The Calculus of Anti-Derivatives, Reimagined:
From Potentials and Integrals to Differential Forms

A Unified View of Vector Calculus

July 20, 2025

Abstract

This lecture builds a bridge between the familiar concepts of multivariable calculus and the language of differential forms, guided by the single, unifying theme of the **anti-derivative**. We will see that the search for a potential function for a vector field (the anti-derivative of a gradient) and the reconstruction of a function from its Jacobian are two facets of the same fundamental question in the world of forms: given a differential form α, can we find its "anti-derivative" β such that $\alpha = d\beta$? We will explore the correspondences:

$$\underbrace{f}_{\Omega^0} \xrightarrow{d} \underbrace{df}_{\Omega^1} \longleftrightarrow \underbrace{\nabla f}_{\substack{\text{gradient}\\ \text{vector field}}} \qquad \text{and} \qquad \underbrace{\mathbf{F}}_{(\Omega^0)^m} \xrightarrow{d} \underbrace{d\mathbf{F}}_{\Omega^1 \otimes \mathbb{R}^m} \longleftrightarrow \underbrace{D\mathbf{F}}_{\substack{\text{Jacobian}\\ \text{matrix}}}$$

1 Part 1: The Scalar Case – The Potential as an Anti-Derivative

The story of the anti-derivative begins in first-semester calculus and finds its first deep generalization in the concept of a potential function for a conservative vector field.

1.1 From Calculus to Vector Calculus

- **Calculus 1:** The anti-derivative reverses differentiation. If we have a function's derivative, $g(x) = f'(x)$, we find the original function by integrating: $f(x) = \int g(x)\,dx$.
- **Vector Calculus:** The concept of a **potential function** is the direct generalization of this. For a vector field $\mathbf{F}$, its potential function is a scalar function f such that $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$. The vector field is the derivative (the gradient) of the potential function.

Guiding Question 1.1. In vector calculus, we ask: "Given a vector field $\mathbf{F}$, is it **conservative**?" This is precisely the anti-derivative question: "Does there exist a potential function f such that $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$?"

1.2 Recasting the Question in the Language of Forms

Core Idea 1.1 (The Gradient/1-Form Correspondence)**.** A vector field $\mathbf{F} = \langle F_1, \ldots, F_n \rangle$ corresponds to a 1-form $\alpha = F_1 dx_1 + \cdots + F_n dx_n$. A potential function f is a 0-form. The relation $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$ translates perfectly to the language of forms as $\alpha = df$.

Therefore, our guiding question becomes:

*"Given a 1-form α, is it **exact**?"*

Answering "yes" means we have found the anti-derivative (the 0-form f).

1.3 Penetrating Example: Gravitational Potential Energy

Consider the force of gravity near the Earth's surface, acting on a mass m.

- **The Vector Field (The Derivative):** The force is a vector field $\mathbf{F}_g = \langle 0, -mg \rangle$.
- **The Corresponding 1-Form:** $\alpha_g = 0 \cdot dx + (-mg) \cdot dy = -mg\, dy$.
- **The Anti-Derivative Question:** Can we find a scalar potential function $U(x, y)$ such that $\mathbf{F}_g = -\nabla U$? (The negative sign is conventional for potential energy). In the language of forms, can we find a 0-form U such that $\alpha_g = -dU$?
- **Finding the Anti-Derivative by Integration:** We need to solve $-dU = -mg\, dy$, which means $dU = mg\, dy$.

  $$\frac{\partial U}{\partial x} dx + \frac{\partial U}{\partial y} dy = 0 \cdot dx + mg \cdot dy$$

  Comparing coefficients of the differentials:

  1. $\frac{\partial U}{\partial x} = 0$. Integrating with respect to x tells us $U(x, y)$ does not depend on x, so $U(x, y) = h(y)$ for some function h of y alone.
  2. $\frac{\partial U}{\partial y} = mg$. Substituting $U = h(y)$, we get $h'(y) = mg$.
  3. We find the anti-derivative of $h'(y)$ by integrating: $h(y) = \int mg\, dy = mgy + C$.

  We have found the anti-derivative! It is the 0-form $U(x, y) = mgy + C$, the familiar formula for gravitational potential energy. The 1-form α_g is exact because we successfully found its anti-derivative (potential).

- **The Payoff (The Fundamental Theorem):** The work done by gravity moving from point $\mathbf{a}$ to $\mathbf{b}$ is $\int_C \mathbf{F}_g \cdot d\vec{r}$. Because we found an anti-derivative, we can use the Fundamental Theorem for Line Integrals:

  $$W = \int_C \mathbf{F}_g \cdot d\vec{r} = \int_C -\nabla U \cdot d\vec{r} = -\int_C dU = -(U(\mathbf{b}) - U(\mathbf{a})) = -\Delta U$$

  The ability to find an anti-derivative (a potential) is what makes the work path-independent and allows us to use the Fundamental Theorem.

2 Part 2: The Vector Case – Reconstructing a Function from its Jacobian

In the vector case, the "derivative" is the Jacobian matrix. The "anti-derivative" process is about reconstructing the original vector function from its complete set of differential relations (i.e., from its Jacobian).

2.1 The Derivative as the Jacobian

A map $\mathbf{F} : \mathbb{R}^n \to \mathbb{R}^m$ has its derivative information encoded in the Jacobian matrix $D\mathbf{F}$. In the language of forms, this corresponds to the vector of 1-forms $d\mathbf{F}$.

