Notes on Physics from Symmetry

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This document contains my personal notes on Jakob Schwichtenberg's Physics from Symmetry (Schwichtenberg, 2015), with a sprinkling of notes from my undergraduate physics course in quantum field theory (and, to a lesser extent, general relativity).

1. Special relativity

1.1. Definitions and postulates

In special relativity, **inertial frames of reference** are coordinate systems moving with constant velocity relative to each other. Special relativity has two basic postulates:

1. **The principal of relativity**: The laws of physics are the same in all inertial frames of reference.
2. **The invariance of the speed of light**: The velocity of light has the same value c in all inertial frames of reference.

Theorem 1.1 (Invariant of special relativity). *Consider two events A and B in an inertial observer O's frame of reference. Let the time interval measured by O between the two events be (Δt), and the three spatial intervals be (Δx), (Δy), (Δz). Then, the quantity*

$$(\Delta s)^2 := (\Delta ct)^2 - (\Delta x)^2 - (\Delta y)^2 - (\Delta y)^2 \tag{1.1}$$

is **invariant** *between all frames of reference. I.e.*

$$(\Delta s') = (\Delta s) \tag{1.2}$$

for any inertial frame of reference O'.

Theorem 1.1 follows directly from the invariance of the speed of light (consider a pair of mirrors, for two observers with relative velocity).

Definition 1.1 (Proper time). *Proper time, τ, is the time measured by an observer in the special frame of reference where the object in question is at rest. In this frame of reference,*

$$(\Delta s)^2 = (c\Delta\tau)^2. \tag{1.3}$$

In the infinitesimal limit

$$(\mathrm{d}s)^2 = (c\,\mathrm{d}\tau)^2. \tag{1.4}$$

Physically, Defn. 1.1 means that all observers agree on the time interval between events for an observer who travels with the object in question. However, different observers **do not** in general agree on the time interval between events generally: $(\Delta t) \neq (\Delta t')$ – this is called **time dilation**.

1.2. c is an upper speed limit

All observers agree on the value of $(\mathrm{d}s)^2 = (c\,\mathrm{d}\tau)^2$. Furthermore, we commonly assume that there exists a minimal proper time of $\tau = 0$ for two events if $\Delta s^2 = 0$. We can therefore write that when $\tau = 0$

$$c^2 = \frac{(\mathrm{d}x)^2 + (\mathrm{d}y)^2 + (\mathrm{d}z)^2}{(\mathrm{d}t)^2} \tag{1.5}$$

between two events with an infinitesimal distance. We can equate the right-hand side with a squared velocity, and hence

$$\tau = 0 \implies c^2 = v^2 \tag{1.6}$$

so

$$(\mathrm{d}s)^2 \geq 0 \implies c^2 \geq v^2 \tag{1.7}$$

for **any** pair of events (which are causally connected, although how this follows is not immediately clear to me right now).

1.3. Tensor notation and Minkowski spacetime

Definition 1.2 (Four-vector (contravariant)). *A position four-***vector** *is defined as*

$$x^\mu = \begin{pmatrix} ct \\ x \\ y \\ z \end{pmatrix} \equiv \begin{pmatrix} x^0 \\ x^1 \\ x^2 \\ x^3 \end{pmatrix}. \tag{1.8}$$

Definition 1.3 (Minkowski metric). *The Minkowski metric is defined as*

$$\eta_{\mu\nu} = \mathrm{diag}(1, -1, -1, -1). \tag{1.9}$$

η is used to compute distances and lengths in Minkowski space.

We define $\eta^{\mu\nu}$ through the relation

$$\eta^{\mu\nu}\eta_{\nu\sigma} = \delta^{\mu}{}_{\sigma} \tag{1.10}$$

where we have appled the **Einstein summation convention**, where a repeated Greek index implies a summation from 0 to 3 (where the zeroth index is time), and a repeated Roman index is summed from 1 to 3. Hence, for a matrix multiplication between two 3×3 matricies A and B, $(AB)_{ij} = A_{ik}B_{kj}$, and $(A^T)_{ij} = A_{ji}$.

Definition 1.4 (One-form (covariant vector)). *We define a one-form as*

$$x_\mu = \eta_{\mu\nu}x^\nu. \tag{1.11}$$

Thus,

$$\mathrm{d}s^2 = \eta_{\mu\nu}\,\mathrm{d}x^\mu\,\mathrm{d}x^\nu. \tag{1.12}$$

Definition 1.5 (Scalar product). *A scalar product between four-vectors x and y is defined as*

$$x \cdot y \coloneqq x^\mu y^\nu \eta_{\mu\nu} = x_\mu y_\nu \eta^{\mu\nu} = x^\mu y_\mu = x_\nu y^\nu \tag{1.13}$$

due to the symmetry of the metric: $\eta_{\mu\nu} = \eta_{\nu\mu}$.

Ordering (spacing) of indicies In order to be able to freely raise/lower indicies (without repeatedly writing the metric tensor), we can impose an ordering upon indicies of tensor fields – which we can represent typographically with spacing between tensor indicies. A metric g_{ij} (or g^{ij}) has the effect of lowering (or raising) a repeated index. For example,

$$g_{iq}T^{abcd}{}_{efgh}{}^{ijkl}{}_{mnop} = T^{abcd}{}_{efghq}{}^{jkl}{}_{mnop}. \tag{1.14}$$

(Proof of this, I imagine, requires background in differential geometry?)

