

# A Closed-form Analytical Solution to Torque Free Precession: Euler-Poinsot Problem

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## Abstract

This work aims to disclose a closed-form analytical solution to attitude motion for a rigid body subject to zero body-fixed torques, i.e., Euler-Poinsot problem. Revisiting Routh's study, the presence of multiple solutions are identified. To verify the proposed solution, numerical simulations and real-life experiment results are presented. A Code Ocean repository is also provided so that readers could test the algorithm individually.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Euler-Poinsot problem tackles the description of attitude motion of a rigid body, subject to zero body-fixed torques. To this end, Poinsot proposed a visualization technique, called Poinsot construction, which can be used to geometrically describe the attitude of a rigid body [1], [2]. Routh challenged the Euler-Poinsot problem and provided analytical solutions to Euler’s equation for the case of zero body-fixed torques [3]. Jupp also proposed a solution using a Lie-series perturbation procedure [4]. Recently, Routh’s study was revisited and researchers provided further findings, e.g, analyses on its state transition matrix, motion constants, and ergodicity [5], Dzhanibekov effect [6], computer-aided visualization [7], and open-source code [8]. They also demonstrated the presence of multiple solutions concerning the problem.

In this study, Routh’s solution was further elaborated so as to identify the multiple solution cases such that it could be used as a generalized *zero-input* solution. The accuracy of the solution was primarily tested via numerical simulations. It was also demonstrated that the proposed solution could represent uncontrolled rotational motion of an actual spacecraft. By solely using the initial angular velocity values, the solution accurately predicted the angular velocity trajectory data which was recorded while the actual spacecraft Aist was undergoing uncontrolled rotational motion [9].

The manuscript is organized as follows. In section II, the mathematical tools used in the manuscript is succinctly provided. The problem definition is given in section III. The closed-form analytical solution is explained in section IV. Simulation and experiment results are presented in section V and the manuscript is concluded in section VI.

## II. MATHEMATICAL PRELIMINARIES

Introduced by Carl Gustav Jakob Jacobi, Jacobi elliptic functions are a set of elliptic functions, which are used for the analytical description of a certain class of nonlinear system

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motion. While a unit circle is considered as a basis for trigonometric functions, a *normalized* ellipse is used as the basis for the definition of Jacobi elliptic functions. Following the descriptions provided in [10], the following equations defines an ellipse:

$$\left(\frac{x}{a}\right)^2 + (y)^2 = 1 \quad (1)$$

$$m = 1 - \frac{1}{a^2} \quad (2)$$

$$(3)$$

Note that  $a > 1$  and the shape of the ellipse can be controlled by the parameter  $m$  which obeys  $0 < m < 1$ . When  $m = 0$ , the ellipse take the form of a unit circle. The parameter  $u$  may be defined as in the following:

$$u = \int_0^\gamma \frac{d\theta}{\sqrt{1 - m \sin^2 \theta}} \quad (4)$$

Using these parameters, the elliptic functions are respectively described as  $\text{sn}(u, m) = \sin \gamma$ ,  $\text{cn}(u, m) = \cos \gamma$ , and  $\text{dn}(u, m) = \sqrt{1 - m \sin^2 \gamma}$ . Furthermore, let  $(x, y)$  be a point on the ellipse;  $\text{sn}(u, m) = y$  and  $\text{cn}(u, m) = \frac{x}{a}$ . Therefore,  $\text{sn}(u, m)^2 + \text{cn}(u, m)^2 = 1$ . In addition,  $\text{dn}(u, m) = \frac{r}{a}$ ;  $r$  is the radial distance of the ellipse.

