

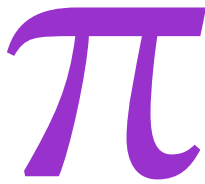
The Wonder That Is Pi

R (Chandra) Chandrasekhar

2004-01-14 | 2024-07-25

This is a sequel to the blog “[The Pi of Archimedes](#)”. Here, we look at π as a number—without explicit reference to its geometric tethering—and explore its remarkable ubiquity in mathematics. As an appetizer, see Figure 1, where the symbol for Pi is surmounted by two very disparate equations defining it. How in all the world could these two different-looking equations be true? But they are indeed!

$$\pi = 4 \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \frac{(-1)^k}{2k+1} = 4(1 - \frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{5} - \frac{1}{7} + \dots)$$



$$\frac{1}{\pi} = \frac{\sqrt{8}}{9801} \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \frac{(4n)! [1103 + 26390n]}{(n!)^4 396^{4n}}$$

Figure 1: Pi expressed by two very different equations. Note that both are sums to infinity of expressions involving integers.

The Number Menagerie

Numbers may be compared to animals in a zoo. Each is different, and yet they all share some attributes in common. The variety and diversity of zoo animals can be challenging. That is why the big cats are grouped together, the herbivores live in another part of the zoo, etc.

Numbers, like animals, have evolved over many centuries into what I call the *number menagerie*. A very elementary picture of this zoo is outlined in my blog “[The Two Most Important Numbers: Zero and One](#)” in case you need to review some definitions.

To appreciate π as a number, we need to be aware of the **taxonomy** in the zoo of numbers. It turns out that π is a real number that is transcendental and therefore also irrational. Let us make a short detour to better understand what this means.

Real and Complex Numbers

There are two major sets of numbers: real numbers, denoted by the set \mathbb{R} , and complex numbers, denoted by the set \mathbb{C} . The difference between the two is that while a real number is a single number, a complex number is a pair, composed of two real numbers, conjoined by the **imaginary unit** i , where $i^2 = -1$. In set-theoretic notation, we write

$$\mathbb{C} = \{a + bi : a, b \in \mathbb{R}\}.$$

Sometimes, the complex number $a + bi$ is written as the ordered pair (a, b) , provided the context is clear.

What then are the reals? The real numbers are the union of the set of rational numbers and the irrational numbers. Alternatively, the reals are the union of the algebraic numbers and the transcendental numbers.¹

We will define each of these terms below and how they relate to one another. As always, we start with the known and proceed to the unknown.

The Integers and Friends

The set \mathbb{N} of *natural or counting numbers* is defined as

$$\mathbb{N} = \{1, 2, 3, \dots, n, n + 1, \dots\}.$$

It is a **countably infinite** set whose members begin with 1 and progress by the addition of 1 to the predecessor. It is an infinite set, which means it never ends, as denoted by the **ellipsis** or dots at the end of the definition.

Zero is not a natural number and is assigned its own, unnamed set, $\{0\}$.²

The set of *integers* \mathbb{Z} includes the negative numbers, zero, and the positive numbers:

$$\mathbb{Z} = \{\dots - 3, -2, -1, 0, 1, 2, 3, \dots\}$$

Like \mathbb{N} , \mathbb{Z} is also a countably infinite set.

A first dichotomy

The real numbers may be partitioned into subsets in different ways: one way is into the *rational* and *irrational* numbers.

Every real number is *either* rational or irrational. If the universe of discourse is the real number set, the rational and irrational numbers are complements of each other. In other words, the *union* of the set of rational numbers and the set of irrational numbers is the set of real numbers.

¹Since both algebraic and transcendental numbers can be complex, we need the added condition that these do not involve the imaginary unit, i . For example, $(1 + \frac{\sqrt{(-7)}}{2}) = (1 + \frac{\sqrt{7}}{2}i)$, and πi are examples of algebraic and transcendental numbers respectively that involve i .

²Some folks include zero in \mathbb{N} .

