

Why a Tilted Sensor Cannot Measure Direct Gravitational Pull

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A common claim holds that a sensor tilted relative to the local vertical can detect the direct gravitational pull of the Sun ($\sim 6 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m/s}^2$) or the Moon ($\sim 3.3 \times 10^{-5} \text{ m/s}^2$) as a time-varying signal. This is incorrect. We show, using only Newtonian point-mass mechanics, that the direct pull cancels exactly against the acceleration of the laboratory, leaving only the tidal residual — regardless of sensor orientation. The proof is given in an inertial frame where no terms are hidden, and the result is then transformed to the rotating laboratory frame.

I. INERTIAL AND NON-INERTIAL FRAMES

An **inertial frame** is one in which Newton’s second law $\mathbf{F} = m \mathbf{a}$ holds without correction. A body subject to no forces moves in a straight line at constant velocity.

A **non-inertial frame** is one that accelerates. In such a frame, Newton’s laws require fictitious forces — centrifugal, Coriolis, etc. — to compensate for the acceleration of the frame itself.

A. The laboratory is non-inertial

A laboratory on Earth’s surface is non-inertial for two reasons:

1. **Earth rotates**, producing centrifugal and Coriolis pseudo-accelerations ($\sim 0.03 \text{ m/s}^2$ at the equator).
2. **Earth freely falls toward the Sun and Moon.** The entire Earth — lab, sensor, test mass, and all — accelerates toward the Sun at $GM_S/R^2 \approx 5.93 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m/s}^2$ and toward the Moon at $GM_M/D^2 \approx 3.3 \times 10^{-5} \text{ m/s}^2$.

The second point is the origin of the cancellation. When you write equations in the lab frame, you have already subtracted these accelerations from every term. A sensor physically implements this subtraction: both ends of the spring accelerate identically in the Sun’s field, so the spring reads zero from that field.

To see this without hidden subtractions, we work in a true inertial frame and carry every term explicitly.

II. THE PROOF

A. Setup

Four point masses in an inertial frame:

Body	Mass	Position
Sun	M_S	$\mathbf{R}_S(t)$
Moon	M_M	$\mathbf{R}_M(t)$
Earth	M_E	$\mathbf{R}_E(t)$
Test mass	m	$\mathbf{x}(t)$

The test mass is connected to the sensor by a spring (or equivalent restoring mechanism). The sensor housing is rigidly attached to the Earth. The sensor reads the spring force $\mathbf{F}_{\text{spring}}$ — the non-gravitational force required to keep the test mass co-moving with the lab.

B. Test mass equation of motion

In the inertial frame, Newton’s second law for the test mass:

$$m \ddot{\mathbf{x}} = -\frac{GM_E m}{|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{R}_E|^3}(\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{R}_E) - \frac{GM_S m}{|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{R}_S|^3}(\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{R}_S) - \frac{GM_M m}{|\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{R}_M|^3}(\mathbf{x} - \mathbf{R}_M) + \mathbf{F}_{\text{spring}} \quad (1)$$

C. Earth's equation of motion

Earth's center accelerates toward the Sun and Moon:

$$\ddot{\mathbf{R}}_E = -\frac{GM_S}{|\mathbf{R}_E - \mathbf{R}_S|^3}(\mathbf{R}_E - \mathbf{R}_S) - \frac{GM_M}{|\mathbf{R}_E - \mathbf{R}_M|^3}(\mathbf{R}_E - \mathbf{R}_M) \quad (2)$$

Every object rigidly attached to the Earth — including the sensor housing — shares this acceleration.

