AN ELEMENTARY PROOF OF THE DESCENT THEOREM FOR 
GROTHENDIECK TOPOSES

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Communicated by F.W. Lawvere
Received August 1984

The key theorem of Joyal & Tierney [1] is the descent theorem for geometric morphisms of Grothendieck toposes (over a fixed base topos \( \mathcal{S} \)). This theorem says that open surjections are effective descent morphisms – a fact which has remarkable consequences (see loc. cit.). Joyal and Tierney prove the descent theorem by first developing descent theory for ‘modules’ (suplattices) over locales, parallel to descent theory for commutative rings. In this way they provide an algebraic explanation for the theorem. The purpose of this note is to give a direct proof of the descent theorem.

1. Formulation of the descent theorem (see Joyal & Tierney [1])

Let \( \mathcal{E} \xrightarrow{f} \mathcal{D} \) be a geometric morphism of Grothendieck toposes over \( \mathcal{S} \), and consider the diagram

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\mathcal{E} \times_\mathcal{D} \mathcal{E} \times_\mathcal{D} \mathcal{E} & \xrightarrow{p_{12}} & \mathcal{E} \times_\mathcal{S} \mathcal{E} \\
\downarrow{p_{23}} & & \downarrow{p_{13}} \\
\mathcal{E} \times_\mathcal{E} \mathcal{E} & \xrightarrow{p_1} & \mathcal{E} \\
\downarrow{p_2} & & \downarrow{\delta} \\
\mathcal{S} & \xrightarrow{f} & \mathcal{D}.
\end{array}
\]

Descent-data on an object \( X \in \mathcal{E} \) consists of a morphism \( \theta : p_1^*(X) \to p_2^*(X) \) such that \( \delta^*(\theta) = \text{id} \) and \( p_{13}^*(\theta) = p_{23}^*(\theta) \circ p_{12}^*(\theta) \) (the cocycle condition). \( \text{Des}(f) \) denotes the category of pairs \( (X, \theta) \), \( \theta \) descent-data on \( X \in \mathcal{E} \), where morphisms \( (X, \theta) \to (X', \theta') \) are morphisms \( X \xrightarrow{f} X' \) in \( \mathcal{E} \) which commute with descent-data in the obvious way. Any object \( f^*(D), D \in \mathcal{D} \), can be equipped with descent-data in a canonical way, and this gives a commutative diagram
where $U$ is the forgetful functor. $f$ is called an effective descent morphism if $\mathcal{D} \to \text{Des}(f)$ is an equivalence of categories. The descent theorem states that every open surjection is an effective descent morphism.

Note that by working inside $\mathcal{D}$, it suffices to prove this theorem for the special case that $\mathfrak{g} \to \mathcal{D}$ is the canonical geometric morphism $\mathfrak{g} \to \mathcal{D}$; accordingly, we will only consider this case.

2. Some preliminary remarks

Let $\mathfrak{g} = \text{Sh}(\mathcal{C})$, $\mathcal{C}$ a site in $\mathcal{D}$. Then a site for $\mathfrak{g} \times \mathfrak{g} = \mathfrak{g} \times_{\mathcal{D}} \mathfrak{g}$ is given by the product-category $\mathcal{C} \times \mathcal{C}$ with the coarsest topology making the projections

$$\mathcal{C} \times \mathcal{C} \xrightarrow{P_1} \mathcal{C} \xrightarrow{P_2} \mathcal{C}$$

continuous, i.e. the topology is generated by covers of the form

$$\{(C_i, D) \xrightarrow{(f_i, \text{id})} (C, D)\}_i \quad \text{and} \quad \{(C, D_j) \xrightarrow{\text{id}, (g_j)} (C, D)\}_j,$$

