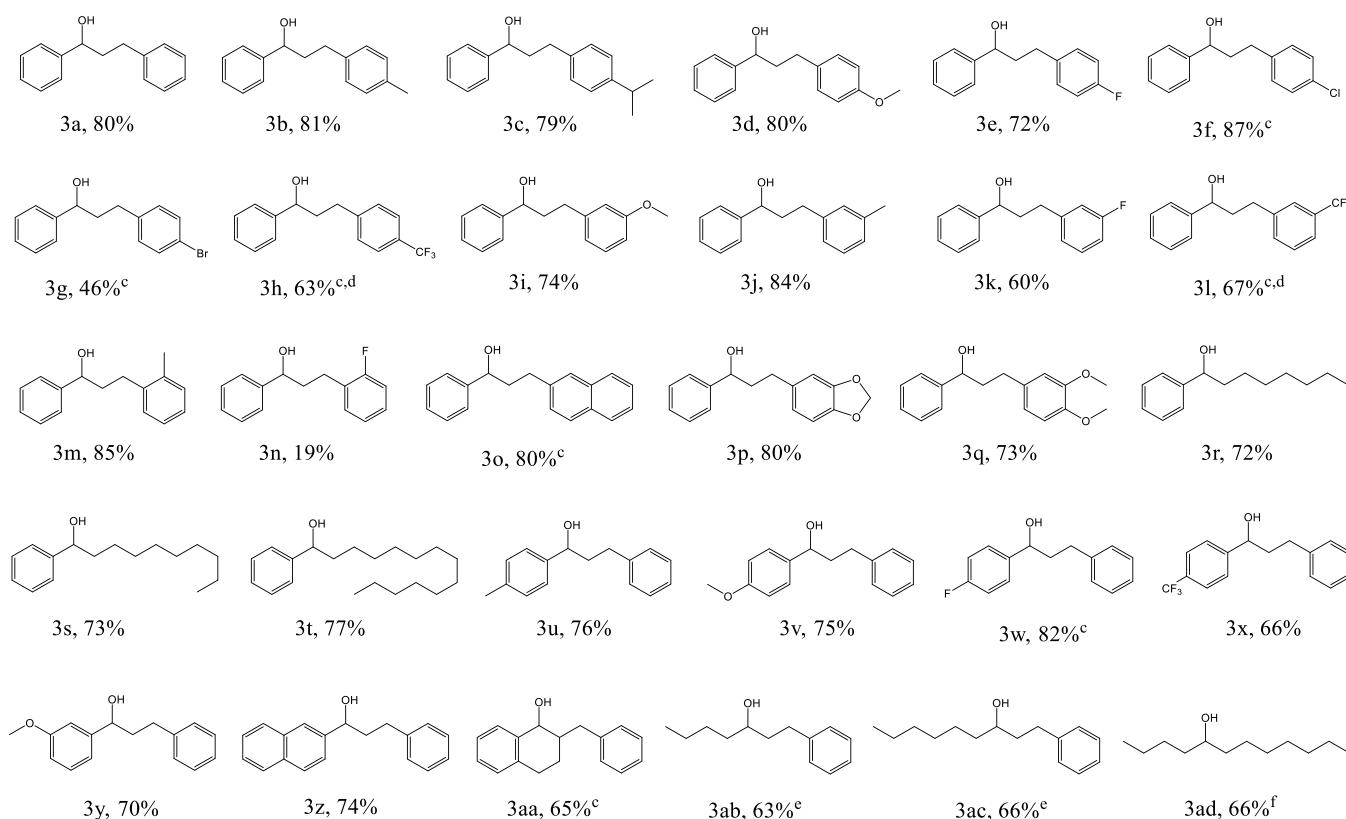
<sup>c</sup>Isolated yield on a 1 mmol scale. <sup>d</sup>Mercury (125 mg) was added to the reaction mixture. <sup>e</sup>100 °C. <sup>f</sup>120 °C.

ketone case, where only a catalytic amount of base (7.5 mol %) was used.<sup>18</sup> Both A and base are essential for this transformation (**Table 1**, entries 1 and 6). Significantly, only 0.7 mol % of A was sufficient to mediate the alcohol-forming reaction (**Table 1**, entry 5). The ketone side product **4a** was detected with only 8% yield. To our surprise, a slightly lower yield (73%) resulted using 2.5 mol % of A, concurrent with the generation of unknown side products (**Table 1**, entry 4). Strong bases are more appropriate

for the reaction (**Table 1**, entries 5 and 7–11). It is noteworthy that KO<sup>t</sup>Bu, NaO<sup>t</sup>Bu, and KHMDS led to comparable yields (**Table 1**, entries 5, 7, and 8). Toluene and a temperature of 110 °C proved to be more suitable (**Table 1**, entries 5 and 12–16). It is worth mentioning that, at a higher temperature of 120 °C, a diminished yield resulted with more unidentified side products being observed (**Table 1**, entry 13). Pleasingly, a very good 75% isolated yield resulted in the 1 mmol scale reaction (**Table 1**, entry 5<sup>c</sup>). A mercury test indicated a homogeneous reaction (**Table 1**, entry 5<sup>d</sup>).

