

Cohen Forcing

Ryan Tay

some date

work in progress

Contents

1	A Countable Transitive Model of ZFC?	2
1.1	A Continuation from Model Theory	2
1.2	Only a Sith Deals in Absolutes	2
	Bibliography and References	5

1 A Countable Transitive Model of ZFC?

1.1 A Continuation from Model Theory

So you wish to prove that the continuum hypothesis (CH), the assertion that $2^{\aleph_0} = \aleph_1$, is independent of the axioms of ZFC set theory. You take a class in model theory and you learn that one can show this by showing that $\text{ZFC} + \text{CH}$ and $\text{ZFC} + \neg\text{CH}$ are both consistent. The typical approach is to exhibit models of $\text{ZFC} + \text{CH}$ and $\text{ZFC} + \neg\text{CH}$. So let us try to do that.

Stop. You realise that a model of $\text{ZFC} + \text{CH}$ (or $\text{ZFC} + \neg\text{CH}$) will, in particular, also be a model of ZFC. Darn. The whole point of ZFC set theory was that it was supposed to be able to formalise (most of)¹ the mathematics we do in our day-to-day lives. A certain pesky Kurt Gödel prevents us from explicitly exhibiting such a model.

But who is going to stop us from simply running off with the assumption that ZFC is consistent?² If we do this, then we can hope to obtain a theorem and proof of the following form.

Theorem

If ZFC is consistent, then $\text{ZFC} + \text{CH}$ and $\text{ZFC} + \neg\text{CH}$ are consistent.

Proof. Let M be a model of ZFC. [Black magic]. Therefore we have obtained a model M' of $\text{ZFC} + \text{CH}$ and a model M'' of $\text{ZFC} + \neg\text{CH}$. \square

In such a proof as above, M' and M'' will presumably be created from M . But at this point, we have no information about M , other than that it models ZFC. Our goal is to improve this model M to a *countable transitive* model of ZFC. By “transitive”, we mean transitive with respect to the membership relation \in . That is, if $x \in y \in M$, then $x \in M$.

To get a countable model of ZFC is fairly easy. Recall the Löwenheim–Skolem theorem, asserting that theories in first-order logic are unable to control the cardinalities of their infinite models.

Theorem (The Löwenheim–Skolem Theorem)

Let T be a consistent \mathcal{L} -theory. Suppose there exists an infinite model of T . Then for all cardinals $\kappa \geq |\mathcal{L}| + \aleph_0$, there exists a model of T of cardinality κ .

A special case of this theorem, which also arises from the proof of Gödel’s completeness theorem via Henkin terms, is that if a language \mathcal{L} is countable, then a consistent \mathcal{L} -theory T has an infinite model if and only if it has a countably infinite model.

In particular, as any model of ZFC must be infinite, there must also exist a countable model of ZFC.

1.2 Only a Sith Deals in Absolutes

Why do we even want to get a countable transitive model of ZFC in the first place?

We want a countable model so we are able to access things from *outside* of the model. This lets adjoin new elements, such as real numbers, to the model, because there are uncountably many real numbers out in the metatheory. This is not unlike a field extension.

Transitive models are desirable due to the fact that they make a lot of formulas “absolute”.

Definition

Let M and N be \mathcal{L} -structures with $M \subseteq N$ and let $\varphi(x_1, \dots, x_n)$ be an \mathcal{L} -formula with n free variables. We say that $\varphi(x_1, \dots, x_n)$ is absolute between M and N if, for all $a_1, \dots, a_n \in M$,

$$M \models \varphi(a_1, \dots, a_n) \text{ if and only if } N \models \varphi(a_1, \dots, a_n).$$

¹Category theory jumpscare.

²If you are an amused reader from the future with the knowledge that ZFC is inconsistent, how is the climate doing? Thought so. Focus on your own problems.

Replacing “if and only if” in the definition above with “if” gives us the notion of downwards absoluteness, whereas replacing “if and only if” with “only if” gives us the notion of upwards absoluteness. Formulas which are absolute between structures M and N , with $M \subseteq N$, are great because they really do let us view N as a certain kind of extension of M .

Atomic formulas are always absolute between M and N whenever M is a substructure of N . This is pretty much by definition: an \mathcal{L} -structure M is a substructure of an \mathcal{L} -structure N if the domain of M is a subset of the domain of N and the inclusion function $\iota: M \rightarrow N$ is an injective homomorphism of \mathcal{L} -structures. Consequently, propositional connectives of atomic formulas are also always absolute between substructures.

But things become icky when we introduce quantifiers. We cannot simply “add” things to a model and expect it to preserve the truth of formulas in the original structure.

Example

Consider the language \mathcal{L}_\in of set theory, which only consists of one relation symbol \in , and has no constant symbols or function symbols. So the only atomic formulas are of the form $x = y$ or $x \in y$, for variables x and y . All the “interesting” formulas are not going to be propositional connectives of atomic formulas.

Let M be a model of ZFC and let \emptyset be the empty set in M . We extend M by letting $N := M \cup \{*\}$ declaring $* \in^N \emptyset$. Then

$$M \models \forall z.(z \notin \emptyset),$$

but

$$N \not\models \forall z.(z \notin \emptyset).$$

Thus even very simple formulas, such as $\varphi_\emptyset(x) := \forall z.(z \notin x)$ asserting that x is empty, are not absolute between M and N . \square

Of particular interest are formulas which are absolute between some model and the ambient universe in the metatheory.

