

13.18: The Challenge of Dark Matter

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain how astronomers know that the solar system contains very little dark matter
- Summarize the evidence for dark matter in most galaxies
- Explain how we know that galaxy clusters are dominated by dark matter
- Relate the presence of dark matter to the average mass-to-light ratio of huge volumes of space containing many galaxies

So far this chapter has focused almost entirely on matter that radiates electromagnetic energy—stars, planets, gas, and dust. But, as we have pointed out in several earlier chapters (especially The Milky Way Galaxy), it is now clear that galaxies contain large amounts of dark matter as well. There is much more dark matter, in fact, than matter we can see—which means it would be foolish to ignore the effect of this unseen material in our theories about the structure of the universe. (As many a ship captain in the polar seas found out too late, the part of the iceberg visible above the ocean’s surface was not necessarily the only part he needed to pay attention to.) Dark matter turns out to be extremely important in determining the evolution of galaxies and of the universe as a whole.

The idea that much of the universe is filled with dark matter may seem like a bizarre concept, but we can cite a historical example of “dark matter” much closer to home. In the mid-nineteenth century, measurements showed that the planet Uranus did not follow exactly the orbit predicted from Newton’s laws if one added up the gravitational forces of all the known objects in the solar system. Some people worried that Newton’s laws may simply not work so far out in our solar system. But the more straightforward interpretation was to attribute Uranus’ orbital deviations to the gravitational effects of a new planet that had not yet been seen. Calculations showed where that planet had to be, and Neptune was discovered just about in the predicted location.

In the same way, astronomers now routinely determine the location and amount of dark matter in galaxies by measuring its gravitational effects on objects we can see. And, by measuring the way that galaxies move in clusters, scientists have discovered that dark matter is also distributed among the galaxies in the clusters. Since the environment surrounding a galaxy is important in its development, dark matter must play a central role in galaxy evolution as well. Indeed, it appears that dark matter makes up most of the matter in the universe. But what is dark matter? What is it made of? We’ll look next at the search for dark matter and the quest to determine its nature.

Dark Matter in the Local Neighborhood

Is there dark matter in our own solar system? Astronomers have examined the orbits of the known planets and of spacecraft as they journey to the outer planets and beyond. No deviations have been found from the orbits predicted on the basis of the masses of objects already discovered in our solar system and the theory of gravity. We therefore conclude that there is no evidence that there are large amounts of dark matter nearby.

Astronomers have also looked for evidence of dark matter in the region of the Milky Way Galaxy that lies within a few hundred light-years of the Sun. In this vicinity, most of the stars are restricted to a thin disk. It is possible to calculate how much mass the disk must contain in order to keep the stars from wandering far above or below it. The total matter that must be in the disk is less than twice the amount of luminous matter. This means that no more than half of the mass in the region near the Sun can be dark matter.

Dark Matter in and Around Galaxies

In contrast to our local neighborhood near the Sun and solar system, there is (as we saw in The Milky Way Galaxy) ample evidence strongly suggesting that about 90% of the mass in the entire galaxy is in the form of a halo of dark matter. In other words, there is apparently about nine times more dark matter than visible matter. Astronomers have found some stars in the outer regions of the Milky Way beyond its bright disk, and these stars are revolving very rapidly around its center. The mass contained in all the stars and all the interstellar matter we can detect in the galaxy does not exert enough gravitational force to explain how those fast-moving stars remain in their orbits and do not fly away. Only by having large amounts of unseen matter could the galaxy be holding on to those fast-moving outer stars. The same result is found for other spiral galaxies as well.

Figure 13.18.1 is an example of the kinds of observations astronomers are making, for the Andromeda galaxy, a member of our Local Group. The observed rotation of spiral galaxies like Andromeda is usually seen in plots, known as *rotation curves*, that show velocity versus distance from the galaxy center. Such plots suggest that the dark matter is found in a large halo surrounding the luminous parts of each galaxy. The radius of the halos around the Milky Way and Andromeda may be as large as 300,000 light-years, much larger than the visible size of these galaxies.

