Coherent acceleration of material wavepackets in modulated optical fields

F. Saif and P. Meystre
1 Department of Electronics, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad 45320, Pakistan.
2 Department of Physics, The University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA.
(Dated: July 20, 2006)

We study the quantum dynamics of a material wavepacket bouncing off a modulated atomic mirror in the presence of a gravitational field. We find the occurrence of coherent accelerated dynamics for atoms beyond the familiar regime of dynamical localization. The acceleration takes place for certain initial phase space data and within specific windows of modulation strengths. The realization of the proposed acceleration scheme is within the range of present day experimental possibilities.

PACS numbers: 03.75.-b, 39.20.+q, 03.65.-w, 47.52.+j, 05.45.-a

Enrico Fermi, in his seminal paper 'On the origin of cosmic rays', conjectured that "cosmic rays are originated and accelerated primarily in the interstellar space of the galaxy by collisions against moving magnetic fields" [1]. Following this work, the possibility of accelerating particles bouncing off oscillating surfaces [2] was extensively studied in accelerator physics, leading to the development of two major models: The Fermi-Ulam accelerator, which deals with the bouncing of a particle off an oscillating surface in the presence of another fixed surface parallel to it; and the Fermi-Pustyl’nikov accelerator, where the particle bounces off an oscillating surface in the presence of gravity. In the case of the Fermi-Ulam accelerator [3], it was shown that the energy of the particle remains bounded and the unlimited acceleration proposed by Fermi is absent [3]. In the Fermi-Pustyl’nikov accelerator, by contrast, there exists a set of initial data within specific domains of phase space that result in trajectories speeding up to infinity.

In recent years, the efficient transfer of large momenta to laser-cooled atoms has become an important problem for a number of applications such as atom interferometry and the development of matter-wave based inertial sensors in quantum metrology. Possible schemes of matter-wave acceleration have been proposed and studied. For example, a spatially periodic optical potential applied at discrete times to an atom [7] was found to accelerate it in the presence of a gravitational field [5]. This δ-kicked accelerator operates for certain sets of initial data that originate in stable islands of phase space.

In this Letter, we propose an experimentally realizable new technique to accelerate a material wavepacket in a coherent fashion. It consists of an atom optics version of the Fermi-Pustyl’nikov accelerator [9] where a cloud of ultracold atoms falling in a gravitational field bounces off a spatially modulated atomic mirror. This scheme is different from previous accelerator schemes in the following ways: i) The regions of phase space that support acceleration are located in the mixed phase space rather than in the islands of stability (or nonlinear resonances); ii) The acceleration of the wavepacket is coherent; iii) It occurs only for certain windows of oscillation strengths.

Our starting point is the analysis by Saif et al. [9] that establishes the dynamical localization of atoms in the Fermi-Pustyl’nikov accelerator (or Fermi accelerator for short) and shows a diffusive behavior both in the classical and the quantum domains beyond the localization regime [11]. We now extend these results to identify conditions leading to the coherent acceleration of the atoms. We find clear signatures of that behavior both in an ensemble of classical particles and for a quantum wavepacket. In quantum mechanics, however, the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle restricts the phase-space size of the initial atomic wavepacket which may result in the coherent acceleration occurring on top of a diffusive background.

We consider a cloud of laser-cooled atoms that move along the vertical \( \tilde{z} \)-direction under the influence of gravity and bounce back off an atomic mirror [11]. This mirror is formed by a laser beam incident on a glass prism and undergoing total internal reflection, thereby creating an optical evanescent wave of intensity \( I(\tilde{z}, \tilde{t}) = I_0 \exp(-2k\tilde{z}) \) and characteristic decay length \( k^{-1} \) outside of the prism.

The laser intensity is modulated by an acousto-optic modulator as [10]

\[
I(\tilde{z}, \tilde{t}) = I_0 \exp(-2k\tilde{z} + \epsilon \sin \omega \tilde{t}),
\]

where \( \omega \) is the frequency and \( \epsilon \) the amplitude of modulation. The laser frequency is tuned far from any atomic transition, so that there is no significant upper-state atomic population. The excited atomic level(s) can then be adiabatically eliminated, and the atoms behave for all practical purposes as scalar particles of mass \( m \) whose center-of-mass motion is governed by the one-dimensional Hamiltonian

\[
\hat{H} = \frac{\hat{p}^2}{2m} + mg\tilde{z} + \frac{\hbar \Omega_{\text{eff}}}{4} e^{-2k\tilde{z} + \epsilon \sin \omega \tilde{t}},
\]

where \( \hat{p} \) is the atomic momentum along \( \tilde{z} \) and \( g \) is the acceleration of gravity.

