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Basic Notions of Algebra

With 45 Figures

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Basic Notions of Algebra

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by M. Reid

Contents

Preface	4
§ 1. What is Algebra?	6
The idea of coordinatisation. Examples: dictionary of quantum mechanics and coordinatisation of finite models of incidence axioms and parallelism.	
§ 2. Fields	11
Field axioms, isomorphisms. Field of rational functions in independent variables; function field of a plane algebraic curve. Field of Laurent series and formal Laurent series.	
§ 3. Commutative Rings	17
Ring axioms; zerodivisors and integral domains. Field of fractions. Polynomial rings. Ring of polynomial functions on a plane algebraic curve. Ring of power series and formal power series. Boolean rings. Direct sums of rings. Ring of continuous functions. Factorisation; unique factorisation domains, examples of UFDs.	
§ 4. Homomorphisms and Ideals	24
Homomorphisms, ideals, quotient rings. The homomorphisms theorem. The restriction homomorphism in rings of functions. Principal ideal domains; relations with UFDs. Product of ideals. Characteristic of a field. Extension in which a given polynomial has a root. Algebraically closed fields. Finite fields. Representing elements of a general ring as functions on maximal and prime ideals. Integers as functions. Ultraproducts and nonstandard analysis. Commuting differential operators.	
§ 5. Modules	33
Direct sums and free modules. Tensor products. Tensor, symmetric and exterior powers of a module, the dual module. Equivalent ideals and isomorphism of modules. Modules of differential forms and vector fields. Families of vector spaces and modules.	
§ 6. Algebraic Aspects of Dimension	41
Rank of a module. Modules of finite type. Modules of finite type over a principal ideal domain. Noetherian modules and rings. Noetherian rings and rings of finite type. The case of graded rings. Transcendence degree of an extension. Finite extensions.	

§ 7.	The Algebraic View of Infinitesimal Notions	50
	Functions modulo second order infinitesimals and the tangent space of a manifold. Singular points. Vector fields and first order differential operators. Higher order infinitesimals. Jets and differential operators. Completions of rings, p -adic numbers. Normed fields. Valuations of the fields of rational numbers and rational functions. The p -adic number fields in number theory.	
§ 8.	Noncommutative Rings	61
	Basic definitions. Algebras over rings. Ring of endomorphisms of a module. Group algebra. Quaternions and division algebras. Twistor fibration. Endomorphisms of n -dimensional vector space over a division algebra. Tensor algebra and the non-commuting polynomial ring. Exterior algebra; superalgebras; Clifford algebra. Simple rings and algebras. Left and right ideals of the endomorphism ring of a vector space over a division algebra.	
§ 9.	Modules over Noncommutative Rings	74
	Modules and representations. Representations of algebras in matrix form. Simple modules, composition series, the Jordan-Hölder theorem. Length of a ring or module. Endomorphisms of a module. Schur's lemma	
§ 10.	Semisimple Modules and Rings	79
	Semisimplicity. A group algebra is semisimple. Modules over a semisimple ring. Semisimple rings of finite length; Wedderburn's theorem. Simple rings of finite length and the fundamental theorem of projective geometry. Factors and continuous geometries. Semisimple algebras of finite rank over an algebraically closed field. Applications to representations of finite groups.	
§ 11.	Division Algebras of Finite Rank	90
	Division algebras of finite rank over \mathbb{R} or over finite fields. Tsen's theorem and quasi-algebraically closed fields. Central division algebras of finite rank over the p -adic and rational fields.	
§ 12.	The Notion of a Group	96
	Transformation groups, symmetries, automorphisms. Symmetries of dynamical systems and conservation laws. Symmetries of physical laws. Groups, the regular action. Subgroups, normal subgroups, quotient groups. Order of an element. The ideal class group. Group of extensions of a module. Brauer group. Direct product of two groups.	
§ 13.	Examples of Groups: Finite Groups	108
	Symmetric and alternating groups. Symmetry groups of regular polygons and regular polyhedrons. Symmetry groups of lattices. Crystallographic classes. Finite groups generated by reflections.	
§ 14.	Examples of Groups: Infinite Discrete Groups	124
	Discrete transformation groups. Crystallographic groups. Discrete groups of motion of the Lobachevsky plane. The modular group. Free groups. Specifying a group by generators and relations. Logical problems. The fundamental group. Group of a knot. Braid group.	
§ 15.	Examples of Groups: Lie Groups and Algebraic Groups	140
	Lie groups. Toruses. Their role in Liouville's theorem.	
	A. Compact Lie Groups	143
	The classical compact groups and some of the relations between them.	
	B. Complex Analytic Lie Groups	147
	The classical complex Lie groups. Some other Lie groups. The Lorentz group.	
	C. Algebraic Groups	150
	Algebraic groups, the adèle group. Tamagawa number.	

