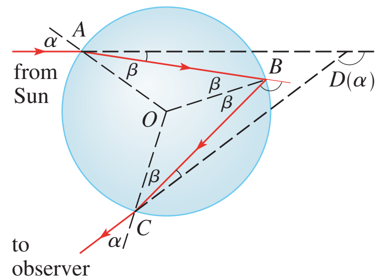
3.1 APPLIED PROJECT: THE CALCULUS OF RAINBOWS

This project can be completed anytime after you have studied Section 3.1 in the textbook.

Rainbows are created when raindrops scatter sunlight. They have fascinated mankind since ancient times and have inspired attempts at scientific explanation since the time of Aristotle. In this project we use the ideas of Descartes and Newton to explain the shape, location, and colors of rainbows.

1. The figure shows a ray of sunlight entering a spherical raindrop at A. Some of the light is reflected, but the line AB shows the path of the part that enters the drop. Notice that the light is refracted toward the normal line AO and in fact Snell's Law says that $\sin \alpha = k \sin \beta$, where α is the angle of incidence, β is the angle of refraction, and $k \approx \frac{4}{3}$ is the index of refraction for water.



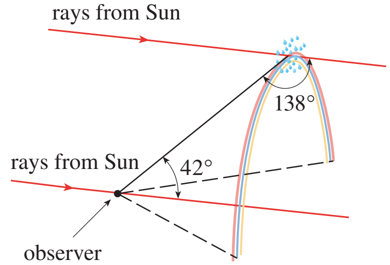
Formation of the primary rainbow

At B some of the light passes through the drop and is refracted into the air, but the line BC shows the part that is reflected. (The angle of incidence equals the angle of reflection.) When the ray reaches C, part of it is reflected, but for the time being we are more interested in the part that leaves the raindrop at C. (Notice that it is refracted away from the normal line.) The *angle of deviation* $D(\alpha)$ is the amount of clockwise rotation that the ray has undergone during this three-stage process. Thus

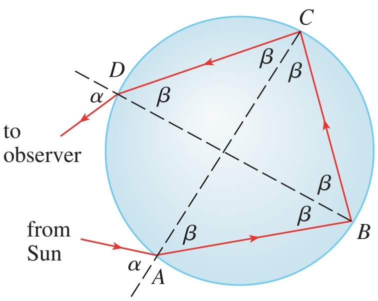
$$D(\alpha) = (\alpha - \beta) + (\pi - 2\beta) + (\alpha - \beta) = \pi + 2\alpha - 4\beta$$

Show that the minimum value of the deviation is $D(\alpha) \approx 138°$ and occurs when $\alpha \approx 59.4°$.

The significance of the minimum deviation is that when $\alpha \approx 59.4°$we have $D'(\alpha) \approx 0$, so $\Delta D/\Delta\alpha \approx 0$. This means that many rays with $\alpha \approx 59.4°$ become deviated by approximately the same amount. It is the *concentration* of rays coming from near the direction of minimum deviation that creates the brightness of the primary rainbow. The following figure shows that the angle of elevation from the observer up to the highest point on the rainbow is $180° - 138° = 42°$. (This angle is called the *rainbow angle*.)



2. Problem 1 explains the location of the primary rainbow but how do we explain the colors? Sunlight comprises a range of wavelengths, from the red range through orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. As Newton discovered in his prism experiments of 1666, the index of refraction is different for each color. (The effect is called *dispersion*.) For red light the refractive index is $k \approx 1.3318$ whereas for violet light it is $k \approx 1.3435$. By repeating the calculation of Problem 1 for these values of k, show that the rainbow angle is about 42.3° for the red bow and 40.6° for the violet bow. So the rainbow really consists of seven individual bows corresponding to the seven colors.



