

Snowmass2021 - Letter of Interest

Fundamental physics with gravitational wave detectors

Thematic Areas: (check all that apply ☐/■)

- (CF1) Dark Matter: Particle Like
- (CF2) Dark Matter: Wavelike
- (CF3) Dark Matter: Cosmic Probes
- ☐ (CF4) Dark Energy and Cosmic Acceleration: The Modern Universe
- ☐ (CF5) Dark Energy and Cosmic Acceleration: Cosmic Dawn and Before
- ☐ (CF6) Dark Energy and Cosmic Acceleration: Complementarity of Probes and New Facilities
- (CF7) Cosmic Probes of Fundamental Physics
- (TF09) Cosmology Theory
- (TF10) Quantum Information Science Theory

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Abstract: (maximum 200 words)

Gravitational wave detectors are formidable tools to explore black holes and neutron stars. These compact objects are extraordinarily efficient at producing electromagnetic and gravitational radiation. As such, they are ideal laboratories for fundamental physics and they have an immense discovery potential. The detection of merging black holes by third-generation Earth-based detectors and space-based detectors will provide exquisite tests of general relativity. Loud “golden” events and extreme mass-ratio inspirals can strengthen the observational evidence for horizons by mapping the exterior spacetime geometry, inform us on possible near-horizon modifications, and perhaps reveal a breakdown of Einstein’s gravity. Measurements of the black-hole spin distribution and continuous gravitational-wave searches can turn black holes into efficient detectors of ultralight bosons across ten or more orders of magnitude in mass. A precise monitoring of the phase of inspiralling binaries can constrain the existence of additional propagating fields and characterize the environment in which the binaries live, bounding the local dark matter density and properties. Gravitational waves from compact binaries will probe general relativity and fundamental physics in previously inaccessible regimes, and allow us to address fundamental issues in our current understanding of the cosmos.

Motivation. Gravitational-wave (GW) detectors are revolutionary probes of fundamental physics. The LIGO/Virgo detections of black hole (BH) and neutron star (NS) mergers [1], the imaging of a BH shadow by long-baseline radio interferometry [2], and ever more precise observations across all electromagnetic wavelengths have opened a new window on strong gravity. Our ability to understand the interplay between gravity and the other fundamental interactions is at a turning point: just as the last three decades of astronomical observations have revolutionized cosmology, GW observations are moving our understanding of relativistic gravity from the domain of mathematical physics to precision experimental science.

The BH information paradox and the existence of unresolved singularities in classical general relativity (GR) point to deep inconsistencies in our current understanding of gravity and quantum mechanics. These difficulties lie at the heart of recent groundbreaking ideas such as the relationship between entanglement entropy and geometry [3], and they drive efforts to go beyond semi-classical gravity. This led in particular to recent progress on the infrared structure of gravity and quantum field theory, linking memory effects, soft theorems and asymptotic symmetries [4]. It is becoming clear that the main conceptual problems in BH physics hold the key to fundamental issues in theoretical physics. The expectation is that GR must be superseded by a more complete description of gravitational phenomena. The mass range of astrophysical BHs spans about 10 orders of magnitude, therefore Earth- and space-based GW detectors will probe the strong gravity and large curvatures around BHs and NSs over a wide range of masses and frequencies. Our newfound ability to characterize these systems through GWs could give us precious experimental guidance towards a unification of gravity with the other interactions.

Black hole horizons, quantum gravity and the information paradox. In GR, the remnant of a binary BH merger is a distorted BH relaxing to a final (Kerr) BH solution via GW emission characterized by a discrete set of quasinormal mode frequencies. Uniqueness results in vacuum GR imply that these frequencies depend only on the BH mass and spin, allowing for powerful spectroscopic tests, in analogy with atomic and molecular spectroscopy [5–8]. The full splendor of GR is imprinted in the complete GW signal, from inspiral to merger. The accurate modeling of the two-body process opens the door for a wide array of tests, probing GR and modified theories of gravity in completely new regimes, including the violent and nonlinear merger process itself [9, 10]. BHs and NSs orbiting around supermassive BHs behave as test masses probing the external geometry. The motion exhibits complicated behavior which can be used – in analogy to geodesy – to provide exquisite measurements of the multipolar structure of the central object’s spacetime. In GR, all of these multipoles depend only on the mass and spin of the central BH, so these systems can be used to identify any deviations of the spacetime from the predictions of GR [11, 12]. Every such detection can constrain deviations of the quadrupole moment from the Kerr value at the level of 0.01–1% [13].

An elegant solution of the information paradox within string theory suggests that BH horizons do not exist, being just coarse-grained descriptions of horizonless geometries [14–16]. Rather general arguments indicate that quantum modifications on horizon scales are possible for macroscopic BHs [17]. Features of the near-horizon region, tidal deformability, and energy dissipation at the horizon (if present) leave characteristic imprints in the gravitational waveforms [18]. Quasiperiodic bursts of radiation (“echoes”) following the initial postmerger burst and ringdown would be smoking guns of drastic near-horizon modifications [18, 19]. Thus, precision GW astronomy can provide unique tests of quantum gravity effects in BH spacetimes.

