# On cluster points of alternating projections

Heinz H. Bauschke* and Dominikus Noll†

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*Dedicated to Asen Dontchev on the occasion of his 65th birthday and to Vladimir Veliov on the occasion of his 60th birthday*

**Abstract**

Suppose that $A$ and $B$ are closed subsets of a Euclidean space such that $A \cap B \neq \varnothing$, and we aim to find a point in this intersection with the help of the sequences $(a_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ generated by the *method of alternating projections*. It is well known that if $A$ and $B$ are convex, then $(a_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ converge to some point in $A \cap B$. The situation in the nonconvex case is much more delicate. In 1990, Combettes and Trussell presented a dichotomy result that guarantees either convergence to a point in the intersection or a nondegenerate compact continuum as the set of cluster points.

In this note, we construct two sets in the Euclidean plane illustrating the continuum case. The sets $A$ and $B$ can be chosen as countably infinite unions of closed convex sets. In contrast, we also show that such behaviour is impossible for finite unions.

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*Mathematics, University of British Columbia, Kelowna, B.C. V1V 1V7, Canada. E-mail: heinz.bauschke@ubc.ca.

†Université Paul Sabatier, Institut de Mathématiques, 118 route de Narbonne, 31062 Toulouse, France. E-mail: noll@mip.ups-tlse.fr.

# 1 Motivation

Let $X$ be a real Euclidean space, and let $A$ and $B$ be closed subsets of $X$. Our aim is to find a point in $A \cap B$ which we assume to be nonempty. One classical algorithm is the *method of alternating projections*: Given a starting point $b_{-1} \in X$, generate sequences

$$(\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad a_n \in P_A(b_{n-1}) \text{ and } b_n \in P_B(a_n) \tag{1}$$

where $P_C x := \{c \in C \mid \|x - c\| = d_C(x) := \inf_{y \in C} \|x - y\|\}$ denotes the *projection* of $x$ onto $C$. When $A$ and $B$ are convex, then the projectors $P_A$ and $P_B$ are single-valued and the sequences $(a_n)_{n \in \mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n \in \mathbb{N}}$ converge to some point in $A \cap B$. This classical result goes back to Bregman [6], and it has found a huge number of extensions (see, e.g., [3], [8], [10], [11]). In the general case, when $A$ and $B$ are not necessarily convex, the situation is much more delicate. In their 1990 paper [9], Combettes and Trussell gave quite general sufficient conditions for the following dichotomy: either $(a_n)_{n \in \mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n \in \mathbb{N}}$ converge to a point in $A \cap B$ or the set of cluster points is a nondegenerate continuum. (For recent results in the nonconvex case, see [4] and [5] and the references therein.)

*The goal of this note is to explicitly construct two sets A and B illustrating the continuum case.*

The main ingredient of our construction is a spiral in the Euclidean plane from which we pick points in an alternating fashion[1].

The sets $A$ and $B$ may be chosen to be countably infinite unions of closed convex sets. In contrast, we also prove that the continuum case cannot occur when $A$ and $B$ are finite unions of closed convex sets.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, we lay the ground work by studying a certain curve in the Euclidean plane. In Section 3, we use this curve to construct a sequence of points in the plane that is crucial in obtaining the sets $A$ and $B$. Some remarks and the announced positive result conclude the paper.

# 2 A useful spiral

We will mostly work in the Euclidean plane $\mathbb{R}^2$. As usual, angles will be measured in radians, but sometimes we shall use degrees as in writing $\pi/2 = 90°$.

Let us recall that the distance $d$ between $(r\cos(\alpha), r\sin(\alpha))$ and $(s\cos(\beta), s\sin(\beta))$, where $r \in \mathbb{R}_+$ and $\alpha \in \mathbb{R}$, satisfies

$$d^2 = \|(r\cos(\alpha), r\sin(\alpha)) - (s\cos(\beta), s\sin(\beta))\|^2 = r^2 + s^2 - 2rs\cos(\alpha - \beta) \tag{2a}$$

[1]The reader is invited to take a peek at the figure below for an illustration of the location of these points.

