Riemann curvature tensor

We have established that the source of the gravitation is the energy-momentum tensor of matter, and that the equation for the gravitational field must have the form

$$G^{ab} = T^{ab} , \tag{1}$$

where T^{ab} is the energy-momentum tensor of matter and G^{ab} is some rank-2 symmetric divergenceless tensor related to the curvature of space.

In this section we shall introduce a tensor associated with the curvature of the space — the Riemann curvature tensor — and try to build a suitable G^{ab} out of it.

Commutator of covariant derivatives

One way to introduce the Riemann tensor is to consider the commutator of covariant derivatives,

$$A_{b;cd} - A_{b;dc} . \tag{2}$$

It is a covariant object which is identically zero in a flat space[1] and non-zero in a curved space.

Let us calculate it. First the double covariant derivative,

$$\begin{aligned} A_{b;cd} &= (A_{b;c})_{;d} = (A_{b;c})_{,d} - \Gamma^e_{bd} A_{e;c} - \Gamma^e_{cd} A_{b;e} \\ &= (A_{b,c} - \Gamma^a_{bc} A_a)_{,d} - \Gamma^e_{bd} (A_{e,c} - \Gamma^a_{ec} A_a) - \Gamma^e_{cd} (A_{b,e} - \Gamma^a_{be} A_a) \\ &= A_{b,cd} - \Gamma^a_{bc,d} A_a - \Gamma^a_{bc} A_{a,d} - \Gamma^e_{bd} A_{e,c} + \Gamma^e_{bd} \Gamma^a_{ec} A_a - \Gamma^e_{cd} A_{b,e} + \Gamma^e_{cd} \Gamma^a_{be} A_a . \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

Now the commutator,

$$A_{b;cd} - A_{b;dc} = \left(-\Gamma^a_{bc,d} + \Gamma^a_{bd,c} + \Gamma^e_{bd} \Gamma^a_{ec} - \Gamma^e_{bc} \Gamma^a_{ed} \right) A_a . \tag{4}$$

The tensor in the parentheses is called the Riemann curvature tensor R^a_{bcd},

$$R^a_{bcd} \mathrel{\hat{=}} -\Gamma^a_{bc,d} + \Gamma^a_{bd,c} - \Gamma^e_{bc} \Gamma^a_{ed} + \Gamma^e_{bd} \Gamma^a_{ec} \tag{5}$$

The Riemann tensor thus determines the commutator of covariant derivatives

$$A_{b;cd} - A_{b;dc} = R^a_{bcd} A_a . \tag{6}$$

Parallel transport around infinitesimal loop

An alternative way to introduce the Riemann tensor is to consider a parallel transport of a vector – a transport with $DA^a = 0$. Under an infinitesimal parallel transport of a vector A^a along a path dx, the components of the vector (generally) change,

$$dA^a \big|_{DA^a=0} = -\Gamma^a{}_{bc} A^b dx^c . \tag{7}$$

The change of a vector along an infinitesimal closed contour, $\Delta A^a = \oint dA^a$, is a covariant quantity since it is the difference between two vectors at the same point. It must be proportional to the vector itself and the area of the surface enclosed by the contour.

Let us calculate this change using a simple rectangular contour with sides dx and dx'. The vector A^a after a parallel transform along dx and then dx' turns into

$$A^a(x + dx + dx') = A^a - \Gamma^a{}_{bc} A^b dx^c - \left(\Gamma^a{}_{bc} + \Gamma^a{}_{bc,d} dx^d \right) \left(A^b - \Gamma^b{}_{df} A^d dx^f \right) dx'^c . \tag{8}$$

Similarly, after a parallel transform first along dx' and then along dx

$$A^a(x + dx' + dx) = A^a - \Gamma^a{}_{bc} A^b dx'^c - \left(\Gamma^a{}_{bc} + \Gamma^a{}_{bc,d} dx'^d \right) \left(A^b - \Gamma^b{}_{df} A^d dx'^f \right) dx^c . \tag{9}$$

[1] Indeed in a flat space we can make a global transformation to Cartesian coordinates where this commutator is obviously zero.