D. Subtract to get the relative motion

Define $\mathbf{r} \equiv \mathbf{x} - \mathbf{R}_E$ and the geocentric positions $\mathbf{R} \equiv \mathbf{R}_S - \mathbf{R}_E$, $\mathbf{D} \equiv \mathbf{R}_M - \mathbf{R}_E$. Then $\ddot{\mathbf{r}} = \ddot{\mathbf{x}} - \ddot{\mathbf{R}}_E$ gives:

$$m \ddot{\mathbf{r}} = -\frac{GM_E m}{|\mathbf{r}|^3} \mathbf{r} + GM_S m \left[\frac{\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}}{|\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}|^3} - \frac{\mathbf{R}}{R^3} \right] + GM_M m \left[\frac{\mathbf{D} - \mathbf{r}}{|\mathbf{D} - \mathbf{r}|^3} - \frac{\mathbf{D}}{D^3} \right] + \mathbf{F}_{\text{spring}} \quad (3)$$

E. The cancellation

Each bracketed term has the form

$$\mathbf{f}(\mathbf{r}) = \frac{\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}}{|\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}|^3} - \frac{\mathbf{R}}{R^3} \quad (4)$$

This is the Sun's gravitational field at the test mass *minus* the field at Earth's center. At $\mathbf{r} = \mathbf{0}$:

$$\mathbf{f}(\mathbf{0}) = \frac{\mathbf{R}}{R^3} - \frac{\mathbf{R}}{R^3} = \mathbf{0} \quad (\text{exactly}) \quad (5)$$

The direct pull — $GM_S \mathbf{R}/R^3$, the uniform field that accelerates the entire Earth at $5.93 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m/s}^2$ — appears with equal magnitude and opposite sign in Eqs. (1) and (2), and cancels identically. No approximation is involved. The same holds for the Moon with \mathbf{D} replacing \mathbf{R} .

What survives is $\mathbf{f}(\mathbf{r}) - \mathbf{f}(\mathbf{0})$: the *variation* of the gravitational field across the baseline \mathbf{r} — the **tidal acceleration**. To leading order in r/R :

$$\mathbf{a}_{\text{tidal}} = \frac{GM}{R^3} \left[3(\mathbf{e}_R \cdot \mathbf{r}) \mathbf{e}_R - \mathbf{r} \right] + O\left(\frac{GM r^2}{R^4}\right) \quad (6)$$

This is suppressed by a factor r/R relative to the direct pull.

F. Derivation of Eq. (6)

Expand $|\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}|^{-3}$ for $r \ll R$. Write

$$|\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}|^2 = R^2 \left(1 - 2 \frac{\mathbf{e}_R \cdot \mathbf{r}}{R} + \frac{r^2}{R^2} \right) \equiv R^2(1 - \epsilon) \quad (7)$$

with $\epsilon = 2 \mathbf{e}_R \cdot \mathbf{r}/R - r^2/R^2 = O(r/R)$. Then

$$\frac{1}{|\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}|^3} = \frac{1}{R^3} (1 - \epsilon)^{-3/2} = \frac{1}{R^3} \left(1 + \frac{3 \mathbf{e}_R \cdot \mathbf{r}}{R} + O\left(\frac{r^2}{R^2}\right) \right) \quad (8)$$

Multiply by $(\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r})$ and keep terms through first order:

$$\frac{\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}}{|\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}|^3} = \frac{1}{R^3} \left[\mathbf{R} + 3(\mathbf{e}_R \cdot \mathbf{r}) \mathbf{e}_R - \mathbf{r} \right] + O\left(\frac{r^2}{R^4}\right) \quad (9)$$

Subtract \mathbf{R}/R^3 :

$$\mathbf{f}(\mathbf{r}) = \frac{\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}}{|\mathbf{R} - \mathbf{r}|^3} - \frac{\mathbf{R}}{R^3} = \frac{1}{R^3} \left[3(\mathbf{e}_R \cdot \mathbf{r}) \mathbf{e}_R - \mathbf{r} \right] + O\left(\frac{r^2}{R^4}\right) \quad (10)$$

The \mathbf{R}/R^3 terms cancel identically — confirming that the direct pull drops out — and the leading surviving term is the tidal quadrupole, Eq. (6). \square

III. TRANSFORMATION TO THE LABORATORY FRAME

Equation (3) is written in the non-rotating geocentric frame. The laboratory rotates with the Earth at angular velocity $\boldsymbol{\omega}$. This is a second source of non-inertiality (see Sec. I).

