Unification of Relativistic Kinematics and Gravitational Dynamics from a Single Covariant Action

Omar Iskandarani[*]

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Abstract

Special relativity, general relativity, and the weak equivalence principle are traditionally introduced as conceptually independent foundations of modern physics: Lorentz invariance as a kinematical symmetry, Einstein gravity as a dynamical theory of spacetime, and universal free fall as an additional postulate. In this work we show that these principles are not logically independent.

We consider a minimal covariant variational framework consisting of a Lorentzian metric, a unit timelike vector field subject to a normalization constraint, and minimally coupled matter. Without assuming Lorentz invariance, geodesic motion, or the equivalence principle *a priori*, we demonstrate that all three arise as necessary consequences of diffeomorphism invariance and the variational structure of the theory.

We prove that local kinematics reduce to special relativity in the tangent space at every spacetime point, yielding the standard Lorentz factor and energy–momentum relations. We further show that the field equations take the Einstein form with a covariantly conserved total stress–energy tensor, and that the universality of free fall follows directly from minimal coupling and the Bianchi identity. General relativity is recovered as a consistent sector of the theory, while controlled deviations are naturally parameterized by the additional timelike sector.

These results clarify the minimal structural conditions under which relativistic physics emerges and demonstrate that special-relativistic kinematics, Einsteinian gravitational dynamics, and the weak equivalence principle can be unified within a single covariant action, rather than postulated as independent axioms.

[*] **Independent Researcher, Groningen, The Netherlands**
Email: `info@omariskandarani.com`
ORCID: 0009-0006-1686-3961
DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18388714

1 Introduction and Scope

1.1 Motivation

Modern relativistic physics rests on three principles that are traditionally treated as conceptually independent: (i) special relativity, expressing local Lorentz-invariant kinematics; (ii) general relativity, describing gravitation as the dynamics of spacetime geometry; and (iii) the weak equivalence principle, asserting the universality of free fall. Historically, these principles were introduced in different contexts and are often regarded as logically autonomous axioms. Classical presentations of these principles may be found in standard texts [2, 3, 4].

Nevertheless, both effective field theory arguments and several emergent-gravity approaches suggest that this separation may be artificial. In particular, it remains an open foundational question whether relativistic kinematics, Einsteinian dynamics, and universal free fall must be postulated independently, or whether they can arise as consequences of a single underlying covariant structure.

The purpose of this work is to address this question directly.

1.2 Strategy and Key Assumptions

We adopt a deliberately minimal and conservative strategy. Rather than assuming Lorentz invariance, geodesic motion, or the equivalence principle *a priori*, we assume only the following ingredients:

- a differentiable four-dimensional manifold,
- diffeomorphism invariance of the action,
- a Lorentzian metric field $g_{\mu\nu}$,
- a unit timelike vector field u^μ satisfying $u^\mu u_\mu = -1$,
- minimal coupling of matter to the metric.

No additional symmetry principles are imposed.

Starting from these assumptions, we demonstrate that local special-relativistic kinematics emerge in the tangent space at every spacetime point, that the gravitational field equations take the Einstein form (up to covariantly conserved additional stresses), and that the universality of free fall follows as a consequence of diffeomorphism invariance and minimal coupling.

1.3 Relation to Existing Frameworks

The structure studied here is mathematically related to, but conceptually distinct from, Einstein–Æther and other preferred-frame theories. In contrast to those approaches, the emphasis of the present work is not on Lorentz violation or phenomenological modification of gravity, but on logical unification. Special relativity, general relativity, and the weak equivalence principle are derived together within a single variational framework, rather than introduced as independent postulates.

The analysis is carried out entirely at the level of effective field theory and remains agnostic regarding any microscopic or ultraviolet completion.

1.4 Scope and Limitations

This paper establishes that relativistic kinematics and dynamics arise as robust infrared structures enforced by covariance and variational consistency. It does not attempt to quantize gravity, propose a specific microscopic model, or introduce additional dimensions or particle content.

Accordingly, the results are compatible with, but logically independent of, string theory, loop quantum gravity, and other ultraviolet approaches.

