

Theory of everything

A **theory of everything** (^[1] or **ToE**), **final theory**, **ultimate theory**, or **master theory** is a hypothetical single, all-encompassing, coherent theoretical framework of physics that fully explains and links together all physical aspects of the universe.^{[2]:6} Finding a TOE is one of the major unsolved problems in physics. Over the past few centuries, two theoretical frameworks have been developed that, as a whole, most closely resemble a TOE. These two theories upon which all modern physics rests are general relativity (GR) and quantum field theory (QFT). GR is a theoretical framework that only focuses on gravity for understanding the universe in regions of both large scale and high mass: stars, galaxies, clusters of galaxies, etc. On the other hand, QFT is a theoretical framework that only focuses on three non-gravitational forces for understanding the universe in regions of both small scale and low mass: sub-atomic particles, atoms, molecules, etc. QFT successfully implemented the Standard Model that describes the three non-gravitational forces: strong, weak, and electromagnetic force.^{[3]:122}

Through years of research, physicists have experimentally confirmed with tremendous accuracy virtually every prediction made by these two theories when in their appropriate domains of applicability. In accordance with their findings, scientists also learned that GR and QFT, as they are currently formulated, are mutually incompatible – they cannot both be right. Since the usual domains of applicability of GR and QFT are so different, most situations require that only one of the two theories be used.^{[4][5]:842–844} As it turns out, this incompatibility between GR and QFT is only an issue in regions of extremely small scale - the Planck scale - , such as those that exist within a black hole or during the beginning stages of the universe (i.e., the moment immediately following the Big Bang). To resolve this incompatibility, a theoretical framework revealing a deeper underlying reality, unifying gravity with the other three interactions, must be discovered to harmoniously integrate the realms of GR and QFT into a seamless whole: the TOE is a single theory that, in principle, is capable of describing all phenomena in the universe.

In pursuit of this goal, quantum gravity has become one area of active research. One example is string theory, which evolved into a candidate for the TOE, but not without drawbacks (most notably, its lack of currently testable predictions) and controversy. String theory posits that at the beginning of the universe (up to 10^{-43} seconds after the Big Bang), the four fundamental forces were once a single fundamental force. According to string theory, every particle in the universe, at its most microscopic level (Planck length), consists of varying combinations of vibrating strings (or strands) with preferred patterns of vibration. String theory further claims that it is through these specific oscillatory patterns of strings that a particle of unique mass and force charge is created (that is to say, the electron is a type of string that vibrates one way, while the up quark is a type of string vibrating another way, and so forth).

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Historical antecedents

Initially, the term *theory of everything* was used with an ironic reference to various overgeneralized theories. For example, a grandfather of Ijon Tichy – a character from a cycle of Stanisław Lem's science fiction stories of the 1960s – was known to work on the "General Theory of Everything". Physicist John Ellis claims^[6] to have introduced the term into the technical literature in an article in *Nature* in 1986.^[7] Over time, the term stuck in popularizations of theoretical physics research.

From ancient Greece to Einstein

In ancient Greece, pre-Socratic philosophers speculated that the apparent diversity of observed phenomena was due to a single type of interaction, namely the motions and collisions of atoms. The concept of 'atom', introduced by Democritus, was an early philosophical attempt to unify all phenomena observed in nature.

Archimedes was possibly the first scientist known to have described nature with axioms (or principles) and then deduce new results from them. He thus tried to describe "everything" starting from a few axioms. Any "theory of everything" is similarly expected to be based on axioms and to deduce all observable phenomena from them.^{[8]:340}

Following Democritean atomism, the mechanical philosophy of the 17th century posited that all forces could be ultimately reduced to contact forces between the atoms, then imagined as tiny solid particles.^{[9]:184}^[10]

In the late 17th century, Isaac Newton's description of the long-distance force of gravity implied that not all forces in nature result from things coming into contact. Newton's work in his *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* dealt with this in a further example of unification, in this case unifying Galileo's work on terrestrial gravity, Kepler's laws of planetary motion and the phenomenon of tides by explaining these apparent actions at a distance under one single law: the law of universal gravitation.^[11]

In 1814, building on these results, Laplace famously suggested that a sufficiently powerful intellect could, if it knew the position and velocity of every particle at a given time, along with the laws of nature, calculate the position of any particle at any other time:^{[12]:ch 7}

An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes.

