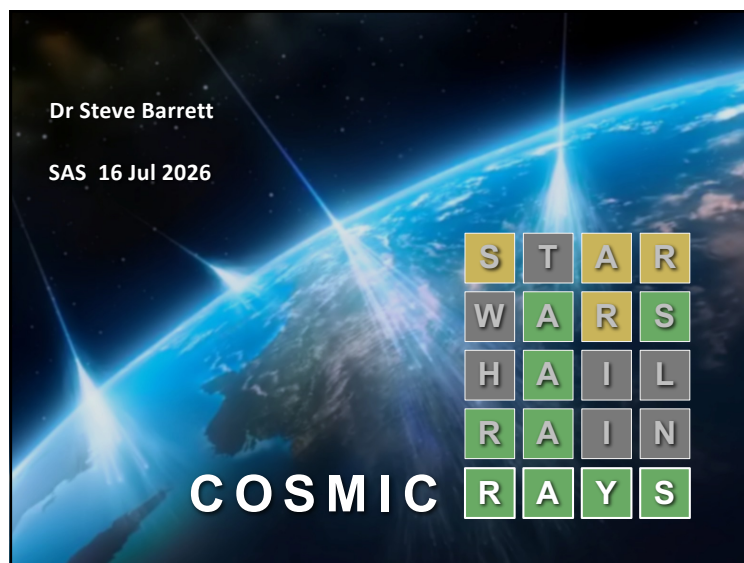


Cosmic Rays



Contents

Introduction

Background Radiation

Earth and beyond
Radioactivity
 α β γ radiation

Cosmic Rays

100+ years of history
Air showers

Detectors

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Cloud chamber
Cosmic ray observatories

Cosmic Sources

Galactic or extra-galactic
Magnetic fields
Ultra-high energies

Summary

The Southport AS lawyers require ...



Risk Assessment

This talk will include a number of table-top demonstrations, some of which use radioactive samples.

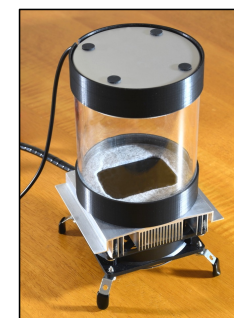
The samples contain naturally occurring elements and there is no risk to any members of the audience.

Demonstrations

On the table in front of me are two types of particle detector that I will be using in live demonstrations at various points throughout this talk.



Geiger-Müller detector



Cloud Chamber

Cosmic Rays

Introduction

What's that clicking?

Each click signals the arrival of a sub-atomic particle passing through the detector of what is often called a Geiger counter.

Maybe it was spat out from an atom that is lurking somewhere in this room. Maybe its origins were more distant ... the result of a supernova that went off a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

We can't tell just from the click itself what the particle was.



Background Radiation

Terrestrial radioactivity and isotopes

Background Radiation

Radiation is all around us ... all the time.

You have lived with it all your life and it is not something to fear.

Before dealing with cosmic rays, let's get some context by considering radiation from the Earth itself.

The Earth is radioactive.

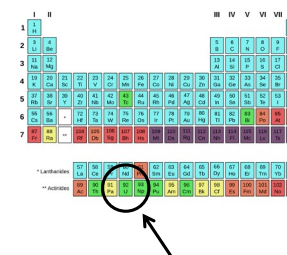
It was radioactive when it was made 4.54 billion years ago and it still is today. This is a natural consequence of the properties of some elements.



Radioactivity

The periodic table contains many elements that are **stable** – once an atom has been made it remains essentially unchanged ... forever.

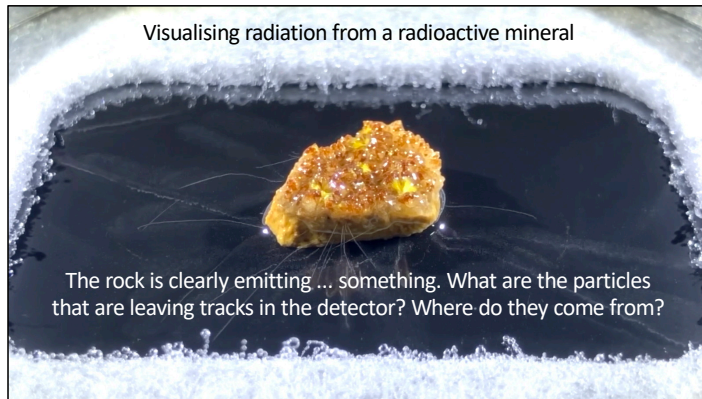
Some elements are **unstable**. They decay (change) into other elements and in the process the atomic nuclei emit sub-atomic particles.



We can visualise the particles emitted by radioactive uranium ...

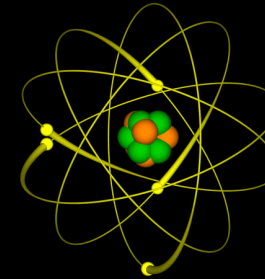
Cosmic Rays

Demonstration



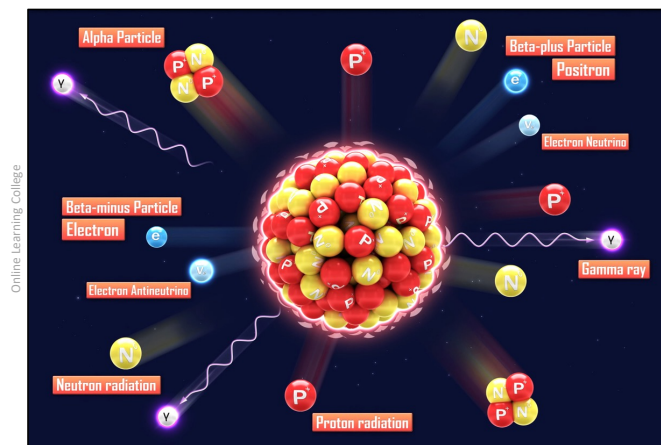
Atomic Nucleus

An atom is a nucleus surrounded by a cloud of electrons ...



