16.3 Path Independence, Potential Functions, and Conservative Fields

Project Project

In gravitational and electric fields, the amount of work it takes to move a mass or a charge from one point to another depends only on the object's initial and final positions and not on the path taken in between. This section discusses the notion of path independence of work integrals and describes the properties of fields in which work integrals are path independent. Work integrals are often easier to evaluate if they are path independent.

Path Independence

If A and B are two points in an open region D in space, the work $\int \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r}$ done in moving a particle from A to B by a field $\mathbf{F}$ defined on D usually depends on the path taken. For some special fields, however, the integral's value is the same for all paths from A to B.

DEFINITIONS Path Independence, Conservative Field

Let $\mathbf{F}$ be a field defined on an open region D in space, and suppose that for any two points A and B in D the work $\int_A^B \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r}$ done in moving from A to B is the same over all paths from A to B. Then the integral $\int \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r}$ is **path independent in *D*** and the field $\mathbf{F}$ is **conservative on *D***.

The word *conservative* comes from physics, where it refers to fields in which the principle of conservation of energy holds (it does, in conservative fields).

Under differentiability conditions normally met in practice, a field $\mathbf{F}$ is conservative if and only if it is the gradient field of a scalar function f; that is, if and only if $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$ for some f. The function f then has a special name.

DEFINITION Potential Function

If $\mathbf{F}$ is a field defined on D and $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$ for some scalar function f on D, then f is called a **potential function for F**.

An electric potential is a scalar function whose gradient field is an electric field. A gravitational potential is a scalar function whose gradient field is a gravitational field, and so on. As we will see, once we have found a potential function f for a field $\mathbf{F}$, we can evaluate all the work integrals in the domain of $\mathbf{F}$ over any path between A and B by

$$\int_A^B \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = \int_A^B \nabla f \cdot d\mathbf{r} = f(B) - f(A). \tag{1}$$

If you think of ∇f for functions of several variables as being something like the derivative f' for functions of a single variable, then you see that Equation (1) is the vector calculus analogue of the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus formula

$$\int_a^b f'(x)\, dx = f(b) - f(a).$$

Conservative fields have other remarkable properties we will study as we go along. For example, saying that $\mathbf{F}$ is conservative on D is equivalent to saying that the integral of $\mathbf{F}$ around every closed path in D is zero. Naturally, certain conditions on the curves, fields, and domains must be satisfied for Equation (1) to be valid. We discuss these conditions below.

Assumptions in Effect from Now On: Connectivity and Simple Connectivity

We assume that all curves are **piecewise smooth**, that is, made up of finitely many smooth pieces connected end to end, as discussed in Section 13.1. We also assume that the components of $\mathbf{F}$ have continuous first partial derivatives. When $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$, this continuity requirement guarantees that the mixed second derivatives of the potential function f are equal, a result we will find revealing in studying conservative fields $\mathbf{F}$.

We assume D to be an *open* region in space. This means that every point in D is the center of an open ball that lies entirely in D. We assume D to be **connected**, which in an open region means that every point can be connected to every other point by a smooth curve that lies in the region. Finally, we assume D is **simply connected**, which means every loop in D can be contracted to a point in D without ever leaving D. (If D consisted of space with a line segment removed, for example, D would not be simply connected. There would be no way to contract a loop around the line segment to a point without leaving D.)

Connectivity and simple connectivity are not the same, and neither implies the other. Think of connected regions as being in "one piece" and simply connected regions as not having any "holes that catch loops." All of space itself is both connected and simply connected. Some of the results in this chapter can fail to hold if applied to domains where these conditions do not hold. For example, the component test for conservative fields, given later in this section, is not valid on domains that are not simply connected.

Line Integrals in Conservative Fields

The following result provides a convenient way to evaluate a line integral in a conservative field. The result establishes that the value of the integral depends only on the endpoints and not on the specific path joining them.

THEOREM 1 The Fundamental Theorem of Line Integrals

1. Let $\mathbf{F} = M\mathbf{i} + N\mathbf{j} + P\mathbf{k}$ be a vector field whose components are continuous throughout an open connected region D in space. Then there exists a differentiable function f such that

$$\mathbf{F} = \nabla f = \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}\mathbf{i} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}\mathbf{j} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}\mathbf{k}$$

if and only if for all points A and B in D the value of $\int_A^B \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r}$ is independent of the path joining A to B in D.