— *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités*, Introduction. 1814

Laplace thus envisaged a combination of gravitation and mechanics as a theory of everything. Modern quantum mechanics implies that uncertainty is inescapable, and thus that Laplace's vision has to be amended: a theory of everything must include gravitation and quantum mechanics.

In 1820, Hans Christian Ørsted discovered a connection between electricity and magnetism, triggering decades of work that culminated in 1865, in James Clerk Maxwell's theory of electromagnetism. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, it gradually became apparent that many common examples of forces – contact forces, elasticity, viscosity, friction, and pressure – result from electrical interactions between the smallest particles of matter.

In his experiments of 1849–50, Michael Faraday was the first to search for a unification of gravity with electricity and magnetism.^[13] However, he found no connection.

In 1900, David Hilbert published a famous list of mathematical problems. In Hilbert's sixth problem, he challenged researchers to find an axiomatic basis to all of physics. In this problem he thus asked for what today would be called a theory of everything.^[14]

In the late 1920s, the new quantum mechanics showed that the chemical bonds between atoms were examples of (quantum) electrical forces, justifying Dirac's boast that "the underlying physical laws necessary for the mathematical theory of a large part of physics and the whole of chemistry are thus completely known".^[15]

After 1915, when Albert Einstein published the theory of gravity (general relativity), the search for a unified field theory combining gravity with electromagnetism began with a renewed interest. In Einstein's day, the strong and the weak forces had not yet been discovered, yet, he found the potential existence of two other distinct forces -gravity and electromagnetism- far more alluring. This launched his thirty-year voyage in search of the so-called "unified field theory" that he hoped would show that these two forces are really manifestations of one grand underlying principle. During these last few decades of his life, this quixotic quest isolated Einstein from the mainstream of physics. Understandably, the mainstream was instead far more excited about the newly emerging framework of quantum mechanics. Einstein wrote to a friend in the early 1940s, "I have become a lonely old chap who is mainly known because he doesn't wear socks and who is exhibited as a curiosity on special occasions." Prominent contributors were Gunnar Nordström, Hermann Weyl, Arthur Eddington, David Hilbert,^[16] Theodor Kaluza, Oskar Klein (see Kaluza–Klein theory), and most notably, Albert Einstein and his collaborators. Einstein intensely searched for, but ultimately failed to find, a unifying theory.^{[17]:ch 17} (But see:Einstein–Maxwell–Dirac equations.) More than a half a century later, Einstein's dream of discovering a unified theory has become the Holy Grail of modern physics.

Twentieth century and the nuclear interactions

In the twentieth century, the search for a unifying theory was interrupted by the discovery of the strong and weak nuclear forces (or interactions), which differ both from gravity and from electromagnetism. A further hurdle was the acceptance that in a TOE, quantum mechanics had to be incorporated from the start, rather than emerging as a consequence of a deterministic unified theory, as Einstein had hoped.

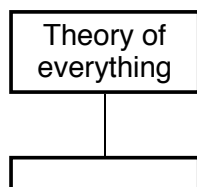
Gravity and electromagnetism could always peacefully coexist as entries in a list of classical forces, but for many years it seemed that gravity could not even be incorporated into the quantum framework, let alone unified with the other fundamental forces. For this reason, work on unification, for much of the twentieth century, focused on understanding the three "quantum" forces: electromagnetism and the weak and strong forces. The first two were combined in 1967–68 by Sheldon Glashow, Steven Weinberg, and Abdus Salam into the "electroweak" force.^[18] Electroweak unification is a broken symmetry: the electromagnetic and weak forces appear distinct at low energies because the particles carrying the weak force, the W and Z bosons, have non-zero masses of $80.4 \text{ GeV}/c^2$ and $91.2 \text{ GeV}/c^2$, whereas the photon, which carries the electromagnetic force, is massless. At higher energies Ws and Zs can be created easily and the unified nature of the force becomes apparent.