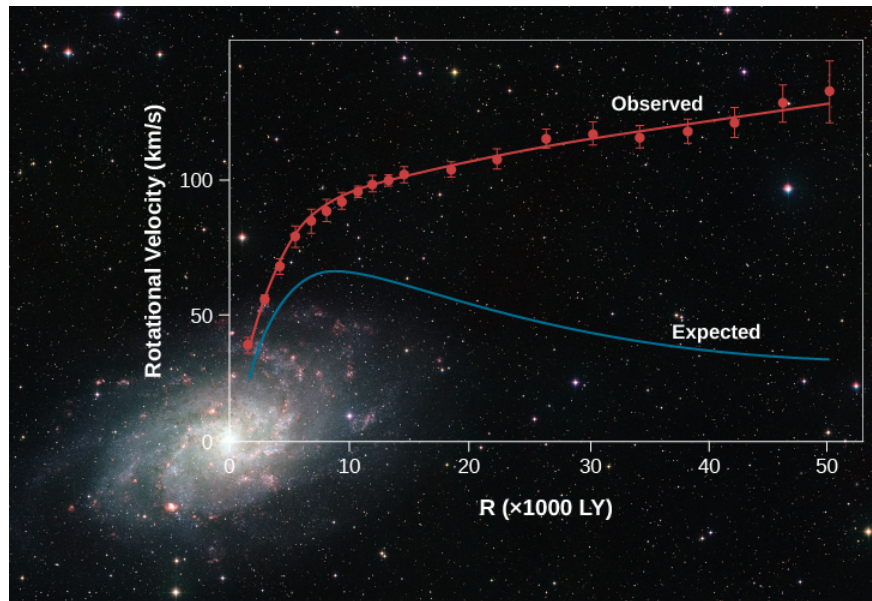


Figure 13.18.1 Rotation Indicates Dark Matter. We see the Milky Way's sister, the spiral Andromeda galaxy, with a graph that shows the velocity at which stars and clouds of gas orbit the galaxy at different distances from the center (red line). As is true of the Milky Way, the rotational velocity (or orbital speed) does not decrease with distance from the center, which is what you would expect if an assembly of objects rotates around a common center. A calculation (blue line) based on the total mass visible as stars, gas, and dust predicts that the velocity should be much lower at larger distances from the center. The discrepancy between the two curves implies the presence of a halo of massive dark matter extending outside the boundary of the luminous matter. This dark matter causes everything in the galaxy to orbit faster than the observed matter alone could explain.

Dark Matter in Clusters of Galaxies

Galaxies in clusters also move around: they orbit the cluster's center of mass. It is not possible for us to follow a galaxy around its entire orbit because that typically takes about a billion years. It is possible, however, to measure the velocities with which galaxies in a cluster are moving, and then estimate what the total mass in the cluster must be to keep the individual galaxies from flying out of the cluster. The observations indicate that the mass of the galaxies alone cannot keep the cluster together—some other gravity must again be present. The total amount of dark matter in clusters exceeds by more than ten times the luminous mass contained within the galaxies themselves, indicating that dark matter exists between galaxies as well as inside them.

There is another approach we can take to measuring the amount of dark matter in clusters of galaxies. As we saw, the universe is expanding, but this expansion is not perfectly uniform, thanks to the interfering hand of gravity. Suppose, for example, that a galaxy lies outside but relatively close to a rich cluster of galaxies. The gravitational force of the cluster will tug on that neighboring galaxy and slow down the rate at which it moves away from the cluster due to the expansion of the universe.

Consider the Local Group of galaxies, lying on the outskirts of the Virgo Supercluster. The mass concentrated at the center of the Virgo Cluster exerts a gravitational force on the Local Group. As a result, the Local Group is moving away from the center of the Virgo Cluster at a velocity a few hundred kilometers per second slower than the Hubble law predicts. By measuring such deviations from a smooth expansion, astronomers can estimate the total amount of mass contained in large clusters.

