WISE GUY

Christopher Langan spends his downtime coming up with a solution to a problem that philosophers and scientists have pondered for thousands of years.

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He's a working class guy with an IQ that's off the charts. What does he have to say about science? Everything -- a theory of everything, that is.

by John R. Quain

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Christopher Langan's theory grapples with some of the murkiest questions about our universe.

The not immodest proposal Christopher Langan is working on is a theory about theories of everything. Physicists often use the term "theory of everything" to describe one of their holy grails, a theory that would be capable of unifying the laws that govern the universe.

When Langan says everything, though, he means everything: from quantum mechanics to consciousness.

He calls his theory the Cognitive-Theoretic Model of the Universe. You can think of it as the answer to the question of how and why science is able to describe reality. What he's getting at is that a complete explanation of reality must encompass not only the things we observe (such as events in our universe) but also the way we think about those things.

It's a sticky conundrum that has foiled philosophers and scientists -- including Descartes and Einstein -- for hundreds of years. Here's an example: Science generally does not count as "real" anything that can't be measured or detected. But although you can't measure or see a mathematical principle, scientists need mathematics to conduct their work. In other words, scientists have a problem on their hands: They rely on numbers even though the question of whether or not numbers are real has not been resolved.

With his theory, Langan hopes -- among other

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things -- to explain the relationship between abstract math and concrete science. He thinks it's necessary to answer such questions before one can come up with a correct theory of the cosmos or even a theory of everything.

For example, Langan says that most theoretical physicists try to fit mathematical relationships to the available empirical data. But because raw information tends to be scarce in the cosmic and subatomic realms, Langan believes that they often resort to filling in the holes with unverifiable mathematical conjecture. Before they do that, however, he argues that they should consider the more basic logical requirements of formulating such cosmological theories.

Does Langan really have the final answer? Robert Seitz, a physicist and former NASA executive, is familiar with Langan's work but admits that he "doesn't fully understand Langan's theory." Seitz does say, however, that Langan is "perhaps the smartest individual" he's ever met, and is looking forward to seeing Langan's "theory given serious and open-minded review." So is Langan. He's explaining it all in detail in his book, Design for a Universe, and is looking for a publisher.

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