Derivatives of the elliptic functions can be expressed as below:

$$\frac{d}{du} \text{sn} = \text{cn dn} \quad (5)$$

$$\frac{d}{du} \text{cn} = -\text{sn dn} \quad (6)$$

$$\frac{d}{du} \text{dn} = -m \text{sn cn} \quad (7)$$

To simplify the notation, the argument  $(u, m)$  is dropped. For the solution of the Euler-Poinsot motion, one needs the squares of the eqs. (5)-(7):

$$\left(\frac{d}{du} \text{sn}\right)^2 = m \text{sn}^4 - (1 + m) \text{sn}^2 + 1 \quad (8)$$

$$\left(\frac{d}{du} \text{cn}\right)^2 = -m \text{cn}^4 + (2m - 1) \text{cn}^2 + (1 - m) \quad (9)$$

$$\left(\frac{d}{du} \text{dn}\right)^2 = -\text{dn}^4 + (2 - m) \text{dn}^2 + m - 1 \quad (10)$$

### III. PROBLEM STATEMENT: EULER-POINSON MOTION

For a given rigid body, Euler's equation for principal axes describes the attitude motion [3],

$$M_x = I_{xx}\dot{\omega}_x - (I_{yy} - I_{zz})\omega_y\omega_z \quad (11)$$

$$M_y = I_{yy}\dot{\omega}_y - (I_{zz} - I_{xx})\omega_z\omega_x \quad (12)$$

$$M_z = I_{zz}\dot{\omega}_z - (I_{xx} - I_{yy})\omega_x\omega_y \quad (13)$$

where  $\mathbf{M} = [M_x, M_y, M_z]^T$  denote the body-fixed torques,  $I_{xx}$ ,  $I_{yy}$ ,  $I_{zz}$  are moment of inertia values for principal axes,  $\boldsymbol{\omega} = [\omega_x, \omega_y, \omega_z]^T$  stand for the angular velocity. In this case, the products of inertia are deemed to be negligible. When the body-fixed torques are zero, the body is subject to Euler-Poinsot motion. In this case, the eqs. (11)-(13) take the following form:

$$I_{xx}\dot{\omega}_x = (I_{yy} - I_{zz})\omega_y\omega_z \quad (14)$$

$$I_{yy}\dot{\omega}_y = (I_{zz} - I_{xx})\omega_z\omega_x \quad (15)$$

$$I_{zz}\dot{\omega}_z = (I_{xx} - I_{yy})\omega_x\omega_y \quad (16)$$

#### A. Conserved Quantities

To express the conservation of energy, the expression (14) $\omega_x$  + (15) $\omega_y$  + (16) $\omega_z$  is computed:

$$I_{xx}\dot{\omega}_x\omega_x + I_{yy}\dot{\omega}_y\omega_y + I_{zz}\dot{\omega}_z\omega_z = 0 \quad (17)$$

If (17) is integrated with respect to time, the following is yielded:

$$2E_k = I_{xx}\omega_x^2 + I_{yy}\omega_y^2 + I_{zz}\omega_z^2 \quad (18)$$

$$= I_{xx}\omega_{x0}^2 + I_{yy}\omega_{y0}^2 + I_{zz}\omega_{z0}^2 \quad (19)$$

In (19),  $E_k$  is the rotational kinetic energy, and  $(\omega_{x0}, \omega_{y0}, \omega_{z0})$  stand for initial angular velocity values. Hence, given the initial angular velocity values, one can compute the conserved value of  $2E_k$ . To express the conservation of angular momentum, one can compute (14) $I_{xx}\omega_x$  + (15) $I_{yy}\omega_y$  + (16) $I_{zz}\omega_z$ :

$$I_{xx}^2\dot{\omega}_x\omega_x + I_{yy}^2\dot{\omega}_y\omega_y + I_{zz}^2\dot{\omega}_z\omega_z = 0 \quad (20)$$

If (20) is integrated with respect to time, the square of the magnitude of angular momentum vector,  $H_b^2$ , can be obtained:

$$H_b^2 = I_{xx}^2\omega_x^2 + I_{yy}^2\omega_y^2 + I_{zz}^2\omega_z^2 \quad (21)$$

$$= I_{xx}^2\omega_{x0}^2 + I_{yy}^2\omega_{y0}^2 + I_{zz}^2\omega_{z0}^2 \quad (22)$$

Similarly, given the initial angular velocity values, one can compute the conserved value of  $H_b^2$  using (22). Without the loss of generality, one can consider  $I_{xx} > I_{yy} > I_{zz}$ , y-axis being the intermediate axis. Thus,  $\omega_y$  is primarily isolated.