Corrections to general relativity, new compact objects. Some of the conceptual issues related to BHs may be resolved by modifications of gravity [20]. This approach naturally leads to the investigation, within the framework of effective field theory, of scalar-tensor theories, massive gravity [21] and higher-order gravity theories, such as Einstein-scalar-Gauss-Bonnet or dynamical Chern-Simons gravity (for reviews see [9, 22–24]). The well-posedness of many of these theories and the nature of BH and NS solutions are largely open issues [9, 25]. These theories, however, can and have been studied as effective field theories to discover that black holes can be hairy and the orbital dynamics of binary systems can be modified, leading to modifications in the GWs emit during inspiral and ringdown [26–28]. The generic excitation of propagating

scalar fields removes energy from the system, forcing the binary to inspiral faster than in GR and affecting the GW phase in potentially observable ways. Besides, the BH uniqueness theorems of GR do not apply in such a broad setup, raising the exciting possibility that BH candidates in our Universe may be exotic compact bodies of an unknown nature, that could be discovered and characterized via GWs [18, 29].

Probing dark matter: black holes as particle accelerators. Dark matter and dark energy represent a substantial fraction of the energy content of the Universe. There is the exciting possibility, to be verified by future observations, that LIGO and Virgo may already have detected dark matter in the form of primordial BHs [30, 31]. We know very little about dark matter, but according to the equivalence principle it should gravitate just like known forms of matter. This implies that rotating astrophysical BHs can be natural dark matter detectors. For example, BHs moving in a dark matter environment will accrete and be subjected to dynamical friction, leading to minute but detectable changes in the GW phase. These effects depend on the nature of dark matter and its properties [32–34]. In addition, models of minicharged dark matter predict the existence of new fermions which possess a fractional electric charge or are charged under a hidden $U(1)$ symmetry [35, 36], leading to charged BH solutions and a different inspiral and merger signal [37–39].

Astrophysical BHs span about ten orders of magnitude in mass. The corresponding Schwarzschild radii are comparable with the Compton wavelength of a broad range of dark matter candidates [40]. In the presence of rotation, ultralight bosons can form quasibound states around BHs, even if their initial abundance is negligible [41, 42]. Therefore BHs are natural particle detectors, complementary to terrestrial colliders [25, 42]. Proposed ways to rule out or strongly constrain light bosons as dark matter candidates include the observation of inspiralling BHs, monitoring of monochromatic sources, and a mapping of the mass versus spin distribution of astrophysical BHs [25, 42]. Axion-like particles have been proposed in many theoretical scenarios, including variations of the original solution to the strong CP problem of QCD. Thus, self-interactions and couplings with Standard Model fields are important and must be accurately modeled. Such couplings can lead to periodic bursts of light, “bosonovas” and other interesting phenomenology [43, 44]. Superradiant instabilities can also give rise to BHs surrounded by boson “clouds” [45], possibly leading to other GW signatures. Thus, GW detectors can test a broad mass range relevant to string axiverse scenarios, as well as fuzzy dark matter candidates that could naturally explain dark matter haloes [46].

GW propagation and the graviton mass. The time lag between detection at different LIGO/Virgo sites, together with time-of-arrival differences between the GW signal and electromagnetic counterparts to the binary NS system GW170817, have already set impressive bounds on the speed of GWs in the LIGO/Virgo frequency range [47]. This bound alone has placed the most stringent constraints on Lorentz violation in the gravitational sector, surpassing previous bounds by over eight orders of magnitude. Monitoring of the inspiral stage, together with superradiant bounds from spinning BHs, can also provide strong bounds on the dispersion relation of GWs, and in particular on the mass of the graviton. Theories with a massive graviton are appealing, in part, because they may explain the late-time expansion of the Universe without invoking dark energy [21], and recent formulations avoid the van Dam-Veltman-Zakharov instability [21, 48] while leading to modifications during binary inspirals and mergers [49, 50]. The propagation of GWs may also be sensitive to macroscopically large extra dimensions, as well as axion-like parity-violating interactions in the action [22]. Observations of GWs at small and large redshift will experimentally verify these possibilities.

Conclusions. The first LIGO/Virgo observing runs have ushered in the promise of GW astronomy and, with it, the power to test our understanding of gravitational physics, from modifications of GR to hints at the true nature of dark matter. New ground-based GW observatories operating in the audio band, e.g. the Cosmic Explorer [51], Einstein Telescope [52], and Neutron-star Merger Observatory [53], mid-band detector concepts such as MAGIS, AION, AEDGE and DECIGO [54–57], and space-based missions operating in the mHz band, like the Laser Interferometer Space Antenna [58] and TianQin [59], will dramatically advance, and potentially revolutionize, our understanding of the fundamental laws of physics.

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