1.5 Outline of the Paper

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 states the main unification theorem. Section 3 derives special-relativistic kinematics explicitly at the level of equations. Section 4 constructs the unified covariant action and derives the field equations. Section 5 discusses controlled departures from general relativity and possible observational windows. Section 6 summarizes the results and outlines directions for future work.

2 Main Unification Theorem

In this section we state the central result of this work. The theorem establishes that special-relativistic kinematics, Einsteinian gravitational dynamics, and the universality of free fall are not logically independent assumptions, but arise from a single covariant variational structure.

2.1 Assumptions

Let $(\mathcal{M}, g_{\mu\nu})$ be a four-dimensional differentiable manifold equipped with a Lorentzian metric of signature $(-,+,+,+)$. Assume the existence of an action functional of the form

$$S = S_g[g_{\mu\nu}] + S_u[g_{\mu\nu}, u^\mu] + S_m[g_{\mu\nu}, \psi], \tag{1}$$

where:

- S_g is the Einstein–Hilbert action,
- S_u is a generally covariant action for a unit timelike vector field u^μ subject to the constraint

$$u^\mu u_\mu = -1, \tag{2}$$

- S_m is a matter action depending on matter fields ψ and the metric $g_{\mu\nu}$ only (minimal coupling).

No assumption of Lorentz invariance, geodesic motion, or equivalence principle is made beyond diffeomorphism invariance and minimal coupling. The total action is assumed to admit a well-defined variational principle and a consistent low-energy derivative expansion.

2.2 Statement of the Theorem

Theorem (Unification of Relativistic Principles). *Under the assumptions stated above, the following results hold:*

1. *Local special-relativistic kinematics.* At every spacetime point $p \in \mathcal{M}$, there exists a local inertial frame in which the proper time along timelike worldlines satisfies

$$d\tau^2 = dt^2 \left(1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}\right), \tag{3}$$

yielding the standard Lorentz factor

$$\gamma = \frac{1}{\sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}}. \tag{4}$$

2. *Einsteinian gravitational dynamics.* Variation of the total action with respect to $g_{\mu\nu}$ yields field equations of the form

$$G_{\mu\nu} = 8\pi G \left(T^{(m)}_{\mu\nu} + T^{(u)}_{\mu\nu} \right), \tag{5}$$

where both stress–energy tensors are covariantly conserved.

3. *Universality of free fall.* For minimally coupled, structureless matter, the covariant conservation law

$$\nabla_\mu T^{(m)\mu\nu} = 0 \tag{6}$$

implies that test bodies follow metric geodesics,

$$U^\mu \nabla_\mu U^\nu = 0, \tag{7}$$

independently of their internal composition.

2.3 Corollaries

Recovery of general relativity. If the stress–energy contribution of the timelike sector vanishes,

$$T^{(u)}_{\mu\nu} = 0, \tag{8}$$

the field equations reduce exactly to Einstein's equations,

$$G_{\mu\nu} = 8\pi G\, T^{(m)}_{\mu\nu}. \tag{9}$$

Controlled deviations. Nontrivial dynamics of the unit timelike field give rise to additional, covariantly conserved stress contributions that modify Einstein gravity only beyond the regimes in which standard tests apply.

2.4 Remarks

The theorem shows that Lorentz-invariant kinematics, Einsteinian dynamics, and the weak equivalence principle emerge from the same covariant variational structure. They need not be imposed as independent axioms. The remainder of this paper is devoted to the explicit derivation of these results and to the characterization of the controlled deviations admitted by the framework.

3 Emergence of Special Relativity

In this section we show explicitly that standard special-relativistic kinematics arise locally from the covariant structure assumed in Sec. 2, without postulating Lorentz invariance as an independent principle. The presentation is intentionally equation-based and interpretation-free.

