

Discovering and Proving that π is Irrational, 2nd Edition

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December 8, 2017

Abstract

Ivan Niven's proof of the irrationality of π is often cited because it is brief and uses only calculus. However it is not well motivated. Using the concept that a quadratic function with the same symmetric properties as sine should when multiplied by sine and integrated obey upper and lower bounds for the integral, a contradiction is generated for rational candidate values of π . This simplifying concept yields a more motivated proof of the irrationality of π and π^2 .

Charles Hermite proved that e is transcendental in 1873 using a polynomial that is the sum of derivatives of another polynomial [8]. Ivan Niven in 1947 found a way to use Hermite's technique to prove that π is irrational [12]. Lambert in 1767 had proven this result in a twelve-page article using continued fractions [10]. Niven's half-page proof, using only algebra and calculus, is frequently cited and sometimes reproduced in textbooks [14]. Although his proof is brief and uses ostensibly simple mathematics, it begins by defining functions as in the technique of Hermite without any motivation. In this article a simplifying concept is used that provides a more motivated and straightforward proof than Niven's. Using this concept, we, as it were, discover that π might be irrational and then confirm that it is with a proof.

1 A MOTIVATED APPROACH.

We seek to combine a known falsity with a known truth and then to derive a contradiction from the combination. If π is assumed to be rational, $\pi = p/q$

with p and q natural numbers, then the maximum of $\sin x$ occurs at $p/(2q)$. The quadratic $-qx^2 + px = x(p - qx)$ will have its maximum at the same point, as will the product of the two functions. If we have a blender that allows inferences from this statement we might be able to derive a contradiction.

Such a blender exists in a definite integral. A definite integral allows for evaluations that might contradict upper or lower bounds. We have

$$0 < \int_0^{p/q} x(p - qx) \sin x \, dx \leq \frac{p^2}{4q} \cdot \frac{p}{q} = \frac{p^3}{4q^2}, \quad (1)$$

where the lower bound holds as the integrand is always positive,¹ and the upper bound is formed from the length of the interval of integration multiplied by the maximum value of the integrand [16, Property 8, p. 389].

For a polynomial $f(x)$, repeated integration by parts² gives the indefinite integral pattern

$$\int f(x) \sin x \, dx = f(x) \cos x - f'(x) \sin x + f''(x) \cos x - f'''(x) \sin x - \dots$$

For the function $f(x) = x(p - qx)$, as $f^{(k)}(x) = 0$ for $k \geq 3$, we have

$$\int_0^{p/q} f(x) \sin x \, dx = \left\{ f(x) \cos x - f'(x) \sin x + f''(x) \cos x \right\} \Big|_0^{p/q}$$

and the odd term drops out ($\sin p/q = \sin 0 = 0$) leaving an alternating sum of even derivatives of $f(x)$ evaluated at the endpoints:

$$\int_0^{p/q} f(x) \sin x \, dx = f(p/q) + f(0) - f''(p/q) - f''(0). \quad (2)$$

The sum is $4q$. Combining (1) and (2), we have

$$0 < 4q \leq \frac{p^3}{4q^2}. \quad (3)$$

¹To see that the inequality is strict, consider:

$$\int_0^{p/(4q)} x(p - qx) \sin x \, dx + \int_{p/(4q)}^{3p/(4q)} x(p - qx) \sin x \, dx + \int_{3p/(4q)}^{p/q} x(p - qx) \sin x \, dx.$$

²Tabular integration by parts (see [11, p. 532], [5] and Appendix A) is especially suited for integrals of the type given in (1).

2 DISCOVERING π IS IRRATIONAL.

2.1 Candidate π Values.

The inequalities in (3) show π does not equal 1 or 2. For $\pi = 7/2$, this $n = 1$ case of the general polynomial $x^n(p - qx)^n$ does not give a contradiction. We will try the $n = 2$ case and see if it works for this rational. This is possible as the same reasoning about $x(p - qx)$ applies to $x^n(p - qx)^n$; it is symmetric like $\sin x$ on $[0, p/q]$ and $x^n(p - qx)^n \sin x$ when integrated in that interval should have a value consistent with the integral's upper and lower bounds.

