

GRAVITATIONAL WAVES FROM NEUTRON STARS

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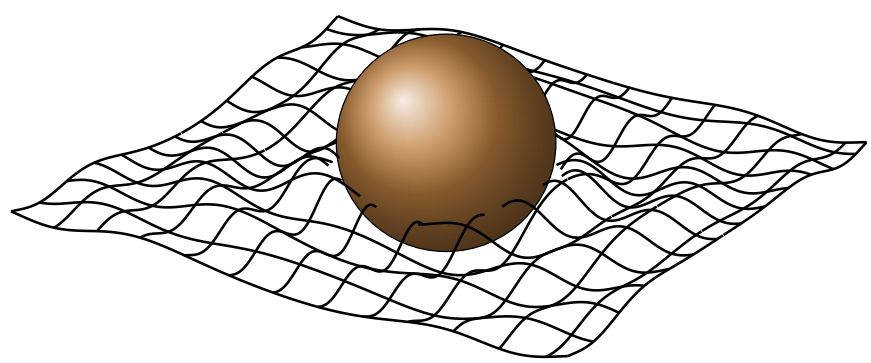
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I: What is a *gravitational wave*?

In 1916 Einstein formulated his theory of gravity, general relativity. Like all good theories it made several important predictions. All but one of these predictions have been tested and agree with the theory exceptionally well. The final prediction left to test is the existence of *gravitational waves*.

General relativity unified the ideas of space and time into a single object which we call *spacetime*. Spacetime is a dynamic object that can interact with matter. We can picture this by imagining a stretched rubber sheet on which we place heavy weights, this creates wells in the sheet. In this picture the rubber sheet is spacetime while the weights are large masses e.g. stars, black holes. The two react to each dynamically, this can be summarised as:

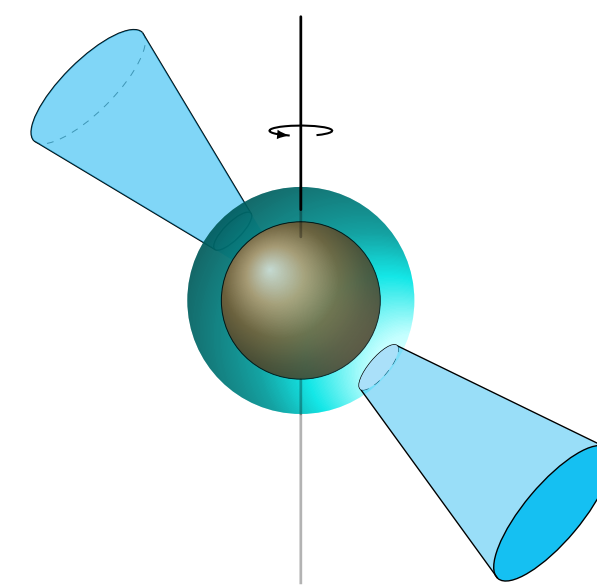
"Spacetime tells matter how to move; matter tells spacetime how to curve." - J. Wheeler



When a large mass which is not symmetric rotates it causes the spacetime to ripple as illustrated in the figure on the left. These ripples are gravitational waves, there is very strong evidence that they exist, but they have not yet been directly observed.

II: What is a *neutron star*?

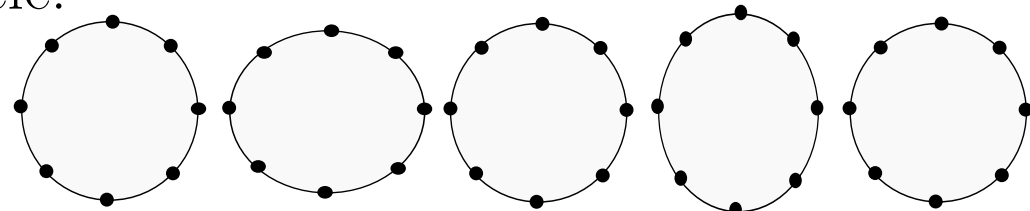
Stars like our sun are in an equilibrium between the outward force from burning nuclear fuel in their core and collapse due to their own gravity. When they run out of fuel they collapse, some of them collapse to form a neutron star. They have a mass about that of our sun, but have a radius of about 10km, this makes them extremely dense. This is like compressing the sun into a sphere roughly the size of Southampton.



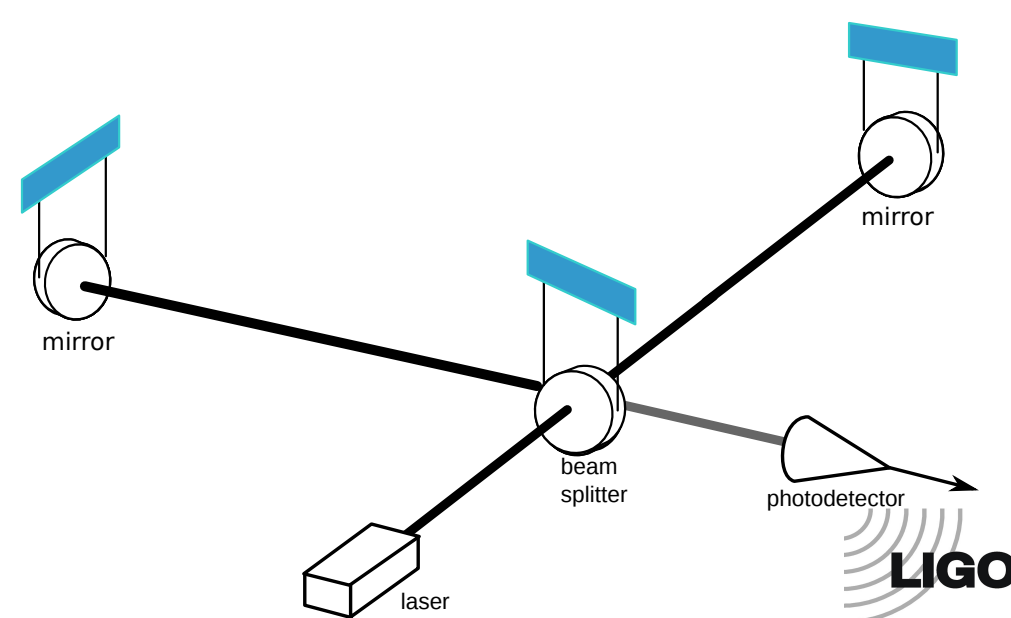
We see some neutron stars as pulses of electromagnetic light. This is caused by radiation streaming out in thin beams which flash over the earth like the beams from a lighthouse, illustrated on the left. Neutron stars contain lots of interesting physics such as massive magnetic fields and exotic forms of matter. Crucially, if they are misshapen then they may emit gravitational waves.

