

Elliptic Regularity

Let Ω be an open subset of \mathbb{R}^d . A measurable, locally square integrable function φ is said to be a weak solution of Laplace's equation in Ω if

$$\iint_{\Omega} \varphi(\vec{r}) \Delta \eta(\vec{r}) d^d \vec{r} = 0$$

for all C_0^∞ functions η that are supported in Ω . The theorem that any weak solution of an elliptic partial differential equation in Ω is C^∞ (technically, equal almost everywhere in Ω to a C^∞ function) is called elliptic regularity. In this course, we are interested in harmonic functions in $d = 2$, so we now prove elliptic regularity for Laplace's equation in $d = 2$.

Theorem. *Let Ω be an open subset of \mathbb{R}^2 . Let φ be a measurable, locally square integrable function that is a weak solution of Laplace's equation in Ω . Then φ is equal almost everywhere in Ω to a C^∞ function.*

Motivation for proof: By way of motivation for the strategy that we'll use to prove this Theorem, I'll first outline a simple proof that any C^2 function φ that obeys $\Delta \varphi = 0$ is in fact C^∞ . Recall that, by the Cauchy integral formula, any analytic function, $f(z)$, obeys

$$f(z') = \frac{1}{2\pi i} \int_{|z-z'|=r} \frac{f(z)}{z-z'} dz$$

Parametrizing the circle $|z - z'| = r$ by $z = z' + re^{i\theta}$,

$$f(z') = \frac{1}{2\pi i} \int_0^{2\pi} \frac{f(z'+re^{i\theta})}{re^{i\theta}} ire^{i\theta} d\theta = \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_0^{2\pi} f(z' + re^{i\theta}) d\theta$$

This is called the "Mean-value Property". It also holds for harmonic functions. That is, if $\Delta \varphi = 0$, then

$$\varphi(x', y') = \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_0^{2\pi} \varphi((x', y') + r(\cos \theta, \sin \theta)) d\theta$$

This is proven using Green's Theorem, which is the same way that the Cauchy Integral Theorem is proven. Now let $g \in C_0^\infty([0, \infty))$ obey $\int_0^\infty g(r)rdr = \frac{1}{2\pi}$. Then

$$\begin{aligned} \varphi(x', y') &= \int_0^\infty dr r g(r) 2\pi \varphi(x', y') \\ &= \int_0^\infty dr r \int_0^{2\pi} d\theta g(r) \varphi((x', y') + r(\cos \theta, \sin \theta)) \\ &= \iint dxdy g(\|(x, y)\|) \varphi((x', y') + (x, y)) \\ &= \iint dxdy g(\|(x' - x, y' - y)\|) \varphi((x, y)) \end{aligned}$$

The right hand side is trivially C^∞ because all derivatives with respect to x' or y' act on $g(\|(x' - x, y' - y)\|)$, which is C^∞ because the length $\|(x' - x, y' - y)\|$ is C^∞ in (x', y') except at $x' - x = y' - y = 0$ and $g(r)$ is C^∞ and vanishes for r in a neighbourhood of 0.

Proof: Every open set is a union of open disks. That φ is locally square integrable in Ω means that φ is square integrable on some neighbourhood of each point of Ω . So we may choose the disks so that φ is L^2 on each disk. Thus it suffices to consider Ω 's that are open disks. By translating and scaling, it suffices to consider the unit disk centred on the origin, which we denote D , and we may assume that φ is L^2 on D .

We first construct the function that is going to play the role of g in the motivation above. Let $\vec{r} = (x, y)$. We shall exploit two properties of the function $\ln \|\vec{r}\|$. The first is that $\ln \|\vec{r}\|$ is defined and harmonic for all $\vec{r} \neq \mathbf{0}$. This is shown by the computation

$$\begin{aligned} d \ln \|\vec{r}\| &= \frac{1}{2} d \ln(x^2 + y^2) = \frac{xdx + ydy}{x^2 + y^2} \\ \Delta \ln \|\vec{r}\| &= d * d \ln \|\vec{r}\| = d \frac{-ydx + xdy}{x^2 + y^2} = \frac{2(x^2 + y^2)dx \wedge dy - (2xdx + 2ydy) \wedge (-ydx + xdy)}{(x^2 + y^2)^2} = 0 \quad (\text{P1}) \end{aligned}$$

