Daniel Opdahl

Bubble Track Experiment Results and Interpretation

In the Millikan oil drop experiment, I calculated the charge of various oil droplets based on their velocity when falling (only experiencing forces due to gravity and air resistance), their velocity when rising (only experiencing forces due to gravity, air resistance, and electrical attraction), the air resistance calculated from the electrical resistance between the two plates, the density of the oil used, the separation of the two plates, and the acceleration due to gravity.

The apparatus used for the Millikan oil drop experiment, shown in Figure 1, utilizes a main chamber, a switch to control the opening of the chamber and the exposure of alpha particles to the chamber, a light source, a camera, and a voltage source. The light source we utilized as a simple LED light bulb that shown into the main chamber through a built-in window. This is necessary to provide light for the camera that can see into the main chamber thanks to another built-in window. The voltage source provides the voltage for the main chamber.

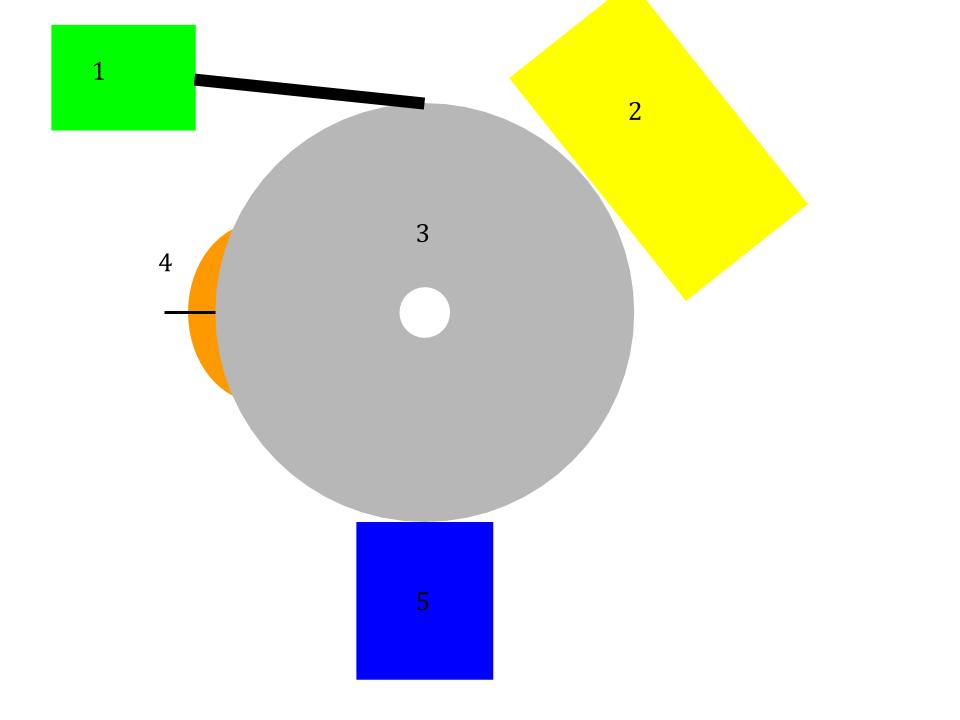


Figure 1: A general schematic for the Millikan oil drop experiment containing (1) a voltage source connected to the main chamber, (2) a light source to illuminate the inside of the main chamber, (3) the main chamber were oil drops are viewed and where the plates are, (4) a switch controlling the opening and closing of the main chamber along with the exposure of alpha particles to the main chamber, (5) a camera that looks into the main chamber.

The main chamber, shown in Figure 2, consists of an opening in the top of the chamber that allows oil droplets to be sprayed in via an atomizer, two plates that have a voltage provided by the voltage source, an alpha source that can be turned off an on that exposes the oil drops to alpha radiation, changing their charges, and two aforementioned windows for the light source and the camera.