... but it is the nucleus alone that determines the radioactivity of the atom

Atomic Nucleus



Alpha–Beta–Gamma

The most common types of radiation are labelled α , β and γ :

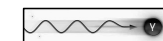
α Alpha rays (or alpha particles)
 α = nuclei of helium atoms = 2 protons + 2 neutrons
 Heavy particles that cannot travel far through matter



β Beta rays (or beta particles)
 β = electrons
 Lightweight particles that can penetrate further than alphas

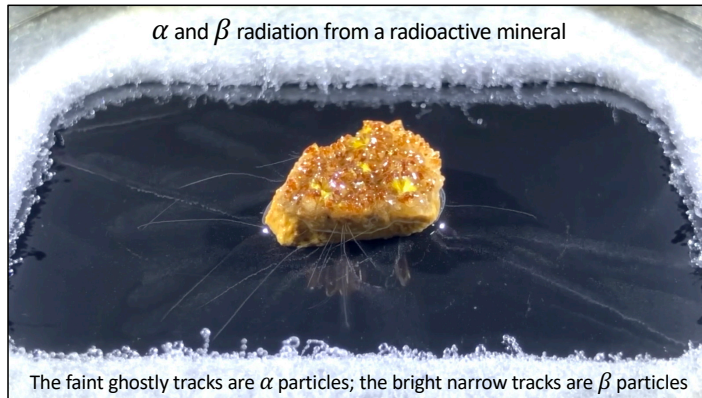


γ Gamma radiation is rather different from α and β rays because it is a high-energy electromagnetic wave.



Cosmic Rays

Demonstration

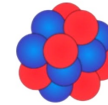


Radioactive Isotopes

Isotopes are 'cousins' of the same type of atom. For instance ...

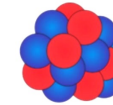
All carbon atoms have 6 protons in the nucleus (by definition).

Carbon atoms that have
6 neutrons are the
stable isotope C-12



$$6 + 6 = 12$$

Carbon atoms that have
8 neutrons are the
radioactive isotope C-14

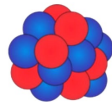


$$6 + 8 = 14$$

Aside: Radioactive Carbon-14

Because C-14 atoms decay (change) into nitrogen atoms over 1000s of years they can be used in carbon dating organic material.

If they don't last long, where do the C-14 atoms come from in the first place?



They are being continuously replenished by cosmic rays hitting nuclei of nitrogen, kicking out protons and changing N-14 into C-14.

Radioactive Elements

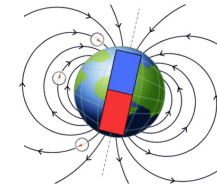
Potassium (K) is the most abundant of the radioactive elements
In your body, potassium atoms decay at the rate of 4000/sec
It is one of largest contributions to natural radiation

Thorium (Th) is more abundant than uranium, and ...

Uranium (U) is more abundant than you think
At 3 ppm there is 500x more uranium than gold in the Earth's crust

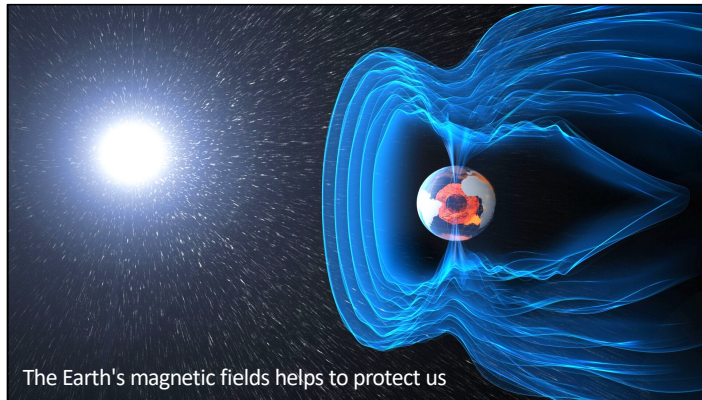
In the Earth's core, these radioactive elements have been emitting radiation for billions of years, heating the core and keeping it molten.

A rotating molten core is the dynamo that creates the Earth's magnetic field.



Cosmic Rays

Earth's Magnetic Field



Aside: Anti-Matter

0.01% of potassium is K-40, an isotope that emits β^+ radiation.

β^+ particles are like electrons, but with the *opposite* electrical charge. They are particles of **anti-matter**.

Hence, foods rich in potassium emit anti-matter radiation.



This gave rise to the unit of "banana equivalent dose" (BED) that compares any dose of radiation to the dose a person would be exposed to by eating one average-sized banana.

Banana Equivalent Dose

Eating 1 banana =



Dose of cosmic rays
that everybody is
exposed to every day



(double it
if you
fly a lot)

Radon

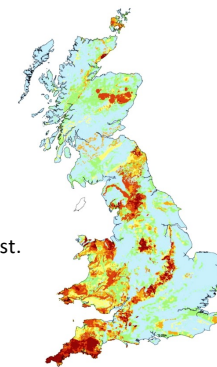
Not all radioactive elements are found in solid form.