(2b) $$\geq r^2 + s^2 - 2rs = (r-s)^2;$$

hence,

(3) $$r - d \leq s \leq r + d.$$

Define the function $\rho$ by

(4) $$\rho\colon \mathbb{R}_+ \to \mathbb{R}_+ \colon t \mapsto 1 + \exp(-t).$$

This function will represent the distance of a point on the curve at time $t$ to the origin. Clearly, $\rho$ is strictly decreasing with $\rho(0) = 2$ and $\lim_{t\to+\infty} \rho(t) = 1$. Also define

(5) $$\varepsilon\colon \mathbb{R}_+ \to \mathbb{R}_{++} \colon t \mapsto \frac{\rho(t) - \rho(t+2\pi)}{2}.$$

Then $\varepsilon' = -\varepsilon$ and hence $\varepsilon$ is strictly decreasing to $\lim_{t\to+\infty} \varepsilon(t) = 0$. Note that

(6) $$\mathbb{R}_+ \to \mathbb{R}_{++} \colon \alpha \mapsto \frac{\varepsilon(\alpha)}{\rho(\alpha)} = \frac{1}{2}\frac{1 - e^{-2\pi}}{1 + e^{\alpha}} \text{ is strictly decreasing.}$$

We now define the curve

(7) $$x\colon \mathbb{R}_+ \to \mathbb{R}^2 \colon \alpha \mapsto \rho(\alpha) \cdot \big(\cos(\alpha), \sin(\alpha)\big).$$

Note that $x$ describes a spiral traversing counter-clockwise; $x$ is *injective* because $\rho$ is strictly decreasing. Now let $\alpha$ and $\beta$ be in $\mathbb{R}_+$, and assume that $\|x(\alpha) - x(\beta)\| \leq \varepsilon(\alpha)$. By (3), $\rho(\alpha) - \varepsilon(\alpha) \leq \rho(\beta) \leq \rho(\alpha) + \varepsilon(\alpha)$. Using the definitions, we solve these inequalities for $\beta$ and obtain

(8) $$\alpha - 0.40 \approx \alpha + \ln(2) - \ln(3 - e^{-2\pi}) \leq \beta \leq \alpha + \ln(2) - \ln(1 + e^{-2\pi}) \approx \alpha + 0.69;$$

in degrees, this implies $\alpha - 24^\circ \leq \beta \leq \alpha + 40^\circ$. To summarize,

(9) $$\|x(\alpha) - x(\beta)\| \leq \varepsilon(\alpha) \quad \Rightarrow \quad \alpha - 24^\circ \leq \beta \leq \alpha + 40^\circ.$$

We will now discuss the monotonicity of the function

(10) $$f\colon t \mapsto \|x(\alpha + t) - x(\alpha)\|^2.$$

Recall that

(11) $$t \in \,]0, \pi/2[ \quad \Rightarrow \quad \sin(t) + \cos(t) > 1.$$

One checks that

(12) $$f'(t)\frac{\exp(2(\alpha + t))}{2} = g_1(t) + g_2(t) + g_3(t),$$

where

$$g_1(t) = \sin(t)\exp(2t+\alpha)(1+\exp(\alpha)), \tag{13a}$$

$$g_2(t) = \exp(\alpha+t)\big(\sin(t)+\cos(t)-1\big), \tag{13b}$$

$$g_3(t) = \exp(t)\big(\sin(t)+\cos(t)-\exp(-t)\big). \tag{13c}$$

Since each $g_i$ is strictly positive on $]0,\pi/2[$, it follows from the mean value theorem that

$$f \text{ is strictly increasing on } [0,\pi/2]. \tag{14}$$

Combining with (9), we deduce[2]

$$\big(\forall \alpha \in \mathbb{R}_+\big)\big(\exists\,!\,\beta > \alpha\big) \;\; \|x(\beta)-x(\alpha)\| = \varepsilon(\alpha). \tag{15}$$

