

# How does the moment of inertia affect the period of Maxwell's Wheel?

Physics HL Internal Assessment

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# 1 Introduction and background knowledge

In ancient Greece (around 220 B.C.), Archimedes laid solid foundation for rigid body statics by discovering and formalizing the conditions of equilibrium for levers. People studied Archimedes's work and developed concepts like torque after then, but it was not until Issac Newton (1643-1727) formulated Newton's Laws of Motion that humans are well equipped for rigid body dynamics (Farber, 1961). With the assistance of advanced mathematical tools, Leonhard Euler (1707-1783) successfully formalized the dynamics of rigid bodies and derived the concepts of moment of inertia and principal axes (Marquina, Marquina, Marquina, & Hernández-Gómez, 2016).

Just like inertia (which is determined by mass) in translational motion, the moment of inertia evaluates a body's ability to resist angular acceleration. Generally speaking, the further away the mass is distributed from its axis of rotation, the larger the body's moment of inertia is. Objects with large moment of inertia are good at storing rotational kinetic energy, which makes them suitable for objects like flywheels, while objects with small moment of inertia can rotate faster.

Maxwell's wheel is commonly used as an instrument to illustrate the conservation of energy and the concept of rotational kinetic energy in physics education. It can also be utilized to measure the moment of inertia of a disk-shaped object. This experiment aims at discovering the significance of the moment of inertia in a Maxwell's wheel experiment.

**Research question: How does the moment of inertia affect the period of Maxwell's Wheel?**

# 2 Hypothesis and reasoning

As is shown in Figure 1, the Maxwell's wheel mainly consists of three parts: a wheel of radius  $R$ , an axle of radius  $r$ , and a string. Aside from friction, two forces are acting on the pendulum: the tension from the string and the gravitational force. During the entire process, the gravitational potential energy converts to kinetic energy of the wheel.

The downward movement and the upward movement is basically symmetric, so only the downward reaction needs algebraic analysis.

Since the wheel is not in equilibrium, it's hard to analyze the magnitude of tension  $T$ . However, the problem can be tackled using conservation of energy.

Due to the negligibility of friction, we can assume that all the gravitational potential energy lost is converted to the kinetic energy. Or more specifically, the sum of the translational kinetic energy and rotational kinetic energy should equal to the loss in gravitational potential energy. Or formally,

$$mg\Delta h = \frac{1}{2}mv^2 + \frac{1}{2}I\omega^2 \quad (1)$$

where  $I$  is the moment of inertia of the entire wheel.

Moreover, using the definition of velocity and angular velocity, the following identities can be derived,

$$\frac{d\Delta H}{dt} = v \quad (2)$$

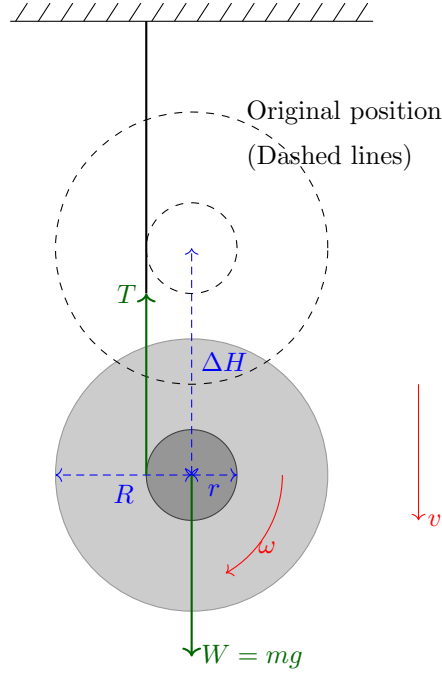


Figure 1: Model of a Maxwell's Wheel

$$\omega r = v \quad (3)$$

$$\Delta H(0) = 0 \quad (4)$$

Therefore

$$mg\Delta H = \frac{1}{2}mv^2 + \frac{1}{2}\frac{I}{r^2}v^2 \quad (5)$$

After moving and combining the terms

$$\frac{2mg\Delta H}{m + \frac{I}{r^2}} = \left(\frac{d\Delta H}{dt}\right)^2 \quad (6)$$

