
When, after we’d written *A Briefer History*, I asked him if he wanted to write another book together, my idea was to focus on his latest physics research, which I had been following with interest. Had we stuck to the physics alone, that would have been plenty for a great and provocative book. But Stephen soon made the idea bigger.

In *The Grand Design* he wanted to talk about the philosophical implications of his latest work. “I want to present a new philosophy for theoretical physics,” he told me. That was a rather bold goal. It interested me as long as we didn’t take it too seriously—after all, we weren’t philosophers. We weren’t experts in the field. On the other hand, I didn’t see anything wrong with trying to illuminate how physicists think about their work and its relation to the world, and the science content of the book did invite such a discussion.

Given Stephen’s desire to get philosophical, I was surprised when I saw the message that he had emailed me that morning. It included some text that he suggested be added early in the first chapter. His text began, “How can we understand the world in which we find ourselves? How does the universe behave? What is the nature of reality? Where did all this come from? Did the universe need a creator?”

And then he added, “Traditionally these are questions for Philosophy, but Philosophy is dead . . .”

How was it possible, I wondered, to start a book in which we’d present “a new philosophy for theoretical physics” with the statement that philosophy is dead?

“Why do you want to write that philosophy is dead?” I asked him. “It’s not dead,” I said. “What used to be called ‘natural philosophy’ is dead, but not philosophy.”

Natural philosophy was a precursor of the sciences, a branch of philosophy in which scholars attempted to understand nature through pure reason rather than reason plus experiment. It was rendered archaic by the development of the scientific method. Stephen knew all this, but I continued making my case.

“I agree that today we can understand the universe better through science than philosophy,” I said. “But there is also the philosophy of life. There’s ethics. There’s logic.
There’s the philosophy of individual disciplines such as mathematics and physics. Those branches of philosophy aren’t dead.”

Stephen gave me a critical look. He obviously saw things differently. As I awaited his response, I gazed idly at him. Suddenly it struck me that the sport jacket he was wearing was a couple of sizes too big. He seemed lost in it. And in his slacks, too. I supposed that well-fitting clothes would be difficult to find for him, given his almost complete lack of muscle. There wasn’t much meat on his bones.

“I have an idea,” I said to Stephen. He stopped composing his answer and turned his eyes toward me. “How about writing ‘As a way of understanding the physical world, philosophy is dead’?”

Stephen grimaced. He looked back at his computer screen and resumed working on his response.

Impatient for his reaction, I got up and walked around to watch as he typed. It felt a bit funny, as I wasn’t accustomed to doing that—and I’d been warned that he “generally” didn’t like it. But on this occasion he didn’t seem to mind. In time, he’d grow comfortable with my pulling up a chair to sit beside him. He would come to welcome it because it would speed things up—I could watch his sentences evolve on his screen, and sometimes I could finish them for him or guess where he was going. When I got it right it would save time, because he didn’t have to finish typing it all out. But if I guessed wrong, he’d be annoyed. If I guessed wrong twice in a row, he’d be really annoyed.

I got to his side as he was just finishing his typing. His text read, “Your sentence has no punch.”

I answered before he had a chance to make his computer voice it.

“That’s true,” I said. “It’s less punchy, but to say ‘Philosophy is dead’ is an oversimplification.”

He looked back at his computer screen but didn’t type anything new, just had his computer give voice to what he had already written. “Your sentence has no punch,” it said.

“I do get what you’re saying,” I told him. “But if we say philosophy is dead we will piss off a lot of people.”

He looked back at his screen and clicked again. Stephen could control the volume of his computer voice, and now his computer voice repeated “Your sentence has no punch,” this time very loudly.

I looked at him. He bent his mouth into an unnatural shape, like an exaggerated smile, but upside down. He was apparently frustrated that I wasn’t getting the point. I had to admit that my phrasing really didn’t have much punch. And if there is one thing Stephen liked, it was punch.
There were two types of coworkers that Stephen had little patience with: those who were not bright enough to understand his point, and those who didn’t accept his point. Was I being too literal? Was I treading on his air for the dramatic? Don Page, one of Stephen’s students from the early days when he could still control his wheelchair, told me that once, during an argument in which Don wasn’t conceding, Stephen charged him with the chair and would have run him down if he hadn’t jumped out of the way. When I knew him, Stephen no longer had control over the chair. He couldn’t run me down. But this issue wasn’t worth making him wish he could.

“Okay,” I said. “But we’ll cause a stir.”

At that thought, his frown flipped into a big smile. He liked causing stirs.