§ 16. General Results of Group Theory	151
Direct products. The Wedderburn-Remak-Schmidt theorem. Composition series, the Jordan-Hölder theorem. Simple groups, solvable groups. Simple compact Lie groups. Simple complex Lie groups. Simple finite groups, classification.	
§ 17. Group Representations	160
A. Representations of Finite Groups	163
Representations. Orthogonality relations.	
B. Representations of Compact Lie Groups	167
Representations of compact groups. Integrating over a group. Helmholtz-Lie theory. Characters of compact Abelian groups and Fourier series. Weyl and Ricci tensors in 4-dimensional Riemannian geometry. Representations of $SU(2)$ and $SO(3)$. Zeeman effect.	
C. Representations of the Classical Complex Lie Groups	174
Representations of noncompact Lie groups. Complete irreducibility of representations of finite-dimensional classical complex Lie groups.	
§ 18. Some Applications of Groups	177
A. Galois Theory	177
Galois theory. Solving equations by radicals.	
B. The Galois Theory of Linear Differential Equations (Picard-Vessiot Theory)	181
C. Classification of Unramified Covers	182
Classification of unramified covers and the fundamental group	
D. Invariant Theory	183
The first fundamental theorem of invariant theory	
E. Group Representations and the Classification of Elementary Particles	185
§ 19. Lie Algebras and Nonassociative Algebra	188
A. Lie Algebras	188
Poisson brackets as an example of a Lie algebra. Lie rings and Lie algebras.	
B. Lie Theory	192
Lie algebra of a Lie group.	
C. Applications of Lie Algebras	197
Lie groups and rigid body motion.	
D. Other Nonassociative Algebras	199
The Cayley numbers. Almost complex structure on 6-dimensional submanifolds of 8-space. Nonassociative real division algebras.	
§ 20. Categories	202
Diagrams and categories. Universal mapping problems. Functors. Functors arising in topology: loop spaces, suspension. Group objects in categories. Homotopy groups.	
§ 21. Homological Algebra	213
A. Topological Origins of the Notions of Homological Algebra	213
Complexes and their homology. Homology and cohomology of polyhedrons. Fixed point theorem. Differential forms and de Rham cohomology; de Rham's theorem. Long exact cohomology sequence.	
B. Cohomology of Modules and Groups	219
Cohomology of modules. Group cohomology. Topological meaning of the cohomology of discrete groups.	
C. Sheaf Cohomology	225
Sheaves; sheaf cohomology. Finiteness theorems. Riemann-Roch theorem.	

§ 22. <i>K</i> -theory	230
A. Topological <i>K</i> -theory	230
Vector bundles and the functor $\mathcal{V}ec(X)$. Periodicity and the functors $K_n(X)$, $K_1(X)$ and the infinite-dimensional linear group. The symbol of an elliptic differential operator. The index theorem.	
B. Algebraic <i>K</i> -theory	234
The group of classes of projective modules. K_0 , K_1 and K_n of a ring. K_2 of a field and its relations with the Brauer group. <i>K</i> -theory and arithmetic.	
Comments on the Literature	239
References	244
Index of Names	249
Subject Index	251

Preface

This book aims to present a general survey of algebra, of its basic notions and main branches. Now what language should we choose for this? In reply to the question 'What does mathematics study?', it is hardly acceptable to answer 'structures' or 'sets with specified relations'; for among the myriad conceivable structures or sets with specified relations, only a very small discrete subset is of real interest to mathematicians, and the whole point of the question is to understand the special value of this infinitesimal fraction dotted among the amorphous masses. In the same way, the meaning of a mathematical notion is by no means confined to its formal definition; in fact, it may be rather better expressed by a (generally fairly small) sample of the basic examples, which serve the mathematician as the motivation and the substantive definition, and at the same time as the real meaning of the notion.

Perhaps the same kind of difficulty arises if we attempt to characterise in terms of general properties any phenomenon which has any degree of individuality. For example, it doesn't make sense to give a definition of the Germans or the French; one can only describe their history or their way of life. In the same way, it's not possible to give a definition of an individual human being; one can only either give his 'passport data', or attempt to describe his appearance and character, and relate a number of typical events from his biography. This is the path we attempt to follow in this book, applied to algebra. Thus the book accommodates the axiomatic and logical development of the subject together with more descriptive material: a careful treatment of the key examples and of points of contact between algebra and other branches of mathematics and the natural sciences. The choice of material here is of course strongly influenced by the author's personal opinions and tastes.