#### B. Isolating the Variable $\omega_y$

Using (15),  $\dot{\omega}_y^2$  can be expressed as in the following:

$$\dot{\omega}_y^2 = \left( \frac{I_{zz} - I_{xx}}{I_{yy}} \right)^2 \omega_z^2 \omega_x^2 \quad (23)$$

Furthermore, (18) and (21) can be collectively processed to obtain  $\omega_x^2$  and  $\omega_z^2$ , in terms of  $\omega_y$  and the conserved quantities  $H_b^2$  and  $2E_k$ :

$$\omega_x^2 = \frac{H_b^2 - 2E_k I_{zz} - I_{yy}\omega_y^2(I_{yy} - I_{zz})}{I_{xx}(I_{xx} - I_{zz})} \quad (24)$$

$$\omega_z^2 = \frac{2E_k I_{xx} - H_b^2 - I_{yy}\omega_y^2(I_{xx} - I_{yy})}{I_{zz}(I_{xx} - I_{zz})} \quad (25)$$

Plugging (24) and (25) into (23), one could obtain the final differential equation that solely comprises  $\omega_y$ :

$$\dot{\omega}_y^2 = a_y\omega_y^4 + b_y\omega_y^2 + c_y \quad (26)$$

where the coefficients  $a_y$ ,  $b_y$ , and  $c_y$  take the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} b_y &= \frac{(I_{yy} - I_{zz})(H_b^2 - 2E_k I_{xx}) - (I_{xx} - I_{yy})(H_b^2 - 2E_k I_{zz})}{I_{xx}I_{yy}I_{zz}} \\ a_y &= \frac{(I_{xx} - I_{yy})(I_{yy} - I_{zz})}{I_{xx}I_{zz}} \\ c_y &= \frac{(2E_k I_{xx} - H_b^2)(H_b^2 - 2E_k I_{zz})}{I_{xx}I_{zz}I_{yy}^2} \end{aligned} \quad (27)$$

Considering the case  $I_{xx} > I_{yy} > I_{zz}$ , it is observed that  $a_y$  is always positive. Furthermore,  $(H_b^2 - 2E_k I_{zz}) = I_{xx}W_{x0}^2(I_{xx} - I_{zz}) + I_{yy}W_{y0}^2(I_{yy} - I_{zz})$  and  $(H_b^2 - 2E_k I_{xx}) = I_{yy}W_{y0}^2(I_{yy} - I_{xx}) + I_{zz}W_{z0}^2(I_{zz} - I_{xx})$ ; thus,  $b_y$  is always negative. Likewise,  $c_y$  is always positive. Therefore, regardless of the initial angular velocity values, the coefficients of the differential equation (26) meets the criteria of  $a_y > 0$ ,  $b_y < 0$ , and  $c_y > 0$ , concerning the intermediate axis.

#### C. Isolating the Variable $\omega_z$

Using (16),  $\dot{\omega}_z^2$  can be express as in the following:

$$\dot{\omega}_z^2 = \left( \frac{I_{xx} - I_{yy}}{I_{zz}} \right)^2 \omega_x^2 \omega_y^2 \quad (28)$$

Similar to the previous case, (18) and (21) can be collectively processed to obtain  $\omega_x^2$  and  $\omega_y^2$ , in terms of  $\omega_z$  and the conserved quantities  $H_b^2$  and  $2E_k$ :

$$\omega_x^2 = \frac{H_b^2 - 2E_k I_{yy} + I_{zz}\omega_z^2(I_{yy} - I_{zz})}{I_{xx}(I_{xx} - I_{yy})} \quad (29)$$

$$\omega_y^2 = \frac{H_b^2 - 2E_k I_{xx} + I_{zz}\omega_z^2(I_{xx} - I_{zz})}{I_{yy}(I_{yy} - I_{xx})} \quad (30)$$

