

Teaching the Kepler laws for freshmen.

Maris van Haandel*

RSG Pantarijn, Wageningen, the Netherlands

Gert Heckman†

IMAPP, Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands

(Dated: November 12, 2007)

We present a natural proof of Kepler's law of ellipses in terms of Euclidean geometry, which we believe is new. Moreover we discuss two existing Euclidean geometric proofs, one by Feynman in his Lost Lecture from 1964 and the other by Newton in the Principia of 1687.

PACS numbers:

I. INTRODUCTION.

One of the highlights of classical mechanics is the mathematical derivation of the three experimentally observed Kepler laws of planetary motion from Newton's laws of motion and of gravitation. Newton published his theory of gravitation in 1687 in the Principia Mathematica [1]. After two short introductions, one with definitions and the other with axioms (the laws of motion), Newton discussed the Kepler laws in the first three sections of Book 1 (in just 40 pages, without ever mentioning the name of Kepler!)

Kepler's second law (motion is planar and equal areas are swept out in equal times) is an easy consequence of the conservation of angular momentum $\mathbf{L} = \mathbf{r} \times \mathbf{p}$, and holds in greater generality for any central force field. All this is explained well by Newton in Propositions 1 and 2.

Kepler's first law (planetary orbits are ellipses with the center of the force field at a focus) however is specific for the attractive $1/r^2$ force field. Using Euclidean geometry Newton derives in Proposition 11 that the Kepler laws can only hold for an attractive $1/r^2$ force field. The reverse statement that an attractive $1/r^2$ force field leads to elliptical orbits Newton concludes in Corollary 1 of Proposition 13. Tacitly he assumes for this argument that the equation of motion $\mathbf{F} = m\mathbf{a}$ has a unique solution for given initial position and initial velocity. Theorems about existence and uniqueness of solutions of such a differential equation have only been formulated and mathematically rigorously been proven in the 19th century. However there can be little doubt that Newton did grasp these properties of his equation $\mathbf{F} = m\mathbf{a}$ [2].

Somewhat later in 1710 Jakob Hermann and Johan Bernoulli gave a direct proof of Kepler's first law, which is still the standard proof for modern text books on classical mechanics [3]. One writes the position vector \mathbf{r} in the plane of motion in polar coordinates r and θ . The trick is to transform the equation of motion $m\mathbf{a} = -k\mathbf{r}/r^3$ with variable the time t into a second order differential

equation of the scalar function $u = 1/r$ with variable the angle θ . This differential equation can be solved exactly, and yields the equation of an ellipse in polar coordinates [4].

Another popular proof goes by writing down the so called Runge-Lenz vector

$$\mathbf{K} = \mathbf{p} \times \mathbf{L} - km\mathbf{r}/r$$

with $\mathbf{p} = m\mathbf{v}$ momentum and $\mathbf{F}(\mathbf{r}) = -k\mathbf{r}/r^3$ the force field of the Kepler problem. The Runge-Lenz vector \mathbf{K} turns out to be conserved, i.e. $\dot{\mathbf{K}} = \mathbf{0}$. This result can be derived by a direct computation as indicated in Section 2. An alternative geometric argument is sketched in Section 3. Working out the equation $\mathbf{r} \cdot \mathbf{K} = rK \cos \theta$ gives the equation of an ellipse in polar coordinates [4]. The geometric meaning of the Runge-Lenz vector becomes clear only a posteriori as a vector pointing in the direction of the major axis of the ellipse. But the start of the proof to write down the Runge-Lenz vector remains a trick. For a historical account of the Runge-Lenz vector we refer to Goldstein [5]. Goldstein traces the Runge-Lenz vector back to Laplace in his *Traité de Mécanique Céleste* from 1798. However the Runge-Lenz vector already appeared in a paper of Lagrange from 1781 [6], and as far as we know this is the oldest reference on the Runge-Lenz vector. Lagrange writes the Runge-Lenz vector down after algebraic manipulations and without any geometric motivation. It is clear by now, that the name Runge-Lenz vector is inappropriate, but with its widespread use in modern literature it seems too late to change that.

