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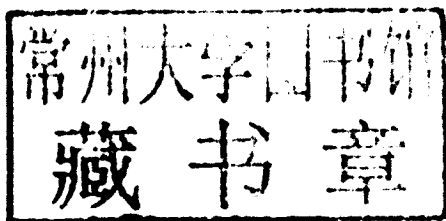
ISAAC NEWTON'S SCIENTIFIC METHOD

*Turning Data into Evidence
about Gravity & Cosmology*

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Gravity and Cosmology*

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Isaac Newton's Scientific Method

Turning Data into Evidence about Gravity and Cosmology

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father,
LEONARD ANDREW HARPER
and
to the memory of my mother,
SOPHIA RATOWSKI HARPER

Preface

The title of this book uses the modern term “scientific method” to refer to the methodology for investigating nature argued for and applied in Newton’s argument for universal gravity. I use this modern term, rather than Newton’s term “experimental philosophy” for his method of doing natural philosophy, to make salient the main theme I will be arguing for. I will argue that Newton’s rich method of turning data into evidence was central to the transformation of natural philosophy into natural science and continues to inform the practice of that science today.

Newton’s argument for universal gravity exemplifies a method that adds features which can significantly enrich the basic hypothetico-deductive (H-D) model that informed much of philosophy of science in the last century. On this familiar H-D model, hypothesized principles are tested by experimental verification of observable consequences drawn from them. Empirical success is limited to accurate prediction of observable phenomena. Such success is counted as confirmation taken to legitimate increases in probability. We shall see that Newton’s inferences from phenomena realize an ideal of empirical success that is richer than prediction. To achieve this richer sort of empirical success a theory needs, not only to accurately predict the phenomena it purports to explain, but also, to have those phenomena accurately measure the parameters which explain them. Newton’s method aims to turn theoretical questions into ones which can be empirically answered by measurement from phenomena. Propositions inferred from phenomena are provisionally accepted as guides to further research. Newton employs *theory-mediated* measurements to turn data into far more informative evidence than can be achieved by hypothetico-deductive confirmation alone.

On his method, deviations from the model developed so far count as new *theory-mediated* phenomena to be exploited as carrying information to aid in developing a more accurate successor. This methodology, guided by its richer ideal of empirical success, supports a conception of scientific progress that does not require construing it as progress toward Laplace’s ideal limit of a final theory of everything. This methodology of progress through successively more accurate revisions is not threatened by Larry Laudan’s argument against convergent realism. We shall see that, contrary to a famous quotation from Thomas Kuhn, Newton’s method endorses the radical theoretical transformation from his theory to Einstein’s. We shall also see that this rich empirical method of Newton’s is strikingly realized in the development and application of testing frameworks for relativistic theories of gravity. Finally, we shall see that this rich methodology of Newton’s appears to be at work in cosmology today. It appears that it was realizations of Newton’s ideal of empirical success as

convergent agreeing measurements of parameters by diverse phenomena that turned dark energy from a wild hypothesis into an accepted background assumption that guides further empirical research into the large-scale structure and development of our universe.

This book is directed to philosophers of science and students studying it. It is also directed to physical scientists and their students. Practicing scientists may well be able to profit from this book. Almost universally, scientists describe the role of evidence in their science as though it were just an application of hypothetico-deductive confirmation. This is so even when, as I try to show in the context of General Relativity and its empirical evidence, the practice of their science exemplifies Newton's richer and more effective method of turning data into evidence. This book is also directed to historians of science and their students. I hope it can suggest how studying the role of evidence can usefully contribute toward understanding the history of radical theory change.

I have found that attention to the details of calculations and proofs of theorems offered by Newton in support of his inferences helped me understand their role in affording empirical support for the propositions inferred as outcomes of *theory-mediated* measurements. I have also found attention to historical details about data available to Newton instructive. I have found historical episodes, such as Römer's use of eclipses of a moon of Jupiter's to measure a finite speed of light and the observation enterprise of Pound and Bradley initiated by Newton to obtain more precise measurements of the orbits of Jupiter's moons, both informative and fascinating. I have, however, attempted to relegate such details of proofs, calculations, and specialized historical background to appendixes so that readers who do not share my fascination for such details can follow the main argument without getting bogged down.