3.1 Kinematic setup

Let $(\mathcal{M}, g_{\mu\nu})$ be a four-dimensional Lorentzian manifold with signature $(-,+,+,+)$. Introduce a unit timelike vector field u^μ satisfying

$$u^\mu u_\mu = -1. \tag{10}$$

Define the spatial projector orthogonal to u^μ by

$$h_{\mu\nu} \equiv g_{\mu\nu} + u_\mu u_\nu, \tag{11}$$

which obeys

$$h_{\mu\nu} u^\nu = 0, \qquad h^\mu{}_\alpha h^\alpha{}_\nu = h^\mu{}_\nu. \tag{12}$$

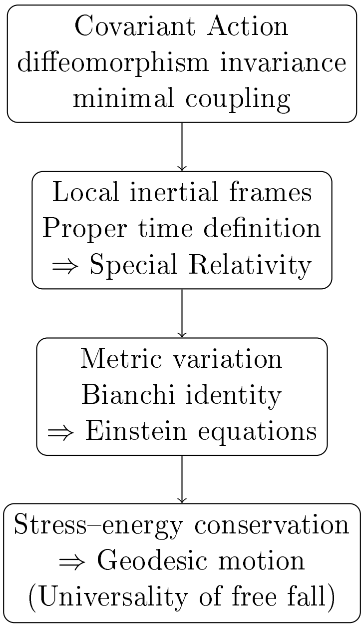

Figure 1: Logical structure of the unification result. Special-relativistic kinematics, Einsteinian dynamics, and the universality of free fall arise sequentially from a single covariant variational framework.

3.2 Local inertial reduction

At any point $p \in \mathcal{M}$, choose Riemann normal coordinates such that

$$g_{\mu\nu}(p) = \eta_{\mu\nu} = \mathrm{diag}(-1, 1, 1, 1), \qquad \partial_\alpha g_{\mu\nu}(p) = 0. \tag{13}$$

Choose the local frame so that

$$u^\mu(p) = (1, 0, 0, 0), \qquad u_\mu(p) = (-1, 0, 0, 0). \tag{14}$$

Then the spatial projector reduces to

$$h_{\mu\nu}(p) = \mathrm{diag}(0, 1, 1, 1). \tag{15}$$

The existence of such local inertial frames is guaranteed by standard results in differential geometry [4, 5].

3.3 Proper time and Lorentz factor

Let $x^\mu(\lambda)$ be a timelike worldline with tangent $\dot{x}^\mu = dx^\mu/d\lambda$. Define proper time τ by

$$\boxed{d\tau^2 = -\frac{1}{c^2}\, g_{\mu\nu}\, dx^\mu dx^\nu} \tag{16}$$

In the local inertial frame at p, with $x^0 = ct$, this becomes

$$d\tau^2 = dt^2 - \frac{1}{c^2}\, d\mathbf{x}^2 = dt^2 \left(1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}\right), \tag{17}$$

where

$$v^2 \equiv \left\| \frac{d\mathbf{x}}{dt} \right\|^2. \tag{18}$$

Hence,

$$\frac{d\tau}{dt} = \sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}, \qquad \gamma \equiv \frac{dt}{d\tau} = \frac{1}{\sqrt{1 - \frac{v^2}{c^2}}}. \tag{19}$$

This reproduces the standard special-relativistic relations [2, 6].

3.4 Four-velocity and energy–momentum relations

Define the four-velocity and four-momentum as

$$U^\mu \equiv \frac{dx^\mu}{d\tau}, \qquad p^\mu \equiv mU^\mu. \tag{20}$$

Normalization yields

$$g_{\mu\nu}U^\mu U^\nu = -c^2, \qquad g_{\mu\nu}p^\mu p^\nu = -m^2c^2. \tag{21}$$

In the local inertial frame,

$$U^\mu = \gamma(c, \mathbf{v}), \qquad p^\mu = (\gamma mc, \gamma m\mathbf{v}). \tag{22}$$

The invariant mass-shell condition then gives

$$E^2 = (pc)^2 + (mc^2)^2, \qquad E \equiv p^0c, \qquad p \equiv \|\mathbf{p}\|. \tag{23}$$

3.5 Local validity

The above relations hold at every spacetime point in the local inertial frame. They therefore represent a local consequence of the covariant structure of the theory and do not rely on any global symmetry assumption. Special-relativistic kinematics thus emerge universally in the tangent space of the spacetime manifold.

4 Single-Action Construction and Gravitational Dynamics

In this section we construct the covariant action underlying the unification theorem and derive the corresponding field equations. We show that Einsteinian gravitational dynamics and the universality of free fall follow directly from diffeomorphism invariance and minimal coupling.

