

The Optimal Paper Moebius Band (Informally)

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April 24, 2024

Abstract

This is a friendly, crisp, and slightly informal account of my solution of the 1977 Optimal Moebius Band Conjecture of B. Halpern and C. Weaver.

1 Introduction

You make a paper Moebius band by giving an odd number of twists to a $1 \times \lambda$ rectangular strip of paper and joining the ends together. If e.g. $\lambda = 6$, this is quite easy to do. If e.g. $\lambda = 2$ you can still do it, but you will find it more challenging. How small can you take λ ? I guess that this question probably arose as soon as people started making paper Moebius bands, but in any case W. Wunderlich [**W**] discusses this question in the introduction to his 1962 paper. On the last line of their 1977 paper [**HW**], B. Halpern and C. Weaver conjecture that λ must be larger than $\sqrt{3}$. I first learned about all this from the excellent survey article [**FT**, Chapter 14].

There is a nice physical experiment you can do which will probably lead you to conclude that $\lambda > \sqrt{3}$ is the right bound. Take a long rectangular strip of paper, give it one twist, and hold the ends together. Now slide the ends past each other, a move which has the effect of simulating a shorter rectangle. Keep sliding as much as you can. Eventually you will see a certain triangular pattern emerge. Figure 1 describes the limiting shape you will see if you do this experiment.

*Supported by N.S.F. Grant DMS-2102802

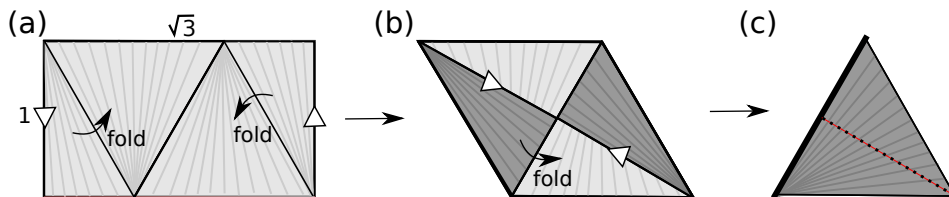


Figure 1: The Triangular Moebius Band

Figure 1(a) is a $1 \times \sqrt{3}$ rectangular strip that is lightly shaded on the side you can see and darkly shaded on the other side. Figure 1(b) shows the rhombus you get after folding over two flaps. Figure 1(c) shows what happens when you fold the rhombus in half like a taco. The folding pattern brings the two ends together with a twist. Figure 1(c) is the *triangular Moebius band*. The dotted line segment indicates the joined ends of the strip. The thick line segment indicates the “taco fold”.

The triangular Moebius band, a completely planar object, does not quite count as a paper Moebius band. Technically, the triangular Moebius band is known as a *folded ribbon knot* [DL] whereas a paper Moebius band is defined as a smooth and locally isometric embedding of a flat Moebius band into space. (You need not understand this formal definition to follow this paper.) However, as is discussed in [Sa] and [HW], you can approximate the triangular Moebius band as closely as you like with a *bona fide* paper Moebius band by taking a slightly longer strip of paper and rounding out the sharp folds. The physical experiment above essentially does this. This is why the Halpern-Weaver conjecture says that $\lambda > \sqrt{3}$ rather than $\lambda = \sqrt{3}$.

In a recent paper [S], I proved the Halpern-Weaver conjecture. I also provided a rigorous justification for the outcome of the physical experiment: If $\lambda \approx \sqrt{3}$, then the shape of your paper Moebius band must approximate the triangular Moebius band. In this paper I will give a friendly and somewhat informal account that I hope will reach a wider audience of scientists who might be interested in these results. The proof here is essentially the same as in [S] but it is presented in a different way, with an emphasis on crisp exposition rather than filling in every detail. I also omit a lot of the mathematical commentary, references, and acknowledgements found in [S].

The proof here starts with four easy optimization problems, the last of which I call the *Coupled Circuit Problem*. Following this, I show how the Optimal Moebius Band Problem gives a special case of the Coupled Circuit Problem, and this solves the whole thing.