With the optimized reaction conditions on hand, we then investigated the reaction scope in terms of the substrates. First, the scope of the primary alcohols was explored in the alkylation of 1-phenylethanol. To our delight, *para*-substituted benzyl alcohols with electron-donating or -withdrawing groups reacted smoothly (**Table 2**, **3b–h**). Notably, this method was also applicable to some challenging substrates such as those bearing –Br or –CF<sub>3</sub> functional groups (**Table 2**, **3g,h**), furnishing moderate to good yields. *Meta*-substituted substrates delivered the corresponding alcohol products in moderate to very good yields (**Table 2**, **3i–l**). It is noteworthy that the sterically hindered *ortho*-substituted 2-methylbenzyl alcohol afforded a very good 85% yield (**Table 2**, **3m**). However, 2-fluorobenzyl alcohol only resulted in a 19% yield, probably due to the coordination of the –F functionality to the catalyst, diminishing its reactivity. Aliphatic primary alcohols were amenable to this method as well (**Table 2**, **3r–t**). Next, a series of secondary alcohols were examined to couple benzyl alcohol. Pleasingly, for aromatic secondary alcohols, –OMe, –F, –CF<sub>3</sub>, and naphthalene functional groups were well tolerated in this method (**Table 2**, **3u–z**). Challenging aliphatic secondary alcohols were alkylated with benzyl alcohols leading to satisfactory yields, albeit under relatively harsher conditions (**Table 2**, **3aa–ac**). This is likely due to the difficulty in the dehydrogenation of aliphatic secondary alcohols.<sup>15</sup> Notably, aliphatic secondary alcohols also coupled with aliphatic primary alcohols by this method. 2-Hexanol reacted with 1-hexanol, affording 5-dodecanol in a good 66% yield. (**Table 2**, **3ad**).

Next, we carried out a preliminary mechanistic study to understand the reaction and elucidate the selectivity switching. In our prior work, ketone is the major product via the ADC process.<sup>18</sup> It is rational to surmise that the selective alcohol formation may originate from further reduction of the *in situ* formed ketone. To examine this hypothesis, we performed the transfer hydrogenation of 3-phenylpropiophenone (**4a**) with 3 equiv of **1a** as the hydrogen source. We found that 80 mol % of KO<sup>t</sup>Bu alone can efficiently reduce **4a** to **3a** to furnish a 90% yield, supporting a base-mediated Meerwein–Ponndorf–Verley (MPV) pathway.<sup>20,21</sup> However, a drastically lower KO<sup>t</sup>Bu loading of 2.5 mol % also leads to a 71% yield of **3a**.<sup>18</sup> An interesting question arises: why is excess base still required in the alcohol synthesis by the  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary alcohols? We then performed the same reaction in the presence of 5 mol % of A and 90 mol % of KO<sup>t</sup>Bu.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, a lower 78% yield of **3a** was observed in comparison to that with 80 mol % KO<sup>t</sup>Bu alone, suggesting that the Co species may have a negative effect on the hydrogenation of **4a** in the presence of excess base. As A has been recognized to be an efficient precatalyst for the dehydrogenation of secondary alcohols from our prior work,<sup>15</sup> the alcohol products could be dehydrogenated back to the ketones. In addition, in the  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary

Table 2.  $\beta$ -Alkylation of Secondary Alcohols with Primary Alcohols to Selectively Form Alcohols<sup>a,b</sup>