The second property of $\ln \|\vec{r}\|$ that we shall use is the following. Let C_δ be the circle of radius δ centered on $\mathbf{0}$, oriented, as usual, in the counterclockwise direction. Then, for any continuous function $\psi(\vec{r})$,

$$\lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0^+} \oint_{C_\delta} \psi(\vec{r}) * d \ln \|\vec{r}\| = 2\pi \psi(\mathbf{0}) \quad (\text{P2})$$

To see this, parametrize C_δ by $\vec{r}(t) = (x(t), y(t)) = \delta(\cos t, \sin t)$ with $0 \leq t \leq 2\pi$. When we evaluate the integral $\oint_{C_\delta} \psi(\vec{r}) * d \ln \|\vec{r}\|$ using this parametrization, $*d \ln \|\vec{r}\| = \frac{-ydx + xdy}{x^2 + y^2}$ is replaced by

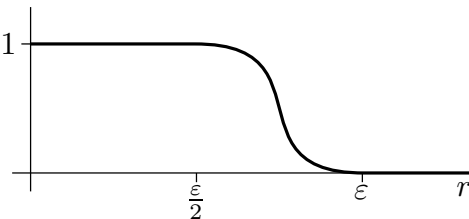
$$\frac{-y(t)x'(t)dt + x(t)y'(t)dt}{x(t)^2 + y(t)^2} = dt$$

so that, using the continuity of ψ ,

$$\begin{aligned} \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0^+} \oint_{C_\delta} \psi(\vec{r}) * d \ln \|\vec{r}\| &= \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0^+} \int_0^{2\pi} \psi(\delta \cos t, \delta \sin t) dt \\ &= \int_0^{2\pi} \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0^+} \psi(\delta \cos t, \delta \sin t) dt = 2\pi \psi(\mathbf{0}) \end{aligned}$$

Now we use $\frac{1}{2\pi} \ln \|\vec{r}\|$ to build the function that plays the role of g . Let $0 < \varepsilon \ll 1$ and let ρ be a C^∞ function on $[0, \infty)$ that obeys

$$\begin{aligned} \rho(r) &= 1 && \text{for } 0 \leq r \leq \frac{\varepsilon}{2} \\ 0 \leq \rho(r) &\leq 1 && \text{for } \frac{\varepsilon}{2} \leq r \leq \varepsilon \\ \rho(r) &= 0 && \text{for } r \geq \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$



Define

$$\begin{aligned}\omega(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) &= \frac{1}{2\pi} \rho(\|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\|) \ln \|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\| \\ \gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) &= \begin{cases} -\left(\frac{\partial^2}{\partial x^2} + \frac{\partial^2}{\partial y^2}\right)\omega(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) & \text{if } \vec{\mathbf{r}} \neq \mathbf{0} \\ 0 & \text{if } \vec{\mathbf{r}} = \mathbf{0} \end{cases} \\ \Phi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}') &= \iint_D \gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}' - \vec{\mathbf{r}}) \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) \, dx \wedge dy\end{aligned}$$

Note that

- $\omega(\vec{\mathbf{r}})$ is defined and C^∞ for all $\vec{\mathbf{r}} \neq \mathbf{0}$.
- $\omega(\vec{\mathbf{r}})$ is supported on $\|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\| \leq \varepsilon$.
- $\omega(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) = \frac{1}{2\pi} \ln \|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\|$ for $0 < \|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\| < \frac{\varepsilon}{2}$ so that $\left(\frac{\partial^2}{\partial x^2} + \frac{\partial^2}{\partial y^2}\right)\omega(\vec{\mathbf{r}})$ vanishes for $0 < \|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\| < \frac{\varepsilon}{2}$
- $\gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}})$ is defined and C^∞ on all of \mathbb{R}^2 .
- $\gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}})$ is supported on $\|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\| \leq \varepsilon$.
- $\Phi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}')$ is defined and C^∞ on all of \mathbb{R}^2 since γ is C^∞ and φ is L^1 on D .