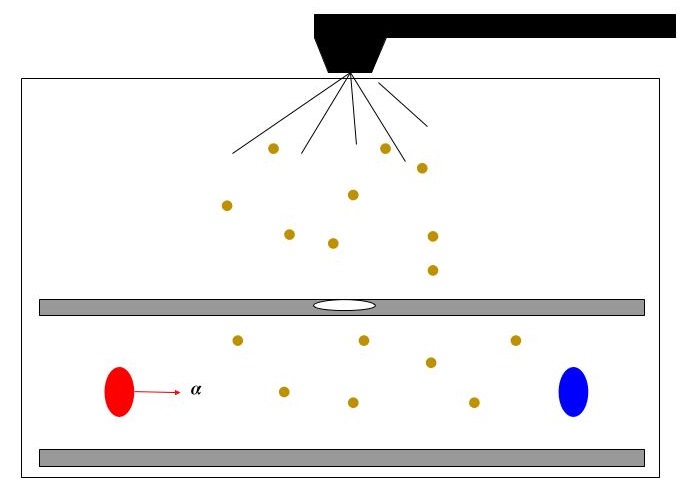


Figure 2: A schematic of the main chamber. Oil drops are sprayed into the chamber by an atomizer and allowed to fall through a small hole in the top plate to enter the area between the plates. The red circle represents the hole controlled by the switch that allows the main chamber to be exposed to alpha particles, and the blue circle represents the viewing window for the camera.

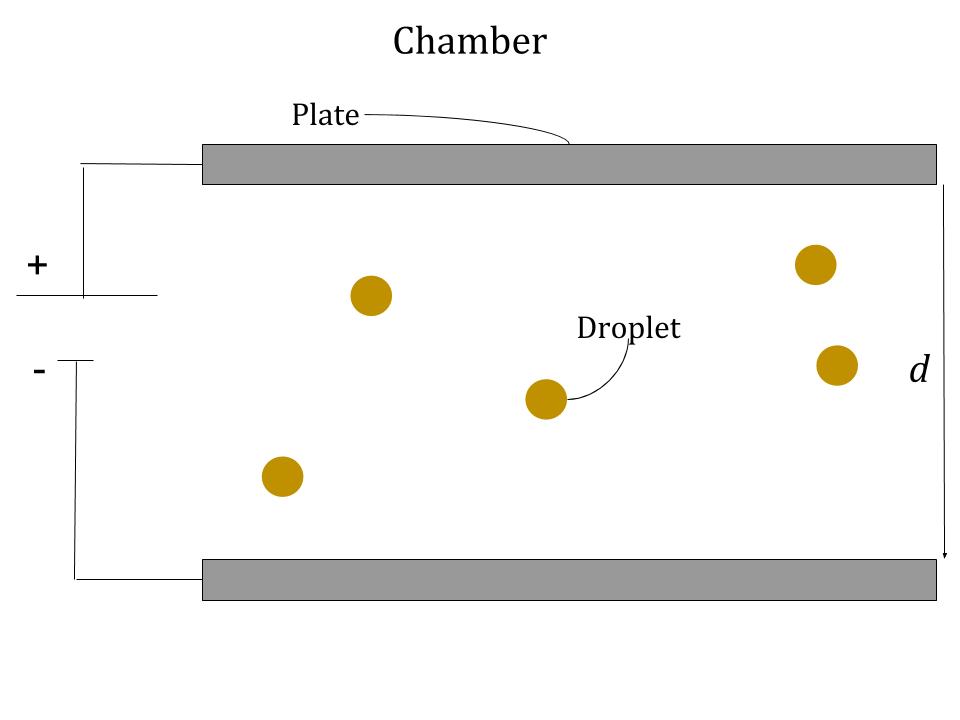
On the top and bottom of the chamber are two horizontal parallel plates that have electrical potential , separated by distance .

Figure 3: A close up of the area between the two plates.

When oil droplets are allowed to fall in between the two plates when no electric potential is applied, the drops reach terminal velocity and fall at a constant speed, experiencing the downward force of gravity balanced with the upwards force of air resistance. This relationship is modeled by Equation 1 as follows

where is the force of air resistance, and is the force of gravity. This relationship is also shown in Figure 1 below.

Stoke’s law provides a formula shown in Equation 2 below that describes the force of air resistance on a drop

Where

Combining this with Equation 3, shown below,

where , gives equation 4 as follows

where

If an electric potential is applied between the plates, an electric field E is created that causes the droplet to rise if the droplet has charge Q. The droplet will then rise at a constant speed vup. This relationship can be modeled by Equation 5 and Figure 2 shown below.