Furthermore, denoting the unit sphere by $S$, we have

$$(\forall \alpha \in \mathbb{R}_+) \quad d_S(x(\alpha)) = \rho(\alpha) - 1 = \exp(-\alpha) > \varepsilon(\alpha). \tag{16}$$

# 3 A useful sequence

We now construct a sequence $(x_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ in the Euclidean plane with remarkable properties. Let us initialize

$$\alpha_0 := 0, \quad x_0 := x(\alpha_0), \quad \rho_0 := \rho(\alpha_0), \quad \varepsilon_0 := \varepsilon(\alpha_0). \tag{17}$$

In Cartesian coordinates, $x_0 = (2,0)$, and $\varepsilon_0 \approx 0.5$. Now suppose $n \in \mathbb{N}$ and $\alpha_n$, $x_n$, $\rho_n$, and $\varepsilon_n$ are given. In view of (15), there exists a unique $\beta > \alpha_n$ such that

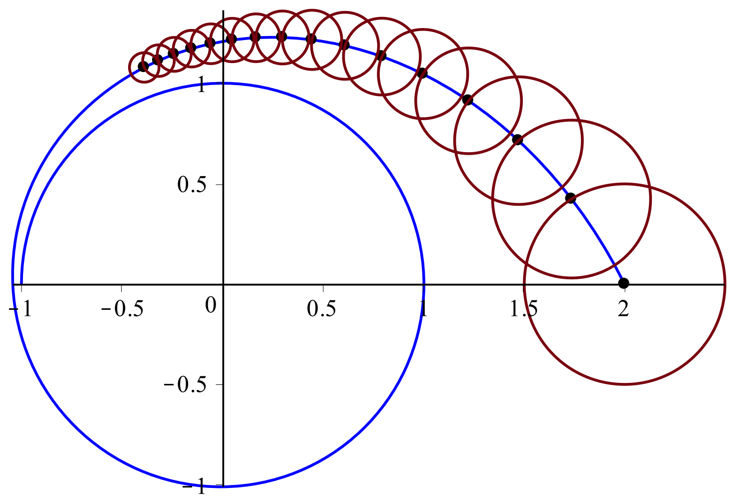
$$\|x(\beta) - x(\alpha_n)\| = \varepsilon_n. \tag{18}$$

We then update

$$\alpha_{n+1} := \beta,\ x_{n+1} := x(\alpha_{n+1}),\ \rho_{n+1} := \rho(\alpha_{n+1}), \text{ and } \varepsilon_{n+1} := \varepsilon(\alpha_{n+1}). \tag{19}$$

(The picture illustrates the beginning of the spiral and $x_0, \ldots, x_{15}$ along with the radii used to construct the next iterate.)

[2] "$\exists\,!$" stands for "there exists a *unique*"




We also set

(20) $$\delta_n := \alpha_{n+1} - \alpha_n.$$

By construction,

(21) $$(\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad \|x_n - x_{n+1}\| = \varepsilon_n \quad \text{and} \quad \sum_{k=0}^{n} \delta_k = \alpha_{n+1} - \alpha_0.$$

Note that

(22) $(\alpha_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ is strictly increasing, and $(\varepsilon_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ is strictly decreasing

because the function $\varepsilon$ is strictly decreasing. Set

(23) $$\alpha_\infty := \lim_{n\in\mathbb{N}} \alpha_n \in \left]0, +\infty\right].$$

Since $\rho$ is strictly decreasing we also note that

(24) $$(\rho_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}} \text{ is strictly decreasing, with } \lim_{n\in\mathbb{N}} \rho_n =: \rho_\infty \in \left[1, 2\right[.$$