2. If the integral is independent of the path from A to B, its value is

$$\int_A^B \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = f(B) - f(A).$$

Proof that $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$ Implies Path Independence of the Integral Suppose that A and B are two points in D and that C: $\mathbf{r}(t) = g(t)\mathbf{i} + h(t)\mathbf{j} + k(t)\mathbf{k}$, $a \le t \le b$, is a smooth curve in D joining A and B. Along the curve, f is a differentiable function of t and

$$\frac{df}{dt} = \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}\frac{dx}{dt} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}\frac{dy}{dt} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}\frac{dz}{dt}$$ Chain Rule with $x = g(t)$, $y = h(t)$, $z = k(t)$

$$= \nabla f \cdot \left(\frac{dx}{dt}\mathbf{i} + \frac{dy}{dt}\mathbf{j} + \frac{dz}{dt}\mathbf{k}\right) = \nabla f \cdot \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt} = \mathbf{F} \cdot \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt}.$$ Because $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$

Therefore,

$$\int_C \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = \int_{t=a}^{t=b} \mathbf{F} \cdot \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt}\, dt = \int_a^b \frac{df}{dt}\, dt$$

$$= f(g(t), h(t), k(t))\Big]_a^b = f(B) - f(A).$$

Thus, the value of the work integral depends only on the values of f at A and B and not on the path in between. This proves Part 2 as well as the forward implication in Part 1. We omit the more technical proof of the reverse implication. ■

EXAMPLE 1 Finding Work Done by a Conservative Field

Find the work done by the conservative field

$$\mathbf{F} = yz\mathbf{i} + xz\mathbf{j} + xy\mathbf{k} = \nabla(xyz)$$

along any smooth curve C joining the point $A(-1, 3, 9)$ to $B(1, 6, -4)$.

Solution With $f(x, y, z) = xyz$, we have

$$\begin{aligned}\int_A^B \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} &= \int_A^B \nabla f \cdot d\mathbf{r} && \mathbf{F} = \nabla f \\ &= f(B) - f(A) && \text{Fundamental Theorem, Part 2} \\ &= xyz|_{(1,6,-4)} - xyz|_{(-1,3,9)} \\ &= (1)(6)(-4) - (-1)(3)(9) \\ &= -24 + 27 = 3.\end{aligned}$$

■

THEOREM 2 Closed-Loop Property of Conservative Fields

The following statements are equivalent.

1. $\int \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = 0$ around every closed loop in D.
2. The field $\mathbf{F}$ is conservative on D.

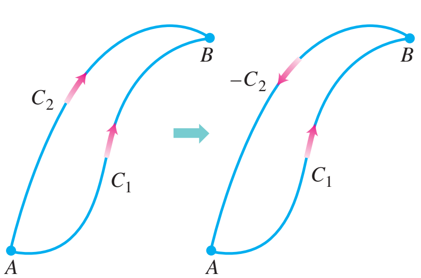

FIGURE 16.22 If we have two paths from A to B, one of them can be reversed to make a loop.

Proof that Part 1 ⇒ Part 2 We want to show that for any two points A and B in D, the integral of $\mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r}$ has the same value over any two paths C_1 and C_2 from A to B. We reverse the direction on C_2 to make a path $-C_2$ from B to A (Figure 16.22). Together, C_1 and $-C_2$ make a closed loop C, and

$$\int_{C_1} \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} - \int_{C_2} \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = \int_{C_1} \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} + \int_{-C_2} \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = \int_C \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = 0.$$

Thus, the integrals over C_1 and C_2 give the same value. Note that the definition of line integral shows that changing the direction along a curve reverses the sign of the line integral.

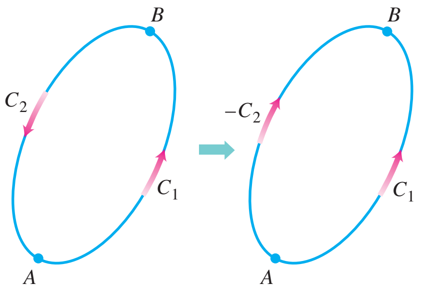

FIGURE 16.23 If A and B lie on a loop, we can reverse part of the loop to make two paths from A to B.

Proof that Part 2 $\Rightarrow$ Part 1 We want to show that the integral of $\mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r}$ is zero over any closed loop C. We pick two points A and B on C and use them to break C into two pieces: C_1 from A to B followed by C_2 from B back to A (Figure 16.23). Then

$$\oint_C \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = \int_{C_1} \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} + \int_{C_2} \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = \int_A^B \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} - \int_A^B \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = 0. \qquad \blacksquare$$

The following diagram summarizes the results of Theorems 1 and 2.

	Theorem 1		Theorem 2	
$\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$ on D	$\Leftrightarrow$	$\mathbf{F}$ conservative on D	$\Leftrightarrow$	$\oint_C \mathbf{F} \cdot d\mathbf{r} = 0$ over any closed path in D

Now that we see how convenient it is to evaluate line integrals in conservative fields, two questions remain.

1. How do we know when a given field $\mathbf{F}$ is conservative?
2. If $\mathbf{F}$ is in fact conservative, how do we find a potential function f (so that $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$)?

