

Solution of the Two-Body Free Fall Problem

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Suppose two particles are initially at rest, at locations x_A and x_B . The particles have masses M_A and M_B , respectively. Here I provide the analytical solution for the free fall. The center of mass of this system stays stationary in this problem, since there are no external forces. Therefore, if I denote by $r(t)$ the present separation of the two particles, the equation of motion is

$$\ddot{r}(t) = -\frac{GM}{r^2}, \quad (1)$$

where M is the total mass of the system $M = M_A + M_B$ and the initial condition is $r_0 = x_{A0} + x_{B0}$.

This can be solved by recognizing that

$$\frac{d^2r}{dt^2} = \frac{dv}{dt} = v(r) \frac{dv(r)}{dr} \quad (2)$$

where $v(r)$ is the instantaneous velocity at particle separation $r(t)$. The equation of motion is then separable:

$$v dv = -GM \frac{dr}{r^2} \quad (3)$$

$$\Rightarrow \frac{1}{2}v(r)^2 = -GM \int_{r_0}^r \frac{dr}{r^2} \quad (4)$$

$$= GM \left[\frac{1}{r} - \frac{1}{r_0} \right] \quad (5)$$

$$\Rightarrow v(r) = \sqrt{\frac{2GM}{r_0} \left[\frac{r_0}{r} - 1 \right]}. \quad (6)$$

Since $v(r) = dr/dt$, this equation is also separable:

$$t(r) = \sqrt{\frac{r_0}{2GM}} \int_{r_0}^r \frac{dr}{\sqrt{\frac{r_0}{r} - 1}}. \quad (7)$$

Here I use the variable substitution

$$u(r) = \frac{r}{r_0}; \quad u(r_0) = 1; \quad du = \frac{1}{r_0} dr. \quad (8)$$

Then the integral takes the form

$$t(r) = \sqrt{\frac{r_0^3}{2GM}} \int_1^{r/r_0} \frac{du}{\sqrt{\frac{1}{u} - 1}}. \quad (9)$$

Here a trigonometric substitution makes sense:

$$u(\theta) = \cos^2(\theta); \quad \theta(u=1) = 0; \quad du = 2 \cos(\theta) \sin(\theta) d\theta \quad (10)$$

Then, using the trigonometric identity

$$\frac{1}{\cos^2(\theta)} - 1 = \tan^2(\theta),$$

the integral gets transformed into the final form

$$t(r) = 2\sqrt{\frac{r_0^3}{2GM}} \int_0^{\theta(r)} d\theta \frac{\sin(\theta) \cos(\theta)}{\tan(\theta)} \quad (11)$$

$$= 2\sqrt{\frac{r_0^3}{2GM}} \int_0^{\theta(r)} d\theta \cos^2(\theta) \quad (12)$$

$$= \sqrt{\frac{r_0^3}{2GM}} \left[\theta + \sin(\theta) \cos(\theta) \right]_0^{\theta(r)} \quad (13)$$

$$= \sqrt{\frac{r_0^3}{2GM}} \left[\theta + \cos(\theta) \sqrt{1 - \cos^2(\theta)} \right]_0^{\theta(r)} \quad (14)$$

$$= \sqrt{\frac{r_0^3}{2GM}} \left[\arccos \left(\sqrt{\frac{r}{r_0}} \right) + \sqrt{\frac{r}{r_0} \left(1 - \frac{r}{r_0} \right)} \right]. \quad (15)$$