

Introduction to computational physics

Lecture 1

**PHYS 246 class 1
Fall 2025
J Noronha-Hostler**

[https://jnoronhahostler.github.io/IntroductionToComputationalPhysics/
intro.html](https://jnoronhahostler.github.io/IntroductionToComputationalPhysics/intro.html)

Why computational physics?

- Most fields of physics have problems that cannot be solved just using pen and paper and require computational algorithms
- Computational simulations can predict the behavior of experiments, allow physicists to compare models to data - leading to new insights, and handle large data sets
- Computational physicists are in high demand, especially with advances in machine learning and artificial intelligence tools. Advances in research lead to industry advances down the road
- Starting good coding practices NOW, can make your life much easier down the road.

About me

- Co-founder of the MUSES collaboration (led by UIUC)

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

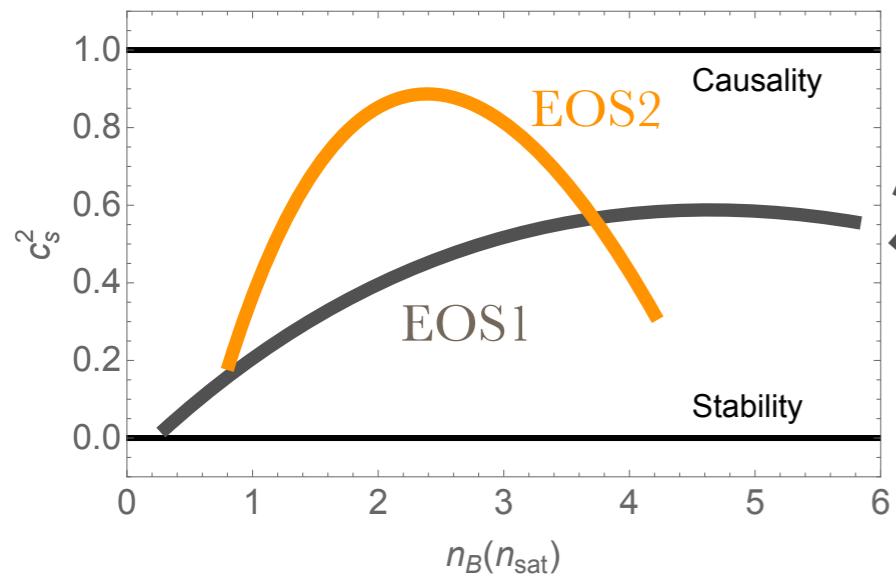


- Co-developer of a number of codes:
 - <https://github.com/the-nuclear-confectionery>
 - <https://gitlab.com/nsf-muses/module-cmf>
 - <https://gitlab.com/nsf-muses>
- My own expertise lies in c++, Fortran, Mathematica and high-performance computing

Peering inside neutron stars

Dead stars = largest densities in the universe!

Generate $> 10^5$ equations of state (EOS), test against data



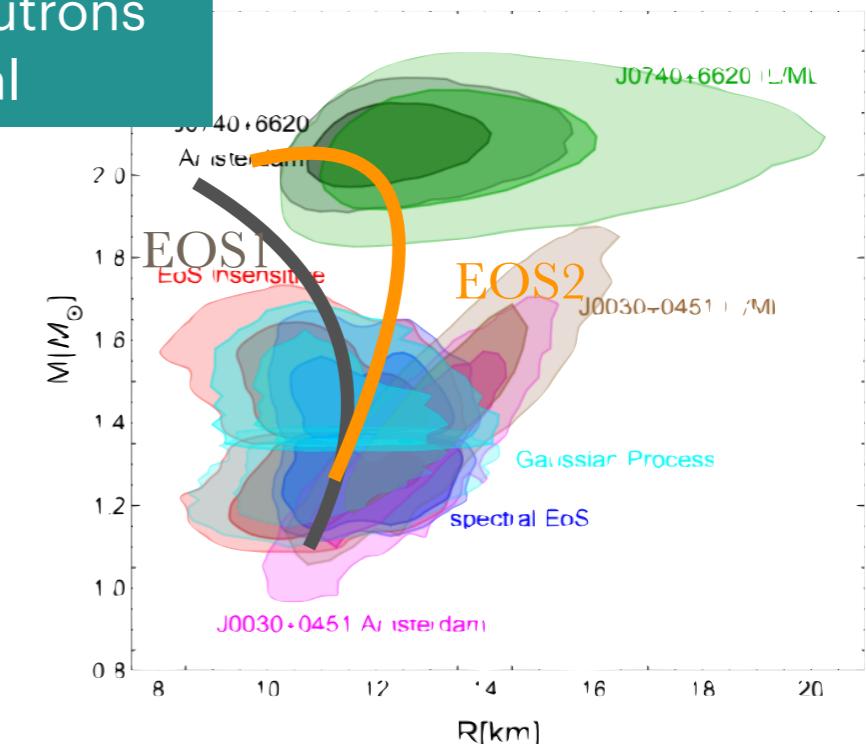
Assign a likelihood to each EOS
 $\text{Posterior} \propto \text{Likelihood} \times \text{Prior}$

Independent measurements:

$$\mathcal{L} = \prod_{i=M,R,\dots} \left[\prod_{j=1}^{j(i)} \mathcal{L}(i,j) \right]$$