2.2 The $n = 2$ Case.

With $f(x) = x^2(p - qx)^2$, repeated integration by parts gives

$$\int_0^{p/q} f(x) \sin x \, dx = f^{(0)}(p/q, 0) - f^{(2)}(p/q, 0) + f^{(4)}(p/q, 0),$$

where $f^{(k)}(p/q, 0) = f^{(k)}(p/q) + f^{(k)}(0)$. Multiplying out $f(x)$, we have

$$f(x) = x^2(p - qx)^2 = q^2x^4 - 2pqx^3 + p^2x^2.$$

Derivatives for this function are easily computed. The values of these derivatives at the endpoints 0 and p/q are given in 1. Using Table 1, with the same logic used

k	$f^{(k)}(0)$	$f^{(k)}(p/q)$
0	0	0
1	0	0
2	$2! \cdot p^2$	$2! \cdot p^2$
3	$-4! \cdot pq$	$4! \cdot pq$
4	$4! \cdot q^2$	$4! \cdot q^2$

Table 1: Derivatives of $x^2(p - qx)^2$.

for the inequalities in (3), we form the inequality

$$0 < -4p^2 + 48q^2 \leq \frac{p}{q} \left(\frac{p^2}{4q} \right)^2$$

and letting $p = 7$ and $q = 2$, we get $-4p^2 + 48q^2 = -4$, a contradiction of the lower bound.

2.3 The $n = 3, 4$ Cases.

Similar calculations can be carried out for the $n = 3$ and $n = 4$ cases. The inequalities for each are

$$0 < -144p^2q + 1440q^3 \leq \frac{p}{q} \left(\frac{p^2}{4q} \right)^3 \quad (4)$$

and

$$0 < 48p^4 - 8640p^2q^2 + 80640q^4 \leq \frac{p}{q} \left(\frac{p^2}{4q} \right)^4, \quad (5)$$

respectively.³

For the $n = 3$ case, when p/q equals $3/1$, $13/4$, $16/5$, and $19/6$ the upper or lower bound of (4) is contradicted. We discover that $22/7$ is not π using (5), the $n = 4$ case.

3 PROVING π IS IRRATIONAL.

3.1 The General Case.

Referring to Table 1, it is likely that $f(x) = x^n(p - qx)^n$ will be such that the alternating sum of its even derivatives evaluated at the endpoints 0 and p/q will be divisible by $n!$. If the integral in

$$0 < \int_0^{p/q} x^n(p - qx)^n dx \leq \frac{p}{q} \left(\frac{p^2}{4q} \right)^n < p^n \quad (6)$$

is divisible by $n!$ then the upper bound on (6) can be used to prove π is irrational. This follows as the integral is increasing with n factorially, but the upper bound has polynomial growth. We know factorial growth exceeds polynomial – see [16, Equation 10, p. 764]; [3, Example 2, p. 86] gives a direct proof of this result.

³Leibniz's formula [1, Problem 4, p. 222] gives a means of calculating n th derivatives of a product of two functions. In the case of the product of two polynomials, all derivatives can be calculated by placing the derivative of one polynomial along the top row of a table, the derivatives of the other polynomial along the left column, and forming a Pascal's triangle in the interior table. After forming products of these row and column entries with the binomial coefficients of Pascal's triangle, all derivatives are given by sums along interior diagonals, SW to NE, of the table. See Appendix B for details.

3.2 Proving the General Case.

The lower and upper bounds of (6) follow from the properties of the integrand. Repeated integration by parts establishes that

$$\int_0^{p/q} x^n (p - qx)^n \sin x \, dx = \sum_{k=0}^n (-1)^k f^{(2k)}(p/q, 0). \quad (7)$$

Consequently, we need only prove that the right-hand side of (7) is divisible by $n!$.

First, symmetry of $f(x)$ allows us to consider only the left endpoint in this sum. This follows as the equation $f(x) = f(p/q - x)$, differentiated repeatedly, gives $f'(x) = -f'(p/q - x)$, $f''(x) = f''(p/q - x)$, and, by induction, $f^{(k)}(x) = (-1)^k f^{(k)}(p/q - x)$. So $f^{(k)}(0) = (-1)^k f^{(k)}(p/q)$. For the even derivatives, with which we are concerned, we have $f^{(2k)}(0) = f^{(2k)}(p/q)$.

Next, $f(x)$ when expanded will have the form $a_n x^{2n} + \dots + a_0 x^n$. For $k < n$, $f^{(k)}(0) = 0$, and for $k \geq n$, $f^{(k)}(0)$ is divisible by $k!$ and therefore $n!$. We have established that the sum in (7) is divisible by $n!$ and that π must be irrational.

4 CONCLUSION.

Niven gives two proofs of the irrationality of π . One has been cited in the introduction. The other occurs in his book on irrational numbers [13]; there he shows the irrationality of π^2 . We will re-examine these proofs.