2 Four Optimization Problems

1. Triangle Problem: Consider a triangle ∇ with a horizontal base of length x , and a height of y . Which choice(s) of ∇ minimize the sum \vee of the two slanting (i.e. non-horizontal) sides of ∇ ? This is a classic problem, familiar to players of billiards and to people who have contemplated the reflection of light. The answer is that the minimum occurs when ∇ is an isosceles triangle. The Pythagorean Theorem computes the minimum as

$$\vee = \sqrt{x^2 + 4y^2}. \quad (1)$$

2. Planar Circuit Problem: Suppose $X = \overline{X_1X_2}$ and $Y = \overline{Y_1Y_2}$ are respectively horizontal and vertical line segments having lengths

$$|X| = x = \sqrt{1 + t^2}, \quad |Y| = y \geq 1. \quad (2)$$

Here and below $|\cdot|$ denotes arc length. For now, writing $x = \sqrt{1 + t^2}$ is just a complicated way of saying that $x \geq 1$, but below t will mean more.

Suppose also that Y is contained in the open half-plane that lies beneath the horizontal line extending X . Finally, suppose γ is a continuous loop that successively connects the points X_1, Y_2, X_2, Y_1 . Figure 2 shows all this.

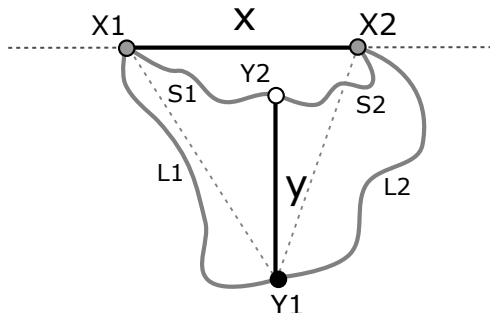


Figure 2: A circuit γ connecting the endpoints of X and Y .

The 4 arcs L_1, L_2, S_2, S_1 comprise γ . Let $|L| = |L_1| + |L_2|$ and likewise $|S| = |S_1| + |S_2|$. Each arc is at least as long as the straight line segments with the same endpoints. Hence $|S| \geq |X|$ and $|L| \geq \vee$, the sum of the lengths of the slanting sides of the triangle ∇ with vertices X_1, X_2, Y_1 . Since ∇ has base X and height greater than 1, Equations 1 and 2 give:

$$|L| > \sqrt{5 + t^2}, \quad |\gamma| = |S| + |L| > f(t) := \sqrt{1 + t^2} + \sqrt{5 + t^2} \quad (3)$$

3. Coupled Planar Circuit Problem: We keep the same problem but add a constraint that couples our loop γ to the segment X :

$$|S| = |L| - 2t. \quad (4)$$

Equations 3 (left) and 4 give another bound:

$$|\gamma| = |S| + |L| = 2|L| - 2t > g(t) := 2\sqrt{5+t^2} - 2t. \quad (5)$$

Combining Equations 3 and 5, we have $|\gamma| > h(t) := \max(f(t), g(t))$.

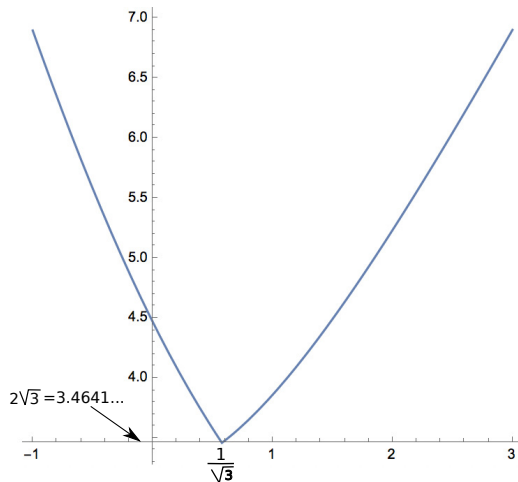


Figure 3: A plot of $h(t)$ for $t \in [-1, 3]$.

Figure 3 shows a plot of $h(t)$. The minimum occurs when $t = 1/\sqrt{3}$, and the minimum value is $2\sqrt{3}$. Therefore, $|\gamma| > 2\sqrt{3}$. Furthermore, if $|\gamma| \approx 2\sqrt{3}$ then $t \approx 1/\sqrt{3}$ and $x \approx 2/\sqrt{3}$, and ∇ has height ≈ 1 and L_1, L_2, S_1, S_2 are all nearly line segments. Hence γ closely follows an equilateral triangle.