I have, however, included a fairly detailed account of data cited by Newton in support of his phenomena in chapter 2 and of his argument in chapters 3 through 8. Readers interested in Newton's main lessons on scientific method can focus on chapter 1, section IV of chapter 3, sections II.2–IV of chapter 4, and chapters 7, 9, and 10. They would also profit from the specifically labeled sections on method in the other chapters, without costing them very much extra time and effort to master details. The details offered in the other sections of these chapters, and the other chapters, do strongly reinforce these lessons on method and their historical context. I hope they will be of considerable interest to the growing number of very good philosophers of science, who are now taking a great interest in the details of Newton's work on gravity and method and in how these details can illuminate scientific method today.

In my effort to show how Newton's argument can illuminate scientific method today, I have appealed to modern least-squares assessments of estimates of parameter values. I argue that Newton's moon-test inference holds up by our standards today. Student's t -95% confidence parameter estimates illustrate the basic agreement achieved in the moon-test in Newton's initial version, and in the different published editions, of his *Principia*. Gauss's least-squares method of combining estimates of differing accuracy affords insight into how the agreement of the cruder moon-test estimates of the

strength of terrestrial gravity adds empirical support to the much sharper estimates from pendulums. The cruder agreeing moon-test estimates are irrelevant to small differences from the pendulum estimates, but they afford additional empirical support for resisting large differences. This increased resistance to large differences – an increased resiliency – is an important empirical advantage afforded by agreeing measurements from diverse phenomena.

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I want to thank my wife, Susan Pepper. Without her generous support I would not have been able to finish this long project. My daughter Kathryn May Harper and my sister Vicki Lynn Harper have also provided much appreciated support and encouragement.

A great many people have contributed to assist my efforts over the more than twenty years I have worked on this project. The historian of science Curtis Wilson and the philosophers of science Howard Stein and George Smith have been my chief role models and have offered very much appreciated critical comments on early versions of several chapters. I also thank George for his permission to use his very informative phrase “Turning data into evidence” in the title of this book.

My colleague Wayne Myrvold has been responsible for a great many improvements, as his very insightful criticisms over quite a few years have led me to deeper understanding of important issues I have tried to come to grips with. This book is part of a project supported by a joint research grant awarded to Wayne and me. Gordon Fleming and Abner Shimony, both of whom are physicists as well as philosophers of science, have offered very much appreciated encouragement and guidance. I especially thank Gordon for his careful reading and critical comments on chapters 1, 9, and 10. Gordon’s emphasis on the value of diagrams was reinforced by my reading of Simon Singh’s book *Big Bang: The Origin of the Universe* as a role model suggested by my lawyer Anthony H. Little. I also want to thank North Davis, a physician and a fellow mountain hiker, who kindly read and sent comments on an early version of my introductory chapter.

My colleagues Robert Batterman, Chris Smeenk, John Nicholas, and Robert DiSalle have also contributed much appreciated critical comments and important guidance. The historical background section in chapter 1 benefited from very much appreciated help by the late James MacLachlan. The comments by referees and by Eric Schliesser have led to substantial improvements, for which I thank them.

This work on Newton’s scientific method has benefited from students and colleagues who participated in my graduate seminars on Newton and method. These included over the years four two-term interdisciplinary seminars on gravitation in Newton and Einstein. These were jointly listed in and taught by faculty from Physics and Astronomy, Applied Mathematics and Philosophy. I want especially to thank Shree Ram Valluri, from Applied Mathematics, who convinced me to help initiate these valuable learning experiences. He has also helped me understand details of many of the calculations and is the developer of the extension of Newton’s precession theorem to eccentric orbits. I also want to thank Rob Corless, another participant in the gravitation seminars from Applied Mathematics, for checking derivations.