We proceed by introducing the dimensionless position and momentum coordinates \( \tilde{z} \equiv \tilde{z}\omega^2/g \) and \( \tilde{p} \equiv \frac{\hat{p}}{\sqrt{m\omega^2}} \),
\[ \dot{z} = 0 \quad \text{and} \quad \dot{p} = 2\pi^2 \text{with} \Delta p(0) = \Delta z(0) = 0.1. \]

The momentum distribution at \( t = 300 \) is illustrated in (b) for \( \lambda = 3\pi/2 \). The broad, barely visible background results from the tails of the initial gaussian distribution outside the area of phase space that supports accelerated trajectories. The numerical calculations correspond to Cesium atoms of mass \( m = 2.2 \times 10^{-25} \text{Kg} \) bouncing off an atomic mirror with an intensity modulation of \( \epsilon = 0.55 \). The modulation frequencies extend to the megahertz range, and \( \kappa^{-1} = 0.55 \mu\text{m} \).

\[ H = \left( \omega^2/4mg^2 \right) \hat{P} = \frac{\dot{p}^2}{2} + z + \exp[-\kappa(z - \lambda \sin t)]. \]

When extended to an ensemble of non-interacting particles, the classical dynamics obeys the condition of incompressibility of the flow, and the phase space distribution function \( P(z,p,t) \) satisfies the Liouville equation

\[ \frac{\partial}{\partial t} + p \frac{\partial}{\partial z} + V \frac{\partial}{\partial p} P(z,p,t) = 0, \]

where \( \dot{p} = -1 + \kappa V_0 \exp[-\kappa(z - \lambda \sin t)] \) is the force on a classical particle.

In the absence of mirror modulation, the atomic dynamics is integrable. For very weak modulations the incommensurate motion almost follows the integrable evolution and remains rigorously stable, as prescribed by the KAM theorem. As the modulation increases, though, the classical system becomes chaotic.

In the quantum regime, the atomic evolution is determined by the corresponding Schrödinger equation

\[ i\hbar \frac{\partial \psi}{\partial t} = \left[ \frac{\dot{p}^2}{2} + z + V_0 \exp[-\kappa(z - \lambda \sin t)] \right] \psi \]

where \( \hbar \equiv \hbar \omega^3/(4mg^2) \) is the dimensionless Planck constant, introduced consistently with the commutation relation \( [z,p] = i(\omega^3/4mg^2) \hbar \equiv i\hbar \) for the dimensionless variables \( z \) and \( p \). We use Eqs. (4) and (5) to study the classical and quantum mechanical evolution of an ensemble of atoms in the Fermi accelerator.

For very short decay lengths \( \kappa^{-1} \) and atoms initially far from the mirror surface, we may approximate the optical potential by an infinite potential barrier at the position \( z = \lambda \sin \omega t \). In that limit the atoms behave like falling particles bouncing off a hard oscillating surface.

Classical version of the problem [6] demonstrates the existence of a set of initial conditions resulting in trajectories that accelerate without bound. Specifically, the classical evolution of the Fermi accelerator displays the onset of global diffusion above a critical modulation strength \( \lambda_c = 0.24 \) [4], while the quantum evolution remains localized until a larger value \( \lambda_u \) of the modulation [3, 13, 14]. Above that point both the classical and the quantum dynamics are diffusive. However, for specific sets of initial conditions that lie within phase space disks of radius \( R \), accelerating modes appear for values of the modulation strength \( \lambda \) within the windows [6] 

\[ s\pi \leq \lambda < \sqrt{1 + (s\pi)^2}, \]

where \( s \) can take integer and half-integer values for the sinusoidal modulation of the reflecting surface considered here.

In order to compare the classical and quantum atomic dynamics within these windows in the present situation we calculate the width of the momentum distribution, \( \Delta p = \sqrt{\langle p^2 \rangle - \langle p \rangle^2} \), as a function of the modulation strength \( \lambda > \lambda_u \). In the classical case, we consider an ensemble of particles with a gaussian initial phase-space distribution \( P(z,p,0) \) centered in a region of phase space...
that supports unbounded acceleration, and record the dispersion in momentum of that ensemble after a fixed propagation time. The corresponding quantum problem is treated by directly solving the Schrödinger equation for an initial gaussian wavepacket of zero mean momentum.

