When is the category of flat modules abelian?

by

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Abstract. Let Fl(R) denote the category of flat right modules over an associative ring R. We find necessary and sufficient conditions for Fl(R) to be a Grothendieck category, in terms of properties of the ring R.

1. Introduction. Let R be an associative ring with identity and denote by Mod(R) the category of all right R-modules, and by Fl(R) the full subcategory of Mod(R) whose objects are all the flat right R-modules. While, in general, Fl(R) need not be an abelian category, it might be so: for instance, let A be a ring with a finite number of isomorphism classes of finitely presented indecomposable right modules, and such that every finitely presented right A-module is a direct sum of indecomposables, and consider then the direct sum U_A of all the indecomposable finitely presented right A-modules (up to isomorphism). Then U_A is finitely presented, and, if R denotes the endomorphism ring R = End(U_A), then the category Fl(R) is equivalent to Mod(A) [15, Corollary 2.9], so that it is abelian. In [10, p. 29], Jøndrup and Simson pointed out that it would be interesting to have a characterization of all rings R such that Fl(R) is abelian, and they conjectured therein that all such rings R having a decomposition into a direct sum of indecomposable right ideals are Morita equivalent to a ring of the form End(U_A) for A and U as above.

On the other hand, Tachikawa [17] studied in 1974 the rings R such that the category A of all projective right R-modules is a Grothendieck category. He obtained two characterizations of such rings R:

• They are the semiprimary and QF-3 rings R such that the dominant dimension of R is ≥ 2, and the global dimension of R is ≤ 2.
• They are the semiprimary QF-3 rings R which are the endomorphism rings End(U_A) of the direct sum of all the finitely generated indecomposable modules over a ring A of finite representation type.

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Since the rings $R$ appearing in Tachikawa’s paper are right perfect, the category $\mathcal{A}$ is, in that case, the same as Fl($R$) and hence the problem in Jøndrup-Simson’s paper may be viewed as a generalization of the problem solved by Tachikawa. Our aim in this paper is to answer the problem of Jøndrup and Simson, stating a characterization for the rings $R$ such that Fl($R$) is an abelian category (see Theorem 3). As a consequence, we get Corollary 5, which asserts that the category Fl($R$) over a (left and right) coherent ring is abelian if and only if $R$ is of weak global dimension $\leq 2$, and the flat-dominant dimension of $R_R$ is $\geq 2$. However, the conjecture stated in [10] which has been just mentioned remains open.

2. Main results. One important step in the solution is to consider the class of FTF-rings which was introduced by Gómez Torrecillas in [7]. So, we begin by recalling the definition of such rings, which are more fully investigated in [7] and [8].

Definition 1 ([7, p. 61], [8, p. 531]). A ring $R$ is a right FTF-ring if the class of right $R$-modules which are (isomorphic to) submodules of flat modules is the torsionfree class for a hereditary torsion theory $\tau$ of Mod($R$).

From now on, if $R$ is assumed to be a right FTF-ring, then $\tau$ will denote the hereditary torsion theory of Mod($R$) just defined. The following result can be gathered in [7, Chapter 2.4], but, for the sake of completeness, we indicate how the proof can be seen from results in [8]:

Proposition 2. If $R$ is a right perfect and right FTF-ring, then $R$ is QF-3. In that case, $R$ is also semiprimary and $\tau$-artinian. Conversely, if $R$ is a perfect and QF-3 ring, then $R$ is right FTF.

Proof. If $R$ is right perfect and right FTF, then the same proof of [8, Corollary 2.11] works to show that $R$ is QF-3. Again, the proof of [8, Corollary 2.11] along with [8, Theorem 2.7] shows that, in that case, $R$ is also semiprimary and $\tau$-artinian. The converse follows from [8, Corollary 2.11].