Finding Potentials for Conservative Fields

The test for being conservative is the following. Keep in mind our assumption that the domain of $\mathbf{F}$ is connected and simply connected.

Component Test for Conservative Fields

Let $\mathbf{F} = M(x, y, z)\mathbf{i} + N(x, y, z)\mathbf{j} + P(x, y, z)\mathbf{k}$ be a field whose component functions have continuous first partial derivatives. Then, $\mathbf{F}$ is conservative if and only if

$$\frac{\partial P}{\partial y} = \frac{\partial N}{\partial z}, \qquad \frac{\partial M}{\partial z} = \frac{\partial P}{\partial x}, \qquad \text{and} \qquad \frac{\partial N}{\partial x} = \frac{\partial M}{\partial y}. \tag{2}$$

Proof that Equations (2) hold if F is conservative There is a potential function f such that

$$\mathbf{F} = M\mathbf{i} + N\mathbf{j} + P\mathbf{k} = \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}\mathbf{i} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}\mathbf{j} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}\mathbf{k}.$$

Hence,

$$\begin{aligned}\frac{\partial P}{\partial y} &= \frac{\partial}{\partial y}\left(\frac{\partial f}{\partial z}\right) = \frac{\partial^2 f}{\partial y\,\partial z}\\ &= \frac{\partial^2 f}{\partial z\,\partial y}\\ &= \frac{\partial}{\partial z}\left(\frac{\partial f}{\partial y}\right) = \frac{\partial N}{\partial z}.\end{aligned}$$

Continuity implies that the mixed partial derivatives are equal.

The others in Equations (2) are proved similarly. $\blacksquare$

The second half of the proof, that Equations (2) imply that $\mathbf{F}$ is conservative, is a consequence of Stokes' Theorem, taken up in Section 16.7, and requires our assumption that the domain of $\mathbf{F}$ be simply connected.

Once we know that **F** is conservative, we usually want to find a potential function for **F**. This requires solving the equation $\nabla f = \mathbf{F}$ or

$$\frac{\partial f}{\partial x}\mathbf{i} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}\mathbf{j} + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}\mathbf{k} = M\mathbf{i} + N\mathbf{j} + P\mathbf{k}$$

for f. We accomplish this by integrating the three equations

$$\frac{\partial f}{\partial x} = M, \qquad \frac{\partial f}{\partial y} = N, \qquad \frac{\partial f}{\partial z} = P,$$

as illustrated in the next example.

You Try It

EXAMPLE 2 Finding a Potential Function

Show that $\mathbf{F} = (e^x \cos y + yz)\mathbf{i} + (xz - e^x \sin y)\mathbf{j} + (xy + z)\mathbf{k}$ is conservative and find a potential function for it.

Solution We apply the test in Equations (2) to

$$M = e^x \cos y + yz, \qquad N = xz - e^x \sin y, \qquad P = xy + z$$

and calculate

$$\frac{\partial P}{\partial y} = x = \frac{\partial N}{\partial z}, \qquad \frac{\partial M}{\partial z} = y = \frac{\partial P}{\partial x}, \qquad \frac{\partial N}{\partial x} = -e^x \sin y + z = \frac{\partial M}{\partial y}.$$

Together, these equalities tell us that there is a function f with $\nabla f = \mathbf{F}$.

We find f by integrating the equations

$$\frac{\partial f}{\partial x} = e^x \cos y + yz, \qquad \frac{\partial f}{\partial y} = xz - e^x \sin y, \qquad \frac{\partial f}{\partial z} = xy + z. \tag{3}$$

We integrate the first equation with respect to x, holding y and z fixed, to get

$$f(x, y, z) = e^x \cos y + xyz + g(y, z).$$

We write the constant of integration as a function of y and z because its value may change if y and z change. We then calculate $\partial f/\partial y$ from this equation and match it with the expression for $\partial f/\partial y$ in Equations (3). This gives

$$-e^x \sin y + xz + \frac{\partial g}{\partial y} = xz - e^x \sin y,$$

so $\partial g/\partial y = 0$. Therefore, g is a function of z alone, and

$$f(x, y, z) = e^x \cos y + xyz + h(z).$$

We now calculate $\partial f/\partial z$ from this equation and match it to the formula for $\partial f/\partial z$ in Equations (3). This gives

$$xy + \frac{dh}{dz} = xy + z, \qquad \text{or} \qquad \frac{dh}{dz} = z,$$

so

$$h(z) = \frac{z^2}{2} + C.$$

Hence,

$$f(x, y, z) = e^x \cos y + xyz + \frac{z^2}{2} + C.$$

We have infinitely many potential functions of **F**, one for each value of C. ■

EXAMPLE 3 Showing That a Field Is Not Conservative

Show that $\mathbf{F} = (2x - 3)\mathbf{i} - z\mathbf{j} + (\cos z)\mathbf{k}$ is not conservative.