1.4. Lorentz transformations

From the invariant of SR (Theorem 1.1), we have

$$\mathrm{d}s'^2 = \mathrm{d}x'_\mu \, \mathrm{d}x'_\nu \eta^{\mu\nu} = \mathrm{d}x_\mu \, \mathrm{d}x_\nu \eta^{\mu\nu} \tag{1.15}$$

for all reference frames. We denote Λ as a (1,1) tensor field, which transforms a four-vector from one reference frame to another:

$$\mathrm{d}x'^\mu = \Lambda^\mu{}_\nu \, \mathrm{d}x^\nu \tag{1.16}$$

which leaves the $\mathrm{d}s^2$ invariant, i.e. $\mathrm{d}s'^2 = ds^2$. It follows that

$$\begin{aligned} \eta_{\mu\nu} &= \Lambda^\sigma{}_\mu \Lambda^\delta{}_\nu \eta_{\sigma\delta} \\ \eta &= \Lambda^T \eta \Lambda. \end{aligned} \tag{1.17}$$

The physical meaning of Eq.(1.17) is that Lorentz transformations leave the scalar product of Minkowski spacetime invariant: i.e. changes between frames of reference that respect the two postualtes of special relativity (Section 1.1). Conservation of the scalar product is analogous to rigid rotation (O) in Euclidean space ($a \cdot b = a' \cdot b' = a^T O^T O b \implies O^T I O = I$), which preserves orientation ($\det(\Lambda) = 1$).

Note that $\Lambda^\mu{}_\nu \neq \Lambda_\nu{}^\mu$. Beginning with Eq.(1.17),

$$\Lambda^\mu{}_\rho \Lambda^\nu{}_\sigma \eta_{\mu\nu} = \eta_{\rho\sigma}$$

we can raise one index, and lower one index, of $\Lambda^\nu{}_\sigma$

$$\begin{aligned} \Lambda^\mu{}_\rho \eta_{\mu\nu} \Lambda^\nu{}_\sigma \eta_{\nu\mu} \eta^{\sigma\lambda} &= \eta_{\rho\sigma} \eta_{\nu\mu} \eta^{\sigma\lambda} \\ \Lambda^\mu{}_\rho \Lambda_\mu{}^\lambda \cancel{\eta_{\mu\nu}} &= \cancel{\eta_{\mu\nu}} \delta_\rho{}^\lambda \\ \Lambda^\mu{}_\rho \Lambda_\mu{}^\lambda &= \delta_\rho{}^\lambda \end{aligned} \tag{1.18}$$

so we see that $\Lambda_\nu{}^\mu$ is the inverse of $\Lambda^\mu{}_\nu$.

2. Lie group theory

2.1. Invariance, symmetry, and covariance

We call a quantity **invariant** if it does not change under particular transformations. E.g. if we transform $A, B, C, ... \to A', B', C', ...$ and we have

$$F(A', B', C', ...) = F(A, B, C, ...) \tag{2.1}$$

then we say F is invariant under this transformation. **Symmetry** is defined as invariance under a transformation (or class of transformations). An equation is covariant if it takes the same form when objects in it are transformed. *All physical laws must be covariant under Lorentz transformations.*

Group theory describes the properties of particular sets of transformations: the invariances under such groups allows us to mathematically describe symmetry. For example, the set of rotations about the origin of a square by $n\pi/2$ form a **discrete group**, and leave the set of points which constitute the square invariant under the transformation. The set of rotations about the origin of a circle form a **continuous group**. We can use group theory to work with *all* kinds of symmetries: symmetries which operate on vectors, equations, ...

2.2. Groups

Definition 2.1 (Group axioms). *A group $(G, \circ)$ is a set G, together with a binary operation $\circ$ defined on G, that satisfies the following axioms*

- *Closure: For all $g_1, g_2 \in G$, $g_1 \circ g_2 \in G$*
- *Identity element: There exists an identity element $e \in G$ such that for all $g \in G$, $g \circ e = g = e \circ g$*
- *Inverse element: For each $g \in G$, there exists an inverse element $g^{-1} \in G$ such that $g \circ g^{-1} = e = g^{-1}g$.*
- *Associativity: For all $g_1, g_2, g_3 \in G$, $g_1 \circ (g_2 \circ g_3) = (g_1 \circ g_2) \circ g_3$*

The set of all transformations that leave a given object invariant is called a **symmetry group**. For Minkowski spacetime, the object that is left invariant is the Minkowski metric, and the corresponding symmetry group is called the **Poincaré group**. Notice that the transformations which constitute a group are defined entirely independently from the object on which the transformations act.

2.2.1. Rotations in two dimensions and $SO(2)$

Consider the 2D rotation matrices

$$R_\theta = \begin{pmatrix} \cos(\theta) & -\sin(\theta) \\ \sin(\theta) & \cos(\theta) \end{pmatrix} \tag{2.2}$$

and the two reflection matrices

$$P_x = \begin{pmatrix} -1 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix} \qquad P_y = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & -1 \end{pmatrix}. \tag{2.3}$$

These matrices satisfy the group axioms. We can uncover this group from a symmetry perspective. The above transformations leave the length of a vector unchanged, i.e.

$$a.a = a'.a'. \tag{2.4}$$

Letting the transformation be represented by $a' = Oa$, it follows that all members of the group must satisfy

$$O^T O = I. \tag{2.5}$$

This condition defines the group $O(2)$, which is the group of all **orthogonal** 2×2 matrices. It follows that $\det(O) = \pm 1$ – i.e. the transformations are area-preserving. The subgroup with $\det(O) = 1$ is called $SO(2)$, which corresponds to rigid rotations preserving the orientation of the system – "S" denoting **special**.

References

Schwichtenberg, J., 2015 *Physics from symmetry*. Springer.