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# PLASMA ASTROPHYSICS PART I

Fundamentals and Practice

BORIS V. SOMOV

 Springer

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VOLUME 340

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Fundamentals and Practice

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*Cover illustration:* Interaction of plasma with magnetic fields and light of stars creates many beautiful views of the night sky, like this one shown as the background – a part of the famous nebula IC434 located about 1600 light-years away from Earth and observed by the National Science Foundation's 0.9-meter telescope on Kitt Peak.

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# Contents

<b>About This Book</b>	<b>xiii</b>
<b>Plasma Astrophysics: History and Neighbours</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Particles and Fields: Exact Self-Consistent Description</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 Interacting particles and Liouville's theorem . . . . .	3
1.1.1 Continuity in phase space . . . . .	3
1.1.2 The character of particle interactions . . . . .	5
1.1.3 The Lorentz force, gravity . . . . .	7
1.1.4 Collisional friction in plasma . . . . .	7
1.1.5 The exact distribution function . . . . .	9
1.2 Charged particles in the electromagnetic field . . . . .	11
1.2.1 General formulation of the problem . . . . .	11
1.2.2 The continuity equation for electric charge . . . . .	12
1.2.3 Initial equations and initial conditions . . . . .	12
1.2.4 Astrophysical plasma applications . . . . .	13
1.3 Gravitational systems . . . . .	14
1.4 Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	15
<b>2 Statistical Description of Interacting Particle Systems</b>	<b>19</b>
2.1 The averaging of Liouville's equation . . . . .	19
2.1.1 Averaging over phase space . . . . .	19
2.1.2 Two statistical postulates . . . . .	21
2.1.3 A statistical mechanism of mixing in phase space . . . . .	22
2.1.4 The derivation of a general kinetic equation . . . . .	24
2.2 A collisional integral and correlation functions . . . . .	26
2.2.1 Binary interactions . . . . .	26
2.2.2 Binary correlation . . . . .	27
2.2.3 The collisional integral and binary correlation . . . . .	29
2.3 Equations for correlation functions . . . . .	31
2.4 Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	33

<b>3</b>	<b>Weakly-Coupled Systems with Binary Collisions</b>	<b>35</b>
3.1	Approximations for binary collisions . . . . .	35
3.1.1	The small parameter of kinetic theory . . . . .	35
3.1.2	The Vlasov kinetic equation . . . . .	37
3.1.3	The Landau collisional integral . . . . .	38
3.1.4	The Fokker-Planck equation . . . . .	39
3.2	Correlation function and Debye shielding . . . . .	42
3.2.1	The Maxwellian distribution function . . . . .	42
3.2.2	The averaged force and electric neutrality . . . . .	42
3.2.3	Pair correlations and the Debye radius . . . . .	43
3.3	Gravitational systems . . . . .	46
3.4	Comments on numerical simulations . . . . .	47
3.5	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	48
<b>4</b>	<b>Propagation of Fast Particles in Plasma</b>	<b>55</b>
4.1	Derivation of the basic kinetic equation . . . . .	55
4.1.1	Basic approximations . . . . .	55
4.1.2	Dimensionless kinetic equation in energy space . . . . .	57
4.2	A kinetic equation at high speeds . . . . .	58
4.3	The classical thick-target model . . . . .	60
4.4	The role of angular diffusion . . . . .	64
4.4.1	An approximate account of scattering . . . . .	64
4.4.2	The thick-target model . . . . .	65
4.5	The reverse-current electric-field effect . . . . .	67
4.5.1	The necessity for a beam-neutralizing current . . . . .	67
4.5.2	Formulation of a realistic kinetic problem . . . . .	69
4.5.3	Dimensionless parameters of the problem . . . . .	72
4.5.4	Coulomb losses of energy . . . . .	73
4.5.5	New physical results . . . . .	75
4.5.6	To the future models . . . . .	76
4.6	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	77
<b>5</b>	<b>Motion of a Charged Particle in Given Fields</b>	<b>79</b>
5.1	A particle in constant homogeneous fields . . . . .	79
5.1.1	Relativistic equation of motion . . . . .	79
5.1.2	Constant non-magnetic forces . . . . .	80
5.1.3	Constant homogeneous magnetic fields . . . . .	81
5.1.4	Non-magnetic force in a magnetic field . . . . .	83
5.1.5	Electric and gravitational drifts . . . . .	84
5.2	Weakly inhomogeneous slowly changing fields . . . . .	86
5.2.1	Small parameters in the motion equation . . . . .	86
5.2.2	Expansion in powers of $m/e$ . . . . .	87
5.2.3	The averaging over gyromotion . . . . .	89
5.2.4	Spiral motion of the guiding center . . . . .	91
5.2.5	Gradient and inertial drifts . . . . .	92

