

# AFFINE CONES AS IMAGES OF AFFINE SPACES

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*To Yuri Prokhorov on the occasion of his 60th birthday*

ABSTRACT. We prove that an affine cone  $X$  admits a surjective morphism from an affine space if and only if  $X$  is unirational.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

We work over an algebraically closed field  $\mathbb{K}$  of characteristic zero. Recall that an irreducible algebraic variety  $X$  is *rational* if the field of rational functions  $\mathbb{K}(X)$  is isomorphic to the field of rational fractions  $\mathbb{K}(x_1, \dots, x_n)$ , and  $X$  is *unirational* if the field  $\mathbb{K}(X)$  is a subfield of the field of rational fractions  $\mathbb{K}(y_1, \dots, y_s)$  for some positive integer  $s$ ; see [15, Chapter III]. Geometrically speaking, rationality means that there is a birational map  $\mathbb{A}^n \dashrightarrow X$  and unirationality means that there is a dominant rational map  $\mathbb{A}^s \dashrightarrow X$ .

Assume that there is a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^m \rightarrow X$  for some positive integer  $m$ . Then the variety  $X$  is irreducible, unirational, and  $\mathbb{K}[X]^\times = \mathbb{K}^\times$ . One may expect that the converse implication also holds.

**Conjecture 1.** *Let  $X$  be a unirational algebraic variety with  $\mathbb{K}[X]^\times = \mathbb{K}^\times$ . Then there is a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^m \rightarrow X$  for some positive integer  $m$ . Moreover, one may take  $m = \dim X + 1$  or even  $m = \dim X$ .*

In [1], several results confirming this conjecture are obtained. Namely, it is shown that every non-degenerate toric variety, every homogeneous space of a connected linear algebraic group without non-constant invertible regular functions, and every variety covered by affine spaces admits a surjective morphism from an affine space. Further, it is proved in [4, Theorem 1.7] that Conjecture 1 holds for any complete variety  $X$ , and it follows from a result of Kusakabe [13] that the number  $m$  can be taken  $n + 1$ , where  $n = \dim X$ . Moreover, if  $\mathbb{K} = \mathbb{C}$ , then by a result of Forstnerič there is a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^n \rightarrow X$ ; see [7, Theorem 1.6].

The proof of [4, Theorem 1.7] is based on the concept of an elliptic algebraic variety in the sense of Gromov [8]; see [7, 4, 10, 11, 13] for more information on elliptic varieties. More precisely, let us recall that an algebraic variety  $X$  is *uniformly rational* if for any point  $x \in X$  there is an open neighborhood  $X_0$  of  $x$  in  $X$  isomorphic to an open subset of  $\mathbb{A}^n$ . Clearly, any uniformly rational variety is smooth and rational. We prove in [4, Theorem 3.3] that any complete uniformly rational variety is elliptic. It follows from Chow's Lemma and Hironaka's Theorem on elimination of indeterminacy that for any complete unirational variety  $X$  there is a surjective morphism  $\tilde{X} \rightarrow X$  from a uniformly rational complete

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variety  $\tilde{X}$ . Kusakabe [13] proved that any elliptic variety  $\tilde{X}$  admits a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^m \rightarrow \tilde{X}$  with  $m = \dim \tilde{X} + 1$ , and [4, Theorem 1.7] follows.

Moreover, [4, Theorem 3.3] claims that the punctured cone  $\hat{Y}$  over a uniformly rational subvariety  $X \subseteq \mathbb{P}^r$  is elliptic, where the punctured cone  $\hat{Y}$  is the affine cone  $Y$  over  $X$  with the vertex removed. In particular, there is a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^{n+2} \rightarrow \hat{Y}$ , where  $n = \dim X$ . Note that  $\hat{Y}$  is a smooth quasi-affine, but not affine variety.