The Theorem now follows from part b of the Lemma below, which implies that $\varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}') = \Phi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}')$ for almost all $\vec{\mathbf{r}}'$ with $\|\vec{\mathbf{r}}'\| \leq 1 - 2\varepsilon$. ■

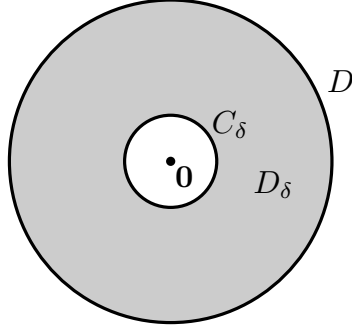
More motivation: To motivate the choice of γ above, I'll now show that if φ is harmonic, that is, if φ is C^2 and obeys $\Delta\varphi = 0$, then $\Phi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}') = \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}')$ for all $|\vec{\mathbf{r}}'| < 1 - \varepsilon$. First observe that, since $|\vec{\mathbf{r}}'| < 1 - \varepsilon$ and $\gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}' - \vec{\mathbf{r}})$ vanishes for $\|\vec{\mathbf{r}}' - \vec{\mathbf{r}}\| \geq \varepsilon$, $\gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}' - \vec{\mathbf{r}})$ vanishes unless $\vec{\mathbf{r}} \in D$. Thus

$$\begin{aligned}\Phi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}') &= \iint_D \gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}' - \vec{\mathbf{r}}) \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) \, dx \wedge dy = \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}' - \vec{\mathbf{r}}) \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) \, dx \wedge dy \\ &= \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \gamma(-\vec{\mathbf{r}}) \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}} + \vec{\mathbf{r}}') \, dx \wedge dy = \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}} + \vec{\mathbf{r}}') \, dx \wedge dy\end{aligned}$$

since γ is even. We are now going to substitute in (for $\vec{\mathbf{r}} \neq \mathbf{0}$) $\gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) = -\left(\frac{\partial^2}{\partial x^2} + \frac{\partial^2}{\partial y^2}\right)\omega(\vec{\mathbf{r}})$ and integrate by parts a couple of times. To treat the singularity in ω at $\vec{\mathbf{r}} = \mathbf{0}$ carefully, we eliminate 0 from the domain of integration. Since γ and φ are both continuous at $\vec{\mathbf{r}} = \mathbf{0}$ and since $\gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}})$ vanishes unless $\|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\| \leq \varepsilon < 1$,

$$\begin{aligned}\Phi(\vec{\mathbf{r}}') &= \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0} \iint_{\|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\| \geq \delta} \gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}} + \vec{\mathbf{r}}') \, dx \wedge dy = \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0} \iint_{D_\delta} \gamma(\vec{\mathbf{r}}) \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}} + \vec{\mathbf{r}}') \, dx \wedge dy \\ &= \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0} - \iint_{D_\delta} \varphi(\vec{\mathbf{r}} + \vec{\mathbf{r}}') \Delta\omega(\vec{\mathbf{r}})\end{aligned}$$

where $D_\delta = \{ \vec{\mathbf{r}} \in \mathbb{R}^2 \mid \delta \leq \|\vec{\mathbf{r}}\| \leq 1 \}$ is the unit disk with the disk of radius δ removed. By



Green's formula (number 6 on our list of integration formulae)

$$\iint_{D_\delta} \omega(\vec{r}) \Delta \varphi(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') - \iint_{D_\delta} \varphi(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \Delta \omega(\vec{r}) = \int_{\delta D_\delta} \omega(\vec{r}) * d\varphi(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') - \int_{\delta D_\delta} \varphi(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') * d\omega(\vec{r})$$

The first term on the left hand side vanishes because φ is harmonic. The boundary $\delta D_\delta = C_1 - C_\delta$. The minus sign is there because the inside part of the boundary of δD is oriented in the opposite direction to C_δ . The outer, C_1 , part of the boundary integrals are zero because $\omega(\vec{r})$ vanishes for all $\|\vec{r}\| > \varepsilon$. Furthermore, if $\delta < \frac{\varepsilon}{2}$, $\omega(\vec{r}) = \frac{1}{2\pi} \log \|\vec{r}\|$ on the inner part, C_δ , of the boundary. So

$$\Phi(\vec{r}') = \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0} \frac{1}{2\pi} \oint_{C_\delta} \varphi(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') * d \log \|\vec{r}\| - \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0} \frac{1}{2\pi} \oint_{C_\delta} \log \|\vec{r}\| * d\varphi(\vec{r} + \vec{r}')$$

