From Stellar Explosions to Dark Energy

The Discovery of Cosmic Acceleration

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January 4, 2026

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1 Introduction

In 1998, two independent teams of astronomers made one of the most surprising discoveries in the history of cosmology: the expansion of the universe is not slowing down, as everyone had expected, but is actually accelerating. This discovery would revolutionize our understanding of the cosmos and reveal that nearly 70% of the universe consists of a mysterious "dark energy" that we still don't fully understand today.

This lecture tells the story of how this discovery came about, connecting multiple Nobel Prize-winning achievements across decades. We'll see how fundamental physics (the Chandrasekhar limit), technological innovation (CCDs), and patient observational astronomy came together to answer one of humanity's deepest questions: What is the fate of our universe?

2 Building Block #1: Understanding the Cosmos

2.1 The Expanding Universe

Our journey begins in the 1920s, when Edwin Hubble made the groundbreaking discovery that the universe is expanding. By measuring the distances to galaxies (using Cepheid variable stars as standard candles) and their velocities (using redshift), Hubble established what we now call Hubble's Law:

$$v = H_0 d \tag{1}$$

where v is the recession velocity of a galaxy, d is its distance, and H_0 is the Hubble constant (the current expansion rate of the universe). This simple relationship told us that galaxies farther away are receding faster, implying that space itself is expanding.

2.2 The Cosmological Question

If the universe is expanding now, what will happen in the future? This became one of the central questions in cosmology. The answer depends on the matter and energy content of the universe. There were three possibilities:

- **Open Universe**: If there's not enough matter, the universe will expand forever, with the expansion rate gradually decreasing but never stopping.
- **Flat/Critical Universe**: If there's just the right amount of matter (the critical density), the universe will expand forever, with the expansion asymptotically approaching zero.
- **Closed Universe**: If there's too much matter, gravity will eventually overcome the expansion, and the universe will collapse in a "Big Crunch."

In all three scenarios, everyone assumed the expansion would be *slowing down* due to the gravitational attraction of matter in the universe. The only question was whether it would slow down enough to eventually reverse.

2.3 The Need for Distance Measurements

To determine which scenario describes our universe, astronomers needed to measure how the expansion rate has changed over cosmic time. This requires measuring distances to very distant objects and comparing their actual distances to what we'd expect based on their redshift in different cosmological models.

The challenge is that measuring cosmic distances is difficult. We need "standard candles"—objects with known intrinsic brightness. If we know how bright an object truly is and measure how bright it appears to us, we can calculate its distance using the inverse square law:

$$d = \sqrt{\frac{L}{4\pi F}} \tag{2}$$

where L is the object's luminosity (intrinsic brightness), F is the observed flux (apparent brightness), and d is the distance.

3 Building Block #2: The Chandrasekhar Limit

3.1 Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar's Discovery (1930)

Timeline: 1930 — On a ship voyage from India to England as a 19-year-old student, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar made a calculation that would change astrophysics forever. He determined that there is a maximum mass for white dwarf stars, above which electron degeneracy pressure cannot support the star against gravitational collapse.

3.2 The Physics of White Dwarfs

When a star like our Sun exhausts its nuclear fuel, it sheds its outer layers and leaves behind a dense core called a white dwarf. In a white dwarf, matter is packed so tightly that electrons are forced into higher energy states—a quantum mechanical effect called degeneracy pressure. This pressure, not thermal pressure, supports the white dwarf against gravity.

Chandrasekhar showed that this degeneracy pressure has a limit. When a white dwarf reaches approximately 1.4 solar masses (now called the **Chandrasekhar limit**), the electrons become relativistic, and the pressure can no longer balance gravity. The star must collapse.

3.3 Nobel Recognition

Chandrasekhar's work was initially met with skepticism, particularly from the famous astronomer Arthur Eddington. However, time proved Chandrasekhar correct. In **1983**, he was awarded the **Nobel Prize in Physics** for his theoretical studies of the physical processes important to the structure and evolution of stars.

3.4 Connection to Supernovae

The Chandrasekhar limit turned out to be crucial for understanding Type Ia supernovae. When a white dwarf in a binary system accretes matter from a companion star and approaches this critical mass, catastrophe ensues. The increasing density and temperature trigger runaway carbon fusion throughout the star, resulting in a thermonuclear explosion that completely destroys the white dwarf.

