A Spring in Imaginary Time

Math 241 Homework
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One of the stranger aspects of Lagrangian *dynamics* is how it turns into *statics* when we replace the time coordinate t by it — or in the jargon of physicists, when we 'Wick rotate' to 'imaginary time'! People usually take advantage of this to do interesting things in the context of *quantum mechanics*, but the basic ideas are already visible in *classical mechanics*. So, let's look at them!

1. Suppose you have a spring in $\mathbb{R}^n$ whose ends are held fixed, tracing out a curve

$$q\colon [s_0, s_1] \to \mathbb{R}^n$$

with endpoints

$$q(s_0) = a, \qquad q(s_1) = b.$$

Suppose the spring is put into a potential

$$V\colon \mathbb{R}^n \to \mathbb{R}$$

(perhaps due to gravity, but not necessarily). What curve will the spring trace out when it is in equilibrium?

Hint: Hooke's law says that a stretched spring has energy proportional to the square of how much it is stretched. Here this is true of each little piece of the spring, so its total energy due to stretching will be

$$\frac{k}{2}\int_{s_0}^{s_1} \dot{q}(s)\cdot\dot{q}(s)\,ds$$

for some 'spring constant' k. But in addition, each little piece will acquire energy due to the potential V at that point, so the spring will also have potential energy

$$\int_{s_0}^{s_1} V(q(s))\,ds.$$

The total energy of the spring is thus:

$$E = \int_{s_0}^{s_1} \left(\frac{k}{2}\dot{q}(s)\cdot\dot{q}(s) + V(q(s))\right)\,ds.$$

Our study of statics has taught us that in equilibrium, a static system minimizes its energy, or at least finds a critical point. So, set

$$\delta E = 0$$

for all allowed variations δq of the path, and work out the differential equation this implies for q.

2. Suppose the spring is in a constant downwards gravitational field in $\mathbb{R}^3$, so that

$$V(x, y, z) = mgz$$

where m is the mass density of the spring and g is the acceleration of gravity (9.8 meters/second^2). What sort of curve does the spring trace out, in equilibrium?

3. The calculation in problem 1 should remind you strongly of the derivation of the Euler-Lagrange equations for a particle in a potential. To heighten this analogy, take the energy

$$E = \int_{s_0}^{s_1} \left(\frac{k}{2}\dot{q}(s)\cdot\dot{q}(s) + V(q(s))\right)\,ds.$$

and formally replace the parameter s by it, replacing the real interval $[s_0, s_1] \subset \mathbb{R}$ by the imaginary interval $[t_0, t_1] \subset i\mathbb{R}$, where $it_i = s_i$. Show that up to some constant factor, the *energy* of the static spring becomes the *action* for a particle moving in a potential.

4. Fill in the blanks in this analogy:

STATICS	DYNAMICS
Principle of Least Energy	Principle of Least Action
spring	particle
energy	
	kinetic energy
	potential energy
spring constant k	

5. What particular dynamics problem is the statics problem in 2 analogous to? How is the solution to the statics problem related to the solution of this dynamics problem?

6. What does Newton's law $F = ma$ become if we formally replace t by $s = it$?

Hint: by 'formally', *I'm suggesting that you shouldn't think too much about what this actually means! It's a good thing to think about, but don't let that stop you from solving what's meant to be a quick and easy problem.*