

# Magnetic Damping

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## 1 Problem

Discuss the most prominent effect on the vertical oscillations of a copper cube of edge  $a$  that is suspended from a spring of constant  $k$  when the cube is immersed in a uniform, horizontal magnetic field  $\mathbf{B}_0$  which is normal to two of the cube's vertical faces. The cube is electrically neutral in the absence of the magnetic field.

## 2 Solution

*This problem was posed on p. 250 of the April 2012 issue of The Physics Teacher.*<sup>1,2</sup>

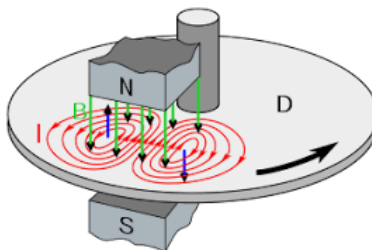
When a conductor moves through a nonuniform, external magnetic field, the magnetic flux varies through loops fixed inside the conductor, so an electromotive force is induced around the loops, according to Faraday's law (in the rest frame of the conductor), and eddy

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<sup>1</sup>Magnetic damping is due to eddy currents, a phenomenon first observed (but not understood) by Arago [1, 2, 5], who reported in 1824: *the results of some experiments that he has conducted on the influence that metals and many other substances exert on a magnetic needle, which has the effect of rapidly reducing the amplitude of the oscillations without altering significantly their duration.* As reported by Babbage and Herschel (1825) [3]: *The curious experiments of M. Arago described by M. Gay Lussac during his visit to London in the spring of the present year (1825), in which plates of copper and other substances set in rapid rotation beneath a magnetized needle, caused it to deviate from its direction, and finally dragged it round with them, naturally excited much attention.*

A step towards an understanding of Arago's phenomenon was made by Christie (1826) [4], who noted that if the copper disk is cut into two or more concentric rings, the effect of a magnet on its rotation is greatly reduced.

In 1831, Art. 131 of [6], Faraday stated: *Future investigations will no doubt ... decide the point whether the retarding or dragging action spoken of (by Arago) is always simultaneous with electric currents, i.e., eddy currents.* This statement might have been clearer if Art. 131 had been followed by Art. 123, where it was stated: *These currents are discharged or return in the parts of the plate on each side of and more distant from the place of the pole, where, of course, the magnetic induction is weaker.*



One can reasonably infer that Faraday had a vision of eddy currents as shown above, although Faraday himself never made such a sketch.

*The notion of eddy currents is sometimes attributed to Foucault (1855) [7], and are sometimes called Foucault currents, although Foucault attributed their explanation to Faraday.*

<sup>2</sup>The pedagogic literature on magnetic damping/braking includes [9]-[81].

currents flow.<sup>3</sup> The Lorentz force on these eddy currents, due to the external magnetic field, opposes the motion, and one speaks of magnetic braking/damping.<sup>4</sup> This effect is (ultra)relativistic, being of order  $v^2/c^2$ , where  $v$  is the speed of the conductor and  $c$  is the speed of light in vacuum. While such relativistic effects are generally small for “ordinary” velocities, the eddy current density obeys  $J = \sigma E$ , where the conductivity  $\sigma$  for good conductors approaches  $c^2/v^2$  when measured in Gaussian units, such that eddy-current braking is a rare example of an important (ultra)relativistic correction at low velocities.

In the present problem the magnetic field is spatially uniform, so the magnetic flux through a moving loop does not change, and no eddy currents develop. Yet, there exists a very weak magnetic-damping effect, as discussed below.

The cube has mass  $m = \rho a^3$ , where  $\rho$  is the mass density of copper, so in the absence of the magnetic field it oscillates vertically with angular frequency,

$$\omega = \sqrt{\frac{k}{m}}. \quad (1)$$

When the oscillations have amplitude  $A$  the vertical velocity has the form,

$$v(t) = A\omega e^{i\omega t}, \quad (2)$$

which is surely small in magnitude compared to the speed of light  $c$  in vacuum.

In the instantaneous rest frame of the cube there appears to be a horizontal electric field of (time-dependent) magnitude,

$$E_0(t) \approx \frac{v(t)B_0}{c} = \frac{AB_0\omega e^{i\omega t}}{c} \quad (3)$$

(to order  $v/c$ , and in Gaussian units),<sup>5</sup> whose direction is perpendicular to that of  $\mathbf{B}_0$ , and hence normal to two faces of the cube. Assuming that the frequency  $\omega$  is low enough that the magnetic field penetrates into the copper cube, the electric field (3) exists throughout its interior, and adds to the electric field  $E_1 \approx 4\pi Q/a^2$  associated with surface charge  $Q$  (to be determined). The total electric field  $E = E_0 + E_1$  gives rise to electrical current density of magnitude  $J = \sigma E$  where  $\sigma \approx 6 \times 10^{17}$  s is the electrical conductivity of copper.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, an electrical current,

$$I(t) = a^2 J = a^2 \sigma E, \quad (4)$$

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<sup>3</sup>Eddy currents can be induced in conductors at rest by time-dependent magnetic fields. The Lorentz force on the eddy currents can then lead to (dramatic) motion of the conductor, as in Elihu Thomson’s jumping ring (1884) [86]-[129]. Here, the magnetic force does the work on the ring.

