THE LAPLACE-DE RAHM OPERATOR ON A RIEMANNIAN MANIFOLD

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In $\mathbb{R}^2$, we know about the standard Laplace operator on $C^\infty(\mathbb{R}^2)$

$$\Delta = \frac{\partial^2}{\partial x^2} + \frac{\partial^2}{\partial y^2}$$

In a more general setting, let (M, g) be a Riemannian manifold. We can define an analogous operator

$$\Delta = \operatorname{div}(\operatorname{grad} f)$$

In local coordinates (x^i), we have that for $f \in C^\infty(M)$ and $X \in \mathfrak{X}(M)$

$$\operatorname{grad} f = g^{ij} \frac{\partial f}{\partial x^i} \frac{\partial}{\partial x^j}$$

$$\operatorname{div} X = \frac{1}{\sqrt{\det g_{ij}}} \frac{\partial}{\partial x^i} \left((X^i \sqrt{\det g_{ij}} \right)$$

Where g_{ij} is the symmetric matrix given by $g_{ij} = \langle \partial_i, \partial_j \rangle$ and g^{ij} is the inverse of g_{ij}. This gives the coordinate formula for

$$\Delta f = \frac{1}{\sqrt{g_{ij}}} \frac{\partial}{\partial x^i} \left(g^{ij} \sqrt{\det g_{ij}} \frac{\partial f}{\partial x^j} \right)$$

Which using the standard metric $g_{ij} = \delta_{ij}$ on $\mathbb{R}^2$ recovers the standard Laplacian. However, we want to generalize Δ to arbitrary differential forms, which requires us to construct a bit of machinery.

To do this, we first note that the metric g determines an inner product on each tangent space T_pM where $\langle v, w \rangle = g_p(v, w)$. From this, we can construct an inner product on the alternating tensors $\Lambda^k(T_pM)$, which will give us a smoothly varying inner product on $\Omega^K(M)$. To do this, we will use the fact that g determines a bundle isomorphism $TM \to T^*M$ via the mapping $(x, v) \mapsto (x, \langle v, \cdot \rangle)$.

Proposition 1.1. *For a Riemannian manifold (M, g), there is a unique inner product on each $\Lambda^k(T_pM)$ characterized by the formula*

$$\langle \omega^1 \wedge \ldots \wedge w^k, \eta^1 \wedge \ldots \wedge \eta^k = \det \left(\langle (\omega^i)^\sharp, (\eta^j)^\sharp \right) \rangle$$

Where $\sharp$ is the index raising operator $\omega_i dx^i \mapsto g^{ij} \omega_j \frac{\partial}{\partial x^i}$.

Proof. We define the inner product locally in terms of an orthonomal frame E_i, and show that it is independent of the choice of frame. Let ε^i denote the coframe to E_i. We first claim that the set of ε^I where I is a strictly increasing multi-index of length k form an orthonormal basis. To see this, we compute

$$\langle \varepsilon^I, \varepsilon^J \rangle = \det \left(E_{i_k}, E_{j_\ell} \right)$$

We note that this is 1 if and only if $I = J$, since then the matrix we are taking the determinant of is $\operatorname{id}_{\mathbb{R}^k}$, otherwise, I contains some i_k not in J, which implies the k^{th} row of the matrix is 0, so the determinant is 0. This then defines an inner product by extending linearly to arbitrary k-forms.

To show that this is independent of our choice of frame, let B_i be another orthonormal frame with coframe β^i. Then we know that $B_i = A_i^j E_j$ with smooth functions A_j^i forming an orthogonal matrix every point. We then compute

$$\begin{aligned} \langle \beta^I, \beta^J \rangle &= \det \langle B_{i_k}, B_{j_\ell} \rangle \\ &= \det \langle A_{i_k}^j E_j, A_{j_\ell}^p E_p \rangle \end{aligned}$$

Noting that $A_{i_k}^j E_j$ is just the i_k^{th} column of the matrix A, we have that this is equal to $\det\langle A_{i_k}, A_{j_\ell}\rangle$. Again, if $I = J$, this is just the identity matrix, but if $I \neq J$, there will be a row of zeroes in the matrix $\langle A_{i_k}, A_{j_\ell}$, so the determinant will be 0. This shows that $\langle \cdot, \cdot \rangle$ is uniquely characterized. ∎

We can then use this inner product to produce an important operator. Recall that given a function $f \in C^\infty(M)$, we can define the integral of f over M by integrating the n-form $f dV_g$, which is a bundle homomorphism $\Omega^0(M) \to \Omega^n(M)$. We can generalize this to arbitrary k forms.

Proposition 1.2. *For every $k \in \{0, \dots n\}$, there exists a unique bundle homomorphism*

$$\star : \Omega^k(M) \to \Omega^{n-k}(M)$$

such that for any $\omega, \eta \in \Omega^k(M)$, we have that $\omega \wedge \star\eta = \langle \omega, \eta \rangle dV_g$ and dV_g is the Riemannian volume form.

Proof. We first prove uniqueness. Let ε^i be the coframe to an orthonomal basis E_i. Then for and increasing index set I of length k, we have that $\star$ must satisify

$$\varepsilon \wedge \star\varepsilon^I = dV_g$$

Therefore, we must have that $\star\varepsilon^I = \pm\varepsilon^J$, where $I \cup J = \{1, \dots n\}$ and J is an increasing index and the sign are chosen such that when we permute I and J to be in increasing order, the sign chosen for $\star\varepsilon^I$ cancel the ones that come from the permutation, since otherwise, $\varepsilon \wedge \star\varepsilon^I = 0$. This uniquely characterizes $\star$ on a basis, so it uniquely extends linearly to $\Omega^k(M)$. ∎

One observation we make is that $\star\star\varepsilon^I = (-1)^{k(n-k)}\varepsilon^I$,which can be verified by shuffling the wedge products and carefully tracking signs. This extends to all k-forms, so $\star\star\omega = (-1)^{k(n-k)}\omega$. Another observation is that this determines a bundle *isomorphism* $\Omega^k(M) \to \Omega^{n-k}(M)$, since it maps an orthonormal basis to an orthonormal basis. The form $\star\omega$ is often referred to as the ***Hodge dual*** to ω.