Rational Numbers

The *rational numbers* are denoted by the set \mathbb{Q} defined to be:

$$\mathbb{Q} = \left\{ \frac{a}{b} \text{ where } a, b \in \mathbb{Z} \text{ and } b \neq 0 \right\}.$$

The condition imposed on b arises from the stricture that division by zero is not permitted among the integers and reals.³

Let us amplify the consequences of these definitions. Is the number 25 rational? Yes, indeed. But where is the denominator? It is *implicit* and equals 1. The fact that

$$25 = \frac{25}{1}$$

makes it clear that 25 is a rational number. Every integer is a rational number.

And it is obvious from the definition that $\frac{2}{3}$ is a rational number. But is $-\frac{11}{16}$ a rational number? Yes, indeed, because the definition depends upon the *integer* a and the *non-zero integer* b , where both integers—being drawn from \mathbb{Z} —can be signed.

When a rational number is expressed as a decimal, that decimal can either terminate or recur without end.

For example, the fraction $\frac{1}{3} = 0.\overline{3}$ has a recurring decimal representation as revealed by division. The line on top indicates the portion of the decimal which recurs—in this case, it is the single digit 3.

When we look at the fraction $\frac{1}{2} = 0.5$, we have an example of a terminating decimal. We could, however, pad zeros after the first decimal place, and claim that even a terminating decimal is recurring; witness that $\frac{1}{2} = 0.5 = 0.5000 \dots = 0.5\overline{0}$. But that is not the whole story.

We can further show that:

$$\frac{1}{2} = 0.5 = 0.5\overline{0} = 0.4\overline{9}.$$

It does seem strange to claim that two different decimals can express the *same* rational number $\frac{1}{2}$.

To see why, let us rewrite $0.4\overline{9}$ as

$$\begin{aligned} 0.4\overline{9} = 0.4999 \dots &= \frac{4}{10} + \frac{9}{100} + \frac{9}{1000} + \frac{9}{10000} \dots \\ &= \frac{4}{10} + 9 \left[\frac{1}{100} + \frac{1}{1000} + \frac{1}{10000} \dots \right] \end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

³See “The Two Most Important Numbers: Zero and One” for the reason why.

Consider now the expression in square brackets on the right hand side (RHS) of Equation (1). We can recognize it as a **geometric series** with first term $a = \frac{1}{100}$ and common ratio $r = \frac{1}{10}$. Since $r < 1$, the series is *convergent* and its **sum to infinity** [1] is given by:

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{a}{1-r} &= \frac{\frac{1}{100}}{[1 - \frac{1}{10}]} \\ &= \frac{[\frac{1}{100}]}{[\frac{9}{10}]} \\ &= [\frac{1}{100}] [\frac{10}{9}] \\ &= \frac{1}{90}.\end{aligned}\tag{2}$$

Substituting for the terms in square brackets in Equation (1), we get

$$0.4\bar{9} = \frac{4}{10} + 9 \left[\frac{1}{90} \right] = \frac{4}{10} + \frac{1}{10} = \frac{5}{10} = \frac{1}{2}.$$

Even if it seems counter-intuitive that $0.4\bar{9} = 0.5 = 0.5\bar{0} = \frac{1}{2}$, it is mathematically consistent and correct. One may therefore hazard a guess, and correctly so, that *every rational number may be expressed as a recurring decimal*.⁴

Infinite sums have this property of upending our “intuition” about what is correct. So, we have to be extra careful when dealing with the value of a limit as some variable goes to infinity. Moreover, infinity, represented by ∞ is *not* a number and cannot be treated as one. It is simply a convenient shorthand symbol. This caveat should be kept in mind when we encounter infinite sums involving π , as shown for example, in Figure 1.

Irrational Numbers

Irrational numbers are numbers which are *not rational*. The discovery that $\sqrt{2}$ —which is the length of the diagonal of a unit square—was not rational [2,3], caused the first ripples of disquiet in the ancient mathematical world, because it upset the prevailing philosophy that ratios of whole numbers alone ruled the world.

There are many celebrated proofs that $\sqrt{2}$ is not the ratio of two integers and is therefore irrational [4]. Nevertheless, it took almost two millennia for $\sqrt{2}$ to be accepted into the fold of properly defined numbers [5].

An irrational number like $\sqrt{2}$ does not have any recurring sequence of digits when expressed as a decimal. But the absence of recurring sequences in the decimal representation of a number should not solely be used to identify a number as irrational, because some rationals with large denominators can and do have very long recurring sequences, which may be difficult to detect by visual inspection. For example, $\frac{8119}{5741}$ —which incidentally is a rational approximation to $\sqrt{2}$ —has a recurring sequence of length 5740.⁵

⁴In this case either the digit 9 or the digit 0 recurs.