There are two other very useful methods for measuring the amount of dark matter in galaxy clusters, and both of them have produced results in general agreement with the method of measuring galaxy velocities: gravitational lensing and X-ray emission. Let's take a look at both.

As Albert Einstein showed in his theory of general relativity, the presence of mass bends the surrounding fabric of spacetime. Light follows those bends, so very massive objects can bend light significantly. You saw examples of this in the Astronomy Basics feature box Gravitational Lensing in the previous section. Visible galaxies are not the only possible gravitational lenses. Dark

matter can also reveal its presence by producing this effect. Figure 13.18.2 shows a galaxy cluster that is acting like a gravitational lens; the streaks and arcs you see on the picture are lensed images of more distant galaxies. Gravitational lensing is well enough understood that astronomers can use the many ovals and arcs seen in this image to calculate detailed maps of how much matter there is in the cluster and how that mass is distributed. The result from studies of many such gravitational lens clusters shows that, like individual galaxies, galaxy clusters contain more than ten times as much dark matter as luminous matter.



Figure 13.18.2 Cluster Abell 2218. This view from the Hubble Space Telescope shows the massive galaxy cluster Abell 2218 at a distance of about 2 billion light-years. Most of the yellowish objects are galaxies belonging to the cluster. But notice the numerous long, thin streaks, many of them blue; those are the distorted and magnified images of even more distant background galaxies, gravitationally lensed by the enormous mass of the intervening cluster. By carefully analyzing the lensed images, astronomers can construct a map of the dark matter that dominates the mass of the cluster.

The third method astronomers use to detect and measure dark matter in galaxy clusters is to image them in the light of X-rays. When the first sensitive X-ray telescopes were launched into orbit around Earth in the 1970s and trained on massive galaxy clusters, it was quickly discovered that the clusters emit copious X-ray radiation (Figure 13.18.3). Most stars do not emit much X-ray radiation, and neither does most of the gas or dust between the stars inside galaxies. What could be emitting the X-rays seen from virtually all massive galaxy clusters?

It turns out that just as galaxies have gas distributed between their stars, clusters of galaxies have gas distributed between their galaxies. The particles in these huge reservoirs of gas are not just sitting still; rather, they are constantly moving, zooming around under the influence of the cluster's immense gravity like mini planets around a giant sun. As they move and bump against each other, the gas heats up hotter and hotter until, at temperatures as high as 100 million K, it shines brightly at X-ray wavelengths. The more mass the cluster has, the faster the motions, the hotter the gas, and the brighter the X-rays. Astronomers calculate that the mass present to induce those motions must be about ten times the mass they can see in the clusters, including all the galaxies and all the gas. Once again, this is evidence that the galaxy clusters are seen to be dominated by dark matter.



Figure 13.18.3 X-Ray Image of a Galaxy Cluster. This composite image shows the galaxy cluster Abell 1689 at a distance of 2.3 billion light-years. The finely detailed views of the galaxies, most of them yellow, are in visible and near-infrared light from the Hubble Space Telescope, while the diffuse purple haze shows X-rays as seen by Chandra X-ray Observatory. The abundant X-rays, the gravitationally lensed images (thin curving arcs) of background galaxies, and the measured velocities of galaxies in the clusters all show that the total mass of Abell 1689—most of it dark matter—is about 1015 solar masses.

Mass-to-Light Ratio

We described the use of the mass-to-light ratio to characterize the matter in galaxies or clusters of galaxies in Properties of Galaxies. For systems containing mostly old stars, the mass-to-light ratio is typically 10 to 20, where mass and light are measured in units of the Sun's mass and luminosity. A mass-to-light ratio of 100 or more is a signal that a substantial amount of dark matter is present. Table 13.18.1 summarizes the results of measurements of mass-to-light ratios for various classes of objects. Very large mass-to-light ratios are found for all systems of galaxy size and larger, indicating that dark matter is present in all these types of objects. This is why we say that dark matter apparently makes up most of the total mass of the universe.