where $\{C_i \xrightarrow{f_i} C\}_i$ and $\{D_j \xrightarrow{g_j} D\}_j$ are covers in $\mathcal{C}$. The inverse image $p_1^*$ of the geometric morphism $\mathfrak{g} \times \mathfrak{g} \to \mathfrak{g}$ comes from composing with $P_1$, followed by sheafification. Similarly for $p_2^*$. The inverse image $\delta^*$ of the diagonal $\mathfrak{g} \xrightarrow{\delta} \mathfrak{g} \times \mathfrak{g}$ comes from composing with $\Delta : \mathcal{C} \to \mathcal{C} \times \mathcal{C}$ followed by sheafification: given $Y \in \text{Sh}(\mathcal{C} \times \mathcal{C}) = \mathfrak{g} \times \mathfrak{g}$, $\delta^*(Y)$ is the sheaf associated to the presheaf $\mathcal{C} \to Y(C, C)$. So for $Y = p_1^*(X)$, $\delta^* p_1^*(X) \equiv X$, and we have a canonical natural transformation $\eta$, $\eta_C : p_1^*(X)(C, C) \to X(C)$, which is the unit of the associated sheaf adjunction. Similarly for $p_2^*$.

3. The case of connected locally connected geometric morphisms

As a warming up exercise, let us point out that the descent theorem is trivial when $\mathfrak{g} \to \mathcal{D}$ is connected, locally connected (this is not needed for the proof of the general case). Indeed, let $\mathcal{C}$ be a molecular site for $\mathfrak{g}$ (with a terminal, since $\gamma$ is connected). Constant presheaves on $\mathcal{C}$ are sheaves, and $p_1^*$, $p_2^*$ are just given by composition with $P_1$ and $P_2$ respectively (no sheafification needed). Now suppose $X$ is a sheaf on $\mathcal{C}$, with descent-data $X \circ P_1 \to X \circ P_2$. This means that we are given
functions $\theta_{CD} : X(C) \to X(D)$ for every pair of objects $C$ and $D$ of $C$. Naturality of $\theta$ means that for any $C' \xrightarrow{\mathcal{f}} C$, $D' \xrightarrow{\mathcal{g}} D$, $X(\mathcal{g}) \circ \theta_{CD} = \theta_{CD'} \circ X(\mathcal{f})$. $\delta^*(\theta) = \text{id}$ means that for any $C$, $\theta_{CC} : X(C) \to X(C)$ is the identity. And the cocycle condition means that for any triple $C, D, E$ of objects of $C$, $\theta_{DE} \circ \theta_{CD} = \theta_{CE}$. So in particular, taking $C = E$, $\theta_{CD}$ is inverse to $\theta_{DC}$, i.e. $\theta$ is an isomorphism. From this it easily follows that $X$ is isomorphic to the constant sheaf $\gamma^*(X(1))$: define

$$X \xrightarrow{\psi} \gamma^*(X(1))$$

by the components $\varphi_C = \theta_{1C}$; $\psi_C = \theta_{C1}$. $\varphi$ and $\psi$ are inverse to each other, and are natural in $C$ by naturality of $\theta$. It remains to show that any morphism $\gamma^*(T) \xrightarrow{r} \gamma^*(T')$ which is compatible with the canonical descent-data comes from a map $T \to T'$. But this is clear from the fact that $\gamma^*$ is full and faithful.

4. A proof of the descent theorem

This is essentially the same as 3, but we have to keep track of sheafification all the time. Let $\mathcal{E} \xrightarrow{\mathcal{r}} \mathcal{S}$ be an open surjection, and let $\mathcal{C}$ be an open site for $\mathcal{E}$; i.e. $\mathcal{C}$ has a terminal object $1$, and every cover in $\mathcal{C}$ is inhabited. We have to show that

(a) every object $X \in \mathcal{E}$ equipped with descent-data is isomorphic to a constant sheaf;

(b) every morphism $\gamma^*(T) \to \gamma^*(T')$ which commutes with the canonical descent-data is of the form $r = \gamma^*(f)$.