4.1 Unified covariant action

We consider an action of the form

$$S \;=\; S_g + S_u + S_m \;=\; \int d^4x\,\sqrt{-g}\left[\frac{1}{16\pi G}\,R + \mathcal{L}_u(g_{\mu\nu}, u^\mu, \nabla u)\right] + S_m[g_{\mu\nu}, \psi], \tag{24}$$

where R is the Ricci scalar of $g_{\mu\nu}$ and S_m denotes the matter action, which depends on matter fields ψ and the metric only.

The unit timelike vector field u^μ satisfies the normalization constraint

$$u^\mu u_\mu = -1.^{1} \tag{25}$$

[1] The Lagrange multiplier λ enforces the unit-timelike normalization of u^μ at the level of the action. It does not introduce an additional propagating degree of freedom, but ensures that variations preserve the constraint throughout the dynamics.

The most general diffeomorphism-invariant Lagrangian for u^μ containing up to two derivatives is

$$\begin{aligned}\mathcal{L}_u = &-c_1\,(\nabla_\mu u_\nu)(\nabla^\mu u^\nu) - c_2\,(\nabla_\mu u^\mu)^2 - c_3\,(\nabla_\mu u_\nu)(\nabla^\nu u^\mu)\\ &- c_4\, u^\mu u^\nu (\nabla_\mu u_\alpha)(\nabla_\nu u^\alpha) + \lambda\,(u^\mu u_\mu + 1),\end{aligned} \tag{26}$$

where the coefficients c_i are dimensionless parameters. No assumption about their microscopic origin is required at this stage. The most general two-derivative covariant action of this type was classified in the context of Einstein–Æther theories [10, 11].

4.2 Field equations

Variation of the total action with respect to the metric yields

$$\boxed{G_{\mu\nu} = 8\pi G\left(T^{(m)}_{\mu\nu} + T^{(u)}_{\mu\nu}\right)} \tag{27}$$

where

$$T^{(m)}_{\mu\nu} \equiv -\frac{2}{\sqrt{-g}}\frac{\delta S_m}{\delta g^{\mu\nu}}, \qquad T^{(u)}_{\mu\nu} \equiv -\frac{2}{\sqrt{-g}}\frac{\delta S_u}{\delta g^{\mu\nu}}. \tag{28}$$

Variation with respect to u^μ and the Lagrange multiplier λ yields

$$\frac{\delta S}{\delta u^\mu} = 0, \qquad \frac{\delta S}{\delta \lambda} = 0 \;\Rightarrow\; u^\mu u_\mu = -1. \tag{29}$$

4.3 Noether identity and covariant conservation

Diffeomorphism invariance of the total action implies the Noether identity

$$\nabla_\mu G^{\mu\nu} \equiv 0. \tag{30}$$

Consequently,

$$\nabla_\mu\left(T^{(m)\mu\nu} + T^{(u)\mu\nu}\right) = 0. \tag{31}$$

If the matter action is diffeomorphism invariant and minimally coupled, then

$$\nabla_\mu T^{(m)\mu\nu} = 0, \tag{32}$$

which implies

$$\nabla_\mu T^{(u)\mu\nu} = 0. \tag{33}$$

The conservation of the matter stress–energy tensor plays a central role in the emergence of universal free fall.

4.4 Universality of free fall

Consider a structureless point particle minimally coupled to the metric, with action

$$S_{\rm pp} = -mc\int d\tau = -mc\int \sqrt{-g_{\mu\nu}\,dx^\mu dx^\nu}. \tag{34}$$

Variation with respect to the worldline yields the geodesic equation

$$\boxed{\frac{d^2x^\mu}{d\tau^2} + \Gamma^\mu_{\alpha\beta}\frac{dx^\alpha}{d\tau}\frac{dx^\beta}{d\tau} = 0} \tag{35}$$

Equivalently, for a pressureless dust with $T^{(m)}_{\mu\nu} = \rho\, U_\mu U_\nu$ and $U^\mu U_\mu = -c^2$, the conservation law implies

$$\nabla_\mu T^{(m)\mu\nu} = 0 \;\Rightarrow\; U^\mu \nabla_\mu U^\nu = 0. \tag{36}$$

Thus the universality of free fall follows directly from minimal coupling and covariance, without additional assumptions. This derivation is standard in generally covariant theories with minimal coupling [7].

