Proposition 10. A polynomial of degree two or three over a field F is reducible if and only if it has a root in F.

Proof: This follows immediately from the previous proposition, since a polynomial of degree two or three is reducible if and only if it has at least one linear factor.

The next result limits the possibilities for roots of polynomials with integer coefficients (it is stated for $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ for convenience although it clearly generalizes to $R[x]$, where R is any Unique Factorization Domain).

Proposition 11. Let $p(x) = a_n x^n + a_{n-1}x^{n-1} + \cdots + a_0$ be a polynomial of degree n with integer coefficients. If $r/s \in \mathbb{Q}$ is in lowest terms (i.e., r and s are relatively prime integers) and r/s is a root of $p(x)$, then r divides the constant term and s divides the leading coefficient of $p(x)$: $r \mid a_0$ and $s \mid a_n$. In particular, if $p(x)$ is a *monic* polynomial with integer coefficients and $p(d) \neq 0$ for all integers d dividing the constant term of $p(x)$, then $p(x)$ has no roots in $\mathbb{Q}$.

Proof: By hypothesis, $p(r/s) = 0 = a_n(r/s)^n + a_{n-1}(r/s)^{n-1} + \cdots + a_0$. Multiplying through by s^n gives

$$0 = a_n r^n + a_{n-1}r^{n-1}s + \cdots + a_0 s^n.$$

Thus $a_n r^n = s(-a_{n-1}r^{n-1} - \cdots - a_0 s^{n-1})$, so s divides $a_n r^n$. By assumption, s is relatively prime to r and it follows that $s \mid a_n$. Similarly, solving the equation for $a_0 s^n$ shows that $r \mid a_0$. The last assertion of the proposition follows from the previous ones.

Examples

(1) The polynomial $x^3 - 3x - 1$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$. To prove this, by Gauss' Lemma and Proposition 10 it suffices to show it has no rational roots. By Proposition 11 the only candidates for rational roots are integers which divide the constant term 1, namely ± 1. Substituting both 1 and -1 into the polynomial shows that these are not roots.

(2) For p any prime the polynomials $x^2 - p$ and $x^3 - p$ are irreducible in $\mathbb{Q}[x]$. This is because they have degrees ≤ 3 so it suffices to show they have no rational roots. By Proposition 11 the only candidates for roots are ± 1 and $\pm p$, but none of these give 0 when they are substituted into the polynomial.

(3) The polynomial $x^2 + 1$ is reducible in $\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}[x]$ since it has 1 as a root, and it factors as $(x + 1)^2$.

(4) The polynomial $x^2 + x + 1$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}[x]$ since it does not have a root in $\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}$: $0^2 + 0 + 1 = 1$ and $1^2 + 1 + 1 = 1$.

(5) Similarly, the polynomial $x^3 + x + 1$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}[x]$.

This technique is limited to polynomials of low degree because it relies on the presence of a factor of degree one. A polynomial of degree 4, for example, may be the product of two irreducible quadratics, hence be reducible but have no linear factor. One fairly general technique for checking irreducibility uses Proposition 2 above and consists of reducing the coefficients modulo some ideal.

Proposition 12. Let I be a proper ideal in the integral domain R and let $p(x)$ be a nonconstant monic polynomial in $R[x]$. If the image of $p(x)$ in $(R/I)[x]$ cannot be factored in $(R/I)[x]$ into two polynomials of smaller degree, then $p(x)$ is irreducible in $R[x]$.

Proof: Suppose $p(x)$ cannot be factored in $(R/I)[x]$ but that $p(x)$ is reducible in $R[x]$. As noted at the end of the preceding section this means there are monic, nonconstant polynomials $a(x)$ and $b(x)$ in $R[x]$ such that $p(x) = a(x)b(x)$. By Proposition 2, reducing the coefficients modulo I gives a factorization in $(R/I)[x]$ with nonconstant factors, a contradiction.

This proposition indicates that if it is possible to find a proper ideal I such that the *reduced* polynomial cannot be factored, then the polynomial is itself irreducible. Unfortunately, there are examples of polynomials even in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ which are irreducible but whose reductions modulo every ideal are reducible (so their irreducibility is not detectable by this technique). For example, the polynomial $x^4 + 1$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ but is reducible modulo every prime (we shall verify this in Chapter 14) and the polynomial $x^4 - 72x^2 + 4$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ but is reducible modulo every integer.

Examples

(1) Consider the polynomial $p(x) = x^2 + x + 1$ in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$. Reducing modulo 2, we see from Example 4 above that $p(x)$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$. Similarly, $x^3 + x + 1$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ because it is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}/2\mathbb{Z}[x]$.

(2) The polynomial $x^2 + 1$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ since it is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}/3\mathbb{Z}[x]$ (no root in $\mathbb{Z}/3\mathbb{Z}$), but is reducible mod 2. This shows that the converse to Proposition 12 does not hold.