Moving  $d\Delta H/dt$  to the left side and make its index 1,

$$\frac{d\Delta H}{dt} = \sqrt{\frac{2mg}{m + \frac{I}{r^2}}} \Delta H^{0.5} \quad (7)$$

This is a simple ODE, with the help of formula (4), we can get that,

$$\Delta H(t) = \frac{mg}{2m + \frac{2I}{r^2}} t^2 \quad (8)$$

The downward movement terminates when  $\Delta H(t) = l$ , which means

$$t_{down} = \sqrt{\frac{(2m + \frac{2I}{r^2})l}{mg}} \quad (9)$$

The entire period of the Maxwell's Wheel is

$$T = 2t_{down} = 2\sqrt{\frac{(2m + \frac{2I}{r^2})l}{mg}} \quad (10)$$

which can be re-written as

$$T^2 = 8l \frac{(m + \frac{I}{r^2})}{mg} \quad (11)$$

Or

$$T^2 = \frac{8l}{mgr^2}I + \frac{8l}{g} \quad (12)$$

From this formula, the hypothesis can be derived:  **$T$  increases as  $I$  increases.  $T^2$  and  $I$  has a linear relationship.**

## 3 Experiment design

### 3.1 Variables

- Independent variable: Moment of inertia (manipulated by changing the distance from the magnets to the pivot:  $r' = 2.5, 3.5, 4.5, 5.5, 6.5, 7.5, 8.5\text{cm}$ ).
- Dependent variable: “Period” of the Maxwell's Wheel (Time between two lowest positions).
- Controlled variables: The material, mass and size of the plate and magnets. The length of the string. The mass, radius and length of the axle, etc. They are listed in table 1.

Independent variable turned out to be 0.668, 0.776, 0.919, 1.09, 1.31, 1.56 and  $1.85 \times 10^{-3}\text{kgm}^2$  (as is shown in Section 4). The independent variable is hard to manipulate, as the moment of inertia results from the arithmetical addition of two parts: the acrylic disk and the magnets. The former part is independent of  $r'$ , making it impossible to reach very small  $r'$ . The latter part is proportional to  $r'^2$ , resulting in difficulty to place the magnets on the acrylic plane if even distribution between  $I$  is needed.

Table 1: Controlled variables

Variable	Value	Reason to control
Total mass of the wheel $m$	$\approx 400\text{ g}$	To make sure the gradient is not affected.
Material of the wheel	Acrylic + NdFeB magnet	To make sure the mass distribution is even and constant
Height of displacement	$\approx 20\text{ cm}$	Unify the initial kinetic energy and length of path
Temperature and humidity	Around $25^\circ\text{C}$ , 40% RH	Avoid the change in air resistance

### 3.2 Materials

- \* 2 Iron stands (height  $\approx 50$  cm)
- \* 2 Cotton strings (length  $\approx 70$  cm)
- \* 1 Acrylic disc (radius  $\approx 10$  cm, mass  $\approx 110$  g)
- \* 16 Magnets (radius  $\approx 3.0$  cm, mass  $\approx 23$  g)
- \* 1 Force gauge (50 N)
- \* 1 Tape rule
- \* 1 Electric balance
- \* 1 Vernier caliper
- \* 1 Hot glue gun

### 3.3 Setup diagram

The apparatus is set up by hanging the Maxwell's Wheel between two iron stands using cotton string, as is shown in Figure 2.

