5.2: Bouncing Balls

When a ball is dropped to the ground, one of four things may happen:

1. It may rebound with exactly the same speed as the speed at which it hit the ground. This is an elastic collision.
2. It may come to a complete rest, for example if it were a ball of soft putty. I shall call this a completely inelastic collision.
3. It may bounce back, but with a reduced speed. For want of a better term I shall refer to this as a somewhat inelastic collision.
4. If there happens to be a little heap of gunpowder lying on the table where the ball hits it, it may bounce back with a faster speed than it had immediately before collision. That would be a superelastic collision.

The ratio \[ \frac{\text{speed after collision}}{\text{speed before collision}} \]

is called the coefficient of restitution, for which I shall use the speed before collision symbol \( e \). The coefficient is 1 for an elastic collision, less than 1 for an inelastic collision, zero for a completely inelastic collision, and greater than 1 for a superelastic collision. The ratio of kinetic energy (after) to kinetic energy (before) is evidently, in this situation, \( e^2 \).

If a ball falls on to a table from a height \( h_0 \), it will take a time \( t = \sqrt{2H_0 / g} \) to fall. If the collision is somewhat inelastic it will then rise to a height \( h_1 = e^2 h_0 \) and it will take a time \( et \) to reach height \( h_1 \). Then it will fall again, and bounce again, this time to a lesser height. And, if the coefficient of restitution remains the same, it will continue to do this for an infinite number of bounces. After a billion bounces, there is still an infinite number of bounces yet to come. The total distance travelled is

\[ h = h_0 + 2h_0(e^2 + e^4 + e^6 + ...) \tag{5.2.1} \]

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and the time taken is

\[ t = t_0 + 2t_0 (e + e^2 + e^3 + \ldots). \tag{5.2.2} \label{eq:5.2.2} \]

These are geometric series, and their sums are

\[ h = h_0 \left( \frac{1 + e^2}{1 - e^2} \right), \tag{5.2.3} \label{eq:5.2.3} \]

which is independent of g (i.e. of the planet on which this experiment is performed), and

\[ t = t_0 \left( \frac{1 + e}{1 - e} \right) \tag{5.2.4} \label{eq:5.2.4} \]

For example, suppose \( h_0 = 1 \text{ m}, e = 0.5, g = 9.8 \text{ m s}^{-2}, \) then the ball comes to rest in 1.36 s after having travelled 1.67 m after an infinite number of bounces.

Discuss

Does the ball ever stop bouncing, given that, after every bounce, there is still an infinite number yet to come; yet after 1.36 seconds it is no longer bouncing...?

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