The first term on the right hand side is exactly $\varphi(\vec{r}')$ by the delta function like property (P2). The second term on the right hand side vanishes. To see this, parametrize C_δ by $\vec{r}(\theta) = (x(\theta), y(\theta)) = \delta(\cos \theta, \sin \theta)$ and observe that, because φ is C^2 , $*d\varphi(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') = -\varphi_y \frac{dx}{d\theta} d\theta + \varphi_x \frac{dy}{d\theta} d\theta = \varphi_y \delta \sin \theta d\theta + \varphi_x \delta \cos \theta d\theta$ is some continuous, and hence bounded function, times $\delta d\theta$. Consequently, the second term on the right hand side is bounded in magnitude by a constant times

$$\lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0} \frac{1}{2\pi} \int_0^{2\pi} \log \delta \delta d\theta = \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0} \frac{1}{2\pi} (\log \delta) (2\pi\delta) = 0$$

Hence $\Phi(\vec{r}') = \varphi(\vec{r}')$ for all $\|\vec{r}'\| < 1 - \varepsilon$. In particular $\varphi(\vec{r}')$ is C^∞ for all $\|\vec{r}'\| < 1 - \varepsilon$. Since $\varepsilon > 0$ is arbitrary, $\varphi(\vec{r}')$ is C^∞ for all $\|\vec{r}'\| < 1$. This ends "More motivation".

We now need to consider functions of both \vec{r} and \vec{r}' . We use d' and Δ' to denote the operators d and Δ acting on functions of \vec{r}' . For example

$$\begin{aligned} d f(x, y, x', y') &= \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}(x, y, x', y') dx + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}(x, y, x', y') dy \\ d' f(x, y, x', y') &= \frac{\partial f}{\partial x'}(x, y, x', y') dx' + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y'}(x, y, x', y') dy' \end{aligned}$$

Lemma. Let $\mu(\vec{r})$ be C^∞ and supported in $\|\vec{r}\| \leq 1 - 2\varepsilon$. Define

$$\eta(\vec{r}') = \iint_D \omega(\vec{r} - \vec{r}') \mu(\vec{r}) \, dx \wedge dy$$

then

- a) $\Delta' \eta(\vec{r}') = \left\{ \mu(\vec{r}') - \iint_D \gamma(\vec{r} - \vec{r}') \mu(\vec{r}) \, dx \wedge dy \right\} dx' \wedge dy'$
- b) $\iint_D \mu(\vec{r}) [\varphi(\vec{r}) - \Phi(\vec{r})] \, dx \wedge dy = 0$

Remark. Let $B_{1-2\varepsilon} = \{ \vec{r} \in \mathbb{R}^2 \mid \|\vec{r}\| \leq 1 - 2\varepsilon \}$. Since $C_0^\infty(B_{1-2\varepsilon})$ is dense in $L^2(B_{1-2\varepsilon})$ and $\overline{\varphi(\vec{r}) - \Phi(\vec{r})}$ is in $L^2(B_{1-2\varepsilon})$, part (b) has the consequence that $\iint_{B_{1-2\varepsilon}} |\varphi(\vec{r}) - \Phi(\vec{r})|^2 \, dx dy = 0$ and hence that $\varphi(\vec{r}) - \Phi(\vec{r}) = 0$ almost everywhere on $B_{1-2\varepsilon}$. Since $\varepsilon > 0$ is arbitrary, this completes the proof of the Theorem.

Proof: b) We first prove part (b) assuming part (a). Since $\mu(\vec{r})$ vanishes unless $|\vec{r}| \leq 1 - 2\varepsilon$ and $\omega(\vec{r}' - \vec{r})$ vanishes unless $\|\vec{r}' - \vec{r}\| \leq \varepsilon$, $\eta(\vec{r}')$ vanishes unless $\|\vec{r}'\| \leq 1 - \varepsilon$. Furthermore, as ω is L^1 and μ is C^∞ and supported in D ,

$$\eta(\vec{r}') = \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r} - \vec{r}') \mu(\vec{r}) \, dx \wedge dy = \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r}) \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \, dx \wedge dy$$

is also C^∞ and hence is in $C_0^\infty(D)$. Our main assumption is that φ is a weak solution of Laplace's equation in D . Hence

$$\begin{aligned} 0 &= \iint_D \varphi(\vec{r}') \Delta \eta(\vec{r}') \\ &= \iint_D \varphi(\vec{r}') \left\{ \mu(\vec{r}') - \iint_D \gamma(\vec{r} - \vec{r}') \mu(\vec{r}) \, dx \wedge dy \right\} dx' \wedge dy' \\ &= \iint_D \mu(\vec{r}') \left\{ \varphi(\vec{r}') - \iint_D \gamma(\vec{r}' - \vec{r}) \varphi(\vec{r}) \, dx \wedge dy \right\} dx' \wedge dy' \end{aligned}$$