Definition

Let M be an \mathcal{L}_\in -structure. An \mathcal{L}_\in -formula $\varphi(x_1, \dots, x_n)$ is said to be absolute for M if, for all $a_1, \dots, a_n \in M$,

$$M \models \varphi(a_1, \dots, a_n) \text{ if and only if } \varphi(a_1, \dots, a_n) \text{ is true.}$$

If our metatheory is ZFC set theory, then the above “ $\varphi(a_1, \dots, a_n)$ is true” is interpreted as $\text{ZFC} \vdash \varphi(a_1, \dots, a_n)$. As before, we similarly have the notions of a formula being upwards absolute and downwards absolute for an \mathcal{L}_\in -structure M .

Definition

An \mathcal{L}_\in -structure M is said to be transitive if, for all $x \in M$ and $y \in x$, we have $y \in M$.

Phrased differently, a transitive \mathcal{L}_\in -structure M is one such that for all $x \in M$ we have $x \subseteq M$.

The idea is that if M is a *transitive* model of ZFC, then lots of formulas are absolute for M . Consequently, if we have a transitive models M and N of ZFC with $M \subseteq N$, then we can really view N as a particularly neat extension of M .

Recall that Δ_0 is the smallest class of all \mathcal{L}_\in -formulas containing the atomic formulas and is closed under propositional connectives and bounded quantification. By bounded quantification, we mean quantifiers of the form $\forall x \in y.\varphi$ or $\exists x \in y.\varphi$.

Lemma

If φ is a Δ_0 formula in \mathcal{L}_\in , then φ is absolute for M for any transitive \mathcal{L}_\in -structure M .

Proof. By induction on φ . □

This is particularly neat because lots of familiar expressions in set theory are expressible as Δ_0 formulas.

Example

All of the following are expressible as Δ_0 formulas.

- $x = y$
- $x \in y$
- $x \subseteq y$
- $z = \{x\}$
- $z = \{x, y\}$
- $z = \langle x, y \rangle := \{\{x\}, \{x, y\}\}$
- $z = \emptyset$
- $z = x \cup y$
- $z = x \cap y$
- $z = x \setminus y$
- $z = x \cup \{x\}$
- z is transitive
- $z = \bigcup x$
- z is an ordered pair
- $z = x \times y$
- z is a relation
- $z = \text{dom}(R)$ and R is a relation
- $z = \text{ran}(R)$ and R is a relation
- f is a function
- f is an injective function
- f is a surjective function
- f is a bijective function. □

Have I convinced you that transitive \mathcal{L}_\in -structures are great yet? If not, then check this out. In attempting to build a countable transitive model of ZFC, simply ensuring that our structure is transitive will yield several axioms of ZFC.

Lemma

If M is a transitive \mathcal{L}_\in -structure, then

$$M \models \text{Extensionality} + \text{Foundation}.$$

If, furthermore, for all $x, y \in M$ we have $\{x, y\} \in M$ and $\bigcup x \in M$, then

$$M \models \text{Extensionality} + \text{Foundation} + \text{Pairing} + \text{Union}.$$

Proof. Just do it. □

Woohoo. Only infinitely many more axioms to go...

Bibliography and References

- Paul Joseph Cohen. The independence of the continuum hypothesis. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 50(6):1143–1148, 1963.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.50.6.1143>.
- Paul Joseph Cohen. The independence of the continuum hypothesis, II. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 51(1):105–110, 1964.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.51.1.105>.
- Mirna Džamonja. *Fast Track to Forcing*, volume 98 of *London Mathematical Society Student Texts*. Cambridge University Press, 2020.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108303866>.
- Kurt Gödel. The consistency of the axiom of choice and of the generalized continuum-hypothesis. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 24(12):556–557, 1938.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.24.12.556>.
- Kurt Gödel. *The Consistency of the Continuum Hypothesis*. Princeton University Press, 1940.
URL: <https://archive.org/details/dli.ernet.469738>.
- Lorenz J. Halbeisen. *Combinatorial Set Theory: With a Gentle Introduction to Forcing*. Springer International Publishing, 2nd edition, 2017.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60231-8>.
- Thomas Jech. *Set Theory: The Third Millennium Edition, revised and expanded*. Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 2003.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-44761-X>.
- Asaf Karagila. Axiomatic set theory. Lectures for the first semester of the academic year 2016–2017 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2017.
URL: <https://karagila.org/files/set-theory-2017.pdf>.
- Asaf Karagila. Forcing & Symmetric Extensions. Lectures for the academic year 2022–2023 at the University of Leeds, 2023.
URL: <https://karagila.org/files/Forcing-2023.pdf>.
- Charlotte Kestner. Part III Model Theory. Lectures for the Lent term of the academic year 2024–2025 at the University of Cambridge, 2025.
- Kenneth Kunen. *Set Theory: An Introduction to Independence Proofs*. North Holland Publishing Company, 1980.
URL: <https://archive.org/details/settheoryintrodu0000kune>.
- Benedikt Löwe. Part III Forcing and the Continuum Hypothesis. Lectures for the Lent term of the academic year 2024–2025 at the University of Cambridge, 2025.
- Saharon Shelah. *Proper Forcing*. Springer-Verlag Berlin Heidelberg, 1982.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-662-21543-2>.
- Nik Weaver. *Forcing For Mathematicians*. World Scientific Publishing Co. Pte. Ltd, 2014.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1142/8962>.