



# Extremal Conformal Structures on Projective Surfaces

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**ABSTRACT.** We introduce a new functional  $\mathcal{E}_p$  on the space of conformal structures on an oriented projective manifold  $(M, p)$ . The non-negative quantity  $\mathcal{E}_p([g])$  measures how much  $p$  deviates from being defined by a  $[g]$ -conformal connection. In the case of a projective surface  $(\Sigma, p)$ , we canonically construct an indefinite Kähler–Einstein structure  $(h_p, \Omega_p)$  on the total space  $Y$  of a fibre bundle over  $\Sigma$  and show that a conformal structure  $[g]$  is a critical point for  $\mathcal{E}_p$  if and only if a certain lift  $\tilde{[g]} : (\Sigma, [g]) \rightarrow (Y, h_p)$  is weakly conformal. In fact, in the compact case  $\mathcal{E}_p([g])$  is – up to a topological constant – just the Dirichlet energy of  $\tilde{[g]}$ . As an application, we prove a novel characterisation of properly convex projective structures among all flat projective structures. As a by-product, we obtain a Gauss–Bonnet type identity for oriented projective surfaces.

## CONTENTS

1. Introduction	1
2. Projective and conformal structures	4
3. Projective surfaces and associated bundles	11
4. The variational equations	19
5. Existence of critical points	30
Appendix I. A Gauss–Bonnet type identity	35
References	35

## 1. Introduction

A *projective structure* on an  $n$ -manifold  $M$  is an equivalence class  $p$  of torsion-free connections on the tangent bundle  $TM$ , where two connections are called projectively equivalent if they share the same unparametrised geodesics. A manifold  $M$  equipped with a projective structure  $p$  will be called a *projective manifold*. A *conformal structure* on  $M$  is an equivalence class  $[g]$  of Riemannian metrics on  $M$ , where two metrics are called conformally equivalent if they differ by a scale factor. Naively, one might think of projective and conformal structures as formally similar, since both arise by defining a notion of equivalence on a geometric structure. However, the formal similarity is more substantial. For instance, Kobayashi has shown [24] that both projective – and conformal structures admit a treatment as Cartan geometries with  $|1|$ -graded Lie algebras. Here we exploit the fact that

both structures give rise to affine subspaces modelled on  $\Omega^1(M)$  of the infinite-dimensional affine space  $\mathfrak{A}(M)$  of torsion-free connections on  $M$ . Indeed, it is a classical result due to Weyl [44] that two torsion-free connections on  $TM$  are projectively equivalent if and only if their difference – thought of as a section of  $S^2(T^*M) \otimes TM$  – is pure trace. Consequently, the representative connections of a projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  on  $M$  define an affine subspace  $\mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$  which is modelled on  $\Omega^1(M)$ . Moreover, it follows from Koszul’s identity, that the torsion-free connections preserving a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $M$  are of the form

$${}^g\nabla + g \otimes \beta^\# - \beta \otimes \text{Id} - \text{Id} \otimes \beta,$$

with  $g \in [g]$ ,  $\beta \in \Omega^1(M)$  and where  ${}^g\nabla$  denotes the Levi-Civita connection of  $g$ . Hence, the space of torsion-free  $[g]$ -conformal connections on  $TM$  is an affine subspace  $\mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  modelled on  $\Omega^1(M)$  as well. It is an elementary computation to check that if  $\mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  and  $\mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$  intersect, then they do so in a unique point. Therefore, we may ask if in general one can distinguish a point in  $\mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$  and a point in  $\mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  which are ‘as close as possible’. This is indeed the case. More precisely, we show that the choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $(M, \mathfrak{p})$  determines a 1-form  $A_{[g]}$  on  $M$  with values in the endomorphisms of  $TM$ , as well as a unique  $[g]$ -conformal connection  ${}^{[g]}\nabla \in \mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  so that  ${}^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]} \in \mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$ . The 1-form  $A_{[g]}$  appeared previously in the work of Matveev & Trautman [35] and may be thought of as the ‘difference’ between  $\mathfrak{p}$  and  $[g]$ . In particular, if  $M$  is oriented, we obtain a  $\text{Diff}(M)$ -invariant functional

$$\mathcal{F}(\mathfrak{p}, [g]) = \int_M |A_{[g]}|_g^n d\mu_g.$$

Fixing a projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  on  $M$ , we may consider the functional  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}} = \mathcal{F}(\mathfrak{p}, \cdot)$ , which is a functional on the space  $\mathfrak{C}(M)$  of conformal structures on  $M$  only. It is natural to study the infimum of  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  among all conformal structures on  $M$ , and to ask whether there is actually a minimising conformal structure which achieves this infimum. This infimum – which may be considered as a measure of how far  $\mathfrak{p}$  deviates from being defined by a conformal connection – is a new global invariant for oriented projective manifolds.

Of particular interest is the case of surfaces where  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  is just the square of the  $L^2$ -norm of  $A_{[g]}$  taken with respect to  $[g]$  and this is the case that we study in detail in this article. It turns out that in the surface case the functional  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  also arises from a rather different viewpoint, which simplifies the computation of its variational equations by using the technique of moving frames.

Inspired by the twistorial construction of holomorphic projective structures by Hitchin [19], it was shown in [13], [42] how to construct a ‘twistor space’ for smooth projective structures. The choice of a projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  on an oriented surface  $\Sigma$  induces a complex structure on the total space of the disk bundle  $Z \rightarrow \Sigma$  whose sections are conformal structures on  $\Sigma$ . In this sense,  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}([g])$  can be interpreted as measuring the failure of  $[g](\Sigma) \subset Z$  to be a holomorphic curve in  $Z$ . We proceed to show that  $\mathfrak{p}$  canonically defines an indefinite Kähler-Einstein structure  $(h_{\mathfrak{p}}, \Omega_{\mathfrak{p}})$  on a certain submanifold  $Y$  of the projectivised holomorphic cotangent bundle  $\mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^*Z^{1,0})$  of  $Z$ . Moreover, every conformal structure  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  admits a lift  $\widetilde{[g]} : \Sigma \rightarrow Y$  so that the variational equations can be expressed as follows:

**Theorem A.** *Let  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  be an oriented projective surface. A conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $\Sigma$  is extremal for  $\mathfrak{p}$  if and only if  $\widetilde{[g]} : (\Sigma, [g]) \rightarrow (Y, h_{\mathfrak{p}})$  is weakly conformal.*

Here we say that  $[g]$  is *extremal* for  $\mathfrak{p}$  if it is a critical point of  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  with respect to compactly supported variations. Moreover, by weakly conformal we mean that there exists a smooth (and possibly vanishing) function  $f$  on  $\Sigma$  so that for some – and hence any – representative metric  $g \in [g]$ , we have  $\widetilde{[g]}^* h_{\mathfrak{p}} = fg$ . In fact, in the compact case  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}([g])$  is, up to the topological constant  $-2\pi\chi(\Sigma)$ , just the Dirichlet energy of  $\widetilde{[g]}$ . As a consequence, we obtain an optimal lower bound:

**Theorem B.** *Let  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  be a compact oriented projective surface. Then for every conformal structure  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  we have*

$$\frac{1}{2} \int_{\Sigma} \mathrm{tr}_g \widetilde{[g]}^* h_{\mathfrak{p}} d\mu_g \geq -2\pi\chi(\Sigma),$$

*with equality if and only if  $\mathfrak{p}$  is defined by a  $[g]$ -conformal connection.*

We then turn to the problem of finding non-trivial examples of projective structures for which  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  admits extremal conformal structures. The conformal connection  $[g]\nabla$  determined by the choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  may equivalently be thought of as a torsion-free connection  $\varphi$  on the principal  $\mathrm{GL}(1, \mathbb{C})$ -bundle of complex linear coframes of  $(\Sigma, [g])$ . In addition, the 1-form  $A_{[g]}$  turns out to be twice the real part of a section  $\alpha$  of  $K_{\Sigma}^2 \otimes \overline{K}_{\Sigma}^*$ , where  $K_{\Sigma}$  denotes the canonical bundle of  $(\Sigma, [g])$ . We provide another interpretation of the variational equations by proving that  $[g]$  is extremal for  $\mathfrak{p}$  if and only if the quadratic differential  $\nabla_{\varphi}'' \alpha$  vanishes identically. Here  $\nabla_{\varphi}$  denotes the connection induced by  $\varphi$  on  $K_{\Sigma}^2 \otimes \overline{K}_{\Sigma}^*$  and  $\nabla_{\varphi}''$  its  $(0,1)$ -part. Applying the Riemann–Roch theorem, it follows that a projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  on the 2-sphere  $S^2$  admits an extremal conformal structure if and only if  $\mathfrak{p}$  is defined by a conformal connection.

While there are no non-trivial critical points for projective structures on the 2-sphere, the situation is quite different for surfaces with negative Euler characteristic. Indeed, the condition of having a vanishing quadratic differential appeared previously in the projective differential geometry literature. In the celebrated paper “*Lie groups and Teichmüller space*” [21] Hitchin proposed a generalisation of Teichmüller space  $\mathcal{H}_2$  by identifying a connected component  $\mathcal{H}_n$  – nowadays called the *Hitchin component* – in the space of conjugacy classes of representations of  $\pi_1(\Sigma)$  into  $\mathrm{PSL}(n, \mathbb{R})$ .<sup>1</sup> Here  $\Sigma$  denotes a compact oriented surface whose genus exceeds one. Using the theory of Higgs bundles [20] and harmonic map techniques, Hitchin showed that the choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $\Sigma$  gives an identification

$$\mathcal{H}_n \simeq \bigoplus_{\ell=2}^n H^0(\Sigma, K_{\Sigma}^{\ell}).$$

Hitchin conjectured that  $\mathcal{H}_3$  is the space of conjugacy classes of monodromy representations of (flat) properly convex projective structures, a fact later confirmed by Choi and Goldman [10] (the geometric interpretation of the Hitchin component for  $n > 3$  is a topic of current interest, c.f. [18], [22], [27] for recent results).

<sup>1</sup>More generally, representation into a real split simple Lie group.

Teichmüller space being parametrised by holomorphic quadratic differentials, one might ask if there is a unique choice of a conformal structure on  $\Sigma$ , so that  $\mathcal{H}_3$  is parametrised in terms of cubic holomorphic differentials only. This is indeed the case, as was shown independently by Labourie [28] and Loftin [34] (see also [2] and [14] for recent work treating the non-compact case and the case of convex polygons, as well as [30] treating the case of a general real split rank 2 group). Furthermore, the conformal structure  $[g]$  making the quadratic differential vanish is the conformal equivalence class of the so-called *Blaschke metric*, which arises by realising the universal cover of a properly convex projective surface as a complete hyperbolic affine 2-sphere, see in particular [34].

Calling a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  *closed*, if  $\varphi$  induces a flat connection on  $\Lambda^2(T^*\Sigma)$ , we obtain a novel characterisation of properly convex projective structures among flat projective structures:

**Theorem C.** *Let  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  be a compact oriented flat projective surface of negative Euler characteristic. Suppose  $\mathfrak{p}$  is properly convex, then the conformal equivalence class of the Blaschke metric is closed and extremal for  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$ . Conversely, if  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  admits a closed extremal conformal structure  $[g]$ , then  $\mathfrak{p}$  is properly convex and  $[g]$  is the conformal equivalence class of the Blaschke metric of  $\mathfrak{p}$ .*

We conclude with some remarks about the possible relation between our functional and the energy functional on Teichmüller space [12], [29] which one can associate to a representation in the Hitchin component. Finally, as a by-product of our ideas, we obtain a Gauss–Bonnet type identity for oriented projective surfaces, which we briefly discuss in [Appendix I](#).

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## 2. Projective and conformal structures

### 2.1. Preliminaries

Throughout the article, all manifolds are assumed to be connected, have empty boundary and unless stated otherwise, all manifolds and maps are assumed to be smooth, i.e.,  $C^\infty$ . Also, we adhere to the convention of summing over repeated indices.

#### 2.1.1. Notation

For  $\mathbb{F} = \mathbb{R}, \mathbb{C}$  the field of real or complex numbers, we denote by  $\mathbb{F}^n$  the space of column vectors of height  $n$  and by  $\mathbb{F}_n$  the space of row vectors of length  $n$

whose entries are elements of  $\mathbb{F}$ . Also, we denote by  $\mathbb{FP}^2 = (\mathbb{F}^3 \setminus \{0\})/\mathbb{F}^*$  the space of one-dimensional linear subspaces in  $\mathbb{F}^3$ , that is, the real or complex projective plane. We denote by  $\mathbb{S}^2 = (\mathbb{R}^3 \setminus \{0\})/\mathbb{R}^+$  the space of oriented one-dimensional linear subspaces in  $\mathbb{R}^3$ , that is, the projective 2-sphere. Likewise, we write  $\mathbb{FP}_2 = (\mathbb{F}_3 \setminus \{0\})/\mathbb{F}^*$  for the dual (real or complex) projective plane and  $\mathbb{S}_2 = (\mathbb{R}_3 \setminus \{0\})/\mathbb{R}^+$  for the dual projective 2-sphere. For a non-zero vector  $x \in \mathbb{F}^3$  we write  $[x]$  for its corresponding point in  $\mathbb{FP}^2$  and for a non-zero vector  $\xi \in \mathbb{F}_3$  we write  $[\xi]$  for its corresponding point in  $\mathbb{FP}_2$ . For non-zero vectors  $x \in \mathbb{R}^3$  and  $\xi \in \mathbb{R}_3$  we also use the notation  $[x]_+$  and  $[\xi]_+$  to denote the corresponding points in  $\mathbb{S}^2$  and  $\mathbb{S}_2$ . Finally, we use the notation  $F(\mathbb{F}_3)$  to denote the space of complete flags in  $\mathbb{F}_3$  whose points are pairs  $(\ell, \Pi)$  with  $\Pi$  being an  $\mathbb{F}$  two-dimensional linear subspace of  $\mathbb{F}_3$  containing the line  $\ell$ .

### 2.1.2. The coframe bundle

Recall that the *coframe bundle* of an  $n$ -manifold  $M$  is the bundle  $\nu : F(T^*M) \rightarrow M$  whose fibre at a point  $p \in M$  consists of the linear isomorphisms  $u : T_p M \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^n$ . The group  $\text{GL}(n, \mathbb{R})$  acts transitively from the right on each  $\nu$ -fibre by the rule  $R_a(u) = u \cdot a = a^{-1} \circ u$  for all  $a \in \text{GL}(n, \mathbb{R})$ . This action turns  $\nu : F(T^*M) \rightarrow M$  into a principal right  $\text{GL}(n, \mathbb{R})$ -bundle. The coframe bundle is equipped with a tautological  $\mathbb{R}^n$ -valued 1-form  $\omega = (\omega^i)$  defined by  $\omega_u = u \circ \nu'_u$ . Note that  $\omega$  satisfies the equivariance property  $R_a^* \omega = a^{-1} \omega$  for all  $a \in \text{GL}(n, \mathbb{R})$ . The exterior derivative of local coordinates  $x : U \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^n$  on  $M$  defines a natural section  $\tilde{x} : U \rightarrow F(T^*M)$  having the reproducing property  $\tilde{x}^* \omega = dx$ . We will henceforth write  $F$  instead of  $F(T^*M)$  whenever  $M$  is clear from the context.

### 2.1.3. Associated bundles

Throughout the article we will frequently make use of the notion of an associated bundle of a principal bundle. The reader will recall that if  $\pi : P \rightarrow M$  is a principal right  $G$ -bundle and  $(\rho, N)$  a pair consisting of a manifold  $N$  and a homomorphism  $\rho : G \rightarrow \text{Diff}(N)$  into the diffeomorphism group of  $N$ , then we obtain an associated fibre bundle with typical fibre  $N$  and structure group  $G$  whose total space is  $P \times_\rho N$ , that is, the elements of  $P \times_\rho N$  are pairs  $(u, p)$  subject to the equivalence relation

$$(u_1, p_1) \sim (u_2, p_2) \iff u_2 = u_1 \cdot g, \quad p_2 = \rho(g^{-1})(p_1), \quad g \in G.$$

A section  $s$  of  $P \times_\rho N$  is then given by a map  $\sigma_s : P \rightarrow N$  which is equivariant with respect to the  $G$ -right action on  $P$  and the right action of  $G$  on  $N$  induced by  $\rho$ . We say that  $s$  is *represented by*  $\sigma_s$ . If  $N$  is an affine/linear space and the  $G$ -action induced by  $\rho$  is affine/linear, then the associated bundle is an affine/vector bundle.