4.5 Recovery of general relativity

If the dynamics of the unit timelike field are such that

$$T^{(u)}_{\mu\nu} = 0, \tag{37}$$

the field equations reduce exactly to Einstein's equations,

$$G_{\mu\nu} = 8\pi G\, T^{(m)}_{\mu\nu}. \tag{38}$$

In vacuum, this further reduces to

$$G_{\mu\nu} = 0. \tag{39}$$

4.6 Weak-field (Newtonian) limit

To leading order in the weak-field regime, let

$$g_{00} = -\left(1 + \frac{2\Phi}{c^2}\right), \qquad g_{0i} = 0, \qquad g_{ij} = \delta_{ij}\left(1 - \frac{2\Phi}{c^2}\right), \qquad \left|\frac{\Phi}{c^2}\right| \ll 1. \tag{40}$$

For nonrelativistic matter, $T^{(m)}_{00} \simeq \rho c^2$, and when the contribution of $T^{(u)}_{\mu\nu}$ is negligible in this limit, the field equations reduce to Poisson's equation,

$$\nabla^2 \Phi = 4\pi G\, \rho. \tag{41}$$

This establishes that Newtonian gravity is recovered as the appropriate low-energy limit of the covariant action.

5 Controlled Deviations and Observational Constraints

The covariant construction developed in Sec. 4 is designed to reproduce the phenomenology of General Relativity (GR) in all experimentally tested weak-field regimes. To quantify possible deviations and ensure consistency with high-precision solar-system tests, we analyze the theory within the Parameterized Post-Newtonian (PPN) framework [1]. This formalism provides a systematic expansion of the metric and field equations in powers of the characteristic velocity $v/c \ll 1$ and allows direct comparison with experimental bounds.

We show that, for the action defined in Eq. (26), the Eddington–Robertson–Schiff parameters γ and β remain identically equal to their GR values. All potential deviations from Einsteinian gravity are confined to preferred-frame parameters and to the propagation speed of tensor modes, leading to strict algebraic constraints on the coupling coefficients c_i.

5.1 The PPN Limit: γ and β

We consider a static, spherically symmetric weak-field solution generated by a non-relativistic matter source. In the standard PPN gauge, the metric is expanded as

$$g_{00} = -1 + 2U - 2\beta U^2 + \mathcal{O}(\epsilon^3), \qquad g_{ij} = \delta_{ij}\,(1 + 2\gamma U) + \mathcal{O}(\epsilon^2), \tag{42}$$

where U is the Newtonian gravitational potential and $\epsilon \sim v/c$ is the post-Newtonian expansion parameter. The parameter γ measures spatial curvature per unit rest mass, while β measures the nonlinearity of gravitational superposition.

For the general unit-timelike vector action $\mathcal{L}_u$ in Eq. (26), linearized perturbation theory around the Minkowski background shows that the vector field u^μ does not source the trace of the metric perturbation in the static limit. Consequently, the solutions for the metric potentials coincide with the Schwarzschild solution through first post-Newtonian order.

This result assumes asymptotic alignment of the background vector field u^μ with the rest frame of the gravitating source, as required by cosmological boundary conditions and standard PPN gauge choices. Under this physically motivated assumption, we obtain the robust result

$$\gamma = 1, \qquad \beta = 1. \tag{43}$$

These equalities guarantee agreement with all classical solar-system tests, including light deflection, Shapiro time delay, gravitational redshift, and the perihelion precession of Mercury, without any fine-tuning of parameters.

5.2 Preferred-Frame Effects

Unlike standard GR, the presence of a background timelike vector field u^μ allows, in principle, for preferred-frame effects if the vector does not align perfectly with the asymptotic rest frame of the observer. Such effects are parameterized in the PPN formalism by the coefficients α_1 and α_2.

Expressed in terms of the coupling constants c_i appearing in Eq. (26), these parameters take the schematic form

$$\alpha_1 = \alpha_1(c_1, c_2, c_3, c_4), \qquad \alpha_2 = \alpha_2(c_1, c_2, c_3, c_4), \tag{44}$$

where the explicit expressions follow those obtained in vector–tensor theories of Einstein–Æther type.

