Brain scan
David Deutsch, father of quantum computing

A fundamentally new way of harnessing nature

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"I OCCASIONALLY go down and look at the experiments being done in the basement of the Clarendon Lab, and it's incredible." David Deutsch, of the University of Oxford, is the sort of theoretical physicist who comes up with ideas that shock and confound his experimentalist colleagues—and then seems rather endearingly shocked and confounded by what they are doing. "Last year I saw their ion-trap experiment, where they were experimenting on a single calcium atom," he says. "The idea of not just accessing but manipulating it, in incredibly subtle ways, is something I totally assumed would never happen. Now they do it routinely."

Such trapped ions are candidates for the innards of eventual powerful quantum computers. These will be the crowning glory of the quantum theory of computation, a field founded on a 1985 paper by Dr Deutsch. He thinks the widely predicted "quantum supremacy" that eventually puts a quantum computation incontrovertibly ahead of a classical one will be momentous for scientists and laymen alike. He brushes off the fervent debate about whether the commercially available D-Wave computer offers a speed advantage. "If it works, it works in a completely different way that cannot be expressed classically. This is a fundamentally new way of harnessing nature. To me, it's secondary how fast it is."