

Derivation of Laplacian in 3D polar coordinate

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Consider orthonormal basis in 3D polar coordinate:

$$\alpha = dr, \quad \beta = rd\theta, \quad \gamma = r \sin\theta d\varphi. \quad (1)$$

The Hodge star operator acts on these 1-forms as

$$*\alpha = \beta \wedge \gamma, \quad *\beta = \gamma \wedge \alpha, \quad *\gamma = \alpha \wedge \beta, \quad *1 = \alpha \wedge \beta \wedge \gamma \quad (2)$$

leading to

$$*dr = r^2 \sin\theta d\theta \wedge d\varphi, \quad *d\theta = \sin\theta d\varphi \wedge dr, \quad *d\varphi = \frac{1}{\sin\theta} dr \wedge d\theta, \quad *dr \wedge d\theta \wedge d\varphi = \frac{1}{r^2 \sin\theta}. \quad (3)$$

For a function f , we have

$$*df = r^2 \sin\theta \frac{\partial}{\partial r} f d\theta \wedge d\varphi + \sin\theta \frac{\partial}{\partial \theta} f d\varphi \wedge dr + \frac{1}{\sin\theta} \frac{\partial}{\partial \varphi} f dr \wedge d\theta \quad (4)$$

and

$$*d*df = \frac{1}{r^2} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} r^2 \frac{\partial}{\partial r} f + \frac{1}{r^2 \sin\theta} \frac{\partial}{\partial \theta} \sin\theta \frac{\partial}{\partial \theta} f + \frac{1}{r^2 \sin^2\theta} \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \varphi^2} f. \quad (5)$$

The Laplacian is defined as $\Delta = \delta d + d\delta$ where δ is the codifferential: $\delta = -*d*$. Since $d*f = 0$, we finally obtain

$$\Delta = -\frac{1}{r^2} \frac{\partial}{\partial r} r^2 \frac{\partial}{\partial r} - \frac{1}{r^2 \sin\theta} \frac{\partial}{\partial \theta} \sin\theta \frac{\partial}{\partial \theta} - \frac{1}{r^2 \sin^2\theta} \frac{\partial^2}{\partial \varphi^2}. \quad (6)$$