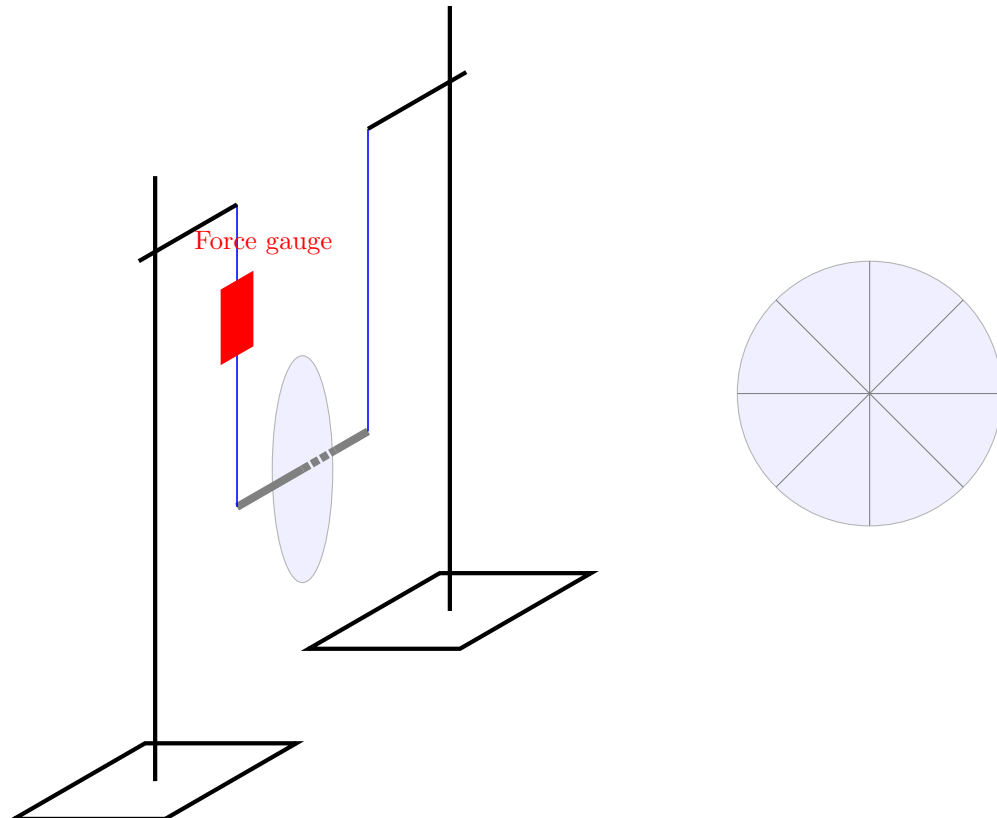


Figure 2: Setup diagram

### 3.4 Procedure

1. Measure the total mass of the magnets, mass of the acrylic plate, radius of the acrylic plate, radius of the axle and maximum vertical displacement after setting up the apparatus as is shown in Figure 2
2. Find a pair of diameters of the acrylic plane that is perpendicular to each other. This can be done by drawing the perpendicular bisector of an arbitrary pair of perpendicular chords.
3. Calibrate both axis with the assistance of a ruler. Make sure the center of the circle is scaled zero.
4. Attach four pairs of magnets to the plane.
5. Adjust the position of the magnets to make the distance for the magnets' centers of mass are  $r = 8.5$  cm. This can be done by placing the magnet (with radius  $r' = 3$  cm) between  $r = 10$  cm mark and  $r = 7$  cm mark, while touching the both marks.
6. Fix the magnets with glue guns.
7. Swirl up the axle until it reaches the designated point, start the forcemeter and release the wheel.
8. Record the time for the first and second time where the forcemeter reading reaches local maxima <sup>1</sup>
9. Repeat Steps 7 and 8 for 4 additional trials.
10. Repeat Steps 5 to 9 with  $r = 7.5, 6.5, 5.5, 4.5, 3.5$  cm.

### 3.5 Risk assessment

The experiment is relatively safe with little potential hazard.

It is worth keeping in mind that one should exercise caution when using the magnets, since the strong attraction of the magnets can cause unintended damage to the operator (e.g. their skin may be pinched when the magnets snap together).

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Raw data

Raw data is collected as follows:

- Total mass of the magnets  $M_m$  :  $193.70 \pm 0.01$  g
- Total mass of the acrylic plate  $M_a$ :  $193.17 \pm 0.01$  g
- Radius of the acrylic plate  $R_a$ :  $10.0 \pm 0.05$  cm

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<sup>1</sup>This is done with the assistance of a program. If the first local maximum is not prominent, the second and the third local maxima is used instead.