Looking at Hermite's transcendence of e proof [7, p. 152], one sees definitions of two functions $f(x)$ and $F(x)$ with the derivatives of $f(x)$ being used in the definition of $F(x)$. An integral is then used with the integrand having e^{-x} in it. In Niven's π and π^2 proofs he defines one function as the sum of the derivatives of the other, as Hermite does. The manipulations Niven performs are to obtain forms like Hermite's. In both articles the integral of one function equals an expression involving the other. To someone un-steeped in Hermite's technique the motivation for the proof must be unclear.

In this note a concept motivates the introduction of the polynomial Niven defines. The concept is that if π is rational then the evaluation of a definite integral comprised of the product of two functions symmetric about $x = \pi/2$ should be consistent with bounds for the integral. This being shown not to be the case, a contradiction occurs and π is proven irrational. The graphs of $\sin x$, $x(p - qx)$, and their product give the concept – visually.

The same logic used for π can be applied to π^2 . Assume $\pi^2 = a/b$. We have

$$0 < \int_0^{a/b} x^n (a - bx)^n \sin \frac{x}{\sqrt{a/b}} dx \leq \frac{a}{b} \left(\frac{a^2}{4b} \right)^n,$$

with the same reasoning as before: the integrand by assumption is a symmetric function with its maximum at $x = a/(2b)$. The integral, using repeated integration by parts, evaluates to

$$\sum_{k=0}^n (-1)^k (\sqrt{a/b})^{2k+1} (f^{(2k)}(a/b) + f^{(2k)}(0)),$$

where $f(x) = x^n (a - bx)^n$. With some factoring, this sum is

$$\frac{\pi}{b^n} \sum_{k=0}^n (-1)^k b^{n-k} a^k (f^{(2k)}(a/b) + f^{(2k)}(0)).$$

With a multiplication by b^n/π to clear π/b^n from this sum, we have

$$0 < \frac{b^n}{\pi} \int_0^{a/b} x^n (a - bx)^n \sin \frac{x}{\sqrt{a/b}} dx = n! R_n \leq \frac{b^n a}{\pi b} \left(\frac{a^2}{4b} \right)^n < a^{3n+1},$$

which gives a contradiction.

Note: reproductions of older articles by Hermite [8] and others can be found in [2].

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. I would like to thank E. F. for helping me to believe that one could spell π without an e . Thanks also go to Richard Foote of the University of Vermont for his patience with me over the years.

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A

Tabular Integration

Tabular integration is based on integration by parts. Integration by parts is, in turn, based on the product rule. Consider

$$(uv)' = u'v + uv'$$

implies that

$$\int (uv)' = \int u'v + \int uv'$$

and so

$$\int uv' = uv - \int u'v. \quad (8)$$

Using placement as an organizing principal (8) translates into

$$\int [1][2] = [same][up] - \int [down][up], \quad (9)$$

where $[down]$ means a derivative is taken and $[up]$ an integral. We now start with the integral on the right of (9) and apply the pattern again:

$$\int [down][up] = [down][upup] - \int [downdown][upup]$$

to get

$$\int [1][2] = [same][up] - ([down][upup] - \int [downdown][upup]).$$

Using exponential notation in an obvious way, the formula for repeated integration by parts is

$$\int [1][2] = su - du^2 + d^2u^3 - d^3u^4 + \dots + (-1)^n \int d^n u^n. \quad (10)$$

For polynomials that only have a finite number of non-zero derivatives eventually, if d is the polynomial all zero terms will be reached. Also, a table is suggested as it is generally easy to repeat taking progressive derivatives and integrals – just use the one above for guidance. We place the first u' in the table and don't use it to accommodate the first su term in (10). Table 2 gives an easy first example: $x \sin x$. Reading the non-zero rows, we arrive at $\int x \sin x = -x \cos x + \sin x$ and, taking derivatives of the right-hand side, we confirm that it is correct.

A table to evaluate the definite integral in (7) is given in Table 3.

	d/dx	f	
		$\sin x$	
+	x	$-\cos x$	su
-	1	$-\sin x$	$-du^2$
+	0	$\cos x$	d^2u^3

Table 2: Tabular integration shows $\int x \sin x = -x \cos x + \sin x$.

	d/dx	f	$\Big _0^\pi$	Σ
		$\sin x$		
+	$f(x)$	$-\cos x$	$-\cos \pi f(\pi) - (-\cos 0)f(0)$	$f(\pi) + f(0)$
-	$f'(x)$	$-\sin x$	0	0
+	$f''(x)$	$\cos x$	$\cos \pi f(\pi) - \cos 0 f(0)$	$-f''(\pi) - f''(0)$
-	$f^{(3)}(x)$	$\sin x$	0	0
+	$f^{(4)}(x)$	$-\cos x$	$-\cos \pi f^{(4)}(\pi) - (-\cos 0)f^{(4)}(0)$	$f^{(4)}(\pi) + f^{(4)}(0)$
\vdots	\vdots	\vdots	\vdots	\vdots

Table 3: Tabular integration used to derive (7).