Hence the corresponding sequence of quotients satisfies

(25) $$1 > q_n := \frac{\rho_{n+1}}{\rho_n} \to 1.$$

Using (2a) and the half-angle identity for sine, we have

$$
\begin{aligned}
&\text{(26a)} \qquad (\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad \varepsilon_n^2 = \|x_n - x_{n+1}\|^2 \\
&\text{(26b)} \qquad = \rho_n^2 + \rho_{n+1}^2 - 2\rho_n\rho_{n+1}\cos(\delta_n) \\
&\text{(26c)} \qquad = (\rho_n - \rho_{n+1})^2 + 2\rho_n\rho_{n+1}\big(1 - \cos(\delta_n)\big) \\
&\text{(26d)} \qquad = (\rho_n - \rho_{n+1})^2 + 4\rho_n\rho_{n+1}\frac{1 - \cos(\delta_n)}{2} \\
&\text{(26e)} \qquad = (\rho_n - \rho_{n+1})^2 + 4\rho_n\rho_{n+1}\sin^2(\delta_n/2).
\end{aligned}
$$

Dividing by $\rho_n^2$ and recalling (6), we obtain

(27) $$(\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad \left(\frac{1}{2}\frac{1 - e^{-2\pi}}{1 + e^{\alpha_n}}\right)^2 = \frac{\varepsilon_n^2}{\rho_n^2} = (1 - q_n)^2 + 4q_n\sin^2(\delta_n/2).$$

Taking limits, we learn that

(28) $$\left(\frac{1}{2}\frac{1 - e^{-2\pi}}{1 + e^{\alpha_\infty}}\right)^2 = 4\lim_n \sin^2(\delta_n/2).$$

Since $\delta_n$, in degrees, belongs to $]0°, 40°]$ by (9), we deduce that $(\delta_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ is convergent as well. If $\alpha_\infty = +\infty$, then $\delta_n \to 0$ by (28); however, if $\alpha_\infty < +\infty$, then $\delta_n = \alpha_{n+1} - \alpha_n \to \alpha_\infty - \alpha_\infty = 0$. Either way,

(29) $$\delta_n \to 0.$$

Again by (28), we have

(30) $$\alpha_n \to \alpha_\infty = +\infty,$$

which by (21) implies

(31) $$\sum_{n\in\mathbb{N}} \delta_n = +\infty,$$

(32) $$\varepsilon_n \to 0,$$

and

(33) $$\rho_n \to \rho_\infty = 1.$$

Note also that in view of (26), we have

(34) $$\varepsilon_n^2 > 4\sin^2(\delta_n/2) \geq \frac{\delta_n^2}{4} \quad \text{eventually,}$$

where we used (29) and the Taylor estimate

$$\sin(t/2) \geq \frac{1}{2}t - \frac{1}{48}t^3 = \frac{t}{2}\Big(1 - \frac{1}{24}t^2\Big) \geq \frac{t}{4} \quad \text{for } t \text{ sufficiently close to } 0. \tag{35}$$

Combining with (31), we record that

$$(\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad \|x_n - x_{n+1}\| > \|x_{n+1} - x_{n+2}\| \to 0, \quad \text{and} \quad \sum_{n\in\mathbb{N}} \|x_n - x_{n+1}\| = +\infty. \tag{36}$$

Furthermore, (30) and (33) imply that

$$\text{the set of cluster points of } (x_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}} \text{ is the unit sphere } S. \tag{37}$$

Define

$$(\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad C_n := \{x_0, x_1, \ldots\} \smallsetminus \{x_n\} \tag{38}$$

We claim that

$$(\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad P_{C_n} x_n = \{x_{n+1}\}. \tag{39}$$