A small such effect was observed by Ampère and de la Rive in 1821-22 [82, 83], but was largely ignored. A brief mention of this was made by Verdet (1872), sec. 209, p. 357 of [84]. This neglected lore was recounted by Thompson (1894) in [90].

<sup>4</sup>For another example of this phenomenon by the author, see [46].

<sup>5</sup>A lab-frame argument is that the Lorentz force on the conduction electrons can be thought of as due to an effective electric field, given by eq. (3).

<sup>6</sup>At high frequencies the conductivity  $\sigma$  has a significant imaginary part, which we neglect in the present low-frequency example.

flows through the copper cube, along the direction of the electric field. This current leads to an accumulation of charge on the faces of the cube normal to the electric field,

$$Q(t) = \int I dt = -\frac{ia^2\sigma E}{\omega}, \quad (5)$$

and this surface-charge distribution leads to electric field,

$$E_1(t) \approx \frac{4\pi Q(t)}{a^2} = -\frac{4\pi i\sigma E}{\omega}, \quad (6)$$

The total electric field inside the cube is,

$$E = E_0 + E_1 \approx E_0 - \frac{4\pi i\sigma E}{\omega}, \quad (7)$$

*i.e.*,

$$E \approx \frac{E_0}{1 + 4\pi i\sigma/\omega} \approx -\frac{i\omega E_0}{4\pi\sigma} = -\frac{i\omega^2 AB_0 e^{i\omega t}}{4\pi\sigma c}. \quad (8)$$

The electric current is,

$$I(t) = a^2\sigma E \approx -\frac{ia^2\omega^2 AB_0 e^{i\omega t}}{4\pi c}, \quad (9)$$

independent of the conductivity  $\sigma$ .<sup>7</sup>

The copper cube presents electrical resistance,

$$R = \frac{1}{a\sigma} \quad (11)$$

to the current flow, and heat is generated at the time-average rate,

$$\langle P \rangle = \frac{|I|^2 R}{2} = \frac{a^3\omega^4 A^2 B_0^2}{32\pi^2 c^2 \sigma} \equiv CA^2, \quad (12)$$

where,

$$C = \frac{a^3\omega^4 B_0^2}{2c^2\sigma} = \frac{k^2 B_0^2}{32\pi c^2 \rho^2 \sigma}. \quad (13)$$

This is an effect at order  $v^2/c^2$ , and will be extremely small due to the additional presence of the large conductivity  $\sigma$  in the denominator.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>The result (9) could be gotten more quickly by arguing that the electric field in the interior of a good conductor is essentially zero, so that there must be charge  $\pm Q \approx \pm a^2 E_0/4\pi$  on the faces of the cubes normal to  $E_0$  to “short out” this field. Then, the current in the interior of the cube is,

$$I(t) = \frac{dQ}{dt} \approx \frac{a^2}{4\pi} \frac{dE_0}{dt} = \frac{ia^2\omega^2 AB_0 e^{i\omega t}}{4\pi c}. \quad (10)$$

However, this argument fails when eddy currents are present, so care is required in using it.

<sup>8</sup>When eddy currents are generated the surface charge is negligible, and a factor of  $\sigma$  appears in the numerator rather than the denominator of the expression for  $\langle P \rangle$ .

The energy deposition (12) results in a gradual decrease of the amplitude  $A$  of oscillation, as the energy  $U$  of the oscillation system is,<sup>9</sup>

$$U(t) = kA^2(t). \quad (14)$$

Then, the energy-loss equation  $dU/dt = -\langle P \rangle$  leads to,

$$\frac{dA^2}{dt} = -\frac{CA^2}{k}, \quad (15)$$

whose solution is,

$$A = A_0 e^{-t/\tau}, \quad (16)$$

with (large!) damping time constant,

$$\tau = 2k/C = \frac{64\pi^2 c^2 \rho^2 \sigma}{kB_0^2}. \quad (17)$$

For parameters typical of laboratory experiments, the time constant  $\tau$  is larger than the age of the Universe.

## 2.1 Other Effects at Order $v^2/c^2$

Even for  $\mathbf{B} = 0$  the “relativistic mass” increase with velocity implies that the angular frequency of oscillation is smaller than  $\sqrt{k/m}$  by a term of order  $v^2/c^2$ .

For nonzero magnetic field the angular frequency is also slightly reduced by the vertical Lorentz force on the horizontal current discussed above.

Whether the tiny frequency shift or the very weak magnetic damping is the more prominent effect is a matter of opinion.

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*Mr. Arago orally communicates the results of some experiments that he has conducted on the influence that metals and many other substances exert on a magnetic needle, which has the effect of rapidly reducing the amplitude of the oscillations without altering significantly their duration. He promises, on this subject, a detailed memoir.*  
 See also p. 445 of [8].

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<sup>9</sup>We ignore the tiny change in the magnetic field energy due to the field associated with the current (9).

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