Radon is a radioactive gas formed by the radioactive decay of the small amounts of uranium that occur naturally in all rocks.

Radon concentrations vary across the UK depending on the type of ground.

For instance, radon levels are high in parts of the UK rich in granite, such as in the South West.

Radon gas atoms emit α particles.



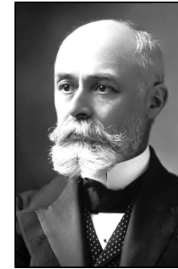
Cosmic Rays

Cosmic Rays

*Having considered terrestrial sources of radiation
we can now return to the main topic of this talk*

Pioneers

The pioneers studying radiation in the period 1895–1915 were ...



Henri Becquerel
1852 – 1908



Marie Curie
1867 – 1934



Victor Hess
1883 – 1964

Above or Below?

In the late 1800s it was known that gold leaf electrosopes lost their charge due to background radiation ...

...but was it coming from **above** or from **below**?



In 1910 Theodore Wulf took an electroscope to the top of the Eiffel Tower.

The radiation levels decreased by far less than would be expected if the radiation was coming **only** from the ground.

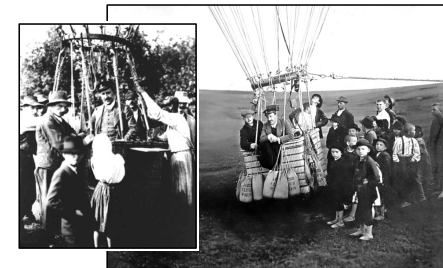
Is the tower radioactive?

Is the atmosphere radioactive?

Above or Below?

To resolve the question of '... from above or from below?' Hess figured that the Eiffel Tower was not high enough.

He designed detectors that would work at high altitudes and in 1911 and 1912 he took them on a series of balloon flights.



Cosmic Rays

Cosmic Radiation

1911 – Ascent to 1000 m – radiation levels essentially unchanged

1912 – Ascent to 5000 m – radiation levels **increased** dramatically

Was the increase due to radiation from the Sun, or from beyond?

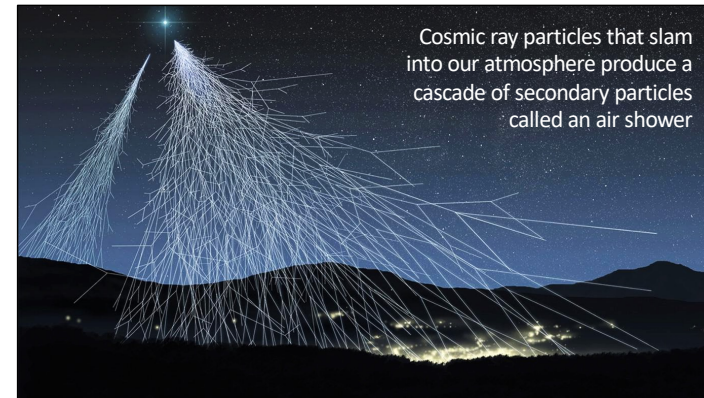
Measurements during a **solar eclipse** effectively ruled out the Sun as the source of cosmic rays.

In 1936 Hess was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for his "discovery of cosmic radiation".



17 Apr 1912

Air Showers



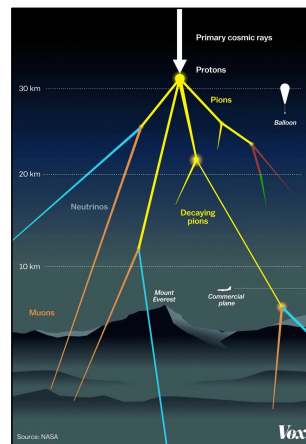
Cosmic ray particles that slam into our atmosphere produce a cascade of secondary particles called an air shower

Air Showers

High-energy **primary** cosmic ray particles collide with atoms in the upper atmosphere, starting a cascade of **secondary** particles.

At each level of the cascade, new particles are created, each sharing the energy of the particle that created them.

A cascade from one primary cosmic ray particle might result in millions of secondary cosmic ray particles at sea level.

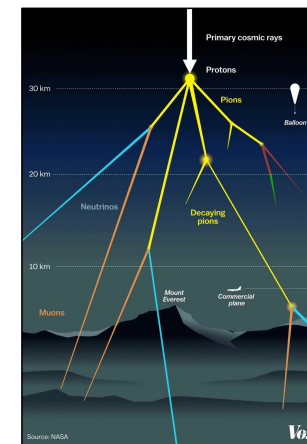


Air Showers

Many of these new particles are unstable and do not live more than a tiny fraction of a second.

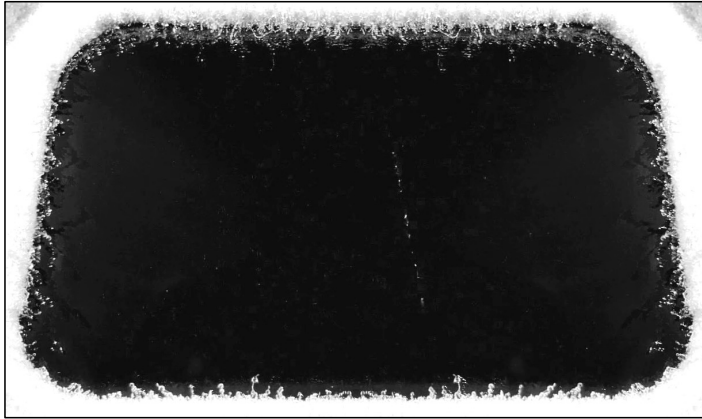
A **muon** is a particle similar to an electron, except that it is much more massive and has no part to play in making atoms.