To prove (a), choose $X \in \mathcal{E}$ with descent-data $\theta$. Write $\mathcal{E} \times \mathcal{E} \xrightarrow{p_1} \mathcal{E}$ and $\mathcal{E} \times \mathcal{E} \xrightarrow{p_1} \mathcal{E}$ for the projections. Identifying $p_2^*(X)(C, D)$ with $p_1^*(X)(D, C)$ in the canonical way, we may regard $\theta$ as a system of functions (in $\mathcal{S}$)

$$\theta_{CD} : p_1^*(X)(C, D) \to p_1^*(X)(D, C)$$

which are natural in $C, D$: for $C' \to C$ and $D' \to D$,

$$p_1^*(X)(C, D) \xrightarrow{\theta_{CD}} p_1^*(X)(D, C)$$

$$p_1(X)(C', D') \xrightarrow{\theta_{CD'}} p_1^*(X)(D', C')$$

commutes. This implies that $\theta_{CD}$ is determined by its restriction $\theta_{CD} \circ i_1$,

$$X(C) \xrightarrow{i_1} p_1^*(X)(C, D) \xrightarrow{\theta_{CD}} p_1^*(X)(D, C)$$

for which we also write $\theta_{CD}$. The condition $\delta^*(\theta) = \text{id}$ means that
commutes for every $C$, while the cocycle condition means that

$$p^*_\tau(X)(C, D, E) \xrightarrow{\theta_{CD(E)}} p^*_\tau(X)(D, C, E)$$

$$p^*_\tau(X)(E, C, D) \xrightarrow{\theta_{CE(D)}} p^*_\tau(X)(E, D, C)$$

where $\theta_{CD(E)}$ is the obvious map induced by $\theta_{CD}$, etc.

We will use the following lemma, to be proved below.

**Lemma.** For $X \in \mathcal{E} = \text{Sh}(\mathcal{C})$, and objects $C, D, E$ of $\mathcal{C}$, the canonical square

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
X(C) & \xrightarrow{p^*_\tau(X)(C, D)} & p^*_\tau(X)(C, D, E) \\
\uparrow & & \uparrow \\
\uparrow & & \uparrow \\
\text{pullback} & & \text{pullback}
\end{array}$$

is a pullback in $\mathcal{E}$.

Let $S = \{x \in X(1) \mid \theta_{11}(i_1(x)) = i_1(x)\}$, where $i_1 : X(1) \hookrightarrow p^*_\tau(X)(1, 1)$ as above. We claim that $X = \gamma^*(S)$ via

$$X \xrightarrow{\varphi} \gamma^*(S),$$

where $\varphi$ is the transpose of $S \to X(1)$, and $\psi$ is the map defined by the components

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
X(C) & \xrightarrow{\varphi} & \gamma^*(S)(C) \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow \\
t_1 & & j_C \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow \\
p^*_\tau(X)(X, 1) & \xrightarrow{\theta_{C1}} & p^*_\tau(X)(1, C)
\end{array}$$

where $j_C$ is the obvious embedding, natural in $C$. The nontrivial thing is to show that $\varphi$ is well-defined, i.e. that $\theta_{C1} \circ t_1$ factors through $j_C$. (Naturality of $\varphi_C$ is then obvious.) So take $x \in X(C)$, and write $y = \theta_{C1}(t_1(x)) \in p^*_\tau(X)(1, C)$. We have to show that $y$ "locally does not depend on the $C$-coordinate", $y$ is given as a compatible family $\{y_a\}_a$, $y_a \in X(D_a)$, for a cover $\{(D_a, C_a) \xrightarrow{(D_a, f_a)} (1, C)\}_{a \in \mathcal{A}}$ in $\mathcal{C} \times \mathcal{C}$. 
Fix $\alpha$, and let $x_\alpha = x^1 f_\alpha \in X(C_\alpha)$. Then $\theta_{C_\alpha D_\beta}(x_\alpha) = y_\alpha$, and by the cocycle condition, we have for any object $E$ of $C$ that $\theta_{C_\alpha E}(x_\alpha) = \theta_{D_\alpha E}(y_\alpha)$ in $\varphi_\alpha^*(X)(E, D_\alpha, C_\alpha)$. So by the lemma,