The aim of this note is to prove Conjecture 1 for a class of affine varieties. We say that a closed irreducible subvariety  $Y \subseteq \mathbb{A}^k$  is an *affine cone* if  $Y$  is stable under scalar multiplications. Equivalently,  $Y$  is the affine cone over an irreducible closed subvariety  $X \subseteq \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$ .

**Theorem 1.** *An affine cone  $Y \subseteq \mathbb{A}^k$  admits a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^m \rightarrow Y$  for some positive integer  $m$  if and only if  $Y$  is unirational or, equivalently, its projectivization  $X$  is unirational. Moreover, one may take  $m = \dim Y + 1$ .*

Let us come to an algebraic version of the results discussed above. Given a commutative associative algebra  $A$ , one may ask whether elements of  $A$  can be expressed as polynomials in finitely many algebraically independent variables. Or, equivalently, can the algebra  $A$  be realized as a subalgebra of the polynomial algebra  $\mathbb{K}[x_1, \dots, x_m]$  for some positive integer  $m$ . Necessary conditions for such a realization are absence of zero divisors and absence of non-constant invertible elements. A more delicate necessary condition is that  $A$  is embeddable into the field of rational fractions  $\mathbb{K}(y_1, \dots, y_s)$  for some positive integer  $s$ . When  $A$  is finitely generated, this condition means that the affine variety  $Y := \text{Spec } A$  is unirational.

Let us say that a subalgebra  $A \subseteq B$  is *proper* if any maximal ideal in  $A$  is contained in a maximal ideal of  $B$ . If  $A$  and  $B$  are finitely generated, this condition means that the corresponding morphism of affine varieties  $\text{Spec } B \rightarrow \text{Spec } A$  is surjective. Denote by  $\text{tr. deg } A$  the transcendence degree of an algebra  $A$ .

Conjecture 1 for affine varieties can be reformulated as follows.

**Conjecture 2.** *Let  $A$  be a finitely generated subalgebra without non-constant invertible elements in the field of rational fractions  $\mathbb{K}(y_1, \dots, y_s)$  for some positive integer  $s$ . Then  $A$  can be properly embedded into the polynomial algebra  $\mathbb{K}[x_1, \dots, x_m]$ . Moreover, the number  $m$  can be taken  $\text{tr. deg } A + 1$  or even  $\text{tr. deg } A$ .*

Clearly, an affine variety  $Y$  can be realized as an affine cone in some affine space  $\mathbb{A}^k$  if and only if the algebra  $A := \mathbb{K}[Y]$  admits a  $\mathbb{Z}_{\geq 0}$ -grading such that  $A$  is generated by elements of degree 1.

We come to the following algebraic reformulation of Theorem 1.

**Theorem 2.** *Let  $A$  be a finitely generated subalgebra in the field  $\mathbb{K}(y_1, \dots, y_s)$  for some positive integer  $s$ . Assume that  $A$  admits a  $\mathbb{Z}_{\geq 0}$ -grading such that  $A$  is generated by elements of degree 1. Then  $A$  can be properly embedded into the polynomial algebra  $\mathbb{K}[x_1, \dots, x_m]$  with  $m = \text{tr. deg } A + 1$ .*

It is interesting to find out whether Theorem 2 holds for not finitely generated subalgebras, over non-closed fields and in positive characteristic.

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2. PROOF OF THEOREM 1

Since the “only if” part of Theorem 1 is clear, we have to prove the “if” part. Let  $Y \subseteq \mathbb{A}^k$  be a unirational affine cone and  $X \subseteq \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  be its projectivization. Consider the quotient morphism  $\pi: \mathbb{A}^k \setminus \{0\} \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  by the one-dimensional torus  $T$  of scalar matrices and its restriction  $\pi: Y \setminus \{0\} \rightarrow X$ .

By Hilbert’s Theorem 90, the variety  $Y$  contains an open subset  $U$  isomorphic to  $T \times V$ , where  $V$  is an open subset of  $X$ ; see [14, Section 2.6]. So we have

$$\mathbb{K}(X) = \mathbb{K}(V) \subseteq \mathbb{K}(T \times V) = \mathbb{K}(U) = \mathbb{K}(Y) \subseteq \mathbb{K}(y_1, \dots, y_s),$$

and the variety  $X$  is unirational.

