Close packing and loose covering with balls

By L. FEJES TÓTH

To the memory of A. Kertész

The problem of the densest packing of balls, as well as the problem of the thinnest covering with balls have a vast literature [1, 2]. In this paper we want to call the attention to a variant of these problems which seems to offer ample scope for work.

Problem 1. In a space of constant curvature let P be a packing of balls of radius r. Let $\varrho=\varrho(P)$ be the supremum of the radii of those balls which have no point in common with any ball of P. Find the infimum $\bar{\varrho}=\bar{\varrho}(r)$ of ϱ extended over all packings P of balls of radius r.

Problem 2. In a space of constant curvature let C be a covering of balls of radius R. Let $\mathsf{P}=\mathsf{P}(C)$ be the supremum of the radii of those balls which are contained in the intersection of two balls of C. Find the infimum $\bar{\mathsf{P}}=\bar{\mathsf{P}}(R)$ of P extended over all coverings C with balls of radius R.

We call a packing with $\varrho=\bar{\varrho}$ a closest packing, in short a *close packing* and a covering with $\mathsf{P}=\bar{\mathsf{P}}$ a loosest covering, in short a *loose covering*. In certain special cases, as for instance in spherical spaces or in the Euclidean plane, the existence of a close packing and a loose covering with equal balls is obvious. But in Euclidean n-space with $n>2$ the question of existence seems to be difficult. Apart from the "regular" cases the same can be said about hyperbolic n-space with $n>1$.

In order to avoid a separate discussion of some uninteresting cases, we shall mean by a spherical ball only a ball not greater than a half-space, i.e. a ball of radius $\leqq\pi/2$.

If we have a packing of balls of radius r then concentric balls of radius $R=r+\varrho$ cover the space. Similarly, if a set of balls with radius R cover the space then concentric balls with radius $r=R-\mathsf{P}$ will form a packing. Thus, completing with the question of existence, the above problems can be summarized as follows: In the (r, R)-plane find the set of points such that balls of radius r form a packing and concentric balls of radius R form a covering.

Let us scrutinize this problem in spherical 2-space. Here the points (r_i, R_i) $i=1, 2, 3$ will play a special part, where r_1, r_2, r_3 are the inradii and R_1, R_2, R_3 are the circumradii of a face of the tessellation $\{5, 3\}$, $\{4, 3\}$ and $\{3, 3\}$, respectively.

Let the unit sphere be packed with n circles $c_1, \ldots, c_n$ of radius r and covered with concentric circles $C_1, \ldots, C_n$ of radius R. Let $D_1, \ldots, D_n$ be the Dirichlet cells of the centers. If p_i is the number of sides of D_i then, as a well known consequence of Euler's polyhedron theorem,

$$p_1+\ldots+p_n \leqq 6n-12$$

with equality only if the Dirichlet cells form a trihedral tessellation. Therefore there is among the Dirichlet cells one, say, D_i which has at most five sides. Since $c_i \subset D_i \subset C_i$, it follows that C_i cannot be smaller than the circumcircle of a regular pentagon circumscribed about c_i. Therefore $\tan R \geqq \tan r/\cos 36°$.

It is known (see e.g. [1]) that the number n of circles of radius $r > r_1$ which can be packed on the sphere is less than 12. But for $n < 12$ the above inequality for the p_i's implies that there is a p_i less than five. Thus for $r > r_1$ C_i cannot be smaller than the circumcircle of a regular quadrangle circumscribed about c_i, i.e. $\tan R \geqq \tan r/\cos 45°$.

Now we refer to the fact that at most four circles of radius $> r_2$, and at most three circles of radius $> r_3$ can be packed on the sphere. On the other hand, the radius of four circles covering the sphere is at least R_3, and the radius of three circles covering the sphere is $\pi/2$. Thus for $r > r_2$ we have $R \geqq R_3$, and for $r > r_3$ we have $R = \pi/2$.

