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Cosimo Bambi

Introduction to General Relativity

A Course for Undergraduate Students
of Physics

 Springer

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*Fatti non foste a viver come bruti,
ma per seguir virtute e canoscenza.
(Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Canto XXVI)*

Preface

The formulations of the theories of special and general relativity and of the theory of quantum mechanics in the first decades of the twentieth century are a fundamental milestone in science, not only for their profound implications in physics but also for the research methodology. In the same way, the courses of special and general relativity and of quantum mechanics represent an important milestone for every student of physics. These courses introduce a different approach to investigate physical phenomena, and students need some time to digest such a radical change.

In Newtonian mechanics and in Maxwell's theory of electrodynamics, the approach is quite empirical and natural. First, we infer a few fundamental laws from observations (e.g., Newton's Laws) and then we construct the whole theory (e.g., Newtonian mechanics). In modern physics, starting from special and general relativity and quantum mechanics, this approach may not be always possible. Observations and formulation of the theory may change order. This is because we may not have direct access to the basic laws governing a certain physical phenomenon. In such a case, we can formulate a number of theories, or we can introduce a number of ansatzes to explain a specific physical phenomenon within a certain theory if we already have the theory, and then we compare the predictions of the different solutions to check which one, if any, is consistent with observations.

For example, Newton's First, Second, and Third Laws can be directly inferred from experiments. Einstein's equations are instead obtained by imposing some "reasonable" requirements and they are then confirmed by comparing their predictions with the results of experiments. In modern physics, it is common that theorists develop theoretical models on the basis of "guesses" (motivated by theoretical arguments but without any experimental support), with the hope that it is possible to find predictions that can later be tested by experiments.

At the beginning, a student may be disappointed by this new approach and may not understand the introduction of *ad hoc* assumptions. In part, this is because we are condensing in a course the efforts of many physicists and many experiments, without discussing all the unsuccessful—but nevertheless necessary and important—attempts that eventually led to a theory in its final form. Moreover, different students may have different backgrounds, not only because they are students of different

disciplines (e.g., theoretical physics, experimental physics, astrophysics, and mathematical physics) but also because undergraduate programs in different countries can be very different. Additionally, some textbooks may follow approaches appreciated by some students and not by others, who may instead prefer different textbooks. This point is quite important when we study for the first time the theories of special and general relativity and the theory of quantum mechanics, because there are some concepts that at the beginning are difficult to understand, and a different approach may make it easier or harder.

In the present textbook, the theories of special and general relativity are introduced with the help of the Lagrangian formalism. This is the approach employed in the famous textbook by Landau and Lifshitz. Here, we have tried to have a book more accessible to a larger number of students, starting from a short review of Newtonian mechanics, reducing the mathematics, presenting all the steps of most calculations, and considering some (hopefully illuminating) examples. The present textbook dedicates quite a lot of space to the astrophysical applications, discussing Solar System tests, black holes, cosmological models, and gravitational waves at a level adequate for an introductory course of general relativity. These lines of research have become very active in the past couple of decades and have attracted an increasing number of students. In the last chapter, students can get a quick overview of the problems of Einstein's gravity and current lines of research in theoretical physics.

The textbook has 13 chapters, and in a course of one semester (usually 13–15 weeks) every week may be devoted to the study of one chapter. Note, however, that Chaps. 1–9 are almost “mandatory” in any course of special and general relativity, while Chaps. 10–13 cover topics that are often omitted in an introductory course for undergraduate students. Exercises are proposed at the end of most chapters and are partially solved in Appendix I.

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Shanghai, China
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Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Special Principle of Relativity	1
1.2	Euclidean Space	3
1.3	Scalars, Vectors, and Tensors	6
1.4	Galilean Transformations	8
1.5	Principle of Least Action	11
1.6	Constants of Motion	13
1.7	Geodesic Equations	14
1.8	Newton's Gravity	17
1.9	Kepler's Laws	19
1.10	Maxwell's Equations	21
1.11	Michelson–Morley Experiment	23
1.12	Towards the Theory of Special Relativity	25
	Problems	26
2	Special Relativity	29
2.1	Einstein's Principle of Relativity	29
2.2	Minkowski Spacetime	30
2.3	Lorentz Transformations	34
2.4	Proper Time	38
2.5	Transformation Rules	39
2.5.1	Superluminal Motion	42
2.6	Example: Cosmic Ray Muons	43
	Problems	44
3	Relativistic Mechanics	47
3.1	Action for a Free Particle	47
3.2	Momentum and Energy	49
3.2.1	3-Dimensional Formalism	49
3.2.2	4-Dimensional Formalism	51