- Radius of the axle  $r$ :  $4.0 \pm 0.1\text{mm}$
- Maximum vertical displacement  $H$ :  $20 \pm 0.5\text{cm}$
- Other data is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Raw Data

Experiments 1-4				Experiments 5-7			
No.	Trial	$t_1(\text{s})$	$t_2(\text{s})$	No.	Trial	$t_1(\text{s})$	$t_2(\text{s})$
	$r(\text{cm})$	$\pm 0.01 \text{ s}$	$\pm 0.01 \text{ s}$		$r(\text{cm})$	$\pm 0.01 \text{ s}$	$\pm 0.01 \text{ s}$
1	2.5	1	2.28	5	6.5	1	3.58
		2	2.25			2	9.28
		3	2.48			3	3.45
		4	6.73			4	3.53
		5	2.33			5	9.28
2	3.5	1	2.73	6	7.5	1	10.43
		2	7.03			2	3.93
		3	2.78			3	4.08
		4	2.58			4	4.23
		5	2.83			5	4.03
3	4.5	1	2.88	7	8.5	1	4.08
		2	3.18			2	11.68
		3	3.08			3	11.48
		4	2.88			4	12.03
		5	3.03			5	11.78
4	5.5	1	3.28			6	4.13
		2	3.23				
		3	3.23				
		4	3.18				
		5	3.48				

## 4.2 Processed data

Table 3: Processed data

Experiment	$I(\times 10^{-3}\text{kgm}^2)$	$T^2(\text{s}^2)$
1	$0.668 \pm 0.0201$	$19.9 \pm 0.759$
2	$0.776 \pm 0.0237$	$21.4 \pm 1.62$
3	$0.919 \pm 0.0528$	$27.9 \pm 2.38$
4	$1.09 \pm 0.0309$	$31.5 \pm 1.40$
5	$1.31 \pm 0.0345$	$35.4 \pm 0.773$
6	$1.56 \pm 0.0381$	$47.2 \pm 5.15$
7	$1.85 \pm 0.0417$	$50.7 \pm 7.48$

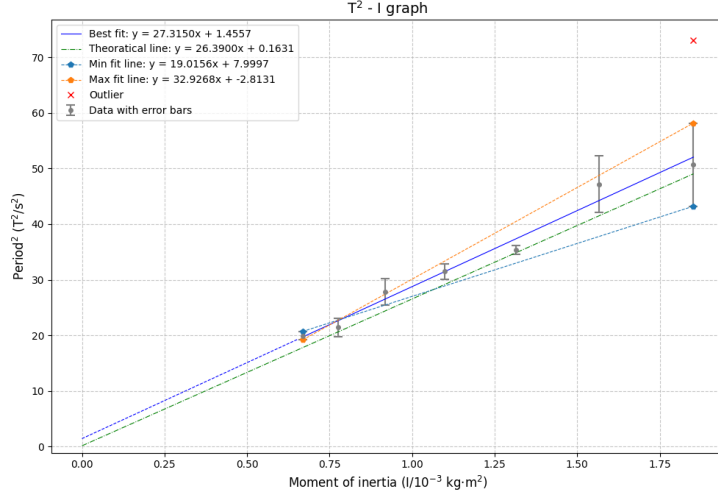


Figure 3:  $T^2 - I$  graph

### 4.3 Sample processing

Take the data processing of experiment 1 as an example. The force gauge data is recorded and plotted against time in Figure 4. It can be noticed that the reading of the force gauge is noisy but shows clear peaks. With the assistance of a program, prominent peaks are marked in the figure using red dots.

The x-index of the first two peaks are taken as  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  of this trial.

$$T_a = t_1 - t_0 = 6.68 \text{ s} - 2.28 \text{ s} = 4.40 \text{ s}$$

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

The diagram shows strong correlation between  $T^2$  and  $I$ . The best fit line of  $T^2 - I$  has

- a gradient of  $(27.3150 \pm 6.9556) \times 10^3 \text{ s}^2\text{kg}^{-1}\text{m}^{-2}$ .
- a y-intercept of  $1.4557\text{s}^2$ .