## 2.2. Projective structures

Recall that the set  $\mathfrak{A}(M)$  of torsion-free connections on the tangent bundle of an  $n$ -manifold  $M$  is the space of sections of an affine bundle  $\mathfrak{A}(M) \rightarrow M$  of rank  $\frac{1}{2}n^2(n+1)$  which is modelled on the vector bundle  $V = S^2(T^*M) \otimes TM$ . We have a canonical trace mapping  $\text{tr} : V \rightarrow T^*M$  as well as an inclusion

$$\iota : T^*M \rightarrow V, \quad \nu \mapsto \nu \otimes \text{Id} + \text{Id} \otimes \nu.$$

For every  $v \in V$  we let  $v_0$  denote its trace-free part, so that

$$v_0 = v - \frac{1}{(n+1)} \iota(\text{tr } v).$$

A projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  on a manifold  $M$  of dimension  $n > 1$  is an equivalence class of torsion-free connections on  $TM$ , where two connections are declared to be equivalent if they share the same unparametrised geodesics. Weyl [44] observed the following:

**Lemma 2.1.** *Two torsion-free connections  $\nabla$  and  $\nabla'$  on  $TM$  are projectively equivalent if and only if  $(\nabla - \nabla')_0 = 0$ .*

Consequently, the set  $\mathfrak{P}(M)$  of projective structures on  $M$  is the space of sections of an affine bundle  $P(M) \rightarrow M$  of rank  $\frac{1}{2}(n+2)n(n-1)$  which is modelled on the traceless part  $V_0$  of the vector bundle  $V$ . We will use the notation  $\mathfrak{p}(\nabla)$  for the projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  that is defined by a connection  $\nabla$ . A consequence of Weyl's result is that the set of representative connections of a projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  is an affine subspace  $\mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M) \subset \mathfrak{A}(M)$  of the space of torsion-free connections which is modelled on the space of 1-forms on  $M$ .

### 2.3. Conformal structures

A conformal structure on a manifold  $M$  of dimension  $n > 1$  is an equivalence class  $[g]$  of Riemannian metrics on  $M$ , where two metrics  $g$  and  $\hat{g}$  are declared to be equivalent if there exists a smooth function  $f$  on  $M$  so that  $\hat{g} = e^{2f}g$ . Equivalently, a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $M$  is a (smooth) choice of a coframe for every point  $p$  in  $M$ , well defined up to orthogonal transformation and scaling. Consequently, the set  $\mathfrak{C}(M)$  of conformal structures on  $M$  is the space of sections of  $C(M) = F/(\mathbb{R}^+ \times O(n)) \rightarrow M$ , where  $\mathbb{R}^+ \times O(n)$  is the subgroup of  $GL(n, \mathbb{R})$  consisting of matrices  $a$  having the property that  $aa^t$  is a non-zero multiple of the identity matrix.

A torsion-free connection  $\nabla$  on  $TM$  is called a *Weyl connection* or *conformal connection* for the conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $M$  if the parallel transport maps of  $\nabla$  are angle-preserving with respect to  $[g]$ . A torsion-free connection  $\nabla$  is  $[g]$ -conformal if for some (and hence any) representative metric  $g \in [g]$  there exists a 1-form  $\beta$  on  $M$  such that

$$\nabla g = 2\beta \otimes g.$$

It is a simple consequence of Koszul's identity that the  $[g]$ -conformal connections are of the form

$$(2.1) \quad (g, \beta)\nabla = {}^g\nabla + g \otimes \beta^\sharp - \beta \otimes \text{Id} - \text{Id} \otimes \beta,$$

where  $g \in [g]$ ,  $\beta$  is a 1-form on  $M$  with  $g$ -dual vector field  $\beta^\sharp$  and  ${}^g\nabla$  denotes the Levi-Civita connection of  $g$ . Consequently, the set of  $[g]$ -conformal connections defines an affine subspace  $\mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M) \subset \mathfrak{A}(M)$  which is modelled on the space of 1-forms on  $M$  as well. For later usage we also record that for every smooth function  $f$  on  $M$  we have

$$(\exp(2f)g, \beta + df)\nabla = (g, \beta)\nabla,$$

as the reader may easily verify using the identity [3, Theorem 1.159]

$$(2.2) \quad \exp(2f)g \nabla = g \nabla - g \otimes g \nabla f + \iota(df).$$

In particular, if  $\beta$  is exact, so that  $\beta = df$  for some smooth function  $f$  on  $M$ , then  $(g, \beta) \nabla = \exp(-2f)g \nabla$  and hence the conformal connection determined by  $(g, \beta)$  is the Levi-Civita connection of the metric  $e^{-2f}g$ .

We also use the notation  $[g] \nabla$  for a connection preserving the conformal structure  $[g]$ .

## 2.4. Compatibility of projective and conformal structures

Since both projective – and conformal structures give rise to affine subspaces of  $\mathfrak{A}(M)$  of the same type, we may ask how two such spaces intersect.

**Lemma 2.2.** *Let  $[g]$  be a conformal – and  $\mathfrak{p}$  a projective structure on  $M$ . Then  $\mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  and  $\mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$  intersect in at most one point.*

*Proof.* Suppose the  $[g]$ -conformal connections  $[g] \nabla$  and  $[g] \hat{\nabla}$  are both elements in  $\mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$ . Then, by Lemma 2.1, there exists a 1-form  $\Upsilon$  on  $M$  so that

$$[g] \nabla = [g] \hat{\nabla} + \iota(\Upsilon).$$

Fixing a Riemannian metric  $g$  defining  $[g]$ , we also have 1-forms  $\beta, \hat{\beta}$  on  $M$  so that

$$[g] \nabla = g \nabla + g \otimes \beta^{\#} - \iota(\beta) \quad \text{and} \quad [g] \hat{\nabla} = g \nabla + g \otimes \hat{\beta}^{\#} - \iota(\hat{\beta}).$$

Applying these formulae we obtain

$$\iota(\Upsilon + \beta - \hat{\beta}) = g \otimes (\beta^{\#} - \hat{\beta}^{\#}).$$

Taking the trace gives

$$(n+1)(\Upsilon + \beta - \hat{\beta}) = \beta - \hat{\beta},$$

so that  $\Upsilon = -\frac{n}{(n+1)}(\beta - \hat{\beta})$ . Therefore we must have

$$\iota(\beta - \hat{\beta}) = (n+1)g \otimes (\beta^{\#} - \hat{\beta}^{\#}).$$

Contracting this last equation with the dual metric  $g^{\#}$  implies

$$0 = (n+2)(n-1)(\beta^{\#} - \hat{\beta}^{\#}),$$

so that  $\beta = \hat{\beta}$  provided  $n > 1$ . It follows that  $\Upsilon$  vanishes too, therefore  $[g] \nabla = [g] \hat{\nabla}$ , as claimed.  $\square$

**Remark 2.3.** Lemma 2.2 raises the question whether or not one can still determine a unique point  $[g] \nabla \in \mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  and a unique point  $\nabla \in \mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$  in the general case, where  $\mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  and  $\mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$  might not intersect. Formally speaking, we are interested in maps

$$\psi = (\psi^1, \psi^2) : \mathfrak{P}(M) \times \mathfrak{C}(M) \rightarrow \mathfrak{A}(M) \times \mathfrak{A}(M)$$

satisfying the following properties:

- (i)  $\psi^1(\mathfrak{p}, [g]) \in \mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$  and  $\psi^2(\mathfrak{p}, [g]) \in \mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$ ;
- (ii) If  $\mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M) \cap \mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  is non-empty, then  $\psi^2(\mathfrak{p}, [g]) - \psi^1(\mathfrak{p}, [g]) = 0$ ;

- (iii)  $\psi$  is equivariant with respect to the natural right action of the diffeomorphism group  $\text{Diff}(M)$  on  $\mathfrak{P}(M) \times \mathfrak{C}(M)$  and  $\mathfrak{A}(M) \times \mathfrak{A}(M)$ .

We will next discuss a geometrically natural and explicit map  $\psi$  having these properties.

To this end let  $g$  be a Riemannian metric on  $M$  and  $\nabla$  a torsion-free connection on  $TM$ . Consider the first-order differential operator for  $g$  mapping into the space of 1-forms on  $M$  with values in  $\text{End}(TM)$

$$(2.3) \quad g \mapsto A_{[g]} = (\nabla - {}^g\nabla - g \otimes X_g)_0,$$

where  $X_g \in \Gamma(TM)$  is

$$(2.4) \quad X_g = \frac{(n+1)}{(n+2)(n-1)} \text{tr} \left( g^\# \otimes (\nabla - {}^g\nabla)_0 \right).$$

The following result is essentially contained in [35] – except for (vi). For the convenience of the reader we include a proof.

**Theorem 2.4** (Matveev & Trautman, [35]). *The 1-form  $A_{[g]}$  has the following properties:*

- (i) *the endomorphism  $A_{[g]}(X)$  is trace-free for all  $X \in \Gamma(TM)$ ;*
- (ii) *for all  $X, Y \in \Gamma(TM)$  we have  $A_{[g]}(X)Y = A_{[g]}(Y)X$ ;*
- (iii)  *$A_{[g]}$  only depends on the projective equivalence class of  $\nabla$ ;*
- (iv)  *$A_{[g]}$  only depends on the conformal equivalence class of  $g$ ;*
- (v)  *$A_{[g]} \equiv 0$  if and only if there exists a  $[g]$ -conformal connection which is projectively equivalent to  $\nabla$ ;*
- (vi) *for  $n = 2$  the endomorphism  $A_{[g]}(X)$  is symmetric with respect to  $[g]$  for all  $X \in \Gamma(TM)$ ;*

*Proof.* The properties (i) and (ii) are obvious from the definition.

(iii) Recall that two affine torsion-free connections  $\nabla$  and  $\hat{\nabla}$  are projectively equivalent if and only if  $(\nabla - \hat{\nabla})_0 = 0$ . The claim follows from the linearity of the “taking the trace-free part” operation.

(iv) Let  $\hat{g} = e^{2f}g$  for some smooth real-valued function  $f$  on  $M$ . Then we have

$$\hat{g}\nabla = {}^g\nabla - g \otimes {}^g\nabla f + \iota(df)$$

and hence

$$\begin{aligned} (\nabla - \hat{g}\nabla)_0 &= (\nabla - {}^g\nabla)_0 + (g \otimes {}^g\nabla f - \iota(df))_0 \\ &= (\nabla - {}^g\nabla)_0 + (g \otimes {}^g\nabla f)_0 \\ &= (\nabla - {}^g\nabla)_0 + g \otimes {}^g\nabla f - \frac{1}{(n+1)}\iota(df). \end{aligned}$$

We obtain

$$\begin{aligned} X_{\hat{g}} &= \frac{(n+1)}{(n+2)(n-1)} \text{tr} \left[ \hat{g}^\# \otimes \left( (\nabla - {}^g\nabla)_0 + g \otimes {}^g\nabla f - \frac{1}{(n+1)}\iota(df) \right) \right] \\ &= e^{-2f} \left( X_g + \frac{n(n+1)}{(n+2)(n-1)} {}^g\nabla f - \frac{2}{(n+2)(n-1)} {}^g\nabla f \right) \\ &= e^{-2f} (X_g + {}^g\nabla f). \end{aligned}$$



This gives

$$\begin{aligned}\hat{g}\nabla + \hat{g} \otimes X_{\hat{g}} &= {}^g\nabla - g \otimes {}^g\nabla f + \iota(df) + e^{2f} g \otimes e^{-2f} (X_g + {}^g\nabla f) \\ &= {}^g\nabla + g \otimes X_g + \iota(df),\end{aligned}$$

so that

$$\left(\hat{g}\nabla + \hat{g} \otimes X_{\hat{g}}\right)_0 = ({}^g\nabla + g \otimes X_g)_0,$$

which shows that  $A_{[g]}$  does indeed only depend on the conformal class of  $g$ .

(v) Recall that the  $[g]$ -conformal connections are of the form

$$[g]\nabla = {}^g\nabla + g \otimes \beta^\# - \iota(\beta),$$

where  $g$  is any metric in the conformal class  $[g]$  and  $\beta$  is some 1-form on  $M$ . Therefore we have

$$\left([g]\nabla - {}^g\nabla\right)_0 = \left(g \otimes \beta^\#\right)_0 = g \otimes \beta^\# - \frac{1}{(n+1)}\iota(\beta)$$

and thus as before we compute that  $X_g = \beta^\#$ . We obtain

$$\begin{aligned}A_{[g]} &= \left[[g]\nabla - ({}^g\nabla + g \otimes X_g)\right]_0 \\ &= \left[{}^g\nabla + g \otimes \beta^\# - \iota(\beta) - {}^g\nabla - g \otimes \beta^\#\right]_0 = [-\iota(\beta)]_0 = 0.\end{aligned}$$

Conversely, suppose  $\mathfrak{p}$  is a projective structure for which there exists a conformal structure  $[g]$  with  $A_{[g]} \equiv 0$ . Fixing a Riemannian metric  $g \in [g]$  and a  $\mathfrak{p}$ -representative connection  $\nabla$ , we must have

$$\nabla - ({}^g\nabla + g \otimes X_g) = \iota(\beta),$$

for some 1-form  $\beta$  on  $M$ . Adding  $\iota((X_g)^\flat)$  gives

$$\nabla - \left({}^g\nabla + g \otimes X_g - \iota((X_g)^\flat)\right) = \iota(\beta + (X_g)^\flat),$$

so that [Lemma 2.1](#) implies that  $\nabla$  and the  $[g]$ -conformal connection

$${}^g\nabla + g \otimes X_g - \iota((X_g)^\flat)$$

are projectively equivalent.

(vi) Let now  $n = 2$ . We need to show that for  $g \in [g]$  and all vector fields  $X, Y, Z \in \Gamma(TM)$ , we have

$$g(A_{[g]}(X)Y, Z) = g(Y, A_{[g]}(X)Z).$$

Without losing generality, we can assume that locally  $g = (dx^1)^2 + (dx^2)^2$  for coordinates  $x = (x^1, x^2) : U \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^2$  on  $M$ . Let  $\Gamma_{jk}^i$  denote the Christoffel symbols of  $\nabla$  with respect to  $x$ . Since the Christoffel symbols of  ${}^g\nabla$  vanish identically on  $U$ , we obtain with a simple calculation

$$X_g = -\frac{3}{4}(w_1 + w_3)\frac{\partial}{\partial x^1} + \frac{3}{4}(w_0 + w_2)\frac{\partial}{\partial x^2},$$

where

$$w_0 = \Gamma_{11}^2, \quad 3w_1 = -\Gamma_{11}^1 + 2\Gamma_{12}^2, \quad 3w_2 = -2\Gamma_{12}^1 + \Gamma_{22}^2, \quad w_3 = -\Gamma_{22}^1.$$

Likewise, we compute

$$A_{[g]} = \frac{1}{2} (a_1 e^{11}_1 - a_2 e^{11}_2 - a_2 e^{12}_1 - a_1 e^{12}_2 \\ - a_2 e^{21}_1 - a_1 e^{21}_2 - a_1 e^{22}_1 + a_2 e^{22}_2)$$

where we write  $e^{ij}_k = dx^i \otimes dx^j \otimes \frac{\partial}{\partial x^k}$  and

$$a_1 = \frac{1}{2}(w_3 - 3w_1), \quad a_2 = \frac{1}{2}(3w_2 - w_0).$$

The claim follows from an elementary calculation.  $\square$

*Remark 2.5.* By construction, the 1-form  $A_{[g]}$  vanishes identically if and only if  $\nabla$  is projectively equivalent to a conformal connection. The necessary and sufficient conditions for a torsion-free connection to be projectively equivalent to a Levi-Civita connection were given in [6]. The reader may also consult [7] for the role of Einstein metrics in projective differential geometry.

As a corollary to [Theorem 2.4](#) and [Lemma 2.2](#) we obtain the following result.

**Corollary 2.6.** *For every conformal structure  $[g]$  on the projective manifold  $(M, \mathfrak{p})$ , there exists a unique  $[g]$ -conformal connection  $^{[g]}\nabla$  so that  $^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]} \in \mathfrak{p}$ .*

Note that [Corollary 2.6](#) provides a unique point  $^{[g]}\nabla \in \mathfrak{A}_{[g]}(M)$  and a unique point  $^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]} \in \mathfrak{A}_{\mathfrak{p}}(M)$ . We may define

$$\psi(\mathfrak{p}, [g]) = \left( ^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]}, ^{[g]}\nabla \right).$$

Since the map which sends a Riemannian metric to its Levi-Civita connection is equivariant with respect to the action of  $\text{Diff}(M)$  on the space of Riemannian metrics and on  $\mathfrak{A}(M)$ , it follows that the map  $\psi$  has all the properties listed in [Remark 2.3](#).