5.3	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	97
<b>6</b>	<b>Adiabatic Invariants in Astrophysical Plasma</b>	<b>103</b>
6.1	General definitions . . . . .	103
6.2	Two main invariants . . . . .	104
6.2.1	Motion in the Larmor plane . . . . .	104
6.2.2	Magnetic mirrors and traps . . . . .	105
6.2.3	Bounce motion . . . . .	108
6.2.4	The Fermi acceleration . . . . .	109
6.3	The flux invariant . . . . .	111
6.4	Approximation accuracy. Exact solutions . . . . .	112
6.5	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	113
<b>7</b>	<b>Wave-Particle Interaction in Astrophysical Plasma</b>	<b>115</b>
7.1	The basis of kinetic theory . . . . .	115
7.1.1	The linearized Vlasov equation . . . . .	115
7.1.2	The Landau resonance and Landau damping . . . . .	117
7.1.3	Gyroresonance . . . . .	120
7.2	Stochastic acceleration of particles by waves . . . . .	122
7.2.1	The principles of particle acceleration by waves . . . . .	122
7.2.2	The Kolmogorov theory of turbulence . . . . .	124
7.2.3	MHD turbulent cascading . . . . .	126
7.3	The relativistic electron-positron plasma . . . . .	127
7.4	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	128
<b>8</b>	<b>Coulomb Collisions in Astrophysical Plasma</b>	<b>133</b>
8.1	Close and distant collisions . . . . .	133
8.1.1	The collision parameters . . . . .	133
8.1.2	The Rutherford formula . . . . .	134
8.1.3	The test particle concept . . . . .	135
8.1.4	Particles in a magnetic trap . . . . .	136
8.1.5	The role of distant collisions . . . . .	137
8.2	Debye shielding and plasma oscillations . . . . .	139
8.2.1	Simple illustrations of the shielding effect . . . . .	139
8.2.2	Charge neutrality and oscillations in plasma . . . . .	141
8.3	Collisional relaxations in cosmic plasma . . . . .	142
8.3.1	Some exact solutions . . . . .	142
8.3.2	Two-temperature plasma in solar flares . . . . .	144
8.3.3	An adiabatic model for two-temperature plasma . . . . .	148
8.3.4	Two-temperature accretion flows . . . . .	150
8.4	Dynamic friction in astrophysical plasma . . . . .	151
8.4.1	The collisional drag force and energy losses . . . . .	151
8.4.2	Electric runaway . . . . .	155
8.4.3	Thermal runaway in astrophysical plasma . . . . .	157
8.5	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	158



<b>9</b>	<b>Macroscopic Description of Astrophysical Plasma</b>	<b>163</b>
9.1	Summary of microscopic description . . . . .	163
9.2	Transition to macroscopic description . . . . .	164
9.3	Macroscopic transfer equations . . . . .	165
9.3.1	Equation for the zeroth moment . . . . .	165
9.3.2	The momentum conservation law . . . . .	166
9.3.3	The energy conservation law . . . . .	169
9.4	General properties of transfer equations . . . . .	173
9.4.1	Divergent and hydrodynamic forms . . . . .	173
9.4.2	Status of conservation laws . . . . .	174
9.5	Equation of state and transfer coefficients . . . . .	175
9.6	Gravitational systems . . . . .	177
9.7	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	178
<b>10</b>	<b>Multi-Fluid Models of Astrophysical Plasma</b>	<b>183</b>
10.1	Multi-fluid models in astrophysics . . . . .	183
10.2	Langmuir waves . . . . .	184
10.2.1	Langmuir waves in a cold plasma . . . . .	184
10.2.2	Langmuir waves in a warm plasma . . . . .	186
10.2.3	Ion effects in Langmuir waves . . . . .	187
10.3	Electromagnetic waves in plasma . . . . .	188
10.4	What do we miss? . . . . .	190
10.5	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	191
<b>11</b>	<b>The Generalized Ohm's Law in Plasma</b>	<b>193</b>
11.1	The classic Ohm's law . . . . .	193
11.2	Derivation of basic equations . . . . .	194
11.3	The general solution . . . . .	196
11.4	The conductivity of magnetized plasma . . . . .	197
11.4.1	Two limiting cases . . . . .	197
11.4.2	The physical interpretation . . . . .	198
11.5	Currents and charges in plasma . . . . .	199
11.5.1	Collisional and collisionless plasmas . . . . .	199
11.5.2	Volume charge and quasi-neutrality . . . . .	201
11.6	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	203
<b>12</b>	<b>Single-Fluid Models for Astrophysical Plasma</b>	<b>205</b>
12.1	Derivation of the single-fluid equations . . . . .	205
12.1.1	The continuity equation . . . . .	205
12.1.2	The momentum conservation law in plasma . . . . .	206
12.1.3	The energy conservation law . . . . .	208
12.2	Basic assumptions and the MHD equations . . . . .	209
12.2.1	Old and new simplifying assumptions . . . . .	209
12.2.2	Non-relativistic magnetohydrodynamics . . . . .	213
12.2.3	Relativistic magnetohydrodynamics . . . . .	215

