

# Two-Body Problem

Hang Su

May 2023

## 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  $\theta$  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  $\phi$  in spherical coordinates is equivalent to  $\theta$  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  $\phi$ .

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

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  $\phi$ .

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

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.

#### 4.3.1 Energy & Momentum as a function of $a$ and $e$

From above results, we can write the energy and momentum in terms of semi-major axis and eccentricity.

$$E = -\frac{\alpha}{2a} \quad (38)$$

$$L = (1 - e)\sqrt{am\alpha} \quad (39)$$

In terms of the two masses  $m_1$  and  $m_2$ ,

$$E = -\frac{Gm_1m_2}{a} \quad (40)$$

$$L = (1 - e)m_1m_2\sqrt{\frac{Ga}{m_1 + m_2}} \quad (41)$$

#### 4.3.2 $a$ and $e$ as a function of energy & momentum

We can hence do the inverse of above equations to show that eccentricity and semi-major axis can be written as a function of energy and angular momentum.

$$a = -\frac{\alpha}{2E} \quad (42)$$

$$e = 1 - \frac{L}{\alpha}\sqrt{-\frac{2E}{m}} \quad (43)$$

In terms of  $m_1$  and  $m_2$ ,

$$a = -\frac{Gm_1m_2}{2E} \quad (44)$$

$$e = 1 - \frac{L}{Gm_1m_2}\sqrt{-\frac{2E}{m_2} - \frac{2E}{m_1}} \quad (45)$$

The above results limit the conserved energy to be negative to have a bounded elliptical orbit.

## 5 Solutions for Two-Body Problem (Numerical)

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

$$\ddot{\theta} = -\frac{\dot{r}L}{mr^3} = -\frac{2\dot{r}\dot{\theta}}{r}. \quad (46)$$

Acceleration in  $r$  direction is

$$\ddot{r} = \frac{F}{m} = r\dot{\theta}^2 - \frac{Gm}{r^2} \quad (47)$$

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

$$V_r = \dot{r} \tag{48}$$

$$V_\theta = \dot{\theta} \tag{49}$$

$$\dot{V}_r = rV_\theta^2 - \frac{Gm}{r^2} \tag{50}$$

$$\dot{V}_\theta = -\frac{2V_r L}{mr^3} \tag{51}$$