*Proof of Corollary 2.6.* Let  $\nabla$  be a connection defining  $\mathfrak{p}$  and  $g$  a smooth metric defining  $[g]$ . Set

$$^{[g]}\nabla = {}^g\nabla + g \otimes X_g - (X_g)^\flat \otimes \text{Id} - \text{Id} \otimes (X_g)^\flat,$$

where  $X_g$  is defined as before (see [\(2.4\)](#)). Then, property (i) of  $A_{[g]}$  proved in [Theorem 2.4](#) implies that

$$\left( \nabla - \left( ^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]} \right) \right)_0 = \left( \nabla - ({}^g\nabla + g \otimes X_g) \right)_0 - A_{[g]} = A_{[g]} - A_{[g]} = 0,$$

so that  $^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]}$  is projectively equivalent to  $\nabla$  by [Lemma 2.1](#). If  $^{[g]}\nabla'$  is another  $[g]$ -conformal connection so that  $^{[g]}\nabla' + A_{[g]}$  defines  $\mathfrak{p}$ , then

$$\left( ^{[g]}\nabla - ^{[g]}\nabla' \right)_0 = 0,$$

hence  $^{[g]}\nabla = ^{[g]}\nabla'$  by [Lemma 2.2](#).  $\square$

## 2.5. A diffeomorphism invariant functional

We will henceforth assume  $M$  to be oriented. For a pair  $(p, [g])$  consisting of a projective structure and a conformal structure on  $M$ , we consider the non-negative  $n$ -form  $|A_{[g]}|_g^n d\mu_g$ , where  $g$  is any metric defining  $[g]$ , the  $n$ -form  $d\mu_g$  denotes its volume form and where  $A_{[g]}$  is computed with respect to  $p$ . For  $f \in C^\infty(M)$  we have

$$|A_{[g]}|_{e^{2f}g} = e^{-f} |A_{[g]}|_g \quad \text{and} \quad d\mu_{e^{2f}g} = e^{nf} d\mu_g,$$

it follows that  $|A_{[g]}|_g^n d\mu_g$  depends only on the conformal structure  $[g]$ . Consequently, we obtain a non-negative functional

$$\mathcal{F} : \mathfrak{P}(M) \times \mathfrak{C}(M) \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_0^+ \cup \{\infty\}, \quad (p, [g]) \mapsto \int_M |A_{[g]}|_g^n d\mu_g.$$

By construction,  $\mathcal{F}$  is invariant under simultaneous action of  $\text{Diff}(M)$  on  $\mathfrak{P}(M)$  and  $\mathfrak{C}(M)$ .

We may also fix a projective structure  $p$  on  $M$  and define  $\mathcal{E}_p = \mathcal{F}[(p, \cdot)]$  which is a functional on  $\mathfrak{C}(M)$  only. We may study the infimum of  $\mathcal{E}_p$  among all conformal structures on  $M$ , and ask whether there is actually a minimising conformal structure which achieves this infimum. The infimum

$$\Gamma\delta(M, p) := \inf_{[g] \in \mathfrak{C}(M)} \mathcal{E}_p([g]),$$

which may be considered as a measure of how far  $p$  deviates from being defined by a conformal connection, is a new global invariant for oriented projective manifolds. Note that reversing the role of  $p$  and  $[g]$  does not give us a global invariant for conformal manifolds. Clearly, fixing a conformal structure and considering the infimum over  $\mathfrak{P}(M)$  yields zero for every choice of conformal structure  $[g]$ .

## 3. Projective surfaces and associated bundles

A natural case to consider is  $n = 2$ , where  $\mathcal{F}$  is just the square of the  $L^2$ -norm of  $A_{[g]}$  taken with respect to  $[g]$ . We will henceforth consider the surface case only.

There are several natural geometric spaces fibering over an oriented projective surface which we will discuss next. Before doing so, we recall a result of Cartan [9], which canonically associates a principal bundle together with a “connection” to every projective manifold. The reader interested in a description of Cartan’s construction using modern language may also consult [26]. For additional background on Cartan geometries the reader may also consult [8].

### 3.1. Cartan’s normal projective connection

Let  $\Sigma$  be an oriented surface and let  $G \simeq \mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \text{GL}^+(2, \mathbb{R})$  denote the two-dimensional orientation preserving affine group which we think of as the subgroup of  $\text{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  consisting of matrices of the form

$$b \rtimes a = \begin{pmatrix} \det a^{-1} & b \\ 0 & a \end{pmatrix},$$

for  $b \in \mathbb{R}_2$  and  $a \in \text{GL}^+(2, \mathbb{R})$ . We denote by  $\nu : F^+ \rightarrow \Sigma$  the principal right  $\text{GL}^+(2, \mathbb{R})$ -bundle of coframes that are orientation preserving with respect to the

chosen orientation on  $\Sigma$  and the standard orientation on  $\mathbb{R}^2$ . We define a right  $G$ -action on  $F^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2$  by the rule

$$(3.1) \quad (u, \xi) \cdot (b \rtimes a) = (\det a^{-1} a^{-1} \circ u, \xi a \det a + b \det a),$$

for all  $b \rtimes a \in G$ . Here  $\xi : F^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2 \rightarrow \mathbb{R}_2$  denotes the projection onto the latter factor. This action turns  $\pi : F^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2 \rightarrow \Sigma$  into a principal right  $G$ -bundle over  $\Sigma$ , where  $\pi : F^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2 \rightarrow \Sigma$  denotes the natural basepoint projection. Suppose  $\nabla$  is a torsion-free connection on  $T\Sigma$  with connection 1-form  $\eta = (\eta_j^i)$  on  $F^+$  so that we have the structure equations<sup>2</sup>

$$\begin{aligned} d\omega^i &= -\eta_j^i \wedge \omega^j, \\ d\eta_j^i &= -\eta_k^i \wedge \eta_j^k + (\delta_{[k}^i S_{l]j} - S_{[kl]j} \delta_j^i) \omega^k \wedge \omega^l, \end{aligned}$$

where  $S = (S_{ij})$  represents the *projective Schouten tensor*  $\text{Schout}(\nabla)$  of  $\nabla$  and  $\omega^i$  the components of the tautological  $\mathbb{R}^n$ -valued 1-form  $\omega$  on  $F$ . Recall that the Schouten tensor is defined as

$$(3.2) \quad \text{Schout}(\nabla) = \text{Ric}^+(\nabla) - \frac{1}{3} \text{Ric}^-(\nabla),$$

where  $\text{Ric}^\pm(\nabla)$  denote the symmetric and anti-symmetric part of the Ricci curvature of  $\nabla$ . On  $P = F^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2$  we define the  $\mathfrak{sl}(3, \mathbb{R})$ -valued 1-form

$$(3.3) \quad \theta = \begin{pmatrix} -\frac{1}{3} \text{tr } \eta - \xi \omega & d\xi - \xi \eta - (S\omega)^t - \xi \omega \xi \\ \omega & \eta - \frac{1}{3} \text{I tr } \eta + \omega \xi \end{pmatrix}.$$

The reader may check that the pair  $(\pi : P \rightarrow \Sigma, \theta)$  defines a *Cartan geometry* of type  $(\text{SL}(3, \mathbb{R}), G)$ , that is,  $\pi : P \rightarrow \Sigma$  is a principal right  $G$ -bundle and  $\theta$  is an  $\mathfrak{sl}(3, \mathbb{R})$ -valued 1-form on  $P$  satisfying the following properties:

- (i)  $\theta_u : T_u P \rightarrow \mathfrak{sl}(3, \mathbb{R})$  is an isomorphism for every  $u \in P$ ;
- (ii)  $(R_g)^* \theta = g^{-1} \theta g$  for every  $g \in G$ ;
- (iii)  $\theta(X_v) = v$  for every fundamental vector field  $X_v$  generated by an element  $v$  in the Lie algebra of  $G$ .

Moreover, writing  $\theta = (\theta_j^i)_{i,j=0,1,2}$ , the Cartan geometry  $(\pi : P \rightarrow \Sigma, \theta)$  also satisfies:

- (iv) for every non-zero  $x \in \mathbb{R}^2$ , the integral curves of the vector field  $X_x$  defined by the equations

$$\theta(X_x) = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & 0 \\ x & 0 \end{pmatrix}$$

project to  $\Sigma$  to become geodesics of  $\mathfrak{p}$  and conversely all geodesics of  $\mathfrak{p}$  arise in this way;

- (v) the  $\pi$ -pullback of an orientation compatible volume form on  $\Sigma$  is a positive multiple of  $\theta_0^1 \wedge \theta_0^2$ ;

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<sup>2</sup>Indices in round brackets are symmetrised over and indices in square brackets are anti-symmetrised over, for instance, we write  $S_{(ij)} = \frac{1}{2} (S_{ij} + S_{ji})$  and  $S_{[ij]} = \frac{1}{2} (S_{ij} - S_{ji})$  so that  $S_{ij} = S_{(ij)} + S_{[ij]}$ .

(vi) the curvature 2-form  $\Theta = d\theta + \theta \wedge \theta$  is

$$(3.4) \quad \Theta = d\theta + \theta \wedge \theta = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & L_1\theta_0^1 \wedge \theta_0^2 & L_2\theta_0^1 \wedge \theta_0^2 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix},$$

for unique curvature functions  $L_i : P \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ .

*Remark 3.1.* Cartan's bundle is unique in the following sense: If  $(\hat{\pi} : \hat{P} \rightarrow \Sigma, \hat{\theta})$  is another Cartan geometry of type  $(\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R}), G)$  so that the properties (iv), (v) and (vi) hold, then there exists a  $G$ -bundle isomorphism  $\psi : P \rightarrow \hat{P}$  satisfying  $\psi^*\hat{\theta} = \theta$ .

A projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  on  $\Sigma$  is called *flat* if every point  $p \in \Sigma$  has a neighbourhood  $U_p$  which is diffeomorphic to a subset of  $\mathbb{RP}^2$  in such a way that the geodesics of  $\mathfrak{p}$  contained in  $U_p$  are mapped onto (segments) of projective lines  $\mathbb{RP}^1 \subset \mathbb{RP}^2$ . Furthermore, a torsion-free connection  $\nabla$  on  $T\Sigma$  is called *projectively flat* if  $\mathfrak{p}(\nabla)$  is flat. Using Cartan's connection, one can show that a projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  is flat if and only if the functions  $L_1$  and  $L_2$  vanish identically. Another consequence of Cartan's result is that there exists a unique 1-form  $\lambda \in \Omega^1(\Sigma, \Lambda^2(T^*\Sigma))$  so that

$$\pi^*\lambda = (L_1\theta_0^1 + L_2\theta_0^2) \otimes \theta_0^1 \wedge \theta_0^2.$$

The 1-form  $\lambda$  was first discovered by R. Liouville [32], hence we call  $\lambda$  the *Liouville curvature* of  $\mathfrak{p}$ . In particular, the Liouville curvature is the complete obstruction to flatness of a two-dimensional projective structure.

*Example 3.2.* Note that the left action of  $\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  on  $\mathbb{R}^3$  by matrix multiplication descends to define a transitive left action on the projective 2-sphere  $\mathbb{S}^2$ . The stabiliser subgroup of the element  $[(1 \ 0 \ 0)^t]$  is the group  $G \subset \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  so that  $\mathbb{S}^2 \simeq \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})/G$ . Taking  $\theta$  to be the Maurer-Cartan form of  $\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$ , the pair  $(\pi : \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R}) \rightarrow \mathbb{S}^2, \theta)$  is a Cartan geometry of type  $(\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R}), G)$  defining an orientation and projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}_{\mathrm{can}}$  on  $\mathbb{S}^2$  whose geodesics are the “great circles”. Since  $d\theta + \theta \wedge \theta = 0$ , this projective structure is flat. We call  $\mathfrak{p}_{\mathrm{can}}$  the *canonical flat projective structure* on  $\mathbb{S}^2$ .

### 3.2. The twistor space

Inspired by Hitchin's twistorial description of holomorphic projective structures on complex surfaces [19], it was shown in [13, 42] how to construct a “twistor space” for smooth projective structures. For what follows it will be convenient to construct the twistor space in the smooth category by using the Cartan geometry of a projective surface.

Let therefore  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  be an oriented projective surface with Cartan geometry  $(\pi : P \rightarrow \Sigma, \theta)$ . By construction, the quotient of  $P$  by the normal subgroup  $\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \{\mathrm{Id}\} \subset G$  is isomorphic to the bundle  $\nu : F^+ \rightarrow \Sigma$  of orientation preserving coframes of  $\Sigma$ . In particular, the choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $\Sigma$  corresponds to a section of the fibre bundle  $C(\Sigma) \simeq P/(\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2)) \rightarrow \Sigma$ . Here  $\mathrm{CO}(2) = \mathbb{R}^+ \times \mathrm{SO}(2)$  is the linear orientation preserving conformal group. By construction, the typical fibre of the bundle  $C(\Sigma) \rightarrow \Sigma$  is diffeomorphic to  $\mathrm{GL}^+(2, \mathbb{R})/\mathrm{CO}(2) \simeq \mathrm{SL}(2, \mathbb{R})/\mathrm{SO}(2)$ , that is, the open unit disk  $D^2 \subset \mathbb{C}$ .

We write the elements of the group  $\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2)$  in the following form

$$z \rtimes r e^{i\phi} = \begin{pmatrix} r^{-2} & \mathrm{Re}(z) & \mathrm{Im}(z) \\ 0 & r \cos \phi & r \sin \phi \\ 0 & -r \sin \phi & r \cos \phi \end{pmatrix}, \quad z \in \mathbb{C}, r e^{i\phi} \in \mathbb{C}^*.$$

Property (iii) of the Cartan geometry  $(\pi : P \rightarrow \Sigma, \theta)$  implies that the (real – or complex-valued) 1-forms on  $P$  that are semibasic<sup>3</sup> for the quotient projection  $\mu : P \rightarrow \mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$  are complex linear combinations of the complex-valued 1-forms

$$(3.5) \quad \zeta_1 = \theta_0^1 + i\theta_0^2, \quad \zeta_2 = (\theta_1^1 - \theta_2^2) + i(\theta_1^2 + \theta_2^1)$$

and their complex conjugates. The equivariance property (ii) of the Cartan geometry gives

$$(3.6) \quad (R_{z \rtimes r e^{i\phi}})^* \begin{pmatrix} \zeta_1 \\ \zeta_2 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} \frac{1}{r^3} e^{i\phi} & 0 \\ \frac{z}{r} e^{i\phi} & e^{2i\phi} \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} \zeta_1 \\ \zeta_2 \end{pmatrix}.$$

It follows that there exists a unique almost complex structure  $\mathfrak{J}$  on  $\mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$  having the property that a complex-valued 1-form on  $P$  is the pullback of a  $(1,0)$ -form on  $\mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$  if and only if it is a complex linear combination of  $\zeta_1$  and  $\zeta_2$ . Indeed, locally we may use a section  $s$  of the bundle  $\mu : P \rightarrow \mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$  to pull down the forms  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2$  onto the domain of definition  $U \subset \mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$  of  $s$ . Since  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2$  are semi-basic for the projection  $\mu : P \rightarrow \mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$ , it follows that the pulled down forms are linearly independent over  $\mathbb{C}$  at each point of  $U$ . Hence we obtain a unique almost complex structure  $\mathfrak{J}$  on  $U$  whose  $(1,0)$ -forms are  $s^* \zeta_1, s^* \zeta_2$ . The equivariance (3.6) implies that  $\mathfrak{J}$  is independent of the choice of the section  $s$  and extends to all of  $\mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$ . Using property (vi) of the Cartan geometry the reader may easily verify that

$$d\zeta_1 = d\zeta_2 = 0, \quad \text{mod } \zeta_1, \zeta_2.$$

It follows from the Newlander-Nirenberg theorem that  $\mathfrak{J}$  is integrable, thus giving  $\mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$  the structure of a complex surface which we will denote by  $Z$  and which – abusing language – we call the *twistor space* of the projective surface  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$ .

### 3.3. An indefinite Kähler-Einstein 3-fold

From (3.6) it follows that the holomorphic cotangent bundle  $T_{\mathbb{C}}^* Z^{1,0} \rightarrow Z$  is the bundle associated to  $\mu : P \rightarrow Z$  via the complex two-dimensional representation  $\rho : \mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2) \rightarrow \mathrm{GL}(2, \mathbb{C})$  defined by the rule

$$(3.7) \quad \rho(z \rtimes r e^{i\phi})(w_1 \ w_2) = (w_1 \ w_2) \begin{pmatrix} \frac{1}{r^3} e^{i\phi} & 0 \\ \frac{z}{r} e^{i\phi} & e^{2i\phi} \end{pmatrix}$$

for all  $(w_1 \ w_2) \in \mathbb{C}_2$ . In particular, the form  $\zeta_1$  is well defined on  $Z$  up to complex-scale and hence may be thought of as a section of the projective holomorphic cotangent bundle  $\mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^* Z^{1,0}) \rightarrow Z$ . Abusing notation, we write  $\zeta_1(Z) \subset \mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^* Z^{1,0})$  to denote the image of  $Z$  under this section. We now have:

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<sup>3</sup>Recall that a differential form  $\alpha$  is said to be semibasic for the projection  $P \rightarrow \mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$  if the interior product  $X \lrcorner \alpha$  vanishes for every vector field  $X$  tangent to the fibres of  $P \rightarrow \mathrm{C}(\Sigma)$ .