The purpose of this note is to present in Section 2 a proof of the Kepler laws for which a priori the reasoning is well motivated in both physical and geometric terms. In Section 3 we review the hodographic proof as given by Feynman in his "Lost Lecture" [7], and in Section 4 we discuss Newton's proof from the Principia [1]. All three proofs are based on Euclidean geometry, although we do use the language of vector calculus in order to make it more readable for people of the 21st century. We feel that our proof is really the simplest of the three, and at the same time it gives more refined information (namely the length of the major axis $2a = -k/H$ of the ellips \mathcal{E}). In fact we think that our proof in Section 2 can compete

*Electronic address: marisvanhaandel@wanadoo.nl

†Electronic address: G.Heckman@math.ru.nl

equally well both in transparency and in level of computation with the standard proof of Jakob Hermann and Johann Bernoulli, making it an appropriate alternative to present in a freshman course on classical mechanics.

II. A EUCLIDEAN PROOF OF KEPLER'S FIRST LAW.

We shall use inner products $\mathbf{u} \cdot \mathbf{v}$ and outer products $\mathbf{u} \times \mathbf{v}$ of vectors \mathbf{u} and \mathbf{v} in \mathbb{R}^3 , the compatibility conditions

$$\mathbf{u} \cdot (\mathbf{v} \times \mathbf{w}) = (\mathbf{u} \times \mathbf{v}) \cdot \mathbf{w}$$

$$\mathbf{u} \times (\mathbf{v} \times \mathbf{w}) = (\mathbf{u} \cdot \mathbf{w})\mathbf{v} - (\mathbf{u} \cdot \mathbf{v})\mathbf{w}$$

and the Leibniz product rules

$$(\mathbf{u} \cdot \mathbf{v})' = \dot{\mathbf{u}} \cdot \mathbf{v} + \mathbf{u} \cdot \dot{\mathbf{v}}$$

$$(\mathbf{u} \times \mathbf{v})' = \dot{\mathbf{u}} \times \mathbf{v} + \mathbf{u} \times \dot{\mathbf{v}}$$

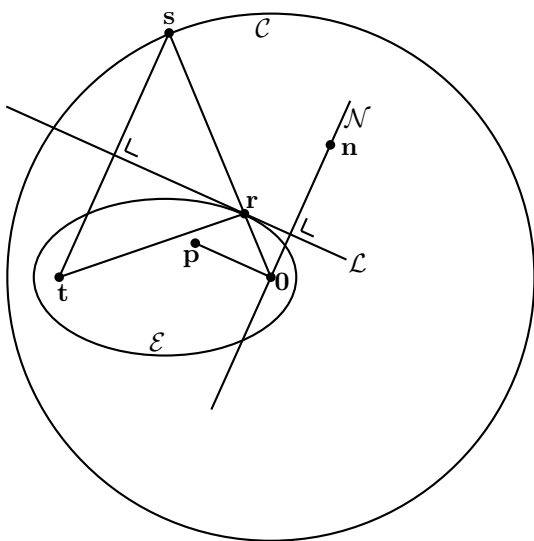
without further explanation.

For a central force field $\mathbf{F}(\mathbf{r}) = f(r)\mathbf{r}/r$ the angular momentum vector $\mathbf{L} = \mathbf{r} \times \mathbf{p}$ is conserved by Newton's law of motion $\mathbf{F} = \dot{\mathbf{p}}$, thereby leading to Kepler's second law. For a spherically symmetric central force field $\mathbf{F}(\mathbf{r}) = f(r)\mathbf{r}/r$ the energy

$$H = p^2/2m + V(r), \quad V(r) = - \int f(r) dr$$

is conserved as well. These are the general initial remarks.

From now on consider the Kepler problem $f(r) = -k/r^2$ en $V(r) = -k/r$ with $k > 0$ a coupling constant. By conservation of energy the motion for fixed energy $H < 0$ is bounded inside a sphere with center $\mathbf{0}$ and radius $-k/H$. Consider the following picture of the plane perpendicular to \mathbf{L} .



The circle \mathcal{C} with center $\mathbf{0}$ and radius $-k/H$ is the boundary of a disc where motion with energy $H < 0$ takes place. Let $\mathbf{s} = -k\mathbf{r}/rH$ be the projection of \mathbf{r} from the center $\mathbf{0}$ on this circle \mathcal{C} . The line \mathcal{L} through \mathbf{r} with direction vector \mathbf{p} is the tangent line of the orbit \mathcal{E} at position \mathbf{r} with velocity \mathbf{v} . Let \mathbf{t} be the orthogonal reflection of the point \mathbf{s} in the line \mathcal{L} . As time varies, the position vector \mathbf{r} moves along the orbit \mathcal{E} , and likewise \mathbf{s} moves along the circle \mathcal{C} . It is a good question to investigate how the point \mathbf{t} moves.