A muon will not live for much more than a few microseconds, but that is long enough for it to reach sea level.

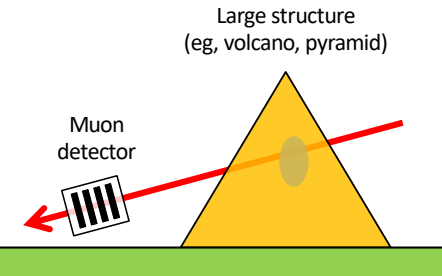


Cosmic Rays

Muon Track in Cloud Chamber



Applications of Cosmic Ray Muons



If there is any variation in density (of the rock or stone) inside the structure, that will affect the absorption of muons. The process is analogous to using the absorption of x-rays to see inside matter.

What Are the Primary Particles?

So far we have been looking at **secondary** cosmic ray particles.

What about the **primary** particles – the ones that *create* the showers?

Decades of research has told us about the primary cosmic rays ...

90% are protons



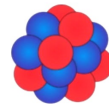
(nuclei of H atoms)

9% are α particles



(nuclei of He atoms)

1% are nuclei of heavy atoms



(the same atoms as
found here within
the solar system)

Detecting Cosmic Rays

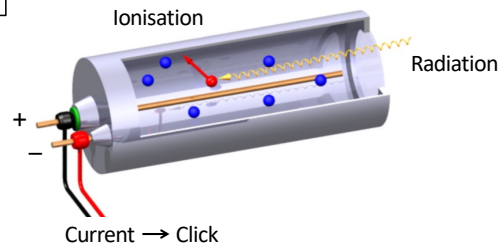
*How can we detect cosmic rays either
before or after they hit our atmosphere?*

Cosmic Rays

Radiation Detectors



What's going on inside the detector?



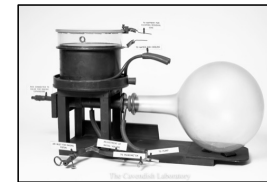
Cloud Chambers



Inspired by sightings of the Brocken spectre from the top of Ben Nevis in 1894, Charles Wilson developed chambers for studying cloud formation and optical phenomena in moist air.



In 1911 he perfected the first cloud chamber.

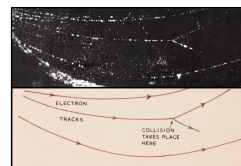


Cloud Chambers

Wilson realised that when charged particles passed through the cloud chamber water droplets condensed to form visible tracks.

As a result, his cloud chambers had an important role in experimental particle physics for decades.

In 1927 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for the "most original and wonderful instrument in scientific history".



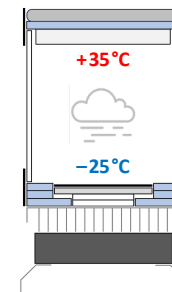
1911



2024

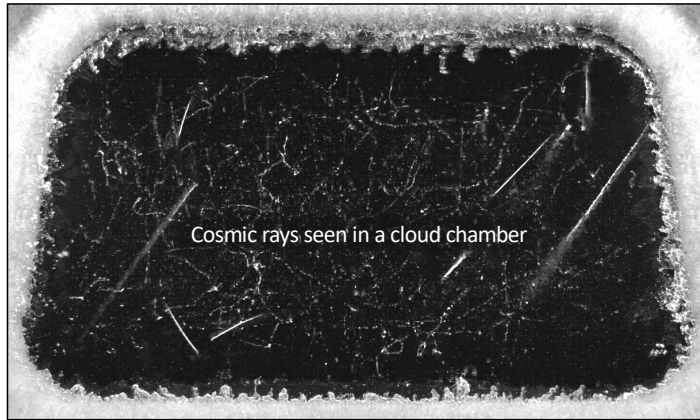
Cloud Chambers

My cloud chamber is a distant cousin of Wilson's original invention. Details of its design and construction will be left for another day.



Cosmic Rays

Demonstration



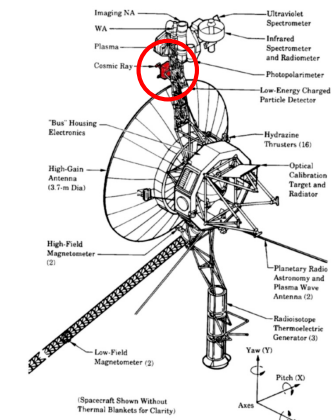
Cosmic rays seen in a cloud chamber

Cosmic Ray Experiments

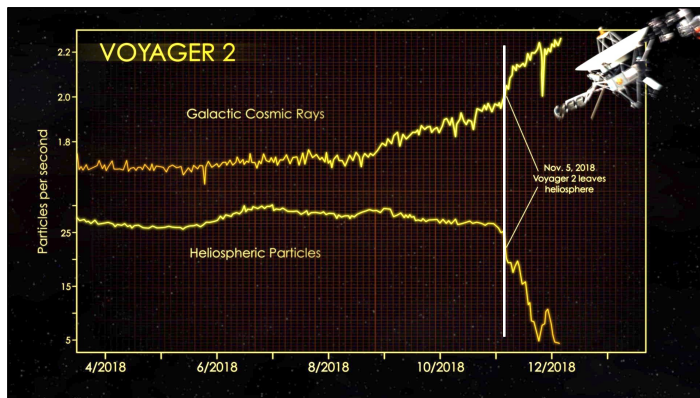
Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 carried instruments to measure cosmic rays as they flew through the interplanetary medium.