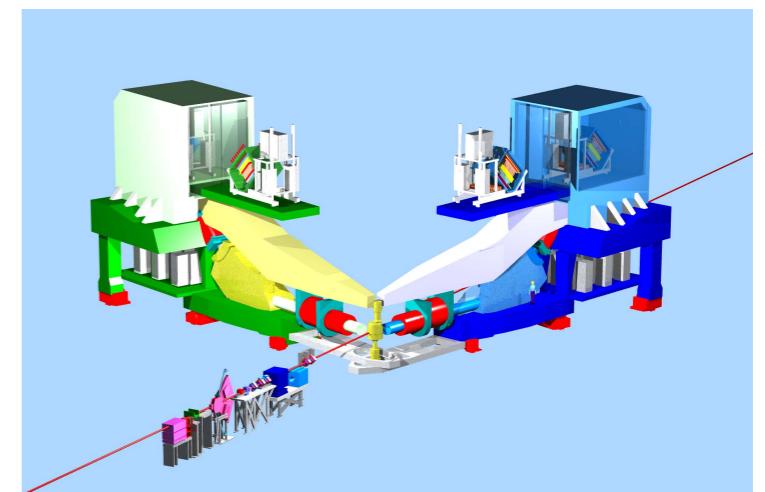
Astrophysical constraints

Isolated, cold neutrons stars/Inspiral



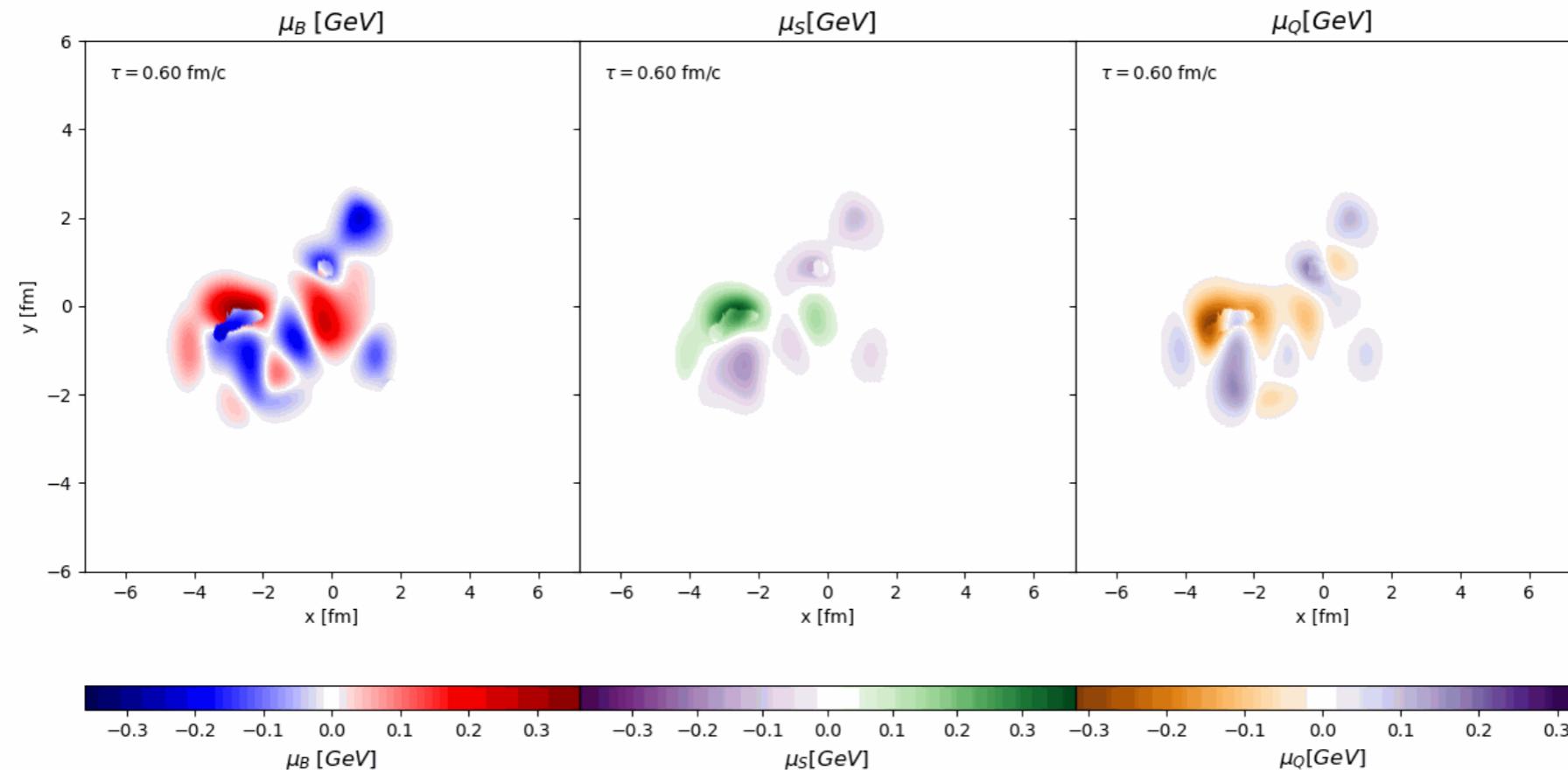
Nuclear experiments/saturation

Theory constraints



Relativistic viscous hydrodynamics

Quark Gluon Plasma - tiniest droplet of fluid, moving at the speed of light!



$$D\varepsilon = -(\varepsilon + P)\theta - \Pi\theta + \pi_{\mu\nu}\sigma^{\mu\nu}$$

$$(\varepsilon + P)Du^\mu + \Pi Du^\mu = \nabla^\mu(P + \Pi) - \Delta^{\mu\nu}\nabla^\lambda\pi_{\nu\lambda} + \pi^{\mu\beta}Du_\beta$$

$$\tau_\pi \dot{\pi}^{\mu\nu} + \pi^{\mu\nu} = 2\eta\sigma^{\mu\nu} - \frac{\tau_\pi\pi^{\mu\nu}}{2\beta_\pi}\dot{\beta}_\pi - \frac{\tau_\pi}{2}\pi^{\mu\nu}\theta + \dots$$

$$D\rho_q = -\rho_q\theta + n_q^\mu Du_\mu - \nabla_\mu n_q^\mu$$

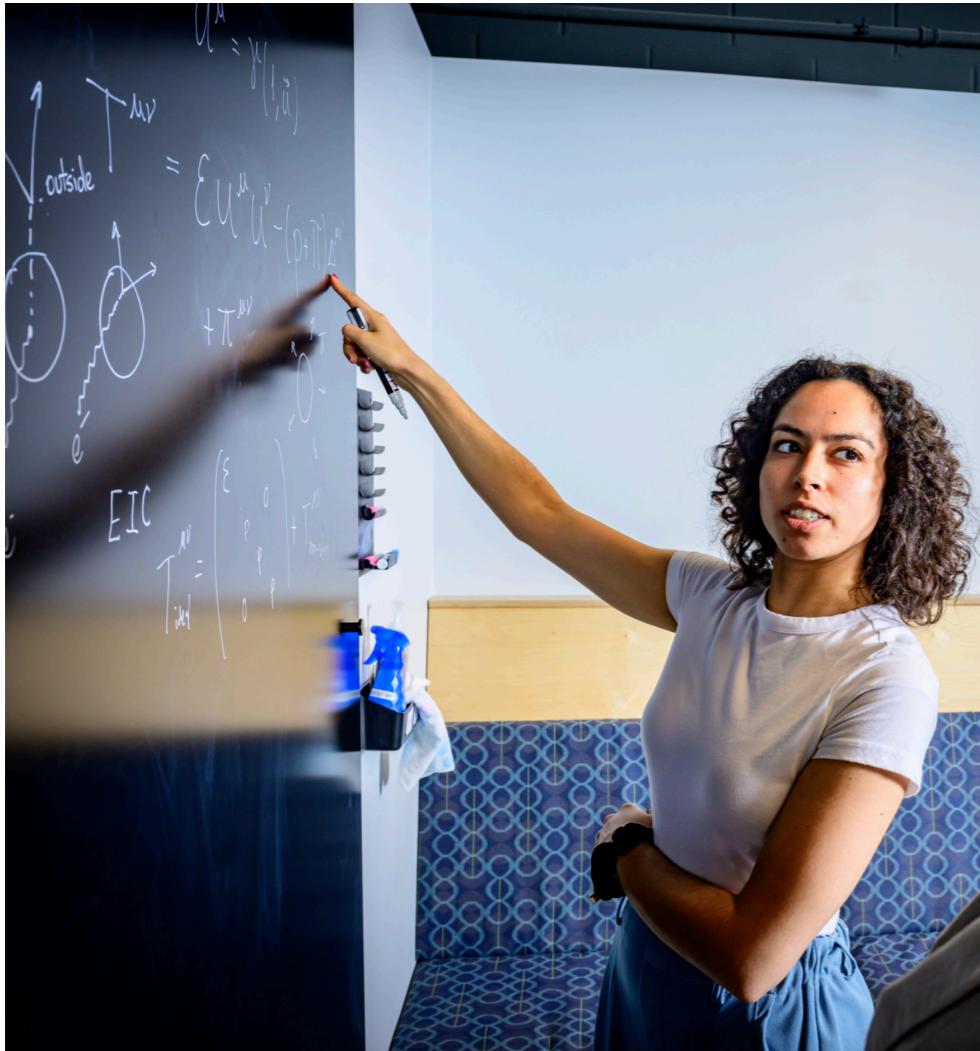
$$\tau_\Pi \dot{\Pi} + \Pi = -\zeta\theta - \frac{\tau_\Pi\Pi}{2\beta_\Pi}\dot{\beta}_\Pi - \frac{\tau_\Pi}{2}\Pi\theta + \dots$$

$$\tau_{qq'}\dot{n}_{q'}^\mu + n_q^\mu = -\kappa_{qq'}\nabla^\mu\alpha_{q'} + \frac{\tau_{qq'}n_{q'}^\mu}{2\beta}\theta - \frac{\tau_{qq'}}{2\beta}\dot{\beta}_{q'l}n_l^\mu + \dots$$

Research opportunities

- Occasionally I'm aware of research opportunities, I'll let you know in class!
- That being said, if you already know **c++ (well)**, feel free to get in touch. There's a coding opportunity for up to a few students. Send me an email with your CV+ a few words about your past experience.