Because these explosions always occur at approximately the same mass—the Chandrasekhar limit—they produce remarkably similar explosions with similar peak luminosities. This uniformity would make them invaluable for cosmology.

4 Building Block #3: The CCD Revolution

4.1 The Invention of CCDs (1969)

Timeline: 1969 — At Bell Laboratories, Willard Boyle and George E. Smith invented the charge-coupled device (CCD) while working on semiconductor memory technology. They could hardly have imagined that their invention would revolutionize astronomy.

4.2 How CCDs Work

A CCD is a light-sensitive integrated circuit that converts photons into electrical charge. Here's how it works:

1. **Photoelectric Effect**: When a photon strikes the silicon semiconductor material in the CCD, it can knock an electron free from a silicon atom, creating an electron-hole pair.
2. **Charge Collection**: The CCD consists of an array of tiny light-sensitive elements called pixels. Each pixel has a potential well that collects and stores the photoelectrons created by incoming light.
3. **Charge Transfer**: After the exposure, the charges are transferred across the chip in a bucket-brigade fashion. Each pixel shifts its charge to its neighbor, row by row, until all the charges reach the edge of the chip.
4. **Readout**: At the edge, the charges are converted to voltage, amplified, and digitized by an analog-to-digital converter, creating a digital image.

4.3 Advantages Over Photographic Plates

Before CCDs, astronomers used photographic plates to record images. CCDs offered revolutionary advantages:

- **Quantum Efficiency**: Photographic plates typically captured only 1–3% of incoming photons. CCDs can capture 70–90% or more, making them up to 50 times more efficient.

- **Linear Response**: CCDs have a linear response to light over a wide range, making photometry (brightness measurements) much more accurate.
- **Dynamic Range**: CCDs can simultaneously detect very faint and relatively bright objects in the same image.
- **Digital Output**: CCD data is inherently digital, allowing for immediate computer analysis, image subtraction, and statistical processing.
- **No Chemical Processing**: Unlike photographic plates, CCDs require no development, eliminating processing variability and reducing time from observation to analysis.

4.4 Nobel Recognition

In **2009**, Willard Boyle and George E. Smith were awarded the **Nobel Prize in Physics** "for the invention of an imaging semiconductor circuit—the CCD sensor." Their citation noted that the CCD revolutionized photography and made it possible to see distant galaxies and exoplanets.

4.5 Impact on Astronomy

The introduction of CCDs to astronomy in the 1970s–80s was transformative. Suddenly, astronomers could detect objects 10–50 times fainter than before, and could do so with precise digital measurements. This made systematic surveys of the sky practical and enabled the detection and study of distant supernovae—objects far too faint for photographic plates.

5 Type Ia Supernovae as Standard Candles

5.1 The Phillips Relationship (1993)

Timeline: 1993 — While Type Ia supernovae were known to have similar peak brightnesses, they weren't perfect standard candles—there was scatter in their luminosities. Mark Phillips discovered a crucial relationship: brighter Type Ia supernovae decline more slowly after peak brightness, while dimmer ones fade more quickly.

This "width-luminosity relationship" (or Phillips relationship) allowed astronomers to standardize Type Ia supernovae. By measuring how quickly a supernova fades, you can correct for the small differences in peak luminosity, making them remarkably precise distance indicators.

5.2 Why Type Ia Supernovae Work So Well

The combination of the Chandrasekhar limit and the Phillips relationship made Type Ia supernovae extraordinary cosmic distance markers:

- **Uniform Explosions**: All Type Ia supernovae explode at approximately the same mass (the Chandrasekhar limit), producing similar energies.

- **Extreme Brightness**: At peak, a Type Ia supernova can briefly outshine its entire host galaxy, making it visible across cosmic distances.
- **Standardizable**: The Phillips relationship allows correction for small variations, achieving distance precision of about 5–10%.
- **Distinctive Spectra**: Type Ia supernovae have characteristic spectra (dominated by silicon absorption) that allow confident identification even at great distances.

5.3 The Distance Ladder

Type Ia supernovae became the top rung of the cosmic distance ladder, capable of measuring distances out to billions of light-years. This made them ideal for studying the expansion history of the universe.

6 The Supernova Cosmology Project

6.1 Formation and Strategy (Early 1990s)

Timeline: 1988–1992 — Saul Perlmutter at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory assembled the Supernova Cosmology Project. Their goal was audacious: use Type Ia supernovae to measure the deceleration of the universe.

