My feelings are perhaps childish or foolish but they are sincere. I was first notified of the prize at 4 A.M. by a New York newspaper. I was not asked by the Nobel committee whether I wanted to receive it. I wanted to quietly demur the honor, but it was already too late to be possible. It would have been an even greater publicity annoyance if I said no in public after newspapers knew I'd won it. It would be a worldwide sensation.

It has been a mild annoyance to me ever since. Never mind whether it should be or not—or whether you think it would not be to you—or whether it is ungrateful of me—it is, to me, an annoyance. On the other hand, as you imply, I am a jerk to say so publicly. An illogical jerk, certainly, to complain to a newspaper publicly about not wanting publicity.

On the other hand you seem to think my criticism of the prize is a criticism of the Swedish people, or of Alfred Nobel himself. I didn't mean to imply that. The one delightful compensation for the trouble of the prize was the wholehearted and open friendly welcome of all the Swedish people when my wife and I went there. I have many Scandinavian friends and students and they are marvelous people. I am sorry if you thought I believed otherwise.

I don't know Mr. Nobel's life or motives for giving the prize, so if I criticized him personally in my remarks I didn't know what I was talking about.

May I wish you many honors in your life, for I know you will accept them far more graciously than I.

From the curmudgeon,

Richard P. Feynman

RICHARD P. FEYNMAN TO DAVID MERMIN, MARCH 30, 1984

David Mermin is an eminent physicist and professor at Cornell who, like Feynman, takes delight in finding simple, elegant explanations for surprising physical phenomena. In 1981 he published an article on quantum mechanics that delighted Feynman and moved him to write the following letter.

Dr. N. David Mermin
Lab. of Atomic and Solid State Physics
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York

Dear Dr. Mermin:

One of the most beautiful papers in physics that I know of is yours in the American Journal of Physics 49 (1981) 10.

All my mature life I have been trying to distill the strangeness of quantum mechanics into simpler and simpler circumstances. I have given many lectures of ever increasing simplicity and purity. I was recently very close to your description (down to six states, instead of three, etc.) when your ideally pristine presentation appeared.

I have since copied it almost exactly (with attribution, of course) in several recent lectures on the subject. Thank you.

I have been making a similar series of attempts to explain the relation of spin and statistics. Can you do as well there? Perhaps if we meet someday we can discuss it together and create a clear explanation of why exchanging two particles implies a tacit rotation of the axes of one by 360 degrees relative to the other.

Sincerely,

Richard P. Feynman

The "relation of spin and statistics" to which Feynman refers is the fact that fundamental particles whose spin angular momentum (in units of Planck's constant) is an integer want, in a statistical (probabilistic) sense, to be in the same quantum state (do the same thing at the same place at the same time as each other), while half-integer-spin particles can never be in the same state. This relation between spin and statistics underlies many important phenomena—such as the lasing of lasers and the fact that solid objects cannot easily be squashed—and so Feynman wanted to find a simple explanation for them.

Feynman and Mermin knew an explanation that relied on one simple property of all fundamental particles: when two particles, with any spin, are interchanged, the result is the same as not interchanging them but instead rotating one of them through 360 degrees. Feynman hoped Mermin could explain that weird rotational property in a simple way.

DAVID MERMIN TO RICHARD P. FEYNMAN, APRIL 11, 1984

Dear Dr. Feynman:

Thanks for the letter about my gedanken demonstration. I'm fond of that paper myself, but I've learned that there are two kinds of physicists: those who enjoy it and those who utterly fail to get the point. I thought

you'd be the first kind, but I'm glad to know for sure... I have nothing simple to say about why interchanging two particles involves a tacit rotation of one by 360° relative to the other. I don't even have a satisfactory complicated understanding. If you ever write anything about that please send me a copy...

Thanks again for the very nice letter. Since you, through your writings, have influenced the way I try to write and think about physics more than anybody else, I'm delighted to have had at least one chance to return the favor.

Yours,
David Mermin
Cornell University Laboratory of Atomic and Solid State Physics

RICHARD P. FEYNMAN TO WILLIAM G. BRADLEY, JULY 13, 1984

As a reminder to the reader, the "event" in question is the examination following the nasty bump on the head that the excited customer received on his way into the computer store.

Dr. William G. Bradley
Director, NMR Imaging Laboratory
Huntington Medical Research Institute
Pasadena, California

Dear Dr. Bradley,

Thank you so much for sending the NMR pictures of my brain. The instrument is sensational in the detail and resolution you can see.

But you can't see what I am thinking—for apparently I still have some functional failure as I remember the event as on 25-Jun–19:33:24 whereas your instrument says it occurred on 06-Jun–19:33:18. The 6 second doesn't concern me, for my time errors already averaged 10 sec. standard deviation before the accident (a deleterious effect of age, I think) but the 19 day error is evidence of severe functional disability (resulting from hematoma, probably).

Sincerely,
Richard P. Feynman

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