

The recombination history of the universe

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Abstract. I set up the background cosmology of the universe.

1. Introduction

In this project I will follow the algorithm presented in Callin (2005)[1] for simulating the cosmic microwave background. This is part two of four for this project.

In the first part I set up the background cosmology of the universe. In this part the goal is to compute the optical depth τ as a function of x , where x is the logarithm of the scale factor a . And the visibility function g , and its scaled version $\tilde{g} = g/\mathcal{H}$. We also want the first and second derivatives of both of these functions with respect to x .

As in the first part of the project I will continue building on the skeleton code provided.

2. Equations

The optical depth is defined

$$\tau(\eta) = \int_{\eta}^{\eta_0} n_e \sigma_T a d\eta'. \quad (1)$$

This is the probability for a photon to scatter between some previous time η and today η_0 . This way, if one at time η had a beam of photons with intensity I_0 one would today at time η_0 have a beam with intensity $I = I_0 \exp(-\tau(\eta))$. Looking at equation 1, n_e is the electron density, σ_T the Thompson cross-section, and a the scale factor.

Equation 1 can be rewritten on differential form as

$$\frac{d\tau}{d\eta} = \dot{\tau} = -n_e \sigma_T a. \quad (2)$$

Or since we generally use x instead of η , as

$$\frac{d\tau}{dx} = \tau' = -\frac{n_e \sigma_T a}{\mathcal{H}}. \quad (3)$$

The Thompson cross section is

$$\sigma_T = \frac{8\pi\alpha^2}{3m_e^2} = 6.652462 \times 10^{-29} \text{m}^2. \quad (4)$$

The only unknown quantity left in equation 2 is n_e . Before finding a way to compute this quantity we define the visibility function as

$$g(\eta) = -\dot{\tau} e^{-\tau(\eta)} = \mathcal{H} \tau' e^{-\tau(x)} = g(x) \quad (5)$$

$$\tilde{g}(x) \equiv -\tau' e^{-\tau} = \frac{g(x)}{\mathcal{H}(x)}.$$

This visibility function is normalized as

$$\int_0^{\eta_0} g(\eta) d\eta = \int_{-\infty}^0 \tilde{g}(x) dx = 1,$$

and thus it can be interpreted as a probability distribution. The visibility function then gives the probability that a CMB photon was last scattered at conformal time η .

From this we see that if we want to find the visibility function g , we will need the optical depth τ and its derivative, and to find that we need the electron density n_e .

To find this we will make some assumptions. We define

$$X_e \equiv \frac{n_e}{n_H} = \frac{n_e}{n_b}. \quad (8)$$

Note here that we assume that the number density of baryons is equal to the number density of hydrogen. And thus we have ignored all elements above hydrogen. We also ignore the small difference in mass between neutral hydrogen and free protons. Thus we have

$$n_H = n_b \simeq \frac{\rho_b}{m_H} = \frac{\Omega_b \rho_c}{m_H a^3} \quad (9)$$

The only thing left to find now is X_e . There are two equations to choose from when calculating this. One is the Saha equation, which is valid for $X_e \approx 1$. And the other is Peeble's equation which is valid for all values of X_e .

Saha's equation is

$$\frac{X_e^2}{1 - X_e} = \frac{1}{n_b} \left(\frac{m_e k_b T_b}{2\pi\hbar^2} \right)^{3/2} e^{-\epsilon_0/k_b T_b}, \quad (10)$$

where m_e is the electron mass, k_b the Boltzmann constant, T_b the baryon temperature, \hbar the reduced Planck constant, and ϵ_0 the ionization energy of hydrogen. This is a regular quadratic equation which can be solved using the regular method.

Peeble's equation is

$$\frac{dX_e}{dx} = \frac{C_r(T_b)}{H} \left[\beta(T_b)(1 - X_e) - n_H \alpha^{(2)}(T_b) X_e^2 \right], \quad (11)$$

where

$$C_r(T_b) = \frac{\Lambda_{2s \rightarrow 1s} + \Lambda_\alpha}{\Lambda_{2s \rightarrow 1s} + \Lambda_\alpha + \beta^{(2)}(T_b)}, \quad (12)$$

$$\Lambda_{2s \rightarrow 1s} = 8.227 \text{s}^{-1} \quad (13)$$

$$\Lambda_\alpha = H \frac{(3\epsilon_0 c/\hbar)^3}{(8\pi)^2 n_{1s}} \quad (14)$$

$$n_{1s} = (1 - X_e) n_H \quad (15)$$

$$\beta^{(2)}(T_b) = \beta(T_b) e^{3\epsilon_0/4k_b T_b} \quad (16)$$

$$\beta(T_b) = \alpha^{(2)}(T_b) \left(\frac{m_e k_b T_b}{2\pi\hbar^2} \right)^{3/2} e^{-\epsilon_0/k_b T_b} \quad (17)$$

$$\alpha^{(2)}(T_b) = \frac{64\pi}{\sqrt{27}\pi} \frac{\hbar^2 \alpha^2}{cm_e^2} \sqrt{\frac{\epsilon_0}{k_b T_b}} \phi_2(T_b) \quad (18)$$

$$\phi_2(T_b) = 0.448 \ln(\epsilon_0/k_B T_b). \quad (19)$$

Here α is the fine structure constant.

At early times X_e should be very close to 1, so we will start with Saha's equation. We define the point where we switch from Saha to Peeble's equation at $X_e = 0.99$.

With this it should be possible to calculate the electron density, optical depth, and the visibility function. How this is done is explained in the next section.

3. Implementation

As in part one of the project we will continue using Fortran90. We will also be using most of the variables we defined in that part again. The only thing I want to change is the length of my x array. Since the evolution of the optical depth should change fairly little except for around recombination, I set it up with three intervals with different step lengths. The first part goes from $x = -10.5$ to the x value corresponding to redshift $z = 1630.4$ with 300 points. The next goes from the end of the first to $z = 614.2$ with 300 points. And the last one goes from there until today at $z = 0$ with 300 points. This ensures that we have a much better resolution around recombination than the rest.

The next step is to calculate the electron density. The first part of this is easy. One writes in the equations and solves the Saha equation with simple algebra. When the switch to Peebles occurs we make use of the ODE solver used in part one of the project. The only change in the implementation is that the guess one does of the appropriate step length is set to one hundredth of the length between two points in the part of x with the smallest resolution.

With that done we now have X_e . We then use X_e to calculate the electron density n_e .

Since we want to be able to find n_e at arbitrary values of x we spline this function. (I actually spline the logarithm of n_e and then exponentiate the answer since n_e varies over so many orders of magnitude.)

Then we use n_e to find τ' , and use the same procedure for the ODE solver to give us $\tau(x)$. Next we spline this function which gives us τ'' . This makes it possible to write a function which uses the spline to find $\tau(x)$ at arbitrary x values inside the x grid we have used.

The library which was included with the skeleton code also includes a function that can find τ' at arbitrary values inside our grid using τ , and τ'' .

These functions are used to make figure 1 in section 4.

Since we now have functions to find τ, τ' , and τ'' at any value inside our grid we use them to compute the visibility function. Note that the function I actually implement is not g itself, but rather \tilde{g} as described in section 2.

I use the exact same procedure as I did for τ to make functions for \tilde{g}, \tilde{g}' , and \tilde{g}'' .

With this, we have now found X_e and n_e , as well as τ, g , and their derivatives. See the next section for figures of these functions.

4. Results

The first figure to look at is the one for X_e . The observant reader may notice that this plot does not include the whole range of z values which one would assume considering the x range we chose earlier. This is because the electron fraction remains constant at 1 for the entire range until recombination starts around redshift $z = 1600$. As expected once we reach recombination X_e starts dropping quickly. In fact it drops 3 orders of magnitude in the time z goes from $z \approx 1400$ to $z \approx 700$.

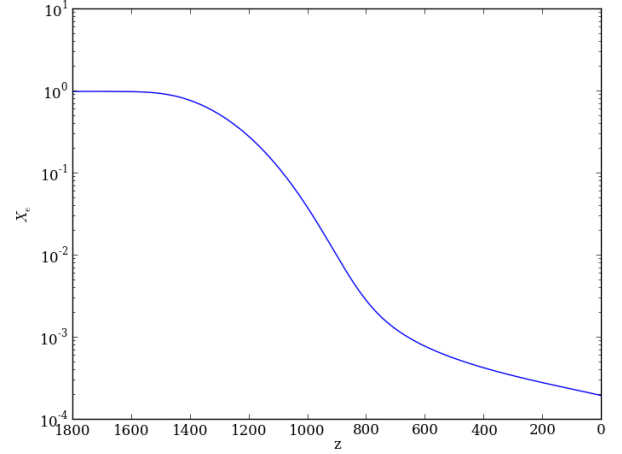


Fig. 1. The electron fraction drops quickly during recombination. This would indicate that the optical depth should decrease drastically during the same period. We note that the electron density keeps declining until today. However this has nowhere near the same impact since the universe has already become transparent at that point.

As we expected after looking at the electron fraction there is a steep decline in the optical depth during recombination. The critical part of this decline is that the optical depth is reduced to levels far lower than 1. This means that the radiation that is sent out is scattered very little before reaching us.

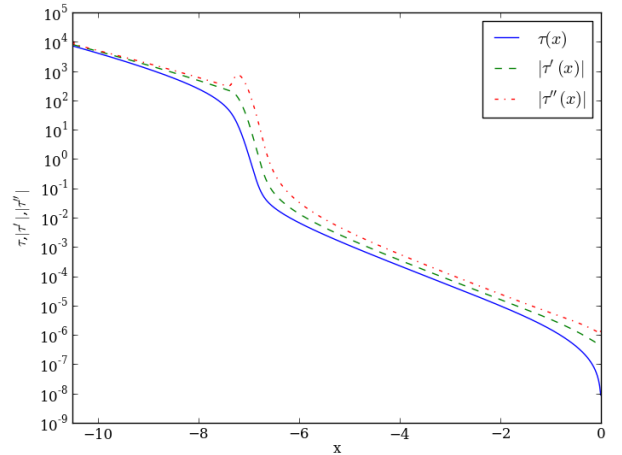


Fig. 2. The optical depth declines as expected and falls far below 1 causing the universe to become optically thin. This makes it possible for photons to travel freely through the universe, reaching us today without having been scattered again after their initially scattering during recombination.

Since the photons almost stop getting scattered after recombination one would expect a large peak in the visibility function. (Since the visibility function describes the probability of last begin scattered at some time.) This is exactly what we see in the figure of the visibility function. We get a large peak between redshift $z = -7.2$ and $z = -6.7$. Because of this narrow range this is usually referred to as the last scattering surface.

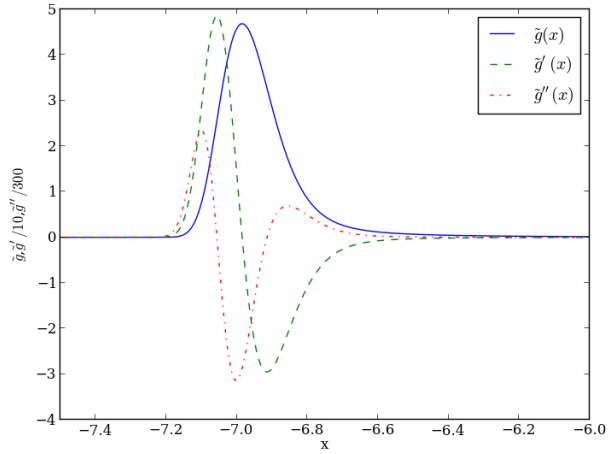


Fig. 3. The figure confirms my expectations from the optical depth, meaning that we get a distinct peak in the visibility function around recombination.

5. Conclusions

In this project I have found the electron fraction for time before, during, and after recombination. This was used to find the optical depth at the same times, which was then used to find the visibility function. We saw that the electron density declined steeply during recombination, causing the optical depth to pass from values much larger than 1 to values much lower than 1. From this one can say that the universe was opaque before, and very nearly transparent for times later than recombination. This resulted in a sharp peak in the visibility function at this time. Since the visibility function works as a probability function of when a photon was last scattered, this sharp peak indicates that the majority of the photons that existed were scattered in this time period. Because of this this is referred to as the last scattering surface.

6. References

- [1] P. Callin, astro-ph/0606683

7. Source code

The source code for the `rec_mod` file is included for inspection. Note that the code makes use of several different files, one with various parameters, as well as the ODE solver, and the spline. The `time_mod` file from part one of the project is obviously used as well.