Theorem. *The point \mathbf{t} equals \mathbf{K}/mH and therefore is conserved.*

Proof. The line \mathcal{N} spanned by $\mathbf{n} = \mathbf{p} \times \mathbf{L}$ is perpendicular to \mathcal{L} . The point \mathbf{t} is obtained from \mathbf{s} by subtracting twice the orthogonal projection of $\mathbf{s} - \mathbf{r}$ on the line \mathcal{N} , and therefore

$$\mathbf{t} = \mathbf{s} - 2((\mathbf{s} - \mathbf{r}) \cdot \mathbf{n})\mathbf{n}/n^2.$$

Now

$$\mathbf{s} = -k\mathbf{r}/rH$$

$$(\mathbf{s} - \mathbf{r}) \cdot \mathbf{n} = -(H + k/r)\mathbf{r} \cdot (\mathbf{p} \times \mathbf{L})/H = -(H + k/r)L^2/H$$

$$n^2 = p^2L^2 = 2m(H + k/r)L^2$$

and therefore

$$\mathbf{t} = -k\mathbf{r}/rH + \mathbf{n}/mH = \mathbf{K}/mH$$

with $\mathbf{K} = \mathbf{p} \times \mathbf{L} - km\mathbf{r}/r$ the Runge-Lenz vector. The final step $\dot{\mathbf{K}} = \mathbf{0}$ is derived by a straightforward computation using the compatibility relations and the Leibniz product rules for inner and outer products of vectors in \mathbb{R}^3 . \square

Corollary. *The orbit \mathcal{E} is an ellipse with foci $\mathbf{0}$ and \mathbf{t} , and major axis equal to $2a = -k/H$.*

Proof. Indeed we have

$$|\mathbf{t} - \mathbf{r}| + |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{0}| = |\mathbf{s} - \mathbf{r}| + |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{0}| = |\mathbf{s} - \mathbf{0}| = -k/H.$$

Hence \mathcal{E} is an ellipse with foci $\mathbf{0}$ and \mathbf{t} , and major axis $2a = -k/H$. \square

The above proof has two advantages over the earlier mentioned proofs of Kepler's first law. The conserved vector $\mathbf{t} = \mathbf{K}/mH$ is a priori well motivated in geometric terms. Moreover we use the gardener's definition of an ellipse. The gardener's definition, called that way because gardeners sometimes use this construction for making an oval flowerbed, is wellknown to freshmen. On the contrary, the equation of an ellipse in polar coordinates is unknown to most freshmen, and so additional explanation would be needed for that. Yet another advantage of our proof is that the solution of the equation of motion is

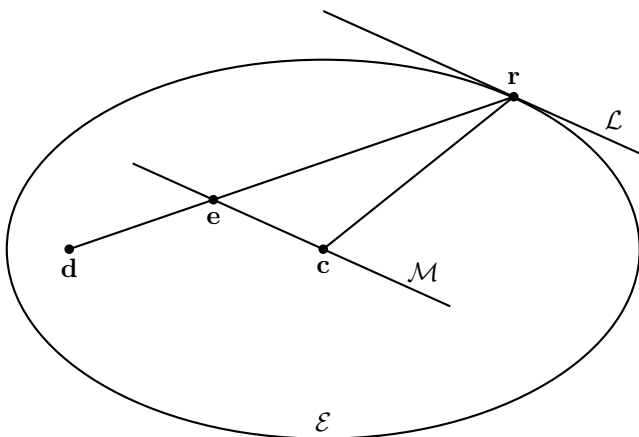
through $k\mathbf{r}/rL$ and $-\mathbf{K}/mL$. For example the ellipse \mathcal{F} with foci $\mathbf{0}$ and $-\mathbf{K}/mL$ and major axis equal to k/L has this property, but any scalar multiple $\lambda\mathcal{F}$ with $\lambda > 0$ equally satisfies this property. Since curves with the above property are uniquely characterized once an initial point on the curve is chosen we conclude that $\mathcal{E} = \lambda\mathcal{F}$ for some $\lambda > 0$. This proves Kepler's first law. A comparison with the picture of the previous section shows that $\mathcal{E} = \lambda\mathcal{F}$ with $\lambda = -L/H$. Indeed \mathcal{E} has foci $\mathbf{0}$ and $-\lambda\mathbf{K}/mL = \mathbf{K}/mH = \mathbf{t}$ and the major axis is equal to $\lambda k/L = -k/H = 2a$.

