

Photon Trajectories around Schwarzschild and Kerr Black Holes

Vaidehi, Shreesha, Harikesh, Samrat, Shivam and Naman

20th November 2025



1 Introduction

- Introduction
- Mathematical tools (Main Ingredients)
- Theory (Recipe)
- Conclusion
- References

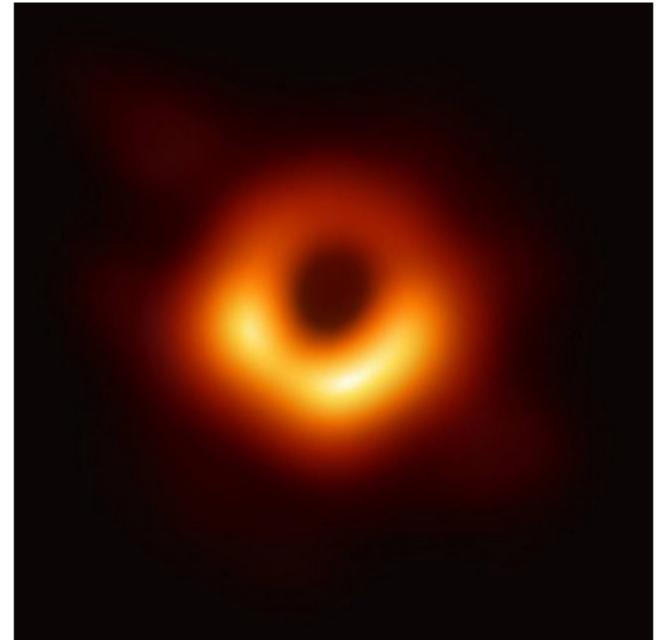


Motivation - Our Whatsapp group DP :)

1 Introduction

First ever image of a Blackhole:

- Released in 2019 by EHT group.
- **Unbelievable !** So we **CHECK** the Physics ourselves.



M87* Supermassive Blackhole



Einstein Field Equations

1 Introduction

- Einstein field equation:

$$G_{\mu\nu} = 8\pi T_{\mu\nu} \quad (1)$$

- For vacuum spacetime:

$$T_{\mu\nu} = 0 \quad (2)$$

- Solving these equations under symmetry assumptions gives 4 key black-hole solutions:

- Schwarzschild (nonrotating, uncharged)
- Kerr (rotating, uncharged)
- Reissner–Nordström (charged, nonrotating)
- Kerr-Newman Black Hole (charged, rotating)

- **Kerr is the most physically relevant solution for real black holes.**

Photon Trajectories around Schwarzschild Black Holes

We will first serve our appetizer !



What are we trying to answer/cook ?

1 Introduction

We want to understand the **Motion of Photons** around **Schwarzschild Blackholes**:

1. Is there any **Possibility of a Circular Orbit** and what will be its **radius** ?
2. What is the **condition** for a photon to move in this orbit?
3. **Stability** of this orbit ?
4. How would **all possible trajectories** look like ?



2 Mathematical tools (Main Ingredients)

- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Mathematical tools (Main Ingredients)
- ▶ Theory (Recipe)
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ References



Schwarzschild Metric

2 Mathematical tools (Main Ingredients)

The metric is given as:

$$ds^2 = - \left(1 - \frac{2GM}{rc^2}\right) c^2 dt^2 + \left(1 - \frac{2GM}{rc^2}\right)^{-1} dr^2 + r^2 (d\theta^2 + \sin^2 \theta d\phi^2)$$

Using geometric units (where $G = c = 1$):

$$ds^2 = - \left(1 - \frac{2M}{r}\right) dt^2 + \left(1 - \frac{2M}{r}\right)^{-1} dr^2 + r^2 (d\theta^2 + \sin^2 \theta d\phi^2)$$



Geodesic equation and Null condition

2 Mathematical tools (Main Ingredients)

The **geodesic equation** is:

$$\frac{d^2x^\alpha}{d\lambda^2} + \Gamma_{\mu\nu}^\alpha \frac{dx^\mu}{d\lambda} \frac{dx^\nu}{d\lambda} = 0$$

