

Breakthrough Online
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Breakthrough

#1 The Winner

Portraits of the earliest universe and the lacy pattern of galaxies in today's sky confirm that the universe is made up largely of mysterious dark energy and dark matter. They also give the universe a firm age and a precise speed of expansion.

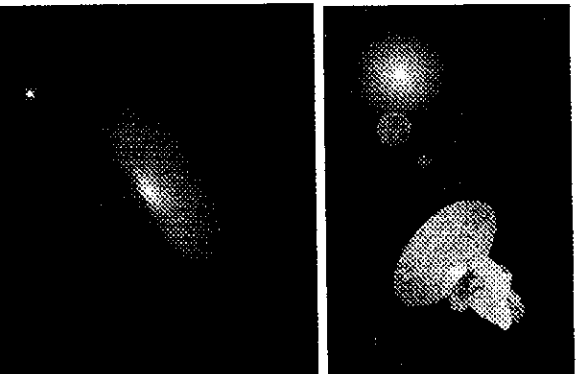
Illuminating the Dark Universe

A lonely satellite spinning slowly through the void has captured the very essence of the universe. In February, the Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe (WMAP) produced an image of the infant cosmos, of all of creation when it was less than 400,000 years old. The brightly colored picture marks a turning point in the field of cosmology. Along with a handful of other observations revealed this year, it ends a decades-long argument about the nature of the universe and confirms that our cosmos is much, much stranger than we ever imagined.

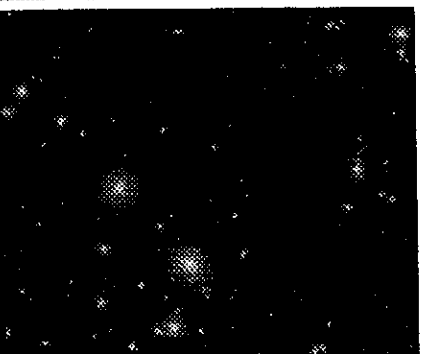
Five years ago, *Science's* cover sported the visage of Albert Einstein looking shocked by 1998's Breakthrough of the Year: the accelerating universe. Two teams of astronomers had seen the faint imprint of a ghostly force in the death rattles of dying stars. The apparent brightness of a certain type of supernova gave cosmologists a way to measure the expansion of the universe at different times in its history. The scientists were surprised to find that the universe was expanding ever faster, rather than decelerating, as general relativity—and common sense—had led astrophysicists to believe. This was the first sign of the mysterious “dark energy,” an unknown force that counteracts the effects of gravity and flings galaxies away from each other.

Although the supernova data were compelling, many cosmologists hesitated to embrace the bizarre idea of dark energy. Teams of astronomers across the world rushed to test the existence of this irresistible force in independent ways. That quest ended this year. No longer are scientists trying to confirm the existence of dark energy; now they are trying to find out what it's made of, and what it tells us about the birth and evolution of the universe. Lingering doubts about the existence of

dark energy and the composition of the universe dissolved when the WMAP satellite took the most detailed picture ever of the cosmic microwave background (CMB). The CMB is the most ancient light in the universe, the radiation that streamed from the newborn universe when it was still a glowing ball of plasma. This faint microwave glow surrounds us like a distant wall of



shape and the material it's made of, so does the “sound” of the early universe—the relative abundances and sizes of the hot and cold spots in the microwave background—depend on the composition of the universe and its shape. WMAP is the instrument that finally allowed scientists to hear the celestial music and figure out what sort of instrument our cosmos is.



Through a glass, darkly. Microwave data observed by the WMAP satellite (*upper left*), supernovae (*lower left*), and galaxy clusters (*above*) all reveal a universe dominated by dark energy.

fire. The writing on the wall—tiny fluctuations in the temperatures (and other properties) of the ancient light—reveals what the universe is made of.

Long before there were stars and galaxies, the universe was made of a hot glowing plasma that roiled under the competing influences of gravity and light. The big bang had set the entire cosmos ringing like a bell, and pressure waves rattled through the plasma, compressing and expanding and compressing clouds of matter. Hot spots in the background radiation are the images of compressed, dense plasma in the cooling universe, and cold spots are the signature of rarified regions of gas.

Just as the tone of a bell depends on its

And the remainder, 73%, is dark energy.

The tone of the cosmic bell also reveals the age of the cosmos and the rate at which it is expanding, and

WMAP has nearly perfect pitch. A year ago, a cosmologist would likely have said that the universe is between 12 billion and 15 billion years old. Now the estimate is 13.7 billion years, plus or minus a few hundred thousand. Similar calculations based on WMAP data have also pined down the rate of the universe's expansion—71 kilometers per second per megaparsec, plus or minus a few hundredths—and the universe's “shape”: slate flat. All the arguments of the last few decades about the basic properties of the universe—its age, its expansion rate, its composition, its density—have been settled in one fell swoop.