Classically, the momentum space variance $\Delta p$ remains small and almost constant for very small modulation strengths, which indicates the absence of diffusive dynamics, but starts to increase linearly [9] as a function of the modulation strength for larger values of $\lambda$. As $\lambda$ is further increased, though, we find that the diffusion of the ensemble is sharply reduced for modulation strengths that support unbounded acceleration, and record the size of the phase-space regions leading to purely unbounded dispersionless acceleration. The initial width of the momentum distribution is $\Delta p = 0.5$.

In the quantum case the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle imposes a limit on the smallest size of the initial wavepacket. Thus in order to form an initial wavepacket that resides entirely within regions of phase space leading to a coherent and dispersionless acceleration, appropriate value of the effective Planck constant is to be evaluated, for example, by controlling the frequency $\omega$ [15]. For broad wavepacket, the situation that we consider in this Letter, the coherent acceleration manifests itself instead, both in the classical and the quantum cases, as regular spikes in the marginal probability distributions $P(p,t) = \int dx P(x,p,t)$ and $P(x,t) = \int dp P(x,p,t)$, which are absent otherwise.

Figure 2 illustrates the marginal probability distribution $P(p,t)$ in momentum space for (a) $\lambda = 1.7$ and (b) $\lambda = 2.4$, both in the classical and the quantum domains. In this example, the initial area of the particle phase-space distribution is taken to be large compared to the size of the phase-space regions leading to purely unbounded dispersionless acceleration. The sharp spikes in time evolved momentum distribution, $P(p,t)$ appear when the modulation strength satisfies the condition of Eq. (6), and gradually disappear as it exits these windows. These spikes are therefore a signature of the coherent accelerated dynamics.

We can gain some additional understanding of the diffusive behavior from the close mathematical analogy between the system at hand and the kicked rotor model [8]. It has been established mathematically [16] that for large modulation strengths, the diffusive behavior of classical systems described by the standard map displays a modulated growing behavior. For large $\lambda$, the diffusion coeff-
such that posed to a broad background due to diffusive dynamics, a series of sharply-peaked gaussian distributions super-

press the complete time-evolved wavepacket composed of tum space and coordinate space. W e can therefore ex-

the spikes are well described by a sequence of gaussian strengths, those trajectories that do not correspond to the phase center of the acceleration windows \[2\], indicating that quantum momentum dispersion as a function of \(\lambda\) modulations. Recent experiments by Kanem et al \[17\] also reports such a behavior for the \(\delta\)-kicked accelerator in the case of large modulations.

A comparison between the classical behavior and the quantum momentum dispersion as a function of \(\lambda\) is illustrated in Fig. 3 while the scaled diffusion coefficient \(D_\lambda/D_0\) is shown in arbitrary units. It is interesting to note that the dispersion exhibits maxima for oscillation strengths, \(\lambda_m = (\pi + \sqrt{1 + (\pi^2)})/2\), which reside at the center of the acceleration windows \(2\), indicating that those trajectories that do not correspond to the phase space area supporting accelerated dynamics display maximum dispersion instead.

From the numerical results of Fig. 2 we conjecture that the spikes are well described by a sequence of gaussian distributions separated by a distance \(\pi\), both in momentum space and coordinate space. We can therefore express the complete time-evolved wavepacket composed of a series of sharply-peaked gaussian distributions superposed to a broad background due to diffusive dynamics, such that

\[
P(p) = N e^{-p^2/4\Delta p^2} \sum_{n=-\infty}^{\infty} e^{-(p-n\pi)^2/4\epsilon^2},
\]

where \(\epsilon \ll \Delta p\), and \(N\) is a normalization constant.

Further insight in the quantum acceleration of the atomic wave packet is obtained by studying its temporal evolution. We find that within the window of acceleration the atomic wave packet displays a linear growth in the square of the momentum variance and in coordinate space variance as a function of time. Figure 2 illustrates that, for modulation strengths within the acceleration window, the growth in square of the momentum variance displays oscillations of increasing periodicity whereas the variance in coordinate space follows with a phase difference of \(180^\circ\). The out-of-phase oscillatory evolutions of \(\Delta p^2\) and \(\Delta z\) indicate a breathing of the wavepacket and are a signature of the coherence in accelerated dynamics as it disappears outside. As a final point we note that outside of the acceleration window the linear growth in the square of the momentum variance, a consequence of normal diffusion, translates into a \(t^\alpha\) law, with \(\alpha < 1\) which is a consequence of anomalous diffusion.

This work is supported in part by the US Office of Naval Research, the National Science Foundation, the US Army Research Office, the Joint Services Optics Program, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and J. William Fulbright foundation.

[10] A. Steane et al., Phys. Rev. Lett. 74, 4972 (1995) have explored a regime of parameters that would lead to the observation of these effects in the long-time regime.