A photon must travel on a **null path**.

$$ds^2 = g_{\mu\nu} dx^\mu dx^\nu = 0$$



3 Theory (Recipe)

- Introduction
- Mathematical tools (Main Ingredients)
- Theory (Recipe)
- Conclusion
- References



Circular orbit and its radius

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Select the **Radial Component**:

$$\frac{d^2r}{d\lambda^2} + \Gamma_{\mu\nu}^r \frac{dx^\mu}{d\lambda} \frac{dx^\nu}{d\lambda} = 0$$

- Expanding:

$$\frac{d^2r}{d\lambda^2} + \Gamma_{tt}^r \left(\frac{dt}{d\lambda} \right)^2 + \Gamma_{rr}^r \left(\frac{dr}{d\lambda} \right)^2 + \Gamma_{\theta\theta}^r \left(\frac{d\theta}{d\lambda} \right)^2 + \Gamma_{\phi\phi}^r \left(\frac{d\phi}{d\lambda} \right)^2 + (\text{cross terms}) \dots = 0$$

(Note: For the Schwarzschild metric, all “cross terms” like $\Gamma_{t\phi}^r$ are zero.)



Circular orbit and its radius

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Condition for a Circular Orbit:
 1. Radial velocity is zero: $\dot{r} = \frac{dr}{d\lambda} = 0$
 2. Radial acceleration is zero: $\ddot{r} = \frac{d^2r}{d\lambda^2} = 0$
- Assuming an orbit in the equatorial plane, so $\theta = \pi/2$ and $\dot{\theta} = 0$
(Do we lose any generality?)
- This is the general condition for **any particle** to have a circular orbit:

$$\boxed{\Gamma_{tt}^r \left(\frac{dt}{d\lambda} \right)^2 + \Gamma_{\phi\phi}^r \left(\frac{d\phi}{d\lambda} \right)^2 = 0} \quad (\text{A})$$



Circular orbit and its radius

3 Theory (Recipe)

- The Photon (Null Geodesic) Condition:

$$ds^2 = g_{\mu\nu} dx^\mu dx^\nu = 0$$

- For circular orbit ($\dot{r} = 0, \dot{\theta} = 0$), this equation becomes:

$$\boxed{g_{tt} \left(\frac{dt}{d\lambda} \right)^2 + g_{\phi\phi} \left(\frac{d\phi}{d\lambda} \right)^2 = 0} \quad (\text{B})$$



Circular orbit and its radius

3 Theory (Recipe)

Substituting Metric components and Christoffel Symbols in equations *A* and *B*:

- Equation *A*:

$$\boxed{\frac{M}{r^2} \left(\frac{dt}{d\lambda} \right)^2 = r \left(\frac{d\phi}{d\lambda} \right)^2}$$

- Equation *B*:

$$\boxed{\left(1 - \frac{2M}{r} \right) \left(\frac{dt}{d\lambda} \right)^2 = r^2 \left(\frac{d\phi}{d\lambda} \right)^2}$$



Circular orbit and its radius

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Solving these 2 equations:

$$\frac{\left(1 - \frac{2M}{r}\right) \left(\frac{dt}{d\lambda}\right)^2}{\frac{M}{r^2} \left(\frac{dt}{d\lambda}\right)^2} = \frac{r^2 \left(\frac{d\phi}{d\lambda}\right)^2}{r \left(\frac{d\phi}{d\lambda}\right)^2}$$

- t^2 and $\dot{\phi}^2$ cancel, leaving an equation purely about r :

$$\frac{1 - \frac{2M}{r}}{\frac{M}{r^2}} = \frac{r^2}{r}$$



Circular orbit and its radius

3 Theory (Recipe)

Simplifying further:

$$r = 3M$$

This is the radius of the **Photon Sphere/Ring** around a **Schwarzschild black hole**, the unique circular orbit where a photon can orbit the black hole.