(3) The idea of reducing modulo an ideal to determine irreducibility can be used also in several variables, but some care must be exercised. For example, the polynomial $x^2 + xy + 1$ in $\mathbb{Z}[x, y]$ is irreducible since modulo the ideal (y) it is $x^2 + 1$ in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$, which is irreducible and of the same degree. In this sort of argument it is necessary to be careful about "collapsing." For example, the polynomial $xy + x + y + 1$ (which is $(x + 1)(y + 1)$) is reducible, but appears irreducible modulo both (x) and (y). The reason for this is that nonunit polynomials in $\mathbb{Z}[x, y]$ can reduce to units in the quotient. To take account of this it is necessary to determine which elements in the original ring become units in the quotient. The elements in $\mathbb{Z}[x, y]$ which are units modulo (y), for example, are the polynomials in $\mathbb{Z}[x, y]$ with constant term ± 1 and all nonconstant terms divisible by y. The fact that $x^2 + xy + 1$ and its reduction mod (y) have the same degree therefore eliminates the possibility of a factor which is a unit modulo (y), but not a unit in $\mathbb{Z}[x, y]$ and gives the irreducibility of this polynomial.

A special case of reducing modulo an ideal to test for irreducibility which is frequently useful is known as *Eisenstein's Criterion* (although originally proved earlier by Schönemann, so more properly known as the *Eisenstein-Schönemann Criterion*):

Proposition 13. *(Eisenstein's Criterion)* Let P be a prime ideal of the integral domain R and let $f(x) = x^n + a_{n-1}x^{n-1} + \cdots + a_1x + a_0$ be a polynomial in $R[x]$ (here $n \geq 1$). Suppose $a_{n-1}, \ldots, a_1, a_0$ are all elements of P and suppose a_0 is not an element of P^2. Then $f(x)$ is irreducible in $R[x]$.

Proof: Suppose $f(x)$ were reducible, say $f(x) = a(x)b(x)$ in $R[x]$, where $a(x)$ and $b(x)$ are nonconstant polynomials. Reducing this equation modulo P and using the assumptions on the coefficients of $f(x)$ we obtain the equation $x^n = \overline{a(x)}\,\overline{b(x)}$ in $(R/P)[x]$, where the bar denotes the polynomials with coefficients reduced mod P. Since P is a prime ideal, R/P is an integral domain, and it follows that both $\overline{a(x)}$ and $\overline{b(x)}$ have 0 constant term, i.e., the constant terms of both $a(x)$ and $b(x)$ are elements of P. But then the constant term a_0 of $f(x)$ as the product of these two would be an element of P^2, a contradiction.

Eisenstein's Criterion is most frequently applied to $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ so we state the result explicitly for this case:

Corollary 14. *(Eisenstein's Criterion for $\mathbb{Z}[x]$)* Let p be a prime in $\mathbb{Z}$ and let $f(x) = x^n + a_{n-1}x^{n-1} + \cdots + a_1x + a_0 \in \mathbb{Z}[x]$, $n \geq 1$. Suppose p divides a_i for all $i \in \{0, 1, \ldots, n-1\}$ but that p^2 does not divide a_0. Then $f(x)$ is irreducible in both $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ and $\mathbb{Q}[x]$.

Proof: This is simply a restatement of Proposition 13 in the case of the prime ideal (p) in $\mathbb{Z}$ together with Corollary 6.

Examples

(1) The polynomial $x^4 + 10x + 5$ in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ is irreducible by Eisenstein's Criterion applied for the prime 5.

(2) If a is any integer which is divisible by some prime p but not divisible by p^2, then $x^n - a$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$ by Eisenstein's Criterion. In particular, $x^n - p$ is irreducible for all positive integers n and so for $n \geq 2$ the n^{th} roots of p are not rational numbers (i.e., this polynomial has no root in $\mathbb{Q}$).

(3) Consider the polynomial $f(x) = x^4 + 1$ mentioned previously. Eisenstein's Criterion does not apply directly to $f(x)$. The polynomial $g(x) = f(x+1)$ is $(x+1)^4 + 1$, i.e., $x^4 + 4x^3 + 6x^2 + 4x + 2$, and Eisenstein's Criterion for the prime 2 shows that this polynomial is irreducible. It follows then that $f(x)$ must also be irreducible, since any factorization for $f(x)$ would provide a factorization for $g(x)$ (just replace x by $x + 1$ in each of the factors). This example shows that Eisenstein's Criterion can sometimes be used to verify the irreducibility of a polynomial to which it does not immediately apply.

(4) As another example of this, let p be a prime and consider the polynomial

$$\Phi_p(x) = \frac{x^p - 1}{x - 1} = x^{p-1} + x^{p-2} + \cdots + x + 1,$$

an example of a *cyclotomic polynomial* which we shall consider more thoroughly in Part IV. Again, Eisenstein's Criterion does not immediately apply, but it does apply for the prime p to the polynomial

$$\Phi_p(x+1) = \frac{(x+1)^p - 1}{x} = x^{p-1} + px^{p-2} + \cdots + \frac{p(p-1)}{2}x + p \in \mathbb{Z}[x]$$

since all the coefficients except the first are divisible by p by the Binomial Theorem. As before, this shows $\Phi_p(x)$ is irreducible in $\mathbb{Z}[x]$.

(5) As an example of the use of the more general Eisenstein's Criterion in Proposition 13 we mimic Example 2 above. Let $R = \mathbb{Q}[x]$ and let n be any positive integer. Consider