

Two-Body Problem

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1 Introduction

The two body problem is an isolated system of two particles which interact through a central potential. For two particles with mass m_1 and m_2 , the equations of motion is

$$m_1 \ddot{r}_1 = F_{21}; \quad m_2 \ddot{r}_2 = F_{12}. \quad (1)$$

In Newtonian gravity, the potentials are therefore

$$U_{12} = U_{21} = \frac{Gm_1m_2}{|r_1 - r_2|}. \quad (2)$$

Since the 2 particles interact via a central potential, the total momentum is conserved. We consider the center of mass,

$$R = \frac{m_1 r_1 + m_2 r_2}{M} \quad (3)$$

where $M = m_1 + m_2$.

The time derivative is therefore

$$V_{CM} = \frac{m_1 v_1 + m_2 v_2}{M}. \quad (4)$$

Since our system is isolated, the net force and total acceleration is zero, thus V_{CM} is a constant. The motion of the center of mass is then

$$R(t) = V_{CM}t. \quad (5)$$

We define the vector of distance between the particles:

$$r = r_1 - r_2. \quad (6)$$

Thus,

$$r_1 = R + \frac{m_2 r}{m_1 + m_2}; \quad r_2 = R - \frac{m_1 r}{m_1 + m_2}. \quad (7)$$

Since we already know R , our problem reduces to finding r .

If we multiply the masses to eq. 1, we get

$$m_1 m_2 \ddot{r}_1 = m_2 F_{21}; \quad m_1 m_2 \ddot{r}_2 = m_1 F_{12}. \quad (8)$$

Subtract the second from the first equation and simplify, we get

$$\frac{m_1 m_2}{m_2 + m_1} \ddot{r} = F_{21} \quad (9)$$

The force derived from the central potential only depends on distance between the 2 particles.

$$F_{21} = -\frac{\partial}{\partial r_1} U_{12}(|r_1 - r_2|) = \nabla U_{12} \quad (10)$$

From above, we can summarize them as

$$m_* \ddot{r} = -\frac{\partial}{\partial r} U(|r|) = F(r) \quad (11)$$

where

$$m_* = \frac{m_1 m_2}{m_1 + m_2} \quad (12)$$

is the reduced mass.

2 Conservation of Angular Momentum

In this section, we will rewrite the system above in terms of the angular momentum.

$$L = m_* r \times V; \quad V = \dot{r}. \quad (13)$$

Since F is in the r direction, the torque has to be 0, and the angular momentum must be constant.

$$\frac{d}{dt} L = 0 \quad (14)$$

Next, we use the *scalar triple product identity*,

$$a \cdot (b \times c) = b \cdot (c \times a) = c \cdot (a \times b) \quad (15)$$

and apply it to the angular momentum, we get

$$r \cdot L = m_* r \cdot (r \times V) = m_* V \cdot (r \times r) = 0. \quad (16)$$

Hence r is always *perpendicular* to angular momentum L .

Because the angular momentum is constant, there must be a fixed vector of which r is perpendicular to in space. Since the position vector is always perpendicular to a certain direction in space, we can reduce the problem into a 2D plane in polar coordinates where

$$r_x = r \cos \theta; \quad r_y = r \sin \theta. \quad (17)$$

We choose the $x - y$ plane for the particles to be on in accordance to conventions, and the angular momentum is oriented to the z direction. The velocity in θ direction is always positive, therefore the particles always rotates around the center of our coordinate system in the same direction.

$$\dot{\theta} = \frac{|L|}{m_* r^2} \quad (18)$$

3 Conservation of Energy

To begin with, we know that Energy is the sum of kinetic and potential energies.

$$E = \frac{1}{2} m_* v^2 + U(r) \quad (19)$$

In polar coordinates, the velocity is

$$v^2 = \dot{x}^2 + \dot{y}^2 = \dot{r}^2 + r^2 \dot{\theta}^2. \quad (20)$$

The energy conservation becomes

$$E = \frac{1}{2} m_* \dot{r}^2 + \frac{1}{2} m_* r^2 \dot{\theta}^2 + U(r). \quad (21)$$

We call part of this equation the **effective potential energy**.

$$U_{\text{eff}}(r) = \frac{L^2}{2mr^2} + U(r) \quad (22)$$

Since the angular momentum is constant, in spherical coordinates,

$$L = mr^2 \dot{\phi} = \text{const}; \quad \dot{\phi} = \frac{L}{mr^2} \quad (23)$$

Here the ϕ in spherical coordinates is equivalent to θ in polar coordinates.

4 Solutions for Two-Body Problem (Analytical)

We have derived that energy of the system is constant

$$\begin{aligned} E &= \frac{1}{2} m (\dot{r}^2 + r^2 \dot{\phi}^2) + U(r) = \text{const}. \\ \dot{r} &= \frac{dr}{dt} = \sqrt{\frac{2}{m} (E - U(r)) \frac{L^2}{m^2 r^2}} \\ \int \frac{dr}{\sqrt{\frac{2}{m} (E - U(r)) - \frac{L^2}{m^2 r^2}}} &= \int dt = t. \end{aligned}$$

We want to find trajectory $r(\phi)$.

$$\begin{aligned}\dot{r} &= \frac{dr}{dt} = \frac{dr}{d\phi} \frac{d\phi}{dt} = \frac{dr}{d\phi} \frac{L}{mr^2} \\ E &= \frac{1}{2}m \left(\frac{dr}{d\phi} \right)^2 \left(\frac{L}{mr^2} \right)^2 + \frac{L^2}{2mr^2} + U(r) \\ E &= \frac{L^2}{2m} \left(\frac{dr}{r^2 d\phi} \right)^2 + \frac{L^2}{2mr^2} + U(r)\end{aligned}\quad (24)$$