**Lemma 3.3.** *There exists a unique integrable almost complex structure on the quotient  $P/\mathrm{CO}(2)$  having the property that its  $(1,0)$ -forms pull back to  $P$  to become linear combinations of the forms*

$$(3.8) \quad \zeta_1 = \theta_0^1 + i\theta_0^2, \quad \zeta_2 = (\theta_1^1 - \theta_2^2) + i(\theta_2^1 + \theta_1^2), \quad \zeta_3 = \theta_1^0 + i\theta_2^0.$$

*Furthermore, with respect to this complex structure  $P/\mathrm{CO}(2)$  is biholomorphic to  $Y = \mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^*Z^{1,0}) \setminus \zeta_1(Z)$  in such a way that the standard holomorphic contact structure on  $Y$  is identified with the subbundle of  $T_{\mathbb{C}}(P/\mathrm{CO}(2))^{1,0}$  defined by the equation  $\zeta_2 = 0$ .*

*Proof.* Again, it follows from the property (iii) of the Cartan connection  $\theta$  that the 1-forms that are semibasic for the quotient projection  $\tau : P \rightarrow P/\mathrm{CO}(2)$  are linear combinations of the forms  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2, \zeta_3$  and their complex conjugates. Here  $\mathrm{CO}(2) \subset G$  is the subgroup consisting of elements of the form  $0 \rtimes re^{i\phi}$ . Writing  $re^{i\phi}$  instead of  $0 \rtimes re^{i\phi}$  and  $\zeta = (\zeta_i)$ , we compute from the equivariance property (ii) of  $\theta$  that we have

$$(3.9) \quad (R_{re^{i\phi}})^* \begin{pmatrix} \zeta_1 \\ \zeta_2 \\ \zeta_3 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} \frac{1}{r^3}e^{i\phi} & 0 & 0 \\ 0 & e^{2i\phi} & 0 \\ 0 & 0 & r^3e^{i\phi} \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} \zeta_1 \\ \zeta_2 \\ \zeta_3 \end{pmatrix}.$$

It follows as before that there exists a unique almost complex structure  $\mathfrak{J}$  on the quotient  $P/\mathrm{CO}(2)$  having the property that its  $(1,0)$ -forms pull back to  $P$  to become linear combinations of the forms  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2, \zeta_3$ . Suppose there exists a 1-form  $\gamma = (\gamma_{ij})$  on  $P$  with values in  $\mathfrak{gl}(3, \mathbb{C})$ , so that  $d\zeta = -\gamma \wedge \zeta$ , then it follows again from the Newlander–Nirenberg theorem that  $\mathfrak{J}$  is integrable. Clearly, if such a  $\gamma$  exists, then it is not unique. Defining  $\hat{\gamma} = (\hat{\gamma}_{ij})$ , with  $\hat{\gamma}_{ij} = \gamma_{ij} + T_{ijk}\zeta_k$  for some complex-valued functions satisfying  $T_{ijk} = T_{ikj}$  on  $P$  will also work. We can exploit this freedom and make  $\gamma$  take values in the Lie algebra

$$\mathfrak{u}(2, 1) = \left\{ \begin{pmatrix} w_1 & -\overline{w_2} & ix_1 \\ -w_3 & ix_2 & w_2 \\ ix_3 & \overline{w_3} & -\overline{w_1} \end{pmatrix} : w_1, w_2, w_3 \in \mathbb{C} \text{ and } x_1, x_2, x_3 \in \mathbb{R} \right\}$$

of the indefinite unitary group  $U(2, 1)$ , where the model of  $U(2, 1)$  being used is the subgroup of  $GL(3, \mathbb{C})$  that fixes the Hermitian form in 3-variables

$$H(z) = z_1\overline{z_3} + z_3\overline{z_1} + z_2\overline{z_2}.$$

Indeed, writing

$$(3.10) \quad L = -\frac{1}{2}(L_2 - iL_1) \quad \text{and} \quad \varphi = -\frac{1}{2}(3\theta_0^0 + i(\theta_2^1 - \theta_1^2)),$$

we have

$$(3.11) \quad d\zeta = -\gamma \wedge \zeta,$$

where

$$\gamma = \begin{pmatrix} \varphi & -\frac{1}{2}\overline{\zeta_1} & 0 \\ -\frac{1}{2}\zeta_3 & \varphi - \overline{\varphi} & \frac{1}{2}\zeta_1 \\ L\zeta_1 - \overline{L}\zeta_1 & \frac{1}{2}\zeta_3 & -\overline{\varphi} \end{pmatrix},$$

as the reader can verify by using the definitions (3.8),(3.10) and the structure equations (3.4). It follows that  $\mathfrak{J}$  is integrable. Likewise, the reader may verify that

$$(3.12) \quad d\varphi = \frac{1}{2}\zeta_3 \wedge \overline{\zeta_1} - \frac{1}{4}\zeta_2 \wedge \overline{\zeta_2} - \zeta_1 \wedge \overline{\zeta_3},$$

simply by plugging in the definitions of the involved forms and by using the structure equations (3.4).

Now consider the map

$$\tilde{\psi} : P \rightarrow P \times \mathbb{C}_2 \setminus \{0\}, \quad u \mapsto (u, (0 \ 1))$$

and let  $q : P \times \mathbb{C}_2 \setminus \{0\} \rightarrow \mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^*Z^{1,0})$  denote the natural quotient projection induced by (the projectivisation of)  $\rho$ . Then  $q \circ \tilde{\psi} : P \rightarrow \mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^*Z^{1,0})$  is a submersion onto  $Y$  whose fibres are the  $\mathrm{CO}(2)$ -orbits. Indeed, let  $(u, w)$  be a representative of an element  $[v] \in \mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^*Z^{1,0})$  which lies in the complement of  $\zeta_1(Z)$ . Then using (3.7) it follows that we might transform with the affine part of the right action of  $\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2)$  to ensure that  $w$  is of the form  $(0 \ w_2)$  for some non-zero complex number  $w_2$ . It follows that the element  $u \in P$  is mapped onto  $[v]$  showing that  $q \circ \tilde{\psi}$  is surjective onto  $Y$ . Clearly  $q \circ \tilde{\psi}$  is smooth and a submersion. Furthermore, suppose the two points  $u, u' \in P$  are mapped to the same element of  $Y$ . Then, there exists an element  $z \rtimes re^{i\phi} \in \mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2)$  and a non-zero complex number  $s$  so that

$$\rho\left((z \rtimes re^{i\phi})^{-1}\right)(0 \ 1) = (-zr^2e^{-2i\phi} \ e^{-2i\phi}) = (0 \ s)$$

which holds true if and only if  $z = 0$ . Consequently, there exists a unique diffeomorphism  $\psi : P/\mathrm{CO}(2) \rightarrow Y$  making the following diagram commute:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} P & \xrightarrow{\tilde{\psi}} & P \times \mathbb{C}_2 \setminus \{0\} \\ \downarrow \tau & & \downarrow q \\ P/\mathrm{CO}(2) & \xrightarrow{\psi} & Y \end{array}$$

The complex structure on  $Y \subset \mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^*Z^{1,0})$  is such that its  $(1,0)$ -forms pull back to  $P \times \mathbb{C}_2 \setminus \{0\}$  to become linear combinations of the complex-valued 1-forms  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2, dw_1, dw_2$ , where  $w = (w_1 \ w_2) : P \times \mathbb{C}_2 \rightarrow \mathbb{C}_2$  denotes the projection onto the linear factor. Clearly, these forms pull back under  $\tilde{\psi}$  to become linear combinations of the forms  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2, \zeta_3$ , hence  $\psi$  is a biholomorphism.

Finally, note that the complex version of the Liouville 1-form on  $T_{\mathbb{C}}^*Z^{1,0}$  – whose kernel defines the canonical contact structure on  $\mathbb{P}(T_{\mathbb{C}}^*Z^{1,0})$  – pulls back to  $P \times \mathbb{C}_2$  to become  $w_1\zeta_1 + w_2\zeta_2$ . Since

$$\tilde{\psi}^*(w_1\zeta_1 + w_2\zeta_2) = \zeta_2,$$

the claim follows.  $\square$

*Remark 3.4.* Whereas the definition of the forms  $\zeta_i$  is a natural consequence of the Lie algebra structure of  $\mathrm{CO}(2) \subset \mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{GL}^+(2, \mathbb{R})$ , the definition of the form  $\varphi$  in (3.10) is somewhat mysterious at this point. The choice will be clarified during the proof of Proposition 4.9 below.



We will henceforth identify  $Y \simeq P/\mathrm{CO}(2)$  and think of  $\tau$  as the projection map onto  $Y$ . Denoting the integrable almost complex structure on  $Y$  by  $J$ , the first part of the following proposition is therefore clear:

**Proposition 3.5.** *There exists a unique indefinite Kähler structure on  $(Y, J)$  whose Kähler-form  $\Omega_Y$  satisfies*

$$\tau^* \Omega_Y = -\frac{i}{4} \left( \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 + \zeta_3 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 + \zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2 \right).$$

Moreover, the indefinite Kähler metric  $h_p(\cdot, \cdot) := \Omega_Y(J\cdot, \cdot)$  is Einstein with non-zero scalar curvature.

*Proof.* The first part of the statement is an immediate consequence of the fact that  $\gamma$  takes values in  $\mathfrak{u}(2, 1)$ . The skeptical reader might also verify this using the structure equations (3.11). Furthermore, by definition, the associated Kähler metric satisfies

$$\tau^* h = \frac{1}{2} \left( \zeta_1 \circ \bar{\zeta}_3 + \zeta_3 \circ \bar{\zeta}_1 + \zeta_2 \circ \bar{\zeta}_2 \right)$$

and hence the forms  $\frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} \zeta_i$  are a unitary coframe for  $\tau^* h_p$ . In order to verify the Einstein condition it is therefore sufficient that the trace of the curvature form

$$\Gamma = d\gamma + \gamma \wedge \gamma$$

is a non-zero constant (imaginary) multiple of  $\tau^* \Omega_Y$ . We compute

$$\begin{aligned} 0 &= d^2 \zeta_3 \wedge \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 = -d(\gamma_{31} \wedge \zeta_1 + \gamma_{32} \wedge \zeta_2 + \gamma_{33} \wedge \zeta_3) \wedge \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 \\ &= \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 \wedge \left( dL + \frac{1}{2} \bar{L} \zeta_2 - L\varphi - 2L\bar{\varphi} \right), \end{aligned}$$

where we have used (3.11) and (3.12). It follows that there exist unique complex-valued functions  $L'$  and  $L''$  on  $P$  such that

$$(3.13) \quad dL = L' \zeta_1 + L'' \bar{\zeta}_1 - \frac{1}{2} \bar{L} \zeta_2 + L\varphi + 2L\bar{\varphi}.$$

Using the structure equations (3.11), (3.12) and (3.13) we compute

$$\Gamma = \frac{1}{4} \begin{pmatrix} \Gamma_{11} & -\zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2 & \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 \\ -\zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 & \Gamma_{22} & \bar{\zeta}_1 \wedge \zeta_2 \\ \zeta_3 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 + * & \bar{\zeta}_2 \wedge \zeta_3 & \Gamma_{33} \end{pmatrix},$$

with

$$\begin{aligned} \Gamma_{11} &= \frac{1}{4} \left( \zeta_3 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 - \zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2 - 4\zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 \right), \\ \Gamma_{22} &= \frac{1}{4} \left( -\zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 - 2\zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2 - \zeta_3 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 \right), \\ \Gamma_{33} &= \frac{1}{4} \left( \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 - \zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2 - 4\zeta_3 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 \right). \end{aligned}$$

and where  $*$  =  $4(L' + \bar{L}') \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1$ . In particular, we obtain

$$\Gamma_{11} + \Gamma_{22} + \Gamma_{33} = 4i\tau^* \Omega_Y,$$

thus verifying the Einstein property.  $\square$

*Remark 3.6.* In [15], it is shown how to canonically associate a split-signature anti-self-dual Einstein metric on the total space of a certain rank two affine bundle  $A$  fibering over a projective surface  $(\Sigma, p)$ . The indefinite Kähler–Einstein manifold  $(Y, J, \Omega_Y)$  constructed here may be interpreted as the twistor space of this anti-self-dual Einstein metric.

### 3.4. The canonical flat case

In this subsection we identify the spaces

$$Y = P/\mathrm{CO}(2) \quad \text{and} \quad Z = P/(\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2))$$

in the case where  $(\Sigma, p)$  is the canonical flat projective structure on the projective 2-sphere. Recall that in this case  $P = \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$ . The group  $\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  also acts naturally on  $\mathbb{C}_3$  by complexification, that is, by the rule

$$g \cdot (\xi + i\chi) = \xi g^{-1} + i\chi g^{-1}$$

for all  $g \in \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$ . Clearly, this action descends to define a left action on  $\mathbb{CP}_2$ . However, this action is not transitive, but has two orbits. The first orbit is  $\mathbb{RP}_2 \subset \mathbb{CP}_2$ , where we think of  $\mathbb{RP}_2$  as those points  $[\xi + i\chi] \in \mathbb{CP}_2$  which satisfy  $\xi \wedge \chi = 0$ , that is,  $\xi$  and  $\chi$  are linearly dependent over  $\mathbb{R}$ . Assume therefore  $[\varepsilon]$  is an element in the complement  $\mathbb{CP}_2 \setminus \mathbb{RP}_2$  of  $\mathbb{RP}_2$  in  $\mathbb{CP}_2$ . Since  $\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  acts transitively on unimodular triples of vectors in  $\mathbb{R}_3$ , we can assume without losing generality that  $\varepsilon = (0 \ -i \ 1)$ . For  $g \in \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  we write  $g = (g_0 \ g_1 \ g_2)$  with  $g_i \in \mathbb{R}^3$ . We will next determine the stabiliser subgroup of  $[\varepsilon]$ . A simple computation gives

$$g \cdot \varepsilon = g_0 \wedge (g_1 + ig_2).$$

An elementary calculation shows that  $[g \cdot \varepsilon] = [\varepsilon]$  implies that we must have

$$\begin{pmatrix} c_1 \\ c_2 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} g_1^2 & -g_1^1 \\ g_2^2 & -g_2^1 \end{pmatrix} \begin{pmatrix} g_0^1 \\ g_0^2 \end{pmatrix} = \begin{pmatrix} 0 \\ 0 \end{pmatrix}.$$

Since

$$\det g = g_2^0 c_1 - g_1^0 c_2 + g_0^0 \det \begin{pmatrix} g_1^2 & -g_1^1 \\ g_2^2 & -g_2^1 \end{pmatrix} = 1,$$

it follows that  $g_0^1 = g_0^2 = 0$ . Therefore, the stabiliser subgroup of  $[\varepsilon]$  is a subgroup of  $\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{GL}(2, \mathbb{R})$ . Writing  $a = (a_i^j)$ , we obtain

$$(b \rtimes a) \cdot \varepsilon = \det a^{-1} (0 \ -a_1^2 - ia_2^2 \ a_1^1 + ia_2^1),$$

from which it follows that  $[(b \rtimes a) \cdot \varepsilon] = [\varepsilon]$  if and only if  $a_1^1 = a_2^2$  and  $a_2^1 + a_1^2 = 0$ , that is,  $a \in \mathrm{CO}(2)$ . Concluding, we have shown

$$\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})/(\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2)) \simeq \mathbb{CP}_2 \setminus \mathbb{RP}_2$$

and the projection map is

$$\mu : \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R}) \rightarrow \mathbb{CP}_2 \setminus \mathbb{RP}_2, \quad (g_0 \ g_1 \ g_2) \mapsto [g_0 \wedge (g_1 + ig_2)],$$

where we use  $\mathbb{R}_3 \simeq \Lambda^2(\mathbb{R}^3)$ .

*Remark 3.7.* We have only shown that  $Z = \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})/(\mathbb{R}_2 \times \mathrm{CO}(2))$  is diffeomorphic to  $\mathbb{CP}_2 \setminus \mathbb{RP}_2$ . Since  $Z$  carries an integrable almost complex structure  $J$ , we may ask if  $(Z, J)$  is biholomorphic to  $\mathbb{CP}_2 \setminus \mathbb{RP}_2$  equipped with the standard complex structure. This is indeed the case, see [37, Prop. 3]. As a consequence of this result one can prove that the conformal connections on the 2-sphere whose (unparametrised) geodesics are the great circles are in one-to-one correspondence with the smooth quadrics in  $\mathbb{CP}_2 \setminus \mathbb{RP}_2$ , see [37, Cor. 2].