Critical Impact Parameter

3 Theory (Recipe)

Starting with Conserved Quantities:

- Lagrangian (\mathcal{L}) for a free particle is defined as:

$$\mathcal{L} = \frac{1}{2} g_{\mu\nu} \dot{x}^\mu \dot{x}^\nu$$

- Using this for the Schwarzschild metric (in the equatorial plane, $\dot{\theta} = 0$), we get:

$$\mathcal{L} = \frac{1}{2} \left[- \left(1 - \frac{2M}{r} \right) \dot{t}^2 + \left(1 - \frac{2M}{r} \right)^{-1} \dot{r}^2 + r^2 \dot{\phi}^2 \right]$$



Critical Impact Parameter

3 Theory (Recipe)

Conserved Quantities:

-

$$\begin{aligned} p_t &= \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial \dot{t}} = - \left(1 - \frac{2M}{r} \right) \dot{t} = -E \\ \implies \dot{t} &= \frac{E}{1 - 2M/r} \end{aligned}$$

-

$$\begin{aligned} p_\phi &= \frac{\partial \mathcal{L}}{\partial \dot{\phi}} = r^2 \dot{\phi} = L \\ \implies \dot{\phi} &= \frac{L}{r^2} \end{aligned}$$



Critical Impact Parameter

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Substituting the Photon Sphere Radius $r = 3M$ in Equation B :

$$\left(1 - \frac{2M}{3M}\right) \ddot{t}^2 = (3M)^2 \dot{\phi}^2 \quad (*)$$

- Substitute Conserved Quantities (Evaluated at $r = 3M$):

$$\ddot{t}(r = 3M) = \frac{E}{1 - 2M/3M} = \frac{E}{1/3} = 3E$$

$$\dot{\phi}(r = 3M) = \frac{L}{(3M)^2} = \frac{L}{9M^2}$$



Critical Impact Parameter

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Substituting these into (*):

$$\frac{1}{3}(3E)^2 = 9M^2 \left(\frac{L}{9M^2} \right)^2$$

- Rearranging:

$$27M^2 = \frac{L^2}{E^2}$$



Critical Impact Parameter

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Now we define the ratio $\frac{L}{E}$ as b i.e. **Impact parameter**
- Let's call this b value for circular orbit to be b_{crit} i.e. **Critical Impact Parameter**:

$$b_{crit} = \sqrt{27}M$$



Equations for Photon Trajectory

3 Theory (Recipe)

1. Radial Velocity Equation:

$$\frac{dr}{d\lambda} = \dot{r}$$

2. Angular Velocity Equation:

$$\dot{\phi} = \frac{d\phi}{d\lambda} = \frac{L}{r^2}$$

3. Radial Acceleration Equation:

$$\frac{d\dot{r}}{d\lambda} = \ddot{r} = \text{Oops ?}$$



Equations for Photon Trajectory

3 Theory (Recipe)

Radial Acceleration Equation:

- Removing $\dot{r} = 0$ and $\ddot{r} = 0$ constraints on geodesic equation:

$$\frac{d^2r}{d\lambda^2} + \Gamma_{tt}^r(\dot{t})^2 + \Gamma_{rr}^r(\dot{r})^2 + \Gamma_{\phi\phi}^r(\dot{\phi})^2 = 0$$

- Plugging in Christoffel Symbols, \dot{t} and $\dot{\phi}$:

$$\ddot{r} + \left[\frac{M(1 - 2M/r)}{r^2} \right] \left(\frac{E}{1 - 2M/r} \right)^2 - \left[\frac{M}{r^2(1 - 2M/r)} \right] (\dot{r})^2 - [r(1 - 2M/r)] \left(\frac{L}{r^2} \right)^2 = 0$$



Equations for Photon Trajectory

3 Theory (Recipe)

- On further simplification:

$$\ddot{r} + \frac{M}{r^2(1 - 2M/r)} (E^2 - \dot{r}^2) - \frac{L^2(1 - 2M/r)}{r^3} = 0 \quad (\text{C})$$