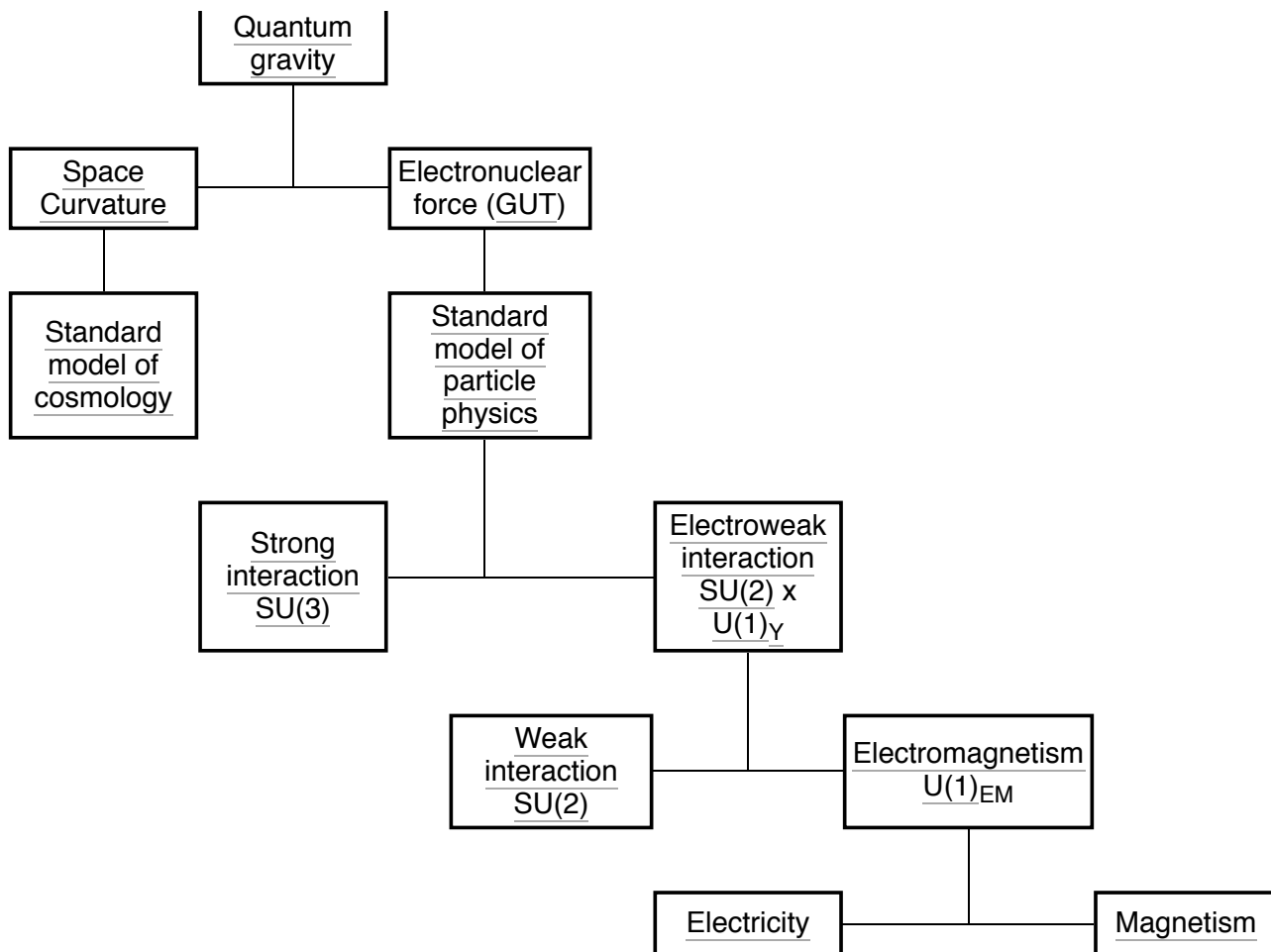
While the strong and electroweak forces peacefully coexist in the Standard Model of particle physics, they remain distinct. So far, the quest for a theory of everything is thus unsuccessful on two points: neither a unification of the strong and electroweak forces – which Laplace would have called 'contact forces' – nor a unification of these forces with gravitation has been achieved.