Since  $X$  is complete, we deduce from [4, Theorem 1.7] that there is a surjective morphism  $\beta: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow X$ , where  $d = \dim X + 1$ . This morphism can be considered as a morphism  $\beta: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$ , whose image is  $X$ .

**Lemma 1.** *For any morphism  $\beta: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  there is a morphism  $\tilde{\beta}: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^k \setminus \{0\}$  such that the following diagram is commutative:*

$$\begin{array}{ccc} & \mathbb{A}^k \setminus \{0\} & \\ \tilde{\beta} \nearrow & & \searrow \pi \\ \mathbb{A}^d & \xrightarrow{\beta} & \mathbb{P}^{k-1}. \end{array}$$

*Proof.* Let  $[z_1 : \dots : z_k]$  be homogeneous coordinates on  $\mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  and let  $\mathbb{P}^{k-1} = \bigcup_{i=1}^k U_i$  with  $U_i = \{z_i \neq 0\}$  be the standard affine covering. We may assume that  $\beta(\mathbb{A}^d) \cap U_1 \neq \emptyset$ . Then  $f_i =: \beta^*(z_i/z_1)$  is a rational function on  $\mathbb{A}^d$ . Multiplying the presentation  $[1 : f_2 : \dots : f_k]$  by the denominators of  $f_i$  we come to the presentation  $[h_1 : h_2 : \dots : h_k]$ . We may assume that the polynomials  $h_1, h_2, \dots, h_k$  are coprime.

Let us check that the polynomials  $h_1, h_2, \dots, h_k$  have no common zero. Assume that

$$h_1(c) = h_2(c) = \dots = h_k(c) = 0$$

for some  $c \in \mathbb{A}^d$ . Let  $\beta(c) \in U_i$  for some  $1 \leq i \leq k$  and  $p(x)$  be an irreducible divisor of  $h_i(x)$  such that  $p(c) = 0$ . Then there is  $j \neq i$  such that  $p(x)$  does not divide  $h_j(x)$ . Then the function  $\beta^*(z_j/z_i) = h_j(x)/h_i(x)$  is not regular at  $c$ , a contradiction. This proves that the polynomials  $h_1, h_2, \dots, h_k$  define the desired morphism  $\tilde{\beta}: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^k \setminus \{0\}$ .  $\square$

Let us return to the original morphism  $\beta: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow X$  and let the morphism  $\tilde{\beta}: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^k \setminus \{0\}$  be given by polynomials  $h_1, \dots, h_k \in \mathbb{K}[\mathbb{A}^d]$ , which have no common zero. We consider the morphism

$$\gamma: \mathbb{A}^{d+1} = \mathbb{A}^d \times \mathbb{A}^1 \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^k, \quad (x, z) \mapsto (h_1(x)z, \dots, h_k(x)z).$$

Then the image  $\gamma(\{a\} \times \mathbb{A}^1)$  is a line in  $\mathbb{A}^k$  corresponding to the point  $\beta(a) \in X \subseteq \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  for any  $a \in \mathbb{A}^d$ . We conclude that the image of  $\gamma$  is  $Y$ . So we obtain a surjective morphism  $\gamma: \mathbb{A}^m \rightarrow Y$  with

$$m = d + 1 = \dim X + 2 = \dim Y + 1.$$

This completes the proof of Theorem 1.

*Remark 1.* It follows from the proof given above that if  $X \subseteq \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  is a locally closed subset that admits a surjective morphism from an affine space, then the same holds for the cone  $Y$  over  $X$  in  $\mathbb{A}^k$ , where  $Y$  is considered as a quasi-affine variety.