We made the change of variables $\vec{r} \leftrightarrow \vec{r}'$ in the second term. The right hand side is exactly $\iint_D \mu(\vec{r}) [\varphi(\vec{r}) - \Phi(\vec{r})] \, dx \wedge dy$.

a) Since μ is supported in D ,

$$\eta(\vec{r}') = \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r} - \vec{r}') \mu(\vec{r}) \, dx \wedge dy = \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r}) \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \, dx \wedge dy$$

In the integrand, μ is a function of $\vec{r} + \vec{r}'$ only, so

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta' \eta(\vec{r}') &= dx' \wedge dy' \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r}) \left(\frac{\partial^2}{\partial x'^2} + \frac{\partial^2}{\partial y'^2} \right) \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \, dx \wedge dy \\ &= dx' \wedge dy' \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r}) \left(\frac{\partial^2}{\partial x^2} + \frac{\partial^2}{\partial y^2} \right) \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \, dx \wedge dy \\ &= dx' \wedge dy' \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r}) \Delta \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \end{aligned}$$

We now integrate by parts twice (apply Green's formula) twice, being careful about the singularity of ω at the origin. Since ω is supported in D and is in $L^1(D)$ and μ is C^∞ ,

$$\iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r}) \Delta \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') = \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0^+} \iint_{D_\delta} \omega(\vec{r}) \Delta \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}')$$

By Green's formula,

$$\iint_{D_\delta} \omega(\vec{r}) \Delta \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') - \iint_{D_\delta} \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \Delta \omega(\vec{r}) = \int_{\delta D_\delta} \omega(\vec{r}) * d\mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') - \int_{\delta D_\delta} \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') * d\omega(\vec{r})$$

Again, the boundary $\delta D_\delta = C_1 - C_\delta$ and the outer, C_1 , part of the boundary integrals are zero because $\omega(\vec{r})$ vanishes for all $\|\vec{r}\| > \varepsilon$. And the C_δ part of the first boundary integral again tends to zero with δ because, if $\delta < \frac{\varepsilon}{2}$, $\omega(\vec{r}) = \frac{1}{2\pi} \log \|\vec{r}\|$ on C_δ , both first derivatives of μ are bounded, say by K , and the circumference of C_δ is $2\pi\delta$ so that

$$\left| \oint_{C_\delta} \omega(\vec{r}) * d\mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \right| \leq \left(\frac{1}{2\pi} \ln \delta \right) (2K)(2\pi\delta)$$

On D_δ , $\Delta \omega(\vec{r}) = -\gamma(\vec{r}) dx \wedge dy$, so that

$$\begin{aligned} \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \omega(\vec{r}) \Delta \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') &= \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0^+} \oint_{C_\delta} \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') * d\omega(\vec{r}) - \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0^+} \iint_{D_\delta} \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \gamma(\vec{r}) dx \wedge dy \\ &= \mu(\vec{r}') - \lim_{\delta \rightarrow 0^+} \iint_{D_\delta} \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \gamma(\vec{r}) dx \wedge dy \quad \text{by (P2)} \\ &= \mu(\vec{r}') - \iint_D \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \gamma(\vec{r}) dx \wedge dy \\ &= \mu(\vec{r}') - \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \mu(\vec{r} + \vec{r}') \gamma(\vec{r}) dx \wedge dy \\ &= \mu(\vec{r}') - \iint_{\mathbb{R}^2} \mu(\vec{r}) \gamma(\vec{r} - \vec{r}') dx \wedge dy \\ &= \mu(\vec{r}') - \iint_D \gamma(\vec{r} - \vec{r}') \mu(\vec{r}) dx \wedge dy \end{aligned}$$

since γ and μ are supported in D . ■