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It's difficult, writes Lee Smolin in this lucid overview of modern physics, to talk meaningfully about the big questions of space and time, given the limitations of our technology and perceptions.

It's more difficult still given some of the contradictions and inconsistencies that obtain between quantum theory, which "was invented to explain why atoms are stable and do not instantly fall apart" but has little to say about space and time, and general relatively theory, which has everything to say about the big picture but tends to collapse when describing the behavior of atoms and their even smaller constituents. Whence the hero of Smolin's tale, the as-yet-incomplete quantum theory of gravity, which seeks to unify relativity and quantum theory--and, in the bargain, to move toward a "grand theory of everything." Smolin ably explains concepts that underlie quantum gravity, such as background independence, the superposition principle, and the notion of causal structure, and he traces the development of allied theories that have shaped modern physics and led to this new view of the universe.