*Remark 2.* The referee observed that Lemma 1 can be proved in another way. Namely, the morphism  $\pi: \mathbb{A}^k \setminus \{0\} \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  is a fiber bundle with fiber  $\mathbb{A}^1 \setminus \{0\}$ . It can be obtained from the tautological line bundle  $\mathcal{O}_{\mathbb{P}^{k-1}}(-1)$  over  $\mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  by deleting the zero section. The line bundle  $\beta^*(\mathcal{O}_{\mathbb{P}^{k-1}}(-1))$  over  $\mathbb{A}^d$  induced by the morphism  $\beta: \mathbb{A}^d \rightarrow \mathbb{P}^{k-1}$  is trivial, since  $\text{Pic}(\mathbb{A}^d) = 0$ . Hence, the latter line bundle admits a non-vanishing section. This yields the desired lift  $\tilde{\beta}$  of the morphism  $\beta$ .

*Remark 3.* By [4, Theorem 3.3], the punctured cone  $\widehat{Y}$  over a uniformly rational subvariety  $X \subseteq \mathbb{P}^r$  is elliptic. This implies that there is a surjective morphism  $\alpha: \mathbb{A}^{n+2} \rightarrow \widehat{Y}$ , where  $n = \dim X$ . Assume that  $\alpha$  is given by polynomials  $h_0, \dots, h_r$ . Consider the morphism

$$\alpha': \mathbb{A}^{n+3} = \mathbb{A}^{n+2} \times \mathbb{A}^1 \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^{r+1}, \quad (x, z) \mapsto (h_0(x)z, \dots, h_r(x)z).$$

Then the image of  $\alpha'$  is the affine cone  $Y$  over the subvariety  $X \subseteq \mathbb{P}^r$ . Hence [4, Theorem 3.3] implies a weaker version of Theorem 1.

*Remark 4.* One may try to generalize Theorem 1 to affine varieties  $Y$  that are closures in  $\mathbb{A}^k$  of preimages of closed unirational subvarieties  $X$  in a weighted projective space  $\mathbb{P}(d_1, \dots, d_k)$  under the quotient morphism  $\pi: \mathbb{A}^k \setminus \{0\} \rightarrow \mathbb{P}(d_1, \dots, d_k)$  by the one-dimensional diagonal torus  $(t^{d_1}, \dots, t^{d_k})$ . But the problem is that Lemma 1 does not hold in this case.

Indeed, let us consider the weighted projective plane  $\mathbb{P}(1, 1, 2)$  and its open affine chart  $U_3 = \{z_3 \neq 0\}$  with coordinates  $(z_1^2/z_3, z_1z_2/z_3, z_2^2/z_3)$ . Note that  $U_3$  is a quadratic cone given by the equation  $b^2 = ac$ . Take the morphism

$$\beta: \mathbb{A}^3 \rightarrow U_3 \subseteq \mathbb{P}(1, 1, 2)$$

given by

$$(x_1, x_2, x_3) \mapsto (x_1^2x_3, x_1x_2x_3, x_2^2x_3).$$

The preimage  $\pi^{-1}(U_3)$  is the principal open subset  $W_3$  in  $\mathbb{A}^3 \setminus \{0\}$  given by  $z_3 \neq 0$ . Assume that there is a desired morphism  $\tilde{\beta}: \mathbb{A}^3 \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^3 \setminus \{0\}$ . This is in fact a morphism from  $\mathbb{A}^3$  to  $W_3$ . Since the function  $z_3$  is invertible on  $W_3$ , its image  $\tilde{\beta}^*(z_3)$  is a nonzero constant  $\lambda$  on  $\mathbb{A}^3$ . So the morphism  $\tilde{\beta}$  is given as

$$(x_1, x_2, x_3) \mapsto (h_1(x_1, x_2, x_3), h_2(x_1, x_2, x_3), \lambda),$$

with some polynomials  $h_1$  and  $h_2$ . On the first coordinate of the equality  $\pi(\tilde{\beta}(x)) = \beta(x)$  we have  $h_1(x_1, x_2, x_3)^2/\lambda = x_1^2x_3$ , a contradiction.