Recall also from [12, p. 1060] that if $\sigma$ is a hereditary torsion theory of Mod($R$), a right $R$-module $M_R$ is called $\sigma$-finitely generated if there is a submodule $L \subseteq M$ such that $L_R$ is finitely generated and $M/L$ is $\sigma$-torsion. A finitely generated module $M_R$ is said to be $\sigma$-finitely presented in case there exists a short exact sequence

$$0 \to K \to P \to M \to 0$$

in Mod($R$) such that $P$ is finitely generated projective and $K$ is $\sigma$-finitely generated.
In [11, Definition 1.2], a ring $R$ is called $\sigma$-coherent in case every finitely generated right ideal of $R$ is $\sigma$-finitely presented. By extending this definition, we will say that the ring $R$ is weakly $\sigma$-coherent if every finitely generated right ideal $I_R$ of $R$ such that $R/I$ is $\sigma$-torsion is $\sigma$-finitely presented.

Finally, we will say that the ring $R$ has flat-dominant dimension $\geq n$ if the first $n$ terms of a minimal injective resolution of $R_R$ are flat (see [9]).

We are now ready to state and prove our main result. In what follows, $\lambda$ will denote the Lambek torsion theory of $\text{Mod}(R)$ (i.e., the $\lambda$-torsionfree modules are exactly the right $R$-modules cogenerated by the injective envelope of $R_R$, $E(R_R)$).

**Theorem 3.** Let $R$ be a ring and $\text{Fl}(R)$ the full subcategory of $\text{Mod}(R)$ consisting of all flat right $R$-modules. Then $\text{Fl}(R)$ is an abelian category if and only the following three conditions are satisfied:

(a) $R$ is a right FTF-ring which is weakly $\lambda$-coherent;
(b) The weak global dimension $wD(R)$ of $R$ is at most 2;
(c) The flat-dominant dimension of $R_R$ is $\geq 2$.

**Proof.** Necessity. Assume that $\text{Fl}(R)$ is abelian. Since the direct sum of a family of flat modules is flat, $\text{Fl}(R)$ is a cocomplete abelian category having a generator, $R_R$. Moreover, since direct limits of flat modules are flat [16, Proposition I.10.3], one sees easily that direct limits are exact in $\text{Fl}(R)$ and hence, the category $\text{Fl}(R)$ is in fact a Grothendieck category [16, p. 114]. By applying the Gabriel–Popescu Theorem [16, Theorem X.4.1] to the generator $R_R$ of $\text{Fl}(R)$ and bearing in mind that $\text{Hom}_{\text{Fl}(R)}(R, R) \cong R$, we deduce that the functor $F : \text{Fl}(R) \rightarrow \text{Mod}(R)$ with $F(X) = \text{Hom}_R(R, X) \cong X_R$ is full and faithful. Moreover, $F$ is naturally equivalent to the inclusion functor and establishes an equivalence between the category $\text{Fl}(R)$ and the quotient category $\text{Mod}(R, F)$ of $\text{Mod}(R)$ whose $F$-closed objects are precisely the flat modules. So, the class of $F$-torsionfree modules coincides with the class of submodules of flat modules, so that $R$ is right FTF, by Definition 1, and $F$ is the Gabriel topology corresponding to the torsion theory $\tau$.

By identifying the above functor $F$ and the inclusion functor from $\text{Fl}(R)$ to $\text{Mod}(R)$, we see that $\text{Fl}(R)$ coincides with $\text{Mod}(R, F) = \text{Mod}(R, \tau)$, and thus $\text{Fl}(R)$ is a Giraud subcategory of $\text{Mod}(R)$ [16, Theorem X.2.1], from which it follows that the inclusion functor has an exact left adjoint $G : \text{Mod}(R) \rightarrow \text{Fl}(R)$. If $\Psi$ denotes the unit of the adjunction, there are homomorphisms $\Psi_M : M \rightarrow G(M)$ such that the kernel and the cokernel of $\Psi_M$ are $\tau$-torsion modules. $G(M)$ is obviously a flat module, and if $F_R$ is...
any flat module and we have a diagram

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
M & \xrightarrow{\Psi_M} & G(M) \\
\downarrow & & \\
F & & 
\end{array}
\]

then the diagram can be completed commutatively by a homomorphism \(G(M) \to F\) in a unique way. This implies that the homomorphism \(\Psi_M : M \to G(M)\) is a flat envelope of \(M_R\) [4] which completes the diagrams in a unique way. It now follows from [1, Proposition 2.1] that \(R\) is a left coherent ring and that the weak global dimension of \(R\), \(wD(R)\), is \(\leq 2\). This proves (b).

