

Some Notes On “When is 0.999... equal to 1?”

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Abstract. In joint work Robin Pemantle and I (2004) consider a doubly infinite sum which is not equal to 1, as first suspected, but evaluates to a sum of products of values of the zeta function. Subsequently, I report on this project.

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During my talk at the Dagstuhl-Seminar “Mathematics, Algorithms, Proofs” (09.01.-14.01.2005) I presented results from [1], namely a doubly infinite sum which, numerically evaluated at between 0.999 and 1.001, turns out not to equal 1, but to be a sum of products of values of the zeta function.

This joint investigation started in July 2004 when Robin Pemantle asked the following question to Herbert Wilf and Doron Zeilberger:

I have a sum that, when I evaluate numerically, looks suspiciously like it comes out to exactly 1. Is there a way I can automatically decide this? The sum may be written in many ways, but one is¹:

$$S := \sum_{j,k=1}^{\infty} \frac{H_j(H_{k+1} - 1)}{j k (k+1)(j+k)}. \quad (1)$$

Of course you can expand out the H’s and get a quadruple sum. There are zillions of ways to play with it, summing by parts, but I have never managed to get rid of all the summations.

D. Zeilberger replied to R. Pemantle and H. Wilf as follows:

I am willing to bet that Carsten Schneider’s **Sigma** package for handling sums with harmonic numbers (among others) can do it in a jiffy. [...]

Carsten: please do it, and Cc- the answer to me.

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¹ $H_j = \sum_{i=1}^j \frac{1}{i}$ denotes the harmonic numbers.

After receiving these emails I was eager to win the bet, i.e., in solving the posed problem. As it turned out, this task was not as simple as it was supposed to be².

Finally, after one week of various attempts I managed to show that the sum (1) is not 1, but evaluates to

$$S = -4\zeta(2) - 2\zeta(3) + 4\zeta(2)\zeta(3) + 2\zeta(5) \simeq 0.99922283776383000876 \quad (2)$$

where $\zeta(r) = \sum_{i=1}^{\infty} \frac{1}{i^r}$ denotes the Riemann zeta function.

Within these computations, see [1] for all the details, the crucial step consists of deriving the identity

$$S = \lim_{a,b \rightarrow \infty} (A(a,b) + B(a,b) + C(a,b)) \quad (3)$$

where³

$$\begin{aligned} A(a,b) &:= \frac{1}{2(b+1)^2} \left(6H_b + 4bH_b + 4H_b^2 + 3bH_b^2 + H_b^3 + bH_b^3 - 6bH_a^{(2)} \right. \\ &\quad \left. + 2H_bH_a^{(2)} + 2bH_bH_a^{(2)} - 2H_b^{(2)} - 7bH_b^{(2)} + H_bH_b^{(2)} + bH_bH_b^{(2)} \right), \\ B(a,b) &:= -\frac{2b^2}{(b+1)^2} \left(H_a^{(2)} + H_b^{(2)} \right) \end{aligned}$$

and

$$C(a,b) := (H_a^{(2)} - 1) \sum_{i=1}^b \frac{H_i}{i^2} - \sum_{i=1}^b \frac{H_i^2}{i^3} + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^b \frac{H_i^3}{i^2} + \frac{1}{2} \sum_{i=1}^b \frac{H_iH_i^{(2)}}{i^2}.$$

Note that (3) has been found with the summation package **Sigma** [2] implemented in the computer algebra system **Mathematica**. More precisely, using the algorithms of **Sigma** I could apply the summation principles from [3] (telescoping, creative telescoping and solving recurrences) to (1) in order to derive (3). Moreover, I want to emphasize that **Sigma** not only finds (3), but also provides proof certificates that enable the user to verify (3) in easy steps; see [1].

Given this result, simple limit considerations show that

$$\lim_{a,b \rightarrow \infty} A(a,b) = 0 \quad \text{and} \quad \lim_{a,b \rightarrow \infty} B(a,b) = -4\zeta(2).$$

Finally, using zeta-relations from [4,5,6] I was capable of deriving the evaluation

$$\lim_{a,b \rightarrow \infty} C(a,b) = -2\zeta(3) + 4\zeta(2)\zeta(3) + 2\zeta(5);$$

² First, I looked up the expression “in a jiffy” in a dictionary and found out that I should solve the problem in a “moment” or “instant”. (Actually, this was the only task that I managed to do in a jiffy.)

³ $H_j^{(2)} = \sum_{i=1}^j \frac{1}{i^2}$ denotes the generalized harmonic numbers.

see [1]. This result produces (2).

To this end, when I reported on my results, I obtained the following concluding remark from D. Zeilberger:

Wow, you (and your computer!) are wizes! I suggest that Carsten and Robin write a short [...] paper, that will serve, among other things, as a cautionary tale not to confuse .99999 with 1, and also the sad fact, that, at least for now, Carsten had to cheat and use some human-previously-proved identities, and hence the proof is not fully rigorous (from my point of view, since it uses human mathematics).

Anyway, even though the bet was one sided, I still feel that Robin and/or Herb owe me a free lunch (and they owe Carsten, and his computer, a free dinner).

References

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