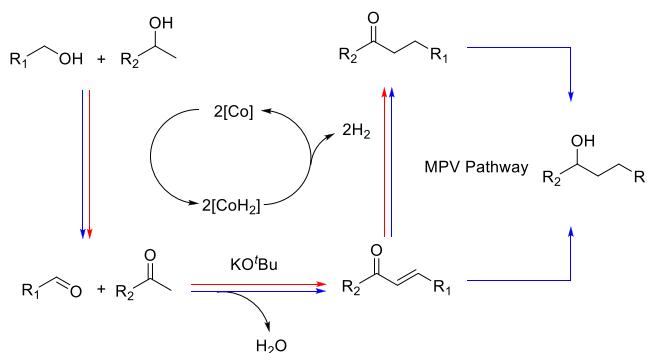
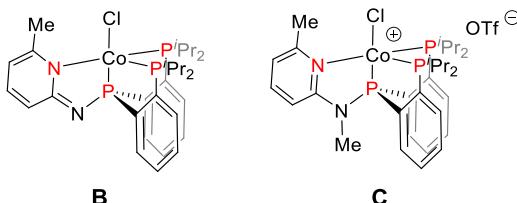
<sup>a</sup>Reaction conditions unless specified otherwise: secondary alcohols (0.375 mmol), primary alcohols (0.25 mmol), **A** (0.7 mol %), KO<sup>t</sup>Bu (110 mol %), and toluene (1.5 mL) were heated at 110 °C in a closed 15 mL reaction tube for 24 h under N<sub>2</sub>. <sup>b</sup><sup>1</sup>H NMR yield using 1,3,5-trimethoxybenzene as internal standard. <sup>c</sup>NaO<sup>t</sup>Bu (110 mol %). <sup>d</sup>48 h. <sup>e</sup>**A** (7.5 mol %), KO<sup>t</sup>Bu (55 mol %), 125 °C. <sup>f</sup>**A** (7.5 mol %), 125 °C.

alcohols to form alcohols, a higher **A** loading results in a lower yield with more unidentified side products being generated (Table 1, entries 4 and 5). To counter these competitive and undesirable reactions mediated by the Co species, excess base is required to enhance the MPV process. In contrast, with regard to the selective ketone formation, a higher **A** loading (2.5 mol %), a catalytic amount of base (7.5 mol %), and an open system are more feasible to circumvent the MPV reaction and promote the dehydrogenation of alcohols. Note that the base is still needed for the Co precatalyst activation, the aldol condensation of the *in situ* formed aldehydes and ketones, and the reduction of the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ketone intermediates to the ketone products.<sup>18</sup> Very recently, we have presented a switchable imine and amine synthesis catalyzed by **A**, where the base loading also plays a critical role.<sup>17</sup> Overall, these results demonstrate the high versatility of our Co catalytic system in control of the products in these transformations.

Finally, two exemplary derivatives of **A** were investigated (Figure 1). Complex **B**, featuring a dearomatized pyridine ring,

showed activity comparable to that of **A**, resulting in a 76% yield, demonstrating that **B** is also an efficient precatalyst. It is noteworthy that **C** bearing an N-Me linker rather than the N-H linker on **A** leads to a comparable yield of 74%, suggesting that metal ligand cooperativity (MLC) that could originate from the N-H linker on **A** may not play a critical role in this reaction.

Considering our experimental findings<sup>18</sup> and the literature,<sup>3,4</sup> we propose a plausible mechanism for the switchable alcohol/ketone formations (Scheme 2). Initially, primary and secondary alcohols are dehydrogenated by the Co catalyst to the corresponding aldehydes and ketones, respectively, which

Scheme 2. Proposed Mechanism<sup>a</sup>Figure 1. Complexes **B** and **C** examined.

<sup>a</sup>Red for the ketone formation and blue for the alcohol formation.

then undergo base-mediated condensation to generate the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ketone intermediates with the depletion of water. The Co catalyst is regenerated by releasing hydrogen gas. At low base loadings, the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ketones are reduced to the ketone products via the MPV process.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, in the presence of excess amount of base, the ketones that formed are further reduced, furnishing alcohols as the final products. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that the  $\alpha,\beta$ -unsaturated ketones could be directly reduced to the alcohols. It is worth noting that, in the alcohol-forming reaction, the generated hydrogen gas might go back into the reaction system.<sup>4b,l</sup> A comprehensive mechanistic study is currently underway in our laboratory.

In conclusion, we have presented a well-defined Co catalyst for the  $\beta$ -alkylation of secondary alcohols with primary alcohols to selectively form alcohols using a remarkably low catalyst loading of 0.7 mol %. Our study provides an alternative solution for the switchable synthesis of alcohols and ketones, which is environmentally benign and atom- and process-efficient. We expect this work will contribute to advanced catalyst design with base transition metals for selective and sustainable chemical transformations.

## ■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

### SI Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.organomet.1c00147>.

Experimental details and NMR spectral data (PDF)

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<https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.organomet.1c00147>

### Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

## ■ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge support from the National Science Foundation (CHE-1465051 and MRI CHE-1626549). We also thank FRCAC, URECA, and the Clean Energy Fee Funds of MTSU for support.

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