Table 13.18.1: Mass-To-Light Ratios

Type of Object	Mass-to-Light Ratio
Sun	1
Matter in vicinity of Sun	2
Total mass in Milky Way	10
Small groups of galaxies	50–150
Rich clusters of galaxies	250–300

The clustering of galaxies can be used to derive the total amount of mass in a given region of space, while visible radiation is a good indicator of where the luminous mass is. Studies show that the dark matter and luminous matter are very closely associated. The dark matter halos do extend beyond the luminous boundaries of the galaxies that they surround. However, where there are large clusters of galaxies, you will also find large amounts of dark matter. Voids in the galaxy distribution are also voids in the distribution of dark matter.

What Is the Dark Matter?

How do we go about figuring out what the dark matter consists of? The technique we might use depends on its composition. Let's consider the possibility that some of the dark matter is made up of normal particles: protons, neutrons, and electrons. Suppose these particles were assembled into black holes, brown dwarfs, or white dwarfs. If the black holes had no accretion disks, they would be

invisible to us. White and brown dwarfs do emit some radiation but have such low luminosities that they cannot be seen at distances greater than a few thousand light-years.

We can, however, look for such compact objects because they can act as gravitational lenses. (See the Astronomy Basics feature box Gravitational Lensing.) Suppose the dark matter in the halo of the Milky Way were made up of black holes, brown dwarfs, and white dwarfs. These objects have been whimsically dubbed MACHOs (MASSive Compact Halo Objects). If an invisible MACHO passes directly between a distant star and Earth, it acts as a gravitational lens, focusing the light from the distant star. This causes the star to appear to brighten over a time interval of a few hours to several days before returning to its normal brightness. Since we can't predict when any given star might brighten this way, we have to monitor huge numbers of stars to catch one in the act. There are not enough astronomers to keep monitoring so many stars, but today's automated telescopes and computer systems can do it for us.

Research teams making observations of millions of stars in the nearby galaxy called the Large Magellanic Cloud have reported several examples of the type of brightening expected if MACHOs are present in the halo of the Milky Way (Figure 13.18.4). However, there are not enough MACHOs in the halo of the Milky Way to account for the mass of the dark matter in the halo.



Figure 13.18.4 Large and Small Magellanic Clouds. Here, the two small galaxies we call the Large Magellanic Cloud and Small Magellanic Cloud can be seen above the auxiliary telescopes for the Very Large Telescope Array on Cerro Paranal in Chile. You can see from the number of stars that are visible that this is a very dark site for doing astronomy.

This result, along with a variety of other experiments, leads us to conclude that the types of matter we are familiar with can make up only a tiny portion of the dark matter. Another possibility is that dark matter is composed of some new type of particle—one that researchers are now trying to detect in laboratories here on Earth (see The Big Bang).

The kinds of dark matter particles that astronomers and physicists have proposed generally fall into two main categories: hot and cold dark matter. The terms *hot* and *cold* don't refer to true temperatures, but rather to the average velocities of the particles, analogous to how we might think of particles of air moving in your room right now. In a cold room, the air particles move more slowly on average than in a warm room.

In the early universe, if dark matter particles easily moved fast and far compared to the lumps and bumps of ordinary matter that eventually became galaxies and larger structures, we call those particles **hot dark matter**. In that case, smaller lumps and bumps would be smeared out by the particle motions, meaning fewer small galaxies would get made.

On the other hand, if the dark matter particles moved slowly and covered only small distances compared to the sizes of the lumps in the early universe, we call that cold dark matter. Their slow speeds and energy would mean that even the smaller lumps of ordinary matter would survive to grow into small galaxies. By looking at when galaxies formed and how they evolve, we can use observations to distinguish between the two kinds of dark matter. So far, observations seem most consistent with models based on cold dark matter.

Solving the dark matter problem is one of the biggest challenges facing astronomers. After all, we can hardly understand the evolution of galaxies and the long-term history of the universe without understanding what its most massive component is made of. For example, we need to know just what role dark matter played in starting the higher-density “seeds” that led to the formation of

galaxies. And since many galaxies have large halos made of dark matter, how does this affect their interactions with one another and the shapes and types of galaxies that their collisions create?

