

# Unlocking the Universe's secrets

Hawking's work centred around bringing together relativity and quantum theory

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Stephen Hawking, who has died aged 76, was Britain's most famous modern day scientist, a genius who dedicated his life to unlocking the secrets of the Universe.

Inside the shell of his increasingly useless body was a razor-sharp mind, fascinated by the nature of the Universe, how it was formed and how it might end.

## Following Newton

"My goal is simple," he once said. "It is complete understanding of the universe, why it is as it is and why it exists at all."

Much of that work centred on bringing together relativity – the nature of space and time – and quantum theory – how the smallest particles in the Universe behave – to explain the creation of the Universe and how it is governed. In 1974, he became one of the youngest fellows of Britain's most prestigious scientific body, the Royal Society, at the age of 32.



**Straddling multiple worlds:** Stephen Hawking at the World Science Festival in New York in 2010. ■ AP

In 1979 he was appointed Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University, where he had moved from Oxford University to study theoretical astronomy and cosmology. A previous holder of the prestigious post was the 17th-century British scientist Isaac Newton. Mr. Hawking eventually put Newton's gravitational

theories to the test in 2007 when, aged 65, he went on a weightless flight in the United States as a prelude to a hoped-for sub-orbital spaceflight.

"I think the human race has no future if it doesn't go into space," he said.

"I believe life on Earth is at an ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster

such as sudden global warming, nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus or other dangers." More recently he said artificial intelligence (AI) could contribute to the eradication of disease and poverty, while warning of its potential dangers.

## Science and beyond

His 1988 book *A Brief History of Time* sought to explain to non-scientists the fundamental theories of the universe and it became an international bestseller, bringing him global acclaim. It was followed in 2001 by *The Universe in a Nutshell*.

Beyond scientific debate Mr. Hawking also weighed into politics, describing Donald Trump as "a demagogue who seems to appeal to the lowest common denominator" ahead of his election as U.S. President.

Mr. Hawking also warned Britain ahead of the Brexit referendum in 2016 against leaving the European Union: "Gone are the days when we could stand on our own against the world".