Where

Since , we can derive Equation 6 as follows

Each time we gathered data, we began by firstly connecting the power supply to the apparatus and setting the voltage to 200 volts. We then measured the thermistor resistance using the multimeter. We then connected the camera to our lab computer and focused the camera such that the grid lines shown in the image were in focus. We also made sure to rotate our camera so that the grid lines were horizontal and vertical and so that the light source was illuminating the majority of the image. Then, we moved the ionization switch to the “SPRAY DROPLET POSITION”, and placed the nozzle of the atomizer on the opening at the top of the chamber. We then used the atomizer to spray some oil droplets into the chamber. After that, we turned the ionization switch to the “OFF” position.

After waiting a moment, the droplets floated down into the area between the plates and appeared on our camera image, after we focused the camera in and out for a while. We then used the voltage switch to apply and stop the voltage between the plates in order to discover which drops moved up and down at a slow but steady rate. We decided that it did not matter if we applied a positive or a negative voltage, the most important thing is that we select a drop that moves slow and steady and is very easy to see.

After selecting our droplet, we began recording a video with our camera and dictating into the computer microphone which droplet we were tracking. We tried to begin each video with the droplet around the middle. We waited until the droplet was as close to the bottom as possible while still being in focus and illuminated and then we noted the time of the video in our lab books while flipping the switch to whichever potential (positive or negative) that made the droplet rise. Once the droplet had traveled as far upwards as possible while still being visible and illuminated, we would flip the switch back to a neutral position so no voltage was applied on the plates and so that the droplet would fall again, noting the time of the video corresponding with the switch flip. One person was responsible for flipping the switch and noting the time in our lab notebooks while the other was responsible for tracking the droplet and keeping the camera focused on it. We tried to track each droplet for as many trips up and down as possible. Often times this wasn’t viable because the droplets would change charge as they traveled up and down and as a consequence would not travel up again when we applied a potential to the plates after falling.

After recording a video, we opened up that video in the VLC application on a computer. We used this application to trim the video into several smaller videos, each only containing a single trip either up or down, using our recorded times of switch flipping as a guide. After splitting our larger video into smaller videos of individual trips, we again used VLC to extract individual frames from each smaller video at a constant frame rate.

Using the extracted images, we ran a MATLAB script that calculated the speed of the tracked oil drop for each traversal along with the uncertainty in that speed. This script took in an initial frame to calibrate the scale of distances for a given set of images, then used the frame rate of the original video and the number of images gathered from that video to calculate the speed of a drop for a single traversal. It also calculated the uncertainty in the speed by considering the uncertainty in pixels.

Using the speeds we found, along with their uncertainties, we were able to use another MATLAB script to calculate the charge on each droplet for each traversal along with the uncertainty in those charge values. This MATLAB script was one that we wrote. It starts out by taking in user input for the velocity going up (in millimeters per second), the velocity going down (in millimeters per second), the uncertainty in the value of velocity going up (in millimeters per second), the uncertainty in the value of velocity going down (in millimeters per second), the calculated viscosity (in newton seconds per square meter), the uncertainty in the calculated viscosity (in newton seconds per square meter), the measured voltage (in volts), the uncertainty in the measured voltage (in volts), the measured value for the separation of the plates (in meters), and the uncertainty in the measured value for the separation of the plates (in meters). Then, it converts all the given values into standard units and defines constants such as the acceleration due to gravity and the density of the oil we used. Then, the script calculates the radius of the droplet using Equation 1 as follows

where is the radius, is the viscosity of air, is the velocity going down, is the acceleration due to gravity (), is the density of the oil (). The uncertainty in is calculated by taking the partial derivatives of with respect to and , multiplying those values by their respective uncertainties, and then adding those values in quadrature, as is shown in Equations 2 – 4 as follows

where is the partial derivative of with respect to , is the partial derivative of of with respect to , is the calculated uncertainty in , is the measured uncertainty in and is the uncertainty in the radius.

In a similar fashion, the script calculates the charge of the droplet using Equation 5 as follows

where is the charge on the droplet, is the velocity of the droplet going up, is the separation of the plates, is the potential difference between the plates, and all other variables represent the same things they did before.

Again, we use error propagation to calculate the error in the charge of the droplet using Equation 6 below

where each term is the partial differential of the variable featured times its uncertainty squared.

After our MATLAB script calculated the values for the charge and the uncertainty in the charge, we exported the data into another MATLAB script that plotted that data.