### 3. EXAMPLES AND APPLICATIONS

We begin with some examples of unirational affine cones.

**Example 1.** Consider a hypersurface  $Y$  in  $\mathbb{A}^{2n}$  given by the equation

$$x_1^{k_1} + \dots + x_n^{k_n} + x_1y_1 + \dots + x_ny_n = 0$$

for some positive integers  $k_1, \dots, k_n$ . The automorphism

$$(x_1, \dots, x_n, y_1 - x_1^{k_1-1}, \dots, y_n - x_n^{k_n-1})$$

of  $\mathbb{A}^{2n}$  sends  $Y$  to a quadratic cone, so the variety  $Y$  is rational. By Theorem 1, there is a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^{2n} \rightarrow Y$ .

**Example 2.** Let us consider the class of so-called trinomial hypersurfaces. Fix a partition  $k = n_0 + n_1 + n_2$  with  $n_0, n_1, n_2 \in \mathbb{Z}_{>0}$ . For every  $i = 0, 1, 2$  let  $l_i := (l_{i1}, \dots, l_{in_i}) \in \mathbb{Z}_{>0}^{n_i}$  and define a monomial

$$\mathbf{x}_i^{l_i} := x_{i1}^{l_{i1}} \cdots x_{in_i}^{l_{in_i}}.$$

The hypersurface

$$\mathbf{x}_0^{l_0} + \mathbf{x}_1^{l_1} + \mathbf{x}_2^{l_2} = 0$$

in  $\mathbb{A}^k$  is called a *trinomial hypersurface*. Let  $l_i := \gcd(l_{i1}, \dots, l_{in_i})$ . The following result characterizes rational trinomial hypersurfaces.

**Proposition 1.** [2, Proposition 5.5] *A trinomial hypersurface  $Y$  is rational if and only if one of the following conditions holds:*

- (1) *there are pairwise coprime positive integers  $c_0, c_1, c_2$  and a positive integer  $s$  such that, after suitable renumbering, one has*

$$\gcd(c_2, s) = 1, \quad l_0 = sc_0, \quad l_1 = sc_1, \quad l_2 = c_2;$$

- (2) *there are pairwise coprime positive integers  $c_0, c_1, c_2$  such that*

$$l_0 = 2c_0, \quad l_1 = 2c_1, \quad l_2 = 2c_2.$$

Any trinomial hypersurface  $Y$  carries an effective action of a torus  $T$  of dimension  $k - 2$ ; see [2, Section 2]. By Hilbert's Theorem 90, the variety  $Y$  contains an open subset isomorphic to  $T \times C$ , where  $C$  is a curve. Since  $C$  is unirational if and only if  $C$  is rational, we conclude that  $Y$  is unirational if and only if  $Y$  is rational.

Clearly,  $Y$  is an affine cone in  $\mathbb{A}^k$  if and only if

$$\sum_{j=1}^{n_0} l_{0j} = \sum_{j=1}^{n_1} l_{1j} = \sum_{j=1}^{n_2} l_{2j}.$$

By Theorem 1, in this case Proposition 1 gives necessary and sufficient conditions for  $Y$  to admit a surjective morphism from an affine space.

For a more general class of trinomial affine varieties (see [2, Construction 1.1] for a definition), a similar criterion of rationality is given in [2, Corollary 5.8]. All the arguments used above work in this case as well.

**Example 3.** Nowadays many examples of unirational but not rational varieties are known. Among the first examples were hypersurfaces built in the work of Iskovskikh and Manin [9]. It follows from this work that the affine cone  $Y$  in  $\mathbb{A}^5$  given by

$$x_1^4 + x_2^4 + x_3^4 + x_4^4 + x_1x_5^3 + x_4^3x_5 - 6x_2^2x_3^2 = 0$$

is unirational but not rational. We conclude that there is a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^5 \rightarrow Y$ .