3.3	Massless Particles	53
3.4	Particle Collisions	54
3.5	Example: Colliders Versus Fixed-Target Accelerators	55
3.6	Example: The GZK Cut-Off	56
3.7	Multi-body Systems	58
3.8	Lagrangian Formalism for Fields	59
3.9	Energy-Momentum Tensor	62
3.10	Examples	64
3.10.1	Energy-Momentum Tensor of a Free Point-Like Particle	64
3.10.2	Energy-Momentum Tensor of a Perfect Fluid	65
	Problems	66
4	Electromagnetism	67
4.1	Action	68
4.2	Motion of a Charged Particle	71
4.2.1	3-Dimensional Formalism	71
4.2.2	4-Dimensional Formalism	73
4.3	Maxwell's Equations in Covariant Form	73
4.3.1	Homogeneous Maxwell's Equations	73
4.3.2	Inhomogeneous Maxwell's Equations	75
4.4	Gauge Invariance	77
4.5	Energy-Momentum Tensor of the Electromagnetic Field	78
4.6	Examples	79
4.6.1	Motion of a Charged Particle in a Constant Uniform Electric Field	79
4.6.2	Electromagnetic Field Generated by a Charged Particle	81
	Problems	84
5	Riemannian Geometry	85
5.1	Motivations	85
5.2	Covariant Derivative	87
5.2.1	Definition	88
5.2.2	Parallel Transport	91
5.2.3	Properties of the Covariant Derivative	95
5.3	Useful Expressions	96
5.4	Riemann Tensor	98
5.4.1	Definition	98
5.4.2	Geometrical Interpretation	100
5.4.3	Ricci Tensor and Scalar Curvature	102
5.4.4	Bianchi Identities	103
	Problems	104
	Reference	105

6	General Relativity	107
6.1	General Covariance	107
6.2	Einstein Equivalence Principle	110
6.3	Connection to the Newtonian Potential	111
6.4	Locally Inertial Frames	113
6.4.1	Locally Minkowski Reference Frames	113
6.4.2	Locally Inertial Reference Frames	114
6.5	Measurements of Time Intervals	115
6.6	Example: GPS Satellites	116
6.7	Non-gravitational Phenomena in Curved Spacetimes	118
	Problems	121
7	Einstein’s Gravity	123
7.1	Einstein Equations	123
7.2	Newtonian Limit	126
7.3	Einstein–Hilbert Action	127
7.4	Matter Energy-Momentum Tensor	131
7.4.1	Definition	131
7.4.2	Examples	131
7.4.3	Covariant Conservation of the Matter Energy-Momentum Tensor	134
7.5	Pseudo-Tensor of Landau–Lifshitz	135
	Problems	138
	Reference	139
8	Schwarzschild Spacetime	141
8.1	Spherically Symmetric Spacetimes	141
8.2	Birkhoff’s Theorem	143
8.3	Schwarzschild Metric	149
8.4	Motion in the Schwarzschild Metric	151
8.5	Schwarzschild Black Holes	154
8.6	Penrose Diagrams	157
8.6.1	Minkowski Spacetime	157
8.6.2	Schwarzschild Spacetime	158
	Problems	160
	References	161
9	Classical Tests of General Relativity	163
9.1	Gravitational Redshift of Light	164
9.2	Perihelion Precession of Mercury	166
9.3	Deflection of Light	169
9.4	Shapiro’s Effect	173
9.5	Parametrized Post-Newtonian Formalism	177
	References	178

10	Black Holes	179
10.1	Definition	179
10.2	Reissner–Nordström Black Holes	180
10.3	Kerr Black Holes	181
10.3.1	Equatorial Circular Orbits	183
10.3.2	Fundamental Frequencies	189
10.3.3	Frame Dragging	192
10.4	No-Hair Theorem	193
10.5	Gravitational Collapse	194
10.5.1	Dust Collapse	196
10.5.2	Homogeneous Dust Collapse	198
10.6	Penrose Diagrams	200
10.6.1	Reissner–Nordström Spacetime	200
10.6.2	Kerr Spacetime	201
10.6.3	Oppenheimer–Snyder Spacetime	202
	Problems	203
	References	204
11	Cosmological Models	205
11.1	Friedmann–Robertson–Walker Metric	205
11.2	Friedmann Equations	208
11.3	Cosmological Models	210
11.3.1	Einstein Universe	211
11.3.2	Matter Dominated Universe	211
11.3.3	Radiation Dominated Universe	213
11.3.4	Vacuum Dominated Universe	214
11.4	Properties of the Friedmann–Robertson–Walker Metric	214
11.4.1	Cosmological Redshift	214
11.4.2	Particle Horizon	215
11.5	Primordial Plasma	216
11.6	Age of the Universe	218
11.7	Destiny of the Universe	220
	Problems	221
	Reference	221
12	Gravitational Waves	223
12.1	Historical Overview	223
12.2	Gravitational Waves in Linearized Gravity	225
12.2.1	Harmonic Gauge	226
12.2.2	Transverse-Traceless Gauge	228
12.3	Quadrupole Formula	231
12.4	Energy of Gravitational Waves	234