In 2012 Voyager 1 measured a significant increase in galactic cosmic rays, indicating that it had entered interstellar space.

Travelling about 10% slower, Voyager 2 measured a similar increase in cosmic rays in 2018.



Cosmic Ray Experiments



Cosmic Ray Experiment on the ISS



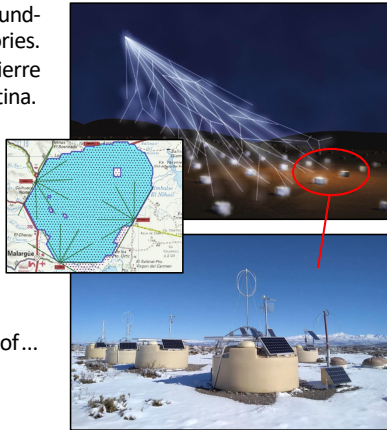
Cosmic Rays

Cosmic Ray Observatory

There are a number of ground-based cosmic ray observatories. One of the biggest is the Pierre Auger Observatory in Argentina.

To catch a reasonable fraction of the particles created in an air shower the detectors have to be spread over a large area.

For the PAO, this is the area of... Luxembourg.



Cherenkov Radiation



Cherenkov Radiation

Development of an air shower

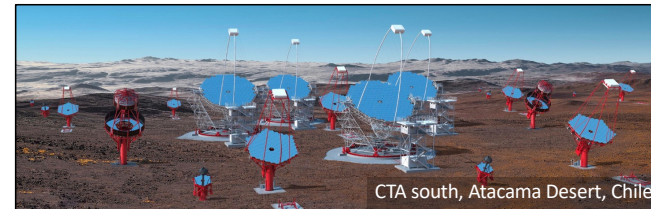


It's blue, and it's spectacular

Cherenkov Telescope Array

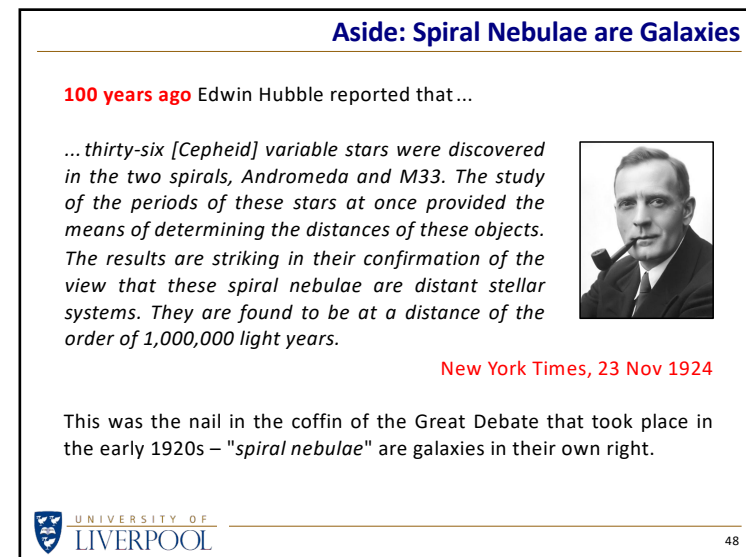
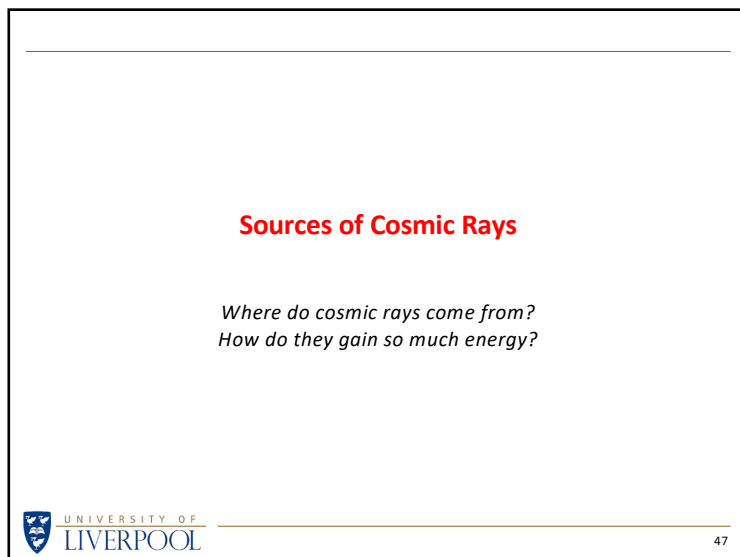
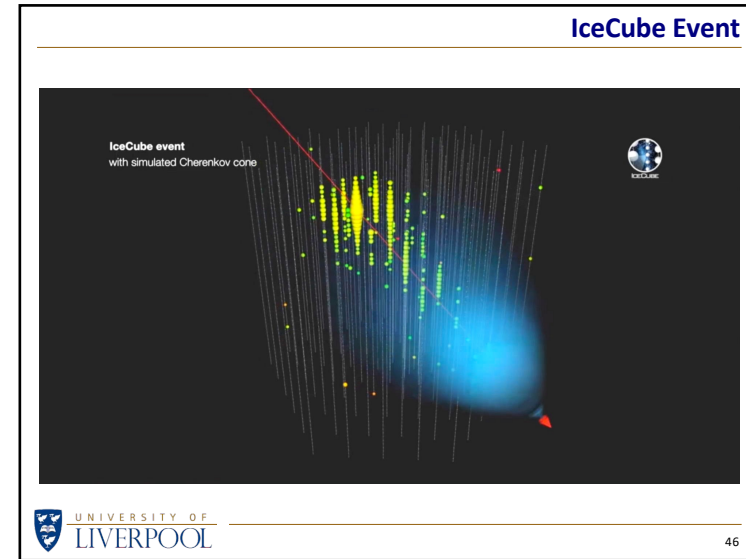
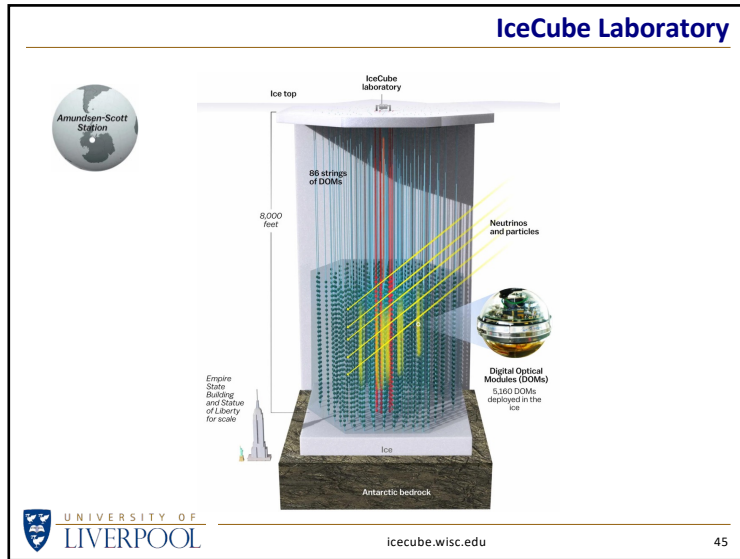