⁵Also called the *period* of a repeating decimal. See <https://www.wolframalpha.com/input?i=8119%2F5741>.

The irrationals exceed in number the rationals

If you are curious, you might wonder which are the more numerous: the rationals or the irrationals. You might guess that the familiar rationals are more numerous than the obscure irrationals. But you would be mistaken.

In fact, **the irrationals far exceed in number the rational numbers** [6]. This fact is stated baldly here, because going into the whys and wherefores of this claim will lead us too far astray from our focus on π . It is an interesting fact, though, that you should stash away for future use.

A second dichotomy

The real numbers may also be split another way into two mutually exclusive sets: the *algebraic numbers* and the *transcendental numbers*. Every real number is *either* an algebraic number or a transcendental number; it cannot be both.

It bears noting though, that both the algebraic and the transcendental numbers may be complex, i.e., have an imaginary part. But in this blog, we have restricted our universe to the real numbers. In this blog, we will not consider algebraic or transcendental numbers that embody the imaginary unit.

The Algebraic Numbers

An algebraic number is the root of a non-zero polynomial with integer or rational coefficients. Things have gotten abstract enough thus far for eyes to be glazed. So, let us invoke some examples to revive attention.

The simplest algebraic number is an integer. Let us take 5 as an example. If the polynomial $p(x) = x - 5$, its root is when $p(x) = 0$, i.e., when $x - 5 = 0$. This implies $x = 5$ and we have shown that 5 is algebraic *by definition*.

Note that we could have used any other polynomial with the same root, such as $q(x) = 2x - 10$. All we need do is find *one* polynomial whose root equals the number and we have shown that the number is algebraic.

Likewise, the rational number $-\left(\frac{2}{3}\right)$ is the root of the polynomial $3x + 2$ and is therefore algebraic.

We may assert that *every rational number is algebraic and therefore not transcendental*.

But what about an irrational number like $\sqrt{2}$? Is it algebraic? The polynomial $(x^2 - 2)$ has a zeros at $\pm\sqrt{2}$, thereby demonstrating that both $\pm\sqrt{2}$ are algebraic.

Can an algebraic number be a complex root of a real polynomial? Let us find the roots for the real polynomial $x^2 - 10x + 34$:

$$\begin{aligned}x^2 - 10x + 34 &= 0 \\(x^2 - 10x + 25) + 9 &= 0 \\(x - 5)^2 + 9 &= 0 \\(x - 5)^2 &= -9 \\(x - 5) &= \pm 3i \\x &= 5 \pm 3i\end{aligned}$$

We have just shown that an algebraic number can be a complex root of a real polynomial. While we will not consider complex algebraic numbers in this blog, it is useful to know that they do exist.

The Transcendental Numbers

Numbers which are *not algebraic* are assigned the rather exalted title of transcendental numbers. But proving that a particular number is transcendental is no mean task. We will accept a number as transcendental if it has been proved to be so by professional mathematicians. Numbers like π , e , and $\ln 2$ are transcendental.

All transcendental numbers are perforce irrational.

Transcendental numbers can also be complex, but we will steer clear of that category here, because we don't want to get more dizzy (mathematically) than we already are right now! 😊.

Taxonomy via Tetrachotomy

We have established a **tetrachotomy** among the real numbers. But the four parts are not mutually exclusive. They overlap. There are two non-overlapping dichotomies: the rationals and irrationals as one pair, and the algebraic and transcendental numbers as the other.

It is noteworthy that irrational numbers like $\sqrt{2}$ and transcendental numbers like π and e are denoted, not by values, but by *symbols*.