*Remark 3.8.* In fact [31], if  $\mathfrak{p}$  is a projective structure on the 2-sphere, all of whose geodesics are simple closed curves, then  $Z$  can be compactified and the compactification is biholomorphic to  $\mathbb{CP}_2$ . This allowed Lebrun and Mason to prove that there is a nontrivial moduli space of such projective structures on the 2-sphere.

We will show next that  $Y$  is a submanifold of  $F(\mathbb{C}_3)$ . Clearly, the action of  $\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  on the space  $F(\mathbb{C}_3)$  of complete complex flags is not transitive, there is however an open orbit. Let  $F(\mathbb{C}_3)^*$  denote the  $\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  orbit of the flag

$$(\ell, \Pi) = (\mathbb{C}\{\varepsilon_1\}, \mathbb{C}\{\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2\}),$$

where

$$\varepsilon_1 = \begin{pmatrix} 0 & -i & 1 \end{pmatrix}, \quad \varepsilon_2 = \begin{pmatrix} 1 & 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}.$$

We already know that the stabiliser subgroup  $G_0$  of  $(\ell, \Pi)$  must be a subgroup of  $\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2)$ . For  $b \rtimes a \in \mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{CO}(2)$  we write

$$b \rtimes a = \begin{pmatrix} \frac{1}{x^2+y^2} & b_1 & b_2 \\ 0 & x & y \\ 0 & -y & x \end{pmatrix},$$

with  $x^2 + y^2 > 0$ . We compute

$$\varepsilon_2 \cdot (b \rtimes a) = \begin{pmatrix} x^2 + y^2 & -xb_1 - yb_2 & -xb_2 + yb_1 \end{pmatrix}$$

which is easily seen to lie in the complex linear span of  $\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2$  if and only if  $b_1 = b_2 = 0$ , hence

$$\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})/\mathrm{CO}(2) \simeq F(\mathbb{C}_3)^*$$

and the projection map is

$$\tau : \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R}) \rightarrow F(\mathbb{C}_3) \quad (g_0 \quad g_1 \quad g_2) \mapsto (\mathbb{C}\{\varepsilon_1\}, \mathbb{C}\{\varepsilon_1, \varepsilon_2\}),$$

with

$$\varepsilon_1 = g_0 \wedge (g_1 + ig_2), \quad \varepsilon_2 = g_1 \wedge g_2.$$

Since  $F(\mathbb{C}_3)$  is real six-dimensional and since  $\dim \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R}) - \dim \mathrm{CO}(2) = 6$ , it follows that  $F(\mathbb{C}_3)^*$  is open.

#### 4. The variational equations

By construction, a conformal structure  $[g]$  on the oriented projective surface  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  is a section of  $Z \rightarrow \Sigma$ . Here we will show that every conformal structure  $[g]$  admits a natural lift  $\widetilde{[g]} : \Sigma \rightarrow Y$ . In doing so we recover the functional  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  from a different viewpoint, which simplifies the computation of its variational equations. We start with recalling the bundle of complex linear coframes of a Riemann surface.

#### 4.1. The bundle of complex linear coframes

Let  $\Sigma$  be an oriented surface equipped with a conformal structure  $[g]$ , so that  $\Sigma$  inherits the structure of a Riemann surface whose integrable almost complex structure will be denoted by  $J$ . The bundle of complex-linear coframes of  $(\Sigma, [g])$  is the  $\mathrm{GL}(1, \mathbb{C})$ -subbundle  $F_{[g]}^+$  of  $F^+$  consisting of those coframes that are complex-linear with respect to  $J$  and the complex structure obtained on  $\mathbb{R}^2$  via the standard identification  $\mathbb{R}^2 \simeq \mathbb{C}$ . Of course, via the isomorphism  $\mathrm{CO}(2) \simeq \mathrm{GL}(1, \mathbb{C})$ , we may equivalently think of  $F_{[g]}^+$  as consisting of those coframes in  $F^+$  that are angle preserving with respect to  $[g]$  and the standard conformal inner product on  $\mathbb{R}^2$ .

Recall that a principal  $\mathrm{CO}(2)$ -connection  $\varphi$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  is called *torsion-free* if it satisfies

$$d\omega = -\varphi \wedge \omega,$$

where here we think of the tautological  $\mathbb{R}^2$ -valued 1-form  $\omega$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  as taking values in  $\mathbb{C}$  and the connection taking values in the Lie algebra of  $\mathrm{CO}(2) \simeq \mathrm{GL}(1, \mathbb{C})$ , that is,  $\mathbb{C}$ . The curvature  $\Phi$  of  $\varphi$  is a  $(1,1)$ -form on  $\Sigma$  whose pullback to  $F_{[g]}^+$  can be written as

$$d\varphi = R \omega \wedge \bar{\omega}$$

for some unique complex-valued function  $R$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$ . By definition of  $F_{[g]}^+$ , a complex-valued 1-form on  $\Sigma$  is a  $(1,0)$ -form with respect to  $J$  if and only if its pullback to  $F_{[g]}^+$  is a complex multiple of  $\omega$ . A consequence of this is the following elementary lemma whose proof we omit:

**Lemma 4.1.** *A complex-valued function  $f$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  represents a section of  $K_\Sigma^m \otimes \bar{K}_\Sigma^n$  if and only if there exist complex-valued functions  $f'$  and  $f''$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  so that*

$$df = f' \omega + f'' \bar{\omega} + f m \varphi + f n \bar{\varphi}.$$

*Remark 4.2.* Here  $K_\Sigma = T_{\mathbb{C}}^* \Sigma^{1,0}$  denotes the canonical bundle of  $(\Sigma, J)$ ,  $K_\Sigma^m$  its  $m$ -th tensorial power and  $\bar{K}_\Sigma^n$  the conjugate bundle of the  $n$ -th tensorial power of  $K_\Sigma$ . As usual, we let  $\nabla_\varphi$  denote the connection induced by  $\varphi$  on  $K_\Sigma^m \otimes \bar{K}_\Sigma^n$  and by  $\nabla'_\varphi$  its  $(1,0)$ -part and by  $\nabla''_\varphi$  its  $(0,1)$ -part. Of course, if  $s$  is the section of  $K_\Sigma^m \otimes \bar{K}_\Sigma^n$  represented by  $f$ , then  $\nabla'_\varphi s$  is represented by  $f'$  and  $\nabla''_\varphi s$  is represented by  $f''$ .

**Lemma 4.1** implies that  $\varphi$  may also be thought of as the connection form of the connection induced by  $\varphi$  on  $K_\Sigma^*$ . Therefore, the first Chern class of  $K_\Sigma^*$  is

$$c_1(K_\Sigma^*) = \left[ \frac{i}{2\pi} \Phi \right]$$

and hence if  $\Sigma$  is compact, we obtain

$$(4.1) \quad \int_\Sigma i \Phi = 2\pi \chi(\Sigma),$$

where  $\chi(\Sigma)$  denotes the Euler-characteristic of  $\Sigma$ .

## 4.2. Submanifold theory in the twistor space

We are interested in co-dimension two submanifolds of  $Z$  arising as images of sections of  $Z \rightarrow \Sigma$ . The second order theory of such submanifolds is summarised in the following:

**Lemma 4.3.** *Let  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  be a conformal structure on  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$ . Then there exists a lift  $\widetilde{[g]} : \Sigma \rightarrow Y$  covering  $[g]$  so that the pullback-bundle  $p : P'_{[g]} = \widetilde{[g]}^* P \rightarrow \Sigma$  is isomorphic to the  $\text{CO}(2)$ -bundle of complex linear coframes  $F_{[g]}^+$  of  $(\Sigma, [g])$  and so that on  $P'_{[g]} \simeq F_{[g]}^+$  we have*

$$\zeta_2 = 2\bar{a}\bar{\zeta}_1, \quad \zeta_3 = k\zeta_1 + 2\bar{q}\bar{\zeta}_1,$$

for unique complex-valued functions  $a, k, q$  on  $P'_{[g]}$ .

*Proof.* First recall that in Lemma 3.3 we have defined

$$\zeta_1 = \theta_0^1 + i\theta_0^2, \quad \zeta_2 = (\theta_1^1 - \theta_2^2) + i(\theta_2^1 + \theta_1^2), \quad \zeta_3 = \theta_1^0 + i\theta_2^0,$$

where  $\theta = (\theta_j^i)$  is the Cartan connection of  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$ .

Let now  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  be a conformal structure on  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  and let  $p : P_{[g]} = [g]^* P \rightarrow \Sigma$  denote the pullback of the bundle  $\mu : P \rightarrow Z$ , that is,

$$P_{[g]} = \{(p, u) \in \Sigma \times P \mid [g](p) = \mu(u)\}.$$

Since  $P_{[g]}$  is 6-dimensional, two of the components of  $\theta$  become linearly dependent when pulled back to  $P_{[g]}$ . Clearly, these components must be among the 1-forms that are semibasic for  $\mu$ . Recall that these forms are spanned by  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2$  and their complex conjugates. However, since  $[g]$  is a section of  $Z \rightarrow \Sigma$  and since the 1-forms that are semibasic for the projection  $\pi : P \rightarrow \Sigma$  are spanned by  $\zeta_1, \bar{\zeta}_1$ , it follows that  $\zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1$  is non-vanishing on  $P_{[g]}$ . Therefore, on  $P_{[g]}$  we have the relation

$$(4.2) \quad \zeta_2 = 2\bar{a}\bar{\zeta}_1 + c\zeta_1$$

for unique complex-valued functions  $a, c$ . From the equivariance properties of  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2$  under the  $\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \text{CO}(2)$ -right action (3.6), we obtain that for all  $u \in P_{[g]}$  and  $z \rtimes re^{i\phi} \in \mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \text{CO}(2)$  we have

$$c(u \cdot z \rtimes re^{i\phi}) = r^3 e^{i\phi} c(u) + r^2 z$$

and

$$(4.3) \quad a(u \cdot z \rtimes re^{i\phi}) = r^3 e^{-3i\phi} a(u).$$

It follows that the equation  $c = 0$  defines a locus that corresponds to a section  $\widetilde{[g]} : \Sigma \rightarrow Y$  covering  $[g]$ . On the pullback bundle  $P'_{[g]} = \widetilde{[g]}^* P$ , where

$$P'_{[g]} = \{(p, u) \in \Sigma \times P \mid \widetilde{[g]}(p) = \tau(u)\},$$

we obtain

$$(4.4) \quad \zeta_2 = 2\bar{a}\bar{\zeta}_1.$$

Since  $P'_{[g]}$  is 4-dimensional, two of the remaining components of  $\theta$  become linearly dependent when pulled back to  $P'_{[g]}$ . Since the 1-forms that are semibasic for the

projection  $\tau : P \rightarrow Y$  are spanned by  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2, \zeta_3$  and their complex conjugates, it follows as before that

$$(4.5) \quad \zeta_3 = k\zeta_1 + 2\bar{q}\bar{\zeta}_1$$

for unique complex-valued functions  $k, q$ .

Now recall that Cartan's bundle  $\pi : P \rightarrow \Sigma$  is isomorphic to  $F^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2 \rightarrow \Sigma$  equipped with the  $G$ -right action (3.1). Therefore,  $P_{[g]} \rightarrow \Sigma$  is isomorphic to  $F_{[g]}^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2 \rightarrow \Sigma$  and consequently, the bundle  $P'_{[g]} \rightarrow \Sigma$  is isomorphic to  $F_{[g]}^+ \rightarrow \Sigma$ .  $\square$

We also obtain:

**Lemma 4.4.** *The functions  $a, k, q$  and the 1-form  $\varphi$  satisfy the following structure equations on  $P'_{[g]} \simeq F_{[g]}^+$*

$$(4.6) \quad da = a'\zeta_1 - q\bar{\zeta}_1 + 2a\varphi - a\bar{\varphi},$$

and

$$\begin{aligned} dk &= k'\zeta_1 + k''\bar{\zeta}_1 + k\varphi + k\bar{\varphi}, \\ dq &= q'\zeta_1 + \frac{1}{2}(\bar{L} + \bar{k}'' - 2\bar{q}a)\bar{\zeta}_1 + 2q\varphi, \end{aligned}$$

and

$$(4.7) \quad d\varphi = \left(|a|^2 + \frac{1}{2}k - \bar{k}\right)\zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1$$

for unique complex-valued functions  $r', k', k''$  and  $q'$  on  $P'_{[g]}$ .

*Proof.* We will only verify the structure equation for  $a$  as the other structure equations are derived in an entirely analogous fashion. The structure equations (3.11) and (4.4) gives

$$\begin{aligned} d\bar{\zeta}_2 &= d(2a\zeta_1) = 2da \wedge \zeta_1 + a d\zeta_1 = -\zeta_1 \wedge da + 2a \left( \zeta_1 \wedge \varphi + \frac{1}{2}\bar{\zeta}_1 \wedge \zeta_2 \right) \\ &= -\bar{\zeta}_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 + \bar{\zeta}_2 \wedge \bar{\varphi} - \bar{\zeta}_2 \wedge \varphi \\ &= 2q\zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 + 2a\zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\varphi} - 2a\zeta_1 \wedge \varphi, \end{aligned}$$

where we have used (4.5). Equivalently, we obtain

$$0 = \left( da + q\bar{\zeta}_1 - 2a\varphi + a\bar{\varphi} \right) \wedge \zeta_1,$$

which implies (4.6). Finally, the structure equation (5.2) for  $\varphi$  is an immediate consequence of (3.11), (4.4) and (4.5).  $\square$

As we will see next, the functions  $a, q, k$  on  $P'_{[g]}$  satisfy certain equivariance properties with respect to the  $\text{CO}(2)$ -right action on  $P'_{[g]}$  and hence represent sections of complex line bundles associated to  $p : P'_{[g]} \rightarrow \Sigma$ .

**Proposition 4.5.** *The choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  determines the following objects:*

- (i) *A torsion-free connection  $\varphi$  on the bundle of complex-linear coframes of  $(\Sigma, [g])$ ;*
- (ii) *A section  $\alpha$  of  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \bar{K}_\Sigma^*$  that is represented by  $a$ .*

- (iii) A quadratic differential  $Q$  on  $\Sigma$  that is represented by  $q$ ;
- (iv) A  $(1,1)$ -form  $\kappa$  on  $\Sigma$  that is represented by  $k$ .

Moreover, the quadratic differential  $Q$  satisfies

$$(4.8) \quad Q = -\nabla''\alpha.$$

*Proof.* By construction of  $P'_{[g]} \simeq F_{[g]}^+$ , a complex-valued 1-form on  $\Sigma$  is a  $(1,0)$ -form for the complex structure  $J$  induced by  $[g]$  and the orientation if and only if its  $p$ -pullback to  $P'_{[g]}$  is a complex multiple of  $\zeta_1$ . Since

$$(R_{re^{i\phi}})^* \zeta_1 = \frac{1}{r^3} e^{i\phi} \zeta_1$$

it follows that the sections of  $K_\Sigma^2$  are in one-to-one correspondence with the complex-valued functions  $f$  on  $P'_{[g]}$  satisfying

$$(R_{re^{i\phi}})^* f = r^3 e^{-i\phi} r^3 e^{-i\phi} f = r^6 e^{-2i\phi} f.$$

Likewise, it follows that the sections of  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K}_\Sigma^*$  are in one-to-one correspondence with the complex-valued functions  $f$  on  $P'_{[g]}$  satisfying

$$(R_{re^{i\phi}})^* f = r^3 e^{-i\phi} r^3 e^{-i\phi} \overline{r^{-3} e^{i\phi}} f = r^3 e^{-3i\phi} f$$

and that the sections of  $K_\Sigma \otimes \overline{K}_\Sigma$  are in one-to-one correspondence with the complex valued functions  $f$  on  $P'_{[g]}$  satisfying

$$(R_{re^{i\phi}})^* f = r^3 e^{-i\phi} r^3 e^{i\phi} f = r^6 f.$$

From (4.5) and (3.9) we obtain that for all  $u \in P'_{[g]}$  and  $re^{i\phi} \in \text{CO}(2)$

$$k(u \cdot re^{i\phi}) = r^6 k(u),$$

$$q(u \cdot re^{i\phi}) = r^6 e^{-2i\phi} q(u).$$

These equations imply that there exists a unique quadratic differential  $Q$  on  $\Sigma$  that is represented by  $q$  and a unique  $(1,1)$ -form  $\kappa$  on  $\Sigma$  that is represented by  $k$ . Furthermore, (4.3) implies that there exists a unique section  $\alpha$  of  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K}_\Sigma^*$  that is represented by  $a$ .