Modern physics

Conventional sequence of theories

A Theory of Everything would unify all the fundamental interactions of nature: gravitation, strong interaction, weak interaction, and electromagnetism. Because the weak interaction can transform elementary particles from one kind into another, the TOE should also yield a deep understanding of the various different kinds of possible particles. The usual assumed path of theories is given in the following graph, where each unification step leads one level up:





In this graph, electroweak unification occurs at around 100 GeV, grand unification is predicted to occur at 10^{16} GeV, and unification of the GUT force with gravity is expected at the Planck energy, roughly 10^{19} GeV.

Several Grand Unified Theories (GUTs) have been proposed to unify electromagnetism and the weak and strong forces. Grand unification would imply the existence of an electronuclear force; it is expected to set in at energies of the order of 10^{16} GeV, far greater than could be reached by any possible Earth-based particle accelerator. Although the simplest GUTs have been experimentally ruled out, the general idea, especially when linked with supersymmetry, remains a favorite candidate in the theoretical physics community. Supersymmetric GUTs seem plausible not only for their theoretical "beauty", but because they naturally produce large quantities of dark matter, and because the inflationary force may be related to GUT physics (although it does not seem to form an inevitable part of the theory). Yet GUTs are clearly not the final answer; both the current standard model and all proposed GUTs are quantum field theories which require the problematic technique of renormalization to yield sensible answers. This is usually regarded as a sign that these are only effective field theories, omitting crucial phenomena relevant only at very high energies.^[4]

The final step in the graph requires resolving the separation between quantum mechanics and gravitation, often equated with general relativity. Numerous researchers concentrate their efforts on this specific step; nevertheless, no accepted theory of quantum gravity – and thus no accepted theory of everything – has emerged yet. It is usually assumed that the TOE will also solve the remaining problems of GUTs.

In addition to explaining the forces listed in the graph, a TOE may also explain the status of at least two candidate forces suggested by modern cosmology: an inflationary force and dark energy. Furthermore, cosmological experiments also suggest the existence of dark matter, supposedly composed of fundamental particles outside the scheme of the standard model. However, the existence of these forces and particles has not been proven.

String theory and M-theory

? Unsolved problem in physics:

Since the 1990s, some physicists such as Edward Witten believe that 11-dimensional M-theory, which is described in some limits by one of the five perturbative superstring theories, and in another by the maximally-supersymmetric 11-dimensional supergravity, is the theory of everything. However, there is no widespread consensus on this issue.

A surprising property of string/M-theory is that extra dimensions are required for the theory's consistency. In this regard, string theory can be seen as building on the insights of the Kaluza–Klein theory, in which it was realized that applying general relativity to a five-dimensional universe (with one of them small and curled up) looks from the four-dimensional perspective like the usual general relativity together with Maxwell's electrodynamics. This lent credence to the idea of unifying gauge and gravity interactions, and to extra dimensions, but did not address the detailed experimental requirements. Another important property of string theory is its supersymmetry, which together with extra dimensions are the two main proposals for resolving the hierarchy problem of the standard model, which is (roughly) the question of why gravity is so much weaker than any other force. The extra-dimensional solution involves allowing gravity to propagate into the other dimensions while keeping other forces confined to a four-dimensional spacetime, an idea that has been realized with explicit stringy mechanisms.^[19]

Research into string theory has been encouraged by a variety of theoretical and experimental factors. On the experimental side, the particle content of the standard model supplemented with neutrino masses fits into a spinor representation of SO(10), a subgroup of E8 that routinely emerges in string theory, such as in heterotic string theory^[20] or (sometimes equivalently) in F-theory.^{[21][22]} String theory has mechanisms that may explain why fermions come in three hierarchical generations, and explain the mixing rates between quark generations.^[23] On the theoretical side, it has begun to address some of the key questions in quantum gravity, such as resolving the black hole information paradox, counting the correct entropy of black holes^{[24][25]} and allowing for topology-changing processes.^{[26][27][28]} It has also led to many insights in pure mathematics and in ordinary, strongly-coupled gauge theory due to the Gauge/String duality.