This classification of the real numbers seems to be crying out for a Venn diagram to depict it visually. But before we do that, let us marshal the facts we have gathered so far:

1. The real numbers are represented by the standard set \mathbb{R} .
2. The rationals are represented by the standard set \mathbb{Q} .
3. There is no assigned symbol for the set of irrationals. Because it is the set difference between the reals and the rationals, it is often denoted as $\mathbb{R} \setminus \mathbb{Q}$. But this notation is cumbersome. So, let us define a non-standard set \mathbb{I} and let it stand for the irrationals: $\mathbb{I} = \mathbb{R} \setminus \mathbb{Q}$.
4. Let us introduce the non-standard symbol $\mathbb{A}_{\mathbb{R}}$ for the set of real algebraic numbers.
5. Let us introduce the non-standard symbol $\mathbb{T}_{\mathbb{R}}$ for the set of real transcendental numbers.
6. The real numbers are the union of the rational and the irrational numbers: $\mathbb{R} = \mathbb{Q} \cup \mathbb{I}$.
7. The real numbers are also the union of the algebraic and transcendental numbers that do not embody the imaginary unit i : $\mathbb{R} = \mathbb{A}_{\mathbb{R}} \cup \mathbb{T}_{\mathbb{R}}$
8. Algebraic numbers can be either rational or irrational: $\mathbb{A}_{\mathbb{R}} \subseteq (\mathbb{Q} \cup \mathbb{I})$.
9. All rational numbers are algebraic: $\mathbb{Q} \subset \mathbb{A}_{\mathbb{R}}$
10. No rational number is transcendental: $\mathbb{Q} \cap \mathbb{T}_{\mathbb{R}} = \emptyset$
11. All real transcendental numbers are irrational: $\mathbb{T}_{\mathbb{R}} \subset \mathbb{I}$.
12. The irrational numbers contain *all* transcendental numbers and a subset of the algebraic numbers, again excluding those that embody i : $(\mathbb{T}_{\mathbb{R}} \subset \mathbb{I}) \wedge (\mathbb{A}_{\mathbb{R}} \cap \mathbb{I} \neq \emptyset)$.

That was quite mouthful even with mathematical symbols. We are now ready to draw the Venn diagram for the tetrachotomy of the real numbers.

And surprise! surprise! There are only *three* regions in the Venn diagram that are populated. So, taking mathematical liberties, we may say that our tetrachotomy was not “linearly independent”.

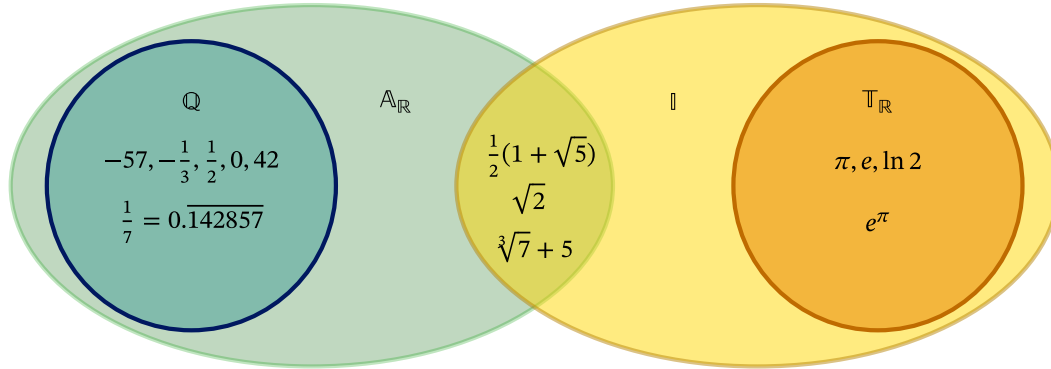


Figure 2: Venn diagram showing the rationals, \mathbb{Q} , the irrationals, \mathbb{I} , the real algebraics, $\mathbb{A}_{\mathbb{R}}$, and the real transcendentals $\mathbb{T}_{\mathbb{R}}$. From this diagram, we may assert that $\mathbb{R} = \mathbb{A}_{\mathbb{R}} \cup \mathbb{I}$. Note where π resides, and also that there are only *three* populated regions in the Venn diagram: \mathbb{Q} , $(\mathbb{A}_{\mathbb{R}} \cap \mathbb{I})$, and $\mathbb{T}_{\mathbb{R}}$.

Enter π

We have gone through all this huffing and puffing to place π contextually among the real numbers. Let us list its characteristics:

1. It is not a rational number, which means that it cannot be expressed as the ratio of two whole numbers, the denominator being non-zero.
2. Its decimal representation is neither finite nor does it contain a recurring segment, regardless of how long the decimal is.
3. It is also not the root to any non-zero polynomial equation whose coefficients are integers or rational numbers.
4. When Pi is used in equations, the placeholder symbol π is used.