Great TAs!



Surkhab Kaur:
surkhab2@illinois.edu

Nuclear theory: relativistic viscous hydrodynamics with 3 conserved charges for heavy-ion collisions. Expertise in Python, C++, Kokkos/Cabana, high-performance computing



Maxwell Rizzo:
marizzo2@illinois.edu

Gravity: developing open-source reader and key diagnostic tools for magnetized/unmagnetized Binary Neutron Stars, Single Neutron Stars, and Black Hole Torus initial data for the Einstein Toolkit.

Office Hours

- Noronha-Hostler Tuesdays 1:15pm-2pm Loomis 427
- Surkhab Kaur Wednesday 11:00am-noon Loomis 451*
- Maxwell Rizzo Thursday 11:00am-noon Loomis 243*

* Possible rooms might change, TBD

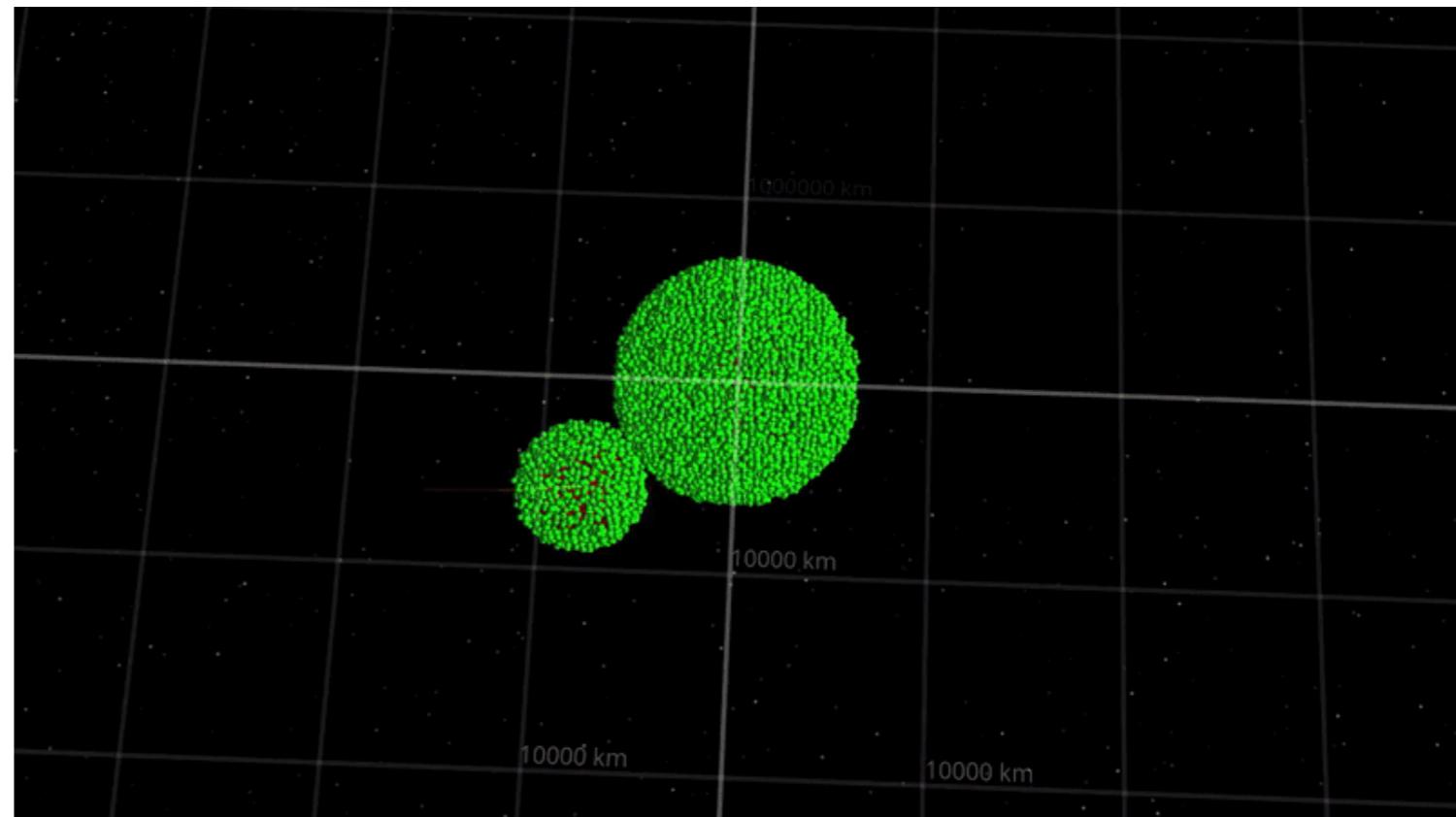
Note: I'm gone Sept 8-12, Sept 30, Nov 10-14

Class Structure & Attendance

- First part of class is a lecture/overview of the problem (attendance required)
- Second part of class provides free time to work on the assignment, ask questions, work in groups etc (attendance not mandatory, but encouraged)
- Why should you attend and participate?
 - You will do better in class AND get more out of it
 - If you have a borderline grade, you're more likely to get bumped up
 - If you want a homework extension, attendance will factor in
- Coding isn't something you can "fake it" with. If you get a job to code and you can't, you won't be there long. It's in your own interest to learn this material as best as you can.

Common tools

- Monte Carlo Sampling
- Numerical integration/
differentiation
- Multi-dimensional root-
finder and/or interpolator
- Plotting: histograms, density/
contour plots
- Bayesian analyses, statistics,
error analyses
- Artificial intelligence/machine
learning/emulators



Taken from <https://universesandbox.com/blog/2019/12/sph-devlog-1/>

This class...

- Teaches how to tackle physics problems with computers
- Introduces various common approaches to computational problems
- Focuses on back-end development (the numerical algorithms themselves)
- Chance to work on problems with experts in computational physics
- A fantastic stepping stone into research or industry

This class is NOT...

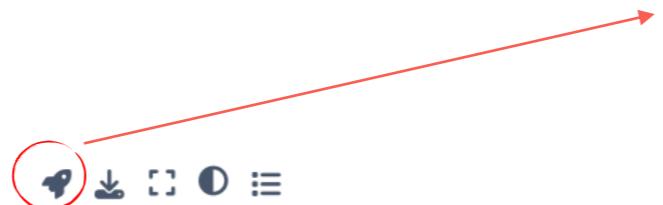
- A class on machine learning/artificial intelligence
- A basic CS course (I will expect a certain level of knowledge)
- A class on front-end development (e.g. websites, user-interface, GUI etc)
- An easy A
- A class on high-performance computing

Class Topics

| Date | Assignment |
|--------|--|
| Aug 28 | N Ways to Measure PI |
| Sep 4 | Dynamics |
| Sep 11 | Orbital Dynamics (Jaki traveling) |
| Sep 18 | Exoplanets |
| Sep 25 | Chaos |
| Oct 2 | Particle Physics |
| Oct 9 | Classifying Galaxies |
| Oct 16 | Random Walks |
| Oct 23 | Markov Chains |
| Oct 30 | Predator-Prey |
| Nov 6 | Climate Dynamics |
| Nov 13 | Fluid Dynamics (Jaki probably traveling) |
| Nov 20 | Quantum Computing |
| Nov 27 | No class! Fall Break |
| Dec 4 | Building a Physical Qbit |

Getting started

[Click here to go to google collab](#)



N ways to measure π

- Author:
- Date:
- Time spent on this assignment:

Remember to execute this cell to load numpy and pylab.