My treatment of Newton's method at work in cosmology today owes much to Dylan Gault who, in December 2009, completed his thesis on cosmology as a case study of scientific method. Wayne Myrvold and I were co-supervisors.

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I want to thank Peter Momtchiloff for encouraging me to publish with Oxford University Press, selecting the excellent initial readers, guiding me through the initial revisions, and convincing me to turn endnotes into footnotes. Daniel Bourner, the production editor, kept us on track and helped to resolve difficult problems about notation. Eleanor Collins was responsible for the excellent cover design. Sarah Cheeseman skillfully guided the transformation to page proofs, including the transformation of my long endnotes into footnotes. Soumi Ghosh helped me proofread and assemble the corrections for the page proofs. Erik Curiel was an excellent, careful proofreader for chapters 1–3, 6, and 8. Howard Emmens was the expert proofreader who used all the queries and my responses to produce the final version for printing. I am very grateful for all their efforts. This book is much better than it would have been without all their help.

Abbreviations

- Corresp.* Newton, I. (1959–1977). *The Correspondence of Isaac Newton*. Turnbull, H.W. (ed., vols. I–III), Scott, J.F. (ed., vol. IV), Hall, A.R. and Tilling, L. (eds., vols. V–VII). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- C&W* Cohen, I.B. and Whitman, A. (trans.) (1999). *Isaac Newton, The Principia, Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy: A New Translation*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- ESAA* Seidelmann, P.K. (ed.) (1992). *Explanatory Supplement to the Astronomical Almanac*. Mill Valley: University Science Books.
- GHA 2A* Taton, R. and Wilson, C. (1989). *The General History of Astronomy, vol. 2, Planetary Astronomy from the Renaissance to the Rise of Astrophysics, Part A: Tycho Brahe to Newton*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GHA 2B* Taton, R. and Wilson, C. (1995). *The General History of Astronomy, vol. 2, Planetary Astronomy from the Renaissance to the Rise of Astrophysics, Part B: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Huygens
1690 Huygens, C. *Discourse on the Cause of Gravity*. Bailey, K. (trans.), Bailey, K. and Smith, G.E. (ann.), manuscript.
- Kepler 1992 Kepler, J. (1992). *New Astronomy*. Donahue, W.H. (trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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Contents

1. An Introduction to Newton's Scientific Method	1
2. Newton's Phenomena	50
3. Inferences from Phenomena (Propositions 1 and 2 Book 3)	84
4. Unification and the Moon-Test (Propositions 3 and 4 Book 3)	160
5. Christiaan Huygens: A Great Natural Philosopher Who Measured Gravity and an Illuminating Foil for Newton on Method	194
6. Unification and the Moon-Test: Critical Assessment	220
7. Generalization by Induction (Propositions 5 and 6 Book 3)	257
8. Gravity as a Universal Force of Interaction (Propositions 7–13 Book 3)	290
9. Beyond Hypotheses: Newton's Methodology vs. Hypothetico-Deductive Methodology	338
10. Newton's Methodology and the Practice of Science	372
<i>References</i>	397
<i>Acknowledgements for use of Images and Text</i>	411
<i>Index</i>	415

Detailed Contents

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Newton's Scientific Method	1
I Some historical background	3
1. Astronomy	3
2. Mechanics and physical causes	15
II Newton's <i>Principia</i> : theoretical concepts	20
1. Newton's background framework	21
2. Newton's theoretical concept of a centripetal force	22
III Newton's classic inferences from phenomena	23
1. Jupiter's moons	24
2. Primary planets	26
3. Inverse-square acceleration fields	28
IV Unification and the moon	31
1. The moon's orbit	31
2. Gravitation toward the earth	32
3. The moon-test	33
4. Empirical success	34
V Generalization by induction: Newton on method	35
1. Proposition 5 and Rule 4	36
2. Proposition 6 and Rule 3	37
VI Gravity as a universal force of pair-wise interaction	40
1. Applying Law 3	40
2. Universal force of interaction	41
3. Resolving the two chief world systems problem	41
VII Lessons from Newton on scientific method	42
1. More informative than H-D method	42
2. Newton's <i>hypotheses non fingo</i>	44
3. A methodology of seeking successively more accurate approximations	45
4. A contrast with Laplace	47
5. Security through strength: acceptance vs. assigning high probability	48
Chapter 2: Newton's Phenomena	50
I The moons of Jupiter	51
1. Römer on the speed of light	51
2. Newton's phenomenon 1	53
II Satellites of Saturn	55