Let $n \in \mathbb{N}$. Since $D_n := \{x_{n+1}, x_{n+2}, \ldots\} \subset x\big(\,]\alpha_n, +\infty[\,\big)$, it follows from (9), (14), and (15) that $P_{D_n} x_n = \{x_{n+1}\}$. We show that there is no $k \in \mathbb{N}$ such that $k < n$ and $\|x_k - x_n\| < \|x_n - x_{n+1}\|$. Suppose the contrary. Then, by (9), $\alpha_n - 24^\circ \leq \alpha_k < \alpha_n$. Hence $\alpha_k < \alpha_n \leq \alpha_k + 24^\circ$. By (14), $\|x_k - x_{k+1}\| = \|x(\alpha_k) - x(\alpha_{k+1})\| \leq \|x(\alpha_k) - x(\alpha_n)\| = \|x_k - x_n\| < \|x_n - x_{n+1}\| < \|x_k - x_{k+1}\|$, which is absurd. This verifies (39). Furthermore, by (16),

$$(\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad d_S(x_n) > \|x_n - x_{n+1}\|. \tag{40}$$

Let us summarize our findings.

**Theorem 3.1** *The sequence $(x_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and the set $Y := \big\{x_n \bigm| n \in \mathbb{N}\big\}$ satisfy the following:*

(i) $(\|x_n - x_{n+1}\|)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ *is strictly decreasing.*

(ii) $x_n - x_{n+1} \to 0$.

(iii) $\sum_{n\in\mathbb{N}} \|x_n - x_{n+1}\| = +\infty$.

(iv) $(\forall n \in \mathbb{N})\ P_{(S\cup Y)\smallsetminus\{x_n\}} x_n = \{x_{n+1}\}$.

(v) *The set of cluster points of $(x_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ is the compact continuum $S$.*

(vi) *$S \cup D$ is closed, where $D$ is an arbitrary subset of $Y$.*

We now obtain the announced example concerning an instance of the method of alternating projections whose set of cluster points is a nondegenerate compact continuum.

**Corollary 3.2** *Set*

$$A := \{x_{2n} \mid n \in \mathbb{N}\} \cup S, \quad B := \{x_{2n+1} \mid n \in \mathbb{N}\} \cup S, \quad \text{and} \quad b_{-1} := x_0. \tag{41}$$

*Then $A$ and $B$ are nonempty compact subsets of $\mathbb{R}^2$. The corresponding sequences of alternating projections satisfy*

$$(\forall n \in \mathbb{N}) \quad a_n = P_A b_{n-1} = x_{2n} \ \ \text{and} \ \ b_n = P_B a_n = x_{2n+1}. \tag{42}$$

*Moreover, $a_n - b_{n-1} \to 0$, $b_n - a_n \to 0$, and $S$ is the set of cluster points of $(a_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and of $(b_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$.*

**Remark 3.3** Some comments on Corollary 3.2 are in order.

(i) We note that Corollary 3.2 is the first example constructed where the set of limit points of alternating projections is a nondegenerate compact continuum. This complements the analysis of Combettes and Trussell [9] who conceived this case.

(ii) If the starting point $b_{-1}$ is an arbitrary point, then either $a_0 \in S$ or $a_0 \in A \smallsetminus S$. In the first case, we have $(\forall n \in \mathbb{N})\ a_n = b_n = a_0$; in the second case, the sequences $(a_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ are tails of $(x_{2n})_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(x_{2n+1})_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ respectively. A more involved analysis shows that if $b_{-1}$ is outside the closed unit disk, then $P_A b_{-1} \in A \smallsetminus S$ and we are in the second case. Hence one obtains a nondegenerate compact continuum of cluster points exactly when $b_{-1}$ lies outside the closed unit disk.

(iii) Suppose that, in (41), we replace $S$ by the closed unit disk and we consider all possible orbits, i.e., the starting point $b_{-1}$ ranges over the entire space $X$ instead of being pinned at $x_0$. Then the corresponding union of the sets of cluster points of $(a_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ is the closed unit disk. Note that in this case, both $A$ and $B$ are *countably infinite* unions of convex sets. In the following result, we show that a degenerate continuum cannot occur as the set of cluster points when $A$ and $B$ are *finite* unions of nonempty closed convex sets.