In the late 1990s, it was noted that one major hurdle in this endeavor is that the number of possible four-dimensional universes is incredibly large. The small, "curled up" extra dimensions can be compactified in an enormous number of different ways (one estimate is 10^{500}) each of which leads to different properties for the low-energy particles and forces. This array of models is known as the string theory landscape.^{[8]:347}

One proposed solution is that many or all of these possibilities are realised in one or another of a huge number of universes, but that only a small number of them are habitable. Hence what we normally conceive as the fundamental constants of the universe are ultimately the result of the anthropic principle rather than dictated by theory. This has led to criticism of string theory,^[29] arguing that it cannot make useful (i.e., original, falsifiable, and verifiable) predictions and regarding it as a pseudoscience. Others disagree,^[30] and string theory remains an active topic of investigation in theoretical physics.^[31]

Loop quantum gravity

Current research on loop quantum gravity may eventually play a fundamental role in a TOE, but that is not its primary aim.^[32] Also loop quantum gravity introduces a lower bound on the possible length scales.

There have been recent claims that loop quantum gravity may be able to reproduce features resembling the Standard Model. So far only the first generation of fermions (leptons and quarks) with correct parity properties have been modelled by Sundance Bilson-Thompson using preons constituted of braids of spacetime as the building blocks.^[33] However, there is no derivation of the Lagrangian that would describe the interactions of such particles, nor is it possible to show that such particles are fermions, nor that the gauge groups or interactions of the Standard Model are realised. Utilization of quantum computing concepts made it possible to demonstrate that the particles are able to survive quantum fluctuations.^[34]

This model leads to an interpretation of electric and colour charge as topological quantities (electric as number and chirality of twists carried on the individual ribbons and colour as variants of such twisting for fixed electric charge).

Is string theory, superstring theory, or M-theory, or some other variant on this theme, a step on the road to a "theory of everything", or just a blind alley?

(more unsolved problems in physics)

Bilson-Thompson's original paper suggested that the higher-generation fermions could be represented by more complicated braidings, although explicit constructions of these structures were not given. The electric charge, colour, and parity properties of such fermions would arise in the same way as for the first generation. The model was expressly generalized for an infinite number of generations and for the weak force bosons (but not for photons or gluons) in a 2008 paper by Bilson-Thompson, Hackett, Kauffman and Smolin.^[35]

Other attempts

Among other attempts to develop a theory of everything is the theory of causal fermion systems,^[36] giving the two current physical theories (general relativity and quantum field theory) as limiting cases.

Another theory is called Causal Sets. As some of the approaches mentioned above, its direct goal isn't necessarily to achieve a TOE but primarily a working theory of quantum gravity, which might eventually include the standard model and become a candidate for a TOE. Its founding principle is that spacetime is fundamentally discrete and that the spacetime events are related by a partial order. This partial order has the physical meaning of the causality relations between relative past and future distinguishing spacetime events.

Outside the previously mentioned attempts there is Garrett Lisi's E8 proposal. This theory attempts to construct general relativity and the standard model within the Lie group E8. The theory doesn't provide a novel quantization procedure and the author suggests its quantization might follow the Loop Quantum Gravity approach above mentioned.^[37]

Causal dynamical triangulation does not assume any pre-existing arena (dimensional space), but rather attempts to show how the spacetime fabric itself evolves.

Christoph Schiller's Strand Model attempts to account for the gauge symmetry of the Standard Model of particle physics, $U(1) \times SU(2) \times SU(3)$, with the three Reidemeister moves of knot theory by equating each elementary particle to a different tangle of one, two, or three strands (selectively a long prime knot or unknotted curve, a rational tangle, or a braided tangle respectively).

Another attempt may be related to ER=EPR, a conjecture in physics stating that entangled particles are connected by a wormhole (or Einstein–Rosen bridge).^{[38][39]}

Present status

At present, there is no candidate theory of everything that includes the standard model of particle physics and general relativity. For example, no candidate theory is able to calculate the fine structure constant or the mass of the electron. Most particle physicists expect that the outcome of the ongoing experiments – the search for new particles at the large particle accelerators and for dark matter – are needed in order to provide further input for a TOE.