It is not clear to us if Feynman was aware of his use of the existence and uniqueness theorem for differential equations. On page 164 of [7] the authors quote Feynman: "Therefore, the solution to the problem is an ellipse - or the other way around, really, is what I proved: that the ellipse is a possible solution to the problem. And it is this solution. So the orbits are ellipses."

Apparently Feynman had trouble following Newton's proof of Kepler's first law. On page 111 of [7] the authors write: "In Feynman's lecture, this is the point at which he finds himself unable to follow Newton's line of argument any further, and so sets out to invent one of his own".

IV. NEWTON'S PROOF OF KEPLER'S FIRST LAW.

In this section we discuss the original proof by Newton of Kepler's first law as given in [1]. The proof starts with a nice general result.



Theorem. Let \mathcal{E} be a smooth closed curve bounding a convex region containing two points \mathbf{c} and \mathbf{d} . Let $\mathbf{r}(t)$ traverse the curve \mathcal{E} counterclockwise in time t , such that the areal speed with respect to the point \mathbf{c} is constant. Likewise let $\mathbf{r}(s)$ traverse the curve \mathcal{E} counterclockwise in time s , such that the areal speed with respect to the point \mathbf{d} is equal to the same constant.

Let \mathcal{L} be the tangent line to \mathcal{E} at the point \mathbf{r} , and let \mathbf{e} be the intersection point of the line \mathcal{M} , which is parallel

to \mathcal{L} through the point \mathbf{c} , and the line through the points \mathbf{r} and \mathbf{d} . Then the ratio of the two accelerations is given by

$$\left| \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{ds^2} \right| : \left| \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{dt^2} \right| = |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{e}|^3 : (|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{c}| \cdot |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{d}|^2).$$

Proof. Using the chain rule we get

$$\frac{d\mathbf{r}}{ds} = \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt} \cdot \frac{dt}{ds}$$

$$\frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{ds^2} = \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{dt^2} \cdot \left(\frac{dt}{ds}\right)^2 + \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt} \cdot \frac{d^2t}{ds^2}.$$

Because $d^2\mathbf{r}/dt^2$ is proportional to $\mathbf{c} - \mathbf{r}$ and likewise $d^2\mathbf{r}/ds^2$ is proportional to $\mathbf{d} - \mathbf{r}$ we see that

$$\left| \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{ds^2} \right| : \left| \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{dt^2} \right| = \left(\frac{dt}{ds}\right)^2 \cdot \left| \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{dt^2} \right| + \left| \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt} \cdot \frac{d^2t}{ds^2} \right| / \left(\frac{dt}{ds}\right)^2 : \left| \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{dt^2} \right| = \left(\frac{dt}{ds}\right)^2 \cdot |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{e}| : |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{c}|.$$

Since the curve \mathcal{E} is traversed with equal areal speed relative to the two points \mathbf{c} and \mathbf{d} we get

$$\left| \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{dt} \right| \cdot |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{e}| = \left| \frac{d\mathbf{r}}{ds} \right| \cdot |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{d}|$$

and therefore also

$$\frac{dt}{ds} = |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{e}| : |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{d}|.$$

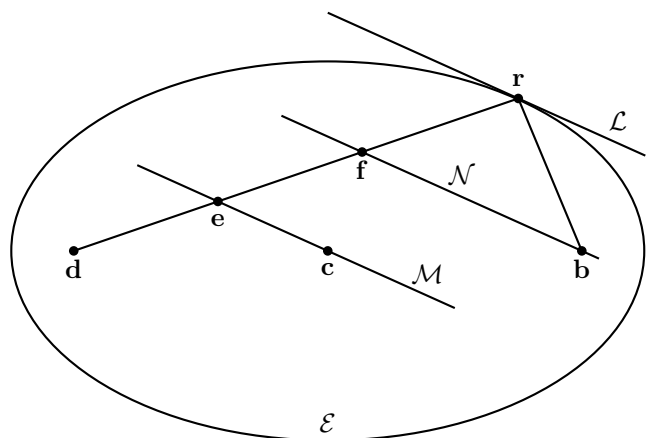
In turn this implies that

$$\left| \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{ds^2} \right| : \left| \frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{dt^2} \right| = \left(\frac{dt}{ds}\right)^2 \cdot |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{e}| : |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{c}| = |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{e}|^3 : (|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{c}| \cdot |\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{d}|^2)$$

which proves the theorem. \square

We shall apply this theorem in case \mathcal{E} is an ellipse with center \mathbf{c} and focus \mathbf{d} . Assume that $\mathbf{r}(t)$ traverses the ellipse \mathcal{E} in harmonic motion, say