It follows from the properties (ii) and (iii) of the Cartan connection that  $\varphi$  is a connection 1-form on the  $\text{CO}(2)$ -bundle  $P'_{[g]} \rightarrow \Sigma$ . Its pushforward under the bundle isomorphism  $P'_{[g]} \rightarrow F_{[g]}^+$  is then a  $\text{CO}(2)$ -connection on  $F_{[g]}^+$  which – by abuse of notation – we denote by  $\varphi$  as well. The structure equation (5.2) implies that  $\varphi$  is torsion-free.

Finally, the identity  $Q = -\nabla''\alpha$  is an immediate consequence of the structure equation (4.6) and Lemma 4.1.  $\square$

We call a map  $\psi : (M, g) \rightarrow (N, h)$  between two pseudo-Riemannian manifolds *weakly conformal* if  $\psi^* h = fg$  for some smooth function  $f$  on  $M$ . Note that we do not require  $f$  to be positive. Two immediate consequences of Proposition 4.5 are:

**Corollary 4.6.** *Let  $[g]$  be a conformal structure on  $(\Sigma, p)$ . Then the lift  $\widetilde{[g]} : (\Sigma, [g]) \rightarrow (Y, h_p)$  is weakly conformal if and only if  $Q \equiv 0$ . Furthermore, the image of  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  is a holomorphic curve if and only if  $\alpha \equiv 0$ . In particular,*

if  $[g](\Sigma) \subset Z$  is a holomorphic curve, then  $\widetilde{[g]}(\Sigma) \subset Y$  is a holomorphic contact curve.

*Remark 4.7.* Here we call a holomorphic curve  $\Sigma \subset Y$  a *contact curve* if its tangent bundle is contained in the (holomorphic) contact structure of  $Y$ .

*Proof of Corollary 4.6.* By construction, the metric  $h_p$  has the property that its pullback to  $P$  is

$$\tau^* h_p = \frac{1}{2} \left( \zeta_1 \circ \overline{\zeta_3} + \zeta_3 \circ \overline{\zeta_1} + \zeta_2 \circ \overline{\zeta_2} \right).$$

Therefore, from (4.4) and (4.5) it follows that

$$(4.9) \quad p^* \left( \widetilde{[g]}^* h_p \right) = \frac{1}{2} \left( 4|a|^2 + (k + \bar{k}) \right) \zeta_1 \circ \overline{\zeta_1} + q \zeta_1 \circ \zeta_1 + \bar{q} \overline{\zeta_1} \circ \overline{\zeta_1}.$$

Since a complex-valued 1-form on  $\Sigma$  is a  $(1,0)$ -form for the complex structure defined by  $[g]$  and the orientation if and only if its  $p$ -pullback to  $P'_{[g]}$  is a complex multiple of  $\zeta_1$ , equation (4.9) implies that  $\widetilde{[g]}^* h_p$  is weakly conformal to  $[g]$  if and only if  $q$  vanishes identically. The first claim follows.

The second part of the claim is an immediate consequence of (4.4) and the characterisation of the complex structures on  $Z, Y$  in terms of  $\zeta_1, \zeta_2, \zeta_3$  and the characterisation of the holomorphic contact structure in terms of  $\zeta_2 = 0$ .  $\square$

*Remark 4.8.* Recall that if  $\psi : (\Sigma, [g]) \rightarrow (N, h)$  is a map from a Riemann surface into a (pseudo-)Riemannian manifold, then the  $(2,0)$ -part of the pulled back metric  $\psi^* h$  is called the *Hopf differential* of  $\psi$ . Therefore (4.9) implies that quadratic differential  $Q$  is the Hopf differential of  $\widetilde{[g]}$ .

**Proposition 4.5** shows that for every choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $\Sigma$  we obtain a section  $\alpha$  of  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K}_\Sigma^*$ , as well as a connection  $\varphi$  on the principal  $\mathrm{GL}(1, \mathbb{C})$ -bundle of complex-linear coframes of  $(\Sigma, [g])$ . Since  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K}_\Sigma^*$  is a subbundle of  $T_\mathbb{C}^* \Sigma^2 \otimes T_\mathbb{C} \Sigma$ , we may use the canonical real structure of the latter bundle to take the real part of  $\alpha$ . Consequently, the real part of  $\alpha$  is a 1-form on  $\Sigma$  with values in  $\mathrm{End}(T\Sigma)$ . We have already encountered an endomorphism valued 1-form  $A_{[g]}$  whose properties we discussed in **Theorem 2.4**. In **Corollary 2.6** we have also seen that the choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $(\Sigma, p)$  determines a unique  $[g]$ -conformal connection  ${}^{[g]}\nabla$  so that  ${}^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]}$  defines  $p$ . On the other hand,  $\varphi$  also induces a  $[g]$ -conformal connection on  $TM$  which we denote by  $\nabla_\varphi$ .

**Proposition 4.9.** *We have:*

$$(4.10) \quad \nabla_\varphi = {}^{[g]}\nabla,$$

$$(4.11) \quad 2 \operatorname{Re}(\alpha) = A_{[g]},$$

$$(4.12) \quad p^* (|A_{[g]}|_g^2 d\mu_g) = 2i|a|^2 \zeta_1 \wedge \overline{\zeta_1} = -\frac{i}{2} \zeta_2 \wedge \overline{\zeta_2}.$$

Since a  $[g]$ -conformal connection  ${}^{[g]}\nabla$  has holonomy in  $\mathrm{CO}(2)$ , it corresponds to a unique torsion-free principal  $\mathrm{CO}(2)$ -connection  $\varphi$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$ , see for instance [5]. Before proving **Proposition 4.9** it is helpful to see explicitly how the principal



connection  $\varphi$  is constructed from  $^{[g]}\nabla$ . The  $[g]$ -conformal connection  $^{[g]}\nabla$  can be written as

$$(4.13) \quad (g, \beta)\nabla = {}^g\nabla + g \otimes \beta^\sharp - \beta \otimes \text{Id} - \text{Id} \otimes \beta,$$

where  $g \in [g]$  and  $\beta$  is a 1-form on  $M$  with  $g$ -dual vector field  $\beta^\sharp$ . Let  $g_{ij} = g_{ji}$  be the unique real-valued functions on  $F^+$  so that  $v^*g = g_{ij}\omega^i \otimes \omega^j$ . Let  $\psi = (\psi_j^i)$  denote the Levi-Civita connection form of  $g$ , so that we have the structure equations.

$$\begin{aligned} d\omega^i &= -\psi_j^i \wedge \omega^j, \\ dg_{ij} &= g_{ik}\psi_j^k + g_{kj}\psi_i^k \end{aligned}$$

as well as

$$(4.14) \quad d\psi_j^i + \psi_k^i \wedge \psi_j^k = g_{jk}K_g\omega^i \wedge \omega^k,$$

where the real-valued function  $K_g$  on  $F^+$  is (the pullback of) the Gauss curvature of  $g$ . Therefore, writing  $v^*\beta = b_i\omega^i$  for real-valued functions  $b_i$  on  $F^+$ , the connection 1-form of (4.13) is

$$\eta_j^i = \psi_j^i + \left(b_k g^{ki} g_{jl} - \delta_l^i b_j\right) \omega^l,$$

where the real-valued functions  $g^{ij} = g^{ji}$  on  $F^+$  satisfy  $g^{ik}g_{kj} = \delta_j^i$ . The equivariance properties of the functions  $b_i$  imply that there exist unique real-valued functions  $b_{ij}$  on  $F$  so that

$$(4.15) \quad db_i = b_j\psi_i^j + b_{ij}\omega^j.$$

From the equivariance properties of the functions  $g_{ij}$  it follows that the conditions  $g_{11} = g_{22}$  and  $g_{12} = 0$  define a reduction of  $v : F^+ \rightarrow \Sigma$  to the  $\text{CO}(2)$ -subbundle of complex linear coframes of  $F_{[g]}^+ \rightarrow \Sigma$  of  $(\Sigma, [g])$ . On  $F_{[g]}^+$  we obtain

$$0 = dg_{12} = g_{11}\psi_2^1 + g_{12}\psi_2^2 + g_{12}\psi_1^1 + g_{22}\psi_1^2 = g_{11}(\psi_2^1 + \psi_1^2)$$

and hence  $\psi_1^2 = -\psi_2^1$ . Likewise, we have

$$\begin{aligned} 0 &= dg_{11} - dg_{22} = 2(g_{11}\psi_1^1 + g_{12}\psi_1^2) - 2(g_{12}\psi_2^1 + g_{22}\psi_2^2) \\ &= 2g_{11}(\psi_1^1 - \psi_2^2) \end{aligned}$$

so that  $\psi_1^1 = \psi_2^2$ . Identifying  $\mathbb{R}^2 \simeq \mathbb{C}$ , we may think of  $\omega = (\omega^i)$  as taking values in  $\mathbb{C}$ . If we define  $\varphi := \frac{1}{2}(\eta_1^1 + \eta_2^2) + \frac{i}{2}(\eta_1^2 - \eta_2^1)$ , we obtain

$$(4.16) \quad \varphi = (\psi_1^1 - b_1\omega^1 - b_2\omega^2) + i(\psi_1^2 + b_2\omega^1 - b_1\omega^2)$$

Using this notation the first structure equation can be written in complex form

$$d\omega = -\varphi \wedge \omega,$$

hence  $\varphi$  defines a torsion-free principal  $\text{CO}(2)$ -connection on  $F_{[g]}^+$ .

*Proof of Proposition 4.9.* Without losing generality, we can assume that the projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  is defined by  $^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]}$  for some  $[g]$ -conformal connection  $^{[g]}\nabla$  and some 1-form  $A_{[g]}$  having all the properties of Theorem 2.4. Recall (3.3) that the

choice of a representative connection  $\nabla \in \mathfrak{p}$  gives an identification  $P \simeq F^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2$  of Cartan's bundle so that the Cartan connection form becomes

$$(4.17) \quad \theta = \begin{pmatrix} -\frac{1}{3} \operatorname{tr} \eta - \xi \omega & d\xi - \xi \eta - (S\omega)^t - \xi \omega \xi \\ \omega & \eta - \frac{1}{3} \operatorname{tr} \eta + \omega \xi \end{pmatrix}.$$

We will construct Cartan's connection for the representative connection

$$(4.18) \quad (g, \beta) \nabla + A_{[g]} = {}^g \nabla + g \otimes \beta^\# - \beta \otimes \operatorname{Id} - \operatorname{Id} \otimes \beta + A_{[g]}.$$

Let  $A_{jk}^i$  denote the real-valued functions on  $F^+$  representing  $A_{[g]}$ . In particular, we have

$$(4.19) \quad A_{jk}^i = A_{kj}^i \quad \text{and} \quad A_{il}^l = 0.$$

On  $F^+$  the connection form of (4.18) is given by

$$(4.20) \quad \eta_j^i = \psi_j^i + \left( b_k g^{ki} g_{jl} - \delta_j^i b_l - \delta_l^i b_j + A_{jl}^i \right) \omega^l,$$

By definition, the pullback bundle  $P_{[g]}$  is the subbundle of  $F^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2$  defined by the equations  $g_{11} = g_{22}$  and  $g_{12} = 0$ . Now on  $P_{[g]} \simeq F_{[g]}^+ \times \mathbb{R}_2$  we have  $\psi_1^2 = -\psi_2^1$  and  $\psi_1^1 = \psi_2^2$ . Using (4.17), (4.19) and (4.20) we compute

$$\begin{aligned} \zeta_2 &= (\theta_1^1 - \theta_2^2) + i(\theta_2^1 + \theta_1^2) \\ &= \psi_1^1 - \psi_2^2 + (\xi_1 + 2A_{11}^1) \omega^1 + (-\xi_2 - 2A_{22}^2) \omega^2 \\ &\quad + i(\psi_2^1 + \psi_1^2 + (\xi_2 - 2A_{22}^2) \omega^1 + (\xi_1 - 2A_{11}^1) \omega^2) \\ &= 2\bar{a}\bar{\xi}_1 + c\xi_1, \end{aligned}$$

where

$$(4.21) \quad \begin{aligned} a &= A_{11}^1 + iA_{22}^2, \\ c &= \xi_1 + i\xi_2 \end{aligned}$$

and we have used that on  $F_{[g]}^+$

$$\delta_{il} A_{jk}^l = \delta_{jl} A_{ik}^l,$$

which follows from Theorem 2.4 (vi). Recall that  $P'_{[g]}$  was defined by the equation  $c = 0$ . Hence on  $P'_{[g]} \simeq F_{[g]}^+$  the function  $\xi$  vanishes identically. Using this we compute

$$\varphi = -\frac{1}{2} (3\theta_0^0 + i(\theta_2^1 - \theta_1^2)) = \psi_1^1 - b_1 \omega^1 - b_2 \omega^2 + i(\psi_1^2 + b_2 \omega^1 - b_1 \omega^2).$$

This is precisely (4.16). It follows that the connection defined by  $\varphi$  is the same as the induced torsion-free connection on  $F_{[g]}^+$  by  ${}^{[g]} \nabla$ . This proves (4.10).

Suppose  $x = (x^i) : U \rightarrow \mathbb{R}^2$  are local orientation preserving  $[g]$ -isothermal coordinates on  $\Sigma$  and write  $z = (x^1 + ix^2)$ . Applying the exterior derivative to  $z$  we obtain a local section  $\tilde{z} : U \rightarrow F_{[g]}^+$  so that

$$A_{[g]} = \tilde{z}^* A_{jk}^i dx^j \otimes dx^k \otimes \frac{\partial}{\partial x^i}.$$

By definition of  $\alpha$  we have

$$\alpha = \tilde{z}^* a dz \otimes dz \otimes \frac{\partial}{\partial \bar{z}},$$

hence (4.11) is an immediate consequence of (4.21).

Finally, in our coordinates we obtain

$$|A_{[g]}|_g^2 d\mu_g = 4|a|^2 dx^1 \wedge dx^2,$$

so that  $p^* (|A_{[g]}|_g^2 d\mu_g) = 2i|a|^2 \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 = -\frac{i}{2} \zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2$ , as claimed.  $\square$

Note that  $A_{[g]}$  vanishes identically if and only if  $\alpha$  vanishes identically. Therefore, as an immediate consequence of Proposition 4.9, Corollary 2.6 and Corollary 4.6, we obtain an alternative proof of [37, Theorem 3] (see also [36] for a ‘generalisation’ to higher dimensions):

**Theorem 4.10.** *A conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  is preserved by a conformal connection defining  $\mathfrak{p}$  if and only if the image of  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  is a holomorphic curve.*

*Remark 4.11.* Locally the bundle  $Z \rightarrow \Sigma$  always admits sections having holomorphic image and therefore every torsion-free connection on  $T\Sigma$  is locally projectively equivalent to a conformal connection (see [37] for additional details).

