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F. T. Farrell

Proceedings of the American Mathematical Society, Vol. 65, No. 2. (Aug., 1977), pp. 215-216.

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THE NONFINITENESS OF Nil

F. T. FARRELL¹

ABSTRACT. We show that Nil R is finitely generated only when it vanishes.

Bass and Murthy [2] gave the first examples of "nice" groups G such that Wh G is not finitely generated. Their examples result from calculating Nil R for certain rings R. (See [1, Chapter 12] for the basic facts about Nil R.) We show this is a general "pathology" for Nil R. Let R be any ring with unit 1.

THEOREM. If Nil $R \neq 0$, then Nil R is not finitely generated.

Our proof is based on three lemmas which we now discuss. Let *n* be a positive integer, *t* an indeterminate, R[t] and $R[t^n]$ polynomial rings, and σ : $R[t^n] \rightarrow R[t]$ the canonical inclusion. Recall that σ induces induction and restriction (transfer) maps

$$\sigma_* \colon K_1 R[t^n] \to K_1 R[t],$$

$$\sigma^* \colon K_1 R[t] \to K_1 R[t^n],$$

respectively. The following is immediate.

LEMMA 1. The composite $\sigma^*\sigma_*$ is multiplication by n on $K_1R[t^n]$.

Next, we recall how Nil R embeds (as a direct summand) in $K_1R[t]$ and in $K_1R[t^n]$. If the nilpotent matrix N represents an element of Nil R then I + Nt represents the corresponding element of $K_1R[t]$ where I is the identity matrix. Denote this map by α and use α' for the map Nil $R \to K_1R[t^n]$ induced by $N \to I + Nt^n$.

LEMMA 2. The image of α' is mapped into the image of α by σ_* .

PROOF. Let N represent some $x \in \text{Nil } R$, then $I + Nt^n$ represents $\sigma_* \alpha'(x) \in K_1 R[t]$. It is well known that the image of α is precisely the kernel of ε_* : $K_1 R[t] \to K_1 R$ where ε : $R[t] \to R$ is the evaluation homomorphism $p(t) \to p(0)$ for $p(t) \in R[t]$; clearly, the class of $I + Nt^n$ is in the kernel of ε_* .

LEMMA 3. For each $x \in \text{Nil } R$, there exists an integer K(x) such that $\sigma^*\alpha(x) = 0$ for all integers $n \ge K(x)$.

Received by the editors February 7, 1977.

AMS (MOS) subject classifications (1970). Primary 18F25.

¹This research was supported by the National Science Foundation and the Institute for Advanced Study.

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F. T. FARRELL

PROOF. Represent x by an $s \times s$ nilpotent matrix N, then the $ns \times ns$ matrix M (described below in blocked form) represents $\sigma^*\alpha(x)$

$$M = \begin{pmatrix} I & & Nt^{n} \\ N & I & & \\ & \ddots & \ddots & \\ & & N & I \end{pmatrix};$$

namely, *M* has *I* down the diagonal, *N* down the first subdiagonal, Nt^n in the upper right corner, and the 0 matrix elsewhere. Let K(x) be the degree of nilpotency of *N*; i.e., $N^n = 0$ for all $n \ge K(x)$. Let *A* be the $ns \times ns$ matrix whose blocked description is the same as *M* except Nt^n is replaced by 0; i.e.,

$$A = \begin{pmatrix} I & & & \\ N & I & & \\ & \ddots & \ddots & \\ & & N & I \end{pmatrix}.$$

One sees (by an easy calculation) that $A^{-1}M = I + T$ where T is a *strictly* upper triangular matrix provided $n \ge K(x)$. Since A and I + T clearly represent zero in $K_1R[t^n]$, so does M.

PROOF OF THEOREM. We proceed by contradiction; i.e., assume Nil R is nonzero but finitely generated. Hence there is a prime p such that multiplication by p is a monomorphism of Nil R. In particular, Lemma 1 together with Lemma 2 imply that $\sigma^* \alpha$: Nil $R \to K_1 R[t^n]$ is nonzero when $n = p^i$ for all i > 0. But this contradicts Lemma 3 since we assumed Nil R is finitely generated.

REMARKS. There are other Nil-type groups in algebraic K and L-theory. They arise geometrically when studying codimension-1 submanifolds. It seems plausible to conjecture the analogue of our Theorem for all these groups. All examples known to me of nonfinite generation for K and L functors applied to "nice" rings arise from these Nil-type groups. For other particular instances of this, see the following articles: [3] and [4] for UNil, [6] for Nil₂, and [5] for Wh₁(;). This phenomena is a major stumbling block to understanding nonsimply connected manifolds.

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SCHOOL OF MATHEMATICS, THE INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY, PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540