$$\frac{d^2\mathbf{r}}{dt^2} = \mathbf{c} - \mathbf{r}.$$



Let \mathbf{b} be the other focus of \mathcal{E} , and let \mathbf{f} be the intersection point of the line \mathcal{N} , passing through \mathbf{b} and parallel to \mathcal{L} , with the line through the points \mathbf{d} and \mathbf{r} . Then we find

$$|\mathbf{d} - \mathbf{e}| = |\mathbf{e} - \mathbf{f}|, \quad |\mathbf{f} - \mathbf{r}| = |\mathbf{b} - \mathbf{r}|$$

which in turn implies that $|\mathbf{e} - \mathbf{r}|$ is equal to the half major axis a of the ellipse \mathcal{E} . We conclude from the formula in the above theorem that the motion in time s along an ellipse with constant areal speed with respect to a focus is only possible in an attractive inverse square force field. The converse statement that an inverse square force field (for negative energy H) indeed yields ellipses as orbits follows from existence and uniqueness theorems for solutions of Newton's equation $\mathbf{F} = m\mathbf{a}$ and the above reasoning. This is Newton's line of argument for proving Kepler's first law.

V. CONCLUSION.

There exist other proofs of Kepler's law of ellipses from a higher viewpoint. One such proof by Arnold uses complex analysis, and is somewhat reminiscent to Newton's proof in Section 4 by comparing harmonic motion with motion under an $1/r^2$ force field [2]. Apparently Kasner had discovered the same method already back in 1909 [9]. Another proof by Moser is also very elegant, and uses the language of symplectic geometry and canonical transfor-

mations [10–12]. However our goal here has been to give a proof which is as basic as possible, and at the same time is well motivated in terms of Euclidean geometry.

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of the role of the Principia Mathematica in the history of science. The year 1687 marks the birth of both modern mathematical analysis and modern theoretical physics. As such the derivation of the Kepler laws from Newton's law of motion and law of universal gravitation is a rewarding subject to teach to freshmen students. In fact we were motivated for our work, because we plan to teach this material to high school students in their final grade. Of course, the high school students first need to get acquainted with the basics of vector geometry and vector calculus. But once this is achieved there is nothing in the way of understanding our proof of Kepler's law of ellipses.

For physics or mathematics freshmen students in the university who are already familiar with vector calculus our proof in Section 2 is fairly short and geometrically well motivated. In our opinion of all proofs it qualifies best to be discussed in a freshman course on mechanics.

Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the support of NWO. We like to thank Alain Albouy, Hans Duistermaat, Ronald Kortram and Arnoud van Rooij for useful comments on this article.

-
- [1] I. Newton, Principia Mathematica, New translation by I.B. Cohen and A. Whitman, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999.
 - [2] V.I. Arnold, Huygens and Barrow, Newton and Hooke, Birkhauser, Boston, 1990.
 - [3] D. Speiser, The Kepler problem from Newton to Johann Bernoulli, Archive for History of Exact Sciences **50**, 103 (1996).
 - [4] H. Goldstein, Classical Mechanics, Addison-Wesley, 1980 (2nd edition).
 - [5] H. Goldstein, Prehistory of the "Runge-Lenz" vector, Am. J. Phys. **43**, 737 (1975);
H. Goldstein, More on the prehistory of the Laplace or Runge-Lenz vector, Am. J. Phys. **44**, 1123 (1976).
 - [6] J.L. Lagrange, Théorie des variations séculaires des éléments des planètes, Oeuvres, Gauthier-Villars, Paris, Tome 5, 1781, pp 125-207, in particular pp 131-132.
 - [7] D.L. Goodstein and J.R. Goodstein, Feynman's Lost Lecture: The motion of planets around the sun, Norton, 1996.
 - [8] D. Derbes, Reinventing the wheel: Hodographic solutions to the Kepler problems, Am. J. Phys. **69**, 481 (2001).
 - [9] T. Needham, Visual Complex Analysis, Oxford University Press, 1997.
 - [10] V. Guillemin and S. Sternberg, Variations on a theme of Kepler, Colloquium Publications AMS, volume 42, 1990.
 - [11] J. Milnor, On the Geometry of the Kepler Problem, Amer. Math. Monthly **90**, 353 (1983).
 - [12] J. Moser, Regularization of the Kepler problem and the averaging method on a manifold, Comm. Pure Appl. Math. **23**, 609 (1970).