12.3	Magnetic flux conservation. Ideal MHD . . . . .	216
12.3.1	Integral and differential forms of the law . . . . .	216
12.3.2	The equations of ideal MHD . . . . .	218
12.4	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	221
<b>13</b>	<b>Magnetohydrodynamics in Astrophysics</b>	<b>223</b>
13.1	The main approximations in ideal MHD . . . . .	223
13.1.1	Dimensionless equations . . . . .	223
13.1.2	Weak magnetic fields in astrophysical plasma . . . . .	225
13.1.3	Strong magnetic fields in plasma . . . . .	226
13.2	Accretion disks of stars . . . . .	229
13.2.1	Angular momentum transfer in binary stars . . . . .	229
13.2.2	Magnetic accretion in cataclysmic variables . . . . .	231
13.2.3	Accretion disks near black holes . . . . .	231
13.2.4	Flares in accretion disk coronae . . . . .	233
13.3	Astrophysical jets . . . . .	234
13.3.1	Jets near black holes . . . . .	234
13.3.2	Relativistic jets from disk coronae . . . . .	236
13.4	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	237
<b>14</b>	<b>Plasma Flows in a Strong Magnetic Field</b>	<b>243</b>
14.1	The general formulation of the problem . . . . .	243
14.2	The formalism of two-dimensional problems . . . . .	245
14.2.1	The first type of problems . . . . .	245
14.2.2	The second type of MHD problems . . . . .	247
14.3	On the existence of continuous flows . . . . .	252
14.4	Flows in a time-dependent dipole field . . . . .	253
14.4.1	Plane magnetic dipole fields . . . . .	253
14.4.2	Axisymmetric dipole fields in plasma . . . . .	256
14.5	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	258
<b>15</b>	<b>MHD Waves in Astrophysical Plasma</b>	<b>263</b>
15.1	The dispersion equation in ideal MHD . . . . .	263
15.2	Small-amplitude waves in ideal MHD . . . . .	265
15.2.1	Entropy waves . . . . .	265
15.2.2	Alfvén waves . . . . .	267
15.2.3	Magnetoacoustic waves . . . . .	268
15.2.4	The phase velocity diagram . . . . .	269
15.3	Dissipative waves in MHD . . . . .	271
15.3.1	Small damping of Alfvén waves . . . . .	271
15.3.2	Slightly damped MHD waves . . . . .	273
15.4	Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	274