4. Coupled Circuit Problem: This is almost the same problem as the previous one. This time we think of our plane as the XY -plane sitting in space. We keep the segments X and Y as before but this time we allow our loop γ to move in space, above and below the XY -plane. All we require is that the endpoints of the 4 arcs L_1, L_2, S_2, S_1 comprising γ are again X_1, Y_1, X_2, Y_2 . Figure 2 again depicts the situation, except that you should imagine you are looking down on the XY plane from space. This problem has the same analysis as the planar version.

3 Recognizing a Coupled Circuit

Let M be a paper Moebius band based on a $1 \times \lambda$ rectangular strip, and let γ be its boundary loop. Note that $|\gamma| = 2\lambda$. We aim to recognize γ as a loop that arises in the Coupled Circuit Problem.

A *bend* is a straight line segment in M which cuts across M and has its endpoints in γ . A *T-pattern* is a pair of coplanar bends which point in perpendicular directions. The dotted segment and the bold segment in Figure 1(c) make a *T-pattern*. I'll prove below that M has a *T-pattern*. We can rotate M in space so that the bends X, Y of the *T-pattern*, and the loop γ , are situated just as in the Coupled Circuit Problem. X and Y cut across M and so have length at least 1. This gives Equation 2.

To derive Equation 4 we cut open M along Y and flatten it out in the plane. We get a symmetric trapezoid τ . Figure 4 shows one of several possible ways τ could look, depending on how X and Y slant. The labels match Figure 2. (The repeat of Figure 2, included for convenience, is not quite drawn to scale.)

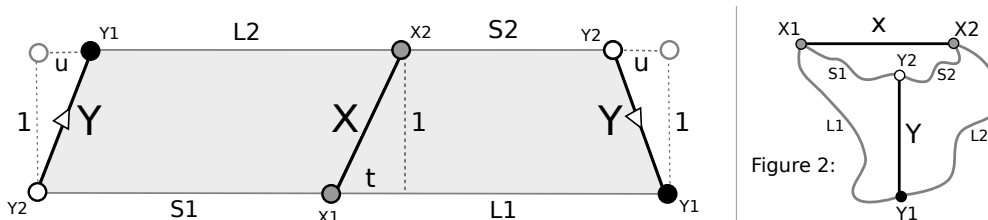


Figure 4: The symmetric trapezoid τ .

The left and right sides of τ get the same labels because on M they are joined together. Since $|X| = \sqrt{1 + t^2}$ the Pythagorean Theorem tells us that t equals the horizontal displacement of the endpoints of X . Therefore

$$|S_1| + t = |L_2| + u, \quad |S_2| + u = |L_1| - t. \quad (6)$$

We get Equation 4 by adding these equations together and simplifying. For the other possible pictures of τ , in which X and/or Y slant the other way, the signs of t and/or u change but we get Equation 4 in all cases.

Having recognized γ as a loop that arises in the Coupled Circuit problem, we get $|\gamma| > 2\sqrt{3}$ and $\lambda > \sqrt{3}$. This proves the Halpern-Weaver Conjecture. Furthermore, if $\lambda \approx \sqrt{3}$ then we have $|\gamma| \approx 2\sqrt{3}$ and, as we remarked above, γ closely follows an equilateral triangle. Hence the triangular Moebius band is the only limit of a sequence of paper Moebius bands having $\lambda \rightarrow \sqrt{3}$.

4 Finding a T Pattern

The only piece of unfinished business is showing that M has a T -pattern.

M has a partition into bends which sweep continuously through it like the pin striping in Figure 1. You can take this as part of the definition of a paper Moebius band, but in [S, §4] I deduce this classically known fact from the definition given in the introduction. The partition is parametrized by the circle $\mathbf{R}/2\pi$. (In $\mathbf{R}/2\pi$ two values are considered the same if they differ by an integer multiple of 2π .) The bend X_θ of M corresponds to $\theta \in \mathbf{R}/2\pi$.

