Curve Integrals

Recall (or accept) from physics that the work (which has the same units as energy) done by a constant force F over a distance D is $W = FD$. This describes the case of the force pointing in the direction of motion. A slightly more general equation is $W = F \cdot D$, where F is the force vector and D is the displacement vector (imagine pushing a box). But this equation still assumes a straight-line displacement and constant force in a fixed direction. What if our trajectory is a curve $C(t)$ and the force is a vector quantity $F(X)$ that depends on position?

If one zooms in close enough on a continuous vector field, it looks constant, and similarly a curve will look like a straight line segment. The work done by the force on a small time interval $(t, t + \Delta t)$ can then be approximated as

$$F(C(t)) \cdot (C(t + \Delta t) - C(t)).$$

We can rewrite this as

$$F(C(t)) \cdot \frac{C(t + \Delta t) - C(t)}{\Delta t} \Delta t.$$

If we add up these small bits of work and let $\Delta t \to 0$, we end up with an integral.

Thus we define the **integral of F along C** from time a to time b as

$$\int_C F = \int_a^b F(C(t)) \cdot \frac{dC}{dt} dt.$$

Example. $F(x, y) = (x^2 y, y^3)$. Find the integral along the straight line from $(0, 0)$ to $(1, 1)$.

We take $C(t) = (t, t)$, $0 \leq t \leq 1$. $C'(t) = (1, 1)$. Then

$$F(C(t)) = (t^3, t^3).$$

Our integral is then

$$\int_0^1 (t^3, t^3) \cdot (1, 1) dt = \int_0^1 2t^3 dt = 1/2.$$

In 2-space, if we write $F = (f, g)$, $C(t) = (x(t), y(t))$, then the curve integral can be expressed

$$\int_C F = \int_C f dx + g dy.$$

Symbolically, the expression $f dx + g dy = (f, g) \cdot (dx, dy)$. So one can write

$$\int_C F = \int_a^b \left[f(x(t), y(t)) \frac{dx}{dt} + g(x(t), y(t)) \frac{dy}{dt} \right] dt.$$

Remark: The curve integral is independent of the particular parametrization you take. That is, if $C_1(t)$ and $C_2(t)$ trace out the same curve but proceed at different rates, the integral of F over either curve will be the same.

Example. Compute the integral of $F(x, y) = (x^2, xy)$ on the parabola $x = y^2$ from $(1, -1)$ to $(1, 1)$.

We can parametrize our curve as $C(t) = (t^2, t)$, $-1 \le t \le 1$. The integral is then

$$\int_C F \cdot dC = \int_{-1}^{1} f(C(t)) \cdot C'(t) dt = \int_{-1}^{1} (t^4, t^3) \cdot (2t+1) dt = \int_{-1}^{1} (2t^5 + t^3) dt.$$

Example. Let

$$G(x, y) = \left(\frac{-y}{x^2 + y^2}, \frac{x}{x^2 + y^2} \right).$$

Integrate G on the circle of radius 3 centered at the origin from $(3, 0)$ to $(3\sqrt{3}/2, 3/2)$.

We can parametrize the curve C as $C(t) = (3\cos t, 3\sin t)$ where $0 \le t \le \pi/6$, so that $C'(t) = 3(-\sin t, \cos t)$. Now,

$$G(C(t)) = \left(\frac{-3\sin t}{9}, \frac{3\cos t}{9} \right) = \frac{1}{3}(-\sin t, \cos t).$$

So the curve integral is

$$\int_0^{\pi/6} G(C(t)) \cdot C'(t) dt = \int_0^{\pi/6} \frac{1}{3}(-\sin t, \cos t) \cdot [3(-\sin t, \cos t)] dt = \pi/6.$$

Notice that $\pi/6$ is also the change in angle of the parametrized particle over the course of its journey. This is not a coincidence.

An Aside on Differential Forms

A function $f(x, y, z)$ has gradient

$$\operatorname{grad} f = \left(\frac{\partial f}{\partial x}, \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}, \frac{\partial f}{\partial z} \right).$$

The **total differential** of f is

$$df = \frac{\partial f}{\partial x} dx + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y} dy + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z} dz.$$

You can view this as a purely symbolic thing, perhaps a fancier way of writing the gradient. However, there is something meaningful about this expression. If we think of dx, dy, dz as small changes in x, y, and z, then this expression gives a way of approximating the corresponding change in f. Remember that differentiability means that for H in some small enough neighborhood of the origin, we can write

$$f(X + H) - f(X) = \operatorname{grad} f(X) \cdot H + \|H\| g(H)$$

where $g(H) \to 0$ as $H \to 0$. The left hand side is the change in f, say Δf, going from X to $X + H$. H itself is the change in input, which we could write $H = (\Delta x, \Delta y, \Delta z)$, where we imagine these are small changes in x, y, and z. Dropping the "error" term $\|H\| g(H)$, this reads

$$\Delta f \approx \frac{\partial f}{\partial x} \Delta x + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y} \Delta y + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z} \Delta z.$$

Back to Curve Integrals

Given $x = r\cos\theta$ and $y = r\sin\theta$, we can form their total differentials

$$dx = \cos\theta dr - r\sin\theta d\theta,\ dy = \sin\theta dr + r\cos\theta d\theta.$$

This is equivalent to

$$dx = \cos\theta dr - y d\theta,\ dy = \sin\theta dr + x d\theta.$$

We can rewrite this as

$$dx = \frac{x}{\sqrt{x^2+y^2}} dr - y d\theta,\ dy = \frac{y}{\sqrt{x^2+y^2}} dr + x d\theta.$$

In turn, we can say

$$-y dx = \frac{-xy}{\sqrt{x^2+y^2}} dr - y^2 d\theta,\ dy = \frac{xy}{\sqrt{x^2+y^2}} dr + x^2 d\theta.$$

Finally, adding these two equations together and solving for $d\theta$ yields,

$$d\theta = \frac{-y}{x^2+y^2} dx + \frac{x}{x^2+y^2} dy.$$

This differential form is telling us that integral of the right hand side above will *always give the change in angle of the position vector over the course of traversing the curve.*