Combining (29) and (30) in (28), the following differential equation is obtained:

$$\dot{\omega}_z^2 = a_z \omega_z^4 + b_z \omega_z^2 + c_z \quad (31)$$

where the coefficients  $a_z$ ,  $b_z$ , and  $c_z$  are computed as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} b_z &= \frac{H_b^2(2I_{zz} - I_{xx} - I_{yy}) - 2E_k(I_{zz}(I_{xx} + I_{yy}) - 2I_{xx}I_{yy})}{I_{xx}I_{yy}I_{zz}} \\ a_z &= \frac{(I_{zz} - I_{xx})(I_{yy} - I_{zz})}{I_{xx}I_{yy}} \\ c_z &= \frac{(2E_kI_{xx} - H_b^2)(H_b^2 - 2E_kI_{yy})}{I_{xx}I_{yy}I_{zz}^2} \end{aligned} \quad (32)$$

Recall that  $I_{xx} > I_{yy} > I_{zz}$ , and thus  $a_z$  is always negative. However, unlike the case for the intermediate axis, the signs of  $b_z$  and  $c_z$  depend on the initial angular velocity values.

#### D. Problem Definition

By respectively isolating  $\omega_y$  and  $\omega_z$ , the solution of (14)-(16) is reduced to the solution of (26) and (31). Although being nonlinear, the eqs. (26) and (31) have no coupling terms; (26) only includes  $\omega_y$  as the variable and (31) only includes  $\omega_z$  as the variable. In the next subsection, it is demonstrated that they can be solved via Jacobi elliptic functions. Once (26) and (31) are solved,  $\omega_x$  can be obtained rather easily.

### IV. ANALYTICAL SOLUTION

Observing the analogy between the eqs. (8)-(10), (26), and (31), it is natural to think that the analytical solutions may appear in the form of Jacobi elliptic functions.

#### A. Analytical Solution for $\omega_y$

To obtain the analytical solution for  $\omega_y$ , one must solve (26). As previously discussed, the coefficients of (26) obey  $a_y > 0$ ,  $b_y < 0$ , and  $c_y > 0$ , regardless of the initial conditions. Considering the fact that  $0 < m < 1$  for the elliptic functions, (26) can only be similar to (8). Therefore, the following function is proposed for the analytical solution of  $\omega_y$ :

$$\omega_y = \mu_y \text{sn}(u, m) \quad (33)$$

where  $u$  is described as  $u = q_0 + qt$ ;  $t$  is the time variable [10],  $q$  and  $q_0$  are constants. The parameter  $\mu_y$  denotes the amplitude of  $\omega_y$ . The first time differentiation of (33) and its square is expressed as below:

$$\dot{\omega}_y = \frac{d\omega_y}{dt} = \frac{d\omega_y}{du} \frac{du}{dt} = q \frac{d\omega_y}{du} \quad (34)$$

$$\dot{\omega}_y^2 = q^2 \left( \frac{d\omega_y}{du} \right)^2 = q^2 \mu_y^2 \left( \frac{d}{du} \text{sn} \right)^2 \quad (35)$$

Again, the function parameters  $(u, m)$  are dropped to simplify the notation. Plugging (8) into (35), the following is yielded:

$$\dot{\omega}_y^2 = m\mu_y^2 q^2 \text{sn}^4 - (1+m)\mu_y^2 q^2 \text{sn}^2 + \mu_y^2 q^2 \quad (36)$$

Using the one-on-one correspondence between (26) and (36), the parameters  $a_y$ ,  $b_y$ , and  $c_y$  can be computed as in the following:

$$a_y = m\mu_y^{-2} q^2 \quad (37)$$

$$b_y = q^4 (1+m)^2 \quad (38)$$

$$c_y = \mu_y^2 q^2 \quad (39)$$

Solving the eqs. (37)-(39), the parameter  $m$  appears to have two solutions:

$$m = \frac{1}{2a_y c_y} (\mp b_y \Delta_y - 2a_y c_y + b_y^2) \quad (40)$$

In (40),  $\Delta_y = \sqrt{b_y^2 - 4a_y c_y}$ . Despite the multiple mathematical solutions, only the one with the plus sign obeys the condition  $0 < m < 1$ , thus the other solution is discarded. Having obtained the parameter  $m$ , the rest of the parameters are computed subsequently:

$$q = \kappa_1 \sqrt{\frac{-b_y}{m+1}} \quad (41)$$

$$\mu_y = \sqrt{\frac{c_y}{q^2}} \quad (42)$$

Despite the presence of multiple solutions, it is determined that  $\kappa_1 = -\text{sign}(W_{x0}) \text{sign}(W_{z0})$  yields a physically consistent solution. Furthermore,  $q_0$  can be computed by using the initial value  $\omega_{y0}$ :

$$q_0 = \arcsn\left(\frac{\omega_{y0}}{\mu_y}, m\right) \quad (43)$$

#### B. Analytical Solution for $\omega_z$ and $\omega_x$

Unlike in the case of intermediate y-axis, the coefficients of (31) depend on the initial conditions. Yet, it is possible to compute  $a_z$ ,  $b_z$ , and  $c_z$ , given the initial conditions. For a given set of initial conditions, if  $c_z < 0$  the solution of  $\omega_z$  is in the form dn; otherwise, it is cn. The ellipse parameters  $m$ ,  $q$ ,  $q_0$  should remain the same [1], [11]; hence, only the computation of  $\mu_z$  is required for two distinct cases.

1) *Case 1:  $c_z < 0$ :* In this case, the proposed solution is in the form of dn; see (10):

$$\omega_z = \mu_z \text{dn}(u, m) \quad (44)$$

where  $\mu_z$  denotes the amplitude of  $\omega_z$ . The first time differentiation of (44) and its square are expressed as below:

$$\dot{\omega}_z = \frac{d\omega_z}{dt} = \frac{d\omega_z}{du} \frac{du}{dt} = q \frac{d\omega_z}{du} \quad (45)$$

$$\dot{\omega}_z^2 = q^2 \left( \frac{d\omega_z}{du} \right)^2 = q^2 \mu_z^2 \left( \frac{d}{du} \text{dn} \right)^2 \quad (46)$$

Combining (10) and (46), the following is obtained:

$$\dot{\omega}_z^2 = -\mu_z^2 q^2 \text{dn}^4 + \mu_z^2 q^2 (2-m) \text{dn}^2 + \mu_z^2 q^2 (m-1) \quad (47)$$

Using the one-on-one correspondence between (31) and (47), the parameters  $a_z$ ,  $b_z$ , and  $c_z$  can be calculated. As the parameter  $\mu_z$  is solely needed, one can use one of the parameters to compute it. Choosing  $a_z$ , the parameter  $\mu_z$  is yielded as below:

$$\mu_z = -\text{sign}(\omega_{x0})q\sqrt{-\frac{1}{a_z}} \quad (48)$$

Having obtained  $\omega_y$  and  $\omega_z$ , it is rather straightforward to compute  $\omega_x$  by using the eq. (14) in the following form:

$$\omega_x = \frac{I_{yy} - I_{zz}}{I_{xx}} \mu_y \mu_z \int \text{sncn} dt \quad (49)$$

Recall that  $dt = \frac{1}{q} du$ , the integration in (49) can be taken with the help of (6) to obtain  $\omega_x$ :

$$\omega_x = \frac{\mu_y \mu_z (I_{zz} - I_{yy})}{q I_{xx}} \text{cn}(u, m) \quad (50)$$

2) *Case 2:  $c_z > 0$ :* In this case, the proposed solution is in the form of cn; see (9):

$$\omega_z = \mu_z \text{cn}(u, m) \quad (51)$$

The first time differentiation of (51) and its square are computed as follows:

$$\dot{\omega}_z = \frac{d\omega_z}{dt} = \frac{d\omega_z}{du} \frac{du}{dt} = q \frac{d\omega_z}{du} \quad (52)$$

$$\dot{\omega}_z^2 = q^2 \left( \frac{d\omega_z}{du} \right)^2 = q^2 \mu_z^2 \left( \frac{d}{du} \text{cn} \right)^2 \quad (53)$$