Subtracting these two and leaving only the lowest order terms gives (after some index renaming)

$$\begin{aligned}\Delta A^a &= A^a(x+dx'+dx) - A^a(x+dx+dx') \\ &= \left(\Gamma^a{}_{bd,c} - \Gamma^a{}_{bc,d} + \Gamma^a{}_{ec}\Gamma^e{}_{bd} - \Gamma^a{}_{ed}\Gamma^e{}_{bc}\right) A^b dx^c dx'^d \\ &\doteq R^a{}_{bcd} A^b dx^c dx'^d \,. \end{aligned} \tag{10}$$

The tensor in parentheses is called the Riemann curvature tensor $R^a{}_{bcd}$,

$$R^a{}_{bcd} \doteq \Gamma^a{}_{bd,c} - \Gamma^a{}_{bc,d} + \Gamma^a{}_{ec}\Gamma^e{}_{bd} - \Gamma^a{}_{ed}\Gamma^e{}_{bc}. \tag{11}$$

It follows from (10) that if the Riemann tensor vanishes, the vector A^a does not change when parallelly transported along an arbitrary infinitesimal closed path. Also after a parallel transport from x to $x+\delta x$ the vector $A^a(x+\delta x)$ is independent on which path is taken. The space where Riemann tensor vanishes everywhere is flat.

Properties of the curvature tensor

1. Antisymmetry:
$$R_{abcd} = -R_{bacd} = -R_{abdc} \,. \tag{12}$$
2. Interchange symmetry:
$$R_{abcd} = R_{cdab} \,. \tag{13}$$
3. Algebraic Bianchi identity:
$$R_{a(bcd)} \doteq R_{abcd} + R_{acdb} + R_{adbc} = 0 \,. \tag{14}$$
4. Differential Bianchi identity:
$$R_{ab(cd;e)} \doteq R_{abcd;e} + R_{abde;c} + R_{abec;d} = 0, \tag{15}$$

Ricci tensor and Ricci scalar

The Ricci tensor is obtained by a contraction of the Riemann tensor over pair of indexes,

$$R_{ab} \doteq R^d{}_{adb} \,. \tag{16}$$

It is symmetric,

$$R_{ab} = R_{ba} \,. \tag{17}$$

The Ricci scalar (or scalar curvature) is the simplest curvature scalar in a Riemannian geometry,

$$R \doteq g^{ab} R_{ab} \,. \tag{18}$$

Contraction of the differential Bianchi identity over bc and ad gives

$$R^b_{a;b} = \frac{1}{2} R_{,a} \,, \tag{19}$$

from which it follows, that the (Einstein) tensor

$$G_{ab} \doteq R_{ab} - \frac{1}{2} R g_{ab} \tag{20}$$

is symmetric and divergenceless

$$G^{ab}_{;b} = 0 \,. \tag{21}$$

The gravitational field equations might therefore have the form

$$G^{ab} = \kappa T^{ab} \,, \tag{22}$$

where the constant κ is related to the used units of mass (energy) like the 4π in the Maxwell equations in Gauss units.

We shall though derive the field equations from an action.

Hilbert-Einstein action and Einstein equation

The simplest action for gravitation is the Hilbert-Einstein action – an integral over the Ricci scalar,

$$S_g = -\frac{1}{2\kappa}\int R\sqrt{-g}d\Omega, \tag{23}$$

where κ is a constant (to be determined from the experiment).

Variation of $R\sqrt{-g}$ with respect to δg^{ab} gives

$$\delta\left(R\sqrt{-g}\right) = \delta\left(R_{ab}g^{ab}\sqrt{-g}\right)$$
$$= R_{ab}\delta g^{ab}\sqrt{-g} + R\delta\sqrt{-g} + g^{ab}\sqrt{-g}\delta R_{ab}. \tag{24}$$

The last term can be shown to be a divergence[2] which does not contribute to variation. In the second term we have[3]

$$\delta\sqrt{-g} = -\frac{1}{2}\frac{1}{\sqrt{-g}}gg^{ab}\delta g_{ab} = -\frac{1}{2}\sqrt{-g}g_{ab}\delta g^{ab}. \tag{30}$$

Thus the variation of the Hilbert action is

$$\delta S_g = -\frac{1}{2\kappa}\int\left(R_{ab} - \frac{1}{2}Rg_{ab}\right)\delta g^{ab}\sqrt{-g}d\Omega. \tag{31}$$