III: Searching for gravitational waves

A gravitational wave will periodically stretch and squeeze space in the two directions perpendicular to its direction of travel. In the figure below we show this effect on a circle.



To detect gravitational waves we can use a laser interferometer. These split a laser beam and send it off in two different directions; both beams are then bounced off a mirror and return to the start. Both beams should have travelled the same distance and so should return at the same time. However, if a gravitational wave passed through during the experiment, they will not both return at the same time.



The problem is that the difference between the two beams is very small. To put it in perspective, it's like trying to measure that a human being has grown by a single atom. We have built enormous detectors in the hope of measuring gravitational waves, below is the 4 km long LIGO detector in the USA.

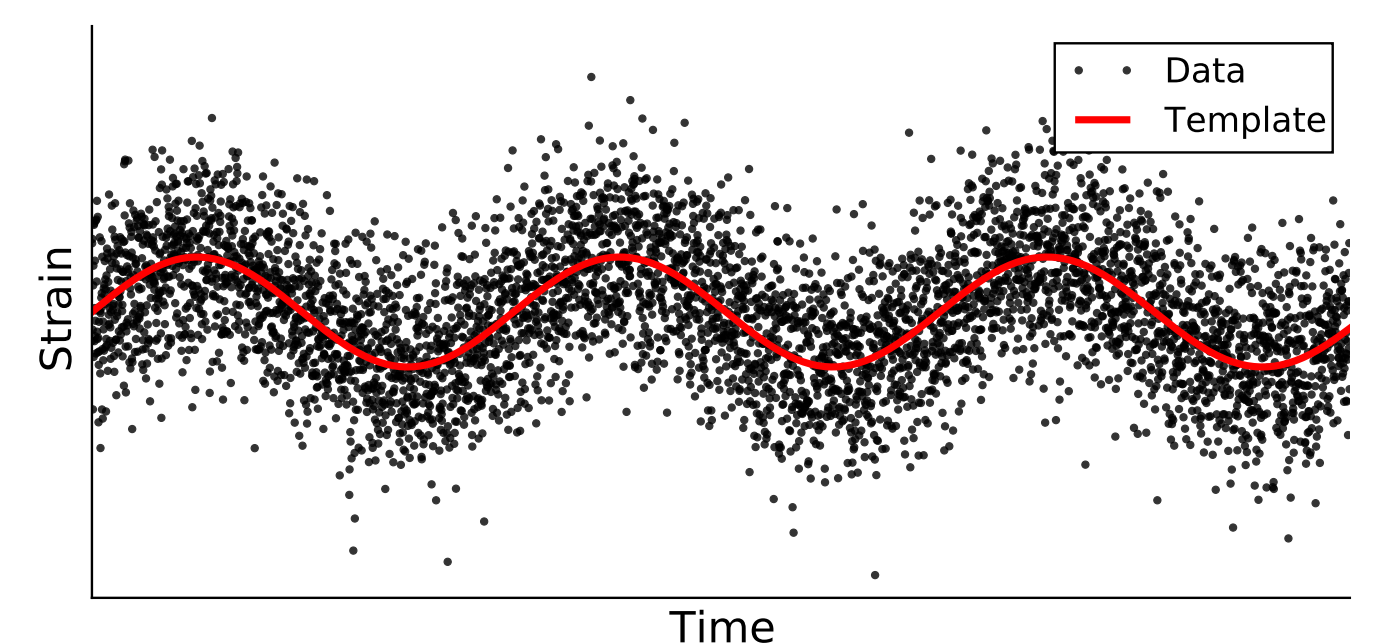


Look out for results when the detectors turn on in 2016.

IV: Searching for signals from neutron stars

The signals we are searching for will be hidden in the detector noise from seismic activity and other sources. To search for it, we have to make a guess for what the signal will look like, this is called a template. The template is then compared to the data like in the graph on the right. This process relies on the ability of the template to match the signal in the data. Using the correct template is crucial to finding the signal.

Unfortunately it is possible that real gravitational wave signals will contain noise from the neutron star itself. This noise can look just like the detector noise. I am trying to test how bad this effect will be and develop methods to improve our chances of detection.



V: Gravitational waves astronomy

Aside from testing Einstein's general relativity, gravitational waves will allow us to explore the universe in a new way. Traditional astronomy observes electromagnetic radiation from distant objects. This means we can only observe the outside of hot, light emitting objects. With gravitational wave astronomy we may be able to observe more of the many exotic and less explored areas of physics such as black holes, neutron stars, and maybe even the big bang.

VI: Conclusions

We are trying to detect gravitational waves. Finding these is crucial evidence for Einstein's theory of gravity, general relativity. If you want to know more visit:

www.bit.do/LIGO