PHY604: homework 1

2025-09-17

1 *understanding round-off error (no program required)*

Consider a quadratic equation of the form $ax^2 + bx + c = 0$. The two solutions of this are:

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a} .$$

1(a) Explain how this expression may be problematic with respect to roundoff errors if b is much larger than a and c. Recall that such errors often occur when subtracting close large numbers.

1(b) Provide an alternative expression that will have smaller errors in the situation you describe in (a).

2 *round-off error and accurate calculation of the exponential series*

Consider the series expansion for an exponential function:

$$e^x \approx S_n(x) := 1 + \frac{x}{1!} + \frac{x^2}{2!} + \ldots + \frac{x^n}{n!} .$$

2(a) Write a program that computes the exponential function using this series expansion for a given number of terms n.

1(b) For n ranging between 0 and 100, compare the result with the exponent calculated with a built-in function or function from a numerical library (e.g. `numpy.exp`) in the following way. Plot the error defined by

$$\epsilon_n := \frac{|e^x - S_n(x)|}{e^x}$$

on a log-log plot for a large positive and large negative exponent (e.g., $x = 20$ and $x = -20$). Describe what you see.

1(c) Consider the following (trivial) equality: $e^{-x} = \left(e^{-1}\right)^x$. Write a program that utilizes this equality to get a more accurate series expansion for large negative exponents. Plot ϵ_n on a log-log plot to demonstrate that you have achieved this.

3 *errors in numerical differentiation*

Calculate the derivative of the function $f(x) = \sin x$ at the point $x = \pi/4$ using the first-order forward difference. Plot on a log-log plot the error with respect to the analytical derivative for a wide range of Δx. Describe the behavior you see (especially for very small Δx) and the reason for the trends. How does it change if you use a second-order central difference? How about a fourth-order central difference?

4 *comparing methods of integration*

Consider the variable

$$I = \int_0^1 \left(\sin\sqrt{100x}\right)^2 \mathrm{d}x$$

4(a) Plot the integrand over the range of the integral.

4(b) Write a program that uses the *adaptive trapezoid rule* to calculate the integral to an approximate accuracy of $\epsilon = 10^{-6}$, using the following procedure. Start with the trapezoid rule using a single subinterval. Double the number of subintervals and recalculate the integral. Continue to double the number of subintervals until the error is less than 10^{-6}. Recall that the error is given by $\epsilon_i = \frac{1}{3}(I_i - I_{i-1}$ where the number of subintervals N_i used to calculate I_i is twice that used to calculate $I_{(i-1}$. To make your implementation more efficient, use the fact that

$$I_i = \frac{1}{2}I_{i-1} + h_i \sum_k f(a + kh_i)$$

where h_i is the width of the subinterval for the ith iteration, and k runs over *odd numbers* from 1 to $N_i - 1$.

4(c) Write a separate program that uses *Romberg integration* to solve the integral, also to an accuracy of 10^{-6} using the following procedure. First calculate the integral with the trapezoid rule for 1 subinterval (as you did in part (b)); we will refer to this as step $i = 1$, and the result as $I_1 = R_{1,1}$. Then calculate $I_2 = R_{2,1}$ using 2 subintervals. Using these two results, we can construct an improved estimate of the integral as: $R_{2,2} = R_{2,1} + \frac{1}{3}\left(R_{2,1} - R_{1,1}\right)$. In general

$$R_{i,m+1} = R_{i,m} + \frac{1}{4^m - 1}\left(R_{i,m} - R_{i-1,m}\right).$$

Therefore, for each iteration i (where we double the number of subintervals), we can obtain improved approximations up to $m = i - 1$ with very minor extra work. For each i and m, we can calculate the error at previous steps as

$$\epsilon_{i,m} = \frac{1}{4^m - 1}\left(R_{i,m} - R_{i-1,m}\right).$$

Use these two equations to iterate until the error in $R_{i,i}$ is less than 10^{-6}. How significant is the improvement with respect to number of subintervals necessary compared to the approach of part (b)?

4(d) Use the Gauss–Legendre approach to calculate the integral. What order (i.e., how many points) do you need to obtain an accuracy below 10^{-6}? You can find tabulated weights and points online.

5 *integration to ∞*

Consider the gamma function,

$$\Gamma(a) = \int_0^\infty x^{a-1} e^{-x}\, \mathrm{d}x\,.$$

We want to evaluate this numerically, and we will focus on $a > 1$. Consider a variable transformation of the form:

$$z = \frac{x}{x+c}\,.$$

This will map $0 \le x < \infty$ to $0 \le z \le 1$, allowing us to do this integral numerically in terms of z. For convenience, we express the integrand as $\phi(x) = x^{a-1}e^{-x}$.

5(a) Plot $\phi(x)$ for $a \in \{2, 3, 4\}$.

5(b) For what value of x is the integrand $\phi(x)$ maximum?

5(c) Choose the value c in our transformation such that the peak of the integrand occurs at $z = 1/2$. What value is c?

This choice spreads the interesting regions of integrand over the domain $0 \le z \le 1$, making our numerical integration more accurate.

5(d) Find $\Gamma(a)$ for a few different values of $a > 1$ using any numerical integration method you wish, integrating from $z = 0$ to $z = 1$. Keep the number of points in your quadrature to a reasonable amount ($N \le 50$).

Don't forget to include the factors you pick up when changing $\mathrm{d}x$ to $\mathrm{d}z$.

Note that roundoff error may come into play in the integrand. Recognizing that you can write $x^{a-1} = e^{(a-1)\ln x}$ can help minimize this.