### 4.3. Derivation of the variational equations

Applying a technique from [4], we compute the variational equations for the functional  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$ . For a compact domain  $\Omega \subset \Sigma$  and a section  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  we write

$$\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p},\Omega}([g]) = \int_{\Omega} |A_{[g]}|_g^2 d\mu_g.$$

**Definition 4.12.** We say  $[g]$  is an  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$ -critical point or that  $[g]$  is *extremal for the projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$*  if for every compact  $\Omega \subset \Sigma$  and for every smooth variation  $[g]_t : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  with support in  $\Omega$ , we have

$$\left. \frac{d}{dt} \right|_{t=0} \mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p},\Omega}([g]_t) = 0.$$

Using this definition we obtain:

**Theorem A.** *Let  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  be an oriented projective surface. A conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $\Sigma$  is extremal for  $\mathfrak{p}$  if and only if  $\widetilde{[g]} : (\Sigma, [g]) \rightarrow (Y, h_{\mathfrak{p}})$  is weakly conformal.*

*Proof.* Let  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  be a conformal structure and  $[g]_t : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  a smooth variation of  $[g]$  with support in some compact set  $\Omega \subset \Sigma$  and with  $|t| < \varepsilon$ . We consider the submanifold of  $\Sigma \times P \times (-\varepsilon, \varepsilon)$  defined by

$$P'_{[g]_t} = \left\{ (p, u, t_0) \in \Sigma \times P \times (-\varepsilon, \varepsilon) \mid (p, u) \in P'_{[g]_{t_0}} \right\}$$

and denote by  $\iota_{[g]_t} : P'_{[g]_t} \rightarrow \Sigma \times P \times (-\varepsilon, \varepsilon)$  the inclusion map. On  $\Sigma \times P \times (-\varepsilon, \varepsilon)$  we define the real-valued 2-form

$$A = -\frac{i}{2} \zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2,$$

where, by abuse of notation, we write  $\zeta_2$  for the pullback of  $\zeta_2$  to  $\Sigma \times P \times (-\varepsilon, \varepsilon)$ . Using the structure equations (3.11), we compute

$$(4.22) \quad dA = \frac{i}{2} \left( \zeta_1 \wedge \zeta_3 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2 - \zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 \right).$$

Now [Proposition 4.9](#) implies

$$f(t_0) := \mathcal{E}_{p,\Omega}([g]_t)|_{t=t_0} = \int_{\Omega} \left( (\iota_{[g]_t})^* A \right) \Big|_{t=t_0}.$$

Therefore

$$f'(0) = \int_{\Omega} (L_{\partial_t} (\iota_{[g]_t})^* A) \Big|_{t=0} = \int_{\Omega} (\partial_t \lrcorner (\iota_{[g]_t})^* dA) \Big|_{t=0},$$

where  $L_{\partial_t}$  denotes the Lie-derivative with respect to the vector field  $\partial_t$ . It follows from the proof of [Lemma 4.3](#) that on  $P'_{[g]_t}$  there exist complex-valued functions  $a, k, q, B, C$  such that

$$(4.23) \quad \zeta_2 = 2\bar{a}\bar{\zeta}_1 + B dt \quad \text{and} \quad \zeta_3 = k\zeta_1 + 2\bar{q}\bar{\zeta}_1 + C dt$$

where we now write  $\zeta_i$  instead of  $(\iota_{[g]_t})^* \zeta_i$ . Combining (4.22) with (4.23) gives

$$(\iota_{[g]_t})^* dA = i(qB + \bar{q}\bar{B}) dt \wedge \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1$$

so that

$$(4.24) \quad f'(0) = i \int_{\Omega} (qB + \bar{q}\bar{B}) \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 \Big|_{t=0}.$$

Recall that  $(R_{r^{e^{i\phi}}})^* \zeta_2 = e^{2i\phi} \zeta_2$  and therefore, by definition, the complex-valued function  $B|_{t=0}$  satisfies

$$(R_{r^{e^{i\phi}}})^* (B|_{t=0}) = e^{2i\phi} (B|_{t=0}).$$

Since  $(R_{r^{e^{i\phi}}})^* \zeta_1 = r^{-3} e^{i\phi} \zeta_1$  it follows that  $B|_{t=0}$  represents a section of  $\overline{K}_{\Sigma} \otimes K_{\Sigma}^*$  with support in  $\Omega$ . Here  $K_{\Sigma}$  denotes the canonical bundle of  $\Sigma$  with respect to the complex structure induced by the orientation and  $[g] = [g]_t|_{t=0}$ .

It remains to show that every such section in (4.23) with support in  $\Omega$  can be realised via some variation of  $[g]$ . We fix a representative metric  $g \in [g]$ . Let  $g_{ij} = g_{ji}$  be the real-valued functions on Cartan's bundle  $P$  so that  $\pi^* g = g_{ij} \theta_0^i \otimes \theta_0^j$ . In particular, from the equivariance properties (ii) of the Cartan connection  $\theta$  it follows that

$$(R_{b \rtimes a})^* \begin{pmatrix} g_{11} & g_{12} \\ g_{21} & g_{22} \end{pmatrix} = (\det a)^2 a^t \begin{pmatrix} g_{11} & g_{12} \\ g_{21} & g_{22} \end{pmatrix} a.$$

Applying property (iii) of the Cartan connection this implies the existence of unique real-valued functions  $g_{ijk} = g_{jik}$  so that

$$(4.25) \quad dg_{ij} = -2g_{ij}\theta_0^0 + g_{kj}\theta_i^k + g_{ik}\theta_j^k + g_{ijk}\theta_0^k.$$

Consider the following conformally invariant functions

$$G = \frac{(g_{11} - g_{22}) + 2ig_{12}}{\sqrt{g_{11}g_{22} - (g_{12})^2}}, \quad H = \frac{g_{11} + g_{22}}{\sqrt{g_{11}g_{22} - (g_{12})^2}}.$$

Translating (4.25) into complex form gives the following structure equation

$$(4.26) \quad dG = G'\zeta_1 + G''\bar{\zeta}_1 + H\zeta_2 + \bar{G}(\bar{\varphi} - \varphi),$$

for unique complex-valued functions  $G', G''$  on  $P$ . Clearly, the complex-valued functions  $G'$  and  $G''$  can be expressed in terms of the functions  $g_{ijk}$ , as  $\zeta_1 =$

$\theta_0^1 + i\theta_0^2$ . In order to verify (4.26) it is thus sufficient to plug in the definitions of the functions  $G, H$ , the definitions of the forms  $\zeta_2, \varphi$  and to use

$$dg_{ij} = -2g_{ij}\theta_0^0 + g_{kj}\theta_i^k + g_{ik}\theta_j^k \mod \theta_0^1, \theta_0^2.$$

While this is somewhat tedious, it is straightforward, so we omit the computation.

Fix a section of  $\overline{K}_\Sigma \otimes K_\Sigma^*$  with respect to  $[g]$  having support in  $\Omega$ . Such sections are well-known to correspond to endomorphisms of  $T\Sigma$  that are trace-free and symmetric with respect to  $[g]$ . In particular, on  $P$  there exist real-valued functions  $(B_j^i)$  representing the corresponding endomorphism. The functions satisfy

$$B_i^i = 0 \quad \text{and} \quad g_{ij} B_k^j = g_{kj} B_i^j.$$

as well as the equivariance property

$$(R_{b \rtimes a})^* \begin{pmatrix} B_1^1 & B_2^1 \\ B_1^2 & B_2^2 \end{pmatrix} = a^{-1} \begin{pmatrix} B_1^1 & B_2^1 \\ B_1^2 & B_2^2 \end{pmatrix} a.$$

We define  $B = \frac{1}{2}(B_1^1 - B_2^2) + \frac{i}{2}(B_2^1 + B_1^2)$ , then  $B$  satisfies  $(R_{z \rtimes r e^{i\phi}})^* B = e^{2i\phi} B$ , hence for sufficiently small  $t$  we may vary  $[g]$  by defining  $[g]_t$  via the zero-locus of the function

$$G_t = G - tBH.$$

Consequently, on

$$P_{[g]_t} = \left\{ (p, u, t_0) \in \Sigma \times P \times (-\varepsilon, \varepsilon) \mid (p, u) \in P_{[g]_{t_0}} \right\}$$

we get

$$\begin{aligned} 0 &= dG_t = dG - dtBH - t d(BH) \\ &= G' \zeta_1 + G'' \overline{\zeta_1} + H \zeta_2 + \overline{G} (\overline{\varphi} - \varphi) - dtBH - t d(BH) \\ &= G' \zeta_1 + G'' \overline{\zeta_1} + H \zeta_2 + t \overline{B} H (\overline{\varphi} - \varphi) - dtBH - t d(BH) \end{aligned}$$

In particular, if we evaluate this last equation on  $P_{[g]_t}|_{t=0}$ , we obtain

$$0 = G' \zeta_1 + G'' \overline{\zeta_1} + H \zeta_2 - dtBH$$

Since  $H$  is non-vanishing on  $P_{[g]_t}|_{t=0}$  we must have

$$\zeta_2 = -\frac{G'}{H} \zeta_1 - \frac{G''}{H} \overline{\zeta_1} + B dt.$$

Since  $P'_{[g]_t}$  arises by reducing  $P_{[g]_t}$ , it follows that on  $P'_{[g]_t}|_{t=0}$  we obtain

$$\zeta_2 = -\frac{G''}{H} \overline{\zeta_1} + B dt,$$

as desired. Finally, we now know that (4.24) must vanish where  $B$  is any complex-valued function representing an arbitrary section of  $\overline{K}_\Sigma \otimes K_\Sigma^*$  with support in  $\Omega$ . This is only possible if  $q|_{t=0}$  vanishes identically. Applying Corollary 4.6 proves the claim.  $\square$

*Remark 4.13.* Clearly, if  $[g](\Sigma) \subset Z$  is a holomorphic curve, then  $\widetilde{[g]} : \Sigma \rightarrow Y$  is weakly conformal. Using the structure equations this can be seen as follows. The image  $[g](\Sigma) \subset Z$  is a holomorphic curve if and only if  $\alpha$  vanishes identically. However, if  $\alpha$  vanishes identically, then so does  $a$  and hence (4.6) implies that

$q$  vanishes identically as well. Consequently, every projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  locally admits a conformal structure  $[g]$  so that  $\widetilde{[g]}$  is weakly conformal.

We conclude this section by showing that in the compact case  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}([g])$  is – up to a topological constant – just the Dirichlet energy of  $\widetilde{[g]} : (\Sigma, [g]) \rightarrow (Y, h_{\mathfrak{p}})$ .

**Lemma 4.14.** *Let  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  be a compact oriented projective surface. Then for every conformal structure  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  we have*

$$\int_{\Sigma} |A_{[g]}|_g^2 d\mu_g = 2\pi\chi(\Sigma) + \frac{1}{2} \int_{\Sigma} \mathrm{tr}_g \widetilde{[g]}^* h_{\mathfrak{p}} d\mu_g,$$

where  $\chi(\Sigma)$  denotes the Euler-characteristic of  $\Sigma$ .

*Proof.* Recall from (4.9) that

$$p^* \left( \widetilde{[g]}^* h_{\mathfrak{p}} \right) = \frac{1}{2} \left( 4|a|^2 + (k + \bar{k}) \right) \zeta_1 \circ \bar{\zeta}_1 + q \zeta_1 \circ \zeta_1 + \bar{q} \bar{\zeta}_1 \circ \bar{\zeta}_1.$$

Hence we obtain

$$\frac{1}{2} \int_{\Sigma} \mathrm{tr}_g \widetilde{[g]}^* h_{\mathfrak{p}} d\mu_g = \frac{1}{2} \int_{\Sigma} \left( 4|a|^2 + (k + \bar{k}) \right) \frac{i}{2} \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1.$$

Since

$$d\varphi = \left( |a|^2 + \frac{1}{2}k - \bar{k} \right) \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1,$$

we get

$$\frac{i}{2} (d\varphi - d\bar{\varphi}) = \frac{1}{2} \left( 4|a|^2 - (k + \bar{k}) \right) \frac{i}{2} \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1$$

and thus

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{1}{2} \int_{\Sigma} \mathrm{tr}_g \widetilde{[g]}^* h_{\mathfrak{p}} d\mu_g &= \int_{\Sigma} 2i|a|^2 \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 - \int_{\Sigma} \frac{i}{2} (d\varphi - d\bar{\varphi}) \\ &= \int_{\Sigma} |A_{[g]}|_g^2 d\mu_g - 2\pi\chi(\Sigma), \end{aligned}$$

where we have used (I.1) and (4.12).  $\square$

As an obvious consequence of Lemma 4.14 and Theorem 2.4 we have the lower bound:

**Theorem B.** *Let  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  be a compact oriented projective surface. Then for every conformal structure  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  we have*

$$\frac{1}{2} \int_{\Sigma} \mathrm{tr}_g \widetilde{[g]}^* h_{\mathfrak{p}} d\mu_g \geq -2\pi\chi(\Sigma),$$

with equality if and only if  $\mathfrak{p}$  is defined by a  $[g]$ -conformal connection.

## 5. Existence of critical points

Clearly, if a projective structure  $\mathfrak{p}$  is defined by a  $[g]$ -conformal connection, then the conformal structure  $[g]$  is a critical point for  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  and moreover an absolute minimiser. In this final section we study the projective structures for which  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  admits a critical point in some more detail. In particular, we will prove that properly convex projective structures admit critical points.

Recall that the choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on an oriented projective surface  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  determines a torsion-free principal  $\mathrm{CO}(2)$ -connection  $\varphi$  on the bundle  $F_{[g]}^+$  of complex linear coframes of  $(\Sigma, [g])$  and a section  $\alpha$  of  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K_\Sigma^*}$ . Furthermore, the conformal structure  $[g]$  is extremal for  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  if and only if  $\nabla_\varphi'' \alpha = 0$ . Conversely, let  $(\Sigma, [g])$  be a Riemann surface. Let  $\varphi$  be a torsion-free principal  $\mathrm{CO}(2)$ -connection on  $F_{[g]}^+$  and  $\alpha$  a section of  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K_\Sigma^*}$ . Then [Proposition 4.5](#), [Proposition 4.9](#) and [Theorem A](#) show that the conformal structure  $[g]$  is extremal for the projective structure defined by  $\nabla_\varphi + 2 \operatorname{Re}(\alpha)$  if and only if  $\nabla_\varphi'' \alpha \equiv 0$ . Since the curvature of the connection induced by  $\varphi$  on the complex line bundle  $E = K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K_\Sigma^*}$  is a  $(1,1)$ -form, standard results imply (see for instance [\[25, Prop. 1.3.7\]](#)) that there exists a unique holomorphic line bundle structure  $\bar{\partial}_E$  on  $E$ , so that

$$\bar{\partial}_E = \nabla_\varphi''.$$

Hence the variational equation  $\nabla_\varphi'' \alpha = 0$  just says that  $\alpha$  is holomorphic with respect to  $\bar{\partial}_E$ . Since the line bundle  $E$  has degree

$$\deg(E) = \deg(K_\Sigma^2) - \deg(K_\Sigma^*) = -3 \deg(K_\Sigma^*) = -3\chi(\Sigma),$$

we immediately obtain:

**Theorem 5.1.** *Suppose  $\mathfrak{p}$  is a projective structure on the oriented 2-sphere  $S^2$  admitting an extremal conformal structure  $[g]$ . Then  $\mathfrak{p}$  is defined by a  $[g]$ -conformal connection.*

*Proof.* Suppose  $[g]$  is an extremal conformal structure of  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$ . From [Corollary 2.6](#) we know that  $\mathfrak{p}$  is defined by  ${}^{[g]}\nabla + A_{[g]}$  for some  $[g]$ -conformal connection  ${}^{[g]}\nabla$ . Since  $\chi(S^2) = 2$ , we have  $\deg(E) = -6$  and hence the only holomorphic section of  $E$  is the zero-section. It follows that  $\alpha$  vanishes identically and since by [Proposition 4.9](#) we have  $A_{[g]} = 2 \operatorname{Re}(\alpha)$ , so does  $A_{[g]}$ .  $\square$

*Remark 5.2.* Note that the projectively flat conformal connections on  $S^2$  are classified in [\[37\]](#).

From the Riemann–Roch theorem we know that the space  $H^0(\Sigma, E)$  of holomorphic sections of  $E$  has dimension

$$\dim_{\mathbb{C}} H^0(\Sigma, E) \geq \deg(E) + 1 - g_\Sigma = 5g_\Sigma - 5,$$

where here  $g_\Sigma$  denotes the genus of  $\Sigma$ . In particular, if  $\Sigma$  has negative Euler-characteristic, then  $\dim_{\mathbb{C}} H^0(\Sigma, E)$  will have positive dimension.

### 5.1. Convex projective structures

Recall that a flat projective surface  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  has the property that  $\Sigma$  can be covered with open subsets, each of which is diffeomorphic onto a subset of  $\mathbb{RP}^2$  in such a way that the geodesics of  $\mathfrak{p}$  are mapped onto (segments) of projective lines  $\mathbb{RP}^1 \subset \mathbb{RP}^2$ . This condition turns out to be equivalent to  $\Sigma$  carrying an atlas modelled on  $\mathbb{RP}^2$ , that is, an atlas whose chart transitions are restrictions of fractional linear transformations. On the universal cover  $\tilde{\Sigma}$  of the surface the charts can be adjusted to agree on overlaps, thus defining a *developing map*  $\operatorname{dev} : \tilde{\Sigma} \rightarrow \mathbb{RP}^2$ , unique up to post-composition with an element of  $\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$ . In addition, one obtains a

*monodromy representation*  $\rho : \pi_1(\Sigma) \rightarrow \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  of the fundamental group  $\pi_1(\Sigma)$  – well defined up to conjugation – making dev into an equivariant map. A flat projective structure is called *properly convex* if dev is a diffeomorphism onto a subset of  $\mathbb{RP}^2$  which is bounded and convex. If  $\Sigma$  is a compact orientable surface with negative Euler characteristic, then (the conjugacy class of) ‘the’ monodromy representation  $\rho$  of a properly convex projective structure is an element in the Hitchin component  $\mathcal{H}_3$  of  $\Sigma$  and conversely every element in  $\mathcal{H}_3$  can be obtained in this way [10].