Let Υ denote the space of ordered pairs $(X_{\theta_1}, X_{\theta_2})$ with $\theta_1 \neq \theta_2$. Let S^2 denote the unit sphere, with north pole P_+ and south pole P_- . We parametrize $S^2 - P_\pm$ by angles (θ, ϕ) , where $\theta \in \mathbf{R}/2\pi$ is the longitude and $\phi \in (0, \pi)$, the angle with P_+ , is the latitude. We identify $S^2 - P_\pm$ and Υ :

$$(\theta, \phi) \longleftrightarrow (X_{\theta-\phi}, X_{\theta+\phi}). \quad (7)$$

Our identification gives two ways to look at the *antipodal map* Σ :

$$\Sigma(\theta, \phi) = (\pi + \theta, \pi - \phi) \longleftrightarrow \Sigma(X_{\theta_1}, X_{\theta_2}) = (X_{\theta_2}, X_{\theta_1}). \quad (8)$$

A function f on S^2 is called *odd* if $f \circ \Sigma = -f$.

Given $(X_{\theta_1}, X_{\theta_2})$, let \vec{X}_{θ_1} be one of the two unit vectors parallel to X_{θ_1} . We write $\vec{X}_{\theta_1} \rightsquigarrow \vec{X}_{\theta_2}$ when we have a continuous choice $\theta \rightarrow \vec{X}_\theta$ which starts at \vec{X}_{θ_1} and ends at \vec{X}_{θ_2} as θ moves from θ_1 to θ_2 forwards in $\mathbf{R}/2\pi$.

Write $(X, Y) = (X_{\theta_1}, X_{\theta_2})$. Let m_X and m_Y be the midpoints of X and Y . Using the dot product (\cdot) and the cross product (\times) we define

$$g(X, Y) = \vec{X} \cdot \vec{Y}, \quad h(X, Y) = (m_X - m_Y) \cdot (\vec{X} \times \vec{Y}). \quad (9)$$

Since $-\vec{X} \rightsquigarrow -\vec{Y}$, we would get the same definition starting with $-\vec{X}$. If $g(X, Y) = 0$ then \vec{X} and \vec{Y} are perpendicular. If $h(X, Y) = 0$ then X and Y are coplanar. So, any common zero of g and h gives a T -pattern.

If (X, Y) corresponds to a point of S^2 near P_\pm then $\vec{X} \approx \pm \vec{Y}$. So, g and h extend continuously to S^2 with $g(P_\pm) = \pm 1$ and $h(P_\pm) = 0$. Since M is a Moebius band, $\vec{Y} \rightsquigarrow -\vec{X}$. Hence g and h are both odd functions. E.g.,

$$h(Y, X) = (m_Y - m_X) \cdot (-\vec{Y} \times \vec{X}) = (m_Y - m_X) \cdot (\vec{X} \times \vec{Y}) = -h(X, Y),$$

By the Borsuk-Ulam Theorem, two continuous odd functions on S^2 have a common zero. Since $g(P_\pm) \neq 0$, the common zero is in Υ . We're done.

Remark 1: Some readers might appreciate a proof of the classic Borsuk-Ulam Theorem. Here is a proof tailored to our set-up. The map $A : S^2 \rightarrow \mathbf{R}^2$ given by $A = (g, h)$ satisfies $A \circ \Sigma = -A$. Suppose there is no $p \in S^2$ such that $A(p) = (0, 0)$. Consider any line of longitude ℓ on S^2 running from P_+ to P_- . The image $A(\ell)$ is a path which starts at $(1, 0)$ and ends at $(-1, 0)$ and misses $(0, 0)$. If you stand at $(0, 0)$ and watch $A(\ell)$ as it progresses from $(1, 0)$ to $(-1, 0)$ your neck will twist some half-integer number of times, either clockwise or counterclockwise. This allows us assign a half-integer $\eta(\ell)$ to ℓ . The function η is both continuous and half-integer-valued. This means that $\eta(\cdot)$ is a constant function. However, consider $\ell' = \Sigma(\ell)$. Since $A \circ \Sigma = -A$, we see that $A(\ell')$ is obtained by rotating $A(\ell)$ by 180 degrees about the origin. But then $\eta(\ell') = -\eta(\ell)$, a contradiction.

Remark 2: The clean T -pattern proof above benefitted from insightful comments made by Matei Coiculescu and Jeremy Kahn.

5 References

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