The team faced enormous challenges:

- Type Ia supernovae are rare—only 1–2 occur per galaxy per century.
- They needed to find supernovae at great distances (high redshift).
- They needed to find them early enough to observe their light curves.
- They needed to schedule follow-up observations on the world's largest telescopes.

6.2 The "Batch" Method

Perlmutter's team developed a systematic approach:

1. **Survey**: Image many galaxies with a wide-field CCD camera around new moon.
2. **Image Subtraction**: Three weeks later (near the next new moon), re-image the same fields. Subtract the previous images using computer algorithms to identify new bright sources—potential supernovae.
3. **Spectroscopic Confirmation**: Obtain spectra of candidates to confirm they are Type Ia supernovae and measure their redshifts.
4. **Light Curve Monitoring**: Track the brightness of confirmed supernovae as they brighten and fade, measuring their light curves with CCDs.

5. **Analysis**: Use the Phillips relationship to standardize the supernovae and calculate their distances.

This "batch" approach allowed them to schedule telescope time in advance, making the search practical.

7 The High-Z Supernova Search Team

7.1 Formation of a Rival Team (1994)

Timeline: 1994 — Brian Schmidt at the Australian National University formed a competing team, the High-Z (High Redshift) Supernova Search Team. Key members included Adam Riess (who would do much of the analysis) and many experienced supernova astronomers.

7.2 Complementary Approaches

While both teams had the same goal, they used slightly different strategies and independent data sets. This independence would prove crucial—when both teams reached the same shocking conclusion, it provided powerful confirmation.

The High-Z team was particularly quick to implement efficient search techniques and analysis methods, and they benefited from team members' deep experience with supernova observations.

8 The Shocking Discovery

8.1 First Hints (1997–1998)

Timeline: 1997 — The Supernova Cosmology Project published results from seven high-redshift supernovae suggesting the expansion might not be decelerating as expected. But the data was still limited.

Timeline: January 1998 — At an American Astronomical Society meeting, both teams presented preliminary results. The High-Z team showed data from 10 supernovae, and the Supernova Cosmology Project had 40. Both teams were seeing the same disturbing pattern: the distant supernovae were too faint.

8.2 What "Too Faint" Meant

When the distant supernovae appeared fainter than expected, this meant they were farther away than predicted for a decelerating universe. Let's understand why this was so shocking:

- **Expected**: In a decelerating universe, the expansion was faster in the past. Objects at high redshift should appear closer than in a coasting (constant expansion) universe.
- **Observed**: The supernovae appeared *farther* than in a coasting universe, implying the expansion was *slower* in the past and is *speeding up* now.

This was the opposite of what everyone expected. The universe's expansion is accelerating!

8.3 Confirmation and Publication (1998)

Both teams subjected their data to intense scrutiny. Could there be systematic errors? Dust extinction? Evolution of supernova properties? They checked everything carefully.
Timeline: 1998 — Both teams published their results:

- The Supernova Cosmology Project published in *The Astrophysical Journal* (June 1998)
- The High-Z team published in *The Astronomical Journal* (September 1998)

The evidence was compelling: the universe's expansion is accelerating.

9 Dark Energy and the Modern Universe

9.1 What Causes Acceleration?

The acceleration of the universe requires something with negative pressure—something that pushes space apart rather than pulling it together through gravity. Physicists call this mysterious component "dark energy."

The simplest explanation is Einstein's cosmological constant (Λ), which he had introduced in 1917 to create a static universe, then abandoned when Hubble discovered the expansion. Ironically, the cosmological constant turned out to be real after all, though it causes acceleration rather than creating a static universe.

The cosmological constant represents vacuum energy—energy inherent in empty space itself. In the equations of general relativity, it acts as a repulsive force that dominates over gravity on cosmic scales.

9.2 The Dark Energy Universe

Current measurements show that our universe consists of approximately:

- 68% Dark Energy
- 27% Dark Matter
- 5% Ordinary Matter (atoms)

This means that 95% of the universe consists of components we still don't fully understand. Dark energy remains one of the deepest mysteries in physics.

9.3 The Fate of the Universe

With dark energy dominating the universe's energy budget, the expansion will continue to accelerate forever. Galaxies not gravitationally bound to our local group will recede ever faster, eventually moving away faster than light can travel through expanding space. In the far future, our descendants will live in an increasingly lonely universe, with only our local cluster of galaxies visible.