<b>16 Discontinuous Flows in a MHD Medium</b>	<b>277</b>
16.1 Discontinuity surfaces in hydrodynamics . . . . .	277
16.1.1 The origin of shocks in ordinary hydrodynamics . . . . .	277
16.1.2 Boundary conditions and classification . . . . .	278
16.1.3 Dissipative processes and entropy . . . . .	280
16.2 Magnetohydrodynamic discontinuities . . . . .	281
16.2.1 Boundary conditions at a discontinuity surface . . . . .	281
16.2.2 Discontinuities without plasma flows across them . . . . .	284
16.2.3 Perpendicular shock wave . . . . .	286
16.2.4 Oblique shock waves . . . . .	288
16.2.5 Peculiar shock waves . . . . .	293
16.2.6 The Alfvén discontinuity . . . . .	294
16.3 Transitions between discontinuities . . . . .	296
16.4 Shock waves in collisionless plasma . . . . .	298
16.5 Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	299
<b>17 Evolutionarity of MHD Discontinuities</b>	<b>305</b>
17.1 Conditions for evolutionarity . . . . .	305
17.1.1 The physical meaning and definition . . . . .	305
17.1.2 Linearized boundary conditions . . . . .	307
17.1.3 The number of small-amplitude waves . . . . .	309
17.1.4 Domains of evolutionarity . . . . .	311
17.2 Consequences of evolutionarity conditions . . . . .	313
17.2.1 The order of wave propagation . . . . .	313
17.2.2 Continuous transitions between discontinuities . . . . .	315
17.3 Dissipative effects in evolutionarity . . . . .	315
17.4 Discontinuity structure and evolutionarity . . . . .	319
17.4.1 Perpendicular shock waves . . . . .	319
17.4.2 Discontinuities with penetrating magnetic field . . . . .	323
17.5 Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	324
<b>18 Particle Acceleration by Shock Waves</b>	<b>327</b>
18.1 Two basic mechanisms . . . . .	327
18.2 Shock diffusive acceleration . . . . .	328
18.2.1 The canonical model of diffusive mechanism . . . . .	328
18.2.2 Some properties of diffusive mechanism . . . . .	331
18.2.3 Nonlinear effects in diffusive acceleration . . . . .	332
18.3 Shock drift acceleration . . . . .	332
18.3.1 Perpendicular shock waves . . . . .	333
18.3.2 Quasi-perpendicular shock waves . . . . .	335
18.3.3 Oblique shock waves . . . . .	339
18.4 Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	340

<b>19 Plasma Equilibrium in Magnetic Field</b>	<b>343</b>
19.1 The virial theorem in MHD . . . . .	343
19.1.1 A brief pre-history . . . . .	343
19.1.2 Deduction of the scalar virial theorem . . . . .	344
19.1.3 Some astrophysical applications . . . . .	347
19.2 Force-free fields and Shafranov's theorem . . . . .	350
19.2.1 The simplest examples of force-free fields . . . . .	350
19.2.2 The energy of a force-free field . . . . .	352
19.3 Properties of equilibrium configurations . . . . .	353
19.3.1 Magnetic surfaces . . . . .	353
19.3.2 The specific volume of a magnetic tube . . . . .	355
19.3.3 The flute or convective instability . . . . .	357
19.3.4 Stability of an equilibrium configuration . . . . .	358
19.4 The Archimedean force in MHD . . . . .	359
19.4.1 A general formulation of the problem . . . . .	359
19.4.2 A simplified consideration of the effect . . . . .	360
19.5 MHD equilibrium in the solar atmosphere . . . . .	361
19.6 Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	363
<b>20 Stationary Flows in a Magnetic Field</b>	<b>367</b>
20.1 Ideal plasma flows . . . . .	367
20.1.1 Incompressible medium . . . . .	368
20.1.2 Compressible medium . . . . .	369
20.1.3 Astrophysical collimated streams (jets) . . . . .	369
20.1.4 MHD waves of arbitrary amplitude . . . . .	370
20.1.5 Differential rotation and isorotation . . . . .	371
20.2 Flows at small magnetic Reynolds numbers . . . . .	374
20.2.1 Stationary flows inside a duct . . . . .	374
20.2.2 The MHD generator or pump . . . . .	376
20.2.3 Weakly-ionized plasma in astrophysics . . . . .	378
20.3 The $\sigma$ -dependent force and vortex flows . . . . .	379
20.3.1 Simplifications and problem formulation . . . . .	379
20.3.2 The solution for a spherical ball . . . . .	381
20.3.3 Forces and flows near a spherical ball . . . . .	382
20.4 Large magnetic Reynolds numbers . . . . .	386
20.4.1 The general formula for the $\sigma$ -dependent force . . . . .	387
20.4.2 The $\sigma$ -dependent force in solar prominences . . . . .	389
20.5 Practice: Exercises and Answers . . . . .	391
<b>Appendix 1. Notation</b>	<b>393</b>
<b>Appendix 2. Useful Expressions</b>	<b>399</b>
<b>Appendix 3. Constants</b>	<b>403</b>