- 12.5 Examples 238
 - 12.5.1 Gravitational Waves from a Rotating Neutron Star 238
 - 12.5.2 Gravitational Waves from a Binary System 241
- 12.6 Astrophysical Sources 243
 - 12.6.1 Coalescing Black Holes 244
 - 12.6.2 Extreme-Mass Ratio Inspirals 245
 - 12.6.3 Neutron Stars 247
- 12.7 Gravitational Wave Detectors 247
 - 12.7.1 Resonant Detectors 251
 - 12.7.2 Interferometers 251
 - 12.7.3 Pulsar Timing Arrays 253
- Problem 254
- References 254
- 13 Beyond Einstein’s Gravity 257**
 - 13.1 Spacetime Singularities 257
 - 13.2 Quantization of Einstein’s Gravity 259
 - 13.3 Black Hole Thermodynamics and Information Paradox 261
 - 13.4 Cosmological Constant Problem 263
 - Problem 265
 - References 265
- Appendix A: Algebraic Structures 267**
- Appendix B: Vector Calculus 273**
- Appendix C: Differentiable Manifolds 277**
- Appendix D: Ellipse Equation 285**
- Appendix E: Mathematica Packages for Tensor Calculus 287**
- Appendix F: Interior Solution 291**
- Appendix G: Metric Around a Slow-Rotating Massive Body 299**
- Appendix H: Friedmann–Robertson–Walker Metric 303**
- Appendix I: Suggestions for Solving the Problems 307**
- Subject Index 331**

Conventions

There are several conventions in the literature and this, unfortunately, can sometimes generate confusion.

In this textbook, the spacetime metric has signature $(- + + +)$ (convention of the gravity community). The Minkowski metric thus reads

$$\|\eta_{\mu\nu}\| = \begin{pmatrix} -1 & 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 1 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad (1)$$

where here and in the rest of the book the notation $\|A_{\mu\nu}\|$ is used to indicate the matrix of the tensor $A_{\mu\nu}$.

Greek letters (μ, ν, ρ, \dots) are used for spacetime indices and can assume the values $0, 1, 2, \dots, n$, where n is the number of spatial dimensions. Latin letters (i, j, k, \dots) are used for space indices and can assume the values $1, 2, \dots, n$. The time coordinate can be indicated either as t or as x^0 . The index associated with the time coordinate can be indicated either as t or as 0 , for example V^t or V^0 .

The Riemann tensor is defined as

$$R^{\mu}_{\nu\rho\sigma} = \frac{\partial\Gamma^{\mu}_{\nu\sigma}}{\partial x^{\rho}} - \frac{\partial\Gamma^{\mu}_{\nu\rho}}{\partial x^{\sigma}} + \Gamma^{\mu}_{\lambda\rho}\Gamma^{\lambda}_{\nu\sigma} - \Gamma^{\mu}_{\lambda\sigma}\Gamma^{\lambda}_{\nu\rho},$$

where $\Gamma^{\mu}_{\nu\rho}$ s are the Christoffel symbols

$$\Gamma^{\mu}_{\nu\rho} = \frac{1}{2}g^{\mu\lambda}\left(\frac{\partial g^{\lambda\rho}}{\partial x^{\nu}} + \frac{\partial g_{\nu\lambda}}{\partial x^{\rho}} - \frac{\partial g_{\nu\rho}}{\partial x^{\lambda}}\right).$$

The Ricci tensor is defined as $R_{\mu\nu} = R^{\lambda}_{\mu\lambda\nu}$. The Einstein equations read

$$G_{\mu\nu} = R_{\mu\nu} - \frac{1}{2}g_{\mu\nu}R = \frac{8\pi G_{\text{N}}}{c^4}T_{\mu\nu}.$$

Since the present textbook is intended to be an introductory course on special and general relativity, unless stated otherwise we will explicitly show the speed of light c , Newton's gravitational constant G_{N} , and Dirac's constant \hbar . In some parts (Chaps. 10 and 13 and Sects. 8.2 and 8.6), we will employ units in which $G_{\text{N}} = c = 1$ to simplify the formulas.

Note that ρ will be sometimes used to indicate the energy density, and sometimes it will indicate the mass density (so the associated energy density will be ρc^2).