$$\theta_{C_\alpha E}(x_\alpha) = \theta_{D_\alpha E}(y_\alpha) \in X(E).$$

Choosing $E = C_\alpha$, we find that $\theta_{C_\alpha C_\alpha}(x_\alpha) \in X(C_\alpha)$, and hence since $\eta_{C_\alpha}$ is the identity on $X(C_\alpha)$, we have for any object $E$ of $C$ that $\theta_{C_\alpha C_\alpha}(x_\alpha) = x_\alpha$. Now let $E$ run over all the objects $D_\beta, \beta \in \mathcal{A}$. Clearly by naturality of $\theta$, if

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
D_\beta & h & \rightarrow & D_\gamma \\
F & \downarrow k & & \downarrow \\
1 & & & 1
\end{array}$$

then $\theta_{C_\alpha D_\beta}(x_\alpha) \uparrow h = \theta_{C_\alpha E}(x_\alpha) = \theta_{C_\alpha D_\gamma}(x_\alpha) \uparrow k$, so since $\{D_\beta \rightarrow 1\}_{\beta \in \mathcal{A}}$ is a cover in $C$ (by openness), there is a unique $z_\alpha \in X(1)$ with $z_\alpha \uparrow D_\beta = \theta_{C_\alpha D_\beta}(x_\alpha)$. So by naturality of $\theta$ again,

$$z_\alpha = \theta_{C_\alpha 1}(x_\alpha) \in X(1),$$

while moreover since $\theta_{C_\alpha C_\alpha}(x_\alpha) = x_\alpha$,

$$z_\alpha \uparrow C_\alpha = x_\alpha \in X(C_\alpha).$$

We claim that $\{z_\alpha\}_\alpha$ determines an element $z \in \psi^*(S)(C)$. (Note that clearly if this is so, $j_C(z) = \theta C_1(x)$. ) Indeed, the $z_\alpha$ are compatible in the sense that if

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
C_\alpha & h & \rightarrow & f_\alpha \\
E & \downarrow k & & \downarrow \\
C_\alpha^\prime & & & f_\alpha^\prime
\end{array}$$

commutes, then $z_\alpha = z_\alpha^\prime \in X(1)$ – this is obvious from naturality of $\theta$. Moreover, each $z_\alpha \in S$. For if $E$ is any object of $C$, we have $\theta_{1 E}(z_\alpha) = \theta_{C_\alpha E}(x_\alpha)$ in $\varphi_\alpha^*(X)(1, C_\alpha, E)$ by the cocycle condition, so by the lemma, $\theta_{1 E}(z_\alpha) \in X(E)$. Since $\eta_1 \uparrow X(1)$ is the identity, we find for $E = 1$ that $\theta_{1 1}(z_\alpha) = z_\alpha$. This proves that $\psi_C$ is well-defined.

It is now clear that $\varphi$ and $\psi$ are inverse to each other: One way round, it suffices to show that $\psi \varphi(s) = s$ for $s \in S$. But $\varphi(s) = s \in X(1)$, and $\theta_{1 1}(s) = i_1(s)$ by definition of $S$, so this is clear. The other way round, take $x \in X(C)$. Then
ψ_C(x) ∈ γ*(S)(C) is the element z as above with z 1 f_a = z_a ∈ S ⊂ X(1). So by definition, \( ϕ_C(z) ∈ X(C) \) is given by \( ϕ_C(z) 1 f_a = z_a 1 C_a \). But \( z_a 1 C_a = x_a \) as we have seen. So \( ϕ_C(z) = x_a \), i.e. \( ϕ_C ψ_C = id \). This proves (a).

To prove (b), suppose \( γ*(T) \to γ*(T') \) is compatible with the canonical descent-data \( \theta \) and \( \theta' \) on \( γ*(T), γ*(T') \). It is trivial to check that \( T = \{ t ∈ γ*(T)(1) \mid \theta_{11}(t) = t \} \), and similarly for \( T' \). So if \( t ∈ T ⊂ γ*(T)(1) \), then \( \theta'_{11}(t) = \tau_1(\theta_{11}(t)) = τ_1(t) \), so \( τ_1(t) ∈ T' \). Therefore \( τ \) comes from a map \( T → T' \), proving (b).