Now, since the \(\tau\)-closed modules coincide with the flat modules, we see that the direct limit of \(\tau\)-closed modules of \(\text{Mod}(R)\) is always \(\tau\)-closed. By [16, Exercise XIII.1.2], \(R\) is a finitely presented object of \(\text{Fl}(R)\). Now, let \(I_R\) be a finitely generated right ideal of \(R\) such that \(R/I\) is \(\lambda\)-torsion. Then the left annihilator \(l(I) = 0\) [16, Proposition VI.6.4], and hence \(R/I\) is also \(\tau\)-torsion (because homomorphisms from \(R/I\) to flat modules have to factor through a projective module [7, Proposición 2.1.5]). Consider any exact sequence \(0 \to K \to P \to I \to 0\) in \(\text{Mod}(R)\), with \(P_R\) projective and finitely generated. If we apply the exact left adjoint \(G : \text{Mod}(R) \to \text{Fl}(R)\) of the inclusion functor, then we obtain the following exact sequence in the category \(\text{Fl}(R)\):

\[
0 \to G(K) \to P \to R \to 0.
\]

Since \(R\) and \(P\) are finitely presented in \(\text{Fl}(R)\), we deduce that \(G(K)\) is finitely generated in \(\text{Fl}(R) = \text{Mod}(R, \tau)\). But this implies that \(K_R\) is \(\tau\)-finitely generated by [16, Proposition XIII.1.1]. Thus \(K/L\) is \(\tau\)-torsion for some finitely generated submodule \(L\) of \(K\). Since \(R\) is right FTF, \(E(R_R)\) is flat by [8, Proposition 2.1] and hence \(\text{Hom}_R(K/L, E(R_R)) = 0\). This means that \(K/L\) is also \(\lambda\)-torsion and \(I_R\) is \(\lambda\)-finitely presented. This completes the proof of condition (a) by showing that \(R\) is weakly \(\lambda\)-coherent.

Finally, we have to consider the flat-dominant dimension of \(R_R\) in order to prove condition (c). Let us look at the short exact sequence of \(\text{Mod}(R)\):

\[
0 \to R_R \to E(R_R) \to Q \to 0
\]

where \(E(R_R)\) is flat, as we saw above. Since both \(R_R\) and \(E(R_R)\) are \(\tau\)-closed modules, one may infer that \(Q\) must be \(\tau\)-torsionfree [16, Proposition IX.4.2]. Hence, \(Q\) is isomorphic to a submodule of a flat module and, therefore, to a submodule of an injective flat module. So, we have an injective resolution

\[
0 \to R_R \to E_0 \to E_1
\]

where \(E_0\) and \(E_1\) are flat injective modules. This shows that the flat-dominant dimension of \(R_R\) is \(\geq 2\).

**Sufficiency.** Since \(R\) is a right FTF-ring, by Definition 1 there is a hereditary torsion theory \(\tau\) of \(\text{Mod}(R)\) such that a module is \(\tau\)-torsionfree if
and only if it can be embedded in a flat module. To show that \( \text{Fl}(R) \) is a Grothendieck category, it will be enough to see that a right \( R \)-module is flat if and only if it is \( \tau \)-closed [16, Theorem X.1.6].

We note first that all flat injective left \( R \)-modules are \( \tau \)-closed [16, Definition, p. 198]. Thus, condition (c) of the hypotheses implies that \( R_R \) is a submodule of a \( \tau \)-closed module such that the quotient is \( \tau \)-torsion-free. But then \( R_R \) is \( \tau \)-closed, by [16, Proposition IX.4.2]. As a consequence, every finitely generated projective right \( R \)-module is also \( \tau \)-closed.