Formation of the secondary rainbow

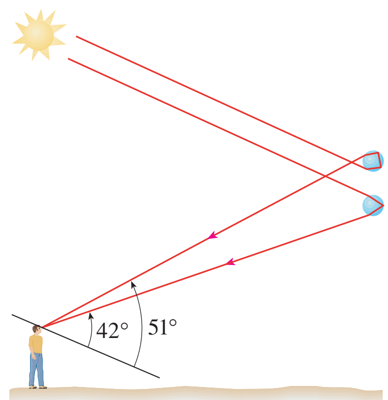
3. Perhaps you have seen a fainter secondary rainbow above the primary bow. That results from the part of a ray that enters a raindrop and is refracted at A, reflected twice (at B and C), and refracted as it leaves the drop at D. (See the figure at the left.) This time the deviation angle $D(\alpha)$ is the total amount of counterclockwise rotation that the ray undergoes in this four-stage process. Show that

$$D(\alpha) = 2\alpha - 6\beta + 2\pi$$

and $D(\alpha)$ has a minimum value when

$$\cos \alpha = \sqrt{\frac{k^2 - 1}{8}}$$

Taking $k = \frac{4}{3}$, show that the minimum deviation is about 129° and so the rainbow angle for the secondary rainbow is about 51°, as shown in the following figure.



4. Show that the colors in the secondary rainbow appear in the opposite order from those in the primary rainbow.

SOLUTIONS

1. From Snell's Law, we have $\sin\alpha = k\sin\beta \approx \frac{4}{3}\sin\beta \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad \beta \approx \arcsin\left(\frac{3}{4}\sin\alpha\right)$. We substitute this into $D(\alpha) = \pi + 2\alpha - 4\beta = \pi + 2\alpha - 4\arcsin\left(\frac{3}{4}\sin\alpha\right)$, and then differentiate to find the minimum:

$D'(\alpha) = 2 - 4\left[1 - \left(\frac{3}{4}\sin\alpha\right)^2\right]^{-1/2}\left(\frac{3}{4}\cos\alpha\right) = 2 - \dfrac{3\cos\alpha}{\sqrt{1 - \frac{9}{16}\sin^2\alpha}}$. This is 0 when $\dfrac{3\cos\alpha}{\sqrt{1-\frac{9}{16}\sin^2\alpha}} = 2 \quad\Leftrightarrow$

$\frac{9}{4}\cos^2\alpha = 1 - \frac{9}{16}\sin^2\alpha \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad \frac{9}{4}\cos^2\alpha = 1 - \frac{9}{16}\left(1-\cos^2\alpha\right) \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad \frac{27}{16}\cos^2\alpha = \frac{7}{16} \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad \cos\alpha = \sqrt{\frac{7}{27}} \quad\Leftrightarrow$

$\alpha = \arccos\sqrt{\frac{7}{27}} \approx 59.4^\circ$, and so the local minimum is $D(59.4^\circ) \approx 2.4$ radians $\approx 138^\circ$.

To see that this is an absolute minimum, we check the endpoints, which in this case are $\alpha = 0$ and $\alpha = \frac{\pi}{2}$: $D(0) = \pi$ radians $= 180^\circ$, and $D\left(\frac{\pi}{2}\right) \approx 166^\circ$.

Another method: We first calculate $\dfrac{d\beta}{d\alpha}$: $\sin\alpha = \frac{4}{3}\sin\beta \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad \cos\alpha = \frac{4}{3}\cos\beta\dfrac{d\beta}{d\alpha} \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad \dfrac{d\beta}{d\alpha} = \dfrac{3}{4}\dfrac{\cos\alpha}{\cos\beta}$, so since $D'(\alpha) = 2 - 4\dfrac{d\beta}{d\alpha} = 0 \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad \dfrac{d\beta}{d\alpha} = \dfrac{1}{2}$, the minimum occurs when $3\cos\alpha = 2\cos\beta$. Now we square both sides and substitute $\sin\alpha = \frac{4}{3}\sin\beta$, leading to the same result.

2. If we repeat Problem 1 with k in place of $\frac{4}{3}$, we get $D(\alpha) = \pi + 2\alpha - 4\arcsin\left(\dfrac{1}{k}\sin\alpha\right) \quad\Rightarrow$

$D'(\alpha) = 2 - \dfrac{4\cos\alpha}{k\sqrt{1 - [(\sin\alpha)/k]^2}}$, which is 0 when $\dfrac{2\cos\alpha}{k} = \sqrt{1 - \left(\dfrac{\sin\alpha}{k}\right)^2} \quad\Leftrightarrow$

$\left(\dfrac{2\cos\alpha}{k}\right)^2 = 1 - \left(\dfrac{\sin\alpha}{k}\right)^2 \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad 4\cos^2\alpha = k^2 - \sin^2\alpha \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad 3\cos^2\alpha = k^2 - 1 \quad\Leftrightarrow$

$\alpha = \arccos\sqrt{\dfrac{k^2-1}{3}}$. So for $k \approx 1.3318$ (red light) the minimum occurs at $\alpha_1 \approx 1.038$ radians, and so the rainbow angle is about $\pi - D(\alpha_1) \approx 42.3^\circ$. For $k \approx 1.3435$ (violet light) the minimum occurs at $\alpha_2 \approx 1.026$ radians, and so the rainbow angle is about $\pi - D(\alpha_2) \approx 40.6^\circ$.

