Calculating Limits

If $f(x, y) \to L_1$ as $(x, y) \to (a, b)$ along a path C_1 and $f(x, y) \to L_2$ as $(x, y) \to (a, b)$ along a path C_2, where $L_1 \neq L_2$, then $\lim_{(x, y)\to(a, b)} f(x, y)$ does not exist.

V EXAMPLE 1 Show that $\displaystyle\lim_{(x, y)\to(0, 0)} \frac{x^2 - y^2}{x^2 + y^2}$ does not exist.

SOLUTION Let $f(x, y) = (x^2 - y^2)/(x^2 + y^2)$. First let's approach $(0, 0)$ along the x-axis. Then $y = 0$ gives $f(x, 0) = x^2/x^2 = 1$ for all $x \neq 0$, so

$$f(x, y) \to 1 \qquad \text{as} \qquad (x, y) \to (0, 0) \text{ along the } x\text{-axis}$$

We now approach along the y-axis by putting $x = 0$. Then $f(0, y) = \dfrac{-y^2}{y^2} = -1$ for all $y \neq 0$, so

$$f(x, y) \to -1 \qquad \text{as} \qquad (x, y) \to (0, 0) \text{ along the } y\text{-axis}$$

(See Figure 4.) Since f has two different limits along two different lines, the given limit does not exist. (This confirms the conjecture we made on the basis of numerical evidence at the beginning of this section.) □

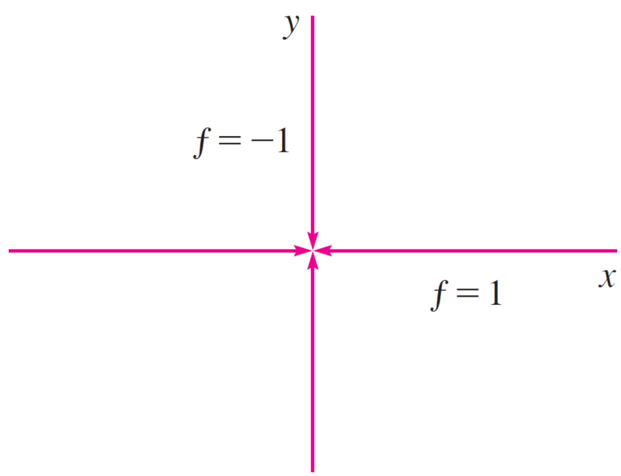

FIGURE 4

EXAMPLE 2 If $f(x, y) = \dfrac{xy}{x^2 + y^2}$, does $\displaystyle\lim_{(x, y)\to(0, 0)} f(x, y)$ exist?

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SOLUTION If $y = 0$, then $f(x, 0) = 0/x^2 = 0$. Therefore

$$f(x, y) \to 0 \qquad \text{as} \qquad (x, y) \to (0, 0) \text{ along the } x\text{-axis}$$

If $x = 0$, then $f(0, y) = 0/y^2 = 0$, so

$$f(x, y) \to 0 \qquad \text{as} \qquad (x, y) \to (0, 0) \text{ along the } y\text{-axis}$$

Although we have obtained identical limits along the axes, that does not show that the given limit is 0. Let's now approach $(0, 0)$ along another line, say $y = x$. For all $x \neq 0$,

$$f(x, x) = \frac{x^2}{x^2 + x^2} = \frac{1}{2}$$

Therefore $\qquad f(x, y) \to \frac{1}{2} \qquad \text{as} \qquad (x, y) \to (0, 0)$ along $y = x$

(See Figure 5.) Since we have obtained different limits along different paths, the given limit does not exist. □