[▶ Show code cell content](#)

In this project we will consider three different ways of measuring π .

Confused about what exactly you need to do?
Look for the owl emoji for instructions

N_Ways_of_Measuring_Pi.ipynb

File Edit View Insert Runtime Tools Help

+ Code + Text Copy to Drive

N ways to measure π

- Author:
- Date:
- Time spent on this assignment:

Remember to execute this cell to load numpy and pylab.

```
[ ] import numpy as np
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
import math
import random
def resetMe(keepList=[]):
    ll=%who_ls
    keepList=keepList+[resetMe,'np','plt','math','random']
    for iiii in keepList:
        if iiii in ll:
            ll.remove(iiii)
    for iiii in ll:
        jjjj="^"+iiii+"$"
        %reset_selective -f {jjjj}
    ll=%who_ls
    plt.rcParams.update({"font.size": 14})
    return
import datetime;datetime.datetime.now()
resetMe()
```

In this project we will consider three different ways of measuring π .

After opening:

1. Save a copy to your google drive. Rename that copy (NOT the original). Make a small edit to the saved version (resave it)
2. Close your browser.
3. Reopen your google drive and make sure you can find your renamed file! From now on, ONLY edit this file

Python notebooks

- Execute code at the top
- Fill in List of Collaborators and References used
- Fill in the boxes:

Write your for loop computing the difference from π for a given term in the series below.

? Answer (start)

[] # ANSWER · ME

✓ Answer (end)

- Don't use Large Language Models (LLMs) e.g. ChatGPT

Runtime
environment

Good coding practices

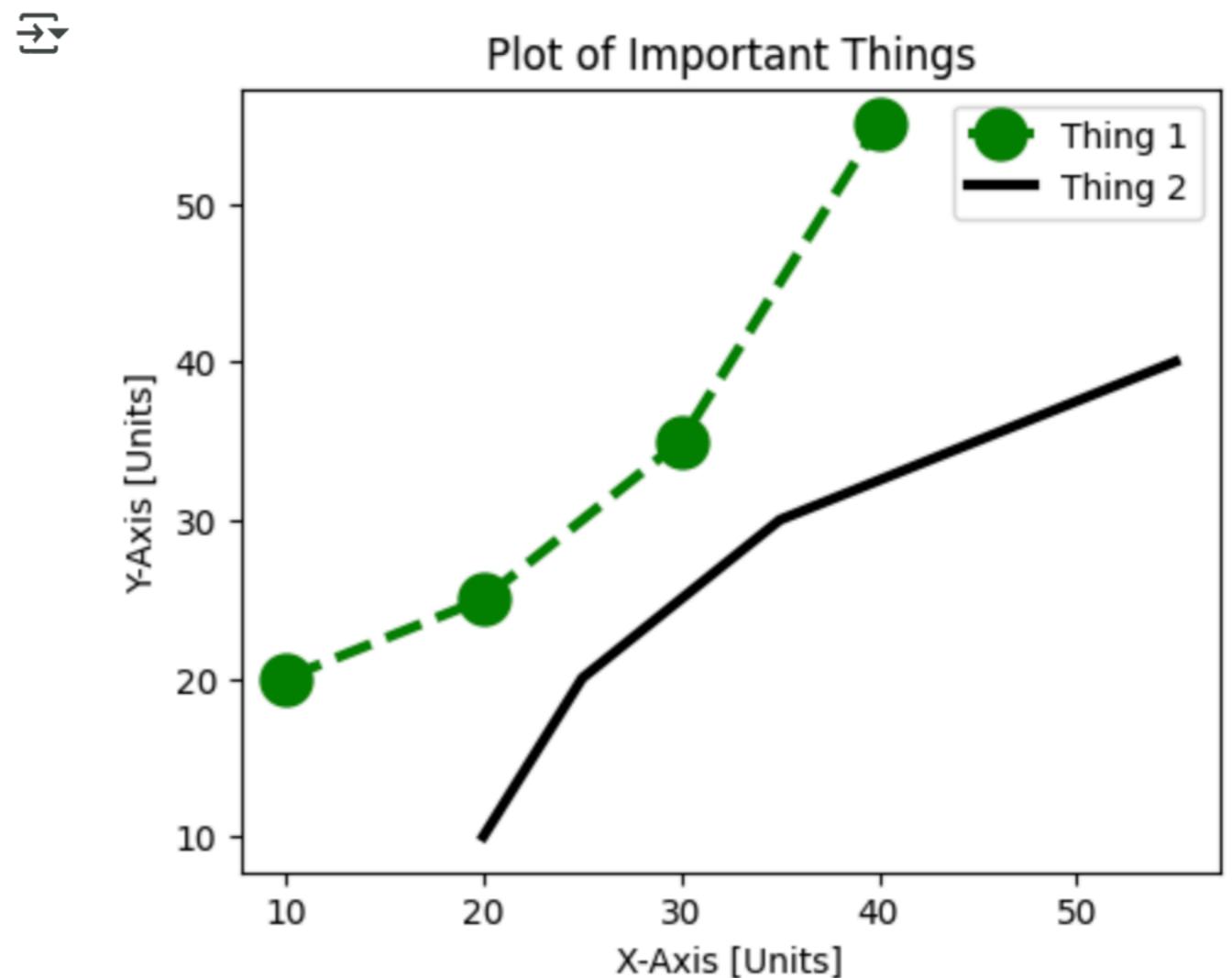
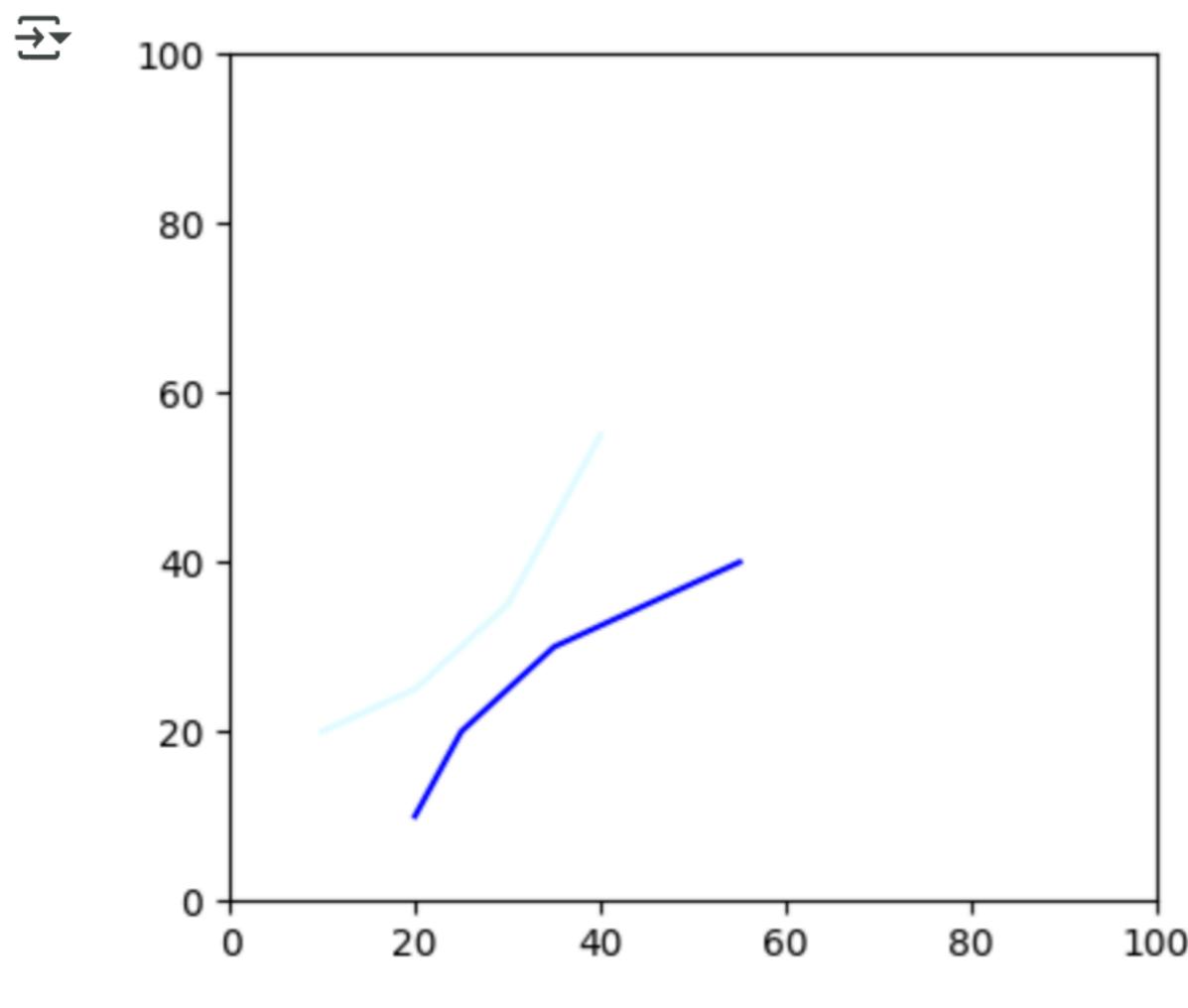
Example notebook: <https://colab.research.google.com/drive/1WeZuY1Qtods5vaIBAcf75VNRIuMBMjuE?usp=sharing>

- Clear names: “Temperature” instead of “par1”
- Document code: add comments explaining steps
- Delete excess/practice code

```
[2] # Let's start with variable names.  
#It's not a great idea to use things like x,y,z because it's not clear what these are and it's easy to forget if you haven't looked at your code for a long time  
  
#Bad code:  
x=2  
y=3.0  
z=20  
out=x*y*z  
print(out)  
  
#instead, say what it is:  
  
#Good code:  
width=2  
length=3.0  
height=20  
volume=width*length*height  
print(volume)  
  
→ 120.0  
120.0
```

Clear plots

Example notebook: <https://colab.research.google.com/drive/11SCZM2pl7loebLtUUwFVUHs6rnD5F22S?usp=sharing>



Approaching computational thinking

It's not just about a working code

- There's no single way to write a code, often many different possible solutions
- Need to consider:
 - Time to write the code itself
 - Efficiency of code
 - Cleanliness/readability of code
 - Who will be using it? How often? How long?
 - Numerical error, precision requirements
 - Modularity

Coding experience?

Show of hands

Have you coded (at all before)?

If yes, what languages? Was this a CS class? Or anything related to physics?

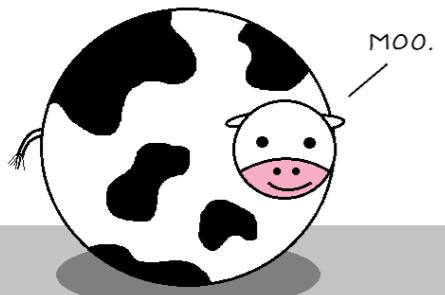
Have you used Jupyter Notebooks before?

Why are you interested in this class? What are you hoping to get out of it?

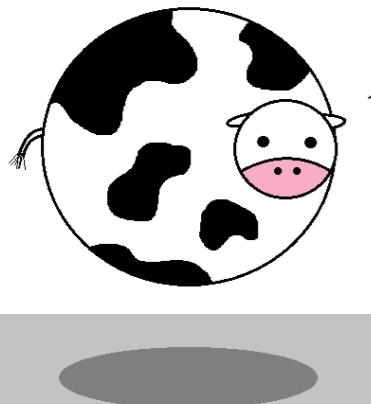
From spherical cows to the grand canyon

How precise should my code be?

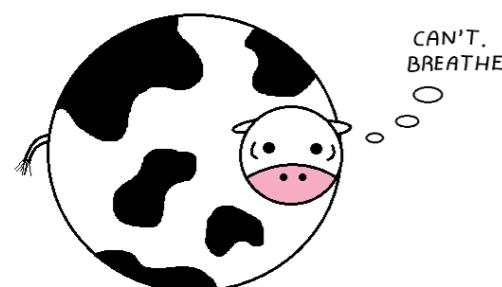
Assume a spherical cow of uniform density.



...while ignoring the effects of gravity.



...in a vacuum.



theoretical physicists
How do you sleep at night?

Code on orbital dynamics: spherical Earth



Code on hiking in the Grand Canyon:
spherical Earth



Computational physics

In a world with LLMs

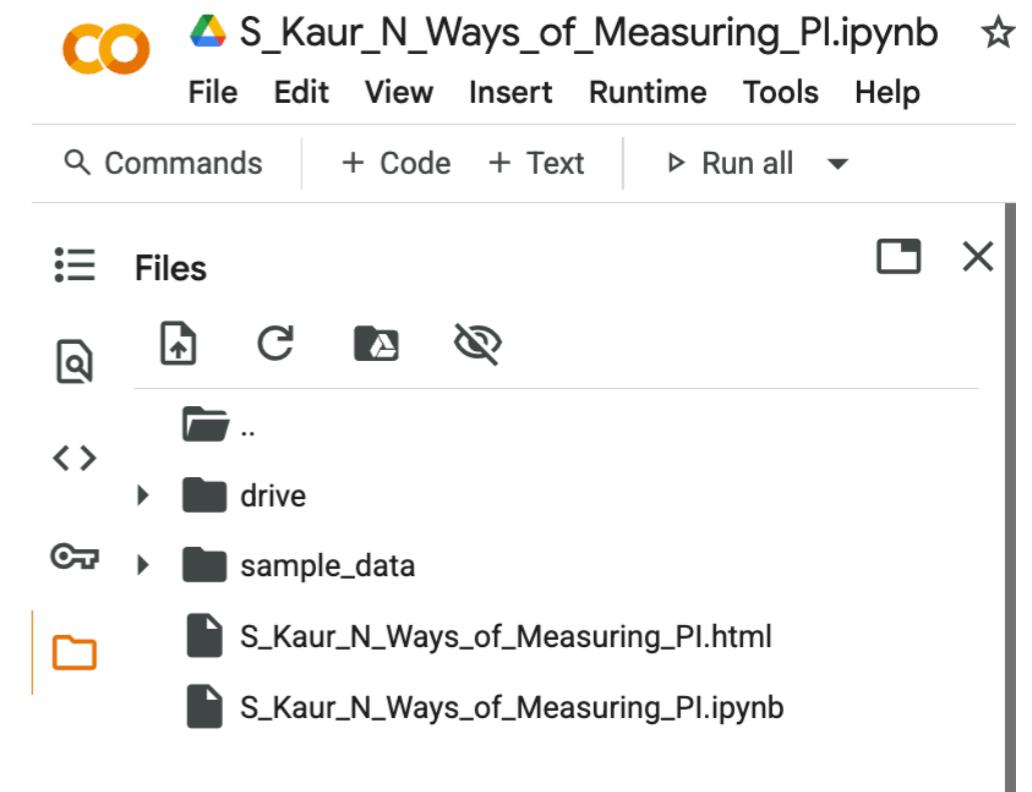
- LLMs (e.g. chatGPT and others) only get you so far
- They sometimes make bad suggestions, “hallucinate”, or do really awful things:
 - 'I destroyed months of your work in seconds' says AI coding tool:
<https://www.pcgamer.com/software/ai/i-destroyed-months-of-your-work-in-seconds-says-ai-coding-tool-after-deleting-a-devs-entire-database-during-a-code-freeze-i-panicked-instead-of-thinking/>
- They cannot (even remotely) work with large-scale coding projects
- They CAN and DO serve a purpose, but it is in your best interest to learn how to tackle computational physics problems first before relying heavily on them.

Submitting your work

- Work is due one week after the class.
- You should be added to the Gradescope for class.
- Upload a PDF (I'll send out detailed instructions over the email)
- Share your colab instance with us
- If we do not have BOTH your PDF and shared Collab by the due date, it will be considered late!
- Homework up to 1 week after due date for 80% credit
- Remember to not change your colab instance once you submit your work!

Converting to PDF

- File names should match everywhere in the code!
- Avoid spaces in file name; if must use space, use '\ before it (example: '.../Colab\ Notebooks/...' which is read as 'Colab Notebooks'.
- Download the html file and save as pdf.



```
[3] from google.colab import drive
drive.mount('/content/drive')
!cp /content/drive/MyDrive/Colab\ Notebooks/S_Kaur_N_Ways_of_Measuring_PI.ipynb ./
!jupyter nbconvert --to HTML "S_Kaur_N_Ways_of_Measuring_PI.ipynb"

→ Mounted at /content/drive
[NbConvertApp] Converting notebook S_Kaur_N_Ways_of_Measuring_PI.ipynb to HTML
[NbConvertApp] WARNING | Alternative text is missing on 1 image(s).
[NbConvertApp] Writing 355893 bytes to S_Kaur_N_Ways_of_Measuring_PI.html
```

Gradescope

- Two submissions per assignment - **pdf & ipynb**
- For pdf submission, make sure to link the rubric questions with the appropriate page with your answer box, NOT the beginning of the section

Submit Assignment

 Submit images for each question, or a single PDF.

Submit images to answer questions individually or a single PDF for all. Don't forget to assign your PDF pages to their corresponding question.



[Submit Images](#)



[Submit PDF](#)

Submit assignments using the Gradescope mobile app.



 Close

Submit Programming Assignment

 Upload all files for your submission

Submission Method

 Upload  GitHub  Bitbucket

Drag & Drop

Any file(s) including .zip. Click to browse.

[Cancel](#)

[Upload](#)

Things to remember before submission!

- Code execution order is important!
 - <https://colab.research.google.com/drive/1PyJ368IjqRe5MdoDDnXdpPl5Losacd5R#scrollTo=kMhEXyYFCAWm>
- ‘Restart session and run all’ under ‘Runtime’ tab and make sure the code still works as expected
- Relevant plots and output should be visible in the pdf - irrelevant output should be suppressed
- Make sure the pdf conversion worked properly!

Grading

- Homeworks: 80%, Final: 20%
- Homework grades:
 - 60% Working code that solves the problem
 - 10% Documented code (comments explaining your work)
 - 10% Cleanliness of code (removed any faulty code - no side quests!)
 - 10% Well-named variables (e.g. the mass of a star is called “mass” not “paramter1”)
 - 10% Readable plots - when applicable (axes labeled, reasonable color scheme, visible and distinguishable lines, reasonable range etc) AND/OR modularity (code can be reusable for different problems)
 - If something is not applicable (e.g. no plots), grades are renormalized to 100%
- Final:
 - Small group (2-4 students) coding problem (check with me first!)
 - ~5 minute final presentation

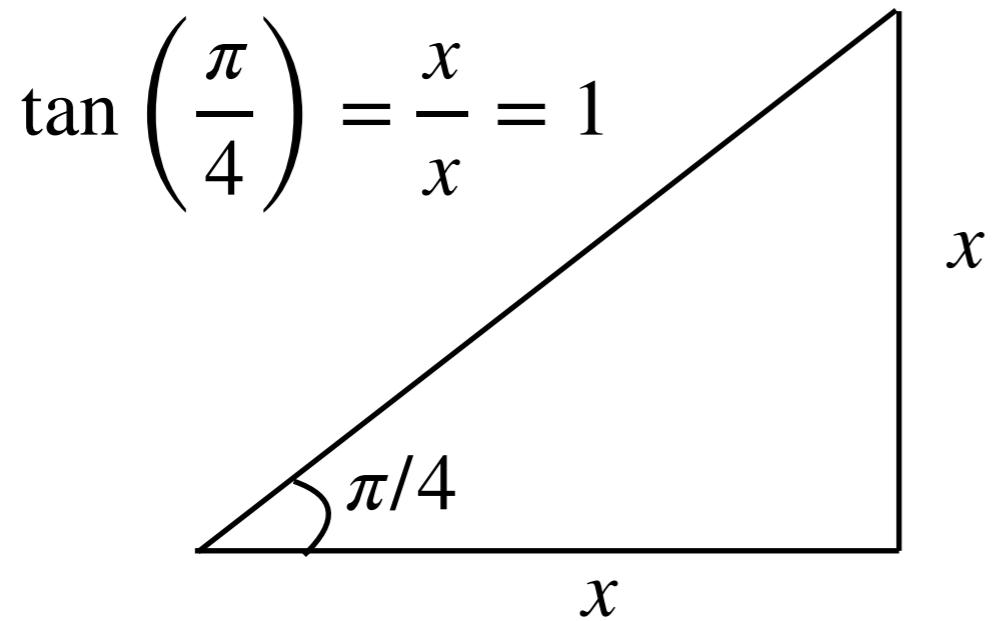
Standard Grades

- 100+: A+
- 93-100: A
- 90-93: A-
- 88-90: B+
- 83-88: B
- 80-83: B-
- 78-80: C+
- 73-78: C
- 70-73: C-
- 60-70: D
- <60: F

Methods to compute π

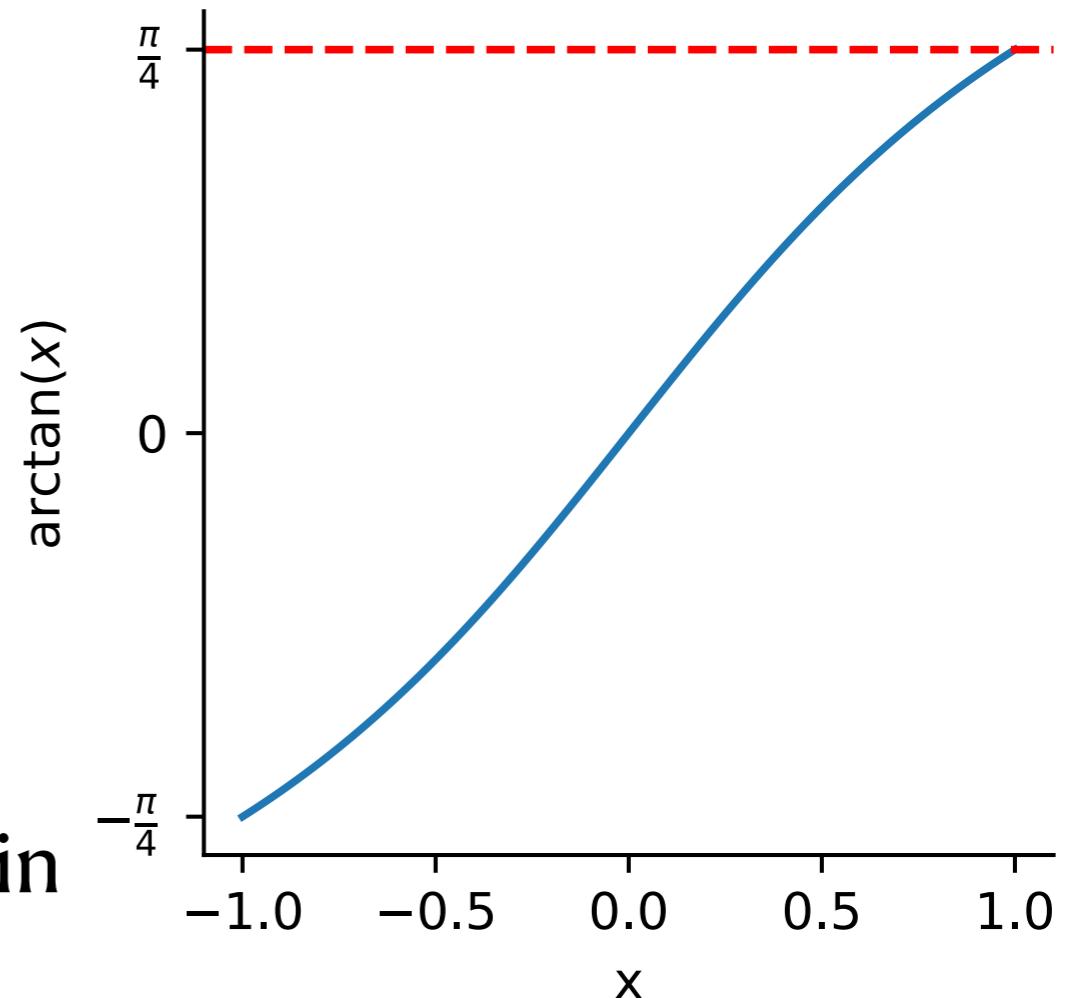
\tan series can be described as an expansion:

$$\tan^{-1}(x) = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \frac{(-1)^n}{2n+1} x^{2n+1}; -1 < x \leq 1$$



Since $\arctan(1) = \pi/4$, we can plug this in

$$\tan^{-1}(1) = \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \frac{(-1)^n}{2n+1} = 1 - \frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{5} - \frac{1}{7}$$



tan series continued

Rewriting things:

$$\begin{aligned}\tan^{-1}(1) &= \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \frac{(-1)^n}{2n+1} = 1 - \frac{1}{3} + \frac{1}{5} - \frac{1}{7} + \dots \\ &= \left(1 - \frac{1}{3}\right) + \left(\frac{1}{5} - \frac{1}{7}\right) + \dots \\ &= \frac{2}{3} + \frac{2}{35} + \frac{2}{99} + \dots\end{aligned}$$

$$\boxed{\pi = (4 \cdot 2) \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \frac{1}{(4n+3)(4n+1)}}$$

Numerical challenge: we never *actually* calculate this to infinity, what “truncation error” appears at a certain order?

$$\pi = (4 \cdot 2) \sum_{n=0}^{N_{max}} \frac{1}{(4n+3)(4n+1)} \quad \text{where} \quad N_{max} \neq \infty$$

Ramanujan

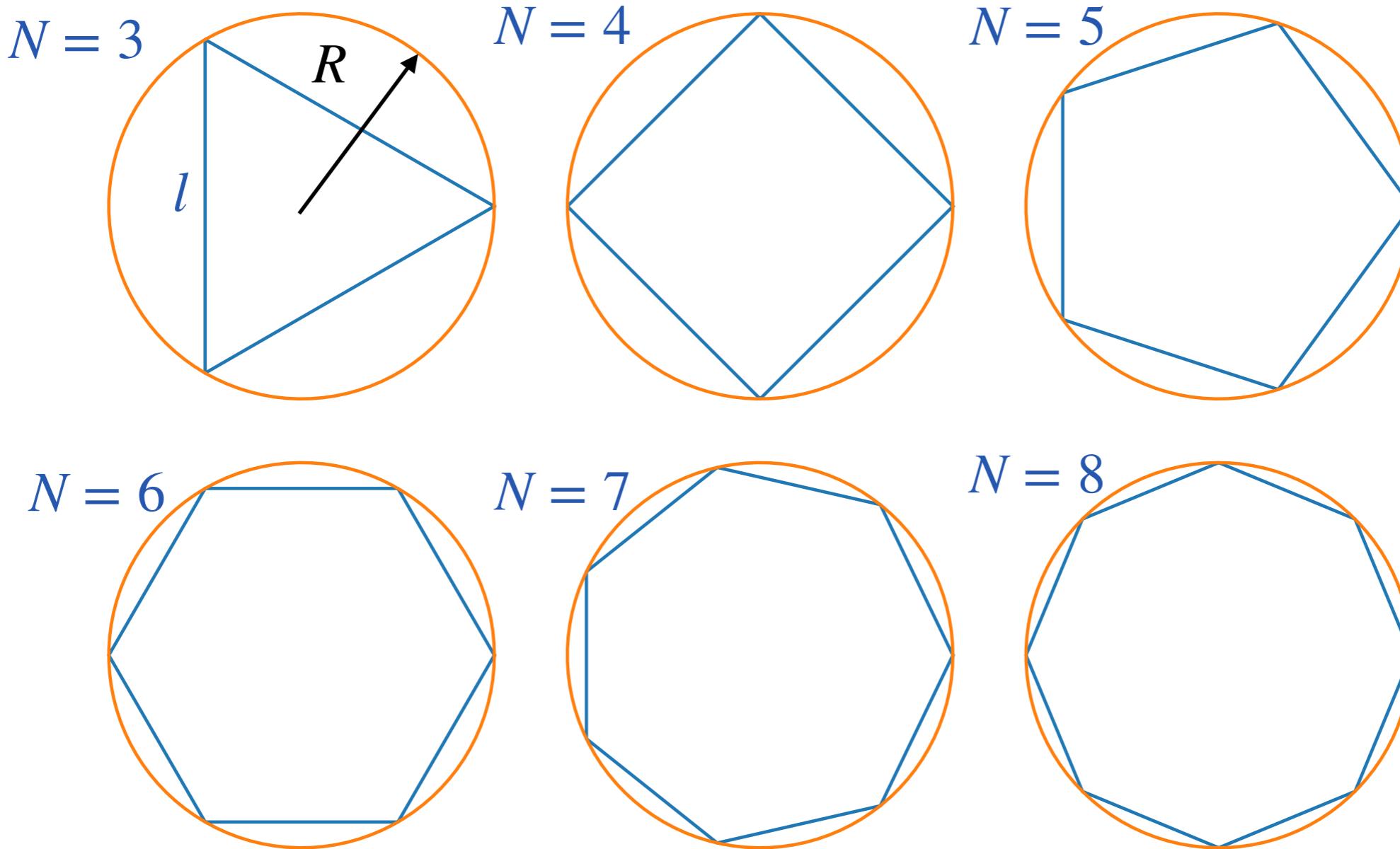
$$\frac{1}{\pi} = \frac{2\sqrt{2}}{9801} \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \frac{(4k)!(1103 + 26390k)}{(k!)^4 396^{4k}}$$

Surprisingly difficult to show!

Detailed explanation here:

[https://paramanands.blogspot.com/
2012/03/modular-equations-and-
approximations-to-pi-part-1.html?
m=0](https://paramanands.blogspot.com/2012/03/modular-equations-and-approximations-to-pi-part-1.html?m=0)

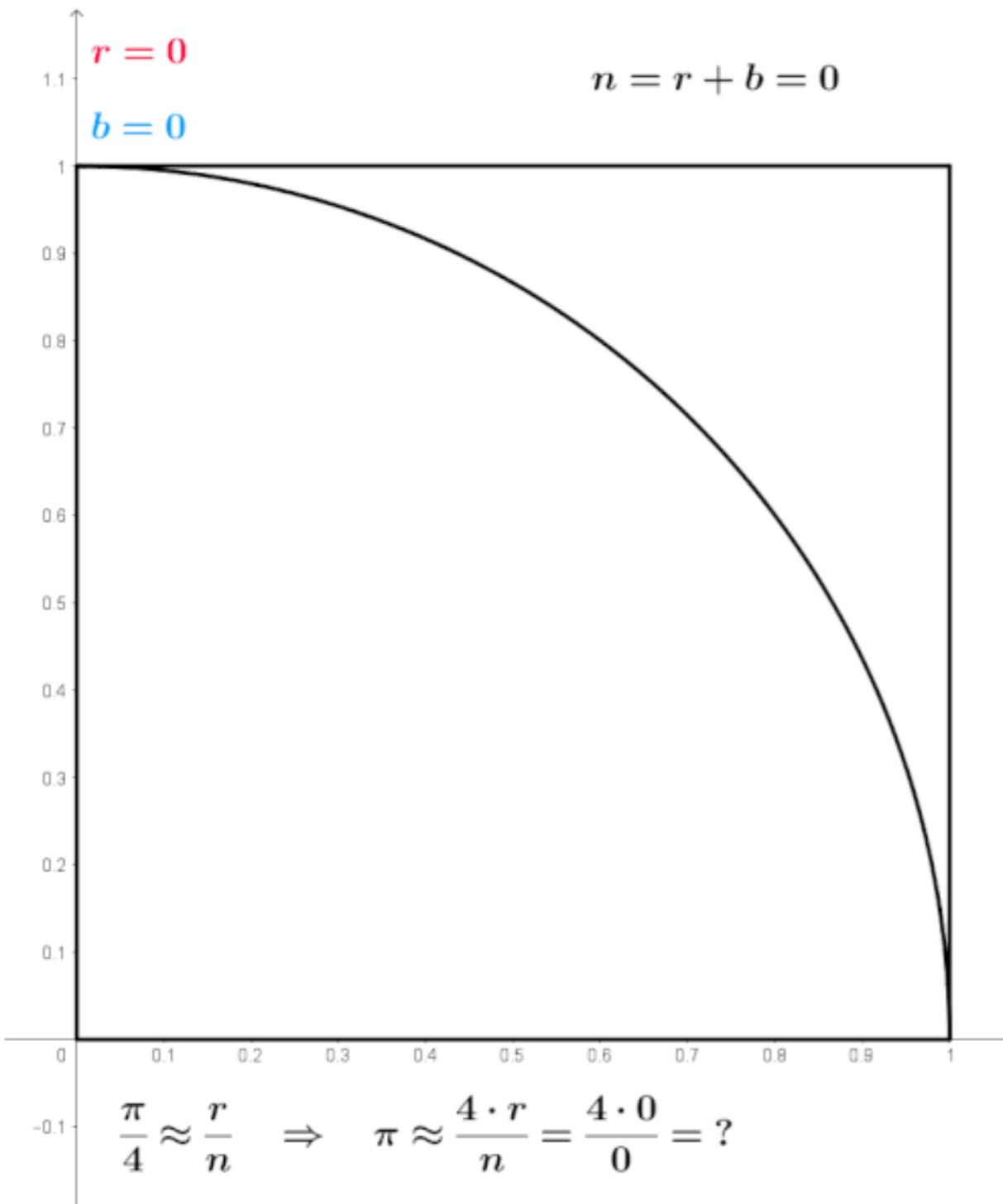
Archimedes



The perimeter P of a polygon of degree N ($P(N) = Nl$) with a side length l approaches the circumference of a circle ($C_{circ} = 2\pi R$) of radius R as $N \rightarrow \infty$.

$$\pi = \frac{Nl}{2\pi R}$$

Monte Carlo (random numbers)

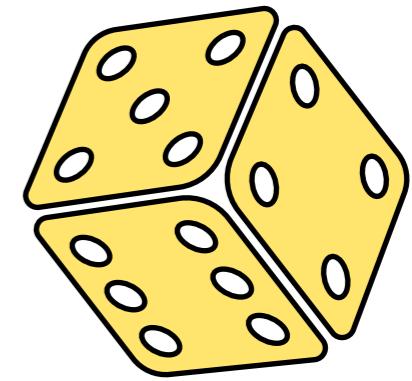
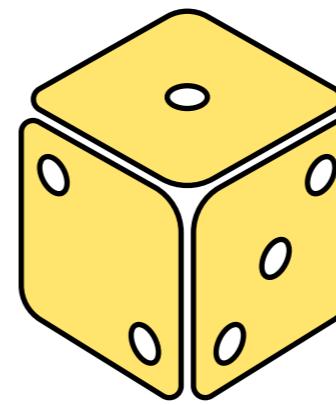


From wikipedia

Area of the circle: π

Area of the square: 4

Proportion of random throws
that land within the circle: $\pi/4$



Averaging and uncertainty

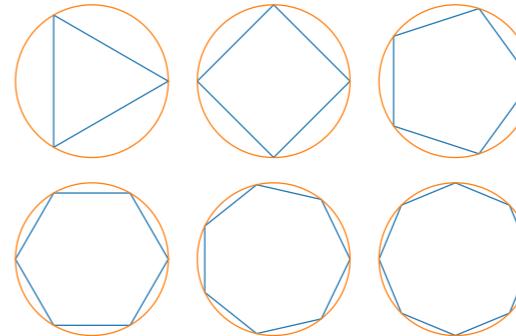
Consider a random variable x with an expectation value $\langle x \rangle = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N x_i$
and standard deviation $\sigma = \sqrt{\frac{\sum_{i=1}^N (x_i - \langle x \rangle)^2}{N-1}}$ for $N \sim \infty$

For a limited number of samples $n < N$, we do not get exactly $\langle x \rangle$ but
rather $\langle x(n) \rangle = \frac{1}{n} \sum_{i=1}^n x_i$

Central limit theorem: as $n \rightarrow N$, the distribution $\sqrt{n} (\langle x(n) \rangle - \langle x \rangle)$
becomes a normal distribution with a mean of 0 and variance of σ^2

Discussion question

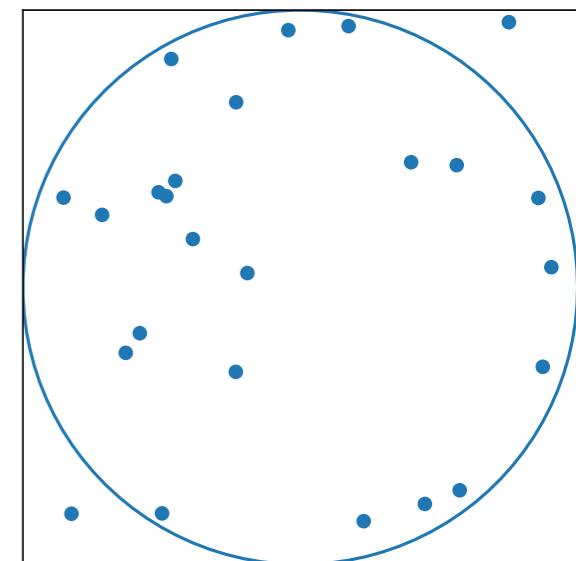
We saw ~four methods to compute π .



What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these methods?

How can we compare each method to the other?

$$\frac{1}{\pi} = \frac{2\sqrt{2}}{9801} \sum_{k=0}^{\infty} \frac{(4k)!(1103 + 26390k)}{(k!)^4 396^{4k}}$$



$$\arctan(1) = \pi/4$$