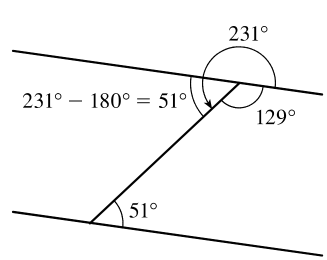
Another method: As in Problem 1, we can instead find $D'(\alpha)$ in terms of $\dfrac{d\beta}{d\alpha}$, and then substitute $\dfrac{d\beta}{d\alpha} = \dfrac{\cos\alpha}{k\cos\beta}$.

3. At each reflection or refraction, the light is bent in a counterclockwise direction: the bend at A is $\alpha - \beta$, the bend at B is $\pi - 2\beta$, the bend at C is again $\pi - 2\beta$, and the bend at D is $\alpha - \beta$. So the total bend is $D(\alpha) = 2(\alpha - \beta) + 2(\pi - 2\beta) = 2\alpha - 6\beta + 2\pi$, as required. We substitute $\beta = \arcsin\left(\dfrac{\sin\alpha}{k}\right)$ and differentiate, to get $D'(\alpha) = 2 - \dfrac{6\cos\alpha}{k\sqrt{1 - [(\sin\alpha)/k]^2}}$, which is 0 when $\dfrac{3\cos\alpha}{k} = \sqrt{1 - \left(\dfrac{\sin\alpha}{k}\right)^2} \quad\Leftrightarrow$

$9\cos^2\alpha = k^2 - \sin^2\alpha \quad\Leftrightarrow$

$8\cos^2\alpha = k^2 - 1 \quad\Leftrightarrow\quad \cos\alpha = \sqrt{\frac{1}{8}(k^2-1)}$. If $k = \frac{4}{3}$, then the minimum occurs at

$\alpha_1 = \arccos\sqrt{\dfrac{(4/3)^2 - 1}{8}} \approx 1.254$ radians. Thus, the minimum *counterclockwise* rotation is $D(\alpha_1) \approx 231^\circ$, which is equivalent to a *clockwise* rotation of $360^\circ - 231^\circ = 129^\circ$ (see the figure). So the rainbow angle for the secondary rainbow is about $180^\circ - 129^\circ = 51^\circ$, as required. In general, the rainbow angle for the secondary rainbow is $\pi - [2\pi - D(\alpha)] = D(\alpha) - \pi$.



4. In the primary rainbow, the rainbow angle gets smaller as k gets larger, as we found in Problem 2, so the colors appear from top to bottom in order of increasing k. But in the secondary rainbow, the rainbow angle gets larger as k gets larger. To see this, we find the minimum deviations for red light and for violet light in the secondary rainbow. For $k \approx 1.3318$ (red light) the minimum occurs at $\alpha_1 \approx \arccos\sqrt{\dfrac{1.3318^2 - 1}{8}} \approx 1.255$ radians, and so the rainbow angle is $D(\alpha_1) - \pi \approx 50.6^\circ$. For $k \approx 1.3435$ (violet light) the minimum occurs at $\alpha_2 \approx \arccos\sqrt{\dfrac{1.3435^2 - 1}{8}} \approx 1.248$ radians, and so the rainbow angle is $D(\alpha_2) - \pi \approx 53.6^\circ$. Consequently, the rainbow angle is larger for colors with higher indices of refraction, and the colors appear from bottom to top in order of increasing k, the reverse of their order in the primary rainbow.

Note that our calculations above also explain why the secondary rainbow is more spread out than the primary rainbow: in the primary rainbow, the difference between rainbow angles for red and violet light is about 1.7°, whereas in the secondary rainbow it is about 3°.