Let us mention some consequences of the fact that a variety admits a surjective morphism from an affine space.

Let  $X$  be an algebraic variety. We say that the monoid of endomorphisms  $\text{End}(X)$  acts on  $X$  *infinitely transitively*, if for any finite subset  $Z \subseteq X$  and any map  $f: Z \rightarrow X$  there is an endomorphism  $\varphi \in \text{End}(X)$  such that  $\varphi|_Z = f$ . This property is a version of the infinite transitivity property for the special automorphism group, see e.g. [3].

If  $Y$  is an affine variety that admits a surjective morphism from an affine space, then the monoid  $\text{End}(Y)$  acts on  $Y$  infinitely transitively; see [13, Corollary 1.5] or [11, Proposition 5.1], where a more general result on infinite transitivity on zero-dimensional subschemes

is proved. Let us give the following elementary lemma, which implies that the monoid  $\text{End}(Y)$  is infinitely transitive on  $Y$ . We learned this lemma from Mikhail Zaidenberg.

**Lemma 2.** *Let  $Z$  be a finite subset of a quasi-affine variety  $X$  and  $Y$  be an algebraic variety that admits a surjective morphism from an affine space. Then for any map  $f: Z \rightarrow Y$  there is a morphism  $\varphi: X \rightarrow Y$  such that  $\varphi|_Z = f$ .*

*Proof.* Let  $Z = \{z_1, \dots, z_k\}$  and  $\pi: \mathbb{A}^m \rightarrow Y$  be a surjective morphism. Given  $f: Z \rightarrow Y$ , fix  $a_1, \dots, a_k \in \mathbb{A}^m$  with  $\pi(a_i) = f(z_i)$ :

$$\begin{array}{ccc} & \mathbb{A}^m & \\ \tilde{\varphi} \nearrow & & \searrow \pi \\ X \supseteq Z & \xrightarrow{f} & Y. \end{array}$$

Consider  $h_j \in \mathbb{K}[Z]$ ,  $j = 1, \dots, m$ , where  $h_j(z_i)$  is the  $j$ th coordinate of  $a_i$ . There are  $f_j \in \mathbb{K}[X]$  with  $f_j|_Z = h_j$ , and the functions  $f_1, \dots, f_m$  define a morphism  $\tilde{\varphi}: X \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^m$  with  $\tilde{\varphi}(z_i) = a_i$ . Then with  $\varphi := \pi \circ \tilde{\varphi}: X \rightarrow Y$  we have  $\varphi|_Z = f$ .  $\square$

Summarizing this discussion, we come to the following result.

**Proposition 2.** *Let  $Y$  be a unirational affine cone. Then the monoid  $\text{End}(Y)$  acts on  $Y$  infinitely transitively.*

It is observed in [5] that by the Noether Normalization Lemma [6, Theorem 13.3] any affine variety  $X$  of dimension  $n$  admits a surjective morphism  $X \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^n$ . This implies that there is a surjective morphism  $X \rightarrow \mathbb{A}^s$  for every  $s \leq \dim X$ . So we come to the next result, which follows from Theorem 1 and [5, Proposition 1.6]; compare also with [7, Theorem 1.6].

**Proposition 3.** *Let  $X$  be an affine variety and  $Y$  be a unirational affine cone. If  $\dim X > \dim Y$  then there is a surjective morphism  $X \rightarrow Y$ .*

We finish with the following observation. It is clear that an affine cone  $Y$  is smooth if and only if  $Y$  is isomorphic to an affine space. On the other hand, an affine homogeneous space  $G/H$  of a semisimple group  $G$  is smooth and is not isomorphic to an affine space by [12, Corollary 5.1]. So  $G/H$  can not be realized as an affine cone. At the same time, [1, Theorem C] implies that there is a surjective morphism  $\mathbb{A}^m \rightarrow G/H$ .

We note that Conjecture 1 remains open for arbitrary affine varieties.

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