These properties have earned for π the rather exalted title of transcendental number, which it shares with other pivotal numbers like e . Pi is not only important, it is also tantalizing. Pi is like a beautiful butterfly that cannot be caught in the net of finitude. It is like a rainbow that is beautiful to behold from afar, but can never be reached.

One could almost say that π is not numerically friendly. And you would not be too wrong. Rational approximations for π , like $\frac{22}{7}$, are used in practice. And the matter would have rested there were it not for the human quest for beauty.

The unpredictability of successive decimal places of π has enchanted mathematicians and still continues to engross them. Pi has been calculated to an unprecedented number of decimal places, and such a quest is certainly driven, not by practical necessity, but possibly by the need for aesthetic fulfilment.

This quest for the unattainable—but supremely beautiful—has engaged human minds to seek π in countless infinite sums, such are shown in Figure 1. These equations are sometimes starkly simple and at other times thoroughly mystifying, and embody the paradox that is π more succinctly than all the words in the world.

Madhava-Gregory series

What does the equality sign mean for an infinite sum? How can a sum of rationals equal and irrational number? A transcendental number? The meaning of $=$ is therefore not in the sense of $2 + 2 = 4$ or even of $x - 5 = 0$. It is something similar and yet something different, because, despite Cantor, we have not tamed the idea of infinity yet.

Acknowledgements

Wolfram Alpha for several results.

Feedback

Please **email me** your comments and corrections.

<https://math.stackexchange.com/questions/4675933/is-the-equal-symbol-in-an-infinite-series-misleading-notation>

<https://mathmonks.com/transcendental-numbers>

<https://gfredericks.com/blog/>

<https://www.quora.com/How-do-you-draw-a-Venn-diagram-showing-the-relationship-of-the-set-of-real-rational-irrational-integers-and-non-integer-numbers>

https://www.reddit.com/r/math/comments/725nxu/how_would_you_improve_this_types_of_numbers_venn/

<https://i.pinimg.com/736x/57/db/7f/57db7fb6dd9a4f2649b0d8ae5689ff98-math-teacher-math-class.jpg>

<https://study.com/skill/learn/how-to-construct-a-venn-diagram-to-classify-real-numbers-explanation.html>

Real Rational Integer Irrational Algebraic Transcendental Complex etc.

Hark back to

Venn diagram showing the number taxonomy can be challenging **Venn diagram is shown here**. This Venn diagram is flawed.

<https://www.quora.com/Why-cant-we-draw-a-Venn-diagram-for-4-sets-with-circles-and-how-can-we-solve-it>

<https://www.gauthmath.com>

<https://tex.stackexchange.com/questions/668565/how-can-i-draw-a-shape-with-overlapping-regions-with-opacity>

https://www.cut-the-knot.org/proofs/sq_root.shtml

<https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=40750230>

References

- [1] —. Sum to Infinity of a Geometric Series—Maths. Edexcel A Level Pure Maths. Retrieved 28 July 2024 from <https://senecalearning.com/en-GB/revision-notes/a-level/maths/edexcel/pure-maths/4-2-9-sum-to-infinity-of-a-geometric-series>
- [2] Various. 2014. Irrationality of the square root of 2. History of Science and Mathematics Stack Exchange. Retrieved 29 July 2024 from <https://hsm.stackexchange.com/questions/2/irrationality-of-the-square-root-of-2>
- [3] Brian Clegg. 2004. The Dangerous Ratio. Retrieved 29 July 2024 from <https://nrich.maths.org/2671>
- [4] Alexander Bogomolny. 2018. Square root of 2 is irrational. Retrieved 29 July 2024 from https://www.cut-the-knot.org/proofs/sq_root.shtml
- [5] Jordana Cepelewicz. 2024. How the Square Root of 2 Became a Number. Quanta Magazine. Retrieved 29 July 2024 from <https://www.quantamagazine.org/how-the-square-root-of-2-became-a-number-20240621/>
- [6] George C. 2017. Are there more rational numbers than irrational numbers?. Socratic. Retrieved 28 July 2024 from <https://socratic.org/questions/58c80a37b72cff29df40c794>