Solution We apply the component test in Equations (2) and find immediately that

$$\frac{\partial P}{\partial y} = \frac{\partial}{\partial y}(\cos z) = 0, \qquad \frac{\partial N}{\partial z} = \frac{\partial}{\partial z}(-z) = -1.$$

The two are unequal, so **F** is not conservative. No further testing is required. ■

Exact Differential Forms

As we see in the next section and again later on, it is often convenient to express work and circulation integrals in the "differential" form

$$\int_A^B M\,dx + N\,dy + P\,dz$$

mentioned in Section 16.2. Such integrals are relatively easy to evaluate if $M\,dx + N\,dy + P\,dz$ is the total differential of a function f. For then

$$\begin{aligned}\int_A^B M\,dx + N\,dy + P\,dz &= \int_A^B \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}dx + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}dy + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}dz \\ &= \int_A^B \nabla f \cdot d\mathbf{r} \\ &= f(B) - f(A). \qquad \text{Theorem 1}\end{aligned}$$

Thus,

$$\int_A^B df = f(B) - f(A),$$

just as with differentiable functions of a single variable.

> **DEFINITIONS** Exact Differential Form
>
> Any expression $M(x, y, z)\,dx + N(x, y, z)\,dy + P(x, y, z)\,dz$ is a **differential form**. A differential form is **exact** on a domain D in space if
>
> $$M\,dx + N\,dy + P\,dz = \frac{\partial f}{\partial x}dx + \frac{\partial f}{\partial y}dy + \frac{\partial f}{\partial z}dz = df$$
>
> for some scalar function f throughout D.

Notice that if $M\,dx + N\,dy + P\,dz = df$ on D, then $\mathbf{F} = M\mathbf{i} + N\mathbf{j} + P\mathbf{k}$ is the gradient field of f on D. Conversely, if $\mathbf{F} = \nabla f$, then the form $M\,dx + N\,dy + P\,dz$ is exact. The test for the form's being exact is therefore the same as the test for **F**'s being conservative.

Component Test for Exactness of $M\,dx + N\,dy + P\,dz$

The differential form $M\,dx + N\,dy + P\,dz$ is exact if and only if

$$\frac{\partial P}{\partial y} = \frac{\partial N}{\partial z}, \qquad \frac{\partial M}{\partial z} = \frac{\partial P}{\partial x}, \qquad \text{and} \qquad \frac{\partial N}{\partial x} = \frac{\partial M}{\partial y}.$$

This is equivalent to saying that the field $\mathbf{F} = M\mathbf{i} + N\mathbf{j} + P\mathbf{k}$ is conservative.

You Try It

EXAMPLE 4 Showing That a Differential Form Is Exact

Show that $y\,dx + x\,dy + 4\,dz$ is exact and evaluate the integral

$$\int_{(1,1,1)}^{(2,3,-1)} y\,dx + x\,dy + 4\,dz$$

over the line segment from $(1, 1, 1)$ to $(2, 3, -1)$.

Solution We let $M = y, N = x, P = 4$ and apply the Test for Exactness:

$$\frac{\partial P}{\partial y} = 0 = \frac{\partial N}{\partial z}, \qquad \frac{\partial M}{\partial z} = 0 = \frac{\partial P}{\partial x}, \qquad \frac{\partial N}{\partial x} = 1 = \frac{\partial M}{\partial y}.$$

These equalities tell us that $y\,dx + x\,dy + 4\,dz$ is exact, so

$$y\,dx + x\,dy + 4\,dz = df$$

for some function f, and the integral's value is $f(2, 3, -1) - f(1, 1, 1)$.

We find f up to a constant by integrating the equations

$$\frac{\partial f}{\partial x} = y, \qquad \frac{\partial f}{\partial y} = x, \qquad \frac{\partial f}{\partial z} = 4. \tag{4}$$

From the first equation we get

$$f(x, y, z) = xy + g(y, z).$$

The second equation tells us that

$$\frac{\partial f}{\partial y} = x + \frac{\partial g}{\partial y} = x, \qquad \text{or} \qquad \frac{\partial g}{\partial y} = 0.$$

Hence, g is a function of z alone, and

$$f(x, y, z) = xy + h(z).$$

The third of Equations (4) tells us that

$$\frac{\partial f}{\partial z} = 0 + \frac{dh}{dz} = 4, \qquad \text{or} \qquad h(z) = 4z + C.$$

Therefore,

$$f(x, y, z) = xy + 4z + C.$$

The value of the integral is

$$f(2, 3, -1) - f(1, 1, 1) = 2 + C - (5 + C) = -3.$$ ■