Next we show that \( R \) is a finitely presented object of the quotient category \( \text{Mod}(R, \tau) \). To this end, let \( 0 \to K 
\to M 
\to R 
\to 0 \) be any short exact sequence in \( \text{Mod}(R, \tau) \), with \( M \) finitely generated. By applying the inclusion functor from \( \text{Mod}(R, \tau) \) to \( \text{Mod}(R) \), we obtain another short exact sequence in \( \text{Mod}(R) \):

\[
0 \to K \to M \to I \to 0
\]

and now \( I_R \) is a right ideal of \( R \) such that the localization of \( I_R \) is \( R_R \), so that in particular, \( R/I \) is \( \tau \)-torsion. By using [16, Proposition XIII.1.1], we have a finitely generated submodule \( N \subseteq M \) such that \( M/N \) is \( \tau \)-torsion, and a new short exact sequence in \( \text{Mod}(R) \):

\[
0 \to K \cap N \to N \to I' \to 0
\]

where \( I'_R \) has the same properties as \( I_R \), i.e., \( R/I' \) is \( \tau \)-torsion. Since \( R \) is right FTF, \( \text{Hom}_R(R/I', E(R_R)) = 0 \), and thus \( R/I' \) is also \( \lambda \)-torsion. By condition (a), \( R \) is weakly \( \lambda \)-coherent, so that \( I'_R \) is \( \lambda \)-finitely presented. Now, by [11, Lemma 2.4], there exists a short exact sequence in \( \text{Mod}(R) \):

\[
0 \to X \to Y \to I' \to 0
\]

such that \( Y \) is finitely presented and \( X \) is \( \lambda \)-torsion. If \( F_R \) is a flat right \( R \)-module and \( E_R \) is its injective envelope, which is also flat by [8, Proposition 2.1], then any homomorphism \( g : X \to F \) could be extended to a homomorphism \( h : Y \to E \). Since \( E_R \) is flat, \( h \) factors through a finitely generated projective, and therefore so does \( g \) followed by the inclusion \( F \to E \). But then \( g \) must be 0, as \( \text{Hom}_R(X, R) = 0 \). This implies that \( X \) is also \( \tau \)-torsion, and hence \( I' \) has to be \( \tau \)-finitely presented. By [11, Proposition 2.3], \( K \cap N \) is \( \tau \)-finitely generated and \( K/(K \cap N) \) is \( \tau \)-torsion, because \( M/N \) is. Consequently, \( K \) is the \( \tau \)-localization of a finitely generated submodule \( L \) of \( K \cap N \). But this implies that there exists an epimorphism \( \varepsilon : P \to L \) with \( P_R \) finitely generated and projective, and hence \( \tau \)-closed. This epimorphism induces, by localization, an epimorphism in \( \text{Mod}(R, \tau) \), \( P \to K \), which shows that \( K \) is a \( \tau \)-finitely generated object of \( \text{Mod}(R, \tau) \). Thus, \( R \) is \( \tau \)-finitely presented in \( \text{Mod}(R, \tau) \). By [16, Exercise XIII.1.2], every direct limit of \( \tau \)-closed modules is \( \tau \)-closed. Since every flat
module is a direct limit of finitely generated projective modules and these are $\tau$-closed, we deduce that every flat module is $\tau$-closed.

It remains to show that every $\tau$-closed module $M_R$ is a flat module. By the definition of $\tau$, $M_R$ has to be a submodule of a flat module $F_R$, so that we get an exact sequence

$$0 \rightarrow M \rightarrow F \rightarrow N \rightarrow 0$$

where $N_R$ is also $\tau$-torsionfree [16, Proposition IX.4.2]. But this implies that $N_R$ is a submodule of a flat module $F'_R$, which gives the exact sequence

$$0 \rightarrow M \rightarrow F \rightarrow F' \rightarrow L \rightarrow 0.$$  

The fact that the weak global dimension of $R$ is $\leq 2$ now implies that $M_R$ is indeed flat, as was to be shown.

We now remark that the first characterization in [17] of rings $R$ for which the class of projective modules is a Grothendieck category may be found as a consequence of Theorem 3 above. Indeed, we can easily show the following:

**Corollary 4** (Tachikawa, 1974). The category $\mathcal{A}$ of all projective right modules over a ring $R$ is a Grothendieck category if and only if $R$ is a perfect and QF-3 ring such that the global dimension of $R$ is at most 2, and the dominant dimension of $R$ is $\geq 2$.