To sum up we phrase the following

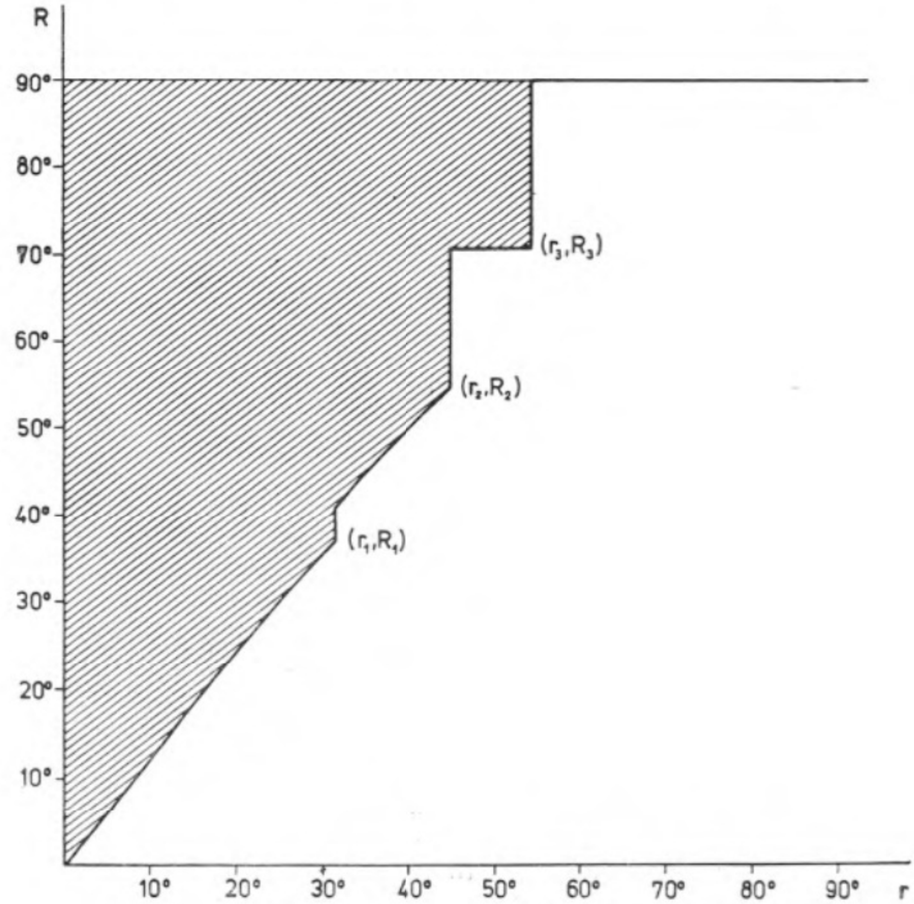

Fig. 1.

Theorem. *If the sphere is packed with at least two circles of radius r and covered with concentric circles of radius R then we have*

$$\frac{\tan r}{\tan R} \leqq \begin{cases} \cos 36^\circ & \text{for } 0 < r \leqq r_1 \\ \cos 45^\circ & \text{for } r_1 < r \leqq r_2. \end{cases}$$

For $r_2 < r \leqq r_3$ we have $R \geqq R_3$ and for $r_3 < r$ we have $R = \pi/2$.

These bounds are represented in *Fig.* 1.