Core Idea 2.1 (The Jacobian/Vector of 1-Forms Correspondence)**.** The Jacobian matrix $D\mathbf{F}$ is the matrix of coefficients for the vector of 1-forms $d\mathbf{F}$.

$$d\mathbf{F} = \begin{pmatrix} dF_1 \\ \vdots \\ dF_m \end{pmatrix} = \underbrace{\begin{pmatrix} \frac{\partial F_1}{\partial x_1} & \cdots & \frac{\partial F_1}{\partial x_n} \\ \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ \frac{\partial F_m}{\partial x_1} & \cdots & \frac{\partial F_m}{\partial x_n} \end{pmatrix}}_{D\mathbf{F}} \begin{pmatrix} dx_1 \\ \vdots \\ dx_n \end{pmatrix}$$

Guiding Question 2.1. Our new anti-derivative question is: "Given a matrix of functions which we suspect is a Jacobian (or equivalently, a vector of 1-forms), can we find the original vector function $\mathbf{F}$ that produced it?"

2.2 Penetrating Example: Reconstructing Polar Coordinates

Let's pretend we don't know the formulas for polar coordinates, but an experiment has given us the differential relationships between the Cartesian and polar systems.

- **The Given "Derivative" Data (The Vector of 1-Forms):** We are given the following relationships, which describe how infinitesimal steps dr and $d\theta$ translate into steps dx and dy.

  $$dx = \cos\theta\, dr - r\sin\theta\, d\theta$$
  $$dy = \sin\theta\, dr + r\cos\theta\, d\theta$$

  This is our given vector of 1-forms, $\alpha = \begin{pmatrix} \alpha_1 \\ \alpha_2 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} dx \\ dy \end{pmatrix}$. The matrix of coefficients is our presumed Jacobian.

- **The Anti-Derivative Question:** Can we find a vector function (a vector of 0-forms) $\mathbf{F}(r,\theta) = \begin{pmatrix} x(r,\theta) \\ y(r,\theta) \end{pmatrix}$ such that $d\mathbf{F} = \alpha$? This means we need to solve $dx(r,\theta) = \alpha_1$ and $dy(r,\theta) = \alpha_2$ simultaneously.

- **Finding the Anti-Derivative by Integration (Component 1):** Let's find $x(r,\theta)$ by "integrating" the 1-form $\alpha_1 = \cos\theta\, dr - r\sin\theta\, d\theta$.

1. We know $dx = \frac{\partial x}{\partial r} dr + \frac{\partial x}{\partial \theta} d\theta$. By comparing coefficients with α_1, we must have:

$$\frac{\partial x}{\partial r} = \cos\theta \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{\partial x}{\partial \theta} = -r\sin\theta$$

2. Let's find the anti-derivative of the first equation with respect to r, treating θ as a constant:

$$x(r,\theta) = \int \cos\theta\, dr = r\cos\theta + C(\theta)$$

   The "constant" of integration can depend on θ, since θ was held constant.

3. Now, we use our second piece of information. We differentiate our result for $x(r,\theta)$ with respect to θ and see if it matches.

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial \theta}\left(r\cos\theta + C(\theta)\right) = -r\sin\theta + C'(\theta)$$

   We must have $-r\sin\theta + C'(\theta) = -r\sin\theta$. This implies $C'(\theta) = 0$, so $C(\theta)$ is a true constant. We can choose this constant to be zero.

We have successfully reconstructed the first component: $x(r,\theta) = r\cos\theta$.

- **Finding the Anti-Derivative by Integration (Component 2):** We repeat the process for $y(r,\theta)$ using $\alpha_2 = \sin\theta\, dr + r\cos\theta\, d\theta$.

1. Compare coefficients: $\frac{\partial y}{\partial r} = \sin\theta$ and $\frac{\partial y}{\partial \theta} = r\cos\theta$.
2. Find the anti-derivative with respect to r: $y(r,\theta) = \int \sin\theta\, dr = r\sin\theta + K(\theta)$.
3. Differentiate with respect to θ and check for consistency:

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial \theta}\left(r\sin\theta + K(\theta)\right) = r\cos\theta + K'(\theta)$$

   We must have $r\cos\theta + K'(\theta) = r\cos\theta$, which implies $K'(\theta) = 0$.

We have reconstructed the second component: $y(r,\theta) = r\sin\theta$.

- **The Payoff (The Reconstructed Function):** By performing this systematic "anti-differentiation", we have recovered the original vector function from its derivative data:

$$\mathbf{F}(r,\theta) = \begin{pmatrix} r\cos\theta \\ r\sin\theta \end{pmatrix}$$

The Jacobian of this recovered function is, of course, the matrix of coefficients we started with.

3 Conclusion

Viewing the relationship between vector calculus and differential forms through the lens of integration and anti-derivatives reveals a profound unity.

1. The search for a **potential function** for a conservative field is the search for the 0-form anti-derivative of a given 1-form.

2. The reconstruction of a **coordinate transformation** from its differential relations is the search for the vector of 0-forms that is the anti-derivative of a given vector of 1-forms.

In both cases, the core mathematical task is the same: to solve the equation $\alpha = d\beta$ for β. This integral perspective shows that the language of forms is not just a new notation, but a framework that unifies the fundamental inverse problems of calculus across all dimensions.