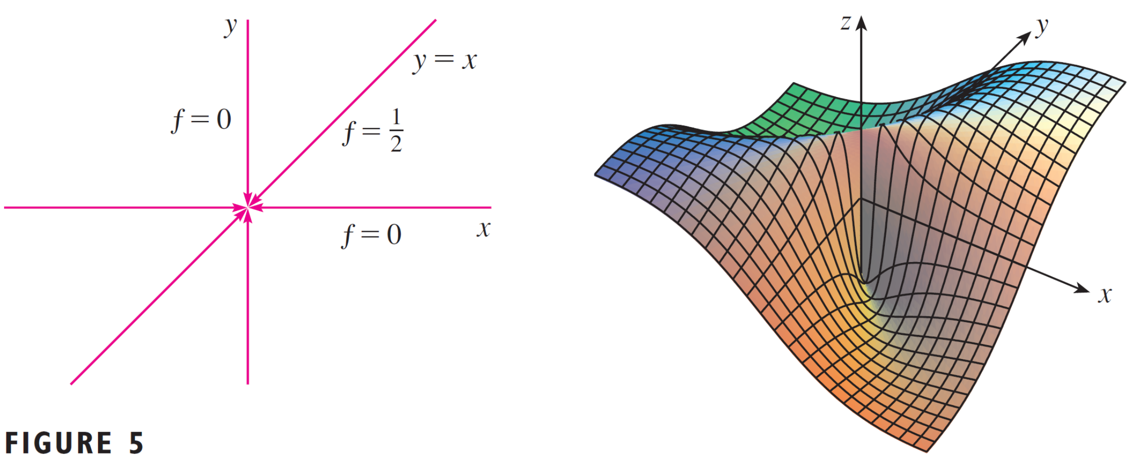

FIGURE 5

EXAMPLE 3 If $f(x, y) = \dfrac{xy^2}{x^2 + y^4}$, does $\displaystyle\lim_{(x, y)\to(0, 0)} f(x, y)$ exist?

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SOLUTION With the solution of Example 2 in mind, let's try to save time by letting $(x, y) \to (0, 0)$ along any nonvertical line through the origin. Then $y = mx$, where m is the slope, and

$$f(x, y) = f(x, mx) = \frac{x(mx)^2}{x^2 + (mx)^4} = \frac{m^2x^3}{x^2 + m^4x^4} = \frac{m^2x}{1 + m^4x^2}$$

So $\qquad f(x, y) \to 0 \qquad \text{as} \qquad (x, y) \to (0, 0)$ along $y = mx$

Thus f has the same limiting value along every nonvertical line through the origin. But that does not show that the given limit is 0, for if we now let $(x, y) \to (0, 0)$ along the parabola $x = y^2$, we have

$$f(x, y) = f(y^2, y) = \frac{y^2 \cdot y^2}{(y^2)^2 + y^4} = \frac{y^4}{2y^4} = \frac{1}{2}$$

so $\qquad f(x, y) \to \frac{1}{2} \qquad \text{as} \qquad (x, y) \to (0, 0)$ along $x = y^2$

Since different paths lead to different limiting values, the given limit does not exist. □

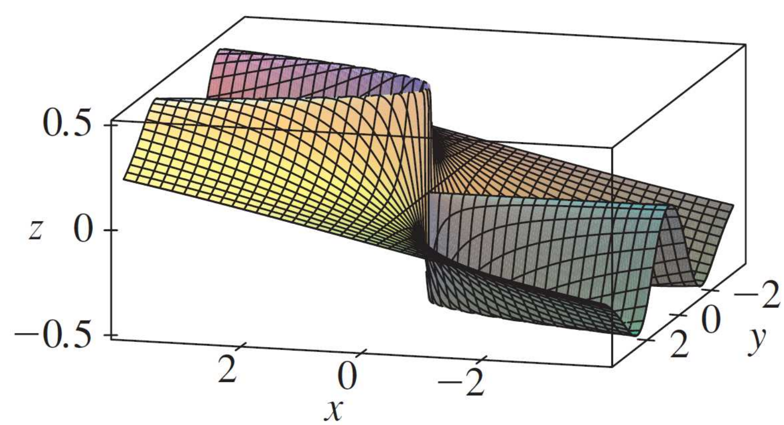

FIGURE 7

EXAMPLE 2 Find

$$\lim_{(x,y)\to(0,0)} \frac{x^2 - xy}{\sqrt{x} - \sqrt{y}}.$$

Solution Since the denominator $\sqrt{x} - \sqrt{y}$ approaches 0 as $(x, y) \to (0, 0)$, we cannot use the Quotient Rule from Theorem 1. If we multiply numerator and denominator by $\sqrt{x} + \sqrt{y}$, however, we produce an equivalent fraction whose limit we *can* find:

$$\begin{aligned}
\lim_{(x,y)\to(0,0)} \frac{x^2 - xy}{\sqrt{x} - \sqrt{y}} &= \lim_{(x,y)\to(0,0)} \frac{\left(x^2 - xy\right)\left(\sqrt{x} + \sqrt{y}\right)}{\left(\sqrt{x} - \sqrt{y}\right)\left(\sqrt{x} + \sqrt{y}\right)} \\
&= \lim_{(x,y)\to(0,0)} \frac{x\left(x - y\right)\left(\sqrt{x} + \sqrt{y}\right)}{x - y} && \text{Algebra} \\
&= \lim_{(x,y)\to(0,0)} x\left(\sqrt{x} + \sqrt{y}\right) && \text{Cancel the nonzero factor } (x - y). \\
&= 0\left(\sqrt{0} + \sqrt{0}\right) = 0 && \text{Known limit values}
\end{aligned}$$

We can cancel the factor $(x - y)$ because the path $y = x$ (along which $x - y = 0$) is *not* in the domain of the function

$$\frac{x^2 - xy}{\sqrt{x} - \sqrt{y}}.$$