**Bibliography**

**405**

**Index**

**427**

# About This Book

If you want to learn the most fundamental things about plasma astrophysics with the least amount of time – and who doesn't? – this text is for you. This book is addressed to young people, mainly to students, without a background in plasma physics; it grew from the lectures given many times in the Faculty of General and Applied Physics at the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technics (the well known 'fiz-tekh') since 1977. A similar full-year course was also offered to the students of the Astronomical Division of the Faculty of Physics at the Moscow State University over the years after 1990. A considerable amount of new material, related to modern astrophysics, has been added to the lectures. So the contents of the book can hardly be presented during a one-year lecture course, without additional seminars.

In fact, just the seminars with the topics '**how to make a cake**' were especially pleasant for the author and useful for students. In part, the text of the book retains the imprint of the seminar form, implying a more lively dialogue with the reader and more visual representation of individual notions and statements. At the same time, the author's desire was that these digressions from the academic language of the monograph will not harm the rigour of presentation of this textbook's subject – the physical and mathematical introduction to plasma astrophysics.

There is no unique simple model of a plasma, which encompasses all situations in space. We have to familiarize ourselves with many different models applied to different situations. We need clear guidelines when a model works and when it does not work. Hence **the best strategy** is to develop an intuition about plasma physics, but how to develop it?

The idea of the book is not typical for the majority of textbooks on plasma astrophysics. Its idea is

the consecutive consideration of physical principles, starting from the most general ones, and of simplifying assumptions which give us a simpler description of plasma under cosmic conditions.

Thus I would recommend the students to read the book straight through each chapter to see the central line of the plasma astrophysics, its **classic fundamentals**. In so doing, the boundaries of the domain of applicability of the approximation at hand will be outlined from the viewpoint of physics

rather than of many possible astronomical applications. After that, as an aid to detailed understanding, please return with pencil and paper to work out the missing steps (if any) in the formal mathematics.

On the basis of such an approach the student interested in modern astrophysics, its **current practice**, will find the answers to two key questions:

(1) what approximation is the best one (the simplest but sufficient) for description of a phenomenon in astrophysical plasma;

(2) how to build an adequate model for the phenomenon, for example, a solar flare or a flare in the corona of an accretion disk.

Practice is really important for the theory of astrophysical plasma. Related exercises (problems and answers supplemented to each chapter) to improve skill do not thwart the theory but serve to better understanding of plasma astrophysics.

As for the applications, preference evidently is given to physical processes in the solar plasma. Why? – Much attention to solar plasma physics is conditioned by the possibility of the all-round observational test of theoretical models. This statement primarily relates to the processes in the solar atmosphere. For instance, flares on the Sun, in contrast to those on other stars as well as a lot of other analogous phenomena in the Universe, *can be seen* in their development, i.e. we can obtain a sequence of images during the flare's evolution, not only in the optical and radio ranges but also in the ultraviolet, soft and hard X-ray, gamma-ray ranges.

This book is mainly intended for students who have mastered a course of general physics and have some initial knowledge of theoretical physics. For beginning students, who may not know in which subfields of astrophysics they wish to specialize,

it is better to cover a lot of fundamental theories thoroughly than to dig deeply into any particular astrophysical subject or object,

even a very interesting one, for example black holes. Astronomers and astrophysicists of the future will need tools that allow them to explore in many different directions. Moreover astronomy of the future will be, more than hitherto, *precise science* similar to mathematics and physics.

The beginning graduate students are usually confronted with a confusing amount of work on plasma astrophysics published in a widely dispersed scientific literature. Knowing this difficulty, the author has tried as far as possible to represent the material in a self-contained form which does not require the reading of additional literature. However there is an extensive bibliography in the end of the book, allowing one to find the original works. In many cases, particularly where a paper in Russian is involved, the author has aimed to give the full bibliographic description of the work, including its title, etc.

Furthermore the book contains recommendations as to an introductory (unavoidable) reading needed to refresh the memory about a particular fact, as well as to additional (further) reading to refine one's understanding of the subject. Separate **remarks of an historical character** are included in many

places. It is sometimes simpler to explain the interrelation of discoveries by representing the subject in its development. It is the author's opinion that the outstanding discoveries in plasma astrophysics are by no means governed by chance. With the same thought in mind, the author gives preference to original papers on a topic under consideration; it happens in science, as in art, that an original is better than nice-looking modernizations. Anyway,

knowledge of the history of science and especially of natural science is of great significance for its understanding and development.