Arguments against

In parallel to the intense search for a TOE, various scholars have seriously debated the possibility of its discovery.

Gödel's incompleteness theorem

A number of scholars claim that Gödel's incompleteness theorem suggests that any attempt to construct a TOE is bound to fail. Gödel's theorem, informally stated, asserts that any formal theory sufficient to express elementary arithmetical facts and strong enough for them to be proved is either inconsistent (both a statement and its denial can be derived from its axioms) or incomplete, in the sense that there is a true statement that can't be derived in the formal theory.

Stanley Jaki, in his 1966 book *The Relevance of Physics*, pointed out that, because any "theory of everything" will certainly be a consistent non-trivial mathematical theory, it must be incomplete. He claims that this dooms searches for a deterministic theory of everything.^[40]

Freeman Dyson has stated that "Gödel's theorem implies that pure mathematics is inexhaustible. No matter how many problems we solve, there will always be other problems that cannot be solved within the existing rules. [...] Because of Gödel's theorem, physics is inexhaustible too. The laws of physics are a finite set of rules, and include the rules for doing mathematics, so that Gödel's theorem

applies to them."^[41]

Stephen Hawking was originally a believer in the Theory of Everything but, after considering Gödel's Theorem, concluded that one was not obtainable: "Some people will be very disappointed if there is not an ultimate theory, that can be formulated as a finite number of principles. I used to belong to that camp, but I have changed my mind."^[42]

Jürgen Schmidhuber (1997) has argued against this view; he points out that Gödel's theorems are irrelevant for computable physics.^[43] In 2000, Schmidhuber explicitly constructed limit-computable, deterministic universes whose pseudo-randomness based on undecidable, Gödel-like halting problems is extremely hard to detect but does not at all prevent formal TOEs describable by very few bits of information.^[44]

Related critique was offered by Solomon Feferman,^[45] among others. Douglas S. Robertson offers Conway's game of life as an example:^[46] The underlying rules are simple and complete, but there are formally undecidable questions about the game's behaviors. Analogously, it may (or may not) be possible to completely state the underlying rules of physics with a finite number of well-defined laws, but there is little doubt that there are questions about the behavior of physical systems which are formally undecidable on the basis of those underlying laws.

Since most physicists would consider the statement of the underlying rules to suffice as the definition of a "theory of everything", most physicists argue that Gödel's Theorem does *not* mean that a TOE cannot exist. On the other hand, the scholars invoking Gödel's Theorem appear, at least in some cases, to be referring not to the underlying rules, but to the understandability of the behavior of all physical systems, as when Hawking mentions arranging blocks into rectangles, turning the computation of prime numbers into a physical question.^[47] This definitional discrepancy may explain some of the disagreement among researchers.

Fundamental limits in accuracy

No physical theory to date is believed to be precisely accurate. Instead, physics has proceeded by a series of "successive approximations" allowing more and more accurate predictions over a wider and wider range of phenomena. Some physicists believe that it is therefore a mistake to confuse theoretical models with the true nature of reality, and hold that the series of approximations will never terminate in the "truth". Einstein himself expressed this view on occasions.^[48] Following this view, we may reasonably hope for a theory of everything which self-consistently incorporates all currently known forces, but we should not expect it to be the final answer.

On the other hand, it is often claimed that, despite the apparently ever-increasing complexity of the mathematics of each new theory, in a deep sense associated with their underlying gauge symmetry and the number of dimensionless physical constants, the theories are becoming simpler. If this is the case, the process of simplification cannot continue indefinitely.

Lack of fundamental laws

There is a philosophical debate within the physics community as to whether a theory of everything deserves to be called *the* fundamental law of the universe.^[49] One view is the hard reductionist position that the TOE is the fundamental law and that all other theories that apply within the universe are a consequence of the TOE. Another view is that emergent laws, which govern the behavior of complex systems, should be seen as equally fundamental. Examples of emergent laws are the second law of thermodynamics and the theory of natural selection. The advocates of emergence argue that emergent laws, especially those describing complex or living systems are independent of the low-level, microscopic laws. In this view, emergent laws are as fundamental as a TOE.