III The orbits of the primary planets encompass the sun	57
IV Kepler's Harmonic Rule	60
V The Area Rule for the primary planets	62
VI The moon	64
Appendix 1: Römer on the speed of light: details and responses	66
Appendix 2: Newton's satellite data	69
1. The table for Jupiter's moons	69
2. Pound's measurements	71
3. Saturn's moons	74
Appendix 3: Empirically determining periods, apsides, mean-distances, and Area Rule motion in Kepler's ellipse	76
1. Determining periods	76
2. Determining apsides and mean-distances	78
3. Kepler's equation and Area Rule motion in Kepler's ellipse	81
Chapter 3: Inferences from Phenomena (Propositions 1 and 2 Book 3)	84
I Newton's definitions	86
1. Basics	86
2. Newton's definitions of centripetal force	88
II Newton's scholium to the definitions and his Laws of Motion	95
1. The scholium on time, space, place, and motion	95
2. The Laws of Motion and their corollaries	99
3. Newton's scholium to the Laws (empirical support offered)	103
III The arguments for propositions 1 and 2 book 3	109
1. Jupiter's moons and Saturn's moons	109
2. Primary planets	116
3. Measurements supporting inverse-square centripetal acceleration fields	123
IV Lessons for philosophy of science	126
1. Duhem on Newton's inferences	126
2. Objections by Duhem and some philosophers	127
3. Duhem and H-D confirmation	130
4. Glymour's bootstrap confirmation	132
5. Newton's inferences vs. Glymour's bootstrap confirmations: <i>laws</i> , not just material conditionals	135
6. Inverse-square acceleration fields and gravity as a universal force of pair-wise interaction between bodies	137
7. Kepler's elliptical orbits	139
8. Newton's ideal of empirical success	142
Appendix 1: Pendulum calculations	143

Appendix 2: Newton's proofs of propositions 1–4 book 1	146
1. Proposition 1	146
2. Proposition 2	149
3. Proposition 3	150
4. Proposition 4	152
Appendix 3: Newton's precession theorem and eccentric orbits	156
1. Newton's basic precession theorem	156
2. A Derivation extending it to include orbits of large eccentricity	157
Chapter 4: Unification and the Moon-Test (Propositions 3 and 4 Book 3)	160
I The argument for proposition 3	161
1. Directed toward the earth	161
2. Inverse-square	162
II Proposition 4 and the moon-test	165
1. The moon-test	165
2. <i>Regulae Philosophandi</i> : Rule 1 and Rule 2	170
3. The two-body correction	174
III The scholium to proposition 4	176
1. Treating the Harmonic Rule as a <i>law</i>	176
2. The scholium moon-test argument	178
3. Newton's definitions of centripetal force	179
IV Empirical success and the moon-test	181
1. The moon-test as an agreeing measurement	181
2. Resiliency	184
V The lunar precession problem	186
1. Newton's treatment of the motion of the moon	186
2. Clairaut, d'Alembert, and Euler	191
Chapter 5: Christiaan Huygens: A Great Natural Philosopher Who Measured Gravity and an Illuminating Foil for Newton on Method	194
I Huygens on gravity and Newton's inferences	195
1. Huygens's measurement	195
2. Gravity varies with latitude	200
3. The shape of the earth	203
4. Huygens's hypothesis as to the cause of gravity	206
5. Huygens on Newton's inference to inverse-square gravity	212
II Lessons on scientific method	214
1. Empirical success and resilience	215
2. Extending inverse-square gravity	217