The majority of the book's chapters begin from an 'elementary account' and illustrative simple examples but finish with the most modern results of scientific importance. New problems determine the most interesting perspectives of plasma astrophysics as a new developing science. The author hopes, in this context, that professionals in the field of plasma astrophysics and adjacent sciences will enjoy reading this book too. Open issues are the focus of our attention in many places where they are. In this way, **perspectives of the plasma astrophysics** with its many applications will be also of interest for readers. The book can be used as a textbook but has higher potential of modern scientific monograph.

The first volume of the book is unique in covering the basic principles and main practical tools required for understanding and work in plasma astrophysics. The second volume "Plasma Astrophysics. 2. Reconnection and Flares" (referred in the text as vol. 2) represents the basic physics of the magnetic reconnection phenomenon and the flares of electromagnetic origin in space plasmas in the solar system, relativistic objects, accretion disks, their coronae.

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# Plasma Astrophysics

## *History and Neighbours*

Plasma astrophysics studies electromagnetic processes and phenomena in space, mainly the role of forces of an electromagnetic nature in the dynamics of cosmic matter. Two factors are specific to the latter: its gaseous state and high conductivity. Such a combination is unlikely to be found under natural conditions on Earth; the matter is either a non-conducting gas (the case of gas dynamics or hydrodynamics) or a liquid or a solid conductor. By contrast, **plasma is the main state of cosmic matter**. It is precisely the poor knowledge of cosmic phenomena and cosmic plasma properties that explains the retarded development of plasma astrophysics. It has been distinguished as an independent branch of physics in the pioneering works of Alfvén (see Alfvén, 1950).

Soon after that, the problem of thermonuclear reactions initiated a great advance in plasma research (Simon, 1959; Glasstone and Loveberg, 1960; Leontovich, 1960). This branch has been developing rather independently, although being partly ‘fed’ by astrophysical ideas. They contributed to the growth of plasma physics, for example, the idea of stellarators. Presently, the reverse influence of laboratory plasma physics on astrophysics is also important.

From the physical viewpoint,

plasma astrophysics is a part of plasma theory related in the first place to the dynamics of a low-resistivity plasma in space.

However it is this part that is the most poorly studied one under laboratory conditions. During the 1930s, scientists began to realize that the Sun and other stars are powered by nuclear fusion and they began to think of recreating the process in the laboratory. The ideas of astro- and geophysics dominate here, as before. At present time, they mainly come from many space experiments and fine astronomical ground-based observations. From this viewpoint, plasma astrophysics belongs to experimental science.

Electric currents and, therefore, magnetic fields are easily generated in the astrophysical plasma owing to its low resistivity. The energy of magnetic fields

is accumulated in plasma, and the sudden release of this energy – an original electrodynamical ‘burst’ or ‘explosion’ – takes place under definite but quite general conditions. It is accompanied by fast directed plasma ejections (jets), powerful flows of heat and radiation and impulsive acceleration of particles to high energies.

This phenomenon is quite a widespread one. It can be observed in flares on the Sun and other stars, in the Earth’s magnetosphere as magnetic storms and substorms, in coronae of accretion disks of cosmic X-ray sources, in nuclei of active galaxies and quasars. The second volume of this book is devoted to the physics of *magnetic reconnection and flares* generated by reconnection in plasma in the solar system, single and double stars, relativistic objects, and other astrophysical objects.

The subject of the first volume of present book is the systematic description of the most important topics of plasma astrophysics. However the aim of the book is not the strict substantiation of the main principals and basic equations of plasma physics; this can be found in many wonderful monographs (Klimontovich, 1986; Schram, 1991; Liboff, 2003). There are also many nice textbooks (Goldston and Rutherford, 1995; Choudhuri, 1998; Parks, 2004) to learn general plasma physics without or with some astrophysical applications.

**The primary aim of the book** in your hands is rather the solution of a much more modest but still important problem, namely to help the students of astrophysics to understand the interrelation and limits of applicability of different approximations which are used in plasma astrophysics. If, on his/her way, the reader will continuously try, following the author, to reproduce all mathematical transformation, he/she finally will soon find the pleasant feeling of real knowledge of the subject and the real desire for constructive work in plasma astrophysics.