Plugging (10) into (53), the following is obtained:

$$\dot{\omega}_z^2 = -\mu_z^2 q^2 m \text{cn}^4 + \mu_z^2 q^2 (2m-1) \text{cn}^2 + \mu_z^2 q^2 (1-m) \quad (54)$$

Similar to the previous case, the parameters  $a_z$ ,  $b_z$ , and  $c_z$  can be calculated by using the one-on-one correspondence between (31) and (54). Choosing  $a_z$ , the parameter  $\mu_z$  is obtained as in the following:

$$\mu_z = -\text{sign}(\omega_{x0})q\sqrt{-\frac{m}{a_z}} \quad (55)$$

Following a similar procedure,  $\omega_x$  can be expressed via (14):

$$\omega_x = \frac{I_{yy} - I_{zz}}{I_{xx}} \mu_y \mu_z \int \text{sncn} dt \quad (56)$$

Using (7), the closed-form solution of (56) is acquired:

$$\omega_x = \frac{1}{m} \frac{\mu_y \mu_z (I_{zz} - I_{yy})}{q I_{xx}} \text{dn}(u, m) \quad (57)$$

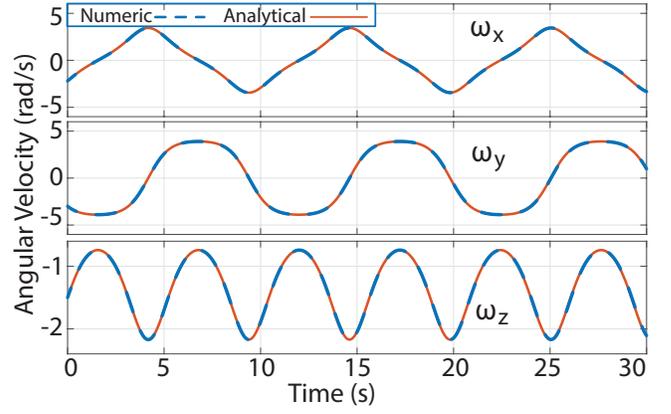


Fig. 1: Numerical simulation 1:  $\omega_{x0} = 2.2 \text{ rad/s}$ ,  $\omega_{y0} = -3.0 \text{ rad/s}$ ,  $\omega_{z0} = -1.5 \text{ rad/s}$ .

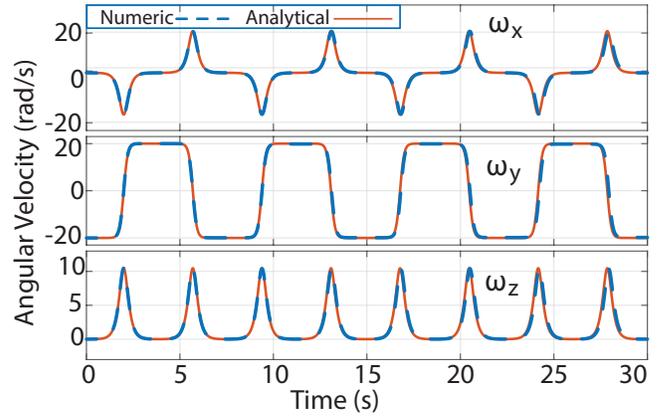


Fig. 2: Numerical simulation 2:  $\omega_{x0} = 0.01 \text{ rad/s}$ ,  $\omega_{y0} = 20.0 \text{ rad/s}$ ,  $\omega_{z0} = 0.01 \text{ rad/s}$ .