Chapter 6: Unification and the Moon-Test: Critical Assessment	220
I Exaggerated precision	221
1. Assessing precision and support for Newton's precession correction factor	221
2. Westfall on fudge factors in the moon-test	223
3. The moon-test in Newton's original version of book 3	229
4. The moon-test in the first and second editions	232
5. The correction to Tycho	235
6. Standards of Newton's day	237
II Empirical success and the moon-test argument	238
1. Newton's inference does not depend on his dubious correction factor, nor upon his selection of which estimates to cite	238
2. Can the lunar distance calculated from Huygens's measurement of g be counted as accurate?	239
3. What about the distance of corollary 7 proposition 37?	241
4. Empirical success and resilience	245
5. Concluding remarks	247
Appendix: The moon-test of corollary 7 proposition 37 book 3	248
1. Octants and Newton's variational orbit	248
2. Oblate earth	249
3. Two-body correction	250
4. The one minutes' fall at orbit	251
5. The precession correction	252
6. The one second's fall at latitude 45°	252
7. The correction for Paris (latitude $48^\circ 50'$)	253
8. Effects of rotation	254
9. Aoki on the moon-test of corollary 7	254
Chapter 7: Generalization by Induction (Propositions 5 and 6 Book 3)	257
I Proposition 5	257
1. The basic argument	258
2. <i>Regulae Philosophandi</i> : Rule 4	260
3. Gravity as mutual interaction	261
II Proposition 6: proportionality to mass from agreeing measurements	265
1. The basic argument	265
2. Corollaries of proposition 6	271
3. <i>Regulae Philosophandi</i> : Rule 3: Newton's discussion	274
4. Rule 3: Newton's explicit application to gravity	277
5. More bounds from phenomena	280
6. Bounds from un-polarized orbits	282
7. Concluding remark	283

Appendix: Polarized satellite orbits as measures of Δ_H	285
1. Nordtvedt's calculation	285
2. Chandrasekhar on Newton's calculation	287
3. Another proposal for Newton's calculation	288
 Chapter 8: Gravity as a Universal Force of Interaction (Propositions 7–13 Book 3)	 290
I Proposition 7	291
1. The argument for proposition 7	293
2. Corollaries to proposition 7	294
3. From inverse-square fields of acceleration toward planets to gravity as a universal force of pair-wise attraction between bodies	296
II The attractive forces of spherical bodies applied to planets	299
1. Proposition 8 book 3	299
2. Measuring surface gravities: corollary 1 of proposition 8	300
3. Measuring relative masses: corollary 2 of proposition 8	303
III The two chief world systems problem	304
1. The system of the world	305
2. Take stable Keplerian orbits as a first approximation	312
Appendix 1: Newton's proof of proposition 69 book 1	315
Appendix 2: The attractive forces of spherical bodies	318
1. Basic propositions from book 1	318
2. Inverse-square attraction to particles from inverse-square attraction to spheres using an integral given by Chandrasekhar	324
Appendix 3: Propositions 70 and 71 book 1	328
1. Newton's proofs of propositions 70 and 71 book 1	328
2. Extending Newton's proof of proposition 71 to support measuring inverse-square attraction toward particles from inverse-square attraction toward a spherical shell made of those attracting particles	331
Appendix 4: Measuring planetary properties from orbits: details of Newton's calculations	333
1. Measuring surface gravities: corollary 1 proposition 8	333
2. Measuring planetary masses and densities: corollaries 2 and 3 of proposition 8	335
 Chapter 9: Beyond Hypotheses: Newton's Methodology vs. Hypothetico-Deductive Methodology	 338
I Newton on method	339
1. Newton's scholium to proposition 69 book 1	339
2. The <i>hypotheses non fingo</i> paragraph	343