A. Rotating-frame equation of motion

Let \mathbf{r}' be the test mass position in the lab frame, related to its geocentric position by $\mathbf{r} = \mathcal{R}(t) \mathbf{r}'$ where $\mathcal{R}(t)$ is the time-dependent rotation matrix. Differentiating twice:

$$\ddot{\mathbf{r}} = \ddot{\mathbf{r}}' + 2\boldsymbol{\omega} \times \dot{\mathbf{r}}' + \boldsymbol{\omega} \times (\boldsymbol{\omega} \times \mathbf{r}') \quad (11)$$

(the Euler term $\dot{\boldsymbol{\omega}} \times \mathbf{r}'$ vanishes for uniform rotation). Substituting into Eq. (3) and expressing all vectors in the lab basis:

$$\ddot{\mathbf{r}}' = \underbrace{-\frac{GM_E}{|\mathbf{r}'|^3} \mathbf{r}'}_{\text{Earth's gravity}} + \underbrace{\mathbf{a}'_{\text{tidal}}}_{\text{tidal}} - \underbrace{\boldsymbol{\omega} \times (\boldsymbol{\omega} \times \mathbf{r}')}_{\text{centrifugal}} - \underbrace{2\boldsymbol{\omega} \times \dot{\mathbf{r}}'}_{\text{Coriolis}} + \frac{\mathbf{F}'_{\text{spring}}}{m} \quad (12)$$

The direct solar and lunar pulls do **not** reappear — they canceled in Eq. (3) before the frame change, and rotating the coordinate basis cannot restore a term that is already zero.

B. What the sensor reads

The test mass sits at rest in the lab: $\dot{\mathbf{r}}' = \ddot{\mathbf{r}}' = \mathbf{0}$. The Coriolis term vanishes. Setting the left-hand side of Eq. (12) to zero:

$$\frac{\mathbf{F}'_{\text{spring}}}{m} = \frac{GM_E}{|\mathbf{r}'|^3} \mathbf{r}' + \boldsymbol{\omega} \times (\boldsymbol{\omega} \times \mathbf{r}') - \mathbf{a}'_{\text{tidal}} \quad (13)$$

The sensor projects this onto its measurement axis \mathbf{e}_n :

$$g_{\text{measured}} = \frac{\mathbf{F}'_{\text{spring}}}{m} \cdot \mathbf{e}_n \quad (14)$$

The three contributions are:

- $GM_E \mathbf{r}'/|\mathbf{r}'|^3$: Earth's gravity (the dominant, static term).
- $\boldsymbol{\omega} \times (\boldsymbol{\omega} \times \mathbf{r}') = -\omega^2 \mathbf{r}'_{\perp}$: the centrifugal reduction (objects weigh less at the equator by $\sim 0.3\%$).
- $-\mathbf{a}'_{\text{tidal}}$: the tidal perturbation from Sun and Moon, of order 10^{-7} m/s².

The direct pull GM_S/R^2 and GM_M/D^2 appear nowhere. This holds for any \mathbf{e}_n .

C. Size of each term

Term	Expression	Magnitude
Earth's gravity	GM_E/r_{\oplus}^2	9.81 m/s ²
Centrifugal (equator)	$\omega^2 r_{\oplus}$	3.4×10^{-2} m/s ²
Lunar tide	$GM_M r_{\oplus}/D^3$	1.1×10^{-6} m/s ²
Solar tide	$GM_S r_{\oplus}/R^3$	5.1×10^{-7} m/s ²
Solar direct pull (canceled)	GM_S/R^2	5.93×10^{-3} m/s ²

The sensor reads a superposition of the first four terms. The fifth — the direct pull — has been subtracted out by the physics of the measurement: the lab accelerates with the Earth, and the spring cannot see it.

IV. WHY SENSOR ORIENTATION IS IRRELEVANT

The cancellation in Eq. (5) is **vectorial**: the direct pull vanishes as a three-component vector, not as a particular scalar projection. Projecting onto any measurement axis \mathbf{e}_n :

$$\mathbf{e}_n \cdot \mathbf{f}(\mathbf{0}) = \mathbf{e}_n \cdot \mathbf{0} = 0 \quad \text{for all } \mathbf{e}_n \quad (15)$$

Tilting the sensor changes \mathbf{e}_n but cannot make zero non-zero. The spring force along any axis contains only the tidal terms from Eq. (6).

