

POETS SPEAK of attaining some distance from the world — finding some strangeness — to express the truths that make a rock stony or a love sublime. Like the poet, the physicist seeks not merely to name the properties of nature, but to plumb their essence. To truly understand the world around us, to fully delight in its marvels, we must step outside ordinary experience and look at the world through new eyes.

PARTICLE PHYSICISTS look at the world quite literally through new eyes when we use accelerators and detectors to create and observe fresh experience. In a more figurative sense, we expand our vision by dreaming other worlds, the better to understand our own. To conduct a thought experiment that transports us to an alternative world, we might simply ask what would happen if we could change a certain parameter, a quantity on which the consequences of physical laws depend. Or we might idealize our own world, trying to get at its essence by sweeping aside the clutter of distracting detail. Or we might forge a more radical vision by changing the rules that shape the world.

THE POINT OF DREAMING NEW WORLDS — the goal of our science — is not merely to describe our world, but to understand why the world is the way it is.

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