As important as WMAP is, it is not this year's only contribution to cosmologists' understanding of the history of the universe. The Sloan Digital Sky Survey (SDSS) is mapping out a million galaxies. By analyz-

CREDITS: (C) CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SDSS COLLABORATION; (S) SFC/NASA; NASA/WMAP SCIENCE TEAM

Of the Year

ing the distribution of those galaxies, the way they clump and spread out, scientists can figure out the forces that cause that clumping and spreading—be they the gravitational attraction of dark matter or the anti-gravity push of dark energy. In October, the SDSS team revealed its analysis of the first quarter-million galaxies it had collected. It came to the same conclusion that the WMAP researchers had reached: The universe is dominated by dark energy.

This year scientists got their most direct view of dark energy in action. In July, physicists superimposed the galaxy-clustering data of SDSS on the microwave data of WMAP and proved—beyond a reasonable doubt—that dark energy must exist. The proof relies on a phenomenon known as the integrated Sachs-Wolfe effect. The remnant microwave radiation acted as a backlight, shining through the gravitational dimples caused by the galaxy clusters that the SDSS spotted. Scientists saw a gentle crushing—apparent as a slight shift toward shorter wavelengths—of the microwaves shining near those gravitational pits. In an uncurved universe such as our own, this can happen only if there is some anti-gravitational force—a dark energy—stretching out the fabric of spacetime and flattening the dimples that galaxy clusters sit in.

Some of the work of cosmology can now turn to understanding the forces that shaped the universe when it was a fraction of a millisecond old. After the universe burst forth from a cosmic singularity, the fabric of the newborn universe expanded faster than the speed of light. This was the era of inflation, and that burst of growth—and its abrupt end after less than 10^{30} seconds—shaped our present-day universe.

For decades, inflation provided few testable hypotheses. Now the exquisite precision of the WMAP data is finally allowing scientists to test inflation directly. Each current version of inflation proposes a slightly different scenario about the precise nature of the inflating force, and each makes a concrete prediction about the CMB, the distribution of galaxies, and even the clustering of gas clouds in the later universe. Scientists are just beginning to winnow out a handful of theories and test some make-or-break hypotheses. And as the SDSS data set grows—yielding information on distant quasars and gas clouds as well as the distribution of galaxies—scientists will challenge inflation theories with more boldness.

The properties of dark energy are also

now coming under scrutiny. WMAP, SDSS, and a new set of supernova observations released this year are beginning to give scientists a handle on the way dark energy reacts to being stretched or squished. Physicists have already had to discard some of their assumptions about dark energy. Now they have to consider a form of dark energy that might cause all the matter in the universe to die a violent and sudden death. If the dark energy

THE RUNNERS—UP

This year's discoveries illuminated realms as small as a single molecule and as large as a gamma ray burst.

#2 Decoding mental illness. Schizophrenia, depression, and bipolar disorder often run in families, but only recently have researchers identified particular genes that reliably increase one's risk of disease. Now they're unraveling how these genes can distort the brain's information processing and nudge someone into mental illness.

The chemical messenger serotonin relays its signal through a receptor that's a target of antidepressant drugs.

The gene for this receptor comes in two common flavors, or alleles, one of which had been tenuously linked to an increased risk of depression. This year, researchers revealed why the link had been so elusive: The allele increases the risk of depression only when combined with stress. Among people who had suffered bereavement, romantic rejection, or job loss in their early 20s, those who carried the vulnerability gene were more likely to be depressed than those with the other gene variant.

People with the high-risk allele have unusually heightened activity in a fear-focused brain region called the amygdala when viewing scary pictures. Together, these studies suggest that the gene variant biases people to perceive the world as highly menacing, which amplifies life stresses to the point of inducing depression.



Agony antecedents. New work links genes, brain activity biases, and mental illness.

year the allele was found to curb activity in the hippocampus, a structure necessary for memory that is shrunken in people with mood disorders. BDNF encourages the birth of new neurons in the hippocampus; other work this year showed that antidepressants require this neurogenesis to be effective. Through these and similar insights, researchers hope to understand brain biases underlying mental illnesses well enough to correct them.

is stronger than a critical value, then it will eventually tear apart galaxies, solar systems, planets, and even atoms themselves in a "big rip." (Not to worry; cosmologists aren't losing sleep about the prospect.)

For the past 5 years, cosmologists have tested whether the baffling, counterintuitive model of a universe made of dark matter and blown apart by dark energy could be correct. This year, thanks to WMAP, the SDSS data, and new supernova observations, they know the answer is yes—and they're starting to ask new questions. It is, perhaps, a sign that scientists will finally begin to understand the beginning.

—CHARLES SEIFE