The debates do not make the point at issue clear. Possibly the only issue at stake is the right to apply the high-status term "fundamental" to the respective subjects of research. A well-known debate over this took place between Steven Weinberg and Philip Anderson

Impossibility of being "of everything"

Although the name "theory of everything" suggests the determinism of Laplace's quotation, this gives a very misleading impression. Determinism is frustrated by the probabilistic nature of quantum mechanical predictions, by the extreme sensitivity to initial conditions that leads to mathematical chaos, by the limitations due to event horizons, and by the extreme mathematical difficulty of applying the theory. Thus, although the current standard model of particle physics "in principle" predicts almost all known non-gravitational phenomena, in practice only a few quantitative results have been derived from the full theory (e.g., the masses of some of the simplest hadrons), and these results (especially the particle masses which are most relevant for low-energy physics) are less accurate than existing experimental measurements. The TOE would almost certainly be even harder to apply for the prediction of experimental results, and thus might be of limited use.

A motive for seeking a TOE, apart from the pure intellectual satisfaction of completing a centuries-long quest, is that prior examples of unification have predicted new phenomena, some of which (e.g., electrical generators) have proved of great practical importance. And like in these prior examples of unification, the TOE would probably allow us to confidently define the domain of validity and residual error of low-energy approximations to the full theory.

Infinite number of onion layers

Frank Close regularly argues that the layers of nature may be like the layers of an onion, and that the number of layers might be infinite.^[50] This would imply an infinite sequence of physical theories.

Impossibility of calculation

Weinberg^[51] points out that calculating the precise motion of an actual projectile in the Earth's atmosphere is impossible. So how can we know we have an adequate theory for describing the motion of projectiles? Weinberg suggests that we know *principles* (Newton's laws of motion and gravitation) that work "well enough" for simple examples, like the motion of planets in empty space. These principles have worked so well on simple examples that we can be reasonably confident they will work for more complex examples. For example, although general relativity includes equations that do not have exact solutions, it is widely accepted as a valid theory because all of its equations with exact solutions have been experimentally verified. Likewise, a TOE must work for a wide range of simple examples in such a way that we can be reasonably confident it will work for every situation in physics.

See also

- Absolute (philosophy)
- Argument from beauty
- Attractor
- Beyond black holes
- Beyond the standard model
- Big Bang
- Bit-string physics
- cGh physics
- Chronology of the universe
- Electroweak interaction
- ER=EPR
- Holographic principle
- Mathematical beauty
- Mathematical universe hypothesis
- Multiverse
- Penrose interpretation
- Scale relativity
- Standard Model (mathematical formulation)
- Superfluid vacuum theory (SVT)
- *The Theory of Everything* (2014 film)
- Timeline of the Big Bang
- Unified Field Theory
- Zero-energy universe

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External links

- [The Elegant Universe](https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/elegant/program.html) (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/elegant/program.html>), *Nova* episode about the search for the theory of everything and string theory.
- [Theory of Everything](http://www.vega.org.uk/video/programme/7) (<http://www.vega.org.uk/video/programme/7>), freeview video by the [Vega Science Trust](#), BBC and [Open University](#).
- [The Theory of Everything](http://iai.tv/video/the-theory-of-everything) (<http://iai.tv/video/the-theory-of-everything>): Are we getting closer, or is a final theory of matter and the universe impossible? Debate between [John Ellis](#) (physicist), [Frank Close](#) and [Nicholas Maxwell](#).
- [Why The World Exists](http://iai.tv/video/why-the-world-exists) (<http://iai.tv/video/why-the-world-exists>), a discussion between physicist [Laura Mersini-Houghton](#), cosmologist [George Francis Rayner Ellis](#) and philosopher [David Wallace](#) about dark matter, parallel universes and explaining why these and the present Universe exist.
- [Theories of Everything](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p004y24b) (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p004y24b>), BBC Radio 4 discussion with Brian Greene, John Barrow & Val Gibson (*In Our Time*, Mar. 25, 2004)

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