Physically: the sensor housing and the test mass both accelerate at GM_S/R^2 toward the Sun. The spring connecting them measures only the *difference* between the accelerations of its two endpoints. A uniform field produces no difference, regardless of the spring's orientation.

A. Sweeping the sensor orientation

Parameterise the measurement axis by zenith angle θ and azimuth φ :

$$\mathbf{e}_n(\theta, \varphi) = \sin \theta \cos \varphi \mathbf{e}_E + \sin \theta \sin \varphi \mathbf{e}_N + \cos \theta \mathbf{e}_U \quad (16)$$

where \mathbf{e}_E , \mathbf{e}_N , \mathbf{e}_U are the local East–North–Up unit vectors defined relative to the *geodetic* vertical. From Eq. (13), the sensor reading as a function of orientation is

$$g(\theta, \varphi) = g_0 \cos \theta - a'_E \sin \theta \cos \varphi - a'_N \sin \theta \sin \varphi - a'_U \cos \theta \quad (17)$$

We now trace each physical contribution from Sec. III through this angular projection.

Earth's gravity and centrifugal ($g_0 \cos \theta$). The gravitational acceleration GM_E/r_\oplus^2 and the centrifugal acceleration $\omega^2 r_\oplus \cos^2 \lambda$ combine into the effective gravity $\mathbf{g}_{\text{eff}} = g_0 \mathbf{e}_U$, which by definition of the geodetic vertical points purely along \mathbf{e}_U . Its projection onto the sensor axis is $g_0 \cos \theta$: it reads the full $g_0 \approx 9.81 \text{ m/s}^2$ when the sensor is vertical ($\theta = 0$), vanishes when horizontal ($\theta = 90$), and reverses when inverted ($\theta = 180$). The centrifugal correction modifies g_0 by at most 0.3% (latitude-dependent) but introduces no separate angular signature — it is entirely absorbed into the amplitude of the $\cos \theta$ term. There is no “rotational residual” in the sweep.

Coriolis ($-2\boldsymbol{\omega} \times \dot{\mathbf{r}}'$). This acceleration is proportional to the test mass velocity $\dot{\mathbf{r}}'$, which vanishes for a mass at rest in the lab. It contributes nothing to the static sensor reading at any orientation.

Solar and lunar tides (a'_E , a'_N , a'_U). The tidal accelerations from Eq. (6) decompose into East, North, and Up components. The horizontal components a'_E and a'_N enter through $\sin \theta \cos \varphi$ and $\sin \theta \sin \varphi$: they vanish for a vertical sensor and are maximized for a horizontal one pointed in the appropriate direction. The vertical component a'_U enters as $\cos \theta$, superimposed on the much larger $g_0 \cos \theta$. Representative combined amplitudes (from Sec. III): solar tidal $\sim 5 \times 10^{-7} \text{ m/s}^2$, lunar tidal $\sim 1.1 \times 10^{-6} \text{ m/s}^2$. These are the only time-varying signals in the sweep.

Direct solar pull (canceled). Were the direct pull GM_S/R^2 not canceled by Earth's free fall, it would project as $a_\odot \sin \theta \cos(\varphi - \varphi_\odot)$ with amplitude $a_\odot \approx 5.93 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m/s}^2$ — four orders of magnitude above the tidal terms. As shown in Fig. 1, no such signal exists at any orientation. An angular scan therefore confirms the cancellation directly: one measures $g_0 \cos \theta$ plus tidal corrections of order 10^{-7} m/s^2 , with no 10^{-3} m/s^2 sinusoidal component.