The book will help the young reader to master the modern methods of plasma astrophysics and will teach the application of these methods while solving concrete problems in the physics of the Sun and many other astronomical objects. A good working knowledge of plasma astrophysics is essential for the modern astrophysicist.

# Chapter 1

## Particles and Fields: Exact Self-Consistent Description

There exist two different ways to describe *exactly* the behaviour of a system of charged particles in electromagnetic and gravitational fields. The first description, the Newton set of motion equations, is convenient for a small number of interacting particles. For systems of large numbers of particles, it is more advantageous to deal with the single Liouville equation for an *exact* distribution function.

### 1.1 Interacting particles and Liouville's theorem

#### 1.1.1 Continuity in phase space

Let us consider a system of  $N$  interacting particles. Without much justification (which will be given in Chapter 2), let us introduce the distribution function

$$f = f(\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{v}, t) \tag{1.1}$$

for particles as follows. We consider the six-dimensional (6D) space called *phase space*  $X = \{\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{v}\}$ . The number of particles present in a small volume  $dX = d^3\mathbf{r} d^3\mathbf{v}$  at a point  $X$  (see Figure 1.1) at a moment of time  $t$  is defined to be

$$dN(X, t) = f(X, t) dX. \tag{1.2}$$

Accordingly, the total number of the particles at this moment is

$$N(t) = \int f(X, t) dX \equiv \iint f(\mathbf{r}, \mathbf{v}, t) d^3\mathbf{r} d^3\mathbf{v}. \tag{1.3}$$

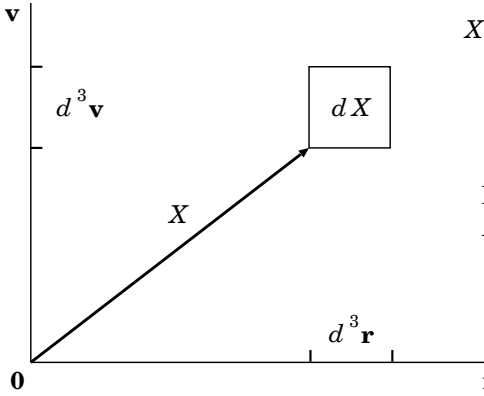


Figure 1.1: The 6D phase space  $X$ . A small volume  $dX$  at a point  $X$ .

If, for definiteness, we use the Cartesian coordinates, then

$$X = \{x, y, z, v_x, v_y, v_z\}$$

is a point of the phase space (Figure 1.2) and

$$\dot{X} = \{v_x, v_y, v_z, \dot{v}_x, \dot{v}_y, \dot{v}_z\} \quad (1.4)$$

is the velocity of this point in the phase space.

Let us suppose the coordinates and velocities of the particles are changing *continuously* – ‘from point to point’. This corresponds to a continuous motion of the particles in phase space and can be expressed by the *continuity equation*:

$$\boxed{\frac{\partial f}{\partial t} + \operatorname{div}_X (\dot{X} f) = 0} \quad (1.5)$$

or

$$\frac{\partial f}{\partial t} + \operatorname{div}_{\mathbf{r}} (\mathbf{v} f) + \operatorname{div}_{\mathbf{v}} (\dot{\mathbf{v}} f) = 0.$$

Equation (1.5) expresses the *conservation law* for the particles, since the integration of (1.5) over a volume  $U$  enclosed by the surface  $S$  in Figure 1.2 gives

$$\frac{\partial}{\partial t} \int_U f dX + \int_U \operatorname{div}_X (\dot{X} f) dX =$$

by virtue of definition (1.2) and the Ostrogradskii-Gauss theorem

$$= \frac{\partial}{\partial t} N(t) \Big|_U + \int_S (\dot{X} f) dS = \frac{\partial}{\partial t} N(t) \Big|_U + \int_S \mathbf{J} \cdot d\mathbf{S} = 0. \quad (1.6)$$

Here a surface element  $d\mathbf{S}$ , normal to the boundary  $S$ , is oriented towards its outside, so that imports are counted as negative (e.g., Smirnov, 1965, Section 126).  $\mathbf{J} = \dot{X} f$  is the *particle flux density* in phase space. Thus