10 The Nobel Prize (2011)

10.1 The Award

Timeline: October 2011 — The Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded to three scientists:

- **Saul Perlmutter** (Supernova Cosmology Project) — one half of the prize
- **Brian Schmidt** (High-Z Supernova Search Team) — one quarter of the prize
- **Adam Riess** (High-Z Supernova Search Team) — one quarter of the prize

The citation read: "for the discovery of the accelerating expansion of the Universe through observations of distant supernovae."

10.2 A Chain of Nobel Prizes

The discovery of cosmic acceleration represents a beautiful example of how scientific progress builds on previous achievements. The chain of Nobel Prizes tells the story:

1. **1983 — Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar**: For theoretical studies of stars, including the Chandrasekhar limit that makes Type Ia supernovae standard candles.
2. **2009 — Willard Boyle & George E. Smith**: For inventing the CCD sensor that made it possible to detect and measure distant supernovae.
3. **2011 — Perlmutter, Schmidt & Riess**: For using Type Ia supernovae to discover cosmic acceleration.

Each discovery enabled the next, culminating in a revolution in our understanding of the universe.

11 Modern Developments and Ongoing Mysteries

11.1 Refined Measurements

Since 1998, astronomers have observed hundreds of Type Ia supernovae at various distances, creating a detailed map of the universe's expansion history. Projects like the Hubble Space Telescope's supernova programs and ground-based surveys have refined our measurements of dark energy's properties.

11.2 The Hubble Tension

Interestingly, recent precise measurements of the Hubble constant using different methods have yielded slightly different values—a discrepancy called the “Hubble tension.” Measurements using Type Ia supernovae in the nearby universe give a value of about 73 km/s/Mpc, while measurements from the cosmic microwave background give about 67 km/s/Mpc. This tension suggests we may be missing something in our understanding of the universe.

11.3 The Nature of Dark Energy

We still don’t know what dark energy truly is. Is it Einstein’s cosmological constant (vacuum energy)? Is it some dynamical field that changes over time (called “quintessence”)? Or does it signal a breakdown in our understanding of gravity on cosmic scales? These questions drive much of modern cosmology.

11.4 Future Surveys

New projects aim to observe thousands of Type Ia supernovae with unprecedented precision:

- The Vera C. Rubin Observatory (formerly LSST) will survey the entire visible sky every few nights
- The Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope will observe supernovae from space
- The Dark Energy Spectroscopic Instrument (DESI) maps the large-scale structure

These surveys will test whether dark energy is truly constant or whether it changes over cosmic time, potentially revealing new physics.

12 Conclusion: Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

The discovery of cosmic acceleration beautifully illustrates how science progresses through a combination of fundamental theory, technological innovation, and patient observation. Chandrasekhar’s theoretical work in the 1930s established that white dwarfs have a mass limit. Boyle and Smith’s invention of the CCD in 1969 gave astronomers the tool to detect faint, distant objects. The supernova teams in the 1990s brought these elements together with systematic surveys and careful analysis to answer a fundamental question about our universe’s fate.

The story also reminds us that science often surprises us. Everyone expected to measure how much the universe’s expansion was slowing down. Instead, they discovered it was speeding up—revealing that we are missing something fundamental in our understanding of the cosmos. This is the essence of scientific discovery: nature doesn’t always behave as we expect, and the universe still holds profound mysteries.

Today’s students of physics and astronomy stand on the shoulders of these giants, equipped with even more powerful telescopes, more sensitive detectors (descendants of those Nobel

Prize-winning CCDs), and deeper questions to explore. The nature of dark energy, the Hubble tension, and the ultimate fate of our universe remain open questions, waiting for the next generation of scientists to unravel.

As we look to the future, one thing is certain: the tools and methods that led to the discovery of cosmic acceleration—precise measurements, technological innovation, and careful attention to what the universe is telling us—will continue to reveal cosmic truths we can barely imagine today.

Key Takeaways:

- Type Ia supernovae are standardizable candles because they explode at the Chandrasekhar limit
- CCD technology made it possible to detect and measure distant supernovae
- The 1998 discovery of cosmic acceleration revealed that dark energy dominates the universe
- This discovery built on multiple Nobel Prize-winning achievements across decades
- Major unsolved questions remain about the nature of dark energy and the universe's ultimate fate