We introduce $b = \frac{1}{r}$ and $db = \frac{-dr}{r^2}$. The equation of energy thus becomes

$$E = \frac{L^2}{2m} \left[\left(\frac{db}{d\phi} \right)^2 + b^2 \right] + U\left(\frac{1}{b}\right), \quad (25)$$

where if we find $r(\phi)$, and $r(\phi) = \frac{1}{b(\phi)}$, we can find $\phi(t)$. We can do this by integrating $\int \dot{\phi} dt = \phi(t)$ where $\dot{\phi} = \frac{L}{mr^2}$. We then take the derivative of E with respect to ϕ .

$$\frac{L^2}{2m} \left[2 \frac{db}{d\phi} \frac{d^2b}{d\phi^2} + 2b \frac{db}{d\phi} \right] + \frac{dU}{db} \frac{db}{d\phi} = 0. \quad (26)$$

Divide both sides by $\frac{db}{d\phi}$, assuming $b \neq \text{const.}$ and $\frac{db}{d\phi} \neq 0$, we get

$$\frac{L^2}{m} \left(\frac{d^2b}{d\phi^2} + b \right) = -\frac{dU}{db}. \quad (27)$$

Here we obtain **Binet's equation for central field**.

$$\frac{d^2b}{d\phi^2} + b = -\frac{m}{L^2} \frac{dU}{db} \quad (28)$$

4.1 Kepler Motion

In a gravitationally bounded two-body system, we take potential

$$U(r) = -\frac{Gm_*m}{r} = -\frac{\alpha}{r} \text{ where } \alpha > 0 \text{ and } \alpha = Gm_*m = \text{const.}$$

Using **Binet's equation** and $U = -\alpha b$ where $\frac{dU}{db} = -\alpha$,

$$\frac{d^2b}{d\phi^2} + b = \frac{m\alpha}{L^2} = \frac{1}{p}; \quad p = \frac{L^2}{m\alpha}; \quad b = \frac{1 + e \cos \phi}{p}. \quad (29)$$

by the definition of **orbital eccentricity** e . Since $r = \frac{1}{b}$, we get $r = \frac{p}{1 + e \cos \phi}$.

The minimum of r is limited by the cosine function, hence,

$$r_{min} = \frac{p}{1 + e}; \quad r_{max} = \frac{p}{1 - e}. \quad (30)$$

If we define a as the semi-major axis of the elliptical orbit, we get

$$\frac{p}{1 + e} + \frac{p}{1 - e} = 2a; \quad p = a(1 - e)^2. \quad (31)$$

4.2 Energy

The constant p depends on the orbital eccentricity e and angular momentum L . In this section, we show that the energy conservation can depend on parameter semi-major axis a .

Using eqn. 24 and results obtained above, we can further write energy as

$$E = \frac{L^2(1 + e \cos \phi)^4}{2mp^4} \left[\frac{p^2 e^2 \sin^2 \phi}{(1 + e \cos \phi)^4} + \frac{p^2}{(1 + e \cos \phi)^2} \right] - \frac{\alpha(1 + e \cos \phi)}{p}. \quad (32)$$

simplify, we obtain

$$E = \frac{(e^2 - 1)m\alpha^2}{2a(1 - e^2)m\alpha} = -\frac{\alpha}{2a}. \quad (33)$$

4.3 Summary

From the two conserved quantities, namely energy E and angular momentum L , we obtain a solution to the Binet's equation of orbital motion for r as a function of ϕ .

$$r = \frac{p}{1 + e \cos \phi} \quad (34)$$

where $p = \frac{L^2}{m\alpha}$ and $E = -\frac{\alpha}{2a}$. Hence different L and E will give rise to different shapes of orbits.

Using Newtonian gravity where the kinetic energy and gravitational potential are equal to each other,

$$\frac{1}{2}mv_e^2 = \frac{GmM}{r}, \quad (35)$$

we obtain the equation for escape velocity of a system.

$$v_e = \sqrt{\frac{2Gm}{r}}. \quad (36)$$

In case of gravitationally bounded objects, the total energy is equal to kinetic energy of the object orbiting the total mass minus the potential energy.

$$E_{tot} = \frac{1}{2}mv^2 - \frac{GMm}{r}. \quad (37)$$

1. If $E < 0$, the orbit is a bounded elliptical orbit.
2. If $E = 0$, the orbit is parabolic where it is marginally unbounded. It comes in from infinitely far away and orbit through and heads back to infinitely away.
3. If $E > 0$, the orbit is hyperbolic where the object does not orbit.

5 Solutions for Two-Body Problem (Numerical)

Since $\dot{\theta} = \frac{L}{mr^2}$, we get the acceleration in θ direction

$$\ddot{\theta} = -\frac{\dot{r}L}{mr^3} = -\frac{2\dot{r}\dot{\theta}}{r}. \quad (38)$$

Acceleration in r direction is

$$\ddot{r} = \frac{F}{m} = r\dot{\theta}^2 - \frac{Gm}{r^2} \quad (39)$$

because $G\ddot{M}/r^2$ and $r = \frac{x}{\cos\theta}$.

Our problem then becomes a system of two second-order ordinary differential equations stated above. To numerically solve it using RK-4, we have to use 4 first-order differential equations such as

$$\dot{V}_r = \dot{r} \quad (40)$$

$$\dot{V}_\theta = \dot{\theta} \quad (41)$$

$$\dot{V}_r = rV_\theta^2 - \frac{Gm}{r^2} \quad (42)$$

$$\dot{V}_\theta = -\frac{V_r L}{mr^3} \quad (43)$$