It remains to prove the lemma. To this end, suppose \( x ∈ φ_1^*(X)(C, D) \) and \( y ∈ φ_1^*(X)(C, E) \) are equal in \( φ_1^*(X)(C, D, E) \). Write \( x = \{ x_a \}_a, \ x_a ∈ X(C_a) \) a compatible family for a cover \( \mathcal{A} = \{(C_a, D_a) → (C, D)\}_{a ∈ \mathcal{U}} \) in \( C × C \), and \( y = \{ y_β \}_β, \ y_β ∈ X(C_β) \), a compatible family for a cover \( \mathcal{V} = \{(C_β, E_β) → (C, E)\}_{β ∈ \mathcal{V}} \) in \( C × C \). Equality of \( x \) and \( y \) in \( φ_1^*(X)(C, D, E) \) means that there is a common refinement \( \mathcal{W} = \{(C_i, D_i, E_i) → (C, D, E)\}_{i ∈ I} \) of \( \{(C_a, D_a, E) → (C, D, E)\}_a \) and \( \{(C_β, D_β, E_β) → (C, D, E)\}_β \) in \( C × C × C \) on which \( x \) and \( y \) agree. Replacing \( \mathcal{A} \) by \( \{(C_i, D_i) → (C, D)\} \) and \( \mathcal{V} \) by \( \{(C_i, E_i) → (C, E)\} \); we get the following notationally more manageable situation: we are given \( x_i ∈ X(C_i), y_i ∈ X(C_i) \), such that whenever

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
(C_i, D_i) & \xrightarrow{f} & (A, B) \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow \\
(C, D) & \xrightarrow{g} & (C_j, D_j)
\end{array}
\]

then \( x_i 1 A = x_j 1 A \), and a similar condition for compatibility of \( \{ y_i \} \) with \( D \) replaced by \( E \). Moreover, since \( x \) and \( y \) agree on the cover \( \mathcal{W} \), \( x_i = y_i \) for every \( i \). We now have to show that \( x = \{ x_i \} \) comes from an element of \( X(C) \), i.e. that \( \{ x_i \} \) is compatible for the cover \( \{ C_i → C \} \) in \( C \). So suppose

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
C_i \downarrow & \xrightarrow{f} & A \\
\downarrow & & \downarrow \\
C \downarrow & \xleftarrow{g} & C_j
\end{array}
\]

commutes. Take a cover \( \{(P_a, Q_a, R_a) → (A, D_i, E_i)\}_a \) refining \( \mathcal{W} \); i.e. for each \( a \) there is a \( j_a ∈ I \) such that
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\[(P_a, Q_a, R_a) \longrightarrow (A, D_i, E_i)\]

\[(C_{j_a}, D_{j_a}, E_{j_a}) \longrightarrow (C, D, E)\]

commutes. By openness, \(\{(P_a, Q_a) \to (A, D_i, E_i)\}_a\) is a cover in \(C \times C\), while moreover,

\[x_i \cdot 1_{P_a} = x_{j_a} \cdot 1_{P_a} \quad \text{(by compatibility of \(\{x_i\}\) over \((C, D)\))}\]

\[= y_{j_a} \cdot 1_{P_a} \quad \text{(by \(x = y\) over \((C, D, E)\))}\]

\[= y_{i_a} \cdot 1_{P_a} \quad \text{(by compatibility of \(\{y_i\}\) over \((C, E)\))}\]

\[= x_{i_a} \cdot 1_{P_a} \quad \text{(by \(x = y\) over \((C, D, E)\)).}\]

The family \(\{P_a \to A\}_a\) covers \(A\), so \(x_i \cdot 1_A = x_i \cdot 1_A\). This completes the proof of the lemma.

Reference