**Proof.** Suppose that $R$ satisfies the conditions of the statement. Since $R$ is perfect, $\mathcal{A} = \text{Fl}(R)$, so that it is enough to see that $R$ satisfies conditions (a), (b), (c) of Theorem 3. But, by Proposition 2, $R$ is right FTF and $\tau$-artinian, hence it is clearly weakly $\tau$-coherent and weakly $\lambda$-coherent, so that $R$ satisfies (a). Conditions (b) and (c) are immediate from the other hypotheses.

Assume now that $\mathcal{A}$ is Grothendieck. Then it is easy to see, as in [17], that $R$ is right perfect. Thus, $\text{Fl}(R)$ is a Grothendieck category and $R$ satisfies conditions (a), (b), (c) of Theorem 3. By (a) and Proposition 2, $R$ is QF-3. Then (b) and (c) imply the rest of the conditions in the corollary.

We next show the following corollaries.

**Corollary 5.** Let $R$ be left and right coherent. Then $\text{Fl}(R)$ is an abelian category if and only if $wD(R) \leq 2$ and the flat-dominant dimension of $R$ is $\geq 2$.

**Proof.** The conditions are necessary by Theorem 3. Conversely, if they hold, then $R$ is right FTF, by [8, Proposition 2.2], and it is obviously $\lambda$-coherent, since it is right coherent. By Theorem 3, $\text{Fl}(R)$ is abelian.

**Corollary 6.** Let $R$ be left and right noetherian. Then $\text{Fl}(R)$ is an abelian category if and only if $\text{Fl}(R^{\text{op}})$ is also an abelian category. This happens if and only if $R$ is an Auslander ring (see [9]).
The category of flat modules

Proof. By [8, Proposition 2.3], the ring $R^{op}$ is also left FTF, provided $\text{Fl}(R)$ is abelian. Of course, $wD(R^{op}) \leq 2$, by the hypothesis. Finally, the flat-dominant dimension of $R^{op}$ is $\geq 2$ in view of [9, Theorem]. By Theorem 3, the category $\text{Fl}(R^{op})$ is abelian. ■

Recall from [3] that a ring $R$ is said to be a right IF-ring in case each injective right $R$-module is flat. The following characterization is immediate.

Corollary 7. Let $R$ be a right IF-ring. Then $\text{Fl}(R)$ is an abelian category if and only if $R$ is a (von Neumann) regular ring.

Proof. If $\text{Fl}(R)$ is abelian, then by Theorem 3, $R$ has finite weak global dimension. By [3, Proposition 5], $R$ has to be regular. ■

Corollary 8. Let $R$ be a commutative ring. Then $\text{Fl}(R)$ is abelian if and only if $R$ is a (von Neumann) regular ring.

Proof. Assume first that $R$ is a local ring. Then, by Theorem 3, $wD(R) \leq 2$ (and $R$ is coherent, by the proof of the Theorem), and from [18, Corollary 5.16], we see that $R$ is a domain. The injective envelope of $R$ is its field of quotients, $Q$, and, since the flat-dominant dimension of $R$ has to be $\geq 2$, we see that $Q/R$ must be torsion and torsionfree, from which it follows that $R = Q$ is a field.

Consider now the general case of a commutative ring $R$ such that $\text{Fl}(R)$ is a Grothendieck category. Let $p$ be a prime ideal of $R$. The localization functor $b : \text{Mod}(R) \to \text{Mod}(R_p)$ induces a functor $b' : \text{Fl}(R) \to \text{Fl}(R_p)$, which preserves kernels. Furthermore, $b'$ is a left adjoint of the inclusion functor from $\text{Fl}(R_p)$ to $\text{Fl}(R)$. Hence, $\text{Fl}(R_p)$ is an abelian category by [16, Proposition X.1.3]. Now, by the first part of the proof, $R_p$ is a field. We deduce finally that $R$ is (von Neumann) regular, from [13, Lemma 8 and Theorem 6]. ■

Finally, we give an example of an indecomposable ring $R$ which is neither regular nor perfect and for which $\text{Fl}(R)$ is abelian, thus exhibiting a case not included in Tachikawa’s theorem.