CTA north, La Palma, Canary Islands



CTA south, Atacama Desert, Chile

Cosmic Rays



Cosmic Rays

Cosmic Origins

Hess showed that (most) cosmic rays do **not** come from the Sun.

So where **do** they come from?

Sources in the Milky Way? ... or beyond?



Hubble's observations made in the 1920s led to a paradigm shift in our understanding of the Universe ... it is a **lot** bigger than was thought, and is full of billions of galaxies like our own.

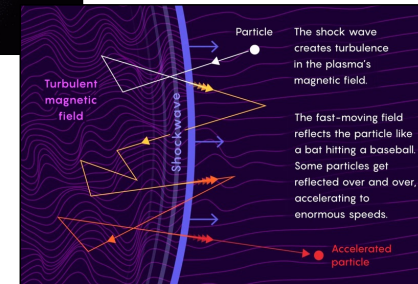
So are the sources of cosmic rays galactic, or extra-galactic?

Supernovae and SMBH

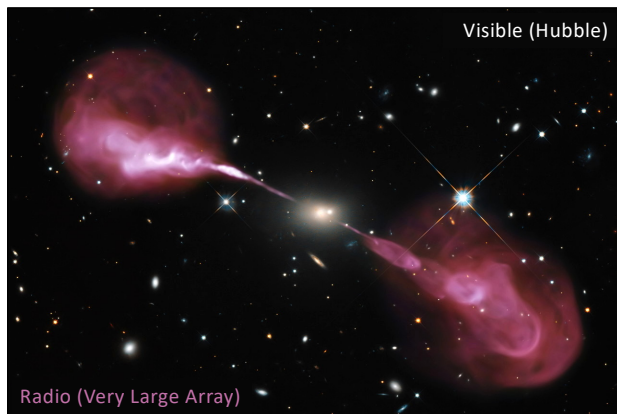


Violent events like supernovae or jets from supermassive black holes produce shock waves in the gas around them.

These shock waves can result in the acceleration of charged particles to **very** high energies.



Galactic Jets from Hercules A



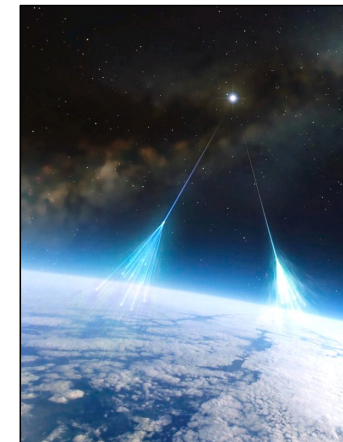
Cosmic Sources

Pinning down the sources of cosmic rays?

Shouldn't that be easy?

Measure the direction of incoming cosmic rays and trace their direction back to the source.

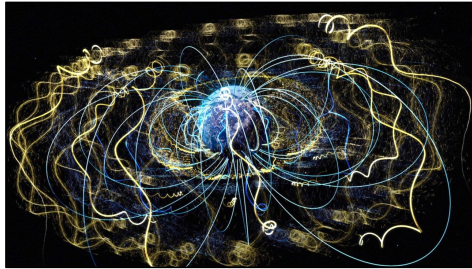
Simples!