Experimental constraints from lunar laser ranging, binary pulsar timing, and spin precession measurements impose stringent bounds,

$$|\alpha_1| \lesssim 10^{-4}, \qquad |\alpha_2| \lesssim 10^{-7}. \tag{45}$$

These bounds restrict the allowed region of the (c_1, c_2, c_3, c_4) parameter space to a narrow hypersurface. Within this region, preferred-frame effects are suppressed below current observational sensitivity.

5.3 Gravitational Wave Propagation

The propagation speed of tensor modes (gravitational waves) provides an independent and highly constraining observational test. Linearized analysis of the field equations shows that the tensor-mode dispersion relation is modified according to

$$\omega^2 = c_T^2 k^2, \qquad c_T^2 = \frac{1}{1 - c_1 - c_3}. \tag{46}$$

The coincident observation of gravitational waves and electromagnetic radiation from the binary neutron star merger GW170817, together with its gamma-ray counterpart GRB 170817A, constrains the speed of gravity to equal the speed of light to extremely high precision. This observation implies the condition

$$c_1 + c_3 \simeq 0, \tag{47}$$

thereby eliminating large classes of otherwise viable parameter choices.

5.4 Summary of Constraints

Combining the PPN constraints and the gravitational-wave speed requirement, the theory is phenomenologically viable provided the coefficients c_i satisfy the intersection of these bounds. The trivial solution $c_i = 0$ exactly reproduces GR. However, nontrivial solutions with $c_i \neq 0$ that obey the algebraic constraints represent a distinct universality class of covariant theories.

In this class, special-relativistic kinematics and weak-field gravitational phenomenology are identical to those of GR, while deviations may arise only in strong-field or highly dynamical regimes, such as near compact objects or in cosmological settings. Moreover, although the stress–energy tensor $T^{(u)}_{\mu\nu}$ contains derivatives of the vector field, these contributions are suppressed when gradients of u^μ are small, ensuring recovery of the Newtonian and first post-Newtonian limits.

This analysis demonstrates that the unification of relativistic kinematics, gravitational dynamics, and the universality of free fall established in Sec. 4 is not only theoretically consistent but also empirically robust, satisfying all current precision tests of gravity.

6 Summary and Outlook

In this work we have shown that special-relativistic kinematics, Einsteinian gravitational dynamics, and the universality of free fall need not be introduced as logically independent postulates. Instead, all three emerge as necessary consequences of a single covariant variational framework based on diffeomorphism invariance, a Lorentzian metric, a unit timelike field, and minimal coupling of matter.

Starting from these minimal assumptions, we demonstrated that:

- local special relativity arises universally in the tangent space at every spacetime point,
- the gravitational field equations take the Einstein form with covariantly conserved stress–energy,
- the weak equivalence principle follows directly from covariance and minimal coupling.

General relativity is recovered as a consistent sector of the theory when the stress contribution of the timelike field vanishes, while controlled deviations appear only when its dynamics become relevant.

The central result is therefore structural rather than phenomenological: relativistic kinematics, gravitational dynamics, and universal free fall are shown to be interlocked consequences of covariance and variational consistency, rather than separate axioms. This reframes relativity as a unified effective structure with a clear logical hierarchy.

The framework remains deliberately agnostic about microscopic completion. It neither assumes nor requires additional dimensions, supersymmetry, or a specific quantum gravity model. Nevertheless, the minimal structure identified here provides a sharp target for any ultraviolet completion: such a completion must reproduce diffeomorphism invariance, the unit-timelike constraint, and minimal coupling in the infrared in order to recover observed relativistic physics.

Several directions for future work naturally follow. These include a more detailed analysis of strong-field and cosmological solutions, a systematic study of observational signatures associated with the additional timelike sector, and the exploration of possible microscopic realizations that give rise to the effective covariant structure identified here. In particular, establishing whether the framework admits a unique and inevitable massless spin-2 excitation in the infrared would provide a decisive link to broader unification programs. The uniqueness of Einstein gravity as the consistent nonlinear theory of a massless spin-2 field is well established [8, 9].

In summary, the results presented here clarify the minimal conditions under which relativistic physics emerges and provide a coherent and testable pathway for extending general relativity without undermining its experimentally confirmed foundations.

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