Example. We start with a field $k$ and a finite-dimensional $k$-algebra $A$ with a connected Gabriel quiver such that $A$ is not of finite representation type. By results in [2], $A$ is not right pure-semisimple (that is, it is not the case that every right $A$-module is a direct sum of finitely generated indecomposable modules). Let $\{U_\lambda\}_{\lambda \in A}$ be the family of all isomorphism classes of finitely presented indecomposable right $A$-modules, and take $T$ as Gabriel functor ring, i.e., $T = \bigoplus_A \text{Hom}_A(U_\lambda, U_{\mu})$ with the obvious multiplication. We remark that $T$ is a ring with enough idempotents [6, p. 138], but without an identity. We denote by $\text{Mod}(T)$ the category of all unitary right $T$-modules. $T$ is also a $k$-algebra in a natural way, and we know that there
is an equivalence between the category $\text{Mod}(A)$ and the category $\text{Fl}(T)$ of all right flat (and unitary) $T$-modules (see [15]). Since $A$ is not right pure-semisimple, $T$ is not right perfect (by [14] and [5, Theorem]). Also, $\text{Fl}(T)$ does not coincide with the category $\text{Mod}(T)$, because this would imply that $A$ is semisimple.

Define now the ring $R = T \times k$, with multiplication given by

$$(t, \alpha) \cdot (s, \beta) = (ts + t\beta + s\alpha, \alpha\beta).$$

Note that $T$ is a twosided ideal of $R$ satisfying the conditions of [16, Proposition XI.3.13] on both sides, with $k \cong R/T$. Hence, all right $k$-modules are flat as right $R$-modules, and, in particular, for every right $R$-module $M_R$, $M/MT$ is always a flat right $R$-module. This implies that $MT$ is a pure submodule of $M_R$, so that $M_R$ is flat if and only if $MT$ is flat. On the other hand, it is clear that the category $\text{Mod}(T)$ may be identified with the full subcategory of $\text{Mod}(R)$ consisting of all right $R$-modules $M$ such that $M = MT$, and this full subcategory is closed under submodules, quotient modules, direct sums, extensions and direct limits. Also, a right $R$-module $M$ is projective if and only if $MT$ is projective as a right $T$-module. Thus, the condition that $M_R$ be flat is equivalent to $MT$ being flat in the category $\text{Mod}(T)$.

Let us denote by $\mathcal{T}$ the class of right $T$-modules $X$ satisfying $\text{Hom}_T(X,F) = 0$ for every flat right $T$-module $F$. Then $\mathcal{T}$ is a hereditary torsion class in $\text{Mod}(T)$. Define now the class $\mathcal{T}'$ exactly in the same way but in the category $\text{Mod}(R)$. Then we easily see that $\mathcal{T}'$ is contained in $\text{Mod}(T)$ and, in fact, coincides with $\mathcal{T}$—up to the obvious identification of $\text{Mod}(T)$ as a full subcategory of $\text{Mod}(R)$. Therefore, $\mathcal{T}'$ is a hereditary torsion class in $\text{Mod}(R)$ and hence $R$ is right FTF. It is clear that $wD(R) \leq 2$, from which it follows that every $\mathcal{T}'$-closed right $R$-module is flat. For the converse, note that for each $M_R$, the injective envelope of $MT$ in $\text{Mod}(T)$ is just $E(M)T$. Since every flat module in $\text{Mod}(T)$ is $T$-closed, it follows that if $M_R$ is flat, then it is also $\mathcal{T}'$-closed. This shows that $\text{Fl}(R)$ is a Grothendieck category.

On the other hand, $R$ is not von Neumann regular, because in that case, every right unitary $T$-module would be flat. Also, $R$ is not right perfect, because $T$ is not right perfect. Finally, $R$ has no nontrivial central idempotents, because the quiver of $A$ is connected.

We finish with the following

PROBLEM. Is the condition that $R$ be weakly $\lambda$-coherent in Theorem 3 a consequence of the other hypotheses?

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The category of flat modules

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