V. NUMERICAL SCALE

Body	Direct pull (cancels)	Tidal residual (observable)	Ratio
Sun	$5.93 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m/s}^2$	$5.1 \times 10^{-7} \text{ m/s}^2$	$11,700\times$
Moon	$3.32 \times 10^{-5} \text{ m/s}^2$	$1.1 \times 10^{-6} \text{ m/s}^2$	$30\times$

The Sun's direct pull is $180\times$ stronger than the Moon's, but its tidal effect is $2.2\times$ *weaker* ($1/R^3$ vs. $1/R^2$ scaling). This inversion is the hallmark of tidal physics, and a direct consequence of the cancellation.

VI. WHAT IS OBSERVABLE

Tilting the sensor accesses different components of the *tidal* field, not the direct pull:

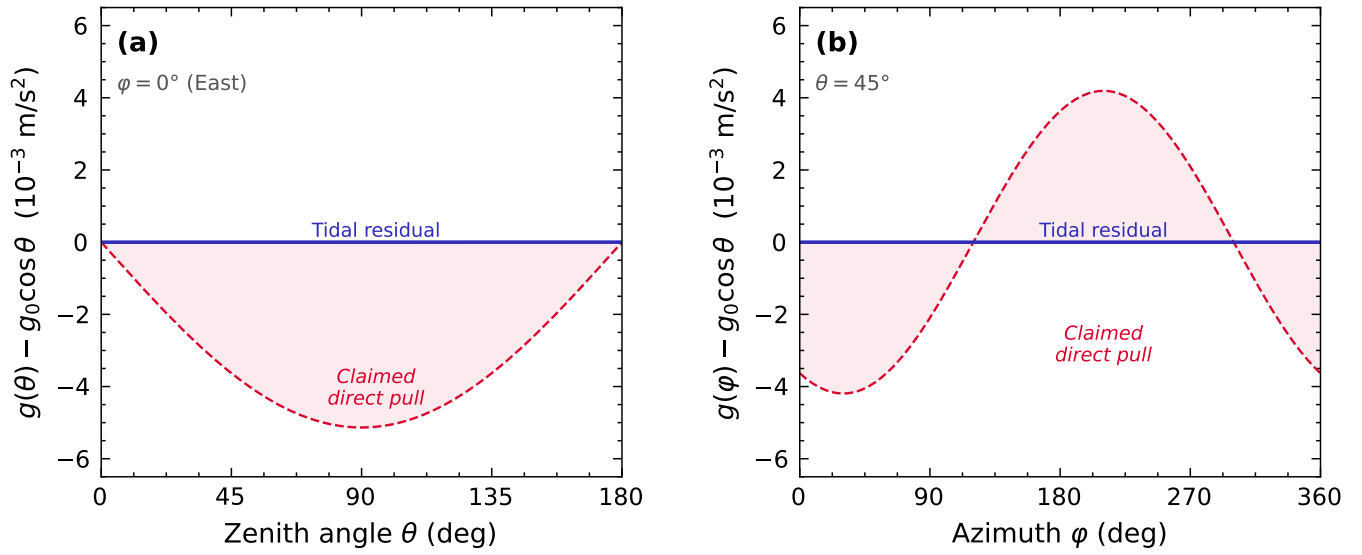


FIG. 1. Residual acceleration $g - g_0 \cos \theta$ as a function of sensor orientation, after subtracting the dominant effective-gravity projection. (a) Sweep over zenith angle θ at fixed azimuth $\varphi = 0$ (East). (b) Sweep over azimuth φ at fixed zenith angle $\theta = 45$. Blue solid line: actual tidal residual ($\sim 10^{-7} \text{ m/s}^2$, indistinguishable from zero at this scale). Red dashed line: hypothetical signal from the Sun's direct gravitational pull ($\sim 6 \times 10^{-3} \text{ m/s}^2$) if it were not canceled. No such signal exists at any orientation.

- A vertical sensor sees the vertical tidal component ($\sim 5 \times 10^{-7} \text{ m/s}^2$, semi-diurnal).
- A horizontal sensor picks up horizontal tidal components (diurnal).
- Three non-coplanar sensors reconstruct the full tidal tensor.

These effects are real and measurable, but four orders of magnitude smaller than the claimed signal.