Cosmic Rays

Magnetic Fields

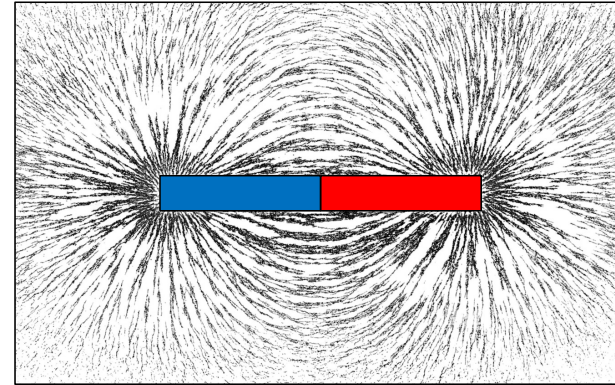
No, not so simple.
The paths of charged particles are **deflected** in a magnetic field ...
... and magnetic fields are everywhere.



Charged particles spiralling along Earth's magnetic field lines

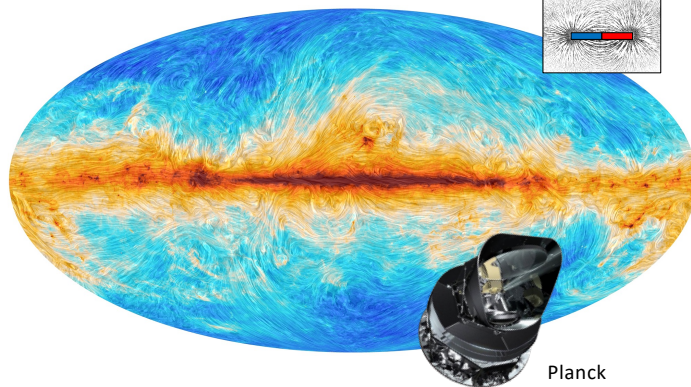
Magnetic Fields

Iron filings can reveal the magnet field around a simple bar magnet



Galactic Magnetic Fields

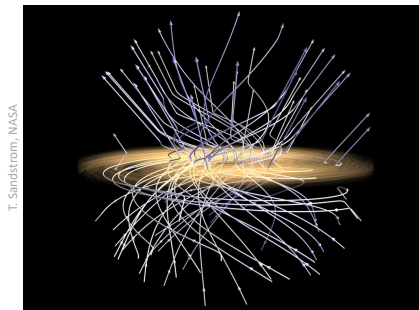
Dust particles floating around the Milky Way behave like iron filings



Planck

Galactic Magnetic Fields

Magnetic fields embedded in the Milky Way have a complex structure.
The fields deflect charged particles and so scramble the direction from
which cosmic rays appear to originate.