- Using the Null condition:

$$g_{tt}(\dot{t})^2 + g_{rr}(\dot{r})^2 + g_{\phi\phi}(\dot{\phi})^2 = 0$$

- Plugging in metric components, \dot{t} and $\dot{\phi}$:

$$-\left(1 - \frac{2M}{r}\right) \left[\frac{E}{1 - 2M/r}\right]^2 + \left(1 - \frac{2M}{r}\right)^{-1} \dot{r}^2 + r^2 \left[\frac{L}{r^2}\right]^2 = 0$$



Equations for Photon Trajectory

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Rearranging:

$$E^2 - \dot{r}^2 = \frac{L^2}{r^2} \left(1 - \frac{2M}{r} \right)$$

- Substituting in C:

$$\ddot{r} + \frac{M}{r^2(1 - 2M/r)} \left[\frac{L^2}{r^2} \left(1 - \frac{2M}{r} \right) \right] - \frac{L^2(1 - 2M/r)}{r^3} = 0$$

- Simplifying this gives the **Radial Acceleration Equation**:

$$\boxed{\frac{d\dot{r}}{d\lambda} = \ddot{r} = \frac{L^2}{r^3} - \frac{3ML^2}{r^4}}$$



Equations for Photon Trajectory

3 Theory (Recipe)

1. Radial Velocity Equation:

$$\frac{dr}{d\lambda} = \dot{r}$$

2. Angular Velocity Equation:

$$\dot{\phi} = \frac{d\phi}{d\lambda} = \frac{L}{r^2}$$

3. Radial Acceleration Equation:

$$\frac{d\dot{r}}{d\lambda} = \ddot{r} = \frac{L^2}{r^3} - \frac{3ML^2}{r^4}$$

- Analytical method can only take us so far!



Stability Analysis of Circular orbit

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Perturb the Orbit:

$$r(\lambda) = r_0 + \delta r(\lambda) = 3M + \delta r(\lambda)$$

- Acceleration of this perturbed radius:

$$\ddot{r} = \frac{d^2}{d\lambda^2}(r_0 + \delta r) = \frac{d^2(\delta r)}{d\lambda^2} = \ddot{\delta r}$$

- Radial acceleration function:

$$\ddot{r} = f(r) \quad \text{where} \quad f(r) = L^2 r^{-3} - 3ML^2 r^{-4}$$



Stability Analysis of Circular orbit

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Taylor Expanding and keeping 1st order term:

$$\ddot{\delta r} = f(r_0 + \delta r) \approx f(r_0) + \left[\frac{df}{dr} \right]_{r=r_0} \cdot \delta r$$

- We know $f(r_0) = 0$:

$$\ddot{\delta r} \approx [f'(r_0)] \cdot \delta r$$

- Stability now depends on the sign of the coefficient $f'(r_0) = f'(3M)$.



Stability Analysis of Circular orbit

3 Theory (Recipe)

- Calculating the Derivative $f'(r)$:

$$f'(r) = \frac{d}{dr} f(r) = -\frac{3L^2}{r^4} + \frac{12ML^2}{r^5}$$

- Evaluating $f'(r_0)$ at $r_0 = 3M$:

$$\boxed{f'(3M) = \frac{L^2}{81M^4}} \quad (\text{Positive})$$

This implies that **orbit is unstable**.



4 Conclusion

- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Mathematical tools (Main Ingredients)
- ▶ Theory (Recipe)
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ References



Here's What We Cooked Up !

4 Conclusion

1. We found out the **circular orbit radius** $r = 3M$.
2. The photons orbiting this radius satisfy $\frac{L}{E} = \sqrt{27}M$
3. Obtained **equations of motion** of photons.
4. Watched the **simulation** of photons playing garba around the blackhole.
5. Found that **circular orbit is unstable** and any perturbation will result in photons either getting captured into the blackhole or escaping.



5 References

- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Mathematical tools (Main Ingredients)
- ▶ Theory (Recipe)
- ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ References



Sources

5 References

1. A First Course in General Relativity - Bernard Schutz
2. Spacetime and Geometry An Introduction to General Relativity - Sean M. Carroll
3. Classical Mechanics - Herbert Goldstein, Charles P. Poole, John Safko
4. David Tong - Lectures on General Relativity
<https://www.damtp.cam.ac.uk/user/tong/gr.html>