

Improper Integrals

Math2411 Calculus II Lecture - Spring 2025

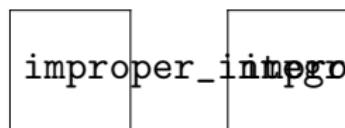
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Our objective is to evaluate integrals over infinite intervals or to integrate functions unbounded functions, such as those with a vertical asymptote. For example,

$$\int_{x=1}^{\infty} \frac{1}{x^2} dx \quad \text{or} \quad \int_{x=0}^{x=1} \frac{1}{x} dx$$

See the graphs in the following figure to get a geometric perspective.



improper_integral_gr07.jpg

figureIntegral With an Infinite Interval and Integrand

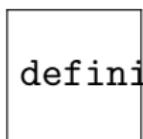
Before we dig into the details we should probably consider the idea of non-terminating addition. In fact, normally, when we think of addition we think of a process which terminates, or comes to an end. For example

$$1 + 6 + 18 + 2 + 10 = 37.$$

Even our experience with integration can be considered a terminating addition process. The definite integral

$$\int_{x=a}^{x=b} f(x) dx$$

can be interpreted as adding up area under the graph of $y = f(x)$ starting at $x = a$ and finishing at $x = b$. See the following Figure ??.



definite_integral_graphic.png

figureAdding Up Area Under the Graph $y = f(x)$

So what about non-terminating addition? It turns out we have already encountered non-terminating addition. For example, we should recall that we can write $1/3 = 0.\overline{3}$. That can be written as follows:

$$\frac{1}{3} = \frac{3}{10} + \frac{3}{100} + \frac{3}{1000} + \frac{3}{10000} + \dots$$

I hope that nobody would protest about assigning the value $1/3$ to the sum on the right. And if you're paying attention you might notice it is a non-terminating sum. That is where we are headed.

Here's another example based on one of Xeno's paradoxes. It states that motion is impossible. You've probably seen the argument.



The logic goes as follows. In order to travel from one point to another point I must first travel $1/2$ the distance, and then I must travel half of the remaining distance, or $1/4$ the total distance. Continuing in this fashion I would next have to travel $1/8$ the total distance, and then $1/16$ of the total distance, etc. Since we can always cut the remaining distance in half, there are infinitely many steps to take and thus it is impossible to move from one point to another. We can describe the process in the paradox with an

infinite non-terminating sum.

$$\frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \frac{1}{16} + \frac{1}{32} + \dots$$

Now, of course, we know that motion is possible. So perhaps it makes sense to assign a value to the above sum. Any thoughts?

I think everyone would agree that the natural value to assign to the sum is 1. As we take more and more steps our total distance is approaching 1. So we write

$$1 = \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8} + \frac{1}{16} + \frac{1}{32} + \dots$$

A little thought should convince you that this sum is really no different than assigning the value $1/3$ to the following sum.

$$\frac{1}{3} = \frac{3}{10} + \frac{3}{100} + \frac{3}{1000} + \frac{3}{10000} + \dots$$

The Question: So what does this have to do with integration?

It turns out that many applications in mathematics require integration over an infinite interval. For example, in probability theory we might consider the integral

$$\int_{x=0}^{\infty} \frac{1}{1+x^2} dx.$$

Here we are adding up area under the graph $y = 1/(1+x^2)$ starting at $x = 0$. But we do not have a right endpoint to the interval and so the addition process does not terminate.

Question: So how should we deal with such an integral? maybe we should approach this as we did with the non-terminating sums above?

Suppose we need to evaluate $\int_{x=a}^{\infty} f(x) dx$.

We will start with a proper Riemann integral

$$\int_{x=a}^{x=t} f(x) dx$$

and consider what happens to the value of the integral as the value t increases.

Formally we write

$$\int_{x=a}^{\infty} f(x) dx = \lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \int_{x=a}^{x=t} f(x) dx.$$

Continuing with the example from above we have

$$\int_{x=0}^{\infty} \frac{1}{1+x^2} dx = \lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \int_{x=0}^{x=t} \frac{1}{1+x^2} dx.$$

Let's formalize this with a two step process.

- **Step #1:** Evaluate the proper integral $\int_{x=0}^{x=t} \frac{1}{1+x^2} dx$.

$$\begin{aligned}\int_{x=0}^{x=t} \frac{1}{1+x^2} dx &= \tan^{-1}(x) \Big|_{x=0}^{x=t} \\ &= \tan^{-1}(t) - \tan^{-1}(0) \\ &= \tan^{-1}(t)\end{aligned}$$

- **Step #2:** Evaluate the limit as $t \rightarrow \infty$.

$$\lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \int_{x=a}^{x=t} f(x) dx = \lim_{t \rightarrow \infty} \tan^{-1}(t) = \frac{\pi}{2}$$

So as the value t increases the value of the integral is approaching $\pi/2$ and so we say the improper integral converges to $\pi/2$ and we write

$$\int_{x=0}^{\infty} \frac{1}{1+x^2} dx = \frac{\pi}{2}.$$

Let's consider an example together.

Example

Evaluate $\int_{x=1}^{\infty} \frac{1}{x} dx.$

Workspace:

Let's have you try an example on your own.

Example

Evaluate $\int_{x=1}^{\infty} \frac{1}{x^2} dx.$

Workspace:

Let's have you try another important example on your own.

Example

For which positive values p does the integral $\int_{x=1}^{\infty} \frac{1}{x^p} dx$ converge?.

Workspace:

Let's move onto the next topic.

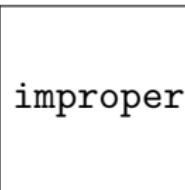
In our previous calculus experience we have always integrated continuous functions. But what if our function f is not continuous on the interval $[a, b]$? Perhaps there is a vertical asymptote at $x = a$ or at $x = b$.



improper_integral_gr02.jpg

figureDealing with an Integral of a Discontinu

We capture the strategy in the following definition.



improper_integral_gr03

Let's work a concrete example.

Example

Evaluate $\int_{x=0}^{x=1} \frac{1}{\sqrt{x}} dx.$

Workspace:

Let's have you try another example on your own.

Example

Evaluate $\int_{x=0}^{x=1} \frac{1}{x} dx.$

Workspace:

Let's have you try an important example.

Example

Evaluate $\int_{x=-1}^{x=1} \frac{1}{x^3} dx.$

Workspace:

Let's have you try another important example.

Example

Evaluate $\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{x}{1+x^2} dx.$

Workspace:

Consider the following example.

Example

Determine whether the following improper integral converges or diverges.

$$\int_{x=2}^{\infty} \frac{x^3}{x^4 - x - 1} dx$$

improper_comparison_gr1.jpg

figureArea under the curve $y = \frac{x^3}{x^4 - x - 1}$

Workspace: