

13.1: Prelude to Gravitation

In this chapter, we study the nature of the gravitational force for objects as small as ourselves and for systems as massive as entire galaxies. We show how the gravitational force affects objects on Earth and the motion of the Universe itself. Gravity is the first force to be postulated as an action-at-a-distance force, that is, objects exert a gravitational force on one another without physical contact and that force falls to zero only at an infinite distance. Earth exerts a gravitational force on you, but so do our Sun, the Milky Way galaxy, and the billions of galaxies, like those shown above, which are so distant that we cannot see them with the naked eye.

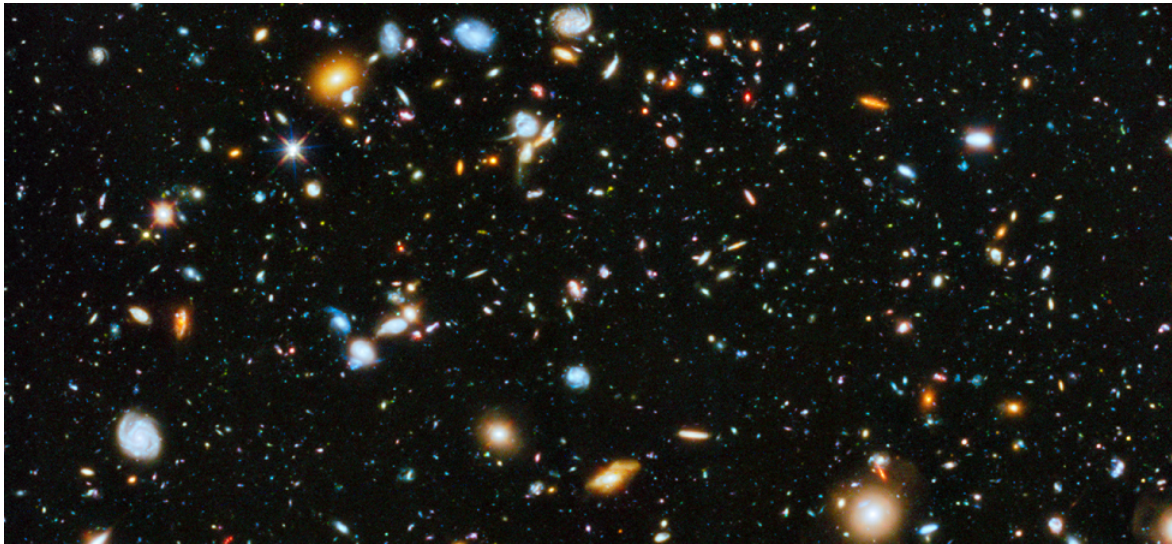


Figure 13.1.1: Our visible Universe contains billions of galaxies, whose very existence is due to the force of gravity. Gravity is ultimately responsible for the energy output of all stars—initiating thermonuclear reactions in stars, allowing the Sun to heat Earth, and making galaxies visible from unfathomable distances. Most of the dots you see in this image are not stars, but galaxies. (credit: modification of work by NASA)

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