## V. RESULTS

### A. Numerical Simulations

In order to verify the proposed closed-form analytical solution, a series of numerical simulations were conducted. In these simulations, NASA's Cassini spacecraft was considered as the rigid body model. Its moment of inertiae about its principle axes are  $I_{xx} = 8802 \text{ kgm}^2$ ,  $I_{yy} = 8155 \text{ kgm}^2$ , and  $I_{zz} = 4715 \text{ kgm}^2$ , respectively [12]. The products of inertia are negligible. The results are displayed in Figs. 1 and 2, where dashed blue lines indicate numerical solutions and solid red lines indicate the proposed analytical solution. Numerical solutions are obtained via MATLAB ode45 solver in which the step size was 1 ms.

In the first numerical simulation, the initial angular velocities were set as  $\omega_{x0} = 2.2 \text{ rad/s}$ ,  $\omega_{y0} = -3.0 \text{ rad/s}$ ,  $\omega_{z0} = -1.5 \text{ rad/s}$ . In the second numerical simulation, they were set as  $\omega_{x0} = 0.01 \text{ rad/s}$ ,  $\omega_{y0} = 20.0 \text{ rad/s}$ ,  $\omega_{z0} = 0.01 \text{ rad/s}$  to simulate Dzhanibekov effect [6]. In both simulations, the difference between both solution is indistinguishable. For longer simulations, the numerical solution inevitably drifts while the proposed analytical solution exhibits no such behavior at all. In [8], a Code Ocean repository is provided

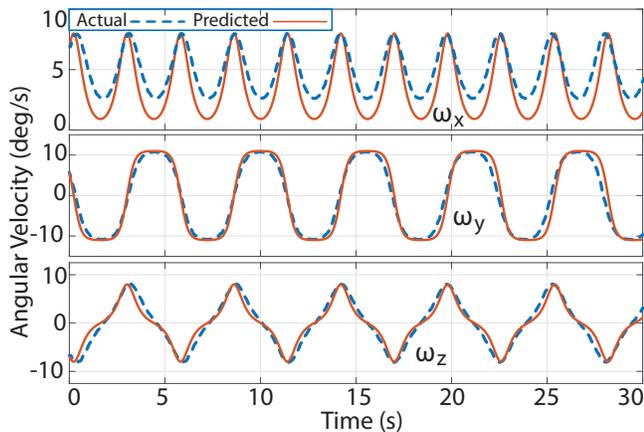


Fig. 3: Angular velocity trajectories of Aist spacecraft [9].

so that the reader could test the proposed analytical solution for different initial conditions and inertia values.

### B. Real-life Experiment Results

In [9], the researchers have reported their findings regarding the uncontrolled rotational motion of an actual spacecraft Aist. Using the initial angular velocity values ( $\omega_{x0} = 6.763 \text{ deg/s}$ ,  $\omega_{y0} = -5.672 \text{ deg/s}$ ,  $\omega_{z0} = 6.752 \text{ deg/s}$ ), angular velocity trajectories were estimated using the proposed analytical solution. Aist's moment of inertia values were not reported; instead, its successor Aist-2's inertia values were slightly tweaked [13]:  $I_{xx} = 275 \text{ kgm}^2$ ,  $I_{yy} = 235 \text{ kgm}^2$ , and  $I_{zz} = 172 \text{ kgm}^2$ , respectively. The products of inertia are omitted. The result is presented in Fig. 3, where dashed blue and solid red lines respectively stand for the actual angular velocity and the proposed analytical solution's prediction. As may be observed, the actual angular velocity trajectories are well predicted with sufficient accuracy, although there is noticeable error for the x-axis angular velocity. This could be due to the fact that Aist's moment of inertia values were guessed by considering the inertia of its successors spacecraft. Despite this error, it is observed that the proposed solution could predict the attitude motion of spacecrafts which are subject to Euler-Poinsot motion.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In this manuscript, a closed form analytical solution for torque free precession is proposed. In this motion type, a rigid body with no body-fixed torques may perform rotational motion and given the initial conditions, the angular velocity trajectories of the rigid body can be obtained using the proposed solution. The validity of the proposed solution was demonstrated via numerical solutions and real-life spacecraft data. In [8], a Code Ocean repository is provided where a MATLAB implementation concerning the proposed solution can be found. Interesting readers could play with the code; they can test the solution with different initial conditions and inertia values.

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