Astronomers armed with various theories are working hard to produce models of galaxy structure and evolution that take dark matter into account in just the right way. Even though we don't know what the dark matter is, we do have some clues about how it affected the formation of the very first galaxies. As we will see in The Big Bang, careful measurements of the microwave radiation left over after the Big Bang have allowed astronomers to set very tight limits on the actual sizes of those early seeds that led to the formation of the large galaxies that we see in today's universe. Astronomers have also measured the relative numbers and distances between galaxies and clusters of different sizes in the universe today. So far, most of the evidence seems to weigh heavily in favor of cold dark matter, and most current models of galaxy and large-scale structure formation use cold dark matter as their main ingredient.

As if the presence of dark matter—a mysterious substance that exerts gravity and outweighs all the known stars and galaxies in the universe but does not emit or absorb light—were not enough, there is an even more baffling and equally important constituent of the universe that has only recently been discovered: we have called it **dark energy** in parallel with dark matter. We will say more about it and explore its effects on the evolution of the universe in The Big Bang. For now, we can complete our inventory of the contents of the universe by noting that it appears that the entire universe contains some mysterious energy that pushes spacetime apart, taking galaxies and the larger structures made of galaxies along with it. Observations show that dark energy becomes more and more important relative to gravity as the universe ages. As a result, the expansion of the universe is accelerating, and this acceleration seems to be happening mostly since the universe was about half its current age.

What we see when we peer out into the universe—the light from trillions of stars in hundreds of billions of galaxies wrapped in intricate veils of gas and dust—is therefore actually only a sprinkling of icing on top of the cake: as we will see in The Big Bang, when we look outside galaxies and clusters of galaxies at the universe as a whole, astronomers find that for every gram of luminous normal matter, such as protons, neutrons, electrons, and atoms in the universe, there are about 4 grams of nonluminous normal matter, mainly intergalactic hydrogen and helium. There are about 27 grams of dark matter, and the energy equivalent (remember Einstein's famous $E = mc^2$) of about 68 grams of dark energy. Dark matter, and (as we will see) even more so dark energy, are dramatic demonstrations of what we have tried to emphasize throughout this book: science is always a “progress report,” and we often encounter areas where we have more questions than answers.

Let's next put together all these clues to trace the life history of galaxies and large-scale structure in the universe. What follows is the current consensus, but research in this field is moving rapidly, and some of these ideas will probably be modified as new observations are made.

Summary

Stars move much faster in their orbits around the centers of galaxies, and galaxies around centers of galaxy clusters, than they should according to the gravity of all the luminous matter (stars, gas, and dust) astronomers can detect. This discrepancy implies that galaxies and galaxy clusters are dominated by dark matter rather than normal luminous matter. Gravitational lensing and X-ray radiation from massive galaxy clusters confirm the presence of dark matter. Galaxies and clusters of galaxies contain about 10 times more dark matter than luminous matter. While some of the dark matter may be made up of ordinary matter (protons, neutrons, and electrons), perhaps in the form of very faint stars or black holes, most of it probably consists of some totally new type of particle not yet detected on Earth. Observations of gravitational lensing effects on distant objects have been used to look in the outer region of our Galaxy for any dark matter in the form of compact, dim stars or star remnants, but not enough such objects have been found to account for all the dark matter.

Glossary

cold dark matter

slow-moving massive particles, not yet identified, that don't absorb, emit, or reflect light or other electromagnetic radiation, and that make up most of the mass of galaxies and galaxy clusters

dark energy

an energy that is causing the expansion of the universe to accelerate; the source of this energy is not yet understood

hot dark matter

massive particles, not yet identified, that don't absorb, emit, or reflect light or other electromagnetic radiation, and that make up most of the mass of galaxies and galaxy clusters; hot dark matter is faster-moving material than cold dark matter

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