Motivated by the circle of ideas discussed in the introduction, it is shown in [28] and [34] that on a compact oriented surface  $\Sigma$  of negative Euler characteristic, the convex projective structures are parametrised in terms of pairs  $([g], C)$ , consisting of a conformal structure  $[g]$  and a cubic differential  $C$  that is holomorphic with respect to the complex structure induced by  $[g]$  and the orientation. Indeed, given a holomorphic cubic differential  $C$  on such a  $\Sigma$ , there exists a unique Riemannian metric  $g$  in the conformal equivalence class  $[g]$ , so that

$$(5.1) \quad K_g = -1 + 2|C|_g^2,$$

where  $K_g$  denotes the Gauss curvature of  $g$  and  $|C|_g$  the pointwise norm of  $C$  with respect to the Hermitian metric induced by  $g$  on the third power of the canonical bundle  $K_\Sigma$  of  $\Sigma$ . Now there exists a unique section  $\alpha$  of  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K}_\Sigma^*$ , so that  $\alpha \otimes d\mu_g = C$ , where here we think of the area form  $d\mu_g$  of  $g$  as a section of  $K_\Sigma \otimes \overline{K}_\Sigma$ . Consequently, we obtain a connection  $\nabla = {}^g\nabla + 2\mathrm{Re}(\alpha)$  on  $T\Sigma$ . The projective structure defined by  $\nabla$  is properly convex and conversely every properly convex projective structure arises in this way [28, Theorem 4.1.1, Theorem 4.2.1]. The metric  $g$  is known as the *affine metric* or *Blaschke metric*, due to the fact that its pullback to the universal cover  $\tilde{\Sigma}$  of  $\Sigma$  can be realised via some immersion  $\tilde{\Sigma} \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^3$  as a complete hyperbolic affine 2-sphere in the affine 3-space  $\mathbb{A}^3$ . In particular, (5.1) is known as Wang’s equations in the affine sphere literature [43]. We refer the reader to the survey articles [23], [33] as well as [1] for additional details.

Calling a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  *closed*, if the associated connection  $\varphi$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  induces a flat connection on  $\Lambda^2(T^*\Sigma)$ , we obtain a novel characterisation of properly convex projective structures among flat projective structures:

**Theorem C.** *Let  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  be a compact oriented flat projective surface of negative Euler characteristic. Suppose  $\mathfrak{p}$  is properly convex, then the conformal equivalence class of the Blaschke metric is closed and extremal for  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$ . Conversely, if  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  admits a closed extremal conformal structure  $[g]$ , then  $\mathfrak{p}$  is properly convex and  $[g]$  is the conformal equivalence class of the Blaschke metric of  $\mathfrak{p}$ .*

*Remark 5.3.* It would be interesting to know if flat projective surfaces  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  exist for which  $\mathcal{E}_{\mathfrak{p}}$  admits an extremal conformal structure that is not closed.

*Proof of Theorem C.* Assume  $\mathfrak{p}$  is properly convex and let  $([g], C)$  be the associated pair. Let  $g$  the Blaschke metric satisfying (5.1) and  $\varphi$  the connection on  $F_{[g]}^+$  induced by the Levi-Civita connection of  $g$ . Recall that  $\nabla_\varphi$  denotes the connection induced by  $\varphi$  on  $TM$ , hence here we have  $\nabla_\varphi = {}^g\nabla$ . From [28] we know that  $\mathfrak{p}$  is defined by a connection of the form

$$\nabla = {}^g\nabla + 2\mathrm{Re}(\alpha),$$



where  $\alpha$  satisfies  $\alpha \otimes d\mu_g = C$ . A simple computation shows that a torsion-free connection  $\varphi$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  induces a flat connection on  $\Lambda^2(T^*\Sigma)$  if and only if  $\nabla_\varphi$  has symmetric Ricci tensor. Since here  $\nabla_\varphi = {}^g\nabla$  is a Levi-Civita connection, it follows that the conformal structure defined by the Blaschke metric is closed. In addition, since  $C$  is holomorphic, we have  $\nabla_\varphi'' C = 0$  and furthermore, since  $d\mu_g$  is parallel with respect to  ${}^g\nabla$ , it follows that  $\nabla_\varphi'' \alpha$  vanishes identically, thus showing that the conformal structure defined by the Blaschke metric is extremal for  $\mathcal{E}_p$ .

Conversely, let  $(\Sigma, p)$  be a compact oriented flat projective surface of negative Euler characteristic. Suppose  $[g]$  is a closed and extremal conformal structure for  $p$ . We let  $\varphi$  denote the induced connection on  $F_{[g]}^+$  and  $\alpha$  the corresponding section of  $K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K}_\Sigma^*$ . [Lemma 4.4](#) implies that on  $P'_{[g]} \simeq F_{[g]}^+$  we have the following structure equations, where we write  $\omega$  instead of  $\zeta_1$

$$(5.2) \quad \begin{aligned} da &= a'\omega - q\overline{\omega} + 2a\varphi - a\overline{\varphi}, \\ dk &= k'\omega + k''\overline{\omega} + k\varphi + k\overline{\varphi}, \\ dq &= q'\omega + \frac{1}{2}(\overline{L} + \overline{k}'' - 2\overline{q}a)\overline{\omega} + 2q\varphi, \\ d\varphi &= \left(|a|^2 + \frac{1}{2}k - \overline{k}\right)\omega \wedge \overline{\omega}. \end{aligned}$$

Since  $[g]$  is extremal, we know that  $Q$  and hence  $q$  vanishes identically. Moreover, recall that  $p$  is flat if and only if  $L \equiv 0$ , hence the third structure equation gives

$$0 = dq = q'\omega + \frac{1}{2}\overline{k}''\overline{\omega}$$

showing that the functions  $q'$  and  $k''$  vanish identically as well. [Lemma 4.1](#) implies that  $-(\varphi + \overline{\varphi})$  is the connection form of the connection induced by  $\varphi$  on  $\Lambda^2(T^*\Sigma)$ . Since  $[g]$  is closed, the induced connection is flat and hence  $d(\varphi + \overline{\varphi})$  must vanish identically. Thus we obtain

$$0 = d(\varphi + \overline{\varphi}) = \frac{3}{2}(\overline{k} - k)\omega \wedge \overline{\omega},$$

showing that  $k$  must be real-valued. Note that since  $k$  is real-valued, we have

$$0 = d(k - \overline{k}) = k'\omega - \overline{k}'\overline{\omega},$$

so that  $k'$  vanishes identically. Finally, we have reduced the structure equations to

$$(5.3) \quad \begin{aligned} da &= a'\omega + 2a\varphi - a\overline{\varphi}, \\ dk &= k\varphi + k\overline{\varphi}, \\ d\varphi &= \left(|a|^2 - \frac{1}{2}k\right)\omega \wedge \overline{\omega}. \end{aligned}$$

The equivariance property of the tautological 1-form  $\omega$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  gives

$$(R_{re^{i\phi}})^*\omega = \frac{1}{r}e^{i\phi}\omega$$

for all  $re^{i\phi} \in \text{CO}(2)$ . The function  $k$  represents a  $(1,1)$ -form  $\kappa$  on  $\Sigma$  which satisfies  $v^*\kappa = \frac{i}{2}k\omega \wedge \overline{\omega}$ . Consequently,  $k$  has the equivariance property  $(R_{re^{i\phi}})^*k = r^2k$ .

Recall that

$$\int_{\Sigma} \text{id}\varphi = \int_{\Sigma} i \left( |a|^2 - \frac{1}{2}k \right) \omega \wedge \bar{\omega} = 2\pi\chi(\Sigma) < 0,$$

hence  $k$  must be positive somewhere. Note that (5.3) shows that the (1,1)-form  $\kappa$  represented by  $k$  is parallel with respect to  $\varphi$ . Consequently,  $k$  cannot vanish. Since  $\Sigma$  is assumed to be connected, the equivariance property of  $k$  implies that the equation  $k = 1$  defines a reduction  $F_g^+ \subset F_{[g]}^+$  to an  $\text{SO}(2)$ -subbundle which is the orthonormal coframe bundle of a unique representative metric  $g \in [g]$ . On  $F_g^+$  we have

$$0 = dk = \varphi + \bar{\varphi},$$

showing that we may write  $\varphi = i\phi$  for a unique 1-form  $\phi$  on  $F_g^+$ . Of course,  $\phi$  is the Levi-Civita connection form of  $g$  and hence using  $\omega = \omega^1 + i\omega^2$ , we obtain the familiar structure equation for the Levi-Civita connection of an oriented Riemannian 2-manifold

$$d\phi = -(-1 + 2|a|^2)\omega^1 \wedge \omega^2.$$

We may define a cubic differential  $C$  by setting  $C = \alpha \otimes d\mu_g$  and since the pullback to  $F_g^+$  of the area form of  $g$  is  $\omega^1 \wedge \omega^2$ , we conclude the the cubic differential  $C$  is holomorphic and represented by the function  $a$ . Since

$$d\phi = -K_g \omega^1 \wedge \omega^2,$$

where  $K_g$  denotes the Gauss curvature of  $g$ , we have

$$K_g = -1 + 2|C|_g^2,$$

where we use that  $v^*|C|_g^2 = |c|^2$ . It follows that  $g$  is the Blaschke metric associated to the pair  $([g], C)$  and hence  $\mathfrak{p}$  is a properly convex projective structure.  $\square$

## 5.2. Concluding remarks

*Remark 5.4.* Let  $G_0$  be a real split simple Lie group and  $S(G_0)$  the associated symmetric space. For our purposes we may take  $G_0 = \text{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  so that  $S(G_0) = \text{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})/\text{SO}(3)$ , but the following results hold in the more general case. Suppose  $\Sigma$  is a compact oriented surface of negative Euler characteristic and  $\rho : \pi_1(\Sigma) \rightarrow G_0$  a representation in the Hitchin component for  $G_0$ . By a theorem of Corlette [11], the choice of a conformal structure  $[g]$  on  $\Sigma$  determines a map  $\psi : \tilde{\Sigma} \rightarrow S(G_0)$  which is equivariant with respect to  $\rho$  and harmonic with respect to the Riemannian metric on  $S(G_0)$  and the conformal structure on  $\tilde{\Sigma}$  obtained by lifting  $[g]$ . Furthermore, this map is unique up to post-composition with an isometry of  $S(G_0)$ . The energy density of the map  $\psi$  descends to define a 2-form  $e_\rho([g]) d\mu_g$  on  $\Sigma$  and hence one may define an energy functional [12], [29]

$$\mathcal{E}_\rho([g]) = \int_{\Sigma} e_\rho([g]) d\mu_g.$$

The energy  $\mathcal{E}_\rho([g])$  turns out to only depend on the diffeotopy class of  $[g]$  and thus defines an energy functional on Teichmüller space for every representation  $\rho$  in the Hitchin component of  $G_0$ . The Hopf differential of the map  $\psi$  yields a holomorphic quadratic differential which descends to  $\Sigma$  as well and it is conjectured [17], [29], that for every representation in the Hitchin component there

exists a unique conformal structure on  $\Sigma$  whose associated Hopf differential vanishes identically. For such a conformal structure the mapping  $\psi$  is harmonic and conformal, hence minimal. In [30] Labourie proves the existence of a unique  $\rho$ -equivariant minimal mapping  $\psi : \tilde{\Sigma} \rightarrow S(G_0)$  in the case where  $G_0$  has rank two (the case  $G_0 = \mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  was treated previously in [28]). Labourie also shows the existence of such a mapping without any assumption on the rank of  $G_0$  in [29]. Moreover, in [30], the energy bound

$$\mathcal{E}_\rho([g]) \geq -2\pi\chi(\Sigma)$$

is obtained, with equality if and only if  $\rho$  is a *Fuchsian representation*.

Given our results it is natural to expect a relation between  $\mathcal{E}_\rho$  and our functional  $\mathcal{E}_p$ , where  $\rho$  is an element in the  $\mathrm{SL}(3, \mathbb{R})$  Hitchin component and  $p$  denotes its associated properly convex projective structure. However, relating the representation  $\rho$  to its associated projective structure  $p$  in a way that would allow to establish the expected relation proves to be quite difficult. This may be investigated elsewhere.

*Remark 5.5.* Although we are currently unable to prove this, the previous remark suggests that in the case of a properly convex compact oriented projective surface  $(\Sigma, p)$  of negative Euler characteristic, the conformal equivalence class of the Blaschke metric is in fact the unique critical point of  $\mathcal{E}_p$ . As a partial result towards this claim, it is shown in [41] that if a properly convex compact oriented projective surface  $(\Sigma, p)$  of negative Euler characteristic admits a compatible Weyl connection, then  $p$  arises from a hyperbolic metric.

*Remark 5.6.* In [38], it is shown that for a compact oriented projective surface  $(\Sigma, p)$  of negative Euler characteristic the functional  $\mathcal{E}_p$  admits at most one absolute minimiser  $[g]$  (i.e. a conformal structure  $[g]$  such that  $\mathcal{E}_p([g]) = 0$ ).

*Remark 5.7.* In [39], the author shows that properly convex projective surfaces arise from torsion-free connections on  $T\Sigma$  that admit an interpretation as Lagrangian minimal surfaces. Some of their properties are studied in [40]. It would be interesting to relate these minimal Lagrangian surfaces to the minimal mapping  $\psi$  constructed in [28].

*Remark 5.8.* We have seen that oriented projective structures admitting extremal conformal structures arise from pairs  $(\varphi, \alpha)$  on a Riemann surface  $(\Sigma, [g])$ , where  $\alpha$  satisfies  $\nabla_\varphi''\alpha \equiv 0$ . The torsion-free connection  $\varphi$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  induces a holomorphic line bundle structure  $\bar{\partial}_E$  on  $E = K_\Sigma^2 \otimes \overline{K_\Sigma^*}$  and conversely, it is easy to see that for every choice of a holomorphic line bundle structure  $\bar{\partial}_E$  on  $E$  there exists a unique torsion-free connection  $\varphi$  on  $F_{[g]}^+$  inducing  $\bar{\partial}_E$ . Hence we may equivalently describe these projective structures in terms of a pair  $(\bar{\partial}_E, \alpha)$  satisfying  $\bar{\partial}_E\alpha \equiv 0$ .

*Remark 5.9.* The so-called *naive Einstein* affine hypersurface structures introduced in [16] also provide examples of projective surfaces admitting an extremal conformal structure.

## Appendix I. A Gauss–Bonnet type identity

As a by-product of our considerations, we obtain a Gauss–Bonnet type identity:

**Theorem I.1.** *Let  $(\Sigma, \mathfrak{p})$  a compact oriented projective surface. Then for every section  $s : \Sigma \rightarrow (Y, \Omega_{\mathfrak{p}})$  we have*

$$(I.1) \quad \int_{\Sigma} s^* \Omega_{\mathfrak{p}} = 2\pi \chi(\Sigma).$$

*Proof.* Since  $\pi : Y \rightarrow \Sigma$  admits smooth global sections, it follows that  $\pi^* : H^k(\Sigma) \rightarrow H^k(Y)$  is injective. Note that by construction the fibres of the bundle  $\pi : Y \rightarrow \Sigma$  are diffeomorphic to  $(\mathbb{R}_2 \rtimes \mathrm{GL}^+(2, \mathbb{R})) / \mathrm{CO}(2)$  and hence diffeomorphic to  $\mathbb{R}_2 \times D^2$ . In particular, the fibre is contractible, thus we have  $H^2(Y) \simeq H^2(\Sigma) \simeq \mathbb{R}$  showing that  $\pi^* : H^2(\Sigma) \rightarrow H^2(Y)$  is an isomorphism. It follows that any two sections of  $Y \rightarrow \Sigma$  induce the same map on the second de Rham cohomology groups. It is therefore sufficient to construct a section  $s : \Sigma \rightarrow Y$  for which (I.1) holds. From the proof of the Lemma 4.3 we know that for every conformal structure  $[g] : \Sigma \rightarrow Z$  there exists a lift  $\widetilde{[g]} : \Sigma \rightarrow Y$  so that on the pullback bundle  $P'_{[g]}$  we have

$$\zeta_2 = 2\bar{a} \bar{\zeta}_1, \quad \zeta_3 = k\zeta_1 + 2\bar{q} \bar{\zeta}_1,$$

Since

$$\tau^* \Omega_{\mathfrak{p}} = -\frac{i}{4} \left( \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_3 + \zeta_3 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 + \zeta_2 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_2 \right),$$

computing as in Lemma 4.14 and using the above identities for  $\zeta_2, \zeta_3$  gives

$$\int_{\Sigma} \widetilde{[g]}^* \Omega_{\mathfrak{p}} = -\frac{i}{4} \int_{\Sigma} \left( k + \bar{k} - 4|a|^2 \right) \zeta_1 \wedge \bar{\zeta}_1 = \frac{i}{2} \int_{\Sigma} d\varphi - d\bar{\varphi} = 2\pi \chi(\Sigma).$$

□

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