**Theorem 3.4 (finite unions of convex sets)** *Suppose that $I$ and $J$ are nonempty finite index sets, let $(A_i)_{i\in I}$ and $(B_j)_{j\in J}$ be families of nonempty closed convex subsets of a Euclidean space $X$, and set $A := \bigcup_{i\in I} A_i$ and $B := \bigcup_{j\in J} B_j$. Consider a sequence of alternating projections $(a_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ generated by $A$ and $B$: $b_{-1} \in X$, and $(\forall n \in \mathbb{N})\ a_n \in P_A b_{n-1}$ and $b_n \in P_B a_n$. Suppose that $(a_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ are bounded, and that $b_n - a_n \to 0$ and $a_{n+1} - b_n \to 0$. Then there exists a point $c \in A \cap B$ such that $a_n \to c$ and $b_n \to c$.*

*Proof*. After relabeling and considering the tails of the sequences if necessary, we assume that

(43a) $$(\forall i \in I)\ A_i \text{ is projected upon infinitely often}$$

and that

(43b) $$(\forall j \in J)\ B_j \text{ is projected upon infinitely often.}$$

The pigeonhole principle gives $(i_+, j_+) \in I \times J$ and subsequences $(a_{k_n})_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_{k_n})_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ lying in $A_{i_+}$ and $B_{j_+}$ respectively. After passing to further subsequences if necessary, we also assume that there is $c \in A_{i_+} \cap B_{j_+}$ such that $a_{k_n} \to c$ and $b_{k_n} \to c$. Set $I_- := \{i \in I \mid c \notin A_i\}$, $I_+ := I \smallsetminus I_-$, $J_- := \{j \in J \mid c \notin B_j\}$, $J_+ := J \smallsetminus J_-$, $\delta := \min\{\min_{i\in I_-} d_{A_i}(c), \min_{j\in J_-} d_{B_j}(c), 1\}$, $A_- := \bigcup_{i\in I_-} A_i$, and $B_- := \bigcup_{j\in J_-} B_j$. Now assume that there exists $m \in \mathbb{N}$ such that $\|a_m - c\| < \delta/2$. Then $d_{B_-}(a_m) \geq d_{B_-}(c) - \|a_m - c\| > \delta - \delta/2 = \delta/2 > \|a_m - c\| \geq d_{B \smallsetminus B_-}(a_m)$. Hence $(\forall j \in J_-)\ b_m \notin P_{B_j}(a_m)$, and thus $b_m \in \{P_{B_j}(a_m) \mid j \in J_+\}$. Since projectors are nonexpansive, it follows that $\|b_m - c\| \leq \|a_m - c\| < \delta/2$. Therefore,

(44a) $$\|a_m - c\| < \delta/2 \quad\Rightarrow\quad \|b_m - c\| < \delta/2 \text{ and } (\forall j \in J_-)\ b_m \notin P_{B_j}(a_m),$$

and a similar argument yields

(44b) $$\|b_m - c\| < \delta/2 \quad\Rightarrow\quad \|a_{m+1} - c\| < \delta/2 \text{ and } (\forall i \in I_-)\ a_{m+1} \notin P_{A_i}(b_m).$$

Since $a_{k_n} \to c$, there does exist $M \in \mathbb{N}$ such that $\|a_M - c\| < \delta/2$. But then (44) has two consequences. First, starting with iteration index $M$, $(\forall i \in I_-)\ A_i$ is not projected upon and $(\forall j \in J_-)\ B_j$ is not projected upon. In view of (43), we conclude that $I_- = J_- = \varnothing$, i.e., $c \in \bigcap_{i\in I} A_i \cap \bigcap_{j\in J} B_j$. The second consequence of (44) is $(\forall m \geq M)\ \|a_m - c\| \geq \|b_m - c\| \geq \|a_{m+1} - c\|$. Finally, since $c$ is a cluster point of $(a_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$ and $(b_n)_{n\in\mathbb{N}}$, it thus follows that $\|a_n - c\| \to 0$ and $\|b_n - c\| \to 0$. ∎

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