MECHANICS – Problem Set 5, assigned 4/5/2022, due 4/26/2022

This (final) problem set is relatively short, since you're also working on your presentations.

(1) Consider a 1D particle with unit mass moving in a potential $U(x)$, in other words the ODE $\ddot{x} = -U'(x)$, whose Hamiltonian is $H = T + U$ with $T = \frac{1}{2}\dot{x}^2$. Suppose the level set $H = E$ is a closed orbit, and let $A(E)$ be the area enclosed by this orbit in the $(x, \dot{x})$ plane. Show that the period of the orbit is then dA/dE.

(2) Consider a particle with unit mass in the plane, which is constrained to stay on the circle $|x| = r(t)$ where r is a fixed function of time. (Aside from this constraint there are no other forces). In polar coordinates, the particle's location is fully determined by $\theta(t)$ (since its distance from the origin $r(t)$ is fixed in advance).

  (a) What is the associated Lagrangian variational principle? What ODE must $\theta(t)$ solve?

  (b) What is the Hamiltonian description of this mechanical system?

  (c) Is the value of H conserved? Why or why not?

(3) (The "principle of least travel time.") Consider an inhomogeneous medium in which the speed of travel at x is $1/f(x)$ (a positive function of location, independent of direction). Our starting point is the observation that for a parametrized path $y(s)$ from $y(s_1) = x_1$ to $y(s_2) = x_2$, the associated travel time is

$$\int_{s_1}^{s_2} f(y(s))|\dot{y}|\,ds.$$

A critical point of this functional is known as a "path of least travel time" (though this terminology is sloppy, since it might be just a saddle point rather than a local minimum of the functional). Consider the mechanical system with Lagrangian $L(x, \dot{x}) = \frac{1}{2}f^2(x)|\dot{x}|^2$. Show that $x(t)$ is a critical point of the associated Lagrangian variational principle

$$\int_{t_1}^{t_2} \tfrac{1}{2}f^2(x(t))|\dot{x}|^2\,dt$$

if and only if (i) it is a path of least travel time, and (2) the path is parametrized so that $f^2(x(t)|\dot{x}(t)|^2$ is constant. (Note: this problem generalizes the case $f = 1$, which was discussed in the Lecture 8 notes.)

(4) Consider a 3-dimensional particle moving under the influence of a force $F = -\nabla U$. Suppose that in cylindrical coordinates (ρ, θ, z), the potential has the form $U = U(\rho, k\theta + z)$ for some constant k. Show that then $m\dot{z} - m\rho^2\dot{\theta}/k$ is constant along trajectories. (This is another instance of Noether's theorem.)