As is mentioned in Section 4.2, the graph is expected to be a straight line very close to the origin. The diagram shows a graph with relatively small error, supporting the initial hypothesis.

The y-intercept is expected to be  $\frac{8l}{mgT^2} \approx 0.16\text{s}^2$ , but  $1.4557\text{s}^2$  is found. This is almost 9 times the theoretical value. However, considering the large value of  $T$  in data,  $1.4557\text{s}^2$  is still less than 10% of the minimum dependent variable. This means it can still be considered an error, whose cause will be discussed in Section 6.

The gradient is expected to be  $\frac{8l}{g} = 26.3900 \times 10^3 \text{ s}^2\text{kg}^{-1}\text{m}^{-2}$ , where  $l$  is the length for lifting (controlled to be close to 20 cm) and  $g$  is the gravitational acceleration near sea level. There is a small 3.51% error between the actual gradient



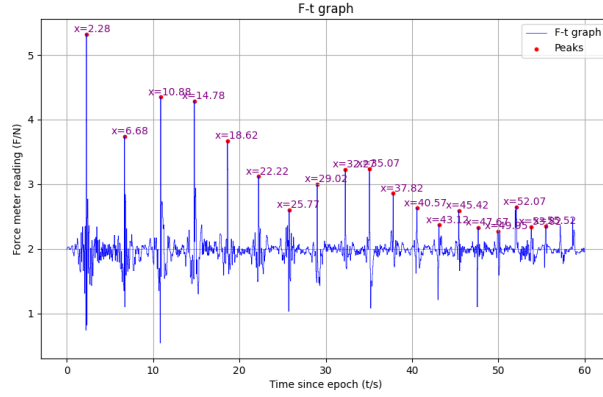


Figure 4:  $F - t$  graph

and predicted gradient, and the predicted gradient lies within the uncertainty range of the gradient. The low error shows high accuracy and precision of this experiment.

Error bars are small when  $I$  is small, but becomes larger as  $I$  gets larger. That might result from the significant horizontal perturbation get greater as  $I$  increases. Horizontal movements make the wheel start to swing like a pendulum and makes the motion more chaotic and less trackable.

The best fit line fails to pass through the fifth error bar, which is also coincidentally a very small error bar. That might result from coincidence, since there is only five trials in each group.

## 6 Evaluation

The experiment was conducted successfully, gathering sufficient data and supporting the initial hypothesis. However, there are some uncertainties in the experiment that can be improved.

- **Defect in modelling** It is assumed in the hypothesis that the wheel do not swing horizontally and the string is always vertical, but small horizontal movement is inevitable during the experiment process.
- **Screw-threaded axle** For an ideal Maxwell's Wheel, the radius of the small axle should be constant. However, a screw-threaded axle is utilized to ensure better installation of the wheel, making the string swirl around the thread with inconsistent radius. This can be improved by using an axle that has screw thread only in the middle point.
- **String attaching** When attaching the wire to the axle, some adhesive (hot glue) is used to ensure connection stability. This also contributed to inconsistent radius. Opt for an axle with a hole for attachment to avoid the use of hot-melt adhesive.

- **Horizontal movement** The hypothesis is based on negligible horizontal movement, but in the real experiment horizontal movement is inevitable because the wheel is controlled and released by hand. Using a plumb line to adjust the string before releasing can minimize the horizontal deflection.
- **Imprecise marking on the string** The string is not vertical to the ground, which means the marked distance is not precisely the vertical displacement. Additionally, axle's size can also lead to inconsistent vertical displacement. This might have led to unexpected large y-intercept mentioned in Section 5.

## References

- Farber, E. (1961, 5). A History of Mechanics. *Science*, 133(3463), 1472. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.133.3463.1472.a> doi: 10.1126/science.133.3463.1472.a
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