It is interesting to observe, that, apart from the regular cases corresponding to the points (r_i, R_i) $(i=1, 2, 3)$ and the cases with $r > r_2$, equality can be attained also in several other cases. Let $ABCD$ be a regular spherical quadrangle centered at the northpole N such that the images T, U, V and W of N reflected in the sides AB, BC, CD and DA, respectively, are the vertices of a quadrangle congruent to $ABCD$. Adding to the points $N, A, \ldots, W$ the southpole S we obtain the vertices of an antiprismatic doublepyramid [3]. This solid is bounded by 16 equal isosceles triangles one of which is NAB. Since in the spherical triangle NAB $\sphericalangle A = \sphericalangle B = 270^\circ/4 < \sphericalangle N = 90^\circ$, we have $AB > NA = NB$. Therefore circles of radius $r = NA/2$ centered at the vertices of the solid will form a packing. In this packing the Dirichlet cells belonging to N and S are regular quadrangles (*Fig.* 2) circumscribed about the respective circles

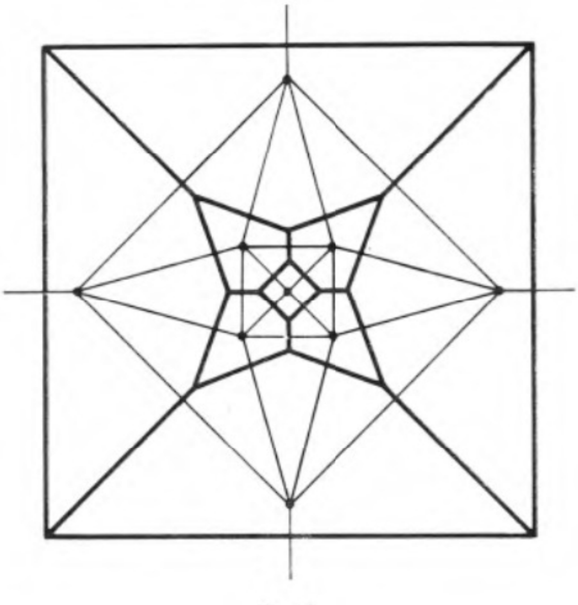

Fig. 2.

On the other hand, the radius R of the circle circumscribed about one of these quadrangles is nothing else as the circumradius of NAB, showing that the circles of radius R with centers $N, A, \ldots, S$ cover the sphere. Since r and R are the inradius and circumradius of a regular quadrangle, we have $\tan R = \tan r / \cos 45^\circ$.

As a second example consider the set S of 32 points consisting of the vertices and face-centers of the tessellation $\{5, 3\}$. The Dirichlet cells are regular pentagons concentric with the faces of $\{5.3\}$ and (not regular) hexagons about the vertices of

{5, 3}. For the inradius r and circumradius R of the pentagons we have $\tan R = \tan r/\cos 36°$. Since, on the other hand, the hexagons have the same inradius and circumradius as the pentagons, the circles of radius r and R about the points of S form a packing and a covering, respectively.

The question whether there are further cases with $r < r_2$ in which equality is attained is still open.

If we have at least three circles then $r \leqq 60°$. Throwing a glance to Fig. 1 we see that the set of admissible points (r, R) with $r \leqq 60°$ lies above the half-line connecting the origin (0, 0) with the point (r_1, R_1). Thus we have the following

Corollary. *If the sphere is packed with at least three circles of radius r and covered with concentric circles of radius R then* $R/r \geqq R_1/r_1$.

To conclude we mention some further problems.

In Euclidean 3-space an interesting problem seems to be to find the closest lattice-packing of balls. It is very likely that in this packing the centers form a space-centered cubic lattice. This would mean that the loosest lattice-covering is identical with the thinnest lattice-covering.

We can define a closest packing of convex bodies as a packing in which the "biggest gap-ball" is as small as possible. Measuring the closeness of a packing with the curvature of the biggest gap-ball we can ask various questions similar to those which arise in connection with the density. For instance, is it true that in the Euclidean plane the closeness of a packing of equal centro-symmetric convex plates cannot exceed the closeness of the closest lattice-packing of the plates?

In a packing of translates of a convex plate p of area A we can measure the closeness also by the quotient A/a, where a is the supremum of the area of those plates homothetic to p which have no point in common with any plate of the packing. It may be conjectured that in a closest packing in this sense we have $A/a \leqq 16$ with equality only if p is a triangle.

References

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