T. Sandstrom, NASA

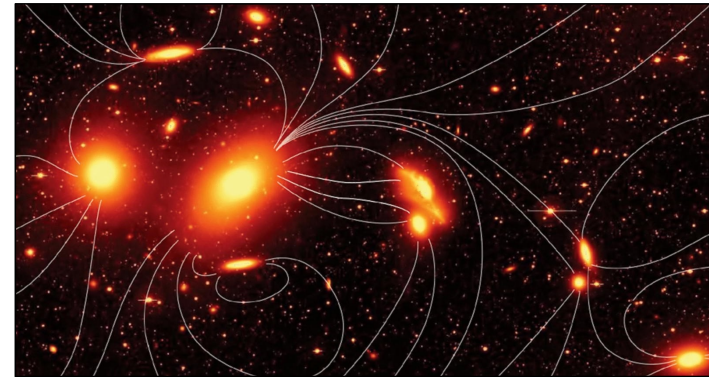
Cosmic Rays

Magnetic Fields in M51



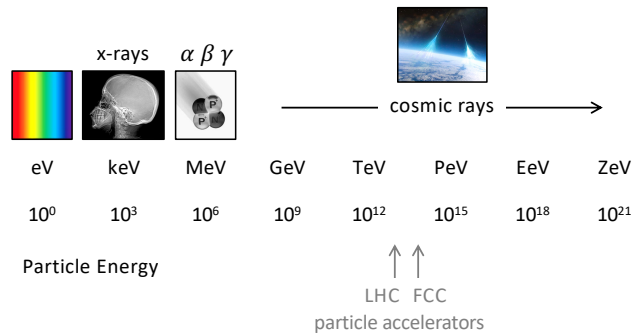
HST + SOFIA

Inter-Galactic Magnetic Fields

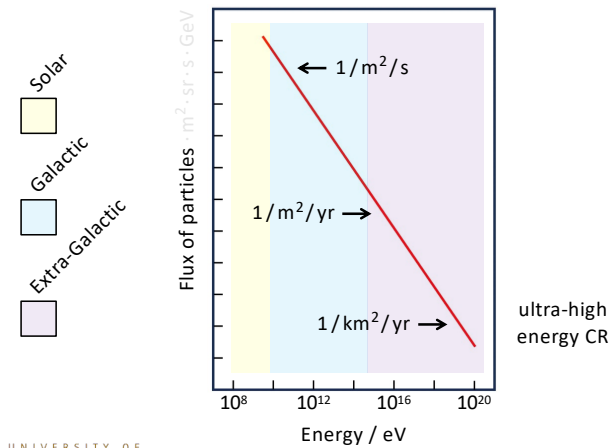


Galactic magnetic fields make it difficult to trace cosmic rays to their source

Energy Distribution

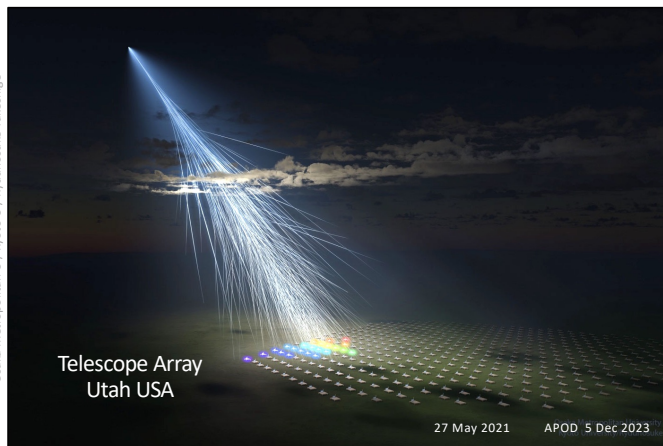


Energy Distribution



Cosmic Rays

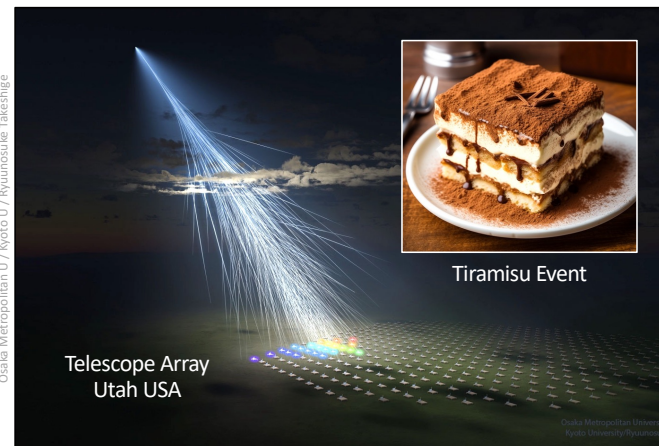
Amaterasu Event



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Amaterasu Event



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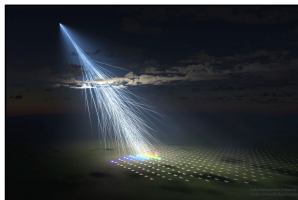
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Ultra-High Energies

Ultra-high-energy cosmic rays should be deflected very little by the magnetic fields that permeate the Milky Way and inter-galactic space.

Hence, tracing back the direction of the Amaterasu event should reveal the source in the sky.

The direction points to ... nothing.
No supernova, no SMBH could be
identified as the source.



More observations are needed to resolve the mystery of cosmic ray origins.



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Close To the Speed of Light

Just how close to the speed of light are these ultra-high-energy cosmic ray particles travelling?

Expressed as a percentage of the speed of light, the most energetic particle yet observed (the "Oh-My-God particle") was travelling at

99.9999999999999999999999995% c

We can attempt to visualise this speed by imagining a race...



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Cosmic Rays

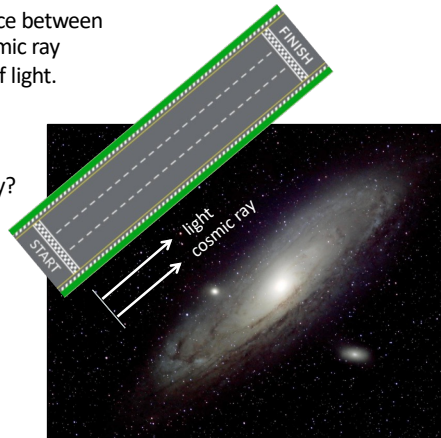
Race With Light

Imagine a 100,000 ly race between the most energetic cosmic ray particle and a photon of light.

When the light crosses the finish line, how far behind is the cosmic ray?

After 100,000 ly the cosmic ray would be about **5mm** behind.

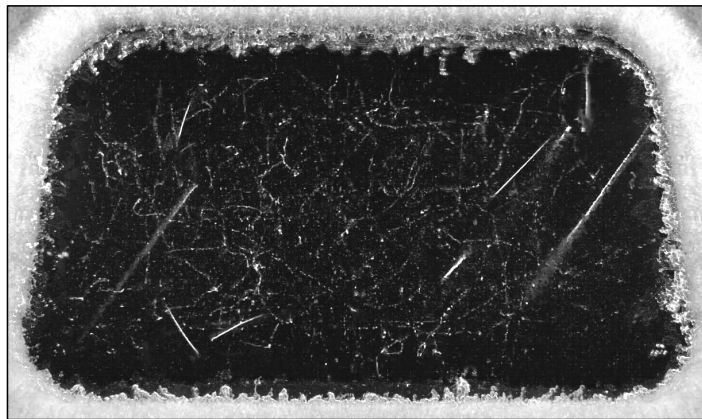
The time difference would be less than a nanosecond.



Summary

- Cosmic ray particles are accelerated ... somewhere, somehow
- **Supernovae** and **SuperMassive Black Holes** are probably sources
- Cosmic rays are **deflected** by magnetic fields
 - Lower energy particles get their paths scrambled
 - Higher energy particles travel in straighter lines
- Some particles make it past Earth's protective **magnetic field**
- Hitting the atmosphere creates an **air shower** of secondary particles
- Some of the **secondary** cosmic ray particles make it to sea level
 - These include muons, electrons and protons
 - They make clicks in Geiger counters and tracks in cloud chambers

Cosmic Rays



www.liverpool.ac.uk/~sdb/Talks

Dr Steve Barrett

SAS 16 Jul 2026

S	T	A	R
W	A	R	S
H	A	I	L
R	A	I	N
C	O	S	M
R	A	Y	S

COSMIC RAYS