As we have shown above, the variation of the matter action with respect to the metric tensor is determined by the energy-momentum tensor,

$$\delta S_m = \frac{1}{2}\int T_{ab}\delta g^{ab}\sqrt{-g}d\Omega\,.$$

Combining the variations of the matter action and the gravitational action into the variational principle

$$\delta(S_m + S_g) = 0 \tag{32}$$

gives the famous Einstein's gravitational field equation,

$$R_{ab} - \frac{1}{2}Rg_{ab} = \kappa T_{ab}\ . \tag{33}$$

Note that the covariant divergence of the left-hand side vanishes, due to Bianchi identity. Therefore the covariant divergence of the right-hand side, the energy-momentum tensor, should also vanish (and it apparently does so as we proved above). The latter, however, contains the equations of motion for the matter. Therefore the Einstein equation determines simultaneously both the gravitational field created by matter and the motion of the matter in this gravitational field.

[2] The variation δR^a_{bcd} of the Riemann tensor is given as

$$\delta R^a_{bcd} = \delta\Gamma^a{}_{bd,c} - \delta\Gamma^a{}_{bc,d} + \delta\Gamma^a{}_{fc}\Gamma^f{}_{bd} + \Gamma^a{}_{fc}\delta\Gamma^f{}_{bd} - \delta\Gamma^a{}_{fd}\Gamma^f{}_{bc} - \Gamma^a{}_{fd}\delta\Gamma^f{}_{bc}\,. \tag{25}$$

The difference $\delta\Gamma^a{}_{bc}$ is a tensor (indeed, $\delta DA^a = \delta\Gamma^a_{bc}A^b dx^c$), therefore

$$(\delta\Gamma^a{}_{bc})_{;d} = (\delta\Gamma^a{}_{bc})_{,d} + \Gamma^a{}_{ed}\delta\Gamma^e{}_{bc} - \Gamma^e{}_{ad}\delta\Gamma^a{}_{ec} - \Gamma^e{}_{dc}\delta\Gamma^a{}_{de}\,. \tag{26}$$

The variation of the Riemann tensor can then be written as

$$\delta R^a_{bcd} = (\delta\Gamma^a{}_{bd})_{;c} - (\delta\Gamma^a{}_{bc})_{;d}\,. \tag{27}$$

The variation of the Ricci tensor is now given as

$$\delta R_{bd} = \delta R^a_{bad} = (\delta\Gamma^a{}_{bd})_{;a} - (\delta\Gamma^a{}_{ba})_{;d}\,. \tag{28}$$

Finally,

$$\sqrt{-g}g^{bd}\delta R_{bd} = \sqrt{-g}\left(g^{bd}\delta\Gamma^a{}_{bd} - g^{ba}\delta\Gamma^d{}_{bd}\right)_{;a} = \left(\sqrt{-g}g^{bd}\delta\Gamma^a{}_{bd} - \sqrt{-g}g^{ba}\delta\Gamma^d{}_{bd}\right)_{,a}\ \blacksquare \tag{29}$$

[3] using

$$dg = gg^{ab}dg_{ab} = -gg_{ab}dg^{ab}\,.$$

Exercises

1. Prove the differential Bianchi identity (e.g. using the locally flat system where Christoffel symbols (but not their derivatives) are equal zero).

2. Prove that $(R^{ab} - \frac{1}{2}Rg^{ab})_{;a} = 0$.

3. Compute the Riemann tensor for the space with the metric $ds^2 = dr^2 + r^2 d\phi^2$. Discuss the result.

4. Compute all non-vanishing components of the Riemann tensor R_{abcd} (where each of indices a, b, c, d takes the values θ, ϕ) for the metric

$$ds^2 = r^2(d\theta^2 + \sin^2\theta d\phi^2) \tag{34}$$

on a 2-dimensional sphere of radius r. Calculate also the Ricci tensor R_{ab} and the scalar curvature (Ricci scalar) R.

Answer:

$$R_{\theta\phi\theta\phi} = r^2 \sin^2\theta = R_{\phi\theta\phi\theta} = -R_{\theta\phi\phi\theta} = -R_{\phi\theta\theta\phi}$$