B

Leibniz Tables

Leibniz tables are an application of Leibniz's formula. Here is Leibniz's formula:

$$(f \cdot g)^{(n)} = \sum_{k=0}^n \binom{n}{k} f^{(n-k)} g^{(k)}.$$

This formula should immediately remind one of the binomial theorem:

$$(a + b)^n = \sum_{k=0}^n \binom{n}{k} a^{(n-k)} b^{(k)}.$$

It is proved using induction in a manner very similar to proving the binomial theorem.

Strangely, no one before now has exploited this similarity to make the equivalent of Pascal's triangle, used for getting coefficients of the binomial formula, for Leibniz's formula. Table 4 gives the idea.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1		f	f'	f''	$f^{(3)}$	$f^{(4)}$...
2	g	1	1	1	1	1	...
3	g'	1	2	3	4	5	...
4	g''	1	3	6	10	15	...
5	$g^{(3)}$	1	4	10	20	35	...
6	$g^{(4)}$	1	5	15	35	70	...
7	\vdots	\vdots	\vdots	\vdots	\vdots	\vdots	\ddots

Table 4: A Leibniz table for general functions f and g .

We can use a Leibniz table to confirm the values entered in Table 1. In Table 5, we have used $f(x) = x^2$ and $g(x) = (p - qx)^2$ in a Leibniz table. It is immediate that the product $f \cdot g$ is 0 at 0 and p/q - these are roots of each. It is also clear that $f'(0) = f'(p/q) = 0$ from the table. For subsequent derivatives we need only evaluate the right most column and last row as all other cells will have a 0 multiple in them. So, we have $(f \cdot g)^{(2)}(0) = (p - qx)^2 \cdot 1 \cdot 2 = 2!p^2$, using the first row and last column; and $(f \cdot g)^{(2)}(p/q) = 2q^2 \cdot (p/q)^2 \cdot 1 = 2!p^2$, using the last row and first interior column. So, we have $(f \cdot g)^{(3)}(0) = 2(p - qx)(-q) \cdot 3 \cdot 2 = -12pq$, using the last column, second interior row; and $(f \cdot g)^{(3)}(p/q) = 2q^2 \cdot (2p/q) \cdot 3 = 12pq$, using the last row, second interior column. Finally, we have $(f \cdot g)^{(4)}(0) = (f \cdot g)^{(4)}(p/q) = 2q^2 \cdot 6 \cdot 2! = 4!q^2$

	x^2	$2x$	$2!$
$(p - qx)^2$	1,0	1, 1	1,2
$2(p - qx)(-q)$	1, 1	2,2	3,3
$2q^2$	1,2	3,3	6,4

Table 5: Leibniz table for $x^2(p - qx)^2$ with binomial coefficients and order of derivatives: (*coefficient, order*).

Tables 6 and 7 confirm the results referenced in (4) and (5), respectively. The tables allow for efficient calculations: one can read which left and top entries yield 0 at $x = 0$ and $x = p/q$. Also, only even derivatives need be calculated. In both cases the calculations are easily done by hand.

To verify that the candidate rationals contradict these $n = 3$ and $n = 4$ cases, use a spreadsheet.

	x^3	$3x^2$	$3!x$	$3!$
$(p - qx)^3$	1	1	1	1
$3(p - qx)^2(-q)$	1	2	3	(4)
$3!(p - qx)(-q)^2$	1	3	6	10
$-3!q^3$	1	(4)	10	(20)

Table 6: Leibniz table for $x^3(p - qx)^3$. Only the circled entries need to be evaluated.

	x^4	$4x^3$	$12x^2$	$4!x$	$4!$
$(p - qx)^4$	1	1	1	1	(1)
$4(p - qx)^3(-q)$	1	2	3	4	5
$12(p - qx)^2(-q)^2$	1	3	6	10	(15)
$4!(p - qx)(-q)^3$	1	4	10	20	35
$4!q^4$	(1)	5	(15)	35	(70)

Table 7: Leibniz table for $x^4(p - qx)^4$. Only the circled entries need to be evaluated.